

H-France Review Vol. 9 (January 2009), No. 17

Renee Winegarten, *Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant: A Dual Biography*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, vii + 343 pp. \$ 35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9780300119251.

Review by K. Steven Vincent, North Carolina State University.

The relationship between Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant is fascinating because of the prominence of the participants, the drama of the historical period on which both made their mark, and the passionate and turbulent nature of the relationship itself. Renee Winegarten's new book examines the Staël-Constant relationship in detail, providing an elegantly written guide to their meetings, movements, union, tensions, and disunion. It provides an excellent narrative account of the relationship; it does not (as its subtitle might suggest) tell us a great deal about the larger lives of Staël and Constant beyond this relationship, or about the important roles they played in European politics and thought. Winegarten has written previously about the life and larger political role of Germaine de Staël, but not to my knowledge about Constant.[1]

Both Staël and Constant had complicated love lives. When they met on September 18, 1794, both had had numerous liaisons and both were legally married. Germaine had had affairs with Hippolyte de Guibert and Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand. In 1786, she had married Eric Magnus de Staël Holstein, the Swedish ambassador to France. It was a marriage of convenience for both parties, and they lived virtually separate lives. In the early years of her marriage (before she and Constant met) Staël had given birth to two children as a result of her passionate relationship with Louis de Narbonne, a liaison that lasted, roughly, from 1788 to 1794. Moreover, at the time of their meeting, she was in the throes of an amorous attachment to Adolf von Ribbing. Benjamin also had experienced numerous early romantic episodes, humorously recounted in his memoir *Le Cahier rouge*. In 1789, he had married Wilhemine Louise Johanne (Minna) von Cramm, a lady-in waiting at the court of Brunswick, to which Constant also was briefly attached. By late-1791 there were serious strains in the marriage, and in 1793 they had agreed to separate (a divorce was finalized in 1795). Constant also had had an intimate, though probably not physical relationship with the accomplished writer Isabelle de Charrière.

When Staël and Constant met, therefore, they were far from being sentimental neophytes. They were both in their late-20s and, though both were legally married, they were not in any important ways emotionally encumbered, with the exception of Staël's attachment to Ribbing. From their first meeting, Constant was dazzled by Staël's mind, wit and enthusiasm. He was immediately infatuated and soon very much in love. Staël, on the other hand, was not swept off her feet, though she was attracted to Constant's energy, sensibility, and generosity, and found great pleasure in their intellectual exchange. Constant became part of Staël's entourage, but not her lover, in February 1795 when he moved into a room in her house in Mézery. Distracted that they were not lovers, Constant staged some dramatic scenes, including a threatened/attempted suicide in late March 1795. Staël was touched by his devotion, but found him physically unappealing and experienced at most what Béatrice Jasinski has called "amused compassion." [2]

Staël and Constant became lovers in late-January 1796, following their return to Paris in May of the previous year. In mid-April, they signed an "engagement" which declared their intention to remain

“indissolubly joined together” and “to devote our lives to each other.”[3] They were frequently separated, however. Because of her political activities and the residency restrictions imposed by the government, Staël was in and out of France during the next few years; when the political leaders permitted it, she would return to Paris. Constant was torn between pursuing his ambition to play a role in French politics and being with Germaine. As a consequence, he was often on the move between Paris, his residence outside Paris at Hérivaux (where Staël often stayed when she was allowed to reside in France, but not Paris), and the Staël château in Switzerland. On June 8, 1797 in Paris, Staël gave birth to Albertine de Staël, Constant’s only child.

Winegarten provides an animated account of the tumultuous relationship and the continuous movements of Staël and Constant into and out of Paris. She provides less detail about the intellectual connection, which was central. In Paris, Staël and Constant became embroiled in post-Thermidorian politics, supporting the Constitution of 1795 and working to find a *via media* between Left and Right. Staël’s salon at the Swedish embassy on the rue du Bac became a central meeting place of moderate republicans and constitutional monarchists working to find a “liberal” middle way.[4] When at the Staël château of Coppet in the *pays de Vaud*, they were at the center of European liberal cultural and politics, especially during the Consulate and Empire, with cultural luminaries like August Wilhelm Schlegel and Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi regular *habitués*. Though romantically connected, these two figures were, first and foremost, public intellectuals with wide-ranging political and cultural agendas.

