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*Slavery and Feminism in the Writings of  
Madame de Staël*

Thesis submitted by  
Françoise Marie Danielle DAQUIN  
in February 2020

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts, Society and Education  
James Cook University

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## *Statement of the Contribution of Others*

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<b>Nature of Assistance</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Names, Titles and Affiliations of Co-Contributors</b>
Intellectual support	Editorial assistance	Dr Janice Wegner James Cook University Primary Advisor  Dr Claire Brennan James Cook University Secondary Advisor
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## *Abstract*

Anne-Louise Germaine de Staël devoted her works to the idea of freedom, particularly for women and slaves. As an intellectual and a writer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in France, she judged not only her community but its political regimes according to the principles of feminism and abolitionism. As a woman, she had only two possible ways to play a public role: to hold a salon like her mother, or to publish books. She did both, and through these acquired considerable influence. De Staël was a feminist whose work queries the subordination of women to men, and her strong liberal position led her to equate the condition of women with that of slaves. De Staël's liberalism was a product of the Enlightenment and early Romanticism. Although she never departed from the Enlightenment's principles, she displayed a more Romantic attitude when she promoted 'enthusiasm' and emotion, which were reflected in her art, politics and love life.

### *Feminism*

De Staël's most important struggle was her fight for the rights of women to education and freedom of thought. She was a feminist who questioned the organisation of society and the place of women in it. During the French Revolution, despite claims advocating gender equality and social justice, the status of women regressed rapidly. Like her feminist contemporaries, she advocated that women ought to be judged by the same liberal code as men while she also praised the positive aspects of female gender roles. De Staël was a moderate feminist who celebrated the feminine. She believed that if educated women retained their traditional female values, they could play an effective role in society.

### *Slavery*

The European slave trade peaked in the eighteenth century, and feminists were among those campaigning for its abolition. Probably initially influenced by her father's stand against slavery, de Staël fought against it in life and in many of her writings. She took a pragmatic and political position when she addressed the subject in her literature, when she supported the campaign of William Wilberforce, and the fight of the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture.

## *Intersection of Feminism and Slavery in Madame de Staël's Writings*

There is a strong link between abolitionism and feminism in de Staël's work, as in the works of other turn of the nineteenth-century feminists. Feminism was closely related to abolitionism as married women, especially from the upper classes, could identify with slaves because they too lacked certain civil rights and were treated as property. While de Staël fought for women to be treated fairly, she also introduced the notion of 'enslavement' to strong emotions which was as distressing as the physical and cultural restrictions enforced on women, and could be used to reinforce those restrictions. In her novels and treatises, she demonstrates that to be in the throes of passion is destructive, causing a loss of autonomy, identity and self-control, the same predicament suffered by slaves.

While numerous biographers of Madame de Staël have noted the impact her work has had on a range of political, social and historical matters, few have considered the way her feminism and abolitionism interacted and intersected in her work. This study analyses de Staël's work in the context of her times and demonstrates that not only did she advocate passionately for abolitionism and feminism, but that she saw how the repression of women and enslavement of Africans were linked in the society of eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries France.

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**Plate 0.1 Madame de Staël by Marie-Eleonore Godefroy (1813)**  
**(Wikimedia Commons).**

# Introduction

## Background

My enthusiasm for Madame de Staël's literature goes back to my school years in France. Over the last decade, I became re-acquainted with her work and saw, as a mature adult, another dimension to her work, as I share her passion for liberty, equality and justice. While numerous writers and philosophes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were studied and celebrated continuously since their deaths, de Staël's work was rather neglected for a long period, especially her political writings.<sup>1</sup> She did not possess the literary prominence of Rousseau or Chateaubriand, nor the political authority of Robespierre or Napoleon. In hindsight, de Staël's gender caused her to be relegated to a secondary position of importance. As she was better known as a novelist and literary critic, her political activities were often dismissed or seen as linked to her emotions or to her personal life. Yet, from the middle of the twentieth century, she began to attract the attention of writers and historians, in France and abroad. Two decades ago, the *Société des Etudes Staëliennes* initiated the formidable task of compiling and editing her work, and the recent commemoration of the bicentenary of her death in 2017 prompted the publication of several books, thereby reviving interest in her work.<sup>2</sup>

Undeniably, gender has been a crucial factor in how de Staël experienced politics, as she was discriminated against because of her sex, and subsequently became an advocate for liberty and equality. She chafed at the restrictions placed on women of her class, which made her sympathetic to slaves who suffered worse restrictions on their lives. It was not unusual for women writers at the time to make the link between slavery and the subordination of women. Historian Doris Kadish points out that women's involvement in the struggle against slavery

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<sup>1</sup> Aurelian Craiutu, "Flirting with republicanism: Mme de Staël's writings from the 1790s," *History of European Ideas* 36, 3 (2010), 343 <https://doi.org/10-1016/j.hiseuroideas.2010.05/2019> (accessed 25 February 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A political portrait*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2. Books that were published in 2017: Leonard Burnand, Stephanie Genand and Catriona Seth (dir.), *Germaine de Staël et Benjamin Constant: l'esprit de la liberté* (Paris: Perrin, 2017); Michel Auboin, *Madame de Staël ou l'intelligence politique* (Paris: Omnibus, 2017); Stéphanie Génand, *La Chambre Noir: Germaine de Staël et la pensée du négatif* (Genève: Droz, 2017); Erick Egnell, *Une Femme en Politique: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: De Fallois, 2017); Marina Priebe, *Les modes de sociabilité au chateau de Coppet à l'époque de Germaine de Staël* (Genève: Droz, 2017). Most of de Staël's works were also re-edited, often in compilations such as *Madame de Staël: La Passion de la Liberté* (Paris: Laffont, 2017).

during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period has only been acknowledged recently by historians. From her early writings de Staël saw similarities between the ways that slaves and women were treated and her analysis of these recurs throughout her work. As Kadish remarks, the period of the French and colonial Revolutions was a time when class, gender identities and race were being renegotiated. The questioning of traditional roles during these turbulent events raised women's awareness of their own subordination and the conditions of the Black slaves and intensified their empathy towards them. Exile, estrangement, feelings of inferiority and loss of identity were factors that led women to identify with the fate of slaves and act on their behalf. As historian Suzanne Keen suggests: "empathy is often associated with the moral emotion sympathy (also called empathetic concern) and thus with altruistic action."<sup>3</sup> Kadish uses the term 'porosity' to describe the way these two categories interacted, and argues that post-colonial theorists, including Edward Saïd, failed to connect race and gender.<sup>4</sup> Kadish further extends her analysis of the writings of de Claire de Duras, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Charlotte Dard, Sophie Doin and Olympe de Gouges from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by stressing that, although abolitionists were aware of the connections between patriarchy and enslavement, de Staël, Dard and Duras did not rebel against the authority of their own fathers, figures of patriarchal authority.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Kadish indicates that these women portrayed in their writings male characters who abused and misused their power and authority over women and slaves alike.<sup>6</sup> Despite this perceptive analysis, Kadish does not explore the extensiveness of the link between the fates of both women and slaves throughout de Staël's work.

Interestingly, Kadish argues that "de Staël's love and admiration for her father produced a conflict between her personal submission to patriarchal authority on the one hand and her commitment to the rights of slaves and women on the other".<sup>7</sup> While de Staël loved and respected her father, she questioned patriarchy generally, although she did not fight it directly. Her biographers have noted the numerous letters and essays which bear testimony to the bond between de Staël and her father, Jacques Necker, Minister for Finances under

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Keen in Doris Y. Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves: Women Writers in the French Colonial Slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Claire de Duras, *Ourika* (1823), Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, *L'Esclave et L'Oiseau* (1819), Charlotte Dard, *La Chaumière africaine* (1821), Sophie Doin, *La famille noire ou La traite de l'esclavage* (1825) and Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791) and *Slavery of the Blacks* (1792).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-6. For instance, Oswald's father who prevents him marrying Corinne, and Pauline's tyrannical husband, who is also a slave-owner.

<sup>7</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 31.

Louis XVI.<sup>8</sup> While Necker may have disapproved of his daughter's turbulent and public love life,<sup>9</sup> he was not critical of her publishing her writings when she was married, despite forbidding his own wife to publish hers.<sup>10</sup> Necker shared his daughter's commitment to abolitionism, demonstrated in his address to the Parliament on 5 March 1789.<sup>11</sup> John Isbell indicates that de Staël's novella *Mirza*, wherein the plot deals with the slave trade, may have influenced her father's political stance in this particular speech.<sup>12</sup> Kadish notes though that Necker's commitment to abolitionism was visible earlier. In his report *De l'Administration des finances de la France* in 1784, Necker questioned France's morality and humanity when fortunes were made in the colonies at the expense of other human beings who were being treated like animals.<sup>13</sup>

There is general agreement among de Staël's biographers that de Stael dedicated her life to literature and valued its role not only as an expression of society and its history, but as a force to create new attitudes and modes of feeling in portraying characters who questioned and rebelled against their condition. In addition, they point to de Staël's self-representation in her novels, in particular in the characters of Mirza, Corinne and Delphine.<sup>14</sup> Historians Susan Hillman and Jane E. Wilhem emphasize that de Staël was the first to see that literature played a vital role in the cause of freedom, creating a new genre of literature, an engaged literature, that praised individual freedom, Romanticism and literary criticism.<sup>15</sup> The work of Winock echoes this idea, noting that de Staël's book *De L'Allemagne* announced the creation of a new French literature in which feelings, emotions and enthusiasm dominate, a genre that was opposed to Napoleon's neoclassicism and the Enlightenment's rationalism.<sup>16</sup> French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne argues that de Staël was also influential in popularizing the idea of

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<sup>8</sup> J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1958), 45-448; Eric Egnell, *Une femme en politique*, 43-4; Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël*, (Paris: Librairie Fayard, 2010), 22-44.

<sup>9</sup> Fontana considers that her very public affair with Narbonne harmed her reputation and credibility with both the Court and the people. Fontana, *Germaine de Staël*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 48-50.

<sup>11</sup> Speech of M. Necker, Minister of Finance. Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, [http://www.persee.fr/doc/arcpa\\_0000-0000\\_1815\\_num\\_8\\_1\\_4240\\_12\\_0005\\_0000\\_2](http://www.persee.fr/doc/arcpa_0000-0000_1815_num_8_1_4240_12_0005_0000_2)

<sup>12</sup> John Isbell, "'Voices lost?': Stael and Slavery 1786-1830" in *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Stéphanie Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique", *Cahiers Staëliens*, 64 (Paris: Editions Champion, 2014), 71; Herold, *Mistress*, 29; Madelyn Gutwirth, "Mme de Staël's debt to Phèdre: *Corinne*", *Studies in Romanticism* 3, 3 (Spring 1964), 168.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Hillman, "Men with muskets, Women with lyres: Nationality, Citizenship and Gender in the writings of Germaine de Staël", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, 2 (2011), 231-54; Jane Elizabeth Wilhem, "La traduction, principe de perfectibilité chez Mme Staël", *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs/Meta: Translators Journal* 49, 3(2004), 692-705. <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/meta-v49-nmeta816/009387> (accessed 20 September 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 391-92.

progress.<sup>17</sup> The search for human perfectibility, elevated into a doctrine by Rousseau, was a common theme among de Staël's contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> The work of these historians is significant, although it does not directly address the connection between de Stael's engaged literature promoting emotion and the concept of perfectibility, the way in which that literature contributed to her campaign for the abolition of slavery, or the link between de Stael's feminism and her views on slavery.

Madame de Staël was a novelist, an essayist and a political thinker who judged not only society but also governments. As a woman, she had to fight to gain recognition for her writings because she dared to broach topics which were traditionally considered a masculine domain, such as formal political theory. Historian Steven Kale has explored the limits placed on women's freedom of expression at the time. His work analyses the hostility towards women's participation in politics and philosophy, and he has found that women of letters were seen as competing with men and intruding into their world.<sup>19</sup> De Staël scholar Simone Balayé declares that de Staël believed strongly in the power of the word to protect the weak, establish justice, and moderate murderous passions. She draws attention though to the fact that de Staël maintains some caution in her novels and essays, as she adopts the role of an informed witness and presents herself as a victim to arouse her readership's pity, rather than using a didactic tone. Balayé notes that it was a representation more suited to the gender expectations of the time.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the scholar Françoise Massardier-Kenney indicates that restrictions on women's publishing led de Staël to write differently from more radical figures such as Olympe de Gouges, and that she cleverly varied her fiction and essays using a variety of voices to avoid censure, and consequently keep her head.<sup>21</sup> More recently, however, historian Dominique Godineau has argued that this period of marked conflict over boundaries between public and private spheres was not as clear cut as earlier thought, that in fact literacy and women's publication increased and that women were beginning to assert themselves in the literary and artistic world. She explains that political upheaval had an impact on French society, giving rise to a new conception of the world, and of gender. Yet, Godineau admits

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<sup>17</sup> Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Une femme témoin de son siècle: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1966), 46-50.

<sup>18</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 700.

<sup>19</sup> Steven D. Kale, "Women, salons and sociability as constitutional: problems in the political writing of Madame de Staël," *Historical reflections/Reflexions historiques* 32, 2 (Summer 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Ecrire, Lutter, Vivre* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1994), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Françoise Massardier-Kenney, "Stael, Translation and Race", in *Translating slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writings, 1783-1823*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish (Kent: Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 7.

that women writers could still be demonized, which caused some of them to remain anonymous or to use a pseudonym. She points to the dimorphism that is well illustrated in the vocabulary used at the time when male writers were designated as *homme de lettres* (men of letters) and women's writers as *femme-auteur* (women authors).<sup>22</sup> However, Kale and Godineau do not appear to consider that de Staël, as a writer, did not fear to transgress into the public sphere, to compete with male writers, or to antagonise leaders. Interestingly, while all of her biographers note that de Staël was born to wealth, they have not analysed the way her privileged position facilitated her public fight for the rights of the oppressed.

Was de Staël a 'feminist'? This is a point of contention among those who analyse her works. Both Egnell and Winock argue that she was. Winock points to two of her novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, as showing her feminist tendencies clearly. In these novels, de Staël's heroines are subjected to the restrictions of their social milieu and bound by society's demands that women fulfil their traditional roles, to their disadvantage. He further points out that, in her non-fiction work *De la Littérature*, de Staël voices the gender inequality that favours men. Egnell finds proof of her feminism in de Staël's rejection of her mother's view that women should submit to public opinion; on the contrary, de Staël appealed to women to remain themselves.<sup>23</sup> Yet, historian Jane Abray argues that while de Staël was undoubtedly one of the most important revolutionary women of the period, she could not be classified as an 'activist', and she writes: "most famous women of the period were careful to give the disreputable feminists a wide berth".<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to agree with Abray's verdict when de Staël, a famous woman herself, was sent into exile because she dared to express her opinions openly.<sup>25</sup>

Abray notes that, in an anonymous pamphlet, French women were criticized for not seizing the opportunity to make themselves heard more openly when "common people were entering into their political rights and when even the blacks were to be free".<sup>26</sup> Abray infers that most French women made no attempt to define themselves other than as wives and mothers, making use of their biological role, rather than using revolutionary ferment to claim civil and

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<sup>22</sup> Dominique Godineau, *Les Femmes dans la France Moderne, XVI-XVIII ème Siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015), 218-20.

<sup>23</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 504.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution", *The American Historical Review*, 80, 1 (Feb. 1975), 43-62. DOI: 10.2307/1859051.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Onfray, *La Force du Sexe Faible: contre-histoire de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2016), 74,100,185.

<sup>26</sup> In *Cahier des doléances et réclamations des femmes*. At the beginning of the Revolution, a list of grievances was drawn up by people of the Third Estate. In Abray, "Feminism", 46.

political rights.<sup>27</sup> This ignores the fact that many nineteenth-century feminists used their social status as mothers to demand improvements and new freedoms, such as the right to an education so they could educate their own children, or to professions that involved caring for other women and children. De Staël was one such feminist. She glorified motherhood and celebrated the household as a moral agency, but as Balayé indicates, she also professed to enlighten, to educate and to perfect women as well as men in order to play a larger role in society.<sup>28</sup> Academic Florence Lotterie corroborates Balayé's statement, confirming that de Staël encouraged women to 'perfect' the mind as a means of raising their consciousness about their oppression, or more precisely, their 'enslavement', in order to give them the confidence to initiate changes in their status.<sup>29</sup> As historian Susan Tenenbaum remarks: "The traditional image of woman's domestic role...gave way to a new vision: woman as an agent and celebrant of social progress".<sup>30</sup> Being feminine did not preclude being a feminist. Abray examines the feminist program at the onset of the Revolution for its educational, economic, political and legal changes, but without recognising that de Staël advocated education as the primary necessity for achieving these goals. Finally, Abray argues that revolutionary feminism failed early in the Revolution because it concerned only a minority of women who themselves accepted willingly the eighteenth-century definition of femininity.<sup>31</sup> Once more, this argument does not apply entirely to de Staël who, while she recommended women to embrace their femininity, found it essential that both sexes be treated equally with regard to education and intellectual pursuits. Beatrice Didier, a literary critic, suggests further that de Staël's work contributed to the progress of later feminist movements in the early nineteenth century. She names Georges Sand<sup>32</sup> as a feminist who celebrated de Staël, and who, like her, fought for women's emancipation and authored political texts.<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to Abray's dismissal of late-eighteenth-century feminists as too moderate, historian Mary Cullen writes that French women were active revolutionaries. She argues that relationships between the sexes are never static and that change inevitably brings feminist thought into the field of political thought. In her essay, Cullen identifies Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft as feminist activists who carried the feminist debate into the late

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> In Simone Balayé, *Ecrire*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Florence Lotterie, *Le genre des Lumières: Femme philosophe au début du XVIII siècle* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), 14-16.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Tenenbaum, "Women through the Prism of Political Thought", *Polity*, 15, 1 (Autumn, 1982), 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Sand (1804-1876), French feminist and author.

<sup>33</sup> Beatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël: Thèmes et études* (Paris: Editions Ellipses, 1999), 20.

eighteenth century. Most important is Cullen's link between republicanism and feminism which she considers necessary to initiate radical changes in society, an ideal that de Staël championed most of her life, as she thought the two ideologies would guarantee individual freedom and social responsibility. Yet, Cullen does not associate de Staël with either of these two ideologies.<sup>34</sup>

Several historians portray de Staël as a 'moderate' rather than 'a radical' in her feminism, her dealings with politics and her abolitionism, particularly when compared to more politically engaged feminists like Olympe de Gouges.<sup>35</sup> Kadish refers to de Gouges only as being both a feminist and an abolitionist. She maintains that most of the women writers who defended the rights of women and slaves were not the rebels of the Revolution, and that as French women, they viewed women's role in society in terms of social complementarity and moral harmony between the sexes.<sup>36</sup> Though she ignores de Staël's feminism and abolitionism, her description of these moderate writers fits de Staël. Similarly, Egnell states that, as a feminist, de Staël was not willing to compete with men but, as an 'oppressed' member of her society, she felt compelled to communicate new and universal values to improve the fate of women.<sup>37</sup> He also stresses that de Staël was proud of her femininity and believed that women could rise intellectually while keeping their feminine characteristics.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Ozouf argues that this form of feminism, still prevalent in France today, as 'timid' and 'singular' as it does not possess the extreme discourse found in other Western countries. It was de Staël's goal to negotiate a happy medium between difference and equality.<sup>39</sup>

The politics of nationalism and the Revolution influenced de Staël's views and the feminism she adopted. Ozouf pinpoints the contradiction in de Staël's outlook, wherein liberty and security are in opposition: where liberty grows, security decreases. Interestingly, Sluga makes the point that de Staël correlates national character with gender according to the way the nation treats its women. For instance, in *Corinne ou l'Italie*, she identifies Italy as a 'feminine' nation because it favours women's freedom, and conversely, identifies England as a 'masculine' nation with its martial and masculine character which kept women in the

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Cullen, "Rational Creatures and Free Citizens: Republicanism, Feminism and the Writing of History", *The Republic: The Ireland Institute*, 1 (June 2000), 63-7. [theirelandinstitute.com/republic/oi/pdf/mcullen001](http://theirelandinstitute.com/republic/oi/pdf/mcullen001)

<sup>35</sup> Historians including Biancamaria Fontana, Kadish, Balayé, Glenda Sluga, Bérangère Kolly, Stéphanie Génand and Egnell.

<sup>36</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Les Mots de femmes* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1985).

shadows. This definition reflects the tension between the early-nineteenth-century views of these two countries, within which women were liberated or repressed. Sluga argues that a country's political system with its correspondent gender bias was a trend that dominated the period and shaped both women's political choices and national politics.<sup>40</sup> Historian Elaine Chalus explains the difference between France and Britain differently; that while the lives of eighteenth-century British women were more restricted to the private sphere than those of French women in the *Ancien Régime*, in Britain, high society and politics interacted, allowing elite women to have an influence in the social world of politicians.<sup>41</sup> However, it needs to be considered that while de Staël's feminism can be accepted as moderate at best, abolitionism was a more radical political stance in France than it was in England.

Only a few historians have begun to link de Staël's abolitionism and her feminism.<sup>42</sup> Kadish considers de Staël's stance on slavery as 'militant' because she played a strong and pragmatic role for abolitionism towards the end of her life. She accepts that de Staël's feminism never departed from a 'traditional outlook' and "never challenged the gendered rules of the game in her lifetime".<sup>43</sup> However, she does indicate that de Staël drew a parallel between slavery and the condition of women in eighteenth-century France. Génand also highlights the link between the fate of slaves and the fate of women in de Staël's novellas, notably in *Histoire de Pauline* wherein the young heroine is married to a much older and despotic man, who uses her dowry to buy slaves for his plantation. Génand argues that de Staël draws an explicit parallel between the two transactions, and in doing so she denounces the imbalance of two forces, the slave trade and the forced marriages, both founded on the vulnerability of the victims and on the injustice of the laws which allowed such a commerce. Furthermore, Génand argues that to de Staël, slavery was a symbol of the passivity imposed on women under the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Isbell and Massardier-Kenney recognise a link between slavery and women when they indicate that de Staël's gender allowed her to be "inclusive racially" when she identified with the Black characters in her novellas in order to erase racial differences between the White female and the Black African. Massardier-Kenney indicates that de Staël's African heroine Mirza is the eloquent voice of antislavery, of

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<sup>40</sup> Glenda Sluga, "Gender and the nation: Madame de Staël or Italy", *Women's Writings* 10, 2 (2003), 242-43.

<sup>41</sup> Elaine Chalus, "Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-century England", *The Historical Journal*, 43, 3 (Sept. 2000), 669 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3020974> (accessed 13 April 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Kadish, Génand, Massardier-Kenney and Isbell.

<sup>43</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> Stéphanie Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique", in *Cahiers Staëliens*, 64 (Paris: Editions H. Champion, 2014), 65-9.

female difference and of passion.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Saïd in his approach to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has theorised that the novel is politically charged, wherein class and gender are not neutral. He argues that Thomas Bertram's plantation estate gave him wealth and social status at home and abroad which granted him the power to impose his values upon the heroine Fanny Price. To Saïd, and similarly in de Staël's novellas, the plantation estate is a symbol of power and privilege abroad with comparable activities at home.<sup>46</sup> While these authors analyse links between feminism and abolitionism in de Staël's literature, they do not do so in any depth.

While Frenchwomen were not supposed to be involved in politics at the turn of the nineteenth century, Madame de Staël was notable for her political activity. De Staël lived through a turbulent period of French politics which was not without danger for herself, her family and her friends. Her actions during the Revolution have attracted the attention of some scholars who have analysed her experiences and their influence on her politics, and which in turn led her to become politically active. Historians Roberta Forsberg and H. C. Nixon note that de Staël saved numerous friends from the guillotine, risking her own life, and they suggest that these life-threatening experiences led her to evaluate governments as to whether they were of benefit to both the nation and the individual.<sup>47</sup> Egnell stresses that the sight of human suffering urged de Staël to fight relentlessly for tolerance and compassion, qualities she deemed to be a social and political necessity.<sup>48</sup> Fontana recounts de Staël's concern for moderation when she battled for several months, without success, to reconcile the republicans and the aristocracy in the new Assembly. Fontana points out that this action was decisive in defining to herself her political thinking. This remained with her for the rest of her life.<sup>49</sup> Balayé recalls the role de Staël played when she used her influence to persuade Bernadotte to form a coalition with Tsar Alexander in 1812 against Bonaparte in order to impose a liberal monarchy in France.<sup>50</sup> Some of her biographers have written about de Staël's meeting with William Wilberforce, and her subsequent actions against slavery with the publication of two pamphlets pleading for the end of the slave trade, on the eve of the Congress of Vienna.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Massardier-Kenney, "Staël, Translation and Race", 7; Isbell, "Voices lost?", 40.

<sup>46</sup> Edward W. Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 73-87.

<sup>47</sup> Roberta J. Forsberg and H.C Nixon, "Madame de Staël and Freedom Today", *The Western Political Quarterly* 12, 1 (March, 1959), 72-3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/444193> (accessed 8 August 2014)

<sup>48</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 84.

<sup>49</sup> Fontana, *Germaine de Staël*, 34-6.

<sup>50</sup> Balayé, *Ecrire*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 296-97; Winock, *Madame*, 459-60; and Herold, *Mistress*, 440.

Other details of de Staël's actions on behalf of slaves, however, have escaped the attention of those historians who restrict their analysis to her actions in the political sphere.

Another well-studied aspect of Madame de Staël is her active opposition to Napoleon and his politics. Biographers describe at length the enduring animosity between the two and the price de Staël would pay for her spirit of resistance.<sup>52</sup> They agree that most of her books were barely disguised political manifestoes which led her to be ostracised and exiled and to have her book *De L'Allemagne* censored. Historian Malita Ramona indicates that Bonaparte noticed the influence, harmful to himself, that de Staël had on some members of the Tribunat, like Benjamin Constant.<sup>53</sup> However, the relationship between Napoleon and de Staël was more complex than outright hostility. Fontana argues that de Staël wrote at length about Napoleon at a time when his career was declining, and that her writings seem to convey a sense of failure, not of relief, at the end of the empire. Similarly, Herold has pointed to her ambivalent attitude to Napoleon's defeat in Leipzig because it meant that France was also defeated. Interestingly, Fontana considers the representation, by some historians, of de Staël as the 'heroic resister' against Napoleon's tyranny, to be an over-simplification of reality, and she found even more misleading the allegation that de Staël opposed the Emperor because she did not gain his political and personal favour. Fontana argues that there were initially significant affinities between de Staël's vision of a republican government and the Consulate's principles. She recalls de Staël's initial expectations and her subsequent disillusionment when the dictatorial regime ignored the Enlightenment's values of political equality and popular sovereignty.<sup>54</sup> However, Didier notes that de Staël's hostility to Bonaparte escalated when he re-introduced slavery in the colonies in 1802.<sup>55</sup> Some scholars have described de Staël's disapproval of the return of slavery in the colonies under Napoleon, but have not linked this to her other work on abolitionism.

Since the 1970s, cultural historians have developed a renewed interest in *le monde des salons* and have challenged previous conceptions of this institution. Recent historiography indicates a shift from the salons of the *Ancien Regime* to post-revolutionary salons. From an institution reflecting aristocratic leisure and idleness, the eighteenth-century salon became an institution of political sociability in which women played an important role of moderation and counsel.

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<sup>52</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 253-257; Egnell, *Une Femme*, 164-66; Herold, *Mistress*, 224-26.

<sup>53</sup> Malita Ramona, *The History of a Brave Spirit: Germaine de Staël*, Philological Studies Series 49 (2011), 99-111.

<sup>54</sup> Fontana, *Germaine de Stael*, 182-83.

<sup>55</sup> Didier, *Madame*, 21-22.

Balayé points out that, as a product of the Enlightenment, salons were a key cultural and intellectual institution in which women played a central role, giving them access to public affairs and philosophical discussions to a degree that was unique in Europe. She argues that as well as in her literary texts, it is as a *salonnière* that de Staël propagated her thoughts on French politics and society.<sup>56</sup> Balayé has described the salon as a legitimate space between the domestic and the public sphere wherein links between the aristocratic society and the Republic of Letters were forged and also between aristocratic women and contemporary intellectual currents. Godineau confirms that *salons* were places of promotion and of symbolic power for a few women, but that it would be an illusion to think that distinctions of rank, fortune or gender were totally abolished in these gatherings.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Lilti minimises the role of salons as literary and intellectual venues, considering them merely social spaces, for the leisure of the elites. He also opposes the Tocquevillian notion that salons were places for the discussion of complex abstract literary politics and oppositional public opinion.<sup>58</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Dena Goodman highlight the evolution of salons from an exclusively monarchical milieu to a more conventional bourgeois environment which permitted *salonnières* to influence public opinion. Dorinda Outram confirms their argument when she writes that the Enlightenment period witnessed an increasing number of non-aristocratic salons which “widened the intellectual agenda from the culture of the seventeenth century’s *précieuses* to a wider focus on critical writing in history, economics and politics”.<sup>59</sup> She mentions that the erosion of the intellectual dominance of the court evolved at the same time as the erosion of its political control.<sup>60</sup> These works provide an important background when examining de Staël’s position in the political and intellectual life of the period, and some historians include an analysis of de Staël’s own salon.<sup>61</sup>

De Staël’s salon has been documented by historians intrigued by its cosmopolitanism. Sluga considers de Staël’s salon in Coppet original because of its hostess’s personality, its historical situation between two centuries with different intellectual climates, and its location in Switzerland, a country that was then considered at the geographical centre of Europe. She underlines the importance of the creation of the ‘Group of Coppet’, both a salon and international network, whose members exemplified the association of cosmopolitanism and

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<sup>56</sup> Balayé, *Ecrire*, 14-20.

<sup>57</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 216-17.

<sup>58</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 4, 192-93.

<sup>59</sup> Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5.

<sup>61</sup> In Winock, Sluga and Balayé’s works.

liberalism, an ideal that de Staël embraced with passion.<sup>62</sup> Winock also examines de Staël's salon and describes the group as an 'informal' association of sometimes ten, twenty or thirty members whose main activity was the exchange of ideas. He notes that for de Staël, conversation was a true literary genre, in contrast to the vulgarity of manners she noticed during the Revolution, and that her salon was not as frivolous as were those of the previous century. Conversation to her was an art which combined good taste, culture, and ideas that stimulate the mind.<sup>63</sup>

Some historians point to de Staël's tolerance towards other cultures and her support for the dissemination of ideas beyond frontiers, even envisaging cooperation among the European "thinking elite", concepts that were hallmarks of the Enlightenment.<sup>64</sup> Historian Willem Frijhoff indicates that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the terms 'cosmopolitan' and 'cosmopolitanism' emerged simultaneously around Europe. He argues that after a century of European conflicts that reinforced national frontiers and accentuated linguistic barriers, cosmopolitanism appeared a reasonable answer to conflict and difference, philosophically, spiritually and intellectually, and also as politically promising and culturally enriching.<sup>65</sup> Historian Beatrice Guenther explains that de Staël made a point of criticising the ban on foreign books in France and made it her mission to explore several European countries, a task that attracted strong criticism from some of her compatriots. She concludes that de Staël's emphasis on the emancipatory potential of multilingualism, translation and intercultural capital was her lasting contribution to Revolutionary thought in the early nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Didier endorses the same view when she writes that it was unusual at the time for an author to demonstrate such an European conscience, someone who was ready to expand her views beyond the 'franco-French' space, and who respected the specificities and particularities of other countries.<sup>67</sup> As an example, Forestier draws attention to de Staël's idealisation of the British political model and her claim that it was 'an ideal to fight for'.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, Sluga notices de Staël's ambivalence when she prided herself on being a 'citizen of the world', yet later in her life, increasingly stressed national differences, and the

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<sup>62</sup> Sluga, "Madame de Staël", 37.

<sup>63</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 266-67.

<sup>64</sup> Sluga, "Madame de Staël", 38; Forsberg and Nixon, "Madame de Staël", 72.

<sup>65</sup> Willem Frijhoff, "Cosmopolitisme", in Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, *Le Monde des Lumières* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Beatrice Guenther, "Trading on Cultural Capital: Madame de Staël's Politics and Literature", *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 40, 3 (Spring-Summer 2012). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23538801> (accessed 8 September 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Didier, *Madame*, 110.

<sup>68</sup> Eloise Forestier, "De Staël and England", *Cahiers Staëliens*, 68 (Paris: Editions Champion, 2018), 138.

importance of patriotism as an emotion. She reaffirmed her position when she opposed ‘foreign’ influence that could weaken the *‘patrie’* and the will to defend it. Sluga advances that this change of heart was a reflection of the influence of Romanticism and its glorification of the idea of a ‘nation’.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, some historians consider that de Staël was strongly influenced by the British anti-slavery movement, and that she co-operated with British activists after meeting Wilberforce in 1813.<sup>70</sup> De Staël’s campaign was not limited to French slavery only, but to slavery as a worldwide calamity. Historians who have analysed the degree of her cosmopolitanism provide another avenue to explore when considering de Staël’s abolitionism.

De Staël’s cultural milieu extended beyond significant political events to embrace the two major intellectual movements in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth century: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. While these movements were quite different in many regards, de Staël drew on both in her work. Didier highlights the influence of the great generation of Encyclopedists on de Staël’s thought. While the precocious Germaine met some of them in her mother’s salon, it was mostly through her readings that she became acquainted with the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>71</sup> Historian Paul Gautier has also emphasised the effect of the Enlightenment on de Staël, defining her as a ‘child of the Enlightenment’ who despite her influence in helping to spread German Romanticism in France, never departed from the Enlightenment’s principles of liberty and reason, imparting them to later ages as the heritage of liberal idealism.<sup>72</sup> Also, philosopher Gordon K. Lewis points to liberty in her thought, saying that eighteenth-century intellectuals advocated changes in different ways through political and social plans based around the idea that society can restrain human conduct but not obliterate its freedom.<sup>73</sup> Balayé confirms that de Staël supported the assertion that individuals were born free and knew their own interests best, and that her primary political ideas were based on humanitarianism.<sup>74</sup> Other researchers consider that de Staël drew more equally on both movements. Didier notes that, contrary to Chateaubriand who wholly embraced

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<sup>69</sup> Sluga, “Gender and the nation: Madame de Staël or Italy”, *Women’s Writings* 10, 2 (2003), 242-43.

<sup>70</sup> Egnell, *Une Femme*, 298; Winock, *Madame*, 459; Leonard Bernand, “Agir pour Abolir”, *Cahiers Staëliens*, 64 (Paris: Champion, 2014), 16; Kadish, *Fathers*, 49.

<sup>71</sup> Didier, *Madame*, 111. Didier indicates that Germaine read the works of Montesquieu when she was 12.

<sup>72</sup> J. E Driault, “Review of Paul Gautier, *Madame de Staël et Napoleon*,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine (1899-1914)*, 5, 1 (1903), 57-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20523642> (accessed 19/05/2014).

<sup>73</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, *Slavery, Imperialism and Freedom* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumières et Liberté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), 35.

Romanticism, de Staël remained devoted to the *philosophes*' principles, but combined them with Rousseauian nascent romanticism.<sup>75</sup> Balayé and political scientist Chinatsu Takeda corroborate Didier's view when they indicate that de Staël shared the Enlightenment's ideals of liberty, reason and natural rights, but that she also gave precedence to emotion over reason. Takeda further notes that de Staël considered reliance on the *philosophes*' confidence in the healing powers of reason only was unsound, and that a truly 'enlightened' individual would turn to both reason and sensibility.<sup>76</sup> Scholar Karina Szmurlo further remarks that de Staël was not the first to defend sensibility in literature, and that she was 'a participant in the 'affective revolution' like Rousseau, Goethe and Vauvenargues, who all sought to rehabilitate passion.<sup>77</sup> Historian Madelyn Gutwirth suggests that this dualism would have caused de Staël an inner struggle as her lines in *De L'Influence* illustrate, wherein she opposes the passionate and the dispassionate; the latter enjoys a tranquility without being agitated by passion, but at the same time she concedes that passion, if controlled, could be sublime and inspiring.<sup>78</sup> This union of reason and emotions in de Staël's work shaped her fight for feminism and abolitionism.

Further complicating any understanding of Staël's motivations are questions about the interpretation of the Enlightenment movement. Outram argues that even those actively participating in the Enlightenment struggled to define it. Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche suggest a more recent upheaval in its meaning.<sup>79</sup> New interpretations have been forged based on modern forms of politics which are linked to the new institutions of civil society in the eighteenth century, and to the formation of public opinion. These studies suggest that the nature of this movement resulted from cultural factors more than from social, economic and political ones. Ferrone and Roche state that to understand politics as a cultural fact, centred on different forms of communication, leads to the interrogation of Enlightenment institutions, in particular salons' sociability, the academies, and the Freemasons' lodges in terms of political sociability.<sup>80</sup> This is in line with the analysis by Outram who has examined the

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<sup>75</sup> Didier, *Madame*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Chinatsu Takeda, "Apology of Liberty in *Lettres sur les Ouvrages et le Caractère de J.J Rousseau: Mme de Staël's Contribution to the Discourse on Natural Sociability*, *European Review of History – Revue Européenne d'Histoire*, 14, 2 (June 2007), 165-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480701433307> (accessed 9/3/2019); Balayé, *Madame*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Karina Szmurlo, "Pour un état des lieux de la recherche Américaine: Germaine de Staël dans le discours de la modernité", in *Cahiers Staëliens*, 57 (Paris: Editions Champion, 2006), 15-34.

<sup>78</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth, "Forging a vocation: Germaine de Staël on Fiction, Power, and Passion", *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 86, 3 (1983-5), 242-254.

<sup>79</sup> Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, *Le Monde des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 9-11.

<sup>80</sup> Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 546-47.

Enlightenment from the point of view of a global phenomenon, setting the period against social changes, and not as an autonomous body of thought as it was previously considered. She highlights the significance of the spread of literacy which infiltrated the lower social classes and prompted the emergence of a new public sphere. Indeed, the Republic of Letters could claim to be a political force in its own right which influenced public opinion in a way that followed, at least in theory, the principles of reason, impartiality and humanity.<sup>81</sup> Roche indicates that the rise of ‘public opinion’ may have created a fundamental problem: were the real elites defined by birth, or by intellect?<sup>82</sup> These issues focus attention on social and cultural aspects of the Enlightenment, including salons like de Staël’s.

De Staël’s work was often discounted by contemporaries because of her gender, though the major philosophies of the time – Enlightenment and nascent Romanticism – had differing approaches to the issue of gender. Outram emphasises that during this period many women, members of ‘Grub Street’<sup>83</sup> and others belonging to the social elites, engaged in promulgating their ideas publicly but were condemned by male writers who doubted their abilities to contribute to intellectual thought, a belief particularly promoted by Rousseau. She draws attention to the fact that at the heart of Enlightenment’s thinking was a concern “about the meaning and the manipulation of differences”.<sup>84</sup> Gender was an area of difference which challenged Enlightenment thought that advocated a universal human nature and a universal human history. Thomas Laqueur explains that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ‘male’ and ‘female’ were redefined according to physical and biological characteristics from which a social role was assigned to each sex. For instance, medical literature of the time stated that women, because of their reproductive role, were fit for domesticity only, and because they had smaller brains than men, were not endowed with the capacity for intellectual pursuits.<sup>85</sup> As Rousseau wrote about Sophie in *Emile*, “In general and almost universally, the feminine intellect has less strength and more acuteness. Consequently, in our exercise of it, we show less perseverance and more vivacity.”<sup>86</sup> It is well-known that many women at the time endorsed this view.<sup>87</sup> Yet, Outram refers to the naturalist Buffon and the

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<sup>81</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Roche in Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 25.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Grub Street’ was used by Darnton to describe a distinct community of writers independent of personal patronage, rather than the ‘hack writers’ usually being referred to by this phrase. In Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 19.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Laqueur, in Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 88-9.

<sup>86</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 89.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

*philosophes* Condorcet and Poulain de la Barre who claimed that people of different genders, race or colour could not be classified into groups and belonged to the same human race.<sup>88</sup> Outram concludes by saying that the debate about gender was quite animated at the time because of its contradictions and challenges. Despite the Enlightenment's ideals of universality, it was difficult to position social groups, not only women but also people from lower social classes and of other races that had never been placed within the centre of the European human community.<sup>89</sup> These ideas are clearly relevant to de Staël's pursuit of feminism and of abolition, although her works have not previously been identified as a useful place to study them.

While Outram identifies uncertainty about the nature of the Enlightenment among those experiencing it, historian Darrin McMahon has argued that it was actively resisted by some of its contemporaries. He notes that, despite Berlin's work in the 1970s,<sup>90</sup> revisionist historians have underestimated the role of the Counter-Enlightenment movement that divided the French population long before the Revolution. The enemies of the Enlightenment, among them Catholic leaders, Parliamentarians and men of letters, denounced the *philosophes* for making and controlling public opinion. McMahon stresses that it was mainly the Catholic Church that was instrumental in this opposition, and which claimed to have predicted the Terror, considering it divine punishment for the Enlightenment's and Revolution's lack of morals and disrespect for authority. Influential publications from Abbé Barruel, Jean-François la Harpe and Chateaubriand, and from journalists and pamphleteers, reinforced and consolidated the Counter-Enlightenment's ideology.<sup>91</sup> Thinkers, including Alexis de Tocqueville, Hippolyte Taine and Charles Mauras, blamed the Enlightenment for the Revolution's excesses.<sup>92</sup> However, de Staël saw the Revolution, despite its turbulence, as a step towards possible positive societal changes. Despite the opposition of the Catholic Church to Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals, she saw faith as a necessity for morality, tolerance and compassion and believed that Revolutionary reforms could align with those ideals.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-3.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-4.

<sup>90</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment: the eighteenth-century philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>91</sup> Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-13.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

Navigating the relationships between the Enlightenment, the Revolution and the two major religious faiths in France would not have been easy for de Staël, who was Protestant. As well as the long-standing tension between Catholicism and Protestantism, all religions were under attack during the Enlightenment. Historian Peter Gay advanced the view that this period witnessed ‘the rise of paganism’ while Thomas describes it as a time of “disenchantment of the world”.<sup>93</sup> Not all historians share their opinions, but they discern a decline in Christian beliefs and a shift in religious conceptions to new forms of ‘rational’ or ‘natural’ religions.<sup>94</sup> Outram suggests that in response, most of the major faiths developed internal reforming movements, such as Pietism, Jansenism and Methodism.<sup>95</sup> Historian of religion Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard stresses that the Enlightenment’s criticism of religion was essentially a fight against Christian dogma and ‘superstitions’, and that this attack was followed by an internal review of religious texts and by giving priority to individual conscience and tolerance as precepts of a new style of religion. She argues that these apologists became Rousseau’s ‘involuntary disciples’ who adopted the ideals found in *Emile* and *The Social Contract* that gave supremacy to sentiment, to religious feelings and to the bond with nature.<sup>96</sup> This more Romantic type of religion could satisfy both Enlightenment critics of dogmatism and Romantic inclinations to sensibility, and would appeal to de Staël. Literary scholar Roland Mortier suggests that her religious education was tinged with a certain Rousseauian influence, a religion of the heart dictated by conscience, by a faith without dogma or miracles, united with a purity of human nature.<sup>97</sup>

French scholarship has underlined the close connection between Protestantism and liberalism, and even democracy. According to historian Claude Nicolet, de Staël and Benjamin Constant made it possible to affirm the link between the two doctrines that advocated freedom of conscience in matters of religion and freedom of thought, a link that was conducive to the fall of absolutism and to the establishment of a constitution and of representative government.<sup>98</sup> Historian Helena Rosenblatt agrees that de Staël’s Protestantism would encourage activism,

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Gay, “The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism”, *The American Historical Review*, 73, 3 (February 1968), 768-69; Keith Thomas in Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 114-15.

<sup>94</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 114.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>96</sup> Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, “Religion” in Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 230-32.

<sup>97</sup> Roland Mortier, in Rosenblatt, “Madame de Staël”, 147.

<sup>98</sup> Claude Nicolet, *L’Idée républicaine en France, 1789-1924: essai d’histoire critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 49.

noting that de Staël described herself as “[une] bonne calviniste” (a good Calvinist)<sup>99</sup> and arguing that early Calvinists were more inclined than Lutherans to encourage political resistance, having a more positive view of the potential of a reformed political realm.<sup>100</sup> According to philosopher Michael Walzer, Calvinism gave people a sense of purpose which inspired Calvinists to consider politics “as a kind of conscientious and continuous labour.”<sup>101</sup> More important to de Staël was the Protestant spirit of critical inquiry, of protest and of individual judgement, principles she valued highly and found liberating. It was historian Lucien Jaume who first called attention to the importance of the notion of ‘judgment’ in de Staël’s liberalism which is displayed in *De L’Allemagne* when she wrote about the freedom of judgment as a tool to acquire new enlightened ideas or to preserve those one has.<sup>102</sup> These beliefs would direct people’s minds to political ideas and to encourage them to become more receptive to ideals of liberty. Rosenblatt agrees, stating that, “Freedom in the intellectual and religious realm fostered freedom in the political”.<sup>103</sup> Not surprisingly, these notions attracted strong criticism from the Catholic Church and from reactionary theorists, as Joseph de Maistre’s words bear testimony: “Qu’est-ce-que le protestantisme? ... C’est l’insurrection de la raison individuelle contre la raison générale.”<sup>104</sup> (What is Protestantism? It is the insurrection of individual reason against general reason). De Staël never departed from her religious beliefs and even, at one time, proposed that Protestantism be made France’s state religion.<sup>105</sup> De Staël’s devotion to Protestant values needs to be linked more closely to her political actions.

Other intellectual currents flowed during the period of de Staël’s life, and Génand and Fontana have examined her relationship with Stoicism, an intellectual movement revived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that advocated impassivity in the face of suffering. De Staël however subscribed more to the theory of French *philosophes*, such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, that proclaimed that ‘peace’ and ‘agitation’ and ‘rest’ and ‘movement’ were the only sources of personal fulfilment and human happiness. Fontana notes that, for de Staël,

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<sup>99</sup> Rosenblatt, “Madame de Staël, the Protestant Reformation and the History of ‘Private Judgement’”, *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 31-32 (2007), 147. De Staël described herself as ‘théophilanthrope’ in “Des Circonstances Actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des Principes qui doivent fonder la République en France” in *La Passion de la Liberté* (Paris: Laffont, 2017), 234-237.

<sup>100</sup> Rosenblatt, “Madame de Staël”, 143-54.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Walzer, in Rosenblatt, “Madame de Staël”, 146.

<sup>102</sup> Lucien Jaume, *Coppet, creuset de l’esprit libéral*, L. Jaume (dir.), (Paris: Economica and Presses Universitaires d’Aix-Marseille, 1999), 86.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenblatt, “Madame de Staël”, 152.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* Joseph de Maistre: philosopher and writer who criticised the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and republicanism.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

happiness is as much derived from the persistence of an emotional state as from the contrast and alternation of different ones. This theory was also applied in her political thought wherein she believed that French society could be transformed favourably if the two opposed parties could combine their two ideals, creating stability and innovation and conservation and improvement. Moreover, de Staël's Calvinism acknowledged suffering as legitimate tests sent by God.<sup>106</sup> Génand's analysis, on the other hand, argues that de Staël's stoicism, playing a double role, affected her disposition and provided her with the ability to sublimate her passion, a source of suffering, into a philosophical principle. Génand argues that in *De l'Influence des Passions*, de Staël shows that she can distance herself from melancholy and examine her 'soul' which, free from personal considerations, can propose an exact assessment of the value of life.<sup>107</sup> This aspect of de Staël's thought should be examined further for its influence on her feminism.

### *De Staël and slavery*

Lesser-known aspects of de Staël's work include her anti-slavery sentiments. A few authors have pointed to her contribution to the campaign against slavery, particularly toward the end of her life.<sup>108</sup> However, they are unusual, and most scholars researching de Staël have failed to notice the anti-slavery sentiments expressed throughout her literature. However, Kadish argues that women, including de Staël, played a significant role in relation to antislavery in the post-revolutionary era.<sup>109</sup>

There is a reasonable corpus of work on the history of the French slave trade itself. Historian Louis Sala-Molins explains that the institution of slavery was made official in France by the *Code Noir* or the "Slave Code", a code that regulated the discipline and the control of slaves. Promulgated by Louis XIV in 1685, its sixty articles ruled the life of the slaves from their acquisition to their death. From a religious point of view, slaves were considered as being capable of salvation, but legally they were nothing more than movable goods which could be sold and traded. Sala-Molins indicates that the "Slave Code", like the Revocation of the

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<sup>106</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 18-19.

<sup>107</sup> Genand, *La Chambre*, 20-21.

<sup>108</sup> Biographers including Egnell, Winock, Kadish, Genand, and Charlotte Blennerhassett *Madame de Staël*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Kadish, *Fathers*, 7.

Edict of Nantes, was set up at a time when the monarchy sought to reaffirm the sovereignty of the state in the French colonies.<sup>110</sup>

Abolition of the French slave trade was slower than abolition of the English, and there has been discussion in the literature about the timing of steps towards its achievement. Kadish and Pinnen identify the few years before the French Revolution as a marked transition that led to the creation of the ‘Société des Amis des Noirs’ (Society of the Friends of the Blacks) in 1788. This society, inspired by the British abolitionist movement,<sup>111</sup> engaged itself politically, and was the first to campaign in France for the suppression of the slave trade.<sup>112</sup> Political scientist Benedict Anderson adds that the political climate during the Revolution, with its temporary overthrow of patriarchal structures, was a driving force in the campaign against the old societal order.<sup>113</sup> Historian Fabienne Manière however repudiates the idea that the Revolution was the turning-point for abolitionism. She argues that in spite of the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens in 1789, the Constitution of 1791 opposed the abolition of slavery on the grounds that it would ruin the economy of the French tropical colonies. However, historian Jean Ehrard has another explanation for the emergence of abolitionism in France in this period. He notes that the Enlightenment and the anti-slavery movement overlapped, at a time when French and English people became aware of the harsh reality of slavery. He explains that this realisation was long in coming because the exploitation of slaves was distant and semi-abstract to Europeans, and tempered by the mental inheritance of the Bible, Greco-Latin philosophy and modern legal thought, all of which accepted slavery as legal fact.<sup>114</sup> It was only after the slaves’ revolt in St Domingue led by Toussaint Louverture that slavery was abolished in 1794. Yet, the institution of

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<sup>110</sup> Louis Sala-Molins, “Le Code noir: Un texte juridique le plus monstrueux de l’histoire moderne”, *Historia* 80 (Nov/Dec 2000), 19.

<sup>111</sup> The British antislavery movement sought to mobilise individual Britons to abstain from slave-grown produce, and pressure parliament, such as by petitions.

<sup>112</sup> Doris Y. Kadish, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World* (Athens (US): University of Georgia Press, 2000), 19. Christian Pinnen, review of “The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade” By Christopher J. Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). *H-French-Colonial, H.Net Reviews*. February 2012. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3248>

<sup>113</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>114</sup> Jean Erhard, *Lumières et Esclavage* (Waterloo: Editions A. Versailles, 2008), 79; Bernardin de St Pierre, *Voyage à l’Ile de France* (1773) and *Paul et Virginie* (1788); Pierre Poivre, *Voyage d’un philosophe* (1769); and Abbé Prévost, *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746-1761) and *Voyage du Capitaine Robert Lade* (1734).

slavery was reinstated by Napoleon under the Consulate in 1802,<sup>115</sup> but was finally eradicated in all French colonies in 1848.<sup>116</sup>

In his revisionist work, Ehrard highlights the significant role played by the Enlightenment in the abolition of slavery and he calls attention to the long sixty years' process to finally apply the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Men to Black slaves. Massardier-Kenney agrees that with the rise of Enlightenment thought and a resurgence in religious values, moral doubts about slavery emerged.<sup>117</sup> She points out that the anti-slavery debate was born from public opinion and was promoted by the freedom of the press, the testimonies of missionaries, and by the introduction of Black Africans, as heroes and heroines, in French and English literature.<sup>118</sup> Ehrard acknowledges that *philosophes* like Montesquieu, Condorcet, and Louis Sebastian Mercier described the French Atlantic trade in their works, but that their critique of slavery was ambivalent and would remain so among French intellectuals until the Revolution.<sup>119</sup> Ehrard argues that some Enlightenment writers may have been silent about slavery because they had vested interests in the trade.<sup>120</sup> Kadish agrees with Ehrard when she states that these authors addressed occasionally the need for the eventual abolition of slavery but that they took a moderate and reformist position in most of their works, believing that an amelioration of the slaves' lot and preservation of European commercial interests were feasible and compatible goals.<sup>121</sup> Yet, Ehrard indicates also that some literature about slavery in the eighteenth century evolved and adopted a new approach to sensitize the reader, describing the atrocities committed against the slaves but also displaying their human qualities, as illustrated in the novels of Bernardin de St Pierre, Pierre Poivre and l'Abbé Antoine François Prévost.<sup>122</sup> De Staël used the same approach in her literature, though this has not received the same degree of attention.

Massardier-Kenney and Egnell highlight that, at the time, feminism and abolitionism were closely linked, as feminists were often active in anti-slavery campaigns. Abolitionism was often perceived as a 'woman issue', and the first abolitionist authors were women. This is

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. Ehrard argues that Napoleon's wife, Josephine de Beauharnais, may have played a role in the re-instatement of slavery in the colonies as she was herself the daughter of a plantation owner.

<sup>116</sup> Fabienne Manière, "20 Mai 1802: Bonaparte légalise l'esclavage", *Historia* 80 (Nov/Dec 2002), 45.

<sup>117</sup> Massardier-Kenney, "Staël and Translation", 7.

<sup>118</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 215.

<sup>119</sup> Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Loix* (1748), Louis-Sebastien Mercier, *L'An 2440* (1771), and Condorcet, *Reflexions sur l'Esclavage de Nègres* (1781).

<sup>120</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 213.

<sup>121</sup> Kadish, *Slavery*, 2-4.

<sup>122</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 80-90.

true of Aphra Behn, Olympe de Gouges, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and other American feminists in the nineteenth century.<sup>123</sup> It was also true of de Staël. There is no doubt that she was influenced by her father's stance against slavery, as referred to earlier in this introduction. They indicate that, as early as 1786, de Staël published novellas which, through her heroines, illustrated the horrors of slavery. In 1814, she took direct action in writing a preface to introduce the French translation of William Wilberforce's work on the abolition of slave trade. She also wrote an anti-slavery pamphlet on the eve of the Congress of Vienna.<sup>124</sup>

While de Staël fought for the abolition of slavery, she also illustrated in her novels and novellas the link between the condition of slaves and the condition of women. Isbell's analysis has shown that, in her fiction, de Staël uses a new voice, different from that of male Romantics such as Victor Hugo and Prosper Mérimée who broached the question of slavery in their novels.<sup>125</sup> De Staël endowed her African heroes and heroines with qualities particularly valued by Europeans, of intelligence, seriousness and sensitivity, in order to encourage empathy for them in the reader. In using this technique de Staël is trying to show there is no difference between races, only differences in opportunities. She thus touched her female readership more deeply when they identified with the Black "other".<sup>126</sup> Historian David G. Larg has noticed that the theme of injustice towards women at the hands of men is recalled and emphasized in *Mirza*. In *Mirza*, though, injustice is directed towards one woman only – a Black woman - who stands out thanks to her genius and who suffers because of it.<sup>127</sup> Génand argues that slavery in de Staël's works was used not only as a metaphor for the condition of women, but as a real point of comparison. A White woman at the time was not a slave, but she could be compared to a slave. In a patriarchal society, the freedom of women, especially married women, was restricted, as was that of slaves.<sup>128</sup> However, the similarities in the condition of women and slaves rested on more than a lack of physical liberty. Génand indicates that, as victims of society's conventions, de Staël's heroines and the slaves share the same fate, defeated for not having kept their freedom.<sup>129</sup> More work needs to be done to

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<sup>123</sup> Françoise Massardier-Kenney, "Staël, Translation and Race", 7. The novels were Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1688), Olympe de Gouges, *Zamore et Mirza* (1784) and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

<sup>124</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 304-05; Kadish, *Fathers*, 49.

<sup>125</sup> Victor Hugo, *Bug-Jargal* (1820), and Prosper Mérimée, *Tamango* (1829).

<sup>126</sup> Isbell, "Voices lost?", 40.

<sup>127</sup> David Glass Larg, *Mme de Staël: La vie dans l'oeuvre (1766-1800), Essai de Biographie morale et intellectuelle* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Edouard Champion, 1924), 104.

<sup>128</sup> Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique", 71-76.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

investigate the link between women and slaves in the entirety of her literature, and compare it with the works of other feminist abolitionists of her time.

As a literary figure, de Staël has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention since the mid-twentieth century. There are numerous biographies of her. There is a wealth of material on related topics such as the political impact of her liberalism and feminism, her love life, and her disagreements with successive French regimes between the Revolution and her death in 1817. Yet, a search in the French and international literature casts little light on her campaign for the abolition of slavery, and when it is present, it is usually embedded in general biographies. More importantly, there are very few references associating feminism and abolitionism in her work. I found only four academic papers, from Massardier-Kenney, Kadish, Isbell and Génand, which touch upon the topics of race, gender, patriarchy and abolition, and who link them briefly in the works of de Staël.<sup>130</sup> I therefore believe that a thorough analysis of de Staël's literature can reveal and establish the extent of the parallel de Staël aimed to convey between the fate of women and the fate of the slaves.

Primarily, this thesis questions the influence of personal, societal and political factors that shaped de Staël's thought, role and contribution to the ideologies of feminism and abolitionism, and how this links the historical context to her writings. As Saïd remarked: "authors are...very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure".<sup>131</sup> New interpretations of ideologies and institutions from revisionist historians are introduced and discussed, giving new insights into de Staël's world in France and Switzerland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The study analyses de Staël's literature to investigate and emphasize her concept that equates the fate of women with the fate of slaves.

## **Research Questions and Thesis Structure**

The question that initially drove this research was:

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<sup>130</sup> Massardier-Kenney, "Stael, Translation and race", 4; Isbell, "Voices lost?"; Genand, *Stael and l'Afrique*, 66.

<sup>131</sup> Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, (1993), xxiv.

What were the personal, social and political influences that shaped de Staël's views and writings about feminism and abolitionism, and the way they intersected with and reinforced each other?

This question then gave rise to another question as the study progressed:

To what degree is the link between feminism and abolitionism developed in de Staël's work?

Chapter two examines de Staël's personal life to discover how her upbringing and experiences shaped her views on feminism and abolitionism. These include her privileged childhood and education, her parents' wealth and religion, her unhappy marriage and love affairs, her celebrity, her suffering during turbulent political times, and her exile. It provides the context for assessing her political engagement and influence, and how these were used to further her feminist and abolitionist programs.

Chapter three discusses the successive changes in women's condition in France from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. It explores the political, intellectual and social movements which took place during the Enlightenment and the Revolution years which prompted some to question and to challenge the traditional representation of women's nature and status. This chapter establishes the context to consider Madame de Staël's actions and her significance in this period of changes.

Chapter three examines the nature of de Staël's liberal political position and the diverse influences that shaped her feminism: her personal life, the *philosophes* and thinkers of the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, and the political events of the period. It is followed by an analysis of her literature which contributed, along with her salons, to the dissemination of her feminist ideas and to her own brand of feminism.

Chapter four traces the history of French slavery and explores attitudes of Enlightenment thinkers and the Catholic Church with their hesitations, nuances and contradictions vis à vis the institution. That analysis is followed by an analysis of reformist propositions that paved the way to both abolition of the slave trade, but also another form of colonisation.

Chapter five studies in depth de Staël's direct and indirect contribution to the anti-slavery campaign, through her literature, essays and pamphlets, and highlights the different legacies that influenced her engagement.

Chapter six considers the conjunction of feminism and abolitionism in the works of de Staël and others at the time. It notes the few feminists who, before the nineteenth century, approached the subject of abolitionism. Most importantly, it establishes the perception of similarities between the position of women and slaves in the writings of de Staël by analysing and highlighting direct and indirect references. The parallel extends to the 'enslavement' of strong emotions, not just as a metaphor, but in the case of romantic love and passion, as keeping women in patriarchal marriages and relationships, limiting their ability to act independently.

## *Chapter 2. Biography of Madame de Staël*

The main purpose of this biography is to provide an account of the elements that shaped de Staël's life, including her personal context, in order to understand her interests and activism, and provide a chronological framework in which to set the analysis of her feminism and abolitionism. De Staël lived during a crucial interlude that both separated and connected two significant intellectual and cultural movements: The Enlightenment and Romanticism. It was a period that saw the collapse of old social and political structures in the French Revolution, and a re-ordering of Europe. De Staël sought to put her written work in the context of her experiences because she believed that literature elicits reflection and is a driving force, initiating changes in society. It is therefore important to examine her life and writings in the context of her times.

Born in Paris on 22 April 1766, Germaine de Staël, the only child of the Necker family, was raised in an exceptional milieu. Her parents, who were French Swiss by birth, were to become outstanding figures of Parisian society. Her father, Jacques Necker, had a strong acumen for business and made a considerable fortune while residing in Geneva. In 1764, he married Suzanne Curchod who shared his Calvinist faith with its strong moral values, but who exhibited more tolerance and open-mindedness. This religion in which heart and virtue were combined would have a profound impact on de Staël's thought and her subsequent work. She considered the union of Protestant religion and Enlightenment values as crucial to the progress and the perfectibility of humanity.

Despite the double difficulty of being neither French nor Catholic, Necker's ambition exceeded the commercial world of finances.<sup>132</sup> Recommended to Louis XVI in 1766, he was named Treasurer in the French government and then Finance Minister with the powers of a Prime Minister. It is fair to say that he played a role in the development of the French Revolution when, in 1781, he made public the country's budget, a novelty in an absolute monarchy. Conscious that public opinion could sway a change of government, he declared in his *Compte rendu*, "Darkness and obscurity favour carelessness, publicity can only become

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<sup>132</sup> The French state had been identified with Catholicism since Louis XIV.

an honour and a reward”<sup>133</sup>. His report, in which he disclosed the large state deficit and the scandalous pensions and privileges given to courtiers, led to his dismissal as General Director of Finances. Public pressure ensured that he was recalled six years later to the applause of a delirious crowd, and to his daughter’s great pleasure. On Necker’s demand, the French Parliament, the Estates-General, was convened in May 1789 in a stormy atmosphere, the first meeting since 1614. Germaine Necker attended all sessions and acclaimed the new progressive ideas which united constitutionalists and liberal monarchists.<sup>134</sup> Soon, however, Necker was compromised in the eyes of the King and was again dismissed. The Paris mob trusted Necker and his absence would play a role in the storming of the Bastille. Louis XVI was forced to recall Necker for the third time. Necker’s subsequent writings, *Sur le Pouvoir Exécutif des Grands Etats* (1792) (*On the Executive Power in Large States*), *Sur La Révolution Française* (1796) (*On the French Revolution*) and *Dernières Vues sur la Politique et la Finance* (1802) (*Last Views on Politics and Finance*) reveal his love of liberty and constitutionalism, and the moderation of his political thought.



**Plate 0.2 Jacques Necker by Joseph-Sifford Duplessis. (1781)**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

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<sup>133</sup> In Aurelian Craiutu, “Staël and the French Revolution”, in Germaine de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, newly revised translation of 1818 English edition*, ed. Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2212> (accessed 3 October 2015).

<sup>134</sup> Madame de Staël, “Considérations sur les Principaux Evenemens de la Révolution Française”, in *La Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis (Paris: Editions R. Laffont, 2017), 376-392.

For Necker, a brilliant career was complemented by domestic felicity. His wife supported his career unreservedly. Her literary salon quickly became one of the most famous in Paris for the radical ideas often discussed. Her home was a meeting place for the most distinguished members of Parisian society such as Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Wilhelm Grimm, Edward Gibbon and Count de Buffon.<sup>135</sup>

Germaine, who participated in her mother's salons from the age of ten, was raised in this enlightened atmosphere where Encyclopedists congregated. The *Encyclopedie*, supervised by Denis Diderot, would become practically the Bible of the Enlightenment. Compiled by a hundred and fifty scholars of all disciplines, it was modern in its novel ideas, in its curiosity for sciences and in its bold new ways of thinking. Thanks to Necker's celebrity, representatives of the contemporary world of politics would also gather in his wife's salon, allowing de Staël to be exposed from a young age to the world of public affairs. While she



**Plate 0.3 Portrait de Germaine Necker aged 14 par Louis de Carmontelle.<sup>136</sup>**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

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<sup>135</sup> Christopher J. Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 24-25.

<sup>136</sup> A drawing by Carmontelle (1717-1806) of Germaine Necker attending her mother's salon, dressed like a lady of fashion. While aristocratic French girls were expected to mature early, most being married by 17, the majority were still at school in convents up to that age, not attending Paris salons. Margaret Darrow, "French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850", *Feminist Studies*, 5, 1 (Spring, 1979), 44-45.

was inspired and stimulated by these intelligent exchanges, she was also known to be precociously bright and mature. At the age of five, she asked the Maréchale de Mouchy her views on the topic of love. At thirteen, she was conversing with ministers and diplomats. At fifteen, she was reading and commenting on the work of Baron de Montesquieu.<sup>137</sup> Her great need for a social life, for conversation and a desire to shine, originated in her parents' salon. With the support of her parents, Germaine received a comprehensive education which was unusual for a young woman of her time. Along with the usual languages, speech, music and dance found in the curriculum for aristocratic girls, she learned mathematics and attended the theatre from a very young age. She accompanied her parents to the court at Versailles and Fontainebleau, and to London. Her mother prompted her to cultivate her mind and her memory and tried to raise her according to the precepts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though using those he recommends for boys, not girls.<sup>138</sup> In Rousseau's *Emile*, the philosophe broaches the question of education in proposing an ideal teaching, not formal or forced, allowing students to learn by guided discovery according to their readiness by age. Despite a divided reception, this treatise on education would exert a great influence in Europe and in America.

