

Liberty

The Lives and Times of Six Women
in Revolutionary France



Lucy Moore

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Women in Revolutionary France**

«HarperCollins»

Moore L.

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The bestselling author of 'Maharanis' recreates the lives of six remarkable women who, in a time of violent revolution, leapt at the chance to exercise their considerable charm, intelligence and acumen, and make their mark on history. Germaine de Stael was an intellectual and an aristocrat, equally obsessed by politics and love affairs, who is said to have helped write the 1791 Constitution. Her fellow salonnière, Mme Roland, was a bourgeois housewife who became a fervent and influential revolutionary, until Robespierre's regime sent her to the guillotine. While female intellectuals sipped wine in their salons, their working class counterparts patrolled the streets of Paris with pistols in their belts. Theroigne de Mericourt was an ill-treated mistress when she fell in love with revolutionary ideals and became an ardent anti-royalist until a mob beating by 'sans-culottes' ended her activism. The mob in question was made up of members of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, whose founder, Pauline Leon, agitated for women's rights. After the sans-culottes came the 'sans-chemises' – the glamorous (often skimpily clad) merveilleuses. Decadent Theresia Tallien combined sexual license with the secular amorality of the new Republic and reportedly helped engineer Robespierre's downfall. Her only rival for beauty was Juliette Recamier, whose elegance made her salons the most sought-after in Paris. When she refused Napoleon's advances she was exiled from the city until his fall. Writing with vigour and passion, Lucy Moore reanimates these witty salonnières, fervent citoyennes and glittering merveilleuses to illuminate the brief, hopeful period in which the Revolution seemed to offer them the freedom they craved – and the ways in which it failed.

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for Justin

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From my earliest days I had a feeling
that adventures lay in store for me.

Lucy de la Tour du Pin

INTRODUCTION CITOYENNES

The women have certainly had a considerable share in the French revolution: for, whatever the imperious lords of the creation may fancy, the most important events which take place in this world depend a little on our influence; and we often act in human affairs like those secret springs in mechanism, by which, though invisible, great movements are regulated.

HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY—France's first constitutional government—met between October 1789 and September 1792 in the covered riding-school of the Tuileries palace in Paris. The long, narrow *manège* [see 'Words and Phrases' p. 437] had been remodelled to accommodate the deputies with a classical austerity intended to correspond to the gravity of their new political responsibilities.

Although women did not possess the rights either of voting or of holding office, they were permitted into the hall's galleries to observe and marvel at the workings of the administration and the debates on France's future. On any given day in the spring of 1791, four women might have been sitting among the onlookers gathered to watch the Assembly's proceedings.

The first was a dark-haired, red-faced woman of twenty-five, looking perennially dishevelled despite her expensive, extravagantly décolleté dress. As she watched the men below her debate, it was clear that several of them were her friends and that she was well acquainted with every argument they put forth. She leaned eagerly forward to catch every word, fiddling distractedly with a twisted scrap of paper that showed off her fine hands.

This was Germaine de Staël, one of the richest women in Europe, daughter of Louis XVI's former Finance Minister Jacques Necker [see 'Secondary Figures' p. 425], whose dazzling intelligence never quite consoled her for not being beautiful. She was at the heart of a group of progressive aristocrats she believed would shape a new, reformed France ruled by a constitutional monarchy; her centrist coterie included the hero of the American War of Independence, the marquis de Lafayette, toeing an uneasy line between his liberal principles and his loyalty to the king.

Her critics found her over-bearing and even her friends called her self-centred, but such was the power of Germaine's intellect and conversation that within half an hour of meeting her most people, despite themselves, were utterly captivated. 'I know of no woman, nor indeed any man, more convinced of his or her own personal superiority over every other person,' wrote one of her lovers, Benjamin Constant, 'or who allows this conviction to weigh less heavily on others.'

Staël, as a novelist, social commentator and literary theorist, left behind a wealth of source material that, unusually, spans the entire period before, during and after the revolution. She is not only the best and most consistently documented of this book's six women, in terms of her own letters and of being mentioned in other people's correspondence and memoirs, but also the one who wrote the most eloquently about the revolution itself.

Germaine had little time for other women, but one acquaintance who might have been sitting nearby was the delectable Thérésia de Fontenay. Just eighteen years old, already married for four years and the mother of a little boy, tender-hearted Thérésia was the toast of Parisian society; the only thing she enjoyed more than pleasure was attention. She would have been wearing fashionably simple, patriotic clothes—a white muslin dress with a tricolour sash fastened with a brooch made out of one of the shards of the fallen Bastille. At her side was her radical lover whose brother, a former marquis, was closely allied to the most extreme-left deputies including Maximilien Robespierre.

Manon Roland, the thirty-seven-year-old wife of a provincial civil servant, sat in another part of the gallery, well away from the world of high society. Demurely dressed, eyes downcast, her virtuous exterior concealed an ardent, rebellious heart. Drawn to Paris in 1791 by the events taking place there, she and her husband became central members of a group of middle-class republican lawyers and

journalists who included Robespierre and the progressive journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot. Unlike Thérésia de Fontenay, Manon had chafed at the old order of things. When the revolution came it was the fulfilment of all her dreams.

Manon watched the debates as keenly as Germaine, knowing the deputies speaking, and their arguments, because many of them met regularly in her drawing-room. But while Germaine would have given her guests champagne; Manon proudly served sugar-water. With her love of order, she deplored the chaos of the Assembly's sessions: the uncontrollable deputies shouted over one another to make their voices heard, preventing the business of the day from being accomplished.

Pauline Léon had no such scruples. She heckled from the galleries, shouting down moderates like Lafayette and cheering her hero Robespierre. No portrait of her survives—if one was ever made—but as a thirty-three-year-old single woman of the streets, who helped her widowed mother run the family chocolate-making business and look after her five younger brothers and sisters, it is likely that she was well made and strongly built. A fresh white handkerchief covered her hair, pinned up with a tricolour rosette, and she was wearing a blue woollen waistcoat over a white chemise, the sleeves pulled up to expose her tanned forearms; a red and white striped skirt with an apron; and wooden clogs.

Sixty-five per cent of French women of the late eighteenth century could not write their names; the illiterate would have been slightly fewer in Paris. Pauline Léon could read and write—she had been educated by her father—but she was a woman of the people and, as with most of them, it is harder to build up a rounded picture of her life because the sources concerning her are so scarce. No onlookers described her behaviour as a child; she left no diaries or letters. In a rare document produced while she was in prison in 1794, Léon testified to roaming Paris from 1789 onwards, frequenting political assemblies, demonstrating on the streets as well as ‘manifesting my love for the fatherland’. She was less forthcoming about harassing and beating up passers-by for not being good ‘patriots’—a synonym for devotion to the revolution.

