UNRULY WOMEN

Philosophers, Romantics, Revolutionaries

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[Sample chapters in English]

CAPPELEN DAMM

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PROLOGUE

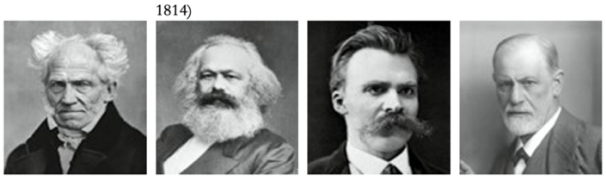
They were unruly women and they were fierce writers. Sometimes they wrote with enthusiasm and an abundance of energy. At other times, they wrote with indignation or even sadness. The ideas they voiced were clear and never failed to provoke.

Women philosophers were subject to censorship from legislators, kings, and, in one case, even Napoleon. Yet they carried on writing. They wrote treatises, essays, literature, and letters. But above all, they wrote philosophy.

The women in the history of modern philosophy, the philosophy that shapes our thinking and way of life today, left a radical legacy. They were many, they were profound, they were communicators of an extraordinary caliber, *and* they wrote on issues and topics that concern us all – and which continue to concern us today.

Yet those of us who work on modern European philosophy have been presented with a narrative in which the important period of the long nineteenth century – the period from Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, to Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – consists of a series of somber-looking men. In gathering their portraits, we can track the trajectory of male sartorial choices from wigs to natural hairstyles, free-flowing tresses to neat-looking trims, and an array of fashion choices in moustaches and sideburns.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) | Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) | F.W.J. Schelling (1775-1854) | G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) | Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)



Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) | Karl Marx (1818-1883) | Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) | Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Let it be said once and for all: Women, too, are part of this history! If they have not found their way into the standardized portrait galleries of philosophy, this does not mean that they were absent. Nor does it mean that their contributions were insignificant. It simply means that it is the portraits of the men, and not of the women, that we have later chosen to hang on the wall.

A retrieval of women's voices in the history of philosophy is long overdue. This also applies to the substantial arc of thinkers from the Enlightenment and Romanticism, via the critical-political contributions of the mid- and late nineteenth century, and all the way up to our own time.

In this period, women philosophers reflected on what it is to be human, our relationship to nature, and questions relating to gender, race, and oppression. They asked what a good and well-lived life might look like. And they demanded the opportunity to realize themselves – as women and as thinkers. The women in modern philosophy took on prevailing patterns of thought, challenged the intellectual consensus, and, through their provocations, they contributed to shaping philosophy as we know it today.

The women in modern philosophy could boast no academic pedigrees. They were barred from formal education, and thus did not receive degrees, nor qualify for academic positions. The kind of philosophy that would thrive in the new universities across Europe was not theirs. But philosophy is more than an academic discipline. Schopenhauer, for instance, never held an academic position. Nietzsche, for his part, only held a university position for ten years and the appointment was not in philosophy. Like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the women philosophers were widely read. They influenced the key debates of the day and wrote international bestsellers. Their works were eagerly discussed by readers of all genders and ages.

As philosophers firmed up their disciplinary self-understanding – thus establishing a canon that served as a boundary between those who were *in* and those who were *out* of the profession – the women were excluded. This exclusion was so successful that today only faint traces of their existence remain.

Those of us who teach modern philosophy tend to procced without questioning the standard picture. We tend to take it for granted that we deal with an all-male lineage of thought. In other academic departments and contexts, by contrast, the works of women who practiced philosophy have been read and appreciated. Yet scholars from these disciplines may have little or no interest in the philosophical aspects of their works. Hence,

to the extent that the women in modern philosophy have been read, they have not been read as philosophers.

But philosophers they were – and their contributions deserve to be revisited.

It was around ten years ago that I returned to the works of the women in modern European philosophy in earnest. Together with a few friends, I trawled library catalogues and retrieved books and m that had been stowed away in basements storage for decades, if not longer. A colleague and I edited an anthology of texts written by women in modern philosophy, then mustered an entire crew of scholars to put together an Oxford Handbook on the work of women philosophers in the German-language tradition.

While working on these projects, I repeatedly taught the works of nineteenth-century women philosophers. What texts would resonate philosophically with the students? What thinkers, works, and chapters would generate interest and a desire to read and find out more? What texts could we learn the most from? What works offered substantial philosophical discussions and food for further thought?

In the end, I designed a separate class dedicated to women in the history of modern philosophy: *Unruly Women: Philosophers, Romantics, Revolutionaries*.

This book is based on my experiences from this class. I present the lives and works of eleven remarkable women in modern philosophy, reflect on the joy I took in teaching this material, and bring to life the thoughts and reactions of a group of students who worked their way into modern philosophy through a set of texts that so far have not been part of standard syllabi in most philosophy departments.

"Unruly Women" has ended up being one of my favorite classes, a class that I have taught over and over again. This certainly isn't the only course on my roster, but over the years, it has become a signature class, one that I have taught almost every semester, along with more traditional classes and seminars on the well-known nineteenth-century figures. The point is not to suggest that we, as a rule, should offer philosophy classes in which we *only* read the works of women. It is rather that I was curious to explore, as an experiment, what the history of philosophy might look like if we approached it from a fresh perspective.

Every semester, the class has unfolded in a similar manner. The students immediately become enamored by these thinkers. They work with purpose and determination – sometimes intellectual voraciousness – and the in-class discussions reach a level of intensity that I rarely encounter in other classes. I do not think this is due to the fact that we read works written by women *per se*. My suspicion, rather, is that it is because these women, partly as a result of their being excluded from academic philosophy, produced a series of wide-ranging contributions that speak with a clear, direct, engaged, and engaging voice. Moreover, they raise questions and concerns that appeal to readers today.

In being excluded from the field they had wanted to make their own – that of philosophy – these women could not help but seek to change the culture that had tried to silence them. Voicelessness was not an option. They defied intellectual conventions, overcame practical challenges, and ran great personal risks – all because they wanted to write philosophy. The texts they produced are still available today and can be downloaded from the internet or checked out from many libraries. It takes neither magic spells, nor laborious efforts, to get one's hands on these works; it is simply a matter of digging out the books and brushing off the dust.

Throughout the period in which I have taught "Unruly Women," I have modified the curriculum multiple times. Each semester, some women are added, others set aside for now. I would easily get bored if I taught the exact same material semester after semester, but, additionally, I want to learn about more of these remarkable women whose work was left behind as philosophy established itself as a modern, academic discipline.

This spring semester, the students and I will begin with the late Enlightenment and the great philosophical movements of Idealism and Romanticism. We will concentrate on Germaine de Staël, Karoline von Günderrode, and Bettina Brentano von Arnim. From the second half of the nineteenth century, when feminism and the struggle for social rights made a genuine breakthrough, we will read works by Hedwig Dohm, Anna J. Cooper, Clara Zetkin, and Rosa Luxemburg. Cooper is a new addition to the syllabus and represents a

part of American philosophy that both continues and breaks with the commitments of the European Enlightenment and Romanticism. A few years back, Cooper's work was suggested to me by my students – and I have not regretted adding her to my syllabus. As in previous semesters, we will also read Lou Andreas-Salomé. She was a contemporary of Dohm, Cooper, Zetkin, and Luxemburg, but chose a somewhat different path. Instead of emphasizing political rights, she stuck to more traditional metaphysical questions, such as the existence of God and the relationship between the soul and the body. From the period around World War I, we have Gerda Walther, one of several women who helped shape phenomenology, the philosophical movement that set itself the goal of overcoming the abstractions of idealism through the battle cry "back to the things themselves!" Another novel twist this spring is a final leg of twentieth-century thought. From this period, we will read excerpts from Simone de Beauvoir, one of the founders of philosophical existentialism. The semester will end with Angela Davis, the American philosopher and civil rights activist who proudly carries on the legacy of the unruly women in contemporary philosophy. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is perennial reading material in my philosophy syllabi. Davis, by contrast, I will be teaching for the first time. Like Cooper, the addition of Davis was suggested by former students. Just like their sisters in European philosophy, Cooper and Davis rebelled by claiming for themselves a place in a field where few thought there was space for them.

For each and every one of the eleven philosophers we are about to discuss, their unruliness is clear and resounding. But once we put them together – in an arc of thinkers spanning from the intellectual superstar Germaine de Staël to the civil rights activist and philosopher Angela Davis – we have a group of thinkers whose courage and depth is nothing short of astounding.

The philosophical A-team the students and I will be discussing could easily have been expanded. There are far more women philosophers in this period. In fact, one could say that the long nineteenth century is a period that is particularly rich in women. Yet, a semester is only some fourteen weeks long, and hard choices must be made.

This spring, it is the voices of these extraordinary women – Staël, Günderrode, Brentano von Arnim, Dohm, Cooper, Zetkin, Luxemburg, Salomé, Walther, Beauvoir, and Davis – that will guide our way through the history of modern philosophy from the French Revolution to our own time.

