



Lord Byron and Germaine de Staël

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Anne Louise Germaine Necker was born in Paris in 1766. Her father, Jacques Necker was a Swiss banker, who became Director General of Finance in France under Louis XVI. Her mother, Suzanne Courchod Necker, originally a Swiss governess, held one of the most famous Parisian salons in the 1770s. From an early age, Germaine was admitted to her mother's salon and became accustomed to meeting the most celebrated aristocrats, intellectuals and politicians of pre-revolutionary France. After refusing to marry William Pitt in 1783, she finally agreed to become the wife of the Swedish ambassador in France, De Staël, in 1786. The young Germaine was an enthusiastic witness to the first revolutionary activities; she was present at the first opening of the Estates General and at the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In this revolutionary atmosphere, she opened her own salon, which soon became a centre for discussing moderate revolutionary ideas. When the French Revolution degenerated into the Reign of Terror, she managed to save the lives of several of her aristocratic friends who escaped to England, and she even organised a plan of escape for the Royal Family. Fearing for her own life, Staël left France in 1792 and reached her father's Swiss residence at Coppet. She lived as an exile for most of her life, under the Reign of Terror and under Napoleonic persecution.

By the time Staël visited England in 1793, she was already a famous writer and thinker, having published stories, plays and articles. While in England she worked at the publication of *De l'Influence des Passions* (1793) and *Réflexion sur le Procès de la Reine* (1793). Her reception, however, was unenthusiastic. The general anti-French mood that prevailed in Britain at the time encouraged a suspicious attitude towards French refugees. Besides, Staël's involvement in French and European politics and her morally questionable behaviour - she lived openly with her lover Narbonne, the former French Minister of War - made her an unconventional woman for the increasingly domestic and conservative English society. Despite a cold welcome, while in London, Staël made a lot of connections. She met Horace Walpole and Edward Gibbon, she became friend with James Mackintosh, and she often visited Lord Sheffield and Lord Loughborough, the new Lord Chancellor. She also met Fanny Burney, author of *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782). Staël admired Fanny's talent as a novelist, and the two women instantly took to each other. However, rumours of Staël's moral character and her relation with Narbonne had reached the conservative Dr. Burney, Fanny's father, who urged his daughter to avoid Staël and her group of French refugees. Burney's letter to Monsieur d'Arblay exemplifies the ambiguous reception of Staël in British circles: 'Everyone says that she is neither an émigré, nor banished, but that it is M. de Narbonne who has seduced her away from her husband and children. In vain do I speak of the different customs of her country. "She is a wife and a mother" is the only reply' (*Letters*, II, 31). By the standards that applied in England, surely Germaine de Staël was an unconventional person, for her literary talents, her political engagement and her moral customs. Commenting on Burney's refusal to see her, Staël remarks: 'But is a woman under guardianship all her life in this country? It appears to me that [Fanny] is like a girl of fourteen' (Burney, *Diary*, V, 348).

Staël was deeply disappointed by the cold welcome that she received in England. As James Mackintosh observes, 'she admired the English, in the midst of whom she could not have lived' (Mackintosh, I, 406). Accustomed to the public fame and the open conversations of the French salons, Staël could not help being depressed by English indifference to her. Most importantly, Staël was not favourably impressed by the conditions of women in English society. Later, in her *Considérations sur la Révolution Française* (1812), Staël was to explain her opinions on

English society and English women. In it, she praised England for its liberal society, and took it as exemplary of democracy and intellectual freedom. Staël admired the seriousness of English political discourse and the fairness of legal eloquence, but deplored the silence of women who held no participation in social or political discussions:

The true character of a woman is to be known and admired in those countries which are free. Domestic life inspires all of the virtues in women [...] In England, a woman of the people feels rapport with the Queen, who has looked after her husband and raised her children, just as religion and morality requires of all wives and mothers. (Sourian, 35).

Staël had observed how women in England had little place in social life, and were 'accustomed to remain silent in the company of men, where politics are concerned'. Furthermore, women had no active personal existence; while men could have an active life, 'women must stay in the shadows' (Sourian, 36).

