

Love Letters and the Romantic Novel during the Napoleonic Wars

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By

Sharon Worley

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PREFACE

In *Love Letters and the Romantic Novel during the Napoleonic Wars*, Dr. Sharon Worley examines the correspondence of some of the 18th and 19th centuries' most celebrated leaders, seducers, writers, beauties, and politicians. This book contains missives penned by Napoleon, his younger brother Lucien Bonaparte, Talleyrand, Lord Nelson, Lady Hamilton, Chateaubriand, Germaine de Staël, Juliette Récamier, and more. Dr. Worley provides a biographical and cultural context for the letters so that a topical narrative supports the correspondence. Whether written on the battlefield or in the boudoir, this collection reinforces the power of words to seduce and conquer long before the existence of modern communication forms like email and text messages.

Of particular interest are Napoleon's letters, which make the past come alive in a palpable wave of emotion. Since the young general's victories began shortly after his conquest of the alluring Josephine in 1795, Dr. Worley cleverly illuminates the link between Napoleon's romantic interests and his military tactics. Bonaparte's vibrant letters to his bride rank among the world's most passionate declarations of love and provide invaluable insights into his psyche. In 2004 I wrote a preface to Ravenhall Publishing's illuminating collection of Napoleon's letters to Josephine, and Dr. Worley's book extends that fascinating story by including the Emperor's later correspondence with his Polish mistress Marie Walewska and second wife Marie Louise.

Like most men in the early 1800s, Napoleon admittedly preferred women that were aesthetically appealing and shunned intellectually substantive women, like the contumacious Mme. de Staël. Dr. Worley addresses the salient issue of how gender identity affected male and female relationships in this era—a recurring theme throughout her book. She emphasizes the stark differences between what was socially acceptable for men and women during the Directory, Consulate, and First Empire. Few opportunities existed for females other than the roles of mother, lover, or muse, and, as Dr. Worley points out, only a few trailblazers like Mary Wollstonecraft could even envisage gender equality. While men marched to war women waited at home, and the letters included here serve as a link between the male and female experiences during the early 1800s.

Diana Reid Haig, August 2016

INTRODUCTION

My Mistress and My Friend: ...

This brings to my mind a fact in astronomy, which is, that the further the poles are from the sun, notwithstanding, the more scorching is the heat. Thus, it is with our love; absence has placed distance between us, nevertheless fervor increases—at least on my part.¹ (Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn)

When Henry VIII used the analogy of astronomy to describe his love for Anne Boleyn, he expressed his desire and longing through gender biased language. The science of sexual reciprocation was simple. Men extended their offers of love and attraction and women generally reciprocated without resistance. Powerless in the fields of both science and politics, women responded in the genres of the romantic novel and love letter to the coded gender biased language of men. The topic of gender in love letters and the romantic novel during the Napoleonic era has not been addressed in an independent study, though certainly it is a relevant topic, particularly in the context of war. The Napoleonic wars were a period of intense romantic conquests as well as military conquests. The romantic novel contributed to a new fascination with the romantic relationship through the exploration of the individual's subjective feelings. At the same time, the Romantic movement encouraged women's independence, despite their lost bid for universal suffrage during the French Revolution.

The Napoleonic Empire, by contrast, cast rigid gender role models for men and women in the empire style of neoclassicism. This program was essential to the imperial aspirations of Napoleon. Men had to follow his example as the sole emperor who issued commands and demanded complete subservience. The contradiction between the women's suffrage movement and Napoleonic imperialism lends itself to the analysis of the love letter and romantic novel from the perspective of both historic and modern post-structural literary criticism. Condorcet and Mary Wollstonecraft laid the foundation for universal gender suffrage during the French Revolution, while postmodern theorist Michael Foucault

¹ Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, *The Love Letters of Great Men*, Ed. Ursula Doyle (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 8.

emphasizes the gender-biased language of culture in his *The History of Sexuality* (1976). In the early modern period, Carl Jung deviated from Freud's theory of sex and gender development by espousing universal gendered archetypes in his *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912). Gender roles were firmly established by the *Ancien Regime* society of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in which members of the Napoleonic era spent their youth. This same generation witnessed the overthrow of the monarchy, while Enlightenment philosophers, such as Condorcet, challenged existing gender role models with new definitions.² The gender biases of Napoleonic society were supported by both language and dress. This coded bias is also present in epistolary and fiction writing, particularly in women's writing.

