Germaine de Staël: ‘When one can no longer find peace of mind in obscurity, it is necessary to look for strength in celebrity’

I then sat an hour with Miss Vardill, who related an interesting anecdote of Madame de Staël. A country girl, the daughter of a clergyman, had accidentally met with a translation of ‘Delphine’ and ‘Corinne’, which so powerfully affected her, in her secluded life, as quite to turn her brain. And hearing that Madame de Staël was in London, she wrote to her, offering to become her attendant or amanuensis. Madame de Staël’s secretary, in a formal answer, declined the proposal. But her admirer was so intent on being in her service in some way, that she came up to London, and stayed a few days with a friend, who took her to the great novelist, and, speaking in French, gave a hint of the young girl’s mind. Madame de Staël, with great promptitude and kindness, administered the only remedy that was likely to be effectual. The girl almost threw herself at her feet, and earnestly begged to be received by her. The Baroness very kindly, but decidedly, remonstrated with her on the folly of her desire. ‘You may think’, she said, ‘it is an enviable lot to travel over Europe, and see all that is most beautiful and distinguished in the world; but the joys of home are more solid; domestic life affords more permanent happiness than any that fame can give. You have a father – I have none. You have a home – I was led to travel because I was driven from mine. Be content with your lot; if you knew mine, you would not desire it’. With such admonitions she dismissed the petitioner. The cure was complete. The young woman returned to her father, became more steadily industrious, and without ever speaking of her adventure with Madame de Staël, silently profited by it. She is now living a life of great respectability, and her friends
consider that her cure was wrought by the only hand by which it could have been effected.²

Reminiscing three years after the death of Germaine de Staël, Henry Crabb Robinson retold a complex story of fame and desire. Desire for fame and the woes of its attendant ills were apparent in this seemingly familiar tale of seduction and seclusion, where rural innocence is corrupted by aristocratic, cosmopolitan savoir faire. In similar fashion to a Laclosian fiction, however, all was not what it seemed. The capturing of the reader’s imagination was here taken to its highest extreme, resulting in total identification with the celebrated author, whose spirit possessed the admirer and impelled her to escape her restricted background and seek out fame and fortune with her idol. Disappointingly for her admirer, de Staël did not suggest an elopement, but counselled the girl to be content with her position and return to respectability, which advice, like all good heroines, she dutifully fulfilled, instead gaining her community credit through ‘industry’ and ‘profit’. Although her ‘adventure’ appeared to have been silenced, seven years later it was still in circulation and even passed on to the friend and chronicler of the famous, Crabb Robinson. Far from expunging the exciting anecdote from the life of the clergyman’s daughter, this story will clearly enhance her prospects, her fleeting moments with her favourite writer a discussion point, her ‘cure’ clearly effected by her contact with the celebrated Germaine de Staël.

It is the reported wording, however, and thus implications of de Staël’s rejection speech, which provided the most ambiguous position on desire and fame in this extract from Crabb Robinson’s diary. Perhaps the longevity of the supposedly silenced story can be explained by de Staël’s advice ‘against’ the courting of fame. Rather than ensuring that her admirer will be repulsed by her idol’s celebrated lifestyle, de Staël’s words pointed to an all too enticing alternative of travel and a distinguished name to rival the staid solidity and permanence of the family home. Setting up an opposition between the delights of movement and the stability of security, de Staël continued to stress the differences between herself and her admirer, demarcating a line between famous person and follower which should never be crossed. Although employing negatives to persuade the girl to remain with ‘home’ and ‘father’, de Staël effectively pinpointed the sources of the probably oppressive background reasons which her admirer saw nowhere in the lives of the liberated heroines of the novels of her favourite. Similarly, by reiterating why she has been forced to flee her home (the exile demanded by Napoleon), de Staël hinted obliquely at her public and