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'Daughter of th'Italian heaven!':
Madame de Staël's *Corinne* in England
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Madame de Staël's life and political interests are an important background to her writings. Her exile from France, her celebrated position as an enemy of Napoleon and, significantly, her interest in the dynamics of the artistic, cultural and political life of European countries (whether Germany, France, England or Italy), are all necessary keys to understanding the novel *Corinne*.

The action of *Corinne* is partly set during the winter of 1794-95 (slightly earlier than Napoleon's campaign of 1796), and continues four years later. Apart from relating a love story in the novel, Madame de Staël was also analysing and presenting to her French audience the life and culture of foreign nations – in this case contrasting England with Italy. This is a very important characteristic of her work as a whole, and she repeats the exercise very successfully and famously in a much more detailed and non-fictional form in her later work about the German nation, *De l'Allemagne* (1813). In both *Corinne* and *De l'Allemagne*, the national characters under scrutiny are dissected in long disquisitions on art, religion, architecture, traditions, music, and geography.

In 1813, Mme. de Staël visited England (her second and most important visit to the country), where she spent almost a year. She was by then a famous and celebrated figure, both as a result of her literary achievements and also due to her opposition to Napoleon - which automatically endowed her with the status of a political ally of England. Her political prestige certainly played an important role in her extremely positive reception by the British public.

She had numerous famous friends in England, and met a large number of the important literary and intellectual figures of the day, including Henry Crabb Robinson, Sir James Mackintosh, Byron (with whom she developed an unusual friendship which included both mutual admiration and much mutual criticism), Maria Edgeworth, Robert Southey, and many others.

It was not only her works, particularly *De l'Allemagne*, which brought her lasting fame in England, but also her life – she was quite a celebrity and her activities and travels were closely watched and gossiped about until her death in 1817 and beyond.

A great many aspects of the life of the protagonist Corinne – her personality, love intrigues, interests, and cultural background – were taken by readers to reflect the personal life of the book's author – to the extent that Corinne almost seems to serve as a fictional double of Mme. de Staël herself. As in the case of her acquaintance and friend Lord Byron and his *Childe Harold* (1812), Mme. de Staël's own life was largely associated with that of her fictional heroine. In the book itself, a significant number of the 'travelogue' episodes are based upon the author's personal experiences when travelling in Italy – whether meeting the Arcadian school of poets, ascending Vesuvius outside Naples, or visiting the sites of Rome – so an autobiographical interpretation is in part justified, and certainly sheds interesting light on the narrative sequence of the novel.

Mme. de Staël's earlier novel *Delphine* (1802) had not been well received in England. Although fairly widely read, it was dismissed by the respectable reading public as immoral. *Corinne*, on the other hand, achieved lasting popularity among the nineteenth-century British reading public. It was translated into English immediately after its publication in 1807, and went through no less than forty editions between the years 1807 and 1872 (apart from the 32 French editions between the years 1830 and 1870 alone).

In the year of its publication, *Corinne* was reviewed favourably in England in both the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Monthly Review*. The *Edinburgh* described it as 'lively,' 'picturesque' and 'original' while finding its depiction of the English character of Lord Nelvil to be somewhat exaggerated and harsh – yet, at the same time, displaying evidence that she had observed the character and manners of the English with notable sensitivity:

Madame de Staël, as appears from almost every part of this work, has studied with great care the character and manners of the English. She has done so also with singular success; and, though all her notions may not be perfectly correct, we believe that hardly any foreigner, who has not resided long in England, ever approached so near to the truth [...] though perhaps with a little of that involuntary exaggeration that mere contrast can hardly fail to produce. The coldness of manner in the English ladies, their reserve and want of animation, are painted too harshly, even though a large share of understanding and accomplishment is allowed them. [...] Much is said through the whole book, of the effect of climate; and the sun of Italy is never mentioned but with [...] enthusiasm [...].¹

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, XI (1807-8), 192f.

The reviewer in the *Edinburgh* recognised that 'it is Great Britain and Italy, the extremes of civilised Europe, that are personified and contrasted in the hero and heroine of this romantic tale.'² This interpretation has been taken up by Ellen Moers, who contrasts Corinne with her half-sister Lucile in terms of northern and southern European culture: 'Corinne represents the passionate exuberance of dark-haired Latin culture, and Lucile, her blond rival, stands for the subdued and inhibited sensibility of Nordic culture, along with all that is implied by the home, the wife, and the private virtues in English society.'³ According to Moers, the love affair between Oswald and Corinne is primarily concerned with the meeting and contradictions of two cultures: '[...] what Madame de Staël puts at issue is no simple *amour*, but the total transformation of cultural attitudes (and perhaps of civilisation itself) by the romance of the woman of genius.'⁴

Corinne therefore functions on one level as an allegory of Italy. The heroine represents the imaginative and emotional side of Italy – and is repeatedly contrasted with the male protagonist, Lord Nelvil, who does not only illustrate the stereotyped, more reserved British character but also represents the British political institutions, liberalism and democracy which Mme. de Staël admired immensely. Corinne herself is, importantly, also half-English, the daughter of an English father and an Italian mother. Yet Italy remains Corinne's country of choice.