A notable absence from the galleries on this imaginary afternoon was the former courtesan Théroigne de Méricourt, who before leaving Paris in the late summer of 1790 had been such a regular observer of the Assembly's sessions that she had her own seat reserved for her. She was known for always wearing a riding-habit of an austere masculine cut, either in red, black or white. Although she had intended her trademark costume to compel men to treat her as an equal rather than as a woman, by wearing it she became one of the feminine icons of the revolution.

Abandoned by a faithless lover and reviled for having lost her reputation, Théroigne was very much alone in the world. She had suffered more at the hands of men than any of the other women here, and she was the most passionate and lonely campaigner for the liberties which the revolution seemed to promise women but ultimately failed to deliver. For nineteenth-century historians the image of pretty Théroigne in her red riding-habit, her bloody sword held aloft, represented all the savage excesses of the popular revolution; but this portrait of her bore very little relation to the earnest young woman whose early hopes were so disappointed by that revolution.

Another figure completes the sextet described in this book, but in the spring of 1791 Juliette Bernard, the future Madame Récamier, was still a bourgeois schoolgirl of thirteen, absorbed in studying English, Italian, dancing and the harp.

One further feminine image appears and reappears throughout these pages: not a real woman, but a constant, ghostly presence alongside her six flesh-and-blood sisters. Throughout this period Liberty—the ideal, or hope, that inspired the revolution—was represented as a goddess and exalted, pursued, manipulated and betrayed by turns.

The world of these six women, centred on Paris, was a small and intimate one. Less than six hundred thousand people lived in the capital in 1791 and their lives touched tangentially, crossed over without pausing and sometimes intersected. Respectable Manon Roland would never have received Théroigne de Méricourt at her salon, but one of her dearest friends fell hopelessly in love with her;

Thérésia de Fontenay would not have known who Pauline Léon was, but before she met him her future husband gave a speech at a popular political club of which Léon was a member; despite the gap in their ages and backgrounds, Juliette Récamier would become one of Germaine de Staël's most intimate friends.

From the start, the revolution coloured every facet of their daily lives. It politicized everything, from clothing to modes of address to what was taught in schools to slang to food. Women, who had no direct influence over the political changes taking place around them, were intimately involved with these cultural changes; after all, they had read the same books and been inspired by the same ideas as their brothers. As the nineteenth-century historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the period leading up to the revolution, even 'women, amidst their petty household tasks, sometimes dreamed about the great problems of existence'. Many found that they were swept away by the exhilaration and optimism that infused French society, and became as absorbed by the revolution as their husbands and lovers.

The six women whose experiences form the basis of this book were each transformed by their experiences during the revolution. As Simon Schama writes in his book *Citizens*, the revolution 'had the deepest craving for heroes' embodying the abstract principles they were trying to make real. It also created heroines.

Although they came from a range of backgrounds and, like looking through different sides of a prism, each illuminates different aspects of the period—from the tomboy Pauline Léon with a brace of pistols tucked into her belt, haranguing the deputies of the National Convention, to the exquisite Juliette Récamier abandoning her inhibitions on the dance floors of the public balls during the Directory—these six women had in common courage, vitality, a youthful energy and a passion that marked the revolution as much as it marked them. Each of them, in her own way, burned to distinguish herself in the great drama unfolding in front of her.

1 SALONNIÈRE *Germaine de Staël* MAY–OCTOBER 1789

Mme de Staël's salon is more than a place where one meets for pleasure: it is a mirror in which we see reflected the image of the times.

ADAM DE CUSTINE

EVERY TUESDAY EVENING in the early years of the revolution, Germaine de Staël held a small dinner at her *hôtel* in the rue du Bac, on Paris's left bank. She invited a catholic assortment of liberal, anglophile nobles, their glamorous wives and mistresses, and ambitious young men of middling rank. 'Go hence to Mme de Staël's,' wrote Gouverneur Morris, the one-legged American envoy to Paris, in his apple-green journal in January 1791. 'I meet here the world.'

For Germaine's guests, these evenings were a chance to discuss the latest news: books, plays, affairs and, above all, politics, the shared obsession of the day. Thomas Jefferson, a frequent visitor to the rue du Bac, called Paris in 1788 a 'furnace of politics...men, women and children talk nothing else'. In the words of a foreign observer, the entire country felt 'that they were on the eve of some great revolution'. For Germaine, her salons, combining her three passions—love, Paris and power—were 'the noblest pleasure of which human nature is capable'.

'We breathed more freely, there was more air in our lungs,' she wrote of this optimistic period; 'the limitless hope of infinite happiness had gripped the nation, as it takes hold of men in their youth, with illusion and without foresight'. If her friend the marquis de Talleyrand could say that no one who had not lived before 1789 could know the true sweetness of living, then Germaine could equally truly declare that for her, nothing could compare to the exquisite flavour of those days between 1788 and 1791 when she was in love and believed a new France was being created within the four gold-embroidered walls of her drawing-room.

Germaine de Staël was twenty-three in July 1789, the month that her father Jacques Necker, on-and-off Finance Minister to Louis XVI, was sacked by the king. Louis's powers permitted him to appoint, dismiss and banish ministers at will, so there was nothing unusual in this; what was unusual this time was the response it provoked.

Necker had made himself unpopular at court by advising the king to make wide-ranging changes to his archaic administration, urging modernization (particularly of the system of taxation, which weighed most heavily on the poor) and greater accountability to the French people. He had encouraged the king to summon the Estates-General, France's only national representative assembly, for the first time since 1614 and, partly at his daughter's urging, argued that the three estates (clergy, nobles and commons, known respectively as the First, Second and Third Estates) should vote individually -thus preventing the nobles and clergy from grouping together to block the Third Estate's demands.

Hard-line royalists, who feared the changes sweeping France, were convinced Necker would betray the king to his people, and welcomed his downfall. In the royal council, two days before Necker was dismissed, the king's brother, the comte d'Artois, told the minister to his face that he ought to be hanged; on the same day, in Paris, a well dressed woman was publicly spanked for spitting on his portrait.

Necker's defiant attitude towards the king had prompted his discharge and cemented his status as a popular hero; his reputation for financial acumen was matched only by his reputation for probity. Reformers who idolized him saw his expulsion as a manifestation of outmoded arbitrary power and an unwelcome confirmation of the king's distaste for reform. They rallied to the cause of their champion.

