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Catherine Dubeau, *La Lettre et la mère: Roman familial et écriture de la passion chez Suzanne Necker et Germaine de Staël*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2013, 468 pp. Appendices, chronology, bibliography, index. \$82.46 U.S., ISBN 978-2-7056-8748-9.

Review by Nanette Le Coat, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.

The paradigm of the family romance is particularly apt for analyzing the genesis of the recurring patterns and obsessive motifs of a writer's oeuvre. Freud coined the term to refer to an idealized version of family history in which neurotic individuals sought to overcome disillusionment with their parents' imperfections and redefine their personal identities. Catherine Dubeau finds the notion useful in answering the fundamental question governing her study: How did the mother-daughter relationship affect the acts of reading and writing as practiced by Suzanne Necker and her daughter Germaine de Staël? Dubeau points to the limitations of both the original Freudian concept and the feminist critique it generated. In the feminist view, Freud failed to acknowledge adequately the female child's oscillation between hostility and identification with regard to the mother, but Dubeau wishes to move beyond the confines of feminist literary analysis. The explanatory power of the family romance is not limited to fiction. In both women's writings family-generated themes surface in journals, philosophical treatises and intimate correspondence as well novels. Nor is the notion of family romance limited to the realm of the individual psyche.[1] Dubeau argues that the family romance paradigm needs to be understood in both psychoanalytic and sociological terms because within an individual's specific sociological context, family patterns are continually being re-enacted.

The interplay between personal psyche and social context is explored in the early chapters Dubeau devotes to Suzanne Necker. Drawing on a reading of intimate letters preserved in the *Mélanges* and *Nouveaux mélanges*, Dubeau identifies as key to Suzanne's personality an ambivalent relationship with her mother, towards whom she displayed insufficient filial affection in her last years. This lapse was to haunt Suzanne for the rest of her life, and she developed an unbending moral code as a way of critiquing and controlling her subsequent behavior. This sense of personal culpability fit easily into the collective psyche of the Calvinist milieu in which she was raised. Suzanne found further intellectual justification for compensatory self-denial in the Stoics whose ideal of self-mastery she saw as a reliable antidote to the seduction of the passions. Suzanne would thus bequeath to her daughter a double legacy of a conflicted maternal relationship and a philosophical tool-kit with which to handle the powerful emotions it elicited.

Character and temperament had much to do with how Suzanne Necker adapted to the social role in which she was cast. As the wife of Jacques Necker, she was expected to preside over a salon. Anxious, self-conscious, and high-minded, Suzanne Necker's personality did not square well with the highly codified rules of this worldly milieu. She had not enjoyed the benefit of a long apprenticeship in the exclusive social world of the Parisian salon, and it was only by dint of hard work and perseverance that she was able to overcome public criticism of her style and make the Necker salon into one of the most prestigious in the city.

What came with great difficulty to Suzanne came completely naturally to the young Germaine. Her mother's salon became her own private school and the most renowned philosophers, literary and political figures of Parisian society her personal tutors. In this exceptional environment, Germaine began to cultivate her dazzling conversational gift, one which her father, Jacques Necker, readily recognized. If Germaine's talent inspired her father's admiration, it provoked anxiety and envy on the part of her mother. As Mme Necker grew older, she felt increasingly threatened by her daughter's self-confident brilliance. She found ways of subtly criticizing what she perceived as Germaine's flamboyance and indiscretion. Dubeau argues that while this mother-daughter rivalry has been widely acknowledged by critics, its profound psychic consequences have not. Guilt and competition, envy and repressed hostility—these emotions powerfully shaped both women's behavior and constituted the emotional reservoir that they drew upon for their writing. "L'écriture semble transformer la culpabilité en rédemption, du moins offrir un rempart—infiniment fragile—contre la chute dans l'abîme" (p. 116).

While many critics have seen Staël's heroines enmeshed in a battle against the forces of patriarchy, Dubeau identifies clashes with maternal figures as the most formidable conflicts. The struggle with her mother was played out in a variety of ways in Staël's fictional writing. While the mother figure was repeatedly portrayed as despotic, the daughter figure was not entirely blameless. Staël's heroines made little effort to hide their sense of superiority and did not hesitate to use their seductive powers to win the male protagonists. They thus willingly participated in a dynamic of competition and rivalry with the mother figure. Thus Staël's early play, *Sophie, ou les sentiments secrets* told the story of young woman who falls in love with her adoptive father provoking a rivalry with her adoptive mother. In Dubeau's reading of *Jane Gray*, a play published contemporaneously with *Sophie*, the heroine's tragic end is interpreted as the expiation for her defiance of her mother's will concerning her choice of a marriage partner. But it was in Staël's two novels that the mother-daughter conflict was most fully explored. Staël's first novel *Delphine* presented a series of female figures, some kindly, others, like Sophie de Vernon, treacherous, who intervened in Delphine's fate and conspired to prevent her from marrying her beloved Léonce.

