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Frances Burney and Mme de Staël: Female Genius and the Call of Duty

MASCHA GEMMEKE

"Peut on faire des lois pour une personne unique?"
Mme de Staël, *Corinne* (45)

"An angel, such as I think you, may run all risks with impunity, save those which may lead feeble minds to hazardous imitation."
Frances Burney, *The Wanderer* (343)

Much has been made of the links between the works of Frances Burney and those of Mary Wollstonecraft, especially with regard to Burney's last novel, *The Wanderer*, and its "feminist" heroine, Elinor Joddrell. Elinor's speeches as well as her hopeless love for the hero and consequent suicide attempts are generally thought to have been modelled on Wollstonecraft.[1] However, there is no explicit factual evidence that Burney ever read Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, or Godwin's scandalous *Memoirs* of his late wife and I doubt that she would have cared to read them (Burney admired Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, the work which triggered

Wollstonecraft's replies).[2] The textual evidence, in my opinion, points to another "feminist" writer, whose works Burney knew well: Germaine de Staël. Throughout her life, Burney was fascinated by intelligent, vivacious women such as Hester Thrale Piozzi and Mme de Staël, who did not conform to her rather strict notions of female propriety. The discrepancy between Burney's sense of duty and her friends' pursuit of happiness led to an irreparable break in both cases, but Burney seems to have valued both women's works nevertheless. Whereas the friendship with Hester Thrale has been well documented by Burney's biographers, the influence of Mme de Staël on Burney's writings has not met with comparable attention.[3]

Considering Mme de Staël's reputation even in France (where adultery among the aristocrats was regarded as a venial sin), Burney's friendship with French authoress is surprising. By the time of their first meeting in 1793, Mme de Staël was deeply in love with the Comte de Narbonne (she declared her two sons to be his), and followed him to England, where he had gone into exile. She joined the "colony" of French *constitutionels* who had settled at Juniper Hall, next to Mickleham, where Burney's sister Susan Philips lived. Frances visited her sister after her release from Court duties, and was delighted with Mme de Staël:

> She is a woman of the first abilities, I think, I have ever seen. She is more in the style of Mrs Thrale ... but she has infinitely more depth, & seems an even *profound* politician & metaphysician. She suffered us to hear some of her works in MSS. which are truly wonderful, for powers both of thinking and expression ... I find her impossible to resist.[4]

Unaware of Mme de Staël's love affairs, Burney enjoyed her friend's conversational ease and radiant charm. However, the interference of her father and his friends quickly put an end to Burney's enthusiasm: she was told to shun that "Adulterous Demoniac," that "Diabolical Democrate," and come home.[5] Apparently, Burney was shocked to discover Mme de Staël's affair with Narbonne (who was nevertheless to become godfather to Burney's son Alex a few years later) and decided to obey orders, even though, as Mme de Staël acidly pointed out, she was no longer a girl of fourteen but a woman of forty.[6] Perhaps, as

critics have assumed, Burney was all the more obedient in this case in order to be able to stand firm in a related affair: her marriage to Alexandre d'Arblay. (Besides, Queen Charlotte, on whom Burney's pension depended, objected to Mme de Staël's politics.[7])

Mme de Staël, by contrast, valued Burney (whom she had called "the first woman in England")[8] and their friendship too much to be easily daunted. She continued to write to M. d'Arblay and tried to renew contact with both the d'Arblays after their removal to Paris in 1801. Yet both Burney and her husband, who had not minded the love affair with Narbonne, were irreconcilable—presumably because Mme de Staël was a danger to her friends in Napoleonic France. What to Mme de Staël must have seemed an unwarranted obedience to the commands of Burney's father was perhaps a step motivated by political reasons as much as prudishness, Mme de Staël being a *persona non grata* about to be exiled by the Emperor. Yet Burney did not hesitate to refer to Mme de Staël's bad qualities in her letters home, and although ten years later she evidently regretted the break, she did not even dare pay a polite visit in 1801. "I can never cease regretting the ungrateful part I have seemed to act towards her, though I was impelled to it by a belief that it was indispensably right," she wrote while still at Paris.[9]

Although Burney blamed Mme de Staël's "unrestrained passions" and her disregard of conventions—a topic addressed in *Corinne*—she valued Mme de Staël's writings. In 1813, on reading *De l'Allemagne*, Burney was as enthusiastic as she had been twenty years earlier on reading one of Mme de Staël's works for the first time: "Such acuteness of thought, such vivacity of ideas ... I often lay the book down, to enjoy, for a considerably time, a single sentence. I have rarely, even in the course of my whole life, read anything with so glowing a fullness of acceptance."[10] Burney admitted that she longed to write to the author, who was in London at the time, but decided not to renew the connection. They did not meet again. Burney's husband happened to be in France when Mme de Staël died in 1817; questioned by his wife about the event, he replied dryly: "La sorte d'existence dont a joui Mad[e] de Staël ...a fait, fait, et fera peut être éternellement plus de mal en morale que la Révolution française." Yet though he condemned de Staël's way of life to all eternity, d'Arblay, like his wife, continued to admire her talents "no less than her most enthusiastic eulogists."[11]