There is no doubt that this education paid dividends in de Staël's intellectual development. However, the relationship between mother and child was tense as Madame Necker sought to control her daughter's sentimentality and imagination. Germaine preferred her father, who was more indulgent and whose character was more in harmony with hers. From Jacques Necker, she inherited his deep intelligence and interest in and passion for public and political affairs. She read and wrote a great deal. Intellectually gifted, she would be both admired and censured for departing from the traditional role that was then assigned to women. Encouraged to shun public life by Necker, her own mother was prevented from publishing her work. In contrast, despite later criticism and opposition, de Staël revelled in intellectual pleasures in a public arena. In 1814 she wrote:

The culture of Letters brought me more pleasure than sorrow...there is in the development and the perfecting of the mind a continuing activity, a hope always

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<sup>137</sup> Charlotte Blennerhassett, *Madame de Staël* 1, trans. Jane Eliza Gordon Cumming (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 100-101.

<sup>138</sup> Georges Solovieff, ed., "Introduction" in *Madame de Staël: Ses amis, ses correspondants. Choix de Lettres (1778-1817)*, (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1970).

<sup>138</sup> Simone Balayé, "Madame de Staël: sagesse ou folie?". *Cahiers Staëliens* 52. (Paris: Editions Honoré Champion, 2002), 72-81.

reborn, that cannot be found in the course of life itself. Everything tends to the decline of the destiny of women, except thought, whose everlasting nature is to rise continually.<sup>139</sup>

The combination of all these traits would characterise her life and her work.

Although middle-class, Mme Necker desired a good match for the daughter of the General Director of Finances of His Christian Majesty. The negotiations that led to Germaine's future alliance aroused international curiosity, and provoked comment from Catherine of Russia. It was understood that Germaine would not be permitted to marry into the French aristocracy as her future husband would have to share her Protestant faith. Few candidates were obvious, although William Pitt the Younger was numbered among them. However, Germaine showed an aversion to England, writing in her diary "why this cursed island has developed against me the rigidity and the coldness of Maman?"<sup>140</sup> A Swedish suitor, less eminent but attractive (see Plate 2.3), had already had been trying for eight years to obtain the hand of the young woman. Baron Eric Magnus de Staël-Holstein, attaché of the Swedish Embassy, was



**Plate 0.4 Baron Erik-Magnus-Staël von Holstein by Marie-Eleonore Godefroid.**  
(Wikimedia Commons)

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<sup>139</sup> In *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>140</sup> In Solovieff, "Introduction," 3.

seventeen years older than de Staël. The marriage negotiations were initiated by the respectable Countess de Boufflers, an aunt of La Fayette and a friend of King Gustave III of Sweden. She considered Eric as a son and wished for his happiness and prosperity, as Germaine would bring a considerable fortune to the marriage. Necker agreed to the alliance on the condition that de Staël was named ambassador for life. With the intervention of the king of Sweden, the two parties came to a compromise and the Baron obtained his new position for twelve years. The wedding was celebrated on 14 January 1786, on which day Germaine became Baroness and Ambassadress, positions which would allow her to move into the aristocracy.

Her marriage was an unhappy one. There was, however, little expectation of happiness on her part as ‘marriages of convenience’ were then standard alliances with a view to ensure lineage and to consolidate patrimony. She wrote in her diary that “Monsieur de Staël ... is a perfect honest man, incapable of saying or doing silly things, but sterile and without enthusiasm: he cannot make me unhappy because he won’t add to my happiness and as a result won’t trouble it.”<sup>141</sup> A few days after her wedding, she confided to her mother in a letter, “Happiness may come, may come by intervals, may never come...”<sup>142</sup>

As Solovieff notes, however charming her husband could have been, it would have been difficult for him to satisfy her idealistic and romantic soul and to compete with the affection she felt for her father, whom she adored and revered, a man she considered to be ‘ideal’. She would write to her husband, with no intent or fear to wound him, “I am twice married”.<sup>143</sup> Although resigned to her new status, de Staël suffered all her life from unsatisfied matrimonial felicity as she longed to recreate her parents’ happy marriage. Indeed, from a merely ‘suitable’ match, her parents’ marriage had developed into a loving, strong and harmonious union - a rare phenomenon in Parisian society of the time.<sup>144</sup>

The first official act of Madame de Staël as Ambassadress was her presentation to Court where she accidentally tore the train of her dress. She would be frequently criticised for her lack of grace, her clumsiness and her lack of tact. She spoke, she shocked and she showed too much assurance and not enough civility. Despite her face being without beauty, her contemporaries were impressed by her black eyes sparkling with intelligence, her beautiful

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<sup>141</sup> In Solovieff, 26.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

arms, her pretty hands, her harmonious voice and mostly her charm and her talent for seduction. As Madame de Tesse once said, “Beautiful or ugly, I do not know, I was listening to her and I believe to have seen only her eyes and her mouth.” And she would add, “If I were a queen, I would order Madame de Staël to talk to me forever.”<sup>145</sup>

As an Ambassadors, de Staël opened her own salon in the rue du Bac in Paris. She was politically liberal like her father and she welcomed the younger generation, many of whom had fought for the War of Independence in America. She embraced their new and generous ideas with great enthusiasm. Among them, she favoured La Fayette, Noailles, Clermont-Tonnerre and Condorcet. They also included Louis de Narbonne (1755-1813) who was her first romantic passion, Mathieu de Montmorency (1767-1826), a friend for life, and Talleyrand (1754-1838), with whom she shared a turbulent friendship.

**Plate 0.5 Hotel de Ségur, rue du Bac, in Paris, the Swedish Embassy in 1790.**  
**([tacotichelaar.nl/wordpress/nl/germaine-de-stael/](http://tacotichelaar.nl/wordpress/nl/germaine-de-stael/))**

From then on, she devoted her life to her passion: writing. Her father did not approve much of women’s authorship and called her ‘Monsieur de Saint-Ecritoire’.<sup>146</sup> However, for her, writing was to become an indispensable occupation and she admitted that “Les jouissances de l’esprit sont faites pour calmer les orages du coeur”.<sup>147</sup> (The pleasures of the mind are made to appease the storms of passion). She wrote pen-portraits of friends of her parents and a remarkable one of her father. She composed tragedies, *Sophie ou les Sentiments Secrets* (*Sophie or Secret Feelings*) in 1786, and *Jane Grey* in 1787 in five acts, written in verse.<sup>148</sup> With her unabated energy and capacity for work, she regularly wrote reports to the King of Sweden. In 1788, a friend of her parents had her work *Lettres sur les Ouvrages et le Caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (*Letters on the Character and Works of J-J Rousseau*) printed without her knowledge.<sup>149</sup> Immediately re-published, it was her first literary success, in which she praised the work of the *philosophe* but also criticised his ideas that women

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<sup>145</sup> In *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>146</sup> “Sir Holy Writing-case”

<sup>147</sup> De Staël, *Lettres sur les Ouvrages et le Caractère de J.J. Rousseau* (1789), (San Bernardino: Ulan Press, 2015), in “Preface”, 1.

<sup>148</sup> De Staël in *Oeuvres Complètes de la Baronne de Staël-Holstein*, vol.2 (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2012).

<sup>149</sup> Erik Egnell, *Une femme en politique: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 2013), 31-33.

should receive little education and play a limited role in society.<sup>150</sup> As Balayé notes, de Staël's enthusiasm would encourage her to assess any work with due criticism but also with sympathy.<sup>151</sup>

During the late 1770s, de Staël attempted to develop both her romantic and political ambitions, although the disorder of the Revolution interfered with her plans. She followed her father's career until he was forced to retire from politics. Now, as an ambassadress, she hoped to satisfy her secret ambition and to have political influence through another "great man". It was also at this time that significant loving relationships appeared in her life. Despite a brief rapprochement with her husband at the death of their first child Augusta, her marriage did not bring her satisfaction, and she looked for happiness elsewhere. She chose the Count Louis de Narbonne-Lara who combined a noble presence with an illustrious ancestry, as he was rumoured to be the illegitimate son of Louis XV. Her first living child, Auguste, was his. Thanks to de Staël, he obtained in 1791 a position in the Ministry of War, though not in Foreign Affairs as he initially coveted. However, his new post was not to last more than three months. A lack of unity in the government, and his attempt to reorganise the army, led to his dismissal.

As the Revolution became increasingly radical, de Staël's comfortable life was disrupted. The final breakdown of relations between the two political parties (the Girondins and the Jacobins) led to the Terror which engulfed France, and then the wars that submerged the whole of Europe in a bloodbath for the next twenty-three years. In September 1792, the French Revolution showed to the rest of Europe its two distinct faces with massacres unleashed in the streets of Paris, but also a victory against Austria and Prussia in Valmy.<sup>152</sup> A day later, the government at that point, the Convention, abolished the monarchy. Soon after, rewards were offered for the capture of those Constitutionnalists who, despite voting for the Constitution of 1791 and therefore a constitutional monarchy, remained faithful to the Old Regime. Narbonne, a member of their party, was saved by de Staël who helped him to escape to England. At the time she was pregnant with his child but extended her stay in Paris

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<sup>150</sup> Solovieff, "Introduction", 4.

<sup>151</sup> Balayé, "Madame de Staël: sagesse ou folie?", 5.

<sup>152</sup> Battle of Valmy, September 1792. Louis XVI's attempt to flee the country confirmed he had no intention of adopting a constitutional monarchy. Prussia and Austria signed a Declaration of Pillnitz which stipulated that both countries would join forces to maintain the monarchy in France and to prevent the spread of revolution to the rest of Europe. The Girondins wanted to spread the principles of 1789 beyond French frontiers and the King saw a conflict as the only way to re-establish absolutism in France. Despite the Jacobin party being opposed to war, especially Robespierre, the Legislative Assembly declared war on the "King of Bohemia and Hungary".

to save more friends. She was herself arrested after nearly dying at the hands of the mob. It is as the wife of the Swedish Ambassador that she was finally released, and left Paris to join her parents in Switzerland. While de Staël's wealth and connections enabled her to rescue friends and extricate herself from dangerous situations, this does not refute her generosity in putting herself at risk.<sup>153</sup> As she wrote in her essay *Sur le Suicide (On Suicide)*: "Ce qui caractérise la véritable dignité morale de l'homme, c'est le dévouement."<sup>154</sup> (Devotion is what characterises the true moral dignity of men).

De Staël's private life was as turbulent as political events. In 1792, she gave birth to a second child who she named Albert. He was also born from her liaison with Narbonne.<sup>155</sup> Hardly recovered from confinement, she embarked, despite her parents' opposition, for Juniper Hall in Surrey to be with her lover. Later, she would remember her stay as "four months of happiness, an escape from the disaster of life"<sup>156</sup>. In England, she dazzled her hosts with her conversation. Her stay and her observations would inspire her future novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*. In exile and confronted with difficulties, Narbonne began to disengage himself from de Staël who felt cruelly abandoned. She nevertheless found consolation soon after in the arms of the Count Adolphe de Ribbing, a young and handsome Swedish hero, who had plotted to kill Gustave III. As Solovieff notes, she seemed to transfer her feelings easily from one to the other, although she always viewed each love affair as distinctive and new.<sup>157</sup> To Balayé, her letters addressed to them reveal "a touching character, prone to suffering, and a longing for happiness, difficult sometime, never ordinary, her mind bubbling with ideas and activities."<sup>158</sup> Balayé speculates that these men would have eventually found her unbearable because of her intelligence, far superior to theirs, and her ever unsatisfied demand for affection. She would eventually meet Benjamin Constant, a man from her region and equally gifted. Captivated by each other's conversation, their liaison enriched their lives intellectually and would linger for fifteen years. Fascinated, she believed he was "one of the best minds of Europe".<sup>159</sup> As for him, he admitted having:

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<sup>153</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: La Passion de la Liberté* (Paris: Laffont, 2017), VIII.

<sup>154</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence des Passions suivi de Réflexions sur le Suicide* (Paris: Payot, 2000), 287.

<sup>155</sup> At the time, de Staël was already estranged from her husband. As Winock notes, despite the scandal the birth caused in Parisian society, particularly as she had not yet provided her husband with an heir, Baron de Staël did not ask for a divorce which would have robbed him of the help of his wife's wealth. Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 72.

<sup>156</sup> Solovieff, "Introduction", 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>158</sup> Balayé, "Madame de Staël: sagesse ou folie?", 3.

<sup>159</sup> In Solovieff, "Introduction", 7.

...rarely met a union of such astonishing and attractive qualities ... so much charm, simplicity and abandon in intimate society. She is exceptional, a superior being so that who approaches her must not wish for other happiness.<sup>160</sup>

After witnessing first-hand the events of the French Revolution, de Staël retired to Switzerland and stayed there from 1792 until 1795. From a distance, she followed the rise of the Jacobin democracy, the Terror and the fall of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor. In the family estate of Coppet, by the lake of Geneva, she resumed her writing. After the Terror's turbulent period, de Staël dedicated herself to political affairs, a topic which would always be present in her analytical works and as a background in her novels. In 1793, she published *Réflexions sur le Procès de la Reine (Reflections on the Trial of the Queen)* in which she depicts the Queen as a victim, accused of faults she had not committed and attacked for being a too significant and visible woman. As in her later novels, this essay has a feminist tone because de Staël realised then that the persecution and condemnation of Marie-Antoinette would denote at time when all possibilities for women to participate in politics would be lost. This is why, in her plea, she addressed herself to all women and came to the Queen's defense not as a court member, but as a politically astute defender of her sex.

In 1794, de Staël wrote *Réflexions sur la Paix adressées à M. Pitt et aux Français (Reflections on Peace addressed to M. Pitt and to the French)* in which she strove to prove that the French nation, though divided, was determined to resist foreign interference. While this work was not published, it showed her final political choice, not for the constitutional monarchy she had favoured earlier, but for a Republic in which all her friends of liberty would be reunited under its banner. She returned to Paris in 1795 with Constant, who was eager to play a political role as a republican. The salon of the rue du Bac became popular again. As Kale remarks, once the Jacobin regime vanished, salons regained some prestige and "continued to perform the same sort of harmonising and 'civilising' function in the political life of the elite as they had in the literary life of the 'Republic of Letters'".<sup>161</sup> In de Staël's salon, the hostess tried to reconcile Thermidorians and royalists, declaring that "The principles of the Republicans, friends of order, are absolutely the same as the principles of the

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> "Republic of Letters": A self-proclaimed community which fostered communication among scholars of all nationalities, which illustrated the values of cosmopolitanism. Kale, "Women, Salons, and the State in the Aftermath of the French Revolution", *Journal of Women's History* 13, 4 (2002), 57 (accessed 15 June 2014). <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2002.0008>.

Royalists, friends of liberty.”<sup>162</sup> She attracted strong criticism from both parties and had to leave Paris once again. While in Switzerland, she established her salon in Coppet, similar to the one in Paris. This brilliant group of intellectuals congregated in her family’s chateau. These intellectuals, who came from different countries, became close friends and were international in focus. The mistress of the house was not only a ‘*salonnière*’, she was a writer by profession and she inspired others to be the same. Her dearest friends, Jean Charles Leonard de Sismondi, Mme Necker-de-Saussure, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, Wilhelm Meister, and August von Schlegel were the foundation members of this group.<sup>163</sup>

From 1794, de Staël published novels which reflected the growing visibility of her engagement with fiction as a place to explore philosophy. In 1794, she published *Zulma*, a work she had written earlier, and in 1795 she published a collection of novellas preceded by an *Essai sur les Fictions* (*Essay on fictions*) that Goethe would translate in 1796. From then on, the famous German writer would follow her work and so would Schiller and Wilhelm von Humbolt.<sup>164</sup> Humbolt became a friend and would encourage her to make German philosophy known to the French.<sup>165</sup> In her *Essai sur les Fictions*, she denounces fantastic elements and allegories in works of fiction and philosophical and historical novels. She would, though, praise novels in which imagination and philosophy were combined, and which portrayed a balanced picture of characters with all their qualities and faults. In her novels, de Staël gave preference to the representation of ‘private circumstances’.<sup>166</sup> Contrary to her female contemporaries who gained credibility only when their novels evoked morality, she stated that life depicted in all its aspects was itself a work of art. She would declare that in a novel: “tout est à la fois inventé et imité, où rien n’est vrai, mais où tout est vraisemblable.”<sup>167</sup> (all is made up or imitated, nothing is true, but all is plausible.)

Also, in 1795, de Staël completed her treatise on *De l’Influence des Passions sur le Bonheur des Individus et des Nations* (*On Influence of Passions on the Happiness of Individuals and Nations*). This was to be her first major work in her career of Letters. While she was

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<sup>162</sup> Egnell, *Une femme en politique*, 114-115.

<sup>163</sup> Béatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël: Thème et études* (Paris: Ellipses, 1999), 110-11.

<sup>164</sup> Friedrich Schiller, German poet and Wilhelm von Humbolt, Prussian philosopher, linguist and diplomat and the brother of the naturalist and geographer Alexander von Humbolt.

<sup>165</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 257.

<sup>166</sup> Florence Lotterie, “Madame de Staël: La littérature comme ‘philosophie sensible’”, *Romantisme: Littérature et philosophie mêlée*, 124 (2004), 19-30. <https://doi.org/10.3406/roman.2004.1254> (accessed 15 October 2015).

<sup>167</sup> De Staël, “Essai sur les Fictions” in *Zulma Et les Trois Nouvelles: Précédé d’un Essai sur les Fictions* (Londres: Colburn Libraire, 1813), 31.

inspired by her personal trials and those of France, her treatise is not autobiographical but an analysis of the good and bad aspects of all kinds of passions and their influence on individuals and society. Passion of glory, vanity, ambition, love, and vengeance were seen as obstacles to personal happiness and political harmony. De Staël claimed that “la base de ce bonheur est toujours la même, c’est la certitude de n’être jamais agité ni dominé par aucun mouvement plus fort que soi.”<sup>168</sup> (The basis of happiness is always the same, it is the certitude not to be agitated or dominated by any emotion stronger than oneself). In this stoic vein, she would advise against dependence on others to find personal happiness. She recommended relying only on oneself and finding serenity through reflection, study and progress of thought. This work, tainted with pessimism and melancholy, bears witness to the suffering of a woman who was barely thirty years old, but who had seen a revolution destroy her society and many of her friends. Published in 1796, the treatise had an ambivalent reception, praised by some, but criticised by others for being over-sentimental.<sup>169</sup> In the literary world, emotionalism would announce the transition from the classical age to the first signs of French Romanticism after Rousseau.<sup>170</sup>

In 1795, the moderate government of the Directory was in power and de Staël hoped to be allowed to return safely to France on account of her diplomatic immunity. The time of her return was auspicious. Her husband had begun negotiations with the new government and he succeeded in becoming the first representative of a foreign power to recognise the French Republic. Also, Barras, one of the Directors, approved of the Baroness’s latest work, *Des Circonstances Actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des Principes qui doivent fonder la République en France* (*Actual Circumstances which can stop the Revolution and Principles which must establish a Republic in France*). In this essay, de Staël pleads for the end of anarchy, for the return of peace and for the dissolution of extremist parties, the Jacobins and the Royalists. It also reveals the influence of her father’s experience as a minister, and her distrust of theories that were too abstract and unrealistic. On this point, she

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<sup>168</sup> De Staël, *De L’Influence des Passions* (Paris: Rivages, 2000), 111.

<sup>169</sup> Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1985), 36.

<sup>170</sup> Rousseau is considered to have introduced the philosophy of Romanticism in France during the Enlightenment. After German and English Romanticism, the Romantic movement in France similarly developed in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century with Chateaubriand, Senancour and Lamartine. Balayé mentions the work of Roland Mortier who defines the work of de Staël as ‘preromantic’, which illustrates, far from the traditional view of opposition between them, the continuity between the Enlightenment and Romanticism.  
Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Ecrire, Lutter, Vivre*, 291-292.

agreed with Montesquieu and Necker but not with Rousseau whom she regarded highly, nevertheless.<sup>171</sup>

During her next stay in France, de Staël gave birth to her third child, Albertine, in June 1797. That Constant was the father of her daughter was no secret and she suffered the humiliation of criticism in the European press. In the meantime, she fought with success to remove her father's name from the list of émigrés whose properties had been confiscated during the Revolution, and was able to repossess his two properties in Paris and one in the countryside, in St Ouen.<sup>172</sup> She would have to wait another two decades, though, before the loan her father granted the government before the Revolution was repaid to her family.

De Staël would use her influence again, through the activities of her salon and her connection with men in power like Constant, to help her friends to gain positions. Thus, she facilitated Talleyrand's new nomination as a Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>173</sup> She was also quite interested in the fate of La Fayette, a prisoner of the Austrians at the time, because she believed the hero of the American Revolution would be an ideal symbol of reconciliation between constitutional royalists and moderate republicans. By the time La Fayette was released, however, Napoleon was already in power.<sup>174</sup> At the same time, Constant published *Des Réactions Politiques* (1797) (*Some Political Reactions*) in which he condemns arbitrary power and displays his liberalism. Written in the shadow of his mistress, the manifesto was well received by the people but not by the Royalist party which, after the Terror, was regaining popularity. As a result, de Staël would be vilified by the Royalist press and accused of being a 'hermaphrodite', a 'Messaline-Staël' and a 'Jacobin'. One of the most hostile newspapers, the *Memorial*, would say of the author:

One ascribes to this famous woman a marked influence who, not finding enough activities in the usual activities of her sex, has found some in the affairs of our government; one knows that she would do anything to be in the limelight ... a

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<sup>171</sup> Balayé, "Madame de Staël: sagesse et folie," 4.

<sup>172</sup> Hannah Calaway, "Révolutionner la propriété", *La Revolution française* (en ligne) October 2016 <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/1542>. DOI: 10.4000/lrf.1542.

<sup>173</sup> Talleyrand, Bishop of Autun (1754-1838) was a statesman and diplomat from the Revolution to the Restoration. Deemed a political visionary, he was also described as an opportunist, a cynic and even a traitor to Napoleon. He was rumoured to have been de Staël's lover when she was a young married woman. Their friendship had its ups and downs as Talleyrand did not always give his support when she was exiled by various governments after the Revolution. Winock, *Madame*, 101.

<sup>174</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 48-50.

monarchy was too monotonous for the mobility of this extraordinary imagination.<sup>175</sup>

While the day of 9 Thermidor an II (27 July 1794) saw the end of the Terror, the 13 Vendémiaire (5 October 1795) would mark the last Parisian insurrection headed by a counter-revolutionary movement.<sup>176</sup> With the help of Bonaparte, the riot was crushed and it was the first time that the army appeared on the political scene. Nevertheless, the elections of 1797 showed that the Royalist party was indeed gaining strength. The Directory government believed that a change of Cabinet would not be enough to ensure a republican victory, so they recalled the army. On 18 Fructidor (4 September 1797), an anti-Royalist coup d'état took place and the leaders of the reactionary party were deported without sentence. A climate of violence followed. Royalists were hunted down, anticlericalism revived, and the press was placed under censorship. Although de Staël succeeded in saving the lives of some of her Royalist friends, she would be criticised for being directly linked to the Directory through Constant and Talleyrand. Divided between her republican principles and her concern for her friends who were threatened, arrested or exiled, she was constantly caught between two fronts.<sup>177</sup> Torn between her heart and reason, she wrote not long after in *Des Circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Revolution (Actual circumstances that can end the Revolution)*:

La passion de mon âme, c'est la pitié...il est un point sur lequel les Républicains ont bien fait de n'avoir pas de confiance en moi, c'est lorsqu'il s'agissait d'une mesure de rigueur quelconque. Mon âme les repousse toutes....<sup>178</sup> (Pity is the passion of my soul...there is a time when the Republicans were right not to trust me when it was a question of being dispassionate. My soul pushes them all away...).

It was at this time that Napoleon started his campaigns abroad. In 1798, Rome was occupied by French troops and Bonaparte planned his expedition to Egypt. However, the country was

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<sup>175</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 146. Royalist newspapers were *Les Actes des Apôtres*, *Le Censeur des Journaux*, and *Le Journal Général de France*.

<sup>176</sup> Pierre Miquel, *Histoire de la France* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 1976), 275-288. Calling for more purges, Robespierre would lose the favour of his committees and be arrested and executed by the forces of the Convention. This date marks officially the end of the Terror. *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>177</sup> Egnell, *Une femme*, 132.

<sup>178</sup> De Staël, "Des Circonstances actuelles que peuvent terminer la Révolution" in *La Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis (Paris: Laffont, 2017), 188.

weary of confrontations and the Directory was losing popularity.<sup>179</sup> On his return to France, Napoleon was acclaimed First Consul, on 18 Brumaire (9 November 1799), making him France's leading political figure.<sup>180</sup>

In 1797, de Staël met Bonaparte. The General had returned victorious from his campaign in Italy, and Germaine was full of enthusiasm as she wrote in her *Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la Révolution Française* (*Considerations on the main events of the French Revolution*):

Le général Bonaparte se faisait remarquer par son caractère et son esprit autant que par ses victoires, et l'imagination des français commençaient à s'attacher à lui...On était prêt à croire qu'il possédait toutes les qualités généreuses qui accentuent les facultés extraordinaires.<sup>181</sup> (The general Bonaparte was noticeable for his character and his mind as much as for his victories, and the imagination of the French started to take a deep interest in him.... One was keen to believe he possessed all the generous qualities which highlight extraordinary faculties).

There is no doubt that de Staël, at least until 1800, tried to charm the future Emperor. With his genius, passion and love of glory, he was endowed with all the qualities Germaine loved in a man. Napoleon, in his Memorial de St Hélène, would mention that de Staël sent him four or five letters, full of praise and admiration, during his campaign in Italy.<sup>182</sup> However, the attraction was not reciprocated. In fact, Napoleon disliked her as he would despise any woman who was too eloquent, too influential and too willing to meddle in political affairs. It was also no secret that the ideas that he rejected were discussed in de Staël's salon where some members of his entourage congregated. Of their first meeting, Talleyrand recalled that the first Consul hardly paid attention to her, and when she asked him who, he believed, was the greatest woman dead or alive, he responded to her dismay, "the one that has made the most children".<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> The Directory seemed totally discredited. Bonaparte would have the support of Sieyès who was eager to apply his constitutional ideas. However, Sieyès would be dismissed from his position soon after Napoleon's nomination. Miquel, *Histoire de la France*, 294.

<sup>180</sup> The Directory was replaced with a three-members Consulate. In 1802, a new amendment made Napoleon Consul for life. In 1804, he crowned himself Emperor of France. *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>181</sup> De Staël, "Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la Révolution Française" in *La Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis, 557.

<sup>182</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 181.

<sup>183</sup> In Herold, *Mistress*, 152.



**Plate 0.6 A plaque commemorates the first meeting between de Staël and Napoleon Bonaparte, Hotel de Gallifet, Paris. (photo taken by author in Paris 3 June 2016).**

De Staël's infatuation with Bonaparte was not to last. As well as the fact that she, most certainly, felt offended by his lack of interest in her, her dislike of tyranny and her love of freedom were bound to clash with the political regime he led. Like the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson, who was proven to be right when he had, pessimistically but realistically, predicted that "a militarised democracy was capable of overturning Europe's balance of power"<sup>184</sup>, she soon could see nothing good coming from Napoleon's regime. From then on, open hostility between them was declared. Napoleon believed, not without reason, that she influenced his opposition and less believably, that she played a role in the subsequent conspiracies against him. De Staël would argue that the future Emperor subjected his critics to countless persecutions and engaged in unrestrained military campaigns to satisfy his ambition, his bellicose tendencies and his thirst for power. The fight was to be unequal. Although de Staël thought that her celebrity and diplomatic status would protect her from tyrannical power, Napoleon exiled her, first from Paris and then from France, for a period of ten years. As she wrote in her *Dix Années d'Exil*<sup>185</sup> (*Ten Years of Exile*): "Mais j'ai voulu déclarer d'abord que le plus grand grief de l'Empereur Napoléon contre moi, c'est l'amour et

<sup>184</sup> In James Livesey, review of "Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution*", *American Historical Review*, 122, 4 (1 October 2017), 1313-14.

<sup>185</sup> *Dix Années d'Exil* was published posthumously.

le respect dont j'ai toujours été pénétrée pour la véritable liberté".<sup>186</sup> (Emperor Napoleon's greatest grievance against me, is my unfailing love and respect for true liberty).

In fact, in exiling de Staël, Napoleon contributed to her celebrity. Coppet was to become the location of "the Great Conferences of the conscience of Europe" and "her home a true arsenal where one would go to earn his/her spurs", as Napoleon would later declare.<sup>187</sup> De Staël had become a famous political figure and she frequented the most select circles in Germany,<sup>188</sup> Sweden, Austria, England, and Russia where the Tsar Alexander I gave her a passport and invited her to stay. In Coppet, she gathered a powerful group of intellectuals who became the Emperor's strongest critics.<sup>189</sup> Sluga describes de Staël's salon in Coppet as atypical because of its hostess's personality, its historical situation between two centuries with different intellectual climates, and its location in Switzerland, a country that was thought at the time at the geographical centre of Europe. She stresses the importance of the 'Group of Coppet', an international network, whose members represented the combination of cosmopolitanism and liberalism, an ideal that de Staël would fight for all her life.<sup>190</sup>

In 1800, de Staël published *De la Littérature et son Influence sur les Institutions Sociales* (*On Literature and its Influence on Social Institutions*).<sup>191</sup> It was to be highly influential. Like Montesquieu before her in *Esprit des Lois* (*Spirit of the Laws*), she would use a system of classification to analyse the evolution of literature and thought, through different types of

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<sup>186</sup> De Staël, "Dix Années d'Exil", in *Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis, 813

<sup>187</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 259-61.

<sup>188</sup> It should be noted that 'Germany' as a state did not exist until 1871, though German nationalism was developing strongly, and the term is used for convenience. Ironically, it was Napoleon Bonaparte's victories against the German states and his rule over the 'Confederation of the Rhine' 1804-1814, that began the process of the unification of Germany.

<sup>189</sup> In "Dix Années d'Exil", 10-11.

<sup>190</sup> Sluga, "Madame de Staël", 37.

<sup>191</sup> At the time, the word 'literature' included more than written works and was what we call today 'humanities'. Florence Lotterie, *Le Genre des Lumières: Femme et Philosophe au XVIII siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2013), 12.



**Plate 0.7 Château de Coppet, Switzerland.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

society, government and religion. In this work, she sought to establish a distinction between the literature of the north of Europe and that from the south. She praised literature from Antiquity to the French Revolution, and predicted the progress of philosophy, history and fiction. In fact, in this project, she shared with Condorcet in particular, the concept of the perfectibility of human nature that was popular during the Enlightenment. De Staël believed that the accumulation of experience and knowledge, over the course of centuries, armed writers with an ever-growing intelligence based on the observation of the behaviour and the psychology of individuals. She considered literature not as “a mere art” but as a means to civilize humankind and to free it from superstition, ignorance and barbarism.

*De la Littérature* has often been considered a manifesto against Bonaparte. Winock makes this connection and supports it by quoting de Staël. Declarations such as “Les progrès de la littérature, c’est-à-dire le perfectionnement de l’art penser et de s’exprimer, sont nécessaires à l’établissement et à la conservation de la liberté.”<sup>192</sup> (The progress of literature, that is to say the perfecting of the art of thinking and of expressing oneself, is essential in order to establish and to preserve freedom) and “L’enthousiasme qu’inspire la gloire des armes est le seul qui puisse devenir dangereux à la liberté.”<sup>193</sup> (The enthusiasm which inspires the glory of wars is

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<sup>192</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 522.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

the only one which may put liberty in danger), certainly appear to support this view. *De la Littérature* had great success among the public and a second edition was reprinted at the end of the same year. However, mixed reviews were written in newspapers, some of them insulting, especially when written by those who were affiliated with Napoleon's government.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, this work would establish de Staël as a serious writer.



**Plate 0.8 Madame de Staël et le Groupe de Coppet by Philibert-Louis Debucourt.**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

The relationship between Napoleon and de Staël deteriorated even further in 1802 when she was suspected of being an accomplice of General Bernadotte in a conspiracy against the First Consul.<sup>195</sup> Although there was no proof of her direct involvement, her association with those

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<sup>194</sup> In *Le Journal de Paris*, her work was described as a “monstrosity in literature” and *Le Mercure* wrote “When a woman appears on a stage which is not hers, she shocks the audience; because of the contrast, judge her with severity”. Winock, *Madame*, 144.

<sup>195</sup> A conspiracy fomented by Napoleon's generals to overthrow the Consulate was crushed but most leaders managed to escape. Concerned about the strength of the Russian army, the King of Sweden appointed Bernadotte as his heir, thus establishing a link between Bernadotte and de Staël.

who opposed the new regime compromised her, and when she portrayed Napoleon as being an “ideophobe”,<sup>196</sup> he was enraged. He declared to his two brothers:

Conseille-lui de ne pas bloquer mon chemin...quel qu'il soit, où que j'aïlle. Sinon, je la briserai, je l'écraserai. Faisons la taire, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus raisonnable.<sup>197</sup> (Advise her not to block my way ... no matter what it is, no matter where I choose to go. Otherwise I shall break her, I shall crush her. Let her keep quiet, it is the wisest course she can take.)

She would pay dearly for the insult.

The previous year, de Staël had lost her husband. He was at the time destitute, crippled with debts from his expensive mistress,<sup>198</sup> and sick, but she nevertheless took pity on him. When he was too weak to return to Sweden, she decided to accompany him to Coppet. She confided to her father: “Monsieur de Staël has many faults, but he is very unhappy; I came back to him because of his misfortune.”<sup>199</sup> On their way, just before crossing the Swiss frontier, the Baron de Staël died in Coligny, in the Jura Mountains. His death caused de Staël some distress as she felt guilty for having married a man she never loved because of her parents' desire and her religion. She stated: “I shall never find any consolation for my inability to make him happy for a little while when he had abandoned himself to me.”<sup>200</sup> The proprieties of the time, with its constraints regarding marriage, would be a recurrent theme in her novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*.

*Delphine*, published in 1802, achieved a great success but also brought the Consul's hostility against the author to a head. Centred on a love story, this epistolary novel broaches political and social questions stemming from the Revolution. Themes such as emigration, political liberalism and praise for England were certain to upset the French government of the day. In this provocative and anti-conformist novel, de Staël denounces the regression of the status of women since the Revolution. She is a feminist when she demands equal rights for women and their ability to divorce. It is not surprising that the book infuriated Napoleon, who at the

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<sup>196</sup> Someone who fears 'Ideologues', a term which in this context designated not only the followers of Condorcet but intellectuals on the left in general.

<sup>197</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 195.

<sup>198</sup> The Baron de Staël was keeping a mistress, Mademoiselle Clairon, who cost him a fortune.

<sup>199</sup> In Herold, *Mistress*, 187.

<sup>200</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 198.



**Plate 0.9 The Emperor Napoleon in his study at the Tuileries by Jacques-Louis David. (1812.) (Wikimedia Commons)**

time tried to impose conventional morality, demonstrated by his urging Talleyrand to marry his mistress, his reintroduction of Catechism lessons for children, and his demand that women stay in their traditional place in the home.<sup>201</sup> A representative of the government, the newspaper *The Journal des Débats*, disapproved of the book for its “completely wrong, antisocial, dangerous principles and its lack of moral aim.”<sup>202</sup> De Staël would have expected such criticism, but she had addressed the book to “the silent but enlightened France” and to the future, not to the present.<sup>203</sup>

Although taking place in different social settings, the two novels, *Corinne*, published in 1807, and *Delphine*, published five years earlier, have many similarities. In *Delphine*, de Staël

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<sup>201</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 235-37.

<sup>202</sup> In *ibid.*, 231.

<sup>203</sup> In Balayé, *Ecrire*, 18.

focused on society, the salons and the turbulent events caused by the Revolution in its early stages. In the later novel, *Corinne* is a woman of genius who is a victim of a repressive English society. As always in de Staël's work, women are victims. While England was a model of political freedom at the time, social freedom was restricted. Sluga posits that *Corinne* was also a novel of national characteristics: the 'feminine' Italy, free but superficial and weak, and the 'masculine' England, where women were repressed. Corinne recognises that her lover Oswald must accept his English nationality and reject her in favour of a demure Englishwoman of lesser talents.<sup>204</sup> The setting and the intrigue of the novel take place in



**Plate 0.10 Madame de Staël as Corinne by Vigée-Lebrun.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

Italy and this accounted for its great success. During the winter of 1804-1805, de Staël had stayed with her children, their preceptor Wilhelm Schlegel, and Sismonde de Sismondi in Italy.<sup>205</sup> She was enchanted by the beauty of the country's sites, its famous history from Rome to the Renaissance, and by its intellectual wealth unknown to the French. In the novel, the half-English, half-Italian Corinne guides the Scottish Oswald, with whom she falls in love, through the splendours of Italy.

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<sup>204</sup> Sluga, "Gender and the Nation".

<sup>205</sup> Sismonde de Sismondi (1773-1842) was an economist and historian. He shared de Staël's anti-Catholicism, and her passion for Italy.

As in *Delphine*, de Staël reiterated the theme of women who did not conform to society, and of men who, weak and irresolute, were overly influenced by the rules of society.<sup>206</sup> De Staël's ridicule of a French character in *Corinne* prompted the French Minister of the Police, Fouché, to ask her to include a flattering remark on Napoleon in her future work, to alleviate the Emperor's anger. She refused categorically and this refusal thwarted her last chance to return to Paris before the Restoration, despite the intervention of her son Auguste. While Napoleon treated her young son with sympathy, he did not yield to his request and remarked:

Si je la laisse venir à Paris, elle ferait des bêtises et je perdrais les gens qui sont autour de moi et qui me sont fidèles. Elle peut aller où elle veut...seule votre mère est malheureuse lorsqu'elle n'a pas le reste de l'Europe à sa disposition.<sup>207</sup> (If I let her come to Paris, she would get into mischief and I would lose the people who are around me and who support me. She can go wherever she wants... only your mother can be unhappy when she has not the rest of Europe at her feet.)

There is no doubt that de Staël was offended by being driven out of France and treated as a foreigner. Her stay in Germany showed Bonaparte that she was well regarded among the princely courts of Europe, thanks to both her father's celebrity and her own. During her exile she sought to increase her knowledge of German thought and she would, to this effect, study the language to gain a deeper appreciation of it. Wilhelm von Humboldt had introduced her to his country's literature and philosophy, and he knew she was in a position to make its classics more familiar to the rest of Europe. Sceptical when she left Coppet in 1803, she would be filled with wonder by the cultural scene of Weimar where the sovereign was a patron of Letters. She reported to her father: "Intellect personified is being called to arms to receive me."<sup>208</sup> Indeed, the population of Weimar thought de Staël was a true representative of the civilized Parisian salon, a reputation reinforced by the success of *Delphine* in Germany. In Weimar, she met famous writers such as Schiller, Goethe, Wieland and others, and thereby enlarged considerably her European network of intellectuals.<sup>209</sup> Unable to return to Paris, de Staël left for Vienna in 1807 with the intention of completing her work *De L'Allemagne* but, probably also, to meet again Maurice O'Donnell, a young attractive Austrian she had met three years before. On her return, she stopped in Teplitz in Bohemia to contact Gentz, the

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<sup>206</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumières et Liberté* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 8.

<sup>207</sup> In Solovieff, "Introduction," 13.

<sup>208</sup> In Herold, *Mistress to an Age*, 260.

<sup>209</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* 1 (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 123.

famous German publicist, an implacable adversary of the Emperor. Because of her association with him, she was accused of being a threat to public tranquillity and her residence in Coppet would be from then on constantly watched by Napoleon's police.<sup>210</sup>

When de Staël crossed the Rhine, she made great efforts to absorb Germany's new and original literature and philosophy. Her knowledge would increase through her German guests in Coppet, her stay in Vienna, and a second journey in Germany. Her book, *De l'Allemagne*<sup>211</sup> described a region virtually unknown to the French: its geography, its history, and its inhabitants. Most importantly, the work reveals and analyses a different literature and thought in which enthusiasm is paramount, as opposed to pragmatism, materialism and the notion of interest. Though an heir of the Enlightenment, she demonstrated that literature could evolve and break away from classicism with its prejudices, its inhibitions, and its taboos. In fact, this book suggested to the French that they should review their literature as limited by pre-conceived ideas. As in *Corinne*, *De l'Allemagne* is critical of Napoleon's regime and therefore of all absolutism. Goethe would see a connection between the book and the German uprising of 1813.

Napoleon reacted strongly to *De l'Allemagne*. He was particularly irritated by the book because she praised the culture, in all its facets, of a region which was subject to France. One phrase in particular upset the Emperor when de Staël refers to his newly established censorship of books: "Car nous n'en sommes pas, j'imagine, à vouloir élever autour de la France littéraire la grande muraille de Chine, pour empêcher les idées du dehors d'y pénétrer."<sup>212</sup> (Because we are not, I imagine, willing to raise around literary France the great wall of China, to prevent outside ideas from penetrating it.) De Staël emphasised the need for international exchange in all matters of culture and politics that would benefit all nations, and she warned against a moral system based on national interest.<sup>213</sup> Napoleon felt the danger of such a publication and *De l'Allemagne* was banned; he decreed that all copies in France be destroyed. Fortunately, some manuscript pages and drafts escaped the attention of the police. De Staël had kept a copy of her work that she took with her when she fled for England in 1812, and the work was reprinted and published in London in 1813.<sup>214</sup> Her feminist claims were criticised in *Le Journal de L'Empire* which indicated that a woman should stay on the

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<sup>210</sup> Solovieff, "Introduction", 8.

<sup>211</sup> *De l'Allemagne* was completed in 1810.

<sup>212</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* I, 47.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-85.

<sup>214</sup> Lotterie, "Madame de Staël: La littérature", 10-12.

path indicated by nature and the order of society, at the risk of uncertain, risky and unfortunate reprisals.<sup>215</sup> These words were in accordance with the Napoleonic Civil Code.

At the same time that de Staël's professional life was a site of conflict, her private life was in disorder. On her way back from Germany, de Staël was shocked to learn that Benjamin Constant had married Charlotte de Hardenberg, a lover he had left de Staël for in the past. To make matters worse, de Staël found she was responsible for the exile from France of her close friends Mathieu de Montmorency and Juliette Recamier. In addition, she lost her father

### **Plate 0.11 De l'Allemagne (1810).**

<https://archive.org/details/delallemagn>

in 1804, and the suffering that ensued left her mentally drained. As she wrote to the Duke of Saxe-Gotha: "It was a different relationship between father and daughter. It was fraternity, love, religion, all my moral being."<sup>216</sup> Her friends described her as "a shadow on earth."<sup>217</sup> Reduced to solitude and overcome by sadness, she would pronounce her famous words: "...et la gloire elle-même ne saurait être pour une femme qu'un deuil éclatant de bonheur."<sup>218</sup> (...for a woman, glory is only the dazzling grief of happiness). Such despondency led her to contemplate leaving Europe to live in the New World. Her father had acquired properties in North America where she had numerous friends such as Jefferson, du Pont de Nemours and Le Ray de Chaumont, among others. De Staël had a deep appreciation for the principles of American democracy and she believed that its new society, free from traditional impediments, would allow freedom and favour individual self-development. Her writings influenced some prominent American intellectuals and thereby contributed to the advance of American education.<sup>219</sup> Before her death, she confided to Ticknor, "you are the vanguard of the human race, you are the future of the world."<sup>220</sup> Her correspondence with Jefferson touched important issues such as slavery. She submitted to him: "If you succeeded in doing away with slavery in the South, there would be at least one government in the world as

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<sup>215</sup> Simone Balayé, "Comment peut-on être Madame de Staël? Une femme dans l'institution littéraire." *Romantisme* 77 (1992), 15-23. <https://doi.org/10.3406/roman.1992.6048> (accessed 3 December 2015).

<sup>216</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 230.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-36.

<sup>218</sup> De Staël, *De L'Allemagne* II (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 218.

<sup>219</sup> American intellectuals such as Georges Ticknor and Henry James would revolutionize instruction in languages and literature at Harvard University. Craiutu, "Staël and the French Revolution", 9.

<sup>220</sup> In Monroe Berger, *De Staël, Politics, Literature and National Character* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1964), 7.

perfect as human reason can conceive it”.<sup>221</sup> However, she was concerned that the involvement of American troops against England would, indirectly, help Napoleon’s despotic regime.<sup>222</sup> In fact, de Staël would never set foot in North America. Jefferson did not encourage her to immigrate, probably for political reasons, as his administration did not wish to provoke Napoleon.<sup>223</sup>

Despite her melancholy, de Staël survived and resumed her writing in secret. She composed a drama in five acts, *Sapho* (1811), which revisits the theme of *Corinne* in which a superior woman is a victim of love. She wrote two years later *Reflexions sur le suicide* (*Reflections on suicide*), a theme she had already developed in *De l’Influence des passions* (1796). In the 1796 work she had tried to justify suicide, a stance which she illustrated in her novel *Delphine* when the heroine took her own life. With the passing of time, she realized that, beside her sense of dignity, her religious scruples prevented her from giving up the desire to live. In *Reflexions sur le suicide*, she advocates fighting, surviving and continuing the struggle in the face of misfortune.<sup>224</sup> She wrote:

Les plus grandes qualités de l’âme ne se développent que par la souffrance, et ce perfectionnement de nous-mêmes nous rend, après un certain temps, heureux.<sup>225</sup>  
(The greatest qualities of the soul can only develop through suffering, and this perfecting of ourselves rewards us, after a certain time, with happiness).

However, in 1811, providence had a surprise in store for de Staël in the person of John Rocca, a romantic hero of twenty-three, pale, consumptive and lame from a wound received in Spain. Despite their difference in age, he fell madly in love with her and declared: “I shall love her until she accepts to marry me.”<sup>226</sup> Touched, she cared for him and let herself be loved. They married in secret on 1 May 1811 and de Staël could finally enjoy some felicity in marriage. He gave her what she thought she would never receive again: passion, devotion

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<sup>221</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 475.

<sup>222</sup> There was armed conflict between the United States and the British Empire between 1812 and 1815. The British restricted American trade since they feared it was harmful to their war with France. This provoked a response from the Americans, who were eager to prove their independence from the British Empire once and for all.

<sup>223</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 345-46.

<sup>224</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 395.

<sup>225</sup> De Staël, *Reflexions sur le Suicide*, (Paris: Payot, 2000), 262.

<sup>226</sup> In Herold, *Mistress*, 412.

and tenderness. From their union, a son, Louis-Alphonse, nicknamed “Petit Nous”, was born secretly.<sup>227</sup>

A son was also born to Napoleon and his second wife Marie-Louise of Austria, Napoléon François Charles Joseph Bonaparte, given the title King of Rome. The new prefect of Geneva asked de Staël to address a panegyric to the emperor for the occasion. She refused, declaring that “As an exile, any praise would seem like a request.”<sup>228</sup>

In her forced retreat after the publication of *De l'Allemagne*, Madame de Staël began *Dix Années d'Exil*<sup>229</sup> (*Ten Years of Exile*), at first conceived as a pamphlet which denounced the Emperor and his tyranny. In 1812, feeling spied on, persecuted and unable to publish again, she planned to escape from the Europe of Napoleon and to go to England. Accompanied by Rocca, Schlegel and her son Albert, she started her long journey through the Austrian and Russian Empires. When they reached the Russian frontier, the ‘Grande Armée’<sup>230</sup> was already advancing and they had to make a detour through Kiev and Moscow to escape the invader. She had little knowledge of Russia but was fascinated by its culture. In *Dix Années d'Exil*, she describes Moscow: “Une cité immense qui brille avec toutes ses coupes dorées et ses temples, cinq semaines avant d’être la proie des flammes.”<sup>231</sup> (An immense city which shines with all its golden cupolas and its temples, five weeks before it became the prey of flames).<sup>232</sup> Her description of the Russian people attracted praise from Pushkin, the notable Russian Romantic poet. While in Russia, she was well received at Court and in society as a representative of “the conscience of an outraged Europe.”<sup>233</sup> After eight weeks in Russia, de Staël and her company sailed for Sweden, though their ship was wrecked near the island of Rügen. When she finally arrived in Stockholm, she was greeted by Bernadotte as an old acquaintance and as a messenger of the enemies of Napoleon.

In June 1813, after a long journey, de Staël and her relatives finally landed in England, considered the land of liberty. In Stockholm, she had worked on the second part of *Dix Années d'Exil*. In London, she went back to an old project. In 1804, she had written a remarkable text on the private life of her father. Now, she was ready to dedicate a book to his

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 467. “Petit nous”: “Little us”.

<sup>228</sup> In Solovieff, “Introduction”, 14.

<sup>229</sup> *Dix Années d'Exil* and *Oeuvres Complètes* were published posthumously in 1820, three years after her death.

<sup>230</sup> “Great Army” led by Napoleon.

<sup>231</sup> De Staël, “Dix Années”, 971.

<sup>232</sup> The Russians would burn their city rather than surrender it to Napoleon, whose army was advancing.

<sup>233</sup> In Egnell, *Une femme*, 333.

political life. She would portray the ‘public man’ and his role during the first years of the Revolution, followed by the disillusionment caused by the Terror, the vagaries of the Directory, and the totalitarian regime of Napoleon. In her book, she also mentioned her doubts regarding the new monarchy which was restored long after her father’s death. Under the title *Considérations sur les Principaux Evénements de la Revolution Française*, she completed this work in which she suggested that the French government adopt the English political system.<sup>234</sup>

When she landed in England, de Staël was acclaimed for the success of *De l’Allemagne* and was received like a princess. She socialized a great deal, mixing with members of the Court and English society. She met the poet Byron who was attracted to her daughter Albertine. Unfortunately, de Staël’s heart was to be broken once more. Her second son Albert had just died in a duel, Benjamin Constant had abandoned her completely, and the Allies were occupying Paris. Yet, she found consolation and support in the presence of John Rocca, the loving and faithful companion.<sup>235</sup>

While de Staël had fought the usurper Napoleon and his regime, and welcomed his defeat in Leipzig, she was on the side of France and was saddened by the vindictive and anti-French attitude of the Allies. She argued with Constant who, in his pamphlet *De l’Esprit de Conquête et de l’Usurpation (On the Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation)*, justified the invasion of France by the enemy. To this she would reply:

Ne voyez-vous pas que la France s’en va au désastre...que Dieu me bannisse de France plutôt que de retourner dans une France occupée par des étrangers...Je desire Napoleon victorieux mais tué. Voulez-vous que la France soit piétinée? Vous n’être pas français, Benjamin...ici, se tient la différence entre vous et moi.<sup>236</sup> (Don’t you see that France is heading for a disaster ... Better God banishes me from France that to return in a France occupied by foreigners ... I desire Bonaparte to be victorious but killed. Would you like France to trampled on? ... You are not French, Benjamin ... here is the difference between you and me.)

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<sup>234</sup> De Staël, *Considerations*, 783-84.

<sup>235</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 440-44.

<sup>236</sup> In Solovieff, “Introduction”, 15.

Finally, in May 1814, de Staël returned to Paris after twelve years of absence. She was disappointed not to find any familiar faces in public places, and seeing soldiers wearing foreign uniforms at the Opera and occupying the Tuileries and the Louvre. Her correspondence testifies that she interceded with Wellington and the Tsar Alexander to soften the fate of a defeated France. Indeed, she appealed to their generosity and to their impartiality when she reminded the victorious general Wellington that, after a series of disastrous totalitarian regimes, France was willing to follow the example of England. She also proclaimed to the Tsar that foreign occupation would threaten France's stability, and she urged him to play a role in setting up and in consolidating the new reforms: "Hurry up to give back this country to itself...save France and through her the liberty of Europe and the cause of the Enlightenment."<sup>237</sup>

Once more, both de Staël's private life and her public life were causing her distress. Reasons for de Staël's misery were the attitude of Constant, who treated her with deliberate indifference, and the obvious reluctance of the Bourbons to accept a new constitutional charter as they favoured restoring the absolute monarchy.<sup>238</sup> De Staël made a point of saying that all the political principles advanced in the Charter had been previously championed by her father. She also doubted the viability of the new constitution, noting that with its too many concessions to the monarchy, it would be difficult to exercise a reasonable balance of powers. In her view, the Charter did not reflect the English model that combined liberty and order, and which had preserved that country from revolutionary chaos since the seventeenth century. After two months in Paris, she was almost relieved to return to Coppet. Geneva would greet her splendidly and once more the salon would return to its former glory with the presence of the brightest minds. As Stendhal remarked:

The general assemblies of European opinion congregated in Coppet ... Voltaire never had the same. By the Lake of Lemman, 600 of the most distinguished persons of Europe were present: mind, wealth and the highest titles, all of them came to seek pleasure in the salon of this illustrious woman that France had lost.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 484.

<sup>238</sup> Miquel, *Histoire*, 323-325. Charte Constitutionnelle of 4 June 1814: this was established at the Restoration when Louis XVIII became the new king, proclaiming to be King of France by divine right since 1795 (after the official death of the uncrowned Louis XVII). The Charter was representative of a compromise between the Old Regime and the Revolution, keeping several benefits acquired during the Revolution and the Empire. The set-up of two parliamentary Chambers met the demands of the Revolutionaries.

<sup>239</sup> In Wincock, *Madame*, 451.

Byron, who was present, concurred: “She has made Coppet as agreeable as society and talent can make any place on earth.”<sup>240</sup>

As for many French people, the political events of 1814 and 1815 shattered the life of de Staël: the defeat of Bonaparte, the collapse of the Empire, the return of the Bourbons, a new attempt to establish a constitutional monarchy twenty-two years after the failure of 1792, the beginnings of the Congress of Vienna which would decide the fate of France, the astounding return of Napoleon from the island of Elba, the flight of the new king, the resumption of the war, Waterloo, and the second Restoration.<sup>241</sup> In the midst of all these uncertainties, de Staël’s private life and public life were irrevocably linked. At the time, her main concern was the marriage of her daughter Albertine to Victor de Broglie, a noble without fortune. It was the time to try to recover the two million her father had loaned to the state, as a substantial dowry would seal the marital union. This familial preoccupation had a political dimension because the restitution depended on the current government. Louis XVIII reimbursed a part of the debt and the marriage was celebrated at Pisa, in February 1816, according to both Catholic and Protestant rites.<sup>242</sup>

While much of de Staël’s work had sprung from private and political turmoil, her interest in the abolitionist cause developed at a time of optimism and peace. After ten years, she was finally free from censorship and surveillance, and it is at this time that she devoted herself fully to her campaign against slavery. Inspired by her father, Montesquieu and the Abbé Raynal, she was a strong proponent of the abolition of the slave trade. In 1795, she had published three novellas, one of them *Mirza*, set in Senegal, which revealed a strong anti-slavery sentiment. She followed the campaign of the English abolitionist William Wilberforce and composed the preface to the French translation of his work, *Preface pour la Traduction d’un Ouvrage de M. Wilberforce sur la Traite des Nègres* (1814).<sup>243</sup> (*Preface to the Translation of a Work by Mr. Wilberforce on the Slave Trade*). In that introduction, de Staël insisted that the abolition of the trade was not political but the result of a religious enterprise accomplished by zealous Christians. In the same year, whether on her own initiative or at the request of Wilberforce, she wrote an article in the French press, *Appel aux*

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<sup>240</sup> In Herold, *Mistress*, 466.

<sup>241</sup> Miquel, *Histoire*, 315-330.

<sup>242</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 458-460.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 459-462. Wilberforce, a deputy of the House of Commons, had won the case against the slave trade in 1807. The reunion of victorious sovereigns in Paris gave him the opportunity to extend the abolition of slave trade to the whole European continent. Franklin College, University of Georgia, “Francophone Slavery”, [slavery.uga.edu/texts/index\\_pages/literary\\_works.htm](http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/index_pages/literary_works.htm) .

*Souverains réunis à Paris pour en obtenir l'Abolition de la Traite des Noirs* (1814) (*Call to the Sovereigns reunited in Paris to obtain the Abolition of the Slave Trade*). Addressing herself to the king of France as 'heir of St Louis', and to Spain, Portugal, Austria, Prussia and Russia, she called for an act which would be in accordance with the victory against the despotism of Napoleon:

On a proposé d'élever un monument pour consacrer la chute de l'opresseur qui pesait sur l'espèce humaine; le voilà, ce monument qu'une parole suffit pour élever: la traite des nègres est abolie par les rois qui ont renversé la tyrannie de la conquête en Europe.<sup>244</sup> (A monument dedicated to the fall of the Emperor, an oppressor of the human race, has been proposed; here it is, this monument that only a word is enough to raise: the slave trade is abolished by the kings who overthrew the tyranny of the conquest of Europe).

Her voice was heard despite the opposition of the powerful colonial lobby. There was also England's influence, as the country stood as a model of humanity when it abolished the slave trade in 1807, with the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.<sup>245</sup> In France, Louis XVIII made the slave trade illegal in 1817 but his government was slow to enforce the new edict. Slavery was finally abolished in France and its colonies in 1848: these were posthumous victories for the daughter of Necker.

Part of her mission accomplished, de Staël endeavoured to finalize her private affairs. In October, she made her union with Rocca official without, however, making it public "for personal and moral reasons", and she legitimated her son Alphonse. She wrote her will which shared her fortune between her children, her friends, her domestics and the poor. She asked Schlegel to take care of the publication of her last work *Considérations sur les Origines et les Causes de la Révolution Française* (1818).<sup>246</sup>

Sadly, the sudden death of Madame de Staël on 14 July 1817, at the age of fifty-one, would prevent her from completing her literary work. In February of that year, she had suffered a stroke which left her paralysed.<sup>247</sup> Despite her suffering, she remained lucid until the end and would await death supported by her religion. She forgave Benjamin Constant when she

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<sup>244</sup> De Staël, "Appel aux souverains réunis à Paris pour en obtenir l'abolition de la traite des nègres", [slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary\\_works/appel.pdf](http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary_works/appel.pdf).

<sup>245</sup> Actually, Denmark was the first European country to abolish the slave trade, in 1803.

<sup>246</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 468.

<sup>247</sup> Blennerhasset, *Madame de Staël*, 573.

wrote: “Il était ma vie, mais dans la profondeur du temps, si Dieu me pardonne, qu’importe d’avoir souffert?”<sup>248</sup> (He was my life, but in the depth of time, if God forgives me, does it matter to have suffered?) Constant was undoubtedly the love of her life because, for fifteen years, they cultivated and nourished each other with a fruitful intellectual exchange. Both shared the same intelligence, the same talent and the same beliefs. He died 13 years later, after a career as a Deputy and a leader of the opposition in the government of Charles X. He had been a popular defender of liberalism during the Revolution of 1830.<sup>249</sup> Before her death, de Staël confided to Chateaubriand her famous words: “J’ai toujours été la même, vive mais triste. J’ai aimé Dieu, mon père et la liberté”.<sup>250</sup> (I have always been the same: lively but sad. I have loved God, my father and liberty.)

Albertine and Alphonse survived Benjamin Constant. Rocca passed away six months after his wife. Auguste, while leading a life of a dilettante, pursued nevertheless his mother’s campaign for the abolition of slavery until his death in 1827. Only Albertine showed her mother’s brilliance and played a significant role in the literary and political society of Paris in the 1820s and 1830s. Her descendants would make their mark as scientists, historians and statesmen.<sup>251</sup>

De Staël was a prolific writer. Beside her novels, her essays, her novellas and her political and literary treatises, she wrote numerous letters. Her correspondence lasted for more than forty years, from the age of twelve in 1778 to 1817, a period when revolutionary upheavals and changes took place in France. The number and the diversity of her correspondents can be explained by her numerous contacts in different circles, and by those she met when she travelled or was exiled. It has been estimated that she sent between eight and ten thousand letters to five hundred addressees. De Staël exchanged letters with sovereigns, princes, ministers and celebrities. Her letters reveal a social, ideological and intellectual circle which encompassed a cosmopolitan Europe in which the superiority of the French language was still undisputed. Yet, few of her letters indicate that she could also communicate in English, Swedish, German and Italian. Her international correspondence reflected her conviction that

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<sup>248</sup> In Solovieff, “Introduction”, 16.

<sup>249</sup> Miquel, *Histoire*, 339. The Revolution of 1830 or July Revolution was an insurrection that brought Louis-Philippe to the throne of France. The revolution was precipitated by Charles X’s publication of restrictive ordinances contrary to the spirit of the Charter of 1814. In this revolution, the bourgeoisie secured a political and social ascendancy.

<sup>250</sup> In Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux Lundis*, 333.

<sup>251</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 474.

“all thinking men are equal, from one side of Europe to the other.”<sup>252</sup> Her letters portray also a woman who had an irresistible charm despite her lack of beauty. Her style is spontaneous, unconventional for the time, in fact quite modern in expression. Her written exchanges are reminiscent of her conversation and she would remark, “Correspondence to me is as alive as the spoken word.”<sup>253</sup> Her letters also display a deliberately literary tone, while others informally express personal feelings. To de Staël, “Writing letters was an exercise for the mind and the heart.”<sup>254</sup> Using her mind and her intelligence, she broached and questioned philosophical, literary and political ideas. Yet, she never adopted extreme positions in her deliberations, as she always advocated moderation, and she considered herself to be a communicator of ideas. Finally, there is the beauty of her love letters which are equal to and surpass those of the most famous lovers in history. In particular, her letters to Narbonne and Ribbing were highly expressive, becoming more and more passionate as she felt their love for her diminishing. Her messages revealed her inner life, its melancholia, its suffering and its regrets, feelings which were reproduced in her novels through her romantic heroines.<sup>255</sup> As Byron noted, “She thinks like a man, but alas! She feels like a woman.”<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Letter to her cousin, François de Pange, quoted in Solovieff, “Introduction”, 22.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>255</sup> Solovieff, “Introduction”, 22.

<sup>256</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 442.

## Chapter 3. Women and Early Feminism in France<sup>257</sup>

The eighteenth century was a period of change which ended in a violent crisis. France's traditional, social and political system was destroyed, and a new order was established. Tradition was under attack in many areas, and gender roles were a subject of discussion and revision. This chapter considers the experiences of women during the *Ancien Regime*, their place in the Enlightenment movement and its societal changes, and the influence of philosophical writings, especially Rousseauian thought, on the meaning of gender and feminism during these periods. After the revolutionary whirlwind had blown itself out there was a reversion to traditional femininity, though some modifications persisted. This section provides the context in which to consider the feminist ideas and actions of Madame de Staël, and her significance in this period of change.

### 3.1 Women in the *Ancien Regime*

During the *Ancien Régime*, individuals were defined by their 'state', which means their position in society. For most, there was no real desire to question or to challenge this position as it was accepted as a divine construction to ensure social and political order. While men's position in society could be established by their social and/or professional status, women's primary function was to be a wife and mother. Thus, the interests of the family unit predominated and were secured by alliances and transmission of patrimony, essential to the wealthy and also to the peasants whose survival rested on land.<sup>258</sup> In all sections of life, the wife was under her husband's legal power, reinforced by religious texts that exhorted women to submit to their husbands, although men had the duty to ensure their wives' protection and to preserve and to defend their dignity, according to the Catholic Church's precepts. Thus, it was nearly unthinkable for women to speak out against the patriarchal system of gender order, or against any injustice; any who did risk being ostracised or exiled from their communities. Nevertheless, as Godineau argues, the separation between the public and the private spheres was not as distinct as it would be later on. It was in fact usual for women, married or single, to work and to have a presence in the public sphere.

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<sup>257</sup> The English word 'feminism' was not in use at the time. The French word *féminisme* was invented by the Utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, and used only by him. The first recorded use of the term in English, derived from the French, was in 1894. Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (London: MacMillan Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>258</sup> Dominique Godineau, *Les Femmes dans la France Moderne XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015), 20-21.

Women made up about half of the labour force, and those who participated in public economic life, in town and in the country, did it as a means of survival. It is understood that these women's situations were not signs of emancipation but, in most cases, simply as a social reality of the time. In the middle classes, wives of artisans, shopkeepers and stallholders were often associated with their husbands' businesses. Small farmers needed women's labour to survive. Yet, records show that women's official identities did not specify their working activities, and they were only mentioned as 'wife of', 'widows' or 'daughter of', their full identity being defined according to that of their fathers or husbands rather than recognising their economic importance to the family enterprise. Their legal rights were defined within the parameters of this domestic labelling, set up to counter the threat posed by independent women who could challenge the existing patriarchy.<sup>259</sup>

From the Renaissance to the Revolution, women were considered second-class citizens in a society that recognised only their role within the family unit, but not in the public sphere as participants in economic life.<sup>260</sup> However, class also affected a woman's status, and Godineau extends her analysis of women in this period to consider class. During the *Ancien Régime*, aristocratic and upper middle-class urban women led an economically non-productive life and were remote from the working community.<sup>261</sup> They had some influence in society, but it was subtle, such as the pressure they brought to bear on government members to reward members of their family with office or honours. Some congregated in salons which were considered public spaces of monarchical representation at the time, and in which they exercised some cultural influence. Often labelled as *précieuses*, these privileged women formed intellectual and literary circles wherein the aristocratic 'school of civility' predominated. As Dena Goodman indicates, it is in the first half of the seventeenth century that academic salons made their appearance, salons which would play a significant social and political role during the Enlightenment.<sup>262</sup> The salons were nevertheless a domestic space.<sup>263</sup> Whatever her station, a woman had to remain within the limits of a domestic existence.<sup>264</sup>

Even when women spoke out on societal and political matters, their voices went unacknowledged or were discouraged. Yet, despite this social refusal to recognise women's

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.* 20-21.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>261</sup> Pierre Miquel, *Histoire de la France* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), 253-257.

<sup>262</sup> Dena Goodman reported in Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>263</sup> Lilti, *The World of the Salons*, 19.

