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Germaine de Staël's *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*: An act of compassion?

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Abstract: In the foreword to the Mercure de France edition of de Staël. (1996 [1793]. *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*. Paris: Mercure de France), Chantal Thomas, French historian and writer, writes that this apology in favor of Marie-Antoinette did not help the queen nor the author herself; on the contrary it only made the latter more unpopular. So why did Germaine de Staël write it? Mme de Staël and Marie-Antoinette did not share many interests; however, at the moment of The Women's March on Versailles in October 1789, the situation had changed. It was at this moment, when Mme de Staël witnessed people's hatred for the Queen, that she for the first time felt that she was on her side. She had the feeling that the Queen would be a victim to a public opinion that had been "manipulated" (Thomas. 1996. Preface. In *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, 7–14. Paris: Mercure de France: 12) in a systematic way, and to which she herself had been a victim. Pursuing some ideas formulated by Reddy (2000, 2001) and (Nussbaum, Martha C. 2001. *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.) in their work on emotion and empathy in history and philosophy respectively, I hope to offer some suggestions, with the aid of cultural semiotics. More specifically I hope to be able to provide some answers to the question whether Mme de Staël's apology might be regarded as an act of compassion.

Keywords: Germaine de Staël, cultural semiotics, emotion, empathy, history

1 Introduction

The following sketch of developments after 1794 rests necessarily on a slim research base. The issue of emotions has not yet been examined for this period with the same intensity as it has inspired eighteenth-century scholars. However, it is beyond doubt that the latter emotional configuration was more stable than the sentimentalism of the late eighteenth century and that its basic contours survived down to 1914 (Reddy 2000: 150).

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In the foreword to the *Mercure de France* (1996) edition of Germaine de Staël's (1766–1817) *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, the historian and writer Chantal Thomas writes that this apology in favor of Marie-Antoinette did not help the queen nor the author herself; on the contrary it only made the latter more unpopular. The 1996 edition follows the one published in 1820, but the pamphlet was originally published in September 1793 in England and in Switzerland anonymously “par une femme,” but this attribution didn't fool anybody. Axel von Fersen, intimate friend of Marie-Antoinette and friend of Mme de Staël's husband, the Swedish ambassador in Paris, Carl-Magnus Staël von Holstein, writes in his journal that “Mme de Staël shows a great sensibility”, but ‘the spirit of constitutional ideas penetrates everything, and she seeks to defend the Queen by transforming her into a Jacobine’” (Thomas 1996: 8). Von Fersen, being against the idea of dialogue with the rebels, as the royalist would call them, calls this publication “very unnecessary and unimportant.” To this Chantal Thomas says: “Unnecessary, without doubt; unimportant absolutely not” (1996: 9).

In terms of cultural semiotics (Rédei 2007, Rédei 2014; Sonesson 2016), Germaine de Staël, as well as Marie-Antoinette, shared the fate of being an Other in the eyes of the Ego-culture, in this case revolutionary Jacobine France in 1793, at war with Austria, England and the Netherlands. What does that entail, to be an Other in terms of cultural semiotics? In the following, a brief presentation of cultural semiotics will be outlined.

The starting point for any inquiry into cultural semiotics is the encounter between an “I” (henceforth Ego) and an “Other.” It is in this encounter that the Ego becomes aware (more or less, or not at all) of her or his preunderstandings of how the own lifeworld is constituted in terms of (cultural and other) norms. In the encounter models for understanding the world/culture are activated. The Other, from the point of view of the Ego, is differentiated, according to cultural semiotics, into two ways: (1) the *Alter*, belonging to a culture that the Ego is on “speaking terms” with, appreciates, understands sufficiently, and wishes to have a dialogue with. This culture we call Extra-culture in cultural semiotics (Rédei 2007; Sonesson 2016) and (2) the *Alius*, belonging to a culture that the Ego is NOT on “speaking terms” with, nor appreciates, understands, or wishes to have a dialogue with. This culture we call the Non-culture in cultural semiotics (Rédei 2007; Sonesson 2016). The historical background will now be resumed, before reaching some conclusions.