Burney had heard Mme de Staël read from a first manuscript version of *De L'Influence des Passions* in 1793. Many of its topics would have been discussed in the literary *salon* at Juniper Hall, making them all the more memorable to de Staël's audience. Considering how much Burney enjoyed Mme de Staël's writings, it is more than likely that she read *Corinne* (1807) and *Delphine* (1802), which appeared with such éclats while she was at Paris.[12] Burney would not have approved of the tenor of these novels, but she would have been interested in their depiction of female difficulties. Several points raised by Mme de Staël, especially in *Corinne*, reappear in *The Wanderer*, even if Burney seems to have disagreed with several of Mme de Staël's conclusions. Both believed that women as well as men needed to learn to "think for themselves," both were attracted by a philosophy of sympathy. "Un seul sentiment peut servir de guide dans toutes les sensations, peut s'appliquer à toutes les circonstances, c'est la pitié: avec quelle disposition plus efficace pourrait-on supporter et les autres et soi-même?" Mme de Staël had asked in *Des Passions*. Or, more explicitly yet: "On peut affirmer que la base de la morale, considérée comme principe, c'est le bien ou le mal que l'on peut faire aux autres."[13] For Burney, personal independence had to go hand in hand with sympathy for others, the good man (or woman) had to learn "to act for himself, by thinking for himself and feeling for others" (*The Wanderer*, 229). Mme de Staël's belief in this moral philosophy was more idealistic than Burney's: her heroines feel more than sympathy for their friends' troubles: they delight in making sacrifices for love. Delphine, for instance, sacrifices her reputation by allowing a married friend to meet her lover under Delphine's roof. Corinne gives up her lover to promote the happiness of her sister. Both Delphine and Corinne die young, believing that true happiness is to be found only in the next world. By contrast, Juliet tries hard to minimize her sacrifice (marriage to the commissioner in order to save the bishop's life) by running away from her 'husband' in order not to forfeit her chance of happiness in this life.

Indeed, there is a fundamental difference between the two writers with regard to their depictions of love and friendship. Once they have fallen in love, Mme de Staël's heroines are no longer happy without their lovers (and soon no longer happy with them, either). Love, with them, is an obsession which robs them of their peace of mind as well as of their social position. Delphine is forced to seek refuge in a

convent after having lost her reputation; Corinne retreats into a secluded spot in the country after having lost her lover. Their friends are unable either to help or console them. "The consolations of friendship act only on the surface," Mme de Staël maintained.[14] Delphine has several female friends, but none of them is able to protect the heroine either from her own recklessness or the world's calumnies. Worse, her best friends betray her, sacrificing in turn Delphine's happiness and her reputation to their own selfish ends. Mme de Staël's maternal and paternal figures are either dead or demanding, or both. By contrast, Burney's fictional friendships are for the most part happy, especially her portrayals of sisterly love and confidence. Only Cecilia's experiences with guardians and friends are at all comparable to Delphine's—but then Cecilia survives to triumph over them.

During the four months Mme de Staël stayed in England in 1793, she felt "escaped from the shipwreck of life."[15] Yet on the whole, as Burney accurately guessed, Mme de Staël's life was not happy, despite (or, as Burney would have seen it, because of) the great licence she allowed herself in matters of female propriety.[16] Mme de Staël blamed nature and society for the wrongs of women: "Oh, femmes! vous, les victimes du temple où l'on vous dit adorées, écoutez-moi. La nature et la société ont déshérité la moitié de l'espèce humaine; force, courage, génie, indépendance, tout appartient aux hommes."[17] Some of Elinor's feminist speeches in *The Wanderer* seem to be directly influenced by *Des Passions*: "Why, for so many centuries, has man, alone, been supposed to possess, not only force and power for action and defence, but even all the rights of taste?" (177). Yet there are more similarities between Elinor and Mme de Staël than Elinor's feminist speeches. Whenever Elinor appears in the novel, her faults are forgotten; she enlivens the atmosphere, and quickens the pace. According to the many records left by both friends and enemies, Mme de Staël seems to have had the same effect on her audience. Both were early enthusiasts of the French Revolution (though Mme de Staël was horrified by the later bloodshed) and the cry for liberty which accompanied it. An unrestrained passion is Elinor's bane just as much as it was Mme de Staël's, their interest in philosophy and search for enlightenment notwithstanding. Elinor accuses the more sober Juliet of being "a compound of cold caution and selfish prudence" (181), and so does Burney seem to have feared being called by Mme de Staël.[18] Yet

Burney makes it clear that Elinor is so absorbed by her own feelings that she no longer relates to anybody else, making her friendships superficial. The intensity of Mme de Staël's love letters to a succession of lovers suggests that she, too, was at times too obsessed with her own feelings to be able to relate to friends or family.

Elinor is unhappy because she insists on "Harleigh's love or annihilation" as the only remedies of her distress. Mme de Staël's love letters to Narbonne harp on the same string: she asserts over and over again that, without his love, only death would comfort her. In almost every letter after her departure from England she threatens to kill herself in case he fails to join her at Coppet, her parents' home in Switzerland, as he had promised to do but avoided to perform until several months later:

> Depuis six mois je me suis tellement accoutumée à voir la mort et la vie en toi seul que je ne crois plus au reste.
>
> J'ai soif de me brûler la cervelle. L'idée de la mort est la seule qui me fasse plaisir.
>
> Vous m'enfoncez le poignard dans le cœur ... Quand on vous mandera que tout mon sang aura couvert le visage de mon malheureux enfant, que le couteau, seul objet dont la vue adoucisse ma misère, aura été chercher le cœur qui ne peut plus vivre sans vous ...[19]

Mme de Staël was the first to admit that she had made a cult of her love for Narbonne—in her letters God and Narbonne occasionally seem to be the same person, accessible only by heartfelt prayers.[20]