The modern independent characters created by romantic authors react against the rigid gender stereotyping of centuries of patriarchal European civilization and monarchy. Inspired by the revolutionary emphasis on universal equality, authors sought to explore their emotions and pursue independent experiences, unshackled by traditional gender role models. At the same time, the new public accessibility to theatre, visual arts and print media created a market for experimentation in role-playing. Thus, when feminist authors such as Germaine de Staël approached gender role models, they sought to draft a new Enlightenment sensibility of gender equality.

Love letters have been the subject of several recent publications which reproduce those of famous authors, musicians, artists or historical persons. Dan Hofstadter's *The Love Affair as a Work of Art* (1997) addresses love letters by famous romantic novelists within a scholarly cultural context, such as the Napoleonic era lovers Benjamin Constant and Staël, and Juliette Recamier and Chateaubriand, among other French authors. Examples of anthologies of love letters include David Lowenhertz's *The 50 Greatest Love Letters of all Time*, which reproduces the love letters of such literary and artistic luminaries as John Ruskin, Mozart, Michelangelo, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.³ Ursula Doyle's *Love Letters of Great Men* (2008) includes Henry VIII's love letter to Anne Boleyn, Victor Hugo and other important cultural heroes, such as Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare, as well as Napoleon and Admiral Nelson.⁴ The 2012 Renaissance Classics edition is retitled *Love Letters of*

² Sophie Delahaye, "La femme selon L'Encyclopédie," *Women in French Studies* 15, no.1 (2007): 98-109.

³ Dan Hofstadter, *The Love Affair as a Work of Art* (NY: Noonday Press, 1997); David Lowenhertz, *The 50 Greatest Love Letters of All Time* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2002).

⁴ Doyle, *The Love Letters of Great Men*.

Great Men: The Collection Drawn from by Carrie Bradshaw in "Sex in the City," and is further subtitled: *from Beethoven to Bonaparte, and Beyond*. John Bradshaw's *98 Love Letters that will bring you to your Knees* (2009) begins with Abigail and John Adams and includes Mary Wollstonecraft, Lord Byron, Mary Wordsworth and Napoleon.⁵ C.H. Charles' *Love Letters of Great Men and Women from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* is a new illustrated reprint of the 1924 edition which begins with Beethoven and ends with William Wordsworth.⁶ *The World's Greatest Love Letters* (2011) compiled by Michael Kelahan also includes the Romantics and Napoleon, among other great literary lovers.

The importance of Napoleon's love letters is indicated by their inclusion in these broader anthologies; in addition to the literary artistry of his love letters, which were intended for posterity, the age of Napoleon was one in which romance was an important cultural element. It was an artistic social form which evolved from the rococo to the romantic era and one which authors increasingly sought to emulate. There are several publications titled *Napoleon's Letters to Josephine*, after the original 1931 edition edited by Leon Cerf and translated by Henry Bunn, such as Henry Foljambe Hall's *Napoleon's Letters to Josephine: Correspondence of War, Politics, Family and Love, 1796-1814* (2010) or *The Letters of Napoleon to Josephine* (2004).⁷ Film productions which focus on Napoleon and romance include the nine-part PBS miniseries *Napoleon and Love* (1974), which features an episode for each of Napoleon's lovers, *Napoleon and Josephine: A Love Story* (Warner Bros. 1987) starring Armand Assante and Jacqueline Bisset, and more recently the A&E Biography special *Napoleon: An Epic Life* (2002), starring Christian Clavier as Napoleon and Isabella Rosselini as Josephine, with Gerard Depardieu as the chief of police, Fouché, and John Malkovich as the diplomat, Talleyrand. This production places a special emphasis on the lifelong romantic relationship between Napoleon and Josephine.

⁵ John Bradshaw, *98 Love Letters that Will Bring You to Your Knees: Poems and Love Letters of Great Men and Women* (Seattle, WA: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2009).

⁶ C.H. Charles, *Love Letters of Great Men and Women from the Eighteenth-Century to the Present Day* (London: S. Paul and Co., 1924), reprint (Megalodon Entertainment, 2008).

⁷ Leon Cerf (ed.) and Henry Bunn (trans.), *Napoleon's Letters to Josephine* (NY: Bretano's, 1931); *The Letters of Napoleon to Josephine* (Welwyn Garden City: Ravenhall, 2004); Henry Foljambe Hall, *Napoleon's Letters to Josephine: Correspondence of War, Politics, Family and Love during 1796-1814* (UK: Leonaaur, 2010).

