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978-1-108-05986-2 - Madame de Staël: Her Friends, and her Influence in  
Politics and Literature: Volume 2

Charlotte Blennerhassett Translated by Jane Eliza Gordon Cumming

Excerpt

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# MADAME DE STAËL.

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## CHAPTER I.

Necker's Book, *Cours de Morale Religieuse*—Count Frederick Stolberg at Coppet—First Influences of the Revolutionary Era on the Women—Party hatred turns against Madame de Staël—Narbonne—Flight of the King's Aunts — Fersen — The King of Sweden's Diplomacy—A Candidate for the Polish Throne—The Flight to Varennes—France in 1791 desires a Monarchy and establishes a Republic—Insurrection on the Champs de Mars, July 17, 1791—The Jacobins—Revision of the Constitution—The Constitutionals insist that the King shall accept the Constitution—The *Constituante*—Madame de Staël to Nils Rosenstein—Madame de Staël to Gustavus III.

IN October 1790, as soon as her health permitted, Madame de Staël followed her parents to Coppet, where she had not been since 1784, and where she now remained until January 1791, besides returning for several months during the course of the year. She found her father possessed by a gentle melancholy, which his originally cheerful nature was never able henceforward to overcome. If a sense of all he had left undone as a statesman may have contributed but little to this frame of mind, he nevertheless met the accusations of ingratitude and of party hatred with

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a forgiving gentleness which had a deeper source than the unsatisfactory philosophy of so many of his contemporaries.

Necker's *Cours de Morale Religieuse*, which dates from those years, corresponds to his earlier work on the Importance of Religious Belief, but was even then the precursor of the reaction upon which Chateaubriand's prose poured forth the richly coloured splendour of its poetical conceptions.

Besides the honour of initiating this reaction Necker had the further merit, not merely of preaching Christianity to others, but of strengthening it by his conduct and cherishing it in his heart. He and his school have been accused of imparting the truth in a lugubrious tone, as a message of sorrow. The accusation may be justified from a literary point of view; but in practical life it did not apply. Necker's existence at Coppet continued to be active, useful, and cheerful; his mind was busy and at peace with the world; spiritually he more and more turned from the world, but even to the last he took a warm interest in all human and national matters. This has never been easy to carry out, and was especially the reverse in those days.\* We have an eloquent witness of Necker's beneficial influence on those who even casually came into contact with him. During 1791, Count Frederick Leopold of Stolberg, with his second wife, Sophia Countess of Redern, came through Switzerland on their wedding tour to Italy, that the Countess might visit her old friend Bonnet on the Lake of Geneva.

\* Joubert, *Pensées*, ii. 373.

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## COUNT FREDERICK STOLBERG AT COPPET. 3

Stolberg himself, Klopstock's enthusiastic disciple and the composer of the "Song of Freedom for the Twentieth Century," had already been forced to give up an active share in religious and political life and to take up a defensive attitude. As an adherent of a moderate monarchy, he took up the only attitude theoretically possible in the Germany of that time, and in Louis the XVI.th's fallen minister he honoured "an enemy of despotic power, desiring to reconcile liberty and order."

His friends in Switzerland thought fit to warn him against Necker's cold, reserved nature. "I allow people to say these things to me," Stolberg wrote, "and I know how much to believe. Outward coldness in a man whose heart glows with such sentiments, who has such a sympathetic mind, giving forth such radiance, will never mislead me. I went to him with that full confidence which a great man only can inspire. The first glance gently but completely reassured me, and this circumstance did not escape his notice. I was thoroughly at ease with the excellent man. His words are few, but what he says is worthy of Necker."\*

Stolberg mentions the 14th of October as the day upon which they met. Madame de Staël had not then reached Coppet. Its peaceful atmosphere, so conducive to quiet reflection and so pleasing to Stolberg, by no means suited her disposition. Somewhat disturbed on this point, Madame Necker wrote to Mar-

\* Janssen, *Friedrich Leopold, Graf zu Stolberg*, i. 275, 276.

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montel that “although her husband appeared much happier in his retirement than he had ever been during his worldly honours, her daughter, on the contrary, seemed so occupied with outward events, and with the joys and distractions of society, that she, her mother, no longer could contribute to her happiness.”