<sup>264</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 113-14.

ability in these areas, female education was a topic of interest. In 1450, Christine de Pisan had written *Le Trésor de la Cité des dames* (*The Treasure of the City of Ladies*), which was the first book by a feminist, published in France in 1497, wherein she denounced the inferior status of women and set forth demands for their education.<sup>265</sup> During the course of the sixteenth century, more texts from de Pisan followed,<sup>266</sup> and from female authors of more modest condition, who dedicated their work to love, and to the freedom for women to study and to write.<sup>267</sup> The resulting ‘*Querelle des Femmes*’ (The Quarrel of Women) promoted women’s education for the first time.<sup>268</sup> The claim was supported by Christian society and the humanists, Erasmus among them, who believed that to educate young noblewomen and those of the bourgeoisie would ensure the success of their marriage. Conversely, the absence of education for working class women, as for working class men, was never a disputed topic of discussion.<sup>269</sup> As Godineau remarks, the sixteenth century witnessed a rebirth of secular literary life, and with these writers also the beginnings of feminism.<sup>270</sup> Women’s claims were also defended by a few male intellectuals who, while not questioning women’s social condition, disputed the belief that they were intellectually and spiritually inferior to men. The humanist Henri Cornelius Agrippa de Nettesheim argued in *De la Noblesse et Préexcellence du sexe féminin* (1537) (*On Nobility and Pre-excellence of the feminine sex*) that women’s alleged inferiority came from unjust laws, and from prejudice which trapped women in a state of ignorance and chained to domestic tasks. This theory was shared, in the seventeenth century, by François Poullain de la Barre. In his pamphlet, *De l’Egalité des deux sexes* (1673) (*On the Equality of the two sexes*), Poullain de la Barre argued that if women were not represented in the disciplines of the arts or sciences, or did not play a role in public office, it did not indicate that they were unfit for these functions *by nature*. As he wrote, “[We] are filled with prejudices, and...we must renounce them completely if we are to obtain clear and definite knowledge”.<sup>271</sup> From his Cartesian approach, Poullain declared that if reason is equally shared by all human beings, women must be included as well. To this early Enlightenment philosopher, “reason has no sex”.<sup>272</sup> His pedagogical work *De l’éducation des*

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<sup>265</sup> Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Persea Books, 1982).

<sup>266</sup> *Enseignements* (1521) (Teachings) and *Le Miroir de l’âme pécheresse* (1531) (Mirror of the sinful soul).

<sup>267</sup> Works from Jeanne Flore, Helisienne de Crenne, and from Lyon, Pernette du Guillet and Louise Labé.

<sup>268</sup> ‘*The Querelle des Femmes*’: a European-wide literary movement which was initiated during the Middle Ages at the Court and extended into the late eighteenth century. The discussed topics were usually about ‘the nature of women’, love, and marriage. In Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 19.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-47.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>271</sup> In Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

*dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les moeurs* (*On the Education of Ladies for the Application of the Minds to Scholarship and Manners*), published in 1674, advocated that there “is only one method for instructing both, since they belong to the same species.”<sup>273</sup> Marie le Jars de Gournay (1566-1645) was another feminist who defended her right to classical scholarship. A companion of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), she studied science and Latin, and wrote about equality between the sexes in *Égalité des Hommes et des Femmes* (1622) (*Equality of Men and Women*) and the right of women to an education in *Grief des Dames* (1626) (*Grievance of Ladies*). Interestingly, she refused to argue or to debate the concept of women’s inferiority when she wrote: “Je me contente de les éгалer aux hommes; la nature s’opposant pour ce regard autant à la supériorité qu’à l’inferiorité”<sup>274</sup> (I content myself to make them [women] equal to men; in this regard, nature is opposed to superiority as it is to inferiority). In France, she was mocked and criticised for her feminist theories but was praised by some female members of the European Republic of Letters. As Godineau notes, de Gournay was the first to mention cultural factors, like the social milieu or a country’s culture, as influential factors in defining women’s status.<sup>275</sup> The *philosophe* François de Salignac de la Motte-Fénelon (1651-1715),<sup>276</sup> promoted instruction for young women but insisted their education be specific and related to their function, when he wrote: “La différence de leurs emplois doit faire celle de leur études”.<sup>277</sup> (The differences in their occupations must be reflected in their studies). This specific recommendation was permitted because it did not disrupt the social order and traditional relationship between the sexes. Generally, during the *Ancien Régime*, equal education for women was not encouraged as it would have been considered prejudicial to the traditional female virtues of morality and innocence.<sup>278</sup>

### 3.2 The Enlightenment and Feminism

In the eighteenth century, a new vision of the world was born. New concepts of behaviour were developed and perceptions of gender changed. While this process began with theory first, during the Enlightenment, it progressed to real experimentation with the French Revolution. Since the 1980s, renewed interest in the Enlightenment has fuelled debate

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<sup>273</sup> In Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 12-13.

<sup>274</sup> In Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 172.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>276</sup> Known as Fénelon, a Christian and a mystic *philosophe*.

<sup>277</sup> In Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 147.

<sup>278</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Ecrire, Lutter, Vivre* (Geneva: Droz, 1994), 54.

among historians. Unsure of how to interpret its meaning, they have sought to examine its culture, which nineteenth-century writers tended to condemn as abstract, cold and artificial.<sup>279</sup> Most Enlightenment historiography has extended consideration of the movement beyond philosophy and researched the modern forms of politics that emerged and that are linked to broader social changes during the period. Interestingly, the eighteenth-century institutions of civil society which formed public opinion revealed that the nature of the Enlightenment resulted more from cultural factors than from social, economic and political ones.<sup>280</sup> This period was indeed marked by a new set of cultural practices and new forms of sociability that facilitated the exchange of ideas, encouraging people to challenge cultural and societal systems, religion, and gender differences. During the second part of the eighteenth century, numerous new cultural beliefs evolved, with the affirmation of individualism, new values of intimacy, and a secular view of the world. Most important was a redefinition of society as a frame of human existence which ought to guarantee its people individual happiness and respect their rights. This new notion of society rested on the belief that the interdependence of its members could generate order and peace without an absolute monarch or divine sanction.<sup>281</sup> As David Garrioch indicates, the new political ideal was that in a civil society, citizens would foster a sense of responsibility for each other while at the same time allowing freedom of opinion and expression.<sup>282</sup> Against the reformist pragmatism of enlightened reason, stood the dream of an ideal society which was not imaginary any more but possible in the future. Inspired partly by the American Revolution, the French Revolution saw a new political and institutional ‘utopic’ tone in literature, some of which moved towards a debate on the transformation of the state, republican ideals, and the meaning of democracy.<sup>283</sup> This debate included the roles and abilities of women.

### 3.2.1 *Enlightenment thinking about gender*

Enlightenment thinkers spent a great deal of energy trying to define gender, and historians have seen this period as a turning point in European culture. The notion of gender differences opposed the basis of Enlightenment thought that sought to recognise a universal

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<sup>279</sup> Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 515.

<sup>280</sup> Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>281</sup> Keith M. Baker, “The Enlightenment Idioms, Old Regime Discourses, and Revolutionary Improvisation” in *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*. (Stanford (Cal.): Stanford University Press, 2011), 171.

<sup>282</sup> David Garrioch, “‘Man is born for society’: Confraternities and Civil Society in Eighteenth-Century Paris and Milan”, *Social Science History*, 41, 1 (Spring, 2017), 103.

<sup>283</sup> Juan Francisco Fuentes, “Utopie”, in Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 152-53.

human nature. While thinkers of the Enlightenment endorsed egalitarian values holding all individuals equal, in an ideal world, it was still difficult to include some members of society, traditionally considered inferior, such as women and Africans.<sup>284</sup>

As a principle, 'equality' was promoted through the notion of the 'state of nature'<sup>285</sup> that was reinforced by the result of comparative studies that followed the early voyages of discovery. Travellers, traders and missionaries wrote accounts of non-Western cultures, practices and institutions, and these accounts encouraged a relativist attitude to Western traditions and values. New information challenged the idea of innate human characteristics and it became accepted that a nation could not be understood in isolation from the social, economic and cultural forces that produced its identity.<sup>286</sup> Such forces also produced each culture's idea of femininity, with gendered characteristics and behaviours no longer seen as simply innate. The belief that women were inherently fit only to be wives and mothers could be questioned.

Still, most debates in the eighteenth century centred on the physical condition of the female sex, characterised by reproductive function, and on the importance of the role of mother. A woman's value as a human being rested on her usefulness to society. This belief was reinforced by the Physiocrats' doctrine that stipulated that, as a guarantee of population growth, a woman's humanity rested on her role as a procreator.<sup>287</sup> As Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779) wrote in his article 'Morale' in the *Encyclopédie*: "Her [woman's] humanity consisted chiefly in her sexual destiny."<sup>288</sup> Her role as a procreator not only produced more labour, but had another economic aspect, due to inheritance of property; fathers wanted to be sure that the sons inheriting their property were really theirs. Thus, woman's biological nature carried a social dimension too, with her morality associated with her sexual behaviour, underlining the importance of women's sexual morals. Moreover, the Encyclopedists, who were greatly influenced by Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, could not reconcile the idea that women, assuming the role of mothers, could have the same intellectual abilities as men.<sup>289</sup> This view is exemplified by Rousseau's character Sophie in *Emile ou l'Éducation* (1762),

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<sup>284</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 194.

<sup>285</sup> The 'state of nature': defined as the hypothetical life of people before the advent of societies.

<sup>286</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 6.

<sup>287</sup> The Physiocrats were a group of economists in the eighteenth century who believed that the wealth of nations was derived, at base, from land and agriculture.

<sup>288</sup> In Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 28.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-34.

whose femininity and excess of emotions were depicted as an impediment to her ability to reason.<sup>290</sup>

Yet, Godineau argues that the majority of Enlightenment thinkers had abandoned the Renaissance idea of women as ‘unperfected beings’ and began to stress instead the ‘natural differences’ that separated the sexes. In fact, there was a tendency to consider women not in terms of superiority, inferiority or equality, but rather in terms of complementarity, and not solely as procreators.<sup>291</sup> This concept was also championed by de Staël. Real curiosity about the female body and about women’s nature emerged at the time, as Pierre Roussel’s work, *Système Physique et Moral de la Femme* (1775) (*Physical and Moral system of the Woman*) testified with five editions in thirty years. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledgement of complementary differences, the works of male writers revealed an assumption of masculine superiority. Because women were defined by their sex, not by reason as men were, it was well accepted that this biological difference shaped their mind, their emotions and their feelings.<sup>292</sup> As Rousseau wrote: “La femme observe, l’homme raisonne”.<sup>293</sup> (The woman observes, the man reasons). Yet, the *philosophe* did not consider women inferior for lacking abstract intelligence, and he endowed them with qualities that men rarely possessed. Pity, tenderness and compassion were praised as feminine virtues which were essential to counter the brutal tendencies of human nature. Later, de Staël would advocate the same qualities in her *De L’Influence des Passions*.<sup>294</sup> While Diderot did not share Rousseau’s misogyny, he agreed that women had less reason than men, and that they had more instinct and passion. Unfortunately, at the end of the century, a growing resentment against female aristocrats at the Court prevailed and damaged women’s image further. Accused of meddling in political affairs, these aristocratic women used their position to place their *protégés* in key government positions – as de Staël did with her lover Narbonne - and were criticised for their excesses, their spending and their scandals as well as their political meddling, although their real crime was engaging in politics. With the growing influence of Rousseauian ideas, they were seen as symbolising a form of ‘feminine degeneration’, blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres, and a source of the political and social confusion prevailing toward the end of the eighteenth century. At the centre of this situation was Queen Marie-Antoinette, whose unpopularity increased as she was held responsible for the reign’s financial distress,

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<sup>290</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 19.

<sup>291</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 182.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>293</sup> In Godineau, *Les Femmes* 183.

<sup>294</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence des Passions suivi de Réflexions sur le suicide* (Paris: Payot, 2000).

even to the point of being labelled ‘Madame Deficit’. These denunciations were excessive, but they showed the disillusionment of the bourgeoisie with the nobility, the first one associated with the feminine, the second, with the masculine.<sup>295</sup> As Godineau indicates, the Enlightenment discourse on gender was not univocal, and paradoxes and contradictions occurred. Among the thinkers who subscribed to the theory of perfectibility and to the progress of reason, some kept women outside of history because of their physiology, while others were convinced of men’s responsibility for keeping women in a state of inferiority.<sup>296</sup> Even so, the Enlightenment was marked by multiple cultural and social developments which had some effects on women and their relationship with men. The spread of literacy and the salons’ evolution were two of them.

### 3.2.2 *Societal changes during the Enlightenment.*

The spread of literacy was a significant and defining element of the Enlightenment because it infiltrated lower social classes and gave rise to a new public sphere.<sup>297</sup> In Paris itself, a relatively high level of literacy was long established but it continued to progress and to strengthen during the eighteenth century, making the French capital the leading centre of academic life and of book production. As Louis-Sébastien Mercier noted in his 1781 *Tableaux de Paris*, “People are certainly reading ten times as much in Paris as they did a hundred years ago”.<sup>298</sup> In 1789, the freedom of the press contributed to the development of authorship and journalism, increasing the circulation of books, pamphlets, newspapers and political writings.<sup>299</sup> Roche explains that the act of reading was an immediate response because “it was also linked with the first active attempts to provoke and stimulate the public, through which countless messages were passed and behaviour patterns diffused.”<sup>300</sup> Indeed, by the 1780s, writers were known to convey knowledge and to shape opinions, forming a kind of ‘soft power’ that was as critical as that of organised government. This led some historians to suggest that the advent of a ‘bourgeois public sphere’ was not the result of socio-economic workings but the consequence of a politicised literature, a fact already mentioned by Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>301</sup> In fact, the Republic of Letters professed to be a political force

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<sup>295</sup> Beatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël: Thèmes et Etudes* (Paris: Ellipses, 1999), 12.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>297</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 19.

<sup>298</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, in Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> century* (Leamington Spa (UK): Berg Publishers, 1987), 198.

<sup>299</sup> Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 220.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

in its own right with the capacity to build and to mould public opinion.<sup>302</sup> Conversely, Fontana claims that this movement, championed by writers and *philosophes*, “was inspired by high sentiments such as a love of equality, the hatred of prejudices and the belief in progress, rather than any specific political project”.<sup>303</sup> Most *philosophes* contributed to the *Encyclopédie* - the words *philosophe* and *Encyclopédist* became nearly synonyms - and were, in the 1750s, recognised or vilified as a group who had become the secular preachers of civilisation, contrary to tradition and to religious doctrines.<sup>304</sup> After centuries of subservient literature, the eighteenth century saw the beginning in France of that ‘revolution of the minds’ that, with its independent intellectual writing, could raise serious philosophical issues in the name of reason.<sup>305</sup> In contrast to great thinkers such as Diderot, Voltaire or d’Alembert, these writers were not under the patronage of society’s elites or monarchs, and this allowed them to be bolder, more engaged and even provocative in their writings.<sup>306</sup> As the *philosophe* Diderot wrote in *Jacques the Fataliste and his Master* (1796), “All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”<sup>307</sup> Yet, freedom of expression was not entirely without risk, as in the hands of fanatical demagogues and unscrupulous pamphleteers, it could inflame and manipulate public opinion.<sup>308</sup>

Recent historical research has shown that most of the books that were widely read during the Enlightenment were not the works of famous thinkers, but books of lesser known writers who addressed a great variety of topics, from political scandals to travel accounts. Historian Robert Darnton argues that the emergence of this new community of authors, that he describes as ‘Grub Street’, created a division between its members and the Republic of Letters, and was one of the factors that led to the demise of the *Ancien Régime* and to the onset of the Revolution.<sup>309</sup> However, as Roche suggests, the growth of public opinion became a source of tension between groups of elites, those whose status rested on birth and those on intellect, thus deepening divisions among the eighteenth century social classes.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 17.

<sup>303</sup> Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 162.

<sup>304</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (London: Penguin, 1985), 202.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-92.

<sup>306</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 18-19.

<sup>307</sup> In Baker, “The Enlightenment idioms”, 174.

<sup>308</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 171.

<sup>309</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 18-19.

<sup>310</sup> Daniel Roche, in Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 25.

The Republic of Letters was also divided in a different way, between men and women, and this division reflected one of the aspects of the Enlightenment's position on gender. Some women writers were members of the 'Grub Street' class while others belonged to the social elites. Thinkers, including Madame de Genlis, Emilie du Châtelet and Madame de Staël, produced among them scientific works, translations, and philosophical and pedagogical essays.<sup>311</sup> More educated than their ancestors, these women wanted to be part of these intellectual changes, and the proliferation of new ideas.<sup>312</sup> Indeed, women's publications increased thanks to the unrestricted publication of books, with novels and epistolary novels being the most popular forms among readers.<sup>313</sup> New types of publications such as magazines also satisfied the public's thirst for information; the monthly magazine *Le Journal des Dames* (1759-1778) was the first to be written by and for women, confirming the growing number of female readers.<sup>314</sup> Roche indicates that in Paris, eighty-four per cent of *Parisiennes* were literate, though only sixty-two per cent of women in the provinces.<sup>315</sup> This increase in women's literacy caught the attention of traditionalists such as the sexist Restif de la Bretonne<sup>316</sup> who declared in *Les gynographes ou la femme réformée* (1777) (*Women writers or the reformed woman*) that daughters of the popular classes must bury themselves only in work "as writing and even reading could only be prejudicial to them."<sup>317</sup> As a result, some female authors preferred to remain anonymous or to use a pseudonym rather than confront public opinion, as most men at the time still doubted women's capacity to contribute to thought and intellectual discussions. Women were still associated with weakness, emotion, maternity and the private domestic space. Indeed, how could women who had no autonomy and independence because of family duties, and no objectivity of judgement because of emotions, be legitimate participants in the shaping of public opinion? Outram argues that the intellectual class displayed its insecurity, despite being aware of its own power over public opinion, when it feared women's participation in public affairs could diminish its credibility and legitimacy.<sup>318</sup> Likewise, in his *Tableau de Paris* (1781-1788), Mercier intimates that a jealous man would feel threatened if there was rivalry between the sexes on the literary scene: "L'homme voudra bien que la femme possède assez d'esprit pour

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<sup>311</sup> Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex*, 3.

<sup>312</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 215.

<sup>313</sup> *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (Mme de Graffigny, 1747), *Lettres de Mistress Fanni Butler* (Mme Riccoboni, 1757) in Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 219.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>315</sup> Roche, *The People of Paris*, 203.

<sup>316</sup> Restif de la Bretonne (1734-1806), a French novelist.

<sup>317</sup> In Roche, *The People*, 203.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

l'entendre, mais point qu'elle ne s'élève trop...et que lui seul, jouisse de l'esprit de celle qui publie"<sup>319</sup> (A man would like a woman to possess enough intelligence to listen to him, but not for herself to rise too much ...and that he should be the only one to enjoy her talent). To Mercier, women's intellectual ability and their right to publish had become the standard of sexual equality. While it was generally accepted that women could please themselves writing about love and relationships, it was still unthinkable that they could engage in social or political critique. In any case, it was generally accepted that women's works could never be as brilliant as those of men. In fact, the only female writings that attracted praise were those recognised as displaying a 'male' style.<sup>320</sup> This contempt towards women writers, who were seen as trespassing on public space and competing with men, was illustrated in the dimorphism used in the vocabulary at the time when male writers were designated as *homme de lettres* (men of letters) and women writers as *femme-auteur* (women authors).<sup>321</sup> This situation was one of many which would prompt women to denounce their fate in literature, exemplified in the work of de Staël. Yet, during the eighteenth century, literature was not the only feminine affirmation in the arts. From 1720, the Royal Academy welcomed women artists. These female artists were financially independent, exhibiting their works in salons, and were usually supported by the women of the royal family. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, who painted famous portraits of the Queen Marie-Antoinette, was one such artist.<sup>322</sup>

Women's education was the most discussed topic of the *Querelle des Femmes*, and the debate continued in the 1780s. In previous centuries, the question of education had been dealt with in religious terms by men of the Church, but in the second part of the eighteenth century, *philosophes* considered it an economic and social issue.<sup>323</sup> The novelist Choderlos de Laclos published a series of essays, *Des femmes et de leur l'éducation (On Women and On Their Education)* that promoted women's instruction. In response, famous *philosophes*, including Condorcet, Helvetius, d'Alembert and Voltaire, reaffirmed their position, claiming that, in the name of reason, both sexes have the same intellectual ability. In contrast, Rousseau was convinced that an identical education would not alter fundamental intellectual differences between the sexes, and it could even jeopardize women's brilliant sensibility, a quality inherent to their femininity and the essence of the moral woman. As he wrote in *Lettres à d'Alembert* (1758), "Ce n'est pas à une femme mais aux femmes que je refuse le talent des

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<sup>319</sup> Mercier in Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 221.

<sup>320</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 223.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-19.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>323</sup> Marina Roggero in Tilti, *Le Monde*, 239.

hommes.”<sup>324</sup> (It is not to a woman that I refuse men’s talent, but to all women). Similarly, Antoine Leonard Thomas and Pierre Roussel argued that women’s intellectual capacities must be linked to their biological nature and thus, femininity and learning were incompatible.<sup>325</sup> There were others who disagreed. In his response to Rousseau’s letter, in *Lettre à Monsieur Rousseau* (1759), d’Alembert criticised men for degrading and enslaving women, and asked for girls to benefit from the same education as boys.<sup>326</sup> The claim for women’s education was also championed by women writers who produced pedagogical works, like Mme de Miremont and Louise de l’Espinay, who developed in the late eighteenth century an educational program for girls. Interestingly, Mme de Miremont advocated a need for education to preserve, contrary to Rousseau’s ideas, young girls’ dignity and morality. During the same period, the historian Catherine Macaulay, and writers Mary Wollstonecraft and de Staël, made education a priority for women’s emancipation. This debate about men’s and women’s education illustrates the equivocal stance taken during the eighteenth century when some philosophers were on one hand, preaching universalism and a better world for all human beings, and on the other, would have some reservations about the full inclusion of women in the public sphere, and not facilitating their participation. It is important to highlight that the topic of women’s intellectual ability was initially at the centre of Enlightenment discussions of woman’s nature.<sup>327</sup>

Historians recognise that communication shapes culture, which in turn influences politics. As a result, organisations including salons, academies, and Freemason’s Lodges have found a place in studies of the end of the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>328</sup> While the spread of literacy had a definite impact on public opinion in eighteenth century France, so did the salon which was a place central to the shaping and diffusion of new thoughts, where people congregated, exchanged ideas and knowledge, and initiated cultural movements.<sup>329</sup> Women were vital to the organisation of this institution wherein “le pouvoir des femmes” (the power of women) reigned, a position that was often criticised in the name of differences and separation between the sexes, particularly by Rousseau.<sup>330</sup> The situation of *salonnières* was indeed exceptional

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>325</sup> Antoine Leonard Thomas, *Essai sur le caractères, les moeurs et l’esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles* (1772) and Pierre Roussel, *Système physique et moral de la femme* (1775), a work that was re-edited up to five times. Steinbrügge, *The Moral*, 7.

<sup>326</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 185.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>328</sup> Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 545-46.

<sup>329</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 216-17.

<sup>330</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 94.

as it allowed these privileged women to use their home both in the traditional sense as the woman's sphere, but also as a liberating space in which personal views could be freely expressed by women as well as men.<sup>331</sup> In fact, de Staël saw a link between the presence of literary salons and the preservation of civil liberties. Balayé points out that, as a *salonnière*, de Staël effectively propagated her thoughts on politics and society.<sup>332</sup>

Since the 1970s, *le monde des salons* has attracted the interest of cultural historians who have challenged previous conceptions of this institution. As Antoine Lilti indicates, "the salon remains curiously charged with contrasting connotations that evoke both the superficial amusements of a tiny elite and an ideal of intellectual communication."<sup>333</sup> Recent scholarship highlights its evolution, during the Enlightenment, from an exclusively monarchical milieu to a more conventional bourgeois environment, composed of heterogeneous elites.<sup>334</sup> In short, the control of intellectual thought was passing from the court to a broader social and intellectual elite who then influenced public opinion. Yet, Helvetius pointed out that the opinion of *le monde*<sup>335</sup> could be different from that of the public at large; a work or a person could not satisfy both the private societies and the general public, because they did not always share the same interests or the same worldly conventions.<sup>336</sup> It is not clear how significant salons were in the process of producing popular literary works. Today's historians, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Darnton, depict the salons of the eighteenth century as a new bourgeois public sphere where literary activity was fostered among writers.<sup>337</sup> Outram corroborates when she writes that this period witnessed an increasing number of non-aristocratic salons which "widened the intellectual agenda from the culture of the seventeenth century's *précieuses* to a wider focus on critical writing in history, economics and politics."<sup>338</sup> Conversely, Lilti emphasises its closed and high society character, and minimises its role as a literary and intellectual venue, considering it to be merely a social space for the leisure of the elites. Moreover, Lilti opposes the Tocquevillian notion that salons were places for the discussion of complex abstract literary politics and oppositional

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<sup>331</sup> The term *salonnière*, increasingly used by historians, did not have that meaning in French at the time. The words 'maitresse de maison' (mistress of the household) was used instead.

<sup>332</sup> Balayé, *Ecrire*, 14-16.

<sup>333</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 5.

<sup>334</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Dena Goodman, in Lilti, *The World*, 4.

<sup>335</sup> *Le monde* is a term that designates both a social group distinguished by its practices of sociability and those practices themselves. It occupied an important place in the aesthetic and intellectual debates of the century. Lilti indicates that "many writers of the Enlightenment were fascinated by it, thus helping to give the customs and the manners of the Paris elite a lasting literary aura". In Lilti, *The World*, 7.

<sup>336</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 177.

<sup>337</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Darnton, in Lilti, *The World*, 4

<sup>338</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 95.

public opinion.<sup>339</sup> Still, writers played a significant role in this form of sociability, producing texts, letters, essays and novels, and promoting their new literary works, while participating in worldly amusements according to the social code of aristocratic behaviour.<sup>340</sup> These writers and *philosophes* were often dependent on the social elite or on patronage; Mme Necker, an important figure of this philanthropic movement, was known to have granted pensions to authors who frequented her salon. After 1770, politics made its entry in salons, with *salonnières* welcoming politicians of the day and foreign diplomats, thereby assisting their career advancement. This interest in politics increased on the eve of the Revolution and became the main topic of salon conversation. Lilti notes that Mme Necker's salon was more active than ever, especially during the period of the Estates-General when all Necker's partisans congregated there, strongly encouraged by de Staël who was central to her father's political network.<sup>341</sup> At the time, with the same energy, she assumed the role of *salonnière* at both her salon in the rue du Bac, and at her mother's when her father's position was restored as Minister of Finances by Louis XVI.<sup>342</sup>

Interestingly, Chinatsu Takeda suggests that when de Staël opened her salon, after her marriage in 1786, the salons' influence on public opinion had declined, replaced by political pamphlets written by men from all sections of society.<sup>343</sup> The political theorist Joan Landes goes further, claiming that "during the enlightenment *salonnières* eventually disappeared as victims of the gendered egalitarianism that permeated the revolutionary public sphere."<sup>344</sup> Conversely, Stephen Kale denies this statement, indicating that after 1796, aristocratic *émigrés* returned and reopened private salons, promoting the fusion between old and new elites.

The French salon gave women access to public affairs and intellectual pursuits to a degree that was unique in Europe, and could also be a place of promotion and symbolic power for a few.<sup>345</sup> Nevertheless, these *salonnières* were more often than not denounced for their

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<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-93.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>341</sup> The Estates-General: Necker insisted, in 1789, that Louis XVI called together the Estates, a congress that originated in the medieval period, and consisted of three estates: the First Estate represented the clergy, the Second Estate the nobility, and the Third Estate, the rest of French society.

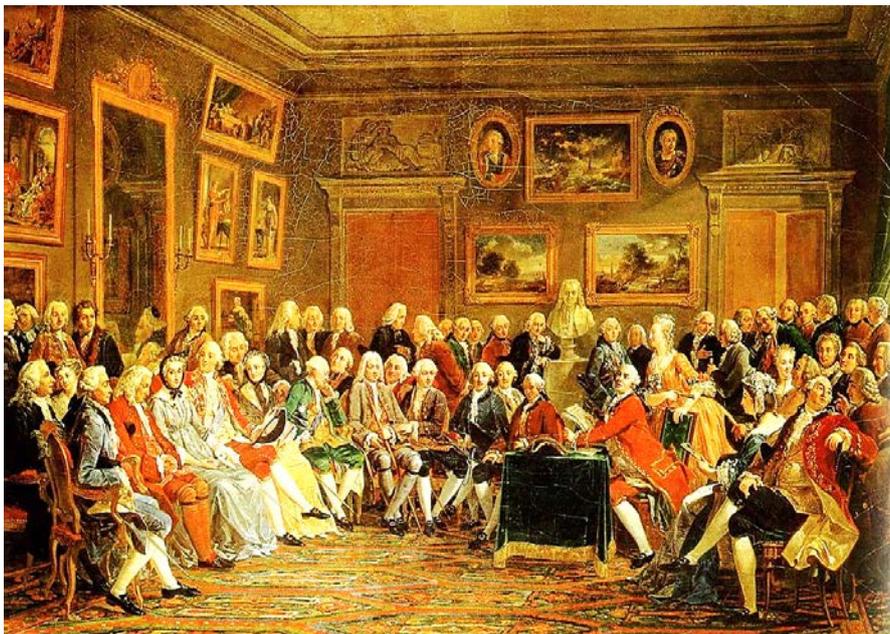
<sup>342</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 225.

<sup>343</sup> Chinatsu Takeda, "Apology of Liberty in *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.J. Rousseau*: Mme de Staël's contribution to the Discourse on Natural Sociability", *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 14, 2 (June 2007), 182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480701433307> .

<sup>344</sup> Joan B. Landes in Takeda, "Apology", 166.

<sup>345</sup> Steven D. Kale, "Women, Salons and Sociability as Constitutional Problems in the Political Writings of Madame de Staël", *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 32, 2 (Summer 2006), 309-38.

intellectual pretension to the status of *femme savante*, thus attracting criticism and inspiring satire from male writers. As early as the seventeenth century, Molière wrote a play, titled *Les femmes savantes*, holding up to ridicule women who claimed to have transformed their salon into a *bureau d'esprit*. Lilti observes that these attacks particularly targeted women writers who confused sociability with publication. As he writes, “The figure of the *femme du monde* was no longer compatible with that of woman author in the eyes of both high society and male writers”.<sup>346</sup> Later, Palissot’s satirical work *Les philosophes* (1760) was aimed in particular at women authors who exhibited their literary skills and learned ‘vanity’ within the realm of salons. This criticism was widely accepted; women were publicly condemned in newspapers and in print for transgressing these norms.<sup>347</sup> Interestingly, Lilti argues that, contrary to Habermas’ model,<sup>348</sup> salons were institutions which could not be categorised as public spaces, but as belonging to *société*, which denoted “voluntary associations and social collectives founded on worldly sociability and polite manners.”<sup>349</sup> Then, *la société* was equivalent to *le monde*.<sup>350</sup>



**Plate 0.1 Madame Geoffrin’s salon in 1755, by Anicet Charles Gabriel Lemonnier.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

<sup>346</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 45.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>348</sup> Habermas’s model: Habermas “defined...the public sphere by the public use of criticism by private individuals.” In Lilti, *The World*, 174.

<sup>349</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 238.

<sup>350</sup> Today’s equivalent would be *La haute société* and *le beau monde*.

While the salon evolved during the Enlightenment period, new forms of association emerged with the establishment of cafés, where news, ideas and current affairs were debated, and clubs, which became popular among politicians and political activists, and which played a crucial role during the Revolution. Clubs and cafés, though, were usually male domains, as were academies and Masonic lodges. Contrary to salons, these new institutions challenged the dominant class and contributed to the formation of eighteenth century ‘civil society’, highlighting the values of reciprocity and exchange in the name of knowledge and social progress.<sup>351</sup>

### 3.2.3 *Philosophes of the Enlightenment*

Both nineteenth-century French analysts Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877) and François Guizot (1787-1874), and more recent scholars, have argued that the Enlightenment played only a small part in the development of a revolutionary feminism because there were diverse ideologies and multiple demands of a practical nature also contributing at the time.<sup>352</sup> Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that the works of *philosophes* such as Condorcet, Montesquieu and Diderot inspired, influenced and propelled women to claim new rights. The opinions of these influential writers require detailed analysis to explain their influence on eighteenth century feminism and de Staël. She herself believed that literature had a political role to play and could contribute to the advancement of civilisation. Feminist political theorist Lori Marso states:

It is no accident that each thinker looks to women as the ones excluded from rationalism’s promise for a better future: gender equality is a central and defining element of Enlightenment reason.<sup>353</sup>

The Marquis of Condorcet (1743-1794), a mathematician, economist, politician and writer, provides the strongest example of a *philosophe* who was willing to re-think the place of

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<sup>351</sup> Goodman, “Sociabilité” in Ferrone and Roche, *Le monde*, 251.

<sup>352</sup> For Thiers or Guizot, the Revolution symbolized the triumph of the bourgeoisie: the triumph of the people for the Romantics; and the triumph of democracy for the Republicans. Since the 1970s, Anglo-Saxon historians (Darton, Cobban, Doyle and Sutherland) have questioned the traditional ideology of the opposition of a feudal nobility to an enlightened bourgeoisie, and a centralized and absolute monarchy as the main triggers of the Revolution. Instead, they have emphasized the weight of circumstances and the regional diversities and have been amazed at how important and little known the people’s counter-revolution had been. Joëlle Chevet, “La Révolution s’approprié les Lumières”, *Historia* 81 (2003), 32-33.

<sup>353</sup> Lori J Marso, “The Stories of Citizens: Rousseau, Montesquieu, and de Staël Challenge Enlightenment Reason”, *Polity* 30, 3 (1998), 455. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3235209> (accessed 30 June 2016).

women in French society.<sup>354</sup> An advocate of liberalism, he fought for the cause of liberty, equality and the ‘rights of man’, which implied equal rights for all human beings. He criticised despotism which prevents the exchange of ideas and wrote, “Man is corrupted by prejudices, by interests of artificial passions, and by social habits.”<sup>355</sup> He admired the American 1776 Declaration of Independence, declaring it to be “a restoration of humanity’s long lost title deeds”.<sup>356</sup> Condorcet embraced the notion of progress and the perfectibility of human nature, and he highlighted the role of public education in the eradication of social inequalities and in the achievement of mass enlightenment. He claimed, “We will show how liberty, the arts and the Luminaries have contributed to the advancement and the improvement of morals.”<sup>357</sup> He believed that through progress, humanity would gradually grow towards a complete acceptance of the principles of the unity and equality of the human species. Thus, it is not surprising that Condorcet was a feminist who advocated equal rights for women. In July 1790, he published *On the admission of women to the right to vote* in which he claimed:

Habit can so familiarise men with violations of their natural rights that those who have lost them neither think of protesting nor believe they are unjustly treated. And, for this exclusion not to constitute an act of tyranny, we would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not exactly the same as those of men, or else that they are incapable of exercising them.<sup>358</sup>

Condorcet continued by giving examples of famous Queens – Elizabeth of England, Maria-Theresa of Austria, and the two Catherines of Russia – who had exercised their leadership successfully through sheer intelligence, courage and strength of mind. In the *Esquisse*, he wrote that:

Among the important progress of the human mind for general happiness, we must consider the complete destruction of prejudices which have been established between the two sexes, ... we will show how much the destruction of these prejudices, and its laws, can contribute to the happiness of families.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> The Marquis of Condorcet (1743-1794), a mathematician, economist, politician and *philosophe*.

<sup>355</sup> Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit humain* (1798), (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1970), 60.

<sup>356</sup> Condorcet, *Political Writings*, eds. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>359</sup> Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 228.

In *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New Haven à un citoyen de Virginie* (1787) (*Letters from a bourgeois inhabitant of New Haven to a citizen of Virginia*), he had already stated that women were rational creatures and should be able to exercise political rights. He held the progressive view that if women were paying taxes, they should be able to exercise free will, to be full citizens and to vote and hold public office. In fact, he



**Plate 0.2 Marquis Nicolas de Condorcet by Jean-Baptiste Greuze. (ca. 1780-90)  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

argued that men were responsible for taking for granted the violation of the natural rights of women.<sup>360</sup> Yet, he was far in advance of public opinion: the question of political rights for women was not one which appeared in the *cahiers de doléances* which contain lists of grievances drawn up by each of the three estates, nobility, clergy and third estate, before the convening of the Estates-General in France in 1789.<sup>361</sup> While Condorcet was criticized by some after the Revolution for his “subversive voluntarism and rationalism”, the *Esquisse* was

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<sup>360</sup> Condorcet, “Lettres d’un bourgeois de New Haven à un citoyen de Virginie”, *Oeuvres de Condorcet, Tome neuvième* (Paris: Firmin Didot Libraire, 1847) gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k417228.

<sup>361</sup> Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 43.

seen later as “a bright, if visionary, picture of the future”.<sup>362</sup> Naturally, de Staël shared Condorcet’s belief in the natural and the equal rights of women, but also his notion of perfectibility of the human species. In *De La Littérature*, she champions this concept and shows her faith in the accumulation of knowledge and experience which could give writers a greater understanding of human behaviour and psychology.<sup>363</sup>

Montesquieu was another *philosophe* whose attitude to women did not conform to traditional thinking. He inspired de Staël, and she embraced his model of interdependence of politics and customs in society, as a way to voice women’s claims. A political theorist, Montesquieu recognised the crucial role of women as educators and transmitters of customs who, as such, could set the standards for social order. In his analysis of different governments, he wrote that under a Republic, “women are free by laws and restrained by customs; luxury is banished and with it corruption and vices.”<sup>364</sup> By a Republic, he meant a polity in which a body of people is sovereign and guided by the principle of virtue. Like most Enlightenment thinkers, for him, virtue and reason were closely linked. To be virtuous one had to be free to act reasonably. As a liberal, he extends his dislike of despotism to the constraints on women under such a regime. In her literature, de Staël shows her support for his political ideals that combine passion and moderation.<sup>365</sup> As she wrote: “Tout doit s’affirmer contre les extrêmes, avec une grande énergie de l’âme”.<sup>366</sup> (All must oppose extremes, with all the energy of the soul). Whereas Montesquieu is able to demonstrate the supportive role of women in a monarchy or a Republic, with examples drawn from history, he explains that despotism would only prosper if women were kept in a state of total servitude.<sup>367</sup> In his *Lettres Persanes*, Montesquieu illustrates the disastrous effects of fundamental gender inequality when the Persian Usbeck is punished for exercising tyranny in his harem. When he wonders if it is natural for women to submit to men, the *philosophe* answers that:

La nature n’a jamais dictée une telle loi. L’autorité qu’exercent les hommes sur elles sont une vraie tyrannie; elles nous laissent agir de cette façon car elles sont

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<sup>362</sup> Steven Lukes, “Introduction” in *Condorcet: Political Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>363</sup> Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 180.

<sup>364</sup> Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois*, 99.

<sup>365</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence des passions suivi de Réflexions sur le suicide* (Paris: Payot, 2000), 71.

<sup>366</sup> De Staël, *De La Littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1820), 404.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, Livre VII, 98.

plus douces que nous sommes and de ce fait sont possédées de plus humanité.<sup>368</sup>  
(Nature has never dictated such a law. The authority men exert on them is real tyranny; they let us act this way because they are gentler than we and they have as a result more humanity and reason. These qualities should give them superiority, which they would have never lost if we had been reasonable).

He concludes by saying that “forces would be equal if so was education”.<sup>369</sup> Montesquieu also criticises boldly the society of his time and would use satire to attack odd habits, prejudices and excesses. When visiting Paris, the Persians of the *Lettres Persanes* are astounded and quite amused when they observe French society with its customs and institutions. As he wrote in his *Cahiers*, “Le ridicule jeté à propos a une grande puissance”.<sup>370</sup> (When it is pertinent and timely, ridicule has great power). Yet, at the same time, Montesquieu demonstrates throughout his work his scorn for female qualities, depicting women as soft, gentle and weak, but also frivolous, superficial and unstable.<sup>371</sup> There is no doubt that, from a young age, Montesquieu’s views had an effect on de Staël’s position on gender equality and female education.<sup>372</sup> His influence extended also to her literary style in which she used a comparative method to judge written works, analysing their historical, political, social and geographical origins, as she did in *De La Littérature* and *De L’Allemagne*.<sup>373</sup>

However, it was Denis Diderot (1713-1784) who was the strongest advocate of the rights of women of the *philosophes*. His article *Reflexions sur le Courage des Femmes* (1745) published in the *Mercure de France*<sup>374</sup> reveals that Diderot was a feminist. The theme of his article focuses on the courage of women and how this quality is hindered by a lack of education. As he writes:

Elles sont gardées dans l’ignorance de tout ce qui pourrait les élever, fortifier et étendre leur âme...Ainsi, le Courage et les autres vertues ont besoin d’être Encouragés ... De tous les temps et dans tous pays, les femmes sont soumises aux

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<sup>368</sup> Montesquieu, *Les Lettres persanes et les archives de la Brède*, ed. Henri Barckhausen (Paris: Hachette, 2001).

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>370</sup> In *Etudes littéraires*, “Montesquieu”. [www.etudes-litteraires.com/biographie-montesquieu.php](http://www.etudes-litteraires.com/biographie-montesquieu.php) .

<sup>371</sup> Rendall, *The Origins*, 15.

<sup>372</sup> Herold indicates that Montesquieu was her mentor. In *Mistress*, 198.

<sup>373</sup> *De La Littérature*, Première partie, 1-386; *De L’Allemagne*, Tome I & Tome II, (Paris: Flammarion, 1968).

<sup>374</sup> A French newspaper.

hommes qui sont plus forts, ont fait les lois et se jugent superieurs.<sup>375</sup> (They are kept in ignorance of all that could raise them, fortify and spread their soul...Thus, Courage and other virtues need to be encouraged ... Of all time and in every country, women are subjected to men who are stronger, have made the laws and judged themselves superior.)

In his *Essai sur les Femmes* published in 1772, Diderot shows that he is free from the prejudices of his time when he studies women on social, biological and sexual levels and praises them, and when he rejects the ancestral myth of feminine inferiority. Given that women were accused of being too emotional, it is interesting that Diderot led a movement to give equal weight to the passions as to reason, explaining that passions were powerful motivators in human psychology. He does advocate rationalism but also recognises the role of instinct and emotion in his literature. In *Le Génie*<sup>376</sup> Diderot shows an emotional element when he analyses the expression of his sensibility.<sup>377</sup> He claimed that passion stimulates artistic creation, even spurring genius.<sup>378</sup> His apology for enthusiasm, intuition and sensibility must have appealed to women at the time who could relate to such sentiments. In fact, de Staël praised the same qualities all through her work.

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<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>376</sup> *Le Génie*, an article of the *Encyclopédie* in which the term is defined by Diderot as an *instinct*, a powerful *inspiration*, which may conflict with reason.

<sup>377</sup> Denis Diderot, in *XVIIIème siècle*, eds. Lagarde & Michard, 198-199.

<sup>378</sup> Takeda, "Apology", 172.



**Plate 0.3 Denis Diderot by Louis-Michel van Loo (1767).  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

#### *3.2.4 Rousseau, Romanticism and Anti-feminism.*

It was Rousseau who, more than any other literary figures, shaped de Staël's thought and writings. With his passionate and impetuous temperament, he unleashed the belief in deep instincts and emphasised the triumph of passion, though it led him to revert to the traditional idea of women. As Isaiah Berlin explains, from 1760 to 1830, a great break in European consciousness took place when reason and sensibility became increasingly associated. Most historians agree that the Romantic movement was a protest against universality of any kind, against rationalism and the rule of the mind over the heart. Romanticism succeeded the Enlightenment, and spontaneity and revolt replaced what was seen as intellectual coldness and reason that predominated during the earlier period. The Romantics believed that humanity could only evolve by freeing the human spirit from stultifying rules and institutions. The Industrial Revolution caused a revulsion against technological progress and the dirt and squalor it seemed to bring with it, and inspired a return to Nature as purer and capable of arousing transcendental emotions. Integrity, sincerity, altruism, a belief in fighting

for an ideal and on sacrificing one's life for it, became important values.<sup>379</sup> As a result, Rousseau would exalt passion with its transports, its sorrows, its weaknesses and its melancholy. He wrote in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754): "Human understanding owes much to the passions which, by common consensus, also owe a great deal to it. It is by their activity that our reason is perfected."<sup>380</sup> This is an approach which appealed to de Staël. An apologist of passion, she nevertheless sought to attenuate its effects, as it could prove detrimental to the happiness of individuals and to the well-being of a nation.<sup>381</sup>

Rousseau was particularly influential because he is both a *philosophe* in the Enlightenment tradition but is also considered one of the fathers of the Romantic movement. De Staël was similarly on the cusp of the transition between the two movements. The combination of these intellectual movements can be seen in Rousseau's statement that property, which gave birth to society, had corrupted individuals and developed inequality.<sup>382</sup> While equality is an Enlightenment theme, his treatment of it is Romantic, in that he believes the artificiality of society causes social problems. In his *Confessions*, he declares, "Insane are you who complain ceaselessly about nature, learn that all your suffering comes from you".<sup>383</sup> As de Staël wrote in *Letters*, Rousseau never denied the progress of modern civilisation, but criticised its consequences; as such, she defined him as a man of the Enlightenment.<sup>384</sup> However, the influence of the Enlightenment over Rousseau did not extend to the feminism of Condorcet, Montesquieu and Diderot. While he condemns the foundations of society, he does not apply his revolutionary ideas to the position of women, instead advocating for traditional sex roles. To Rousseau, the 'ideal' woman had to be submissive. In *Emile* (1760) he wrote, "Woman is made to submit to man and to endure even injustice at his hands".<sup>385</sup> It is not surprising that de Staël refuted this statement, and his belief that women could not create "avec de l'âme et de la passion."<sup>386</sup> (with soul and passion). No *philosophe* has written more on gender than Rousseau, and he was concerned that gender boundaries would erode.

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<sup>379</sup> Ferdinand Brunetière defines it as "literary egotism", stressing individuality at the expense of a larger world. In Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Pimlico, 2000), 15.

<sup>380</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* and *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, ed. Jacques Roger (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 8.

<sup>381</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*, 76.

<sup>382</sup> Rousseau, "Discours sur l'inégalité" (1755), in *XVIIIe siècle*, eds. Lagarde & Michard, 272.

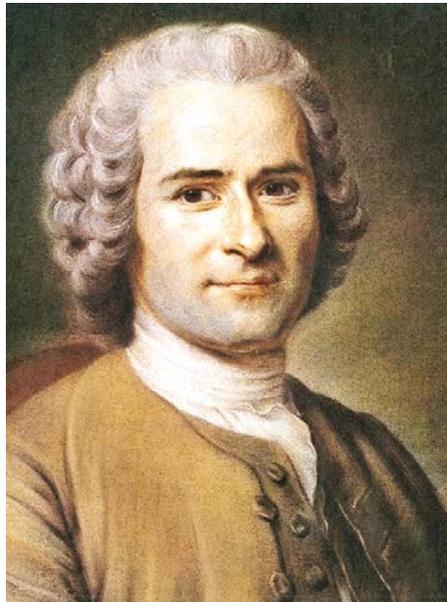
<sup>383</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, VIII, in *XVIIIème siècle*, eds. Lagarde & Michard, 271.

<sup>384</sup> De Staël, *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.J Rousseau* (San Bernardino: Ulan Press, 2015), 85-87.

<sup>385</sup> Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Everyman's Library, 1911), 359.

<sup>386</sup> De Staël, *Lettres*, 17.

Men in the confines of the salon could become too effeminate, while women who were too visible in the public sphere could become masculinised and a threat to public order.



**Plate 0.4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau by Quentin de la Tour (1753).  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

He believed that “The more they resemble our sex, the less power they will have over us, then men will be masters indeed”, speaking of the manipulation of men by women through feminine ‘wiles’.<sup>387</sup> He believed however that men and women, because of their differences, were dependent on each other.<sup>388</sup> He pointed out that historically, domination and exploitation had prevailed in society, and that it was possible to move from corruption to future redemption through the proper education of women. However, the ‘proper education’ of women was to be as good mothers who could teach their younger children only the basics.<sup>389</sup> Rousseau thought that only women who embraced their role as mothers and wives could make men into excellent citizens. In contrast to the common practice by richer women to put their babies to wet-nurses, he wanted them to breast-feed their own children:

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<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>389</sup> It is ironic that Rousseau, himself, who fathered five children to his laundress/mistress, sent them all to an orphanage at birth. In Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (London: Orion Books, 1993), 21-22.

Let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiment will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repopulated. This first point, this point alone will bring everything back together.<sup>390</sup>

De Staël did not question Rousseau's view that women should be good wives and good mothers, but she also believed in women's legitimacy to have the freedom to voice and to publish their opinions on social and political matters.

In his *Emile*, about the education of a boy for future citizenship, there was one chapter devoted to the education of girls, titled "Sophie". Sophie was raised to become the ideal companion for Emile, possessing conventionally feminine traits. A woman should not depart from the qualities she was born with: "When she makes a good use of her own rights, she has the best of it; when she tries to usurp our rights, she is our inferior."<sup>391</sup> In the five Books of *Emile*, Rousseau portrays men with qualities of strength, independence and power while women are portrayed as passive, dependant and weak. However, he does not consider women's weakness as a disadvantage. Because of their disposition, women ought to be treated with gentleness and politeness.

In his analysis, Joel Swartz argues that: "Rousseau advocates sexual differentiation in part because of his perception of the effects on politics of various relationships between the sexes."<sup>392</sup> This point, which links gender roles to separate spheres for women and men, was justified in Rousseau's thought as having political consequences.

### 3.2.5 *Enemies of the Enlightenment*

It would be a mistake to believe that the Enlightenment's precepts were embraced and glorified by all its contemporaries. Darrin McMahon notes that, apart from Isaiah Berlin, revisionist historians have played down the Counter-Enlightenment movement that divided the French population long before the Revolution.<sup>393</sup> In *The Enemies of the Enlightenment*, Berlin defines the movement as a 'Manichean construction', wherein the Revolutionaries saw the Revolution as the daughter of the Enlightenment, and the Counter-Revolution as a 'plot'

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<sup>390</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, 347.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>392</sup> Joel Swartz, *Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, quoted in Penny A. Weiss, "Rousseau, Antifeminism and Woman's nature", *Politics Theory* 15, 1 (1987), 81-98.

<sup>393</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment: the eighteenth-century philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979),

which aimed to destroy the newly-established political, social and religious order.<sup>394</sup> Criticism of the Enlightenment was made by some German philosophers, among them, Johan Herder, who in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (1773) (*On a Philosophy of History*) campaigned against the movement's abstract and cold philosophy, and its cosmopolitan uniformity.<sup>395</sup> Instead, the Romantic Herder claimed the right to imagination, to the fantastic and to the unique destiny of individuals as opposed to the *philosophes'* moralist and egalitarian 'hypocrisy', and contrasted its abstract humanity to the authentic and distinctive history of a nation.<sup>396</sup> While de Staël valued the principles of cosmopolitanism, she also, later in life, adopted a nationalist spirit, as a consequence of Napoleon's desire for unlimited conquests. In France, the enemies of the Enlightenment, represented by Catholics, Parliamentarians and men of Letters, denounced the *philosophes* for making and controlling public opinion. McMahon stresses that it was mainly the Catholic Church that was instrumental in this opposition, and it claimed to have predicted the Terror, considering it divine punishment for the Enlightenment lack of morals and respect for authority. Religious confraternities, as a form of sociability, were significant at the time and must have also had the power to sway public opinion towards the Counter-Enlightenment.<sup>397</sup> Historical studies show these associations mainly attracted women, who resisted the displacement of religion witnessed toward the end of the century. As Godineau explains, it shows that women tended to be more traditional than men, valuing the established order and opposing social changes.<sup>398</sup> Important publications from Abbé Barruel, Jean-François la Harpe and Chateaubriand, and from journalists and pamphleteers, supported and secured the Counter-Enlightenment's ideology.<sup>399</sup> McMahon specifies that famous thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville, Hippolyte Taine and Charles Maurras believed that the Enlightenment was responsible for the Revolution's excesses, and adds that some postmodern critics still misrepresent the movement's ideals as encouraging the supremacy of reason, leading to more calamities, such as totalitarianism, racism or moral tyranny. McMahon likes to remind that these intellectuals may be forgetting that the rights we enjoy today, in our Western societies, originate from the Enlightenment's egalitarian principles.<sup>400</sup> Despite the Revolution's turbulence, de Staël held

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<sup>394</sup> Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-13.

<sup>395</sup> In Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 514-15.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>397</sup> Religious confraternities as making a contribution to the formation of civil society. In David Garrioch, "Man is Born for Society", 103.

<sup>398</sup> Godineau, *Les Femmes*, 224-25.

<sup>399</sup> McMahon, *Enemies*, 7-13.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

the view that this upheaval would, with time, open the possibility for future societal and political changes for the better.

### 3.2.6 *Feminists in the eighteenth century*

With its traditional social and political values under challenge, eighteenth-century France witnessed an acceleration in women's claims to end the limitations on their condition. As mentioned earlier, in France, demands for more equality between the sexes has had a long history and its origin goes back to the Middle Ages. Decades before the Revolution, the emphasis on sexual difference was still quite marked and was closely connected with the equally marked contrast between public and private spheres. The masculine sphere of political, economic, civic and intellectual life was ever expanding while the feminine private or domestic sphere was increasingly centred on and confined to family life, its economic role declining in the face of capitalist production replacing home manufactures and larger businesses doing away with the old craft shops in which women had vital roles. This social and economic system created a double standard, still relegating women to an inferior status.

Legally, women had few rights in the eighteenth century, especially married women who lost their independent legal status on marriage.<sup>401</sup> As during the *Ancien Régime*, husband and wife were one person in law which meant that the legal existence of a woman was incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband. While their testimonies could be accepted in civil and criminal courts, Frenchwomen were under the yoke of Roman Law which supported male governance in the domestic and political domains. For instance, the dowry of a married woman remained her own but her husband was the only administrator of family assets, as a woman was seen as unfit for management.<sup>402</sup> Yet, women in religious orders and noble women could be represented at the assemblies of the Estates-General, while widows from the Third-Estate could attend the deliberations of the Assembly. These rights gave French women more power than their British sisters, whose property passed to their husbands upon marriage and who had no political representation. That power was nevertheless limited in the public sphere because of limited education and economic opportunities. The historian Catherine Macaulay, in her *Letters on Education* (1790), argued that women were mentally and physically restricted by traditional ideas of femininity and she

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<sup>401</sup> Susan Foley, *Women in France since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 22.

<sup>402</sup> Sarah Hanley, "Social Sites of Political Practices in France: Lawsuits, Civil rights and the Separation of Powers in Domestic and State Government, 1300-1800", *The American Historical Review* 102, 1 (1997), 27-31. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/102.1.27> (accessed 3 December 2015).

recommended physical exercise and academic studies for women, similar to those provided for men.<sup>403</sup>

Issues of gender, a common theme in the eighteenth century, were debated by feminists such as de Staël and Mary Wollstonecraft who fought, in different degrees, for a less definite separation between the sexes. While these authors admired Rousseau's sensitivity and his social and religious thought, they deplored his belief in women's inferiority. They approved of the message in his *Social Contract* which emphasises an egalitarian view of society, but wanted it applied to gender. They related to the lyrical description of romantic love in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, although they were wary of excessive passion, and agreed that women had a moral role to play within their marriages and their families. However, they saw as a betrayal of liberalism, Rousseau's acceptance of traditional attitudes about female inferiority. To de Staël and Wollstonecraft, women's faults were a consequence of a restricted environment and lack of education that kept them in a state of ignorance and submission. As Wollstonecraft wrote: "If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence?"<sup>404</sup> Rousseau believed "that woman is specially made for man's delight".<sup>405</sup> What he considered charming, a woman's dissimulation, cunning and manipulation of men, Wollstonecraft thought dangerous and immoral.<sup>406</sup> She recognises that manipulation was the only weapon that the weak could use to influence the strong. In fact, the notion that women were 'inferior' did not always reflect reality. As during the *Ancien Régime*, women had economic power, especially in the lower classes. Intellectual and political power was exercised in salons and earlier meeting places among noble women. Widows had economic power through running their husbands' businesses, while women of means, once out of their fathers' control, enjoyed independence. However, they did not have access to the type of education given to men, which would allow them further economic opportunities such as entry to the professions. While feminists fought for the same rights of freedom and equality, differences among them in their concepts of the feminine were also present. These will be developed in the following chapter, which examines de Staël's feminism.

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<sup>403</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education*, Letter VI, 5-65, <http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139600088.008> (accessed 4 January 2016).

<sup>404</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 100.

<sup>405</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, 322.

<sup>406</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 49.

### 3.3 The French Revolution

A long period of social and intellectual ferment and economic malaise had prepared the ground for the French Revolution. The Revolution has been interpreted from a range of viewpoints: from a Jacobin, liberal, royalist, anarchist, Marxist and even from a religious point of view. Common to them all is the condemnation of the Bourbon monarchy which was seen as increasingly ineffective in bringing about the changes needed for France in the capitalist world-system then developing.<sup>407</sup> Keith Baker urges us to remember that there was no script for this upheaval, and argues that it is essential to understand the ideas behind the event.<sup>408</sup>

Both the Enlightenment and the early stages of the French Revolution created a space and a climate which encouraged the assertions of women's claims for equality with men. In fact, at the beginning of the Revolution, women saw an improvement of their situation. Supporters of women's emancipation made specific requests for education and for economic, legal and political rights. Women were allowed to attend political assemblies and they claimed the right to form a National Guard and to vote, an idea that was encouraged by Robespierre and Condorcet. Pamphlets, brochures and newspapers began to appear which argued that all human beings were naturally equal and that discrimination between the sexes was unnatural. Such radical ideas were evident within a petition by women to the *Assemblée Nationale* in 1789:

...the French are a free people, and everyday you continue to allow thirteen million slaves to wear the shameful chains of thirteen million despots! You have declared equality of rights, and you unjustly deprive the gentlest and most useful group amongst you of those rights!<sup>409</sup>

In 1774, Mme de Montenclos, the editor of *Le Journal des Dames*, proclaimed: "I am not out to draw attention to myself, but I swear I do want to *shatter our conventions* and guarantee women the justice that men refuse to them on a whim." [de Monteclos's emphasis].<sup>410</sup> However, no one could symbolise better the hopes for gender egalitarianism than Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793).

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<sup>407</sup> François Furet, "L'idée de république et l'histoire de France au XIX siècle", in *Le siècle de l'avènement républicain*, sous la direction de François Furet et Mona Ozouf (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 298-305.

<sup>408</sup> Baker, "Enlightenment Idioms", 168.

<sup>409</sup> "Requête des dames à l'Assemblée Générale, 1789" in Susan K. Foley, *Women*, 1.

<sup>410</sup> Jane Abrey, "Feminism in the French Revolution", *The American Historical Review*, 80, 1 (1975), 45.



**Plate 0.5 Late-18<sup>th</sup> century portrait of Gouges by Alexander Kucharsky.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

A well-known playwright, de Gouges spoke in the name of women when she wrote her *Declaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*<sup>411</sup>, which took the National Assembly's *Declaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*<sup>412</sup> and converted every masculine noun and pronoun to feminine. As a feminist, she professed that women were capable of reasoning and of making moral decisions while possessing the female virtues of caring and sympathy. She fought for social justice, the right to divorce, the abolition of the death penalty, and for gender equality. Asserting her claims publicly with passion and determination, she was arrested and sent to the guillotine just after Marie-Antoinette for daring to criticise the government at the time, the Convention.<sup>413</sup>

There were others as radical as De Gouges. Théroigne de Méricourt (1762-1817) tried to rally women under the banner of a women's political club, declaring that "it is time for women to break out of the shameful incompetence in which men's ignorance, pride and

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<sup>411</sup> *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen*. See *La Declaration des Droits de la femme*. [http://fr.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=D%C3%A9claration\\_des\\_droits\\_de-la-femme\\_et-de-la-citoyenne&oldid=5845809](http://fr.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=D%C3%A9claration_des_droits_de-la-femme_et-de-la-citoyenne&oldid=5845809) (accessed 31 January 2016).

<sup>412</sup> *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*.

<sup>413</sup> Olympe de Gouges, among her numerous writings, wrote "Forecast on Maximilien Robespierre by an amphibian animal". Her opposition to Robespierre was one of the factors which contributed to her condemnation. Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges: Des droits de la femme à la guillotine* (Paris: Editions Tallendier, 2014).

injustice have so long held us captive.”<sup>414</sup> The most famous women’s club, the “Revolutionary Republican Female Citizens”,<sup>415</sup> was founded in the spring of 1793 by Pauline Leon and Claire Lacombe. Their program focused on practical claims like cheap food, but they also demanded that women be armed and be able to participate in the affairs of state. As Foley remarks, some of these radical demands from women testify to their efforts to gain the status of ‘citizens’.<sup>416</sup> They were partly responsible for the fall of the Girondins<sup>417</sup> and they drifted away from the Jacobins<sup>418</sup> toward the *enragés*,<sup>419</sup> a move which would contribute to the club’s suppression in October 1793.<sup>420</sup> Like the founders of the Club of the Revolutionary Republican Female Citizens, Manon Roland is known to have played a role in widening the split between the Jacobins and the Girondins. The wife of the Minister of the Interior, she opened a salon which became the meeting place of the Girondins. An admirer of Plutarch and Rousseau, she considered herself a republican and she welcomed the Revolution. As she wrote:

La Révolution survint et nous enflamma; amis de l’humanité, adorateurs de la liberté, nous crûmes qu’elle venait régénérer l’espèce, détruire la misère flétriissante de cette classe malheureuse sur laquelle nous nous étions si souvent attendris; nous l’accueillîmes avec transport.<sup>421</sup> (The Revolution appeared and inflamed us; friends of humanity, lovers of liberty, we believed that it would revive the species, destroy the misery of the working class we so often pity: we welcomed it with transports.)

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<sup>414</sup> In Abray, *Feminism*, 51.

<sup>415</sup> *Le Club des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires*.

<sup>416</sup> Foley, *Women*, 12.

<sup>417</sup> Girondins: a political group operating in France from 1791 to 1795. Considered bourgeois Republicans, they campaigned for the end of the monarchy but resisted the spiralling momentum of the Revolution. Their members were executed during the Terror.

<sup>418</sup> Jacobins: The most famous political movement during the Revolution. They preached radical revolutionary politics.

<sup>419</sup> *Enragés*: Extreme revolutionaries in 1793. Their leaders advocated economic measures in favour of the lower-class.

<sup>420</sup> Kolly, “Frères et soeurs politiques: La fraternité à l’épreuve des femmes, 1789-1793”, *Genre et Histoire* 3 (2008), 11.

<sup>421</sup> In Michel Onfray, *La force du sexe faible* (Paris: Les Editions Autrement. Collection Universitaires populaires & Cie, 2016), 81.



**Plate 0.6 Club of the Revolutionary Republican Female Citizens by Lesueur.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

She drafted a program of revolutionary actions and attended the deliberations of the Assembly, but she preferred to frequent popular societies. She was arrested during the Terror when the Jacobin insurrection led to the elimination of the Girondins. While in prison, she wrote a memorable memoir in which she praises feminine virtues. Just before being guillotined, she is said to have uttered the words: “O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name”.<sup>422</sup> Abney explains that women did not rely on pamphlets or newspapers alone to make claims for change. As mentioned earlier, and before 1793, a few of their *proposals* were drafted in the *Cahiers* and presented to the National Assembly. The most common demand of the feminists was for education for women, a claim both long-standing and widespread. In 1792, the British feminist Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in French. In her essay, she urged Talleyrand, then Minister of Education, to include girls alongside boys in the national education program. Etta Palm van Aelders, a Dutch feminist residing in Paris, also pressed for women to have access to education and to have political freedom and equal rights. Van Aelders, Roland and de Mericourt were members of the Fraternal Society of the Two Sexes, Defender of the Constitution founded by Claude Dansart in February 1790. The first society to welcome

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<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

women, it was dedicated to civics and to comments on legal texts. However, it lived in obscurity and disappeared by the end of the same year.<sup>423</sup>

Historians of the French Revolution recognise that women were politically active. As Michel Delon notes: “Le souvenir des mouvements de femme fait parti avec celui des grandes manifestations populaires de la Terreur, des traumatismes de la Révolution.”<sup>424</sup> (The memory of women’s movements is part of the great popular demonstrations of the Terror, of the Revolution’s traumas.) During the October Days of 1789, women who were driven by a food crisis, staged a protest in front of the Hotel de Ville (City Hall), marched to Versailles, and occupied the National Assembly and the Palace. As Joan Lander explains, the walk of women to Versailles to demand bread, sugar and other essentials symbolised their political engagement as these demands were part of the quest for political goals such as citizen rights.<sup>425</sup> Likewise, David Garrioch indicates that:

There is ample evidence that Parisian women of humble social origins, in quite large numbers, were demonstrating both a political awareness and a capacity for independent political action.<sup>426</sup>

This women’s revolt would simply not have been possible on such a scale a year earlier, but the revolutionary atmosphere and the events since the Storming of the Bastille in July, reinforced women’s conviction and willingness to play a part for their families in matters of food supply.<sup>427</sup> Garrioch reminds that some responsibilities endorsed, not by men, but by women, illustrate the division of gender roles within the family and the neighbourhood. To be concerned for the welfare of one’s community and family was very much a female role which justified the woman playing a very public role, “making certain public spaces and certain issues into female ones.”<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>424</sup> Michel Delon in Florence Lotterie, *Le Genre des Lumières: Femme philosophe au XVIII siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2013), 254.

<sup>425</sup> Joan Lander, quoted in Lori J. Marso, “Wollstonecraft and Staël on the Politics of Sensibility and Feminine Difference”, *The Eighteenth Century* 43, 1 (2002): 47

<sup>426</sup> David Garrioch, “The everyday lives of Parisian women and the October days in 1789”, *Social History*, 24, 3 (October, 1999), 232 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4286577> (accessed 2 June 2016).

<sup>427</sup> Food riots had happened many times before and were usually attended by women but were about local economic justice rather than national politics. See e.g. Louise Tilly, “The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2, 1 (Summer, 1971), 23-57.

<sup>428</sup> Garrioch, “The everyday lives”, 240.

