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### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1g95g1s9>

### **Journal**

Paroles gelées, 15(1)

### **ISSN**

1094-7264

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

1997

### **DOI**

10.5070/PG7151003055

Peer reviewed

## “That God Within:” Writing Female Genius from Diderot to Staël

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Cecilia Feilla

A thin but significant line is traversed in the representation of female authorship between the depiction of Germaine de Staël at age twenty as the possessed “prêtresse la plus célèbre d’Apollon” (Staël’s *Journals intimes* qtd. in Vallois 4) and that of Emily Brontë in 1851 as an author who “possesses the creative gift” (C. Brontë 40). One of the central figures to effect this change is, ironically, Staël herself. Her novel, *Corinne, ou, l’Italie* (1807) rescripts possession (both ownership and the proper) in important ways which negotiate a new place for female genius in the novel. What I pursue in this paper is how “genius” is constructed along gender lines at the moment it takes its modern introjected form as a natural gift in the late eighteenth century, and how the “inspiration,” “prophecy” and “possession” which characterize genius take on a negative valence when applied to women writers, often emblemized as sibylline, and read as signs of hysteria. Is the woman writer possessed by genius (a transcendent figure) or does she possess genius (an immanent gift)? A close reading of *Corinne* in light of Denis Diderot’s essay, *Sur les femmes* (1772), will reveal how gender marks the discourse of writing and genius, especially as it pertains to issues of style and female authorship.

Diderot wrote *Sur les femmes* as a reply to l’Abbé Antoine-Léonard Thomas’s *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l’esprit des femmes* (1772). A complex meditation on the “nature” of women and their potential for genius, Diderot’s essay is also a reflection on writing and the exercise of style. From the first lines, Diderot establishes his authority on the subject of women by invoking his carnal knowledge of them. He explicitly links the lack of heterosexual activity in men with a lack of style in writing: Thomas, he claims, cannot write because he is celibate (251, 261-262), d’Alembert cannot because he is homosexual (262). Man distinguishes himself with style (Buffon’s “Le style est l’homme même” [30]), and the subject fashioning this style is woman:

Thomas ne dit pas un mot des avantages du commerce des femmes pour un homme de lettres; et c'est un ingrat.... Elles nous accoutument encore à mettre de l'agrément et de la clarté dans les matières les plus sèches et les plus épineuses. On leur adresse sans cesse la parole; on veut en être écouté; on craint de les fatiguer ou de les ennuyer; et l'on prend une facilité particulière de s'exprimer qui passe de la conversation dans le style.... (*Sur les femmes* 261-262)

Diderot performs here a curious linking of style, authority, sex, and woman, ending with a notion of writing-the-female as defining an author. He manages to unite the rhetoric of possessing women sexually with the author's possession of style. The female body, in other words, is the medium through which man achieves his "voice," much the way in classical antiquity Apollo's prophecy is voiced through his priestess at Delphi. The female subject and female subjectivity become the means by which the male writer achieves his own style and glory.<sup>1</sup> If women provide *agrément*, *clarté* and *facilité* to men's writing, what do they bring to their own? Can the female body/style constitute anything on its own, without the mediation of men, or are women purely style without substance?

Where women afford men the passage "de la conversation dans le style," Diderot suggests that woman's conversation is her style. In his biography of Germaine de Staël, *Mme de Staël et la Suisse*, P. Kohler writes that "elle a mis le meilleur de son esprit et de son art dans ses paroles envolées. Ecrivant, elle causait encore..." (53). The woman author is presented as an artist of conversation whose *parole envolée* spills over into writing. Categories of sex are curiously enforced: a woman does not write; rather, she converses or chats. Her writing is merely a continuation of her idle or inspired chatter. Diderot further suggests that women authors write from feeling and not convention: "Elles sont rarement systématiques, toujours à la dictée du moment" (*Sur les femmes* 261).<sup>2</sup> Spontaneous and uncontrived, her writing is presented as a copia, an excess of language overflowing onto the page (a notion which suggests that this feminine, conversational style is a precursor of automatic or stream-of-consciousness writing, and marks the transformation of genius in the direction of modernity's *vie quotidienne*, as in Baudelaire's well-known quote, "la modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent" [553]).

