



Culture, Conversations, and Social Networks in 18th & 19th Century Italy:

Madame de Staël's Italian Influence

Colson Gantt and Prof. Irene Zanini-Cordi, College of Arts and Sciences

Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida



Abstract

Salons and *salonnières* of the 18th century can teach us a lot about our world today when examined through the lens of Social Network Theory. Salons were a place where people could gather to discuss political, social, and intellectual knowledge with peers. This project examines how Parisian salons of the second half of the 18th century had an influence on the arts, literature, and culture of Italian salons. Salons were born in Renaissance Italian courts but many of the most influential ones of the 18th century were established in Paris. Madame de Staël was one of the most well-known French *salonnières* and writers of the period, as she paved the way for women to have a voice in society through her formidable example. This project explores how her travel diaries, letters, and books described Italian culture from an outsider's perspective as she examined that society with the (sometimes biased) lens of a French/Parisian woman looking at a foreign culture. Novels such as *Delphine* (1802), *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), and some of her accounts of her travels across Europe reveal a shifting of her understanding of women's agency and their position in society. The impact of Madame de Staël's fame and works, and of Parisian salons on Italian culture offers an explanation of certain Enlightenment and pre-Romantic literary and political ideas that developed in Italy during the last part of the 18th century.

Background

- For many 18th century women, attending a salon was a formative experience, as they were one of the few places where they could socialize, form opinions about the world and, to some extent, express their own ideas. They were trend-setting places where women had a reigning role.
- Madame de Staël was the daughter of Jacques Necker, the finance minister for Louis XVI and her mother, Suzanne Curchod was a prominent French salonnière. Madame de Staël's parents taught her how to wield power through sociability and the creation of resilient social networks.
- While Paris was the center of refined sociability, during the age of the Grand Tour, Italy was the destination to learn about the greatness of past civilizations, as De Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* demonstrates.

Methods

- I performed a literary review of primary and secondary sources to understand French culture's influence on Italian culture during the 18th and 19th centuries.
- I focused on Madame de Staël's *Delphine* and *Corinne ou l'Italie* which portray through her characters some of her own personal opinions and experiences during her Italian travels.
- I studied Madame de Staël's French and Swiss salons to understand the inner workings of salons.
- I closely read and analyzed secondary sources on French and Italian salons and their connection to Social Network Theory.



Madame de Staël's Swiss salon by Philibert-Louis Debucourt



Madame de Staël as Corinne by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun



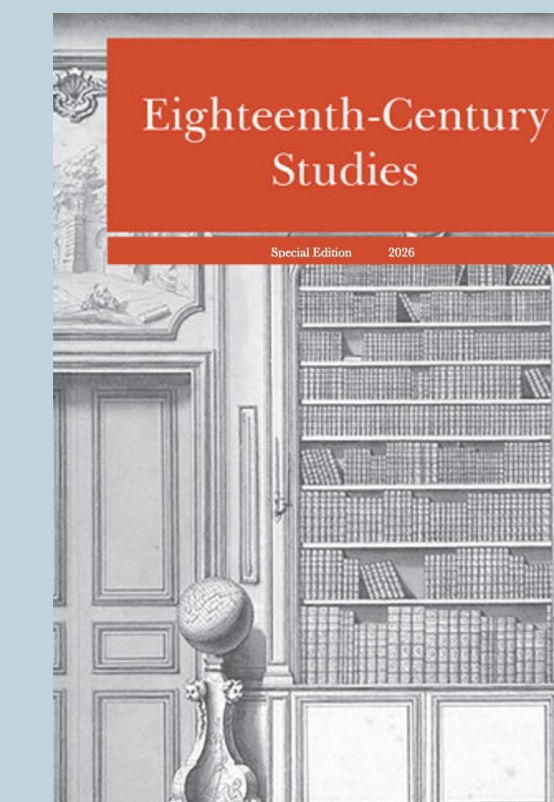
Madame de Staël by Marie-Éléonore Godegroid



Madame de Staël's Coppet Switzerland château

Selected Bibliography

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Content Analysis

- Madame de Staël's literary salons had a major influence on the arts, literature, and culture of late 18th century Europe. Due to her fame, guests would travel from different areas to visit her. Her international guests contributed broader insight and intercultural views as well as diverse artistic and political perspectives.
- *Delphine* is Madame de Staël's first publication. Delphine's story takes place during the French Revolution. Despite the author's denial of it being a political novel, its anti-Napoleonic ideas were a major cause of her exile from France in 1803, which led to the establishment of her politically engaged Swiss salon in Coppet.
- *Corinne ou l'Italie*, Madame de Staël's most famous novel, also had an important influence on Italian culture. The story provides detailed descriptions of Corinne and Lord Nelvil's travels around Italy from a French perspective. Corinne, an Italian woman improviser, acts as a stand-in for De Staël in her novel. In the mind of the reader, Corinne and Madame de Staël become the same person. The novel describes famous monuments, daily Italian life, politics, and literature with the mindset of "grand tourists." It became a bestseller all over Europe and helped shape a particular vision of Italy, while also influencing Italians' opinions.

Conclusions

- Through her writings, Madame de Staël paved the way for women to have a voice in the literary and political world. She became a symbol of what is possible for women to achieve. While *Delphine* points to the inequalities that women faced during the French revolution, *Corinne ou l'Italie* exemplifies the author's ideas of a just and progressive female role in society.
- The character of Corinne, while inspired by celebrated Italian women-improvisers, can be read somewhat as a portrayal of the authors' ideas, talents, lifestyle, and aspirations. Madame de Staël was a unique writer as she used the characters in her story to convey her own political and cultural agenda, and to empower women.
- My research highlights how Madame de Staël's Parisian salons had an influence on Italian culture as well as Italian salons.
- Madame de Staël's salons, and other successful salons in general, fostered a cross-pollination of sorts between cultures. Salons helped the spread of new ideas which led to great bounds in intellectual development. Instead of an idea being stuck in its place of origin, thanks to the salons' social and intellectual networks, it reached other cultures where people could expand upon it with a new lens and reach novel results.
- I have recorded a podcast to work in tandem with this poster research. It focuses on the more personal side of Madame de Staël. It includes a discussion of her social life and her day-to-day lifestyle.
- I will integrate the experience gained while conducting this research in a scholarly article on pedagogics that has already been accepted for publication in a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* focusing on women. "Conversations that Shape Identity: What 18th-Century Italian *Salonnières* Can Teach Modern Students," will be written in collaboration with my UROP teammates and Prof. Zanini-Cordi.