These letters were in the hands of the d'Arblays: on leaving England in 1794, Narbonne had given all Mme de Staël's love-letters to his friend d'Arblay. Burney may not have seen them till after the death of her husband in 1818, but she did read them at some point, as the letters are annotated in Burney's hand: "Lettres brûlantes, à brûler—*A fine moral lesson, too.*"[21] Mme de Staël had tried to be circumspect in her conduct towards Narbonne while in England—Burney at first doubted the rumours, arguing that she had seen them together, but never noticed any indications of an illicit connection—yet Alexandre d'Arblay knew of Mme de Staël's passion, and so did William Locke, friend and neighbour of the d'Arblays.[22] Even if Burney did not read the letters

until later, she would have guessed a great deal of Mme de Staël's passionate character and her unhappy love for a man who did not return her feelings, at least not as ardently as she wished him to.[23] As regards Narbonne, Mme de Staël was as much an "unhappy persecutrix" as Elinor is in her pursuit of Harleigh.[24]

Yet Elinor is not Mme de Staël in English disguise, though they do share several traits. "She has qualities the most bewitching, of kindness, generosity, & zeal, joined to almost every intellectual attribute that can elevate a human being," Burney wrote of Mme de Staël. Elinor, too, is gay and original, with a "great quickness of parts," and a "solid goodness of heart" (77), and her battle-cry "I hold no one thing in the world worth living for but liberty!" in no way contradicts Mme de Staël's philosophical system (110).[25] Although Burney sincerely admired Mme de Staël's intellect and profundity, she may have felt that de Staël's mind, like Elinor's, was dominated by an "ungoverned inclination, which sought new systems for its support" (154). Both women are driven by the need for attention, both see themselves as torn between tragedy and comedy. Yet, paradoxically, Elinor is more and less faulty than Mme de Staël: more, because she is vindictive to some extent, a trait which undercuts her generosity (77); less, because she has not left the path of virtue in search of love (if only because Harleigh is a more virtuous character than Narbonne ever was).[26]

By the time *The Wanderer* appeared, Mme de Staël had changed her opinion concerning revolutions. In *De l'Allemagne*, she asserted that revolutionary innovations do not last.[27] Moreover, Mme de Staël—unlike Elinor—believed in life after death, being a devout Protestant. Religion, as she said herself, had to be "all or nothing."[28] Yet her belief differed from Burney's in the question of duty, a difference made obvious by their respective treatment of suicide. Burney believed that it was a breach of duty to quit one's post on earth for any reason whatsoever. Mme de Staël, on the other hand, maintained that a benevolent God would not want man to bear excessive suffering, which might cause him to lose his reason or religious feelings. She argued that God was sure to pardon the suicide of those who preferred to die rather than lose their belief in Him.[29] Presumably, Burney would have accused her of sophism.

Death is the only solution to unrequited love, Mme de Staël asserted in her letters, and so does Elinor in her discussions with Juliet. Elinor's suicide attempts follow careful choreographies and rely on an audience: she makes sure that at least Harleigh and Juliet are present. At Juliet's concert, she dresses up as an old man, emerging from the disguise as a madwoman with long, streaming hair and wild eyes. Later on, she chooses a church for the setting, sets up a grave stone, and wears a shroud in a macabre reversal of the wedding scene she had hoped for. Her choreographies resemble Mme de Staël's fictional accounts of her own death; with both, their manner of exit from the stage of life is designed to impress their lovers and to strike them with remorse. Paradoxically, suicide is used as a means to reunite them with their absconded lovers. Mme de Staël approved of Werther's suicide; in the original ending of *Corinne*, later substituted by a less dramatic one, the heroine takes poison so as not to survive the execution of her lover, who has been condemned to death by the French Republicans. She discusses the question of suicide in *Des Passions*: "Pour se tuer, il faudrait embrasser le tableau de ses infortunes comme le spectacle de sa fin, à l'aide de l'intensité d'un seul sentiment et d'une seule idée. Rien cependant n'inspire autant d'horreur que la possibilité d'exister uniquement parce que on ne sait pas mourir."[30] In Mme de Staël's view, suicide is as much an act of defiance against an unsympathetic society as against the wayward self. By contrast, Burney disliked Goethe's *Werther* and saw only the horrors of suicide, both in its impact on the survivors and in the desertion of duties which suicide implied to her. She claimed that Christian religion prohibited such an act of defiance: human beings have no right "to *rush unlicensed on Eternity.*"[31]

Yet Mme de Staël decided that in order to be consistent with her principles, she could not admit religion to be of much comfort to an independent mind:

> J'ai donc dû ... ne pas admettre la religion parmi les ressources qu'on trouve en soi, puisqu'elle est absolument indépendante de notre volonté, puisqu'elle nous soumet et à notre propre imagination, et à celle de tout ceux dont la sainte autorité est reconnue. En étant conséquente au système sur lequel cet ouvrage est fondé, au système qui considère la liberté absolue de l'être moral comme son

> premier bien, j'ai dû préférer et indiquer comme le meilleur et le plus sûr des préservatifs contre le malheur, les divers moyens dont on va voir le développement.[32]

Mme de Staël questions the comforts of religion for the same reason that prevents Elinor from believing in an eternal life: the comforts religion has to offer are based not on independent reasoning, but on clerical authority—unless the sufferer has already found a true, personal faith.[33] The only certain remedies against unhappiness, according to her early system, are philosophy, study, and active benevolence.[34] Of these remedies, however, none at all are sufficient to soothe Elinor's distress, presumably because her philosophy is mistaken, and benevolence is, at best, a sporadic emotion with her, not an active principle. The "most solemn chapter" (9) of *The Wanderer* (chapter lxxxv) is devoted to a discussion of Christian duty and eternal life between Elinor and Harleigh. According to Burney, Elinor's misery stems from her infidelity: "Should you shake my creed,—shall I be better contented? or but yet more wretched?" (792). When Elinor's atheism falters, she begins to find comfort in Harleigh's assertion that there is a life after death: "Oh delicious idea!...I hope,—I hope;—my soul may be immortal!" (794).

