

“Rousseau, The Misfit’s Hero”

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ABSTRACT:

An extraordinarily pluralistic group of eighteenth-century men and women were drawn to Rousseau’s writings and Rousseau himself because of his sympathetic portrait of the person who did not fit into the artificial and inegalitarian culture of *le monde*. Some of these men, like Jean-Paul Marat, became revolutionaries; Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, by contrast, found Rousseauian inspiration for his labors in the Counter-Enlightenment. Stranger still, Olympe de Gouges, whose life and work represented all that Rousseau feared, claimed an enormous debt to Rousseau as the person who helped her imagine an unashamed and authentic life that was free from the shackles of social expectations.

In this paper, I explore “Three Rousseaus” (the Romantic, the Tutor, and the Legislator) with this reception history in mind, highlighting the ways in which Rousseau’s paeans to the authentic life and desire to protect the misfit from social shame radicalize his republican thought in exciting ways. Yet at the same time, perhaps because Rousseau was aware of the pluralism of his readers and his following by women in particular, I show how his texts forestall these romantic implications. By closing off the romantic republic from literary women and the men with whom they dwell, Rousseau strives to protect the misfit who animates his defense of the authentic life—the simple, provincial man. Against current trends in political theory, I affirm Rousseau’s concern with the psychological state of the misfit and his willingness to see it in political terms, but caution against the effort to *guarantee* the misfit or any other citizen a social or political life that is free from the injuries of shame. It is this move of seeking to guarantee the misfit a life free from anything that will mock or humiliate him that enables Rousseau to close off the public to others who were eager to take up his an invitation to live an authentic life.

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The Misfit's Hero

In 1771, the French writer Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément was thrown in jail for slandering the philosophe Jean François de Saint-Lambert. Clément had come to Paris from Dijon in order to join the republic of letters where he imagined a literary life alongside his heroes, most notably Voltaire but also Saint-Lambert himself. By his own account, during his youth he had been “seduced by the new systems... It was above all [*la*] *philosophie moderne* that [he] loved.”¹ According to Darrin McMahon’s account of the Rousseauian influence in the Counter-Enlightenment, “At the tender age of eighteen, [Clément] wrote to Voltaire, beseeching guidance, describing himself as ‘a young man who loves you because he loves your works, who owes you everything because your writings have taught him how to think.’”² But Clément, like many men who came from the provinces in search of the company of philosophes and a life with them, was rebuffed and ultimately disgusted with the hypocrisy of the literary “republic.” He, like others in the “literary low-life,” never earned the recognition of Voltaire and his company, and was left to pursue a literary career in the shadow of those he had so admired as a young man. When given the opportunity to write back to the philosophes, he jumped at the chance—attacking the eighteenth-century men of letters, saying they had done a disservice to the tradition of French classicism he had come to embrace. Clément attacked Saint-Lambert in particular, describing “*Les Saisons*” as an “eternally wearying monotony,” indicative of the “devastating effects of *philosophie* on the century’s taste.”³ Demonstrating the cozy relationship between the republic of letters and the establishment, Saint-Lambert arranged for Clément to be thrown in jail. He was bailed out by none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had become a friend of the Counter-enlightenment, both for his

¹ *Nouvelles observations critiques, sur différents sujets de littérature, par M. Clément* (Amsterdam and Paris, 1772), 1-2. Cited in Darrin M. McMahon, “The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past & Present*, No. 159 (May, 1998), pp. 77-112: 95. McMahon notes: “The introduction to the work contains a long retraction of his former allegiance.”

² McMahon, 95, citing “Clément to Voltaire, Dijon, 17 May 1760,” cited in Desnoiresterres, *Voltaire et la société française*, viii, 6.

³ McMahon, 96, citing Clément, *Observations critiques*, 238.

tributes to traditional morals and criticism of the literary establishment in which he, too, claimed never to fully belong.⁴

Clément and his friends were not the only men who resented the closed nature of the “republic of letters” and saw their work as an extension of Rousseauian ideas. Whereas Rousseau’s fans in the Counter-enlightenment turned to French classicism and traditionalism in order to destabilize the philosophes’ influence as arbiters of culture, another group—aptly called the “Rousseaus du ruisseau,”⁵ (“Rousseaus of the gutter”) attacked establishment and elitism in all of its forms.⁶ They became *libelles* who hated the monarchy, Church, and philosophes equally. Charles Thévenau de Morande, who referred to himself as “*le philosophe cynique*,” was a paradigmatic *libelle*—his pamphlets, like the more familiar *L’Ami du Peuple* of Jean-Paul Marat, a fellow “gutter Rousseauian” were fraught with moral outrage. Their pamphlets were intentionally designed to incite resentment in the dispossessed majority. As Robert Darnton puts it, “their pornographic details got the point [that social rot was consuming French society] across to a public that could not assimilate the *Social Contract*.”⁷ They took Rousseauian disgust with elites and his concern for the ordinary man and made it viscerally accessible to everyone. This “democratization” of Rousseau’s message was seen as entirely consistent with Rousseau’s republicanism.