1

ON CANON, GENDER, AND PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING

IN LIEU OF AN INTRODUCTION

I spend the first morning of the spring semester snuggled up in the second-floor sunroom that covers the front porch of my old Philadelphia house. I live here with my husband, who is also a philosophy professor, and my two children, when they are home. I moved here from Norway, where I am from, but have also spent periods of time in the UK and Germany.

When we were looking for a new home in Philadelphia, this was the smallest house we could find in the neighborhood. By our Norwegian standards, though, we have an abundance of space. In the morning, waking up to the sight of old maple trees and our brick-covered street never fails to excite me. The house is built in heavy Wissahickon Schiefer, but as Scandinavians, we immediately fell for the uncharacteristically bright and sun-drenched rooms. The house was built in the 1890s, that is, around the time when many of the women I will be teaching this semester were in their philosophical prime. In a reassuring combination of places and cultures that matter to me, their works reached far enough to be read both in Norway and here on the east coast of the United States.

I returned from my winter break in Oslo last night and am feeling predictably jet-lagged and lightheaded. Oslo was white and glorious when I left, and Philadelphia is dark by comparison. Even though the days here are longer than in Norway, I gravitate towards the brightest parts of the house.

There are books in most of the rooms. In the sunroom, the shelves are filled with nineteenth-century German philosophy. Fiction has found a home in the first floor living room; ancient philosophy lines the walls of the guestroom; philosophy of art and aesthetics can be found in the mini version of the sunroom on the third floor. Critical theory and contemporary philosophy is stacked from floor to ceiling in my husband's study.

Recently, a vacated children's room has been fitted with new bookshelves. The shelves are filled with books by women in philosophy – and there are additional piles of books along the walls and on the chest of drawers where my daughter still keeps her running gear and my son stores abandoned cameras and racks of aging rolls of film.

Philadelphia has been my home since 2005. I got my position in the Department of Philosophy at Temple University shortly after I defended my PhD.

When I was a philosophy student at universities in Oslo, Frankfurt and New York, there were, as far as I can recall, hardly any history classes offered – were there any at all? – in which we read works by women philosophers. From time to time, the other students and I would ask the professors why there were no women on the history of philosophy reading lists.

Looking back, I realize that the answer we were met with was astonishingly naïve.

"Had there been any women in the history of philosophy," we were told, "their works would certainly be read." The self-assured droning would continue: "But since there were no women, we cannot read their works."

The naivety here is twofold.

First, the response veers towards the self-affirming: If one is convinced that there are no women in the history of philosophy, then there is little point in looking for them.

Second, the answer conceals a deeper level of naivety, namely the assumption that if the women *had* existed (and, yes, indeed they did!), they *would* have been read. That is, the responses my fellow students and I got from our professors conveyed the view that philosophy, this shining beacon of academic culture, was so reflective and mature that it would be completely different from the rest of society, where women, throughout most of human history, were excluded from public life.

If this kind of (un)critical reasoning remains dominant in the bastions of the human sciences, it is time to launch an ideological SOS-flare.

With such an attitude, the picture of philosophy will remain unchanged. Year in and year out, new generations of students will be introduced to philosophy through the works of great thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Formidable moustaches, sizeable sideburns, well-positioned frowns over deep and serious gazes. It is no coincidence that Kant, when writing about women who tried their luck at philosophy and science, mockingly suggests that they might as well have grown beards![1]

Against such a background, it should not surprise us that philosophy still struggles with its gender balance. Is there, a woman who finds her way into the field may ask, a place

for me within this discipline? And what is more, what does it say about us philosophers that we have allowed ourselves to reproduce an image of the history of modern thought – the period in which philosophers critically and systematically began to reflect on fundamental human questions independently of the state, church, and other such authorities – that is completely void of women?

These are questions that have troubled me since I started my graduate studies.

There is, in my view, no getting away from the fact that the classics of modern philosophy are crucial. I teach these works and I will continue to do so for as long as I do philosophy. But the fact that some works and figures are more or less mandatory should not prevent us from critiquing the canon in its present form.

We can and must raise questions about who is included, who is excluded and, not least, which criteria for inclusion and exclusion have been adopted in the shaping of our canon.

Admittedly, the absence of women philosophers was not the first thing that occupied me as a philosophy student. On the contrary, I remember how fascinating it was to try and get a handle on the big philosophers and classical questions of the canon: How best to understand the mystery of human self-consciousness? What is right? What is wrong? How can we justify our aesthetic judgments? What is truth? Knowledge? What should we humans aspire to and what can we hope for? Kant once summed up all other philosophical questions with the grand "What is a human being?"

I first encountered philosophy as an elective high school minor in my senior year. In the 1990s, I continued studying philosophy at the college level. As a newly minted student at the University of Oslo, I threw myself into the history of ideas, then comparative literature. Nevertheless, philosophy remained the subject I cared the most about, and that would eventually take me to graduate school.

As soon as I started reading the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers, my course was set. Kant's three critiques, Hegel's account of the educational path of the human spirit, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory. This was an arena in which I, as a woman in my early twenties, felt at home, and which had piqued my interest with a kind of intensity that made me feel I had no choice but to carry on studying.

The questions of the great philosophers, I thought at the time, concern us all, regardless of factors such as gender, social class, cultural background, and age.

This is how it was in the beginning.

But as I worked my way from undergraduate to graduate studies and read further into the classics of modern philosophy, I reached the lesser-known works. Here, as a woman at least, one encounters a new kind of resistance.

In their best-known works, Kant and Hegel write in depth about the nature and importance of human reason and understanding. However, once we reach their writings in philosophical anthropology, philosophy of law, and other arenas where gender becomes an issue, the situation changes. At this point, it becomes clear where the philosophers stand: With their unstable natures and emotions, women have no place in philosophy, nor in any other part of public life.

If it had not previously dawned on me to what extent philosophy bears the mark of the philosopher – Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche were simply treated as *philosophers* (as opposed to the way we still talk about *women* in the history of philosophy) – it was suddenly obvious that these works were written by men.

And if the tradition, as we know it, consists exclusively of philosophers who all happened to be men, what on earth had happened to the women?

I can hardly describe the disappointment that ensued. I sometimes talk to female colleagues about this experience – the feeling of suddenly being homeless in the academic neighborhood that had just begun to feel like home, and in which we had envisioned graduate work, possibly a PhD, and maybe even a tenure-track position.

It takes a surprisingly long time for this kind of insight fully to sink in. But when it does, it creates a feeling of unease. It was this pesky sense of unease – slight, but ever present – that seemed to vanish when I started reading the women in the history of modern philosophy. In fact, it was only then, when the extent and quality of the women's contributions began to dawn on me – and I use the term "woman" in a historically narrow *and* anachronistically broad sense (those who are not men) – that I realized how skewed a history of philosophy I had been presented with.

And what was worse, year after year, I, too, had propagated this history of modern philosophy in my own research and teaching.

It had not always been this way. Before I got into the more mainstream questions in nineteenth-century philosophy, there was a period in which I read a lot of works by Hannah Arendt, a towering figure in twentieth-century political thought. What had caught my attention was her early monograph on the romantic salon hostess Rahel Levin Varnhagen, herself a writer of a solid, philosophical caliber.[2] I remember being perplexed to see that Arendt, as a woman, could launch her academic career with a work on this Romantic

thinker, only to stay silent on women philosophers later on. The point is not that Arendt does not mention women at all – she certainly does, and she wrote powerful essays on Rosa Luxemburg, Karen Blixen, and the Romantic salon culture in which women were both facilitators and active participants. But the kind of penetrating analysis and sustained orientation towards a woman's life and experiences that saturates her early work is hardly part of her later, more well-known corpus. In the same way, I myself left Arendt behind and concentrated on other things as I commenced my graduate studies in philosophy. A focus on the women of the romantic salons, I had come to realize, would make it practically impossible to carry on studying philosophy. The topic was too marginal, or, rather, a non-topic at the time.

Today, I think I see where Arendt was coming from when she left Rahel Levin Varnhagen behind. I would like to think that I also have a better sense of why it took me so long to start working more systematically to promote the works of women in modern European philosophy. It was, to put it plainly, a matter of finding a way to stay afloat in the academic field I was interested in and hoped to be a part of.

At the time, anyone who wanted to address a topic like "women in philosophy" was branded a misfit, perhaps even as someone who was obsessed with gender issues to the extent that this would stand in the way of "real" philosophy. Read one or two books written by a woman, and you risked being the student who *only* cared about women philosophers – and this in spite of the fact that at least three quarters of the books you read, probably even more, were written by men.

Looking back, I am astounded by the silliness of it all.

Need we assume that it is those of us who insist that women contributed to modern philosophy who are obsessed with gender? Is not this obsession – if we want to use such a term – rather to be found among those who, year after year, facilitate reading lists and syllabi that are stripped of women's names?

For me, the turn to women in philosophy has been a crucial watershed, both professionally and personally. This has been such thoroughly exciting material to work with that it hardly compares with my previous scholarship. Even though the texts are old, often hard to read, and the secondary literature is scanty, these works keep evoking a sense of excitement.