Diderot's vision of writing as a necessarily gendered practice is based on the sex of the author or (in the case of men) the sex the author writes. Of Thomas and his *Essai* Diderot remarks: "Il a voulu que son livre ne fût d'aucun sexe; et il n'y a malheureusement que trop bien réussi. C'est un hermaphrodite" (*Sur les femmes* 251). Mme de Staël expresses a similar sexual segregation of writing in *De l'Allemagne*, but playfully inverts the notion that sex determines writing to suggest that writing may determine sex: "Les femmes cherchent à s'arranger comme un roman, et les hommes comme une histoire" (qtd. in Vallois 8). Gender here takes its form from the stylistic convention of genre, an elision of generic/gendered categories as they are internalized as a category of identity.

The heroine of Staël's *Corinne* is praised for her remarkable ease and wit in conversation, which extends into her art of improvisation. "We must certainly imagine," writes Madelyn Gutwirth of Staël, "there was some intent on her part to transmute her own conversational genius into Corinne's art, that of improvisation" (191). An art without preparation or reflection, improvisation is the inspired speech of a performer who speaks "à la dictée du moment." A description of the young Staël further illustrates the pervasiveness of this view of the female writer: "elle est la prêtresse la plus célèbre d'Apollon ... que de nuances dans les accents de sa voix! quel accord parfait entre la pensée et l'expression" (Count Hippolyte de Guilbert qtd. in Vallois 12). Staël's genius for conversation is depicted in terms of the possessed utterance of Apollo's priestess at Delphi, and is praiseworthy for the perfect unity of thought and bodily expression. When applied to writing, however, this conversational style is devalued, as in Buffon's *Discours sur le style*: "Ceux qui écrivent comme ils parlent, quoiqu'ils parlent très bien, écrivent mal" (21).<sup>3</sup> Conversational writing is viewed as flowing without conscience, without reason, as if by accident. "Si nous disons quelque chose de bien, c'est comme des fous ou des inspirés, par hasard," laments Rameau's nephew ironically. "Il n'y a que vous autres qui vous entendiez" (Diderot, *Neveu* 20). Apparently only men of letters can have genius and self-presence, achieving their style through knowledge and intellect; lunatics and women, on the other hand, produce "par hasard." It is furthermore for "vous autres" to determine the meaning of the latter's utterance, the value of their art, much the way exegeti existed to interpret the sibylline prophecies.

"Jamais un homme ne s'est assis, à Delphes, sur le sacré trépied," Diderot writes in *Sur les femmes*.

Le rôle de Pythie ne convient qu'à une femme. Il n'y a qu'une tête de femme qui puisse s'exalter au point de pressentir sérieusement l'approche d'un dieu, de s'agiter, de s'écheveler, d'écumer, de s'écrier: *Je le sens, je le sens, le voilà le dieu*, et d'en trouver le vrai discours. (252-253)

Diderot casts woman into the sublime because, he says, she is without measure ("s'étend sans mesure" [252]) and without reason. Woman is so different from man ("organisé[e] tout au contraire de nous" [252]) that there is nothing but difference, an idea which recalls Rousseau's claim in book five of *Emile* that woman's sexuality is everything in her and thus she shares nothing with man. Woman alone has the capacity to feel the coming of a god, an oracle which speaks through her, and which she serves with her body.

The words, "Je le sens, je le sens, le voilà le dieu," quoted by Diderot in the passage above, are those spoken by the Sibyl in book six of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Like the ancients he invokes, Diderot locates the capacity to receive divination in the womb:

La femme porte au-dedans d'elle-même un organe susceptible de spasmes terribles, disposant d'elle, et suscitant dans son imagination des fantômes de toute espèce. C'est dans le délire hystérique qu'elle revient sur le passé, qu'elle s'élançe dans l'avenir, que tous les temps lui sont présents. C'est de l'organe propre à son sexe que partent toutes ses idées extraordinaires.... Rien de plus contigu que l'extase, la vision, la prophétie, la révélation, la poésie fougueuse et l'hystérisme. (*Sur les femmes* 255)

