THESIS

MADAME DE STAËL

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During the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the time was approaching in which France was to reap the harvest of the tares she had long been sowing, James Hector was one of the few men prominent for his virtues and ability. A native of Geneva, beginning life as a clerk in a bank, he had risen to his position as Swiss Ambassador solely by his own merits, and, showing remarkable business talent, was chosen financier by Louis XVI. Thoroughly honest as well as capable in business matters, he also had a good deal of literary ability, and, in his work, "The Importance of Religious Opinions," endeavored to counteract the skeptical tendencies of the age.

His wife, the daughter of a Protestant pastor in Switzerland, was a woman of great beauty and intellectual power; she had pursued the course of study usually taken by young men, under the best teachers her native country afforded, and had been
herself a teacher in Geneva. The great men of the age, recognizing the superiority of her mind, frequented her salon at Paris, and there discussed the political and literary problems of the day.

Into this atmosphere—of great intellectual activity and political unrest—came their only child, Anne Marie Louise Germaine Necker, born at Paris, April 22nd, 1766. She inherited from her father, energy, a vivid imagination, an ardent love for the beautiful, and an impulsive nature; from her mother, an earnest desire for truth, and a firm adherence to the path of duty, even under the peculiar temptations which the condition of society placed in her way; and, from both parents, "strong religious feeling and extraordinary mental power. Being zealous Protestants, her father and mother would not send her to a convent to be educated in accordance with the custom of the time, but she pursued her studies at home, under their personal supervision.
Madame Ticker, as a teacher, had a theory of education which she attempted to carry out in her daughter's training. She believed in cramming the mind to its utmost capacity instead of aiming at a gradual, symmetrical development of all the mental powers. She stimulated the child's already active intellect by keeping her closely at her studies, or allowing her frequently in the Salon when only eleven years old, where such men as Raynal, Mirabeau, and Baron de Grimm delighted to converse with her upon subjects suited to mature minds. The mother tried to control her exuberant spirits, and even forbade her innocent plays, which were consequently enjoyed secretly; the child would not be moulded into a Puritan, and, encouraged by her father, often burst the bonds of restraint. This discipline was too severe for her frail constitution, and her health failed; her parents sent her into the country for recuperation, and there, free from restraint, almost
constantly in the open air, she gradually regained her strength. Some evil effects, however, always remained, and to this cause is due the strain of melancholy traceable in all her writings.

As Mademoiselle Becker grew into womanhood, her talents, social position, and enormous wealth attracted many suitors, but few of them were acceptable to her parents, who wished their son-in-law to be of good parentage, a Protestant, and to possess a moderate fortune. At that time, there were few eligible Protestants, but at length one appeared, Eric Magnus, Baron de Staël-Holstein, who combined all the qualities required. He was several years her senior, handsome, attractive, and the Swedish Ambassador to the court of France. He had some literary taste, and sympathized with Becker in his political views, though he afterward became more radical. Their marriage took place on the 14th of January, 1786. Notwithstanding the disparity in their ages, and the
lack of genuine affection, Mademoiselle Becker consented
to it because it was in accordance with her father's
wishes, and on the condition that her husband should
never ask her to leave her parents.

As Ambassador, Madame de Staël was presented
at court, and at first kindly received by Marie
Antoinette; but afterwards, political reasons caused
some coldness on the part of the Queen. Her Salon
became one of the most brilliant in Paris, for her
high social position, fine conversational powers, and
literary talents drew about her the people of distinc-
tion in social, literary, and political life. Her conver-
sational powers were so remarkable that she would
sometimes entertain a room full of people for an
hour at a time. She was particularly fond of dis-
cussion, and, rarely defeated, yet could argue with
such consummate tact and skill as not to wound the
feelings of her opponents. "If I were a Queen," said
Madame de Tesse, "I would order Madame de Staël to
talk to me all day long.

