

# Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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# 14. Anne Louise Germaine, Baronne de Staël-Holstein 22 April 1766–14 July 1817

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Fig. 14. Anne Louise Germaine, baronne de Staël-Holstein, by F. Massot. Photo by Siren-Com (2011). Wikimedia, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/33/Madame\\_de\\_Sta%C3%ABl\\_en\\_Corinne\\_1807.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/33/Madame_de_Sta%C3%ABl_en_Corinne_1807.jpg), CC BY 4.0.

## *Zulma*

J'étais prisonnier chez les sauvages qui habitent le bord de l'Orénoque ; mais comme ma rançon était stipulée, je jouissais de quelque liberté parmi eux. Un long séjour dans leur contrée m'avait permis d'apprendre leur langue, et l'un de leurs vieillards me témoignait une amitié particulière ; son âge lui donnait des droits à l'exercice du gouvernement ; ces sauvages ne connaissant pas la première base de toute réunion sociale, la propriété, leurs peuplades errantes adoptaient pour chefs, ceux qui devaient à une longue expérience cet esprit conservateur, ange gardien des destinées

humaines. Un matin je fus réveillé par le bruit des instruments militaires : je crus que la guerre allait recommencer ; le vieillard qui me protégeait vint à moi, et me dit : « Ce jour est le plus cruel de ma vie ; je vais donner à mes concitoyens une douloureuse preuve de mon dévouement ; je suis appelé par mon âge et le sort à juger un coupable ; sept d'entre nous sont condamnés à ce triste devoir. On dit que le crime qui va nous être exposé ne peut être pardonné ; mais quand ma voix prononcera la sentence de mort, mon cœur déchiré pourra-t-il savoir s'il n'abuse pas du droit de l'homme sur l'homme, et ne s'arroge pas la vengeance divine ? Après ce jugement, je serai huit jours sans vous voir ; c'est un usage établi parmi nous, que les juges, qui ont condamné à la peine de mort, restent enfermés seuls pendant une semaine, et soient rassemblés de nouveau après ce temps, pour confirmer, ou casser leur jugement. Dans votre pays, un second tribunal révisé les décisions du premier ; ici nous en appelons de l'homme en société, à l'homme solitaire, de l'impression du moment, à la conscience éternelle : nous bénissons cette institution, puisque très souvent elle a fait révoquer des jugements sévères. Suivez-moi, mon ami, dans l'enceinte où l'on va plaider en présence du peuple ; vous y verrez la famille de l'accusé plus inquiète que lui-même, de l'arrêt qui sera prononcé ; car nos lois bannissent pour jamais les parents d'un enfant coupable, et souvent dans nos déserts ils périssent d'isolement et de misère. Cette responsabilité funeste est un préjugé qui nous est commun avec vous. Souvent les erreurs les plus composées s'admettent avant les vérités les plus naturelles, cependant nos mœurs errantes ne permettant pas au gouvernement une surveillance générale et constante, il nous était peut-être nécessaire de resserrer les liens des familles. Et cette punition rétroactive, de quelque manière que vous la jugiez, a produit cet heureux effet : venez donc, écoutez avec attention les motifs qui vont nous être présentés, et si vous excusez le crime que je serais prêt à condamner, hâtez-vous de m'en instruire, et sauvez à votre ami la douleur irréparable, le meurtre de l'innocent. » Alors je suivis ce bon vieillard vers la grande plaine, où le peuple était rassemblé. Je fus étonné d'en approcher sans être averti par aucun bruit, de la réunion d'un si grand nombre d'hommes. « Tous se recueillent, me dit le vieillard, dans la contemplation du malheur et de la mort, et ces guerriers si braves, versent des pleurs pour des dangers qu'ils ne partagent pas. »<sup>1</sup>

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1 Germaine de Staël, *Zulma*, in Madame de Staël, *Œuvres de jeunesse*, ed. Simone Balayé and John Isbell (Paris: Desjonquères, 1997), pp. 107–108.

Translation: I was a prisoner with the savages who live on the banks of the Orinoco; but as my ransom had been stipulated, I enjoyed a certain freedom among them. A long stay in their country had allowed me to learn their language, and one of their elders showed me a particular friendship; his age gave him rights to the exercise of government; these

Anne Louise Germaine, *Baronne de Staël-Holstein* was born and died in Paris, though she was Genevan through her father Jacques Necker, the wealthy minister of Finance for Louis XVI. Her mother was Suzanne Necker, in whose salon she met Buffon, Marmontel, Grimm, Gibbon, the *abbé* Raynal, and La Harpe among others. In 1786, after turning down Pitt, she married the older Erik Magnus, Baron Staël von Holstein, who was then made Ambassador of King Gustav III of Sweden at the court of France. The couple separated in 1800. Staël found fame early as a thinker and writer, with the *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1788), *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur de l'individu et des nations* (1796), and *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800). Favoring the ideals of 1789—the Bastille fell three days after her father's first dismissal—Staël grew critical by 1791, as her lover Narbonne became Minister for War. She left France at the

