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978-1-108-05987-9 - Madame de Staël: Her Friends, and her Influence in
Politics and Literature: Volume 3

Charlotte Blennerhassett Translated by Jane Eliza Gordon Cumming

Excerpt

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MADAME DE STAËL.

CHAPTER I.

Goethe and Madame de Staël—The *Horen*—*On the Influence of the Passions*—Madame de Staël in Weimar—Goethe at Jena—Madame de Staël's Reception at the Court—Schiller—Goethe's Return to Weimar—*Die Naturliche Tochter*—*Eugenie*—The New Year of 1804 at Weimar—Karl August—Duchess Amalie—Duchess Luise—Knebel—Wieland—Henry Crabb Robinson—Johannes von Müller—Goethe's *Annals*—Contrast between German and French Views.

AND now what did Weimar or Germany know of the fugitive who crossed its border in search of spiritual food?

Her first literary effort, the *Letters on J. J. Rousseau*, had already attracted attention across the Rhine, a translation of them having appeared in 1789.*

During the last ten years of the century, since the *Horen und Musen Almanach* had been started—therefore since 1795—the attention of Schiller and Goethe, that of Wieland and his fellow-workers, had been directed to the rising authoress; and the collec-

* Frau von Staël, *Letters on Rousseau*. Leipzig, Kammer, 1789. Campe, *Briefe aus Paris zur Zeit der Revolution*, 315, etc.

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tion of her earliest works, which appeared in Lausanne and Leipzig in 1795 and 1796, first induced Goethe to busy himself with her.*

“I find it gives me more work than I thought,” he wrote to Schiller in the first letter making mention of her, “but I will go through with it as it is not much; the whole takes at most fifty-five pages of my manuscript. . . . I will explain my way of treating the translation in a short preface addressed to the editor. To save small corrections, I have rendered her words according to our sense, and I have tried to reconcile the French lack of precision to our German style. In detail you will find a great deal that is good; being biassed, yet clever and honest, she can never be in harmony with herself, but you can perfectly use it. I could wish that you would give yourself the trouble to be as clear and gallant as possible in your work, so that it might be sent to her in the sequel, and thus in a metamorphosed France an opening might be made even for the dance of the Horae.” †

From Eisenach, returning to the same subject, he wrote, “I have employed my quiet sojourn here to finish translating Madame de Staël, and at the same time to transpose her. A feminine method, and the

* Madame de Staël, *Recueil de Morceaux Détachés*. Lausanne, 1795, Leipzig, 1796; afterwards printed in the *Œuvres complètes*. Contains *Zulma*, et trois nouvelles, précédées d'un *Essai sur les Fictions*.

† *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, iv. Aufl. i. 79, 80. Letters 107, 108. Goethe to Schiller, Weimar, 6th and 10th Oct. 1795.

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CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN GOETHE AND SCHILLER. 3

French language, gave me a great deal to do, especially the continual ‘but,’ and the attempt to make her meaning correspond with ours. I have finished now; the work shall at once be printed, and you shall have it directly.” *

Schiller replied, “I am looking forward eagerly to your sheets of Madame de Staël. If space at all permits I am also of opinion that the whole should be published in one number. My comments could follow in the next. The reader will then have made his own, and will listen to mine with more interest.” A few days later he adds, “I have forgotten to write to you about Madame de Staël. The production is written with much cleverness, and, as there are gleams of light rather than actual daylight in it, it lends itself to criticism. It would be difficult to bring harmony into it, and it would not repay the trouble. It might be tried in individual instances, and I have already selected material which will by no means be out of season.”

December came, however, and nothing had appeared, so that Goethe wrote warningly that he would not advise that the publication should suffer further delay, as French copies of the book were beginning to spread over Germany. †

The work here in question, the *Essai sur les Fictions*,

* Goethe, *Jahrbuch*, 1885, 381. Goethe to Schiller, Oct. 13, 1795.

† *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, i. 81, 84, 97. No. 109, 114, 128, to Goethe, Jena, 16th and 26th Oct. 1795; to Schiller, Weimar, Dec. 15, 1795.

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appeared in the second number of the *Horae* for 1796, translated into German by Goethe under the title of *Versuch über die Dichtungen*; a notice added by him, to the effect that he would publish something on Madame de Staël's essay, was not followed up.