Staël and Constant were clearly attracted to each other’s intellect, but they were also driven by passion. Unfortunately, however, their temperaments were quite different, and from the middle of 1798 there were severe strains in the relationship. Concerning this, Winegarten provides a well-informed account with much clarifying detail. The first decade of the new century was filled with dramatic confrontations interspersed with temporary reconciliations. They did not definitively part ways until May 10, 1811, but the emotional closeness of the first few years became more intermittent, and they were more and more frequently apart. The strain is revealed most starkly in Constant’s *Journaux intimes*, where he vacillated between his desire to rupture with Staël and his desire to “return to this tie because of memories or some momentary charm.”[5] There are extended entries where Constant saw Staël as “the only person who understands him” and imagines a future in which they will be married. More frequently, he expressed his need for a quiet scholarly life, and imagined (or celebrated) his escape from the exhausting rigors of the continuous sociability that surrounded Staël. Most arrestingly, the private journals record the dramatic gyrations from one to the other, sometimes in the same day. One emerges from reading Constant’s private journals with the sense that Staël was such an immense presence—intellectually, physically, and emotionally—that Constant was alternately dazzled, enthralled, exhausted, and disgusted. Sometimes, he seems to have experienced all of these simultaneously. Staël left no intimate private diary for the period, so her day-to-day thoughts and passions are more difficult to gauge.

By the time they parted in 1811, Staël and Constant had long ceased to be intimate. Constant had a passionate affair with Anna Lindsay in 1800-01, and he married Charlotte von Hardenberg in June 1808, regularizing what is arguably the most emotionally stable, and certainly the most enduring, relationship of his life. Staël had long since taken on a succession of other lovers, and, in October 1816, secretly married John Rocca. Winegarten provides a lively account of the spectacular chapters of this fraught relationship, and is especially good on the mutually critical regard they showed each other after they returned to Paris in 1814 (pp. 247-87).

Inevitably, when dealing with the personal lives of historical figures with whom one has spent a lot of time, one comes to conclusions about psychological makeup and character. Just as inevitably, perhaps, assessments differ. Winegarten captures something essential, I believe, about Staël’s character when she writes that:

she held in her mind two images of womanhood: the delicate creature, weak by nature, who needed to be supported and protected by an admired master, and the daring, visionary, exceptional woman. She would never be able to reconcile the two, either in her life or in her novels (p. 93).

And I find myself nodding in agreement when she writes that Constant's "tendency was to veer between frenetic activity and quiet and solitude, whereas she [Staël] was a constant whirlwind of energy and sociability" (p. 136). She is less convincing, to my mind, when characterizing Constant's attitude toward women. She claims, incorrectly I believe, that he had a "fundamental reluctance to accept her [Staël's] genius as a woman" (p. 183). Winegarten also suggests that Constant's dissatisfaction with Staël in the early years of the new century was sexual in nature (p. 162), and that he was driven by a desire to dominate her in the context of "an ideal haven of quiet domesticity" (p. 186). While these were clearly expressed, I am not convinced that Constant's attitude toward Staël is so easily summarized, given the various, often conflicting, roles that he imagined women in his life were to fill.[6] Constant, at times, imagined a relationship with a woman who would be entirely subordinate to him and to his own emotional and social needs. At other times, however, quite at variance with this, he longed for complete transparency and sublime fusion. Finally (and most famously), he depicted love as a self-defeating dialectic of desire. In this form, as depicted in his novel *Adolphe*, love is identified as the desire to attain the love of another, to overcome obstacles, to eliminate difficulties, and to obtain the object of love. But, the "dialectic" is such that if the love is reciprocated then the desire disappears. Therefore, love, in this mode, is either unfulfilled or it dies.[7] At certain moments, Constant may have wanted or imagined that his connection with Staël could be restricted to the first type of relationship, as Winegarten suggests, but I do not think he ever seriously believed it should be, or could be, forced into such a conventional mold.

What is so impressive about the Constant-Staël relationship is the intellectual power and productivity of the participants, something that generated deep mutual respect that survived the emotional storms of their years together. Winegarten's book notes the intellectual connection, especially in the epilogue, but unfortunately does not give its substance sufficient attention. What the book does highlight is the fraught nature of their intimacy, what she cogently refers to as "the splendors and miseries of their liaison" (p. 299).

In quest of an elusive happiness and deeply dissatisfied, veering between euphoria and melancholy, both of them appear highly sensitive, kind and thoughtful, vain, egotistical, ambitious for *gloire*, coolly reasonable and rational, wildly passionate and emotional—in short, full of contradictions. Both of them knew each other and themselves, and both, in their worst moments, can be unjust to each other (p. 158).

One of the things that makes this book so compelling is that, along with deep sympathy for both Constant and Staël, Winegarten is willing to be critical of the actions of both parties. She places more of the blame for the ultimate unraveling of the relationship on Constant than on Staël, but both are implicated in the failure. Like Winegarten, I would emphasize the psychological neediness of both parties (both were narcissistic and melancholic[8]), their contrasting natures, and the inherent difficulty of constructing a stable relationship in the midst of the torrent unleashed by the Revolution.