Surprisingly, none of these publications address the issue of gender in the love letter. The authors of love letters written during the Napoleonic wars assess traditional gender roles differently from other periods. Inspired by the example of medieval courtly love and the hero's quest, romantic authors created ideal characters whose sole source of inspiration is romantic love and devotion to a lover. The liberal romantics, including Staël and her sometimes lover Benjamin Constant, re-evaluate traditional gendered roles in romantic love, while the members of the Napoleonic aristocracy attempt to impose archaic standards in male-dominated relationships which reflect their militant dynastic aspirations. One thing is for certain: love was an indispensable element in socialization. The romantic novel made it the primary plot in pivotal works such as Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* or Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise*. The conflicts in these works revolve around the rejection of traditional monogamous and heterosexual relationships and gendered role models for men and women. Both male and female characters grapple with the implications of marital infidelity while rejecting gender role models in favor of their emotions.

The love letter also emerges as a significant literary genre during the Napoleonic era. Napoleon, the novelist, was inspired by the genre of the epistolary novel made popular by Rousseau and Goethe, and consciously developed the art of letter writing in real life as well as in his epistolary novel *Clisson and Eugenie*. This reciprocal relationship between fiction and life is a distinguishing feature of literature during the Napoleonic wars. Staël and Constant explored their feelings as well as their attitudes towards political independence and personal autonomy through the forum of the love letter and the romantic novel. While the liberal romantics equated individual freedom with political liberty, Napoleon and those who conformed to the dynastic model believed that the purpose of the love relationship was to strengthen the state and its military aristocracy. Thus, the emergence of the Napoleonic period hinges upon the reevaluation of love within the context of encroaching totalitarianism. The romantic lover was modern in his or her desire to reject social norms and values in favor of feelings. The Napoleonic lover was seeking to reinstate ancient feudal foundations through dynastic unions that ultimately limited political freedom and replaced it with a dictatorship inspired by Imperial Rome.

During the Rococo period of the court of Louis XV, the love letter became associated with the epistolary novel, as well as the rococo style of painting which features lighthearted scenes of romance among elegantly clad nobles. Epistolary novels of the period taking the form of a series of letters which reveal the romantic liaisons of couples include English author Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), which was followed by a

parody by Henry Fielding entitled *Shamela* (1741) and Richardson's *Clarissa* (1749), *Persian Letters* (1721) by Montesquieu, Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), and Choderlos Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782). While these seduction novels warned of the dangers awaiting sexually adventurous young women, the authors did not seek to alter the gender biased structure of society. They expose the gender inequity imposed on women by society, but do not advocate for women's rights and suffrage. By contrast, the post-revolutionary generation had lobbied for women's rights and witnessed the dismal failure to pass universal suffrage laws. The characters in the romantic novel challenge social norms and recognize that the revolutionary age can radically change society as well. Their antecedents lingered in the form of the rococo romance and the brothel. Freedom in love entailed a complicated set of rules which had to be navigated or circumvented. In the rococo style of visual arts, the gender invective is more severe; submissive, plump, pale pink nymphs and goddesses give in to male dominated gazes. There is no question of social gender equality. Images which specifically depict love letters perhaps hold more promise for equitable arrangements.

Francois Boucher's painting *The Love Letter* (1750) (fig. Intro-1) was commissioned by Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, and depicts two women in a pastoral setting sharing a love letter, which is held between them. Pompadour wielded considerable authority at court, and her commission of the love letter suggests her source of incontestable bureaucratic power which rivaled that of the queen.⁸ Boucher's contemporary, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, painted the same subject, *The Love Letter*, with a woman seated at her desk reading or composing a love letter while clutching a bouquet of flowers (fig. Intro-2). Dutch Baroque artist Jan Vermeer had previously painted the subject of the love letter, but here the demure modest lady receives the letter from a conservative maid who looks down on her (Rijksmuseum 1670).

By contrast, Louis-Leopold Boilly, who was active in Paris during the Revolution and Napoleonic era, was inspired by the genre themes of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, who celebrated middle class values, and the satire of William Hogarth, who was critical of aristocratic debauchery. Boilly addressed the culture of romantic love through a somewhat satiric rococo lens which united both traditions. Paintings such as *The Jealous Lover*, *The Visit Received* (1789), *Love Extinguishes It* (1790) (Musée Sandelin, Saint-Omer, France), *The Visit Returned* (fig. Intro-3) or *Push Hard*

⁸ Colin Jones, *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

(Norton Simon Art Foundation) revive the satire of Hogarth and express the foibles, exploitation and contradictions of romantic love and lust.⁹ His paintings entertain with satire, but are not intended to instruct like those of Hogarth, who sought to eliminate corruption among the aristocracy by exposing their depravity. Rather, this artist sentimentalizes the best impulses in society and laughs at the worst. While the liberal romantics and Napoleonic circles were inspired by the concept of free love which permeates rococo sentimentality, the politicization of love propounded by the neoclassical artists and authors is the point of reference for the romantic nominalization of the word “love.”

