
Review by Karyna Szmurlo, Clemson University

Although there has been a recent resurgence in Staël biographies, Angelica Goodden's volume certainly stands out. While most authors have indulged in the personal scandals that have routinely tempered the significance of Staël as a writer and thinker, Goodden's, while not scanting that element, also raises our awareness of the international impact of this early multiculturalist who was exiled from her native France by Napoleon Bonaparte. With its emphasis on the creative impulse engendered by her imposed banishment, Goodden's literary biography depicts the difficult rise of a modern genius whose strengths provided her with an inflexible resistance to persecution as well as the ability "to change the course of cultural thought by seeing which philosophies, arts, and customs were particularly adapted to a new age, and then presenting them to the right audience" (p. 241).

Goodden finds an enormous appeal in the richly ambivalent personality of the woman writer "who both enjoyed and deplored celebrity, and professed her political innocence in the same breath as writing and behaving in a patently political way" (p. 121). Her abundantly documented analysis of Staël's ascendance to fame is propelled by an exploration of these inherent contradictions and the author's attempt to elude them. As the title of the work indicates, one of the antithetical paradigms it deals with is that of the exile which opinion transmuted into counter-attack: Staël was the "dangerous exile." Deprived by Napoleon of what to her was the cherished sociability of Paris, Staël would become the European writer emblematic of resistance to despotism, recognized by her contemporaries and truly feared by members of the Directory as well as by later imperial establishments.

Traced briefly in the introduction, the reversal from pain to glory is woven into individual chapters and pursued at various levels. Goodden presents us with Staël's encounters with a "consolidated" punishment, one that inflicts pain and "acts on the imagination and is constantly present as an obstacle to every desire, every plan, every hope" (p. 65). The geographical isolation of the château of Coppet and the insupportable rigidity of life in Switzerland, the constant checks at frontiers in Austria and Germany, the persecution of friends, the exhaustion and melancholy intensified by literary displacements echoed in Staël's fiction were progressively conquered by an intense quest for knowledge and an extraordinary expansion of human contacts. Staël's multiple stays in England, Germany, Austria, Italy, and her transcontinental flight of 1,500 leagues from Switzerland to England through Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, Russia and Sweden, during which she was welcomed by intellectual elites and heads of states, incited her to envisage new—although never realized—journeys to Constantinople (via Greece, Sicily, Cadiz, and Lisbon) and America.

What is more, *The Dangerous Exile*, effectively demonstrates how the defiance of spatial limits coincided with the prise de conscience of a literary vocation on the part of Necker's daughter. The young girl was jokingly called *Monsieur Sainte-Ecritoire* (Master Holy-Desk) by a father who wanted to temper her literary talents and remind her that the art of the pen belonged to men. She nevertheless turned into an accomplished writer able to direct international collaborative publishing enterprises. Her tireless activism as a salonnière with a pan-European epistolary network at her disposal,
and as novelist, liberal theorist, and cultural critic became intolerable to the imperial regime. Napoleon disclaimed her *De la littérature* as evidence of a lack of subordination. Her first novel *Delphine*—literally a narrative exile addressed to a *France silencieuse*—spurred his fury. And *Corinne ou l'Italie*, glorifying a female genius, led to more prohibitions. The final coup of the suppression of *De l'Allemagne* by Napoleonic censors provoked spectacular reverberations. Published in England in its restored version, *De l'Allemagne* was acclaimed by the British press as a work embodying the reversal of despotic rule. Restrictions made Staël notorious as she epitomized the dilemma of a female intellectual impossible to silence.

Another paradox carefully explored by Goodden is a conflict between Staël's fictional works and her womanliness. Goodden marvels that the writer who controlled patriarchal norms by her fortune, heritage, and position chose to represent women's submissiveness and fragility. It was her passionate heroines who suffered and perished, wantonly betrayed and abandoned by their lovers. The famous epigraph to *Delphine* echoing the restrictions of Staël's Protestant mother ("a man must be able to brave public opinion, a woman submit to it") as well as the "breathtakingly condescending" statements from *De la littérature* about women "unable to produce truly superior works" seem to be highly "dismaying for the supporters of women rights" (p. 4).

On the contrary, the life of the writer, born to money in an exceptional milieu, persistently disavows weakness. Her contacts, correspondence, energy, and sexuality denied the image of a female limited to reproduction. Goodden unveils Staël's strong relationships with an effeminate husband and lovers. Eric de Staël's pretentiousness and penchant for luxury were positively repellent. He traveled in a carriage, "with a bed, the best horses, a pack of hounds, (and) three valets" (p. 66). Her lover, Louis de Narbonne, handsome but also terribly indebted, was perceived as "delicate" by watchful British observers, "a really feminine woman" in contrast to the opinioned Germain (p. 46). Staël's foremost lover, Benjamin Constant, complained *ad infinitum* about her, insisting that all his "existence, all the hours, minutes, and years had to be at her disposal" (p. 151). Her domineering personality subjegated her children's tutor, August Schlegel, who described himself as "putty in her hands" (p. 149). She was quite "as authoritarian as the despotic Napoleon," states Goodden, suggesting that Bonaparte felt drawn to Staël's exceptional mental qualities and assertiveness (p. 152).

