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"THERE IS ALWAYS A LITTLE COQUETRY": FRENCH WOMEN'S POLITICAL WRITINGS, 1789-1815

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ABSTRACT

The debate over women participating and benefitting from the Revolution and its aftermath remains contentious, particularly given the scarcity of political writings and primary sources documenting women's experiences. Thus, the question of whether women's rights evolved or relapsed during and after the Revolution persists. Despite the lack of sources, this paper examines the primary documents of two French women around the time of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era, namely Manon Roland and Germaine de Staël to elucidate how their intellectual contributions through penmanship, slowly redefined and challenged contemporary gender norms. Both Roland and Staël used their intellectual privileges to argue against the authoritarian and despotic regimes imposed on them by leaders Maximilien Robespierre, the Jacobin group, and Napoleon Bonaparte. Their writings, whether accidentally or purposefully incorporating gendered language enriched the discourse on gender and citizenship. With reading their excerpts, there comes the necessity to recognize and commend their act of speaking up to diversify the Revolutionary and Napoleonic narrative, in which they used to prove their participation and role of making France to what it is now, even if they played a miniscule part in shaping Revolutionary and Napoleonic discourse, and even if their names don't ring a bell.

Discipline: European History

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Third Estate, which was made up of everyone other than the clergy and nobility, later known as the National Assembly of the 1789 French Revolution, aimed to create financial equality, overthrow the arbitrary monarchy, and establish the French Republic.

Whether women benefited from the revolution remains an open question. For centuries, the Ancien Régime confined women to subordinate roles, shaped by expectations of virtue and domesticity. Prominent British writer Mary Wollstonecraft, famously critiqued this relationship, arguing that women were not inherently inferior but made so by systems that prized their submission. Women were not irrational by nature, only made out to be because they were denied political and educational rights.1 The revolutionary promise of universal rights[1] and equality exposed a contradiction, especially present post-revolution: how could a society that championed liberty for all deny that liberty to half its population post-revolution?

[1] Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 2.

While women did participate in significant revolutionary moments, their contributions were sometimes dismissed by conservatives, Enlightenment thinkers who viewed women as irrational (such as Rousseau), or revolutionary leaders who aimed to silence any dissent, even if it was minimal in nature[2]. While women in this administration were suppressed, it is crucial to recognize that leaders of the French Revolution, particularly during the Reign of Terror, resorted to executing and silencing the dissent of everyone, not only women through domestic espionage[3].

A revolution's broader goal is to dismantle oppressive structures and establish new forms of governance that reflect the people's will. As proposed in English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's social contract theory, people are willing to surrender certain rights in exchange for security, stability, and new freedoms under a social contract[4]. Following the era after the Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), a French military leader and emperor rose to prominence by seizing power in a coup d'état[5] in 1799 and crowning himself emperor in 1804. He expanded his empire through military conquests across Europe[6].

In his Napoleonic Code, he acknowledged the principles of civil liberty, the secular nature of the state, and equality before the law, but institutionalized women's subordination by legally subjugating women to husbands and brothers in terms of marriage or property rights, reaffirming the patriarchy as the foundation of society. Napoleon's France reversed the limited gains women had achieved and reinforced an explicitly male vision of citizenship. In the Napoleonic era, it is thus evident that liberty was prevalent for men. They had equality under the law, religious freedom, property rights, and other privileges. As for women, the equality didn't apply to them. This trade-off between lost liberties and new forms of it helped ensure social stability in the following decades, hypothesized by Thomas Hobbes, delaying further upheavals until 1848, when inequality again came to the forefront of a crumbling nation state.

This paper explores how the roles and rights of women evolved or regressed from the Revolutionary era to the Napoleonic period. By providing analysis of the writings of Anna Louise-Germaine Necker (Germaine de Staël) and Marie-Jeanne Phlipon (Manon Roland), the analysis pays close attention to language, tone, and political context, examining how both women constructed authority in a political environment that denied them formal power.

Ultimately, the close reading of two female authors works to bridge the gap between abstract political theory of republicanism, liberty, equality, versus the reality of females.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

[2] "Women in the Revolution," Library of Congress. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/women-in-the- french-revolution.

[3] Garcia de la Huerta, C. "Securing the Revolutionary State: The Development of French Counter- Espionage, 1791-1794." PhD diss. (Kingston University, 2020), 1. https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/48858/1/Garcia%20de%20la%20Huerta-C-48858.pdf.

[4] Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, or The Matter, Form, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil (London: Printed for Andrew Crooke, 1651), 79-88.

[5] A coup d'état, or coup, is a forceful and sudden overthrow of government, usually done by military leaders.