Juliet is more closely related to Mme de Staël's heroines, especially to Corinne. Critics of French fiction assert that Mme de Staël created ideal versions of herself in her heroines, thus trying to justify her conduct.[35] Considering how original, intelligent, and lovelorn her heroines are, there is much to be said for this assumption. If Burney, too, read Delphine and Corinne as ideal versions of her former friend, she may have created Juliet as an anti-heroine to Mme de Staël's bold female protagonists.[36] Elinor is Juliet's *alter ego*—her destructive, passionate self, suppressed in order to conform to the demands of late eighteenth-century society, sanitized at last by Harleigh's friendship and religion. They seem to be one person, torn by different needs—as was Mme de Staël. Corinne is a female genius, who has left her English family in order to live in Italy, where women are free to pursue their studies and ambitions. Corinne's mother is Italian, her father English, so that she inherits some of the national traits of both countries. After living in Italy for the first fifteen years of her life, Corinne finds it hard to adjust to England's (mental) fogginess and the social restrictions placed on women. (In fact, Mme de Staël makes use of Corinne's five-

year stay to criticize English mores regarding proper female conduct.) After her father's death, Corinne decides to leave her step-mother and half-sister, passing for dead with them from then on. In Italy, however, known only as Corinne, she becomes a celebrated poetess, singer, and musician.

The hero of the novel, Oswald, Lord Nelvile, embodies English virtues and prejudices, even though he is a Scot. (Mme de Staël applied the epithet "English" to all Britons alike.[37]) He first sees Corinne at the most glorious moment of her career, when she is being crowned on the Capitol in Rome. "In England, he would have severely judged such a woman," Mme de Staël concedes, but travelling makes Oswald forget his native prejudices against learned ladies. He falls violently in love with Corinne, but cannot persuade himself to marry her, since his late father had destined him for another (Corinne's half-sister Lucile, as it turns out). Corinne returns his love, and sacrifices her reputation (without telling him so) to travel with him around Italy. However, she hides a secret from her lover: he cannot marry her as long as he does not know who she is, and she does not dare tell him because his adored father knew her, and did not think her a suitable wife for his only son. She persuades herself to wait with an explanation until she feels secure in his love, but eventually exasperates him by her evasions. After many complications, the secret is let out and the lovers (virtuous lovers, Mme de Staël insists) separate for a year, in which Oswald, recalled to his regiment on the outbreak of war, returns home, and falls in love with Lucile. Alarmed by the sudden coldness of his letters, Corinne decides to travel to England, where she sees him together with Lucile, and gives up her love for lost. Without ever confronting him, she sacrifices herself, returning by letter a ring he gave her and thus telling him that he is free to marry another. Accordingly, Oswald thinks that Corinne has deserted him and marries Lucile. Yet he is unable to forget Corinne, and the marriage turns out to be unhappy because of Lucile's "English" coldness. After a few years, the couple and their only child travel to Italy, where they find Corinne dying from disappointed love. Generously, Corinne tries to mend the marriage between her former lover and her sister by enlightening Lucile about Oswald's needs in marriage. She teaches the child, Juliette, to play on the harp, thus passing on some of her knowledge to the next generation. The novel ends with Corinne's death and Mme de Staël's refusal to tell whether

Oswald ever forgave himself for having abandoned Corinne, thus placing the blame firmly on his shoulders.

Corinne is a novel celebrating female genius. Mme de Staël is insistent that genius—whether male or female—cannot be made to submit to common rules, and lets even Oswald assert that Corinne cannot be judged according to normal conventions: "Les règles ordinaires pour juger les femmes ne peuvent s'appliquer à elle."[38] Mme de Stäël concedes that some men, while they admire Corinne, would not dream of marrying her because of the ill reputation female artists were up against, but these are depicted as men guided by public opinion, not their own judgment. Among themselves, the men assume that Corinne, being an artist, must be "of easy access," yet nobody molests her in the course of the novel. Her (male) friends are devoted to her. One of them even follows her to share the retired life she leads after Oswald has left her, content to be with her as a friend. Corinne flouts the conventions, and she is punished for her daring. However, Oswald's desertion seems to be the result of male perfidiousness rather than divine intervention, and Corinne to be punished for trusting a man rather than for her "unfeminine" ambitions.

The novel oscillates between Great Britain and Italy, two countries which in the early nineteenth century were celebrated for the liberty their citizens enjoyed. Yet whereas England was famous for the liberal spirit of its laws, English women lead the most restricted lives, Mme de Staël declared. Corinne's father calls her home to his native Northumbria when she is fifteen, and Corinne, being used to Italy's sunny indifference towards other people's affairs, sinks into depression after having had to listen to English women's tea-table talk: "J'avais été dans les couvents d'Italie, ils me paraissaient pleins de vie à côté de ce cercle, et je ne savais qu'y devenir" (283). Mrs Edgermont, Corinne's English stepmother, declares that a woman's sole interest in life has to be her husband's household and his children (281).[39] Against her, Corinne fights a losing battle, believing as she does that happiness consists in developing one's own faculties. Mrs Edgermont has been guided by custom all her life, and her mind has grown too rigid to admit of any personal thought concerning happiness, let alone understand another woman's yearning for liberty. At last, Corinne becomes so depressed by the never-ending repetition of her stepmother's favourite maxim ("That is not done!") that death itself seems to her a better

choice than a life-time of trodding along the worn-out path (285). She is saved by a band of Italian musicians, who play under her window one night and entice her to follow the sounds of their music until she is safe on a vessel bound directly for Italy.

