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Rousseau's Views on Women

Although Rousseau's sexual politics have received considerable attention in recent years from scholars in a variety of fields, much critical discussion of his views is undermined by an inadequate framework of textual and historical reference. There is a tendency to cull anti-feminist remarks from his writings in order to conjure up an ominous, yet entertaining portrait of Rousseau the reactionary misogynist, whom our enlightened twentieth-century minds enjoy ridiculing. There is also a tendency to isolate certain passages from the texts in which they appear and from the general corpus of Rousseau's works, as well as from the socio-historical context in which they were written, thereby ignoring factors that might explain or counterbalance the views expressed.¹ For example, numerous studies have been made of Rousseau's sexual politics based solely on readings of Book V of *Emile* that ignore the more positive views toward women expressed in Book I. Similarly, critics are quick to point to the anti-feminist aspects of *La Lettre à d'Alembert*, without taking into account the more favorable view of women presented in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

On the other hand, studies that attempt to present a comprehensive, systematic view of Rousseau's sexual politics tend to distort his views on women by ignoring underlying contradictions and ambiguities or by trying to resolve them and make them fit into a coherent system. For example, Stephen Salkever writes: "The problem of Rousseau seems to be that he presents us with two very different ways of life. . . . One is characterized by reason, sociality, and activity, the other by sentiment, nature, solitude, and idleness. The task of much of the critical literature concerning Rousseau has been that of determining how these apparently mutually exclusive patterns can be explained and/or resolved into a single coherent system."² Similarly, Colette Piau-Gillot maintains: "Rousseau's fictional heroines can be seen as the

concrete representations of a theoretical model of the new woman, mediatrix of a new order. . . . This model has a specific function in a coherent philosophical-political system."³ This tendency toward simplification and systematization also characterizes the two best-known studies of Rousseau's sexual politics by Paul Hoffmann and Joel Schwartz.⁴

It is my contention that Rousseau's sexual politics are too complex to be reduced to a single coherent system. To fully grasp the richness and complexity of his views on women, one must resist the desire to systematize what is not systematic, to simplify what is not simple; more importantly, one must resist the urge to resolve or efface tensions and contradictions that are deeply rooted in, even constitutive of, Rousseau's thought and the thought of his period. Rousseau himself admits the contradictory nature of his thinking. In the Second Preface to *Julie*, feigning irritation with N's persistent questions, "R" retorts: "You want us always to be consistent; I doubt this is humanly possible; but it *is* possible always to be truthful and frank, and that is what I hope to be."⁵ Similarly, Julie writes of Saint-Preux (Rousseau's avowed fictional alter-ego): "He is less inclined to search for universal principles now that he has seen so many exceptions; his love for the truth has cured him of rigidly systematic ways of thinking" (II: 427). For Rousseau, it is less important to be consistent with oneself than to engage in the search for truth, a search which (in his view) necessarily involves the recognition of contradictions as a potential source of truth.⁶ Hence the bold caveat in *Emile*: "Readers, forgive my paradoxes. Anyone engaged in serious reflection is bound to produce them."⁷ This acceptance of contradictions as a constructive, dynamic by-product of reflection is at the very core of Enlightenment thought, and to ignore it is to run the risk of misreading much of the writing of the period.

A second contention underlying my study is that the formal aspects of a work—particularly the conventions and constraints of genre—exert a determining influence on the portrayal of characters and the presentation of ideas. Few studies of Rousseau's sexual politics have sought to analyze the relation between form and content. In this chapter, I examine how seeming discontinuities in Rousseau's writings on women can be traced to differences in genre, voice, and audience. As for women's response to Rousseau, I argue that it was the very ambiguity of his writings on women—the possibility for multiple and even contradictory readings—that contributed in large part to their widespread appeal among female readers of his day.



Let us begin by examining Rousseau's views on women and the contradictions underlying his portrayal of Julie and Sophie, the heroines of his two major fictional works. In the second half of this chapter, I then situate Rousseau's sexual politics in relation to the gender ideology of his period. After tracing the traditionalist, feminist, and pseudo-feminist strands interwoven in his writings, I discuss how women readers responded to these different strands in Rousseau's thought and how his rhetoric of moral reform and pre-Romantic sensibility influenced their values and behavior. The chapter concludes with a look at the conflicting interpretations to which Rousseau's writings on women and the family gave rise, particularly in the decade following the French Revolution.