The old experience—that the greatest men are the most indulgent—is further confirmed in this instance; for, after the publication of the essay, Schiller mentions the journal *Deustchland*, edited by J. F. Reichardt, and says that the insect had not been able to give up stinging—having spoken with the greatest contempt of Madame de Staël's essay.*

Meanwhile, whilst Goethe translated her, and Schiller promised to review her, Madame de Staël had completed her book upon the *Influence of the Passions*.

Goethe, in a letter to Schiller, called it “very interesting, written in constant observation of the very extensive and great world in which she had lived, and full of clever, tender, and dauntless remarks.”

He thought it worth while to return to the subject a few days later. “Madame de Staël's work, of which Herr von Humboldt will have told you, is to come in a few days,” he wrote to Jena. “It is extremely interesting to see how such an intensely-passionate nature comes out of the terrible refining fire of a Revolution, in which she had had to

* *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, i. 183. No. 225, to Goethe, Oct. 16, 1796.

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CRITICISM ON "THE INFLUENCE OF THE PASSIONS." 5

take so large a share, and I might say that nothing but what was intellectual and human was left in her. Perhaps it would be possible to make a kind of series of the best sayings, and to use it for the *Horae*; or a single chapter might be taken, but soon, as it is certain to be translated by Easter. I leave this to your own judgment." *

In other places Goethe remarks that Madame de Staël's book brings the sterling value of her conduct "before the eyes of the public." †

Schiller declared himself in perfect agreement with the suggestion made by his friend, and to be attracted by some of the excellent ideas in the book itself. Meanwhile, regardless of the pressure put upon him by Goethe, there came a book by Diderot which enthralled Schiller, and he called both works "a real spiritual need; as my own work, in which I live entirely, and in which I am obliged to live, narrows my circle so much." ‡

This work was no other than *Wallenstein*, and it was the highest acknowledgment which the poet could give the young authoress that his spirit could fly from that world of tragic conflict to seek and find a resting-place in hers.

* *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, i. 203, 205, 208. Nos. 247, 248, 250, 253, to Schiller, Weimar, Nov. 30, Dec. 5, Dec. 7, Dec. 10, 1796.

† Goethe, *Jahrbuch*, 1880, 416. Goethe to Körner, Weimar, Dec. 8, 1796.

‡ *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, i. 204, 208, 210. Nos. 249, 252, 255, to Goethe, Jena, 6th, 9th, and 12th Dec. 1796.

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“The optics are progressing,” replies Goethe, who meanwhile was engaged in scientific experiments. “Knebel takes an interest in them; moreover, they are an excellent exercise for the mind; it soothes the passions and compensates us for them, as Madame de Staël has so minutely described to us.” *

Criticism was not always so favourable. When Schiller received the text of the tales, which hardly justified the interest testified by Goethe, he thought that the “exaggerated, argumentative, and entirely unpoetical nature of the authoress, or rather her unnatural amount of understanding,” was here very characteristically exhibited. “Its perusal puts one sensibly out of humour,” he continues, “and I feel as you have felt on reading such works—that one enters into the tone of the authoress herself, and that one feels very uncomfortable in the process. This person fails in all feminine charm, and yet the faults of the book are essentially feminine. She comes out of her sex without raising herself above it. Meanwhile really beautiful thoughts are suggested to me in this little work; there is never any lack of these, and they betray her penetrating observation of life.”

Goethe, again, was more indulgent. He only replied that Madame de Staël’s romances were known to him, and that they were admirable and passionately-conceived productions. †

* *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe*, i. 198. No. 242, to Schiller, Weimar, July 21, 1798.

† *Idem*, ii. 85, 86. Nos. 481, 482, to Goethe, Jena, July 20, 1798, Weimar, July 21, 1798.

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MADAME DE STAËL'S FIRST LETTER TO GOETHE. 7

Not only the authoress but the woman was discussed in the meantime in Germany. As early as January, 1797, therefore just at a period when the waves of abuse and slander were at their height against her, Böttiger wrote to Schlegel on the subject, and sent him some numbers of the *Quotidienne*, with the remark that it might perhaps amuse him to see "this armoury of Satan's darts." *

A little later William von Humboldt, who had returned from Spain, again took up the thread. He sent the book *On Literature* to Goethe "by a couple of Danes," and Madame de Staël added a few lines with it, the first she had addressed to the prince of poets, and which have been published: "*Parmi vos nombreuse admirateurs,*" she wrote, "*il n'en est point, je crois, qui sente votre ouvrage avec un enthousiasme plus profond que moi. La lecture de Verther à fait époque dans ma vie comme un événement personnel, et ce livre, ainsi que la nouvelle Héloïse, sont les deux chefs d'œuvres de la littérature selon moi.*" †

"You would honour the Staël," wrote Humboldt, "and it would give her great pleasure, if you would send her a few words or a message. I have only spent about a fortnight with her, but I have seen her daily. I like her very much; although she has many feminine traits, she certainly lacks what we

* A. W. Schlegel, *Correspondence*, 24 volumes, in possession of the Dresden Library. Böttiger to Schlegel, Jan. 7, 29, 1797.