Corinne's love is doomed because Oswald is unable to forget his first vision of a weak, timid, and silent companion-for-life, whom he thinks he has found in Corinne's sister Lucile, only to discover on marrying her that he is bored by his wife's vacuity. "C'est en vain qu'un Anglais se plaît un moment aux mœurs étrangères; son cœur revient toujours aux premières impressions de sa vie" (223). The English, then, do not fare well in Mme de Staël's hands: they are chastised for their insular pride and self-righteousness as much as for their insistence on woman's inferiority and restriction to the private sphere. It is tempting to think that Mme de Staël should have written with the English experiences still fresh in her mind, though in fact she had not been to Britain for fifteen years when *Corinne* appeared in 1807. Yet Burney's second refusal to recommence their friendship when she was in Paris in 1802 must have been an unexpected blow, considering the pains Mme de Staël took to become reconciled with her erstwhile friends, and might have influenced her opinions on the strictness of English women's propriety.

Whatever their personal relations, as women writers Burney and Mme de Staël had similar concerns, and it is not surprising that Burney's last novel should deal with similar topics as Mme de Staël's *Corinne*.[40] The question of whether women had a right to a personal way of life, away from the beaten road, and, if so, how they could pursue a new road without going astray is a leitmotif with both novelists. "Chaque femme, comme chaque homme, ne doit-elle pas se frayer une route d'après son caractère et ses talents?" (281).[41] Both were of the opinion that women should be allowed to develop their talents, but how to find a personal way of life remained a point in dispute. While Corinne seems to be self-assured and competent in the choice of her *route*, she loses all she has achieved because she falls for the wrong man, one who does not appreciate her talent and believes that his domestic comfort is more important than her literary ambitions. Juliet, on the other hand, does not seem to have much of a choice in coming to England, yet she studiously avoids giving way to her feelings for

Harleigh and thus turns out to be self-assured and competent to a degree Corinne never reaches.[42] It is Juliet who lives according to the philosophical maxims developed by Mme de Staël in *Des Passions:*

> Le seul système vrai pour éviter la douleur, c'est de ne diriger sa vie que d'après ce qu'on peut faire pour les autres, mais non d'après ce qu'on attend d'eux. Il faut que l'existence parte de soi au lieu d'y revenir, et que sans jamais être le centre, on soit toujours la force impulsive de sa propre destinée (177).

Yet Juliet hides a secret, too, and in contrast to Corinne whose friends accept her as she is (40), Juliet is pestered to name herself at every step she makes. Corinne silences Oswald by claiming that during the four years she has spent at Rome, however famous for her literary talents, she has never been interrogated about her name and family. Her friends, she insists, have tactfully desisted on realizing that she was pained by such enquiries. Apart from Harleigh, Juliet's acquaintances are anything but tactful in this respect. Only to Harleigh "her manner ... had announced her to have lived the life of a gentlewoman" (75). Oswald uses nearly the same words to tell a sceptical friend about Corinne: "Son nom est inconnu ... mais ses manières doivent le faire croire illustre" (50).

Thus, the centres of both novels revolve around a similar mystery: a woman without a name, a wanderer between two clashing cultures, who belongs to neither. Both heroines puzzle and intrigue their friends by their mysteriousness: "Vous êtes une magicienne, qui inquiétez et rassurez alternativement; qui vous montrez sublime, et disparaissez tout à coup de cette région où vous êtes seule, pour vous confondre dans la foule" (109). Both are talented actresses, and delight in assuming and discarding roles and costumes in quick succession. Corinne attributes her mysteriousness, her "magic," to being a natural person without constraints, who accordingly has variable feelings and opinions not necessarily in harmony with one another (110). Such harmony in any person's character, she maintains, would be artificial, real characters are inconsistent. Juliet and Corinne both have this magic quality which attracts people, and a bewitching talent to reveal others in their true colours besides. Their "nationlessness"—they do not belong to either England, or France, or Italy—is an asset to both (even though

both suffer from being divided in their loyalties) because they have been able to keep their minds free from national peculiarities and flaws. Corinne has been called a cosmopolitan, whose "inner foreignness, which defines her essence, allows her to play, with respect to the various manifestations of the national spirit, the role of someone who both reveals and interprets. She *plays* the role."[43] By acting for herself, Corinne has become an ambassadress: not only does she reveal and interpret national differences; she also bridges the cultural "gap" between Italy and England. That she is allowed to teach Oswald and Lucile's daughter the harp is a proof of the success of her diplomatic role with regard to women's musical and poetic abilities. Her magic is that of a first-class actress, able to influence the audience to sympathize with others and accept their otherness. Juliet has similar talents, and employs them for similar diplomatic ends.