Rousseau's Views on Women's Nature, Role, and Destiny

For Rousseau, anatomy is destiny. In his view, women's physiology determines their fate, both biologically and socially. From the moment of birth, a girl's life is entirely conditioned and programmed by her sexuality, by her "nature" as a female: "A male is male only at certain moments, whereas a female is female all her life . . . ; she is constantly reminded of her sex," he maintains (IV: 697). By underlining the continuity between woman's procreative function and her social role as wife, mother, and *maîtresse de maison*, Rousseau subtly shifts from the physical to the psychological, from the natural to the social, which he presents as mutually reinforcing and mutually justifying. The anatomy of women serves to distinguish them from men and to define their primary role and destiny, which (in Rousseau's view) is to bear and care for the young in order to assure the survival of the species. He invokes this natural teleology both to restrict the role and education of women and to explain their inequality.

At the core of Rousseau's thought is an idealized concept of nature that serves both as the fundamental guide for human relations and institutions and as the basis for social criticism.⁸ He views nature "not just as an external blueprint for human life, but as its inner truth . . . as a model for, and source of, moral regeneration," remarks Genevieve Lloyd. For Rousseau, she maintains, "nature is both a nostalgically remembered mythical past of the human species and a



This engraving by de Launay served as the frontispiece for the 1782 edition of *Emile*. The original caption read: "L'éducation de l'homme commence à sa naissance" ("A man's education begins at birth"). In the foreground, a mother dutifully reads *Emile* as she breastfeeds one baby and changes another. Her daughter looks on, eager to learn from her mother's example. They are seated in a forest clearing at the foot of a pedestal bearing a larger than life bust of Rousseau, who by the 1780s had become a kind of patron saint for nursing mothers. Numerous other children are vying for their mother's attention or are raising garlands toward Jean-Jacques in a gesture of gratitude. In the background are scenes from *Emile*'s childhood. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

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goal to be reattained."⁹ Rousseau's appeal to nature is nowhere more apparent than in his discussion of sex and gender roles: "Do you wish to be well guided in everything?" he asks in *Emile*. "Then always follow nature's instructions. Everything that characterizes the female sex must be respected as nature has dictated" (IV: 700). Throughout his writings, Rousseau invokes nature—his own highly subjective and masculinist conception of it—to define women's role and to justify their subordination. In his view, it is the nature of man (i. e., the male sex) to be free and equal, just as it is the nature of woman to be dependent, unequal, and subordinate:

Since dependance is a state natural to women, girls feels themselves made to obey; they have, or should have, little freedom. . . . Destined to obey a being as imperfect as man, a woman should learn to suffer—even to suffer injustice—at an early age, and to bear the wrongs of her husband without complaint. You will never reduce boys to the same point; their inner sense of justice rises up and rebels against such injustice, which nature never intended them to tolerate. (*Emile*, IV: 710–11)

It is clear that the egalitarian principles elaborated in the *Contrat Social* apply only to the male sex. In Rousseau's view, women are by nature denied not only the right, but even the desire for freedom, just as they are denied the instinct to resist injustice—an instinct considered "natural" in men.

Elsewhere in *Emile*, Rousseau attempts to sidestep disputes concerning the equality or inequality of the sexes by arguing that men and women are either equal or, insofar as they are different, not comparable. "Everything they have in common is derived from the human species, while their differences are all derived from their sex," he writes. "Through what they have in common, they are equal; through their differences, they are not comparable: the mind of a perfect woman and a perfect man should not resemble each other any more than should their appearance" (IV: 693). However, this principle of different but equal (which Rousseau also expounds in *Julie*) does not obscure the fact that he generally views women as inferior to men physically, intellectually, and morally. Even Julie, whose intellectual and moral superiority sets her above the common horde, recognizes her subordinate position within patriarchal structures: "I am a wife and mother; I know my place and I keep to it" (II: 578).

To justify the subordination of women and their relegation to the domestic sphere, Rousseau advanced an elaborate series of arguments: Since, in his view, the fundamental law of nature was the survival of the species, he maintained that woman's primary destiny was to fulfill her procreative and maternal functions and that activities outside the domestic sphere were basically incompatible with her role as wife and mother. To the law of the survival of the species Rousseau added *le droit du plus fort*—the right to dominance of the strongest.¹⁰ In his view, man was destined by nature to be the master because of his superior intellect and physical force; weaker both in mind and in body, and further weakened by her procreative functions, woman was destined to be dependent upon and subordinate to man. Linked to the maternal role of woman was her role as educator and moral guardian of the family. According to Rousseau, the exclusion of women from public life was necessary to preserve the purity and moral vigor of the home, so that the family could become the basis for the moral regeneration of society.

Not surprisingly, Rousseau also appealed to traditional theological discourse on women. In the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, the First Discourse, and numerous passages of *Emile*, he maintained that women were responsible for the denatured, corrupt state of society. To compensate for the evils they had brought upon the world, these eighteenth-century Eves must be conditioned to sacrifice their own desires to the collective good and to submit unquestioningly to patriarchal authority: "Girls should be taught constraint at an early age. Dissipation, frivolity, and inconstancy are character flaws that easily develop if girls are allowed to yield to their first corrupt inclinations," warns Rousseau in *Emile*. "To avoid such problems, teach them self-control above all else. Because of our insane social practices, the life of a respectable woman is a perpetual struggle against herself; it is fitting that the female sex share the burden of the ills it has brought upon us" (IV: 709).