In contrast with their frivolous rococo predecessors, neoclassical artists, such as Jacques Louis David, painted stoic contemporary portraits and neoclassical scenes which feature the theme of love. The consequences of neoclassical love are both severe and deadly. When lovers give free reign to their feelings, states crumble and gods ordain retribution for mortal acts. The neoclassical emphasis on the patriotic consequences of love appears to have profoundly influenced the liberal romantic novelists. The plays of Racine and Corneille were performed throughout the Revolution and Napoleonic era. The heroine from Racine’s *Phèdre* was Staël’s favorite role which she performed in productions at her home at Coppet and abroad for the romantic intelligentsia of Germany.¹⁰ The cultural portrayal of the dramatic consequences of love is also consistent with the dramatic political shifts in power occurring during the French Revolution and Napoleonic era. David’s double portrait of *Antoine-Laurent and Marie-Anne Lavoisier* (1788) (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY) depicts a respectable married couple whose activities directly support the state interests. Lavoisier was a French aristocrat and chemist whose work advanced both chemistry and biology. His spouse, Marie, who studied under the artist to develop the skills to illustrate her husband’s theories, is depicted in a supporting posture as she stands beside him and encircles him with her embrace with one hand on his work table. She later edited and published his memoirs.¹¹ In the same year, on the eve of the Revolution, David painted *Helen and Paris* (1788) from Homer’s *Iliad*. Here, the fated couple assume a similar posture, with Helen standing on

⁹⁹ Susan L. Siegfried, *The Art of Louis-Léopold Boilly: Modern Life in Napoleonic France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Sharon Worley, *A Feminist Analysis of Gender and Primogeniture in French Neoclassical Tragedy: The Literary Politics behind the French Revolution* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 217-219.

¹¹ Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution, 1750-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 414-416.

the left while Paris holds her arm in one hand and his lyre in the other, while seated on a bench before the lovers' bed. Neoclassical subjects continued to be popular throughout the Napoleonic era and influenced contemporary concepts of love. The leading Italian neoclassical sculptor, Canova, carved *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss* (1793) and Francois Gerard painted *Psyche and Cupid* in 1798, while the subject of Staël's play, the suicide of the Greek poetess, Sappho, over unrequited love, is the subject of Jean Antoine Gros' painting *Sappho at Leucate* (1801) (Musée Baron Gerard, Bayeaux, France).

Love between men and women traditionally conformed to social standards. Nobles married to increase their collective wealth, and the middle class married for social and financial stability. However, romance emerged as a function of literary and artistic culture. Artificial constructs of social conversation and flirtation followed their own rules of etiquette. They were connected to salon culture where educated women met their male peers on equal footing as intellectuals. In romance, however, men and women followed the role models of previous generations which were established by court culture and expressed in art and literature.¹² Men were dashing and brave on the battleground and in politics. They looked to literary role models from classical antiquity and emerging romantic culture. Romanticism encouraged a departure from existing gender role models and placed a greater emphasis on the individual freedom. Women, whose monetary needs and vulnerability took precedence, continued to be the needy recipients of male affection and largess. Both parties acted upon their desires to engage in romantic liaisons. When confronted with shifting gender roles established by art and literature, romantic authors reacted against the status quo and the moral lessons it taught. Romanticism qualified the intense romantic feelings of the respective fictional characters, Werther and Julie, in their passionate feelings of love. The ethics of awkward love triangles notwithstanding, these characters erred when they rejected their feelings and refused their lovers. In their personal lives, authors such as Staël and Constant gave free reign to their flirtations and established romantic liaisons whenever and wherever they conveniently could. Constant's pattern of impulsive love relationships differed little from the established social standard for men. The rococo movement had encouraged free love as a fringe benefit of the aristocracy.¹³ Staël's

¹² Hermitage Rooms at Somerset House, Courtauld Institute of Art, and Gosudarstvennyĭ Ėrmitazh (Russia), *The Triumph of Eros: Art and Seduction in 18th-century France* (London: Fontanka, 2006).

¹³ Richard Rand, Juliette M. Bianco, and Mark Ledbury, *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-century France* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum

approach to free love, however, was the direct result of the struggle of the women's suffrage movement to gain independence in both the social and political spheres.¹⁴

One of the primary sources of literary entertainment among Napoleon's coterie in Paris in the first decade of the nineteenth-century was the evolving genre of the romantic novel. The romantic novel inspired the concomitant genre of love letters while exploring the feelings associated with transcending the accepted boundaries of social decorum in extramarital affairs. The two major romantic epistolary novels which circulated among the Napoleonic milieu of salon circles include Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774; 1787) and Rousseau's epistolary *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie, or the New Heloise) (1761). Inspired by these romantic works, Napoleon's novel *Clisson and Eugénie* (1795) and Staël's novel *Delphine* (1802) also incorporate love letters against the backdrop of war and revolution. Their characters become embroiled in the military maneuvers which ultimately claim their lives as their loyalties are divided between their duty to their loved ones and to the nation. The analysis of their love letters then offers the opportunity to examine the emergence of the genre based on the recent development of both philosophical theories of the emotions and the romantic novel.