Corinne's preoccupation with wandering and play-acting reveals its desire to unite an inner, personal truth with an outer, open cosmopolitanism, an inner liberty with an outer performance of duty, the self with the other. *Corinne* and *The Wanderer* have the same goal at heart: to promote a philosophy of sympathy. Both maintain that experience teaches sympathy and that women have to be allowed the chance to gain personal experience, too. Nor are the novels as far apart as it seems on first sight with regard to the affairs of the heart: both insist that a woman who gives herself up for love must need be unhappy. However, whereas Mme de Staël glorifies the self-sacrificing capacity of her heroine and blames her hero, Burney exonerates Harleigh by exposing the selfishness of Elinor's love, which she paints as an obsession. The main difference between the novels lies in the authors' consideration of duty. Mme de Staël maintains what Burney denies: that an extraordinary woman is exempt from common duties. Both novels were slashed by contemporary critics with astonishing fury—perhaps a sign of the prevailing misogyny, but surely a sign of the novels' sisterhood as well.[44] Indeed, if Burney read the reviews of *Corinne*, notably that in the *Journal de l'Empire*, she would have been forewarned. The reviewer condemned Mme de Staël's portrait of an extraordinary woman: "Chaque femme doit rester dans la route qui lui est indiquée par la nature et l'ordre de la société; les pas qu'elle fera dans une autre route seront trop souvent incertains, hasardés, malheureux: voilà la maxime générale."[45] A young woman, he

continued, should be demure and deferential, her aims in life marriage and motherhood, not literature and laurels.

Both Corinne and Juliet (and, indeed, Elinor) prove the general maxim to be true: the routes they choose are hazardous and their steps uncertain, so that, for most of the time, the heroines are unhappy, too. Yet the very fact that they suffer makes them not only extraordinary, but feeling personalities. According to Burney as well as to Mme de Staël, personal suffering is the clue to enlightenment: "La douleur ... est ce qu'il y a de plus noble dans l'homme; et, de nos jours, qui n'aurait pas souffert, n'aurait jamais senti ni pensé" (*Corinne*, 157). The *routes* they take and the sufferings they experience, are not at all alike—accordingly, their experiences are personal to a degree which they never are for women who contentedly walk along "the beaten road." Corinne is a well-to-do woman who finds fulfilment in a life devoted to the arts. Juliet, by contrast, arrives in her native country without a penny to call her own, and her attempts to eke out a living by her musical talent fail. Her every step is scrutinized by the none-too-generous guardians of society's honour, whereas in Italy, Corinne claims, nobody is unduly interested in other people's affairs (*Corinne*, 105).[46] However, while according to Mme de Staël, genius cannot be judged by common laws, Burney restricts Juliet's options: her heroine must not endanger weaker minds, who might go astray, pleading her example. Corinne, too, is accused by her stepmother of giving a bad example, even if she allowed herself to pass for dead with her relatives in order not to compromise them (*Corinne*, 358). Yet even Burney makes allowances for female musicians and actresses, and Corinne's excuse is that she is indeed "impelled by resistless genius" (*The Wanderer*, 399) to appear on stage—as Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, translated into Italian by herself.

The novels' endings differ widely: Corinne loses everything she has achieved and dies a lingering death in retirement from the world whose praises she so much coveted. Death is the natural ending to a Romantic love story, not marriage with its strains and duties. Mme de Staël admired Goethe's *Werther*, yet Goethe accused Mme de Staël of not having any sense of duty; he saw marriage as the individual's taking up of responsibility, the end of the errors and selfishness of youth, and the beginning of maturity and happiness.[47] Duty, Corinne retorts, is but a weapon used by ordinary people who are satisfied with being ordinary

to impose silence on talent. Juliet, by contrast, falls low among the destructions of the Terror Regime, but slowly climbs up again to her natural place in society, the noble position which belongs to her by birth as well as education. That very place entails a responsibility towards other people, which Juliet is made to understand by experiencing herself the effects which the negligence of the rich had on the labouring classes. Juliet is taught the lessons of duty: the burden of enlightenment is the personal responsibility for the welfare of society.

For all her fascination with *les lumières*, Mme de Staël was ever-ready to leave old responsibilities for a new love affair: when she came to England in 1793, she had left her sons with her husband and parents in order to follow Narbonne.[48] Yet Mme de Staël, too, claimed that an act of duty was "the only act of man which is sure always to reach its goal." She moved heaven and earth in order to assist the miserable or to advance a friend's career, but she acted spontaneously, out of pity or friendship, but not on principle.[49] Being first and foremost a woman of principles, Burney found it hard to understand Mme de Staël's erratic goodness, which she admired nevertheless: "Blame her as I may, *I* never can hate her, nor dislike her,—praise her as I may, must & will, I never can vindicate nor esteem nor respect her," Burney noted.[50] To her, doing one's duty warranted a kind of happiness unknown to more romantic dispositions, a happiness which Mme de Staël's heroines tried to gain by sacrificing themselves to friendship and love, but which eluded them. Burney felt it to be her duty to break the budding friendship with the notorious French authoress, and this sense of duty divided their works.

Duty and autonomy are the opposite poles of the modern individual's existence, the poles between which he—or she—wanders back and forth as long as both poles are equally attractive. Juliet and Corinne belong to the first women torn between autonomy and duty, between the desire to be themselves, to express themselves, and the equally urgent desire to follow the norm, to be women in the understanding of early nineteenth-century womanhood: wives and mothers. As wives and mothers, however, very few women had the time and energy left to be themselves, to cultivate their tastes and interests, to study, to work, or to write. Married women were expected to submit to their husbands, to care for "his" house and "his" children; they were

secondary beings.[51] Women who refused to follow this normative pattern of a woman's life, which prescribed marriage and motherhood, had to fight against the predominant conviction that single women were somehow masculine or frigid old maidens, whom nobody had wanted to ask in marriage. From the late eighteenth century onwards, a third, legitimate 'way out' offered itself, an alternative which was open only for the exception to the rule: the female genius. A female genius, such as Corinne, stood apart from the generality of women and was not to be judged by common rules. Mme de Staël chose this route of autonomy both for herself and her heroine: even though she was married and a mother, her unconventional life-style appeared masculine and morally reprehensible to many of her contemporaries. Yet autonomy has a dangerous foe: love, as Corinne, Elinor, and Mme de Staël herself demonstrate: once a woman falls in love, she loses her autonomy for good. (However, once a widow, Mme de Staël was in no hurry to get remarried, ostensibly to save the fortune of her children.[52])