Finally, Rousseau advocates the segregation of the sexes through the strict maintenance of separate spheres. In his view, excessive familiarity between men and women leads not only to moral corruption and mutual scorn, but also to a progressive effacement of the "natural" differences and roles between them. The segregation of the sexes he called for was designed less as a discipline of love or a precaution against temptation than as a means of preserving the distinctive traits of each sex. It was, as Bernard Guyon observes, "a specific example of

the law—never explicitly expressed, but underlying Rousseau's whole anthropological outlook—that difference is inherently corruptive."¹¹ Subscribing on the whole to traditional gender stereotypes, Rousseau distinguished between masculine and feminine traits, aptitudes, and roles down to the finest detail, even food preferences (sweets and dairy products for women, meat and wine for men).¹² He insisted on the need to preserve these so-called natural differences, arguing that women could not truly love or esteem effeminate men, any more than men could truly love or respect virile women. He was especially critical of Parisian society which, he claimed, "virilized" women and "effeminized" men, making both sexes less willing and less able to fulfill their natural role as parents and, in the case of men, their duty as citizens and soldiers. He warned that women who strove to cultivate the qualities and talents of men and to usurp their prerogatives only worked against their own interests, since (in his view) such behavior deprived them of their feminine charms and hence of their power to subjugate men.

In Rousseau's view, only by conforming to the role nature prescribed for them could women maintain their power over men. Drawing on the old myth of "feminine wiles," he argues that women's intuition and practical intelligence enable them to exert a covert but powerful influence over men that compensates for their physical weakness and material dependence. Since men depend on women for the satisfaction of their sexual desires and for their happiness, an astute woman can easily tip the balance of power in her favor. However, Rousseau insists that women should exercise this power discreetly and not attempt to usurp men's "natural" right to command. After asserting that "it is in the natural order of things that women should obey men," he adds an important explanatory note:

Recalling that I recognize in women a natural talent for dominating men, many readers—I imagine—will accuse me of contradicting myself; yet they will be mistaken. There is an important difference between usurping the right to command and governing the one who commands. Woman's empire is one of gentle sweetness, artfulness, and an accommodating spirit. Her orders come as caresses, her threats as tears. She should rule her household like a minister his government, by having herself ordered to do what she wishes. . . . But when she fails to heed the voice of the true head of the family and tries to usurp his rights and to

command alone, this disorder leads to nothing but misery, scandal, and dishonor. (IV: 766–67)

The key to this passage is the distinction between woman's covert power and man's overt rule, which Rousseau illustrates by the comparison of the family to the state: A wife serves as her husband's prime minister, implementing the directives which he alone has the authority to establish, but which she has the power to influence.

According to Rousseau, this power hierarchy is grounded in nature and is beneficial to both sexes. He therefore strongly criticizes women who attempt to pervert it by usurping male prerogatives or by adopting traits traditionally ascribed to men. In his view, women's influence on men should be gentle and covert. "If a women is bitter and obstinate, it only increases her troubles and her husband's ill-treatment of her," he warns in *Emile*.

Heaven did not make women ingratiating and persuasive in order for them to be shrewish; nor did it make them weak to be imperious; it did not give them so sweet a voice to speak insults or such delicate features to be contorted by anger. . . . Each person should maintain the tone appropriate to his or her sex. Too gentle a husband can make a woman impertinent; but, unless a man is a monster, a gentle wife will triumph over him sooner or later. (IV: 711)

This passage, like many others in *Emile*, is *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*. In these passages, Rousseau prescribes guidelines for proper female behavior by distinguishing certain traits as feminine (weakness, delicacy, submissiveness, persuasiveness) and others as unfeminine or otherwise unbecoming to women (shrewishness, anger, impertinence). Like the chapters in *Julie* describing domestic life at Clarens, Books I and V of *Emile* can be read as a fictionalized conduct book and domestic manual for eighteenth-century women. Reader response to *Julie* and *Emile* suggests that they did in fact function in precisely that way for many women—a point I illustrate later in this chapter.