[6] "Napoleon Bonaparte," A&E Television Networks. Accessed 14 May 2025. https://www.history.com/articles/napoleon.

Scholars have long scrutinized the paradox at the heart of the Revolution and the aftermath. They have also highlighted women's roles in both violent and overtly political action, as well as more subdued intellectual contributions. As Napoleon grew increasingly despotic, women who spoke out against his reign, such as Germaine de Staël were exiled from France to limit political dissent.

Women in the French Revolution participated in the March to Versailles, urging the return of the royals to Paris[7]. They formed provincial Jacobin clubs and advocated for equal rights[8]. Siobhan Mcllvanney argues that women began to involve themselves intellectually and politically in spheres that welcomed only men through journals, an explicit and loud method of advocacy[9]. Alternatively, Noah C. Shusterman has argued that women were silent workers in the Revolution. They offered a significant yet often overlooked role in supporting Maximilien Robespierre's rise to success as a despot in the French Revolution. Radicals even wore necklaces of Robespierre to display their support while market women prayed for him when he was ill[10]. This general support from a large demographic pool contributed to his political success.

However, the active participation of women in the Revolution far exceeded their proper roles. The influence of women has been undermined in historical narratives; it is thus important to re- establish their role in shaping revolutionary politics.

Some scholars have chosen to focus on individual actors to examine the role of women. Lindsay A.H. Parker's Family and Feminism in the French Revolution: The Case of Rosalie Ducroallay Jullien, delves into the life of a woman of the Parisian bourgeoisie[11], Rosalie Ducroallay Jullien, as well as gender roles and family life through Jullien's detailed letters. Jullien discussed how divorce for women was finally decreed and jokingly, she could finally initiate a divorce with her husband[12]. Case studies that analyze female's journal entries are important because, unlike their male counterparts, women were rarely allowed to leave behind extensive legal or political treatises. Roland's, for example, were burned, forcing her to rewrite them in the final months of imprisonment.[13] The absence of writing is not due to a lack of thought. It is rather the result of centuries of suppression in all realms that limited women's access to education, civic participation, and public authorship. The scarcity of female-authored legal documents or political texts is therefore not indicative of apathy or irrelevance. Works like those of Madame Roland and Germaine de Staël provide a counter-narrative to the dominant

[7] Lori J. Marso, "Defending the Queen: Wollstonecraft and Stael on the Politics of Sensibility and Feminine Difference." The Eighteenth Century 43, no. 1. (2002): 43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41468201.

[8] R.B. Rose. "Feminism, Women and the French Revolution." Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques, 21, no. 1. (1995): 187. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299020.

[9] Siohbhan Mcllvanney, "Figurations of the Feminine in the Early French Women's Press, 1758–1848." Liverpool University Press, (2019): 21-22. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqr1bqv.5.

[10] Noah C. Shusterman, "All of His Power lies in the Distaff: Robespierre, Women, and the French Revolution." Past and Present, no. 223. (May 2014): 131. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24545154.

[11] Bourgeoisie: In French Revolution terms, a member of the bourgeoisie was a member of the middle- class. Later, Karl Marx would use this to describe the ruling and oppressive class that exploited the proletariat class.

[12] Lindsay A. H. Parker, "Family and Feminism in the French Revolution: The Case of Rosalie Ducrollay Jullien." Journal of Women's History, 24, no. 3. (2012): 39, 51. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/485077/summary.

[13] "Manon Roland," Library of Congress. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/women-in-the-french-revolution/manon-roland.

male voices of the period. For example, historian Carl Becker reveals how the writings of Madame Roland manifest the restrictions of the Revolutionary period. The Revolution, particularly in its early phases, promoted the idea of motherhood. Women were essential to the success of the new republic, but through their domestic function: raising virtuous, patriotic citizens for the future of France.[14] While seemingly empowering, it also reinforced the notion that women's primary contribution to the state was through their reproductive and nurturing duties.

Similarly, the prevailing Eurocentric belief at the time was that males were closely associated to sense and rationality. Sensibility: the ability to empathize, was associated with females because women were taught to be feminine, subconsciously forcing them into subservient roles.[15] Their sensibility and ability to appeal to emotion burgeoned into the common perception that women were unfit for serious political thought.[16] Becker analyzed how Roland transcended this ideal. She was both a devoted wife and a politically engaged intellectual.

Roland, specifically, played a domestic role, when she only supported, as a background figure in her husband's political career. Perhaps the most interesting is Max Nelson's dissection of Roland's claim. Nelson states that Roland simply found a certain aesthetic satisfaction in the act of living up to a demanding ideal due to the belief in the importance of sexual purity for a woman's reputation.[17] She used the idea of feminine virtue shrewdly, to gain acceptance and influence because society valued female chastity. She even framed this "submission" as a source of voluptuous charm, where she uses her reputation as a virtuous wife to gain access to salons as a salonnière.[18]

To move beyond theoretical interpretations, it is critical to engage directly with the writings of women. Reading directly from the women of the period provides a deeper understanding of how women subtly redefined their roles during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era.