Among her friends was J. J. Rousseau, for whom she had a great admiration, both as a man and an author, and wrote some letters upon his character and works which were published without her consent in 1729. Though in sympathy with the author, and showing "an unreasonable admiration for her subject," she gave a "masterly exposition of the sophisms of the Nouvelle Héloïse." In the beginning of the Revolution, she hoped for the correction of the abuses so long endured, and sided with the Revolutionists; but, seeing the crimes that were committed in the name of liberty, she con-

sidered the Royal family and the aristocrats the op-

pressed, and sympathized with them. Her parents were

compelled to flee to Coppet, their estate in Switzerland,

but she, the wife of the Swedish Ambassador, was

safe, and, thus sheltered, used all the means in her

power to save their friends who were in danger. Talley-

rand, Jaucourt, Dally-Tollental and Carbonne owed
their escape from Paris during the "reign of terror," to her efforts, she risking her own life for them; at last, attempting to flee, she was arrested, and taken to the Hotel de Ville, but was rescued by Manuel, for her father's sake. She reached Coppet in safety, but the next year went to England. At Michelham, near Richmond, she joined a colony of French refugees, among whom were Carbonne, Talleyrand, General d'Arblay, and Montmorency. In straightened circumstances, and not noticed much in society, they embraced the opportunity for a careful study of English institutions.

Notwithstanding the slight resuscitations derived from Marie Antoinette, Madame de Staël espoused her cause warmly, and, after returning to Coppet, wrote a pamphlet in her defense, in which she pleaded with the leaders of the Revolutionists for the life of their Queen with all the eloquence, pathos, and force, over which she had such perfect command; but it was all in vain; the voice of the little pamphlet was scarcely heard
above the roaring of the storm.

In 1794, Madame Necker died, greatly mourned not only by her husband and daughter, but by all who knew her; by the poor who had enjoyed her bounty as well as by the rich and learned who had admired her intellectual gifts. In the course of years, the daughter had come more into sympathy with the mother, and had learned to understand her better and appreciate her real worth.

Returning to Paris, Madame de Staël found the city in the greatest confusion, for the reaction had begun, even among the Revolutionists themselves who were beginning to condemn the extreme measures taken. She again opened her Salon, by this means helping to reinvigorate society, and encourage the progress of literature. She used her influence in obtaining the recall of her exiled friends, and was so successful that suspicion was excited, and she herself was compelled to leave the city for a time. After her return, one of her intimate friends, Benjamin
Constant, who habitually frequented her Salon, delivered a
speech in which he denounced Napoleon's rising tyranny
and despotism. As it was supposed that she was the
real author of it, her Salon was immediately deserted.
In 1807, she published her work "On literature considered
in its relation to social institutions," in which, in direct
opposition to the prevailing opinions of the time, she ex-
pressed her belief in the dependence of society upon
religion and philosophy. The book would have attracted
attention had it been written by a man, because of its
"acuteness of criticism and subtlety of speculation," but,
coming from the pen of a woman, it was considered remark-
able, she was at once restored to her former position in
society, and her Salon was again thronged.