Yet, even if male feminists shared their enthusiasm, women were often mocked for their pretensions.<sup>429</sup> In fact, all women's clubs were outlawed by the Convention at the end of 1793. Article 7 of the second Declaration of Rights which guaranteed the right of free speech and assembly, as well as article 5 which promised equal access to public office for all citizens, could not be implicitly applied to women any more.<sup>430</sup> Women though did not always speak in a unified voice throughout the Revolution, and the existing female clubs did not win the support of the main Revolutionary groups. Too, the reputation of some feminist leaders did not play in their favour. The pretensions to high birth of de Méricourt, de Gouges and the 'Baronne' d'Aelders attracted ridicule and for some, sexual adventures attracted contempt.<sup>431</sup> While men might be forgiven for their philandering, women's dalliances outside marriage were condemned by society. As Abray suggests, the feminists made some 'tactical and strategic errors.'<sup>432</sup> Members of the *Républicaines Révolutionnaires* became involved in street fights over the wearing of the *cocarde* and of the *bonnet rouge*,<sup>433</sup> disorder that precipitated the government to move against women's clubs. Furthermore, feminists' views were often seen as either too extreme or too moderate. Finally, feminists found themselves sharing the unpopularity of those women who had lost the French public's favour: Marie-Antoinette, Charlotte Corday,<sup>434</sup> the *émigrés* and the *tricoteuses* or 'knitting women' who sat at the Place de la Revolution to attend and take pleasure in the decapitation of victims on the guillotine.<sup>435</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the treatment reserved for women during the Revolution was entirely repressive, as shown in the gains discussed above. The revolutionary ideals did not rest on the complete political exclusion of women but were rather meant to encourage unity between husbands and wives. The new Republican woman was to advise her husband, to share his successes and to console him in times of misfortune. Apart from the radical feminists, when most women demanded the right of citizenship, it was normally in the name of duties which were considered properly feminine. Rather than a desire to mimic

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<sup>429</sup> In 1792, Aubert-Dubayet called women "the victims of their fathers' despotism and of their husbands' perfidy". Abray, "Feminism", 47-48.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>431</sup> Pauline Leon and Claire Lacombe had a notorious affair with Leclerc, a member of the *Enragés*. Claude Guillon, "Pauline Leon, une républicaine révolutionnaire", *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 344 (Avril-Juin 2006), DOI:10.4000/ahrf.6213 (accessed 30 March 2016).

<sup>432</sup> Abray, "Feminism", 61.

<sup>433</sup> The *cocarde* was a circular badge with national colours and the *bonnet rouge*, a red hat, both emblems of the Republic.

<sup>434</sup> Charlotte Corday: a figure of the French Revolution who assassinated the Jacobin Jean-Paul Marat in his bath. His murder is memorialised in a celebrated painting by Jean-Louis David.

<sup>435</sup> Abray, "Feminism", 60-62.

men, they demanded rights in accordance with what was believed were their own ‘natural’ abilities which could be played out in the family unit and their proper responsibilities to safeguard: being a good wife, housekeeper and mother.<sup>436</sup> Thus, they welcomed and glorified the maternal role in the name of good republican principles. As Ozouf argues, women voiced the ideals of justice more than they demanded political rights.<sup>437</sup> The acceptance of this moderate equality between the sexes was supported by de Staël who celebrated the role of women as mothers and companions. During the Revolution, a new model of femininity which involved caring for the weak and oppressed developed, alongside the push to abolish slavery. In major French cities, neighbourhood activists, independent of the Convention, made a vital contribution to the revolutionary civic order, by organising a system of home relief for indigents. Between 1789 and 1793, the *Comité de Bienfaisance* (Committee of Charity) of Paris was the first to be firmly established and it lasted, in different forms, until the Third Republic (1870-1940).<sup>438</sup> As Foley remarks, this new “social reconstruction reshaped rather than removed male dominance”.<sup>439</sup> Rendall adds that the women who were involved in such societies were usually well-educated and supporters of the Revolution, thus combining both their patriotic and philanthropic duties. Yet, some of these organisations, often under the authority of the aristocracy and the Church, simply continued the charitable work they had begun before the Revolution.<sup>440</sup>

It would seem that a deep-rooted state of mind at the time played a part against the feminist revolution. Femininity, or the idea of what it is to be a woman, was in flux in Europe around the end of the eighteenth century. The works of Edmund Burke and Wollstonecraft<sup>441</sup> illustrate respectively the two opposing ideological forces, conservatism and liberal feminism,<sup>442</sup> which were in play at the time. Some women believed they could contribute to the patriotic cause and gain new rights in the process, but the division between public and private spheres in French society prevailed. Both spheres existed in relation to and in reflection of each other and defined a space of exclusion. Throughout the Revolution, women

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<sup>436</sup> There were however a few radical feminists who belonged to the Revolutionary Republican Female Citizens who demanded to bear arms. This club formed close ties with the *Enragés*. Aurore Chemama, “L’Ancien Régime: La Contestation du pouvoir”, *Les Dossiers: La Marche de l’Histoire*, 5 (Août-Novembre 2016), 54.

<sup>437</sup> Ozouf, *Les Mots*, 357.

<sup>438</sup> Isser Wolloch, “From Charity to Welfare in Revolutionary Paris”, *The Journal of Modern History* 58, 4 (December 1986), 779-812.

<sup>439</sup> Foley, *Women*, 8.

<sup>440</sup> Rendall, *The Origins*, 48-50.

<sup>441</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790), (London: Hackett Publishing, 1982); Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol Poston (New York: W.W Norton, 1988).

<sup>442</sup> These two anachronistic terms were not used in the eighteenth century but are understood today as such.

were viewed principally through a Rousseauian lens. The idealization of the maternal role relegated women to a sphere essentially domestic and their presence in the public sphere was considered unnatural. The public sphere still represented the masculine domain with its political freedom, reason and individualism, whereas the private sphere stood for the feminine domain of emotions, dependence and discretion. Women who tried to reconcile the two spheres by participating in political and intellectual life were quickly condemned. Women who were too overt in the public sphere were seen as transgressing the natural order. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Burke divided the feminine into the Beautiful versus the 'female sublime' or the 'Bad sublime'.<sup>443</sup> Marie-Antoinette exemplified the "Beautiful woman", a queen in distress and defenseless, "glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendor, and joy", whereas the women who marched to Versailles, armed with pikes, were described as "unutterable abominations of the furies of hell."<sup>444</sup>

For Burke, women who forgot their femininity were also losing their dignity. However, while Burke praised Marie-Antoinette's delicacy, in others the Queen would arouse distrust and contempt for being represented as a powerful and political woman. Rousseau too classified feminine identity into two categories, woman as whore / seductress / *salonnière* versus woman as wife/mother.<sup>445</sup> Susan Conner comments that even women who tried to gain some political power covertly, through male friends or relatives, were demonised and labelled as "influence peddlers, inveterate seductresses, or coquettes".<sup>446</sup> Margaret Darrow suggests that the Revolution was blamed partly on the selfish and immoral behaviour of aristocratic women, who internalised these criticisms and reformed their behaviour, reinforced by the privations experienced by many when they were forced to flee from France. They turned from their previous public lives at Court, seeking influence and royal favour for themselves, their friends and their relatives, to more domestic pursuits.<sup>447</sup>

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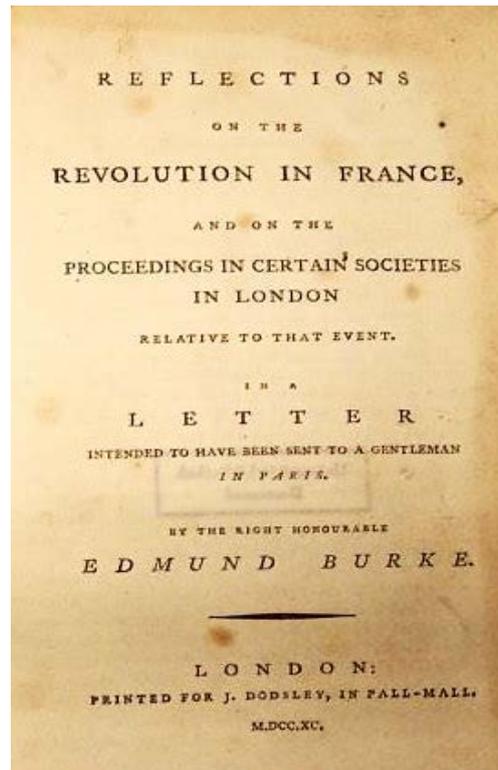
<sup>443</sup> In section XXVII, Part III of his work, Burke contrasted the notion of beauty to the sublime, stating that sublime objects are vast in their dimensions and as a result rugged and negligent whereas beautiful ones are small, smooth and polished. He confirmed his thought when he wrote: "beauty should not obscure, the great ought to be dark and gloomy".

<sup>444</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 165.

<sup>445</sup> Marso, "Defending the Queen", 3.

<sup>446</sup> Susan P. Conner, "Women and Politics" in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Samia Spencer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 52.

<sup>447</sup> Margaret Darrow, "French Noblewomen and the New Domesticity, 1750-1850", *Feminist Studies* 5, 1 (Spring, 1979), 41-65.



**Plate 0.7 Reflections on the French Revolution by Edmund Burke.**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

It is clear that the issue of gender influenced both de Staël's experience of politics and the way she was seen and judged by her contemporaries. Despite the fact that women acquired new rights during the Revolution, revolutionary feminism was not entirely successful, as it was championed by a minority of women only.<sup>448</sup> Even before 1793, little was done to improve women's education, their public role was not really discussed, and female suffrage was rejected.<sup>449</sup> In general, French women continued to accept the eighteenth century's definition of femininity while, in literature, Pre-Romanticism began to replace the Enlightenment ideals. Yet, de Staël never departed from the Enlightenment's faith in the progress of history. As she states in her literature, women's condition had improved over the centuries, from the time of paganism to Christianity, and from the '*Anciens* to the *Modernes*'. After the Queen's murder and the Terror, women's condition in France did deteriorate. Still, de Staël believed in the 'system of perfectibility' that would revive and overcome the pessimism that succeeded this dark period of histo

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<sup>448</sup> Changes for women during the Revolution: Women acquired legal majority at age 21, equality with men regarding inheritance laws, and were allowed to contract debts and be witnesses in civil acts. In Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution", 58.

<sup>449</sup> Randall, *The Origins*, 53.

## *Chapter 4. Madame de Staël's Feminism*

From the Renaissance to the Revolution, women remained defined by their roles as wives and mothers, dependents of their husbands or fathers. While some women participated in political, cultural, religious and economic life, female agency was rarely acknowledged and was generally considered inferior to that of men. Still, the period of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution saw a definite increase in discussion about the nature, ability, education, and place of women, and a rise in feminist thinking.<sup>450</sup> However, advances were short-lived, and women became marginalised again once the Convention realised their capacity to arouse dissent and criticism of government action and policy. Despite feminists' actions and arguments opposing traditional suppression of women, they remained excluded from political rights, and the period of the Convention and after saw a return to emphasising their 'feminine nature' and domestic roles. In granting citizenship to men only, revolutionaries introduced a new inequality while they professed, at the same time, the fundamental principle of the equality of "man".

These political and societal changes had a profound effect on the life and the work of de Staël. A feminist, de Staël was a proponent of women's liberty and emancipation. However, she opposed political equality of the sexes, preferring the traditional idea of gender division and femininity, as long as it did not interfere with intellectual pursuits. Unlike Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt, de Staël was never a radical who demanded civil equality and political rights, nor did she believe that progress for women could be achieved with violence. Instead, as an intellectual, she trusted the power of literature to prompt a collective effort from women to improve their social position. In doing so, she provided a new vision of a woman who, with access to education, could be an instrument for and a celebrant of social progress. With the Romantic movement, de Staël used her novels to appeal to women's sensibilities and to promote reform through influencing public opinion. Her feminism may seem ambivalent, sometimes even reactionary, particularly when she wrote of women's frailty. Certainly, she never displayed an openly combative feminism. Yet, despite her acceptance of traditional roles for women, new scholarship is emphasising de Staël's impact on domestic and international politics, a role which was not always

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<sup>450</sup> Mary Cullen, "'Rational Creatures and Free Citizens': Republicanism, Feminism and the Writing of History", *The Republic: Journal of the Ireland Institute*, 1 (June 2000), [theirelandinstitute.com/republic/01/pdf/mcullen001](http://theirelandinstitute.com/republic/01/pdf/mcullen001) accessed 17 June 2016.

acknowledged in the past.<sup>451</sup> Sluga talks of “Staël’s relative invisibility [that] mirrored that of women generally”.<sup>452</sup> She notes that de Staël steered events through her letters, novels and salons, fought for feminism and a constitutional liberal government, and played an important role in organising the alliance between European countries around Napoleon’s defeat. However, women who engaged in politics were not seen as agents but intriguers, and de Staël attracted criticism when her concerns and actions became too public.<sup>453</sup> Whatever her fight, she made Romanticism and its model of femininity central to her understanding of French social life and political developments. Most important was her contribution to the contemporary debate about female authorship. While she may have not pushed for political rights, she certainly exercised political influence in creating a new discourse on women’s relationship to politics and art as expressed in her writings.

This chapter first establishes the diverse influences that directly shaped de Staël’s feminism, from the precepts of the *philosophes* to the events of the French Revolution, and her subsequent political position. It is followed by an analysis of her salons and her literature, and the role they played in the dissemination of her feminist ideas, her advocacy for women’s education, and her faith as a source of strength to challenge tyranny and to promote civil liberty. It concludes with an examination of de Staël’s own brand of feminism, with its glorification of the feminine, its moderation, and also its ambivalence.

#### **4.1 The *Philosophes*’ Influence on Madame de Staël’s Thought and Feminism**

De Staël’s intellectual framework was drawn from two dominant movements, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. During the late eighteenth century, these two ideologies, one advocating reason, the other sensibility, became increasingly associated, and this trend is reflected throughout the work of de Staël. As previously commented, the great generation of eighteenth-century Encyclopedists and *philosophes* shaped her thought. While the precocious Germaine met some of them, as Diderot and Raynal<sup>454</sup> were familiars of Mme Necker’s literary salon, it was mostly through her reading that she became acquainted with

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<sup>451</sup> Eric Egnell, *Une femme en politique: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 2013); Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>452</sup> Glenda Sluga, “Madame de Staël and the transformation of European politics, 1812-17”, *The International History Review* 37, 1 (2015), 146-48. DOI: 10.101080/07075332.2013.852607 (accessed 13 June 2017).

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

<sup>454</sup> L’Abbé Raynal wrote the immensely popular *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770) (History of the Two Indies), a philosophical work that portrays the noble passions of exotic savages. From an early age, Germaine exchanged ideas with him.

Rousseau, Montesquieu, Condorcet and Voltaire.<sup>455</sup> De Staël inherited from the Enlightenment's *philosophes* the conception that writers could write on all subjects, and that literature could claim the right to be universal. These intellectuals advocated changes, in different ways, through political and social reforms, based on the idea that society can restrain human conduct while not eradicating its freedom.<sup>456</sup> De Staël embraced these concepts wholeheartedly, and supported their assertion that individuals were born free and knew their own interests best, beliefs that would justify her political ideals based on humanitarianism.<sup>457</sup> These Enlightenment ideas created a new language and a framework for understanding moral agency and for changing the social roles of women.

The scholar Roland Mortier, who believed that de Staël was 'the heiress of the great thinkers of the eighteenth century', pointed to the evolution of her thought from the Enlightenment to Romanticism.<sup>458</sup> De Staël did not oppose the two movements, however, but illustrates their continuity in her work when she combined the Enlightenment's principles and Rousseauian nascent Romanticism.<sup>459</sup> While de Staël is known for having introduced German Romanticism to France, Karina Szmurlo maintains that de Staël was not the first to defend sensibility in literature, and that she was "a participant in the affective revolution" like Rousseau, Goethe and Vauvenargues who rehabilitated passion.<sup>460</sup> It would be wrong, however, to credit Rousseau with being the earliest advocate of the cult of sensibility and passion. Herold indicates that it was John Locke in the seventeenth century, not Rousseau, who was the first to uphold the need for passion, and that Diderot "pleaded even more eloquently than Rousseau, the case for the natural passions of man."<sup>461</sup> Yet, it is to Rousseau that de Staël felt intellectually indebted, as her essay *Lettres sur les ouvrages de Rousseau et le caractère de J.J. Rousseau* testifies. She valued his works on the love of humankind and the desire to be loved in return, a principle that is reflected in her impassioned style, leading the heart to virtue through emotions. As passion and emotions were usually condemned as female failings, a philosophy that elevated sensibility would attract someone of de Staël's feminist inclinations.

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<sup>455</sup> Béatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Elipses, 1999), 111.

<sup>456</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, *Slavery, Imperialism and Freedom* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 2-3.

<sup>457</sup> Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumières et Liberté* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1977), 35.

<sup>458</sup> Roland Mortier in Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Ecrire, Lutter, Vivre* (Genève: Droz, 1994), 292.

<sup>459</sup> Didier, *Madame*, 8.

<sup>460</sup> Karina Szmurlo, "Pour un état des lieux de la recherche Américaine: Germaine de Staël dans le discours de la modernité", in *Cahiers Staëliens* 57, 15-34.

<sup>461</sup> Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 194.

De Staël followed Rousseau when she conciliated the notions of reason and ideals of liberty and natural rights, with the need for passions and emotions.<sup>462</sup> Herold notes that: “Rousseau...was, paradoxically, one among the *philosophes* who achieved a synthesis of reason and feelings.”<sup>463</sup> In his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1754), Rousseau attested that: “Human understanding owes much to the passions, which by common consensus, also owes a great deal to it. It is by their activities that reason is perfected.”<sup>464</sup> Curiously, Madelyn Gutwirth argues that this dualism would have caused de Staël an inner struggle, illustrated in *De l’Influence des Passions sur le bonheur* (1796) (*The Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations*) when she contrasts the passionate with the dispassionate; the latter enjoys a tranquillity without being agitated by passion, although de Staël concedes that passion, if controlled, could be sublime or inspiring.<sup>465</sup> In de Staël’s thought, sensibility is tamed by reason as reason is softened by the voice of the heart.

De Staël dedicated a book to passions and emotions, sometimes referred to as the ‘language of the heart’. *De l’Influence des Passions* is a reflection of the Enlightenment tradition of the legitimacy of sentiment, whereby emotions are an integral part of human morality; de Staël wrote: “Il n’est point de bonheur sans la vertu.”<sup>466</sup> (There is no happiness without virtue). De Staël deemed passion to be essential to initiate and to sustain sociability. Yet, she agreed with the position of Rousseau in his *Letters to d’Alembert* that these emotions had to be well-regulated, and dedicated to the love of humanity and one’s country.<sup>467</sup> De Staël endorses his view, with a recommendation against unrestrained passion: “Les passions, cette force impulsive qui entraîne l’homme indépendamment de sa volonté, voilà le véritable obstacle au bonheur individuel et politique.”<sup>468</sup> (The passions, this impulsive force that drives man independently of his will, here is the true obstacle to individual and political happiness.) Similarly Condorcet, from a moral point of view, after 1796 advocated the necessity of

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<sup>462</sup> Chinatsu Takeda, “Apology of Liberty in *Lettres sur les Ouvrages et le Caractère de J.J Rousseau: Mme de Staël’s Contribution to the Discourse on Natural Sociability*”, *European Review of History – Revue Européenne d’Histoire*, 14, 2 (June 2007), 165-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480701433307> (accessed 9/3/2019).165-93; Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumières et Liberté* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 40.

<sup>463</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 194.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>465</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth, “Forging a vocation: Germaine de Staël on Fiction, Power, and Passion”, *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 86, 3 (1983–5), 242–254.

<sup>466</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence des passions suivi de Réflexions sur le suicide*, Preface de Chantal Thomas (Paris: Rivage, 2000), 53.

<sup>467</sup> Lori J. Marso, “The Stories of Citizens: Rousseau, Montesquieu, and de Staël challenge Enlightenment Reason”, *Polity* 30, 3 (1998), 446. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3235209> (accessed 30 April 2016).

<sup>468</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 28.

controlling passions after the horrific events of the Terror, and he advised working on oneself, exercising reason which can instruct actions.<sup>469</sup> Like Rousseau, de Staël drew a link between emotions and judgment, as is powerfully depicted by her eloquent, politically engaged female heroines. She believed in the role of fiction which can more powerfully convey those truths that allow individuals to become moral beings. As she states in her *Essai sur les Fictions*: “Le don d’émouvoir est la grande puissance des fictions: on peut rendre sensibles presque toutes les vérités morales, en les mettant en action.”<sup>470</sup> (The gift to move is the great power of fiction: it can make one sensible to all moral truths, and to act on them). In this passage, she also points out that women rely on emotion to inform reason, whereas men are taught to suppress or to distance themselves from emotions. As Marso indicates, for de Staël, “the suppression of emotions, articulated in terms of commitment to particular others, is inextricably bound with the construction of gender boundaries and prescriptions concerning how men and women should act.”<sup>471</sup> As well, Fontana highlights Rousseau’s influence on de Staël’s dramatization of Queen Marie-Antoinette’s character, when she uses excessive sentimentality to plead the Queen’s case.<sup>472</sup> Similar to the *philosophe*, de Staël found it crucial to emphasise human suffering so as to elicit compassion, the sentiment that she considered the most basic of human virtues, the foundation of sociability.<sup>473</sup> A society in which individuals were unable to feel pity was no longer truly human. In fact, she would redefine pity as a feminine, morally elevating passion which could augment reason.<sup>474</sup> As she noted:

La philosophie n’est pas de l’insensibilité; quoiqu’elle diminue l’atteinte de vives douleurs, il faut une grande force d’âme et d’esprit pour arriver à cette philosophie...et l’insensibilité est l’habitude du caractère, non le résultat d’un triomphe.”<sup>475</sup> (Philosophy is not insensitivity; although it diminishes the effects of sharp pains, great strength of soul and mind is necessary to reach this philosophy...and insensitivity is a habit of character, not the result of a triumph).

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<sup>469</sup> Lotterie, *Madame*, 22.

<sup>470</sup> De Staël, *Essai sur les Fictions*, (London: Colburn, 1813), 33.

<sup>471</sup> Marso, “The Stories of Citizens”.

<sup>472</sup> For instance, “Marie-Antoinette contient tout ce qui peut toucher votre coeur” (Marie-Antoinette embodies all that can touch your heart).

<sup>473</sup> Fontana, *Germaine de Staël*, 134

<sup>474</sup> De Staël, *De L’Influence*, 122.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

There is no doubt that her last words refer to society's expectations of masculine behaviour, as feelings of pity or compassion would be interpreted as a lack of masculinity. This led de Staël to be quite critical of 'hyper-masculine' politics, rooted in 'philosophical fanaticism',<sup>476</sup> which played out during the Revolution, when gentler emotions were suppressed and concern for the 'other' non-existent.<sup>477</sup> Interestingly, Edmund Burke shared de Staël's concern for the protection of individuals from arbitrary power, and also her view that passion can instruct and inform reason. He lamented at the time that: "Humanity and compassion are ridiculed as the fruits of superstition and ignorance. Tenderness to individuals is considered as treason to the public."<sup>478</sup> The themes of pity and compassion were recurrent in de Staël's political writings as necessary elements to combat barbarism and its excesses as witnessed during the Terror when she defended the Queen.

As de Staël's cousin and first biographer, Mme de Necker de Saussure, declared: "Whatever the enthusiasm Rousseau inspired in her, she always maintained her independence of spirit," particularly with regard to his attitudes towards women and society.<sup>479</sup> De Staël, indeed, agreed with Rousseau's critiques of societal values and conventions, and his elevation of sensibility, but she does not defend him unreservedly. For instance, she disapproved of his need to withdraw from society; sociability was her life. She also opposed his refutation of modern civilisation and his division of nature from society, not accepting his dichotomy between 'good nature' and 'bad society'. As she wrote in *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*:

C'est un beau system, que celui qui, recevant l'homme des mains de la Nature, réunit toutes ses forces pour conserver en lui l'empreinte qu'il a recue d'elle... On répète souvent que dans la vie sociale, il est impossible; mais je ne sais pourquoi l'on n'a voulu trouver cette auguste empreinte que dans l'homme sauvage.<sup>480</sup> (It is a beautiful system, one which, having received men from Nature's hands, gathers all its strength to preserve in them the imprint they have received from

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<sup>476</sup> 'Philosophical fanaticism': based on the three abstract concepts, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

<sup>477</sup> Marso, "The Stories of Citizens", 453-55.

<sup>478</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth (UK): Penguin, 1982), 160-61.

<sup>479</sup> In Madelyn Gutwirth and C. Thomas, "Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question", *PMLA* 86, 1 (1971), 100.

<sup>480</sup> De Staël, *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (San Bernardino, CA: Ulan Press), 53.

it...One repeats often that in [civilised] society it is impossible, but I do not know why one wants to find this imprint in the savage man only).

De Staël maintained that primitive goodness might be preserved in society with the aid of a proper education of sentiment, and the aid of religious education: “les sentiments simples qu’on lui a inspirés, guideront seulement sa conduite et soutiendront son âme”<sup>481</sup> (simple sentiments that will inspire one, guide one’s behaviour and sustain one’s soul). According to de Staël, the merging of nature and society was possible, because she believed in nature’s providence that has endowed individuals with intellectual aptitude to allow them to exploit the good of nature itself.<sup>482</sup> Hence, she makes a link between women and their natural intellectual ability, and the way in which access to education would improve their fate: “Enfin, si les femmes, s’élevant au-dessus de leur sort, osoient prétendre à l’éducation des hommes;...quelle noble destinée leur seroit réservée?”<sup>483</sup> (Finally, if women could rise above their fate and dare to pretend to men’s education...what a noble destiny is there for them?)

Furthermore, she disagreed with Rousseau’s claim that a too intimate commerce between men and women was dangerous, as each sex would be tempted to take the traits and the morals of the other; men would become effeminate, and women would speak and command with authority, losing the charms of their femininity. In contrast, as Marso indicates, Montesquieu offered “a glimpse of gender expectations rooted in erotic freedom and fundamental equality”, a stance with which de Staël was more in sympathy.<sup>484</sup> Also, Rousseau claimed that the origin of corrupted French culture emerged in salons because of the influence of women over men of letters. This was in opposition to de Staël’s faith in women as agents of social and moral regeneration, and her hope that their influence might be extended to the public sphere.<sup>485</sup> This hope led her to revive her salon with the intention of shaping public opinion, and to promote their publications that sought to civilise men and to pacify society.<sup>486</sup> Most *philosophes* also disagreed with Rousseau, glorifying the role of women within the salons.<sup>487</sup> Most of all, de Staël disputed Rousseau’s view that women were

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<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>484</sup> Marso, “The Stories of Citizens”, 455.

<sup>485</sup> Takeda, “Apology of Liberty”, 182.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

not capable of writing with sentiment and passion.<sup>488</sup> Yet, because Rousseau never rejected the idea of the progress of modern civilisation but only condemned its consequences, de Staël still considered him a man of the Enlightenment.<sup>489</sup>

De Staël took from Rousseau only what suited her: his faith in the innate nature of individuals, his cherished melancholy, his sensibility and his enthusiasm.<sup>490</sup> In truth, de Staël responded more to the emotional atmosphere of Rousseau's writing than to his ideas; she was moved by *La Nouvelle Héloïse* more than by *Le Contrat Social*.<sup>491</sup> Rousseau's sensibility and melancholy appealed to de Staël, but also his notion of 'enthusiasm', that is central to her thoughts and to her work. This figures notably in her *Lettres sur les ouvrages de JJ Rousseau*, in the way she praises the *philosophe's* talent. In the last chapter of *De L'Allemagne*, she celebrates the liberating influence of passion in all cultural fields from politics, ethics, and philosophy to religion. As she wrote:

car, pour pénétrer l'essence des choses, il faut une impulsion qui nous excite à nous en occuper avec ardeur. En considérant la destinée humaine en général...nous ne rencontrons jamais le vrai que par l'élévation de l'âme."<sup>492</sup>  
(because, to penetrate the essence of things, an emotional force is needed to deal with it with ardour. When one considers human destiny in general...we encounter authenticity only with the elevation of the soul).

In a direct and explicit manner, de Staël insisted that enthusiasm had nothing to do with fanaticism and could not lead people astray. Enthusiasm is indeed tolerant, and fills the soul with happiness, even in times of misfortune.<sup>493</sup> As she claimed: "In our age...the hope and need for happiness [has] raised the human race."<sup>494</sup> It is important not to forget that she was writing in the wake of the French Revolution, at a time of post-revolutionary spiritual fervour when she, like some, adopted a form of spirituality derived from Platonic and Neo-Platonic doctrines that stress *enthusiasmos*, the presence of God within.<sup>495</sup> De Staël embraced

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<sup>488</sup> De Staël, *Lettres*, 17: "qu'elles ne sont jamais capables des ouvrages qu'il faut écrire avec de l'âme ou de la passion" (that they are never able to write with sentiment and passion).

<sup>489</sup> Takeda, "Apology of Liberty", 178.

<sup>490</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 196.

<sup>491</sup> Gutwirth and Thomas, "Madame de Staël", 100.

<sup>492</sup> De Staël, *De L'Allemagne* II, 305-08.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>494</sup> De Staël in Fontana, *Germaine*, 134.

<sup>495</sup> Michel Brix, "Les sources mystiques de *Corinne*: la femme, l'amour et le sacré", in *Mme de Staël: Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 20 novembre 1999*, ed. Michel Delon and Françoise Mélonio (Paris: Presse de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000), 85-97.

enthusiasm freely and without ambiguity, confident of its positive effects on her inspiration, and her conviction to fight for what she knew to be right. Indeed, the rights promoted by the Enlightenment and early Revolution, which included human rights extended to women, were worth fighting for.

Individual happiness for individuals and for nations was a concept at the heart of the philosophical and political project of the Enlightenment. De Staël endorsed the *philosophes*' view, and claimed in her work that the natural right for happiness extended to women too. Fontana notes that while *De l'Influence* had a political tone, de Staël was also concerned about the issue of personal happiness.<sup>496</sup> Indeed, at the time of its publication in 1796, the author was experiencing some of the mild depression which haunted her throughout her life. Different factors contributed to her melancholy: the death of her mother, her father's decline, and the end of her long and passionate relationship with Narbonne.<sup>497</sup> In her search for happiness, de Staël sought an intermediate emotional disposition, favourable to individual happiness. It was a view contrary to Montesquieu, Voltaire and Diderot who claimed that human happiness could only be fulfilled from the alternating of opposite states, such as 'peace' and 'agitation', or 'movement' and 'rest'. In contrast, de Staël proposed her version of happiness, derived from the persistence of a moderate emotional state, not from the alternating different ones. Interestingly, she applied the same concept to nations, with the reconciliation of opposing parties, initiating stability, innovation and progress, and leading to a moderate government as promoted by Montesquieu.<sup>498</sup> She expressed it clearly in *De l'Influence*:

Le bonheur tel qu'on le souhaite est la réunion de tous les contraires: c'est pour les individus l'espoir sans la crainte, l'activité sans l'inquiétude, la gloire sans la calomnie, l'amour sans l'inconstance, l'imagination qui embellirait à nos yeux ce qu'on possède et flétrirait le souvenir de ce qu'on aurait perdu...Le bonheur des nations serait aussi de concilier ensemble la liberté des républiques et le calme des monarchies, l'émulation des talents et le silence des factions, l'esprit militaire au-dehors, et le respect des lois au-dedans."<sup>499</sup> (The happiness we wish is the reconciliation of all opposites: for individuals, it is hope without fear, activity

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<sup>496</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 137.

<sup>497</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 165.

<sup>498</sup> Stéphanie Genand, *La Chambre noire: Germaine de Staël ou la Pensée du Négatif* (Genève: Droz, 2017), 20-22.

<sup>499</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence*, 30-31.

without worry, glory without slander, love without inconstancy, imagination which would embellish in our eyes all we own and to lessen the memory of what has been lost...The happiness of nations would also conciliate both the freedom of republics and the calm of monarchies, the emulation of talents and the silence of factions, the military spirit outside, and the respect of laws inside).

Here, de Staël adopts the classical stoic approach to happiness, with its absence of passion as a path to tranquillity. She remained adamant that passion has a role to play, but that it does not conflict with philosophy, when she states: “La philosophie ... nait toujours de la profondeur de la réflexion, et qu’elle est souvent inspirée par le besoin de résister à ses passions,...et donne une jouissance de ses propres facultés tout à fait inconnues à l’homme insensible.”<sup>500</sup> (Philosophy is always born from the depths of reflection, and it is often inspired by the need to resist passions...and give a pleasure to ones’ faculties quite unknown to insensitive individuals). As a woman, it was expected that she should possess this sensitivity.

From the *philosophes*, Madame de Staël inherited the theoretical concept of ‘perfectibility of the human mind’, reflected in women being encouraged to develop their intellectual talents. In 1755, Rousseau had minted the neologism ‘perfectibility’ to accentuate its dramatic character. The word ‘progress’ remained neutral, as it could be interpreted as an advance for good or evil. In fact, it was Condorcet who was the first to delineate this theory in his *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795) (Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind), which stressed how fundamental printing had been as a step towards ‘perfecting humanity’, because it enables knowledge to be conserved and to be safeguarded against loss. De Staël endorsed Rousseau’s theory that progress and perfectibility require human initiative, and the will to act in favour of political regeneration and new institutions.<sup>501</sup> An heir of Condorcet and Turgot<sup>502</sup>, she studied the evolution towards perfection of the human mind against a wide historical context of different civilisations, with transformations of their mores, of their cultural representations and their political forms. In *De la Littérature*, she demonstrates the link between the progress of sciences and the progress of morality, and as a reader of Rousseau, she underlines the

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<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>501</sup> Florence Lotterie, “L’année 1800: Perfectibilité, progrès et révolution dans *De la Littérature* de Mme de Staël”, *Romanticism*, 108 (2000), 11-13.

<sup>502</sup> Anne Robert Turgot (1727-1781), a French economist.

importance of human responsibility to pursue perfectibility in order to benefit society.<sup>503</sup> Similar to Montesquieu in his *Esprit des Lois*, she reviewed the link between the progress of civilisation and the socio-political system in force. In her own original way, she used literature as a contributor to the idea of progress, and to the formation of public opinion. She explains:

Si l'imprimerie avait existé, les lumières et l'opinion publique acquérant chaque jour plus de force, le caractère des Romains se seroit conservé, et avec lui la nation et la république; on aurait pas vu disparaître de la terre, ce peuple qui aimoit la liberté sans insubordination."<sup>504</sup> (If printing had existed [among the Romans], knowledge and public opinion would have gained strength each day, the Romans' character would have stayed the same, and with it the nation and the republic; one would have not witnessed the disappearance, from the earth, of these people who loved liberty without insubordination).

In *De Littérature*, de Staël says that friends of progress could only be republicans, and that it would be their task to defend the principle of perfectibility. As a true Rousseauist, she associates the love of progress with morality. Lotterie specifies that this psychological dimension of the theory of progress is inseparable from the historical context, as emotions were high during the Revolution, and influenced ideas which would be adopted as progressive.<sup>505</sup> In studying and analysing the evolution and the perfection of the human mind, against a wide historical context, de Staël shows her preoccupation with history; like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Condorcet and Turgot before her, she established that institutions, laws and mores were interrelated, and were all manifestations of the human mind throughout the centuries.

Issues of gender, the French Revolution and the breakdown of the revolutionary project no doubt shaped de Staël's views and her development as a feminist. She considered the advent of the Revolution an advance in the political and social progress of European civilisation.<sup>506</sup> As a liberal, she welcomed the Revolution's principles and goals but condemned its atrocities, which she blamed on unreliable and dishonest elites. She argued that the

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<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-28.

<sup>505</sup> Lotterie, "L'année 1800", 13-14.

<sup>506</sup> De Staël, "Considerations sur les principaux évènements de la Revolution Française" (1812) in *Madame de Staël: La Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Thies (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2017), 303.

Revolution was the result of “a rupture entre le lien du gouvernement et du gouverné...seule une révolution, celle de 1789, a été faite par la force de l’opinion”.<sup>507</sup> (a breach between the government and the governed...only one revolution, that of 1789, was made by the force of that idea). Although she often denied her involvement in politics, she believed she had a role to play when she saw the disorganisation of parliamentary groups. She regularly attended the debates of the Assembly and witnessed the unfolding of revolutionary politics. In fact, it was the lack of cooperation between the different political factions that brought de Staël’s political thinking to prominence. She endorsed her father’s view, exemplified in his work *Du pouvoir exécutif dans les grands états* (1792) (Of the executive power of the higher Estates) which pointed to the difficulties between the executive and the legislative bodies to enforce new laws.<sup>508</sup> Fontana notes that, with Benjamin Constant, de Staël fought for what we call today ‘modern liberalism’, and for the shaping of a modern style of republic with the basic principle of liberty, aspiration for personal happiness, and emphasis on the importance and independence of individuals, which were also characteristics of eighteenth-century feminism. Cullen suggests that a link between modern republicanism and modern feminism originated in the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, and in the aftermath of the American and French revolutions.<sup>509</sup> Interestingly, Annelien de Dijn defines this transition of political thought as ‘aristocratic liberalism’, and as more representative of the French tradition, which rested on Montesquieu’s precepts, which assumed the virtues of social hierarchy and monarchy, as well as the English model of representation. As de Dijn says: “Aristocratic liberalism...was not a minority tradition; rather, it constituted one of the most important ways of thinking about liberty in nineteenth-century France.”<sup>510</sup> This model was fully embraced at the Restoration, and may explain de Staël’s earlier support for a constitutional monarchy before she favoured a republic.<sup>511</sup> De Staël’s heroine Delphine, who defies gender conventions, openly voices her support for the political ideals of freedom and republicanism that guarantee the interests of both men and women, and their participation in the running of the government.

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<sup>507</sup> De Staël, “Des Circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Revolution et des Principes qui doivent fonder la Republique en France” (1899), in Thies (ed.), *La Passion de la Liberté*, 181-84.

<sup>508</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 47-48.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>510</sup> Annelien de Dijn, “French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?” quoted in J.K. Wright, “The hard birth of French liberalism”, *Modern Intellectual History* 6, 3 (November, 2009), 599-601.

<sup>511</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 113-18.

In *De L'Influence des Passions*, de Staël asserts that happiness is a natural aspiration for individuals and for nations, and that this concept was at the heart of the philosophical and political project of the Enlightenment.<sup>512</sup> Interestingly, the fate of women during the Revolution was never addressed directly by de Staël but certain remarks in her novel *Delphine* (1802) and in *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (1818) show she believed that the world of the *Ancien Régime*, and the traditional roles of women within it, was in the past. Until the period of the Terror, women thought that they could benefit from the dramatic changes which took place in French society. Their hopes are illustrated in the story of Delphine when Mr Lebenzei wrote to the heroine: “Vous vivez...dans une de ces époques rares où la puissance ne méprise pas les lumières; dans un mois, la loi du divorce sera décrétée.”<sup>513</sup> (You live...in one of these rare periods of history when the powerful still remember the Enlightenment: in a month, the law which allows divorce will be decreed). While the Terror brought these hopes to a tragic end, de Staël still believed that the desire for happiness was ingrained in humans, and that the design for a free, fair and humane society was still valid: “oui, c’est dans ce siècle, c’est lorsque l’espoir ou le besoin du bonheur a soulevé la race humaine. C’est dans ce siècle surtout qu’on est conduit à réfléchir profondément sur la nature du bonheur individuel et politique, sur sa route, sur ses bornes, sur les écueils qui séparent d’un tel but.”<sup>514</sup> (Yes, it is in this century, when the hope or the desire for happiness has lifted the human race. It is in this century especially, that one is led to think deeply on the nature of individual and political happiness, on its journey, on its limits, on its pitfalls that separate them from such a goal). Florence Lotterie points out that de Staël rejected the temptation of despair and fatalism when faced with setbacks. Separation from the trauma of the Revolution was indeed necessary and was made possible by remaining faithful to the Enlightenment concept of ‘perfectibility of the human species.’ *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, published a year after the Revolution, illustrates strongly the Staëlian conception of progress, a continued and linear human progression.<sup>515</sup>

Unsurprisingly, de Staël’s involvement and position in politics remained ‘passive’ mainly because of her sex, but also because of her reputation. Her insistence on promoting her lover Narbonne to the position of Minister of War brought her shame and derision as illustrated in

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<sup>512</sup> In Cullen, “Rational Creatures”, 130.

<sup>513</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* II (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 67.

<sup>514</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence*, 25.

<sup>515</sup> Lotterie, “L’année 1800”, 9.

Queen Marie-Antoinette's comment: "The comte de Narbonne is finally, since yesterday, the minister of war. What glory for Mme de Staël, and what pleasure to have the whole army at her disposal."<sup>516</sup> Fontana believes that this may have been the reason why de Staël's political writings were neglected at the time. Nevertheless, de Staël showed no rancour towards the Queen when, in her pamphlet *Réflexions sur le Procès de la Reine*<sup>517</sup> (*Reflections on the Trial of the Queen*), she stood against the Queen's condemnation. Because the trial was essentially political, but nonpartisan, de Staël addressed herself to the opinions of all parties and analysed the current politics.<sup>518</sup> She condemned the government for "La barbarie de vos décisions: vous gouvernez par la mort."<sup>519</sup> (The barbarity of your decisions; you govern by death). In this instance, she engaged in revolutionary politics, in defending the Queen, not as a court member but as a member of her sex.<sup>520</sup> In this essay, the Queen becomes the symbol of all women, as mothers and as victims, an image that conformed to the 'ideal woman' at the time. Shrewdly, she invites women of the people, known as the most notorious and vicious enemies of the Queen, to identify with Marie-Antoinette through shared maternal feelings when her son was taken away from her. As she wrote:

"Je reviens à vous, femmes immolées toutes dans une mère si tendre, immolées toute par l'attentat qui seroit commis sur la foiblesse, par l'anéantissement de la pitié, c'en est fait de votre empire si la férocité règne, c'en est fait de votre destinée si vos pleurs coulent en vain, défendez la Reine par toutes les armes de la nature, allez chercher cet enfant qui périra s'il faut qu'il perde celle qui l'a tant aimé"<sup>521</sup> (I turn to you, women who have been sacrificed along with such a tender mother, sacrificed by an attack committed out of weakness, by the absence of pity; your empire is over if ferocity reigns, your destiny is over if your tears flow in vain; defend the Queen by all forces of nature, go and fetch this child who will die if he loses the one who loved him so much.)

During the events of the 'October days of 1793', de Staël appealed to women who were able to understand "tout ce que peut toucher votre coeur"<sup>522</sup> (all that can touch your heart), and

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<sup>516</sup> In Fontana, *Germaine*, 44.

<sup>517</sup> De Staël, *Réflexions sur le Procès de la Reine* (München: Bayerischer Staatsbibliothek, 1793).

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>520</sup> Nanette Le Coat, "The Virtuous Passion" in *Staël's Philosophy of the Passions*, ed. Tili Boon Cuillé and Karyna Szmurlo (Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2013), 46.

<sup>521</sup> De Staël, *Réflexions*, 34.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

who, through emotional truths, became political actors. In truth, de Staël was worried that if women failed to defend the Queen, the most prominent and visible woman in France, their future in the Revolution would be forever compromised. In doing so, she claimed the Rousseauian ideals of femininity according to which women, “as mothers and spouses, would regenerate the nation through their self-sacrificing and lactating generosity.”<sup>523</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth explains that it was also a way to oppose the Jacobins’ accusation of Marie-Antoinette’s sexual excesses. She states that: “For the Revolution, maternity redeemed female sexuality”.<sup>524</sup> Yet, de Staël’s strategy in *Réflexions sur le Procès de la Reine* was not without ambivalence. Some critics have argued that defending Marie-Antoinette as an apolitical female was to deny the crucial fact that she was both the Queen of France and a foreign princess. Also, to define her as a mother and an emotional being only was to approve the traditional role attributed to women by men, and the deep-rooted anthropological view of female nature, without acknowledging her lack of deceit and her ability to reason.<sup>525</sup> In this pamphlet, de Staël showed her desire to influence public opinion, appealing to pity, a feeling the Jacobins tried to repress because it risked betraying the Revolution.<sup>526</sup> In fact, she saw the Queen as a scapegoat for all women who aspired to play a political role.<sup>527</sup>

At the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, French idealism including its nascent feminism was in peril. Idealism had inspired the Revolution, but then was killed by it. De Staël believed that modern notions of human rights and those of Christian virtues were ignored: “mais c’est dans l’âme que les principes de la liberté sont fondés”.<sup>528</sup> (but it is in the soul that the principles of liberty are founded). The notion of liberty, the essence of a republic, was at the forefront of her political thought. When de Staël invokes republican customs, she refers to gender equality as a central and defining element of a republican system. It is in her book, *Des Circonstances qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la république en France*,<sup>529</sup> (*Circumstances that can end the Revolution and principles which must be the foundation of the Republic in France*) that

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<sup>523</sup> Gutwirth, in Cuillé and Szmurlo (eds), *Staël’s Philosophy*, 46.

<sup>524</sup> Le Coat, in Cuillé and Szmurlo (eds), *Staël’s Philosophy*, 46.

<sup>525</sup> Gutwirth, in Cuillé and Szmurlo (eds), *Staël’s Philosophy*, 46-7.

<sup>526</sup> In *De l’Influence*, she wrote: “C’est dans la crise d’une révolution que l’on entend répéter sans cesse que la pitié est un sentiment puéril qui s’oppose à toute action nécessaire à l’intérêt général”, 246. (It is during the crisis of a revolution that we hear incessantly that pity is a weak sentiment which opposes all necessary actions in the interest of all).

<sup>527</sup> Marso, “The Stories of Citizens”, 435-463.

<sup>528</sup> De Staël, “Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la Révolution française” in *Madame de Staël: La Passion de la Liberté* (Paris: Laffont, 2017), 804.

<sup>529</sup> Published posthumously in 1818.

she advocates that republican institutions adopt republican *moeurs* (mores) thereby generating more tolerance, more justice and more liberty.<sup>530</sup> With liberty, the principle of justice was “L’égide de tous et de chacun”<sup>531</sup> (the aegis for each and all), as justice governs the moral world, and justice should be the same for all. Like Montesquieu, she subscribed to the theory that political questions and gender politics were fundamentally interrelated. The *philosophe* demonstrates in his *Persian Letters* that denying freedom or desire to women is not only despotic, but encourages the making of more despotic societal structures that destroy the purpose of forming good citizens.<sup>532</sup> De Staël’s political philosophy converged with Montesquieu’s comparative methods of governments when she declared that: “Les institutions politiques peuvent seules former le caractère d’une nation”<sup>533</sup> (political systems alone shape the character of nations). It was very much in line with her desire for ‘civil liberty’ to ensure freedom and security for all. In her *Reflexions sur la paix intérieure* (1795), she stressed that ‘civil liberty’ was a privilege that served people’s interests best, whereas ‘political rights’ were a form of public obligation to the nation, which could also be used as an instrument to satisfy political ambitions. As Fontana notes, to de Staël: “Civil liberty, on the other hand, mattered to all quiet, peaceful men who did not want to be dominated and enslaved”.<sup>534</sup> In *Circonstances*, de Staël noted: “Est-il besoin de dire que, sans un pays où, ... la vie et la pensée ne sont pas libres, on est aussi privé de ses droits politiques? Cette garantie de la liberté civile n’en est jamais séparée.”<sup>535</sup> (is it necessary to recall that, in a country wherein life and thought are not free, individuals are also deprived of their political rights? This guarantee of civil liberty is never separate from it). Because she was a *salonnière* and a writer, Madame de Staël saw a direct connection between the preservation of civil liberties and free thought; for women of her class, free thought was expressed most through the salons and literature.

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<sup>530</sup> Paul Gautier, “Le centenaire de Mme de Staël”, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, 26e Année, 2 (1919), 211 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40518166> (accessed 03/07/2013).

<sup>531</sup> In De Staël, “Considerations”, III, 524.

<sup>532</sup> In Marso, “The Stories”, 447-48.

<sup>533</sup> De Staël, *De L’Allemagne*, 1 (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 63.

<sup>534</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 116-17.

<sup>535</sup> De Staël, *Circonstances*, Partie II, 226.

## 4.2 The Role of Salons and Literature in Madame de Staël's Feminism

### 4.2.1 Salons in Paris and in Coppet

It was with conversation and her literature that de Staël was able to propagate and promote her ideals. Her idea of feminism was the freedom to partake in the intellectual life of a nation in the same way as the French *salonnières* of the Enlightenment. Stephen Kale considers that de Staël made the *esprit de société* a fundamental element of the French national character.<sup>536</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most men still saw women, even *salonnières*, as having a passive role in society. Conversely, de Staël regarded her role not as a form of entertainment but as an active intellectual and political ideal.<sup>537</sup> Likewise, Kale praises *salonnières* when he states that they were not simply “passive hostesses but guardians of freedom and engines of social progress ...they married conversation to the selfless pursuit of transcendental values.”<sup>538</sup> As de Staël wrote in *De l'Allemagne*: “Le grand charme de la vie sociale en France, consiste dans l'art de concilier parfaitement ensemble, les avantages que l'esprit des femmes et celui des hommes réunis peuvent apporter dans la conversation.”<sup>539</sup> (The great charm of social life in France consists in the art of marrying perfectly the advantages of women's and men's minds in conversation). Admittedly, de Staël's position was exceptional, allowing her to use the salon – as a space both public and domestic, and therefore permitted to women - as a liberating space to influence politics, and later, to protest against political authoritarianism. In fact, salons had become central to the sociability of the Enlightenment, forging links between the nobility and the Republic of Letters. Their influence continued during the Revolution. Jules Michelet described the first year of the Revolution as the ‘apogee of society life’.<sup>540</sup> After 1789, *salonnières* continued to receive and to entertain, with a clear political role, permitting encounters and discussions among people who played a vital role during the Revolution. Lilti indicates that during the Estates-General and in the early years of the Revolution, de Staël's salon was one of the meeting points of the liberal aristocracy.<sup>541</sup> On her return from her first exile in 1795, de Staël reopened her salon at rue du Bac, where politically minded guests congregated. Kale

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<sup>536</sup> Stephen Kale, “Review of Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des Salons: Sociabilité et Mondanités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*”, *H-France Review* 6, 106 (2006), 445, doi: 10.3917/rhmc.543.0206.

<sup>537</sup> Stephen Kale, “Women, Salons, and the State in the Aftermath of the French Revolution”, *Journal of Women's History*, 13, 4 (Winter, 2002), 310, 320.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>539</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* 1, 134.

<sup>540</sup> Jules Michelet (1798-1874), a French nationalist historian, in Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 227.

<sup>541</sup> Lilti, *The World of the Salons*, 227.

states that these were de Staël's salon's finest hours, "when *salonnières* had the opportunity to orchestrate a fusion of *la politique* and *la lumière*." It is well-known that de Staël could charm even her detractors with her conversation: "Pas un de ses ennemis ne restera son ennemi après l'avoir entendu parler pendant un quart d'heure."<sup>542</sup> (Not one of her enemies will remain an enemy after listening to her speaking for a quarter of an hour). Indeed, de Staël revelled in conversation, a talent she described as existing in France only, arguing that in other countries, it was practiced out of politeness, discussion and friendship. She said that in France it is an art, wherein imagination and soul are necessarily combined.<sup>543</sup> In his diaries, the American diplomat Morris, who discovered Parisian high-society during the Revolution, described the "intermingling of worldly amusements and political intrigues"<sup>544</sup>, and reported attending de Staël's reading of her tragedy *Montmorency*.<sup>545</sup>

Politicians feared the influence these gatherings had on public opinion, as demonstrated when Benjamin Constant delivered his first speech in the Tribune in January 1800, denouncing the future emperor's threat of tyranny; as a result, de Staël's salon was immediately placed under surveillance. During the years of the Consulate and the Empire (1799-1814), Napoleon had nevertheless encouraged traditional institutions of sociability, hoping that, in this way, he could gain the confidence and the recognition of the old nobility. *Salonnières* were then advised to concentrate on social amusements rather than on political discussion. As de Staël wrote in *Considérations*, in the absence of an authentic and uncensored discourse, sociability could no longer be counted on to provide a foundation for free government.<sup>546</sup> Egnell recalls an incident involving Napoleon and a French woman, famous for her beauty, wit and open opinion, to whom he declared that he did not like women meddling in politics; she replied that, as a woman who lives in a country in which women could lose their heads, it was natural to want to know why.<sup>547</sup> A well-known misogynist, Napoleon tried to obliterate women's political power, as exemplified by de Staël's forced exile at his command and the censoring of some of her work.

De Staël believed that *salonnières* were advocates of moral regeneration, and she rejected the idea that because of their confinement to the domestic sphere, their role would be limited to

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<sup>542</sup> Alexandre Dumas in Isabelle Safa, "Une conversation avec G.de Staël", *Cahiers Staëliens* no. 65, (Paris: Champion, 2015), 210.

<sup>543</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* 1, 67.

<sup>544</sup> Lilti, *The World*, 228.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>547</sup> Egnell, *Une Femme*, 143.

supporting men in their political endeavours. She viewed their function as a way to reinforce women's position in society wherein they could play the role of moral educators, as she judged women "worthier of moral esteem than men", to ensure that men's public actions would always be committed to the public good.<sup>548</sup> At the time of the Revolution, de Staël made her salon a place where ideally, those responsible for the exercise of power could gain in the wisdom and virtue necessary to draft new legislation. According to de Staël, women were less susceptible to – although not immune from – moral corruption, particularly when an arbitrary government and its actions encouraged the abandonment of social conventions.<sup>549</sup> Thus, in her political writings, de Staël invites feminine mediation to replace selfish ambition with refined passion and sentiments conducive to intellectual and political harmony.<sup>550</sup> She reiterated the significance of women's presence in every form of sociability, when she wrote in *De L'Allemagne*: "mais dans les pays où il n'y a pas de gouvernement représentatif, la présence des femmes est nécessaire pour maintenir tous les sentiments de délicatesse et de pureté...L'influence des femmes est plus salutaire aux guerriers qu'aux citoyens."<sup>551</sup> (but in countries wherein there is no representative government, women's presence is necessary to maintain the qualities of tact and purity...Women's influence is more salutary to warriors than to citizens). However, historians Madelyn Gutwirth and Chantal Thomas do not support the assumption that de Staël's position, as a *salonnière*, was merely to impart moral and feminine values:

Madame de Staël rompt avec l'attitude réservée des *salonnières*, avec la tradition de l'Ancien Régime du pouvoir caché des femmes, de leur influence toute-puissante mais invisible. Passionnée de politique, convaincue du plein-droit de son engagement, résolue à donner le maximum d'impact à ses prises de position, elle est celle – la première – qui invente au féminin le personnage de l'intellectuelle.<sup>552</sup> (Madame de Staël departs from the reserved attitude of *salonnières*, with the traditional hidden power of the Ancien Regime, with their powerful but invisible influence. With a passion for politics and convinced of her

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<sup>548</sup> De Staël, *De L'Allemagne*, 1, 65.

<sup>549</sup> Susan Tenenbaum, "Montesquieu and Mme de Staël: The Woman as a Factor in Political Analysis", *Political Theory* 1 (1973), 92-103; and "Woman Through the Prism of Political Thought", *Polity* 15 (1982), 90-102.

<sup>550</sup> Kale, "Women", 319.

<sup>551</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 1, 134.

<sup>552</sup> Chantal Thomas, "Préface", *De l'Influence des Passions*, 11; Madelyn Gutwirth, "Madame de Staël, Rousseau and the Woman Question", *PMLA* 86, 1 (1971), 100-09.

rightful engagement, resolute to give the maximum of impact to her decisions, she is the first figure of the female intellectual).

Naturally, this was denying Rousseau's belief that, for the sake of society's harmony wherein men were free to pursue their interests, women should have no role in, or exert no influence on the public sphere. Yet, Kale indicates that de Staël's feminism did not refer to the question of equal rights because she was the product of a *milieu* wherein women without political power could achieve public distinction through conversation. Victor de Pange, who edited her correspondence with the Duke of Wellington, wrote that: "her ultimate intention always was to influence public opinion and the men who shaped it."<sup>553</sup> There is no doubt that her salon rose quickly to fame during the revolutionary years, as a letter from the Marquis de Custine testifies: "the salon of Madame de Staël is more than a place where one amuses oneself, it is a mirror depicting the history of our time. The things one sees and hears there are more instructive than many books and more lively than many comedies."<sup>554</sup> De Staël was aware of this. In her novel *Corinne* (1791), Oswald, the heroine's British lover, recalls after visiting a Parisian salon:

...that conversation had inherited the deepest ideas...I met well-educated and highly-talented men...seeking a salon's approval after winning acclaim at the speakers' rostrum, living in a society of women to be applauded rather than loved."<sup>555</sup>

Madame de Staël was indeed in her element in the salon environment in which women could refine their minds, express their thoughts and interact with men in ways unknown to English polite society. During her stay in England, in 1793, she was shocked to discover that English women:

ne se mêlent jamais aux entretiens à voix haute; les hommes ne les ont point habitués à prendre part à la conversation générale...les femmes, à cet égard, sont d'une extrême timidité; car dans un état libre, les hommes reprenant leur dignité naturelle, les femmes se sentent subordonnés.<sup>556</sup> (never come conspicuously forward in discourse; the men have not accustomed them to take a share in

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<sup>553</sup> In Kale, "Women", 335.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>555</sup> In *Ibid.*, 335-36.

<sup>556</sup> De Staël, "Considerations", 455.

general conversation...English women are extremely timid in this respect; for in a free country, men always consider their dignity to be natural, while women feel subordinate.)

When de Staël wrote *Corinne*, she had already been twice to England. She went for the first time when she was ten years old, and when she followed Narbonne there, from January to May 1793. She was to return again during her last exile in 1813. As mentioned earlier, her idealisation of the British political model can be read throughout the entirety of her work. To her, the English nation combined la “sécurité, la liberté et les lumières”<sup>557</sup> (security, liberty and enlightenment), thanks to the freedom surrounding participation in public affairs, expression, and publication. Nevertheless, her first impression of England was that women were not permitted to shine in society. She described the society as an ‘enceinte glacée’, (frozen circle) in which there was no room for an exceptional woman like herself.<sup>558</sup> She blamed this conservative attitude on the absence of salons. In *Corinne*, she depicted this society satirically with the character of the second Lady Edgermond, who rejected anything that stood outside the usual and monotonous rules imposed by society.<sup>559</sup> Her heroine Corinne found the convents in Italy full of life compared to British women’s society.<sup>560</sup> In *Considérations*, de Staël wrote: “Les femmes en France dirigeaient chez elles presque toutes les conversations, et leur esprit s’était formé de bonne heure à la facilité que ce talent exige.”<sup>561</sup> (In France, women directed almost all conversation, and their minds were formed from an early age to acquire the necessary talent.) Women’s influence, if indirectly, on the course of politics was beyond any doubt. Kale states that, for de Staël and the women of her class, “there was no real distinction between the salons and the domestic sphere: decisions and arrangements made at home, by men involved in politics occurred in a space open to the influence of women.”<sup>562</sup> De Staël admits that British women may not have enjoyed the pride and the dignity of their French counterparts in the realms of salons; nevertheless, their conversations were filled with the qualities of modesty and tactfulness: there was no sarcasm or irony, no maliciousness, nothing that could hurt feminine sensibility. Despite their subordinate position in society, they were rewarded with men’s respect and loyalty, a theme

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<sup>557</sup> De Staël in a letter to August Wilhelm Schlegel, 25 September 1813, in Laetitia Saintes, “Le Groupe de Coppet et l’expérience anglaise des limites d’un idéal”, *Cahiers Staëliens* no. 68 (Paris: Editions H. Champion, 2018), 141.

<sup>558</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Les Mots des Femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 126.

<sup>559</sup> De Staël, *Corinne ou l’Italie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2017), 543.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>561</sup> De Staël, “Considerations”, 455.

<sup>562</sup> Kale, “Women”, 334.

dear to de Staël.<sup>563</sup> Surprisingly, de Staël failed to mention that the British women still had a part to play in politics through their influence within political parties, a phenomenon unknown in France before the Revolution, and through influence at Court.

Yet, while de Staël's salon was famous for its worldly conversation, it also attracted strong criticism. During the revolutionary years, it was labelled as 'a centre of political intrigue', a denunciation reinforced by the prejudice against women in politics. This did not come as a surprise to de Staël. She was accused of meddling in politics when she tried to reconcile, in vain, opposing parties, and thus attracted sarcasm from all factions. Satirical pamphlets were issued, among others, *The Intrigues of Madame de Staël* (1791) in which she was shown as a nymphomaniac inciting riots to keep her lovers. Later, a poem mocking her attempts to unite all parties portrayed her as receiving the royalists in the morning, the Girondins for dinner, the Jacobins for supper and "at night, everybody".<sup>564</sup> While she felt hurt, she was not intimidated, and the abuse must have reinforced her determination to fight for the freedom of women to play a role, even if obliquely, in political affairs.

It is in Switzerland, however, that de Staël's salon reached its full cultural and political potential. As noted earlier, on Napoleon's orders, de Staël was exiled from France from 1802 to 1812, and spent most of her time in the family château in Coppet, near Geneva, where she attracted a constellation of European intellectuals, among the most brilliant of her generation; in this way, creating an exceptional literary and philosophical centre in Europe. The 'liberal label' was often attributed to her salon in Coppet, because its members advocated individual liberty, civil equality, and the end of inherited privileges.<sup>565</sup> As Napoleon declared in St Helena, her house "became a full arsenal against me".<sup>566</sup> It was true, but it was also much more than a place of political conspiracy and opposition. Herold points out that it was "a permanent seminar and a debating club, a laboratory of ideas, and a Circean menagerie."<sup>567</sup> Winock describes the group as an 'informal' association of sometimes ten, twenty or thirty members, and maintains that de Staël's conversation became a true literary genre that

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<sup>563</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 448.tte.

<sup>564</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 106-07.

<sup>565</sup> Lucien Jaume, (dir.), *Coppet, Creuset de l'esprit libéral: les idées politiques et constitutionnelles du groupe de Mme de Staël* (Paris: Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2000), 243.

<sup>566</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 281.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

contrasted with the vulgarity of manners de Staël had noticed during the Revolution.<sup>568</sup> Yet, the ‘Group of Coppet’, as it has been named since 1930, was never considered a unified and coherent group. In her salon, de Staël created a new form of sociability which departed from the worldly salons by its serious and theoretical intent, without, nevertheless, claiming an intellectual unity, or belonging to any specific literary or philosophical school. While its members debated varied subjects such as literature, philosophy, law and history, the group’s main intellectual objective rested on two words, liberty and diversity, stressing individual freedom, and an interest in differing opinions and other cultures. Victoire Feuillebois argues that these ideas were clearly linked to the Group’s geographical position, at the crossroads of different political and religious systems, and on the axis separating the Latin world from the Germanic world.<sup>569</sup> As a feminist, de Staël believed that the communication and propagation of ideas, with the presence of salons and literature, would ensure a solid foundation for the integration of women in society.

#### 4.2.2 *Madame de Staël’s nationalism and cosmopolitanism*

De Staël’s pursuit of knowledge and depth of thought are illustrated in her literature, especially in her works *De la Littérature* (1800) and *De l’Allemagne* (1813-1814). Her thoughts were significant in promoting individual liberty as a social phenomenon within a variety of contexts and allowed her to evaluate and compare the position of women within different societies. Probably due to Romanticism, this modern analysis distanced itself from the eighteenth century’s ideal of universality and may also have been elicited by Napoleon’s enforced unification of European states. For instance, she did not hide her idealisation of the British political model, with its representative parliamentary system, an ideal she believed was worth fighting for.<sup>570</sup> In all, de Staël suggested a more flexible model based on the collaboration of different states without their losing their own particularities. As she wrote in *De l’Allemagne*: “C’est une qualité dans les individus que l’abnégation de soi-même et l’estime des autres; mais le patriotisme des nations doit être égoïste”<sup>571</sup> (Self-abnegation and regard for others are qualities of individuals but nations’ patriotism must be selfish), and she

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<sup>568</sup> Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 266-67. Being a member of high society, de Staël remained attached to aristocratic politeness and never used the familiar form ‘tu’ (you) that was encouraged during the revolutionary years, when she addressed herself to others. She continued to use the form ‘vous’.

<sup>569</sup> Victoire Feuillebois, “Le groupe de Coppet”, *Les Essentiels Littérature*, 1.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/essentiels/repere/groupe-coppet>

<sup>570</sup> Eloise Forestier, “De Staël and England”, *Cahiers Staeliens* 68 (Paris: Editions Champion, 2018), 138.

<sup>571</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 56.

praised English people's pride in their nation as being of great benefit to their politics.<sup>572</sup> Sluga points to the author's ambivalence as de Staël professed, on one hand, to be 'a citizen of the world', but later stressed national differences, and the importance of patriotism, opposing 'foreign' influence which could weaken the *patrie*. Sluga concludes that this change of heart was a reflection of the influence of Romanticism and its glorification of the idea of a 'nation'.<sup>573</sup> Indeed, fostered by Rousseau, the idea of patriotism was viewed at the time as a political ideal, and crucial to de Staël's role in the 'emotional revolution'.<sup>574</sup> Suzanne Guerlac comments that "The transformation of a territory into a *patrie*, imbuing its inhabitants with the shared tastes, *habitudes*, and sentiments was the role of the Republic of Letters including literary figures as herself [de Staël]".<sup>575</sup> On a different note, Simone Balayé explained that de Staël was led by the love of her country and the necessity to protect it against foreign domination.<sup>576</sup> Interestingly, Charlotte Hogsett argues that, after *On Literature*, de Staël's thinking shifted and the "essence of a nation as the fundamental way of being became neglected in favour of a more complex approach to identity".<sup>577</sup> Silvia Bordoni sums it up perfectly when she concludes that: "in de Staël's European ideal, nationalism and cosmopolitanism are not in conflict, but rather integrate with each other".<sup>578</sup> Women were encouraged to be sympathetic and emotional and had thus the capacity to embrace the notion of a community of shared feelings or *patrie*.