Love letters during the Napoleonic wars were largely framed by concepts of love which were promoted through novels and philosophy. The standard texts, so to speak, which were written by major authors who inherited this Enlightenment bearing, responded to the emerging concepts of love found in novels and philosophical essays. Love among this Napoleonic coterie is unique because it demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between the love letter and the romantic novel. Staël, Récamier, Chateaubriand, Constant, Lady Emma Hamilton, Napoleon and his brother, Lucien Bonaparte, were the authors and recipients of some of the most passionate love letters. They were also avid readers of the newly emerging genre, the romantic novel, and most of them were also authors of romantic novels where they projected their personal romances onto the characterization of their fictional heroes and heroines. In addition, these authors lived through the recent French Revolution and the Terror. Imprisoned during the Revolution, or branded as emigrés upon their return

of Art, Dartmouth College, 1997); Emma Barker, "Rehabilitating the Rococo," *The Oxford Art Journal* (2009): 306-313.

¹⁴ Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Staël, Novelist: the Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

to Paris, their mature adult lives were spent in the shadows of the Napoleonic wars in which they shifted political loyalties as the specter of Napoleon's powers grew from First Consul to Emperor of Europe. The looming threat of war ignited the depths of their passions and inspired their intellectual analysis of love, happiness and suicide. Their evolving concept of love was a romantic all-consuming passion which gripped the lovers in fatal embraces. The analysis of their love letters and romantic novels reveals the emerging political landscape of democracy to empire through extended metaphors of love and patriotism.

Gendered roles have always been important in humanist culture. The romantic period was inspired by the revival of the humanist culture of Renaissance Florence. The love sonnets of Petrarch to Laura, and the love poems written by Lorenzo de Medici and Angelo Poliziano, emphasize the distinctly female gender roles in love relationships. The revival of Renaissance Italy directly impacted the art and literature of Napoleonic Europe. For example, the Florentine author and patriot Vittorio Alfieri revived the reign of the Medici Florence in his dramas *The Pazzi Conspiracy* and *Don Garcia*, while Antonio Canova, Italy's leading neoclassical sculptor, revived the gender idealism of classical Greece and Renaissance Italy in his interpretation of great lovers such as Cupid and Psyche.¹⁵

The self-conscious act of creating a body of work was practiced by all members of this circle. As they wrote to express their feelings of love and romance, they also wrote to make a historical record for posterity which added to an existing canon of work in the genre of the love letter. Empress Josephine promoted this fashion for the historic love letter by requesting the removal of the remains of the famous medieval lovers, Peter Abelard and Heloise (after whom Rousseau subtitled his novel), to Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. Following Josephine's death in 1814 at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the remains of the famous medieval lovers were transferred to Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris in 1817, a place which became a fashionable burial ground for romantic artists and intellectuals.¹⁶ Abelard was a monk and teacher at the Gothic Cathedral School of Paris. He accepted a young pupil and novice, Heloise, with whom he began an affair in 1119. When her uncle, Canon Fulbert, discovered the affair, Abelard was punished with castration and Heloise was sent to a convent.

¹⁵ Sharon Worley, *Louise Stolberg's Florentine Salon and Germaine de Staël's Coppet Circle: The Politics of Patronage, Neoclassicism and the Code of Freedom in Napoleonic Italy* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Jonathan Glancy, "Tombs with a View: The City Cemetery," *BBC Culture*, 20 January 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150120-tombs-with-a-view>.

The testimony of their love survived in the form of love letters which they exchanged over the next twenty years while living in cloistered isolation. The couple was reunited once before their deaths only to discover that their love for one another was undiminished with time.¹⁷

This history of love letters during the Napoleonic era is intertwined with the history of the novel and the politics of emerging feminism. As women discovered that they could exercise a degree of influence over society by commenting on it in the forum of the novel, they also discovered that they exerted an influence on the social structure and politics in the realm of marital and extramarital affairs. The etiquette behind state sponsored marriages was ingrained in the social rhetoric of the church. At the upper echelons of society, it assured the transfers of wealth and property. But the history of illicit romances acquired a much greater importance and fascination among the social sphere of Enlightenment authors. Affairs of the heart reverberated with the import of neoclassical stoicism and romantic feelings unrestrained by the strictures of decorum. Great romances, such those experienced by Josephine, Récamier, Lady Hamilton and Staël, were also reflected in the emerging women's romance novels. If these women did not achieve financial independence, they certainly attained emotional independence through the forum of the love letter and romantic novel. Freed from the strictures of social decorum which proscribed extramarital affairs as detrimental to the family and state, modern romantic women experienced the liberty of choice through the liberty of love.

