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Annie Jourdan, *Le Rendez-vous manqué: Germaine de Staël, une femme d'influence face à Napoléon*. Paris: Flammarion, 2023. 400 pp. Notes. \$39.63 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9782080244840.

Review by Barbara Woshinsky, Professor Emerita, University of Miami.

Among the opponents of Napoleon's regime, few were more harshly treated than Germaine de Staël. The author of books that brought early Romanticism and liberal political ideas into France, Staël was repeatedly exiled by the emperor. Yet Annie Jourdan asks a seemingly counterintuitive question: in an alternate history, might these two superior beings have come together? The text is scattered with such might-have-beens ("aurait été" [p. 187]). However appealing, these speculations are vain: given Napoleon's background and character, any attempted rapprochement was bound to fail. The true contribution of this work lies elsewhere. By focusing on gender, the author illuminates the complex situation of a gifted woman at the turn of the nineteenth century—perhaps of any century.[1]

Annie Jourdan, an emerita researcher at the University of Amsterdam, enjoys an international reputation as a historian of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. Her recent books include *L'Empire de Napoléon*, *La Révolution française*, and *Napoléon: Héros, Imperator, Mécène*. [2] *Le Rendez-vous manqué* seemingly aims to attract both specialists and non-specialists. Jourdan writes in a clear, informal style, and her sentences are often sprinkled, like Staël's own, with exclamation points. There are footnotes, but the bibliography is brief. For studies in English, the reader is referred to a website. The work draws heavily upon the vast array of original documents Jourdan employed in her earlier works, including the recently published complete correspondences of Staël and Napoleon. While her prolific research contributes to the book's authority, this dense, discursive account, arranged in thematic rather than chronological order, can become repetitive and enmesh the reader in so much detail that a timetable and index would have been helpful.

Jourdan introduces her theme with a literal *rendez-vous* between the two, said to have taken place in 1798. At that time, Germaine viewed Bonaparte as a genius and national hero whom she hoped to charm. Napoleon, however, disliked and feared intellectual women. In a frequently quoted exchange, Germaine purportedly asked him: "...quelle serait pour vous la première des femmes?" To which Napoleon would have answered: "Celle qui fait le plus d'enfants, Madame" (p. 17). Jourdan notes that there is doubt among witnesses as to whether this *boutade* was actually pronounced by Napoleon or invented by Staël's detractors. In either case, this anecdote dramatizes the conflict between Germaine's aspirations and the social prejudices surrounding her.

The main body of the book comprises four chapters, divided into short, episodic sections. The first, “L’amour est l’histoire de la vie des femmes,” examines Germaine’s early life, her arranged marriage at nineteen to the baron de Staël-Holstein, and her subsequent love affairs. Germaine Necker was the precocious only child of Jacques Necker, a Swiss banker turned statesman who became Louis XVI’s *intendant des finances*. Growing up in the Necker salon, she absorbed the conversation of famous figures of the Enlightenment while admired and praised for her intelligence. But dissonant forces soon weighed upon Germaine’s development. By contemporary standards of woman’s beauty that extolled slimness and blondness, she was considered ugly. Her positive traits included large, expressive eyes and lovely arms and shoulders, but she had inherited the strong masculine features of her father. Worse, her complexion was deemed dark, even “noirarde” (p. 37). Jourdan does not comment on the implicit racism of this observation. Staël compensated by developing her own style of dress, wearing turbans and low-cut dresses to show off her assets. Thus, she exemplifies the conflict lived by many women even today: though bright and ambitious, she was imbued with the need to please men, and then criticized for her attempts to get their attention.

The young Germaine also absorbed romantic ideas of love. She wrote in her journal: “Quelle délice d’avoir pour époux celui dont le pas, dont la voix ferait tressaillir mon coeur” (p. 38). At the same time, she was aware of women’s subordinate place in society. Forbidden to play an openly public role, the only way for a superior woman to realize herself was through a union with a “grand homme” (p. 40). Staël’s model for this great man was her father, who gave her the love and support she never received from her cold and critical mother. [3] On the other hand, Napoleon’s hatred of Necker contributed to his hostility towards her. An arranged marriage soon disabused Germaine of romantic illusions: M. de Staël proved a distant husband, only interested in the Necker money. Germaine soon began a series of affairs, the most important being her twenty-year connection with the writer and politician Benjamin Constant—less a passionate liaison than an intellectual intimacy. Count Louis de Narbonne was another of her lovers and the father of two of her five children.

The second and shortest chapter, “La religion de l’amitié,” pursues the book’s central theme, asking whether Napoleon and Germaine at least “could have been” friends. She was after all close to Napoleon’s brothers, who continued to intercede for her until the emperor totally forbade it. Most of Staël’s friends were men, some of whom, like Narbonne, were also her former lovers. Exceptionally, she had a long friendship with the beautiful Mme Récamier. The contacts she made with intellectuals and political leaders during her foreign journeys helped build her international reputation. Germaine also suffered betrayals as her former allies shifted with the political winds. Notably, Talleyrand, one of her oldest friends, turned against her and maligned her to Napoleon.

In the last two chapters, Jourdan finally arrives at the heart of her topic: “la petite guerre” between Staël and Napoleon. As her political views evolved towards republicanism and Napoleon’s rule became more despotic, Staël’s original enthusiasm for him gave way to criticism. In retaliation, Napoleon exiled her repeatedly, first banning her from Paris, then restricting her to Coppet, the Necker estate near Lausanne, where his network of spies continued to report her every word. She was still able to maintain a salon and host theater performances until he imposed even more severe limits. Certain visitors were forbidden access to Coppet, while others stayed away out of fear of losing imperial favor. Staël recounted this long persecution in her last book, *Dix Années d’Exil*, begun in 1810 and published posthumously in 1821. As a literal child of the

salon who needed society and admiration to live, she suffered cruelly from this isolation, writing “c’est la mort en miniature, cela” (p. 234). Under the stress of her situation, she began taking opium, which practice may have shortened her life.