The uterus is the source of prophetic ecstasy and poetic creation, and thus allows women a capacity for discursive insight not accessible to men. This feminine capacity, however, is marked by malady: *le délire hystérique*. Hysteria, as early as Hippocrates, was thought to be the result of "the wandering womb" which traveled within the female body. Attributed to supernatural causes and associated with witchcraft and possession in the Middle Ages, hysteria was later viewed in the Renaissance as a physical, rather than spiritual, condition. During the Enlightenment, hysteria became known as a disorder of the nervous system rather than the



uterus, and remained so throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Although Diderot was informed by medical experts of his time who refuted Hippocratic myths, he and his contemporaries continued to look upon hysterical manifestations with fascination and fear. "La femme dominée par l'hystérisme éprouve je ne sais quoi d'inferral ou de céleste," he writes in *Sur les femmes*. "Quelquefois, elle m'a fait frissonner. C'est dans la fureur de la bête féroce qui fait partie d'elle-même que, je l'ai vue, que je l'ai entendue. Comme elle sentait! comme elle s'exprimait! Ce qu'elle disait n'était point d'une mortelle" (256). This ecstasy, either religious or poetic, leads to a decentered utterance which propulses her outside of herself, and outside of the human.<sup>5</sup> Beast or angel, woman's utterance is viewed as an irrational and uncontrolled outburst of language, somewhere between the grotesque and the sublime.<sup>6</sup> A pointed critique of the excessive religious lifestyle wherein certain privations lead to these hysteric states, Diderot indicates Mme de Guillon [Guyon] and Saint Teresa of Avila, two women renowned for their ecstatic visions, as models of female genius. For these women, the womb does not create children, rather it creates phantoms which haunt and inhabit them (a notion which recalls the line in Mary Shelley's preface to *Frankenstein*, "I could not so easily get rid of my phantom; still it haunted me" [9]). The poet and mystic are joined by their transports and cast into the sublime as that which exceeds or transgresses (as lack or excess) the borders of the rational. Woman is the bookend that constitutes male reason without being constituted by it herself.

Diderot's discussion of female genius/hysteria presupposes as its horizon a fixed view of both reason and masculinity. The Enlightenment order, which links women to superstition and irrationality, articulates femininity—and more specifically, female sexuality—as aberrant and, at times, inhuman.<sup>7</sup> Women are situated outside, or at the extremes of, male reason and are thus either excluded from any potential for genius (this is Rousseau's claim that "les femmes ... n'ont aucun génie" in his *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* [247n2]) or their potential for genius is defined as different (and necessarily so in view of woman's maternal role). And yet Diderot concedes to say that when women have genius, it is more original than in men ("Quand elles ont du génie, je leur en crois l'empreinte plus originale qu'en nous" [*Sur les femmes* 262]). Women are capable of either hysteria or pure poetic

genius, the two polar ends of reason, and of little, if anything, in between. This pervasive gendering of the possibilities of and for genius informs the portrayal of women writers, real and fictional, from the late eighteenth century onward. It will be useful at this point to take a cursory look at the classical sources to which Diderot and Staël allude in their representations of the woman of genius.

The philosophical theory of inspiration took two divergent paths in the ancient world: prophetic utterance was held to come either from the soul of the ecstatic raised to abnormal powers or from a wholly different personality which had temporarily possessed the soul of the ecstatic, and spoken through his or her lips. Although the ancients accepted this possibility of divine inspiration, they also recognized that what appeared to be divination could merely be the manifestations of insanity. In his essay entitled *The Sacred Disease*—written at the height of rationalism in fifth-century Athens—Hippocrates berates the ignorant and often profit-motivated practice of passing mental disease off as prophecy. He couples inspiration with its look-alike, madness, and presents it in opposition to reason, science and the established order (Bevan 138-139). In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates discusses poetic inspiration in similar terms when he says that poets and their interpreters are "not in their senses," but "a poet is ... never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him" (533e). He disputes the possibility of poetry being art because art, he says, is not dependent upon the emotions but belongs to the realm of knowledge. Poetry on the other hand is inspiration, not knowledge. "We call it being 'possessed'" (536a). Some of the Greek words used to connote a state of possession, *epipnoi* and *ekstasis*, also indicate a state of madness or folly. A familiar topos, one Diderot invokes in *Le Neveu de Rameau* ("les hommes de génie sont communément singuliers, ou comme dit le proverbe, qu'il n'y a point de grand esprit sans un grain de folie" [18]), the link of genius and folly becomes central to the representation of female genius as aberrant or hysterical (in the sense of possession rather than self-possession). It is significant, for instance, that Hippocrates was also the first to coin the term *hysteria*, a word which locates the source of disease in the womb, or *hys*. Edward Bevan explains in *Sibyls and Seers* that "the principal material means by which the oracular ecstasy at Delphi was believed by the Greeks to be

