

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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23. Hortense Thérèse Sigismonde Sophie Alexandrine Allart de Méritens 7 September 1801–28 February 1879



Fig. 23. Hortense Thérèse Sigismonde Sophie Alexandrine Allart de Méritens, by S. Allart. Photo by BeatrixBelibaste (2022). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/35/Hortense_Allart_by_Sophie_Allart.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Lettres sur les ouvrages de Madame de Staël

Lettre I.
Des lettres sur Rousseau.

Le premier ouvrage connu de madame de Staël a été l'expression de son enthousiasme pour celui de nos grands écrivains avec lequel elle devait avoir le plus de rapport.

C'est un beau début pour le talent que l'examen d'un sublime génie. Madame de Staël, élevant un monument à la gloire de J.-J. Rousseau, put

déjà faire prévoir quel serait son talent, si l'on peut jamais prévoir ce qui doit étonner.

Nous n'examinerons pas ces cinq lettres en détail. Nous ne dirons pas les endroits où il nous semble qu'elle a trop ou pas assez loué ; nous ne ferons point remarquer la justesse de certains aperçus, et la profondeur et la force naissantes de ses pensées. Nous jetterons sur ces lettres un coup d'œil général.

Madame de Staël s'élève en parlant de l'auteur qui a le mieux su toucher son cœur, ébranler son âme, de celui avec lequel elle s'est trouvée le plus de sympathie.

On ne l'accusera pas d'exagération. Elle se contient dans son admiration ; elle veut être sage dans son enchantement. Quoiqu'elle avoue que plusieurs des idées de Rousseau sont fausses, elle le reconnaît, à tout prendre, l'homme de la nature et de la vérité. Elle a dit beaucoup sur lui ; il ne nous semble pas cependant qu'elle ait tout dit. En examinant ses plus forts écrits, elle n'a point parlé d'un des grands effets qu'ils produisent. Elle a loué l'Emile, mais elle n'a pas fait l'observation que cet ouvrage révèle, pour ainsi dire, les droits de l'homme. On se sent fier et libre après l'avoir lu ; il donne le sentiment de la grandeur et de la dignité humaines ; c'est une école de liberté autant que de morale.

Remontant toujours aux sources des idées de l'homme, pour trouver la vérité dans sa pureté première, Rousseau a ramené l'humanité à la liberté naturelle comme aux sentiments primitifs. Donnant toujours les théories abstraites, travaillant d'une manière spéculative, il a fait le Discours sur l'inégalité des conditions, il a fait le Contrat social ; génie universel et profond, il a jeté les bases immuables, il a révélé les principes éternels, laissant à d'autres le soin de construire sur ces bases et de faire l'application de ces principes. Il vous fait l'homme de l'indépendance en vous faisant l'homme de la nature. Et en effet l'espèce humaine, dans son innocence, est à la fois libre et sensible. La perfection de la société, c'est d'avoir consacré ces vertus de fierté et de sentiment que la nature indique. Dans ses progrès elle s'écarte quelquefois de la vraie route. Les hommes qui, comme Rousseau, viennent, lorsqu'elle est déjà avancée dans sa course, lui rappeler ses devoirs et la raffermir dans la vérité, sont certainement les plus utiles. On a attribué la révolution française à une foule de causes. Sans doute la masse des années et des événements amena cette grande secousse ; mais, parmi les progrès de la raison humaine qui l'ont produite, Rousseau a fait faire les plus forts, les plus hardis et les plus rapides.¹

1 Hortense Allart, *Lettres sur les ouvrages de Madame de Staël* (Paris: Bossange, 1824), pp. i-ii, 1-4.

Hortense Thérèse Sigismonde Sophie Alexandrine Allart de Méritens [Prudence de Saman L'Esbatx] was born in Milan and died in Montlhéry, losing her father, Nicolas Jean Gabriel Allart, at the age of sixteen and her mother, Marie Françoise Gay, translator of Ann Radcliffe, four years later. She was also the niece of Sophie Gay and cousin of Delphine de Girardin, both featured here. Her father died penniless in 1817. The young Allart wrote to Henri Galien Bertrand in 1819, volunteering to travel to Saint Helena to nurse the ex-emperor, Napoleon. Bertrand later offered her a job as a governess; she worked for him for two years and was there impregnated and abandoned by the Portuguese Comte de Sampayo. In 1824, amid this liaison, she published her letters on Staël.

Translation: The first known work of Mme de Staël was the expression of her enthusiasm for the one of our great writers with whom she must have had the greatest connection.

It is a fine start to talent to examine a sublime genius. Mme de Staël, elevating a monument to the glory of J.-J. Rousseau, could already reveal what was to be her talent, if one can ever reveal early that which is to astonish.

We will not examine these five letters in detail. We will not name the places where it seems to us she has too much or too little praised; we will not point out the justice of certain insights, and the growing depth and force of her thoughts. We will offer a general overview of these letters.