Yet Germaine did not remain a passive prisoner. Evading Napoleon’s interdictions, she returned to France on several occasions. In the book’s most exciting episode, she escaped from Coppet under the noses of Napoleon’s police. They did not notice her absence for days. Using false passports, she traveled through eastern Europe to Russia in 1812, then on to Sweden, where she helped convince Crown Prince Bernadotte to form a coalition with Russia against Napoleon. The emperor’s fears were thus realized: Staël did contribute to his downfall. On his brief return to France in 1815, Napoleon invited her to meet with him, as a condition for recovering the two million francs her father had lent the French government. She refused. This *rendez-vous manqué* effectively bookends the narrative structure of the work.

This examination of “la petite guerre” between Germaine and the emperor uncovers two complementary mysteries without completely resolving them. The first concerns Germaine’s long-held belief in a possible rapprochement with Napoleon. Despite his repeatedly maligning and exiling her, despite her growing dislike of his policies, she kept hoping that her next book would win his favor. The opposite was true: Napoleon disdained *Corinne ou l’Italie* (1807) because Staël did not mention him once, and her positive descriptions of German culture caused *De l’Allemagne* to be banned in France (only appearing in 1813, in an English translation). Even then, she continued writing to Napoleon, asking him to change his mind. Some writers have interpreted her unrealistic attitude as a strategy employed to impress her friends and family. Yet for much of her life, Germaine may really have believed that she and Napoleon were made for one another—she just needed to convince him of it.

The second mystery is even more puzzling. Why did Napoleon take her—a mere woman—so seriously? As the author notes, the pervasive misogyny of the time was especially poisonous when directed against a strong, talented female. Moreover, Napoleon came from a conservative Corsican background where women were supposed to stay home, knit, and produce children. Seeing females as inferior beings, he consistently underestimated “cette folle de Mme de Staël,” ascribing her actions to female weakness rather than authentic political principles (p. 262).

Furthermore, as he evolved from a lover of Rousseau and Ossian (ironically, a fictitious Irish poet) into a Machiavellian tyrant, the emperor would brook no opposition. In 1807, he wrote to Germaine’s son, Auguste: “Paris...c’est le lieu de ma résidence, et *je ne veux y souffrir que des personnes qui m’aiment*” (p. 274, emphasis added). He was particularly sensitive to mockery, and her clever neologism “idéophobe” clearly irked him (p. 210). Yet these factors do not completely account for the paranoid obsession of an emperor with a woman who played no direct political role. Perhaps a deeper psychological examination is called for: was he reacting against a strong mother figure? Along with an inflated ego, did he harbor a deep sense of inferiority? Jourdan does not attempt to answer these questions. Perhaps, given the lack of documentation on Napoleon’s early life, they must remain at the level of speculation.

The book’s conclusion teases out parallels and oppositions between the two protagonists. Though Napoleon was four years younger, they both died at the same early age of fifty-one. Both were ambitious egotists, convinced of their superiority and concerned for their legacy. Staël wished for literary fame but is better known for her political stance while Napoleon tried to polish

his reputation through the memoirs he wrote in exile. On the other hand, they exhibited strong moral differences. While Germaine hated war, Napoleon was indifferent to the carnage he caused: the Napoleonic era was the bloodiest in French history until World War I. In a final irony, Napoleon suffered an exile crueler than the one he had imposed on her. Having read this book, one feels it to have been a just retribution.

In conclusion, while Jourdan appears sincerely intrigued by the possibility of a relationship between Staël and Bonaparte, it seems at times that the “rendez-vous manqué” is a convenient hook on which to hang a Staël biography. Much of the material, though fascinating, is not directly related to its theme. Nevertheless, this focus highlights an important if unintended result of Napoleon’s enmity. His persecution of Staël ironically gave her power she would not otherwise have had, turning her into a *femme d’influence* on a European scale. It was largely his persecutions that spurred her to travel abroad, to write the books, and to forge the cultural and political connections that made her reputation. With a bit of license, one might translate the French phrase *femme d’influence* into the current expression “influencer.” Before X, Meta, and Instagram, Staël extended her social networks through published writing, correspondence, salon conversation, travel—and Napoleon’s hostile actions. In a final irony, he helped create his own intimate enemy.

## NOTES

[1] Jourdan considers Michel Winock’s *Mme de Staël* (Paris: Fayard, 2010) “la meilleure biographie à tout point de vue” (p. 384). But in this journal, Helena Rosenblatt criticized Winock’s depiction of Staël as a “hopelessly divided creature,” caught between her reason and her emotions (*H-France Review* Vol. 11 [November 2011] No. 243, p. 3). Jourdan implicitly refutes Winock’s view.

[2] Annie Jourdan, *L’Empire de Napoléon* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), *La Révolution française, une histoire à repenser* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021) and *Napoléon: Héros, Imperator, Mécène* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021).

[3] For a perceptive analysis of Germaine’s family life, see J. Christopher Herold’s *Mistress to an Age* (Indianapolis and New York: 1958; New York: Grove Press, 2002), which won the National Book Award in 1959. While Herold lacked access to all the original sources that Jourdan employs, his insights into Staël and her entourage remain cogent.

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