In the same month that the Jacobins sent Marie Antoinette and several other prominent women to the guillotine, Olympe de Gouges, née Marie Gouze, was executed for her disloyalty to the republic, and more specifically her verbal attacks on Robespierre and Marat. De Gouges, born in Montauban to working-class parents, had no formal education. She moved to Paris and gave herself an aristocratic-

⁴ McMahon, 96, 108. Saint-Lambert was also the lover of Sophie d’Houdetot, with whom Rousseau was famously in love. He recounts the triangulation among Saint-Lambert, Sophie, and himself in the *Confessions*, (year 1757) 445-56. This was likely additional motivation for Rousseau to come to Clément’s rescue.

⁵ “Rousseaus du Ruisseau” was a term a term applied to Restif de la Bretonne in the 18th Century; it fits many of Restif’s Grub Street comrades. See Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” p. 110, n86.

⁶ Darnton, 110.

⁷ Darnton, 110.

sounding name, which bought her access to the city's salon culture. She fabricated a story about her lineage, claiming to be the "illegitimate daughter of the marquis le Franc de Pompignan, a minor playwright [and a] ...member of the Académie Française."⁸ She was a courtesan, a playwright, and the author of the *Declaration of Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*, a feminist rendering of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. She also proposed a French national women's theater. And she claimed an extraordinary inspirational debt to Rousseau, whom she "continued to idolize ... and to view ... as her literary father."⁹ Mary Trouille, who has written a history of Rousseau's female readership, emphasizes that De Gouges invoked Rousseau's authority in order to defend herself against those who criticized her involvement in the theater. "'Proud and strong-willed like Jean-Jacques, I persisted in my ambitious plan nonetheless'", she proclaimed.¹⁰ She was drawn to him "as a *déclassée*." "Like him," writes Trouille, "Gouges felt out of place in the petit bourgeois world of her childhood and ardently aspired to a place in the Republic of Letters."¹¹ Note that it was not simply Rousseau's writings that inspired her; like the men who wanted to be philosophes but were denied entrance to the club, she was drawn to Rousseau the man and all that he represented—the ordinary person doing battle with the arbiters of society. In 1791, three years after Rousseau's death, she finished her tribute to him, *Les Rêveries de Jean-Jacques, le Mort de Rousseau à Ermenonville*.¹²

These stories appear contradictory, yet a survey of the reception of Rousseau suggests that it was the portrait of the misunderstood outsider and the critique of the artificial, unjust, and hypocritical nature of French society that was especially salient with Rousseau's extraordinarily diverse readership.

Focusing on this figure of the "misfit," there is no contradiction between radical republican, feminist,

⁸ Mary Seidman Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 239.

⁹ Trouille, 240.

¹⁰ Olympe de Gouges, *compte Moral* (Paris, 1792), p. 4, in Trouille, 240 n3.

¹¹ Trouille, 241.

¹² Trouille, 241.

and counter-enlightenment traditionalists being inspired by Rousseau. All were shut out by what they perceived to be the rules of dominant or ascendant society; all felt like they did not belong. All felt the shame and humiliation of clamoring for admission into a social culture that was ostensibly based on merit and reason yet felt just as impenetrable as the *ancien régime*. Because the literary republic, in particular, was so small—with only 40 appointments in the Académie Française, for example—the outsiders and misfits far outnumbered the insiders and arbiters.¹³ Rousseau, the *déclassé*, served as a kind of every man. Salonnières, actresses, traditionalists, and literary hacks alike felt like they didn't belong, and saw a friend in Jean-Jacques who had a flair for dramatizing social exclusion.

In this paper, I explore “Three Rousseaus” (the Romantic, the Tutor, and the Legislator) with this reception history in mind, highlighting the ways in which Rousseau's paeans to the authentic life and desire to protect the misfit from social shame radicalize his republican thought in exciting ways. Yet at the same time, perhaps because Rousseau was aware of the pluralism of his readers and his following by women, in particular, I show how his texts constrain and regulate these romantic implications. By closing off the romantic republic from literary women and the men with whom they dwell, Rousseau strives to protect the misfit who animates his defense of the authentic life—the simple, provincial man. Against current trends in political theory, I affirm Rousseau's concern with the psychological state of the misfit and his willingness to see it in political terms, but caution against the effort to *guarantee* the misfit or any other citizen a social or political life that is free from the injuries of shame. Seeking to guarantee the misfit a life free from mockery and humiliation closes off the public to others who were eager to take up Rousseau's invitation to live something like an “authentic” life, as well.

¹³ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 99.

Receiving Rousseau

The Men of Grub Street

As scholars of the nascent European public sphere and French salon culture have noted, a counterpublic that had a republican spirit emerged in the waning years of the ancien regime.¹⁴ Termed the “republic of letters,” the counterpublic was a site of literary and philosophical exchange among an emerging literary middle class who attended the theater, held salon gatherings, joined the various French national academies, and also penned epistolary exchanges that served to develop their philosophical and literary talent while advancing ideas they believed were for the good of France and humanity as a whole. The “great philosophes” described the republic of letters as “the literary counterpart to the ‘atomic’ individualism of Physiocratic theory, a society of independent but fraternal individuals, in which the best men won but all derived dignity, as well as a living, from service to the common cause.”¹⁵ They existed quite comfortably in the shadow and protective cover of the ancien regime, but nonetheless saw their own sub-culture as a republic in miniature--a respectful and egalitarian literary community that prized the play of “democratic wit” (d’Alembert) in which all voices were equally valued.