Manon Roland

Marie-Jeanne "Manon/Madame" Roland de la Platiere (Marie-Jeanne Philpon), the daughter of an engraver, was born on March 1754 in Paris, France. Growing up in a bourgeois (middle-class) household, Roland received an unusually rigorous education for a woman of her time. She was an avid enthusiast of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Emilie for its explicit democratic ideals, as well as other 17th-18th century Enlightenment thinkers, reflected in her role as a salonnière. She married Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, a government official, in 1780. The couple settled in Lyon; however, with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, they moved to

[14] Carl Becker, "The Memoirs and Letters of Madame Roland. " The American Historical Review 33, no. 4. (July 1928): 28. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1838371?seq=1.

[15] Marso, "Defending the Queen," 44-45.

[16] Becker, "The Memoirs and Letters of Madame Roland," 1,5.

[17] Max Nelson. "Unseen, Even of Herself." The Paris Review." November 17, 2015. Accessed April 2, 2025. https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/11/17/unseen-even-of-herself/.

[18] Salonnière: a woman who hosts and organizes a salon. A gathering of intellectuals, artists, and political figures in a private setting. These salons were popular in 17th- and 18th-century France and served as important venues for discussion, debate, and the exchange of ideas and played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual and cultural landscape by fostering conversations and networking among influential thinkers and creators.

Paris, where Manon played a crucial role in her husband's political life. When he was appointed Minister of the Interior under King Louis XVI in March 1792, she authored the protest letter from Jean-Marie Roland to the king, which was a precursor in the king's demission and a turning point in French history; a constitutional monarchy was established. The protest letter ultimately led to her husband's defenestration from the ministry on June 13, 1792. Mme. Roland's intense animosity was directed at Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre, who overshadowed her husband on the provisional executive council established after the monarchy's downfall on August 10, 1792. By persuading her husband to denounce Robespierre and Danton before the National Convention, she succeeded in alienating Danton from the Girondins - a moderate republican group. Amidst the reign of terror, the political tide turned against the moderate Girondins, foreshadowing Roland's arrest in the Abbey Prison and St. Pelaige, where she was accused of treason. During her five months in prison, she dedicated her time to writing An Appeal to Impartial Posterity while awaiting execution.

Madame Roland's An Appeal to Impartial Posterity was a diary and, in many ways, a political manifesto. Roland frequently framed her contributions to align with the era's expectations of feminine virtue, presenting herself as a protector of the Revolution. Yet, scholars have often characterized Roland as a tragic figure, a martyr to the Revolution, whose downfall epitomized the precarious position of politically engaged women.[19] Roland's An Appeal to Impartial Posterity does more than reaffirm scholarly interpretations of her. It shows how she was acutely aware of the gendered limitations of France and thus, schemed to work within, and subtly, against these constraints to assert her intellectual and political voice.

Madame Roland: Republicanism and Beliefs

As the Revolution devolved into chaos and authoritarianism, particularly under Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre, Roland grew increasingly critical of those who had seized control of the movement. In the following section of An Appeal to Impartial Posterity, Roland exposes the failures of the Revolution's political leaders.

> "In vain did I insist on admission; till at length it came into my mind to employ such language as a bigotted Robesperian would have held. 'Why, citizens,' said I, 'in this day of salvation for our country, and in the midst of the traitors, from whom we have so much to fear, you do not know then of what importance some notes may be which I wish to transmit to the president."[20]

Roland begins by calling Robespierre a bigot, an overly religious individual in the period being. Roland is not referring to how Robespierre would incorporate religion with his ruling as he was actually against religion, developing his cult of reason. He asked citizens to worship reason, not God. Thus, Roland is referring to the act of idolatry, people who blindly follow Robespierre and the Convention, and worship them like a God. The flaws in assimilating to Robespierre's

[19] Nelson, "Unseen, Even of Herself."

[20] Marie-Jeanne Roland, An appeal to impartial posterity / by Madame Roland, wife of the minister of the Interior; or, A collection of tracts written by her during her confinement in the prisons of the Abbey, and St. Pélagie, in Paris; translated from the French original; published for the benefit of her only daughter, deprived of the fortune of her parents by sequestration, vol.1. (New-York: Printed by Robert Wilson, for A. Van Hook, proprietor of the reading- room, 1798), retrieved from the University of Michigan Digital Collections, 19.