De Staël always displayed her tolerance towards other cultures. She supported the dissemination of ideas beyond frontiers and even envisaged the cooperation of 'thinking elites' which included women.<sup>579</sup> After years of European conflicts that had reinforced national frontiers and accentuated linguistic barriers, cosmopolitanism, a term that emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century, appeared to be a reasonable answer to conflict and

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<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 56 ("La fierté des anglais servent puissamment à leur existence politique").

<sup>573</sup> Glenda Sluga, "Gender and the nation: Madame de Staël or Italy", *Women's Writings* 10, 2 (2003), 37. DOI: 10.1080/09699080300200197

<sup>574</sup> Glenda Sluga, "Passions, patriotism and nationalism and Germaine de Staël", *Nations and Nationalism* 15, 2 (2009), 303.

<sup>575</sup> Suzanne Guerlac in Sluga, "Passions", 310.

<sup>576</sup> Simone Balayé, "Madame de Staël et l'Europe napoléonienne", in *Le Groupe de Coppet et l'Europe 1789-1830: actes du cinquième Colloque de Coppet, Tübingen, 8-10 juillet 1993*, ed. Kurt Klooche and Simone Balayé (Paris: Jean Touzot, 1994), 25-37.

<sup>577</sup> Charlotte Hogsett, "A Topography of the Soul" in *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël* (Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1987), 106-08.

<sup>578</sup> In Tegan Zimmerman, "Cosmopolitanism or Globalization? Mme de Staël's Feminist Comparative Literature for Fredric Jameson", *The Humanities Review* 9, 1 (Spring, 2011), 94. [stephens.academia.edu/TeganZimmerman](http://stephens.academia.edu/TeganZimmerman)

<sup>579</sup> Roberta J. Forsberg and H.C Nixon, "Madame de Staël and Freedom Today", *The Western Political Quarterly* 12, 1 (March, 1959), 72-3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/444193>.

difference, philosophically, spiritually and intellectually, and also politically promising and culturally enriching.<sup>580</sup> De Staël demonstrated an European conscience which was quite unusual at the time, and was ready to expand her views outside the ‘French space’, respecting other countries’ specificities.<sup>581</sup> Beatrice Guenther asserts that de Staël’s claim on the emancipatory potential of multilingualism, translation and intercultural capital was her lasting contribution to Revolutionary thought in the early nineteenth century. Yet, she attracted strong criticism from some of her compatriots when she made her mission to explore several European countries, and to condemn the banning of foreign books.<sup>582</sup> She believed it was a bad system to forbid the entry of foreign books, especially philosophical works that have the ability to elevate the soul and to spread ideas.<sup>583</sup> It was indeed in promoting the translation of foreign literature that she demonstrated her cosmopolitanism. Thus, the art of translation was important to her, because she believed that women of all nations shared a past of patriarchal oppression, and that literature could bring a sense of community, uniting women well beyond national borders, and create a collective effort to improve their social situation. Translation, she argued, can be used by other nations as a medium for self-reflection, and for looking within and beyond their own culture and their political/linguistic frontiers.<sup>584</sup> She wrote:

Les nations doivent se servir de guide les unes aux autres, et toutes auraient tort de se priver des lumières qu’elles peuvent mutuellement se prêter...on se trouvera donc bien en tous pays d’accueillir les pensées étrangères; car, dans ce genre, l’hospitalité fait la fortune de celui qui la reçoit.”<sup>585</sup> (Nations must guide each other, and all of them would be wrong to go without the light they can convey to each other...therefore, it will be beneficial to all countries to welcome foreign thoughts; because, in this way, hospitality makes fortunate the one who receives it).

Overall, de Staël maintained that nations should benefit from other nations’ social characteristics to advance the progress of civilisation, and especially the position of women in

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<sup>580</sup> Willem Frijhoff, “Cosmopolitanism”, in Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, *Le Monde des Lumières* (Paris: Librairie A. Fayard, 1997), 33.

<sup>581</sup> Beatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël: Thèmes et Etudes* (Paris: Editions Ellipses, 1999), 20.

<sup>582</sup> Beatrice Guenther, “Trading on Cultural Capital: Madame de Staël’s Politics and Literature”, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 40, 3 (Spring-Summer 2012). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23538801> (accessed 8 Sept. 2014).

<sup>583</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 1, 79-80.

<sup>584</sup> De Staël, “De l’esprit des traductions or The Spirit of Translations,” in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women’s Writings, 1785-1823*. Trans. Doris Y. Kadish, ed. Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, (Ohio: The Kent UP, 1994), 136-46.

<sup>585</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, II, 75.

society. She aimed to “bind literature and society in a universal perspective, without compromising the individuality of each cultural and social entity, but respecting the *entirety* of a nation.”<sup>586</sup> Her unique position as a feminist in exile gave her a different perspective, and the hope that translated literature would revitalise French culture. She promoted the art of translation and a literary identity that was flexible, diverse and plural.

#### 4.2.3 *Feminism in Madame de Staël’s literature*<sup>587</sup>

De Staël had a strong belief in the power of literature, as a strategy and as a tool, to create a feminist voice that could inspire others, prompting a collective effort from women to improve their social position.<sup>588</sup> She endorsed the view that literature could be used as a catalyst to communicate ideas and thus, to learn about ‘the other’ as a goal to transform the relationship between the sexes, believing that divisions among people were based on ignorance.<sup>589</sup> She valued its role as an expression of society but also as a force to generate new attitudes in portraying characters who challenge their condition. She especially saw literature as playing a vital role in the enduring cause of freedom itself, in protecting the weak, in establishing justice and in moderating the destructive power of passions.<sup>590</sup> In doing so, she provided a new vision of woman who could be an instrument for and a celebrant of social progress. Most importantly, she saw how crucial was the political role of literary activity, with literature contributing to the development of civilisation, if the state of civilisation could grant liberty to freedom of expression.<sup>591</sup> To de Staël, a literature that progresses is a philosophical literature, which can only be effective without outside constraints. Well aware of literature’s powerful influence on public opinion, she created a new form of literature, an engaged literature, that praised individual freedom, Romanticism and literary criticism.<sup>592</sup> As

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<sup>586</sup> Steinback and Isbell in Silvia Bordoni, “From Madame de Staël to Lord Byron: The dialectics of European Romanticism”, *Literature Compass* 4, 1 (2006), 134-48.

<sup>587</sup> In using the word ‘literature’, de Staël subscribed to the definition adopted the previous century, which encompassed the ‘Belles-Lettres’, the study of erudition, history, eloquence and morality. In 1800, she proposed to include philosophical writings and fiction, thereby covering all that concern the exercise of thought in writing. In Florence Lotterie, “Madame de Staël: La littérature comme ‘philosophie sensible’”, *Romantisme* 124 (2004). DOI: 10.3406/roman.2004.1254

<sup>588</sup> De Staël, *De La Littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions* (1800), ed. A. Blaeschke (Paris: Garnier, 1998), 214-67.

<sup>589</sup> Lotterie, “Année 1800”, 17.

<sup>590</sup> Balayé, *Madame de Staël*, 16.

<sup>591</sup> Lotterie, “L’année 1800”, 9.

<sup>592</sup> Susan Hillman, “Men with muskets, women with lyres: nationality, citizenship and gender in the writings of Germaine de Staël”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, 2 (2011), 231-54; Jane Elizabeth Wilhem, “La traduction, principe de perfectibilité chez Mme de Staël”, *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs/Meta: Translators’ Journal* 49, 3 (2004), 692-705. <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/meta-v49-nmeta816/009387> (accessed 20 September 2014).

Balayé notes, in this new genre, feelings, emotions and enthusiasm dominated and opposed Napoleon's neoclassicism and the Enlightenment's rationalism.<sup>593</sup> De Staël wrote in *De la Littérature* that "Etudier l'art d'émouvoir les hommes, c'est approfondir les secrets de la vertu."<sup>594</sup> (To study the art of moving men's emotions, is to go deeper into the secrets of virtue), an art, she believed, women had the ability to develop being more emotional, sensitive and moral.

De Staël was a novelist, an essayist and a political thinker who judged both society and governments. Unsurprisingly, as a female commentator, she attracted criticism. She was not just publishing, but publishing in an area considered outside the traditional concerns of women. She did not hesitate to criticise Bonaparte's regime for censoring literature. When Fontanes, who reviewed her work *De la Littérature*, declared in the *Mercure de France* that "The masses must be led by a well-informed government"<sup>595</sup>, she replied that only the freedom and the progress of literature could contribute to the development of benevolent ideas.<sup>596</sup> As pointed out earlier, there had been an increase in women's publications at the end of the eighteenth century, but women were still demonised for publishing, and some were compelled to remain anonymous.<sup>597</sup> This was not the case for de Staël. Nevertheless, contrary to more radical figures like de Gouges, she maintained some discretion in her novels and essays by choosing the role of an informed witness as narrator, and portraying the characters who spoke for her as victims to inspire her readership's pity, an image that was more suited to the feminine ideal of the time.<sup>598</sup> Still, she was well aware of the danger women writers would encounter. She knew she would lose the good will of other women and the support of men, because in writing, she would blur the frontier between the worlds of masculinity and femininity, public and domestic. In *De L'Influence*, she complained: "De quels sentiments de jalousie et de haine les grands succès d'une femme ne sont-ils pas l'objet!...La plupart des femmes sont contre elles par rivalité, par sottise, ou par principe."<sup>599</sup> (A woman's great success is subjected to feelings of jealousy and hate ...most women are against her out of rivalry, out of stupidity, or out of principle). Her heroine Delphine is

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<sup>593</sup> Balayé, *Madame de Staël*, 24.

<sup>594</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, Tome IV (Paris: Imprimerie de Plassan, 1800), 30.

<sup>595</sup> In Winock, *Madame*, 214.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>597</sup> Dominique Godineau, *Les femmes dans la France moderne, XVI-XVIII siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015), 218-20.

<sup>598</sup> Balayé, *Madame de Staël*, 16.

<sup>599</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence*, 101.

reminded that she would be ostracised by both men and women if she ever wrote.<sup>600</sup> Madame de Genlis criticised violently de Staël's novel *Delphine*, in a parody entitled *La femme philosophe* (1803) (*The Woman Philosopher*), which denounced the Staëlian representation of a woman who affirms openly her intellectual power. In this regard, de Staël's thought is not without ambiguity when in *De la Littérature* she disapproves of women who pretend to philosophical knowledge and publicise it, unless it is the work of a woman 'intellectually superior' who, in this society, would inevitably suffer from a tragic existence. In this last statement, she was no doubt referring to herself. And she added: "Peut-être seroit-il naturel que, [...], la littérature proprement dite devînt le partage des femmes, et que les hommes se consacraient uniquement à la haute philosophie"<sup>601</sup> (Perhaps, it would be natural if literature as such became women's domain, and men devote themselves to philosophy only). It is important not to forget that de Staël transgressed her own precepts repeatedly, and contradictorily claimed that philosophy is a women's affair, because women are on the side of morality and disinterested when it comes to politics.<sup>602</sup> In the same work, de Staël distinguishes what can be expected from an intellectual woman in a monarchy and in a republic, and she naturally gives to the latter regime a new mission, to give intellectual liberation to women, a hope which had been sadly and brutally destroyed by the Revolution.<sup>603</sup> As she remarks: "depuis la révolution, les hommes ont pensé qu'il étoit politiquement et moralement utile de réduire les femmes à la plus absurde médiocrité".<sup>604</sup> (since the Révolution, men have thought that it was politically and morally useful to reduce women to the most absurd mediocrity.)

Society did make de Staël pay the price for departing from her feminine role, with marginality, ridicule, coldness, and direct and violent confrontation with the masculine world. During these challenging times, she must have remembered her mother's advice that if she were to shine, it would have to be behind closed doors.<sup>605</sup> After the publication of her novels *Delphine* and *Corinne*, she was showered with insults. An article in *La Gazette de France* criticised her work, arguing that: "Une femme qui se distingue par d'autres qualités que celles de son propre sexe dérange les principes d'ordre général" (A woman who distinguishes

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<sup>600</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, 344.

<sup>601</sup> De Staël, "Des femmes qui cultivent des lettres", *De la Littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, ed. A. Blaeschke, Chapitre IV (Paris: Garnier, 1998), 446.

<sup>602</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 332.

<sup>603</sup> Florence Lotterie, *Le Genre des Lumières: Femme et Philosophe au XVIII siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2013), 271.

<sup>604</sup> De Staël, "Des femmes qui cultivent des lettres", 447.

<sup>605</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 98.

herself by other qualities than those of her own sex upsets the principles of general order.) In *Le Mercure de France*, the heroine Corinne is portrayed as an idealised being, and just as well, because an honest and reasonable woman would never wish to be like her. These relatively mild comments were followed by a ferocious portrait of de Staël by Fievée, watchdog of the Bonapartist regime. Portraying de Staël as an unhappy gossip who complained about everyone, he wrote in *Le Mercure*:

“Regardez-les: elles sont grandes, grosses, grasses, fortes; leur figure enluminée de trop de santé n’offre aucune des traces que laissent toujours après elles les peines qui viennent du coeur. C’est qu’en effet elles n’ont jamais éprouvé d’autre chagrin que celui-ci de l’amour-propre humilié;”<sup>606</sup> (Look at them: they are tall, big, fat, and sturdy; their faces, illuminated by too much vigour, show no traces of the sorrows that come from the heart. This is because they have never felt any sorrow other than that of humiliated pride).

*Le Journal des Débats* criticised as well what it called the author’s false, anti-social and dangerous principles: she denigrated the Catholic religion, although she had little knowledge of it. It is true that *Delphine*, a novel about love and mores, appears quite anti-conformist when France, exhausted after ten revolutionary years, was under the hand of a supreme leader. Indeed, many features in this novel demonstrate resistance, even provocation, to the new order of French society. In this work, de Staël questions suicide and denounces the Church for condemning divorce, at a time when Napoleon had signed the *Concordat*,<sup>607</sup> that formalized Catholicism as ‘the faith of the majority of French people’, thereby giving the clergy the power of social control, lost during the Revolution.<sup>608</sup>

De Staël confessed she felt helpless when faced with hostility, and she ignored her detractors out of fear of bringing more shame on herself. She wrote in “*Du caractère de Monsieur Necker et de sa vie privée*” (1804): “Il faut se garder d’apprendre à ses ennemis comment ils peuvent nous faire du mal”.<sup>609</sup> (It is better to hide from one’s enemies how they can hurt you). A female writer was not permitted to indulge in the ‘sweet pain of bitterness’: in other

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<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>607</sup> *Concordat*: The Consulate’s motto was “Authority from above, confidence from below”. Napoleon’s religious policy helped secure that confidence. Negotiated in 1802 between Napoleon and the papacy, the *Concordat* ended the cycle of bare toleration and persecution that had begun in 1792.

<sup>608</sup> Winock, *Madame*, 204.

<sup>609</sup> In Catherine Dubeau, “Ecriture intime et Ambivalence du Deuil dans deux Inédits de Jacques Necker”, *Cahiers Staëliens* no.67 (Paris: Editions Champion, 2017), 16.

words, to feel sorry for herself or to retaliate. Yet, one can see during the course of de Staël's life a shift of attitude, from female subordination to female self-assertion, when she defied Napoleon's censorship of her book *De l'Allemagne*, and had it published in England.

De Staël's study of the nature of women and their destiny is well illustrated throughout her work, particularly through her novels' characters. Because she was a woman transgressing into male domains, de Staël suffered and it led her to question accepted ideas of the nature of her gender and ask if all women were doomed to share the same fate. For her, women's nature has specific qualities: tactfulness, attention to detail, and the discernment needed for pity and sympathy. However, she also pointed to some weaknesses: timidity when a victim of calumny, the difficulty of existing without support, sacrifice of her own needs to those of others, and inherent weakness. In *Delphine*, the sad and wise Mademoiselle d'Albemar reminds the heroine: "La nature a voulu que les dons des femmes fussent destinés au bonheur des autres et de peu d'usage pour elles-mêmes."<sup>610</sup> (Nature has deemed that women's gifts are dedicated to the happiness of others and are of little utility for themselves). D'Albemar also remarked that some feminine qualities could lead to perversion. A desire to shine at any cost in society, one of the few public ambitions for women, could only lead to frivolity, superficiality and immorality, more than self-reflection. The consequence was vanity, often the cause of misfortune. Nevertheless, de Staël's feminism praises the nature and the essence of women in accordance with the traditional image of them. As seen earlier, she celebrated women's sensibility, and professed women's moral superiority. In *De l'Allemagne*, she stated that women were given fewer opportunities to be selfish and were consequently "worthier of moral esteem than men for whom success was an end in itself",<sup>611</sup> and:

La plus belle des vertus, le dévouement, est leur jouissance et leur destinée; nul bonheur ne peut exister que le reflet de la gloire et des prospérités d'un autre, enfin, vivre hors de soi-même, soit par les idées, soit par les sentiments, soit par les vertus, donnent à l'âme un sentiment habituel d'élévation.<sup>612</sup> (Forced by destiny to find satisfaction in the glory and happiness of others, women cultivated the virtue of self-effacement and a habitual feeling of elevation towards things other than themselves; the love of another, or the beauty of truth).

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<sup>610</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, t.1, 148.

<sup>611</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, t.1, 65

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

In this passage, de Staël makes the claim that restrictions placed on women led them to acquire noble qualities which are often foreign to men. In *De l'Influence*, she noted that because men encountered few obstacles to their attainment of social and economic rewards, they were more self-centred and 'must necessarily have less generosity, less sensibility, than women.'<sup>613</sup> Yet, the fact that society expected women to cultivate 'self-effacement' would, at the same time, prevent the possibility of combining both love and glory. As a result, she felt that her vocation for art and literature was restricted, creating in her a profound dilemma, caught between her desire for love and her desire for glory: "les femmes doivent penser que, pour la gloire même, il faut renoncer au bonheur et au repos de la destinée de leur sexe"<sup>614</sup> (women must think that, for glory itself, one must renounce happiness and the peace attached to their female destiny). As she pointed out, men could hide their appetite for praise and glory under apparently noble passions; women were allowed no such excuse. This theme is recurrent in Staëlian works and it is illustrated in some of her famous aphorisms and through her heroines, whom she painted as better versions of herself, sometimes prettier, but also 'better than beautiful'.<sup>615</sup> Although endowed with talents and a generous spirit, their energy and their impetuosity, which could have guaranteed them happiness, drove them to their deaths. Mirza, Delphine and Corinne looked quite pathetic once abandoned; even if a woman basks in glory, she remains a being who needs protection. Thus, Corinne needed to seek support from those less gifted than herself. De Staël knew by experience that men would desert 'une femme extraordinaire', a woman with too much wit and intelligence who seems to compete with men.<sup>616</sup> Did not Corinne confess: "En cherchant la gloire, j'ai toujours espéré qu'elle me ferait aimer, seulement pour trouver que c'est le contraire qui s'est passé"<sup>617</sup> (I sought glory as an assurance to be loved, only to find that the opposite occurred.) De Staël's novels illustrate that it was difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile emotional happiness and intellectual distinction in a woman's life, a tragic situation she had to fight throughout her life. Yet, because she believed that society would progress with time, she never lost hope that women would, one day, be able to enjoy the security of both love and knowledge, without one being detrimental to the other.<sup>618</sup> At the time, rivalry between the sexes had to be avoided, as it could be an impediment to marital happiness. For de Staël,

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<sup>613</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence* in Kale, "Women", 319.

<sup>614</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence*, 103.

<sup>615</sup> Béatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël*, 52.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>617</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 443.

<sup>618</sup> Geneviève Fraisse, "Muse de la raison", in Stéphanie Génand, *La Chambre Noire: Germaine de Staël et la pensée du Négatif* (Genève: Droz, 2017), 215.

glory could be sacrificed in the name of love and of a happy union. She wrote in *De l'Influence*: “L’amour est la seule passion des femmes; l’ambition, l’amour de la gloire même leur vont si mal.”<sup>619</sup> (Love is women’s only passion; ambition, even the love of glory does not suit them at all). In her diary, as a young woman in 1775, she confided that: “Une femme ne doit faire don de ses talents qu’à celui qu’elle aime et dans le secret de l’intimité.”<sup>620</sup> (A woman must give away her talents to the one she loves, and in the strictest privacy). Later in life, and as a famous woman in Europe, she further illustrated this belief when she declared that glory for a woman was ‘a dazzling mourning for happiness’.<sup>621</sup>

De Staël was a romantic and longed for marital bliss. She believed that women should be willing to renounce intellectual rivalry with men if, in exchange, they were guaranteed emotional fulfilment, their reward for confining themselves to domesticity. D’Albemar reminds Delphine that the only pleasure society approves for women, is a happy marriage.<sup>622</sup> De Staël suffered from an unhappy union with her first husband, and this may explain her constant quest for happiness in love, and her succession of lovers. Delphine sighs: “Si il y avait une circonstance qui pût nous permettre une plainte contre notre créateur, ce serait du sein d’un mariage mal assorti que cette plainte échapperait.”<sup>623</sup> (If there was a circumstance which allows us to complain to our creator, this complaint would be about mismatched marriages). For de Staël, love was the true story of a woman’s life, which prompted her to say: “Qui se sait aimé est habité (plus de silence) et accompagné (plus de solitude).” (The life of one who knows he/she is loved is not filled with silence and solitude anymore). She believed that those who did not possess love would lead colourless lives, whereas those who possess it have everything. Undoubtedly, de Staël hoped to recreate her parents’ blissful union, and it was her lifelong quest to find the emotional security a good marriage could bring. In *De l’Allemagne*, she reiterates her dissatisfaction: “Il y a dans un mariage malheureux une force de douleur qui dépasse les autres peines du monde.”<sup>624</sup> (There is in an unhappy marriage, a pain which is stronger than any other sorrow in the world). In chapter XIX, she pleads for marital love and fidelity, especially masculine fidelity, and recalls that in a Christian marriage there is equality of the spouses. She celebrates the peace that would then follow:

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<sup>619</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 125.

<sup>620</sup> Ozouf, *Les mots*, 121.

<sup>621</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, 2 (1810), 217-22.

<sup>622</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, t.1, 408.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>624</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, t.2, 219.

Qui promet la constance à qui ne veut pas être fidèle? Sans doute la religion peut l'exiger, car elle seule à les secrets de ces contrées mystérieuses où les sacrifices sont des jouissances."<sup>625</sup> (Who can promise constancy to those who do not want to be faithful? Without any doubt religion can demand it because only it has the secrets of these mysterious places where sacrifices are pleasurable).

In this passage, she denounces men for their light attitude with regards to women and the institution of marriage, a situation she had herself experienced in the course of her love life. To de Staël, felicity in marriage was important, based on sexual equality, but with the right to divorce if it soured. Introduced in 1792 and abolished in 1816, the right to divorce was indeed crucial to women's emancipation.<sup>626</sup> Relying on the model of her parents' marriage, she thought that a successful marriage was founded on intellectual exchange and mutual admiration, which she believed required the same level of education for both men and women. Nevertheless, she also believed that in a woman's life, there was a choice to be made between security and emancipation. As noted earlier, she considered not only love and glory to be mutually exclusive, but also liberty and security. This contradiction is present in the lives of her heroines, as when their liberty grows, their security regresses. In *Considerations sur la Revolution française*, she makes the same parallel with France during the years of the Revolution; when liberty was asserted, security declined.<sup>627</sup> In the mind of de Staël, social and political problems were always closely linked because she believed both were moral issues. With regards to a choice between liberty and security, she advocated security for ordinary women who tended to be weak and vulnerable.<sup>628</sup> Yet, de Staël was not an 'ordinary' woman, but an 'exceptional one', and was conscious of it. Consequently, all her life, she would be torn between her need for both freedom and security, and the implications of this for her love life.

De Staël idealised love and the institution of marriage, but she was also aware that they were not always guarantees of emotional security; in her fiction, she suggested that women know instinctively that loving moments can be brief. With the passage of time, women lose their youthful appeal, and subsequently the attraction men feel for them. In *Delphine*, the wife of a

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<sup>625</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>626</sup> Geneviève Fraisse, "Mme de Staël: grâce à elle, les femmes ont pu exprimer publiquement leurs opinions", interview published in *L'OBS*, 2 August 2018.  
<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idee/20180806.OBS0582/mme-de-sta...lles-femmes-ont-pu-exprimer-publiquement-leurs-opinions.html>

<sup>627</sup> De Staël, *Considerationss sur la Revolution française*, ed. Jacques Godechot (Paris: Taillandier, 1983), 103.

<sup>628</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, t.2, 73.

man who becomes prematurely blind feels secure, knowing that her youthful image would remain fixed and indestructible in her husband's memory.<sup>629</sup> To de Staël, getting old and losing her power of seduction was a source of constant anxiety. As she sighed: "A la moitié de leur vie, il ne leur reste plus que des jours insipides, pâlisant d'année en année."<sup>630</sup> (In mid-life, only insipid days are left, fading from year to year). Hence, the agitation and the energy she displayed to find other ways to seduce, using her intelligent conversation, her generosity and her natural charm.<sup>631</sup> De Staël believed that men and women have a different conception of love. For women, it was central to their lives; as girls they acquired accomplishments to attract men into marriage, their ultimate goal, and their husbands were central to their married lives. Men, on the other hand, led busy lives, spent between a career and distractions, and tended to forget the names of the women they once loved. She was also convinced that once a man had won a woman's heart, he would often tire of her and detach himself from her. De Staël probably had in mind Benjamin Constant, who pursued her assiduously for years and ended up marrying another woman.



**Plate 0.1 Henri-Benjamin Constant de Rebecque (1767-1830).**  
(Wikimedia Commons)

De Staël's life, filled with passion and extreme emotions, was not only a reflection of the nascent Romantic period, but the expression of her true nature, as she is described by

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<sup>629</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* t.2, 97.

<sup>630</sup> In Ozouf, *Les Mots*, 116.

<sup>631</sup> Herold, *Mistress*, 104.

Constant: “tous les volcans sont moins flamboyants qu’elle.”<sup>632</sup> (all volcanos have less fire than she has). As a woman, she identified love as the passion to which women are more inclined, and the one least likely to lead to happiness. In fact, her treatises and novels show that she was haunted by the idea of separation from her lovers, the agony of unrequited love, and by the temporary nature of life.

In *Corinne*, the heroine realises how ephemeral happiness can be.<sup>633</sup> De Staël admitted to finding solace in writing as a way to assuage her anxiety and to forget when she wrote: “J’ai écrit pour me retrouver à travers tant de peines, pour dégager mes facultés de l’esclavage des sentiments, pour m’élever jusqu’à une sorte d’abstraction...”<sup>634</sup> (I wrote to find a way through my many sorrows, to set free my faculties, and to raise myself to a sort of abstraction...). For her, to write provided a compensation for the fragility of emotional relationships. De Staël was also aware of the benefits of sensibility to society. She believed in sympathy, that she called good will or “bienfaisance”, in empathising with someone’s else plight, as a means of weakening the passions, along with philosophy and fiction.<sup>635</sup> It is therefore not surprising that she put forward the right of women to not only write, but publish.

Despite her own success and the glory and adulation she attracted, de Staël disapproved of women’s vanity. In *De l’Influence*, she condemned the pride of ambitious women who covet glory. She believed that authority through celebrity reconciles with femininity only when a woman accepts it as an incomplete representation of her identity.<sup>636</sup> Celebrity is illusory in itself. Still, it is interesting to note that she regretted in *Dix Années d’Exil* (1810-12) that despite her celebrity, her exile from France by Napoleon was unknown in most European circles. In this case, her regrets were probably due to the hope that foreign heads of state would intervene in her favour.<sup>637</sup> In fact, she placed the essence of women as above pride and ambition when she wrote:

L’origine des femmes est céleste, car c’est aux dons de la nature qu’elles doivent leur empire: en s’occupant de l’orgueil et de l’ambition, elles font disparaître tout

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<sup>632</sup> Ozouf, *Les Mots*, 117.

<sup>633</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 524.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>635</sup> David Denby in Tili Boon Cuillé, “Introduction” in *Staël’s Philosophy of the Passions*, eds Cuillé and Szmurlo, 5.

<sup>636</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 189-99.

<sup>637</sup> De Staël, *Dix Années d’Exil*, eds. Simone Balayé et Mariella Bonifacio (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 133.

ce qu'il y a de magique dans leur charme.<sup>638</sup> (The origin of women is celestial because they owe their empire to nature's gift: in being proud and ambitious, they lose all their magic and their charm).

To de Staël, the love of fame does not suit women and this is why few of them take an interest in it. To her, modesty was paramount. For this reason, she castigated young women who meddled in politics, ignoring the fact that she had, herself, voiced her political opinions all through her work and in her salon in order to influence politics.<sup>639</sup>

To de Staël, 'thought' had no gender. She was nevertheless well aware that social mores imposed a difference, a difference she could not ignore. This was actually illustrated in her request to Roederer, *The Journal de Paris's* editor, to emphasise her 'femininity' in his review of *De l'Influence des Passions*. She asserted that the work was not about politics, but solely about passions and written from a woman's point of view. As a woman writer, she feared criticism from the public, and censorship and persecution by the Directory.<sup>640</sup> In fact, Roederer minimised the threat she could represent in praising her talent as a writer. He admired the fact that, considering her social position, she did not indulge in frivolous pastimes, and that she had the ability to produce a work of quality.<sup>641</sup> As well, Constant outlined the audacity of a woman who does not fear to deal with serious subjects in an article in the *Moniteur Universel* on 26 October 1796: "Une femme française traite avec talent les matières les plus difficiles de la politique et de la morale, et joint à l'énergie de la pensée, l'éclat du talent et les charmes du style."<sup>642</sup> (Here is a French woman who deals with the most difficult subjects of politics and of morals with talent, and adds energy to her thought, her brilliance and the elegance of her style). When *Corinne* was published, de Staël asked the Secretary General Gérando to write favourably about her novel in a letter to him: "C'est un voyage, et non un roman."<sup>643</sup> (It is a journey, not a novel). In fact, she did not want to be praised for her talent but for her moderation. If de Staël had enemies, she had friends too. Still, her request to have her work approved highlights the vulnerability of women and the fact that, contrary to men, they were not taken seriously. There is no doubt that she was

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<sup>638</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*, 97-98.

<sup>639</sup> Winock, *La Passion de la Liberté*, 48-49.

<sup>640</sup> Génand, *La Chambre Noire*, 218.

<sup>641</sup> P.L. Roederer, "Journal de Paris du 2 Frimaire an V (22 Nov, 1795)", in *Oeuvres du Comte P. Roederer publiées par son fils* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1856), t. IV, 472.

<sup>642</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), 302.

<sup>643</sup> Letter 24 April 1807, "Correspondance Générale-V" in Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique: Esthétique et politique de l'altérité" in *Cahiers Staëliens* No. 64 (Société des Etudes Staëliennes, 2014), 54.

particularly vulnerable to political censorship of the type exercised by Napoleon, as she would be treated even more harshly as a woman critical of his government.

#### 4.2.4 *De Staël's self-representation in her literature*

There is evidence of de Staël's self-representation in her novels, as a feminist heroine. She is easily recognisable in her two fictional heroines, Delphine and Corinne, both exceptionally gifted, who have the courage to defy social conventions in love and in art, and who subsequently suffered deeply for it. *Corinne*, especially, is an autobiographical document wherein de Staël achieved power and authenticity unequalled anywhere in her other novels; it is also a narrative which had a great effect on her female contemporaries.<sup>644</sup> The heroine is shrewd, demanding and spoiled, but an idealised version of the author. Corinne is a "favorite des dieux et adorée des foules"<sup>645</sup> (favourite of the gods and adored by the multitudes), who worships Rome's glorious past with visions of a utopian future, thus posing a potential threat to guardians of political order and social hierarchy. As a remarkable woman, Corinne would have to curb her personal ambition, and the fulfilment it could bring, to conform to society's conventions and expectations.

Both novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, are set during critical periods of the Revolution, and they portray strong women who make political judgments, but without discarding their loyalties to their families and friends. Similarly, Fontana suggests that de Staël's compassion for the Queen contains some elements of self-identification as she had herself been the victim of violent attacks from the press, and of calumnies of a sexual nature. Furthermore, Fontana intimates that de Staël empathised with the feelings of the Queen who was, after her arrest, separated from her lover Fersen. At the time, de Staël herself feared a separation from her lover Narbonne as her correspondence testifies: "such a decision would be even more atrocious than the fate of the woman [Marie-Antoinette], renowned for her misfortune."<sup>646</sup> Similarly, when de Staël wrote *Delphine* and *Corinne*, in the early eighteenth century, she was suffering, like her two distressed heroines, from a succession of inconclusive love affairs, with Pedro de Souza, Maurice O'Donnell and Prosper de Barante. As Gutwirth indicates, "those sentimental failures [...] weighed more heavily in the scales than public acclaim."<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth, "Mme de Staël's Debt to 'Phèdre: *Corinne*", *Studies in Romanticism* 3, 3 (Spring, 1964), 161-176. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25599615>.

<sup>645</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 57.

<sup>646</sup> In Fontana, *Germaine*, 64.

<sup>647</sup> Gutwirth, "Mme de Staël's debt", 162.

Epistolary form in novels encourages the reader to identify with the characters, and to reflect from their own perspective about the events and the problems the characters encountered. Like Montesquieu and Rousseau before her, de Staël used this literary form in *Delphine* to present an intimate view of her characters' thoughts and feelings, and to allow social criticism. The novel *Delphine* analyses French society, from that before the Revolution to the new one that had emerged, a society that champions the Enlightenment's ideals and its principles of reason, sensibility and justice. Similar to the *Persian Letters* and to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Emile*, de Staël's novels differ from the usual philosophical prose, in introducing new ways of discussing the complexity of politics through their characters' situations, thoughts and reflections. As Marso notes: "Each author, *deliberately*, tells a story, or stories, and in doing so is able to discuss politics at the level of the personal, the passionate, and the erotic."<sup>648</sup> The role of the novel thus was to portray, to convey and to stir the passions, and to enable the reader to live and to learn from it more fully than in real life. To de Staël, it was indeed an effective way to heighten public awareness of women's disadvantages.

### 4.3 De Staël's Advocacy for Women's Education

As mentioned earlier, de Staël valued and promoted women's education. Of all the rights she felt important, that of instruction for girls was paramount. To de Staël, mind and thought were neither masculine nor feminine because they fed from the same source. Thought for her had no gender, and education was essential to the proper development of thought. Indeed, if women were to maintain moral independence from men, they needed to be educated, and she attacked one of the most conservative aspects of Rousseau's thinking about women. In her *Letters sur les ouvrages et le caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, de Staël complained of the limits Rousseau placed on women's instruction. However, she approved of the *philosophe's* recommendation to his heroine Julie when he advised her to exercise her will and her intelligence to create herself: "Il vaut mieux trouver soi-même les choses qu'on trouverait dans les livres."<sup>649</sup> (It is better to find out things for oneself rather than find them in books). In spite of this, de Staël claimed that reading would stimulate the mind and be a remedy against boredom, and that writing was an activity that would lead to emancipation and help women to escape from the social expectations which constrained their lives. As Ozouf explains: "Ecrire, c'est se délier."<sup>650</sup> (Writing is to free oneself). For de Staël, literary

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<sup>648</sup> Marso, "The Stories of Citizens", 437.

<sup>649</sup> Rousseau in de Staël, *Les Lettres sur les ouvrages*.

<sup>650</sup> Ozouf, *Les Mots*, 21.

activity is a talisman against mediocrity and monotony in the life of a woman. Regardless of the criticism she encountered for writing, she always made a strong statement in favour of women's right to the development and flowering of their minds. In *De Littérature*, she confessed:

Il y a dans le développement et le perfectionnement de son esprit une activité toujours continuelle, un espoir toujours renaissant, que ne saurait offrir le cours ordinaire de la vie. Tout marche vers le déclin dans la destinée des femmes, excepté la pensée, dont la nature immortelle et de s'élever toujours.<sup>651</sup> (There is in the development and the perfecting of one's mind, a continuous activity, a hope always reborn, that the course of daily life cannot offer. Everything tends towards the decline of a woman, except thought, whose eternal nature is to rise above).

More importantly, like her contemporaries Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Macaulay and Olympe de Gouges, de Staël claimed women's education to be a priority as a guarantee of freedom, one of the tenets of political liberty.<sup>652</sup> She underlined its importance as an aid to propagate reason and as a means to sustain in all the desire to attain self-perfection. To educate girls meant to train them to be the 'moral sex'.<sup>653</sup> The rules of morality were to be the same for both sexes, for all rational creatures. The vices considered particularly female by Rousseau were the product of women's subordination and lack of education. As mentioned earlier, de Staël drew attention to the ignorance, vanity and deviousness that women were capable of, and she considered these flaws to be reasons for the *philosophe's* argument for masculine superiority. Only education, based on moral values, could remedy these vices and generate a more rational society in which women no longer needed to rely on their personal charms to attract a husband and masculine protection. De Staël supported Wollstonecraft's thought that virtue should result from the exercise of reason rather than from perfecting 'slavish dependence'.<sup>654</sup> As always, she drew a parallel between human progress and society, when she declared:

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<sup>651</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, livre 1, 5.

<sup>652</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 23; Catherine Macaulay, Letters XXI-XXIV, *Letters of Education, with observations on religious and metaphysical subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 198-223; Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges: Des Droits de la Femme à la Guillotine* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014), 152-53.

<sup>653</sup> Kale, "Women", 447.

<sup>654</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 9.

Eclairer, instruire, perfectionner les femmes comme les hommes, les nations comme les individus, c'est encore le meilleur secret pour tous les buts raisonnables, pour toutes les relations sociales et politiques auxquelles on veut assurer un fondement durable.<sup>655</sup> (To enlighten, to educate, to perfect women like men, and nations like individuals, this is still the best secret for all reasonable goals, for all social and political relations to ensure a durable foundation).

Both feminists believed that women's intellectual equality would and should pave the way to the transformation of relations between the sexes, and even of society itself. Furthermore, de Staël drew attention to the contrast between unlimited career choices for men and the limited choices allowed to women by society, as Leontine's confession in *Delphine* illustrates: "Un homme à l'âge que j'avais alors aurait pu commencer une carrière nouvelle...Mais les femmes, grand Dieu! Les femmes! Que leur destinée est triste."<sup>656</sup> (A man at my age could have begun a new career...but women, dear God! Women! How sad their destiny!) De Staël's advocacy of women's instruction is linked to the way she felt about literature, with its capacity to emancipate women. Indeed, she saw culture as a positive medium to realise social harmony.

#### **4.4 The Role of Faith in de Staël's Feminism**

To de Staël, religious faith was fundamental to morality, tolerance and compassion, and her particular brand of faith encouraged rebellion against received dogma. Lotterie argues that when de Staël embraced the Enlightenment's principles of liberty and equality, her political thought did not rest on what she thought to be intellectual 'truth', but on her faith. For many people, the Revolution strengthened religious beliefs as after two decades of political turmoil and violence, people sought for metaphysical explanations. As seen in the previous chapter, some thinkers at the time blamed the Enlightenment for the Revolution's excesses, while the Catholic Church strongly condemned the movement for its lack of traditional morals and respect for authority, particularly religious authority. While Peter Gay depicts this period as 'the rise of paganism', and Keith Thomas as a 'time of disenchantment of the world',<sup>657</sup> some historians indicate that, in addition to a decline in religious beliefs, major faiths experienced a

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<sup>655</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, Livre I, 7.

<sup>656</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* I, 550.

<sup>657</sup> Peter Gay, "The Enlightenment: An interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism", *The American Historical Review* 73, 3 (February, 1968), 768-6. DOI: 10.1086/ahr/75.5.1410; Keith Thomas, in Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 114-15.

shift with the emergence of internal reform movements.<sup>658</sup> Indeed, criticism of the Christian Church for its dogma and superstitions prompted a review of religious texts, which gave priority to individual conscience as essential in the new religion. De Staël confessed in *De l'Influence* that to bear, in secret, the dogmas of some religions was indeed painful for someone who was enlightened with reason.<sup>659</sup> The apologists of these new movements, de Staël among them, were in fact Rousseau's 'involuntary disciples' who adopted the ideals found in *Emile* and *The Social Contract* that gave supremacy to sentiment, to religious feelings and to the bond with nature.<sup>660</sup> Like Rousseau, de Staël rejected institutionalised religion in favour of spirituality. Alongside the *philosophe's* ideals, the work of Chateaubriand, *Le Génie du Christianisme* (1802) which promoted religion as an intellectual, spiritual and emotional need, strongly influenced her thinking.<sup>661</sup> In the Romantic movement, religion and literature were interconnected, and it elicited from her new ideas about the relationship between art and religion, morality and justice.

De Staël's religious fervour stemmed from her Protestant upbringing. Helena Rosenblatt indicates that she was brought up in a family milieu wherein enlightened and religious values were closely intertwined.<sup>662</sup> Mortier agrees, pointing out that her religious education was tinged with a certain Rousseauian influence, a religion of the heart, dictated by conscience, by a faith without dogma or miracles, and believing in the purity of human nature.<sup>663</sup> As noted earlier, Rosenblatt quotes de Staël's self-identification as "a good Calvinist" in *Des Circonstances actuelles*, and argues that early Calvinists were more inclined than Lutherans to encourage political resistance, seeing political involvement as inevitable in the furtherance and preservation of faith. French scholarship supports this argument, underlining the close connection between Protestantism and liberalism, and even democracy. According to Claude Nicolet, de Staël and Benjamin Constant noted the link between the two doctrines, which correlated freedom of thought and freedom of conscience, with the fall of absolutism and subsequent establishment of representative government.<sup>664</sup> The political thinker Michael Walzer supports this view, declaring that Calvinism gave people a sense of purpose which

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<sup>658</sup> Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 128.

<sup>659</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*, 196.

<sup>660</sup> Marie-Hélène Froeschlé-Chopard, "Religion", in Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 230-32.

<sup>661</sup> One should not forget, however, that Chateaubriand's attack on Protestantism was matched by the violence of de Staël's counterattack on Catholicism in *Delphine*.

<sup>662</sup> Helena Rosenblatt, "Madame de Staël, the Protestant Reformation and the History of 'Private Judgement'", *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 31-32 (2007), 146-47.

<sup>663</sup> Roland Mortier, in Rosenblatt, "Madame", 147.

<sup>664</sup> Claude Nicolet, *L'idée républicaine en France, 1789-1924: essai d'histoire critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 49.

inspired them to consider politics “as a kind of conscientious and continuous labour”.<sup>665</sup> It was nevertheless the Protestant spirit of critical inquiry, of protest and individual judgement that de Staël embraced wholeheartedly, principles she found liberating. Interestingly, the historian Julien Jaume has drawn attention to the significance of the concept of ‘judgment’ in de Staël’s liberalism which she reveals in *De l’Allemagne*: “l’étude et l’examen peuvent seuls donner cette libéralité de jugement, sans laquelle il est impossible d’acquérir des lumières nouvelles ou de conserver même celles qu’on a.”<sup>666</sup> (Only study and introspection can give this freedom of judgment as tools to acquire new enlightenments, or to preserve those one has). She thought that study and reflection would direct people’s minds to political ideas, encouraging them to be more receptive to ideals of liberty. As Rosenblatt argues, “Freedom in the intellectual and religious realm fostered freedom in the political.”<sup>667</sup> On the other hand, de Staël saw her religion as progressive when she wrote: “Le protestantisme devrait donc suivre le développement et les progrès des lumières, tandis que le catholicisme se vantait d’être au milieu des vagues du temps immuable”<sup>668</sup> (Protestantism should therefore follow the Enlightenment’s development and progress, whereas Catholicism has boasted that it remains unchanged in the midst of troubled times).

De Staël’s feminism was in agreement with her conscience and her inner faith. Her campaign for ‘equal rights’ was not couched as self-interest. She declared in *De l’Influence*: “L’homme n’accroît ses facultés qu’en les dévouant en dehors de lui, à une opinion, à un attachement, à une vertu quelconque”<sup>669</sup> (Men increase their faculties in dedicating themselves to a cause, to an opinion, to passion, to any virtue.) She insisted that it was essential to renounce personal benefits in favour of duty, a resolution which could be inspired by feelings deeper than those of sensations, a divine state guided by the ‘soul’, which would lead to disinterestedness, generosity and enthusiasm.<sup>670</sup> As seen earlier, de Staël agreed with David Hume who said that those who are filled with ‘enthusiasm’ believe themselves to be ‘distinguished favourites of the Divinity’. These people are possessed with strength and courage to challenge tyranny and promote civil liberty.<sup>671</sup> In contrast to Hume, however, de Staël’s perception of

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<sup>665</sup> Michael Walzer, in Rosenblatt, “Madame”, 146.

<sup>666</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, t.1, 48.

<sup>667</sup> Rosenblatt, “Madame”, 152.

<sup>668</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, t.2, 247.

<sup>669</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 95.

<sup>670</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 45.

<sup>671</sup> Kari Lokke, “British legacy of *Corinne* and the commercialization of enthusiasm”, in *Staël’s philosophy of the Passions*, eds Cuille and Szmurlo, 174.

sentiment is above all spiritual. In *De l'Allemagne*, she combined both sentiment and enthusiasm:

L'enthousiasme se rallie à l'harmonie universelle: C'est l'amour du beau, l'élévation de l'âme, la jouissance du dévouement, réunis dans un même sentiment, qui a de la grandeur et du calme.<sup>672</sup> (Enthusiasm is joined to universal harmony. It is the love of beauty, the elevation of the soul and the pleasure of devotion, united in a sentiment which has greatness and calm).

As the incarnation of enthusiasm, Corinne, the inspired poet, confides to her friend Prince Castel-Forte that enthusiasm is 'an inexhaustible well of feelings and ideas'.<sup>673</sup>

Lotterie speaks of metaphysical revelation when de Staël wrote in *De l'Allemagne*: "Il en est de même de Dieu, de la conscience, du libre-arbitre. Il faut les croire parce qu'on les sent: Tout argument sera toujours d'un ordre inférieur à ce fait."<sup>674</sup> (It is the same about God, about conscience, and free will. One should place confidence in them because one can feel them: all discussions will be inferior to this fact). In her same work, Lotterie indicates that in Germany, religion is attached to a literary and philosophical system based on a feeling of the infinite that is positive and creative.<sup>675</sup> De Staël believed that this feeling for the 'infinite' is a basic feature of the soul, without which there would be only physical instincts and self-interest in individuals. She can be considered a 'romantic feminist' whose novels illustrate her idealistic version of progress. Her faith in the immortality of the soul, with its uninterrupted continuity, concurs with her belief in perfectibility. Indeed, her heroines display a forward-looking spirit that calls for personal and social changes for the benefit of future women, and disenfranchised others, like the slaves. Through her characters' individual consciousnesses, de Staël hoped to reach collective consciousness. In *De l'Influence*, she declares: "Man's thought becomes sublime when he succeeds in thinking of himself from a universal point of view. He then quietly contributes to the triumph of truth."<sup>676</sup> De Staël's

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<sup>672</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* II, 301.

<sup>673</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 56.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>676</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*: "l'homme n'accroit ses vertus qu'en les dévouant en dehors de lui, à une opinion, à un attachement, à une vertu quelconque", 95.

belief in sacrificing her own interests to the devotion of nobler goals, like her fight for women's rights, was fuelled by her faith and an obligation towards social and moral life.<sup>677</sup>

#### 4.5 The Singularity of de Staël's Feminism

De Staël's early 'liberal feminism' rested on a symbolic association between the female gender and a specific, often contradictory, range of psychological and cultural attributes. While feminist thoughts and practices seemed to share some basic characteristics in all societies with a feminist movement, they were also marked by their own cultural specificity. This can explain why some women's movements emerged first in some Western countries but were slow to develop in others. Martin Pugh argues that Anglo-Saxon culture, Protestantism and a comparatively liberal political system were key features which encouraged feminist activities.<sup>678</sup> However, this statement can be disputed as French Revolutionary feminists were, until their activities were suppressed in 1792, more radical than English women. De Staël's British counterparts appeared more traditional. The "Bluestockings" of the English Enlightenment like Hannah More (1745-1833), Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) and Fanny Burney (1752-1840) focused their demands mainly on education and freedom of expression, especially the freedom to write. While de Staël promoted the same rights, she also intended to influence politics as her works *De l'Allemagne* and *De la Littérature* reveal. In these, she demonstrates her continued commitment to revolutionary ideals, even if they were not entirely democratic, and her opposition to Napoleonic ideology that she condemned for its tyranny and militarism. Her treatise *Lettres sur les ouvrages de Rousseau*, that was published just before the Estates-General met, is another example. Through her *Lettres*, she explicitly attempted to influence the assembly by diffusing the principles of Rousseau's thoughts, and among them, the importance of his concept of the social contract.<sup>679</sup> In the same vein, though much more radically, the writer and activist de Gouges proposed in 1789 to the French National Assembly a radical reform policy when, among others demands, she called for complete legal equality for women.<sup>680</sup>

Yet, de Staël displayed some ambivalence, even contradictions at times, in her thought and her feminism which is, as Michel Delon explains, a true reflection of a generation divided between two worlds. The downfall of the monarchy followed by the foundation of a new

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<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>678</sup> Martin Pugh, "The women's movement, 1850-1939", *History Review* 27 (March 1997).

<sup>679</sup> De Staël, *Lettres*, 84-94.

<sup>680</sup> Blanc, *Olympe*, 112.

political model created feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Indeed, the sons and daughters of the Enlightenment were living in a painful state of contradiction between their ideals and the emerging reality.<sup>681</sup> De Staël embraced the new era, breaking away from the reserved attitude of the *salonnières*, from the traditions of the *Ancien Régime*, and from the hidden influence of powerful women that fed anti-feminism during the Revolution. At the same time, she tried to discount her influence on political affairs as if her evident participation, as a woman, was inappropriate, and she did not demand a political voice equal to that of men, such as claiming the right to vote or to stand for office. This can also be seen in British feminism at the time, as in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. As de Staël declared in *De l'Allemagne*: "On a raison d'exclure les femmes des affaires politiques et civiles; rien n'est plus opposé à leur vocation naturelle que tout ce qui leur donnerait des rapports de rivalités avec les hommes."<sup>682</sup> (It is right to exclude women from political and civil affairs; nothing is more opposed to their natural vocation, as it contributes to rivalry between them and men). However, de Staël also believed that, as a writer who was living at a time of political turmoil and change, it was crucial to record the moment in history, which inevitably produced political commentary. In a letter to a friend of Benjamin Constant, Claude Hochet, she stated in October 1800 that: "Je continue mon roman *Delphine*...Il n'y aura pas un mot de politique, quoiqu'il se passe dans les dernières années de la Révolution."<sup>683</sup> (I continue writing my novel *Delphine*...There won't be any word about politics although the plot is taking place during the Revolution). Ironically, her political reflections are spread throughout her novels. Indeed, de Staël's position appeared to be equivocal: she thinks women should be excluded from public affairs, but at the same time, should be allowed to participate through free expression of political opinion. Her lack of overt pleading for political rights shows her to be conservative in contrast to the radical French Revolutionary feminists like de Gouges and the revolutionary women's political clubs.

De Staël's ambivalence about feminism in relation to femininity is clear in her work, when she approved of passive domesticity, and believed that a woman exposed to public life would degrade her essential womanhood. She also declared in *De l'Influence* that: "les femmes...se défiant d'un empire sans fondement réel, cherchent un maître, et se plaisent à s'abandonner à

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<sup>681</sup> Michel Delon, *L'idée d'énergie au tournant des Lumières, 1770-1820* (Paris: PUF, 1988). It must be said that this ambivalence is also present in de Staël's temperament which oscillated between melancholia and hyperactivity, torn between feelings of despair and enthusiasm.

<sup>682</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* 1, 64.

<sup>683</sup> In Didier, "Presentation", *Delphine* I, 9.

sa protection;”<sup>684</sup> (women, ...distrusting an empire without real foundation, seek a master, and are pleased to give themselves up to his protection). In this stance, Rousseau’s influence is quite apparent. Nevertheless, three years before her death, she wrote a second preface on her work *Letters on the Works and the Character of J.J Rousseau* in which she does not mention the *philosophe*’s name and ideas. Gutwirth argues that this second preface revealed the intellectual conflict de Staël felt between Rousseau’s influence on her sensibility as a young woman, and her *expérience vécue* over her lifetime.<sup>685</sup> Such a change in her views indicates that, by 1814, her intellectual choice was in harmony with her choice of existence. While she could never renounce public life, she stressed the importance of a woman’s role in the private sphere, and her influence on decisions and domestic arrangements. However, she fought to modify the dualism of public and private spheres by projecting the norms of domesticity into the public arena as a guide to political action, a stance often taken in the nineteenth century by British feminists. In fact, de Staël believed that a reappraisal of domestic life would indeed redefine the role of women.<sup>686</sup> In *De la Littérature*, she professes that the traditional representation of women’s domestic role, with its constraints and limitations, would be replaced by the image of a woman who could be an agent of social progress because of her importance in creating and sustaining domestic life.<sup>687</sup>

As a proponent of the Enlightenment concept of gender, de Staël stressed the ideas and practices of ‘difference’, rather than the type of equality between men and women that minimised difference, the cornerstone of liberal feminism.<sup>688</sup> In fact, she refused strongly to imitate men. While she opposed the traditional representation of the fate of women, she celebrated feminine sensibility, emphasising and praising femininity within a philosophical, legal and political context. The nurturing female should not be passive but liberated. As Anne Mellor explains, de Staël’s feminism is in accordance with the tradition of French feminism which is philosophically oriented, with a theory that disputes, even opposes, the dualistic mode of thinking which goes back to the Greeks. French feminists argue that the female, with her biological and psychological differences, should be re-situated, not in opposition but within. In contrast, Anglo-Saxon feminism emphasises the cultural origins of the duality of male and female, which as a practice can lead to repression, exploitation and

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<sup>684</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 125, 127.

<sup>685</sup> Madelyn Gutwirth and C. Thomas, “Madame de Staël”, 100.

<sup>686</sup> In Sluga, “Madame de Staël and the Transformation”, 160.

<sup>687</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 203.

<sup>688</sup> Godineau, *Les femmes*, 182.

exclusion of the 'other'.<sup>689</sup> Percy Shelley exemplified this dual approach to an extreme in 'deifying the male ego as it cannibalised the attributes of the female.'<sup>690</sup> As a result, Anglo-Saxon feminists criticised French feminists for their moderation long after the death of de Staël.

So, why does French feminism, when compared to others, have an air of calm, of measure, even of timidity? In her fight for equal rights, de Staël shows no trace of hostility.<sup>691</sup> Nevertheless, her engagement with these issues does not break away from a feminism which is considered moderate. Thus, she cannot be labelled a 'militant', in a modern sense. Still, C. Thomas and Gutwirth found that de Staël shows some belligerence when she expresses her desire for freedom of expression which was limited by society's constraints.<sup>692</sup> De Staël had a passion for politics, including the politics of the personal, and was convinced of her right to participate, and was determined to use her position to the maximum.<sup>693</sup>

De Staël's feminist thought is situated between two worlds. As a figure of transition, she does not pass from one world to another, but she thinks from both worlds. Her vision is still attached to worldly affairs, to reason and to the need for clarity in literature. Yet, her Romantic enthusiasm is linked to the spiritual which helped her to find consolation in her suffering, and a higher meaning in her fight for what she believed to be fair and right. Through her literature, she played a crucial role in questioning social customs which had replaced natural affections. For de Staël, a woman's ideal situation would be in a society wherein imposed rigidity and restriction would be deemed 'unnatural'. Besides her feminine role as companion and mother, a woman should have the right and the opportunity to be educated and enlightened in order to rise above a pre-determined fate. As a feminist, de Staël claimed that women were entitled to have their intellectual abilities acknowledged and encouraged, and the freedom to express themselves without being ostracised. Throughout her life, she glorified the 'feminine' and she advocated that feminine qualities should be recognised and treasured. In fact, her vision of gender differences contributed to the glorification of feminine values as a moral, transcendental and spiritual force. She believed

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<sup>689</sup> Anne K. Mellor, "Am I not a woman and a sister? Slavery, Romanticism and Gender" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 3-6.

<sup>690</sup> Percy Shelley, *Shelley's Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 170.

<sup>691</sup> This moderation in French feminism is also illustrated in the long delay in obtaining success by the suffragist movement. With regards to the right to vote, French women would have to wait 1945, and until 1974 to see the abolition of the condemnation of women for adultery.

<sup>692</sup> Thomas and Gutwirth, "Madame de Staël, Rousseau", 100-09.

<sup>693</sup> C. Thomas, "Préface", in de Staël, *De l'Influence*.

women could play a role as agents of social progress by arousing feelings of pity and fear, sentiments which could be conducive to 'moral' aims. In criticising society in her writings, de Staël invites women readers to gain a new perspective on their position as outsiders, and she inspired them to overstep the boundaries that restrain them from becoming their authentic selves and from feeling valued and fulfilled. De Staël lived during a pivotal period of history that included different regimes from monarchies to republics, and it is reflected in her moderation, her contradictions and her reticence on some of the more radical changes. Actually, her moderation is still present in contemporary French feminism which emphasises and values the fact that the two sexes are complementary. As Anne Mellor notes, de Staël championed above all women's liberty and emancipation. In her relentless fight, she acknowledged multiplicity within unity.

## *Chapter 5. French Slavery*

Slavery is an ancient institution, often linked to the expansion of empire. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, slavery was generally imposed on non-Europeans, particularly Africans. As the main source of labour, enslaved Africans sustained the plantation system in European colonies. During the Enlightenment, the slave trade gained momentum and so did anti-slavery rhetoric. Critiques of colonial slavery emerged, highlighting its violation of the rights of man. Before considering the abolition of slavery, however, one had to be totally convinced of its illegitimacy. Abolitionism had to be preceded by an anti-slavery discourse that exposed slavery's brutality and inhumanity in order to create the emotional climate necessary for ending the transatlantic slave trade. Interestingly, very few testimonies by slaves were written in French during this period, such that anti-slavery rhetoric came from a handful of *philosophes* and abolitionists, including feminists such as Olympe de Gouges and de Staël.

This chapter reviews the history of slavery in the French colonies, drawing on a recent surge of interest by researchers in the French slave trade and slave holding. It also explores the attitudes of Enlightenment thinkers and the Church to this institution. Their positions displayed hesitations, nuances and, at times, contradictions. The following sections address the political climate during the French Revolution which, supported by the actions of philanthropists and the discourse surrounding the Haitian Revolution, allowed a short-lived shift from abolition to reformist propositions that paved the way to another form of colonisation. It provides the context necessary to analyse de Staël's abolitionism.

### **5.1 Slavery in the French Colonies**

The beginnings of Europe's slave colonies in America and the West Indies lie with Portugal's exploration of the western coast of Africa in the fifteenth century. A search for fertile new lands and Europe's growing desire for sugar drove the Portuguese to establish plantations on the islands of Madeira, Cape Verde and the Canaries, which were worked by slaves imported from Africa. This system was supported by Africa's own internal slave trade. Sugar plantations in the small Atlantic islands facilitated experimentation with the use of African slaves on the plantations later established in the Caribbean, Mexico and Peru. By the early

sixteenth century, slaves were transported to the Americas by Spanish conquistadors to replace the native Americans who lacked physical resistance to imported European diseases. The use of African slaves in the American colonies was initially proposed by Bartholomé de Las Casas, an Andalusian bishop. He had befriended the native Americans and considered they had souls, despite their animistic practices, while judging Africans to be soulless.<sup>694</sup> He would nevertheless, after 1560, condemn slavery for all.<sup>695</sup> It must be noted that slavery was not prohibited by the Bible and ancient philosophers, so few people considered it to be morally wrong at the time.

From 1580 to 1700, an estimated 1,531,000 Africans were transported to the Americas, while many died during transport, particularly during the crossing of the Atlantic. By the seventeenth century, trade by Portuguese companies had declined, and Dutch, French and English trading companies had become involved. French colonists who saw an opportunity to enrich themselves settled in the Antilles, in Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1635 and in St Domingue (modern Haïti) in 1640, coastal Guyana, and to a lesser extent on the Isle Bourbon and Isle de France in the early eighteenth century.<sup>696</sup> Plantations had traditionally concentrated on the production of sugar, but tobacco, cotton and coffee were also cultivated to satisfy the growing demand by Europeans for tropical produce. These crops increased the need for slave labour and, from 1700 to 1760, 2,775,000 Africans were shipped to the New World. Today, the castles and forts on the Gold Coast of modern Ghana, where slaves were held captive ready to be shipped across the Atlantic, bear witness to the scale of the trade. The slave trade continued to prosper until the end of the eighteenth century, and it has been estimated that over a period of three hundred years, at least ten million Africans were sold into slavery. In the West Indies, by 1700, there were two Africans for every European, and in 1780 ten Africans for each European.<sup>697</sup> The disproportion between colonists and slaves would prove to be fatal to White colonists in some islands, during the late eighteenth century, due to slave rebellions.

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<sup>694</sup> Christiane Taubira, *L'esclavage raconté à ma fille* (Paris: Editions Philippe Rey, 2015). Christiane Taubira is a French politician born in French Guiana, who was Minister of Justice from 2012 to 2016.

<sup>695</sup> Philippe Haudrère et Françoise Vergès, *De l'esclave au citoyen* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Découvertes texto', 1998), 55.

<sup>696</sup> Isle Bourbon and Isle de France are today named La Reunion and Mauritius. The colonisation of these two islands was promoted by *La Compagnie des Indes* which had, at the time, the trade monopoly in the Indian Ocean.

<sup>697</sup> Taubira, *L'esclavage*, 54-57.

Thus, the ‘Triangular Trade’ emerged linking Europe, Africa and the Americas. Manufactured products such as glass, guns and trinkets were brought from Europe to African traders to exchange for slaves, who were shipped to the colonies. Those who survived the journey were sold to planters for the cultivation of tropical commodities that, in turn, were sold to Europe. The second leg of the trade, the ‘middle passage’, lasted many weeks, and because of the appalling conditions during the Atlantic crossing, an estimated ten per cent of slaves died. The transportation ships were equipped with chains to restrain their human cargo. Decks were built like shelves, hardly a metre wide, so that the maximum number of Africans could be crammed on board the ships.<sup>698</sup> From the middle of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, France organised 4022 slave expeditions to the West Indies and Indian Ocean.<sup>699</sup> European merchants, bankers and investors profited from the ‘African trade’; it contributed to the growth of French cities on the edge of the Atlantic, such as Nantes, Le Havre, Bordeaux, and La Rochelle and Marseille in the south. In 1790, near five million French people derived their livings from the trade with the colonies, and that wealth also contributed to the development of art and letters and more largely to the ‘culture de goût’<sup>700</sup> (‘culture of taste’). While the merchants of Nantes arranged most of the voyages, this city was also the first to abandon the trade in 1830, long before the other ports.<sup>701</sup> Overall, the slave trade benefited French mercantile activities enormously. As Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), Controller-General of Finance under Louis XIV, wrote:

The increase [in the population of the islands in the French West Indies] results in the increase of products which it brings forth, and these two things should produce wealth and benefits for the company.<sup>702</sup>

Acceptance of the trade was well entrenched in French society. Most judicial courts of Western Europe, including France, adhered to Roman law, which dealt with slavery as a normal practice.<sup>703</sup> Under Roman law, slaves could not be parties to civil lawsuits, nor

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<sup>698</sup> Graham Gendall Norton, “Ghana’s Golden Coast,” *History Today* (March, 2007), 19-23.

<sup>699</sup> Richard B. Allen, “‘Satisfying the Want for Laboring People’: European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850”, *Journal of World History* 21, 1 (March 2010). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752925> (accessed 3 September 2019).

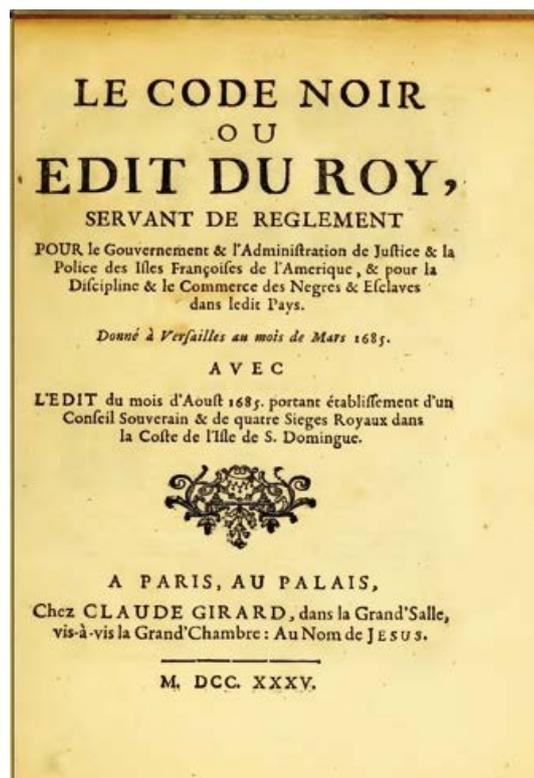
<sup>700</sup> Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>701</sup> Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, “Nantes, the slave trade and slavery”, <http://memorial.nantes.fr/en/nantes-the-slave-trade-and-slavery/> (accessed 4 February 2016).

<sup>702</sup> From Jean-Baptiste Colbert to directors of the French West India Company who were being sent to the Americas, 1670, in C.W Cole, “Colbert and a Century of French Mercantilism” in *History in Quotations*, ed. M.J. Cohen and John Major (UK: Weiderfeld and Nicolson, 2004).

<sup>703</sup> Miquel, *Histoire de la France*, 253.

accusers in criminal cases, nor could they marry. However, new rules were established according to changing customs, traditions and circumstances through the medieval and early modern eras. In France, the *Code Noir* demonstrated the willingness of King Louis XIV to institutionalise slavery. Conceived by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the *Code Noir* was immediately applied in the West Indian colonies in 1685 and extended to La Reunion in 1724. It was composed of fifty-five articles which regulated and formalised the status of slaves and free Black people, as well as relations between masters and slaves. In the Code, slaves were declared ‘personal property’ and were designated as livestock in the planters’ books.<sup>704</sup> In article 38, it was stipulated that a master had the power of life and death over his slaves. Belonging to his master, a slave would be marked with the fleur-de-lis<sup>705</sup> by a hot iron, could have his ears cut at the first attempt to escape and could be hanged or quartered on his third attempt. However, the master had a duty to care for slaves who became invalids because of old age or disease.