In his essays, Rousseau portrays relations between the sexes as a perpetual battle of wills in which each tries to dominate the other. He criticizes what he considers women's corruptive, emasculating influence on men in societies that allow unlimited contact between the

sexes. In the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, for example, he denounces the overt rule of society by women as unnatural and describes romantic love as an artificial emotion invented by them to dominate the sex that nature intended them to obey. In his view, women's negative influence on men is nowhere more evident than in literature and the arts. "What kind of mind can one expect to find in a man solely occupied with the important task of amusing women?" he asks in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*. "Our talents and writings reflect our frivolous occupations—pleasant enough, but as petty and cold as our feelings."¹³ Hence Rousseau's praise for—and idealized portrait of—the sexual mores and intellectual vigor of Genevan society. In Geneva, unlike Paris, sexually segregated clubs or *cercles* permit men to engage in serious intellectual discussion and debate, while women amuse themselves elsewhere in light, but decent female chitchat.

In his fictional works, Rousseau generally presents a more optimistic and idealized view of the power relations between the sexes. He describes the Wolmars' marriage, like that of the newlywed Sophie and Emile, as a relationship of interdependence, affection, and mutual esteem. Because of the natural differences between the sexes, their bodies and minds complement and complete each other, making of each couple an organic whole. "From this union arises an ethical being whose eyes are provided by the woman and arms by the man, but so entirely interdependent that the woman learns from the man what to see and the man learns from the woman what to do," he explains in *Emile* (IV: 720). Similarly, describing her marriage to Wolmar, Julie writes: "Each of us is exactly what the other needs; he enlightens me and I animate him; we are far better off together. We seem destined to form a single being, of which he is the mind and I the will" (II: 373–74). Yet Rousseau is careful to distinguish between interdependence and equality. In his view, the mutual dependence of men and women does not make them equal; their interdependence, being itself unequal, serves in fact to underline the superiority of men, who are supposedly more self-sufficient. Yet Rousseau is far from unambiguous on this point, since of all his fictional characters, it is Claire who is the most self-sufficient in relation to the opposite sex. She resolutely refuses to remarry, insisting that the institution of marriage is too constraining for her independent spirit.

Aside from Claire, however, Rousseau's women characters generally consider marriage their natural destiny and their greatest hope for happiness. Sophie sees in Emile the Telemachus of her dreams. Similarly, Julie declares that "man and woman are destined for each other;

it is nature's intention that they be united in marriage" (II: 456). She views her own *mariage de raison* with Wolmar as a liberation from the perils of romantic passion. Indeed, in the second preface to *Julie*, Rousseau presents his novel as a defense of companionate marriage:

I like to imagine a man and his wife reading this book together and drawing from it new strength to persevere in their joint efforts. . . . How could they contemplate its portrayal of a happy companionate marriage, without wishing to emulate it . . . and without their own union being strengthened? (II: 23)

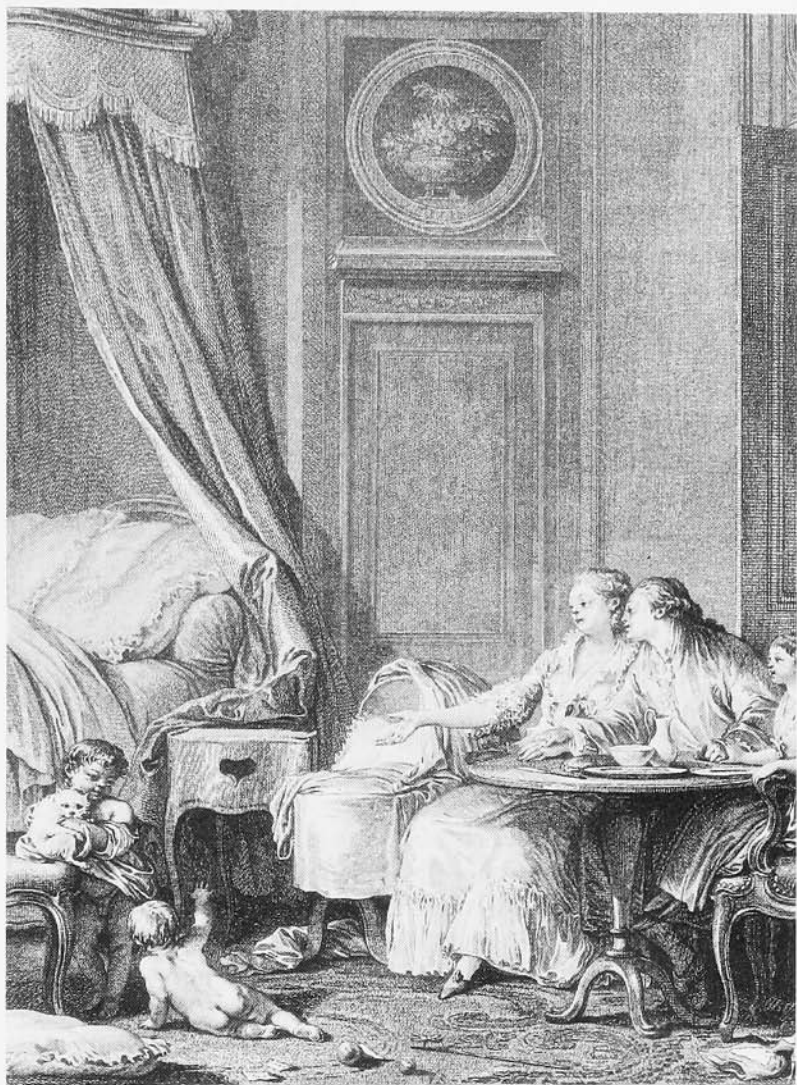
Rousseau views such *mariages d'estime* as the surest path to domestic harmony, social order, and personal happiness. His idealized view of such marriages is presented most forcefully in Julie's account of her wedding ceremony and the dramatic conversion to virtue that it caused in her: "The chaste and sublime duties of marriage, so crucial to the happiness, peace, order, and survival of the human race, the dignity and sanctity of the marriage vow, so forcefully expressed in the Scriptures—all this made such a strong impression on me that I seemed to feel a sudden inward revolution," she later recalls. "Suddenly, an unknown power seemed to correct the disorder of my affections and to set them straight according to the law of duty and nature" (II: 354).