Staël's visit to England determined her ideas on the difference between northern and southern cultures and societies, which was to influence deeply the following generation of Romantic writers, including Byron. In *De la Littérature* (1800), Staël first theorised her philosophical approach to Europe. By developing Montesquieu's theory of climates, Staël focused on the link between land and people. She explained how 'climate is certainly one of the main causes of differences between the images that delight us in Northern countries, and those we enjoy recalling in the South' (176). This, she argued, inevitably has repercussions on culture, literature and society. In Staël's view, southern poets mix natural images with all the emotions of life, while northern people tend to be more concerned with pain than pleasure. As a consequence, southern people are inclined to express emotions rather than abstract thoughts, while northern people have a more fertile imagination and a strong tendency to melancholy.

Her subsequent visit to Italy in 1803 helped her to further develop her theory of the difference between northern and southern societies and, in particular, to focus on England and Italy as representative countries. At her arrival in Italy, she was impressed by the warm reception. As the daughter of Necker and as a major thinker, she was enthusiastically received. Staël was deeply affected by the freedom with which she could express her thoughts and feelings in Italy. She did not have to be reticent about any of her knowledge and talents, and she was not judged for her moral behaviour. There, she also met 'charming, educated, intelligent and passionate women', among whom were poets, professors, translators and *improvisatrici* (Gutwirth, 172). Thanks to her travels, Staël understood how Italy and England could be taken as representative of southern and northern societies, thus perpetrating a long-lasting geographical and cultural division of Europe. She compared the freedom of the Italian society with the traditionalist and conservative English values. In particular, she juxtaposed the public display of feminine talents of Italian women, with the timidity, reserve and decorum of English women. Her experience of English and Italian societies shaped the plot and the setting of her most famous novel: *Corinne, ou l' Italy* (1807).

Staël met Byron for the first time on her second visit to England in 1813. By then, she was a famous and admired intellectual and writer, whose works were well known all over Europe. The fact that she was a victim of Napoleonic persecution made her particularly welcome in anti-Napoleonic England. While in England, Staël witnessed the successful publication of her *De l'Allemagne*, published in English by John Murray in 1813. Staël and Byron met in London on several occasions. As Byron's letters and journals suggest, their relationship was often controversial. He clearly admired her works, but he seemed to have a problem with her character and with her public display of opinions. As Byron recalls in *Some Recollections of my Acquaintance with Madame de Staël* (1821), he was introduced to Staël the very night of her arrival in London:

She arrived, - was dressed - and came "with her Glory" to Lady Jersey's - where in common with many others - I bowed- *not* the knee- but the head and heart - in homage to an extraordinary and able woman driven from her own country by the most extraordinary of men. (Nicholson, 184)

Staël's character soon appeared as un-English to the young Byron. He also recalled how her behaviour in society was a source of shock for most of the English aristocracy:

I saw the woman of whom I had heard marvels - she justified what I had heard - but she was still a mortal - and made long speeches - nay the very day of this philosophical feast in her honour - she made *very* long speeches to those who had been accustomed to hear such only in the two Houses - [...] She harangued - she lectured - She preached English politics to the first of our English Whig politicians - the day after her arrival in England- and preached politics no less to our Tory politicians the day after (Nicholson, 185).

Byron, however, appears to have felt that Staël's inquisitiveness and curiosity could not be judged solely according to English customs. As he observed, 'she was often troublesome, some thought rude, in her questions, but she never offended me, because I knew that her inquisitiveness [proceeded] from a wish to sound people's characters' (Medwin, 182). In spite of his admiration for her intellectual abilities and her works, though, Byron could not help making sarcastic comments on Staël's physical appearance and on her gender: 'Her figure was not bad; her legs tolerable; her arms good. Altogether I can conceive her having been a desirable woman, allowing a little imagination for her soul, and so forth. She would have made a great man' (Nicholson, 222). It seems that even for the well-travelled and anti-conformist Byron it was not easy to come to terms with the passionate, intellectual and exhibitionist Staël.