† Goethe, *Jahrbuch*, 1884, 112. Madame de Staël to Goethe, April, 1799.

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should call the charm of womanliness ; and, notwithstanding an understanding worthy of all admiration, she is not often what we should call intellectually powerful. But it is difficult to believe how good-natured she is ; even in the midst of the insignificant circumstances which often surround her, she brings everything back to ideas and feelings ; gives nature her share in the sentiments ; never argues, as is so often done here, until all truth is extirpated, root and branch, and everything is resolved in sounding words, but rather argues herself into that of which mere reason can make nothing further ; she is always impartial and many-sided in her views, and great and noble in her way of thinking.

“I always consider her to possess a liberal character and a courageous mind, which, since it began to use its wings, has been tied up in the long clothes of the spiritual destitution of the French. In some ways her books, like those of other people, are less than she is herself ; but in other ways they are more. For we seldom find her so retired, so quiet, or so absorbed in conversation as she is in her books.

“Her *Passions* always appear to me to be her best work. The book now before us is of course feeble if it stands on the merit of its actual contents. She lacks both the necessary philosophy and learning to judge the position of literature in all times and in all countries.

“She has no clear conception of what men should strive for, and regards all literature from the French

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W. VON HUMBOLDT'S LETTERS FROM PARIS. 9

point of view. You will be surprised to find how unjustly the Greeks are treated. We Germans do not sufficiently recognise how much we gain by the mere fact that Homer and Sophocles have, as it were, become nearly related to us.

“ You see for yourself how she can judge the Germans. In many portions it is the same lyre as that used formerly by the Père Bonhours; very much what I recently found in Baillet's *Journal des Savants*: ‘*Les Allemands dans leurs écrits restent toujours Allemands.*’ But there are a few exceptions which I highly value; for instance, ‘*En Allemagne les idées sont encore ce qui intéresse le plus au monde. Les Allemands n'ont point une patrie politique, mais ils se sont fait une patrie littéraire et philosophique pour la gloire de laquelle ils sont remplis du plus noble enthousiasme. Les hommes éclairés de l'Allemagne ont pour la plupart un amour pour la vertu, du beau dans tous les genres qui donne à leurs écrits un grand caractère. Ce qui distingue leur philosophie, c'est d'avoir substitué l'austerité de la morale à la superstition religieuse. En France, on s'est contenté de renverser l'empire des dogmes,*’ etc.

“ In this work there is a clever remark about your *Werther*. She says that you are blamed for giving Werther something besides love to suffer from, for adding the abasement of his natural pride through social circumstances, and then she goes on to say: ‘*Goethe voulait peindre un être souffrant par toutes les affections d'une âme tendre et fière, il voulait peindre*

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ce mélange de maux qui seul peut conduire un homme au dernier degré du désespoir. Les peines de la nature peuvent laisser encore quelques ressources ; il faut que la société jette ses poisons dans la blessure pour que la raison soit tout-à-fait altérée et que la mort devienne un besoin.’”

It is well known that Napoleon, in his conversation with Goethe, formed a different opinion on this problem to that of Madame de Staël.

“ If,” continues W. von Humboldt, “ you could arrange that the reviews of this work in the papers should fall into disinterested and gentle hands, you would be doing a great kindness to the Staël.

“ Along with her book I will send a French treatise I have written here, so as to acquaint the Staël and a few others with the principal ideas in my German book printed by Mullin. This work has interested me, because it has taught me how one should tack when one wants to sail in the German direction with a French wind, and it was my intention to write as far as possible from a French point of view.” *

This treatise, written at the request of Madame de Staël, had the *Musée des petits Augustins* for its subject. All the works of art hitherto scattered over Paris, and which had been saved from the Revolution, including especially interesting portraits from the

* *Goethe's Correspondence with the Brothers Von Humboldt*, 1795-1832. F. Th. Brantraneck, iii. 159, 161. No. 29, W. von Humboldt to Goethe, Paris, May 30, 1800. Compare Goethe, *Jahrbuch*, 1887, 69.