Winegarten's book reinforces what we know about the contrasting natures of Staël and Constant. Constant, though anxious to attain public recognition, was drawn to a relatively quiet existence that would allow him to pursue his intellectual pursuits. In a revealing letter to his aunt dated 15 May 1798, Constant complained that in the relationship with Staël he was "isolated without being independent, subjugated without being united with her. I see the last years of my youth passing by with neither the repose of solitude nor the gentle affections of a legitimate union. I have tried in vain to

break it off.”[9] Staël, on the other hand, dreaded isolation, expected devotion and attention from those around her, and required a lively social scene. By all accounts, she was an enthralling conversationalist and an enthusiastic and generous supporter of her friends and acquaintances. Generally surrounded by a veritable court of admirers, she suffered when confined to a more restricted life-style. In 1797, passing several days in Coppet with only her father and Constant in residence, she wrote to a friend: “il faut du monde pour avoir de l’esprit, du monde pour s’animer, du monde pour tout.” As Henri Grange has cogently put it, this made an intimate like Constant, in Staël’s dizzying social world, “toujours nécessaire et jamais suffisant.”[10]

One of the fascinating aspects of the Staël-Constant relationship is the analytical acumen each brought to it. Both are famous for their examination of relationships in their novels; Constant, in addition, obsessively scrutinized his own character and relationships in his private journals. He was impressed with the elusive quality of emotional attachments. “In the present state of society,” he wrote in 1806, “personal relations are composed of fine nuances, undulating, impossible to grasp, which would be denatured in a thousand ways if one tried to give them greater precision.”[12] Renee Winegarten’s engaging new book provides greater precision but avoids any “denaturing”; she helps us better understand the “fine nuances” and “undulating” aspects of this passionate and productive relationship.

## NOTES

[1] Renee Winegarten, *Mme de Staël* (Leamington Spa, UK: Berg, 1985); and the especially good chapter on Staël in *Accursed Politics: Some French Women Writers and Political Life, 1715-1850* (Chicago: Joan R. Dee, 2003), pp. 153-90.

[2] Béatrice Jasinski, *L’Engagement de Benjamin Constant: amour et politique (1794-1796)* (Paris: Minard, 1971), p. 19.

[3] These quotes from: Dennis Wood, *Benjamin Constant: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 1993), 142.

[4] See my “Benjamin Constant, the French Revolution, and the Origins of French Romantic Liberalism,” *French Historical Studies* 23:4 (2000):607-37. There were some differences in their political stances, however. During 1795, Staël was close to the republican opposition around Pierre-Louis Roederer’s *Le Journal de Paris*, while Constant in July 1795 moved closer to the partisans of the government around Jean-Baptiste Louvet’s *La Sentinelle*. For the political maneuverings of this period, see Henri Grange, *Benjamin Constant: amoureux et républicain 1795-1799* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004).

[5] This is a direct translation of the *code chiffré du journal abrégé*—that is, of the numerical code that Constant himself devised to refer to his shifting emotional states for the abridged version of his *Journaux intimes*. 2 = “Désire de romper mon éternel lien dont il est si souvent question.” 3 = “Retours à ce lien par des souvenirs ou quelque charme momentané.” [Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres complètes*, t. VI: *Journaux intimes (1804-1807)* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2002), p. 44.]

[6] On this, see Tzvetan Todorov, *A Passion for Democracy: The Life, the Women He Loved and the Thought of Benjamin Constant*, translated from French (no name provided) (New York: Algora Publishing, 1999).

[7] I discuss this in more detail in my “Constant and Women,” *The Cambridge Companion to Constant*, ed. Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[8] Jean Starobinski has suggested that Staël struggled with melancholy and was preoccupied with thoughts of suicide. Constant suffered from a similar inquietude. See Starobinski, “Suicide et mélancolie

---

chez Mme de Staël,” in *Madame de Staël et l'Europe* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1970), pp. 242-52. I have written at more length about this in “Character, *Sensibilité*, Sociability and Politics in Benjamin Constant’s *Adolphe*,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 28:4 (2002):361-83.

[9] Constant to Anne-Marie-Pauline-Adrienne de Nassau, 15 May 1798, Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale III (1795-1799)* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003), p. 335. Winegarten discusses this famous letter, on pp. 111-16, 136, 159.

[10] Letter from Staël to Adrien de Mun (19 septembre 1797), cited and commented on by Grange, *Benjamin Constant: amoureux et républicain 1795-1799*, p. 134.

[11] Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements*, ed. Etienne Hofmann, 2 vol. (Genève: Droz, 1980), II, p. 443.

K. Steven Vincent  
North Carolina State University  
steven\_vincent@ncsu.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172