The fact that Byron was an assiduous reader of Staël's works emerges clearly in his letters, but most importantly in his works. In a note to the *Bride of Abydos*, which came out in 1813, while Stael was in England, Byron refers to Staël and to her recently published *De l'Allemagne*: 'For an eloquent passage in the latest work of the first female writer of this, perhaps of any age, on the analogy [...] between "painting and music", see vol. iii, cap. 10, *De l'Allemagne*' (v. 179). Staël was extremely pleased with Byron's reference to her work, and she directly thanked him in a letter, to which Byron thus replied:

I was but too happy to avail myself of your authority for a real or fancied confirmation of my opinion on a particular subject. - My praise was only the feeble echo of more powerful voices - to yourself any attempt at eulogy must be merely repetition. - Of the work itself I can only say - that few days have passed since it's publication without my perusal of many of it's pages - & that I should be sorry for my own sake to fix the period when I should not recur to it with pleasure. (*L&J*, III, 184)

The admiration was reciprocal. Staël knew Byron's works and admired them. In *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*, she enlisted Byron among the 'heralds of the new glorious century of British poetry', together with Walter Scott, Samuel Rogers, Thomas Moore and Thomas Campbell (Wilkes, 158). Byron was flattered by this association.

Their esteem and friendship strengthened during Byron's stay at Villa Diodati on the Lake Geneva. There he became a habitual visitor at Staël's Coppet, where he met some of the most illustrious European intellectuals of the time, among whom were the brothers Schlegel, Sismond de Sismondi, and Benjamin Constant. Byron had left England after the scandal following the separation from his wife Annabella Milbanke. He, like Staël, had become a morally controversial character, and was often unwelcome in aristocratic circles. Staël turned out to be a valid intellectual and emotional support to Byron at the time; she even attempted a reconciliation between him and lady Byron. She commented on Byron's behaviour in a maternal way: 'You should not have warred with the World - it will not do - it is too strong always for any individual - I myself once tried it in early life - but it will not do' (Nicholson, 97). By then, Staël and Byron had surely much in common. They were both exiled from their native countries, both disillusioned with their own cultures and societies, and both shared strong anti-imperialistic views.

Byron's frequentation of Coppet constituted a crucial moment in his life and in the development of his poetic career. He was deeply influenced by the circle's discussion of issues of national and cultural integration, and he actively participated in the creation of a more cosmopolitan view of European cultures and societies. Staël was the first to suggest a re-discussion of national boundaries and an enlargement of cultural and social understanding. In *De l'Allemagne* (1810), Stael reflected on nationalism and suggested a re-consideration of strict and sometimes artificial national and cultural boundaries. More specifically, Staël elaborated a new idea of nationalism, one that is not based on opposition but on positive confrontation between different national entities. Still respecting the distinctiveness and specificity of nations, Staël condemned any form of nationalism that sought to impose one's identity on another. In other words, while she emphasised national differences, Staël rejected any form of national imperialism. By celebrating the possibility of choosing 'une patrie de la pensée' over any imposed idea of national belonging, Staël promoted forms of interaction and cooperation between different national and cultural entities. This move toward a new view of the relations between nations and cultures is also evident in British literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, when concepts such as cosmopolitanism and national hybridism appear in the writing of a number of authors. As Joanne Wilkes has observed, Byron was particularly receptive to this mingling of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He felt the need to overcome literary, cultural and national barriers and to promote a new philosophy of hybridism, which was to become fundamental to his later works. Byron's decision to move to Italy may well have been influenced by Staël's thoughts and works and indeed his itinerary from Britain to Italy followed the same path as Staël's famous heroine Corinne.