News of Necker's dutifully silent departure from Versailles reached Paris on Sunday, 12 July. A large crowd had gathered in the Palais Royal, as it did every Sunday, to eat ices, buy caricatures, ribbons or lottery tickets, ogle scantily dressed *femmes publiques* and magic lantern shows, and listen to orators declaiming against the government. The Palais Royal, owned by the king's cousin the duc

d'Orléans, was a vast, newly built piazza surrounded by colonnaded shops, theatres and cafés. By the mid-1780s, protected from police regulation by its royal owner and encouraged by that owner's well known antipathy to the court party at Versailles, it had become a city within a city, a place where anything could be seen, said or procured, and the centre of popular opposition to royal abuses.

On that July afternoon the crowd gathered around a passionate young journalist, Camille Desmoulins, who stood on a table urging his fellow-citizens to rise up against the king's 'treachery' in sacking Necker. 'To arms, to arms,' he cried; 'and,' seizing a leafy branch from one of the chestnut trees that edged the Palais Royal, 'let us all take a green cockade, the colour of hope.' With Desmoulins carried triumphantly aloft, the shouting, clamouring, bell-ringing mob surged on to the streets to search Paris for the weapons that would transform them into an army.

The king was not unprepared for this type of rising; indeed, one of the underlying causes for the popular uproar that greeted Necker's dismissal was distrust of the troops—about a third of whom were Swiss or German soldiers rather than French—with which Louis had been quietly surrounding Paris during late June and early July as preparation for a show of force that would silence his critics for good. But the democratic germs of patriotism and reform that had infected the French people had penetrated as far as the lower ranks of the army, for so long a bastion of aristocratic privilege and tradition, and their leaders' response to the crisis was hesitant. The Palais Royal mob, by evening numbering perhaps six thousand, met a cavalry unit of the Royal-Allemands at the Place Vendôme and the Place Louis XV (later, Place de la Révolution, and still later Place de la Concorde) just to the north-west of the Tuileries palace, and, reinforced by the popular Paris-based *gardes françaises*, forced the German and Swiss soldiers, in the early hours of 13 July, to retreat from the city centre. After a day of chaos and plunder, on the 14th the people's army reached the Bastille, and the revolution received its baptism in blood.

The storming of the Bastille was by no means the first act of the revolution. Since 1787, extraordinary developments had been witnessed in government. France was a nation trembling on the brink of change. Its causes were many and varied: ideological, fiscal, constitutional, personal, economic, historical, social, cultural. 'The Revolution must be attributed to every thing, and to nothing,' wrote Germaine. 'Every year of the century led toward it by every path.' In the summer of 1789 the fateful mechanism that would exchange absolute for representative government (and back again) was already in motion. Nor was Necker's dismissal the sole cause of the Bastille's fall. But Germaine de Staël can be forgiven for thinking that her adored father—and through him, she herself—was at the heart of events.

It was no accident that green, the colour Camille Desmoulins chose as the emblem of hope in the Palais Royal, was the colour of Necker's livery—and typical of the confusion inherent in the revolution itself that it should be replaced soon after with the tricolour because it was also the livery colour of the king's unpopular brother, the comte d'Artois. The tricolour contained within it a multitude of references: red and blue for Paris, combined with white for the Bourbon dynasty; red and blue were also the colours of the popular duc d'Orléans. Like everything during this period, these colours were laden with symbolism: white for the revolutionaries' purity, blue for the heavenly ideals they were pursuing, red for the blood which was already seen as the necessary price of France's liberation. The tricolour was immediately invested with an almost mystical aura. It became a sacrosanct emblem of the new France that the revolution was creating, materially revered in bits of ribbon representing the fatherland.

Germaine had been dining with her parents in Versailles when Necker received Louis's notice on 11 July. Saying nothing, but squeezing his daughter's hand beneath the table, Necker got into his carriage with his wife as if for their regular evening drive; instead of idling round the park in Versailles, they headed straight for the border with the Low Countries. Germaine returned to Paris that night (fourteen kilometres, a carriage journey of about two hours) and found there a letter from her father informing her of his departure and advising her to go to his country house at Saint-Ouen.

Ignoring, despite herself, the crowds already gathered in the rue du Bac to hear news of Necker, she rushed to Saint-Ouen with her husband, only to find there another letter summoning them to Brussels, where they arrived on the 13th. There she found her parents, still wearing the same clothes in which they had sat down to dinner two days earlier.

After a week Necker received a courier from the king recalling him to Versailles. He deliberated for three days and then began the journey back to Paris with his wife, daughter and son-in-law. Fifteen years later, Germaine remembered how intoxicated she was by the accolades showered on her father, the bliss of basking in his popularity. Women working in the fields fell to their knees as the Neckers' coach passed by; as they entered each town, their carriage was unhitched from the horses and drawn through the streets by the inhabitants. When they reached the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, where a massive crowd was waiting to greet the man on whom their hopes for reform and prosperity rested, Germaine fainted, feeling she had 'touched the extreme limits of happiness'.

The excitement even made her write affectionately to her husband, uncharacteristically sending him in a note, soon after they returned to Paris, '*mille et mille tendresses*'. The same letter concluded, more characteristically, with a message for her father: 'Tell my father that all of France does not love or admire him as much as I do today.'

It was in this heady atmosphere that Germaine de Staël's salon became the most important in Paris. The tradition of the salon, in which an intelligent woman (never her husband) held regular 'evenings' for a circle of friends and acquaintances, was a long-established one in France and had ordained Woman, according to the Goncourt brothers a century later, as 'the governing principle, the directing reason and the commanding voice' of eighteenth-century high society. The salon may have brought women extraordinary behind-the-scenes influence; but this influence came at a price.

On the surface, salons might seem nothing more than parties attended by bored, frivolous socialites whose daily lives were governed by their toilettes—aristocratic women changed their clothes several times a day, often while receiving favoured visitors—but the details of these lives in fact reveal the social developments of the times. In an age of rigorous formality, for example, in which behaviour itself seemed bound up in whalebone stays, the ritual of the toilette provided a release, allowing people to see each other in relaxed circumstances. In an age that had almost institutionalized extramarital affairs, it also gave women the chance to display themselves to current or potential lovers beyond the citadel of their petticoats, hoops and corsets: in 1790 it was fashionable to receive friends from the luxury of one's milk-bath.