When I reflect on this experience – how empowering it was to discover the women in modern philosophy – I cannot help thinking of the Norwegian Nobel-laureate Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's sense of elation when he visited a women's rights conference in Boston in 1889. At this conference, he might even have encountered activists who were

themselves galvanized by the philosophers the students and I will be reading this semester. In a pitch of exultation, Bjørnson writes home:

> ... the hours I have spent here must have been the most beautiful time in my life; for I sat there, as if in the future, and I found it difficult to control my feelings.[3]

Even though some of the texts I teach were produced more than two hundred years ago, they herald, in Bjørnson's words, a vision of what the history of philosophy might look like in the future, especially for those of us who care about the magnificent nineteenth century.

It is my hope that, before too long, we will have reached a point where women have been given the place they deserve in the history of philosophy. At that point, I hope that we will be able – finally! – to talk about nineteenth-century philosophers without implicitly assuming that the party is but a select gathering of gentlemen. Only when we reach such a point, will we also stop turning it into a "special project" when other groups, which in the case of women accounts for roughly half the thinking population, are included.

My own research centers on the history of philosophy, especially the European eighteenth- and nineteenth century onwards. When it comes to acknowledging the contribution of women, this field seems like a backwater compared to the scholarship that has been dedicated to earlier and later periods.

Within ancient philosophy, medieval philosophy, renaissance philosophy and the early modern period, there has, over the past ten to fifteen years, been considerable support for the effort to rehabilitate marginalized voices.

Scholars from these fields have even been able to demonstrate that women's contributions are routinely mentioned in histories of philosophy up to the time of the French Revolution.[4]

The same applies to the later periods, i.e., the second half of the twentieth century. Here, too, solid scholarship has established the importance of women's participation, and there is a rich research literature on figures such as Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir and the formidable Oxford Quartet consisting of Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, and Philippa Foot.[5]

In my first years at Temple University, I had watched with envy as my colleagues, especially those who specialized in early modern philosophy, modified their syllabi and expanded their areas of research to achieve historical equity. Similarly, those who taught recent analytic philosophy were able to put together syllabi that were both of high quality and sensitive to the virtues of an inclusive approach.

Contrary to what my own generation had been taught by our college professors, it was now clear not only that there were indeed women in the history of philosophy, but also that their works had significantly contributed to the development of the discipline.[6]

And still: When it comes to the key period from Kant to the beginning of the twentieth century – the period *in between* early modern philosophy, on the one hand, and Arendt and Beauvoir on the continent and the Oxford Quartet in England, on the other – it was remarkably quiet.

This makes no sense at all.

If philosophy, at least in some regions, included women throughout the long stretch from antiquity and the Middle Ages all the way up to the late seventeenth century, should women then suddenly have stopped thinking, writing, and publishing around the time when the great revolutions reshaped the political and intellectual landscape in Europe and other places? How likely is it that women philosophers had a role to play in earlier periods, but then put aside their pens as Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche made their entrance?

One need not be a historian to deem this is an implausible scenario. Yet the canon is not set in stone – and action is called for.

How can a field of study be changed or expanded? Writing and publishing research articles and textbooks is an obvious answer. But if the field is to change more profoundly, new generations must be brought onboard. It is the students, not the professors, who make up the future of the field.

It was with these kind of reflections in mind that my "Unruly Women" class took shape.

I initially had taught "Unruly Women" as part of the research going into the co-editing of a reader on women philosophers in the nineteenth century, but it soon became clear that this work could be taken further.

More importantly, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the works of the women philosophers. This was not a matter of individual biographies or the genealogies of individual works – even though, in this case, biographies and the emergence of individual works often happen to be of an unusually dramatic kind. What mattered, rather, was the philosophical ideas – the questions, the answers, the modes of reasoning – that materialized in the works of nineteenth-century women. These philosophers offer perspectives that challenge the traditional history of philosophy *and* make the reader aware of how the established canon, for all its grandness, remains both limited and limiting.

If the works of these women can be counted as philosophy – which I firmly believe to be the case – then we can also imagine that our image of philosophy will be altered.

This is definitely true at an everyday sociological level that has to do with who we are, those of us who happen to do philosophy for a living, and how we relate to the subjects we discuss and find interesting. But it also applies at a deeper, intellectual level, relating to the kinds of questions we ask and the issues and topics we take to be academically exciting and relevant.

The women in the history of philosophy were marginalized as *women*, yet it is as *philosophers* that we must rehabilitate them.

Needless to say, the rehabilitation of philosophy's many voices cannot stop with the inclusion of a handful of historical women but must be extended to the many other groups that have been marginalized or excluded to a similar or even greater extent.

One might ask why I retained the nineteenth century as an anchoring point for "Unruly Women." As an alternative, I could have offered a broad class on women throughout the entire history of philosophy – be it European philosophy, or philosophy in a global perspective.

Such a focus would definitely be worth pursuing.

Yet, in keeping my emphasis on the nineteenth century, I was motivated, at least in part, by the conviction that there is great value in studying a particular period up close, in this case the long nineteenth century, as it spans from the French Revolution to World War I. I hoped that a focus on this period would make it exceedingly clear just how actively women contributed to modern philosophy. Moreover, it would allow us to see that these women not only collaborated with and learned from the men in philosophy, but also from each other. In the period from the French Revolution onwards, the number of women with an interest in philosophy was such that they could stimulate, influence, and challenge each other. Moreover, the women were strong enough to leave a mark on mainstream philosophy. Their thoughts were philosophically groundbreaking, important, and provocative at the time. They remain so today.

Thus, it was here, with the philosophical line from the French Revolution to World War I, that it made sense for me to focus both in my research on women in the history of philosophy and in my teaching. And on this very first day of the spring semester, I am getting ready for a new class in which a new group of students will make their way into philosophy, most of them in their early or mid-twenties – that is, the same age as I was when I started to think about majoring in philosophy.

It is time to leave for campus. My tote bag is filled with books, I have my laptop in my backpack, and a I quickly grab a mug of coffee. In the winter, when I cannot bike to campus, the half-hour ride on the regional railway serves like a mini meditation, easing the transition from the peacefulness of my study to the bustling life on campus. When needed, I use the commute to prepare for class, yet my favorite pastime is to look aimlessly out of the window, watching the city pass by as the Chestnut Hill West-line loops south to Center City and then heads back up north to Temple's Main Campus.

Temple University was founded in 1884. However, if we judge by the architecture that dominates the part of the campus where the regional railway makes its stop, the university conveys a newer ideal of knowledge.

The original buildings are solid stone, with leaded glass and heavy wood throughout. These buildings were raised for eternity; they signal that nothing much will change in the fields of scholarship and education.

By contrast, the new buildings, including the brutalist 1970s complex where my own department is housed, reflect a different idea of knowledge. No-nonsense concrete, with floor plans designed to maneuver hordes of students in and out of seminar rooms and auditoriums with maximal efficiency.

The Philosophy Department is located on the seventh floor, with offices and classrooms overlooking the vast urban landscape that is only reined in by the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. I am heading to my office, then more or less straight to class.

I have taught philosophy for more than twenty years and at this point my rhythm of life is intertwined with the rhythm of the semester.

Be it in Norway, the UK, or the US, the drill remains the same: Every spring and fall, fresh, expectant faces are waiting in the classroom and an awkward sense of reticence is palpable throughout the first weeks of class. As we get closer to the drop date, some students will leave for other classes. Others join the group a few weeks in.

It is impossible to know how the semester will develop and if we will succeed in cultivating a classroom atmosphere in which budding ideas can be tested without fear of social or academic sanctions.

This spring, too, is marked by such openness.

Yet one thing remains fixed: what I will be teaching. I will be teaching a graduate seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as the class on the unruly women, many

of whom were active in and around the period in which Hegel wrote his phenomenology – but who, unlike him, never received the recognition and the scholarship they deserved.

Even before I designed the "Unruly Women" course, I had begun to incorporate more works by women into my history of philosophy classes. But a class with an all-women syllabus was definitely a new experience for me.

I vividly recall my surprise when I met with the first group of students. This group was different from the students I usually teach. As an academic discipline, philosophy remains an unusually male-dominated field, more male-dominated than almost any other university subject.[7]

When I teach Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, the proportion of women students is sometimes fewer than one in ten – and this *includes* me as the teacher. In my first section of "Unruly Women," by contrast, at least half of the students were women, and more students than usual introduced themselves using non-binary pronouns. I was not the only one who spoke with an accent, although I was alone in that my accent revealed a Northern European background. Some of the students were philosophy majors; others were minors, or just picking up the odd philosophy class.

Strangely enough, with the works of the women philosophers as our starting point, this group was easy to engage.

Will this semester's class be equally fun to teach? Will the discussions be as animated and engaging as they were the first time I taught "Unruly Women"?

Facing a new semester and a new group of students, I never quite know what to expect. This generation of students is so different from my own that I sometimes find it hard to understand where they are coming from. As an undergraduate student, I was blissfully unconcerned with the prospects of finding a job after graduation. I was part of a student culture in which politics mattered but was not linked to identity-related issues as it often is today.