Corinne, or Italy was published in 1807 and was soon a phenomenal success. It was translated into English the same year and it got through fourteen editions between 1807 and 1810. Corinne is a half- English, half-Italian woman of genius: improviser, poet, writer, singer, dancer and actress, who is forced to leave a strict, domestic-oriented and morally imprisoning England for a more relaxing, liberal and sentimental Italy, where she obtains fame and public admiration. Poetic success, however, does not bring Corinne sentimental stability, especially when she directs her affections to an Englishman extremely devoted to his country and to moral and familial duty. Corinne dies of a broken heart in misery and solitude, after Lord Nelvil has abandoned her in favour of Corinne's English half-sister Lucile. *Corinne* was to influence the perception of Italy by British authors throughout the nineteenth century; in particular, it suggested how Italy was an ideal place for poetic expression and literary success. Byron read *Corinne* several times, before and after meeting Staël at Coppet. He brought a copy with him on his first journey to Italy, and clearly the novel influenced his own perception of the country.

Byron's assimilation of Staël's views and his sense of *Corinne* as a point of departure for his own life and works is clearly demonstrated in his Italian letters and journals. In 1823, after he had spent several years in Italy and made connections with Italian men and women, Byron voiced his agreement with Staël's differentiation of Italian and English customs in *Corinne*:

The Italians do not understand the English, indeed, how can they? For they (the Italians) are frank, simple and open in their natures, following the bent of their inclinations, which they do not believe to be wicked; while the English, to conceal the indulgence of theirs, daily practice hypocrisy, falsehood, and uncharitableness. (Blessington, 29)

The striking opposition that Staël had suggested in her novel between the timid and domestic English Lucile and the passionate and successful Italian Corinne became evident to Byron's eyes. Commenting on English women, he remarks that 'you may make an English woman (indeed Nature does this) the best daughter, wife, and mother in the world', while he describes Italian women in a totally different way:

They are natural, frank, and good-natured, and have none of the affectation, pettiness, jealousy and malice, that characterize our more polished countrywomen. This gives a raciness to their ideas as well as manners, that to me is peculiarly pleasing; and I feel with an Italian woman as if she was a full-grown child, possessing the buoyancy

and playfulness of infancy with the deep feeling of womanhood; none of the conventional *maniérisme* that one meets with from the first patrician circles in England, justly styled the marble age, so cold and polished, to the second and third coteries, where a coarse caricature is given of the unpenetrated and *impenetrable* mysteries of the *first*. (Blessington, 39,112-13)

Byron's reflection on Italian women's spontaneity and playfulness and on English women's coldness and detachment re-elaborates Staël's analogical description of English and Italian women in *Corinne*.

The influence of *Corinne* can be perceived clearly in Byron's own poetic production, and nowhere more so than in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. As Joanne Wilkes has observed, *Childe Harold* is clearly indebted to *Corinne*. More specifically, Canto IV can be read as an extended and critical response to *Corinne* in terms of plot and setting. Through their characters, Staël and Byron explored the place in the world of remarkable individuals: their opportunities for action, the factors which might hamper or compromise their actions, and the suffering to which their unusualness may make them prone in the context of northern and southern societies. The connection between the character of Corinne and Childe Harold is an important one for the construction of the idea of the Romantic hero. As John Isbell points out, 'almost nothing before *Corinne* had put *any* exceptional creative genius, man or woman, so gloriously centre stage: Ossian hints at it, Byron completes the process; but Byron started to write *Childe Harold* in 1812, after *Corinne*' (Isbell, 66). This suggests that Staël played a fundamental role in the construction of the Romantic hero not only before Byron's own developments in this area, but also in form of a female figure. In this way, Childe Harold would be the transformation of the cosmopolitan, multiple female genius of Corinne into its male equivalent.

The similarities between the two characters operate on different levels. Like Corinne, Harold is a poet of British origins who travels abroad to find poetic success. His poetry, like Corinne's improvisations, celebrates political freedom. Both Corinne and Harold are presented as links between north and south, since they act as mediators between Britain and Italy. In the novel, Corinne tries to decipher Italy for the British Oswald. Similarly, Harold attempts to interpret the southern countries that he visits for British readers. Both characters also promote national and cultural integration as a fundamental value. Corinne's efforts to combine her paternal British origin with her maternal Italian side correspond to Harold's absorption of non-English literary and cultural traditions: both aim to stress the incompleteness of national and cultural homogeneity and to promote heterogeneity.

