

Book Review

John Claiborne Isbell: *Staël, Romanticism and Revolution: The Life and Times of the First European*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xvi, 289.)

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Germaine de Staël's initial foray into publication is sometimes presented as partly involuntary. While it was something of a literary conceit to claim that your occasional verse had been stolen from your portfolio or that well-meaning friends had insisted you should allow the wider world to read your prose, circumstantial evidence suggests that the author was not at first intent on her 1788 *Lettres sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* being circulated widely. A complicated network of pirate versions but also ones she tolerated marked her entry into what John Claiborne Isbell rightly terms "a public career against which she protested, if she did not fight" (13). He affirms this in a 1999 article, originally published in French (but given here in English), which concludes with a full bibliographical description of sixteen duly analyzed editions. Like the earlier version of this one, many excellent articles appear in edited volumes, Festschriften, or journals with a limited readership. It is in many ways a service to the profession, when they display some form of thematic unity, to bring such texts together in a single volume (and in one language). Despite what one might be led to expect, such an initiative is more or less exactly what lies at the core of John Claiborne Isbell's *Staël, Romanticism and Revolution: The Life and Times of the First European*, although it appears in a series which has as its purported aim "to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies." The overarching title, with its unexpected ordering of the two nouns (French Romanticism, in chronological terms, is generally considered to be post- rather than prerevolutionary), suggests a narrative which is replaced here by the largely chronological ordering of the component parts.

This is not, as one might think, glancing at the cover, a rival to Maria Fairweather's 2006 biography. Rather than the monograph at which the engaging subtitle too appears to hint, it is a set of seventeen chapters, two-thirds of which, like the one mentioned above, had already been published as separate articles in various places over twenty years ago. Some of the footnotes pay lip service to more recent bibliographical references, but without taking on arguments or affording a real overview of Staël scholarship over the last quarter of a century. To take just one example, one might have expected that in a volume on *Staël, Romanticism and Revolution* there might be some engagement with Aurelian Craiutu's work—including his edition

of the English translation of the *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* (Liberty Fund, 2008)—beyond a reference to a short article in the bibliography. The same could be said of many other important recent publications in both French and English, and it seems a pity that when the author went to the trouble of translating several pieces or revising some of the notes, he did not go one step further. The previously unpublished chapters include seven promising pages on *De l'influence des passions* which are crying out for development into a full-blown article, a brief presentation of *De la littérature*, and a curious piece "Suicide, Meaning, and Power in *Delphine*," which asks: "Was Staël's suicide fixation some sort of cry for help? Was it sociogenic, feminist, or proof of true love or a great soul?" (70) before evoking the well-documented reception of the novel.

This is a handsome hardback which runs to nearly three hundred pages and reproduces a somewhat dark close-up of Corinne and Oswald from François Gérard's well-known painting *Corinne au Cap Misène* on its cover. Unfortunately the pages of the first few articles come unstuck (at least in my copy) as you turn them. The volume opens with a perfectly referenced epigraph drawn from a May 5, 1814, letter written from London by Staël to Karoline von Häsel, baronne von Berg, given as follows: "L'exil m'a fait perdre les racines qui me liaient à la France et je suis devenue par mes goûts européenne" (Exile made me lose the roots which tied me to France and through my taste I became European). In reality, as a quick check in the *Correspondance générale* confirms, what Staël admitted she had lost were not the roots which tied her to France but "les racines qui me liaient à Paris." She goes on to write that France still "hurts" her ("la France me fait toujours mal") and adds that she still feels French in that respect ("c'est en cela que je me sens française"). Substituting France for Paris may seem anecdotal to a nonspecialist. It is anything but. Staël spent several periods of her life in exile within France in Normandy or Touraine. She was as unhappy as she could be, indeed at some times possibly unhappier than when she was outside France. Paris was the metropolis with which she identified. She was born there and it was, for her, the intellectual and political center of Europe. Nothing, she would write in her *Considérations*, could ever match Parisian society's joint brilliance and seriousness during the three or four first years of the Revolution, between, she said, 1788 and the end of 1791. This is central to her experience of Revolution, to her conception of Romanticism and to her active participation in a cross-border intellectual movement. The shift from the woman who felt that the French capital was necessary for her well-being to the dazzling hostess of Coppet and melancholy exile who, when she returned to die prematurely in Paris, in 1817, was arguably the most famous woman of her era, is a crucial one which warrants examination. A study both of the *First European's* life and times and of the links between the French Revolution and Romanticism in her works and their influence must take on this question. There is much of interest in

the seventeen “chapters” on Germaine de Staël and her works but the book on Staël, Romanticism, and Revolution still remains to be written.

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