Dubeau is not the first to liken the relationship between Delphine and Mme de Vernon to that of Germaine de Staël and her mother, but she is insightful in analyzing the feelings of debt and obligation that bind mother and daughter. As the preface of the second version of the novel makes clear, Staël struggled with a conflict between a sense of her own responsibility for the difficulties that had befallen her and feelings of profound resentment towards a mother who was totally unforgiving of her daughter's infractions against her rigid moral code. The Terror served not only as an historical setting for the novel but also represented the emotional landscape of Germaine de Staël's relationship with her mother. Mme Necker's absolutist hold over her daughter's psyche was such that even after her death, her opinions and attitudes continued to hold sway. Germaine explicitly likened her mother's despotism to the tyranny of the Jacobins and, later, to that of Bonaparte.

In her second great novel, *Corinne*, Staël reprised the theme of maternal coldness and rejection, only this time the mother figure was split between a stepmother, the judgmental and rigid Lady Edgermond, and a warm and accepting birth mother whose premature death permanently destabilized the heroine's identity. The ground-breaking readings of *Corinne* by Madelyn Gutwirth and Marie-Claire Vallois already have had much to say about the mother-daughter relationships that figured so prominently in the novel, so in this regard Dubeau is on well-trodden territory.<sup>[2]</sup> She is more original in showing how Staël explored in fictional terms a problem that had long preoccupied her: the difficulty of finding a balance between freedom and repression in the governance of the passions. The conflict between Corinne and the Edgermonds is both familial and national. Whereas Corinne represents Italy and the values of spontaneity, individual genius, and freedom from the censoriousness of public opinion, Oswald's English family represents the tyranny of mediocrity and the stifling of individual expression in the name of order and duty. The chief exemplar of this repressive social code is Madame Edgermond, Suzanne Necker's avatar. Corinne and Oswald argue about the cause of Italian subjugation. For Oswald, Italy has become vulnerable because its people do not know how to govern their passions. For Corinne,

Italy has become weakened by a tyrannical government. Thus, once again Staël drew implicit comparisons between the familial despotism of her mother and the brutal suppression of freedom and public opinion imposed by Bonaparte.

One of the book's most compelling arguments is that the narrative of family romance is not limited to fiction alone. Domestic conflict is so integral to the mother-daughter relationship, it permeates all forms of their writing, including journals, personal letters and philosophical disquisitions. Thus, in what Dubeau describes as a literary duel, Suzanne Necker and Germaine de Staël battle it out in two passionately personal essays ostensibly addressed to broader social questions. Mme Necker's *Réflexions sur le divorce* was nominally motivated by the desire to speak out against a law enacted in 1792 by the National Assembly legalizing divorce, while Germaine de Staël's *De l'influence des passions sur le Bonheur des nations et des individus*, written during the height of the Terror, represented the author's effort to come to terms with violent and intractable passions that were ravaging the French nation. In Dubeau's telling, however, both texts have a back story. The motivation for Mme Necker's discourse on divorce was her fury at her daughter's adulterous relationship with Narbonne and her open talk of divorce. The work was both a defense and an attack. In defending the indissolubility of marital vows, Suzanne Necker presented her own marriage to Staël's father as the very model of conjugal harmony. Placing the responsibility for social stability on the shoulders of women, Mme Necker bitterly condemned women who reject their "natural protectors," thereby depriving their children of the support their weakness demands. Her target audience was thus both the general public and the daughter whose moral conduct she found so reprehensible.

Staël's essay was similarly defensive and aggressive. The destructive power of the passions lay in the powerlessness and vulnerability they foster. In order to avoid these dangerous effects, Staël recommended a "système de vie" that would be constantly vigilant against the passions and that would redirect the individual's energies to productive outlets such as philosophy, study, or good works. This model of constraint owed much to the stoical outlook favored by her mother. The subtext of Staël's treatise was far less tranquil, however. Staël's effort at philosophical detachment was necessitated by the fact that those who by all rights should love her the most are those who have withheld the love she craves. The origin of her psychic trauma—the failure to achieve a bond with her mother—became the basis of all subsequent disappointments in love. The essay reveals the tension between Staël's lifelong effort to satisfy her mother's expectations and the anger and disappointment at failing to do so. Ultimately, Staël would reject her mother's stoical solution for the problem of the passions and turn to the novel as a way of exploring the dialectic between reason and sensibility.

Dubeau's study contributes in a number of ways to our understanding of the period and our deeper appreciation of Staël's work. Gifted women in the late eighteenth century found themselves held back in particularly frustrating ways. Recipients of a highly advanced education, one that equaled that of their male counterparts, they were nonetheless discouraged from their efforts to find a meaningful scope for their ambitions. As Staël's experience shows, women themselves, women like Suzanne Necker, were paradoxically the most powerful enforcers of the patriarchal values opposing women's intellectual and social advancement. In another paradox, however, a struggle that might have defeated a woman of lesser energies, Staël's conflict with her mother did not discourage her writing but immeasurably enriched it.

## NOTES

[1] The compulsive repetition of familial patterns can also help explain the production of historical events, as did Lynn Hunt in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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[2] Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: the Emergence of the Novelist as Woman* (Urbana/Chicago/London: University of Illinois Press, 1978) and Marie-Claire Vallois, *Fictions féminines: Mme de Staël et les voix de la Sibylle* (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1987).

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