Although she was famously badly dressed, Germaine never lost the ancien régime custom of receiving visitors during her toilette, all through her life carrying on metaphysical conversations with a horde of people while one maid dressed her hair and another did her nails. Her doctor in England in 1792 was surprised to be greeted by Germaine in her bedroom wearing 'a short petticoat and a thin shirt', and astonished by her energy. She talked and wrote all day long, he reported, her green leather portable writing-desk permanently open on her knees, whether she was in bed or at dinner. Even when she gave birth there were fifteen people in her bedroom and within three days she was talking as much as ever.

Before the revolution, every different outfit served a different purpose, and each one minutely indicated the wearer's status. Wearing unsuitable clothes was an implicit rejection of the hierarchy that controlled society. Inelegant Germaine, who always showed too much flesh—even her travelling dresses had plunging necklines—was by these criteria deeply suspect. Riding-habits were worn to ride or drive in the Bois de Boulogne or go out hunting with the court; day dresses were worn to receive guests at home, to go shopping in the Palais Royal or to attend lectures in the thrilling new sciences of electricity and botany; in the evening, to attend the theatre or a court ball, three-inch heels, heavy makeup and elaborate, pomaded headdresses, snowy-white with powder and sprinkled with jewels, flowers and feathers were de rigueur. Their hair arrangements were often so tall that women had to travel crouching on the floor of their carriages.

Fluttering a fan in a certain way or placing a patch near the eye as opposed to on the cheek revealed a person's character without them having to speak. The sociologist Richard Sennett observes of this period that it is hard to imagine how people so governed by 'impersonal and abstract convention [can] be so spontaneous, so free to express themselves...their spontaneity rebukes the notion that you must lay yourself bare in order to be expressive'. Contemporaries were fully aware of this dichotomy between word and action. 'A man who placed his hand on the arm of a chair occupied by a lady would have been considered extremely rude,' wrote the comtesse de Boigne, looking back on the pre-revolutionary period of her youth, and yet language 'was free to the point of licentiousness'.

But by the mid-1780s contemporary medical and philosophical views were transforming women's fashions and habits. In 1772 one doctor described corsets as barbarous, impeding women's breathing and deforming their chests, and especially dangerous during pregnancy; he was also concerned about the moral effects they produced by displaying the bosom so prominently. His advice was echoed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, prophet of naturalness and sensibility in *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, who recommended that children wear loose clothes that would not constrict their growing bodies.

For the first time, women's clothes allowed them to breathe and eat freely: the new fashions quite literally liberated their bodies from an armour of stays, panniers and hoops at the same time as the ideological implications of the change in fashion began to liberate their behaviour. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* written in 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft declared that stiff, uncomfortable clothes, like the 'fiction' of beauty itself, were a means by which society kept women submissive and dependent. Shedding these restrictions would empower them. By this definition Germaine, who rose above her plainness (Gouverneur Morris thought she looked like a chambermaid) and paid scant attention to her dress, was already halfway to emancipation.

Perhaps the most celebrated proponent of these progressive ideas was the queen, Marie-Antoinette, who was painted by Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in 1783 in a simple white chemise dress tied at the waist with a satin sash. This seemingly innocent act raised eyebrows for a number of reasons. Chemises were muslin shifts, previously worn only in the intimacy of a toilette (or by prostitutes), so to eighteenth-century eyes Vigée-Lebrun had painted the queen in a shocking state of undress. Furthermore, for the queen herself to reject the formality of court custom—she was traditionally portrayed in carapace-like court dress—carried seditious undertones of disrespect to the traditions she represented. Finally, the *chemise de la reine* (as it came to be called) was a style anyone could afford. As Mary Robinson, the courtesan who popularized the *chemise de la reine* in England, commented, 'the duchess, and her *femme de chambre*, are dressed exactly alike'. Dress, which had once distinguished between people, was becoming dangerously democratic.

Manners, too, were changing. As with clothing, the fashion for informality initially came from the top down: in the artificial world of the salon, being able to give the impression of naturalness and ease had long been considered the highest of the social arts. 'Do not people talk in society of a man being a great actor?' asked the philosopher Denis Diderot. Just as the cut flowers in her headdress were kept fresh with tiny glass vases hidden in her hair, the salonnière achieved the sparkling effect of spontaneity in conversation through study and discipline. Every day, Mme Geoffrin, celebrated pre-revolutionary hostess to the great Enlightenment philosophers, wrote two letters (in those days an art form) to keep her brain sharp.

Germaine de Staël's favourite game was called the Boat, in which everyone present was asked who they would save from a sinking ship. She asked her first lover, Talleyrand, who he would rescue, her or his other mistress Adèle de Flauhaut. He replied that she was so talented she could extricate herself from any predicament; gentility would oblige him to save the resourceless Adèle. Another version of this story has Germaine and Talleyrand actually in a boat, talking about devotion and courage. To her question as to what he would do if she fell in, he reportedly replied, 'Ah, Madame, you must be such a good swimmer.'

Word games, jokes, debates, making up poems and proverbs and amateur theatricals were salon pastimes designed to stimulate and heighten conversation, which Germaine described as an instrument the French above all other nations liked to play, producing a sublime 'intellectual melody'. Conversation, she said, was

a certain way in which people act upon one another, a quick give-and-take of pleasure, a way of speaking as soon as one thinks, of rejoicing in oneself in the immediate present, of being applauded without making an effort, of displaying one's intelligence by every nuance of intonation, gesture and look—in short, the ability to produce at will a kind of electricity.

Naturally, Germaine herself excelled at this art: 'If I was queen,' said a friend, 'I should order Mme de Staël to talk to me always.' When she spoke, constantly fiddling with a small twig or twist of paper which the unkind said was a way of drawing attention to her fine hands, her captivated listeners forgot her scruffy clothes, red face and large frame, noticing only the beautiful expression in her eyes.

These showers of sparks, as Staël defined the words and ideas that brought a salon to life, showed the importance to French society of writers and philosophers. Salonnières acted as confidantes, editors, muses and patrons to their talented guests, corresponding with them, intriguing to have them elected to the Academy or appointed to political office and erecting statues in their honour. Women were, according to a 1788 pamphlet entitled *Advice to the Ladies*, 'the arbiters of all things... Business, honours, everything is in your hands.' These roles set a dangerous precedent by giving women powerful identities outside marriage and motherhood.

Another dangerous precedent set by the salons was the relatively open access to them. Women who wanted to have the best thinkers in Europe at their feet were unconcerned about their breeding, and willing to run the moral and political risks of being exposed to their exciting new philosophies. It was at Versailles and in the most exclusive salons in Paris that the 'bourgeois' works of Diderot, Rousseau and the artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze were celebrated.