Is it the orientation towards identity politics that has led to the peculiar mix of moral confidence and social anxiety that seems to characterize the student groups I have been teaching lately? In discussions of gender and ethnicity, they express a constant fear of hurting others. Yet they are ruthlessly strict if someone is perceived to be insensitive with respect to identity-related issues.

Be that as it may, the cohorts that are currently coming through the system are by far the most thoughtful and caring students I have taught.

Group discussions, for example, are no longer characterized by the one dominant voice that always prevailed when I was a student. It is no longer taboo to be uncertain or to admit that a text is difficult. The discussions usually open with students sharing reactions one by one, so that everyone gets their turn to speak – some with a solid understanding of the material, others with an attempt to express what they find difficult.

Either way, this is, for better or worse, a group of students who, as far as my own experience goes, will provide a fresh take on old philosophical texts and display a unique ability to connect the philosophy we study to the realities of the twenty-first century.

When I reach the classroom, every chair is taken and a couple of students are perched on the windowsill. The students are eager, but also not sure what to expect from a philosophy class. I, too, am unsure what to expect. Each semester is different; each class is a melting pot, in which individual students, with their own unique backgrounds and experiences, gather around a set of philosophical texts. This is our common ground – shared by the students, many of whom are new to philosophy, and myself, with some twenty years of philosophy-teaching under my belt.

In this sense the class is a micro-laboratory for testing out and discussing what kind of resonance these philosophical works, written by a group of women in the nineteenth century, might have in today's world. As with all lab work, the outcome cannot be predicted in advance.

This section of "Unruly Women" is an honors class, which means that the students have better grades, and I can typically expect more than usual in terms of academic interest and results. The twenty-four students all have different backgrounds. Some are majoring in subjects such as biology or chemistry. One is a mathematics major. Others are from the social sciences, gender studies, Africology and African American Studies, history, English, marketing, and drama. I have three philosophy majors and a handful minors. But even for students who are well on their way to obtaining their philosophy degrees, the material for this class is new.

We start with a round of presentations. Some students share a lot, while others keep their cards closer to their chests. One student has come all the way from Hawaii, another from Oregon, several from New York and New Jersey. Most of them are from the greater Philadelphia area or elsewhere in Pennsylvania. A girl at the back of the room tells the class that her grandmother had insisted she take a philosophy class. It is not the first time I have had students who have signed up on recommendations from close family members, although the norm seems to be that students are having a hard time convincing

their parents that they will get their money's worth covering credit hours in a field as "useless" as philosophy.

Sports bags – lacrosse sticks, field hockey gear, and running shoes – offer a clear indication of extracurricular interests. But the beauty of a college setting like this, is that once the students get settled in the classroom, they leave behind their everyday lives and focus instead on the discussions taking place in the here and now.

As the semester progresses, the students are likely to find their role within the group. They may be confident or anxious. Some of them will chatter away at all costs; others tend to think twice before they raise their hand. Some students pay attention; others are prone to daydreaming or they may even nod off. In most classes, the students become more talkative as we reach the second half of the semester.

Gradually, I get to know how each and every one of them tends to express themselves, how they write, and how they develop their thoughts and organize their ideas.

It is a big responsibility, year after year, to show a new group of students the way into philosophy. I easily admit that I am always slightly apprehensive when I face a new cohort of freshmen. But this particular group of "Unruly Women" students appear to be intellectually curious and full of energy. Even though they are of a generation that practically has the internet and social media incorporated into their DNA, they don't raise an eyebrow at my request for a screen-free classroom. The response makes me hopeful – maybe the spring is, after all, off to a good start.

This level of expectation and anticipation – an excitement that is almost palpable – is something I rarely experience in other classes. Yet with "Unruly Women," the same thing happens semester after semester. The students realize, from the very first week onwards, that they are part of a groundbreaking effort to make space for forgotten voices and to think through how it is that this group of strong women philosophers was so completely ignored when the history of philosophy was being written. This excitement is also shared by the students who are not women. Across gender identification and extracurricular interests, there is a sense that these are texts that *matter*, even if that means slightly different things to each and every one of them.

Naturally, I welcome this interest. At the same time, I cannot help but wonder how my own student experience would have been had the occasional female name found its way onto reading lists and syllabi.

It is getting darker outside, and the rain is lashing against the window. The first introduction has taken more time than planned and we are getting ready to wrap things up. "Get to work!" I urge the students, who are packing up their bags. Some are on their way to their next class; others are heading over to the bookstore to buy books for the spring semester. A small group of students linger. They want to talk more. I miss the first train home and then the next. But when I finally leave campus and make my way towards the railway station, I have a broad smile on my face.

I am already looking forward to next Monday and the philosopher who will open the semester: the legendary Germaine de Staël.

2

A TIME WILL COME

GERMAINE DE STAËL ON WOMEN, AMBITIONS, AND INTELLECTUAL TAKEDOWNS

Germaine de Staël was in a league of her own. She was as extravagant as she was wealthy. Combined with her extraordinary political talents, her cunning networking had made her a key player in European politics around and after the Napoleonic Wars.

An unconstrained taste for extramarital affairs was also part of Staël's image. Her most famous relationship, spanning almost seventeen years, was with the political philosopher Benjamin Constant.[8] She was no stranger to the use of opium and the parties she threw were of a kind that no one was prone to leave early.

In the period between 1804 and 1814, the visitors at Coppet, Staël's family estate in Switzerland, was a veritable "who's who" of European politics, literature, and culture. Among the visitors were Caroline von Humboldt, the Schlegel brothers, Adam Oehlenschläger, Prince August of Prussia, Dorothea Mendelssohn, Lord Byron, James Mackintosh, and Friederike Brun and her daughter Ida.[9]

Can it surprise us that Germaine de Staël's biography keeps fascinating new generations? Can it surprise us that she, like many women in the history of philosophy, has been the subject of exposés that allow her colorful personality to overshadow her intellectual contributions?

It should be possible to entertain two thoughts at the same time: On the one hand, the allure of an extraordinarily dramatic early nineteenth-century life, and, on the other, the fascination with her equally extraordinary philosophical contribution.

In the second week of the semester, the atmosphere in the classroom is more relaxed. Some of the students have discovered that they are also taking other classes together; they share experiences and talk about syllabi and mutual friends. New seating constellations have emerged, and I suspect this is how they will remain. Before class, I have briefly looked over the list of student names and we do a quick round of refreshment introductions – this

time with me in charge (Do I remember the students' names? Can I recall the interests they shared last week?).

In a week or two we will all be better acquainted, but during the first few weeks there is always some confusion with regard to names and pronouns. I take simple mnemonic notes to distinguish the two political science students who both look rather shy, and the two first-year students who sit next to each other with their long vintage skirts, white tops, well-worn Fjällräven backpacks.

We have a busy afternoon ahead of us. First, I would like to give the students a sense of where Germaine de Staël was coming from, philosophically speaking. What is her story? How did she develop as a thinker? And, not least, how did a woman become a philosopher at the end of the seventeenth century?

Germaine de Staël (1766-1817, née Necker) grew up in Paris. The family was exceptionally privileged. Her father, Jacques Necker, was a banker with a fortune so massive that at one point he extended a private loan to the French state. Necker was Minister of Finance under Louis XVI. He was also the author of several political and philosophical texts. For a period of time, he had financial interests in the French colonial empire, but his free-trade instincts eventually turned him into a staunch opponent of slavery, even at a time when the sugar production in Saint-Domingue, now Haiti, accounted for about two-thirds of France's foreign trade.[10] Her mother, Suzanne Curchod, was a socialite and social benefactor. She, too, wrote texts of a philosophical caliber. Her famous Friday salons were frequented by David Hume, Denis Diderot, Nicolas de Condorcet and other seventeenth-century celebrities.

We can imagine that there must have been an excess of hair powder, much vanity, *and* extremely interesting discussions in the Necker family's reception halls.

The young Germaine de Staël

Suzanne Curchod raised the young Germaine in line with a modern, philosophical pedagogy.

In this period, *Emile*, *or On Education* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's celebrated work on education, was ubiquitous – despite (or because of?) the fact that the work was blacklisted in both Paris and Geneva. In *Emile*, Rousseau recommends the cultivation of the child's nature and advocates the idea that children should learn by taking the consequences of their actions. Likewise, they should be raised for social life through a primary knowledge of their inner nature.

In Germaine's world, however, Rousseau's pastoral musings were replaced by Parisian high culture, and the relationship between child and tutor ranked second to that between child and parents. Most importantly, though, the young Germaine was subject to an education that led in a completely different direction from the one Rousseau attributes to women – intentionally or not, she was raised to become an intellectual woman.

This is not to say that Staël, when she started writing, received unconditional support from her parents. In her father's view, women should be educated, as his own spouse clearly was, but kept away from writing and the hustle and bustle of public life. It was only when Staël had turned forty and had the best-selling novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) under her belt that she mustered up the courage to purchase a desk, the ultimate expression of a life devoted to intellectual work.[11]

By this time, Staël was already a married woman. It was a major event when the Necker daughter was to be married off. Her parents considered several candidates, including William Pitt the Younger, who would later become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Ultimately, the choice fell on Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, a Swedish diplomat and nobleman. Staël von Holstein was considerably older than his bride-to-be, but could offer a title as well as diplomatic immunity, both of which would later come in handy for Germaine. She, in turn, was one of Europe's richest heirs, a boon for the gambling-addicted and financially strapped groom-to-be.