¹⁷ Mary McAuliffe, *Paris Discovered: Explorations in the City of Light* (Hightstown, NJ: Elysian Books, 2006), 19-23.



Fig. Intro-1 Francois Boucher. *The Love Letter*. 1750. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. Intro-2 Jean-Honoré Fragonard. *The Love Letter*. 1770s. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. Intro-3 Louis Leopold Boilly. *The Visit Returned*. 1789. Wallace Collection. London.

CHAPTER ONE

GENDER ROLE MODELS IN MARRIAGE, ROMANCE AND REVOLUTION: STAËL'S *DELPHINE* AND *ZULMA*

As a lover and as a woman, Staël sought both emotional commitment and independence. Her concept of gender equality was a function of her concept of romantic love. Consequently, scholars agree that her fictional characters are a projection of the author's attitudes about sex and gender equality, as well as political equality. However, the role models she created were drawn from the shifting archaic hierarchy of the aristocracy to which she belonged. Thus, as an author and a lover, she was never able to completely free herself from the past. Prescribed rules of gender decorum abound in her works. Her female heroines reveal their strengths through their feminine weaknesses, never going so far as to strip themselves entirely from the class bound gender coded society of their author. They commit suicide rather than live a sexless life in a sexless society without male companionship.

Staël's attachment to her father, Jacques Necker, the king's minister of finance, and the queen, Marie Antoinette, prevented her from attaining total gender equality. Instead, she clung to the gendered role models of *Ancien Regime* court culture and salon society, while at the same time seeking feminist autonomy in her stance against the tyranny of Napoleon's patriarchal empire. Staël followed the examples of her revolutionary peers, Mary Wollstonecraft, Manon Roland and Olympe de Gouges. The conflicts between the established role models of feminine decorum, archaic nobility and the modern democratic promise of freedom distinguish her romantic heroines and inform her relationships with lovers. Staël's love letters belie her strong desire for emotional intimacy which she projected onto her fictional heroines. This intimacy also suggests her desire for emotional and political autonomy.

Staël's literary oeuvre includes correspondence, novels, plays, literary criticism and political analysis. All of these genres were a direct reflection of her stance on gender politics. Staël's personal love life served as the

inspiration for her fictional heroines. Her intense feelings of romantic love, loss and suffering formed the inspiration for her novels and apply her theories to romantic literature. As an author of the romantic era, she gave full reign to her feelings and experienced the catharsis of introspection and expurgation. Examining her love letters against the backdrop of her personal life and novels provides rare insight into the author's coded gender politics. Based on composites of her personal life and emerging romantic character types, she forged rounded characters who respond to the strictures of *Ancien Regime* social and sexual politics, while seeking to navigate a future of gender equality through romantic love. Staël's romantic heroines swoon in their desires, but impose strong moral compunctions which reflect the author's own social values. Sex thus becomes a political affair which at the same time challenges a sexist gendered society which denied women equal rights.

Staël's rejection of a loveless marriage pact was a revolutionary act. Yet, it also suggests her inability to free herself from traditional gender-biased roles for women. The eighteenth-century court protocol was gender biased and had been established through a complex ritual of space, fashion and cosmetics. The grand hôtels constructed by the nobles in Paris in the early eighteenth century created separate choreographed spaces for men and women. Luxurious fashions for women further distinguished their gendered roles in society. The women's toilette was also introduced as a new luxury product which emphasized the ritualized space of the women's boudoir. Staël's colleague Stephanie Genlis noted that, "in Paris, women received visits from men at their toilette." The gendered ritual distinguished the role of women from men and reinforced their subordinate roles in *Ancien Regime* society. The new grand hôtels were designed with rooms around the central space of the salon which would become the forum of male and female interactions through the medium of political philosophy and literary theory. Women exhibited their new luxurious fashions and make-up for men, who in turn shared their new philosophical discoveries.¹

Though women failed to receive equal rights during the Revolution, they continued to be prolific novelists. Romantic liaisons in fiction may express a desire for gender freedom and political equality, but they also reveal the subordinate status of women to men. Glenda Sluga concurs that Staël's bid for female emancipation was in direct contradistinction to contemporary nationalist movements which denied women equal political rights. Staël's desire to graft her own experience onto the progress of