Just as in Rousseau's ideal society the social contract would end the struggle for power among its citizens, so too in the ideal marriage he envisaged, mutual affection and esteem would resolve the war between the sexes and the disruptive, anti-social effects of passion. However, as Burgelin observes in his discussion of Book V of *Emile*, "This sounds good in theory, but in practice it seems as difficult to go from passion to marriage as it is to go from social disorder to the social contract. This is the main problem with Book V."¹⁴ This same attempt to resolve the war between the sexes—that pernicious duel of desire and domination—through the harmony offered by companionate marriage underlies not only Book V of *Emile*, but also the second half of *Julie*.

The Rousseauian Ideals of Motherhood and Enlightened Domesticity

Like many of his contemporaries, Rousseau was alarmed by the high infant mortality rate in France, which exceeded fifty percent in the

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This illustration by Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune from the 1777 edition of *Emile* bears the caption: "Voilà la règle de la nature. Pourquoi la contrariez-vous?" ["This is the rule of nature. Why hinder it?"] This intimate family scene was clearly designed to support Rousseau's claim that a woman's natural role was to bear children, to nurse and raise them herself, and to provide a warm, nurturing environment for her family. Like other leading Enlightenment figures, Rousseau was concerned by his country's slow population growth and high infant mortality rate. He therefore opposed contraceptive practices and abortion and maintained that every married woman should bear at least four children. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

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mid-eighteenth century. He was not alone in arguing that each woman should produce at least four children in order to assure a stable population rate.¹⁵ Like Montesquieu and Diderot, he disapproved of parents who, for social and economic reasons, forced their children into unhappy and mismatched marriages; for such matches, in addition to the grief they caused, were less likely to produce children. For the same reason, Rousseau criticized the widespread use of birth control (mainly in the form of coitus interruptus and herbal spermicides) and the frequency of abortions.¹⁶ Rousseau charged that in their frivolous pursuit of pleasure, society women rejected both their procreative and maternal functions: "Not content to have stopped breastfeeding their children, women no longer want them at all," he charges in *Emile*.

As soon as motherhood becomes burdensome, people find a way to avoid it altogether; they wish to perform a useless act in order to repeat it over and over. In this way, the attraction designed to multiply the human species is turned against it. When added to the other causes of depopulation, this practice foretells the impending doom of Europe. The sciences, arts, philosophy, and morals to which this mentality gives rise will soon turn Europe into a desert. (IV: 256)

Rousseau draws a parallel between the sterility of women and the sterility of the arts and sciences. The link is not simply metaphoric, but causal as well, since in his view intellectual and moral libertinism were closely related, feeding on each other and slowly, perniciously sapping a people's mental and moral vigor.

For Rousseau, the refusal of motherhood was both a symptom and a primary source of the moral corruption and egoism of urban society in eighteenth-century France. "If the force of blood ties is not strengthened by habit and solicitude, it becomes stifled in the first years of life, and the heart dies before ever being born," he warns in *Emile*.

