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Angelica Goodden, *Madame de Staël: The Dangerous Exile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. viii + 332 pp. Introduction, bibliography, and index. £45.00. ISBN 978-0-19-923809-5.

Review by Karyna Szmurlo, Clemson University

Although there has been a recent resurgence in Staël biographies, Angelica Goodden's volume certainly stands out. [1] 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 furor. 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 “dispiriting 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 Germaine (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 subjugated 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 Révolution 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

[1] The following titles are among most recent biographical studies: Michel Winock, *Madame de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Renée Winegarten, *Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Germaine de Staël: The First Modern Woman* (New York: Atlas, 2008); Sergine Dixon, *Germaine de Staël, Daughter of the Enlightenment* (Amherst, Mass.: Prometheus Books, 2007); Maria Fairweather, *Madame de Staël: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005); Victoria Schmidt, *Triumph in Exile* (New York: Chaucer Press, 2002), and Jean-Denis Bredin, *Une singulière famille* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

[2] Karyna Szmurlo, "Pour un état des lieux de la recherche américaine: Germaine de Staël dans le discours de la modernité," *Cahiers staëliens* 57 (2006):15-31.

[3] See among others Robert Casillo, *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the Idea of Italy* (Macmillan: New York, 2006) or Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

[4] Clifford Siskin and William Warner, eds., *This is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the Form of an Argument* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2010) and Karyna Szmurlo, ed., *Germaine de Staël: Forging a Politics of Mediation* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Oxford University, 2011).

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