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tract to gain admission to a meeting reaffirms Robespierre's values of accepting only those who act and think like him. This is physically manifested through Robespierre's abundant use of the guillotine during the Reign of Terror, killing "unvirtuous" individuals. Roland addresses the readers as citizens, which was used to address people in the Revolution, displaying the emerging nationalist sentiment as she aligns herself with the values and priorities of the Revolution.

She wrote "that fury, glutted by my destruction, would be less violent against [Jean- Marie] Roland [her husband],"[21] indicating her awareness of the gendered nature of power and persecution during the Revolution. By positioning herself as a sacrificial figure, she reinforces the notion of female sensibility. Her sacrifice is also political, rooted in her belief that her husband's survival and reinstatement in government would ensure the continued progress of the French Republic. Roland's willingness to sacrifice herself for Jean-Marie Roland reflects the expectation and her inherent belief that women's political engagement should be mediated through males. While she was involved in shaping revolutionary ideals and engaging with Girondin leaders, her intellectual labor was often overshadowed by her husband's professional role. She believed that if Jean-Marie Roland were "saved from this crisis, [he] might still tender great services to the public in other parts of France,"[22] a statement that reveals internalization of the era's gendered hierarchy. To some extent, Roland accepted the idea that her influence should be channeled through her husband. However, her writings suggest that this acceptance was not passivity, but instead, pragmatism. She saw the Revolution as a means of national renewal and firmly believed that France's success required competent, virtuous leaders, like her husband. In another excerpt, Roland says:

> "Robespierre, with his usual sneer, and biting his nails, asked what was a republic? The plan of a paper entitled the Republican, of which two numbers only were published, was then devised."[23]

This passage is as much of a political critique as it is an attack on Robespierre's character. Portraying him as physically undisciplined: sneering and biting his nails, strips him of the dignity and composure expected of a virtuous revolutionary leader, subtly feminizing him in a way that undermines his authority. Roland's implies that Robespierre is unfit for leadership, lacking both the intellectual and moral courage required to guide the Republic. She recounts his question, "What was a republic?" which suggests that he, one of the most powerful men in France, did not understand the foundational principles of the government he sought to control.

This moment of skepticism and uncertainty juxtaposed with her conviction in republicanism. Roland believed that Robespierre was an opportunist for power rather than a true believer in liberty. Her disdain for him was ideological, because she saw in him the embodiment of the Revolution's betrayal of its ideals. Roland's chagrin with the Revolution extends beyond individuals to encompass the very fate of France itself. In another passage, she writes:

[21] Ibid, 27.
[22] Ibid, 27.
[23] Ibid, 69.

> "My heart bleeds for my country; and I regret my mistake in supposing it qualified for liberty and happiness: but life I appreciate at its due value; I never feared aught but guilt; and injustice and death."[24]

Roland's tone shifts to being mournful. Her patriotism is evident as her "heart bleeds" for France, a country she once believed capable of self-governance and republicanism. Her main incentive was turning France constitutional, not causing outbreaks of havoc, therefore, she regrets at having misjudged its readiness for liberty, which reflects a broader anxiety among revolutionary thinkers who had hoped to mold France into a republic of reason and civic responsibility, only to see it engulfed by violence, factionalism, and despotism. This statement is particularly interesting given Roland's commitment to the Revolution in its early years. The phrase "I regret my mistake in supposing it qualified for liberty" suggests a painful realization that the people may not have been prepared for the responsibility of self-rule.

Despite her disappointment, Roland does not succumb to despair. Her assertion that she "never feared aught but guilt; and injustice and death" restates her integrity. Unlike Robespierre, whom she portrays as insecure and hypocritical, Roland remains resolute in her principles, willing to face execution rather than compromise her beliefs. While she sees the Revolution as having failed, she does not abandon the ideals of republicanism itself. The French Republic she dreamed of was a republic governed by reason, morality, and justice rather than by fear and violence. She thus can stay true to her values as a "patriot" while critiquing the calamitous state of France.

Daily Life in Prison

In her memoir, An Appeal to Impartial Posterity, Madame Roland provides an account describing her life in captivity as a political prisoner. The excerpt below highlights a moment of connection between Roland and the keeper's wife.