Burney, on the other hand, very early on decided not to marry in order to be free to follow her literary ambitions. She deliberately avoided other than filial duties, and refused an eligible offer against the advice of her family because she did not care for the man.[53] She did not escape all chains, however, but was made Second Keeper of the Robe to Queen Charlotte, a post which she would have refused if she could have done so honourably. To quench all regrets, she wrote to her sister, she would regard herself as "married" to her superior at Court.[54] When she did marry after her release from Court duties, she made sure her husband understood, and approved of, her ambitions. In *The Wanderer*, Gabrielle, Juliet's childhood friend and companion at the French convent were both were educated together, has been married at fourteen according to the French custom, too young, that is, to know whether she wants to marry at all, let alone to know about conjugal duties. Juliet is older and more experienced when she chooses a husband. She even chooses a career, if only to find that none of the professions she tries out suits her. Both Corinne and Juliet hesitate to marry the men they love. Corinne is not certain whether to marry Oswald, knowing that she would have to return to England and give up her artist's life if she did so. Juliet, too, hesitates to marry Harleigh. He does not believe her marriage to the French fortune-hunter to be binding, so she could have married him.[55] Yet Juliet chooses to remain single and to accept all the

burdens placed on her shoulders rather than push them onto a husband's. She refuses to be an old-fashioned heroine who stays behind, waiting for the outcome of her lover's quest. Instead, she is that dangerous being, an independent woman, who tries to reconcile autonomy with duty by enjoying what she can of the one without neglecting the other. When she eventually accepts the duties of marriage and motherhood, she is unlikely to give up her independence of mind in marriage. Like Burney herself, Juliet has vowed to obey, but insists on her husband's listening to her counsel in all major decisions. Rather than choose a way out, Juliet tries to ameliorate the system from within. Elinor resists all endeavours to (re-)integrate her into the society she has left, yet she is unable to find a path that would lead her on to a circle consisting of like-minded people. Corinne seems to have found such a society, but loses it because of her love for an outsider, Oswald, who belongs to the narrow-minded English gentry Elinor detests. The battle between Juliet and Elinor, Oswald and Corinne is in many ways a battle between reformation and resistance, between Burney's *weltanschauung* and that of Mme de Staël. Contemporary readers, at least, decided in favour of Mme de Staël, if the immediate success of *Corinne* and the equally immediate failure of *The Wanderer* are any criteria to go by.

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NOTES:

[1] See, for instance, Claudia L. Johnson, Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s (Chicago and London, 1995), pp. 14;183, and Katharine M. Rogers, *Frances Burney: The World of 'Female Difficulties'* (New York, 1990), pp. 163-64.

[2] That she might not have read it does not mean that she would have been unacquainted with its central arguments. She jokingly mentioned the title in a letter: "The maxims and manners of the day ... hold not only the Rights of Man, & the Rights of Woman, but the Rights of Children - & will, ere long, in all probability, include the Rights of Cats, Dogs, & Mice" (see *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Joyce Hemlow, 12 vols [Oxford, 1972-84],, IX, L. 1046, p. 305). Wollstonecraft's book was widely discussed in the private correspondences of the day. Mrs Chapone read it and disapproved of its tenor, while Hannah More declared in the Preface to her *Strictures* that she did not even want to read it (Hannah More, *Strictures on Female Education*, 2 vols (repr. Oxford and New York, 1995), I, pp. i, vii).

[3] It has been suggested, though, that the lively and unconventional Mrs Arlbery in *Camilla* is meant to be a likeness of Mme de Staël (see Margaret Doody, Fanny Burney: The Life in the Works [Cambridge, 1988], p. 249).

[4] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, pp. 17-18, L 49.

[5] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, II, p. 25, L 52 by James Hutton.

[6] Ghislain de Diesbach, *Mme de Staël* (Paris, 1983), p. 132.

[7] Mme de Staël, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Béatrice W. Jasinski (Paris, 1965), II, ii, p. 398.

[8] *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, ii, p. 395.

[9] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, V, p. 419, L 541.

[10] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, VII, p. 207, L 735. The first volume of *De l'Allemagne* deals with the national characteristics of France, Britain, and Germany rather than with the German culture in particular. The third chapter, entitled 'Les femmes' is brief but expressive: "La nature et la société donnent aux femmes une grande habitude de souffrir" (Mme de Staël, *De L'Allemagne*, ed. Jean de Pange, 6 vols [Paris, 1958], I, 64).

[11] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, X, pp. 666-67, L 1121.

[12] There are several reasons why Burney might have decided not to mention reading them. She did not write many letters home during her exile, never knowing whether they would reach their destinations during the blockade, so that she might not have wanted to waste writing space with literary discussions. Besides, her favourite sister Susan Phillips, to whom she had written her journal letters and who had introduced her to Mme de Staël, had died in 1800. Given his attitude towards Mme de Staël in 1793, Dr Burney presumably did not care to hear about her novels. Besides, if she gave up Mme de Staël's acquaintance for pragmatic reasons, she would not have wanted to draw attention to their former friendship.