induced was a kind of gas or vapour which, it was asserted, rose from a fissure in the ground beneath the Pythia and entered her womb" (157).<sup>8</sup> The womb is thus the organ of the Sibyl's prophetic powers. It is not only the receptacle of divination ("le vrai discours") which leads to inspired discourse—either spoken or written verse (usually Greek hexameter!)—but is also the potential source of disease, hysteria.

The words of Virgil's Sibyl, which Diderot cites in *Sur les femmes*, occur in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* when the Cumaen Sibyl foretells Aeneas's future: first she senses the god approaching, "Deus, ecce deus!" (6.46), then as he nears, she falls into a paroxysm. The Sibyl struggles against the god in an agonized effort to rid herself of him. "The prophetess, not yet able to endure Apollo, raves in the cavern, swollen in stature, striving to throw off the God from her breast; he all the more exercises her frenzied mouth, quelling her wild heart, and fashions her by pressure" (6.77-80). The extremely violent and sexual nature of the possession in this passage is remarkable, not only because the Sibyl is the property of the god, relegated to his shrine to use as he likes, but because the god's physical presence inside her body (in the form of a vapor that enters her vagina and lodges in the womb) has the quality of penetration and insemination, if not rape. The Sibyl is presented as a vanquished animal, molded by the force of a god who animates her body. Yet what is also notable is that the Sibyl retains her consciousness separate from Apollo's throughout. Like Cassandra, she is inspired and possessed by the god, but not completely one with him.<sup>9</sup>

The sexual valence is also present in other versions of the tale from antiquity. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, for instance, the Sibyl explains to Aeneas that, though she is not a goddess, she has been offered immortality if she yields her virginity to Apollo. The god uses her body for oracles yet, because she refuses him, she remains a virgin. Similarly, Cassandra learns the secrets of prophecy from Apollo because he is attracted by her beauty. However, because she rejects his advances, he lays upon her the curse that her prophecies will never be believed. Thus the price she pays for her chastity is the appearance of madness, and he retains access to her body (14.130). Spiritual and physical possession are thus nearly allied in the classical tradition; the one is often associated and portrayed in terms of the other. The pervasively sexual nature of



the dynamic draws our attention to two issues in regard to later representations of, and allusions to, the Sibyl: the classical model presents the female body as vehicle for male writing, and portrays prophetic ecstasy in terms of sexual possession and sexual ecstasy.

For Diderot, genius is not characterized by divine inspiration or any other supernatural cause; rather, for him it is natural, a "gift of nature," a conception which differs significantly from Plato's notion of *daimonion*. In the Greek context, Hesiodic daimones are essentially spirits mediating between gods and men. Following the Greek sources, Roman religion posits that every man has a genius, or a guardian spirit, who has charge of his destiny. Ken Frieden informs us in *Genius and Monologue* that until the mid-eighteenth century "genius" runs parallel to the German *Geist* and retains traces of its Latin heritage: all individuals are believed to have a genius (spirit or mind) of some sort (66).<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the 1750s, however, an outpouring of theoretical writings suggests that the inspired person need not have a genius but rather has genius or is a genius. Mythical ideas of genius as the mediator between gods and men, *daimon*, cede in the eighteenth century to the popular call for original creation. Although artistic invention is seen as displacing divine inspiration at this time, transcendent ideas continue to guide the modern notions of genius. Ancient mythology, as Frieden suggests, has not disappeared but has been turned inward. The Enlightenment contested all figures of manifest divinity, but nonetheless retained its tropes. This internalization of mythological figures is evident in expressions like that of British writer, Edward Young, who described genius as "that god within" (qtd. in Frieden 66). Genius no longer descends to man but rises within him. It appears as both transcendent and immanent spirit by virtue of the fact that the internalization of tropes transforms the mythical figure of genius (Roman divinity) into a category of modern psychology. What Frieden fails to address, however, is the fact that genius is also gendered at this transformational moment. The mythical figure associated with female genius, the Sibyl, is internalized, or introjected, as a category of modern female psychology and pathology. The discursive mark of this internalization, as we have seen above, is conversation and the conversational style associated with women's writing.<sup>11</sup>