> "After saying this, the keeper's wife made some civil observations on the regret she felt whenever a person of her own sex arrived, 'for,' added she, 'they have not all your serene countenance, madam.'—I thanked her with a smile."[25]

The acknowledgment by another woman reinforces the idea of gendered identification. Roland is recognized not only as prisoner but as a woman whose demeanor, her "serene countenance" sets her apart. This recognition hints at an implicit solidarity among women. The feeling of "regret she [the keeper's wife] felt" at seeing another woman incarcerated exhibits sympathy; although the keeper's wife is not held captive, she feels for another woman. Roland also received different treatment in captivity, as compared to that of male prisoners, which reinforces the idea of how men and women were perceived and managed within institutional settings. While male prisoners were housed together in confined quarters, she was granted a degree of separation and allowed to remain in the parlor if her designated space was unavailable.[26]

[24] Ibid, 32.
[25] Ibid, 34.
[26] Ibid, 34.

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This differentiation raises questions about whether her treatment constituted privilege or was simply a reflection of the era's gendered expectations. Women, particularly those of status, were often placed in domestic or private spaces rather than subjected to the harsher conditions imposed on men, showing the paradox of women's roles during this period: excluded from politics yet afforded some reverence in social settings. Roland's reaction to this treatment is also significant. Rather than expressing despair at her confinement, she responds with a composed smile, demonstrating resilience and dignity. Another day, "at seven in the morning, I [Roland] left my daughter and my servants, after having exhorted them to be patient and calm, and feeling myself more honoured by their tears, than dejected by the oppression of which I was the victim…I found two ranks of armed citizens; and proceeded gravely with measured steps, and with my eyes fixed upon these pusillanimous or deluded men."[27] Roland doesn't position herself as a victim. She contrasts her dignity with the cowardice of the men who enforced her imprisonment. The "armed citizens," in this context, are the enforcers of the radical Jacobin and Montagnard factions, the more radical Girondins (the faction Roland was aligned with). Roland's critique of the "deluded men" reveals her disillusionment with the Revolution's betrayal of its ideals, especially portrayed by the Jacobin guards and their enforcement for the violent and hypocritical elements of the Revolution. In her view, the male-dominated revolutionary government failed to uphold the virtues of justice and courage it so fervently proclaimed. Roland's experience in exile, treated neither with cruelty nor with full equality to her male counterparts, mirrors societal values of the revolutionary era: women were acknowledged, but that was as far as it went.

She emphasizes her composure in contrast to the weakness of her captors, and Roland challenges the idea that women were unfit for political life, asserting the moral superiority over "pusillanimous" men who succumbed to corruption and fear. Roland declares, "No, gentlemen, innocence, however oppressed, never puts on the guise of criminality,"[28] asserting her strength of mind and rejecting the notion that she must meekly await justice. She explained, "I should not be now in your hands."[29] Her awareness of the injustice that has ensnared her emphasizes that persecution is not a consequence of actual wrongdoing. It is a corrupt judicial system that disproportionately silenced people who were not aligned with the Jacobins. The statement "I should not" also resembles strength as she advocates for herself.

The dialogue also becomes more reflective, especially when she says, "you have more strength of mind than many men."[30] It shows reason and temperament in Roland's character, which was mostly considered male traits.

Roland claims that she "shall walk to it with the same firmness and tranquility with which I now go to prison."[31] She equates her approach to death with inner peace and courage and accepts what fate holds: execution because the political system particularly sought to erase those who challenged its descent into tyranny. Her choice of words: firmness and tranquility, rejects any notion of victimhood. She contrasts the volatile and often self- serving men who

[27] Ibid, 32.
[28] Ibid, 32.
[29] Ibid, 32.
[30] Ibid, 32.
[31] Ibid, 32.

orchestrated the Reign of Terror. It also raises the question: could a woman possess both firmness and tranquility?

Germaine de Staël

The life of Manon Roland offers an illustration of tensions women faced during the French Revolution, as they sought to navigate political life that invoked universal ideals of liberty and equality while excluding them from its promises. Yet, as the Revolution gave way to the Napoleonic era, oppression of women intensified. It was within this repressive context that another figure of female intellectualism emerged: Germaine de Staël. Germaine de Staël (Anne-Louise-Germaine Necker) was born on 22 April 1766 in Paris, France, to Jacques Necker, a Swiss banker who served as finance minister under Louis XVI, and Suzanne Curchod, a respected salonnière. Raised in an environment steeped in intellectual debate, Germaine developed an early love for literature and philosophy. Her mother's salon, frequented by leading Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot and d'Alembert, provided the foundation for her lifelong engagement with political and literary discourse. In 1786, she married Baron Erik de Staël-Holstein, the Swedish ambassador to France. The marriage granted her a noble title, diplomatic protection, and allowed her the freedom to cultivate her intellectual pursuits. Madame de Staël's salons became famous, attracting figures from across the political spectrum, including republicans, monarchists, and future leaders of post- revolutionary France. De Staël was a thinker of profound originality. She wrote works on liberty, governance, and human emotion, establishing her as one of the leading French female political theorists and literary critics of her era. Scholars have often cast her as a resistant force of Napoleon Bonaparte, as she relentlessly criticized his regime for its suppression of individual freedoms and its reassertion of patriarchal norms.[32]