The issue of virility emerges at many levels and in the most various settings, beginning with that of the patriarch. In the family circle, Goodden assigns the role of facilitator to Jacques Necker, a father not really deserving his daughter's and wife's worship of him, but who nevertheless enabled both of them to live their lives through his famous political career. In the salon, Germaine led inquisitive tireless debates surrounded by male listeners. Goethe, Fichte, Heine, Schiller, Henry Crabb Robinson, and many others confirmed her preference for the practice of fast philosophical scrimmaging in front of great men. But above all, the best confirmation of a male drive was, according to Goodden, Staël's transition in her writing habits from a youthful desire for self expression and the analysis of the passions, to her panoramic works like *De l'Allemagne* or the later *Considérations sur la Revolution française*, contributions to social philosophy and political historiography rarely associated with female writers. Staël's open defiance of subordination, her refusal to accept the passiveness imposed on her sex (somehow uncontested in her own fiction in Goodden's reading), caused a "seismic shock" all over Europe.

Two chapters that frame the volume deal with Staël's ambiguous reception in England. Goodden provides a unique insight into the British circles that acclaimed Staël as a woman of genius while fearing her unconventionality and suspecting her of republicanism. The volume opens with her earlier visit to Juniper Hall where the young Germaine—in a shocking betrayal of her conjugal duties—followed Narbonne, the father of her two infant sons. The most startling example of a climate of gossip and unpleasant allegations about her character emerges in the love/terror relationship between Staël and the rising young novelist, Francis Burney. Although Burney felt irresistible attraction and admiration for the French celebrity, she consistently avoided contact with Staël because of her reputation. As
Burney herself stated, “she fought the hardest battle” against waves of messages, from “almost all (her) best connections,” including her own father, warning her against this undesirable acquaintance (p. 53).

When Staël returned later to England after her legendary flight through Europe with Napoleon's Grande Armée on her heels, there was still a great deal of prejudice against her. The chapter “Lionized in London” reports at length on the whirl of receptions offered her by the Whigs at Holland House or Devonshire House during the days preceding Waterloo. This time, however, she appears not only as a talkative public figure stubbornly promoting her anti-napoleonic views, but as a theatrically portrayed celebrity. Above all, her tongue was “in perpetual motion” as she declaimed at people instead of conversing. She lost herself in the labyrinth of philosophical madness, and her spontaneous “harangues” seemed “borrowed or prepared” (pp. 225, 228, 233). This problematic representation of the acclaimed conversationalist/improviser is supplemented by attributions to her of another antithetic anomaly, “a mind so attuned to sociability,” in a “whole being completely lacking sensitivity” (p. 236). She seemed to astonish listeners not only by her social awkwardness and “breaches of etiquette,” but also by a deficiency of maternal sensibility when informed about her son Albert’s accidental death (pp. 234, 237).

Staël’s purported lack of femininity reappears in a closer reading of the excessively numerous commentaries that focus on the ugliness of “a fat fifty-year old woman dressed too youthfully for her years, with her speeches far too long and her sleeves far too short.” We hear a roar of convulsive laughter at the sight of her corset rising above her décolletage during a social dinner party (p. 246). On another occasion, the costume of the restless traveler reaches “the height of ridiculousness, which in combination with her ugliness [makes] her even more hideous” (p. 183). Although Goodden usually prepares readers for a deep-rooted misogyny on the part of Staël’s observers, she does not hesitate to report in its entirety the revolting remarks by J. W. Cooker who would like to forget “that Staël was a woman.” She “was ugly...her features were coarse, and the ordinary expression rather vulgar; she had an ugly mouth and one or two irregularly prominent teeth, which perhaps gave her countenance a habitual gaiety” (p. 228).

Goodden works dangerously here at the edge of condescension, too close to the prejudicial interpretations of Christopher Herold and company from the years gone by. These British sections where the scandalous Staël acquires a dimension of the grotesque Staël, make us pause and reflect upon the exegete’s impartiality. Is Goodden working under the spell of Lord Byron’s “sadistic pleasure” in mocking Staël? (pp. 246-47). Or is she trying to revivify Staël's energy through the heated commentaries of her contemporaries? After all, Goodden likes to report on Staël’s vocal apparatus: her tonality, her salon conversations, even her foreign language practice with Burney and later Humboldt.