Thus, Germaine left England, where she had been staying during the spring, for Coppet (her home by the lake of Geneva in Switzerland), and there she finished the pamphlet at the beginning of September, before Marie-Antoinette fell victim to the guillotine on October 16th. Now, in order to shed some light on the question whether Germaine de Staël's pamphlet was an apology, we would

need to study it intertextually, in the way Bakhtin (2001) understood any artefact as being the result of a dialogue with its time. In more detail, we would need to know a bit about the history of emotions, and the way these were expressed – or not expressed. In this, we will be informed by the emotional historian William M. Reddy and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum – because, as we shall see, Germaine was very preoccupied by emotions.

2 Germaine and Marie-Antoinette

There was not an intimate bond between Mme de Staël and Marie-Antoinette, but the latter was nevertheless involved in the former's past, because she intervened in Mme de Staël's life by actively supporting the idea of her marriage with Eric Magnus de Staël in order to hinder one with von Fersen. This marriage, which took place in 1786, led to her presentation at the court at Versailles and thus to the Queen (Thomas 1996: 9).

Mme de Staël and Marie-Antoinette did not share many interests: The former excelled, as a *salonnière* and writer, in wit and intellectual discussions, in contrast to the latter, who fled such activities (Thomas 1996: 9). This was the time of The Women's March on Versailles to get bread – also known as The October March, The October Days, or simply The March on Versailles – that started on 5th October, and on its way assembled thousands of allies, growing into a mob which reached Versailles on the morning of October 6, 1789. The confrontation was very violent, and the King had to open the stores of bread at Versailles. The royal family was forced to leave Versailles and to come with the mob back to Paris, where they were to settle at the Tuileries. It was at this moment, when Mme de Staël witnessed the people's hatred for the Queen, that she for the first time felt that she was on her side, and perhaps also saw her properly: “The Queen then entered the salon, her hair was in a mess, her face pale, but dignified, and everything about her struck the imagination” (de Staël in Thomas 1996: 12, my translation). At this moment, Thomas (1996) continues, Mme de Staël saw the Queen as the daughter of Marie-Thérèse, and she was captured by an admiration for Marie-Antoinette which grew stronger with time. She had the feeling that the Queen would be a victim to a public opinion that had been “manipulated” in a systematic way (Thomas 1996: 12). Thomas touches upon something very important here in connection with Mme de Staël: “This monster of slander, of which Mme de Staël had suffered attacks herself, had constantly assaulted Marie-Antoinette from the beginning of her stay in France” (Thomas 1996: 12, my translation).

And yes, one could easily believe that this was indeed the case with Mme de Staël: she would without doubt be very sensitive to slander when seeing it happen to others, and probably it raised a strong empathy in her. After freedom of speech was installed, Marie-Antoinette had been called a number of different invectives: “coquette, frivol, spender, bad wife, bad mother, nymphomaniac, lesbian, the arc-tigress of Austria” (Thomas 1996: 13, my translation).

The main purpose of the apology, according to Thomas (1996), was to denounce this slander, to reveal the underlying misogynistic and xenophobic attitude that created this picture of the queen-monster that she had become. Again, one is quickly ready to agree with Thomas (1996) here, because of the similarities with Mme de Staël’s destiny in the public eye, a situation that would in due course be aggravated with the increased power of Napoleon and the Napoleonic press. Mme de Staël was already at this time very well aware of what it was like to be exposed to the public opinion as a woman. As Geneviève Fraisse writes (1995), Germaine never stopped complaining over the tyranny prevailing in the public opinion regarding women: “The opinion caused women to be unhappy” (182). The fight for liberty, the liberty to write and love, was the theme of Mme de Staël’s two novels *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne* (1807), whose two protagonists succumb to unhappy love.