It was specifically through her political writings that she articulated a vision of liberal constitutionalism and cultural cosmopolitanism that positioned her at odds with Napoleon Bonaparte. Her insistence on intellectual freedom and opposition to Napoleon's autocracy led to her exile in 1803, which only reinforced her influence, as her writings Ten Years' Exile and Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution continued to shape European political thought. Besides Napoleon's animosity towards her, Staël's reputation has not been without further controversy. Contemporary critics, particularly those aligned with Napoleon, have dismissed her as overly emotional or dangerously subversive.[33]

Germaine de Staël: Beliefs

In Staël's Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, she articulates her belief that cultural and intellectual growth is inextricably linked to the freedoms of a democracy. The exchange of ideas and creativity thrives only in an environment where individuals are free to express themselves without fear of repression.[34] This perspective

[32] "Germaine de Staël," Library of Congress. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/women-in-the-french-revolution/germaine-de-stael.

[33] "Germaine de Staël," Library of Congress. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/women-in-the-french-revolution/germaine-de-stael

[34] Germaine de Staël, Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, revised translation of the 1818 English edition, edited by Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 17.

becomes particularly resistant in the context of Napoleon's reign, which was marked by further repercussions on political dissent and a curtailment of some civil liberties, especially with slavery in France's colonial holding. Having colonial territories is also a violation of full equality.

> "The two nations of antiquity, whose literature and history still form the principal portion of our intellectual treasure, were indebted for their astonishing superiority entirely to the enjoyment of a free country. But slavery existed among them, and, consequently, those rights and those motives to emulation, which ought to be common to all men, were the exclusive lot of a few."[35]

Staël held animosity towards Napoleon Bonaparte. In this excerpt, de Staël is criticizing the perpetuation of slavery in Saint-Domingue, reinstated by Napoleon in 1802 after seeing the Haitian Independence Revolution as a threat to France's colonial project. "Rights and those motives to emulation" were confined to men in France rather than extended universally. She explores the inherent contradiction between the ideals of liberty and the reality of inequality. This critique is a veiled attack on Napoleon's regime. Napoleon's authoritarian consolidation of power, epitomized by the Napoleonic Code, perpetuated inequality by reinforcing patriarchal and hierarchical structures. De Staël highlights the dangers of restricting freedom, drawing a parallel to Napoleonic France, the era where the promises of the Revolution were betrayed. De Staël frames freedom as the foundation of intellectual and cultural flourishing. Thereby, she implicitly condemns Napoleon's autocratic rule: it is antithetical to the progress and enlightenment that true liberty fosters.

Before the Revolution, women of a certain social rank held an informal position in the political sphere, as their relationships with powerful men allowed them to act as intermediaries, in which they advocated for causes or individuals. Their ability to "urge a point strongly with less apparent impropriety"[36] reflects how societal norms granted them unique access to power, enabling them to navigate political structures while maintaining the appearance of propriety. However, the Revolution's promise of equality for all dismantled these modes of influence, replacing privilege with an ideal of citizenship that excluded women from both formal and informal forms of political engagement. De Staël's description of how women could "outstep the proper limits, without affording an opening to complaint,"[37] describes the period hitherto to the revolution and during the revolution: women navigated power through subtle and relational influence. This system was closed off under Napoleon's authoritarian regime. De Staël's reflection thus highlights the irony of revolutionary progress. While dismantling the old aristocratic order that abolished feudalism using the August 4th Decree, a set of 19 articles passed by the National Assembly, it also erased the limited but meaningful avenues of power women had once possessed, leaving them increasingly marginalized in the new, Napoleonic France.

Staël believes the practice of banishment is a weapon of tyranny that silences intellectual freedom and destroys the moral fabric of society. No sovereign should possess the unchecked authority to exile individuals. Power not only suppresses dissent but also undermines the very

[35] Ibid, 18.
[36] Ibid, 75.
[37] Ibid, 75.

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conditions necessary for genuine thought and expression. The fear of banishment, Staël argues, creates an atmosphere of pervasive self-censorship, where "no deputy, no writer, will ever express his thoughts freely,"[38] if the act of speaking truth to power risks the destruction of one's life and family. This critique is deeply personal for de Staël, who herself faced exile under Napoleon's regime. The punishment was designed to neutralize her voice and many of Europe's most prominent critics of authoritarianism. By highlighting the familial and emotional toll of exile, particularly on women, she expands her critique beyond the political to the intimate. She conveys how such despotism gnaws the bonds of love and loyalty that sustain human lives far more than glory, money, and power should.