¹ Charissa Bremer-David et al., *Paris: Life and Luxury in the Eighteenth-Century* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 33-74.

national politics resulted in her creation of romantic heroines who ultimately reject their suitors in favor of freedom.² The importance of exploring, expressing and recording the emotions is the complex result of a revolutionary and decidedly romantic transformation of society. The aristocracy was challenged by the Revolution, but survived and was reestablished as a military aristocracy under Napoleon. Arranged marriages continued to be important, but the recognition of romantic feelings impelled lovers to rebel against the social custom of arranged marriages, though Napoleon insisted on this for the dynastic purpose of empire building.

Staël's disappointment in her loveless marriage coincided with her first writing experiences, including her literary analysis of Rousseau's *Julie* and her play *Sophie*. Her letters to her husband reveal her shifting attitudes on marriage and gender which were projected onto her romantic heroines. Her revolutionary rejection of marriage was accompanied by a desire to find true romantic love. During her exile and at the height of her conflict with Napoleon, Staël wrote in *On Germany* that love in marriage was temporary, acknowledging that traditional "moralists" limit the feelings of love in marriage to parental roles and regard marriage as useful for procreation alone. Religion, which according to Staël was responsible for the institution of marriage, also relieved women from the prehistoric condition of slavery, but social and emotional inequalities continued to subjugate women to an inferior status in society. Staël argues that marital fidelity became a condition of marriage only because religion demanded it and compelled conformity through belief in an ideal world, "where sacrifice turns into pleasure. But the bargain man wants to impose on his companion is so unfair!" Staël rebelled with all the fervor of a revolutionary crusade against this sentence of passionless domesticity. Yet, her romantic heroines lack the conviction of a revolutionary movement, and they move like ethereal shades to their tombs in ecstatic suicides. She analyzed the traditional gendered roles of men and women in her theoretical criticism and fiction alike, and arrived at the conclusion that women must seek total independence in true romantic love. Her life as a writer was thus bound to her life as a lover:

"I will love you passionately for two or three years," says the man. "Then, at the end of that time, I will talk sense with you." And what men call sense is disillusionment about life. "I will be cold and bored at home, and try to be pleasant elsewhere. As for you, who are usually more imaginative

² Glenda Sluga, "Gender and the Nation: Madame de Staël or Italy," *Women's Writing* 10, no.2 (2003): 241-252.

and sensitive than I am, and have no career or distraction such as the world offer me—you who live for me alone, while I have a thousand other things to think about—you will be satisfied with the second-rate, frigid, part-time affection it suits me to give you, and despise any homage that might express higher, more tender feelings.”

The male-tinged words and phrases resound with Foucauldian significance: sense, disillusionment, cold, bored, world, alone, second-rate, frigid, part-time, despise. The female terms appeal to the romantic sensibility: passionately, imaginative, sensitive, offer, give, homage, tender feelings. A romantic world might well improve society through art and love, but could it improve politics? Staël and her liberal romantic contemporaries were committed to both worlds. Her male friends Chateaubriand and Constant were active as romantic novelists and politicians. She was their intellectual equal but was excluded from direct political participation on the basis of gender. Staël’s only real influence in the world of politics was through her theory and her romantic attachments to powerful men, such her husband, the ambassador or Narbonne, the minister of war. Her emphasis on romantic love is a projection of her philosophy of gender politics. Staël did not believe that marriage was a viable moral commitment. Humans had as much right to pursue happiness and to love freely, without the restrictions imposed by social marriages, as they did to life. The emotional and gender inequality within the institution of marriage was responsible for “illegitimate attachments, betrayals, neglect and despair.” To Staël and her contemporaries, love was a prime motivator in life. Social attachments were guided by flirtation and attraction.

Authors of the new literary style of romanticism created characters who reflected this dichotomy between marriage and romantic love. It was important for Staël and her romantic heroines to experience happiness to the fullest extent before death. According to Staël, the existential boundaries of life dictated a progression towards death, and “to struggle against fate alone, moving toward your coffin without a friend to support or mourn you—that is a form of isolation beside which the Arabian desert pales.” Women naturally revolted against this life sentence, believing that they were equally entitled with men to enjoy the gifts of nature and life. The inequality between men and women in both the domestic and political spheres created a secret “war between the sexes.”³ Thus, Staël’s love

³ Vivian Folkenflik (trans.), “Love within Marriage (3.19),” from *On Germany, Major Writings of Germaine de Staël* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 317-19.

letters demonstrate her covert strategy to gain both emotional intimacy and personal independence.