Rousseau was of course not only part of this culture but thriving in it. He won the Académie Dijon prize for his *First Discourse*, and wrote and lived under the support of various salonnières, most notably Madame d’Epinay, whose estate, l’Ermitage was where Rousseau wrote most of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. But the “socio-culture elite known as *le monde*” and its preoccupation with Paris and hostility to the simple pleasures of the country grated on both Rousseau’s philosophical sensibility and his provincial identity.¹⁶ In particular, he found the obsession with reason, progress, and civilization to take men only further away from their natural selves. He would attack Paris and the city in general every

¹⁴ See, for example, Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) and Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 99.

¹⁶ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” 82, 83.

chance he got. As man sought to cultivate the natural self living in society—what Jean Starobinski has aptly described as a “second nature,” the city and the world of the philosophes were something to be escaped rather than embraced.¹⁷ As Rousseau tells us in his *Confessions*, as much as he found life in Paris quite pleasurable, he both needed and pined for the simplicity of Geneva to allow him to live as an ordinary man. That he spends most of his life outside of Geneva while writing as a “citizen” of it of course complicates the authenticity of Rousseau’s own claims to the country, but it was certainly part of his strategy of representing himself as an outsider who was never at home in the crowded city.

Meanwhile, other men with backgrounds not unlike Rousseau’s were leaving the provincial countryside to pursue their literary dreams in Paris, seeking membership in the republic of lettres. These men dreamt of the lively and sustainable literary life of “democratic wit” that had been promoted by the likes of Voltaire, Diderot, and d’Alembert, and imagined a welcoming, bustling, “republic of letters” and vibrant literary market where they could earn a living as writers.¹⁸ Diderot himself had successfully navigated the provinces-to-Paris migration, becoming the exemplary philosophe who was once the “son of a cutler.” But like many who gained entry in *le monde*, Diderot was not a peasant but a land-owner who simply understood the peasant’s plight.¹⁹

Most were not to become the next Diderot, “lecturing monarchs, rescuing outraged innocence, and ruling the republic of letters from the Académie Française or a chateau like Ferney.” They were met with closed doors by the *le monde*. There were no plum academy posts to be passed around, and the presses were all closed shops.²⁰ “Experience taught,” writes Robert Darnton, “that the real world of letters functioned like everything else in the Old Regime: individuals got ahead as best they could in a

¹⁷ Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988), 294.

¹⁸ Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past & Present* 51 (May, 1971), 81-115. See also Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ Peter France, *Politeness and Its Discontents: Problems in French Classical Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146.

²⁰ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” 98-99.

labyrinth of baroque institutions ... [ruled by] privilege and protection, not merely the demonstration of talent.”²¹ These men instead found themselves living in Paris’s “Grub Street,” the space of the literary low life who aspired to live in *le monde* but could not. Publishing monopolies prevented their books from actually reaching the literary market.²² Many survived “by doing the dirty work of society—spying for the police and peddling pornography; and they filled their writings with imprecations against *le monde* that humiliated and corrupted them.”²³ Jean-Paul Marat, for example, was an archetypal man of Grub Street. These men became proto-revolutionary pamphleteers, moralizing about the dangers and fraudulence of Courtly society.

Perhaps more infuriating than the rejection these men experienced was the extent to which they were attacked by Voltaire and the other mandarins who characterized them as “poor hacks” and the “dregs of humanity”—a “ragged rabble” that “crowded the bottom of the literary world.”²⁴ Their crime was writing for money rather than under the protective cover of elite patronage or the academies, and in the world of letters they were seen, according to Darnton, as on a “social level below prostitutes.”²⁵ In spite of its protestations to the contrary, the republic of letters was hypocritical to the core. Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s own *Essai sur les gens de lettres et les grands* (1752) advanced a “‘democratic’ republic of letters in contrast to the humiliating practices of patronage,” but most writers enjoyed the cover of patronage and d’Alembert himself “stressed that society is and ought to be hierarchical and that the *grands* [literary elite] belonged on top.”²⁶ In Darnton’s analysis, it was the ongoing “psychological toll” of groveling for crumbs at the feet of the philosophes and the increasing awareness of the republic of letters’ proximity to the *ancien* regime that fueled the Revolution.²⁷ He writes: “[While the philosophes]

²¹ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” 99.

²² (Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” 99).

²³ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 98.

²⁴ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 94-95.

²⁵ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 95.

²⁶ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 91.