Napoleon's hostility to Madame de Stael dates from
the time of Benjamin Constant's speech. With his usual
clear perception, he saw that she was a woman of extra-
ordinary ability, and might be of invaluable service to him,
so he used all the means in his power to win her to his
side; but she was a true patriot, and seeing his aspirations for supreme power, and that he was likely to establish a despotism worse than that from which they had just been freed, would not use her influence in his favor. She was the head of the conservative republican party, but still he could find no sufficient reason for complaint, as he himself says of her, "she speaks neither of politics nor of me, as they affirm, yet I know not how it happens, those who have seen her, always like me less; she gives them fanciful notions, and of the opposite kind to mine. His brothers, Lucien and Joseph Bonaparte were her friends, yet their influence could not move her from what she considered the path of duty; gradually Napoleon's enemies either left the country or yielded to his wishes, but she remained firm. Not prudence made it difficult for him to find an excuse for ridding himself of what he called "a machine in motion, which made "a disturbance in the Salons. But when her father published his "Last views upon politics and finance" in 1802, Napoleon was displeased
with it, and seized the opportunity to punish both offenders by ordering the daughter not to come within ten leagues of Paris, though Necker assured him that she had had nothing whatever to do with the obnoxious work. Finding that some of her friends could still visit her, he forbade her coming within forty leagues of the city. To Madame de Staël who was a true Frenchwoman, notwithstanding her Swiss parentage, the society and conversation of thinkers were necessities. Paris was at this time the theater of political events which were watched with breathless interest by all Europe. Is it, then, any wonder that exile, the loss of everything most dear, meant almost death to her? She had separated from Baron de Staël on account of his prodigality; he seemed to have no conception of the value of money, and she was compelled to place herself and her children under her father's care in order to save the remnant of her fortune. When, however, she heard that her husband was sick, she immediately went to him, cared for him, and attempted to remove him to Coppet, but he
died on the way there.

In the midst of her troubles, Madame de Staël endeavored to divert her mind by writing "Delphine." In this book, she rebels against the system of morality then prevailing, and asserts that "men ought to know how to set public opinion at defiance; woman must submit to it."

This doctrine may be considered as an outgrowth of the unsettled opinions of the period immediately following the Revolution.

Deprived of the society of thinkers of Paris, she started, in 1803, on a tour through Germany. In Weimar, then the intellectual center of Europe, she was enthusiastically received by the Duke and Duchess, and there made the acquaintance of Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland. She studied the language, literature, and philosophy of Germany, and was delighted to find such a wealth of literature outside of France. Her own reputation as an author had preceded her, so that her tour was an ovation. In Berlin she was kindly received at court, and became
acquainted with Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia and
August Wilhelm Schlegel; the latter, one of the most
learned men and best literary critics of the day, became
her son's tutor. While here, she received news of her father's
illness, and immediately set out for Coppet, but he died
before she could reach him, on the 9th. of April, 1804. Madame
de Stäel was broken-hearted; there had always existed
between her and her father the greatest sympathy and
tenderness; she had loved him better than any one else, had
suffered in his sufferings, and rejoiced when he rejoiced;
had reverenced him as a man of the most wonderful
genius; her love for him was a sort of worship. Exiled
from Paris, deprived of her husband, mother, and now her
father, she was indeed desolate. These bereavements, however,
purified her character, and made religion a more active
principle in her life. Seeking relief in work, she wrote
a brief sketch of the character and private life of Richer
as an introduction to his "Manuscript", in which is
revealed more plainly than in any of her other works.
the depth of her affection for her father.

Accompanied by Schlegel, she then went to Italy, hoping to divert her mind by change of scene. Here she studied art, and the southern life, and after her return, prepared her book "Corinne or Italy" for the press. It was published in Paris in 1807, and as there was no mention of political subjects in it, it was very popular throughout Europe; in Edinburgh the Professors would stop each other on the street to inquire, how far they had read in the "great new book. Corinne is a book of travel in the guise of a novel. Though the plot is deficient, and it is lacking in dramatic interest as a novel, as a "poetical description of a poetic country," it is unsurpassed. The delineations of Italian art and scenery are very fine, and the author shows a wonderful power in her analysis of the national character. Jealous of the popularity of the book, Napoleon was so cruel as to send her another order of exile on the anniversary of her father's death.
Wishing to complete her studies of the German character and literature, Madame de Staël went to Vienna; she then returned to Coppet, where she spent two years in writing her greatest book. In 1810, "De l’Allemagne" was published in Paris, and, as a great demand was anticipated, ten thousand volumes were ordered; the book passed through the hands of the censor un molested, but the whole edition was destroyed by the Minister of Police, the only excuse given being that the work was not French. France was at that time bound in the fetters of a threefold despotism; the nation was in the power of Napoleon, philosophy was under the dominion of the materialistic school, and literature was only a servile imitation of the old authors. Madame de Staël’s purpose was to liberate her countrymen from these bonds, and she attempted to do it by awakening an interest in the philosophy of their sister nation, hoping thus to stimulate activity at home. There had long existed a spirit of jealousy and rivalry between the two nations, and neither one was
acquainted with the other; the author hoped to call the attention of France to Germany, and stimulate a desire for more knowledge which should lead to further research. Her success is indicated in what Goethe says of her book, "it ought to be considered as a powerful battery which made a wide breach in the sort of wall raised up between the two nations by superannuated prejudices." She attempted to arouse enthusiasm among her countrymen, and, in one of her finest passages, indignantly refutes the doctrine that morality is dependent upon self-interest. Says a German critic of her work, "she seems to have written it with her soul."