Because of this corruption of natural ties, the whole moral order deteriorates and the voice of nature is extinguished in everyone's heart; households become less animated, the touching sight of a newly formed family no longer binds husbands People are no longer fathers, mothers, children, brothers, nor sisters; they are barely acquainted, why would they love each other? People

think only of themselves. When the home is nothing but a place of sadness and solitude, it is only natural to seek to amuse oneself elsewhere. (IV: 257–58)

Rousseau's pessimistic portrayal of family life—or lack of it—in eighteenth-century French society was quite accurate historically, at least for the upper and upper-middle classes. Among the French aristocracy, it was not uncommon for husband and wife to maintain separate residences and to lead completely separate lives. Their children were sent away soon after birth, first to wet-nurses, often living far from their parents, then to boarding schools or convents. As adolescents, they were then brought home to be “polished” and married off as quickly and as advantageously as possible. Given these circumstances, affective ties had little chance to develop among family members. In many upper-class families, children scarcely knew their parents or siblings and grew to adulthood in an emotionally sterile environment. The intimate nuclear family as we know it simply did not exist—or only in rare cases—among the French aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie of the mid-1700s.¹⁷

Rousseau maintained that if women conscientiously fulfilled their maternal role and remained at home to nurse and raise their children, family life could be revived, thereby fostering the moral regeneration of society as a whole. “If only mothers would breastfeed their children, then public morals would reform themselves,” he affirms in *Emile*.

The attraction of family life is the best antidote to bad morals When a family is lively and animated, domestic duties become a woman's fondest occupation and her husband's favorite amusement. The correction of this problem alone would soon lead to a general moral reform; nature would soon have reestablished all its rights. Once women become mothers again, soon men will again become fathers and husbands. (IV: 257–258)

Similarly, in *Julie*, he declares: “Mothers, if you conscientiously fulfill your duties, everyone else will fulfill theirs. . . . If you decide to be wives and mothers again, then the sweetest power on earth will be the most respected as well!” (II: 585).

Anticipating twentieth-century psychological theory, Rousseau argued that it was not the biological fact of being a mother, but rather

the daily physical contact of nursing and childrearing that fostered affective ties between mother and child. To women who were courageous enough to defy social customs and prejudices in order to nurse, Rousseau promised not only a happier domestic life, but also better health for themselves and their children: "I dare to promise these worthy mothers their husbands' solid and constant attachment, a truly filial tenderness from their children, . . . successful deliveries and easy recoveries, a strong and vigorous health, and the pleasure of seeing their daughters imitate them one day" (IV: 258–59). For several decades before the publication of *Emile*, doctors and moralists had urged mothers to nurse their children to help reduce the high mortality rate among infants and postpartum mothers.¹⁸ In his efforts to promote maternal nursing, Rousseau was therefore following the most advanced medical opinion of his period. Thanks to his talents as a polemicist and popularizer, Rousseau's breastfeeding campaign had considerable impact on childrearing practices both in his own period and in succeeding generations.¹⁹

Commenting on Rousseau's impact on gender ideology in Revolutionary France, Carol Blum writes: "The reabsorption of the sexually active woman into the lactating mother, the substitution of a nutritive for a genital function, was a bold and daring provocation in the eighteenth century, where an egalitarian attitude toward women had become fashionable in enlightened and aristocratic circles."²⁰ Blum implies here that Rousseau's ideal of motherhood and his rhetoric of moral reform constituted a repressive and reactionary discourse designed to relegate women to a subordinate position after they had succeeded in achieving a certain degree of independence. While his writings on women may well have had a negative influence on the attitudes and policies of the revolutionary leaders, Rousseau and many of his followers considered his ideal of enlightened domesticity an empowering discourse for women—one that could restore their lost dignity, give them a positive influence over their husbands and children, and increase their chances for a happy, productive life.

This interpretation is borne out by Rousseau's advice to Mme de Berthier, a young countess who was expecting her first child and who had written to him of a deep melancholy and inner emptiness for which she could find no source nor remedy: "This inner emptiness of which you complain is only felt by hearts made to be filled. . . . I am offering you a remedy suggested to me by your condition. Breastfeed your child. . . . Don't send your daughter away to a convent. Raise her

yourself."²¹ He recognizes the unconventional nature of his advice and the class prejudices the young countess would need to defy in order to follow it: "Already I hear objections and a fuss. Out loud, people speak of inconveniences, lack of milk, a husband who is annoyed. Under their breath, they whisper about a woman who feels constrained by the tediousness of domestic life, by duties beneath her station, by the lack of pleasure." Yet Rousseau insists that he is offering her the only sure path to happiness:

Pleasures? I promise you the kind that will truly fill your heart. It is not by accumulating pleasures that we become happy. The sweetest pleasures that exist are those brought by domestic life. The feelings we acquire in this intimate relationship are the most genuine, durable, and solid that can bind us to mortal beings. They are also the purest feelings, since they are closest both to nature and to social order and, by their sheer strength, steer us away from vice and base inclinations. (CC, v. 37: 206–7)

Rousseau concludes his letter by encouraging the young countess to abandon the superficial pleasures of society in order to secure for herself and her husband the simpler but more durable pleasures of domestic life: "Countesses don't ordinarily serve as wet-nurses and governesses; but then they must also learn to do without happiness. If you dislike the life of a bourgeois couple, if you let yourself be controlled by the opinion of others, then you must cure yourself of the thirst for happiness that torments you, for you will never satisfy it" (CC, v. 37: 207–8). The class distinctions in this passage suggest that Rousseau's breastfeeding campaign was addressed above all to aristocratic women and that the ideal of domesticity he was proposing was modelled after the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie—particularly the sober Genevan bourgeoisie of his youth recalled through the idealizing lens of memory and the unfulfilled longings of a motherless son.