Byron's perception of Italy in Canto IV has clearly assimilated the re-visionary message of *Corinne*. In it, Staël had suggested an emotional approach to the interpretation of the Italian landscape, history and culture. This approach does not simply imply scenic tourism and erudition, but involves an emotional and imaginative encounter with the country. As a result, Italy acquires a double level of significance for visitors: a historical and aesthetic dimension and an imaginary and emotional characterization. As Byron explains in his letter to John Hobhouse, in Canto IV his intention is 'to touch upon the present state of Italian literature, and perhaps of manners', in a way that describes 'the labyrinth of external objects and the consequent reflections'. As Byron points out, his intention is not simply to describe the intricacy of the present state of Italian society and culture, but he is also attempting to represent the refractions that this reality has in his own mind, filtered through the imagination of his poetic persona. This association inserts Harold's description of Italy into that imaginary dimension which *Corinne* had firstly suggested.

This double level of interpretation is maintained throughout the canto and clearly frames Harold's description of Venice. In the first stanza, Venice is characterised by a sum of oxymoronic constructions, which describe the real and imaginary dimensions of the town. Venice appears as 'a palace and a prison', it rises from the waves as 'from the stroke of the enchanter's wand', and it emanates a 'dying Glory', which reveals the past grandeur and the present decay. In Stanza V, Byron further insists on the importance of the mind's interpretations of reality: 'The beings of the mind are not of clay;/ Essentially immortal, they create/ And multiply in us a brighter ray/ And more beloved existence'(37-40). As Staël had suggested in *Corinne*, this double reading of reality is particularly

important for the present situation of Italy, suspended between a glorious liberal past and a decaying and enslaved present.

The political situation of Italy is a major concern both for *Corinne* and *Childe Harold*. *Corinne* was intended to celebrate the cultural, social and historical homogeneity of Italy in a way that promoted national unity and freedom. Corinne's improvisation at the Capitol in Rome begins by positioning Italy in the moment of its utmost political power: 'Italy, empire of the Sun; Italy, mistress of the world, cradle of literature; I salute you. How many times has the human race been under your sway, sustained by your arms, your arts, and your skies!' (26). By commemorating the glory of Rome and its illustrious past, and by praising Italian artistic and poetic achievements, Corinne presents Italy as a country worthy of admiration and consideration. Thus, Italy emerges as a distinctive country, as prestigious and potentially powerful as other politically united and free countries. By constructing this indirect analogy, Corinne asserts Italy's right to be considered as a nation, and encourages Italy to regain its unity and freedom.

Canto IV follows a very similar pattern. By celebrating the illustrious past of Italy, this Canto reproduces Corinne's improvisation at the Capitol, and promotes Italy's right to self-determination. After describing Venice's past and present condition, Harold proceeds to describe Italian literature and to evoke its glorious cultural and political past. The celebration of Italian greatness has the same oblique intent that Corinne's improvisation had, that is of promoting Italy's right to political unity and freedom. In his description of Canto IV, Byron explains that the prestigious past of Italy should suffice to convince foreign countries of its right to independence. Moreover he castigates British indifference toward the repartition of Italian territory at the Congress of Vienna: 'What Italy has gained by the late transfer of nations, it were useless for Englishmen to enquire, till it becomes ascertained that England has acquired something more than a permanent army and a suspended Habeas Corpus' (McGann, II, 124). Like *Corinne*, Canto IV was clearly intended to promote Italian independence, but also to awake the consciences of other European countries.

In the last part of the canto, Byron reunites his poetic voice with that of Childe Harold's, the bard who, like Corinne, has turned poetry into politics, and has committed his poetic activity to the cause of freedom. After he has completed his song in favour of Italian independence, Harold has no more reason to exist:

*But where is he, the Pilgrim of my song,
The being who upheld it through the past?
Methinks he cometh late and tarries long.
He is no more - these breathings are his last;
His wanderings done, his visions ebbing fast,
And he himself as nothing - (164)*

At the end of Staël's novel, Corinne, abandoned by Lord Nelvil, has lost any faith in her ability to change her fate and the fate of Italy, and she dies in solitude and anonymity, aware of the insignificance of her poetic efforts. Like Corinne, Harold realises that men's deeds are only 'wrecks' and that human lives are 'like drops of rain' sinking in the ocean 'without a grace, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown'. Like the fading and dying Corinne, Harold '[is] not now that which [he has] been', his 'visions flit less palpable before [him]', and 'the glow which in [his] spirit dwelt, is fluttering, faint, and low' (185).