2.1 The submissive position of women

One means of altering the submissive position of women was to enter the commercial book market and thus create a place for oneself outside the restrictive domestic sphere and become part of the public sphere (Hesse 2001). The number of women consuming books had increased substantially, and reading novels played an important role in their emancipation (Gutwirth 1978: 11).

Although Mme de Staël was not accused of being a lesbian as was Marie-Antoinette, her womanhood was called into question, as was her nationality. This was something she also shared with Marie-Antoinette. It might be illustrated with what Fiévée, journalist, writer and follower of Napoleon, wrote in *Mercure* ten years later, when her first novel was published in 1802, during the rise of the Napoleonic era in France:

The French [...] have no obligations towards her because of the way she treats them, all her love today is directed towards the English, which should be of no surprise. The spirits that sail above this base world have no home country, and [...] it is permitted to Madame de Staël not to have any. Born in a country that is no more, wife to a Swede, having become French by circumstances, not having had any home country except an illusory one, it is

possible that she cannot conceive of anything else: it is an old habit. (quoted in Gaultier 1933: 103–104, my translation)

Gaultier (1933: 104) underlines that Mme de Staël was subject this time to a new reproach, that of being “Anti-French.” Thus, Germaine was here attacked for not being French, and, losing any platform from which she could make herself heard, she is, in short, made into an “Other” not worth listening to. At other times, Mme de Staël’s womanhood would be further attacked, as in this example involving Napoleon and Talleyrand, the former’s police minister and once the lover of Mme de Staël:

Another time, in a somewhat gentler vein, the Emperor told of asking Talleyrand in genuine disbelief, ‘what is this hermaphrodite?’ Talleyrand, faithful for once to his old friendship with Mme de Staël, replied, ‘She is a very witty woman who writes just as she speaks.’ Yet when *Delphine* was published, with its singeing portrait of the arch-hypocrite Mme de Vernon in whom all of Paris recognized him, Talleyrand could not resist that famous riposte that all of Paris delighted in, ‘It seems that Mme de Staël has written a novel in which both she and I are travestied as women.’ (Gutwirth 1978: 287)

Now, *Réflexions*, Thomas (1996) continues, is a call for all women who are humiliated as women by the destiny that is forced upon Marie-Antoinette, the very same person who had led Olympe de Gouge to publish her *Déclaration des droits de la femme, dédiée à la Reine* in 1781. Germaine de Staël opens the pamphlet as follows:

My name cannot be of any assistance and ought to be kept a secret; but in order to assert the impartiality of this writing I need to say that among the women who have been called to see the Queen, I belong to those who have had the least personal contact with the Princess. These reflections, thus, merit to be trusted by all sensitive hearts because they are inspired only by the affections that stirred them. (de Staël 1996, my translation)

Already from the outset Mme de Staël indicates that her motives and intentions with this writing is to convey her emotions and share it with others in order to make them feel the way she does, and by doing so mobilize the public opinion. Further on she writes:

Oh, you women of all countries and social positions, listen to me with the same emotion that I experience! The destiny of Marie Antoinette reveals everything that might touch your heart: if you are happy, she was; if you have suffered a year, all the pain there is in life has torn her heart apart for even a longer period of time [...]. I do not want to either attack or to justify any political party, because I fear that this would distract or diminish the interest in this respectable person whom I will defend. (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 20, my translation)

This exclamation is then followed by another where she asks republicans, constituents, and aristocrats to unite in order to save the Queen, and she continues to say anyone should, anyone who had ever been unhappy, or had been in need for compassions in others, or felt fear when thinking of the future. Further on then, she expands her call to include the French in general terms, trying to suggest that Marie-Antoinette's destiny should worry the French and make them hesitant in their way of judging the Queen (de Staël 1996 [1793]).