Rousseau's firm belief in the soundness of his advice is illustrated by the fact that he encouraged his own friends to nurse their children by presenting them with a sash woven by his own hand as a wedding gift, to be worn on condition that they breastfeed their babies. For example, in a letter to Anne-Marie d'Ivernois on the eve of her wedding, Rousseau wrote: "To ensure your good fortune, wear this emblem of the ties of affection and love in which you will entwine your lucky spouse. Remember that by wearing a sash woven by the hand

that outlined the duties of mothers, you are promising to fulfill those duties yourself."²²



Given the importance of maternal nursing in Rousseau's program of moral reform, it is surprising that no reference is made to it in *Julie*. It may be that Rousseau did not wish to mar his heroine's ethereal image by portraying her engaged in an activity as *terre-à-terre* as breastfeeding. Or perhaps it was only after doing research for *Emile* that Rousseau became convinced of the importance of maternal breastfeeding for the well-being of mothers and children. In any case, Julie's sons are well beyond the nursing stage by the time Saint-Preux returns to admire her in her maternal role. Despite this significant gap, it is *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, more than any other work, that presents Rousseau's most exalted vision of motherhood and domesticity. While *Emile's* mother is conspicuously absent and Sophie appears singularly ill-equipped for motherhood, given her limited education, Julie clearly represents the ideal mother-educator and the model upon which her educational methods are patterned. Referring to her cousin as "the perfect little mother" ("la petite maman par excellence"), Claire not only designates Julie as the model for her daughter's education, but asks that she raise her in her place: "I relinquish my maternal authority in your hands; and to make my daughter even more precious to me, turn her into another Julie if you can" (II: 439).

In his detailed and enthusiastic descriptions of daily life at Clarens, Rousseau presents his readers with a veritable manual of domestic economy and an eloquent exposition of his ideal of domesticity based on the bourgeois values of simplicity, order, utility, thrift, and virtue. Although Julie and Wolmar are both aristocrats by birth, their modest income and simple tastes lead them to adopt the bourgeois lifestyle of their Protestant compatriots. Both by necessity and by inclination, they have retired to their country estate, which has prospered thanks to their hard work and careful management. The secret of the Wolmars' prosperity lies above all in the successful division of labor and harmonious cooperation between the two spouses in their daily tasks.



In the ideal world imagined by Rousseau, women would be so immersed in their maternal and domestic responsibilities that they would have neither the time, nor the energy, nor even the desire, to

participate in activities outside the home: "Far from being a socialite, a true mother and housewife is no less a recluse in her home than a nun in a cloister," he maintains (IV: 737). The comparison of the home to a cloister recurs in another key passage of *Emile*:

Will a woman be a nursing mother today and a warrior tomorrow? Will she change her temperament and tastes like a chameleon changes colors? Will she suddenly abandon the shelter of a cloistered life and domestic concerns for the harshness of the elements and for the labors, fatigues, and perils of war? Will she be fearful at some moments and courageous at others; now delicate, now robust? (IV: 699)

Not surprisingly, Rousseau appealed to nature—and specifically to physiology—to justify women's relegation to the domestic sphere. He consistently ignored—or chose to ignore—the extent to which social conditioning determined women's abilities, temperament, and physical condition, that it was society and not nature that made them "fearful" and "delicate," indeed that his very concept of nature was itself an ideological construct designed to naturalize and legitimize male hegemony.

In the ideal society imagined by Rousseau, women were excluded a priori from playing any military or political role, as indeed they were for the most part in reality. War and politics were the business of men, just as love and domestic life were the concern of women. Yet Rousseau did not consider women's exclusion from public life as a privation, but as a privilege. In his view, true happiness and moral decency were possible only in the domestic sphere, while the public sphere was inevitably a locus of corruption, exploitation, and misery. An early formulation of this view is found in Rousseau's unfinished play, *La Mort de Lucrèce*, written in 1754. Responding to a friend's complaint that she has imprisoned herself in her home, Lucrèce asks: "Do you call the pleasure of living peacefully in the bosom of one's family an imprisonment?"

I will never need any company other than that of my Husband, my Father, and my Children to assure my happiness, nor anyone else's esteem besides theirs to satisfy my ambitions. I have always believed that the woman most worthy of esteem is the one spoken of the least, even to praise her. May the gods protect my

name from ever becoming famous: success of that kind is achieved by our sex only at the expense of happiness and innocence.²³

In her celebration of the joys of domesticity, Lucrèce appears here as a prototype for the heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Her words anticipate a particularly glowing tribute to Julie by Saint-Preux: "Heaven seems to have sent her here to demonstrate the excellence a human soul is capable of attaining, as well as the happiness that one can enjoy in the obscurity of private life" (II: 532).