The marriage was a question of international relations. The negotiations must have been tough, and it took almost five years to finalize the details. In the end, the agreement included the transfer of the Caribbean island of Saint-Barthélemy (today: St Barthes) from France to Sweden. Of the island's small population, around four hundred people lived in slavery.[12]

From her earliest philosophical and literary works to her posthumous writings, Staël stood forth as a clear-spoken abolitionist.

Stäel was born into the golden age of French philosophy. The Enlightenment movement was as its peak. Not only were important works being written, but key figures and movements were beginning to see the light of day. It was also the case that in this period, philosophy served as an integrated part of a broader social and political discourse. Would the French Revolution ever have emerged without the works of *philosophés* such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, d'Alembert, and Condorcet?

As is to be expected from the prodigy of one of Paris' renowned salonnièrs, Staël was well-versed in French philosophy. She was also fluent in English and read works by David Hume and Adam Smith. What interested her in particular was how the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers not only treated man as a rational being, but also emphasized the role of human emotions and passions.

It is precisely by combining impulses from French and English Enlightenment thinking that Staël develops her own original position. But she does not stop here – neither geographically, nor philosophically. For Staël is a philosopher who synthesizes virtually *all* the major impulses of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European thought, thus subverting our conventional wisdom about the -isms and movements of this period.

As students of philosophy and the history of ideas, we learn to trace the major trends of the late eighteenth century. We encounter the French Enlightenment, with its focus on rationality and self-determination. We are presented with the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, with its infamous skepticism (Hume even questions the assumption that when one rolling billiard ball hits another, the movement of the second ball is caused by the first). A little later, we are introduced to German Idealism, with its focus on the freedom and spontaneity of the self. We find this in Kant, Fichte, and, in a historicized version, in Hegel. We also come into contact with the movement of Romanticism and learn how the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Schleiermacher, and others equip the idealist self with expression, imagination, and the need for a more comprehensive totality of life that finds form in art and encounters with natural beauty.

Staël brought Enlightenment thinking with her from home. She became acquainted with the works of Kant and other contemporary German philosophers through her friendship with Wilhelm von Humboldt, who resided in Paris. Humboldt wrote enthusiastically to his friend Goethe to tell him about Staël's philosophical originality.

Staël, in turn, would contribute to the definition and development of Romanticism as a movement – both with her early works on the passions, her work on literature, and her later, more anthropological-philosophical work *Germany*. Through a sequence of trips

to the German-speaking lands – partly the result of Napoleon having banned her from Paris, then from France – she would disseminate her own thinking, but also learn more about what was happening in the neighboring states, with which Napoleon was waging war.

As a thinker, Staël summarizes her time and simultaneously escapes any attempt to be classified by the standard labels of the period. She belongs to each and every movement of the period – and to none of them. Socially as well as intellectually, she represents a point of crystallization for the period's cultural impulses and rich philosophical life. Throughout the vicissitudes of her work, interests, and collaborations, she remains entirely herself, with her unique and irreducible position.

Staël published her first philosophy book at the age of 22 – a study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's works and character.[13] The book, which was published anonymously, was immediately branded as being hagiographic in its approach. It is easy to see what the critics were referring to: This is by and large a sympathetic overview of Rousseau's thought. But the study also contains independent reflections that point towards Staël's later contributions. When the book was reprinted, Staël took the opportunity to revise the preface and make clearer where she (now) stood in relation to, for example, Rousseau's ideas on the subordinate position of women.

A similar mixture of fascination with Rousseau and a desire to distance herself from him can also be found in Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft reviewed Staël's early work, but beyond the fact that she takes the young Germaine de Staël seriously by treating her as a thinker deserving of criticism, she is not especially generous in her treatment of the young French writer.[14]

After the study of Rousseau there ensued a string of philosophical publications from Staël's hand, one after the other. A study of the passions and their influence on the individual and society was published in 1796; *A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions, Upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations* (English trans, 1798) was its mammoth title. Here, she analyzes the nature of the passions and how they tend to override reason and self-determination, thus being a major cause of human unhappiness. She also delivers a frighteningly relevant analysis of phenomena such as populism and political fanaticism.[15] Initially, Staël had intended for this to be a two-part study. The first part would concentrate on the effects of the passions on the individual: on how we submit to passions such as love, envy, gambling, greed, vanity, and megalomania. The second part was to deal with the social and political consequences of the passions. Only the study's first part was

completed in its intended form. Nevertheless, *A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions* stands as a crucial contribution to moral psychology.

Four years later, Staël published her magisterial *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (1800, English trans. 1812). In this work, too, she developed a radical and original position.

When Staël published her study on literature, Kant had already set philosophical aesthetics on a new path, insisting, as he does, that our attempts to determine whether or not something is beautiful must bracket all considerations of morality, politics, and knowledge. Staël, by contrast, insists on the social and political role of art. Not only does a work of art reflect the culture and period from within which it emerges, but it can also help to articulate a social and political agenda.

For Staël, art is never art only; beauty is never pure.

In this respect, it is symptomatic that her first works of fiction made up a triplet of novellas that unabashedly take on French colonialism and its slavery-based economy. The best known of these novellas is *Mirza*. Staël's abolitionist campaign later reached England and all the way to the U.S., where, in letter form, she takes her friend Thomas Jefferson to task for betraying the deepest ideals of the republic by not abolishing slavery.[16]

In 1810, Staël was ready to publish *Germany*, her major study of culture and philosophy across the German-speaking lands. The book is groundbreaking in its methodology. In her approach, Staël describes the most concrete aspects of life across the German-speaking lands and then ascends to the more abstract. She begins with descriptions of nature and climate. What do the German-speaking areas look like? What kind of living conditions do they offer? What kinds of winter, summer, spring, and fall characterize these regions? She goes on to describe daily life, and the worries and joys of ordinary people. What makes people happy? What makes them glum and anxious? What kind of literature does the German-speaking population like to read? It is only against this background that philosophy is introduced: as an expression of, and a reflection on, the natural and cultural conditions across the German-speaking lands.

For Staël, though, German-language culture and philosophy is not just for the Germans. The French, too, have something to learn. Here they can find a philosophy that is not hampered by a one-sided worship of reason but instead seeks to take the entire human being as its starting point, even its metaphysical longings and its attempt to go beyond what reason, strictly speaking, can offer. In German philosophy, Staël thus encounters precisely the combination of reason and emotion that she herself had reflected on in her earlier work on the passions.

Needless to say, Napoleon was less than enthusiastic about a work that praised German culture and thereby diluted the support for his warfare in German-speaking Europe. As the publisher prepared to dispatch the book, Napoleon sent in his troops to destroy the ten thousand copies – five thousand copies of each of the two volumes. The original print run speaks volumes about Staël's popularity. This was confirmed when the book was finally published, in French in London, after a delay of three years. *Germany* became an instant bestseller, both in the original French and in English translation.

Staël's analysis came to define German Romanticism for her contemporaries as well as for posterity. In fact, it defined not only German Romanticism but, one might say, Romanticism *tout court*, including its English, Italian, Russian, and American variations.[17]

Staël's later works include a study on suicide from 1813. Strictly speaking, the book is less about suicide than about deep existential questions and the creeping sense of meaninglessness that can arise when culture and politics fall apart, and individuals lose a key arena for self-expression and meaning. Here, as in her earlier works, Staël sees compassion – a quality that takes us beyond a self-centered outlook – as the key to a meaningful existence.

In her earlier works, Staël had defended the right to suicide. In the 1813 essay, by contrast, she argues that suicide can only be defended in morally troubling, almost impossible situations, such as the one in which Socrates found himself when the Athenians gave him the choice to either disown his fundamental commitment to reason-giving and democracy, or to drink the lethal potion with which they had provided him – that is, situations where one is faced with the choice between preserving one's own life or renouncing one's deepest ideals.

Staël also wrote a comprehensive study of the French Revolution. This book, *Considerations on the Principal events of the French Revolution, From its Early beginnings to July 8, 1815,* was posthumously published in 1818 (an English translation was published the same year). Ditto for her description of the ten-year-long period she spent in exile after Napoleon found her presence in France too much of a provocation. While rather self-righteous in its tone, *Ten Years in Exile* (1821, English trans. 1821) provides a vivid picture the period and of Staël's suffering at the systematically discouraging treatment of woman intellectuals.

Staël's legacy in political philosophy includes her steady defense of tolerance, moderation, and liberalism. She advocates for international cooperation and understanding. In her own work, she draws on philosophical and political ideas from many cultures. In the last essay she published, she argues for the importance of enriching national

literature and philosophy with translated texts from other language areas. She emphasizes the value of an exchange of ideas across languages and national borders. Given how steeped we are in our own culture and its preferences, this is, for her, the ultimate bulwark against prejudice and intellectual provincialism.