Women, whom she describes as "destined to be the support and reward of enthusiasm,"[39] are uniquely burdened by this injustice, as their roles as nurturers compel them to either suppress their convictions or endure the devastating consequences of exile alongside their loved ones. Staël, once again, expresses her stance against arbitrary rule, which she saw as corrosive not only to political liberty but to the emotional integrity of individuals and families. Her emphasis on the human cost of absolute power transforms her critique into an argument circling pathos. Tyranny, by silencing sincerity and stifling "generous feelings," dehumanizes those who suffer under it and those who wield it.

Synthesis

Given Staël's critique of Napoleon and Roland's dissent for Robespierre, both Staël and Roland stand as female resisters to authoritarianism. Madame Roland, writing and acting in the heart of the Revolution, directed her critique of Robespierre and the Jacobin-led Terror. Under the guise of virtue, the regime descended into political purges and a form of absolutism. In her prison writings and final words, Roland exposes the moral hypocrisy of Robespierre's rule, who was an executioner of virtue. Roland's "O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!"[40] describes the tragic irony of the Revolution. Roland's opposition is thus grounded in Enlightenment reason and civic virtue. Madame de Staël confronts another form of despotism. Her critique articulates a vision of liberal constitutionalism, cosmopolitanism, and individual liberty that directly contradicted Napoleon's centralization of power. Her exile from France is a literal and symbolic confirmation of her threat to Napoleonic orthodoxy.

Roland and Staël's resistance focuses on the betrayal of Enlightenment principles by those who claimed to uphold them. They reveal how Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France, despite its declarations of universal rights, remained deeply ambivalent, if not hostile, to women's political agency. Their legacies endure because they resisted power, and also because they exposed the contradictions at the heart of that power. Roland and Staël proposed a vision of political action rooted in reason, conscience, and liberty: truly universal ideals espoused in the Enlightenment.

Life in Prison

[38] Germaine de Staël and Baroness De Staël-Holstein, Ten Years Exile. (New York: Collins and co., 1821), 30.
[39] Ibid, 49.
[40] "Manon Roland," Library of Congress. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/women-in-the-french-revolution/manon-roland.

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Writing in Prison, De Staël acknowledges women's "coquetry," or the subtle desire to please and secure attachment. Her use of the term does not trivialize women's actions, but rather, highlights the strategies they employed to navigate a sociopolitical reality that excluded them from direct power.

> "It must be confessed, that in the actions of women, there is always a little coquetry, and that the greater part of their very virtues are mixed with the desire of pleasing, and of being surrounded by friends, whose attachment to them is heightened by the feeling of obligation. In this point of view only, can our sex be pardoned for being fond of influence: but there are occasions when we ought even to sacrifice the pleasure of obliging to preserve our dignity: for we may do everything for the sake of others, excepting to degrade our character. Our own conscience is as it were the treasure of the Almighty, which we are not permitted to make use of for the advantage of others."[41]

Women's virtues are inherently tied to the "desire of pleasing." Staël critiques how societal expectations forced women to relational and sentimental roles, even as they sought to exert influence. Yet, de Staël's insistence on the sanctity of conscience as a "treasure of the Almighty" elevates women's moral autonomy, suggesting that their inner ethical compass remains inviolable despite external pressure. De Staël claims that women must sometimes sacrifice "the pleasure of obliging to preserve our dignity." Her emphasis on dignity and conscience resists the Napoleonic narrative that reduced women to passive subjects in the 1804 Napoleonic code: Title VI. of Divorce.

Germaine de Staël's experience under Napoleon illustrates the fraught relationship between female intellectual autonomy and authoritarian power in post-revolutionary France. She claims, "The existence of a woman, who was visited on account of her literary reputation, was but a trifle; but that trifle was totally independent of him, and was sufficient to make him resolve to crush me."[42] De Staël's literary prominence and the social influence she wielded outside traditional male-dominated institutions represented resistance to the Napoleonic vision of order, which relied on the containment of women within the private sphere. Her independence was emblematic of the broader revolutionary ideals of individual liberty and self-determination. Yet, as her experience demonstrates, these ideals were curtailed when applied to women, who were expected to remain confined within roles that upheld the patriarchal order.

De Staël's analysis also speaks to the vulnerability of revolutionary gains for women, as the Revolution's universalist language gave way to a more targeted repression of female autonomy under Napoleon. Even the smallest assertion of independence could be perceived as a threat to the patriarchal order. Napoleon's desire to crush her reflects personal animosity and cultural anxiety about the implications of women's visibility and influence in the public sphere. De Staël's position as an intellectual independent of male control was a paradox to a system that sought to define women's value through their roles as wives and mothers. The Revolution provoked a counter-revolutionary backlash that sought to relegate them to the private sphere. De Staël sharply critiques the hostility women faced when they dared to step outside the bounds of domesticity:

[41] Staël and Staël-Holstein," Ten Years Exile," 30.
[42] Ibid, 39.

