MARIE D'AGOULT, née Marie-Catherine-Sophie de Flavigny; married name the Comtesse d'Agoult; pen name Daniel Stern; born on December 31, 1805, at Frankfurt-on-Main; died March 5, 1876, in Paris. Writing under the pen name Daniel Stern, Marie d'Agoult was a frequent contributor to the French liberal opposition press of the 1840s. Her three volume Histoire de la Révolution de 1848 remains her best-known work, and is still considered by many historians to be a balanced and accurate contemporary treatment of events in France. The daughter of Comte Alexandre-Victor de Flavigny, an intransigent French emigré, and Marie-Elisabeth Bethmann, a wealthy German banker's daughter, Marie d'Agoult spent her early years in Germany. After the Bourbon Restoration her family resettled in France and d'Agoult completed her education at the Sacré-Coeur convent. In 1827 she was married to the Comte Charles d'Agoult. In the waning years of the Restoration, the young Comtesse d'Agoult became a leading Parisian hostess. She was not happy in her arranged marriage, but she found spiritual and intellectual sustenance in the religious teachings of the Abbé de Lammenais and in the company of a new generation of Romantic artists (Hugo, Vigny, Lamartine, Chopin, and Rossini, among others). In 1833 d'Agoult met and fell in love with the Hungarian composer and virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt. Rather than carry on a discreet affair, d'Agoult deserted her husband and lived openly as Liszt's mistress. She was ostracized by the polite society of the Faubourg-Saint-Germain for making a spectacle of her infidelity, but she avenged herself by entertaining an intellectual and artistic aristocracy of painters, writers, musicians and political thinkers at the various residences she and Liszt shared. D'Agoult and Liszt's union produced three children, but Liszt's protracted absences and well-publicized philandering brought an end to the affair in 1844. At this time d'Agoult began a serious career as a journalist, under the guidance of Emile de Girardin, editor of the liberal journal La Presse. She introduced the French reading public to a variety of foreign authors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Georg Herwegh, and Bettina von Arnim, and she drafted political commentary based on regular attendance at parliamentary debates. In 1846 she published Nelida, a thinly-veiled fictional account of her affair with Liszt. Nelida was a succes de scandale, but d'Agoult recognized that her talents lay more in analysis and commentary, and she quickly forswore fiction. Her journalism earned her considerable respect, and her Essai sur la liberté, published in 1847, was well received, winning the praise of numerous critics (including Sainte-Beuve), and establishing her as a feminist thinker in the mold of Mary Wollstonecraft and Madame de Stael. D'Agoult greeted February of 1848 with enthusiasm and took an active part in Parisian events. Her salon became a meeting-place for liberal Republicans like Hippolyte Carnot, Jules Simon, Alphonse de Tocqueville, and the young Emile Olivier (who would later marry Blandine Liszt, one of d'Agoult's daughters). She continued to write newspaper reports on the political scene, establishing herself as a staunch supporter of the fledgling republic in the face of conservative reaction. The articles d'Agoult published between May and December of 1848 were later collected and put out as Lettres Républicaines in Esquisses morales et politiques (1849). Written in the heat of the moment--"fragmentary at the heart of the struggle"--these reports covered a broad range of topics, and included pencil-portraits of leading members of the national assembly, editorials on the presidential campaign, and analyses of the various socialist schools of thought. D'Agoult expressed dismay over the June insurrection, which she blamed on poverty and the machinations of ambitious sectarians, and she was merciless in her criticism of the presidential candidate Louis-Napoleon, "the obscure nephew of a great man." D'Agoult published the three volumes of her Histoire de la Révolution de 1848 in the years 1850 to 1853. Based on eye-witness reports, painstaking investigation, and personal involvement in the unfolding drama of 1848, this historical work was intended as a dispassionate and impartial account. Having spent long hours observing the national assembly at work, d'Agoult focused largely on Parisian political personalities, but she also provided detailed, carefully researched descriptions of the demonstrations and street battles that helped to shape governmental policy and public opinion. Her incisive portraits of political leaders, and her reasoned analysis of the social factors influencing the outcome of the revolution, would have a profound impact on many subsequent treatments of 1848. Despite personal tragedy, including the deaths of two of her children, d'Agoult continued to be involved in politics after Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état. During the Second Empire her salon once again became a center of liberal opposition. She continued to write, notably for the Revue Germanique, a journal dedicated to promoting friendly Franco-German relations. At the time of her death in 1876, she had been preparing her memoirs for publication. They were published posthumously as Mes Souvenirs, 1806-1833 (1877) and Mémoires, 1833-1854 (1927). D'Agoult had been raised a legitimist and a Catholic, but her native affinity with the nascent forces of literary and political liberalism, and her association with left-leaning politicians, social theorists, and foreign exiles (Mickiewicz, Teleki, Daniel Manin), converted her into a republican and a freethinker during the 1840s. Her contempt for conservative leaders like Louis-Philippe and Louis Napoleon was buttressed by her aristocratic distaste for parvenus, but it also reflected her disdain for political incompetence and authoritarian rule. If her writing sometimes betrayed a hint of noblesse oblige, her dedication to democracy and social justice, and her sympathy for the poor and the disenfranchised, was never open to question. D'Agoult's politics were always moderate. She rejected the utopian-socialism of the Saint-Simonians and Cabetists as charming but ineffectual, and she rejected the "sectarian" socialism of activists like Louis Blanc and Pierre Proudhon as irrational and anarchistic. Her support went to what she called "states man's socialism," a liberal republicanism based on universal political enfranchisement and including state-sponsored initiatives aimed at reducing poverty through gradual reform. D'Agoult's feminism bore the marks of her liberal politics and romantic leanings. Like eighteenth-century feminists, she was a strong advocate of improved education for women, but like the Saint-Simonians and other of her contemporaries, she believed not in absolute equality between the sexes, but in complementarity. While man's place was the public world of political and economic action, woman's place was the private sphere, from which she might exercise her civilizing influence on the moral and spiritual realms. D'Agoult rejected feminist radicalism as impolitic--she had no patience with the Vesuviennes, female clubistes, and femmes libres of 1848--and looked to gentle persuasion and moral fortitude as agents in the gradual and judicious amelioration of woman's condition. Unlike her more colorful countrywoman George Sand, d'Agoult has received surprisingly little attention from historians. Best known through her personal association with Liszt, and as the mother of Cosima Wagner, her own writings and political influence have been left in virtual oblivion in recent years.

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