Despite these similarities, it would be a mistake to consider *Childe Harold* as merely derivative of *Corinne*. Undeniably, Byron was inspired by Staël's novel; however, Canto IV represents not simply an imitation of, but also an evolution from *Corinne*. The sad ending of Staël's novel seems to suggest that English and Italian customs are irreconcilable, thus north and south seem to be incompatible. This implies that Corinne's role as mediator has failed. Harold is also a mediator between north and south. However, his attempt to reconcile northern and

southern traditions has not failed. In his letter to Hobhouse, Byron explains that *Childe Harold* is meant to celebrate 'the countries of chivalry, history, and fable' that they visited together, especially Spain, Greece and Italy (McGann, 121). Byron's intention, therefore, is to combine the northern and southern literary and cultural traditions, which Staël had argued to be oppositional in *De La Littérature*, and confirmed to be incompatible in *Corinne*. While *Corinne* had rejected her northern origins in favour of the southern cultural and literary tradition, *Childe Harold* tries to reconcile the two in its poetic persona. If Staël had failed to reunite in the character of *Corinne* the northern and southern components, Byron, on the contrary, successfully combines in the character of Harold northern and southern influences, thus mirroring the mingling of poetic styles, literary traditions, cultural influences and social customs that makes *Childe Harold* a more positive celebration of hybridity.

Byron never openly acknowledged Staël's influence on his works. His comments on her works and character remained largely sarcastic. After Staël's death in 1817, in his 'Epistle from Mr. Murray to Dr. Polidori', Byron seems to reaffirm his controversial relation with her, partly based on admiration, partly on aversion:

*[They] are at this moment in discussion
On poor de Staël's late dissolution -
'Her book they say was in advance -
Pray Heaven! She tells the truth of France,
'Tis said she certainly was married
To Rocca - and had twice miscarried,
No- not miscarried - I opine -
But brought to bed at forty-nine.*

It was true that Staël had married her long-lasting lover Rocca a few months before dying, and it was also true that they had a baby when she was forty six. However, Byron's sarcasm is clearly directed to her femininity in a way that makes Staël appear as a sort of freak, not only, as it may appear, for being sexually active at an age that, at the time, was considered old for a woman, but also for being a woman intellectual and writer: 'But peace be with her - for a woman/Her talents surely were uncommon'.

Surely, Byron was aware of his debt to Staël and of the fact that his life and his works were inspired by this great thinker. In 1819, two years after Staël's death, Byron was reading *Corinne*, probably for the last time before his own death. He was in Bologna, hiding from the Austrian government, and waiting to rejoin the Gambas in Pisa. In Teresa Guiccioli's copy of the novel he commented:

I knew Madame de Staël well - better than She knew Italy; - but I little thought that one day I should think her thoughts in the country where she has laid the scene of her most attractive production. - She is sometimes right and often wrong about Italy and England- but almost always true in delineating the heart, which is of but of one nation of no country or rather of all.-

As a successor and perpetrator of Staël's ideas, but also as a male poet, Byron never had to justify his intellectual ability and his poetic success. In absorbing and re-elaborating Staël's views, Byron started a process of masculinisation of Romantic heroism. Thanks to his transmutation of the female *Corinne* into the male *Childe Harold*, Byron created a more active, powerful, politically influent and morally free hero, thus eradicating the gender limitations, which had been imposed on Staël and her heroine. Yet, the following generation of writers, especially women, would continue to take *Corinne* as an inspiring model for the successful woman poet, and would follow Staël's effort to reconcile different social and cultural traditions.

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