Elliot on Goldzink and Gengembre, editors (2017)


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2017 marked the two hundredth anniversary of the death of Madame de Staël (1766–1817), and with it came the publication of several excellent collections of and on her work. Madame de Staël, la femme qui osait penser, the most recent collaboration by Jean Goldzink and Gérard Gengembre, played an essential part in those publications. These experienced researchers (Goldzink teaches, writes, researches, and publishes on eighteenth-century literature, while Gengembre focuses on nineteenth-century authors) have assembled their own critical works into a masterful reference book for both trained scholars and neophytes in Staëlïen studies.

This scholarly partnership dates back to their first edited volume, a critical introduction that re-introduced Madame de Staël’s De la littérature in 1991. That groundbreaking study presented Staël’s overlooked writing to a new generation of scholars, inviting them to discover her literary production as a dynamic expression of the philosophy of her times. Twenty-six years later, readers are again challenged with the pair’s distinct approach to reading Staël, abandoning the intellectual biography in favor of analyses deeply rooted in the texts. Avoiding the biographical in favor of the exegetical, Goldzink and Gengembre center on the conversations to be extracted from the writings themselves, illuminating Madame de Staël’s perceptive analytical abilities, impressive powers of reflection, and formidable talent for the transmission of ideas in her quest for human and social perfectibility.

This latest volume includes that 1991 introduction along with eight previously published and jointly crafted articles on the works of Madame de Staël. In addition to the benefit of having those essays neatly gathered together, Madame de Staël, la femme qui osait penser adds eight new critical writings. The editors’ objective is to help non-experts appreciate the texts of this Enlightenment writer, and to expose Madame de Staël as “le plus grand écrivain, en langue française, des années révolutionnaires et impériales” (9).

Goldzink introduces and executes the book’s first half, which comprises eight new studies of Madame de Staël’s works grouped thematically to maximize their intellectual interplay with each other and with contemporaneous texts. Each study offers close readings of Staël’s most important writings that carefully guide the reader through her thematic considerations to her unique conclusions. Beginning with short sections on her “Correspondance” and “Premiers essais,” Goldzink methodically explores the synergies found between Staël’s texts and similarly themed ideas of the period (Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work holds an important place here). The early letters and essays unveil nuanced contemplations on morality and religion, lead into the sections of reflections on the Revolution (both during and beyond), and then transition to her masterpieces of cultural thought, De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales (1800) and De l’Allemagne (1813). Goldzink dissects those publications to explicate Staël’s theory of a European literary structure responsive to but also responsible for advancing social institutions, in opposition to the period’s more prescriptive stance that would have historical situations shape literary trends. These thematic groupings would not be complete without sections on Staël’s novels (Delphine, 1802, and Corinne, 1807), on the travel writings of her Dix années d’exil, published posthumously and, for Goldzink, a taste of the unachieved autobiography Madame de Staël would never write.

What Goldzink emphasizes repeatedly is Madame de Staël’s desire for perfectibility, that coming together of institutions and their members in a state of cooperation and progress. Drawing directly from her writings, he establishes her exceptional ability to synthesize the philosophical offerings of the period’s intellectuals who influence her even as she draws her own logical conclusions—not necessarily in agreement with her better-known counterparts—complemented by “empathie et jugement raisonné” (26). She theorizes, and then moves to put her ideas into practice. Her works, Goldzink posits, straddle the theoretical and the practical, where lofty principles meet quotidian circumstances.

Gengembre introduces the second half of the text, which consists of eight previously published articles written by this self-described “Castor and Pollux” duo. In his light-hearted preface, Gengembre affirms the importance of Staël the author, whose deliberations added depth to every topic that had bearing on “la naissance douleureuse de la modernité” (167). The selected articles that follow roughly mirror the first half’s themes, beginning with the politics of revolution, and leading through to the romanticism of the early nineteenth century. As the authors detail Staël’s “electrifying” conclusions, the strength of her political astuteness, her insights regarding religion and the state, and her uncanny ability to comprehend institutional dynamics...
are all exposed. The “four-handed” discussion of *De la littérature* exemplifies the book’s interactions, providing an intellectual backdrop to the first half’s newer essay on the text by introducing their original thesis of Staël as inheritor of Montesquieu, responsible for pushing his laws to new understandings and applications by perfecting them as reciprocal relationships. Gengembre’s bibliography and timeline appear as the final entries in the book, and provide the reader with a handy resource.

This collection of critical essays from Goldzink and Gengembre provides an excellent resource for Staëlien scholars, who no longer have to track down the eight previously published articles in separate volumes. In addition, they are skillfully selected and arranged to complement the book’s eight new essays by Goldzink, which add fresh ideas and insight to those earlier conversations. The authors have crafted an important collection, and this volume is a must-have for readers of Staël at both ends of the scholarly spectrum.

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