**Plate 5.1 The Code Noir ou Edit du Roi.**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

<sup>704</sup> Taubira, *L'esclavage*, 54.

<sup>705</sup> Fleur-de-Lis: Emblem of the French monarchy.

While the Code was instituted to ensure, to some extent, the humane treatment of the slaves, inhumane practices of control and restraint prevailed. On the first pages of the Code, the king demanded that “All slaves on our islands be baptised and instructed in the Catholic religion.”<sup>706</sup> Thus, from a religious point of view, slaves were considered human beings whose souls could be saved. The measure reflects the period of counter-Reformation Catholicism with its proselytising passion.<sup>707</sup> It was also a way to reaffirm the kingdom’s sovereignty, power and control in far distant lands. However, the main impact of the Code was to validate the ‘dehumanisation’ of the slave on a civil and legal level.<sup>708</sup> In addition, at the end of the eighteenth century, the nascent science of anthropology became closely linked to economics and theology and further legitimised the trade. In that period, racial prejudices that asserted the inferiority of Black peoples were prevalent and championed by most scientists and *philosophes*. There were, however, two dominant schools of thought on the question of race: on the one hand, egalitarianism inherited from the Enlightenment, and on the other, racism based on the military conquest by Europeans of other races. Encouraged by the exploration of distant lands and the discovery of racial diversity, the classification of human races became widely debated. Most thinkers at the time were polygenists who, opposed to monogenists, believed that White and Black peoples belonged to different human species. In his book *Reason in History*, the German philosopher Georges Hegel<sup>709</sup> claimed that “In the little time we are given to observe the African man, we can see him as wild and barbarian .... One cannot find anything human in his character”.<sup>710</sup> Taubira explains that there was gap between the observation and the explanation, and these differences were used to justify the exploitation, the domination and the destruction of Black lives.<sup>711</sup> Several elements, such as physical differences and the impact of climate, were introduced to support the theory that Africans were inferior. The French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) declared that a Black person has a “depressed and compressed skull” and is therefore subject

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<sup>706</sup> *Le Code Noir or Edit du Roy*, donné à Versailles au mois de Mars 1685. Paris: MDCCXVIII (1718). <https://archive.org/details/lecodenoirouedi00fran> (accessed 15 January 2015).

<sup>707</sup> Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. After the Revocation of the Edict, only Catholicism was permitted in France. The Edict was initially established by Louis XIV’s grandfather, Henry IV, who preached tolerance and allowed Protestants to follow their beliefs. After the Revocation, Protestants were persecuted and could be sent to the galleys.

<sup>708</sup> Louis Sala-Morin, “Le Code Noir”, *Historia* 80 (Nov/Dec 2002), 33.

<sup>709</sup> Georges W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher. “Reason of History” was included in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, published posthumously in 1837.

<sup>710</sup> In Taubira, *l’Esclavage*, 48.

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

to “a cruel law which seems to have condemned [him] to an internal inferiority”.<sup>712</sup> Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), a leading anthropologist at the time, alleged in *Histoire naturelle* (1749) that climatological factors influence human development causing, for instance, the decrease of intellectual capacities in a hot climate, and he classified Black people as ‘degenerate’, a useful argument to legitimise slavery.<sup>713</sup>

Similarly, Cornelius Van Pauw (1739-1779)<sup>714</sup> subscribed to de Buffon’s theory when he wrote:

The true country where the human species has always succeeded and prospered is the temperate zone of our hemisphere; it is the seat of its power, of its greatness and of its glory.<sup>715</sup>

This view was not shared by all. Abbé Grégoire noted that those who wanted to disinherit the *nègres* used anatomy and difference of skin colour to their advantage.<sup>716</sup> As historian Curran observes, while advocates of polygenesis criticised slavery, they still remained convinced of Black Africans’ innate biological and social inferiority. Hogarth, a specialist in early modern ideas of race, suggests that the debate about the origin of mankind and biological and cultural differences was, at the time, a reflection of Europeans’ anxieties over their own social identities.<sup>717</sup>

## 5.2 The Position of Writers, *Philosophes* and the Church on Slavery

### 5.2.1 French writers on slavery.

Debates about slavery exerted a strong influence on literature. In his recent work, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*, Christopher Miller explores the history of the slave trade through literary sources, reviewing the works of *philosophes*, writers and abolitionists on the slave question.<sup>718</sup> Interestingly, he notes that

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<sup>712</sup> Georges Cuvier, *Leçons d’anatomie comparée*, t.1. <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30293062v> (accessed 15 January 2016)

<sup>713</sup> Sala-Morin, *Le Code Noir*, 35.

<sup>714</sup> Cornelius Van Pauw was a geographer, a philosopher and an ethnologist.

<sup>715</sup> In Taubira, *L’Esclavage*, 54-55.

<sup>716</sup> Abbé Grégoire, “De la Littérature des Nègres” in Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>717</sup> In Rana Asali Hogarth, “Review of Andrew Curran, *Anatomy of Blackness*”, *Isis* 103, 4 (2012), 783-84, 783. doi:10.1086/670092.

<sup>718</sup> Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture and the Slave Trade* (Durham, DC: Duke University Press, 2008).

there are very few surviving French slave narratives, and he compares this situation with the wide availability of accounts written by former slaves in English colonies and North America, such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.<sup>719</sup> Miller explains that this was the result of a low level of literacy among French slaves, and probably also of a lack of desire by French abolitionists to publish such accounts. He argues that French abolitionists never displayed the same enthusiasm for publicising testimonies from enslaved people as those in Britain or in America, because of the absence of a significant Protestant culture in the French Atlantic.<sup>720</sup> In this statement, Miller implies that the Protestant tradition created a more liberal and democratic outlook that was reflected by the actions of early opponents to slavery, who belonged to Protestant congregations.<sup>721</sup> He even points to Equiano's conversion to Methodism in support of this theory. Despite Miller's reference to religious differences, Massardier-Kenney maintains that a resurgence of moral doubts and religious values in Catholic France also contributed to anti-slavery sentiment at the time.<sup>722</sup>

Moreover, Miller does not consider significant the role played by eighteenth-century French women writers against slavery. He is quite critical of the work of both D. Y Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney for relying on women's abolitionist writings, including those of de Staël, Olympe de Gouges and Claire Duras.<sup>723</sup> Miller defines *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race* as "narrowly feminist, ... creat[ing] a distorted impression of literary history and the role that gender plays in it."<sup>724</sup> Consequently, he draws attention to lesser known works from male writers, like those of Jean-François de Saint-Lambert's *Zimeo* (1769) or Bernardin de St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), making clear that abolitionist literature was not restricted to female writings.<sup>725</sup> Contrary to Miller, Mary Jane Cowles highlights the role some French women played during the revolutionary period when they featured enslaved Black Africans in their narratives, with the hope it would create a shift in consciousness within society. She agrees with Massardier-Kenney who writes that "women

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<sup>719</sup> Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), and Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897). All three authors were former slaves and played a significant role later in life as abolitionists and social reformers.

<sup>720</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic*, 33-37.

<sup>721</sup> The Presbyterians, the Baptists and the Methodists, along with the Quakers.

<sup>722</sup> Françoise Massardier-Kenney, "Staël, Translation and Race", in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writings, 1783-1823*. Translation Studies No.2 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*, and Doris Y. Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves: Women Writers and French Colonial Slavery*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

<sup>724</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic*, 102.

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

authors of this period were, perhaps because of their cultural position, sensitive to the plight of the Africans, and opposed slavery textually in ways male counterparts (canonical writers such as Hugo or Mérimée) did not or could not.”<sup>726</sup> In novels like Victor Hugo’s *Bug Jargal* (1818) and Prosper Mérimée’s *Tamango* (1829), Black Africans are glorified, but end up losing their lives rebelling against the White man, thus recalling the superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of the slaves.<sup>727</sup> While Cowles does not refer to de Staël’s work, she evokes de Gouges’s *L’Esclavage des noirs* (1792) and de Duras’s *Ourika* (1823), a play and a short novel respectively, both of which portray and speak for colonial Black subjects, thereby giving a voice to those of lowly status.<sup>728</sup> Miller also argues that female authors of this period did not intend drawing a parallel between themselves, as women, and the condition of slaves. He states instead that their fictional representations of slavery came about because of historical and geographical knowledge and abolitionist concerns. Yet, he recognises that the bride’s dowry, as illustrated in de Staël’s and de Gouges’ novels, could, as a transaction, parallel the sale of the slave.<sup>729</sup> Nonetheless, Miller undermines the link between gender and race identified by other theorists.<sup>730</sup>

Jean Ehrard, a specialist in eighteenth century history, indicates that literature about slavery in that century evolved and adopted a new approach to sensitise the reader. Atrocities committed against slaves were depicted in works of fiction, and the good qualities of enslaved persons were highlighted in novels including those by Bernardin de St Pierre, Pierre Poivre and l’Abbé Antoine François Prévost.<sup>731</sup> This is the approach—humanising individual enslaved persons—that de Staël would use in her novels. It is, however, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements, et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, more simply known as *Histoire des deux Indes*, which was the most famous book to put issues of colonialism and slavery at the centre of the period’s intellectual project. The book, to which Diderot contributed, was reissued three times, in

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<sup>726</sup> Mary Jane Cowles, “The Subjectivity of the Colonial Subject from Olympe de Gouges to Mme de Duras”, *L’Esprit Créateur* 47, 4 (Winter, 2007), 29.

<sup>727</sup> Taubira indicates that Hugo was only sixteen when he wrote *Bug Jargal* and was, at the time, accepting of slavery as an established institution. However, by 1859 he was aware of the activities of White American abolitionist John Brown, and finally abandoned his prejudices about ‘nègres’ in 1860, as is illustrated in a letter addressed to the editor of the Haitian newspaper *Le Progrès*. Taubira, *L’Esclavage*, 62.

<sup>728</sup> Cowles, “The Subjectivity”, 27-42.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>731</sup> Jean Ehrard, *Lumières et Esclavage*, (Waterloo: Editions A. Versailles, 2008), 80-90. Works that feature African slaves include: Bernardin de St Pierre, *Voyage à l’Île de France* (1773), *Paul et Virginie* (1788) as seen above; Pierre Poivre, *Voyage d’un philosophe* (1769) and Abbé Prévost, *Histoire générale des voyages* (1746-1761) and *Voyage du Capitaine Robert Lade* (1734).

1770, 1774 and 1780, incorporating changes Raynal made at the end of his life, and a posthumous version published in 1820.<sup>732</sup>

Interestingly, Raynal had predicted that a black Spartacus, incarnated later by Toussaint Louverture, would arise and avenge the rights of the oppressed. He wrote: “Où est-il le grand homme, que la nature doit à ses enfants vexés, opprimés, tourmentés? Où est-il? Il paraîtra, n’en doutez point, il se montrera, il lèvera l’étendard sacré de la liberté.”<sup>733</sup> (Where is he, this great man who nature owes to her mistreated, oppressed, tormented children? Where is he?



**Plate 0.2 Portrait du citoyen Belley, ex-représentant des colonies, by Anne-Louis Girodet. (1797). (Wikimedia Commons)**

He will appear, without doubt, he will show himself and raise the sacred banner of liberty.) The gratitude of Black Africans in the French colonies towards Raynal is well illustrated in the portrait of Belley, the first Black deputy to the National Convention during the French

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<sup>732</sup> Ann Thomson, “Colonialism, race and slavery in Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*”, *Global Intellectual History* 2, 3 (2017), 254. DOI: 10.1080/23801883.2017.1370233. Ann Thomson argues that the posthumous edition may contain additions for which Raynal was not responsible, as it shows numerous inconsistencies and contradictions when compared with his previous work.

<sup>733</sup> Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements, et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 12 volumes, (Paris: A. Costes, 1820-1821), H. 80, VI, 221.

Revolution, who is represented standing next to the bust of Raynal in Anne-Louis Girodet's "Portrait du citoyen Belley, ex-representant des colonies" (1797).<sup>734</sup>

In his writings, Raynal shows his uncompromising denunciation of slavery and European inhumanity in the colonies. However, intellectual historian Ann Thomson argues that at the end of his life, his disapproval of slavery was not as definite, and more moderate. In the last volume of the *Histoire* he stated that some defenders of slavery could be 'virtuous', and that the institution might have benefitted France and its colonies. In this work, he suggested "a progressive liberation of the slaves and the replacement of slave crops with produce bought from Africa".<sup>735</sup> His argument was based on his perception of former slaves' incapacity to work as free men and to take care of their own well-being:

Les Africains, ceux du moins qui sortent de la Guinée, sont très-bornés. Jamais on ne leur voit combiner la fin avec les moyens. Le passé, l'avenir ne sont rien pour eux, et le présent est très-peu de chose. Ce sont des espèces de machines qu'il faut comme remonter toutes les fois qu'on veut les mettre en mouvement.<sup>736</sup> (The Africans, those at least who come from Guinea, are very stupid. We never see them linking the ends with the means. Past and future mean nothing to them, and the present is very little. They are a type of machine that has to be wound up, as it were, each time we want to make them act).

### 5.2.2 *The Philosophes' position on slavery*

In his work *The French Atlantic Triangle*, Miller argues that the Enlightenment had little effect on the abolitionist movement. He discusses how most *philosophes* dealt with the enslavement of Black Africans: as disciples of the Enlightenment they objected to slavery in principle, but in practice they did not advocate full abolition. Worse, if they condemned slavery in theory, they tolerated it without qualm in other climates, and remained rather unconcerned about the fate of slaves. Miller even points out that some slave ships bore names that referred to the *philosophes*, indicating that their owners saw no conflict between the slave trade and the Enlightenment. Such names included *Le Voltaire* and *Le Contrat*

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<sup>734</sup> In Kadish, *Fathers*, 153.

<sup>735</sup> Thomson indicates that the latter proposal was behind abolitionist plans for sending Africans from the colonies back to Africa, which led to the foundation of Sierra Leone, for instance.

<sup>736</sup> In Thomson, "Colonialism", 262.

*Social*, which may suggest how little influence the Enlightenment had on ending the slave trade.<sup>737</sup>

On the other hand, Ehrard sees as significant the role played by the Enlightenment in the abolitionist movement, and he points out that it took sixty long years to apply the egalitarian principles of the Enlightenment, as enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, just to all Frenchmen. As he notes, the Enlightenment and the anti-slavery movement overlapped, at a time when the French and the English peoples became aware of the harsh reality of slavery. This realisation was nevertheless slow to arrive because the exploitation of the slaves was distant and semi-abstract to Europeans, and tempered by the mental inheritance from the Bible, Greco-Latin philosophy and modern legal thought. In truth, the anti-slavery debate was born from public opinion, and was promoted by the freedom of the press, the testimonies of missionaries, and by the introduction of Black Africans as heroes and heroines in French and English literature, as noted earlier.<sup>738</sup> Ehrard also recognises the Enlightenment's contribution to the anti-slavery debate, though he also admits that the *philosophes'* critique of slavery was ambivalent and would remain so among French intellectuals until the Revolution. He believes that some Enlightenment thinkers may have been silent about slavery because they had vested interests in the trade.<sup>739</sup> Kadish corroborates Ehrard's argument, stating that these writers addressed occasionally the need for the abolition of slavery but that they took a moderate and reformist position in most of their works, believing that amelioration of the slaves' lot and preservation of European commercial interests were feasible, compatible, and appropriate goals.<sup>740</sup>

It is probably the work of Montesquieu that displays the most ambivalence towards the Africans' enslavement. In his book, *Anatomy of Darkness*, Andrew Curran comments that the *philosophe* was the first to articulate the political implications of the Enlightenment's belief on the slavery question.<sup>741</sup> While Montesquieu condemned slavery in principle, he

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<sup>737</sup> Anthony Mangeon, "Review of Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic, Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 54, 216 (2014), 1152-1156.

<sup>738</sup> Ehrard, *Lumières*, 213.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*, 79

<sup>740</sup> Doris Y. Kadish, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World* (Athens (US): University of Georgia Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>741</sup> Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 130.

explained that loss of civil liberty could be bearable and even desirable in countries where there was no political freedom.<sup>742</sup> In *L'Esprit des Lois* (1748), he wrote:

Mais comme tous les hommes naissent égaux, il faut dire que l'esclavage est contre la nature, quoique dans certains pays il soit fondé sur une raison naturelle; il faut bien distinguer d'avec ceux où les raisons naturelles même les rejettent, comme les pays d'Europe où il a été si heureusement aboli...Il faut donc borner la servitude naturelle à certains pays particuliers de la terre.<sup>743</sup> (But as all men are born equal, one must say that slavery is against nature, although in some countries it is founded on natural reason; it is important to distinguish these countries from those in which natural reason rejects it, like European countries where it has been fortunately abolished...it is important to limit natural servitude to particular countries on earth).

Montesquieu saw chattel slavery as inhumane and even dangerous for masters, but he still believed that it was natural for some people to be slaves, in this case Africans.<sup>744</sup> His argument was based on Buffon's theory that 'the climate makes the man', and thus suggested that Africa's hot climate was the cause of its peoples' indolence, a factor that could also explain the long-established practice of slavery on the continent. In *Les Misères des Lumières* (1992) (*Miseries of the Enlightenment*), political philosopher Louis Sala-Molins considers this last statement as the most 'inconsistent' aspect of the *philosophe's* thought wherein his climate theory justifies the legitimisation of natural servitude. Similarly, Curran stresses that Montesquieu's restriction regarding natural slavery and its association with a particular climate contradicts his fundamental precept of "all men are equal".<sup>745</sup> Watkins remarks that such reasoning provided a response to those who advocated free labour, as Adam Smith<sup>746</sup> did later: in a hot climate, free workers would not be more productive regardless of their newly acquired economic advantages.<sup>747</sup> This discourse shows how critical was the Enlightenment's debate about human nature, and the various influences on its development and character.

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<sup>742</sup> "L'esclavage est d'ailleurs aussi opposé au droit civil qu'au droit naturel" (Slavery is on the other hand as opposed to civil right as to natural right). In Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Lois* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1869), Chapter XV.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>745</sup> Curran, *Anatomy*, 135.

<sup>746</sup> Adam Smith published his first edition of *Wealth of Nations* in 1776.

<sup>747</sup> Margaret Watkins, "Slaves among us": The Climate and Character of Eighteenth-Century Philosophical Discussions of Slavery", *Philosophy Compass* 12, 1 (January 2017). DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12393.

As a thinker of the eighteenth century, Montesquieu subscribed to the scientific analysis of conceptual differences between Europeans and Africans. He drew attention to “the conceptual status of the African body, not to mention the African soul” to justify the enslavement of Africans.<sup>748</sup> He wrote: “On ne peut se mettre dans l’esprit, que Dieu, qui est un être raisonnable, ait mis une âme, surtout une bonne âme, dans un corps si noir.”<sup>749</sup> (One cannot think that God, who is a very wise being, could have put a soul, especially a good one, in so black a body), and “Ils ont un nez si écrasé qu’il est impossible de les plaindre”<sup>750</sup> (They have a nose so flat that it is impossible to feel sorry for them). Curran points to the *philosophe*’s extreme and absurd criticism of foreign cultural practice when he refers to the Egyptians, “les meilleurs philosophes du monde”<sup>751</sup>, who used to kill people born with red hair, and to his praise of Asians who acknowledged Africans’ inferior status in castrating Black slaves. These declarations attracted Raynal’s strong disapproval.<sup>752</sup>

Mercantile benefits drawn from slave labour were another ‘reason’ for Montesquieu to rationalise slavery in the colonies. He supported the argument that it had been necessary to substitute Africans for native Americans, whose numbers had been decimated by disease, in order to ensure low prices of commodities, such as sugar, for Europeans.<sup>753</sup> Curran highlights Montesquieu’s insincerity in justifying the continued existence of slavery by satisfying Europeans’ cravings for their luxuries and their pleasures.<sup>754</sup> On the other hand, Erhard argues that Montesquieu had declared, as Voltaire and Helvétius would do later, that to consider only the price of sugar, without acknowledging the horrible means necessary to obtain it, was disproportionate.<sup>755</sup> The *philosophe*’s ambivalence remains striking. He condemns the Church’s hypocrisy in using slavery as a way to convert indigenous populations, and quotes in *L’Esprit*:

J’aimerais autant dire que le droit de l’esclavage, vient du mépris qu’une nation conçoit pour une autre, fondée sur la différence de coutumes...Les connaissances rendent les hommes doux; la raison porte à l’humanité: il n’y a

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<sup>748</sup> Curran, *Anatomy*, 132-33.

<sup>749</sup> Montesquieu, *L’Esprit*, 223.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>751</sup> *Ibid.* (The greatest philosophers in the world).

<sup>752</sup> Curran, *Anatomy*, 132.

<sup>753</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>755</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 151.

que les préjugés qui y fassent renoncer.<sup>756</sup> (I would like to say that the right to practise slavery comes from the contempt that one nation conceives for another, founded on differences in customs... Knowledge makes people kind; reason leads to humanity: only prejudice obliterates them both).

In the same vein, Montesquieu uses satirical comments to reprove dissimulating governments. For example, when recalling that the declaration of the Guyenne Parliament in 1571 stipulated “France, the mother of liberty, doesn’t permit any slaves”,<sup>757</sup> he wrote:

De petits esprits exagèrent trop l’injustice que l’on fait aux Africains: Car, si elle étoit telle qu’ils le disent, ne seroit-il pas venu dans la tête des princes d’Europe, qui font entre eux tant de conventions inutiles, d’en faire une générale en faveur de la miséricorde et de la pitié ?<sup>758</sup> (Small minds exaggerate too much the injustice done to Africans: for if everything were as they say, would it not have occurred to the princes of Europe, who make so many useless agreements with one another, to make a general one in favour of mercy and pity?)

In addition to satire, Montesquieu articulated powerful philosophical arguments against slavery when he declared that the nature of the institution was neither useful nor good, for both the master and the slave. While the slave was not given any opportunity to become virtuous, the master could acquire all sorts of bad habits from his slaves, and become gradually insensitive to any moral virtues, replacing them with pride, anger and cruelty.<sup>759</sup>

Overall, while Montesquieu remained convinced that all men were equal, and that slavery was against nature, he still believed it could be tolerated in a hot climate. As he wrote in the Preface of *L’Esprit*: “Je n’écris point pour censurer ce qui est établi dans quelques pays que ce soit. Chaque nation trouvera ici les raisons de ses maximes”.<sup>760</sup> (I do not write to censure what is established in some countries. Each nation will find here the reasons for its own maxims). Historians continue to argue about Montesquieu’s stance on slavery. Sue Peabody concludes that despite his environmental theory, Montesquieu’s thought shows that he opposed slavery.<sup>761</sup> Conversely, Laurent Estève and other scholars have taken a more critical

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<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>757</sup> Watkins, *Slaves*, 3.

<sup>758</sup> Montesquieu, *L’Esprit*, 223.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>760</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>761</sup> Sue Peabody in Ehrard, *Lumières*, 167.

view of Montesquieu's position on slavery and have highlighted the most difficult and inconsistent aspects of his position.<sup>762</sup>

Whereas Montesquieu used a set of reasons to explain and justify the institution of slavery, Voltaire (1694-1778) believed that these factors should not be used to rationalise human bondage, despite the obvious physical differences between Black Africans and White Europeans, or between any other groups for that matter. In his philosophical tale, *Candide ou l'Optimiste* (1759), Voltaire made clear his opposition to slavery. Candide's encounter with a mutilated slave, the *nègre* of Surinam, is a famous eighteenth-century attack on colonial slavery.<sup>763</sup> Yet, Voltaire demonstrates some inconsistencies in his views, as did other thinkers of the time, when he points to the *nègres'* physical and intellectual traits, arguing that such divergences from the Whites indicated Africans' lack of intellectual aptitude. He wrote in *Des singularités de la nature* (1768): "Their intelligence...is at least greatly inferior [to ours]. They are not capable of holding attention for long. They plan very little in advance".<sup>764</sup> In the same work, Voltaire draws a parallel between Africans' physical and intellectual attributes and their unfortunate fate, and he also believed that the ease with which they submitted to their own enslavement, without displaying much resistance, could only be an indication of their inferiority.<sup>765</sup> As a polygenesist, Voltaire opposed the belief that Black Africans and White Europeans shared the same origin. In fact, his rejection of monogenesis and its views on race reinforced his distrust of a religion that championed the Biblical account of one creation only. Curran indicates that whereas naturalists, including Buffon, exposed their polygenesist views openly, Voltaire preferred "to ridicule the Bible presenting it as a series of far-fetched myths".<sup>766</sup> However, being a racist does not make him a supporter of slavery.

Interestingly, unlike Montesquieu and Voltaire, Diderot (1713-1784) was a defender of a group of people who many of his contemporaries upheld to be "born for abjection,

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<sup>762</sup> Ehrard, *Lumières*, 27.

<sup>763</sup> Voltaire, *Candide ou l'Optimiste*, Chapitre onzième.  
[www.ebooksgratuits.com/blackmask/voltaire\\_candide.pdf](http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/blackmask/voltaire_candide.pdf)

<sup>764</sup> In Curran, *Anatomy*, 146.

<sup>765</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), Tome 1, (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 10-11. Voltaire did not acknowledge the frequent acts of resistance taking place on board slave ships. For example, an attempted uprising is recorded in the log of the Liverpool ship *Unity*. Acts of resistance did happen with some captives committing suicide by jumping overboard. National Museums Liverpool, "The Middle Passage", <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/middle-passage>.

<sup>766</sup> Curran, *Anatomy*, 138-39.

dependence, for work and punishment”.<sup>767</sup> He openly denounced colonial rule and slavery in the third edition of Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780), when he wrote: “L’esclavage répugne à l’humanité, à la raison et à la justice”.<sup>768</sup> (Slavery is repugnant to humanity, to reason and to justice). Whereas Montesquieu, Jaucourt<sup>769</sup> and Rousseau claimed that liberty was sacrosanct, Diderot proclaimed it for all. In fact, Diderot was quite critical of Montesquieu for voicing grounds to justify slavery: “Montesquieu n’a pu se résoudre à traiter sérieusement la question de l’esclavage... Quiconque justifie un si odieux système, mérite du philosophe un silence plein de mépris, et du nègre un coup de poignard.”<sup>770</sup> (Montesquieu could not resolve himself to deal seriously with the slavery question... Whoever justifies such an horrible system, deserves contemptuous silence from the *philosophe*, and stabbing from the slave). Diderot explicitly condemned the traditional justifications raised by colonists: the theological simplification that Africans descended from the biblical Cain, the universality of servitude, and the alleged protection given to slaves (itself undermined by the brutal treatment of slaves in the French colonies). Most important was Diderot’s argument that all the vices and weaknesses attributed to Africans were the result of their condition rather than the cause of it. In a passage he wrote in the 1770 edition of *Histoire*, he opposes the prejudice that Africans’ intellectual inferiority comes from nature rather than from the condition they suffer: “Les nègres sont bornés parce que l’esclavage brise tous les ressorts de l’âme”.<sup>771</sup> (The Negroes are limited because slavery breaks their spirits). Diderot also strongly opposed Voltaire’s polygenist view and professed that all human species have a common source: “There was... originally only a single race of men, which, having multiplied and spread across the globe, in time produced all of man’s varieties.”<sup>772</sup>

In his *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772), Diderot used the voice of Orou, a Tahitian man, to criticise both European sexual morality and the institution of slavery. Orou denounces both as against nature, because they postulate that beings, who have the ability to think, to feel and who are free, could be the property of fellow creatures. Most interesting is the parallel Diderot draws between the enslavement of women and slaves: “Jamais un homme ne peut être la propriété d’un souverain, un enfant la propriété d’un père, une femme la propriété d’un mari, un domestique la propriété d’un maître; un nègre la propriété d’un

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<sup>767</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 200.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>769</sup> Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, a prolific writer for the *Encyclopédie*.

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>771</sup> In Erhard, *Lumières*, 199.

<sup>772</sup> In Curran, *Anatomy*, 160.

colon.”<sup>773</sup> (Never can a man be the property of a sovereign, a child the property of the father, a wife the property of a husband, a domestic servant the property of a master; a Black man the property of a colonist). Watkins confirms that, at the time, slavery discussions “were interwoven with moral and political debate about the status of women” along with civil and political slavery.<sup>774</sup> Montesquieu had also dealt with practices of ‘domestic slavery’, where women were confined and restrained, particularly in southern regions where there was less equality between men and women, whereas he approved the status of women in Europe. Naturally, this argument sparked a quick response from eighteenth-century women writers, like de Staël, who portrayed marriage as a state of slavery.<sup>775</sup>

Diderot provided a voice for anti-slavery sentiments. In Raynal’s first edition of *Histoire*, Diderot envisaged a project which would allow slaves to be emancipated gradually, followed by a program of inclusion within society, and he called upon European sovereigns to set an example by abolishing the slave trade. He also claimed that the suppression of slavery would not deprive Europeans of the islands’ products: “Ces productions peuvent être cultivées par des mains libres, et dès lors consommées sans remord.”<sup>776</sup> (These products can be cultivated by free hands, and then consumed without remorse). Ehrard argues that it is difficult to reconcile Diderot’s reformist suggestions and his predictions, with Raynal’s view that it would take a slave rebellion to free them from servitude.<sup>777</sup> Diderot was more likely a reformist than a revolutionary as it would be out of character for him to have contemplated the massacre of colonists.

While Rousseau did not make direct allusions to the race-based slavery debate, or offer any solutions to post-colonial problems, his philosophy of liberty which was the foundation of his politics had an extraordinary impact on his generation and the following one. As Erhard notes: “Est-ce un hasard si le transfert de ses restes au Panthéon, en octobre 1794, suit de quelques mois l’abolition de l’esclavage? Dans l’intervalle il y eu Thermidor, mais les Thermidoriens, pour la plupart bons républicains, ne sont souvent pas moins rousseauistes que Robespierre.”<sup>778</sup> (Is it an accident that the transfer of his remains to the Pantheon, in October 1794, followed by a few months the abolition of slavery? In the interval, there has

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<sup>773</sup> In Ehrard, *Lumières*, 200.

<sup>774</sup> Watkins, *Slaves*, 6.

<sup>775</sup> Among them, Sarah Chapone, *The Hardships of English Laws in Relation to Wives* (1735) and Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1706).

<sup>776</sup> In Ehrard, *Lumières*, 202.

<sup>777</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-202.

<sup>778</sup> Ehrard, *Lumières*, 161.

been Thermidor, but Thermidorians, most of them good republicans, are often no less rousseauist than was Robespierre).

**Plate 0.3 “Ce qui sert à vos plaisirs est mouillé de nos larmes” (What is for your pleasure is wet with our tears). Illustration from “Voyage à l’Isle de France”, Jean Michel the Younger Moreau (1741-1814).**

(<https://www.copia-di-arte.com/a/moreau/cequisertavos> )

Although Rousseau does not refer often to enslaved Africans, he still points, in his *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité* (1754), to attributes associated with Africans, such as their character and their skin colour, and particular traits which he thought needed to be studied. In *Emile ou de l’Education* (1762), the main character can only be French because Rousseau believed that human beings can only reach their full potential in a temperate climate, and he stated: “Les Nègres ni les Lapons n’ont pas le sens des Européens.”<sup>779</sup> (Neither the *Nègres* nor the Lapps have the Europeans’ common sense.) He nevertheless invoked slavery in *La Nouvelle Heloise* when the leading male character Saint-Preux describes having witnessed:

ces vastes et malheureuses contrées...troupeaux d’esclaves. A leur vil aspect j’ai détourné les yeux de dédain, d’horreur et de pitié, et voyant...mes semblables changés en bêtes pour le service des autres, j’ai gémi d’être homme.<sup>780</sup> (these vast and unfortunate countries... herds of slaves. At their ugly physique, I looked away out of disdain, horror and pity, and seeing...my fellow creatures turned into animals for the service of others, I bemoaned being a man).

Ehrard argues that in these words, Rousseau further condemned the slaves for choosing to live in servitude rather than die free. His thought is exemplified once more in the *Discours* and the *Contrat Social’s* philosophy when Rousseau declared that:

La liberté étant la plus noble des facultés de l’homme, ce n’est pas dégrader sa nature...que de renoncer sans réserve au plus précieux de tous ses dons...pour complaire à un maître féroce ou insensé ?”<sup>781</sup> (Freedom being human beings’

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<sup>779</sup> Rousseau, *Emile ou de l’éducation*, ed. Michel Launay (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), Livre I, 56.

<sup>780</sup> Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, Partie IV, Lettre III, Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel Raymond (dir.) (Paris: NRF, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1962-1991), 413.

<sup>781</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social ou Principes du Droit Politique: Une Collection complète des oeuvres* 1 (Genève, 1780-1789), 183.

noblest quality, is it not to degrade one's nature to renounce without reserve the most precious of all gifts [freedom]...only to please a ferocious and mad master?)

Yet, to Rousseau, African slaves who were transported to colonies were the victims of a corrupt European society. Contrary to Thomas Hobbes who defined human beings as naturally 'brutish', Rousseau believed that people were inherently non-violent.<sup>782</sup> His concept of the 'Noble Savage', who lived before civilisation, led the public to view Black Africans in a new light, not as 'savages'. A dominant theme in Romantic writing was the myth of 'l'homme naturel',<sup>783</sup> who was celebrated as a pure human being in contrast to the civilised man who was corrupted by society. Rousseau argued that individuals who live in a state of nature embodied peacefulness and equality and are blessed with an enviable freedom. They are free physically because they are not forced to comply with the state's demands, and psychologically and spiritually because they are not enslaved to the artificial needs of European society. Why then, was the uncorrupted 'Noble Savage' who has a harmonious existence and possesses innate goodness, being put in the chains of slavery by White peoples? This notion must have stirred the imagination of abolitionists at the time.

To Rousseau, liberty is absolute, and all laws must ensure liberty and equality. With his famous quote: "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains", he asserted that the modern state represses the physical freedom that is our birthright, drawing a link between slavery and political freedom.<sup>784</sup> In the *Contrat*, he draws a parallel between slaves and humans in general, who fail to realise that the freedom they claim is in fact illusory, and that they were really little better than slaves:

Tous les hommes nés en esclavage sont nés pour l'esclavage, rien n'est plus certain. Les esclaves enchainés perdent tout, même le désir d'être sans chaines...S'ils sont esclaves par nature, c'est contre nature.<sup>785</sup> (All men born into slavery, are born for slavery, nothing is more certain. Slaves in chains lose everything, even the desire to be unchained...If they are slaves by nature, it is against nature).

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<sup>782</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h681/index.html> (accessed 15 January 2016).

<sup>783</sup> 'natural man'.

<sup>784</sup> Rousseau, *Du Contrat*, 313-346.

<sup>785</sup> Rousseau, "Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les Hommes", in *Oeuvres complètes*, 268.

Contrary to Montesquieu, Rousseau objected to prisoners becoming enslaved. He argued that wars were conducted by states to gain property and territory, but that they had nothing to do with individuals. Moreover, Rousseau believed that in slavery, masters and slaves are in a permanent state of war which led both parties to use force; if superiority is perpetuated by force, not by nature, political authority has no basis in nature. To Rousseau, the state of the master in relation to the slave was the epitome of inequality.<sup>786</sup>

As well, Rousseau advances in *Discours* that ‘property’ was the source of all evils in society, and that its origin could indeed be found in the institution of slavery:

mais dès l’instant qu’un homme eu besoin du secours d’un autre, dès qu’on s’aperçut qu’il était utile à un seul d’avoir des provisions pour deux, l’égalité disparut, la propriété s’introduisit, le travail devient nécessaire, et les vastes forêts se changèrent en des campagnes riantes qu’il fallut arroser de la sueur des hommes, et dans lesquelles on vit bientôt l’esclavage et la misère germer et croître avec les moissons.”<sup>787</sup> (but as soon as a man needed the help of another, as soon as he realised it was useful to have the provisions of two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into pleasant fields that needed to be watered by the sweat of men, and in which slavery and misery appeared and grew with the harvests.)

Overall, Rousseau thought slavery to be erroneous, not only because it is illegitimate, but because it is meaningless. To him, the words ‘slavery’ and ‘right’ were mutually exclusive.

Condorcet (1743-1794) was probably the most generous of *philosophes* who fought against the institution of slavery and it is not surprising that his ashes were transferred to the *Panthéon* in 1989.<sup>788</sup> Sala-Molins maintains that Condorcet used in *Reflections sur L’esclavage des Nègres* (1787) (*Reflections on the Slavery of Negroes*) “the most appropriate words, the strongest expressions to condemn slavery...to ridicule its legal and rational legitimacy, its moral bankruptcy, and its economic and political opportuneness.”<sup>789</sup> As a strong advocate of abolition, Condorcet proposed ways to prevent crimes by colonists, by

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<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>788</sup> The delay between this event and his death may be due to long-standing French ambivalence towards abolitionism, and later, the strength of colonial interests in Africa.

<sup>789</sup> Louis Sala-Molins and John Conteh-Morgan, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 50.

reforming regulations around slavery. He appealed to the role and responsibility of society to protect and to care for the welfare of those who, like the slaves, had lost their capabilities through misfortune. He wrote: “The interests of the nation, both in terms of its power and wealth, must give way to the rights of a single individual if there is to be a difference between a self-regulated society and a horde of thieves”.<sup>790</sup> Condorcet does not separate individual rights from political rights, and argues that the legislator owes to society the safeguarding of the rights of the people if they were to carry out normal human functions. In his work, he recalls the Enlightenment’s universal ideals and its battle for universal justice, and he puts forward a plan for the slaves’ emancipation, a project that had to be implemented gradually in order to not provoke the colonists’ anger, damage their interests, or threaten their security. Similarly, he points to the slaves’ challenges when they will have to rediscover ‘normal’ human relations. As well, Condorcet argues for the economic advantages of employing free men and he contemplates a time when a master would see his former position as evil and instruct his workers to become good farmers. Interestingly, this suggestion was illustrated in de Staël’s novella *Mirza* in which the Black male character, Ximéo, was trained to manage a plantation in Africa. Condorcet thought that, in these conditions, order would be established and that: “Punishment that in the past resulted from greed and caprice is now reserved only for crimes. The judges would be chosen from among fellow nègres. The vices of the slaves would disappear with those of the master.”<sup>791</sup> Sala-Molins and Morgan argue that Condorcet failed to consider full political sovereignty for Africans, and that when he predicted the integration of Black and White peoples, he implied that it is the African people who would eventually merge into and adopt White culture, not vice versa. The following words exemplify his thought: “There will necessarily be in each colony, initially, two types of people, whose food, customs, and traditions differ. After a few generations, the blacks will merge with the whites to a point where the only difference left will be that of colour.”<sup>792</sup>

Condorcet was an active participant in the movement to abolish slavery and was the first president of *La Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society of the Friends of the Blacks). As he noted in the preamble of the society’s status: “La traite & l’esclavage des Nègres ne pouvoient se concilier avec les principes d’égalité, de douceur & d’humanité.”<sup>793</sup> (The trade and slavery of Nègres could not be conciliated with the principles of equality, of gentleness

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<sup>790</sup> In *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>793</sup> Rolf Reichardt in Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche (dir.), *Le Monde des Lumières*, (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 106.

and of humanity.). In the last chapter of *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès humains* (1793-1794), Condorcet deplored that, despite the French Revolution's egalitarian principles, inequality was still prevalent: "Souvent il a existé un grand intervalle entre ...l'égalité qui est établie par les institutions politiques et celle qui existe entre les individus".<sup>794</sup> (There has often existed a great gap between... equality which has been established by political institutions and the one that exists between individuals.)

During the eighteenth century, slavery was at the heart of philosophical arguments and scientific debate about race. Discussions developed around the biological ideas of racism, of superiority and inferiority between races. While progress was made, it is undeniable that this progress was 'half-hearted', and not always reflected in society. As seen earlier, while philosophers participated in the anti-slavery debate, some of them demonstrated marked racism and helped to develop racial concepts that would provide arguments used by pro-slavery theorists. In classifying human races, a biological hierarchy was established in which the White race was the most perfect and the Black race was on the lowest level. The hierarchy was matched with African social development which was also classified at the bottom of the scale. Africans were often seen as 'primitive', at a stage Europeans experienced during prehistoric times. This belief was reinforced by travel literature and accounts from European traders, missionaries and government officials who experienced some degree of uncooperativeness from Africans. Prejudice was also reflected in opinions about Africans' appearance.<sup>795</sup> For Europeans, physical beauty and colour closest to theirs would reflect the degree of civilisation of a people. When Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1729-1811) circumnavigated the globe, he opined that "Blacks were much more savage than Indians whose colour approached that of Whites".<sup>796</sup> This concept was illustrated in de Staël's work as she could only give dignity and nobility to her Black hero Ximéo by depriving him of African features.<sup>797</sup> Chateaubriand mentions, after the slave uprising in St Domingue in 1791, it was less popular to talk about the 'Noble Savage' and the indignities he suffered. While defending the cause of the slaves, abolitionist literature did not always oppose the contemporary view that the abilities of the White race were superior to those of the Black.

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<sup>794</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>795</sup> Watkins, "Slaves among Us", 1-2.

<sup>796</sup> Jean-Etienne Martin-Allanic, *Bougainville: navigateur et les découvertes de son temps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 749.

<sup>797</sup> De Staël, "Mirza" in *Trois Nouvelles*, 23. Similarly, the hero in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave* was portrayed as having European features, as well as "Zimeo" in St Lambert's *Saisons*. In Ehrard, *Lumières*, 83-85.

Yet, this theory was not shared by all intellectuals. In his novel, *Kélédor, histoire Africaine*, Baron Roger adopted the Enlightenment view of perfectibility and wrote that the Black man was ‘further from the savage state than one would think; he likes to reason, he would like to learn...he is already on the road to perfection’.<sup>798</sup> The belief that all races were equal and had the potential to evolve was shared by de Staël who asserted in her novellas that Africans were as competent as Europeans if they were given the opportunity to be educated.

### 5.2.3 *The church and slavery*

Before the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church’s position on colonial slavery remained ambivalent. The church never criticised it openly because there was no explicit condemnation of slavery in the New Testament.<sup>799</sup> In 1539, in his *Leçons sur le droit de guerre* (Lessons on the right to war), the Spanish Dominican Francisco de Vitoria approved of the enslavement of prisoners of war except for those who were Christians. In 1794, the theologian Bellon de St Quentin, in his *Dissertation on the trade and commerce of Negroes*, demonstrates in detail that the slave trade and ownership of slaves was not contrary to “natural law, neither to the written Divine law, and nor even to the laws in the Gospel.”<sup>800</sup> While consumed with doubts at times, the Church always cooperated with the established order and respected the interests of the powerful. This may explain why there had never been, in France, religious anti-slavery movements comparable to those of the Quakers.<sup>801</sup> Yet, Abbé Grégoire<sup>802</sup> (1750-1831) fought tirelessly against the trade. He dedicated his book *De la littérature des nègres ou Recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature* (1808) to:

All courageous men who pleaded for the cause of the unfortunate Negroes and persons of mixed blood, either by their works, or by their speeches in political

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<sup>798</sup> Jacques-François Roger, *Kélédor: histoire Africaine* (1868), (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2007), 76.

Baron Roger (1787-1849) was the first governor of the French colony Senegal.

<sup>799</sup> Alphonse Quenum, *Les Eglises chrétiennes et la traite atlantique du XV au XIX à St Domingue* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 51.

<sup>800</sup> In Ehrard, *Lumières*, 101.

<sup>801</sup> Lynn Hunt, in Ferrone and Roche, *Le Monde*, 329.

<sup>802</sup> Abbé Grégoire was a former bishop from Blois who was also a member of the Senate, of the National Institute, and of the Society of Royal Sciences.

assemblies for the abolition of the trade, and for the relief and the freedom of slaves.<sup>803</sup>

This work is a manifesto against the restoration of slavery by Bonaparte in 1802, but it is also a testimony of Abbé Grégoire's fidelity to abolitionists who had created the Society of the Friends of the Blacks. The book, at a time of censorship, was not well received by colonists who identified it as a manifesto of 'negrophilism'.<sup>804</sup>

Abbé Grégoire did save the honour of the Church. In *De la littérature des nègres*, he demonstrates the fundamental equality of all societies and of human beings who have, in principle, the capacity to reach the same stage of civilisation as the European cultural elites of the Enlightenment. The book is composed of a series of short biographies of Black and mixed-race artists and writers, preceded by a few essays written and published by the author in the 1790s. These essays were translated almost immediately into English and German, and they had a huge impact on the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. Like Raynal before him, Grégoire critiqued Western civilisation which, in spite of its advanced material state, brought only desolation to Africans who were working laboriously to satisfy Europeans' greed:

L'Europe qui se dit chrétienne et civilisée, torture sans pitié, sans relâche, en Amérique et en Afrique, des peuples qu'elle appelle sauvages et barbares. Elle a porté chez eux la crapule, la désolation et l'oubli de tous les sentiments de la nature, pour se procurer de l'indigo, du sucre et du café.<sup>805</sup> (Europe that defines itself as Christian and civilised, tortures peoples that are considered savage and barbarous, without pity and without respite, in America and in Africa. It brought them degradation, desolation, and oblivion of natural feelings, in order to provide indigo, sugar and coffee.)

As a deputy of the revolutionary government, Abbé Grégoire wanted to be represented as the spiritual guide of a Republic which had lost its initial aspirations during the Revolution. An apologist of Christianity, he was nevertheless against religious fanaticism and did not

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<sup>803</sup> Abbé Grégoire, *De la Littérature des Nègres* (1808) (Paris: Collection du Domaine Librairie Delinco, 2016), 128. *On Literature of Negroes, or Research on their intellectual Faculties, their moral Qualities and their Literature.*

<sup>804</sup> Bernard Gainot, "L'Abbé Grégoire et la place des Noirs dans l'histoire universelle", *Gradhiva: Revue d'Anthropologie d'histoire des Arts* 10 (2009), 22. <http://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1477> (accessed 6 February 2016).

<sup>805</sup> In Ehrard, *Lumières*, 172-73.

subscribe to the belief that kings were divinely chosen. Abbé Grégoire was active in the international abolitionist movement, his engagement exemplified by his long-lasting correspondence with the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, and the Society for Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania. Most importantly, he was a champion of liberty and equality, and of inclusiveness of specific groups, such as Black peoples, the Jews, the poor and women. He identified his defence of underprivileged minorities with universal liberation and their integration in a universal family. This prompted him to put forward a program of integration and ‘regeneration’ of a type that historian Alyssa Sepinwall defines as “the homogenizing action of regeneration”.<sup>806</sup>

Over time, this project led to an emphasis on conversion of Africans to Christianity. Sepinwall indicates that in the ‘integration and regeneration project’ the minorities’ cultural values and identities were ignored. She notes that Abbé Grégoire remained attached to the hierarchy of values that preserved the Europeans’ dominant position while erasing differences in order to facilitate the assimilation of others into the nation.<sup>807</sup> This process of ‘regeneration’ was inherent to the ‘progress of civilisation’, in agreement with the eighteenth-century philosophical concept of ‘perfectibility’. Like Condorcet, Abbé Grégoire envisaged a different colonisation that could establish new relations with Africa, but with a civilising contribution in one direction only. In contrast, Condorcet did not prioritise religion as part of his regeneration project. Interestingly, Sepinwall mentions the recent debate in French revolutionary historiography that draws a link between Abbé Grégoire’s ideas of regeneration and the repressive republicanism of the year II of the Revolution<sup>808</sup>; just as oppressed groups had to be integrated, so had the enemies of the Revolution.<sup>809</sup> In response to Sepinwall’s interpretation, Marcel Dorigny argues that to characterise Abbé Grégoire “in terms of condescending ‘paternalism’ is not an adequate evaluation of what seems to have constituted his conception of humanity”.<sup>810</sup> Dorigny does however note that Abbé Grégoire, as a revolutionary figure, initially paid more attention to the movement of the French colonies’ free coloured population, and their integration, than to the condition of the

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<sup>806</sup> Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Oakland (Ca.): University of California Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>808</sup> During the Year II of the Revolution, the Thermidorian Reaction (July 1794) took place with the fall of Robespierre, the collapse of revolutionary extremism, and the end of the Reign of Terror.

<sup>809</sup> Sepinwall, *The Abbé*, 88, 135-36.

<sup>810</sup> Marcel Dorigny in Jeremy Popkin, “Race, Slavery, and the French and Haitian Revolutions”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, 1 (2003), 119.

more numerous Black slaves.<sup>811</sup> He achieved national fame for his consistent commitment to a broad application of revolutionary equality. Abbé Grégoire was the first priest to be enshrined in the *Panthéon*, the temple of French republicanism.<sup>812</sup>

### 5.3 Philanthropy and French Revolutionary Politics on Slavery

During the eighteenth century, several major secular organisations were formed to bring about the end of slavery and to promote the emancipation of slaves. Philanthropy, lectures and publications, combined with the new revolutionary politics, played a definite role that led to the temporary abolition of slavery before its restitution in 1802.

#### 5.3.1 *Philanthropy and slavery*

In eighteenth-century France, ‘philanthropy’<sup>813</sup> was given a new impetus when both the Church and the State combined their efforts to perform humanitarian work within civil society.<sup>814</sup> While charity work was often provided by religious organisations, philanthropy was secular, at least in continental Europe, and it proclaimed specifically the love of human beings rather than the love of God. These associations, the Freemasons being one of them, had a profound social ethos, and they postulated that some problems could only be resolved by social action, as professed by the Enlightenment’s ideals.<sup>815</sup> Besides dealing with poverty, disease and disability, the main objective of these secular humanitarian organisations was to fight religious intolerance, legal torture and slavery.<sup>816</sup>

Similarly, *La Décade Philosophique* (1794-1807) advocated social action. Founded by Republicans, the publication dealt with philosophy, morality and politics. The journal published anti-slavery articles, and some of them suggested projects of ‘assimilation and regeneration’ for enslaved Africans.<sup>817</sup> It is important to note that the time of the Directory (1795-1799) witnessed a change of mind among French colonial administrators towards colonialism. Black people were not considered human goods anymore, but potential partners

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<sup>811</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>812</sup> Ehrard, *Lumieres*, 196.

<sup>813</sup> ‘Philanthropy’ from the Greek, ‘friend of humanity’.

<sup>814</sup> Lynn Hunt, “Philanthropie” in Ferrone (ed.), *Le Monde des Lumières*, 325.

<sup>815</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, many private charitable associations emerged in the 1780s such as *La Maison philanthropique* (Philanthropic House), *La Société de la charité maternelle* (Society of Maternal Charity) and *L’Association de bienfaisance judiciaire* (Association of Legal Benevolence).

<sup>816</sup> Hunt in Ferrone (ed.), *Le Monde*, 328.

<sup>817</sup> Edouard Guittou (dir.), *Ginguené (1748-1816): Ideologue et médiateur*, Nouvelle Edition [en ligne] (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1995). DOI: 10.4000/books.pur.35876.

in a network of exchange in which each party could find its own interest. This new form of colonial policy was not to ‘evangelise’ but to ‘civilise’. As heirs to the Encyclopedists, the editors of *La Décade Philosophique* condemned unequivocally what they called ‘modern colonisation’ founded on the right of conquest and exploitation of an enslaved workforce. This philanthropic group conceived a plan of European settlements in Africa in which colonists would set up a network of exchange with the indigenous population, based on free work and the transfer of European technology. Gainot points to the way these projects of reform reflected this century, seeking to combine humanitarian zeal and economic interests. Yet, he also argues that these new conceptions of colonisation brought forth contradictory opinions from the Enlightenment thinkers who, sometimes, condemned without reservation colonisation whether resulting from predatory conquest<sup>818</sup> or as a means to generate social and economic progress.<sup>819</sup>

This new form of colonialism conformed to the views of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*.<sup>820</sup> Founded in 1788 by Jacques Pierre Brissot (1754-1793)<sup>821</sup>, who imported the idea from London, the Society was an anti-slavery group which counted among its members Condorcet, de Gouges and Abbé Grégoire. Although the society fought for the abolition of slavery, it was not opposed to colonisation. Its doctrine demanded the immediate abolition of the trade, and it suggested a progressive abolition of slavery. Naturally, the Society was criticised by colonists and labelled immediately as ‘anti-French’ for destroying the colonial order. Its anti-colonist reputation compelled the Society to change its name to ‘Society of the Friends of the Blacks and of Colonies’. However, enthused by the ideals of the rights of man, the philanthropic society proposed also a new plan for colonial activity, the ‘African project’, in Africa and Madagascar. In many aspects similar to the *La Décade Philosophique*’s project, the plan was to transform the continent into France’s ‘breadbasket’ and to teach Africans the new principles of reason and liberty.<sup>822</sup> The abolition of the trade would create a free and important workforce in Africa which would work alongside Europeans. The project was championed by the abolitionist movement which considered the slave system outdated, not

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<sup>818</sup> As illustrated by the Spanish plunder of the Americas.

<sup>819</sup> Bernard Gainot, “La Décade et la colonisation nouvelle”, *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* (2005), 99-116. Founded by Republicans, *La Décade* was a political and literary society

<sup>820</sup> *La Société des Amis des Noirs* was narrowly linked to *La Décade Philosophique*.

<sup>821</sup> Brissot was a French politician belonging to the Girondin party during the Revolution.

<sup>822</sup> Marcel Dorigny, “La société des Noirs et les projets de colonisation en Afrique”, *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 293-294 (1993), 421-429.  
[https://persee.fr/doc/ahrf\\_0003-4436\\_1993\\_num\\_293\\_1\\_1583](https://persee.fr/doc/ahrf_0003-4436_1993_num_293_1_1583) (accessed 25 March 2016)

only because of its non-profitability<sup>823</sup> but also because of the disapproval of all classes of society who saw the institution as a violation of human rights. This project would have been dear to Physiocrats who advocated the exploitation of tropical cultures, worked by free Black Africans, as a fruitful alternative to slavery. Interestingly, as early as 1822, Senegal's governor Baron Jacques-François Roger (1787-1849), founded an experimental African plantation, the 'gardens of Richard-toll', which proved to be a successful enterprise, as illustrated by Roger in his African story, *Kelédor* (1828).<sup>824</sup>

As Dorigny mentions, from its foundation until its last program at the end of the Directory, the Society made diverse propositions to reorient colonists' activities in, and attitudes towards, Africa.<sup>825</sup> Many of those involved in commerce and politics approved of the project as they were quite aware of the wealth of the African continent in minerals, precious wood, cotton and spices, to name just a few of these resources. The enthusiasm felt for the plan is well illustrated in Mirabeau's speech:

Planters, don't say anymore that you work for the nation; animated instruments, machines of your workshops stop you enjoying richer and more varied, purer and more innocent commerce; your merchants would embrace it without becoming barbaric.<sup>826</sup>

Although the proposal meant expansion of trade, it also implied territorial possession. The Society considered this form of colonisation to be above all beneficial to Africans.<sup>827</sup> Its philosophical principles were based on the concept of perfectibility and that the unity of all could be achieved once servitude was abolished. An article in *La Chronique du mois*<sup>828</sup> shows that the Society took an interest in the British experiment of settling freed slaves in Sierra Leone.<sup>829</sup> It praises in detail the docility of Africans, their desire to acquire a European education and the unlimited agricultural wealth of Africa, which surpassed that of the West

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<sup>823</sup> In his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith (1723-1790) wrote that "From the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, that the work done by free men comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves", *Wealth of Nations*, (New York, 1974), 184.

<sup>824</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic*, 134.

<sup>825</sup> Gainot, "La Décade", 99-116. Founded by Republicans, *La Décade* was a political and literary society.

<sup>826</sup> Excerpt of Mirabeau's speech in front of the Society of Jacobins in Paris in April 1790. In *Mémoires biographiques, politiques et littéraires de Mirabeau* (tome VII, livre V), 1835.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=kb07AAAAMAAJ&oe=UTF-8> (accessed 4 April 2016).

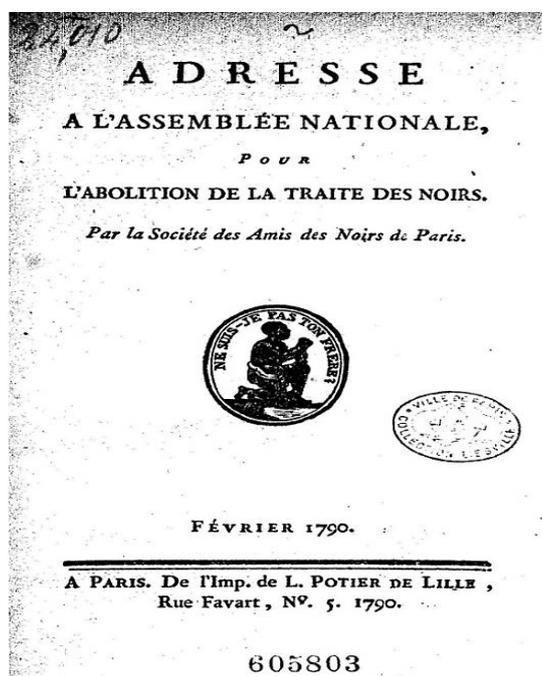
<sup>827</sup> In Dorigny, "La société des Noirs", 421-429.

<sup>828</sup> In *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>829</sup> Wilberforce and Clarkson were the founders of the state of Sierra Leone in 1786. It was populated mainly by freed slaves.

Indies. The commitment to the project by the Society was total between 1788-1794 and in 1798.

The participation of the Swede Carl D. Wadström, a co-founder of Sierra Leone, reveals the international character of the project.<sup>830</sup> Apart from the efforts of those who had conceived the project, a first attempt to colonise Africa took place under Bonaparte. The enterprise would be realised on a large scale during the nineteenth century, when successive governments in France undertook the task assigned by the first anti-slavery society at the end of the previous century for more selfish reasons than those of the Society. The Society ceased to exist in 1791. Colonists and proponents of slavery accused the organisation of being responsible for the uprising in Saint Domingue and for the loss of that colony. Under the Directory, however, the Society of the Friends of the Blacks and Colonists was revived by some of its former members like Abbé Grégoire. In 1831, the Society was replaced by the *Société de la Morale Chrétienne* (Society of Christian Morality). Its influential members played a strong role in promoting the end of the slave trade under Louis-Philippe. The reports of the sessions of the two societies show and confirm the moderation of their plans.<sup>831</sup>



<sup>830</sup> Ronny Ambjörnsson, “‘La République de Dieu’: une utopie suédoise de 1789”, trans. Jean Heyun, in *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française* 277 (1989), 244-273.

<sup>831</sup> Yves Benot, *La démence coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1992), 102-110.

## Plate 0.4 Société des Amis des Noirs de Paris (1791)

(Wikimedia Commons)

Indeed, they had both envisaged gradual abolition, not immediate and total, to allow time to educate the slaves morally and religiously.<sup>832</sup> In hindsight, it is easy to see that the elaboration of the ‘assimilation and regeneration’ project became the foundation for the nineteenth century’s expansion of European colonisation into Africa. As Miller reminds us, “the slave trade abolitionism and African colonisation were twins born of the same egg.”<sup>833</sup>

### 5.3.2 French slavery and revolutionary politics

In his prophetic work *Writings on Empire and Slavery* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

Slavery, set against democratic liberty and the progressive thinking of our age, is an institution which cannot endure. It will be ended either by the slave or the master. In both cases, great tribulations must be accepted.<sup>834</sup>

In France, at the end of the eighteenth century, there were increasing concerns about the viability of plantations, caused by the increasing number of runaway slaves and by the new abolitionist measures taken on the North American continent by the Quakers. With the French Revolution, the old order was being challenged with new ideas, new circumstances and new peoples. As a result, conflicts in the colonies multiplied among the different social and racial groups, as each of them looked to benefit in their own way from the new political and social climate. For wealthy planters in the colonies - the *grands Blancs* - usually monarchists, it meant more autonomy from metropolitan France. The artisans, shopkeepers and members of the middle and lower classes of society - the *petits Blancs* - embraced the revolutionary agenda of abolishing privileges and abuses by the upper classes. For free non-White peoples, some of whom had been educated in France, it meant redefining society so that merit through education and talents would be recognised. It is worth noting that at the time of the Revolution, free non-White peoples in St Domingue owned a third of the plantations and a quarter of the slaves. As for the slaves, Revolution meant freedom from

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<sup>832</sup> Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788-1789: Contributions à l’histoire de l’abolition de l’esclavage* (Paris: Editions de l’UNESCO, 1999).

<sup>833</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic*, 201.

<sup>834</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 56.

bondage, oppression and suffering. In Paris, the National Assembly extended, on 4 April 1792, citizenship to all free men of colour. For the slaves, it meant that slavery was now in the hands of planters alone; rebellion then became possible.<sup>835</sup>

Haiti prided itself on being the richest colony in the world towards the end of the eighteenth century. According to David Geggus, the island made up some forty per cent of France's foreign trade in 1780 and was growing two-thirds of the world's sugar and half of the world's coffee.<sup>836</sup> One contributing factor to the rebellion was its sheer number of slaves, 420,000 in 1788, a number greater than the combined slave populations of the British West Indies at the time. The majority of slaves in St Domingue were born in Africa and were still close to their roots and as such, were more resentful than their counterparts born in the colonies. Through a succession of revolts between 1789 and 1791, slaves learned the principles and the tactics of revolution that allowed them to lead a successful rebellion against their White oppressors on the island of St Domingue. François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture was at the heart of the success of the Haitian Revolution. Born Toussaint Bréda, an ex-slave and slave owner, he received a privileged upbringing, learning French and some Latin. Politically astute and a great military leader, Toussaint gained considerable control over his four thousand well-armed and disciplined troops.<sup>837</sup> In 1793, when the French government sent Léger Félicité Sonthonax<sup>838</sup> and six thousand troops to restore law and order, Toussaint shifted his allegiance from the Spanish to the French when the new Republic promised to abolish slavery. The decision to emancipate the slaves was certainly motivated by the fear of losing the island to the counter-revolutionary colonial Whites and their British and Spanish allies.<sup>839</sup> Before the Convention passed the abolition decree in 1794, France had already lost most of St Domingue to foreign forces. The British coveted the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe as well.<sup>840</sup> Debate continues about the motives of Sonthonax and the Convention in decreeing universal emancipation: whether they were driven by necessity and military pragmatism, or were profoundly opposed to colonialism and the institution of slavery which

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<sup>835</sup> Philip D. Curtin, "The Declaration of the Rights of Man in Saint-Domingue, 1788-1791", *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 30, 2 (May 1951), 157-75. DOI: 10.2307/2509493.

<sup>836</sup> David Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution: the British occupation of St Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 6.

<sup>837</sup> Erhard, *Lumières*, 16.

<sup>838</sup> Sonthonax was a Girondin and the first French abolitionist legislator, who promulgated the abolition of slavery in the north part of St Domingue before the Convention in Paris decided to abolish slavery in all colonies on 4 February 1794. Ehrard, *Lumières*, 15.

<sup>839</sup> Spain and Great Britain formed an alliance after Louis XVI's execution.

<sup>840</sup> In fact, the British occupied La Martinique twice for short periods, in 1809 and 1814, and La Guadeloupe from 1759 to 1763. Jean-Louis Donnadieu, "Toussaint-Louverture: le libérateur opportuniste", *Historia* 80 (November-December, 2002), 60.

violated human rights. As a Girondin, Sonthonax would have been a proponent of anti-slavery.<sup>841</sup> Jean-Louis Donnadieu argues that Sonthonax's promise of emancipation motivated the Black rebels to side with the French Republic.<sup>842</sup>

The political climate changed considerably during the Directory (1795-1799) when the government sought to regain control of the colonies. During the Consulate, a treaty was agreed on 20 May 1802<sup>843</sup> which stipulated the restoration of the slave system that existed prior to 1789. The change of climate had considerable implications for the island of La Guadeloupe. Thousands of slaves who had been emancipated were enslaved again or had to pay for their freedom. Still, individuals who were freed retained their rights even after the restitution of slavery. In St Domingue, Toussaint, who was appointed commander-in-chief by Sonthonax, expelled all invading forces and took control of the whole island. However, in 1801, he aroused Napoleon's anger when, with a group of influential Whites and Mulattos, he drafted a constitution, and appointed himself governor for life. To the Consul, it seemed a declaration of independence, and in 1802, he sent an army headed by General Charles Leclerc. In 1803, after a short time of peace with the Haitians, Leclerc was defeated at the Battle of Vertières. However, after the French defeat, Toussaint was lured to France and arrested and died in prison on 7 April 1803.<sup>844</sup> A new declaration of independence of St Domingue was proclaimed in January 1804 by Jean-Jacques Dessalines,<sup>845</sup> but the new republic would not be recognised by France or the United States.

Finally, the island obtained official independence under the Restoration, in 1825. However, French studies scholar Cora Monroe explains that France's recognition of Haiti's independence was tempered by French demands; the Haitian government had to concede exclusive commercial rights to France and compensate former colonists for damages that had occurred during the rebellion. These measures were deemed unjust and cruel by liberals and abolitionists in France.<sup>846</sup> As Franklin Knight indicates, the Haitian Revolution increased

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<sup>841</sup> Benot et Dorigny, *Grégoire et la cause des Noirs*, 191. The Girondins were known to have embraced the cause of the slaves. Jacques-Pierre Brissot, leader of the Girondin faction was, as seen earlier, the founder of the *Society des Amis des Noirs*.

<sup>842</sup> Donnadieu, "Toussaint-Louverture", 65.

<sup>843</sup> Part of the Treaty of Amiens.

<sup>844</sup> Diane Batts Morrow, "Francophone residents of Antebellum Baltimore and the Origins of the Oblate Sisters of Providence", in *Slavery in the Caribbean*, ed. D. Y. Kadish, 122.