The interiorization and psychologization of classical tropes of genius is explicitly performed in Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne*,

considered "*the book of the woman genius.*" (Ellen Moers qtd. in Heller 213). *Corinne* presents the defeat of a woman of genius by the restrictive forces of narrow social convention and expectation. *Corinne* differs, however, from standard plots in which an individual's potential is thwarted by social constraint because the eponymous heroine has already fulfilled her genius when the book opens: the reader first encounters Corinne as she is being crowned poet laureate at the Capitol in Rome. What is striking in the first description of Staël's heroine is the allusions to classical Greek mythology: "Elle étoit vêtue comme la sibylle du Dominiquin ... elle donnoit à la fois l'idée d'une prêtresse d'Apollon, qui s'avançoit vers le temple du Soleil" (1:45-46).<sup>12</sup> It is not by chance that Staël's heroine evokes the image of an inspired and possessed woman. A footnote in the Goldberger translation informs us that when improvisatrices like Corinne performed, it was believed "a god was in them and spoke through them" (421n1). It is fruitful to consider Corinne—the oracular woman, "la sibylle triomphante" (*Corinne* 1:47), inhabited by external voices—as an allegory for Staël's own performance as a writer. Indeed Staël identified herself with the figure of the Sibyl when she represented the woman of genius, Corinne, as sibylline. In the frontispiece to the 1844 *Œuvres Complètes*, after a painting by François Gérard, Staël is portrayed in the guise of Domenicho's sibyl. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's portrait of her as Corinne also takes as its model Domenicho's sibyl.

The oracular overtones bring to mind the writing strategies of French feminism: the poetic language of Kristeva, the *parler-femme* of Luce Irigaray and the *écriture féminine* of Cixous. The *écrivaine*, as oracle or diviner, voices feminine experiences relegated by patriarchy to the margins of discourse. Writing is a medium in both senses of the term: an encoded method of communication and a conduit through which "unincorporated" voices may speak. The *écrivaine* can elude patriarchal discourse through a process that echos oracular ecstasy: proceeding from a sublimation of the ego, followed by an attentiveness to the erotic rhythms of the unconscious. Cixous remarks (in a way that echos Shelley and Brontë) that "what is going to write itself comes from long before me, me [moi] being nothing but the bodily medium which formalizes and transcribes that which is dictated to me" (qtd. in Conley 146). She does not take personal credit for her *écriture*, but admits her debt to some oneiric voice outside herself. The source of this voice,

Cixous claims, is the voice of the ideal mother. Cixous suggests that the *écrivaine* assumes the role of spokesperson for this maternal voice in order to become like a sibyl. Certainly it is when Corinne reclaims her "mother tongue" that her artistic voice flourishes. Despite its essentialist claims for an *écriture féminine*, Cixous's approach raises the interesting questions of maternal legacy and the female author's relationship to the patriarchal order. It is interesting to note that, historically, the sibyls were "safely officialized" by the government of ancient Greece. "Oracular inspiration was canalized," explains Bevan, "for the Greek states, at the great shrines" (137). The oracular seat was regulated by the state and served as the vehicle of ideological reproduction. Marginalized and aberrant as the sibyl's oracles were, they were never outside the dominant discourse they reproduced. What this suggests is that the oracular writing of the "maternal voice" cannot in fact elude patriarchal discourse, as Cixous avers, but is a marginal voice always already regulated by it. Moreover, the "maternal voice" she describes can itself be seen as the internalized trope of the Sibyl inherited from Enlightenment discourse on female genius: "that god[dess] within" which dictates a writing. The task at hand is to reveal how this internalized mythological figure is rewritten, how possession is rescripted in *Corinne* and how Staël thereby negotiates a crucial place for women within the writing of genius.