²⁷ Darnton, “The High Enlightenment,” 104.

grew fat in Voltaire's church, the revolutionary spirit passed to the lean and hungry men of Grub Street, to the cultural pariahs who, through poverty and humiliation, produced the Jacobinical version of Rousseauism. The crude pamphleteering of Grub Street was revolutionary in feeling as well as in message. It expressed the passion of men who hated the Old Regime in their guts, who ached with the hatred of it. It was from such visceral hatred, not from the refined abstractions of the contented cultural elite, that the extreme Jacobin revolution found its authentic voice."²⁸

Salon culture and its democratic sensibility have been celebrated by 20th-century historians like Daniel Gordon who praise the "progressive power of conversation," but for the men of Grub Street there was nothing particularly progressive or open about it.²⁹ They had come to Paris to seek friendship in the so-called republic of letters and instead found a humiliating labor market that left them living in poverty in the midst of grandeur while the philosophes defended so-called republican values and enjoyed decadent lives of kings and queens. Their provincialism was mocked, their talent derided. They had not come from the right place; they did not speak the right way. To have been simply poor in the country was honorable, but to grovel for money in the city while living in poverty was the worst of shames.³⁰ They were living a Rousseauian nightmare.

It is unsurprising that the men of Grub Street identified directly with Rousseau and responded enthusiastically to his tributes to the common man and jeremiads against high society and the Philosophes and salonnières more explicitly. Describing the *Confessions*, J.M. Cohen writes, "One is readily drawn into his dream world in which every man's hand is against him, and [watches] with

²⁸ Darnton, "The High Enlightenment" 115.

²⁹ Daniel Gordon, "'Public Opinion' and the Civilizing Process in France: The Example of Morellet," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1988-89): esp. 305, 321. Cited in Rosenblatt, who notes: "Gordon emphasizes, however, that this egalitarianism was not democratic; in fact in many ways it involved a repudiation of political action; see his *Citizens without Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), in Rosenblatt, p. 104.

³⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York and London: Penguin, 1953), 55-57. Subsequent references are in text.

horrified sympathy.”³¹ The *Confessions* were a tribute to the misfit’s plight against high society.

Rousseau became a hero to the misfits of the pre-revolutionary period who could not find a place in the republic of letters. He had “risen from their ranks into le monde, seen it for what it was, exposed elitist culture itself as the very agent of social corruption, and returned with his semi-literature, working-class wife to a humble existence in the neighborhood of Grub Street, where he died pure and purged. The hacks respected him and despised Voltaire,” writes Darnton.³² This “gutter Rousseauism,” as Darnton calls it unsympathetically, amounted to a moralizing and totalizing critique of inequality that bred a dangerous version of authenticity . It gave us the hungry masses on the march—the putative embodiment of the general will—whose violent rise from obscurity would be famously lamented by Hannah Arendt and others.

The artifice and hypocrisy of the republic of letters also bred its own cast of Rousseauian Court loyalists, men like Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, who became foot soldiers in the Counter-Enlightenment and, by some accounts, the first wave of the French Right.³³ In a follow-up study to Darnton’s account of the ways in which the “Rousseaus du ruisseau” fomented the Revolution, McMahon has uncovered the extent to which the men of Grub Street became virulent anti-philosophes who ultimately sided with the traditionalism, which they saw as natural (against the artificiality of reason), of the French Court and High Church. Antoine Sabatier who had “come from Castres in *sabots*,”³⁴ as d’Alembert put it disparagingly, had a long journey into *le monde*, “mak[ing] a go of it in good hack fashion, seeing his first play ... through to production ... and supplementing his meager

³¹ J.M. Cohen, “Introduction,” *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York and London: Penguin, 1953), 12.

³² Darnton, “The High Enlightenment” 111.

³³ McMahon, 110.

³⁴ McMahon, 90, citing “D’Alembert to Voltaire, Paris, 26 Dec. 1772” in *Voltaire’s Correspondence*. McMahon notes: “the word *sabot*, a play on Sabatier, refers to the wooden clogs worn by the *peuple*, and is thus a reference to [Sabatier’s] less than genteel condition. Voltaire’s letters are replete with other such damning portrayals of Sabatier, described as a *scélérat* (scoundrel) and a *petit monster* (little monster), whose writing is ‘the worst’ in the French language” (n43).

income with a variety of publications: epigrams, madrigals, epistles and licentious verse.”³⁵ He was ultimately offered a small stipend, but Sabatier wanted more: “Not content with a mere pension,”

McMahon writes,

[Sabatier] set about trying to take the literary *monde* by storm. He made the rounds of the salons. He sought out the eminent writers of the day. He published glowing panegyrics of Voltaire. But despite this determined effort, ... Sabatier was met with disappointment. His attempts to flatter the king of Ferney, and his overtures to the first minister of the intellectual world, d’Alembert, were bluntly refused. As d’Alembert later boasted in a letter to Voltaire, the perpetual secretary of the Academy had “chased” this “little vagabond” (*gueux*) ... out of his house “like a lackey”.³⁶