<sup>845</sup> Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806) participated in the 1791 uprising and fought alongside Toussaint Louverture.

<sup>846</sup> Cora Monroe, "The Black subject of La famille Noire", *L'Esprit Créateur* 47, 4 (Winter 2007), 105-117.

sensitivity to race, colour and status in the Caribbean. It also encouraged stronger and bolder anti-slavery movements in Europe, especially in England.<sup>847</sup>

During the Congress of Vienna, the question of the abolition of slavery was discussed on an international level for the first time. In late 1814, European powers congregated in the Austrian capital to settle outstanding matters after Napoleon's defeat. Until then, previous peace settlements in Europe had been bilateral or trilateral deals which had made official the new frontiers drawn by foreign invaders.<sup>848</sup> This time, the goal of the conference was to draw up a constitution for the entire European community which would ensure peace on a permanent basis. Also, the representatives of the Congress promoted human rights and added a cultural dimension in proclaiming the abolition of slavery and instituting civil rights for the Jews.

The suppression of the slave trade, however, was a contentious issue between France and the other European nations. Between 1810 and 1814, Great Britain had signed treaties with Sweden and Denmark wherein these nations agreed to restrict their slave trading activities. A letter from Talleyrand shows that public opinion in France was not yet ready to abolish the trade: "La chose m'est démontrée; il s'agit de la démontrer en France" (It is obvious to me; it is yet to be obvious to France).<sup>849</sup> Prejudices against abolition still existed in France, mainly among royalists who associated the anti-slavery movement with the Revolution. The French emissary, General Caulaincour, indicated also that to force France to abolish the trade would affect its national honour and prestige, and discredit the restored monarch. Indeed, Baron von Humboldt remarked that the subject of abolition was debated with passion in France, and that the perpetuation of slavery had become a point of national honour to its citizens. Yet, if France did not accept abolition as part of the treaty, the treaties signed with Denmark and Sweden would undoubtedly be nullified. A compromise had to be reached to persuade France to comply with British demands. The Duke of Wellington, who was sent as a plenipotentiary to France, implored the French King to use his power to accelerate the process of abolition and pointed out that "his voice and example" would be "productive of the most decisive and happy consequence on behalf of these suffering people."<sup>850</sup> Louis XVIII approved of the

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<sup>847</sup> Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution", *The American Historical Review* 105, 1 (2000), 103-115.

<sup>848</sup> For instance, the treaties of Cateau-Cambresis in 1559, Westphalia in 1648 and Utrecht in 1713.

<sup>849</sup> In letter from Sidney Smith to William Wilberforce, quoted in Jérôme Reich, "The Slave Trade and the Congress of Vienna: a study in English public opinion," *The Journal of Negro History* 53, 2 (1968), 144-145.

<sup>850</sup> Letter of the Prince Regent of Great Britain to the King of France, 5 August 1814, *British Foreign State Papers*, III, 900.

abolition of slavery, as a letter from Talleyrand to Wilberforce testifies: “Ce prince éclairé a le désir de voir abolir la traite des nègres”<sup>851</sup> (This enlightened Prince wishes to see the abolition of the trade in Negroes). Ultimately, to prompt the French to sign the treaty, Wilberforce promised their government that its colonies would be restored on the condition that it stopped the trade. Probably hoping to receive more British aid on other issues, France agreed to support British efforts. Talleyrand added that if Spain and Portugal, countries which had not agreed yet, would consent to cease the trade after a period of five years, France was ready to adopt the same condition. A letter from Talleyrand to Wilberforce confirmed that Louis XVIII believed that “five-years to prepare the French mind would suffice to attain the desired end”.<sup>852</sup> Talleyrand advised the French ambassadors that:

Ce qui n’était dans le principe qu’une affaire d’intérêt et de calcul, est devenu pour le peuple anglais une passion portée jusqu’au fanatisme, et que le ministère n’est plus libre de contrarier. C’est pourquoi les Ambassadeurs du roi donneront toute satisfaction à l’Angleterre sur ce point, en se prononçant franchement et avec force pour l’abolition de la traite.<sup>853</sup> (What was a matter of principle and calculation, has become for the English people a passion which borders on fanaticism, and that the ministry cannot afford to upset. It is why the Ambassadors of the King will give all satisfaction to England on this point, in agreeing openly and strongly to the abolition of the trade).

Still, the supporters of abolition criticised the British government for being too lenient towards a defeated country, and also questioned French integrity. After all, in five years France could restock its colonies with slaves and protect its vested interests. The hostility intensified when the island of Gorée and Senegal were given back to France by the British government, and La Guadeloupe by the Swedes, without any guarantee that the slave trade would not continue. However, when Napoleon returned from the island of Elba, he declared immediately the total abolition of the trade on 29 March 1815. While his decrees were considered illegal after his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo (June 1815), Louis XVIII’s promises were restored and made official by the government in July 1815: “On the part of

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<sup>851</sup> Letter from Talleyrand to Wilberforce, 1 July 1814. In *Mémoires et Correspondance du Prince de Talleyrand*. Edition intégrale présentée par Emmanuel de Waresquiel (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 2007), 136-137.

<sup>852</sup> In Martha Putney, “The Slave Trade in French Diplomacy from 1814 to 1815”, *The Journal of Negro History*, 60, 3 (1975), 411-427. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716902> (accessed 22 January 2016).

<sup>853</sup> Letter from Talleyrand (August 1814), “Instructions pour les Ambassadeurs du Roi au Congrès”, in *Mémoires et Correspondance du Prince de Talleyrand*, 474.

France, the traffic in slaves may cease from the present time, everywhere and forever.”<sup>854</sup> In the meantime, public opinion in France had shifted and this was confirmed by the warm reception Abbé Grégoire received when he presented his anti-slavery speech to the Chamber of the Deputies in July 1815. Members of the British African Society contributed to the change in the French view of abolition, using pamphlets, speeches and articles in the press. Talleyrand reiterated that the King was satisfied “by the idea that [he] at the same time does what is agreeable to the English Government and people”.<sup>855</sup> It was de Staël though who most praised Wilberforce for his efforts:

Combien vous devez être heureux de votre triomphe, vous l'emporterez et c'est vous et Lord Wellington qui auraient gagné une grande bataille pour l'humanité...D'ordinaire, les idées triomphent par elles-mêmes et par le temps, mais cette fois, c'est vous qui avez devancé les siècles.<sup>856</sup> (You are triumphant and you must be so happy. You will win and it is you and Lord Wellington who have won a great battle for humanity...Usually, ideas prevail with time, but this time, it is you who is in advance of your time.)

France and England agreed to join their efforts in capturing all ships which engaged in the slave trade along the African coast. They also informed countries which refused to abolish the trade within five years that their products would be boycotted.<sup>857</sup> For France, the slave trade was formally abolished by imperial decree on 29 March 1815.

Yet, despite a new law which permitted British ships to stop French vessels suspected of carrying slaves, colonists and traders took little notice of the legislation and slave trade and slavery continued until the end of the Bourbon regime in 1830.<sup>858</sup> Serge Daget explains that for the French, abolitionism was linked to their defeat after the fall of Napoleon, and to the English. Indeed, politicians and diplomats believed that the British used a humanitarian cause to promote their “ambitions for political, commercial, and indeed military

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<sup>854</sup> Putney, “The Slave trade”, 425.

<sup>855</sup> Talleyrand to Castlereagh, 30 July 1815, *Le Monitor Universel*, (2 November 1816), 1235.

<sup>856</sup> In *Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, eds. Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce II. (Philadelphia, 1841). <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=XmLLAAAAMAAJ&pg=PP1#> (accessed 3 March 2016)

<sup>857</sup> Reich, “The Slave Trade at the Congress of Vienna”, 132.

<sup>858</sup> F. George Kay, *The Shameful trade* (Great Britain: Frederic Muller Editions, 1967), 185.

hegemony”.<sup>859</sup> However, the blockade of slave traders was also the cause of horrific incidents such as the one related in the Parisian newspaper, *The Constitutionnel*, on 3 April 1847. Under the heading “Atrocious Results of the Cruises on the African Coast”, the article reports that two thousand slaves had been beheaded by a slave merchant who had them killed so he did not have to feed them.

The final success of abolitionism in France came in 1848 through the work of Victor Schoelcher (1804-1893) who initiated, during the second French Republic (1848-1851), the final decree which ended permanently the French slave trade and slavery. In 1838, he participated in a literary competition organised by the *Société de la Morale Chrétienne* in which he advocated immediate freedom of the slaves without a transition period. Named President of the Commission of the Abolition of Slavery, Schoelcher prepared the abolition statute which was passed on 27 April 1848. As a result, 248.000 slaves were freed in Guadeloupe, Martinique and La Réunion, and ten thousand in Senegal.<sup>860</sup> Unsurprisingly, the abolition of slavery and the subsequent loss of the Atlantic trade caused substantial economic damage in French cities such as Nantes, le Havre and Marseilles. As Peter McPhee notes: “Bordeaux and La Rochelle would never quite recover from the loss of St Domingue.”<sup>861</sup> The new political order had an impact not only socially, but also economically.

## 5.4 Conclusion.

This chapter sets out a brief history of slavery and its abolition in French colonies, highlighting the complexity of the period which was divided between well-entrenched assumptions and social and economic practices, and the principles of liberty and equality championed by some *philosophes* and the new Republic. Most importantly, it underlines the eighteenth-century intellectual, societal and political factors that were instrumental in creating a new perception of slavery’s inhumanity. This overview of the historical context of French slavery sheds some light on de Staël’s thought, engagement and actions in her personal fight for abolitionism throughout her life.

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<sup>859</sup> Serge Daget, “France, Suppression of the Illegal Trade, and England, 1817-1850,” in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa and the Americas*, eds. David Eltis and James Walvin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 67.

<sup>860</sup> Ehrard, *Lumières*, 15.

<sup>861</sup> Peter McPhee, “The Economy, Society and Environment”, in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 454-469.



**Plate 0.5 Posthumous painting of Toussaint Louverture (Wikimedia Commons)**

## *Chapter 6. Madame De Staël's Contribution to the Abolition of Slavery*

Abolitionism was a family affair for the Neckers, and Madame de Staël's ideas and activities contributed significantly to the fight against slavery and to the emancipation of the slaves in France. Through her work, French people became more aware of the reality of slavery and of the fate of the Africans caught up in it.<sup>862</sup> Like male activists including Condorcet, Diderot and Abbé Raynal, and later on, Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo<sup>863</sup>, de Staël addressed the subject of slavery and abolition in her literature, but she also took a more pragmatic and political position than those authors. She championed William Wilberforce's campaign, and pleaded the cause of the leaders of the independence movement in St Domingue. Yet, she seems to have gained little recognition for her engagement with abolitionism, or for her personal and intellectual partisanship for the movement. For instance, she voiced the cause of the slaves before and during the Congress of Vienna, but this advocacy has not always been acknowledged. In 1821, her early biographer, Albertine Necker de Saussure, commented that, as a woman, de Staël was seen as an agent intruding on what was considered a masculine domain. Yet, Glenda Sluga notes that some of her contemporaries thought that "de Staël was a crucial catalyst, confirming and consolidating strategies, providing the intellectual context in which the moral and political resolve to strategize was clear."<sup>864</sup> Later, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Lord Acton, the editor of *Cambridge Modern History*, underlined de Staël's contribution to historical progress when she stood for "the reign of conscience in politics".<sup>865</sup> Still, Sluga notes that there is room for more scholarship that examines de Staël's political agency and analyses the importance of her campaign for abolition.<sup>866</sup>

This chapter will therefore examine thoroughly de Staël's participation in the anti-slavery campaign, first highlighting the various legacies that shaped her ideological thinking,

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<sup>862</sup> Aphra Behn's anti-slavery novel *Oroonoko* was among the nine best-selling English novels in France during the seventeenth century. Edward D. Seeber, "Anti-slavery opinion in France during the second-half of the eighteenth century," in *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish (USA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 41.

<sup>863</sup> Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), poet and politician; Victor Hugo (1802-1885), novelist and politician.

<sup>864</sup> Glenda Sluga, "Madame de Staël and the Transformation of European Politics, 1812-17", *The International History Review* 37, 1 (2015), 4.

<sup>865</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>866</sup> There are some recent works which deal with de Staël's involvement in politics such as Biancamaria Fontana's *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (2017). As well, Erik Egnell's *Une Femme en Politique: Germaine de Staël* (2013); and an article from Stéphanie Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique", *Cahiers Staëliens* 64 (Paris: Editions H. Champion, 2014), both broach the subject of de Staël's direct role in abolitionism.

followed by an analysis of her indirect and direct contribution to the abolitionist cause through her literature and essays. The chapter focuses on the strategies she employed in her writing and the ways she attempted to heighten people's awareness of the slaves' condition.

## 6.1. Anti-slavery legacy

De Staël was influenced, from a young age, by her parents' position on abolitionism. Her youthful anti-slavery stance was unusual for a young woman of her milieu. There is no doubt that her greatest influence was her father, a man she loved and admired. That admiration is clear in the few words she uttered, just before she died: "J'ai aimé Dieu, mon père et la liberté."<sup>867</sup> (I have loved God, my father and liberty). Kadish writes that, as early as 1784, de Staël adopted her father's Enlightenment views.<sup>868</sup> It was the year Jacques Necker composed *De l'Administration des finances de la France* which reveals his anti-slavery spirit and his anti-racist sentiment:

Dans les colonies de France ..., c'est par le nombre de malheureux qu'on mesure la fortune. ... Nous nous enorgueillissons de la grandeur de l'homme et cependant, une petite différence dans les cheveux, ou dans la couleur de l'épiderme suffit pour changer notre respect en mépris, et pour engager à placer des êtres semblables à nous, au rang des animaux sans intelligence<sup>869</sup> .... (In the French colonies..., it is by the number of unfortunate people that we measure our fortune....We take pride in the greatness of men and yet, a small difference in the hair, or the colour of the skin is enough to change our respect into contempt, and we place human beings, who are similar to us, on the level of animals without intelligence...).

Still, at the time, Necker endorsed the institution of slavery as long as no abuse or mistreatment occurred. Five years later, as Finance Minister, he reiterated these sentiments in a speech in opening the Estates-General, but with a marked difference when he put the cases of both colonists and abolitionists on the agenda, hoping for a compromise to satisfy both parties. One of his proposals was to cut the Government's bonuses to slave traders, arguing

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<sup>867</sup> In Charlotte Blennerhasset, *Madame de Staël: Her Friends, and her Influence in Politics and Literature*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge (US): Cambridge University Press, 2013), 575.

<sup>868</sup> Doris Y. Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters and Slaves: Women writers and French colonial slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 40.

<sup>869</sup> Jacques Necker, "De l'Administration des Finances de la France", (1784), t.1, 317-318. In *Cahiers Staëliens* 64, 7.

that “There is reason to believe that the expense can be cut in half, by adopting a measure which humanity alone should have recommended.”<sup>870</sup> Before concluding, he addressed himself directly to the deputies of the colonies, and pleaded the cause of the slaves:

Un jour viendra, peut-être,...vous jetterez un regard de compassion sur ce malheureux peuple dont on a fait tranquillement un barbare objet ce trafic; sur ces hommes semblables à nous par la pensée et surtout par la triste faculté de souffrir...sans pitié pour leurs douloureuses plaintes, nous accumulons, nous entassons au fond d’un vaisseau pour aller ensuite en pleine voile les présenter aux chaines qui les attendent.<sup>871</sup> (One day, maybe, you will show some compassion to the unfortunate people who have been made the object of a barbarous trade; for these human beings who think, as we do, and who have, especially, the sad capacity for suffering...we ignore their painful complaints, we take them, we stuff them into the hold of a vessel in order to proceed under full sail to deliver them to the chains that await them).

Necker ended his speech by congratulating the British people who had displayed their ‘enlightened compassion’ towards the slaves, and he encouraged the French to be moved by the same sentiment. Jeremy Popkin points out that Necker was nevertheless cautious not to advance concrete proposals, and he hoped that the issue would be dealt with by some future Estates-General.<sup>872</sup> Similarly, John Isbell identifies the limits on Necker’s stance on slavery and defines him as an “orthodox mercantilist” who nevertheless endorsed the moral argument that slaves, as subjects of the King, were entitled to protection.<sup>873</sup> Undoubtedly, Necker’s attitudes played a part in his daughter’s abolitionist stance, but so did Adam Smith’s liberal economic arguments against slavery.<sup>874</sup> This double justification allowed de Staël to marry her faith in the principles of freedom for all with her predilection for a liberal moral, political, and economic philosophy.<sup>875</sup> As a Finance Minister, Necker did not overlook France’s

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<sup>870</sup> “Discours de M. Necker, Ministre des Finances, lors de la séance du 5 Mai 1789”, in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, Tome VIII (Paris: Librairie Administrative P. Dupont, 1815), 20-21.

<sup>871</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>872</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, “Saint-Domingue, Slavery, and the Origins of the French Revolution”, in *Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*, eds. Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. van Kley (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>873</sup> John Clairborne Isbell, “‘Voices Lost?’: Staël and Slavery, 1786-1830”, in Doris Y. Kadish, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone World* (Athens, Georgia): The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>874</sup> Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was first published in 1776, with two new editions in 1784 and 1786. As noted earlier, Smith argued that slave labour cost more than free labour.

<sup>875</sup> Javier Fernandez Sebastián, “Review of Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1760*”, *The Review of Politics* 77, 4 (2015), 713-16.

economic interests when he declared in *De l'Administration* that only an international pact to abolish slavery could be envisaged in order to avoid giving some states a commercial advantage over others.<sup>876</sup> This proposition was taken much further by his daughter when she appealed to European heads of State, who congregated in Vienna for the Congress, to abolish the slave trade. It is worth noting that Necker had ties with *La Compagnie des Indes*, a company which ended its slave trade in 1744. Moreover, Christopher Miller points to a clause included in Germaine's marriage contract which stipulates the transfer of the French colonial island of St Barthelemy to Sweden, an island populated by four hundred slaves, in exchange for the title "de Staël-Holstein".<sup>877</sup> While this exchange appears to point to some hypocrisy in Necker's stance on slave trading, this does not imply that de Staël was herself complicit in slavery.

Necker's two addresses to the government show that his anti-slavery views developed over time, views that paved the way for his daughter to engage and to intervene directly in actions related to abolitionism. Interestingly, de Staël confides in *Du Caractère de M. Necker et de sa vie privée* (1804), that she inherited her father's intellectual and political *penchant*, but she also admitted to possessing a stronger character than his. She concludes that he was relieved to abandon his political position because he was of an indecisive and delicate nature. De Staël demonstrated her greater strength when she refused to accept her exile without protesting, when she defended her father's reputation with great energy, and when she fought for the underprivileged.<sup>878</sup>

Her mother, Suzanne Necker, was also committed to the cause of abolition. Alongside her husband, she joined *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, and she organised readings in her salon of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788).<sup>879</sup> A French classic, *Paul and Virginie* tells of a love story which ends tragically, set in a tropical island colony where slavery is rife. Inspired by his own stay on Isle de France, Bernardin's work introduced to the French reading public a type of sentimental literature that is tied to issues of race and slavery. As he wrote in the preface of his earlier work *Voyage à l'Isle de France* in 1773,

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<sup>876</sup> Necker, "De l'Administration des Finances de la France", 11.

<sup>877</sup> Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave trade* (Durham, DC: Duke University Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>878</sup> De Staël, "Du Caractère de M. Necker et de sa vie privée", *Oeuvres complètes de Mme. la Baronne de Staël* (Paris: Treutell et Würtz, 1820), tome 17, 16.

<sup>879</sup> Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737-1814), a botanist and writer.

“Je croirai avoir été utile aux hommes si le faible tableau du sort des malheureux noirs peut leur épargner un seul coup de fouet, et si les Européens, qui crient en Europe la tyrannie, et qui font de si beaux traités de morale, cessent d’être aux Indes des tyrans barbares.”<sup>880</sup> (I hope that I can be useful to mankind if my feeble picture of the luckless Blacks can save them from one single lash of a whip, and if Europeans, who cried out against tyranny in Europe, and who write such pretty treatises on morality, cease being barbarous tyrants in the Indies.)

Kadish describes *Paul et Virginie* as “the ‘locus classicus’ of exoticism and pre-romanticism.” Bernardin’s lyric style was emulated by de Staël in her novels, and especially in her novellas.<sup>881</sup>

Germaine was not as close to her mother as she was to her father, yet she benefited greatly from her mother’s intellectual leanings, recommendations and social life. As the wife of a famous minister, Madame Necker was expected to preside over a brilliant salon. Her Friday *diners* were famous; there, *philosophes* and *Encyclopédistes*, the great *salonnières*, and younger participants like Bernardin all congregated. Her most regular visitors were Diderot and Abbé Raynal, both proponents of the abolition of slavery. Germaine attended these gatherings from a young age, and endowed with a precocious mind, she absorbed these intellectuals’ conversations and deliberations wherein liberal ideas were championed. In 1778, her mother took her to visit Voltaire in Switzerland. Yet despite this contact, Beatrice Didier maintains that it was mainly through their works that the *philosophes* shaped the young Germaine’s intellectual and humanitarian ideals. Indeed, the young girl was an avid reader, and Simone Balayé recounts that she had read Montesquieu by the age of twelve.<sup>882</sup>

## 6.2 De Staël’s contribution to slavery through her literature, treatises and translation

De Staël’s long-standing involvement in abolitionism started in 1786 with her novellas<sup>883</sup> and endured to her late works such as *Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la*

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<sup>880</sup> In Kadish, *Fathers*, 14.

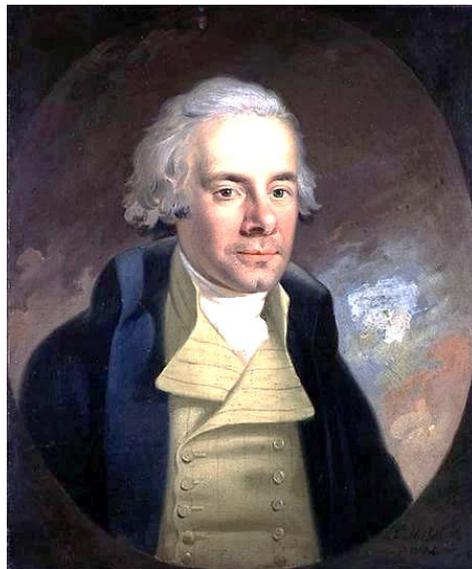
<sup>881</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>882</sup> Beatrice Didier, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Ellipses Editions, 1999), 8.

<sup>883</sup> Olympe de Gouges wrote *Zamore et Mirza*, retitled *L’Esclavage des noirs* (Slavery of Black Africans), a play which was performed in Paris in 1789. De Staël’s use of the name ‘Mirza’ in her novella seems to indicate that she knew de Gouges and had attended a performance.

*Révolution Française* (1818).<sup>884</sup> She explored the nature of slavery and advocated abolition in a range of writings. In her work, she expresses her disapproval of the trade directly and indirectly.

De Staël's opposition to slavery appears clearly in numerous works. It is obvious in her two essays which were inspired by her stay in England between 1813 and 1814, *Preface to the Translation of William Wilberforce's work on slave trade* and *Call to the Sovereigns reunited in Paris to obtain the abolition of the slave trade*, published in 1814, and in her three novellas composed between 1786 and 1795: *Mirza ou lettre d'un voyageur*, *Histoire de Pauline*, and *Zulma*. All have slavery central to the stories. It is worth noting that de Staël waited until 1795 to have these novellas published in the midst of the slave rebellion in St Domingue and a year after the Convention had abolished slavery. She was more cautious than Olympe de



**Plate 0.1 William Wilberforce by Lawrence (Wikimedia Commons).**

Gouges, whose efforts were quickly thwarted when her play *L'Esclavage des noirs* (1784) was immediately suppressed by the colonists' Club Massiac, which still had the support of the Convention.<sup>885</sup> In her novels, de Staël's opposition to slavery is clear. In *Delphine*, the character Madame de Lebenstein talks of a tyrannical Dutch colonist who made his fortune in

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<sup>884</sup> De Staël, "Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la Révolution Française" in *La Passion de la Liberté*, ed. Laurent Theis (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2017), 302-804.

<sup>885</sup> The play was severely criticized by anti-abolitionists for making the unpunished murderer of a White man into a hero.

America at the expense of his unfortunate slaves.<sup>886</sup> Similarly, in *Mirza* and *Histoire de Pauline*, the author refers directly to the “Triangular Trade” and its horrors.<sup>887</sup> Her anti-slavery stance is also illustrated in her correspondence, in particular a letter addressed to the King of Sweden, which relates the events of the slave rebellion in St Domingue: “What glory for a century which could see the abolition of slavery! If only one man was responsible for it, he would have done more good than any other man”. In the same letter, she suggests that sugar should be cultivated freely in Africa, a commodity “which is the source of so much misfortune”.<sup>888</sup> Between 1813 and 1814, de Staël wrote to Wilberforce and Wellington to praise the British government for leading the abolitionist campaign and for its generosity to the enslaved.<sup>889</sup> In a letter to Wilberforce, she also thanked him for inspiring moral goodness in a generation which seemed to have forsaken it.<sup>890</sup> In *Considerations*, she judged British legal institutions which were used to fight slavery, such as the writ of *Habeas Corpus*: “Le plus beau monument de justice et de grandeur morale, existant parmi les Européens.” (The most beautiful monument to justice and moral greatness, existing among Europeans).<sup>891</sup>

### 6.2.1 De Staël’s literature and abolitionism

For de Staël, public opinion became a medium for social guidance and political harmony.<sup>892</sup> In *Considérations*, she refers to “the link between the government and the governed”, and stresses the importance of public opinion as a collective emotion that linked a people to its leaders.<sup>893</sup> How to achieve then the difficult task of heightening public awareness of the horrors of slavery, and to convince European countries to imitate England? She expressed the view that philosophy on its own was too cold and rational to persuade fully. In her *Essai sur les fictions*, she advocated a philosophical literature which appealed to the readers’

<sup>886</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, t.1, 237.

<sup>887</sup> De Staël, *Trois Nouvelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 75.

<sup>888</sup> “Letter of 11 November 1786 to Gustave III, King of Sweden, *Correspondance Générale*” in Génand, “Staël et l’Afrique”, 60; Letter of 25 August 1792 to Comte de Narbonne, *Correspondance Générale*, ed. Beatrice W. Jasinki (Genève: Champion-Slatkine, 1960), t.2,1; Letter of 18 April 1801 to Joseph Bonaparte, *Correspondance Générale*, t.IV, 365.

<sup>889</sup> *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, ed. by his son (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1846), Vol. II, 138-139.

<sup>890</sup> Letter from de Staël to Wilberforce, 4 November 1814, in *The Life of William Wilberforce*, by his sons (London: J. Murray, 1839), t.IV, 217.

<sup>891</sup> De Staël, “Considérations”, 768.

<sup>892</sup> Fontana argues that ‘public opinion’ meant at the time a variety of different concepts: the views expressed by intellectual elites, the expectations and sentiments of the population at large, and their real or imagined interests. In Biancamaria Fontana, *Germaine de Staël: A Political Portrait* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 213.

<sup>893</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-18.

emotions and had moral ends.<sup>894</sup> The beginning of *Mirza* opens with the sad observation that “Vainement les écrivains les plus éloquents ont tenté d’obtenir cette révolution de la vertu des hommes”.<sup>895</sup> (In vain, the most eloquent writers have attempted to obtain this revolution in men’s virtue). De Staël believed that post-revolutionary literature must be different from that of the *Ancien Régime*, and that a political revolution would inevitably lead to a literary revolution. Thus, literature could assert itself both as a reflection of society and as a moral driving force which is inherent to the advancement of civilisation. She conceived literature as an instrument to create a national spirit which links together the values of the Enlightenment, realises the republican values of equality and fraternity, and can inspire the informed reader to emulate virtuous action. In *De la Littérature*, she wrote:

Le style doit subir des changements par la révolution qui s’est opérée dans les esprits et dans les institutions .... Le style des ouvrages est come le caractère d’un homme; ce caractère ne peut être ni étranger ni à ses opinions, ni à ses sentiments; il modifie tout son être.<sup>896</sup> (The style must change because of the revolution which has taken place in minds and institutions .... The style in literature is like the nature of men; this nature can be estranged from neither his opinions, nor his feelings; it modifies his whole being.)

Only literature, she believed, could touch people at the deepest level and change attitudes and states of feeling.<sup>897</sup> In *Lettres sur les ouvrages de JJ Rousseau* (1788), she praises the moral greatness of Rousseau’s writing and his sentimental style: “Son style n’est pas continuellement harmonieux; mais dans les morceaux inspirés par son âme, on trouve,...une sorte d’harmonie naturelle, accent de la passion”<sup>898</sup> (His style is not always harmonious; but in the pieces which are inspired by his soul, one finds, ...a kind of natural harmony, an accent of passion). To de Staël, even if Rousseau’s writing lacks stylistic perfection, his appeal to readers’ moral sensibility should become a model for future literature. In *Paul et Virginie*, Bernardin included exotic details; in contrast, de Staël focused mainly on feelings and politics to tackle the African slave question, by giving eloquent speeches from her heroes and heroines, messages that ‘touched the soul’. In the writings of de Staël, slaves have a voice

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<sup>894</sup> De Staël, “Essai sur les fictions” in *Zulma, et trois Nouvelles* (London: Chez Coburn Libraire, 1813), 32-33.

<sup>895</sup> De Staël, “Mirza” in *Trois nouvelles*, 22.

<sup>896</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 381.

<sup>897</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968) t.1, 23.

<sup>898</sup> De Staël, *Lettres sur les ouvrages de JJ Rousseau* (San Bernardino: Ulan Press, 2015), 12.

and reveal their emotions after deep ‘self-analysis’.<sup>899</sup> In *Zulma*, there is ‘la passion réfléchiante’ (thoughtful passion) as later defined in *De La Littérature* (1800): “l’examen de ses propres sensations, fait par celui-là même qu’elles dévorent.”<sup>900</sup> (the examination of sensations made by those who are devoured by them). Slaves are conscious of their own tragic destiny and of the passions that drive some individuals to subjugate others. In *Mirza*, the enslaved heroine forgets her condition to become an inspired agent for abolition:

Je l’entends qui demande aux Européens de l’écouter; sa voix était émue, mais ce n’était point la frayeur, ni l’attendrissement qui l’altérait; un mouvement surnaturel donnait à toute sa personne un caractère nouveau.<sup>901</sup> (I hear her asking the Europeans to listen to her; her voice was full of emotions, it was not fear or pity that altered it; but a supernatural metamorphosis that was giving a new character to her whole person).<sup>902</sup>

Mirza’s eloquence saved Ximéo, the young African man, and herself from enslavement. When de Staël uses the first person ‘I’ in her novellas, it is a direct address to the reader as a way to convey her feelings of love, distress and despair better. John Isbell goes further and declares that “Staël thus launches her Romantic career by seeing herself as African”.<sup>903</sup> She willingly identified with her characters and used literary devices to encourage her readers to do the same. As noted earlier, de Staël believed that Europeans could relate to her characters if they had qualities and facial features similar to theirs. The suppression of differences in physical traits and character would intensify the reader’s feeling of empathy. In *Mirza*, the author describes Ximéo:

...vous ne pouvez imaginer une figure plus ravissante, ses traits n’avaient aucun des défauts des hommes de sa couleur ...; il disposait de l’âme et de la mélancolie qu’il exprimait passant par le cœur de celui sur lequel il s’attachait”, and “sa physionomie peignait, s’accordait mieux avec la délicatesse qu’avec la force.”<sup>904</sup> (you cannot imagine a face more ravishing, his features had none of the defects of men of his colour...he had a soul and an air of melancholy that was expressed

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<sup>899</sup> Génand, “Staël et l’Afrique”, 64.

<sup>900</sup> De Staël, “De la Littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales”, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Staël*, 1-2, ed. S. Génand (Paris: H. Champion, 2013), 256.

<sup>901</sup> De Staël, “Mirza”, 36.

<sup>902</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>903</sup> Isbell, “Voices lost?”, 41.

<sup>904</sup> De Staël, “Mirza”, 42-43.

through his heart, and his facial appearance was like a painting, which reflected more gentleness than force).

However, de Staël did not rely only on giving her Black hero nobility and humanity through European features in order to sway her readers. By allowing the novel's heroine Mirza, who is not 'graced' with European features, to sacrifice her blood to bring freedom to her people, de Staël makes a case for the very humanity of all Africans.

In the novella, de Staël sets out the slaves' happier condition before their enslavement, when she makes an allusion to the time of the 'noble savage': "Quand j'approchais, les nègres jouissaient de leur moment de délassement; ils s'amusaient à tirer à l'arc, regrettant peut-être le temps où ce plaisir était leur seule occupation."<sup>905</sup> (When I was approaching, the Africans were enjoying their moment of rest; they were playing at archery, perhaps now regretting the time when this pleasure was their only occupation.) This comment could have prompted the reader to think that Africans were 'simple', with limited intellectual faculties, but de Staël was quick to relate the first encounter between Ximéo and the narrator who, despite his preconceptions, was moved by the young African's beauty and eloquence.<sup>906</sup> Because the narrator betrays his surprise, Ximéo confronts him, declaring bluntly, on behalf of himself and his people: "Vous êtes surpris...quand nous ne sommes pas au niveau des brutes dont vous nous donnez la destinée."<sup>907</sup> (You are surprised...when we are not the brutes that you have made of us). In this exercise, de Staël seeks to erase Europeans' prejudices, and she demonstrates that when exposed to the same education and opportunities, Africans are far from devoid of reason. Similarly, when Ximéo hears Mirza speak, he is himself stunned to learn that she composed the words of her hymn to freedom and resistance to slavery herself. She tells him: "Cessez d'être surpris...un français établi au Sénégal...a daigné prendre soin de ma jeunesse, et m'a donné ce que les Européens ont de digne d'envie: les connaissances dont ils abusent, et la philosophie dont ils suivent si mal les leçons."<sup>908</sup> (Do not be surprised...a French man who settled in Senegal...deigned to take care of me in my youth, and he gave me what we envy in Europeans: knowledge, that they neglect, and the lessons of philosophy, which they do not follow.)

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<sup>905</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>906</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>907</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>908</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Along with Condorcet, Diderot and Raynal, de Staël believed that Africans were capable of economic independence and success along European lines when she credits Ximéo with an understanding of European business methods, and a successfully managed plantation. In this novel, de Staël was inspired by the governor of Senegal, Chevalier de Boufflers, whose project was to plant sugar cane in Africa so that Africans could cultivate it in total freedom. In a letter addressed to Gustave III on 11 November 1786, she mentioned the Chevalier and his plan.<sup>909</sup> In her *Correspondance*, she broached the subject of economics, suggesting the exchange of services rather than servility.<sup>910</sup> She claimed in her preface to *Zulma*: “Puisse un commerce libre s’établir entre les deux parties du monde!”<sup>911</sup> (May free trade be established between the two worlds!) Given the popularity of liberal economics and free trade at the time, de Staël is being ironic in this comment while also pleading for slavery to be replaced by a wage system with free workers. She was critical of the greed that drove the slave trade, and therefore critical of slave owners. In his *Wealth of Nations*, Smith asserted that, despite slavery being less economic than free labour, the institution had been able to continue to exist thanks to the immense profits gained from the sale of sugar and tobacco.<sup>912</sup> In this line of thinking, de Staël was aligned with Montesquieu who argued that the continuous use of slaves by colonists was the cause of their well-entrenched passions such as pride, greed, cruelty and lasciviousness.<sup>913</sup>

De Staël’s opinion of the brutalising effect of slavery is illustrated in *Histoire de Pauline*, in a scene set in St Domingue:

Dans ces climats brûlants, où les hommes uniquement occupés d’un commerce et d’un gain barbare, semblent pour la plupart avoir perdu les idées et les sentiments qui pouvaient leur inspirer l’horreur.<sup>914</sup> (In these burning climates, men are occupied with barbaric commerce and gain only, for most of them seem to have lost the ideas and the feelings which could have inspired horror in them.)

<sup>909</sup> De Staël, “Letter addressed to Gustave III” (11 Nov. 1796) in *Correspondance Générale*, ed. Jasinki, 64.

<sup>910</sup> *Madame de Staël, ses amis, ses correspondants: Choix de Lettres (1778-1817)*, ed. G. Solovieff (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1970), 64, 65.

<sup>911</sup> De Staël, “Zulma”, in *Trois nouvelles*, 46-47.

<sup>912</sup> Catherine Larrère, “Economie politique et esclavage au XVIIIe siècle, une rencontre tardive et ambiguë”, in *Abolir l’esclavage: Un réformiste à l’épreuve (France, Portugal, Suisse, XVIII-XIXe siècles)*, ed. Olivier Pétré Grenouilleau (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 220.

<sup>913</sup> “s’accoutume insensiblement à manquer toutes les vertues morales, qu’il devient fier, prompt, dur, colère, voluptueux, cruel” ([the colonist] comes, unconsciously, to lack all moral virtues, and becomes proud, impatient, harsh, angry, voluptuous and cruel.) Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois* (Paris: Garnier, 1869), Livre XV, Chapitre I, 220.

<sup>914</sup> De Staël, “Zulma”, 46-47.

The heroine Pauline was married at the age of twelve to a slave owner who coveted her dowry. Isbell remarks that the story appears to correspond to the time of the rupture between de Staël and her lover Louis de Narbonne in 1794. Narbonne's wife owned sugar plantations in St Domingue. Similarly, Mme de Lebensei in de Staël's novel *Delphine* was first married to an abusive slave owner. It is however in *Mirza*, using her character Ximéo, that de Staël expresses clearly and directly her sentiments about slavery: "J'avais horreur de l'esclavage, je ne pouvais concevoir le barbare dessein des hommes de votre couleur." (I abhorred slavery; I could not understand the barbarous purpose for the men of your colour.)<sup>915</sup>

As noted earlier, de Staël embraced the Enlightenment ideal of progress, the notion of perfectibility of the human race triumphing over devotion to origins and traditions.<sup>916</sup> She believed that from one generation to the next, society could progress and evolve in a more humane way. De Staël thought that the slave trade violated the ideal of perfectibility as illustrated in one of her letters to Joseph Bonaparte: "Pouvez-vous nier la perfectibilité de l'espèce humaine quand les noirs commencent à parler constitution?"<sup>917</sup> (Could you deny the existence of perfectibility of human species when Black slaves start talking about a constitution?). Thus, she privileged education as a means of attaining progress, stating in her *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.J Rousseau* that to educate a child was to educate the species. For de Staël, error and injustice, rather than the Enlightenment, were responsible for distancing oneself from natural feelings including pity and compassion.<sup>918</sup> In *De l'Allemagne* (1810), she introduced French people to German culture, believing that in being exposed to new ideas, her compatriots could acquire new awareness:

Car on se soumet à de certaines idées reçues, non comme à des vérités, mais comme au pouvoir; et c'est ainsi que la raison humaine s'habitue à la servitude dans le champ même de la littérature et de la philosophie.<sup>919</sup> (Because one accepts certain ideas as valid, not as the truth, but as power, human reason gets used to servitude even in the field of literature and philosophy).

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<sup>915</sup> De Staël, *Mirza*, 46.

<sup>916</sup> This is an important aspect of her legacy to French Romanticism, from the end of the eighteenth century to authors in the 1820s and 1830s.

<sup>917</sup> In Comtesse de Pange, "Madame de Staël et les Noirs", *Revue de l'Alliance St Jeanne d'Arc* 34, (1934), 4-5.

<sup>918</sup> Abel Stevens, *Madame de Staël: A study of her life and Times: The First Revolution and the First Empire* (Oxford: John Murray, 1880), 53.

<sup>919</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, t.1, 48.

De Staël believed that the French and the Haitian Revolutions were a turning point in history which could advance the ‘perfectibility of the human species’, and the ideals of equality between individuals and races. In *Des Circonstances actuelles et autres essais politiques sur la Révolution*, she claimed that the Revolution was the result of the progress of philosophy and that the establishment of the republic would be a victory over previous prejudices.<sup>920</sup> In addition, she wrote:

En parcourant les révolutions du monde et la succession des siècles, il est une idée première dont je me détourne jamais mon attention: c’est la perfectibilité de l’espèce humaine. Je ne pense pas que ce grand oeuvre de la nature morale ait jamais été abandonné.<sup>921</sup> (In looking back at the revolutions in the world and at the succession of centuries, there is one thing I have never diverted my attention from: it is the perfectibility of the human species. I don’t think that this great work of a moral nature has ever been abandoned).

Fontana argues that the French Revolution was different from other revolutions because of its more abstract nature. Countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States, rebelled against colonial powers primarily in order to gain independence. In France, although revolutionaries had practical aims and causes, the Revolution was carried out in the name of a set of abstract principles such as liberty, equality and a belief in progress.<sup>922</sup> De Staël was a woman of her time who pledged allegiance to such principles. She believed that all human beings should be treated with respect and dignity, be they Black Africans, women, slaves or the poor. Once prejudices are erased, ‘human perfectibility’ could continue to progress and to pave the way to humankind’s happiness.<sup>923</sup>

De Staël’s dedication to abolitionism was reinforced by her feelings of pity. To her, the ability to feel for others regardless of ideological and social divisions was primary to safeguarding the rights of minorities. In *De La Littérature*, she emphasised that sympathy, empathy and compassion were essential sentiments to keep violence at bay, especially during revolutionary times. Although she argues in *The Influence of the Passions* that excessive emotions could be the cause of human unhappiness, she encourages pity. Pity, she wrote:

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<sup>920</sup> De Staël, *Des Circonstances actuelles et autres essais politiques sur la Révolution*, t. 1, ed. Lucia Omacini (France: H. Champion, 2009), 293-94.

<sup>921</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, ed. A. Blaeschke (Paris: Garnier, 1998), 40-41.

<sup>922</sup> Fontana, *Germaine*, 162.

<sup>923</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 23.

is that divine sentiment which transforms sorrow into a human bond ..., that instinctive virtue which preserves the human species by preserving individuals from the effects of their own ferocity.<sup>924</sup>

Like Rousseau, she believed pity to be a natural virtue. Pity is not of an intellectual nature but more “like blows and wounds to the heart”.<sup>925</sup> She defined pity as a feminine quality which elevates those who feel it morally. Her pamphlet *Reflexions sur le Procès de la Reine*<sup>926</sup> (1793), published anonymously but deceiving no-one about its authorship, was truly directed at the reader’s emotions. However, her work shows that emotions and reflection are inextricably linked. As Paul Gautier indicates, for de Staël, pity, this “passion of the soul”, is not the purely instinctive feeling usually attributed to women. It is a sentiment which is reasoned, well-considered and philosophical.<sup>927</sup> In one of her letters, de Staël explained that the purpose of feeling is not to dismiss reason but to complement it, although the faculty to judge adds much to pain when the same faculty has not taken away the power to feel.<sup>928</sup>

She reiterated this belief in *Considerations*, when she wrote:

les amis de la liberté communiquent par les lumières, comme les hommes religieux par les sentiments, ou plutôt les lumières et les sentiments se réunissent dans l’amour de la liberté comme dans celui de l’Etre Suprême. S’agit-il de l’abolition de la traite des nègres, de la liberté de la presse, de la tolérance religieuse, Jefferson pense comme La Fayette, La Fayette comme Wilberforce.<sup>929</sup> (friends of liberty communicate with wisdom, like religious men with feelings, or rather wisdom and feelings are bonded in the love of liberty as the love of the Supreme Being. Is the question the abolition of the slave trade, or the liberty of the press, or religious toleration? Jefferson thinks like La Fayette, La Fayette like Wilberforce.)

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<sup>924</sup> De Staël, *A treatise on the Influence of the passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations*, anonymous translation (London: Gale Ecco, 2010), 55.

<sup>925</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>926</sup> De Staël, *Reflexions sur le Procès de la Reine* (München: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek).

<sup>927</sup> Paul Gautier, “Le centenaire de Mme de Staël”, *Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 26<sup>ème</sup> année, 2 (1919), 206-219.

<sup>928</sup> De Staël, “De l’Influence des passions” in *Oeuvres complètes de Mme la Baronne de Staël*, ed. Auguste de Staël, 3 (Paris: Treutell et Wurtz, 1820-1821), 352.

<sup>929</sup> De Staël, “Considérations” in *Passions*, 804.

In her novels, de Staël used both reason and imagination to captivate her readers and to heighten awareness of the abolitionist cause. Although she recognised in her *Essay on Fictions* the danger of unbridled imagination when aroused by passion, she also considered that, properly directed, imaginative capacity was a powerful force which shapes the individual's moral behaviour. Despite its imaginative character, the novel portrays feelings so naturally that readers may believe that they are being spoken to directly. De Staël insisted that the moral message in novels was more apparent to the reader when the soul was moved. She claims that novels cultivate sensibility and nurture the 'inner emotions' of the reader's soul. However, these inner emotions are better developed when imagination is allied with reason than when reason alone is exercised. If reason is superior to passion, passion is necessary to render reason effective and to humanise its precepts.<sup>930</sup> The novel remains a work of art, adding a sort of dramatic effect to the truth, not distorting it, but distilling: "C'est un art du peintre, qui, loin d'altérer les objets, les représente d'une manière plus sensible"<sup>931</sup> (It is a painter's skill which, far from altering objects, represents them in a more sensitive manner).

There is no doubt that de Staël's religious feelings could only strengthen her conviction to fight for the abolition of slavery. She shared her parents' fervent Christianity and like her father, she believed that religion could help the progress of civilisation. Power over life and death, which was often granted to paternal authority and to slave owners, divided members of society into two classes wherein women, children and slaves were considered inferior and expected to submit to the other class, and were therefore vulnerable to mistreatment. Conversely, Christianity preaches the idea of equal value of individuals, regardless of their race, age and gender, and encourages moral qualities of sympathy and service to the disadvantaged.<sup>932</sup> The spiritual and moral principles of the Christian religion were instrumental in the fight for the freedom of the slaves. In the preface to her translation of Wilberforce's work, de Staël points out that the abolition of the slave trade in England was not due to the victory of political influence only but was the result "d'une oeuvre religieuse accomplie par des 'chrétiens zélés.'"<sup>933</sup> (of a religious work accomplished by zealous Christians). Justice and Christian charity were key arguments in 1814, just before the

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<sup>930</sup> De Staël, "Essai sur les fictions", in *Zulma*, 3-4, 35-36.

<sup>931</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>932</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 189, 191.

<sup>933</sup> De Staël, "Préface pour la traduction d'un ouvrage de M. Wilberforce sur la traite des nègres" (1814), in *Oeuvres complètes de Madame de Staël-Holstein*, tome 2, 290.  
<http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=NUMM-208094&M=tdm> .

Congress of Vienna, when a political and moral reconstruction of Europe “doit consacrer le triomphe de L’Europe par un acte de bienfaisance”<sup>934</sup> (must dedicate the triumph of Europe to an act of benevolence). Steven Ozment notes that, as a Calvinist, de Staël embraced the nature of the Reformation movement, which professed ‘a spirit of protest’ and a ‘spirit of critical inquiry’ towards some well-established institutions that were contrary to Christian values, which for her, would include slavery.<sup>935</sup> De Staël belonged to a milieu in which Enlightenment humanism and religious values were not incompatible.<sup>936</sup> In fact, the union of the two ideals became the source of her enthusiasm and supported her in her fight and plea for abolitionism.

De Staël’s reverence for ‘enthusiasm’ is at the heart of her philosophy and it reinforced her strength to fight for great causes. De Staël thought that to achieve a goal, reason was nothing without enthusiasm, and like Rousseau, her faith was strengthened by enthusiasm.<sup>937</sup> Defined by her as a ‘philosophy of the sentiment’, enthusiasm united religion and ethics in a sensual and sentimental experience. She wrote in *De l’Allemagne* “car pour pénétrer l’essence des choses, il fait une impulsion qui nous excite à nous en occuper avec ardeur.”<sup>938</sup> (because to penetrate the essence of things, one needs an impulse which drives us to act with ardour). De Staël felt that such disposition of the soul showed strength despite its gentleness; while the tumult of passions may subside and the pleasures of self-love may wither, only enthusiasm remains unyielding.<sup>939</sup> For de Staël, ‘enthusiasm’ is not an abstract idea, but rather is a kind of moral, socio-political effort which inspires people to act. In other words, it is an instrument which is linked to political action.<sup>940</sup> Her enthusiasm endowed her with the energy to fight injustice, and with an inspiration and a determination to fight for the freedom of the slaves.

In fact, to fight for a cause was for de Staël a family tradition and a family duty. Her descendant, the Comtesse de Pange, speaks of her legacy “pour le triomphe d’une idée”<sup>941</sup>

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<sup>934</sup> De Staël, “Appel aux souverains réunis à Paris pour en obtenir l’abolition de la traite des Nègres”, in *Oeuvres complètes de Madame de Staël-Holstein*, tome 2, 292.

<http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=NUMM-208094&M=tdm> .

<sup>935</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: the appeal of Protestantism to sixteenth-century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 76.

<sup>936</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter: “Madame de Staël’s feminism”.

<sup>937</sup> Rousseau, “La Nouvelle Héloïse,” in Lagarde & Michard (eds), *XVIII siècle* (Paris: Bordas Editions, 2001), 308.

<sup>938</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne* II, 306.

<sup>939</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-02.

<sup>940</sup> Florence Lotterie, “Madame de Staël: A la recherche de l’enthousiasme perdu”, *Acta Fabula* 10, 8 (October 2009), 3. <http://www.fabula.org/acta/document5246.php> (accessed 13 July 2016).

<sup>941</sup> Comtesse de Pange, “Madame de Staël et les Noirs”, 1.

(for the triumph of an idea). Her direct involvement is exemplified in her defence of Toussaint Louverture. In September 1803, she wrote in support of Toussaint in Haiti, who had been captured the previous year, and she condemned the government's refusal to negotiate with Toussaint, and the drowning of those who resisted: "They threw eighteen hundred into the sea with no form of trial. There are now in the galleys of Toulon negro generals in generals' uniform, and every cruelty which violence and contempt can invent has been lavished on these unfortunates."<sup>942</sup>

In *Dix Années d'Exil*, she conveyed her sympathy to Louverture who died in prison in the Jura region:

A l'entrée de la Suisse, sur le haut des montagnes qui la séparent de la France, on aperçoit le château de Joux ... C'est dans cette prison que Toussaint Louverture est mort de froid.<sup>943</sup> (On arriving to Switzerland, on the top of the mountains which separate it from France, one can see the castle of Joux .... It is in that prison that Toussaint Louverture died from the cold).

De Staël's intervention on behalf of Magloire Pélage in 1803 is another illustrative example of her involvement in abolitionism and her defence of persons of 'colour'. The Guadeloupean Pélage was a mulatto slave who became an officer in the French army and administered Guadeloupe. Because of his support of the St Domingue rebellion, he was arrested, judged but eventually released. De Staël wrote: "I spoke at length in favour of this Pélage, without whom we would not have kept Guadeloupe."<sup>944</sup> Her descendant, Comtesse de Pange, suggested that Pélage's release was "doubtless thanks to the intervention of Mme de Staël".<sup>945</sup> Isbell concurs, noting de Staël was exiled two weeks later because of her political influence.

### 6.2.2 *Didactic writings*

De Staël's direct involvement in the anti-slavery campaign is illustrated by her two pamphlets and by her correspondence with foreign politicians and heads of state. Written in a non-fiction form, these essays confirm her concerns expressed at the beginning of her literary career in *Mirza* and *Histoire de Pauline*. She was inspired by the philanthropic efforts which

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<sup>942</sup> In Isbell, "Voices lost?", 43.

<sup>943</sup> De Staël, "Dix Années d'Exil", in *La Passion*, 859.

<sup>944</sup> In Isbell, "Voices lost?", 43.

<sup>945</sup> Comtesse de Pange in Isbell, *Slavery*, 43.

had started in England. During her stay in London in 1813, she renewed her acquaintance with Wilberforce, which dated from the days of Necker's second ministry. She had long been swayed by Wilberforce's views against slavery, and from this date she dedicated herself actively to his cause which she pleaded in the preface to the French translation of one of his works, and in her appeal to the Allies. There is no doubt that Wilberforce was aware that de Staël could influence the great and powerful men of Europe. On her return to France, he asked her to write a preface to his *Lettre à son Excellence Monseigneur le Prince de Talleyrand Perigord au sujet de la traite des nègres*, (*Letter to his Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord about the slave trade*). His letter was translated into French by her daughter Albertine, and was issued in 1814, coinciding with the beginning of the Restoration. As noted earlier, de Staël was an advocate of translation that allows the 'circulation of ideas' beyond frontiers, an 'agent of change' that functions like a commodity.<sup>946</sup> A letter testifies that Wilberforce was grateful to de Staël for her effort: "I should be void of all feelings, if I were not deeply sensible how much I owe you for all the zeal you manifest for our good cause."<sup>947</sup>

In her *Préface*, de Staël praised the work of Wilberforce "qui a consacré trente ans de sa vie à faire rougir l'Europe d'un grand attentat et à délivrer l'Afrique d'un grand malheur" (who dedicated thirty years of his life to bring shame on Europe for its crime, and who freed Africa from a great misfortune). In *Considérations*, she refers to Wilberforce as the most loved and esteemed man in England.<sup>948</sup> She also undertook to refute the economic and social arguments claimed by the colonists, stating that when an abuse of power was under attack, those who took advantage of it were eager to advance all the social benefits attached to it and none of the adverse effects. In her conclusion, she praised the Duke of Wellington's engagement in and his influence for the cause, citing the words of Bossuet:<sup>949</sup> "Il avait un nom qui ne parut jamais que dans les actions dont la justice était incontestable." (His name appeared only when fair actions were indisputable).<sup>950</sup>

However, de Staël was not satisfied with writing a preface to another's work only. Before the negotiations in the Austrian capital to reorganise post-Napoleonic Europe, she launched an *Appel aux souverains réunis à Paris pour en obtenir l'abolition de la traite des nègres* (*Call*

<sup>946</sup> Eric Egnell, *Une femme en politique: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 2013), 392-393.

<sup>947</sup> In Isbell, "Voices lost?", 45.

<sup>948</sup> De Staël, *Considérations*, in *La Passion*, 767-68.

<sup>949</sup> Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), French bishop and theologian.

<sup>950</sup> De Staël, "Préface pour la traduction", t.2, 290.

to the Sovereigns reunited in Paris to obtain the abolition of the slave trade).<sup>951</sup> In 1814, de Staël argued in this pamphlet that England's abolition of the slave trade seven years before had not damaged the commerce and the prosperity of its colonies, while it prevented the enslavement of thousands of Africans. She also recounts the horrific conditions in which slaves were transported to the distant plantations and compares the ships to long coffins. Addressing herself to the King of France, as the 'heir of Saint Louis', and to representatives of Spain, Portugal, Austria, Prussia and Russia, she calls for an act which would match the victory over Napoleon's despotism:

On a proposé d'élever un monument pour consacrer la chute de l'opresseur qui pesait sur l'espèce humaine; le voilà, ce monument qu'une parole suffit pour élever: la traite des nègres est abolie par les rois qui ont renversé la tyrannie de la conquête en Europe.<sup>952</sup> (It has been proposed to raise a monument to celebrate the fall of the oppressor who plagued humanity; here is a monument, that one spoken word suffices to elevate: the slave trade is abolished by the kings who have released Europe from tyranny.)

De Staël believed that the confederation of sovereigns who were soon to be united at the Congress of Vienna had to dedicate an act of benevolence to the victory of Europe. De Staël's voice, along with those of other abolitionists, was heard despite the powerful colonial lobby and mercantile interests. At the Congress of Vienna, Talleyrand supported the British position and introduced the interdiction of the slave trade in the Final Act. Signed on 9 June 1815, the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna amalgamated all the various treaties agreed by the states attending the Congress.<sup>953</sup>

Abolitionist sentiments appear elsewhere de Staël's writings. In *Dix Années d'Exil*, two pages address Bonaparte's violation of his treaty with Louverture and she has no hesitation in naming the Emperor "a great criminal".<sup>954</sup> Her last work bears traces of her decisive campaign when she wrote to Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in 1816: "If you succeed in destroying slavery in the South, the world will have at least one government as perfect as

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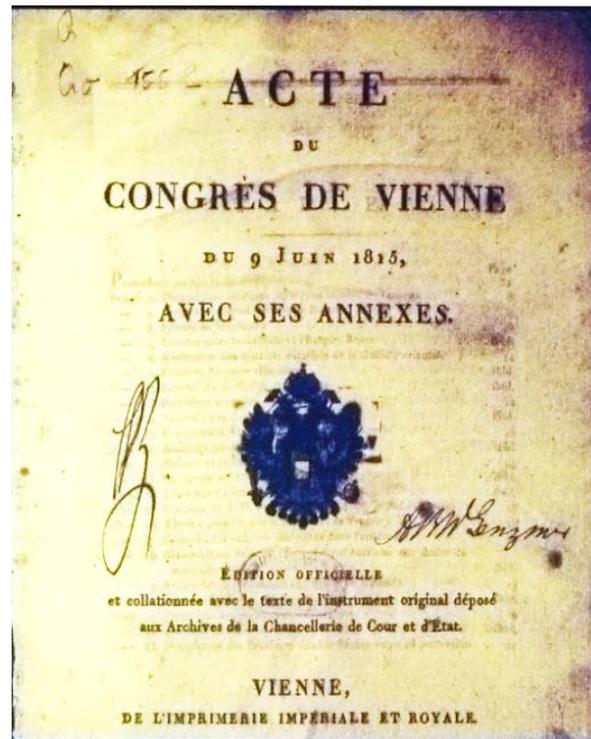
<sup>951</sup> De Staël, "Appel aux souverains", 292.

<sup>952</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>953</sup> The Congress of Vienna began a series of international conferences known as the Concert of Europe which attempted to produce a peaceful balance of power between European states. The Final Act gave extra land to Russia and Prussia, while France lost all the extra territories it had conquered or annexed in the wars since 1795.

<sup>954</sup> De Staël, *Dix années d'exil* (1820), eds S. Balayé et M. Vianelo Benifacio (Paris: Editions Fayard, 1996), 203.

human reason can conceive”. In 1815, she reiterated to Jefferson that “Freedom and religion are bound together in my thought” and she linked slavery with atheism.<sup>955</sup> For de Staël, there was no greater condemnation: in *Corinne*, she declared “il n’y a d’athéisme que dans la froideur, l’égoïsme, la bassesse (in atheism, there is only coldness, selfishness and meanness).<sup>956</sup>



**Plate 0.2 Frontpiece of the Acts of the Congress of Vienna, 1815.**

**(Wikimedia Commons)**

However, after de Staël’s death, reality overwhelmed the advances gained as a result of the advocacy of de Staël and other abolitionists. During the Congress of Vienna, a declaration among the powers stipulated that each country would determine an appropriate time to execute the new legislation. While the Act signed in Vienna marked a definite step forward for the abolition of the slave trade, as noted in the previous chapter, King Louis XVIII was not eager to apply the law immediately. Ironically, it is Napoleon Bonaparte who, on his

<sup>955</sup> “La correspondance de Madame de Staël avec Jefferson,” in Fontana, *Germaine de Staël*, 207.

<sup>956</sup> De Staël, *Corinne ou l’Italie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 102.

return from the Island of Elba, incorporated the interdiction of slave trade into French Constitutional law. However, several years would pass before the shameful trade disappeared completely in 1848. De Staël's son-in-law the Duke of Broglie continued her fight, along with her son Auguste, who became President of the *Société de la Morale Chrétienne*, the organisation that replaced the *Société des Amis des Noirs*. They were both legitimate heirs of a family which was devoted to the idea of freedom for all, regardless of colour.

### 6.3 Conclusion

Madame de Staël's personal and intellectual trajectory is well-known from a number of critical works that deal mainly with the nineteenth century's intellectual movements and literature. Yet, only a few have noted her significant connection to slavery, and her direct and indirect contribution to its abolition.

In de Staël's work, sentiment, ideology and politics are interlinked. It was the horrors of slavery, as an institution, that sparked her abolitionism. Her work reveals her strong liberal position and the use of different strategies in her literature. She conveyed a strong anti-slavery view which originated in her parents' legacy, and from the ideals that helped to spark the French and the Haitian Revolutions. She utilised essays and novellas to make a range of voices heard, compelling her audience to become aware of their own culture through an awareness of other cultures. Unlike that of Olympe de Gouges, de Staël's anti-slavery message was less direct. It was also more effective, and her work was published at critical times. De Staël waited for the first abolition of slavery in England to publish her anti-slavery novellas, and the imminent fall of the Empire to publish her preface to Wilberforce; both propitious statements on colonial politics. As her descendant, Comtesse de Pange claimed in 1934, "Ce qui la passionne, ce sont les sentiments et la politique; elle se passionnera pour la question 'nègre' quand elle lui apparaîtra sous ce double aspect, ce qui ne va pas tarder."<sup>957</sup> (What drove her was both passion and politics, and she developed a passion for the 'Negro' question, which could combine these two, and it did not take long).

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<sup>957</sup> Comtesse de Pange, "Madame de Staël et les Noirs", 62-63.

## Chapter 7. Intersection of de Staël's Feminism and Abolitionism

This chapter analyses de Staël's written work to show how she identifies and promotes a sense of similarity between the position of women in French society and that of slaves. It places de Staël's work in context by identifying and examining the few feminists before 1800 who broached the subject of abolitionism. This chapter also shows the progression of de Staël's thinking and commitment over the years, as a result of her life experiences. An in-depth analysis of de Staël's writings highlights the numerous parallels she drew between women and slaves. Both of these groups suffered from physical, mental and emotional subjection.

From the time she was a young woman, Madame de Staël wrote about women and their difficulties living in the eighteenth century.<sup>958</sup> Her own life included difficulties and heartbreak and she observed others with pity. This led her to compare women with Black slaves who shared some similar misfortunes. Slavery, like marriage, was constructed by social custom and laws rather than being a natural relationship. The 'natural' woman became the 'social' woman who became the property of men. Therefore, some women writers have drawn a parallel, explicitly and implicitly, between wives and slaves, who could both be subjected to similar types of inequality and abuse. The legal construction which defined the role of the husband as a 'protector' and dominant partner produced an economic and emotional dependence of the wife that other feminists of the time, like Mary Wollstonecraft, described as 'slavish dependence'.<sup>959</sup> The passage of a woman from dependence on her father to dependence on her husband, and the slave from one master to another was, in Wollstonecraft's view, analogous. As Gerda Lerner stated much later, "A subordination of women by men provided the conceptual model for the creation of slavery as an institution, so the patriarchal family provided the structural model."<sup>960</sup> In *De la Littérature*, de Staël made the same observation regarding the fate of women during Antiquity when the right of life or death was often granted to paternal authority, thus creating two classes of people, one of

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<sup>958</sup> De Staël wrote "Sophie ou les sentiments secrets" in 1786, a play in which the heroine praises freedom: "Etre libre à jamais, voilà mon seul désir" (To be free forever, is my only wish). *Oeuvres complètes de la Baronne de Staël* (Paris: Treutell et Würtz, 1821), t. XVII. She was 20 years of age at the time.

<sup>959</sup> Anne K. Mellor, "'Am I not a woman, and a sister?': Slavery, Romanticism and Gender," in Anne Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 317.

<sup>960</sup> Gerda Lerner in Doris Y. Kadish, *Fathers, Daughters, and Slaves: Women Writers and French Colonial Slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 32.

whom felt no obligation to the other. Women then were submitted to some of the conditions of slavery.<sup>961</sup>

In the idealised view of marriage in the eighteenth century, a husband was considered the honourable ‘guardian’ of his wife. However, social mores meant a wife was viewed as essentially the property of her husband, just as the slave was the property of the master. In de Staël’s time, marriage was generally for reasons of business or property, not affection. Both marriage and slavery therefore rested on a commercial transaction, and de Staël viewed them as representing two faces of the same injustice. To associate the bond of marriage with slavery redefined love and protection in terms of ownership.

Feminists and abolitionists knew that the political and legal subordination of women and slaves was supported by contemporary scientific opinion. Most scientists claimed that women were inferior to men intellectually, psychologically and physically, and fit only for domesticity and marriage. Similarly, Black Africans were considered inferior to Europeans who therefore had the right to force them into unfree labour, like Aristotle’s natural slaves. In both cases, it was in the nature of inferior beings to be tied to conditions by which their freedom and choice were severely limited.

In *Bodily Bonds*, literary studies scholar Karen Sanchez-Eppler intimates that women could also identify with slaves as victims of sexual exploitation. She suggests that in anti-slavery writings, the recurrence of accounts of sexual abuse suffered by female slaves was a projection of the White woman’s anxiety about not owning her own body in marriage. As both husbands and masters sought to assert exclusive sexual rights, the choice and the desire of the woman was not often addressed. Bodies of wives and slaves were prisons dictating the terms of their relationships with their husbands or masters, which were implicitly or explicitly coercive. Resistance was not an option, and both groups knew that through submission, their fate and status might improve.<sup>962</sup> In previous centuries, women’s sexuality remained a delicate matter and was not discussed openly. For feminist writers to substitute the female slave as a proxy for the “unarticulated and unacknowledged failure of the free woman to own her own body in marriage” was an indirect way to attack patriarchy. Feminist writers used the same strategy in giving a voice to the bound and silent slave who metaphorically

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<sup>961</sup> De Staël, *De La Littérature dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (Paris: Garnier, 1998), 138.

<sup>962</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition”, *Representations* 24 (1988), 28-59. DOI: 10.2307/2928475

represented all oppressed women. This was also the case for de Staël who attempted, at the same time, to represent and to speak for colonial subjects and women in a way that gave them a voice despite their subaltern position.