The voyage of Oswald and Corinne to Naples, and their excursion to the edge of Vesuvius, recalls that of Aeneas, who, accompanied by the Cumaen prophetess, descends into Hell. The "Improvisation de Corinne dans la Campagne de Naples" explicitly invokes the Virgilian myth: "La ville de Cumes, l'antre de la Sybille, le temple d'Apollon, étoient sur cette hauteur. Voici le bois où fut cueilli le rameau d'or. La terre de l'Énéide vous entoure; et les fictions consacrées par le génie, sont devenues des souvenirs dont on cherche encore les traces" (2:72). Her language gestures toward an internalizing of fictions mediated by genius, similar to Frieden's discussion of the introjection of mythological figures into modern psychology. Furthermore, the similarity of Oswald and Aeneas's quest goes deeper than first appears: Aeneas descends into Hell in order to seek the counsel of his father and learns that his only option is to leave Dido. In *Corinne*, it is also at the edge of the volcano that Oswald remembers his father's words of

wisdom and decides to leave Corinne. The difference here is that Corinne, as Deborah Heller has pointed out, is both the sibyl that guides Oswald to his father and the lover he must abandon.<sup>13</sup> By making her both Sibyl and Dido, Staël expands the definition of the woman of genius to include both the public role of Sibyl and the romantic heroine, both duty and love. Corinne's many negotiations of public and private spheres throughout the novel entail a necessary conflict of two rights, of two inherited but irreconcilable traditions. The reader is confronted with the conflict between Corinne's increasing dependence on Oswald and the necessary independence of spirit required for her artistic creativity. This latter conflict is in part formulated along national lines. Corinne needs the freedom and public acclaim afforded her in Italy in order to be creative.

The linking of genius and nation—already present in the title, *Corinne, ou, l'Italie*—was a convention current in Staël's day. The notion that context determines identity and possibility, that genius is dependent on socio-historical circumstances, is a reiteration of Diderot's discussion of genius in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Diderot, similar to Machiavelli, argues that a particular age produces genius by providing favorable conditions for its flowering. In turn, "les hommes de génie ... feront l'honneur des peuples chez lesquels ils auront existé" (Diderot, *Neveu* 18). This is certainly true of Corinne, of whom Prince Castel-Forte says, "[n]ous sommes fiers de son génie; nous disons aux étrangers: 'Regardez-la, c'est l'image de notre belle Italie'" (1:52). The fact that she is a woman, however, problematizes the formulation. England is presented as the land of patriarchy, a country "où les institutions politiques donnent aux hommes des occasions honorables d'agir et de se montrer," but where "les femmes doivent rester dans l'ombre" (*Corinne* 2:184). Corinne cannot live happily in England because, as Diderot explains, men and women of genius "ne savent ce que c'est d'être citoyens, pères, mères, frères, parents, amis" (*Neveu* 16). Italy represents the "nation libérale, qui ne banissez point les femmes de son temple ... vous qui toujours applaudissez à l'essor du génie" (*Corinne* 2:298); its topology of ruins symbolizes a patriarchy in ruins. The very possibility of Corinne's living a life in the public eye is dependent on her renunciation of the father's name, the paternal home and the fatherland.



The necessary link of Corinne's genius with Italy is made explicit in the letter Oswald's father addresses to her father regarding the marriage of their children: "[D]e talents si rares doivent nécessairement exciter le désir de les développer . . . elle entraîneroit nécessairement mon fils hors de l'Angleterre, car une telle femme ne peut y être heureuse; et l'Italie seule lui convient" (2:184). There is a marked fatality in the utter irreconcilability of her love for Oswald (and the fact that Corinne has never found love with an Italian). Like Aeneas, Oswald chooses duty over love, yet this duty also includes the romantic love he feels for Lucille. Corinne, too, chooses filial duty when she asks for "la bénédiction paternelle" for Lucille and herself: "[E]xaucez-la, mon père, et pour l'autre de vos enfans, une mort douce et tranquille" (2:219). This choice of duty allows Corinne to acquiesce to the paternal order at the same time that she excludes herself from it. Corinne rewrites the binaries to accommodate her problematic position in society, it suggests that women, and specifically the woman of genius, cannot be contained within the boundaries erected by male society. The woman of genius represents a destabilizing force, an excess that spills over: a characterization we have encountered in Diderot's *Sur les femmes*.<sup>14</sup> Like her literary forebear, the Princesse de Clèves, Corinne foresees no hope in marriage to Oswald, nor happiness from her art alone, and thus withdraws from society, from marriage, and ultimately from life. She resists circulation within the male economy—"resist[s] possession," to recall Nancy Miller's expression—in order to come into self-possession, in order to avoid continued mediation through her relation to men (42).