Frustrated and humiliated by these persistent attacks, Sabatier joined the anti-philosophes. He spent the rest of his literary life working on the *Tableau philosophique de l’esprit de M. de Voltaire*, a cataloging of Voltaire’s “personal slurs, his *bons mots* and blows below the belt,” which was designed to show the cruel alliance between Voltaire and the king of Ferney.³⁷ McMahon describes the work as nothing short of “character assassination, of the homeopathic variety, emphasizing the therapeutic quality Grub Street writers believed came from their penned attacks.”³⁸

For the men who were struggling with the resentment they felt for being rejected by the literary republic, the fact that Rousseau had attacked salon culture and praised ancient, “natural” morals had great appeal. Sabatier had agreed with some of the attacks on Rousseau’s work—the “Sorbonne’s censure of *Emile* in 1762,” for example—“[y]et he also defended Rousseau, describing him ... as the ‘most manly, the most profound, the most sublime writer of the century’, despite his ‘paradoxes’ and

³⁵ McMahon, 89.

³⁶ McMahon, 90, citing “D’Alembert to Voltaire, Paris, 26 Dec. 1772” in *Voltaire’s Correspondence*.

³⁷ McMahon, 90-91.

³⁸ McMahon, 90.

‘errors’. On the whole, Sabatier was inclined to treat Rousseau as a case apart [from the rest of the literary establishment].”³⁹ McMahon’s study details the ways in which Rousseau responded to the Court loyalists sympathetically because of their common hostility to the philosophe and his world. What united the anti-philosophes was, according to McMahon, “bitter, cultural resentment: the conviction that France had been hoodwinked by charlatans and was much the worse for it.”⁴⁰ Rousseau was seen as someone who was sympathetic to this critique, and in the *Dialogues* Rousseau attacked the philosophes directly, writing in a voice sounding much like Sabatier and Clément’s.⁴¹

Rousseau’s Disloyal Sisters

Rousseau forged an unsurprising connection with many women who were eager to assume the role of “natural” motherhood—bowing out of the artificial world of French society that left mothers and children living far apart while wet nurses raised their children. Many were also inspired by Rousseau’s promises of domestic happiness that would come from a close-knit family that was bound by love rather than the interests of social classes. Anticipating Tocqueville’s praise for the American marriage rooted in companionship rather than parental class interest, Rousseau painted a sentimental portrait of family life that had broad appeal among aristocratic women, his intended audience. Consider “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”:⁴²

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.... I promise you the kind [of pleasures] that will truly fill your heart. It is not by accumulating pleasures that we become happy. The

³⁹ McMahon, 108, citing Sabatier, *Tableau philosophique*, 254; Sabatier, *Trois siècles* (1772 edn), iii, 210.

⁴⁰ McMahon, 102.

⁴¹ McMahon, 109.

⁴² Trouille, 26.

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.⁴³

That aristocratic women were writing to Rousseau, whom they believed to understand their misfortune and unhappiness seems initially quite shocking. But the shock fades if we go back to *Emile*, which was written for these very women, whom Rousseau endowed with the power of saving civilization and morals. For again, in spite of the tendency (not at all absent in Rousseau's own work) to see salonnières as all-powerful, they were nonetheless governed by certain rules of masculine authority. Rousseau promised elite women real authority—the authority over their home and families; the authority to raise men and citizens.

Emile is therefore written in order to “gratify a good mother who knows how to think.”⁴⁴ Here and elsewhere, Rousseau praised women's intelligence and thoughtfulness while criticizing the artificiality of a culture that limited their “natural” powers, most specifically the power to care for their children through breastfeeding. Rousseau took the power of breastfeeding to be so important that he weaved sashes for his female friends as wedding presents, “to be worn on condition that they breastfeed their babies.”⁴⁵ According to Trouille, doctors had been trying for decades to get mothers to nurse their children in order to reduce mortality rates, but it was Rousseau's campaign and the publication of *Emile* that actually inaugurated a new era of breastfeeding among European women.⁴⁶ The constant praise for

⁴³ Letter to Mme de Berthier, 17 Jan 1770, in *Correspondance Complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R.A. Leigh (Geneva: Institut Voltaire, 1967), v. 37, pp. 205-7. Cited in Trouille, 26-7.

⁴⁴ *Emile*, Bloom translation, 33.

⁴⁵ Trouille, 27.

⁴⁶ Trouille, 26.

the mother and his own friendships with society women ingratiated Rousseau to many who found society life both displeasing and onerous.⁴⁷

More common was the case of women who found Rousseau's tributes to women's natural authority compelling and inspiring, but ultimately exceeded the roles Rousseau had carefully prescribed for them. Madame Roland, who became a leader in Girondist circles, initially found Rousseau's cult of domesticity empowering. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had resonated with her, and in fact she claims to have read it every year until her death.⁴⁸ Describing her feelings after reading it, she writes: "It seemed to me that I then found my true substance, that Rousseau became the interpreter of feelings and ideas I had had before him, but that he alone could explain to my satisfaction. He showed me the domestic happiness to which I had a right to aspire."⁴⁹ Yet as much as she agreed with Rousseau's claim that women had domestic duties to fulfill, her own political involvement suggests that she did not see these duties as at odds with political authority. Empowered by Rousseau's promise of a *happy* life, she felt authorized to pursue politics, which she dearly loved. Describing herself as a person "'seized by a feverish and continual preoccupation with public affairs,'" it is clear that she believed the right to happiness to mean the right to do as she pleased in public as well as private life.⁵⁰ Furthermore, like many women of the time, she was devoted to Rousseau's education prescriptions, but ignored Book V of the *Emile* and the treatment of Sophie in general, going on to raise her daughter in keeping with the autonomy and focus on natural education that Rousseau prescribed for Emile. It is one of many ironies and paradoxes of the time that Madame Roland, who so admired and defended Rousseau against feminist criticism, was