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savages not knowing the first basis of all social gatherings, property, their wandering peoples adopted as leaders, those who owed to a long experience that conserving instinct which is a guardian angel of human destinies. One morning I was awakened by the sound of martial instruments: I thought that war would start back up; the elder who protected me came to me and said "This day is the most cruel of my life; I shall give to my fellow citizens a painful proof of my devotion; I am called by my age and fate to judge a guilty person; seven of us are condemned to this sad duty. They say that the crime which shall be shown to us cannot be pardoned; but when my voice pronounces the sentence of death, can my torn heart know if it does not abuse of the right of man over man, and take to itself divine vengeance? After this judgement, I shall go eight days without seeing you; it is a custom established among us, that the judges who have condemned someone to death stay shut up alone for a week, and be assembled again after this time, to confirm or nullify their verdict. In your country, a second tribunal revises the decisions of the first; here we call from man in society to solitary man, from the impression of the moment to eternal conscience: we bless this institution, because very often it has caused severe judgements to be revoked. Follow me, my friend, into the enclosure where speakers will plead in the presence of the people; you will see the family of the accused more worried than the accused about the verdict that will be pronounced; because our laws banish forever the parents of a guilty child, and often in our deserts they perish of isolation and destitution. This fatal responsibility is a prejudice we share with you. Often the most composite errors are admitted before the most natural truths, although with our wandering customs not allowing a general and constant surveillance by the government, it was perhaps necessary for us to strengthen the bonds of families. And this retroactive punishment, however you judge it, has produced this happy effect: come then, listen with attention to the motives that will be presented to us, and if you excuse the crime that I would be ready to condemn, hasten to inform me of it, and save your friend that irreparable grief, the murder of an innocent. "Then I followed this good elder toward the great plain where the people were assembled. I was astonished to approach it without being alerted by any noise to the presence of so great a number of men." "All are meditating, said the elder, in the contemplation of unhappiness and death, and these warriors who are so brave, shed tears for dangers they do not share."

September Massacres after saving several friends, staying in England before returning to Directoire Paris as a republican in 1795. Staël there reopened her salon, hosting a literary and political elite. Exiled by Bonaparte in 1803, she continued to publish with European success: the novels *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), as well as the treatise *De l'Allemagne* (1810/1813), a book pulped by Napoleon's police. Her home in Coppet became a meeting-place for Europe's Romantics, from A.W. Schlegel, her children's tutor, to Sismondi and Byron, alongside her great love, the writer and politician Benjamin Constant: the *Groupe de Coppet*. Widowed in 1802, in 1811 she remarried a young Genevan officer, John Rocca, before fleeing Coppet for London via Moscow in an occupied Europe. Staël reopened her Parisian salon in 1814, receiving kings, ministers, and generals, campaigning also to end the slave trade but dying on Bastille Day, 1817. Her works, *De l'Allemagne* in particular, helped introduce Romanticism to Europe. She was praised by writers from Pushkin to Emerson or Leopardi. Major political works appeared posthumously: the *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la Révolution française* in 1818, and the *Dix années d'exil* in 1821.

Where to begin? Generally, for Staël scholarship, the answer is with *Corinne ou l'Italie*. Let us begin instead with her first published fiction, *Zulma*, which appeared in 1794, under the Terror; and certainly, the opening to this tale is striking. Our narrator, who seems to be European, is "prisonnier chez les sauvages," rather as Candide and Cacambo were prisoners of the *Oreillons* in Voltaire's *Candide*. But there the resemblance ends: for these South American "savages," in their customs, are as worthy of emulation as Voltaire's citizens of El Dorado in that same book, or as the Peruvians in Graffigny's *Lettres péruviennes*. Staël uses the death penalty to illustrate her thesis, somewhat fittingly, as the Terror unfolded over France: on the banks of the Orinoco, amid these apparent savages, the death penalty requires that seven judges isolate for a week after their verdict before confirming it. The relativity of laws is precisely Montesquieu's subject in *De l'esprit des lois* (1748); but this investigation into crime and punishment is more topical, reflecting notably Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764)—*On Crimes and Punishments*—with its reasoned rejection both of the death penalty and of torture, a detail Staël remarks on in her *Considérations* of 1818. As Staël's judge here notes, "Cette responsabilité funeste est un préjugé qui nous est commun avec

vous”—and indeed, the death penalty was not abolished in France for another 200 years. Who, one may ask, are the savages then, in 1794? For Staël invites that question. It is worth remembering that *Zulma* was originally conceived as an illustrative chapter in Staël's *De l'influence des passions* (1796), with its tight focus on the Revolution and the Terror that followed. Thus, the end of this first paragraph, in which the narrator is astonished at the crowd's silence, stands in direct contrast to the Parisian *sans-culotte* crowd at the guillotine, key player in the Terror, as Staël and her audience both knew.

A short note on *Zulma* herself, the defendant in this American trial. She has killed her unfaithful lover—one thinks of Staël's torrent of unanswered letters to her beloved Narbonne—and awaits her death unflinchingly, asking only to be allowed to address the crowd and the judges before judgement. She does this leaning on her offending bow. *Zulma* is not Staël's only non-European heroine; *Mirza*, published the following year, features an African heroine thirty years before Duras's *Ourika* (1823). All three heroines are given extensive voice, they are not voiceless. In Staël's case, each speaks to the assembled nation: theirs is a *public* voice, like that of Staël's *Corinne* in 1807, not a private one. Staël is closer to Gouges here than she might herself have suspected.

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