Necker’s opponent, Sénac de Meilhan,† describes her under the name of “Hortense,” at that time as intoxicated by talent and carried away by intercourse with enthusiastic people. Study, reflection, love, politics, music, dancing, plays, everything that could excite, please, or flatter, had its attractions for her. Anxious to please, this true and sincere nature was at the same time equally capable of deep and lively feelings. Restless and imprudent, she might be called an extraordinary rather than a lovable woman. But for the sake of those who succeeded in satisfying her, she was capable of anything.

Fraulein Hüber, her former playmate and relation, speaks of the overflowing sense of life and youth possessed by this young creature, now four-and-twenty years old.

She thought Madame de Staël would have been an angelic being had she known how to combine wise deliberation with her inimitable kindness and marvellous intellect. Even as it was, intercourse with her disenchanted her with all other women.‡

\* Madame Necker, *Mélanges*, i. 141.

† Sénac de Meilhan, *Portraits et Caractères*, 80, 81. Bouillé, *Mes Récapitulations*, i. 146.

‡ A. Stevens, *Life and Times of Madame de Staël*, i, 114, 115.

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## EFFECT OF REVOLUTIONARY ERA UPON WOMEN. 5

It might be supposed that the agitation of those days, the terrible pictures already unfolded, and still more the fearful anticipation of those in store, would arouse both in men and in tender womanly natures a desire for quiet and rest, a longing to fly from a world abandoned to storms and dangers. Experience has proved the contrary. On the very threshold of the Reign of Terror, and immediately after it, youth asserted its rights; and the uncertainty of what might happen on the morrow seemed only to enhance the fascination of the present moment. Political interests did not overwhelm private interests, and every other passion was stimulated by the passion which had taken possession of a whole nation.

Mirabeau's life was not sacrificed to the agitation of the tribune. There were days on which the Gironde waited in vain for Vergniaud, whilst the latter forgot tragedy in a love adventure.

The same Lally Tollendal who so pathetically claimed justice for his father's memory and liberty for his country was only half known by those who in the eloquence of the deputy forgot the man whose inexhaustible humour shortened the hours.

Talleyrand jokingly reproached Madame de Staël for cutting short a discussion upon doubling the *Tiers*, in favour of a quadrille. The contrast did not exist in her alone but in the whole surrounding society. Gentle, thoughtful, apparently supine and retiring women were no less electrified by the Revolution and drawn into its whirl than those of the intellectual

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breadth, health, and power of resistance possessed by the young Swedish ambassadress.

As little protected as the men from the infectious power of the ruling political passions, the mothers and wives in the retirement of their homes as well as the brilliant women of the world sacrificed their own comfort in the midst of the tumult and butchery; were ready to help, courageously facing death, so that the annals of the Terror contain hardly any example of weakness at the prospect of the guillotine or of the hangman.

Before these last sanguinary trials there were others in store. The women, hitherto accustomed to the most exaggerated homage, poetical deification, and social supremacy, had now to experience party hatred, the insinuations of slander, the far-reaching arrows of malice; to see the veil lifted from their private life, and the story of their domestic happiness or personal disappointments exposed to publicity.

The most distinguished of her sex, the queen of France, was the first to be attacked, and knew the length to which this system might be pursued. None of her defenders, not even her own innocence, succeeded in delivering her from the deadly snares of the story of the Necklace.

What had occurred to the king's consort, and what still happened every day in Paris, gave some idea of the portion to be expected by those who excited the revengeful thoughts, both of political opposition, personal antipathy, and disappointed ambition.

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## PARTY HATRED TURNS AGAINST MADAME DE STAËL. 7

Madame de Staël was one of the first to experience this. It is well known that accommodating views stir up greater opposition than entire difference of opinion.

“*Ce sont les nuances qui se querellent, pas les couleurs,*” says Tocqueville.

The Right in the National Assembly, the Royalists of 1789, hated Necker a great deal more than the Jacobins, and would rather have come to an understanding with Marat than with Mirabeau—with Danton than with Necker. The most important decrees of the National Assembly, the dismissal of the parliamentary ministry on the 7th of November, 1789, and the subsequent resolutions of the 17th of May, 1791, wherein Robespierre, assisted by the Right, debarred all members of the Assembly from re-election in any future Assembly, were carried by the union of the *intransigent* Royalists in conjunction with the Left against the moderate conciliatory elements.