Despite her formidable philosophical track-record, it was not only Staël's philosophy that bothered Napoleon (although the emphasis on cultural cooperation over warfare was undoubtedly provocative enough). Rather, it was the novel *Delphine* (1802), published eight years prior to *On Germany*, that made him lose his temper. The novel is philosophical in spirit. It addresses the political climate of the time, portrays a strong and reflective woman and, horror of horrors, promotes the view that unhappily married women should be given the right to divorce.

When Napoleon sent Staël into exile, he probably hoped to silence her, bothersome and eloquent as she was. She, however, made good use of her time in exile. The ten years or so she spent outside of France were used for precisely the kind of international networking and exchange of ideas that would later become one of her most favored philosophical topics.

With her children in tow and none other than the famous philosopher August Wilhelm Schlegel hired as their tutor, Staël journeyed through Russia and continental Europe.

It was here that she met the greatest German writers and philosophers of the time: Goethe, Schiller, Jacobi, Fichte, and others. Goethe had already translated her early "Essay on Fictions" into German; her novel *Corinne* had been translated into German by Dorothea von Schlegel (née Mendelssohn). When she met with Fichte, she is said to have quickly put him in his place by telling him that his notion of absolute freedom appeared to be little more than inflated musings.[18]

In this sense, it was precisely her exile that made it possible for Staël to write the work on the German philosophy and culture that Napoleon hated so much.

Staël's philosophical legacy lived on after her death. We find traces of her influence in, among others, Simone de Beauvoir, who in *The Second Sex* writes uncharacteristically positively about Staël's ability to be a woman and an intellectual:

> Mme de Staël cleverly mixed both methods [being a woman and being an intellectual] with stunning triumphs; she was almost always irresistible.[19]

The difficult act of balancing life as an intellectual and life as a woman is a topic to which Staël, like many of the other women we will discuss this semester, will constantly return.

Some readers find Staël more progressive when she writes about women in her novels than when she offers her philosophical analysis of gender-related topics. Is this so?

In my view, this is a misreading. Indeed, it is undoubtedly true that the female characters in *Delphine* and *Corinne* are radical (for their time) and that Staël's philosophical contributions entails claims on women that today would be seen as wildly undated. But when it comes to her philosophy, there is hardly a single work in which Staël does not reflect on what it is like to be a woman and an intellectual, thus thematizing the difficult position from which she herself writes. In her early work on the passions, she even interweaves a separate discussion of love, targeted at the book's female readers.

As I am preparing to wrap up my introductory lecture, I notice that one of the students is impatiently squirming in his chair. He obviously has something on his mind. Or rather, from the way he is looking about him, I get the sense that the students have been chatting before class. Clearly, I should have started the class with an invitation to share reactions to the two Staël-texts we have been reading: an excerpt on women writers from *The Influence of Literature* and the eponymous protagonist's self-reflective letter, addressed to the lover she ultimately cannot have, from *Corinne*.

The student leans forward.

Then he blurts out: "Staël is just about the most arrogant thinker I've ever encountered." He blushes ever so slightly upon realizing what he just said. Did he not intend to make his point so bluntly? There is no way to know. Yet it is easy to see what he is referring to. Among all the philosophical snobbery we encounter in the period, Staël positions herself in the top tier. In her discussion of art and politics, she does not hesitate to talk about female geniuses. There is little doubt that she sees herself as one of them.

Scholars have written approvingly on how Staël extends the Romantic idea of genius to include women, but they have also pointed out that Staël is not particularly generous in naming other women who distinguish themselves in this way.[20]

The student's concern is also valid on a more principled level. Superficially, expanding the category of genius so as to include women may make it less restricted in its area of application, but it does not make the category of "genius" (and the adherent distinction between "genius" and "ordinary") less problematic as such.

Where does Staël's insistence on women geniuses come from?

In Staël's view, modern women suffer a fate that is not unlike that of the freed slaves during the Roman empire: "If they seek to achieve a higher status – one which the laws have not granted them—they are regarded as criminals; if they remain slaves, they are oppressed."[21] These are, undoubtedly, strong words. But given Staël's assumptions, it becomes imperative to explore, in far greater detail, what characterizes the situation of modern women.

In this context, Staël provides an analysis of the kind of social strategies that are consciously or unconsciously used to belittle intellectual women, i.e., women who may be as bold as to publicly to flaunt their bookish ambitions. Staël writes:

> Women are forgiven if they sacrifice their household occupations for the sake of worldly amusements, but if they take their study seriously, they are accused of pedantry. And if they do not immediately rise above the pleasantries that are leveled against them from all directions, these pleasantries manage to discourage talent, to dry up the very source of confidence and exaltation.[22]

Is it then the case that women should not be educated because this would make them pedantic, unhappy, and disillusioned? If this was a commonplace position at the time, it is certainly not Staël's. Proceeding to pick apart any argument of this kind, she writes:

> It is of course possible that by developing their reason, women would become aware of the hardships that are often part of their destiny. But this same reasoning would have to be applied to enlightenment more generally and its effect on the happiness of all of humanity.[23]

If women are intellectually undermined, this leads to personal unhappiness and a loss of talent that could have benefited society.

Nevertheless, Staël's thinking retains an element of optimism. These are, she believes, attitudes that will soon be left behind. In this sense, female geniuses are to be regarded as intellectual and artistic guiding stars. For as she insists: "I believe that there will come a time in which the philosophical legislators will pay serious attention to the education of women, the civil laws that should protect them, the duties that must be imposed on them, and the happiness that can be guaranteed to them."[24] *The happiness that can be guaranteed to them* – Staël envisions no less than this.

For Staël, this promise has yet to be fulfilled. She must have had high hopes for the future, possibly even for the age in which we now live, a good two hundred year after she published *The Influence of Literature on Society*.

"Do the experiences – and hopes – that Staël conveys belong to a distant past?" I ask.

Some of the students start laughing; many of them shake their heads. One of them even rolls her eyes, as if to emphasize how preposterous it would be to assume that today, we take women's intellectual capacities to be on a par with men's. They clearly recognize themselves in Staël's descriptions.

A girl at the back of the classroom forgets to raise her hand and eagerly cuts off another student who was about to speak.

"If you're not a man," she says, "you have a kind of perpetual intellectual gagging order. Any transgression will quickly be punished by labeling the woman a bitch." Some students nod in agreement. They share experiences from high school or other college classes. The b-word is repeated, over and over again: the ultimate gender insult.

But this is not the only form of sanctioning that the students bring up. A political science major who devotes time to local politics has interned for a former sex worker turned politician. When the politician participates in public debates, attention is all too easily drawn to her past and her appearance rather than the political message she conveys.

In a philosophy context, it is worth remembering how Simone de Beauvoir herself, the mother of modern feminism, was referred to in a 1947 New Yorker interview as *the prettiest existentialist you ever saw*. [25]

Staël does a good job of describing the predicament under which even an intellectual icon such as Beauvoir would suffer in the late 1940s. But in addition to her description, Staël also offers a critical analysis of this disempowering dynamic.

The student who had initially brought attention to Staël's arrogance puts it in clear terms:

"It's mindboggling," he says, staring down at his desk, "that even one of Europe's most intelligent and powerful women can be so completely disheartened by the reactions she encounters."

Again, I cannot help but agree.

"Why," I ask, "were – or are – so many women trapped in such an existential cul-de-sac?"

The students are at a loss, but Staël's texts offer a possible answer.

In her work, Staël highlights a pattern in which women are brought up to see themselves through the eyes of others and thus become particularly vulnerable to negative reactions. When they feel that they fail to live up to the expectations of others, they do not review these (imaginary or real) expectations, but instead accept their own inadequacy and strive to do better.

Staël elaborates:

> Men can always hide their *amour-propre* [self-esteem] and their desire to be lauded under the appearance, or reality, of the strongest and most noble passions. But when women write, one always assumes that it is in order to display their abilities. Thus the public grants them approval only very reluctantly. *It is precisely because the public thinks that women cannot do without its approval that approval is withheld.* [26]

Once again, the point is not that men are exempt from the dialectics of recognition given and recognition withheld. *Anyone* who has been brought up be sensitive to the expectations of others will to some extent be exposed to the brutal economy of recognition. But as Staël emphasized at the time and feminists make it clear today, typically more women than men have internalized such external expectations. For the students, Staël's point – philosophical and abstract, summarized over two centuries ago – still resonates today.

Does this also apply to the kind of experiences Staël writes about in *Corinne*?

In its time, the novel was an international bestseller of immense proportions. Reportedly, American readers were so eager to get their hands on the book that once the novel was out in French, translations were started in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. All along the East Coast, readers were impatiently twiddling their thumbs, unwilling to let the contingencies of book-distributions delay their reading.

From previous years, I know that this literary – and somewhat less arrogant – text will easily engage the students. Although *Corinne* is written in novel form, it has clear philosophical undertones…and, just to be on the safe side, it is also furnished with an apparatus of endnotes.