Napoleon followed the suppression of De l'Allemagne with an order to leave France at once, never to return. Stunned by this blow, Madame de Staël fled to her usual refuge, Coppet; but was not safe from the persecutions of her tormentor even here. She was closely watched, and the Prefect of Geneva was dismissed for being too kind to her; travel was denied her; Schlegel was ordered to...
leave Coppet, and Mathieu Montmorency, Madame Recamier, and Saint-Priest (the latter an old man almost eighty years old) coming to proffer their sympathy, were exiled as soon as they arrived.

At this time there was in Geneva a young soldier, M. de Rocca, who had been wounded in the Spanish wars. His misfortunes excited the pity and compassion of Madame de Staël, and her kindness awakened a feeling deeper than friendship on his part. Persecuted and despairing, her heart was won by his persistence; though she was nearly twice as old as her lover, she thought she saw in a marriage of affection, that domestic happiness—the supreme, the complete blessedness of this world, which had before been denied her. Accordingly she married de Rocca in 1811, secretly, since she, as an author, did not wish any other name to be associated with her works, and was afraid that Napoleon, jealous of their happiness, would recall him.

Her persecution at length becoming unbearable, Madame
de Staël resolved to flee to England through Russia and Sweden, but was so closely watched that she made her escape with great difficulty. In Germany she was saved only through the stupidity of the officials. At length reaching St. Petersburg, she was welcomed with enthusiasm by the Emperor and the nobility, as the political opponent of Napoleon, almost the only one of any note then remaining. In 1813, she reached England, and Ce l' Allemagne was published in London. It created such a sensation in literary circles, that her reputation was yet further increased, and she was the "lion of the season. Here she became acquainted with Lord Byron and Sir James Mackintosh, by whom she was very highly esteemed. In the midst of her triumph came the sad news of the death of her youngest son, Albert, in Germany, who was killed disgracefully in a duel. While Madame de Staël's star was thus in the ascendant, notwithstanding her misfortunes, her enemy's power was declining, and when Napoleon retired to Elba in 1814, she returned to
Paris joyfully. Again opening her Salon, she was immedi-
ately surrounded by those most noted in the fields of
politics, literature, and art, among whom were Welling-
ton, Blucher, Guizot, Chateaubriand, Lafayette, Humboldt,
Sismondi, the Schlegels, Constant, and Cambray. She pos-
sessed the rare faculty of drawing about her the most
celebrated men in opposite parties, literary and political,
who would converse in the most friendly manner possible,
thus establishing relations not easily forgotten afterwards.