[13] Mme de Staël, *De l'Influence des Passions sur le Bonheur des Individus et des Nations* (Lausanne, 1796), pp. 272, 359.

[14] Mme de Staël, *Des Passions*, p. 248.

[15] *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, i, p 102.

[16] See *Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, p. 417, L 185.

[17] Mme de Staël, *Des Passions*, pp. 168-69.

[18] See, for instance, *Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Lars Troide and Peter Sabor (London, 2001), p. 360.

[19] *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, i, p. 40 (5 October 1792), p. 167 (21 September 1793), and p. 176 (11 October 1793).

[20] See *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, i, p. 40 (5 October 1792).

[21] See *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, I, p. xii.

[22] See *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jasinski, II, I, pp. 125, 204.

[23] This would also explain why Burney was horrified on learning that advance copies of *The Wanderer* had been handed out to well-known critics, Mme de Staël among them (*Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, pp. 470-71). More intriguingly still, when Benjamin de Constant published his autobiographical novel *Adolphe* in 1816, he portrayed Mme de Staël under the name of Ellénore (see Diesbach, *Mme de Staël*, p. 529).

[24] Burney called Mme de Staël an "unhappy persecutrix" on hearing that the latter tried to get back in touch despite the d'Arblays' obvious attempts to avoid her (*Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, p. 417).

[25] "S'il fallait caractériser d'un mot l'œuvre de Mme de Staël, c'est le mot *liberté* qui conviendrait" (Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté*, p. 240).

[26] In 1802, Burney declared that Mme de Staël was free from "malice or vengeance" (*Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, p. 416).

[27] "Rien ne dure que ce qui vient progressivement" (*De l'Allemagne*, I, pp 226-227).

[28] Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté*, p. 182.

[29] Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté*, p. 184.

[30] Mme de Staël, *Des Passions*, p. 307. In *Réflexions sur le Suicide* (which Burney wished to read in 1813), however, she goes back on her earlier assertions and rules out suicide as an option.

[31] *Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, p. 157. Burney quoted Mason in a discussion with a Miss White, who was determined to kill herself for love in the manner of Werther.

[32] Mme de Staël, *De l'Influence des Passions*, p. 293.

[33] Mme de Staël did not entirely exclude religion as a comfort, being certain that suffering led to religious experience: True faith, as Elinor experiences, has to be acquired by suffering. However, an excess of suffering might lead to loss of faith, thus eliminating religion from the number of certain comforts (see Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté*, p. 184).

[34] Mme de Staël, *De l'Influence des Passions*, p. 293.

[35] See Mme de Staël, *Delphine*, eds Simone Balayé and Lucia Omacini (Genève, 1987), p. 30 ("Les Clés").

[36] If Juliet is Burney's version of what Mme de Staël might have been—the woman who attracts and wins Harleigh—then Harleigh might himself be modelled on Narbonne, whom Burney equally admired: "He bears the highest character for goodness, parts, sweetness of manners, and ready wit: You could not keep your Heart from him, if you saw him only for half an hour" (*Selected Letters and Journals*, eds Troide and Sabor, L 154, p. 359).

[37] Oswald's title may be an allusion to Burney's hero Mortimer, soon to become Lord Delvile in *Cecilia*.

[38] Mme de Staël, *Corinne*, p. 50.

[39] Again, her name may be an allusion to Burney's hero Edgar Mandeville, whose strict notions of propriety exasperate the eponymous heroine in *Camilla*.

[40] Even though Burney had begun to write *The Wanderer* shortly after the publication of *Camilla*, she may yet have been influenced by *Corinne* from 1807 onwards.

[41] Compare Burney's personal statement in the Preface to *Evelina*: "However I may feel myself enlightened by the knowledge of Johnson, charmed with the eloquence of Rousseau, softened by the pathetic powers of Richardson, and exhilarated by the wit of Fielding, and humour of Smollet, I yet presume not to attempt pursuing the same ground which they have tracked; whence, though they may have cleared the weeds, they have also culled the flowers, and though they have rendered the path plain, they have left it barren" (*Evelina*, ed. Stewart Cooke [New York and London, 1998], p. 7).

[42] Simone Balayé makes a similar observation: "Corinne and Delphine are defeated because they do not know how to guard their liberty" (Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté* [Paris, 1979], p. 56).

[43] Pierre Macherey, *The Object of Literature* (Cambrdge, 1990), p. 21.

[44] Simone Balayé, *Mme de Staël: Écrire, Lutter, Vivre* (Geneva, 1994), pp. 18-19.

[45] Balayé, *Écrire, Lutter, Vivre*, p. 251.

[46] English society, it must be noted, did not fare well in Burney's hands, either.

[47] See Diesbach, *Madame de Staël*, p. 11.

[48] Burney had blamed Mrs Thrale for deserting her maternal duties in order to marry Mr Piozzi, and did not absolve Mme de Staël, either.

[49] See Balayé, *Lumières et Liberté*, p. 188.

[50] *Journals and Letters*, ed. Hemlow, III, pp. 312-13, L 237.

[51] Mrs Edgermont's principles are an echo of the British conduct-book advice of the time (see, for instance, James Fordyce, *Sermons for Young Women*, I [London, 1766], p. 207).

[52] See Diesbach, *Mme de Staël*, p. 389.

[53] See *Early Journals and Letters*, ed. Troide, II, pp. 115-128.

[54] *Selected Journals and Letters*, eds Troide and Sabor, p. 239.

[55] After all, she might have made him her knight-errant according to the conventions of more Romantic novels, demanding that he solve her problems by saving the bishop himself.