⁴⁷ Trouille, 27. She elaborates: "Rousseau's breastfeeding campaign was addressed above all to aristocratic women ... the ideal of domesticity he was proposing was modeled 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" (27).

⁴⁸ Trouille, 166.

⁴⁹ *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. Paul de Roux (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966), p. 302, cited in Trouille, 164.

⁵⁰ *Mémoires*, 154, cited in Trouille, 172.

executed by Jacobins who saw her political authority as evidence that the Girondists were not autonomous men, but mere puppets of an imperious woman.⁵¹

And finally, there are women like Olympe de Gouges, who as the earlier depiction suggests, all but ignored Rousseau's domestic prescriptions and instead found in Rousseau a special authority for self-determination. "I am the product of Nature I owe nothing to book learning. I am my own creation," De Gouges wrote in the preface to *Le philosophe corrigé*.⁵² As McMahon has put it, Rousseau's "criticism of pride and egotism (*amour propre*), his denunciations of *luxe* and depravity, and his constant self-fashioning as an outsider—a man more sinned against than sinning" endeared him to the Jacobin and moralists among the literary low-life as well as women of varied classes who were at the fringes of both provincial and literary society.⁵³ Rousseau—in his written works and his everyday interactions with friends, acquaintances, and fans, had a flair for dramatizing subjects who were unjustly mocked and ridiculed. His works are replete with accounts of the injustice of society's manners and codes of conduct, and it is unsurprising that this commended him to so many who saw themselves as both excluded and misunderstood.

This snapshot of some of Rousseau's readers and the service to which they put Rousseauian ideas indicates the tremendous plasticity of his account of authenticity, the virtue and value ascribed to a "natural" life, and figure of the misfit and his shame. In emphasizing Rousseau's dreams of an authentic life and his ability to extend that dream to social outsiders, I do not mean to uncover an absolute account of authenticity—a life that is unmoored from convention and habit. This would be impossible to justify. Rather, by paying attention to the trope of authenticity and its resonance with his readers, I mean to draw attention to something that is invoked as a standard against which political and social relations can be

⁵¹ Trouille, 182-87.

⁵² De Gouges, "Préface sans caractère," preface to *Le Philosophe Corrigé, ou Le Cocu Supposé* (1789), in Benoît Groult, p 136, in Trouille, 267. [This cite needs checking: I am unsure if the Groult refers to a book about De Gouges or Groult's edited collection of her works. It is unclear from Trouille.]

⁵³ McMahon, 109.

judged and not as an earnest call to actually return to “nature.” Rousseau’s image of an authentic life was a political critique of existing society and the standards invoked to constrain participation in public and social life. More pointedly, it was a mechanism that authorized the expansion of the citizenry beyond the 18th-century elites.

Rousseau’s wide appeal raises a set of questions quite familiar to political theorists. Specifically, a politics whose only requirement is a “feeling” of psychological injury may be *too* expansive. Even elites can “feel” disempowered, as so many Royalists and Catholics did as the eighteenth century marched on in the name of reason and Enlightenment. Rousseau in fact had a strong following among them—perhaps for this reason of feeling under siege in the Age of Reason.⁵⁴ And McMahon’s link between the Rousseauian-inspired counter-Enlightenment and the French Right suggests that reactionaries often frame their political claims in terms of the humiliation they feel amidst modernization and progress. Echoing Arendt’s broader concerns, when inclusion and recognition of suffering are all that citizens demand, their needs can be met by the most anti-republican of regimes. A regime that responds to its citizens’ injuries and makes citizens feel a sense of belonging need not be republican in nature.⁵⁵ And finally, in authorizing and legitimating the dream of living a life that is true to oneself—the rest of the world and its rules be damned—Rousseau and Romanticism, more broadly, ostensibly narrow the political universe in a way that makes everything about whether or not a particular individual “feels” like she or he “fits in.”

⁵⁴ McMahon, 109.

⁵⁵ See Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963), esp. Chapter Two, “The Social Question.”