A plan for the assassination of Napoléon was
revealed to Madame de Staël as his enemy, but she, with
characteristic magnanimity, made it known to his friends
who prevented its execution. Upon his return in 1816, she
again took refuge at Coppet, though urged by him to
remain in Paris. She would not write a single word
in praise of the tyrant, though by that means she
might have enjoyed the pleasures of the capital, so dear
to her. Warned by the sufferings she had endured,
Madame de Staël went with her husband, who was
also in very feeble health, to Italy for rest. The change
was beneficial, and after Napoleon was sent to St.
Helena in 1816, they returned to Paris. Madame de Staël
resumed her social position, but the vicissitudes of her
life had been too wearing, even for her strong constitution,
and her physical strength gradually failed. In Februa-
ry, 1817, she was prostrated with a fever from which she
never recovered. During this sickness, her intellectual pow-
ers were unimpaired; the light of her genius shone the
more brightly, and her religious faith strengthened, afford-
ing her support and consolation for her last journey. She
died July 14th, 1817, leaving a son and daughter eminent
for their virtues and abilities; her husband, broken-hearted,
survived her only six months.

Her “Ten years of exile,” published after her death,
was an account of her wanderings in foreign lands, and
her persecutions by Napoleon, whose portrait, as here given,
is not flattering. Her “Considerations upon the French
Revolution,” “perhaps her most perfect work,” was written for
the purpose of vindicating her father, and explaining the
causes, results, and principles of the opposing parties
during the Revolution; her position was peculiarly favora-
ble for observation at that time; she was thoroughly
acquainted with her subject, and the book is now of the
greatest value.

The private life of Madame de Staël was without
reproach; her peculiar affection for her father was as
touching as it was rare, even from childhood, and as a
mother, she was both wise and loving. In considering her
as a wife, we must make all due allowance for the
prevailing influences of Parisian society, and remember
that her first husband was her parents' choice, not her
own; in regard to her second marriage, her misfortunes, the
proffered happiness, and apparent necessity for secrecy
must be taken into account. We can readily excuse her
vanity, since she had so much of which to be proud;
this did not prevent her appreciation of the genius of
others, for she always recognized it and paid it the homage
due, jealousy, and resentfulness seem to have been entirely lacking in her nature, and the only injuries she could not forgive were her father's; her own were soon forgotten. Her magnanimity was strikingly exemplified in her defense of Marie Antoinette and disclosure of the plot against Napoleon's life. She could do without the improvements needed in her dwelling that she might relieve the sufferings of the poor, and with rare self-forgetfulness, could risk her life to save her friends during the "reign of terror." She did not yield to the skeptical tendencies of the age, but the influence of religion as an active principle, purifying and enabling, ever grew stronger in her life and works. "Life is valuable," said Madame de Staël, "only so far as it serves for the religious education of the heart."

As a "Queen of society," she owed her superiority over her contemporaries to her lack of beauty, (then so great a temptation), her intellectual powers, education, and Protestantism. She did much to civilize and elevate society, especially after the Revolution. With her love for liberty, clear insight,
sound judgment, firm adhesion to what she believed to be right, and belief "that under politics were comprehended morality, religion, and literature," she exercised a great influence over the statesmen of the day. In her political relations with Napoleon, she was "the last of the Romans under this Caesar who was afraid to destroy her and could not abase her," and he himself is compelled to admit, "no one can deny that she is a woman of grand talent, of extraordinary intellect; she will last."

As an author, Madame de Staël was not judged fairly during her lifetime, nor for many years afterward, for the subjects she considered were long those of partisan warfare, and people were too much blinded by prejudice to judge impartially. Even yet, those who differ from her in opinion can scarcely appreciate her "nobleness of mind, the grandeur of thought, and above all the uprightness and rectitude and the sincere love of truth which distinguish her productions perhaps above those of every French author." Madame de Staël is considered by
Macaulay "the greatest woman of her times," by Byron, "the greatest woman in literature." In her writings, she shows the strength of mind, clearness of view, and comprehension of a man, united with the tenderness, pathos, and passion of a woman. She did much to disarm the prejudice of the French against Germany, thus producing greater harmony of feeling between the two nations; revived literature in France, and accomplished much in her attempts to counteract the influence of the materialistic school of philosophy. Bonstetten says that "each of her works had made sonorous chords vibrate through all Europe."