Women's Education: Rousseau and les femmes savantes

Because women wielded such tremendous power over men for good or for ill, Rousseau underlined the importance of improving female education. Indeed, he saw the improvement of women's education as the key to his program of moral reform; for, in his view, only virtuous, intelligent, and conscientious mothers would be capable of raising children who would later become loving and morally responsible adults. It is Julie who best exemplifies the positive effect women could have on men. Numerous references are made to her powerful influence over friends and family. "My Julie," declares Claire, "you are made to reign. Your empire is the most absolute that I know . . . Your heart animates everyone around it and gives them a new being" (II: 409).

Like Fénelon and Diderot, Rousseau was highly critical of the convent education traditionally given to girls, since it separated them from their families and, as a result, ill-prepared them for their future role as wives and mothers. He further maintained that convents were to a large extent responsible for the greater coquettishness, affectation, and moral laxity of women in Catholic countries: "Convents are veritable schools of coquetry, not the honest coquetry I spoke of earlier, but the type that leads to all the failings of women" (IV: 739). Rousseau considered the education of girls at home by enlightened, conscientious parents far better than the education available in either convents or boarding schools. He therefore opposed l'abbé de Saint-Pierre's proposal for the establishment of a network of boarding schools for girls.²⁴

In Book V of *Emile*, Rousseau offers a detailed plan for women's education. He was especially interested in improving their moral education, which he considered far more important than either academic

instruction or domestic training. According to this plan, girls would receive careful moral training to develop the qualities Rousseau considered essential to the fulfillment of their future role as wives and mothers: modesty, chastity, obedience, self-control, and—above all—solid moral judgment. Since, in his view, it was women's destiny to be subjected all their lives to the laws of decorum and to the authority and opinion of others, they should be taught self-discipline at an early age:

Women should be subjected to constraint from an early age. This misfortune, if it is one at all, is inseparable from their sex. Throughout their lives, they will be subjected to the most constant and severe of restraints: the rules of decorum. They should be accustomed to constraint early, so that it costs them nothing to control their whims and to submit to the will of others. (IV: 709–10)

Rousseau insisted, however, that the moral conditioning of girls should be gentle and reasonable, since excessive constraint might incite rebellion, just as endless sermonizing could lead to boredom and to contempt for their duties.

In his prescriptions for female education, Rousseau aims for a happy medium between what he considers two equally dangerous extremes: leaving a girl in total ignorance (which would make her too dull a companion for her husband and too easy a target for seducers) or turning her into a bluestocking—who, by usurping male prerogatives and by neglecting her domestic duties, would disrupt both the sexual hierarchy and the equilibrium of family life. "Falling into opposite extremes, some would limit a woman's activities to sewing and spinning at home with her servants, making her nothing more than the head servant to her master," he remarks in *Emile*. "Others, not satisfied with guaranteeing her own rights, would have her usurp ours; for, placing her above us in the traits specific to her sex and making her our equal in everything else, doesn't that amount to giving woman the dominance that nature grants her husband?" (IV: 730).

Between the extremes exemplified by Agnès in Molière's *Ecole des Femmes* and Philaminte in his *Femmes Savantes*, Rousseau therefore sought a happy medium. In a simpler, healthier society, women would not need much education, aside from practical domestic training. But in the corrupt social world of eighteenth-century France, argued



Left: Illustration by Maurice Leloir for the *Confessions* bearing the caption "Rousseau enseignant les heures à Thérèse" (Rousseau teaching Thérèse how to tell time). Right: Portrait of Louise d'Épinay by Carmontelle. Both pictures courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris. Rousseau's satiric portrait of bluestockings in *Emile* may have been aimed at his benefactresses (particularly Mme Dupin and Mme d'Épinay), who criticized him for his choice of the illiterate Thérèse as his companion.

Rousseau, women needed to understand the institutions, customs, and prejudices of society, as well as the seductive wiles of men. In his view, a woman's moral education should prepare her adequately for the social milieu in which she is to live. This is precisely where Sophie's education fails, since her moral education does not adequately protect her against the corruption of the city; moreover, her general culture is so limited that Emile soon tires of her charms and, after their move to Paris, strays from home in search of more stimulating company, thereby compounding her vulnerability to seducers.²⁵

Rousseau maintained that a woman's education should also serve to make her an interesting and agreeable companion for her husband. No doubt he was reflecting on his own bitter disappointment with Thérèse's mediocre intelligence and lack of culture when he described