Contemporary opinion was divided over the wisdom of women occupying such a prominent place in society. On the whole, the philosophers who frequented salons and benefited from their hostesses' efforts on their behalf were liberal-thinking, although many believed that trying to impose uniformity on men and women was to challenge nature's own distinctions. To equalize men and women, wrote the novelist Restif de la Bretonne in 1776, 'is to denature them.' Implicit in all this was the understanding that of the two sexes, the masculine was undoubtedly the superior. Diderot held that 'beauty, talents and wit' would in any circumstances captivate a man, 'but these advantages peculiar to a few women will not establish anywhere a general tyranny of the weaker sex over the robust one'.

Many reformers saw the influence women wielded as evidence of the corruption of the ancien régime. Boudoir politics, as it was called, when women manipulated their family, friends and, still worse, their lovers, to gain personal influence in the political world from which they were theoretically excluded, was held up before the revolution as one of the chief problems with the French system. Thomas Jefferson told Washington in 1788 that women's solicitations 'bid defiance to [natural] laws and regulation' and had reduced France to a 'desperate state'. The fact that women could play a role in politics at all was, for reformers of all stripes, one of the essential justifications for change.

'The influence of women, the ascendant of good company, gilded salons, appeared very terrible to those who were not admitted themselves,' conceded Germaine de Staël. While she acknowledged that ancien régime women 'were involved in everything' on behalf of their husbands, brothers and sons, she maintained they had no effect on 'enlightened and natural intelligence' like that her father possessed; in this as in everything, she believed herself an exception.

The prevailing view, propounded by the great naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, was that women, inherently more gentle and loving than men, played a valuable social role by moderating masculine energies. Germaine agreed, arguing that French women were accustomed to take the lead in conversation in their homes, which elevated and softened discussions on public affairs. This more temperate view did allow that wives and mothers were essential elements of a

civilized society, and some radical thinkers went so far as to suggest that if women were educated they would make their husbands happier and their sons more successful. Mankind would enter into 'all its vigour, all its splendour', wrote Philibert Riballier in 1779, if women could be made 'strong, robust, courageous, educated and even learned'.

Riballier's 'even learned' is crucial, because it reveals, even in works that were outwardly sympathetic to women, a belittling tone beneath the praise. The duchesse d'Abrantes commented that before the revolution women seemed to be esteemed but in fact had only the appearance of influence. In 1785 Mme de Coicy said that although France was called 'the paradise of women' its female subjects were 'unworthily scorned and mistreated', despite their superiority to all other European women. The privileged few who became powerful, like Mme de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress, generally acquired that power at the cost of their reputations.

Although strong women had been tolerated and even appreciated through French history, there was an equally potent strain of misogyny to which Germaine de Staël, as gauche as she was eloquent, frequently fell victim. In her writings, throughout her life, she railed against the double standards that permitted women to be judged by different standards than men. Women, as she put it in her novel *Corinne*, were fettered by a thousand bonds from which men were free. Every man of her acquaintance might, as she did, take lovers, neglect his spouse, write books or involve himself in politics; they were not criticized for doing those things at all, but for doing them well or badly, while she would always be castigated for her looks or her private life. In *On Literature* she wrote feelingly of the 'injustice of men towards distinguished women', their inability to forgive 'genuine superiority in a woman of the most perfect integrity'. The knowledge that she was as intelligent as any man of her generation but could never truly have a public life tortured her, and only at her salon was she consoled.

But Germaine was extraordinary, and her contemporaries did recognize it. 'The feelings to which she gives rise are different from those that any woman can inspire,' observed one, unwittingly providing a list of the feminine qualities her age considered ideal. 'Such words as *sweetness, gracefulness, modesty, desire to please, deportment, manners*, cannot be used when speaking of her; but one is carried away, subjugated by the force of her genius... Wherever she goes, most people are changed into spectators.'

Her friends (and enemies) were united in praise of her ability to talk, but also of her skill in drawing out whomever she was talking to. One left Germaine 'in admiration', spellbound by her knowledge and persuasiveness, but also 'entirely pleased with oneself'. She could be overpowering, egotistical and embarrassingly unselfconscious, and she preferred 'to dazzle rather than to please', but she was good-natured and generous to those she loved.

This group did not include her husband, whom she charitably described as being, 'of all the men I could never love... the one I like best'. Éric Magnus de Staël was an affable Swedish diplomat seventeen years Germaine's senior who had begun pursuing the greatest heiress in Europe when she was twelve. Her parents made it a condition of their betrothal that Staël be appointed ambassador to France for life; King Gustavus of Sweden conveniently made his betrothal to Germaine a condition of his appointment as ambassador. The wedding took place in Paris on 14 January 1786, the contract signed the day before by the king and queen.

Staël married Germaine for her money, and she married him for her freedom. As Claire says to Julie in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*, 'If it had depended on me, I would never have married, but our sex buys liberty only by slavery and it is necessary to begin as a servant in order to be a mistress someday.' After their wedding day her husband was a virtual nonentity to her although for the first few years, almost surprised to be wooed by him, she did try to treat him kindly.

Germaine's first lover was probably Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord. A refined, cynical libertine, thirty-four-year-old Talleyrand was so amoral that his own mother opposed his appointment as Bishop of Autun in 1788. Like Germaine, Talleyrand skilfully deployed his abundant charm and subtle wit to make people forget his appearance; this was quite a feat, since he had been crippled

since childhood and was described in 1805 as having the complexion of a decomposed corpse. Their relationship did not deepen into passion—besides, Talleyrand already had an ‘official’ mistress—but the love and the friendship endured.

In 1788 Germaine fell deeply in love with a friend of Talleyrand's, Louis de Narbonne, the man she called her magician. The sophisticated Narbonne, illegitimate son of Louis XV (and, it was whispered, of his own sister, Mme Adélaïde), united, according to Fanny Burney, ‘the most courtly refinement and elegance to the quickest repartee’. Narbonne was as celebrated for his wit as for his looks—‘the inexhaustible treasures of grace, absurdity, gaiety, and all the seductions of his conversation’—and, at thirty-three, had already run through three fortunes (those of his mother, the comtesse de Narbonne; his godmother, Mme Adélaïde; and his wife) and fathered at least two illegitimate children.

‘He is a miracle,’ wrote a young German acquaintance, some time later, marvelling at Narbonne's sparkling intelligence, courtesy, courage and modesty. ‘It is no surprise that Madame de Staël should be so attached to this friend, even more so, as she was lumbered with a husband incapable of creating a recipe for potatoes, let alone gunpowder.’ Her uninspiring husband was the man tradition and society had dictated that she marry, but Narbonne was her choice, her heart's partner, her soulmate, and Germaine dedicated herself to him and to their love with all the ardour and idealism of youth. The strength and purity of her feelings for Narbonne were all the justification she needed for a crime (infidelity) she considered society's, not her own.