## 7.2 Feminists who Campaigned for the Abolition of Slavery

While France can take pride in producing a number of feminists between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, none of them have been documented as associating the fate of women with that of slaves.<sup>963</sup> Feminist writers elsewhere made the link occasionally. During the seventeenth century, British writer Aphra Behn, a proponent of women's freedom, used her writings to address her engagement with abolitionism. In her novel *Oroonoko*, she shows similarities between the fate of her heroine Imoinda, a Black slave who rebels against male dominance, and the narrator, a White female who is a victim of a patriarchal colonial society. In late eighteenth-century France, feminist and abolitionist discourses overlapped.<sup>964</sup> As noted previously, Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), the French feminist, denounced strongly and publicly the institution of slavery. Among her numerous writings, her novel *Zamore and Mirza* (1788) and her play *Esclavage des Noirs* (1790) drew parallels between the oppression of women and slavery.<sup>965</sup>

Unlike Madame de Staël, who wrote abolitionist pamphlets, the English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) did not play a direct part in the fight for the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, she decried in her writings the violation of what she called the 'inherent rights' of women and notes that without "natural rights" women were merely 'slaves' who had no voice about their condition<sup>966</sup>. As in de Staël's work, the words 'slave' and 'slavery' are recurrent throughout her writings, for instance when she addresses the need for public education which would let women 'out of slavery', i.e. economic dependence on marriage.<sup>967</sup> Wollstonecraft's intimation that marital relations were similar to slavery was often expressed

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<sup>963</sup> The following feminists are illustrative: Christine de Pisan (1368-1431) wrote *Le Livre de la cité des femmes* (1403) and *Le Livre des trois vertus* (1405); Louise Labé (1521-1566) was a feminist French poet who wrote *Oeuvres* (1555); Marie le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645) wrote *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622) and *Le Grief des dames* (1626) among other works; François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723), an early French male feminist, wrote *De l'Egalité des deux sexes* (1673), and *De l'Education des dames* (1674).

<sup>964</sup> Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and other stories* (London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>965</sup> "Slavery of Black people", in Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges: Des Droits de la Femme à la Guillotine* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014), 242.

<sup>966</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1988), 175, 5.

<sup>967</sup> For instance, "L'esclavage, cet abominable fléau de l'espèce humaine" (Slavery, this abominable scourge of the human species). De Staël, *De La Littérature* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 222.

literally. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she declared that British wives were not different from slaves in a political and civic sense, and she based her argument on both legal and psychological reasons.<sup>968</sup> She considered gender inequality as being demeaning for both men and women when she wrote: “slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the object dependent”.<sup>969</sup> Men dominated women as plantation masters dominated slaves. She extended her parallels between women and slaves to the “slavish bondage” of women to parents, whose education of their daughters was only to prepare them to submit to the slavery of marriage. Similarly, de Staël criticised the complex and unequal relationship between parents and children. She used the term ‘despotism’ to describe the form of oppression which can occur within the family unit. In the same way, de Staël underlined the structural imbalance of the relationship between husband and wife which unites individuals who are not free and equal. The wife is dependent on and vulnerable to the husband’s authority, which has considerable power over her existence:

Il y a dans ces liens une inégalité naturelle qui ne permet jamais une affection du même genre, ni au même degré; l’une des deux est plus forte, et par cela même trouve des torts à l’autre.<sup>970</sup> (There are in these bonds a natural inequality which never allows the same affection, to the same degree; one is stronger than the other, and because of that finds faults in the other.)

In her novels, de Staël used the voices and the emotions of her dramatic characters in a direct manner, as did Olympe de Gouges and Aphra Behn, but she also relied on metaphor. In her writings, women are represented as metaphorical slaves to pernicious social forces and also as victims. This was the traditional stereotype of the female into which they were socialized from birth as being weak, submissive, and emotional.

### **7.3 Madame de Staël’s intersection of feminism and abolitionism**

#### *7.3.1 Life events that shaped de Staël’s perception of analogies between women and slaves*

The metaphor of ‘slavery’ was often used in feminist writings in the eighteenth century, but their authors did not always oppose chattel slavery or fight for its abolition. So, what led de Staël to embrace this double cause, and to posit close ties linking explicitly and implicitly the

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<sup>968</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 167.

<sup>969</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>970</sup> De Staël, *De L’Influence des passions, suivi de Réflexions sur le suicide* (Paris: Editions Payot, 2000), 250.

fate of slaves with the fate of women? A chronological analysis of her life events casts some light on her motives for doing so.

De Staël started writing her novellas in 1786, a year that coincides with her marriage to Eric Magnus de Staël-Holstein.<sup>971</sup> Written a few months before her marriage, her *Journal* reveals candidly her indifference to a man she found “stérile et sans ressort” (vain and lacking spirit), as well as her presentiment that her loveless marriage would develop into a painful experience.<sup>972</sup> Such a context is likely to have inspired de Staël to write about unhappy unions, a theme that is central to and recurrent in her novels and novellas. Moreover, soon after her marriage, in a letter addressed to the Swedish King Gustave III, she mentions the Chevalier de Boufflers (1738-1815) whom she admired for suggesting the replacement of the slave trade with a direct commercial exchange between Europe and Africa, “afin que les Européens ne les enlèvent plus à leur patrie.”<sup>973</sup> (to prevent Europeans from removing them far from their homeland). In this instance, de Boufflers is seen as a kind benefactor and as a liberator of slaves. Stéphanie Génand notes the timing of this letter, and she suggests that de Staël’s reference to the slave trade is implicitly linked to her recent loss of freedom.<sup>974</sup> De Boufflers is indeed represented in *Mirza*, as the enlightened governor of Sénégal, who endeavours to teach autonomy (on a European model) to Africans. De Staël’s commitment to freedom is well-illustrated throughout her work. At the beginning of her novels, her female characters Mirza, Delphine and Corinne are free, unfettered by social obligations, and are devoted to political and personal liberation, before becoming the victims of their female condition. De Staël’s love of freedom is directly expressed by Ximéo who praises the poems written by Mirza, the African embodiment of freedom and abolition: “L’amour de la liberté, l’horreur de l’esclavage, étaient le sujet des nobles hymns qui me ravirent d’admiration.”<sup>975</sup> (The love of liberty, the horror of slavery, were the topics of her noble hymns that filled me with admiration).

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<sup>971</sup> A fact underlined by Beatrice d’Andlau, *La Jeunesse de Madame de Staël (de 1766 à 1786)* (Genève: Droz, 1970), 107.

<sup>972</sup> De Staël, “Mon Journal” (1785), ed. Comtesse de Pange, in *Cahiers Staëliens*, no.28 (Genève: Editions Slatkine), 1980, 71.

<sup>973</sup> Lettre à Gustave III, 11 Nov. 1786, “Correspondance Générale”, 1, 141, in *Cahiers Staëliens* no. 64, (2014), 70. She met the Chevalier de Boufflers, who was returning to Sénégal with the intention of planting sugar cane, a commodity which was the “cause of so much misfortune”, and of employing free Africans to work on plantations. This point is included in the novella “Mirza”, 21-22.

<sup>974</sup> Stéphanie Génand, *La Chambre Noire: Germaine de Staël et la Pensée du Négatif* (Genève: Droz, 2017), 79.

<sup>975</sup> De Staël, “Mirza” in *Zulma, Et Trois Nouvelles: Précédé d’un Essai sur les Fictions* (Londres: Colburn Libraire, 1813), 49

By marrying the Baron, de Staël lost her independence and the identity she had been born with, and she felt isolated. Her change of patronymic paralysed her, and to her it felt like a symbolic death: “Ah! Je suis une autre destinée, je suis fille de M. Necker, je m’attache à lui; c’est là mon vrai nom.”<sup>976</sup> (Ah! I have another destiny, I am the daughter of M. Necker, I am attached to him: here is my true name). Marriage and its property laws, and the traditional adoption of a husband’s name, in the same way a slave took the name of the master, illustrates the bondage which made free women like slaves. She equated the feeling of separation from her family and estrangement from her former identity, imposed by marriage, with slaves’ deprivation of their identity and of their original homes.

The exile of African slaves from their homeland struck a deep chord of recognition in de Staël. The same sentiment surfaced when she was in exile in Switzerland, a sentiment she associated with the fate of St Domingue’s slaves. She wrote in *L’Appel aux Souverains*, “Ces infortunés qui sont pour jamais exilés des bords qui les ont vu naître” (These unfortunate people who are forever exiled from the coast where they were born). Forced displacement and exile, and the sorrows that ensue, are felt like a break between the past and the present. De Staël laments in *De L’Allemagne* that we change worlds without changing our heart.<sup>977</sup> However, women were expected to go where their husbands directed, regardless of their own feelings and preferences, another kind of exile. Once more, de Staël intertwined the fates of wives and slaves, one who might have to follow a husband where he chose to go, the other forced to be where a master demanded.

When de Staël experienced exile during the Directory, and then a longer one during the Empire, she found it difficult to be far from Paris, a city and its society she loved. Her feeling is expressed in her letter to the King of Sweden, “Le Chevalier de Boufflers va repartir pour le Sénégal. C’est cependant un bel exemple de zèle, car il faut du courage pour quitter Paris et pour aller au Sénégal.”<sup>978</sup> (The Chevalier de Boufflers is going back to Senegal. This demonstrates his zeal, because it takes courage to leave Paris and to go to Senegal.) In exile, de Staël felt ‘displaced’<sup>979</sup>, excluded and eliminated, because of a third party, Napoleon in this case. As Sluga notes, de Staël wrote of “her visceral unbearable pain”

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<sup>976</sup> De Staël, “Mon Journal”, 73.

<sup>977</sup> De Staël, *De L’Allemagne*, t.1 (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 115.

<sup>978</sup> Lettre à Gustave III, 11 Nov. 1786, “Correspondance Générale”, 1, 141, in *Cahiers Staëliens* 64, 70.

<sup>979</sup> In French, ‘excentrée’, ‘displaced’ in English, because of Napoleon who exiled her. Napoleon represented the ‘centre’ with his despotism and power.

caused by being forced to leave a country she had always considered her *patrie*.<sup>980</sup> With exile, all hopes and future projects were lost.<sup>981</sup> Like the slave, she felt like an object which could be forced to act against her will. Separation was also a cruel blow to her heroines; during her stay in England, her character Corinne declared: “Je n’étais plus maitresse de moi-même, toute mon âme était entraînée vers ma patrie; j’avais besoin de la voir, de la respirer, de l’entendre”<sup>982</sup> (I could not keep my self-control, all my soul was carried away to my homeland; I needed to see it, to breathe it, to hear it). De Staël felt ‘mutilated’ when separated from the people she loved, as her letter to her friend Mme de Récamier shows: “this death that one calls departure”.<sup>983</sup> In a letter to Hochet, she wrote:

L’exil a le même effet que l’amour malheureux; en lui ôtant la liberté, il ôte à l’être qui le subit, le plaisir d’exercer ses facultés ; il tue le génie en lui ôtant l’exaltation, la joie et la plénitude.<sup>984</sup> (Exile has the same effect as unhappy love; in taking away freedom from its victims, it takes away their pleasure in exercising their faculties; it kills genius in taking away exaltation, joy and plenitude.).

Separation from familiar surroundings and a loss of identity caused both women and slaves to feel alienated. When de Staël returned to France in 1811, she felt ‘resurrected’.

### 7.3.2 *Analogy between conjugal destiny and the slave status*

De Staël’s novellas were a clever way to shed light on the parallel between conjugal destiny and slave status. In her writings, the sale of slaves to sugar plantations is a metaphor that symbolizes forced marriage as a property transaction in which a woman is shown to be first a saleable resource for her family, and then a financial, sexual and reproductive asset for her husband. Similarly, in de Staël’s novellas her female characters, Mirza, Zulma, Pauline and Adelaide, suffer from a destiny they did not choose. In *Histoire de Pauline*, the heroine was forced to marry a merchant who was involved in the slave trade in St Domingue<sup>985</sup>, and later

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<sup>980</sup> Glenda Sluga, “Passions, patriotism and nationalism, and Germaine de Staël”, *Nations and Nationalism* 2, (2009), 299-318.

<sup>981</sup> De Staël, “Dix Années d’Exil”, in *La Passion de la Liberté* (Paris: Laffont, 2017), 888.

<sup>982</sup> De Staël, *Corinne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 385.

<sup>983</sup> De Staël, Letter to Mme Récamier (1811), in Balayé, *Ecrire*, 57.

<sup>984</sup> De Staël, Letter to Hochet, Coppet, 16 December 1811, in *ibid*, 201.

<sup>985</sup> De Staël chose to set her story in St Domingue, because that was the largest French slave-holding and sugar-producing colony in the eighteenth century.

became the victim of two men's deception.<sup>986</sup> Pauline symbolises the wife/slave, who is defenceless against the husband/owner's despotism, and who serves an immoral economic interest in a colonial society. Mr de Valville buys Pauline the same way he would buy a workforce chained to his sugar-cane fields: "Il s'était marié parce qu'il avait, dans ce moment, besoin d'une grande somme d'argent pour faire un achat considérable de nègres, et que la dot de Pauline lui en fournissait les moyens."<sup>987</sup> (He got married because he needed, at this moment, a large amount of money in order to buy a great number of slaves, and Pauline's dowry allowed him to do so). In this passage de Staël sets an explicit parallel between two commercial transactions; transferring slaves between masters, and the transfer of a young woman who, bound by a contract, brings to her husband a 'dowry', an infusion of capital thereby enabling the merchant to acquire more slaves.<sup>988</sup> She directly links the transactions, by making Pauline's dowry become a payment for slaves. The enslavement of a woman enables slavery of Africans. De Staël reiterated this analogy in *Delphine*, when she denounced the same marriage transaction as being the cause of two disastrous unions.<sup>989</sup> In *Histoire de Pauline*, the bride and the slave share the same trajectory, which is reminiscent of de Staël's own marriage which was settled with the exchange of a considerable dowry for an aristocratic title which improved her personal social standing and, by connection, that of her family. However, at least she was able to avail herself of the privilege of an aristocrat, and exercise a certain amount of freedom from her husband.

In writing *Histoire de Pauline*, de Staël draws attention to women's forced passivity during the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>990</sup> The words of the character Meltin exemplify this point when he proposed and declared to the young widow that, "moi seul, je saurai vous conduire et vous tenir lieu de père, d'époux et d'amant."<sup>991</sup> (I am the only one who can guide you, and be a father, a spouse and a lover to you). With this declaration, de Staël illustrates the degree of

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<sup>986</sup> De Staël, "Histoire de Pauline" in *Zulma et Trois Nouvelles*, 132. After her husband's death, Pauline had an affair with a man who took advantage of her naivety to seduce her before abandoning her. When she finally met a man she loved, she let herself die, ridden with guilt because of her past.

<sup>987</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>988</sup> The dowry was intended to be a way of sharing the father's wealth with daughters who would otherwise not inherit property. Technically, this money belonged to the wife and she could, for instance, claim it if her husband died. However, in practice it was managed by her husband and she could not access or control it while the marriage lasted.

<sup>989</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 43, 69. In *Delphine*, Elise de Lebensein left her contemptible husband (who was involved in the slave trade), a man she was forced to marry when she was young, for the man she loved. Her divorce was condemned by society. Thérèse d'Ervin was also married very young, to a much older man who abandoned her. She was unhappy, but as a fervent Catholic, she refused to divorce out of fear of being denounced by public opinion.

<sup>990</sup> Génand, "Staël et l'Afrique", in *Cahiers Staëliens*, no.64 (Paris: Editions Slakine, 2014), 69.

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

power a husband could hold over his wife. She also highlights women's naivety and innocence, which is perpetuated by leaving them uneducated: "Pauline avait un naturel aimable et sensible; mais à cette époque de la vie, de quel usage est ce don, si l'éducation ne l'a pas développé?"<sup>992</sup> (Pauline was naturally pleasant and sensitive; but at this time in her life, what is the use of this gift if it has not been developed by education?) Like the slave, the woman is kept in a state of ignorance. As noted earlier, Diderot argued in *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770) that the Black slaves' apparent intellectual inferiority does not come from their nature but from the conditions imposed on them.<sup>993</sup> Knowledge was a kind of power, and without it, women and slaves were more inclined to submit to their condition as set down in tradition. In this case, de Staël exposes the imbalance between male authority and female helplessness, and she demonstrates that both forced marriage and the slave trade rest on the vulnerability of the victims, and on the injustice of the law that sanctions "un commerce et un gain barbare"<sup>994</sup> (a barbaric trade and profit).

Nevertheless women, like slaves, were conscious of their potentially tragic fate. In her literature, de Staël added the voice of Africans to the voice of these female characters. Zulma is eloquent in exposing the condition and the horror of the trade.<sup>995</sup> De Staël's description of Zulma as "un être infortuné qui pût s'observer lui-même et fût contraint de peindre ce qu'il a éprouvé."<sup>996</sup> (an unfortunate being who could self-reflect and was constrained to describe the way he felt), is an allegory of the European woman who, like Zulma, is considered 'inferior', but has the ability for self-reflection and the capacity to analyse her condition. In *Mirza*, when the heroine amazes her lover by expressing her thoughts with fluency, or when Ximéo surprised the narrator for not being the 'brute' Europeans thought him to be, de Staël makes a link between African slaves and women who suffer from the same prejudices, but who also share the same faculties as those who hold them in contempt: "Examinez l'ordre social, ..., et vous verrez bientôt qu'il est tout entier armé contre une femme qui veut s'élever"<sup>997</sup> (Examine the social order... and you will soon see that it is totally armed against a woman who wants to improve herself). Women like slaves were considered second-class citizens who should not aspire to education beyond the basics, or seek to raise themselves to the same

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<sup>992</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>993</sup> Diderot, "Histoire des deux Indes", in Jean Ehrard, *Lumières et l'Esclavage* (Paris: Versailles Editeur, 2008), 198.

<sup>994</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* (1802), eds S. Balayé and L. Omacini, *OCS-II-2* (Paris: H.Champion, 2004), 43, 169.

<sup>995</sup> De Staël, *Zulma*, 3-34.

<sup>996</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-22.

<sup>997</sup> De Staël, *De La Littérature*, 132.

level as White men. If they did, they would be condemned, a fact de Staël reminds the reader of in *De la Littérature*: “Si elles veulent acquérir de l’influence, elles sont critiquées pour utiliser un pouvoir qui leur est refusé par la loi; et si elles restent esclaves, elles sont tout simplement opprimées.”<sup>998</sup> (If they wish to acquire influence, they are decried for using a power not given to them by law; and if they remain slaves, they are simply oppressed). When de Staël gave her African characters access to education, she reiterates her belief that education available to all would lay the foundation for a new social and political order. The biography of Toussaint Louverture, a man de Staël admired, illustrates this point. A former slave, he received some education from the Jesuit missionaries, and, later in life, was successful in turning St Domingue into the first free colonial society which explicitly rejected race as the basis of social order.

### 7.3.3 *Napoleon, the oppressor of women and slaves*

In the second phase of de Staël’s work, from 1802 to 1810, a distinct deconstruction of the concept of the White male takes place.<sup>999</sup> Central to the shift in her thinking was the persecution she endured at the hands of Napoleon who, during this period, exerted an increasingly oppressive power, including the reinstatement of slavery in the colonies. To reintroduce slavery was, in the eyes of de Staël, the ultimate abusive act of a tyrant; she portrayed him as “l’opresseur qui pesait sur la race humaine”<sup>1000</sup> (the oppressor who lay like a pall over the human race). The period during which Napoleon sent troops to St Domingue to quell revolts coincided with the time her salon became a centre of liberal opposition. De Staël condemned the way Napoleon treated Black people of the colony. As she wrote in her correspondence, “whatever cruelty that violence and disregard for human beings can invent has been unleashed against these poor souls.”<sup>1001</sup> She was, however, particularly outraged by the way he behaved towards Louverture, a French general who entrusted his career, his life and the education of his sons to France, on the basis of promises made directly to him by Napoleon.<sup>1002</sup> De Staël equated Napoleon’s treatment of Black people to his abusive patriarchal attitude to women. From the onset of his regime, he claimed that women should be restricted to traditional motherhood and private life, and not be

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<sup>998</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>999</sup> During the first phase of her works, from 1786 to 1800, de Staël drew a more implicit parallel between the fate of women and slaves, in her novellas; during the last phase, from 1812 to 1817, she wrote more directly against slavery.

<sup>1000</sup> De Staël, *De La Littérature*, 912.

<sup>1001</sup> De Staël, “Correspondance générale”, Vol. V, 23-25, in Kadish, *Fathers*, 41.

<sup>1002</sup> *Ibid.*

educated beyond the bare minimum required to function in society. They were not to have any intellectual pretensions. When the Consulate, and then the Empire, imagined what Jean-Claude Bonnet calls “une emprise sans partage sur les esprits”<sup>1003</sup> (a total control over minds), de Staël knew that in dedicating *Delphine* to “La France silencieuse mais éclairée”<sup>1004</sup> (a silent but enlightened France), she would transgress the political laws of the new regime. In *Dix Années d’Exil*, she attacked Napoleon for his intolerance vis à vis freedom of expression, and his own use of propaganda in the press to indoctrinate and to dominate. In this passage, de Staël compares, implicitly, Napoleon to a master controlling his slave.<sup>1005</sup> In the final phase of her writings, her commitment to freedom finds direct expression, with Napoleon remaining the target, the embodiment of the oppression of women and slaves.<sup>1006</sup>

As a writer, freedom of expression was central to de Staël’s work. While she defends in *De la Littérature* (1800) freedom of thought, inseparable from artistic creation, it is in her novels that she defends, directly and indirectly, freedom of expression. While her African characters voice the plight of slaves and women eloquently, Delphine and Corinne were tormented by being unable to communicate. In this dichotomy, de Staël presents two situations which both lead to repression, frustration and suffering. In Europe, society deterred women from expressing their feelings if these indicated discontent with their lot. If they did, they encountered ridicule and condemnation, as a slave would have by expressing unhappiness about her predicament. From a young age, Delphine realises that when she verbalizes her feelings, they are greeted with derision, and that it is better to remain silent, as it would have been improper to display some form of intelligence.<sup>1007</sup> She confessed: “De tout ce qui j’éprouvais, j’acquis de bonne heure aussi l’art de la dissimulation, et j’étouffais la sensibilité que la nature m’avait donnée”<sup>1008</sup> (I kept to myself all that I felt, also, I acquired early the art of dissimulation, and I smothered the sensibility that nature had given me.) Delphine is conscious that her fight against society is useless, a society she dislikes for being the cause of her distress, and that her only recourse was concealment. De Staël remarks that to be in a position of inferiority promotes a need to pretend and to conceal, so as to retain the favour of a master or husband. Just as for slaves, dissimulation for women was a matter of compromise

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<sup>1003</sup> Jean-Claude Bonnet (dir.), *L’Empire des Muses: Napoléon, les arts et les lettres* (Paris: Belin, 2004), 16.

<sup>1004</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, 13-14.

<sup>1005</sup> De Staël, “Dix Années d’Exil”, in *La Passion de la Liberté*, 882.

<sup>1006</sup> It is worth noting that the death of Louverture in 1803, who had been imprisoned and exiled in France, occurred simultaneously with the beginning of de Staël’s long exile. Both were at Napoleon’s command.

<sup>1007</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, 340.

<sup>1008</sup> *Ibid.*

and appeasement. Delphine declared: “j’étais, par mon sexe et peu de fortune, une malheureuse esclave à qui toutes les ruses étaient permises avec son tyran”.<sup>1009</sup> (I was, because of my gender and little fortune, an unhappy slave; all trickeries were permitted to me to please my tyrant). De Staël deplored the fact that women had to resort to deception to “enslave” men, that is, in order to influence and manipulate them. In *De l’Allemagne*, she admits that by being immoral, women could lose influence once they were found out, but nevertheless they took that risk, because of the fear of being abandoned.<sup>1010</sup> By appearing submissive and servile, slaves and women would gain a small measure of control over their fate but at the same time validate the tyranny of their masters and husbands. To be in a position of inferiority, however, can cause more than a loss of integrity. In his *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), Franz Fanon goes a step further, when he argues that the repression of one’s true nature can result in a state of ‘alienation and psychological disintegration’, a fact he witnessed in colonised Africa when he wrote, “Il y a chez l’homme de couleur tentative de fuir son individualité, de néantiser son être là.”<sup>1011</sup> (Coloured individuals seek to shun their individuality, to obliterate their own being). Similarly, women identified, legally and socially, with their husbands, as their own identities as wives and mothers were taken for granted and valued so much less.

Dependence versus independence is a recurrent theme in de Staël’s work. It is easy to understand that without any real power or chance of economic independence, women, like slaves, could easily abandon themselves to a protective master.<sup>1012</sup> After all, society expected women to be dependent and submissive and rewarded this behaviour. Delphine reminds her lover Leonce that a woman is at the mercy of her fate and of her own emotions, and that she could not walk alone in life.<sup>1013</sup> Léonce reinforces this statement when he claims that a woman should not live without the support of a man, father, brother or husband, nor should she have her own opinion, which means she has no freedom to act or even to think.<sup>1014</sup> Once defeated, Delphine admits: “Vous savez bien que je suis une femme, avec les qualités et les défauts que cette destinée faible et dépendante peut entraîner.”<sup>1015</sup> (You know very well that I am a woman, with the qualities and flaws that a weak and dependent destiny may entail).

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<sup>1009</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>1010</sup> De Staël, *De L’Allemagne*, 72.

<sup>1011</sup> Franz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 48.

<sup>1012</sup> De Staël, *Delphine*, 137-38.

<sup>1013</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>1014</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>1015</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

The innocent heroine faced all the harshness attached to her wish for independence and discovered society's meanness and vileness. Corinne told Oswald, her lover, that in some countries, institutions have enslaved and oppressed other people who, unlike women, do not dream of another destiny. She said of women: "Nous sommes des esclaves mais des esclaves frémissantes"<sup>1016</sup> (We are slaves, but trembling slaves). Just as for slaves, independence for women was rarely an option, and their fate was set, unlike that of men.

Yet, de Staël vacillates between resignation and rebellion in the face of women's plight. In *De l'Allemagne*, she cautioned women against fighting their condition at the risk of encountering more misery, as a slave would be severely punished for attempting to flee from captivity. She thought that it was cruel to allow women to develop their intellectual and creative qualities, and to later refuse these women the opportunity to exercise them openly in society: "Il vaut mieux renfermer les femmes comme des esclaves...pour leur refuser ensuite le bonheur que ces facultés leur rendent nécessaire".<sup>1017</sup> (It would be better to keep women locked up like slaves... than to refuse them, later on, the happiness they could draw from these faculties). De Staël was a romantic who idealised marriage, a union she considered 'sacred', and she clearly accepted a wife's subordinate role when she confessed: "Il vaut mieux...qu'il y ait dans le mariage une esclave que deux esprits forts"<sup>1018</sup> (It would be better... that there is one slave in a marriage than two strong minds). In *Delphine*, the heroine's words reflect Staëlian pessimism and resignation when she affirms that women's aspirations to free themselves civilly and politically were unrealistic, and that while it was hazardous to promise happiness to a woman, it was possible to guarantee the duration of her misfortune.<sup>1019</sup> Nevertheless, when de Staël posited that nature and society have disowned half of the human species, she shows again her ambivalence when she invites women to rebel against their condition.<sup>1020</sup> Even if her heroines are portrayed as passive victims, gentle and resigned in the face of distressing events, they still refuse to surrender totally to their fate. In *De L'Influence des passions*, de Staël argues that when an individual shows passivity and no resistance against power, then tyranny can impose its laws without limits. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) which led slaves to freedom in St Domingue, must have reinforced her conviction that to fight for one's ideals and to succeed was indeed possible.

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<sup>1016</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>1017</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, II 219.

<sup>1018</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 218.

<sup>1019</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* II, 61.

<sup>1020</sup> De Staël, *De L'Influence*, 124.

In addition to limitations to their aspirations, women were enslaved to societal and cultural forces. De Staël talks metaphorically about the enslavement of women to convention, prejudice and passions. While women may enjoy some freedom, they, nevertheless, remain ‘enslaved’ to society’s prejudices, and these prejudices are the cause of their suffering. The theme of women being ‘slaves to opinion’ is central to de Staël’s work and to her fight for women’s freedom. She wrote:

sous la prescription de l’opinion, une femme s’affaiblit, mais un homme se relève; il semble qu’ayant fait les lois, les hommes sont les maîtres de les interpréter ou de les braver.<sup>1021</sup> (under the weight of public opinion, a woman weakens, but a man stands up again; it seems that having written the laws, men have the authority to interpret them or to defy them).

To de Staël, the ‘weight’ of public opinion is an allegory of the yoke carried by women, a symbol of their servitude. Both Corinne and Delphine were victims of public opinion. Corinne is a prime example of a woman circumscribed by the society she lives in, with its conventions, its demands and its hypocrisy. She confesses that in a country where political institutions gave men honourable occasions to act and to show themselves, women had to remain in obscurity, kept on the fringes of the important civic, economic and political life of the nation.<sup>1022</sup> De Staël complained: “mais la société, la société, comme elle rend le coeur dur, et l’esprit frivole. Comme elle fait vivre pour ce que l’on dira de vous!”<sup>1023</sup> (society, society, how it makes people hard-hearted, and the mind frivolous. How much is life based on what will be said about you!)

Similarly, to maintain a good reputation, women had often to repress their talents and personality as these might not be in accordance with society’s expectations of them, as wives and mothers. She drew the parallel between the talents of a slave, which could be disregarded or repressed if not of use to a master. Delphine declared: “j’étouffais en moi tout ce qui me distinguait parmi les femmes, pensées naturelles, mouvements passionnés, élans généreux de l’enthousiasme”<sup>1024</sup> (I smothered everything in me that differentiated me from other women, my natural thoughts, my passionate movements and my fits of generous enthusiasm). In these words, it is easy to recognise the author disguised as Delphine. In fact,

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<sup>1021</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>1022</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 467.

<sup>1023</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>1024</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* 1, 223.

Delphine lived a life of public humiliation. When Leonce was finally free to marry her, Delphine was not free anymore. As a novice, she could have broken her vows with the Church, as it was now permitted by the Republic's new laws, but once more, the ghost of shame, the fear of opinion and the force of prejudice kept them apart.<sup>1025</sup> Likewise, while divorce was legal in France from 1792 to 1816, it was morally condemned in the eyes of society. It is exemplified by de Staël's character Mathilde who refuses to meet her cousin, Madame de Lebenzei, because she remarried while her first husband was still alive, "un pareil scandale ne sera jamais autorisé en ma présence."<sup>1026</sup> (I will never approve such a scandal).<sup>1027</sup> Indeed, a gap existed between legislation and the evolution of opinion. Parisian society was cruel to those who did not conform to its rules of right conduct, and it caused much suffering because it exercised power without pity. Feelings of compassion towards rebellious women were non-existent because it was understood that women should know their place and role in society, and that they would submit to it. Again, there is a parallel between women's subjection to an all-controlling and unforgiving society and the slaves' condition. Men, like masters, dictated the rules of morality, and were ably seconded by socialised women. This phenomenon had its parallel in slavery personified by the well-known character 'Uncle Tom' who demonstrated passivity and submissiveness while concealing his true thoughts and feelings, thus not challenging the slave overseers. Victims begin to love, 'to depend on' or 'to identify with' their captors out of self-protection and self-interest.<sup>1028</sup> Slaves who identify with their masters for psychological reasons or for self-advancement compromise their own sense of the moral wrongness of slavery. Throughout her work, de Staël attempted a re-evaluation of morals that would correct the inconsistencies in both master and slave moralities, and that of the status of women in society.

De Staël's heroines, Delphine and Corinne, became also victims of their lovers' fear of not complying with society's expectations. Men expected their women to follow society's rules, as not to do so would reflect badly on themselves. Leonce de Mondeville admitted that he stood by public opinion, unlike Delphine whose only interests in life were sentiments and thought.<sup>1029</sup> Delphine was driven by internal forces, not the external force of social expectations: "c'est de mon Dieu et de mon propre coeur que je fais dépendre ma

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<sup>1025</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>1026</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* II, 229.

<sup>1027</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>1028</sup> This concept of master-slave morality is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's work *On Genealogy of Morality* (Oxford, UK: Oxford's World Classics, 2009).

<sup>1029</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* II, 124.

conduite”<sup>1030</sup> (it is on God and my own heart that my conduct depends.). In a letter to Mademoiselle d’Albemar, Delphine mentioned that Leonce was a prisoner of his milieu and that its rules had dictated his most significant actions. She believed that if Leonce could be free from these restrictions, he would be far happier.<sup>1031</sup> She also realised that a lover who submitted totally to public opinion could never be a reliable protector. De Staël argues that individuals whose conduct depended on people’s opinion do not always behave according to their own conscience, and compromise their chance of happiness.<sup>1032</sup> Despite society’s disapproval, she pursued her passion for writing, but she was ostracised because of it and compared the fate of women writers to that of India’s pariahs.<sup>1033</sup> However, it is from the press, which inflamed public opinion, that de Staël suffered the most. During the reign of Napoleon, her literature was mocked in newspapers, for instance in the *Mercure de France*,<sup>1034</sup> and some of her work, like *De l’Allemagne*, was censored by the dictator until his downfall in 1815.<sup>1035</sup> De Staël accused the government of stealing her liberty through censorship:

Enfin, de toutes les douleurs que l’esclavage de la presse fait éprouver, la plus amère, c’est de voir insulter dans les feuilles publiques ce qu’on a de plus cher, ce qu’on respect le plus<sup>1036</sup> (Finally, of all the pains caused by being a slave to the press, the most bitter one is to see insulted in newspapers what is dearest to us, what we respect most).

In *De L’Allemagne*, de Staël declared that, in any country, women were in danger when their happiness and freedom rested on public opinion.<sup>1037</sup> Similarly, slaves were caught in a belief-system wherein they were considered to have no rights under the weight of a long-established and traditional institution. It was inconceivable that they should be treated as humans in the

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<sup>1030</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>1031</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>1032</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>1033</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, eds Gerard Gengembre and Jean Goldzink (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1991), Chapter IV, 442.

<sup>1034</sup> A virulent review of her work *Corinne ou l’Italie* (1807) said “Madame de Staël does not seek to paint like other novelists (I mean the good one...and she always deals with superior beings who are always victims of public opinion).” “Littérature et Romans”, *Mercure de France*, May 1807, 466-479. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

<sup>1035</sup> De Staël’s work *De L’Allemagne* was destroyed in France by Napoleon and was finally published in England in 1813. Egnell, *Une Femme en Politique: Germaine de Staël* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 2013), 251-52.

<sup>1036</sup> De Staël, “Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution Française,” in *La Passion de la Liberté*, 630.

<sup>1037</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne* II, 72.

same way as the master class, because it was taken for granted that they were little better than animals.

#### 7.3.4 *Enslavement of women to passions and relationship to feminism*

While women in de Stael's works felt enslaved to the rules and conventions of social traditions, 'enslavement' to one's feelings is also central to de Staël's female characters, in her novels and novellas. To the author, passion elicits, on a figurative level, the same characteristics that kept women in their place, when it accentuates their vulnerability and thus, places them in a state of inferiority. In her personal life, de Staël suffered from her strong emotions, and it is why she probably dedicated a book, *De l'Influence des Passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations*, to the subject. To write about, and to analyse the consequences passion could inflict on anyone, was salutary for her. She wrote:

En composant cet ouvrage, où je poursuis les passions comme destructrices du bonheur...c'est moi-même qui j'ai voulu persuader; j'ai écrit pour me retrouver, à travers tant de peines, pour dégager mes facultés de l'esclavage des sentiments.<sup>1038</sup> (In composing this work, in which I maintain that passions are contrary to happiness ... I just wanted to persuade myself; I wrote to find myself, through so many sorrows, and to distance my faculties from the enslavement of feelings).

In this book, she makes recommendations to lessen the power of passion. She advises women to foster their uniqueness and their self-confidence, so as not to be trapped and enslaved by the grip of passion. Yet, de Staël did not wish to evade passion completely, as she firmly believed it enriches one's life, but she warned against its ability to control and the loss of independence and happiness that ensue. Women had little enough ability to control their fate; passion, especially romantic love, could remove even that moiety of emotional independence.

In her study of 'passion', de Staël examined its power to destroy the autonomy and the identity of an individual. This loss of individuality led de Staël to use of the metaphor of 'slavery' in relation to the passions. The slave owner made a conscious effort to remove the identity of his slaves who, after losing their freedom, had to abandon their heritage and adopt,

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<sup>1038</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*, 240.

at least in part, their masters' culture. Without the stabilising influence of their previous culture, slaves' identity diminished, and they lost personal control over their own lives.<sup>1039</sup> In *De L'Influence*, de Staël analysed, in succession, the passions that she judged destructive and alienating, such as ambition, vanity, love, gambling, meanness, envy and revenge, inclinations that, when manifested without measure or control, engender suffering and dependence, and lead to a distortion of identity. Then, she suggested means to resist them through philosophy, study and benevolence, methods and tools to overcome suffering and regain freedom. In *Delphine*, de Staël also recommends the Stoics' philosophical system, which she deemed less dangerous than religious precepts which claim that unhappiness could make one more virtuous. Free from superstitions, limitations and unrealistic goals, the ideals of Stoicism can be applied by individuals by developing self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions, thus helping the individual to control her destiny.<sup>1040</sup>

In de Staël's work, the destructive force of passion was mostly focused on the lives of her heroines, who personified women in general. She presented romantic love as the most powerful passion, one which enslaved women most and could cripple them. The greatest defeat of Delphine was not merely to be heartbroken, but to be subjected to the 'tyranny' of her love, and to be unable to think rationally about her own fate. Similarly, Corinne, an articulate artist with a gift for improvisation and languages, would lose her voice and her talent to create, because in losing the man she loved, she also lost her abilities: "Mon talent n'existe plus, je le regrette".<sup>1041</sup> (My talent is dead, and I miss it). For de Staël, passion always crushes natural qualities and kills the spontaneity to express them. She complains:

A quel prix ne voudrait-on pas n'avoir jamais aimé, n'avoir jamais connu ce sentiment dévastateur, qui, semblable au vent brûlant d'Afrique, sèche dans la fleur, abat dans la force, courbe enfin vers la terre la tige qui devait croître et dominer.<sup>1042</sup> (At what price, wouldn't we want to have never loved, to have never known this devastating sentiment, which, similar to the burning wind of Africa, dries the flower, kills with force, finally pushes down the stem which was supposed to grow and to dominate).

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<sup>1039</sup> Christiane Taubira, *L'Esclavage raconté à ma fille* (Paris: Editions Philippe Rey, 2015), 85.

<sup>1040</sup> De Staël, *Delphine* II, 64.

<sup>1041</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 520.

<sup>1042</sup> De Staël, *De l'Influence*, 130.

She identifies personal passion with slavery when, under its influence, one loses independence and self-control.<sup>1043</sup> Other feminists, including Mary Wollstonecraft, have also argued that ‘romantic love’ has been the sweetener which disguises the power of patriarchy and leads women to want marriage despite its many disadvantages.<sup>1044</sup> Moreover, de Staël asserts that passion does not bring serenity, and that happiness is jeopardised when one is controlled by external circumstances, or by the character and the willpower of others. For Corinne, as for de Staël herself, passion was an irresistible attraction that left her helpless, and she paid the price, losing tranquility.<sup>1045</sup> Corinne, betrayed, abandoned and finally resigned to her misfortune wishes for: “Tranquillo varco, A più tranquilla vita”<sup>1046</sup> (a tranquil passage, a more tranquil life). Zulma is the most Staëlian representation of a person dominated by passion when she is driven, by jealousy and despair, to kill her lover. Alienated, she becomes someone else and commits an act contrary to her nature. In de Staël’s novellas, the alienation resulting from passion surpasses mere metaphor. Zulma acted upon it in a moment of folly. Similarly, Mirza, who tries to resist passion, fell for Ximéo. Deceived and despairing, she kills herself with an arrow in the heart. Before her fatal gesture, she declares: “Il y a des coeurs qui ne savent qu’aimer, et dont toute la passion ne se retourne que contre eux-mêmes”.<sup>1047</sup> (There are some hearts which know how to love only, and all their passions turn on themselves). Both Delphine and Corinne would also sacrifice their lives for succumbing to their respective passions. As de Staël wrote:

Si vous aimez encore celui qui vous traite en esclave, puisqu’il ne vous appartient pas et qu’il dispose de vous, le désespoir s’empare de toutes les facultés, et la conscience elle-même se trouble à force de malheurs.<sup>1048</sup> (If you still love the one who treats you like a slave, as he does not belong to you and disposes of you, despair takes away all your faculties, and conscience itself is troubled by successive misfortunes.

Furthermore, de Staël suggests that there is no pride to draw from passion. Passion enslaves, leading to self-degradation, a state that would be familiar to slaves. Ximéo felt the slave

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<sup>1043</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>1044</sup> Matthew H. Hartman, “An Aristotelian paradox: Wollstonecraft and the implication of marriage as friendship”, *Journal of Gender Studies* 28,7 (October, 2019), 826-836.

<sup>1045</sup> Especially, her passion for her lover Narbonne, the alleged father of two of her children. Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2010), 48-50.

<sup>1046</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 525.

<sup>1047</sup> De Staël, “Mirza”, 29.

<sup>1048</sup> De Staël, *De l’Allemagne* I, 219.

traders' contempt when they examined him to see if his age and strength would allow him to sustain the work on plantations.<sup>1049</sup> Similarly, Uncle Tom's depression deepens under the burden of humiliation.<sup>1050</sup> Likewise, terrified at the thought her lover would leave her, Corinne confesses: "Je me réveille qu'en tremblant...je ne sais...si vous êtes encore là...Oswald, ôtez-moi cette terreur...Eh bien, emmenez-moi comme épouse, comme esclave".<sup>1051</sup> (I wake up shaking...I don't know...if you are still there...Oswald, relieve me from this terror...well, take me as your wife, as your slave). In the grip of passion, Corinne loses all pride and becomes a slave, totally submissive to Oswald, her master. As a result, her fear of being abandoned was magnified, and it manifested through physical symptoms like palpitations and a loss of breath, and the sensation that her room was spinning as if during an earthquake.<sup>1052</sup> Corinne's quasi-hysterical reaction is a manifestation of a woman's vulnerability and powerlessness. De Staël felt humiliated when she thought of the way a man could treat a woman in love lightly, and she wrote: "Oui, c'est un jeu pour vous, mais c'est la mort pour nous"<sup>1053</sup> (Yes, it is a game for you, but it is death for us). In *Histoire de Pauline*, when the naive young heroine is betrayed by her lover, she feels lost, a victim of her ignorance. Her feelings, though, were seen as a weakness which, in the end, would bring her into disrepute. De Staël indicates that it is easy to inflame a young head for the object of her infatuation, more than the object itself feels.<sup>1054</sup> For De Staël, Pauline's lover, Theodore, embodies men in general who, contrary to women, have the capacity to resist being 'enslaved' by love, or imprisoned in a marriage wherein they would lose their independence.<sup>1055</sup>

While one could lose dignity through passion, to detach oneself completely from emotions could lead to the weakening of one's sensibility. De Staël concedes that after having experienced the distress associated with passion, individuals could become hesitant to fall in love again in order to protect themselves from their own vulnerability. Similarly, slaves had to become emotionally harder in order to survive their condition. De Staël observes that

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<sup>1049</sup> De Staël, "Mirza", 62.

<sup>1050</sup> Irene Visser, "(In) Famous Spirituality: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom", *Spiritus* 8, 1 (Spring, 2008), 14.

<sup>1051</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 214.

<sup>1052</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>1053</sup> De Staël, *De l'Allemagne* II, 219.

<sup>1054</sup> De Staël, *Trois Nouvelles*, 77.

<sup>1055</sup> De Staël, *De la Littérature*, 222.

when passion crushes, the soul is overcome by a kind of weakness which destroys sensibility along with the capacity to love again with total abandonment.<sup>1056</sup>

Overall, de Staël maintains that the root of all suffering is attachment. While slaves are bonded in law, women are slaves to their passions. Delphine and Corinne were defeated because they did not preserve their emotional independence and thus their liberty. De Staël reminds us that, “La souffrance provient de l’abandon de soi à d’autres qui ont toujours la possibilité de se dérober.”<sup>1057</sup> (Suffering comes from abandoning oneself to others who have always the possibility to slip away). Both heroines met and discovered their lovers through a succession of disappointments and painful moments, and the union they dreamed of never came to fruition. Corinne felt excruciating pain when she learned that her lover would marry her half-sister Lucille: “partie, mais en tremblant comme une esclave condamnée”<sup>1058</sup> (gone but shaking like a slave who is condemned.) In her study *De l’Influence*, de Staël classifies two kinds of individuals: those who, not possessed by passion, have complete self-control, and those who become entirely dependent on a powerful force stronger than themselves, thus losing their autonomy.<sup>1059</sup> Because women were more emotional and therefore vulnerable to the force of passion, they were seen as fragile, thus inferior to men. De Staël was herself an emotional person and this is the reason why, in *Corinne*, she defends and invokes a right to female fragility, even though it could be destructive. By examining the harmful effects of passion on freedom, de Staël sought to free women from their own enslavement, as she sought to free the slaves from their condition.

In her novels, de Staël resorted to symbolism to give deeper meaning to the bondage suffered by married women and slaves. She used the ring as an allegory to symbolise attachment but also as a symbol of restraint and restriction, like the chains which kept the slaves fettered to their condition. This theme is significant in her work and exemplifies the fated bond born from passion. It is present in *Corinne* when the heroine gives Oswald his ring back, and his freedom, accompanied by a few laconic words. In the same way, Delphine, before dying, shows Leonce the ring he gave her once, as a reminder of his broken promise to unite his fate to hers.<sup>1060</sup> As well, the setting of most of de Staël’s novellas in Africa or in countries where

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<sup>1056</sup> De Staël, *De l’Influence*, 197.

<sup>1057</sup> In Simone Balayé, *Madame de Staël: Lumière et liberté* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 57.

<sup>1058</sup> De Staël, *Corinne*, 493.

<sup>1059</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>1060</sup> De Staël, *Delphine II*, 361.

French colonists had plantations, is a stern reminder of places where slavery was perpetuated. Metaphors such as the ‘burning winds of the Tropics’ were used to convey suffering in general; they expressed not only physical but also mental and emotional suffering, creating a link to referring to a place where women and slaves lost their independence and control over their lives.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

The discourse on all forms of slavery was nothing new for women writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Conservative and radical women alike criticised marriage, love and traditional female education as manifestations of slavery perpetrated upon women by men and by conventions of society. Current scholarship, however, has overlooked the extent of the parallel between the fate of women and slaves in the work of de Staël, a link she expressed directly and indirectly.

There is no doubt that events and personal experience in de Staël’s life shaped her thinking, from her unhappy marriage to the censure of the world in response to her intellectual brilliance in conversation and writing, and Napoleon’s persecution and exile of her. These events and experiences prompted her to identify more strongly with the slaves, because she felt in a subordinated and oppressed position. In her literature, she evoked explicitly the link between slavery and the traditional expectations of women, in that women and slaves shared the same condition: a loss of freedom and control, estrangement, exile, and notions of inferiority, and metaphorically, their subjection to long-established cultural beliefs and expectations, and to mental and emotional forms of oppression. De Staël wrote of women’s enslavement to their passions that kept them tied to men, limiting their freedom and keeping them in a state of dependence and therefore inferiority. Her use of the language of slavery for this situation demonstrates the parallels she drew with slaves, who were captured by human feelings of affection for their masters or more commonly, kept obedient and passive by the strong emotion of fear. As she wanted to liberate the slaves, she wanted to liberate women from the tyranny of strong emotions. In her literature, de Staël acknowledged that women and slaves were feeling, thinking human beings endowed with the same moral and intellectual capacities as White men. Hence, her belief in the liberating and improving influence of education that would develop those capacities, and the need to abolish the system of slavery that deemed part of the human race incapable of intellectual and moral improvement. Men’s control over women’s bodies and fate paralleled the control by White

men over colonised or enslaved Black people. Both women and Black slaves were handicapped by their belief in their inferiority.<sup>1061</sup>

De Staël's novels and novellas are politically charged in relation to class, race and gender. She engaged the language of slavery to question female subjugation and to call for the restoration of inherent human rights. She championed abolitionism so slaves could enjoy the same rights. She referred to 'enslavement' to strong emotions not just as a metaphor, but in the case of romantic love and passions, as trapping women in patriarchal marriages and relationships, and limiting their ability to act independently and create their own identities.

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<sup>1061</sup> While it is recognised that there were Black slave-owners, the vast majority of slave-owners were White.

## *Conclusion*

This thesis explores the link between feminism and abolitionism in the work of Madame de Staël, and the diverse influences which drove her to fight and campaign in the name of these two movements. Until recently, de Staël was famous principally for having introduced German Romanticism to France, for her opposition to Napoleon, and for her long liaison with Benjamin Constant. During the last few decades, however, a flurry of revisionist critical studies has revived an interest in the work of de Staël, particularly for those studying the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet, very little research has noted how much feminism and abolitionism were intricately related in her work, both playing a central role in her narratives. I found the intersection of these two movements to be at the heart of her work, mainly in her novels and novellas, which support and reinforce each other. This thesis identified important influences in de Staël's life, then analysed her writings, comparing her works to each other, and placing those works in their historical framework as supplied by both primary and secondary sources. In this process the significance of the intersection of feminism and abolitionism in the thinking of de Staël and in her writing sprang into focus.

### **8.1 Liberal and Romantic Ideals**

This research identified the vital role eighteenth century liberal and Romantic ideals played in de Staël's thought as it pertained to her engagement in feminism and her campaign against slavery. Her work is a reflection of a profound intellectual change that took place in French society around the turn of the nineteenth century. New concepts of emotions, sentiments and passions permeated literary, philosophical, and political debates that were taking place among the Enlightenment *philosophes* and leading intellectuals of the time.

De Staël's privileged position worked to her advantage when she used her social and literary life to improve the fate of victims of oppression. Some significant factors prompted her, early in life, to engage in the fight for the freedom of women and slaves: her parents' anti-slavery attitudes, her own life experiences, and her belief in the religious equality of souls. Her gender was also a definite factor in how she experienced politics, as she was discriminated against because of her sex, which subsequently led her to become an advocate for liberty and equality in the realms of intellect. In reading her works, it quickly becomes apparent that they were centred around the notions of freedom, freedom of movement but

also freedom of thought and expression. A comprehensive education, enhanced and furthered by her attendance at Enlightenment salons, encouraged her to apply her liberal principles to question well-established institutions such as the place of women in society and the practice of slavery. Roger Chartier notes that her salon allowed her to play a cultural role during the revolutionary decades by transforming aristocratic sensibility into a liberal cultural current in the name of sentiment.<sup>1062</sup> Indeed, her fight was made stronger by her Romantic ideals, which she drew, initially, from the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While she disagreed with his portrait of the 'ideal' woman being submissive and intellectually inferior to men, she celebrated those aspects of his work that advocated sensibility, justice and morality, and a life uncorrupted by the artificialities of society. It is, however, during her stay in Germany in 1803-1804 that she fully embraced the Romantic movement. The power of sentiment that she had found in Rousseau, she would also find in Weimar. The advent of Romanticism can be interpreted as a reaction to the Enlightenment's rationalism, giving primacy to the emotional life of individuals with their introspection, sensibility and dreams; this is true for de Staël as Romanticism suited her sentimental nature. Yet, she remained faithful to the spirit and the tradition of the Enlightenment and its ideal of liberty, that so many had forsaken after 1793, and to the moral and religious vision she had inherited from her father. Overall, de Staël applied in her campaign the cosmopolitan tradition of Calvinism, with its tradition of questioning long-accepted beliefs, and believed that individual liberty rested on the fusion of reason and emotion. These dual beliefs allowed her to remain isolated from the excesses of two ruling movements in France at the time: the materialistic philosophy of the eighteenth century, and Catholic conservatism. Like others of the Enlightenment, de Staël had a deep distrust of fanaticism, particularly religious dogmatism, and she recommended moderation in all things throughout her writings.

## **8.2 Women in France**

While a man's position in society was established by his social, political and professional status, a woman's primary function was to be a wife and a mother. Women were considered second-class citizens whose traditional role within the family unit predominated. This is despite their significance as workers, as they made up about half of the public labour force of France, and working class women needed to work to survive. At the time, women who dared voice their opinion on societal and political matters were seen as challenging the patriarchal

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<sup>1062</sup> Roger Chartier, *Les Origines Culturelles de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 64.

system. However, in the eighteenth century, another vision of the world was born as well as new concepts of behaviour; perceptions of gender changed, first with the Enlightenment, and then with increasing radicalism in the French Revolution.

The Enlightenment was marked by multiple cultural and social developments that affected women and their relationship with men: the spread of literacy and the evolution of the salons were two of them. The increase in the number of works published by women had a definite impact on public opinion, and so did the salons which played a vital role by promoting the diffusion of new thoughts and ideas, and initiated cultural movements. The *salonnière* had a privileged position by which she used her home, the woman's sphere, as a place wherein views could be expressed freely. De Staël made a link between the literary salon and the liberation of women's intellectual abilities.

The eighteenth century was also a time when an acceleration of women's claims to end the limitations on their condition took place, as they fought for a less definite separation between the sexes with a right to education. *Philosophes* inspired, influenced and propelled women to claim new rights. Condorcet, Montesquieu and Diderot, who argued for equal and natural rights, championed education for women who they thought could educate and set the standard for social order. Not all *philosophes* held these views, and Rousseau, who advocated passion and freedom of the human spirit from rigid rules and institutions, did not believe in women's emancipation, arguing that blurring the two spheres, public and private, could entail political consequences. However, while not universally accepted, ideas of intellectual and social equality between the sexes were emerging in this period, even if they did not extend to politics or economic life.

The Enlightenment and the early stages of the French Revolution created a space and provided a climate to call for specific reforms. French women were politically active and saw an improvement in their situation, demanding legal, economic and political rights. For instance, they obtained the right to divorce, to attend the debates at the Assembly and to make proposals in the *Cahiers*. These women voiced their ideals of justice, arguing that all human beings were equal and that discrimination between the sexes was unnatural. However, these revolutionary demands were expressed only by a minority of women, and little was done with regard to women's education, while the suffrage request was completely rejected. By the Jacobin stage of the Revolution, women were reduced to silence once more. The oblique power they exercised during the *Ancien Régime* was lost, and their attempt to obtain overt

political power fed the Jacobins' mistrust and anti-feminism. Nevertheless, the resistance of women, even if they were denied any political power, became more visible; they rejected the Terror and the tightening of the straitjacket of domesticity. Their voice is heard through their literature.

### **8.3 Madame de Staël's literature**

As a true liberal, de Staël's literature bears testimony to her belief in liberty when she directly, and also indirectly, denounced the plight of women, particularly married women, whose conditions she equated with those of the slaves. At the time, her political activism was restricted to literary protest. However, her writings were subjected to the scrutiny of governments fearful of subversive criticism, but she never departed from her values and from her faith in freedom, even at the risk of censorship and retaliation.

De Staël was convinced that literature was a reflection of society, but that it could also influence and change modes of thinking and attitudes. She understood that the social and political aim of both feminism and abolitionism rested on an act of representation. In her fiction, she used different genres of literature, the epistolary form among them, to encourage the reader to identify with the characters who conveyed their thoughts and feelings, thus revealing her protagonists' points of view to better defend hers. The role of women, as authors or heroines, was then crucial in the new literary regime. Women more often than men stressed the importance of relationships. De Staël was critical of men's writing; she thought it cold, lacking in passion and not conveying the subjectivity of their characters. She wrote cleverly to engage readers' sympathies, her novels using the *genre Romanesque* to appeal to her readership. Romance tends to be more allegorical than realist fiction and dramatizes psychological undercurrents and conflicts of the human heart. She understood literature as a philosophical message, and claimed that fiction, with a combination of moderated imagination and emotions, was a powerful force in forming an individual's moral behaviour. De Staël, who suffered from her condition as a woman, could only create characters who were misunderstood and destroyed by prejudices. Succumbing to the weight of their sorrow, her heroines failed where the author attempted to succeed. The main tone of her literature was melancholic, and the passion of her characters evoked pity. Her novels were nevertheless statements which reflected a social reality; women were unhappy, and society accepted them only if they submitted to men and men's laws and conventions. Slaves shared the same misery. In her work, she kept emphasising, outside any political view, that

throughout time women have often been on the side of victims, including slaves. De Staël engaged in the language of colonial slavery to condemn the subjugation of women and slaves, and to call for the restoration of their inherent rights.

#### **8.4 Madame de Staël's Feminism**

The term 'feminism', which was mentioned in the nineteenth century for the first time, is still open to many interpretations and classifications. Today, Madame de Staël would be recognised as a 'liberal and limited feminist', limited because she was not asking for complete civil and economic equality or political rights. Her feminism was a product of its own cultural specificity. Like Rousseau, de Staël asserted that European society was corrupt, not because it was unnatural and artificial as Rousseau claimed, but because it was based on unequal social relationships, exemplified by the treatment of women and slaves. This long-established situation arose from the all-powerful masculine sphere, and she believed it could be changed. However, she did not aim to place women above men, nor did she show any open hostility towards men. Still, Madame de Staël was known to have said: "Plus je vois les hommes, plus j'aime les chiens"<sup>1063</sup> ("The more I see of men, the more I like dogs.").

De Staël's literature reflects the condition of women within her society, and she thought that women, by identifying and empathising with the characters of her novels, would gain a new consciousness which would prompt them to strive for more freedom. She did not oppose men but believed that the two genders could be brought closer. De Staël argued that a mutual understanding, acceptance and appreciation of their different natures would lead to more equality. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, she did not accept the strict duality of the 'rational male' and the 'emotional female' that created division and a status of superiority and inferiority between them. To accept such a duality could only pave the way to oppression, exploitation and repudiation. De Staël like Wollstonecraft believed that if women were considered inferior, it was because men had refused them access to education. As a result, de Staël invited women to develop their minds in order to be exposed to new perspectives and to consider new possibilities, more than the limited options allowed by society. She championed education as a necessity for women themselves, but also to give them the ability to support their husband's ambitions and to play a role in their children's education. De Staël suggested that even with an aptitude for intellectual reflection, women had to tolerate some dependence which should be seen as a complementary role to the male provider in the domestic sphere.

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<sup>1063</sup> De Staël, "Dix Années d'Exil", in *La Passion*, 887.

Seen as 'moderate equality', this model of femininity was encouraged, especially during the Revolution, when the role of mother and companion was celebrated.

However, de Staël's celebration of the feminine went further. Her feminism sought rights for women to be themselves and not to deny their "true qualities". She believed that women's femininity with its sensibility should be recognised, accepted and nurtured. These qualities exhibited in the private sphere could be extended to the public sphere. With education and their "natural" feminine graces, women would play a positive role in society and 'civilise' the Republic. Like Wollstonecraft, de Staël emphasised the importance of care, compassion and fairness, attributes valued in the family environment which, when transposed to the public sphere, could bring about political and social justice. Indeed, the ideal nineteenth-century woman's empathy for the weak, devotion to the happiness of others and superior sense of morality would be an asset to societal progress. However, contrary to Wollstonecraft, de Staël does not mention that a fair and equal society could, in turn, have a positive impact on family relationships. This may be explained by the fact that the authors had very different upbringings. While Wollstonecraft's childhood was miserable, de Staël was brought up in a climate of love and security. The argument by British feminists that an educated woman made a better mother and wife, and that feminine values were necessary in politics to ensure social welfare, was an effective one over the ensuing nineteenth century, turning the argument for female domesticity on its head. However, de Staël never seemed to use it.

There is a continuing ambivalence in the way de Staël viewed women's status, and it is a true reflection of a generation caught between two worlds. A daughter of the Enlightenment, she saw her hopes for more legal rights replaced by restrictions imposed by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes. De Staël's feminism rested on an awareness that the inequality between the sexes was not natural, but a social construct. She believed that women had reason to seek their own independent definition of womanhood. Yet, she was not a strong activist as was Olympe de Gouges, who took advantage of the Revolution to stridently claim new political rights. De Staël's voice was milder. Her main purpose was to defend women's intellectual legitimacy and to fight public opinion which impeded women's freedom of thought and expression. Yet, she criticised the participation of women in politics as a lack of discretion and modesty. This deficit of visibility confers a melancholic dimension to Staëlian feminism: there is no need to fight openly, and it is better to accept semi-obscurity which allows women to stay on the margins of the public sphere. This however does not undermine

her feminism; it gives it a moderation which is still reflected in French liberal feminism today.

## 8.5 Madame de Staël's Abolitionism

During the French Revolution, de Staël's involvement in politics may have been limited, but it was real, and some of it was directed to abolitionism. Following in her father's footsteps, she condemned the slave trade, a position which was in accordance with her ideals of justice and Christian charity. Showing strong empathy towards the slaves and their 'abominable yoke', she contributed to the abolitionist cause in both a direct and an indirect way, addressing a pamphlet to the Heads of States, introducing William Wilberforce's work to France, and advocating on behalf of slaves through her literature.

Most of de Staël's anti-slavery work was produced during a period that witnessed the abolition of slavery in 1794, its reinstatement in 1802, the first successful slave revolution in St Domingue (1791-1804), and the formation of a French abolitionist movement in the 1820s. Steeped in the Enlightenment's ideology, abolitionist campaigns were fuelled by the Abbé Grégoire and Guillaume Raynal who were responsible for the distribution of British propaganda, mainly from Wilberforce's and Thomas Clarkson's printed works. It was, however, three years before the Revolution that de Staël wrote her first novellas, *Mirza ou Lettre d'un voyageur* and *Zulma*, whose plots are situated in Africa. Endowing her characters with physical and personality attributes attractive to Europeans, she hoped to move her readership to feel pity and to recognise the basic humanity of slaves. In *Mirza*, De Staël expresses clearly anti-slavery sentiments, directing her readers' attention to the colonisers' responsibility for enslaving human beings, as much as to the fate of those enslaved. So as to give objectivity and authenticity to her abolitionist argument, she also referred to the complicity of Africans in the slave trade, a statement that she repeated in *Call to the Sovereigns*. She also voiced her anti-slavery plea at the very beginning of her novella *History of Pauline*, whose heroine is married to a slave owner. As a woman, the author expressed a more personal and deeper sense of empathy than most of her male counterparts for the oppressed Black Africans, partly because women were permitted more emotional expression and partly because of the parallels she saw between the condition of women and that of slaves. There is no doubt that, with her tradition of sentimental moral philosophy, her literature advanced the cause of anti-slavery.

In a more open and public manner, de Staël published, in 1814, two didactic anti-slavery pieces. *A Preface for the translation of a work of Mr Wilberforce*, written in London, was translated into French by her daughter Albertine. *A Call to the Sovereigns reunited in Paris to obtain the abolition of the slave trade* recalls, in a non-fictional form, the concerns already expressed in her early novellas *Mirza* and *History of Pauline*.

## 8.6 Slavery in the Feminist writings of Madame de Staël

A careful, comprehensive examination of her literature reveals that de Staël drew specific parallels between the two groups, directly and indirectly, to demonstrate that married women and slaves were subjected to similar types of inequality and abuse. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler indicates, the parallel between “feminist and abolitionist concerns support both reciprocal and appropriate strategies”.<sup>1064</sup> In her novels, de Staël’s heroines exemplified different experiences of enslavement and, like the slaves, yearned for freedom but were legally under the power of a protector, a husband or a master, a situation which caused legal, economic and emotional dependence. The passage of a woman from father to husband and of the slave from one master to another was similar. In both cases it consisted of a commercial transaction. Love and protection for women by their husbands and male relatives could then be considered in terms of ownership, parallel to the legal ownership of slaves, and enforced cooperation and interdependence were a matter of survival for both groups. In a patriarchal society, women and slaves did not have a voice in the public sphere. De Staël was herself a prime example of the risks of transgressing the bounds of domesticity, and was herself condemned, ostracised and finally exiled. In her literature, she points to the suffering shared by both married women and slaves, suffering that manifested in many forms: literally, from a loss of liberty resulting from a ‘transaction’ and subsequently a loss of civic identity; and figuratively, from a feeling of separation, estrangement and a loss of self-identity when placed in an unfamiliar environment. Women had to forsake their former identities, including their birth names, and go where their husbands directed; slaves could be taken or sold away from their homes and families, losing their culture including former names. There was also a feeling of shame for being submissive, which was necessary in a position of no power, and having to be manipulative and servile to ease the husband’s or master’s tyranny.

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<sup>1064</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “The Intersection Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition”, *Representations*, 24 (Autumn, 1988), 28-59.

On a subtler level, de Staël's female characters display their enslavement to cultural forces, the long-established conventions and prejudices of society. Customs and education were designed to deprive women of their ability to question their status; likewise, slaves would be forcibly silenced. To behave in a way that did not conform to society's expectations restrained women from acting according to their conscience, their feelings and their beliefs. The crippling power of public opinion would cause her heroines distress and misfortune, and for some, even death.

Moreover, de Staël redefines the concept of enslavement when she states that one can be 'enslaved' to feelings. Her treatise, *De l'Influence des Passions*, analyses a theme that is central to her sentimental fiction. She argued that an individual could be mentally and emotionally enslaved, losing all autonomy and the ability to think and to act rationally. In the case of romantic love, enslavement to this passion aggravated women's dependence by tying them emotionally to their husbands as well as legally and economically. She equated the tyranny of romantic passions with the tyranny exercised on slaves by their masters, wherein the oppressed lose their independence, their self-control and their honour. In her fiction women, like slaves, suffer from the same emotional turmoil. When de Staël wrote *De l'Influence*, she sought to free women from the debilitating effects of extreme emotion, in the same way she sought to free slaves from their situation by campaigning for their freedom.

As a child of the Enlightenment and a Romantic spirit, de Staël epitomised the challenging role of an independent female writer during the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century regimes in France. As a feminist and a fervent defender of abolitionism, she found in slavery a model and a symbol of women's enforced passivity and subordination in the *Ancien Régime*. From this argument, she redefined the role and the status of women, celebrating the feminine as different but equal to the masculine. To de Staël, literature was important in the fight against prejudice, and instrumental in the progress of thought and expression, creating human bonds. Yet, human bonds can only be formed between free individuals because they are equal, and equal because they are free.



**Plate 0.1 Statue of Madame de Staël, Hotel de Ville, Paris (15e).  
(Photo taken by author in June 2016)**

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