A general off-balance feeling in these two chapters is also created by an excess of detail on seemingly peripheral subjects. Although no one else to my knowledge has ever so thoroughly collected behind-the-scenes data on Staël in England, these two sections of The Dangerous Exile are crowded with information that seems irrelevant to Staël's biography. Staël's decisive encounters with Burney, with the abolitionist Wilberforce and with Byron are made to fade away in the story of Burney's marriage or that of her sister Susanna Phillips. Staël is peripheral, too, to the analyses here of Burney's own works (e.g., Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla, and The Wanderer) which are quoted under the pretext of comparative goals. We also learn about Byron's marital irregularities and his affair with his sister Augusta, and read a quite detailed overview of Holland House and its habitués. This material could be the subject of independent studies.

Having expressed some concerns, I highly recommend The Dangerous Exile for its compatibility with several trends in modern Staël studies. Researchers of the last several decades have focused on more dynamic interpretations of Staël's life and work.[2] Goodden does a fine job of discussing the writer’s phenomenal resistance to historical adversities and her ascension to the status of a “literary colossus” in her own time (p. 224). The biography also sheds new light on the extent of the power Staël could
exercise in political negotiations and on her highly ambiguous relationship with Napoleon, who recognized her as a truly dangerous opponent.

The book also participates (even with its occasional negativities) in an ongoing cultural interrogation. On several occasions, Goodden comments on the discrepancies between Staël's perception of cultures and historical truth. She questions her Anglophilia, indicates her misunderstanding of British politics and of Austrian society, and points out that “lacking familiarity with Italian literature had not stopped her from writing about it” (p. 156). All these topics of cultural misinterpretations emerge sharply today in the revisionist debates on national identities.\[3\]

More importantly, *The Dangerous Exile* complements modern interest in the phenomena of displacement and social networking. The biography emphasizes a tension between homeland and the far-away places, Frenchness and foreignness, local and global, all dualities that are invested with emotional qualities and, in Staël’s case, complicated by a tremendous investment in sociability. What is more, Goodden investigates the writer in relation to the motion of travel which creatively shaped her literary projects (it is not coincidental that her major works, *De la littérature*, *Corinne*, and *De l'Allemagne* were all results of Staël’s extensive peregrinations).

A variety of recent studies address the Enlightenment as an event in the history of mediation and grant Staël a significant role as a mediator between political parties, cultures, nationalities, historical epochs, and literary movements.\[4\] Although Goodden stops short of resolving contradictions and uses them predominantly as a methodological tool, her richly documented book, with its emphasis on crossings, transfers, celebrity status, and foreign elites, clearly portrays Staël as a premonitory agent of cultural exchange.

NOTES


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Angelica Goodden is Fellow and Tutor at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. She has a particular interest in women artists and writers and has written several books on the literature and culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with biographies of the artists Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Angelica Kauffmann. Product details. Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1st edition (May 15, 2008). Language: English. Hardcover: 320 pages. #3,973 in Women Author Literary Criticism. Start reading Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile on your Kindle in under a minute. Don't have a Kindle? Get your Kindle here, or download a FREE Kindle Reading App. Review. This biography of Staël opens by asking 'How does writing beget exile, and exile writing?', and in response the nine chronologically ordered chapters offer insightful and bold analysis of Staël's life and mentality. (Forum for Modern Language Studies). a detailed and elaborate reconstruction of the experience of exile in relation to the forging of de Stael's major literary works (Biancamaria Fontana, Times Literary Supplement). Goodden gives many illuminating examples, and points clearly to the tension between Staël's desire for personal freedom and her shift Exile, which was meant to imprison her, paradoxically gave Madame de Stael a freedom that enabled her to be as active a dissident as any woman in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was capable of being. Repeatedly banished for her nonconformism, she felt she had been made to suffer twice over, first for political daring and then for daring, as a woman, to be political (a particularly grave offence in the eyes of the misogynist Napoleon). About the Author: Angelica Goodden is Fellow and Tutor at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Read "Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile" by Angelica Goodden available from Rakuten Kobo. How does exile beget writing, and writing exile? What kind of writing can both be fuelled by absence and prolong it? Exi...Â You submitted the following rating and review. We'll publish them on our site once we've reviewed them. 1. Madame de Staël book. Read reviews from worldâ€™s largest community for readers. How does exile beget writing, and writing exile? What kind of writing can both be fuelled by absence and prolong it?Â Preview â€œ Madame de Staël by Angelica Goodden. Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile. by. Angelica Goodden. 0.00 Â· Rating details. Â· 0 ratings Â· 0 reviews. How does exile beget writing, and writing exile? What kind of writing can both be fuelled by absence and prolong it?Â Kindle Edition, 339 pages. Published March 6th 2008 by OUP Oxford. More Details ASIN.Â Start your review of Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile. Write a review. Sincerae marked it as to-read Apr 27, 2020. new topic. Discuss This Book. There are no discussion topics on this book yet. Be the first to start one ». Share.