The role models established by her parents, Suzanne Curchod, the daughter of a Swiss Calvinist pastor, and Jacques Necker, the king's finance minister, provided her with the first examples of morality and love in marriage. Her mother advocated the teachings of Rousseau and followed his guide to childrearing in *Emile*.⁴ However, her parents were also attached to the court culture of the *Ancien Regime*; they promoted aristocratic marriages which superseded the flirtations of the court and salons. Staël never completely rebelled against this social hierarchy. She continued to entertain members of the upper echelons of society, and was dependent upon them for her own social and literary successes. She accepted the patriarchal father and submissive doting mother as institutional, but reacted against such archetypal stereotypes in her own life and in the development of her fictional characters.⁵ The combination of these influences creates the tension between politics and morality within the context of love in her writings. Staël's parents clearly enjoyed one another's company and never separated during their long marriage, which was punctuated by Necker's tenure as the Finance Minister of Louis XVI, the subsequent revolution and his retreat to his estate at Coppet, Switzerland. Their marriage, however, had not been arranged. Necker chose his bride and she accepted his proposal of marriage.

The deep affection that Staël felt for her parents clearly stemmed from their long stable marriage. By contrast, Staël's marriage at the age of twenty to the thirty-six year old Swedish ambassador to France, Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, had been arranged by her parents and quickly proved to be unhappy and unfulfilling. In 1778, the Swedish diplomat approached Staël's parents about his betrothal to their twelve-year-old Germaine, and in 1786 Staël's marriage contract was witnessed by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette at Versailles, while the ceremony took place at the Swedish embassy. During the same year, Staël wrote *Sophie, or the Secret Sentiments*, and began writing her *Letters on Rousseau* in which she

⁴ Catherine Dubeau, *La letter et la mère: roman familial et écriture de la passion chez Suzanne Necker et Germaine de Staël* (Quebec City: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2013), 71-88.

⁵ Stephanie Génand, "La Femme Eunuque: Germaine de Staël et la pensée négative du despotisme," *Cahiers Staëliens*, 65 (2015): 89-113; Huguette Krief, "Femmes dans l'Agora Révolutionnaire ou le Deuil d'un Engagement: Olympe de Gouges, Constance Pipelet, Germaine de Staël," *Littérature et Engagement pendant la Révolution Française*, ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends et Laurent Loty (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), 141-161.

analyzed Rousseau's heroine Julie from his novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*. Named for the medieval scholar Peter Abelard's lover Heloise, the portrait of Julie emerges through the epistolary genre of letter writing. Staël's assessment of Rousseau's novel reflects her own perception of married life as a contract based on mutual respect, but loveless and boring.

Julie is portrayed as a model of virtue who overcomes her attraction to her tutor, Saint-Preux, and is forgiven by her husband, Wolmar, for her affair. The illustrations by Gravelot commissioned by Rousseau depict romantic trysts in the rococo style, such as the first illustration for the novel *Love's First Kiss* (1767),⁶ in which Julie swoons into her lover's arms. According to Staël, Julie attains "felicity through virtue; happy through the happiness she gives her husband, the education she gives her children, the effect of her example on all around her, and the consolations she finds in her confidence in her God." Despite this model of domestic bliss, Staël is drawn to one of the final letters that Julie writes to her former lover while she is dying in which she confesses that "she has never been able to stop loving him—Julie, whom I thought cured, showed me a heart wounded more deeply than ever..." This strong sentiment, observes Staël, was intended for the enjoyment of life, not death!⁷ Violent deaths had threatened and claimed the aristocracy during the Reign of Terror, infant mortality rates were high, and the people witnessed the executions of the king and queen. In her immediate family, Staël suffered the death of her first child and also her husband within a relatively short period of time. Staël's aestheticizing of death and her analysis of romantic love and political idealism are the consequence of her own personal life in which she failed to gain complete fulfillment and happiness in a romantic union.

Staël's ideal marriage was one that was based on love and affection, and which transcended death. However, marriages, in her view, had to be based on love to be legitimate. If one or the other party failed to commit to their feelings, the contract was rescinded, much like the revolutionary right to disobey unjust laws. Otherwise, marriage was a form of institutionalized slavery which had been perpetrated against women since the ancient world. In Staël's novel *Delphine*, set against the backdrop of the revolution,

⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vache, eds. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 53, fig.1; Catherine J. Lewis Theobald. "Graphic Descriptions: Pictures and Pleasure in Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse," *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text*, ed. Christina Ionescu (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 367-397.

⁷ Folkenflik, "Letters on Rousseau," *Major Writings*, 49-50.