The link between Corinne and Italy is clearly pointed out in the full title of the novel, *Corinne, or Italy*, and also early on in the narrative when we first meet Corinne improvising to the public on the Capitol hill in Rome. Here she is described to Oswald by Prince Castel-Forte (who immediately after this statement is declared by Mme. de Staël to be a man who speaks 'with unusual wisdom') as an image of Italy itself:

Look at her, she is the image of our beautiful Italy; [...] we delight in gazing at her as an admirable product of our climate and of our arts, as an offshoot of the past, as a harbinger of the future.⁵

The novel therefore employs the idea of travel and clashing of cultures to display the differences between the mind-sets of the north and

2 *Ibid.*, 183.

3 E. Moers, *Literary Women* (1963 repr. London, 1978), 175.

4 *Ibid.*, 181.

5 Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy* (1807 repr. Oxford, 1998), 27.

the south of Europe – cultural prejudice is one of the pivotal themes of the book. The act of travelling from one country to another, of witnessing at first hand the life, ideas and landscape of another culture, is presented as a means of liberating the mind, of deepening and also educating the emotions, and in particular, of escaping from cold, rational and reserved northern habits of mind.

Importance is placed on the effect of climate upon national character. For example, in Chapter 5 entitled ‘Tombs, Churches and Palaces,’ Oswald remarks that these sombre monuments are well-suited to his melancholy disposition, and goes on to remark to Corinne that the Italian character is much more light-hearted and carefree, associating this quality with the weather: ‘In your happy country sombre thoughts disappear in the brightness of the skies,’⁶ he announces to her gravely, while assuring her that his own life has been shattered by sorrow right to the depths of his soul and that the weather therefore can have no cheering effect on him personally although it may do so on others.

The link between Corinne and Italian culture is emphasised in the numerous detailed sections describing Italy throughout the book – the novel almost functions as a guidebook to the historical and artistic sites and achievements of Italy. It was, in fact, later used as such by educated English travellers throughout the nineteenth century. Frances Trollope, for example, relied on information and attitudes to Italy obtained from *Corinne*, and in her novel *The Robertses on their Travels* (1846), the young girl, Bertha, goes sightseeing and uses *Corinne* as her guide, retracing the steps of Corinne and Lord Nelvil:

Of all the books treating of Rome and its marvels, the ‘Corinne’ of Madame de Staël had made the deepest impression. It was in fact her handbook, her *vade mecum*, her delight [...]. To see all that Corinne saw, was the first wish of her heart, and the first resolve of her bold young spirit.⁷

The importance of *Corinne* as an introduction to Italy extended right up to the end of the nineteenth century – as late as 1875, Henry James described his characters Mary Garland and Mrs. Hudson as reading *Corinne* in preparation for their trip to Italy, in his novel *Roderick Hudson*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷ Frances Trollope, *The Robertses on their Travels* (London, 1846), Vol. III, 70.

Corinne reflects the love for Italy which characterised so many of the major works of Romanticism, including Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. It did not, however, simply function as a guide to the historical sites, but also as a model for the appropriate emotional response to Italy expected from an educated and sensitive traveller of the period.

While travellers of the neo-classical period and the traditional 'Grand Tour' took it for granted and indeed fully expected to share the sights, responses, contacts and attitudes of their predecessors when travelling through Italy – to the point that full appreciation of the country would only be complete when they had done and seen exactly what everyone else before them had done and seen – Romantic and post-Romantic travellers were overcome with the new urge that everything they did was somehow 'belated' and not original enough. They preferred to get away from the traditional attitudes and routes, and were proud of displaying a disdainful attitude to imitation and stock responses to Italy.