A constant interchange of notes between Germaine and her husband, to and from her parents' lodgings in Versailles (where she stayed when she was called upon, as she often was, to play hostess for her father) and their house in the rue du Bac, indicates how rarely they were together during this period, and how often she would have been able to entertain Narbonne alone. When Staël accused her of doing so, she did not hesitate flatly to deny it: ‘stop your famous jealousy,’ she insisted. ‘You will lose me if you continue [to make demands on me],’ Germaine wrote in another letter, ‘and it will only be your fault.’ Personal freedom was evidently as important to her as abstract political liberties.

To outside eyes, the union between Staël's wife and the elegant courtier, Narbonne, was a strange one: ‘her intellectual endowments must be with him her sole attraction,’ wrote the naïve Fanny Burney, on being told that Germaine and Narbonne were lovers. ‘She loves him even tenderly, but so openly, so simply, so unaffectedly, and with such utter freedom from coquetry, that, if they were two men, or two women, the affection could not, I think, be more obviously undesigning.’

By July 1789, the month the Bastille fell, their relationship was public enough for Gouverneur Morris—who was chasing Talleyrand's mistress, Adèle de Flauhaut, with some success—to refer to Narbonne in his diary as ‘the friend of Mme de Staël’. Another suitor, Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, was not deterred from declaring his love for Germaine that autumn, but her relationship with Narbonne did allow her to reject him gently, telling him how much she loved ‘le comte Louis’ who had ‘changed his destiny’ for her the moment he saw her, breaking off his other attachments and consecrating his life to her.

By this she meant politically as much as emotionally. The aristocratic but relatively liberal Narbonne told Morris that July that he feared a civil war was inevitable; he was considering rejoining his regiment. He felt trapped between his duty to the king—his godfather and probably his nephew—and his political principles, urged upon him by Germaine. The American Morris, safe in his self-righteous republicanism, could smugly reply that he knew ‘of no duty but that which conscience dictates’, and speculate that Narbonne's conscience would ‘dictate to join the strongest side’; but he was underestimating both the conviction that lay behind the progressive views of Germaine and her friends and the genuine conflict of interest they faced as they watched the revolution gather momentum. Narbonne allowed himself to be convinced by his mistress's eloquence, and remained in Paris with her to pursue glory through, rather than against, reform.

Germaine welcomed the early changes of the revolution with all the passion of her nature. Her upbringing had been a strange one. The only child of cool, ambitious, rather selfish parents, worshipping her father and jealous of her beautiful prig of a mother, she had lived among adults all her life. She was taught elocution by the greatest actress of the day, Mademoiselle Clairon (who later became her husband's mistress). Instead of playing, she watched Diderot, Gibbon, Voltaire, Grimm and Buffon spar in her mother's Friday salons; she did not have a friend her own age until she was twelve.

Germaine's intellectual brilliance, like her emotional intensity, was evident early on, and at twenty-two she published her first important book, *Letters on Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Her passion for Rousseau was an indication both of her personal veneration of romantic love and of the philosophical atmosphere of the times. He was the most popular author of the second half of the eighteenth century, and probably the most important ideological inspiration to a generation of revolutionaries from Germaine herself to Robespierre. Even Marie-Antoinette had made a pilgrimage to his grave.

Rousseau's most celebrated and incendiary phrase comes from his treatise *The Social Contract*—‘Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains’—but his influence was far more than just political. He created a cult of sentimentality, exalting love not as a fashionable diversion indulged in outside marriage but as a noble, all-consuming calling: as Julie, the gentle but ardent heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, says, love became ‘the great business of our lives’. In Julie, Rousseau gave Frenchwomen a new role model; her lover, sensitive, introspective Saint-Preux, provided a new romantic ideal.

Implicit in Rousseau's ideas about love was a rejection of conventional ideas about society's constraints, about status and about individual worth. ‘I am not speaking of rank and fortune,’ the commoner Saint-Preux tells his noble mistress Julie proudly, ‘honour and love suffice for want of all that.’ Germaine knew only too well that the bonds imposed by society meant nothing beside the bonds imposed by the heart.

Because of Rousseau, wrote the English traveller Mary Berry, ‘maternal love became as much the fashion as soon afterwards balloons and animal magnetism’. Rousseau called motherhood a woman's highest responsibility. His works reunited a generation of mothers with their children, encouraging them to breast-feed (hitherto rare; middle-and upper-class babies had usually been handed almost immediately after birth to wet-nurses) and take an interest in their children's education. Before Rousseau, children had been treated as miniature adults. They were not allowed to run around or ask questions, and were dressed in stiff adult clothes. Rousseau recommended that they be allowed to play outside, that their curiosity be encouraged and their innocence nurtured. The exquisitely intimate, informal mother-and-child portraits of the late eighteenth century were direct responses to this new philosophy.

Rousseau, in glorifying women as wives and mothers, denied them any role outside the home. ‘There are no good morals for women outside of a withdrawn and domestic life,’ he wrote. ‘A woman outside her home loses her greatest radiance, and is shorn of her true adornments, shows herself indecently. If she has a husband, what is she out seeking among men?’ For him, as for so many of his generation, sexual inequality created an ideal equilibrium: men were dominant, active and reasoning, and their role was public; women were emotional, modest and loving, and their role was private. ‘A taller stature, a stronger voice, and features more strongly marked seem to have no necessary bearing on one's sex, but these exterior modifications indicate the intentions of the creator in the modifications of the spirit,’ he reasoned in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. ‘The souls of a perfect woman and a perfect man must not resemble each other more than their appearances.’ According to this argument, the complementary differences between the sexes were essential to maintaining social harmony.

Despite the fact that her own ambitions were thwarted by his way of thinking, Germaine was typical of Rousseau's female readers in disregarding his prejudices because the vision he offered of love as redemption was so powerful, and the importance he attached to the domestic role so flattering.

She conceded that 'Rousseau has endeavoured to prevent women from interfering in public affairs, and acting a brilliant part in the theatre of politics,' but while he attempted 'to diminish their influence over the deliberations of men, how sacredly has he established the empire they have over their happiness!' Even the committed campaigner for women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, famously described by Horace Walpole as a 'hyena in petticoats', was not immune to Rousseau's allure: she admitted she had 'always been half in love with him'.