The Queen was not responsible for the financial crisis, the war against America, the abuse of ministers, or all sorts of exploitations that were unknown to the Queen and which she thus, were *not responsible for*. What follows in Mme de Staël's apology might be a proof that she had other reasons for defending the Queen than purely compassionate ones: "M. de Maurepas had two ministers sacked, M. Turgot and M. Necker, and the Queen showed publicly that she estimated them and regretted both." (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 25, my translation)

What was Mme de Staël's purpose in writing this apology? Or was it rather an apology in disguise, so to speak? De Staël writes about the Queen:

One said that she hated France, that she was Austrian, and it was always by that name that her enemies, in anger, called her, some in order to agitate the spirit of the people – a word misplaces, a word unites a people who only gets excited by ideas expressed in a single word. (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 28, my translation)

Mme de Staël comes back to the theme of how the French have been indoctrinated to believe that the Queen is an enemy of France, an Alius, and this has been used to provoke the opinion against her (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 32).

And then Mme de Staël continues to ask rhetorically if it would be foolish to think that the Queen, who left Vienna at 13, would prefer Austria, where she could only obtain a second rank to France, over the France where she was a Queen! Here it would be easy to make some parallels with Mme de Staël and her relation to Switzerland in comparison with France, in the case of which she herself could be regarded as being the Queen of salons and wit. Before ending the pamphlet, she discusses in more depth the civil war, and the position of France and its relations to Austria. But she ends the book as she started it with a call to all women:

I turn to you again, all women sacrificed in such a tender mother, sacrificed all through the coming assault on frailty, through the violent destruction of compassion; your empire will be ruined if violence is going to reign, your destiny will be ruined if your tears drop in vain. Defend the Queen with all nature's weapons; go and get that child, who is going to succumb if he has to lose her, whom he has loved so much. (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 59, my translation)

Her way of addressing “all women,” we may add, has some resemblance with the letter of the activist Olympe de Gouges to the Queen in the opening of *Les droits de la femme* (1791), where she asks her to support and defend the women in their claim for having the same political and civil rights as the men, because if she did half the kingdom would be hers.

It is difficult to say, though, if Mme de Staël wrote her apology only with the purpose of saving the Queen. Perhaps there were other reasons as well? Before making any suggestions, we need to take the study one step further by examining the *form* of the text, and therefore we need to scrutinize it in terms of an artefact that has emerged in a socio-cultural context, philosophically and historically. In short, methodologically we will rely on *cultural semiotics* to analyze the pamphlet as an intertextual artefact – in a Bakhtinian vein this means to study how the author entered the text by analyzing the text in its dialogue with the socio-cultural context in which it emerged (Rédei 2014: 316).

3 The history of emotions

In his works on emotion history, Reddy (2000) writes on the topic of Mme de Staël, that in 1789, as she wrote in *Considérations sur la Révolution française* (1820–1821 [1818]), she was happy about the absence of “artifice” in the French. She wrote that “A sincere and disinterested enthusiasm inspired all French at that time” (de Staël in Reddy 2000: 110). The word “enthusiasm” might be puzzling here, and it is a word commonly used by Mme de Staël and at least in many of the occasions it has positive connotations. Looking at the history of the word in *Trésor de la langue française*, one may learn that it denotes: “a state of exaltation of the spirit, deep trembles of the sensibility of someone who thinks of him or herself as being possessed by Divinity, the source of his or her inspiration, or of prophecy and fortune telling. *Prophetic enthusiasm; the enthusiasm of Pythia or the Sibyl; fortune telling through enthusiasm*” (Trésor de la langue française 2018, my translation). In 1793, in the apology, the object under scrutiny here, she uses the word as follows in connection with the faith of the Queen: “The memory of this enthusiasm is enlarged by the bitterness of her destiny, the memory of this enthusiasm ought also to worry the French and make them hesitant towards their new judicial decisions, one challenges it as an error” (de Staël 1996 [1793]: 23).