Mme de Staël lifts herself in speaking of the author who best knew how to touch her heart, overthrow her soul, him with whom she felt the most sympathy.

One will not accuse her of exaggeration. She is contained in her admiration; she wishes to be wise in her enchantment. Although she acknowledges that several ideas of Rousseau's are false, she recognizes him, all things considered, as the man of nature and truth. She spoke about him at length; it does not however seem to us that she said everything. In examining his strongest writings, she did not speak of one of the great effects they produce. She praised *Émile* but did not make the observation that this work reveals, so to speak, the rights of man. One feels proud and free after having read it; it gives the sentiment of human grandeur and dignity; it is a school of freedom as much as of ethics.

Going back always to the sources of man's ideas, to find the truth in its first purity, Rousseau brought humanity to natural liberty as to first or primitive feelings. Always giving abstract theories, working in a speculative fashion, he wrote the *Discourse on the Inequality of Conditions*, he wrote the *Social Contract*; a universal and profound genius, he laid down immovable bases, he revealed eternal principles, leaving to others the care to construct on these bases and to make the application of these principles. He gives you independent man in giving you natural man. And in fact the human species, in its innocence, is both free and sensitive. The perfection of society is to have consecrated these virtues of pride and sentiment which nature indicates. In its progress, it sometimes loses sight of the true road. Men who, like Rousseau, come, when it is already advanced in its course, to remind it of its duties and strengthen it in its truths, are certainly the most useful. The French Revolution has been attributed to a host of causes. Doubtless the mass of years and of events brought on this great convulsion; but, among the advances in human reason which produced it, Rousseau made the strongest, the boldest and the most rapid.

Gertrude followed in 1828, under the name Hortense Allart de Thérèse, then books on history and politics. In 1832, she began a longstanding liaison with George Sand. Her autobiography on the topic was a *succès de scandale* in 1873. A believer in free love, Allart demanded an improvement in women's condition, participating in the *Gazette des femmes*. She also wrote on philosophy, in her *Novum organum ou sainteté philosophique* (1857), and had liaisons with Chateaubriand, Bulwer-Lytton, Cavour, and Sainte-Beuve.² Between 1838 and 1879, she corresponded with Marie d'Agoult, also featured in this volume. In 1843, she married Napoléon Louis Frédéric Corneille de Méritens de Malvézie, an architect she left the following year. She is buried with her two sons in Bourg-la-Reine.

One work which seems to have escaped Staël scholars is Allart's 1824 *Lettres sur les ouvrages de Madame de Staël*. It was Allart's first major publication, at the age of twenty-three; almost exactly Staël's age when she published her own first major work, the *Lettres sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1788). As Allart writes, "C'est un beau début pour le talent que l'examen d'un sublime génie." The book is relatively long—144 pages—and contains a series of letters on Staël's major works, precisely Staël's own 1788 format. What are we to make of this? First, Staël had died in 1817, and her last major work, the *Dix années d'exil*, appeared with her complete works in 1821. The young Allart is not only topical; hers may be the first monograph devoted to Staël's complete works ever written. Second, Allart has embraced her youthful model's method: one of enthusiasm, which is not the same as blindness. Thus, she notes absences in the works she admires so readily: in the *Lettres sur Rousseau*, for instance, she writes, "il ne nous semble pas cependant qu'elle ait tout dit"—notably, the way that Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) reveals the rights of man. One feels, writes Allart in the masculine, "fier et libre après l'avoir lu."

This passage of Allart's is describing the same work of Rousseau's to which Genlis was responding in 1782, but it feels like we are in a different universe. Allart swims gladly in the sea of enthusiasm into which Genlis dips her toe. Allart's is undeniably a critical approach, though perhaps an uncommon one today; in 1824, year of the *Chambre retrouvée* with its crushing Ultra majority, this gushing Romantic praise for Staël

2 There is a book on the topic: André Billy, *Hortense et ses amants, Chateaubriand, Sainte-Beuve, etc.* (Paris: Flammarion, 1961).

and Rousseau together was cutting edge. Thus, Allart writes of the Revolution: “parmi les progrès de la raison humaine qui l’ont produite, Rousseau a fait faire les plus forts, les plus hardis et les plus rapides.” The work deserves some attention for that Romantic liberalism as well, in the allegedly ‘preromantic’ decade before 1830’s *bataille d’Hernani*.

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Allart, Hortense, *Lettres sur les ouvrages de Madame de Staël* (Paris: Bossange, 1824)

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Settimia (Bruxelles: Wahlen, 1836)

La Femme et la démocratie de nos temps (Paris: Delaunay et Pinard, 1836)

Histoire de la république de Florence (Paris: Delloye, 1843)

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Essai sur la religion intérieure (Paris: chez tous les libraires, 1864)

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