Three Rousseaus⁵⁶

Rousseau the Romantic

The theme of the person who is perennially misunderstood and expected to live a life different from the one dictated by his or her heart redounds throughout Rousseau's works and is especially pronounced in *La Nouvelle Héloïse (Julie)* and the *Confessions*. *Julie* was read widely and influential among women readers (his intended audience) who were eager to read Rousseau's depiction of the injustices of eighteenth-century marriage customs. It was the most popular book of the 18th century and the book that made "Jean-Jacques" a sympathetic friend of many.⁵⁷ Although the *Confessions* were published posthumously, Rousseau read them aloud for public audiences during his lifetime.⁵⁸ These public readings would have intensified the sense of identification between the audience and Jean-Jacques himself. Even in *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, Rousseau links justice and republicanism to the resistance of aristocratic conventions like politesse. The general will cannot be derived in a climate where citizens are trying to think of the "right" thing to say; they are to speak coarsely and frankly so that the general will can be properly found. *Emile* is taught to value the coarse and vulgar ways of country life, and the reader of *Emile* is instructed in the evils and "polite" imperiousness of "the rich," who teach their children "the words to use so that no one will dare to resist them."⁵⁹ Rousseau's overriding message appears to be that there is something unjust in having to live a false life in order to fit into the social world, and he underscores this injustice in his jeremiads against civility, politeness, fancy dress, theatricality, and other accoutrements of society. As Tracy Strong notes, Rousseau is acutely aware of the ways in which "the world in which we live makes it hard for us to act like our

⁵⁶ I should note that in this section, "Three Rousseaus," I am taking Rousseau at his word more than I usually would. At this stage in the paper, I am simply trying to best represent how--in these three modes (Romantic, Tutor, Legislator)--Rousseau tells the story of the authentic life and also manages its more unruly implications.

⁵⁷ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Viking (1984), 242.

⁵⁸ Trouille, 372 n32.

⁵⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 86. Hereafter cited in-text.

selves.”⁶⁰ And this difficulty of living in the world as our selves underscores Rousseau’s sense that authenticity and republicanism are mutually reinforcing; only imperious and imperial regimes require citizens to live as something other than that they are. To modify Elizabeth Wingrove’s apt phrase, Rousseau allows his readers to imagine a “romantic republic” in which citizens could feel the beat of each other’s hearts and are, to use Strong’s phrase, “able to live with others as what one is”—without shame or regret.⁶¹

The image of such a romantic republic—a place with no room for artifice or injustice—is brought into sharp relief in *Julie*, Rousseau’s epistolary novel that tells the story of “true” love confounded by aristocratic artifice. Julie’s wealthy parents have hired the tutor Saint-Preux, ten years Julie’s senior, to accommodate for the poor education in Clarens. He and Julie grow fond of each other, but Julie knows that her father would never allow her to marry a common man. Although Saint-Preux’s teaching abilities impress Julie’s father, he will not respect him as Julie’s suitor. Julie and Saint-Preux’s different social classes prevent their ability to display and legitimate their relationship through the bonds of marriage. Instead, Julie must marry Wolmar, a husband more suitable to her father’s and Clarens’s social demands. Yet she never forgets her love for Saint-Preux. The letters she and Saint-Preux exchange establish the longing in Julie and Saint-Preux’s hearts and allow the reader to experience, viscerally, the injustice of the social codes that keep them apart. *Julie* is not only the story of the woman constrained by her parents’ social wishes. It is also, as Lori Jo Marso puts it, the story of “a man at the margins of society, Saint-Preux” who is up against “a man already considered an upstanding citizen, ... Wolmar.”⁶² Again we see the trope of a simple man in search of simple love who is, predictably, stymied by social forces beyond his control.

⁶⁰ Tracy Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Politics of the Ordinary* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 1994), 31.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Wingrove, *Rousseau’s Republican Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Strong, 149.

⁶² Lori Jo Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Germaine de Stael’s Subversive Women* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 56.

It is unsurprising that *Julie* was especially influential among Rousseau's women readers. Not only does Rousseau write in a feminine form *expressly for* literary women, but the themes of unhappy marriages that are dictated by social expectations resonated with women readers of a variety of social classes who identified with one aspect or another of the story line. There is a sense in the novel that the dangers of following one's heart and living a life that is true to it are worth the corresponding risks. At least one moral of *Julie* appears to be that sometimes the authentic life is an audacious life and love, not marital contracts or social expectations, is the arbiter of the just. Julie and Saint-Preux are in search of love without shame. The public could not handle their unashamed love, and Julie only achieves her goal in death. *Julie* may have had a somber and sober ending, but even the tragedy could not contain the dramatic and romantic appeal of life and love unconstrained by convention. Madame Roland, whom we recall read *Julie* yearly for inspiration, said that her identification with Julie made it easier for her to endure the prison of her own marriage when her heart longed for Françoise Buzot, her own "worthy Saint-Preux."⁶³ The "truth" of Julie's unhappiness resonated with many women readers because Rousseau had lived in the company of women as he wrote it.⁶⁴ It was through listening to their stories and miseries that Rousseau was able to understand and represent the misery of *la femme mal mariée*.⁶⁵

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau projects the critique of *le monde* onto his own story, dramatizing his own life in terms of the outsider who does not fit into the social world. In the work that is generally understood to have inaugurated the modern confessional memoir, Rousseau models what he had previously described: How one might unshackle himself from shame and other social restraints and empty his life story into the public, and the therapeutic and political benefits of doing so. He performs his own unhappiness and connects his misery to injustice by telling his own stories of shame and

⁶³ Trouille, 177.