Corinne enacts a further rewriting of genius in the final scenes of the novel in which she passes on her talents to Juliette, her sister's daughter with Oswald. Although Corinne has ceased to perform her improvisations, her voice is passed on: the repressed maternal legacy continues in Juliette: "La pauvre Corinne, dans son état de foiblesse et de dépérissement, se donnoit une peine extrême pour l'instruire et lui communiquer tous ses talents comme un héritage qu'elle se plaisoit à lui léguer de son vivant" (2:292). Corinne teaches Juliette to nurture "tous ses talents"—lute-playing, singing, and Italian (the mother tongue)—thereby keeping the memory of Corinne alive to Oswald. Corinne acts the part of a classical Roman genius, a tutelary spirit, who has the destiny of Juliette (and Oswald) in her hands. Although it is a tempered form



of genius she passes on—in which pleasing is key—the crux of the transformation is in the nature of the legacy. Most of what passes between Juliette and Corinne occurs behind closed doors (a space coded as feminine) and outside the narrative space. Like a sibyl emitting mysterious messages, Corinne's legacy is constructed as an abundant and unstoppable excess that, not contained by death, must be passed on. Akin to the conversational style of women writers, Corinne's heritage reflects a verbal, somatic form of "writing" which affords the passage from conversation into the conversational style (improvisation)—"de la conversation dans le style conversationnel" (Diderot, *Sur les femmes* 262). The medium for this writing of the feminine legacy is Juliette's body.

Where Diderot claims that woman is always possessed—by lovers, natural powers, or by supernatural powers—Staël here presents the woman of genius as self-possessed. Staël undermines the essentializing discourse of the Enlightenment, and of French feminism, and opens the way for an understanding of female authorship and genius that is not limited by myths of the natural. Through a consideration of the classical and pathological discourses inflecting eighteenth-century writing on genius, we can see how genius is constructed along gender lines at the moment it takes its modern introjected form as a gift of nature. The conversational style Staël embodies reflects this introjection of classical myth, as it rewrites it; it also points to a transformation of genius in the direction of modernity.

*Cecilia Feilla is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at New York University.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richardson and Marivaux reestablished male authority and authorship in the novel by writing as women. Female subjectivity and authorship, in the character of the writing woman (such as Pamela, Clarissa or the Marianne), is a male construction, a character created by male writing.

<sup>2</sup> In *Sur les femmes* Diderot speaks of male conventionality as substantive, a history of thought that builds upon itself over time. Women are deemed incapable of this, as they are "toujours à la dictée du moment" (261). I argue that Staël's conversational style is substantive and follows/

creates certain discursive conventions (and thus has both a history and a future).

<sup>3</sup> Buffon's notion that "[l]es idées seules forment le fond du style" (28) further corroborates Diderot's claim that woman lacks style because she lacks reason.

<sup>4</sup> Sources for the history of hysteria include Logan and Veith.

<sup>5</sup> According to Diderot, the female orgasm wanders through the woman's body ("elle s'égaré"), but is not expelled. It is epileptic, phantom-like, excessive; it also reflects the "wandering womb" of hysteria.

<sup>6</sup> The aesthetic categories Diderot presents suggest the uncanny.

