Romantic Selfhoods: Gender and Nationhood in the Works of Germaine de Staël and Claire de Duras

Abstract
This thesis investigates the intersection of gender and nationhood in the works of Germaine de Staël and Claire de Duras. Despite Staël’s and Duras’s close friendship and their common experiences of exile, their intertextual relationship remains unexplored. Assessing their portrayals of the post-Revolutionary dislocation of individual subjectivity, it contends that the two authors expressed this generational malaise by writing the self through agents and sites of otherness. I argue that Staël and Duras challenge the construction and enforcement of binaries such as male/female, French/foreign, within contemporary legislation and culture. Studying form and theme, this thesis contributes to the ongoing feminist revision of nineteenth-century French literary history, with particular emphasis on the pre-1830 Romantic novel. Against Realism’s rise as the dominant novelistic form, it reassesses the sentimental novel as a mediated strategy of political engagement, which Staël and Duras use to appeal for social change, and to plot individual emotional experiences of the disjunctions of historical time post-1789. The methodological framework combines psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and autobiographical studies to develop a fluid and relational model of Romantic selfhood that interacts with the Other. Three chapters assessing masculinity, femininity, and England emphasise the universality of human emotions and the process of modernisation, whilst revealing tense attachments to the nation and the past.

This thesis provides valuable insight into women’s writing, French Romanticism, and the rise of the novel. Placing Staël’s and Duras’s works in dialogue offers mutual benefits for the scholarship of each author, deepening our understanding of Staël’s influence on and interactions with other women, and broadening perspectives on Duras. Overall, it clarifies
their roles within the emerging narrative poetics of historical consciousness, places them within a lineage of writers who understand the self as non-categorical, and shows them engaging with philosophical concerns over the connections between emotions, national unity, and cosmopolitanism.