Part of the reason for this is the hidden currents lying beneath the surface of Rousseau's work. Although he told women they should be subservient to men, his heroines were in fact often more capable and passionate than the men in their lives. In *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, Sophie 'sought a man and...found monkeys'. When Émile falls in love with her, he recognizes that she must be his guide, just as in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* Julie tells Saint-Preux that she will direct their common destinies. For all its melancholia and high-mindedness—Germaine said that he had made 'a passion of virtue'—Rousseau's writing was also thrillingly erotic. He himself said his books 'can only be read with one hand'.

The duality in his books echoed that in his life. Although he idealized motherhood, Rousseau abandoned his own children; although he wrote about pure, innocent love he openly admitted to masochism and masturbation; although he praised submissive women his own first mistress, with whom he lived in a *ménage à trois* alongside her herbalist, was a speculator, adventuress and sometime spy. His *Confessions*, published posthumously, revealed vanity, vices and frailties but only added to his appeal.

While he explicitly excluded women from political life, Rousseau's writings inadvertently made women political creatures. They may have read his works for pleasure, but they also found in them rejections of tyranny and pleas for justice so persuasive that they came to believe the inequalities and constraints of society that they had once unquestioningly accepted were absurd.

Rousseau's philosophy, both public and private, set the tone for salons like Germaine's of the late 1780s. Her circle rejected the ancien régime world for its hollowness, its arbitrariness and its superficiality. 'It laughs at all those who see the earnestness of life and who still believe in true feelings and serious thought,' she lamented later. 'It soils the hope of youth.' The French, she said, were 'too civilised in some respects', their rigmarole of manners and conventions grading 'people instead of uniting them'.

But while Germaine's salon was notable for its liberalism and lack of prejudice, and welcomed newcomers if they had something to offer, its habitués were largely drawn from a small group of aristocrats who, in Germaine's words, 'preferred the generous principles of liberty to the advantages which they enjoyed personally'. Despite her democratic ideas, Germaine lived and entertained on an almost royal scale: two rows of footmen flanked the anteroom through which her fashionably free-thinking guests entered the gold and marble salon. Victorine de Chastenay was thinking of Germaine's friends when she said that at the start of the revolution the most progressive nobles were generally 'not the provincial gentry and those least qualified, but the most brilliant youth, men whose families had been the most loaded with gifts and honours at the Court'. 'It was the fashion to complain of everything,' wrote one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. 'Unnoticed, the spirit of revolt was rampant in all classes of society.'

Many of Mme de Staël's friends had served in the American army during the late 1770s and early 1780s when the French government supported the United States against the British (the burden of its spending there precipitating the financial crisis of the mid-1780s) and saw in the United States a republican idyll of freedom, simplicity and virtue. The marquis de Lafayette had fought beside George Washington and considered him his adoptive father. He and Washington were also united by their freemasonry, one means by which the enlightenment philosophies that inspired the revolution were disseminated; the writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier called masons' lodges in the 1780s 'a kind of school for oratory'. Germaine remarked that the love of liberty 'decided every action' of Lafayette's life.

Another idealistic American veteran was Mathieu de Montmorency, a friend of Lafayette's and a prominent member of the Estates-General, who demanded a Declaration of Rights and happily relinquished his aristocratic privileges in August 1789. A year later, he called for the abolition of titles themselves and all marks of nobility, like servants in livery and coats of arms on carriages, façades and church pews. 'All Frenchmen shall wear from henceforth the same ensigns,' he declared, 'those of Liberty.' Like Germaine he looked on Rousseau as a hero, petitioning for him to be honoured by the French nation in 1791.

As well as Frenchmen who had served in America, Germaine knew several Americans in Paris, including Thomas Jefferson (who advised Lafayette on his drafts of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen before leaving Paris in September 1789) and Tom Paine. One of her most regular American guests was Gouverneur Morris, who admitted he felt very stupid in the rue du Bac. His pursuit of Talleyrand's mistress did not stop him making eyes at the wild, enchanting Aimée de Coigny. 'We have some little compliments together, Mme de Coigny and I,' he confided to his diary after a dinner in 1791 at Lady Sutherland's,—the British ambassadress was another member of Germaine's set,—'and I think it possible we may be pretty well together, but this depends on the Chapter of Accidents for she must be at the Trouble of bringing it about. Stay late here.'

Morris was not entirely in agreement with the politics of Germaine's salon. Soon after his arrival in Paris in early 1789 he described Germaine's friend and Lafayette's cousin Mme de Tessé, a member of the queen's household, as a republican 'of the first feather'; a week later he was told her friends saw him as an 'aristocrat', with ideas 'too moderate for that company'. This was partly true. Morris thought the French too depraved for liberty—but perhaps he was simply intoxicated by the pleasures of the ancien régime and did not want them replaced by republican austerity before he had drunk his fill.

The most radical aristocrat of Staël's group was the marquis de Condorcet, a mathematician and philosopher. Reserved and painfully timid, Condorcet lacked social polish—he was said always to have hair-powder in his ears—but his passion for modernity illuminated his views. The first stirrings of reform confirmed all his faith in the perfectibility of mankind. 'Everyone tells us that we are bordering the period of one of the greatest revolutions of the human race,' he wrote optimistically. 'The present state of enlightenment guarantees that it will be happy.'

Condorcet, married to a celebrated intellectual (and another celebrated salonnière) twenty-one years his junior, Sophie de Grouchy, known as *la Vénus lycéenne*, was one of the rare feminists of the age. In his political writings of the late 1780s he called repeatedly for the franchise, when it came, to be extended to women as well as men. 'Either no individual in humankind has genuine rights,' he declared in *On the Admission of Women to Civil Rights* in July 1790, 'or all have the same ones.' Excluding women from political life, he argued, violated the entire principle of natural rights on which the first revolutionaries were basing their calls for reform. The right to participate in the government of their country is a right men hold by virtue of their reason, not their gender; thus women, who also possess reason, cannot be deprived of those rights. Furthermore, he insisted, women's active contribution to society could only be of benefit to it.

According to the historian Madelyn Gutwirth, Condorcet was so concerned to avoid the 'posture of bogus rococo gallantry' that marked so much eighteenth-century writing about women that he lamented his lack of it. 'Sighing philosophically, he observes that in robbing women of their myth by speaking of their "rights rather than their reign", he may fail to earn their approval, for he saw all about him the stampede among women to Rousseauist views', which granted them dominion over men's hearts but no political rights.