In her early work, Staël had argued that the modern novel should itself display philosophical aspirations – an idea that was later adopted by the German romantics. But whereas the romantics gave literary form to their abstract ideas about, say, the nature of the self and its metaphysical desires, Staël arrived at similar ideas as early as the 1790s, at the point when she was ready to publish her abolitionist novellas. Here, her approach to the human self goes hand in hand with her criticism of France's slave-based sugar

production. If every self is free and endowed with a capacity for self-determination, the slave trade is a crime of the gravest kind.

It is worth considering that these reflections may have been stirred during or shortly after the settling of the dowry that accompanied Staël's marriage to the much older Staël von Holstein.

As Staël's contemporaries understood it, *Corinne* was of a similarly provocative nature. The excerpt we have read for class takes the form of an explanatory letter, which the novel's protagonist writes to Oswald, the man she loves but cannot have. She talks about her upbringing, her attempts to get an education and her desire to lead a life in which she can express herself independently of society's image of a woman's place and role. In literary form, Staël thus offers an analysis of how women are disciplined within and through culture (to borrow a concept that will later gain traction in the works of Michel Foucault).

In her treatise on literature, Staël had described society's reaction to intellectual women. *Corinne* takes this topic further and addresses a phenomenon that we today would speak of as *internalized bias*. It is not only men who maintain the norms and categories of patriarchy. In a society where such norms dominate, they also influence women's way of living, thinking, and feeling – and this is so *even* if the values expressed are deeply misogynistic and thus harmful to women's well-being.

In this way, the women in the novel, not least Corinne's stepmother, convey standards of normalcy that curb the protagonists' opportunities for happiness and self-expression. In Staël's vivid portrayal, Corinne describes the kind of female community she would later run away from:

> Sometimes I spent whole days in my stepmother's social gathering, without hearing a word which expressed a thought or a feeling. Even gestures were not allowed in speaking. On the young girls' faces there was the loveliest bloom and the most vivid coloring, but the most complete immobility. What a strange contrast between nature and society! All age-groups had similar pleasures. They drank tea, they played whist, and the women grew old always doing the same thing, always staying in the same place. Time certainly did not let them escape; it knew where to capture them. [27]

Corinne's hopes and ambitions cannot be realized within the framework of dull tea parties. It is her stepmother who informs Corinne that her transgression of the prevailing gender norms will come at a high price. In order to avoid shaming her family, she must leave for Italy.

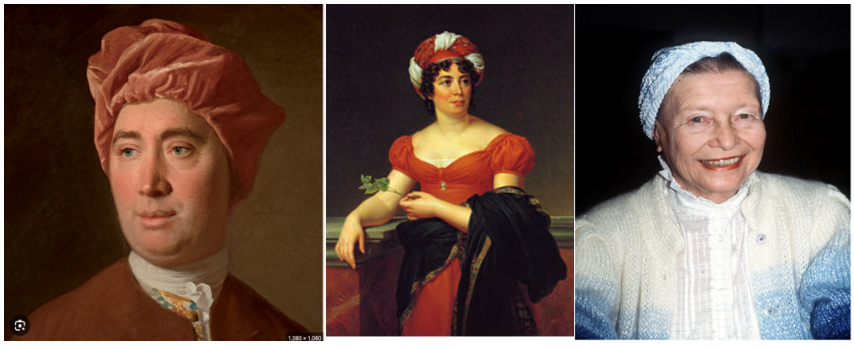
As far as Staël's biography goes – and her situation here is hardly unique – we see how she is judged on the basis of her eccentric style. Both in France and during her European sojourns, she was confronted with a bewildering mix of admiration and condemnation. What an outfit! What a look! She is far from pretty! Such was the chorus she was met with. The salon hostess Rahel Levin Varnhagen was a devoted reader of Staël's works. Yet she is not at her most generous when, after the two met at the home of a mutual friend, she exclaimed that Staël had "seen nothing, knew nothing, understood nothing."[28]

Similar sentiments are reiterated even by Staël's translator. In the English translation of her study of the passions, published just two years after the French original, the translator excuses her the thirty-year-old author's appearance: "Her figure is not remarkable for beauty or elegance," the translator writes. Nonetheless, it is added, Staël's book is likely to please.[29]

The translator's comment speaks volumes about the work's intended readership – *and* about how women in philosophy were perceived at the time.

Did Staël know that her outfits would provoke? With a speculative mindset, we can safely answer: Yes, of course she did.

The signature garment, for her as well as for the vain David Hume, was the turban – the favored fashion accessory among those who wished to exude a cosmopolitan mindset. One might ask whether it is a matter of sheer coincidence that Simone de Beauvoir, who returned to Staël more than a dozen times in *The Second Sex*, was so attached to her turban variation that she was buried in it. [30]



Philosophers in turban: Hume, Staël, and Beauvoir

Staël's analysis of how we internalize and live with beliefs and values that are contrary to our own interests is ahead of her time. These are points that, without reference to her work,

have received increasing attention in contemporary analyses of the nature of oppression, be it based on gender, skin color, or other identity markers.

In *The Frozen Woman* (1981), one of her many autobiographical works, the French Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux describes a more contemporary version of the kind of situation Staël, in her time, had pinned down. The novel's protagonist is studying with her husband, as the following scene unfolds:

> We've been married for a month, three months now. We're back at the university, and I'm teaching Latin. The days are shorter. We work at home together. How serious and fragile we are, the touching image of a young, modern, intellectual couple. An image that could still move me if I weren't trying to discover how it can gently suck you in, and swallow you whole, while you never lift a finger to save yourself. I'm working on La Bruyère or Verlaine in the same room with him, not two yards away from where he's sitting. The pressure cooker, a wedding present (so useful, you'll see), is hissing merrily on the stove. United, alike. Shrill ringing of the kitchen timer, another present. Here the resemblance ends. One of the two figures gets up, turns off the gas, waits for the whirling top to slow its crazy dance, opens the cooker, strains the soup, and returns to the table piled with books, wondering, now where was I… Me. The difference is off and running. [31]

Why does only one of them get up to check on the soup? And what will, in the long term, their lives look like if, year after year, *only one of them* gets up when the soup is ready? What kind of personal costs will this incur for each of them? What are the social consequences of the fact that even the soon-to-be French intellectuals of the 1970s take it for granted that it is the woman who will be in charge of the soup enterprise?

Staël was hardly confined to pressure cookers and the monotony of everyday dinners. But she did find that her work was constantly furnished with the special label "written by a woman."

Couldn't philosophy written by a woman be philosophy, plain and simple? Couldn't it be philosophy in the same way that we think of works written by men as covering issues regardless of the author's gender?

For Staël, the case is clear: The Enlightenment aims to realize freedom for all – *liberté, egalité, fraternité,* as the grand new ambitions resounded in the period leading up to the French Revolution.

But on closer inspection, "all" in this case turns out to be the "someone" who, thanks to their privileges, benefits from the present hierarchies of values and gender.

Staël's simple point is that an enlightened society cannot afford this. If we are to have, as she envisioned, a modern society that allows for individual perfection and

perfectibility, then everyone, independently of gender, must be given a chance to realize themselves and achieve their goals. The alternative is for women to live their lives as passive mannequins – out of touch with their own abilities and life opportunities.

Henrik Ibsen is said to have used Staël's description of the mannequin-like women who passively follow society's conventions as a pretext for Nora in *A Doll's House*. It is also possible that Ibsen was inspired by the main male character in *Corinne* when he named the character of Osvald in *Ghosts*.[32]

Even though Staël has much to teach us, one would be hard pressed to present her as a feminist in the modern sense of the word, especially if we are mindful of the modern distinction between *sex* (as a biological phenomenon) and *gender* (as a cultural phenomenon). At times, she links gender to biological characteristics in a way that today appears essentialist. In her work on the on literature, itself an excellent piece of philosophy, she occasionally accepts a division of labor that assigns philosophy to men, while saving socializing and literature for women.[33] She is sparing in her solidarity with women from the lower social classes and women who do not share her extraordinary talents. And she hardly reflects on how her talents and achievements may be linked to the privileged conditions under which she grew up.

In previous semesters, students have been provoked by Staël's apparent blindness to her privilege. In the spring, it was the comment about her arrogance, which is irritating enough. For the students this semester, it was Staël's analysis of the implicit gender bias that made an impression. They have a point: In the texts we have read this week, this stands out as philosophically interesting and insightful. Here – just as in her moral psychology, aesthetics, metaphysics, existential philosophy, and political thought – Staël was a true pioneer.

If Staël, in our time, has not received the philosophical limelight she deserves, it is precisely as a philosopher that she was recognized during her lifetime and in the years that followed her premature death at 51.

In a North-European context, Staël's literary philosophy resonated with Georg Brandes and other radical nineteenth-century thinkers.[34] In the U.S., the nineteenth-century feminist Margaret Fuller was such an avid reader of Staël's work that she branded herself a Yankee Corinne.[35] Several female intellectuals wrote biographies of Staël, including the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child in the U.S. and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in England (the latter is best known as the author of *Frankenstein* [1818], but also as Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter).[36] Ralph Waldo Emerson drew his ideal of *self-reliance* from Staël's works, which he read with much enthusiasm.[37]

In this sense, history itself can provide us with inspiration. For here, it seems like the past – with its efforts to secure Staël a place in the philosophical canon – has been more forward-looking than present-day philosophy often is. Forward-looking in this sense, too, were the scriptwriters for The Sopranos, who, in the series' second season, have the gangster progenies tumbling around New Jersey with existential qualms and seeking reprieve in philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre ... and Germaine de Staël.