The feeling was moreover reciprocal, “for,” the moderate Ferrières tells us—amongst others—“the constitutionalists feared the nobility and the clergy more than the Jacobins.” The queen’s exclamation is well known, “Rather be destroyed; than saved by means of La Fayette and the Constitutionalists.”\*

How could personal honour be protected where the highest interests and life itself were abandoned to party hatred? Madame de Staël found herself exposed to its attacks no less on account of her

\* Madame Campan, *Mémoires*. Malouet, *Mémoires*, ii. 126.

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own personal views than because she was Necker's daughter.

Rivarol led the attack. Like Voltaire, he appeared to have discovered the art of "slandering the dead and the living in alphabetical sequence," and in this he has been compared to Aretino.\*

Madame de Staël figures in the *Actes des Apôtres* in 1789 as the "Bacchante of the Revolution," and as "the one person in all Europe who might cause doubts as to her sex." †

This merely signified that, once the colouring and tender grace of first youth were departed, her outward appearance began to be characterised by features of masculine strength and by a stout figure, which often led her to deplore that beauty, the gift most to be desired by woman, had been denied to her. But these harmless accusations were not to be the end of it. In the *Galérie des Etats-Généraux et des Dames Françaises*, which Rivarol published in 1789, he caricatured Madame Necker as Statira and her daughter as Martesia. One of the most original and charming women of her day, the widowed Comtesse de Sabran, whose correspondence is one of the jewels of French prose, and unfortunately but little known, ‡ was derided as Sappho on account of her love for

\* Caro, *Rivarol et la Société Française. Journal des Savants*, Sept. and Nov. 1883.

† Lescure, *Rivarol*, 175.

‡ E. de Magnieu et Henri Prat, *Correspondance de Madame de Sabran et du Chevalier de Boufflers*, 1778-1788.



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## RIVAROL'S ATTACK,

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poetry. The artist Vigée Lebrun figured as Charity, the Comtesse François de Beauharnais as Corylla, and Madame de Genlis as Pollyxene. All these joking invectives originated of an evening over wine and cards in a restaurant in the Palais Royal, where the elder Marquis de Rivarol, Mirabeau-Tonneau—thus named by reason of his size, the brother and political opponent of the great orator—Champcenetz, Rivarol's actual collaborator, and Suleau, the most zealous leader of the Royalist press, were wont to meet. There it was said of Mirabeau that for money he was capable of anything, even a noble action. He resembled his reputation, because it was hideous. There, Talleyrand was inexorably ridiculed in verse by Peltier:

“Froidement du mépris il affronte les traits;  
Il conseille le rapt, enseigne le péjure.  
Et sème la discorde en annonçant la paix,  
Sans cesse on nous reedit, qu'il ne peut rien produire  
Et que de son discours il n'est que le lecteur,  
Mais ce qu'un autre écrit, c'est lui seul qui l'inspire,  
Et l'on ne peut du moins méconnaître son cœur.\*

After these *Acts of the Apostles* the inexhaustible author published the *Journal Politique National*, which attacked the Revolution more than it defended the monarchy;† and in February 1790, after the *Galérie des Etats-Généraux*, he brought out the *Petit Dictionnaire des grands Hommes de la Révolu-*

\* L. G. Michaud, *Talleyrand*, 16.

† Lescure, *Rivarol*, 194. Lotheisen, *Literatur und Gesellschaft in Frankreich während der Revolution*, 84, 85.

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*tion, par un citoyen actif, ci-devant rien*, which Grimm points out as a pattern of impertinent *persiflage*.\*

This pamphlet began with a solemn dedication to “Madame de Staël, ambassadress from Sweden to the nation.”

It ran thus: “Madame,—We permit ourselves to place your name at the head of our collection, for to publish a list of the great men of the day only means to unfold before you a list of your adorers.”

Hardly a year had elapsed since Rivarol had been unable to find any more serious accusation against the young woman than that of pedantic prudery; his attacks now took another line, and gave the tone, to be subsequently outstripped by the press during the Consulate and the Empire.

Not forbearance towards the woman, but the duty imposed by friendship for one whose name the scandal-loving world had already coupled with hers, induced Rivarol to leave the mention of this name to others.

The blank was soon enough filled in. A so-called private correspondence was circulated in Paris from hand to hand, which undertook to acquaint a distinguished European public with the gossip and daily news of the polite world. On the 29th January, 1791, it announced the return of the Swedish ambassadress to Paris, with the marginal note that the former bishop of Autun (Talleyrand’s bishopric was abolished owing to the new partition of the French dioceses, brought about by the civil constitution of

\* Grimm, *Correspondance Littéraire*, xv. 139.