Although the constitution of the newly formed United States had not granted rights to women, its democratic example was an inspiration to Condorcet. 'Men whom the reading of philosophic books had secretly disposed to love liberty were filled with passion [during the War of Independence],'

he wrote in a eulogy to Benjamin Franklin. 'They seized with joy this occasion to publicly confess sentiments that prudence had obliged them to maintain in silence.'

England provided Germaine's circle with another social and political model; collectively, they were known as 'Anglomaniacs'. Helen Maria Williams described the French in 1789 and 1790 as 'mad about the English'. So-called English pastimes of racing and betting preoccupied the upper classes' leisure time; young aristocrats affected English accents and a deliberate awkwardness of manner, because the English were famously clumsy. 'Everything had to be copied from our neighbours, from the Constitution to horses and carriages,' wrote Lucy de la Tour du Pin, whose Irish blood and fair English looks made her a sensation at court.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the political philosopher Montesquieu had applauded Britain's well balanced, representative government. English customs were seen as an ideal combination 'of privilege and liberty, elegance and easy informality, tradition and reform', and English men and women were praised by French visitors for their cleanliness, motivation and industry. Germaine thought England had 'attained the perfection of the social order', with its division of power between Crown, aristocracy and people. But even to speak of the English constitution at court 'seemed as criminal as if one had suggested dethroning the king'.

Away from court, beneath the Gobelin tapestries on the walls of the dining-room in the rue du Bac, there were no such restrictions on speech or thought. In her favourite stance with her back to the fireplace, Mme de Staël, 'young, brilliant [and] thoughtless', would captivate her own coterie of dazzled youths by proclaiming 'in strokes of fire the ideas they thought they held'.

On 5 May 1789, from a palace window, an ecstatic Germaine watched the deputies of the Estates-General process into their opening session at Versailles. They had last gathered together 175 years earlier. Among the deputies Germaine's rejected suitor, Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, represented the royalist centre right; her friend Lafayette was a moderate constitutional monarchist; the three Lameth brothers and Mathieu de Montmorency, all of whom had fought beside Lafayette in America, were slightly more liberal; on the extreme left were the lawyers Maximilien Robespierre, François Buzot and Jérôme Pétion.

Perhaps the most celebrated deputy in 1789 was Honoré-Gabriel de Mirabeau, the debauched Provençal count who represented his region in the Third Estate, the commoners, instead of sitting with the peers. The inspiring beauty of his oratory was almost enhanced by its contrast with his physical brutishness and coarse, pock-marked face. Germaine despised him: he was her father's rival for the hearts of the people. Blinded by his weaknesses—egotism and immorality—she could not see the political talents he possessed in abundance. Necker dismissed Mirabeau as 'a demagogue by calculation and an aristocrat by disposition'.

On the streets of Versailles, crowds 'drunk with hope and joy', according to another observer, lined the route to wish the Estates-General well, but Mme de Montmorin, the wife of a royal minister standing beside Germaine, was pessimistic. 'You are wrong to rejoice,' she said to Germaine. 'This will be the source of great misfortune to France and to us.' She was right, as far as she and her family were concerned: she would die on the scaffold beside one of her sons; another son drowned himself; her husband and one daughter died in prison and another daughter died before she was thirty.

Maximilien Robespierre was invited to Necker's Versailles residence later that summer. Deputies to the National Assembly* were much in demand in the grand salons of Paris and Versailles. 'His features were ignoble, his skin pale, his veins of a greenish colour,' Germaine recalled. 'He supported the most absurd propositions with a coolness that had the air of conviction.' From the start, Robespierre saw himself as France's saviour. '*La patrie est en danger*,' he had written in April 1789. 'Let us fly to its aid.' A provincial lawyer from a modest but comfortable background (at the start of the revolution he signed his name using the aristocratic 'de'), he became a regular speaker at the National Assembly and was already attracting attention for his lofty democratic principles, arguing in

favour of freedom of the press and insisting suffrage should be granted to all men, including servants and the poor; he did not mention votes for women.

Alongside Germaine's friends Lafayette and the Lameth brothers, Robespierre was a prominent member of a club formed at Versailles in the summer of 1789 by a group of progressive deputies with the purpose of debating issues before they came before the National Assembly. The Society of the Friends of the Constitution would become known as the Jacobin Club because, when the Assembly moved to Paris that October, they hired the hall of a Dominican (*Jacobin*, in French slang) monastery on the rue Saint-Honoré, almost opposite the *manège* where the Assembly met.

As her opinions of Robespierre and Mirabeau demonstrate, Germaine's view of politics was intensely personal, coloured by her firsthand observation of people and her sense of being at the centre of events. She called Clermont-Tonnerre 'my speaker', meaning speaker on her behalf in the Assembly, and in September 1789 she scribbled an urgent note to Monsieur de Staël in Versailles to find out whether or not 'my bill on the veto' (whether or not the king should have a veto over legislation in the new constitution, and if so how strong a veto) had been won; as she hoped, the 'Necker-Lafayette' partial veto had been adopted.

She had cause to feel possessive. In July, committees were created to compose France's first constitution, and on them sat many of Germaine's friends including Talleyrand, Lafayette and the Lameths. In August they produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which established in its first article that all men are born and live free and equal. Torture and arbitrary imprisonment were abolished and innocence was presumed; freedom of the press and of worship was declared; citizens were to bear the weight of taxation according to their abilities; the army was defined as a public force and access to the officers' ranks opened up to non-nobles.

Even though the real work of composing a constitution was still to come, these basic liberties were exactly those for which Germaine had been agitating behind the scenes and, looking back on the achievements of this period, she remained certain that politics and society had never been so intimately or valuably connected. 'As political affairs were still in the hands of the elite, all the vigour of liberty and all the grace of old-fashioned manners were united in the same people,' she wrote. 'Men of the Third Estate, distinguished by their enlightened ideas and their talents, joined those gentlemen who were prouder of their own merit than of the privileges of their class; and the highest questions society has ever considered were dealt with by minds the most capable of understanding and debating them.'

This self-referential, unabashedly elitist idea of 'communication of superior minds among themselves' was the spirit of Germaine de Staël's salon, and, though it was instrumental in bringing the revolution into being, it would have little place in it in the years to come. As Germaine herself said, from the day that the National Assembly moved from Versailles to Paris in the autumn of 1789, 'its goal was no longer liberty, but equality'.

* The Estates-General had changed its name to the 'National Assembly' on 17 June 1789, three days before the Tennis Court Oath in which the deputies swore to remain in session until France had a constitution; over the next three years it would become, successively, the Constituent Assembly and the Legislative Assembly. As contemporaries usually did, in the main I have referred to it as the National Assembly.

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