In this context, Mme. de Staël's *Corinne* provided a new example to follow – the intense emotions evoked by the Italian scenery and experienced by Lord Nelvil and Corinne were imitated by readers of the novel, who applied them to their own experiences of the country. The novel served as an illustration of how to appreciate the traditional Italian sites, while at the same time providing the necessary cultural knowledge combined with the suggestion of a sought-after and desirable original and individual response:

Corinne provided 'travellers' with a script for being original, in the sense of obeying one's unique inner dictates; it suggested that the goal could be accomplished by anyone properly sensitive.⁸

Apart from the travelling English public, Mme. de Staël's *Corinne* also functioned as an important role model for many young women in Victorian England with literary ambitions. The exotic and new figure of the female artist performing in public – the *improvisatrice* – opened up their minds to the possibility that women were capable of participating in the public sphere of the world of literature and the arts. Corinne, together with her poetic ancestor Sappho, embodied the literary aspirations of the Victorian woman. Although both paid the price of sacrificing happiness in love for

⁸ J. Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and Ways to Culture, 1800-1918* (Oxford, 1993), 111.

poetry, the images of Corinne and Sappho gave the hope of success and recognition to budding female poets at the time.

Mme. de Staël's heroine presented a contrast between the possibilities available to English women – represented in the novel as demure, passive and servile – and those available to an imaginary, foreign, exotic woman, who was free to indulge in art and love. In the novel, Corinne appears to allegorise the Italian landscape itself, utilised as a metaphor for artistic and sexual freedom. In the words of Ellen Moers, 'Corinne served as a children's book for a special kind of nineteenth-century child: girls of more than ordinary intelligence or talent, and rising ambition to fame beyond the domestic circle. Reading *Corinne* made an event of their youth – for some, a catalyst to their own literary development [...].'⁹

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is based, to a large extent, on Mme. de Staël's *Corinne*. When only twenty-six years old, Barrett Browning proclaimed that *Corinne* was 'an immortal book, and deserves to be read three score and ten times – that is once every year in the age of man.' Barrett Browning admired not only De Staël's heroine, but also the novel itself. In a letter of 1842 to her friend Miss Mitford, she praised the passion and sensibility of Mme. de Staël's writing style:

There are occasional florid passages, to be sure, in Mme. de Staël [...]. The French critics cried aloud I know, and spared not, against her want of classicism and departure from the models. Let them cry! Who can be insensible to the warmth of colouring, the masterdom of outline [...] the eloquent weeping and laughter of her style. It is eloquence [...].¹⁰

The popular Victorian poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon's celebrated *L'Improvisatrice* (1824) and 'The History of the Lyre' both employ the figure of the *improvisatrice* as protagonist. Eulalie in 'The History of the Lyre' laments that she has not followed the accepted domestic role set for women and instead lives a different sort of life as a performer. She is isolated, almost an outcast or 'castaway.' A woman performing in public in the early part of the nineteenth-century was socially unacceptable, and could well be likened to a prostitute. L.E.L.'s Eulalie has not become a wife or mother; she is not a home-maker and has,

⁹ Moers, 174.

¹⁰ B. Miller (ed.) *Elizabeth Barrett to Miss Mitford* (London, 1954), 159.

therefore, foregone the Victorian woman's supreme fulfilment. She is a person who lives in the public sphere rather than in a private or domestic one, and is recognised as such by those around her. Her public role diminishes her position and respectability within the community.

One important aspect of the Italian setting in the book is the advantage that in contrast to the socially strict, moralistic, conventional and generally intolerant behaviour prevalent in nineteenth-century middle class England, Italy's sunny climate is presented as a catalyst for tolerance of social lapses, relaxed social decorum and flexible attitudes. This enables Corinne herself to behave much more freely than her English equivalent Lucile – and also to be judged less harshly by Lord Nelvil: 'In England he would have judged such a woman very severely, but he did not apply any of the social conventions to Italy. Corinne's coronation aroused in him the kind of expectant interest he would have taken in one of Ariosto's tales.'¹¹

Apart from this freedom afforded by the climates and conventions of differing nations, Mme. de Staël also frees Corinne from restricting social norms by playing with the romantic notion of the artist as a person of heightened sensibility set aside to some degree from the community. According to this viewpoint, artists almost belonged to a social category of their own, subject to different criteria and able to deal with the usual family ties and obligations in unconventional ways.

Yet the flipside of this idea is that the artist was also doomed to unhappiness – whether due to an inevitable hand of fate linking genius with misfortune, or because the artist was destined to suffer because of heightened sensitivity and susceptibility to problems - the idea was that a person of genius was doomed to an unhappy life.

The poet Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) illustrates this idea of the suffering woman artist in her poem 'Corinne at the Capitol' (1817), written as a response to Mme. de Staël's novel. The scene is that during which Corinne is crowned with a laurel wreath on the Capitol hill in Rome in the early part of the book. Hemans' poem describes the happiness of a wife as being far greater than that of the celebrated Corinne:

Happier, happier far than thou,
With the laurel on thy brow,
She that makes the humblest hearth
Lovely but to one on earth!