In 1794 sentimentalism was still an important element in the political debates among the revolutionaries. Reddy gives an example of this by pointing to an exception that in a way pointed to, if not a rule, but a praxis: Condorcet,

mathematician, philosopher, and revolutionary, called the idea of a “natural feeling” (central to sentimentalism) into question in the beginning of the 1790s by urging fellow politicians to “enlighten rather than to move” (Reddy 2000: 137).

At that time Mme de Staël’s interest in German Romanticism started to grow, and as a result she eventually introduced the movement in France. Reddy also shows that Mme Necker, Germaine de Staël’s mother, railed against

the insincere talk of feelings: ‘Love of country, humanity – vague terms empty of meaning that men invented to hide their insensitivity under the very veil of sentiment’. This divergence between mother and daughter rested on a deeper agreement though, a shared belief that sincere emotion was of great political importance. (Reddy 2000: 110–111)

Reddy asks an important question which has cognitive implications: did the “French feel differently once they had access to *émotion*, *sentiment*, and *sensibilité* [key words in the new emotional lexicon]” (Reddy 2000: 111). Even if emotions, on one level, are products of habits or otherwise put, of socio-cultural praxis, they are on another level not consciously functioning as affective schemata, but these issues are beyond the scope of this presentation, since we are interested in the history of emotions and the way they were expressed and interpreted. In fact, Mme de Staël also made a strong link between words and sentiments, according to Reddy, who underlines this with an example from *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (published in 1800):

For her, the answer came easily: words and ideas enriched and educated feelings. Her *De la littérature dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800) was a veritable history of emotions in Europe. As she conceived this grand narrative, first Christianity, then the spirit of northern peoples had reformed the misguided stoicism of the ancients. Finally, the modern novel had begun to inculcate ‘man’s highest sentiment’, which was ‘friendship in love’ between a man and a woman. (Reddy 2000: 112)

What may be worthwhile, perhaps, is to add that to Mme de Staël it was important not only to feel, but also to reflect upon one’s feelings as well – otherwise emotions would stay shallow. This is an issue she writes about in her *Dix années d’exil* (1820) in connection with her travel to Russia in 1812, observing the Russians as being emotional but not inclined to reflect upon their feelings. Nevertheless, feelings were indeed important to her, and had political as well as private implications, as Reddy underlines (2000: 112). He also points to the fact that Voltaire, before her, adhered to sentimentalist ideas, and so did of course Rousseau, who’s influence on Mme de Staël was great.

Even though Sentimentalism was challenged after 1789, it was only at the end of the Terror that people turned against it as something characteristic of a

hypocritical aristocracy who had excelled in its “excesses” (Reddy 2000: 147). But some of its ideas “survived this transition:” feelings were innate and biological, and secondly, to be sincere was to be morally superior (Reddy 2000: 147).

Now, we are going to turn to Martha Nussbaum, in order to derive some enlightenment from the insights brought forth in her work *Upheavals of thought: the intelligence of emotions* (2001), which may give us a broader and deeper understanding of the sociocultural context of the emergence of emotions in the era of the French revolution. And perhaps more importantly, we may shed some light on the initial question: can Mme de Staël's apology to Marie-Antoinette be considered as an act of compassion?

3.1 Emotions and ethics

In line with most recent research into emotions in psychology, Nussbaum does not consider emotions and reasoning as being two separate systems in the act of decision-making and behaviour. Consequently, Nussbaum (2001: 1) continues, emotions are also necessary for ethical thinking: “To put it simply, compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune” (Nussbaum 2001: 301). In this way, her ideas about emotions are not far from the ones argued for during the Enlightenment as they have been discussed earlier on in this paper, in that emotions are also, as a consequence, thought of as being a part of “our reasoning capacity as political creatures” (Nussbaum 2001: 3). Now, we are interested in a particular emotion here, namely compassion, which Nussbaum defines as the one that makes us look to the “good of others and to make them the object of our intense care” (2001: 13).