<sup>7</sup> Diderot links women to the hysterical fury of revolutionary masses, grafting his gender anxiety onto class instability. He associates men, on the other hand, with the *peuple*, the organized and military corps. He furthermore appeals to the figure of woman as contagion and metonymy: "Les femmes sont sujettes à une férocité épidémique: l'exemple d'une seule entraîne une multitude; il n'y a que la première qui soit criminelle, les autres sont malades" (*Sur les femmes* 257). It is not surprising, within such a rhetoric of pathology, that the only one to calm woman successfully is the physician: "Cette imagination fougueuse, cet esprit qu'on croirait incoercible, un mot suffit pour l'abattre. Un médecin dit aux femmes de Bordeaux, tourmentées de vapeurs effrayantes, qu'elles sont menacées du mal caduc; et les voilà guéries. Un médecin secoue un fer ardent aux yeux d'une troupe de jeunes filles épileptiques; et les voilà guéries" (*Sur les femmes* 257). The physician represents science and morality, the new figure of authority. The treatment of hysteria anterior to Freud's studies was already being articulated as the triumph of secular reason over superstition.

<sup>8</sup> Bevan refers to John Chrysostom in I Corinthians 34. The induction of the ecstatic state was commonly believed to be triggered by the entrance of some material object into the body, as when the spirit of Bacchus possesses us through the drinking of wine. Plato also sought a physiological theory for inspiration in his *Timaeus* in which he locates the seat of divination in the liver, the lower appetitive part of the soul: "God has given the art of divination not to the wisdom, but to the foolishness of man. No man, when in his wits, attains prophetic truth and inspiration, but when he receives the inspired word, either his intelligence is enthralled in sleep or he is demented by some distemper or possession" (71a-72b). Plato associates inspiration with a purely physical state and thus devoid of reason. I argue that when the choice of organ is gender-specific, it automatically becomes a vehicle for ideology.

<sup>9</sup> Bevan and Dronke are my sources for the ancient perceptions of sibyls.

<sup>10</sup> Frieden's insightful discussion of genius informs this piece throughout, especially the etymological transformation of genius from Greek to modern culture.

<sup>11</sup> This can be related to the "talking cure," Freud's psychoanalytic method for treating hysteria.

<sup>12</sup> Page references to Staël's *Corinne* refer to the French edition in the Works Cited. Also of interest in the first description of *Corinne* is the use of *encens*, a French term meaning both flattery and incense. "Elle reçoit l'encens de tout le monde, mais elle n'accepte à personne une préférence décidée" (44). *Corinne* is inspired by the regard and praise, *l'encens*, of her public rather than by the odorous vapor, *l'encens*, associated with the Pythia. The role of the inspired woman is motivated in her case by *amour-propre* and glory rather than duty to a male divinity.

<sup>13</sup> Heller discusses *Corinne's* dilemma in terms of two inherited but irreconcilable literary traditions, romance and epic.

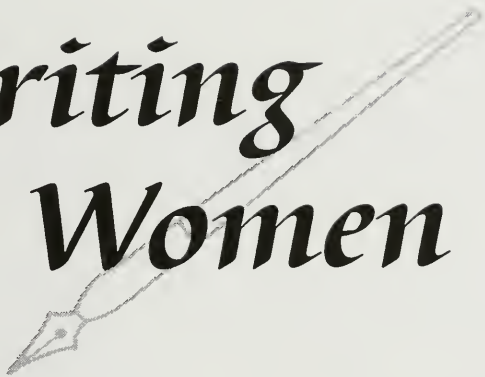
<sup>14</sup> In *Sur les femmes*, women are presented as not honoring social lines, moving back and forth across these borders as the situation changes: "Dans les temps de révolution, la curiosité les prostitue aux chefs de parti" (253).

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# *Writing Women*



**PAROLES GELEES**

UCLA French Studies

Volume 15.1 1997





# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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*Paroles Gelées* was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Funds for this project are generously provided by the UCLA Graduate Students' Association.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

*Paroles Gelées*  
 UCLA Department of French  
 2326 Murphy Hall  
 Box 951550  
 Los Angeles, California 90095-1550  
 (310) 825-1145  
 gelees@humnet.ucla.edu

Subscription price (per issue):      \$10 for individuals  
    \$12 for institutions  
    \$14 for international subscriptions

Back issues available for \$7 domestic, \$12 international each. For a listing, see our home page at <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/parolesgelees/>.

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 ISSN 1094-7294

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