END NOTES

Notes are to be replaced by page numbers.
EN* = to be replaced with English translation

WP refers to *Women Philosophers in the Long Nineteenth Century: The German Tradition*, ed. Dalia Nassar and Kristin Gjesdal, trans. Anna Ezekiel, w. Dalia Nassar and Stephen Gaukroger (for Germaine de Staël). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

[1] Kant's suggestion about the bearded women scientist can be found in Immanuel Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen.* Academy edition. Volume II, *Vorkritische Schriften* 1757-1777, ed. Paul Gedan, Kurd Lasswitz, Paul Menzer, Max Frischeisen-Köhler, Erich Adickes. Berlin: Brandenburgische Akademie, 1969, pp. 229-230. [EN*]

[2] For Hannah Arendt's work on Rahel Levin Varnhagen, see Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman.* Translated by Richard Winston and Clara Winston. New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2022.

[3] Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson writes: "This afternoon I was at the 'Women's Congress', which is being held this year in Boston. Here the most famous supporters of the cause are to be found. There is no scientist or man of letters here who does not fully share the work for the emancipation of women, so that they may gain equal rights with men. The most outstanding women lead the movement; this is where their papers are published. I have read a number of issues of it.

The meetings here have been crowded. And I will say that the hours I have spent here are must have been the most beautiful time in my life; for I sat there, as if in the future, and I found it difficult to control my feelings. America's best women, with an education like the best men, well-traveled and well-read, several of them with university degrees, as doctors, etc., rose up, one after the other, to spread their view of the subject matters discussed with skill, truthfulness, breathtaking conviction." *Dagbladet* November 16, 1889, under the heading "Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson." See https://www.nb.no/items/67314750e99f13a310fc26dd394f1f1f?page=0. I thank Marit Grøtta for the reference – and for the comment accompanying the: "use this a source of sustenance!"

[4] For a review of a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of philosophy-books that take women's contributions seriously, see Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, "From a 'Memorable Place' to 'Drops in the Ocean': On the Marginalization of Women Philosophers in German Historiography of Philosophy." In *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2020, pp. 442-62.

[5] The so-called Oxford Quartet is vividly described in Benjamin J. B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris*

Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Highly recommended is also Mary Midgley's autobiography, *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* London: Routledge, 2005.

[6] Women's contribution to the history of (especially European) philosophy is widely documented in the groundbreaking *A History of Women Philosophers*. Four volumes. Edited by Mary Ellen Waithe. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995. Among the many websites and centers dedicated to the project of highlighting women's voices in philosophy are Project Vox. Duke University. http://projectvox.org/about-the-project/; the SSHRC project Extending New Narratives in the History of Philosophy, www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net, and https://historyofwomenphilosophers.org.

[7] For demographical data on philosophy in the US, see https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/data_on_profession/fy2020-demographicstatistics.pdf. For the UK, see https://bpa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-BPA-SWIP-Report-Women-in-Philosophy-in-the-UK.pdf and for Canada: https://www.acpcpa.ca/blogs/gender-ratio-in-philosophy-an-inferential-statistical-model-of-possible-determinants. Daily Nous provide useful statistics: https://dailynous.com/2021/11/16/women-in-philosophy-recent-reports/ The report from the UK in particular shows a clear decline from recruitment positions to professor. Thanks to Eli Israel for help with filtering the data.

[8] For Staël's relationship with Constant, see Renee Winegarten, *Germaine de Staël & Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. For an estimate of the length of the turbulent relationship, see p. 2.

[9] For an overview of the extravagant social life at Coppet, see Etienne Hofmann and François Rosset, *Le groupe de Coppet. Une constellation d'intellectuels européens*. Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2005.

[10] Haiti's importance to French foreign trade is discussed in Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, esp. pp. 25-26.

[11] The anecdote about Staël's belated desk purchase is widespread; here: Madelyn Gutwirth, "Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question," *PMLA*, vol. 86, no. 1, January 1971, pp. 100-109, p. 103.

[12] For more details on the transfer of Saint-Barthélémy from France to Sweden, see Christopher Miller. *The French Atlantic Triangle*, p. 143.

[13] Staël's first book is translated as *Letters on the Works and Character of J. J. Rousseau*. Trans. unknown. London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789.

[14] Mary Wollstonecraft discusses Staël's first published work in "Art. XLIX." *Analytical Review* 4 (August 1789). For a discussion of the complexity of this review, see Julie A. Carlson, "Characters: Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine de Staël." *Modern Philology*, vol. 98, no. 2, 2000, pp. 320-38. For a discussion of women thinkers and their orientation towards Rousseau, see Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.

[15] I discuss Staël's concept of the passions, and especially political fanaticism, in "Germaine de Staël on Passions, Politics, and Fanaticism" in *Fanaticism and the History of Philosophy*. Ed. Paul Katsafanas. London: Routledge, 2023, pp. 143-160.

[16] The correspondence with Jefferson is published, for example, in Marie G. Kimball, "Unpublished Correspondence of Mme. De Staël with Thomas Jefferson." *The North American Review*, July, 1918, vol. 208, no. 752 (July, 1918), pp. 63-71. Letter of January 16, 1816, p. 70.

[17] For Staël's influence on the Romantic movements in Europe and beyond, see John Claiborne Isbell, *The Birth of European Romanticism: Truth and Propaganda in Staël's "De l'Allemagne"* 1810-1813. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. See especially the introduction, pp. 1-9.

[18] For Staël's response to Fichte's theory, see Reinhard Lauth, "J.G. Fichte et Madame de Staël." *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1984 (January - March), pp. 63-75, here: p. 69. The report hails from the American George Ticknor's memoirs. Ticknor was a devout admirer of Staël.

[19] The Simone de Beauvoir quote is from *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Knopf, 2010, p. 726.

[20] When it comes to Staël's lack of references to historical figures, there are some exceptions, such as the free analysis, in the last part of the study on suicide, of Lady Jane Grey. See *Reflections on Suicide*. Translator unknown. London: Longman et al, 1813.

[21] The quote "if they seek to achieve ..." is from WP 30.

[22] The quote "Women are forgiven ..." is from WP 32.

[23] The quote "It is possible that ..." is from WP 34.

[24] The quote "There will come a time ..." is from WP 31.

[25]The description of "the prettiest existentialist" is from https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1947/02/22/simone-de-beauvoir-visits-new-york. Accessed April 30, 2023.

[26] The quote "Men can always ..." is from WP 31, emphasis added.

[27] Germaine de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*. Translated and edited by Sylvia Raphael. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 249.

[28] Rahel Levin Varnhagen's snarky comment is mentioned in J. Christopher Herold. *Mistress to an Age: A Life of Madame de Staël* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 264. Rahel Levin Varnhagen had met Staël at the home of the Swedish ambassador Carl Gustaf Brinkman.

[29] The English Staël translator's description can be found in "Sketch of the Life of Madame de Staël" written by the translator in Germaine de Staël, *A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions, Upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations*. Translator unknown. London: Cawthorn, 1798, vii-xx, here: p. xix.

[30] For a description of Beauvoir's funeral procession, see Bianca Lamblin, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée*. Paris: Éditions Balland, 1993, p. 167.

[31] The Annie Ernaux-quote is borrowed from *A Frozen Woman*, translated by Linda Coverdale. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995, p. 137.

[32] There are a number of references to Ibsen's possible borrowings from Staël. On *Ghosts*, see See Daniel Haakonsen, *Henrik Ibsen. Mennesket og kunstneren*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2003, p. 86 and pp. 145-50. On *A Doll's House*, see Toril Moi, Ibsen*'s Modernism*. Translated by Agnete Øye. Oslo: Pax, 2006, pp. 332-333. [EN*]

[33] For the role of (intelligent) women in educated society, see WP 33-35.

[34] For Georg Brandes' enthusiastic reading, see *Hovedströninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur*, *Emigrantlitteraturen*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1872, chapters XI-XVII. [EN*]

[35] For a discussion of Margaret Fuller and the American reception of Staël, see Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Cultural mediation as Innovation: The incongruous Presences of Germaine de Staël in the United States (1805-1880)," in *Madame de Staël und die Internationalität der europäischen Romantik*, ed. Udo Schöning and Frank Seemann. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003, pp. 111-135, here: p. 129.

[36] For two English-language sketches of Staël's life, see Lydia Maria Child, *The Biographies of Madame de Staël, and Madame Roland* (Boston: Carter and Hendee: 1832) and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Lives of the Most Eminent French Writers*, volume 2. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840.

[37] For Staël's international influence, see Schöning and Seemann (2003) above, but also the anthology *Germaine de Staël, Forging a Politics of Mediation*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011.