Also, for the sake of clarification, Nussbaum uses the word “compassion” instead of “empathy,” “sympathy,” or “pity.” There seems to be a good reason for that, since the word empathy can be used in two ways (at least), and often is used in the sense of a Theory of Mind as applied in Cognitive science, which would mean our capacity to infer (rather than to feel) what another person might be thinking and feeling (Stenberg 2006: 332). As Nussbaum (2001: 302) writes, empathy is something one can have without any evaluation of any emotion (Nussbaum 2001: 302). And since “sympathy” is not intense enough in the modern use of the word (in contrast to the usage of the word in British eighteenth-century texts), Nussbaum (2001: 302) uses “compassion” instead. So, sympathy and compassion are closer to being synonymous in that they recognize that “the other person's distress is bad” (with references here to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; Nussbaum 2001: 306), in comparison to “empathy”

(Nussbaum 2001: 302). According to Aristotle, compassion needs to include three cognitive elements (from Nussbaum 2001: 306):

- (1) A belief that the suffering is grave rather than banal
- (2) that the person who suffers does not deserve it
- (3) “the belief that the possibilities of the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer.” This third point is not necessary, according to Nussbaum.

Well, following the schema of Aristotle, we may conclude that Mme de Staël’s apology does qualify as an act of compassion, and moreover, that she had probably read Aristotle to begin with.

Now, very briefly, what is political in Mme de Staël’s act? Or put in Nussbaum’s words: “How can we make this compassion do the best work it can in connection with liberal and democratic institutions?” (Nussbaum 2001: 403).

Compassion functions on two levels: on the individual psychological level and that of the institutions (the institutional structures). In the case of Mme de Staël’s apology for Marie-Antoinette, she was struggling with the opposite, namely the absence of institutional compassion. Perhaps she viewed her text as somehow filling that gap? As Nussbaum writes (2001: 403), in the best of worlds we would not need to rely on the compassion of citizens, because compassion would be imbedded in the institutional structures. However, as compassionate institutions often are non-existent, tragically enough, we have to rely on “compassionate individuals” to remind political institutions of crucial political issues and to keep them on the agenda (Nussbaum 2001: 404). This is important, as institutions also shape our emotions and therefore, they might promote, or prevent compassion, as well as other emotions that work against compassion as shame, disgust, and envy.

4 Some concluding remarks

In the case of *Réflexions sur le procès de la reine*, Mme de Staël turned to public opinion in order to change the unjust and cruel faith of Marie-Antoinette. She acted upon her emotions and seemed to have been well versed in the Sentimentalism of her time, and, as Reddy (2000) has been showing in his outlines of a history of emotions, Germaine de Staël, and other like-minded of her times, regarded emotions as an important source for political engagement and action. However, in 1793, on an institutional level, no compassion was shown for Marie-Antoinette. In that sense, in the case of Germaine’s apology,

an individual citizen acted out of compassion in order to bring compassion to the political agenda. But also, I would like to suggest, Mme de Staël fulfilled the third point of Aristotle's schema (in Nussbaum 2001), namely that as a woman she could on good grounds have the "belief that the possibilities of" Marie-Antoinette "who" experienced "the emotion" were "similar to those of" her. As we saw earlier, in the sense of being a woman and regarded as a "foreigner" and even to be considered as "anti-French," Germaine de Staël shared at least three essential predicaments with the Queen. Thus, Germaine could identify with the Otherness of Marie-Antoinette in regard to the public opinion of the times, being treated herself as an Other, being a woman not complying with the norms of womanhood at the time. In cultural semiotic terms Marie-Antoinette was an *Alter* to Germaine and both were considered *Alius* from the point of view of the French elite in power, both considered to be foreigners, as "non-French" and as women. By means of connecting a selection of discourses as they were expressed in different writings, published in newspapers, letters, books, etc., we were able to discern the dialogic of Germaine's apology, and thus we could come to the tentative conclusion that her pamphlet was an act of compassion, indeed.

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