¹¹ *Corinne*, 22.

A woman artist – inspired by the image of Sappho – was by definition straying from her traditional role as a silent, servile, repressed and modest individual – and was to expect pain, suffering and betrayal as a result. Corinne's suffering and unhappiness in love was received as a just and fitting retribution for her unconventional lifestyle dedicated to art and display.

It is important to remember that a happy ending for a woman like Corinne, who lived an unconventional and rebellious life, would have been inconceivable for the period during which the novel was written. Corinne could not, like a man, dedicate her life to her career and renounce love completely – this would have been unthinkable to the contemporary audience. Her career in itself prevented her from being happy in love according to the conventions of the day.

Yet, even in spite of the unhappy conclusions and miserable fate which awaited young women keen to try their hands at a career in the arts, many of them idolised Corinne and were very influenced by the book. We even find Byron himself telling a correspondent that he had reprimanded Mme. de Staël for presenting such a dangerous and bad example to impressionable young women:

I continued saying, how dangerous it was to inculcate the belief that genius, talent, acquirements, and accomplishments, such as Corinne was represented to possess, could not preserve a woman from being a victim to an unrequited passion, and that reason, absence, and female pride were unavailing. I told her that 'Corinne' would be considered, if not cited, as an excuse for violent passions, by all young ladies with imaginations exalted, and that she had much to answer for.¹²

This concern was not unfounded and its consequences are reflected throughout the century's literature – in Geraldine Jewsbury's popular novel, *The Half-Sisters* (1848), for example, one of the female protagonists is entranced and very influenced by Mme. de Staël's novel.

In 1865, Christina Rossetti wrote the poem 'Italia, io ti saluto!' inspired by a recent trip to Italy. This Italian title to a poem written in English is taken from Mme. de Staël's *Corinne*. When Oswald first sees Corinne she is in the process of being crowned on the Capitol hill in Rome, where she is requested to produce an *ex tempore* poem for her

¹² M. Gardiner Blessington, *Conversations of Lord Byron* (Princeton, 1969), 26.

audience. She chooses to improvise a poem on the subject of Italy, and the English translation of the poem begins, 'Italy, empire of the sun; mistress of the world; Italy, cradle of literature; I salute you!'¹³ For a brief moment, Christina adopts the *persona* of the *improvisatrice*, likewise writing an ode to Italy, using the same opening words as Corinne.

As a young girl, Christina was very influenced by the popular image of the *improvisatrice*, and was encouraged in this role by the example set by her father. Gabriele Rossetti (1783-1854) himself belonged to the last wave of poets of the *Italian Arcadian Academy*, originally established in Rome around the middle of the seventeenth century and eventually forming so-called 'colonies' all over Italy – with Gabriele Rossetti belonging to the Naples branch at the turn of the nineteenth century, some 150 years after the founding of the school.

Mme. de Staël was also received by the Arcadians in Rome, and attended several performances of poetry given by the famous *improvvisatore* Vincenzo Monti, who became her lifelong friend. In Rome, she attended an evening at the *Bosco Parrasio*, the main seat of the Arcadians, where she was asked to recite a poem. This, however, was not done spontaneously – in anticipation, she had brought a prepared poem with her – which was a great success with the company present.

Although Victorian women admired the figures of Sappho and Corinne, they also knew that improvisation was considered to be a 'feminine' kind of poetry in England because it was apparently easy and spontaneous. Felicia Hemans regarded what William Michael Rossetti described as the 'readiness approaching improvisation' with which her verse was written as a blemish rather than as something positive or 'feminine.' The idea of the female *improvisatrice* was encouraged by many Victorian male critics, as they preferred women to remain in a separate sphere as writers, supposedly relying on different methods of composition and inspiration, always close to nature and their own sensibilities 'rather than intruding upon the masculine domain of art and dabbling in intellectual pursuits.'¹⁴

Yet, in spite of the interest of female poets in *Corinne*, the novel was not conceived as a feminist work in any polemical sense. What

¹³ *Corinne*, 28.

¹⁴ G. Stephenson, 'Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice: the Construction of L.E.L.,' *Victorian Poetry*, 30 (1992), 1-17.

Mme. de Staël does instead is 'show that regional or national or what we call cultural values determine female destiny even more rigidly, even more inescapably than male.'¹⁵ As in Madame de Staël's other works, the focus of the novel is placed primarily on cultural and national values and characteristics.

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¹⁵ Moers, 207.