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> "In truth, he began complimenting me upon my writings. 'You see,' said I to him, 'the consequences of being a woman of intellect, and I would recommend you, if there is occasion, to dissuade any females of your family from attempting it.' I endeavoured to keep up my spirits by boldness, but I felt the barb in my heart."[43]

Her "boldness" in the moment is a form of resistance, a way to reclaim agency in a situation where her intellect, an asset celebrated in theory, becomes a source of vulnerability and exclusion. Yet her admission that she "felt the barb in [her] heart" reflects the emotional toll of navigating a world in which the recognition received for her talents was inseparable from the societal backlash it provoked. This duality satirically describes another paradox of women's participation in the intellectual and politics in revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The Revolution had opened new spaces for women to contribute to public discourse, but it also heightened the scrutiny and hostility directed at them, particularly under Napoleon's regime. There are personal costs of being a woman who defied social norms, caught between their aspirations and the knowledge that such ambitions came with significant personal sacrifice. Staël's ability to articulate this tension speaks to her critique of a society that simultaneously lauded revolutionary ideals of equality while excluding women from their full realization. Her intellect is both a gift and a liability; Staël exposes the fragility of women's agency in a patriarchal system that punished those who dared to claim independence, even in the realm of thought.

3.0 CONCLUSION

The Revolution's trajectory, and Robespierre's consolidation of power, was shaped subtly but significantly by women who mobilized, mediated, and magnified Revolutionary ideals. Once the political stakes grew too high and the danger of female influence became too apparent, women were excluded. First, symbolically, then legally. Roland was executed. Staël was exiled. Women's political clubs were shut down. The Revolution, having relied on women's labor and passion, discarded them in favor of a masculinized, militarized nation.

Women have always been political actors, even when denied the title; they have always shaped history, even when written out of its official narrative. This erasure reached its apotheosis under Napoleon Bonaparte. The Napoleonic Code of 1804, often celebrated for its rationalization of French civil law, did more than restructure property rights. It deliberately reversed the modest gains women had achieved during the Revolution. Revolutionary reforms had opened the door to female autonomy: women could initiate divorce, own property independently, and participate in civil society. The Napoleonic regime slammed the door shut. Divorce was restricted, property reverted to male control, and women were once again rendered legal minors under their fathers and husbands. In doing so, Napoleon effectively severed the potential of the Revolution by anchoring its legacy in patriarchal control.

The term feminism, as a self-aware political ideology and movement, was not coined until the late 19th century by Charles Fourier, well after both women's deaths. To label either woman a feminist in the modern sense would be anachronistic. Neither called explicitly for women's suffrage, equality in education, or the dismantling of patriarchal structures as later feminists like Simone de Beauvoir would. Roland saw the Republic in which women could advise but

[43] Ibid, 48.

not rule; she was deeply engaged in the political reimagining of France, but stayed loyal to the gendered expectations of virtue, sensibility, and domesticity. Yet, her writings and influence far exceeded the private sphere. Her very presence in the Revolutionary narrative, her intellect, and her resistance to tyranny constitute a powerful disruption of the notion that politics was a male domain. In this sense, Roland was not a feminist by ideology, but a feminist figure by contemporary standards. Similarly, Staël imagined a liberal Europe in which reason and culture could cancel out tyranny but did not emphasize her work for women's emancipation. Her literary salons, her political treatises, and her cosmopolitan vision of liberalism made her a threat to centralized, masculine authority, threatening Napoleon to the point where he tried exiling and censoring her works. Staël's intellectual autonomy was intolerable to a regime that equated order with male control. Unlike Roland, whose political voice was entangled with her loyalty to her husband's career, Staël operated independently.

Nevertheless, both women laid the groundwork for the emergence of feminist consciousness in France. The legacies of Roland and Staël are foundational to understanding the genealogy of feminist thought in France. France, in 2024, became the first country in the world to embed abortion rights in the constitution,[44] though not perfectly equal, is a victory built not only on the activism of twentieth-century feminists but also on the voices of women like Roland and Staël: their courage lit the fire to the subtly gendered movements of their age, which continued on in the late nineteenth to twenty-first century. It is thus plausible to deem the struggle for equality as something that is never linear and is often regressive; the act of speaking, writing, and refusing to disappear is a radical act, even in the twenty-first century.

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