⁶⁴ This representation of women is not very precise, and in future drafts of this paper I will do more to tease out the socio-economic distinctions among Rousseau's readers.

⁶⁵ Trouille, 96.

suffering at the hands of illegitimate authorities. As Wingrove has noted, Rousseau sketches his “autonomy through self-subjection”; that is to say, it is only through a self-narration of injury and misery that Rousseau is able to represent himself as an autonomous subject.⁶⁶ He tells us that for a long time he was a slave to the opinions of others, and easily made to feel ashamed or disgraced. In his words, “I was always extremely sensitive to disgrace” and “more upset and displeasing [others] ... than at being punished.” He connects his misery to an unhealthy preoccupation with the impressions of others and the ease with which he could be made to feel ashamed. His “strongest [and most plaguing] desire was to be loved by everyone who came near [him]” (C, 25).

Beyond the everyday injustices that Rousseau experiences and narrates in his *Confessions*, the work transforms imposed silence into a question of justice. He regales his readers with stories of public urination and nascent masochism—“the ridiculous and the shameful,” which are “hardest to confess.” He promises to go on speaking frankly and coarsely—drawing upon the “courage” required in telling all and disregarding any social costs that will come from it (C, 28). He goes on to apologize for being so candid, but insists that candor is what is needed in order to reveal the “truth” (C, 65). He continues to confess his fear that he is “concealing the truth from the reader,” which would be unforgivable (C, 170). Imposed silence is a recurring threat.

There is a double move at work in this aspect of the *Confessions*, as Rousseau describes not simply the pressure to be reticent as an author speaking to his 18th-century audience, but also the pressure to be reticent he felt as a child living in the house of M. Ducommum, an “oafish, violent young man who managed in a very short time to quench all the fire of [his] childhood” (C, 39). The story of a child who was afraid to speak curries sympathy, naturalizing the link between reticence and injustice, which can then extend to his adult self who stumbles to speak freely before them now. And so he elaborates: “I was used to ... having no desires that I did not express... Imagine my fate in a house

⁶⁶ Wingrove, 132.

where I dared not open my lips” (C, 40). Rousseau’s representation of this house and his representation of 18th-century culture are linked to underscore injustice of life for the sensitive person who could not dare to open his mouth and speak from the heart without risking mockery and humiliation.

And mocked and humiliated he was. As Rousseau brings the *Confessions* to an end he explains his side of the falling out he had with Diderot and Voltaire, who became jealous of his accomplishments, as well as the end of his friendship with Madame d’Epinay. Eugene Stelzig, in his work on Romantic autobiography, puts it this way: “Clearly, Rousseau wanted to explain himself—to present his side of the story, his version of himself, which he thought had been willfully preempted by the false public image or maligned legend of ‘Jean-Jacques’ fabricated by his detractors and enemies, who after the traumatic shock of his flight from France began to loom large in his increasingly paranoid imagination.”⁶⁷ And so Rousseau’s *Confessions* are not simply what Stelzig describes as a way to “identify, celebrate, and invoke as a standard the wholeness, integrity, and transparency progressively lost in, covered over, or corrupted by history” but also the chance to redeem his reputation and, perhaps more importantly, to publicly disclose and politicize the shame and suffering he experienced at the hands of “society.” As Stelzig puts it, “The author’s claims of full disclosure and of having the reader judge are really a strategy of disarming the reader’s judgment. Rousseau’s most compromising confessions are always self-exculpating—his intentions were always good, even if his misdeeds cannot be excused in terms of their putative consequences.”⁶⁸ There is a sense in the *Confessions* that Rousseau’s autobiography gives an opportunity to indulge the fantasy of a second birth.

This fantasy of a new beginning was important for Rousseau and also inspired his many followers. By telling his version of his life story, Rousseau paints a sympathetic portrait of himself that offsets the humiliating attacks by his contemporary interlocutors—“the carping Encyclopedist friends

⁶⁷ Stelzig, 29.

⁶⁸ Stelzig, 38.

like Denis Diderot and Friedrich Melchior Grimm”—who had mocked his “attempt to return to the standard of nature in modern society” and his literary-philosophical talent, more broadly.⁶⁹ Diderot had called *Julie* “3 or 4 pages worth reading and 1,000 pages of ‘moralizing speeches.’”⁷⁰ Grimm had referred to “priggish Julie and her pedantic tutor,” the anti-philosophe critic Élie Fréron called it fake, affected, artificial and false wit.⁷¹ Finally and perhaps most scandalously, Madame d’Epinay, Rousseau’s friend and literary rival, had written *Madame*, her own *Julie*, though which she explicitly hoped to attack and surpass Rousseau’s reputation. “In my eyes, René [her name for Rousseau] is nothing but a moral dwarf perched on stilts,” D’Epinay’s protagonist proudly proclaims.⁷²

Part of the power of the *Confessions* and its broader appeal was the way it communicated the idea that an individual *could* have the last word about the meaning of his own life. He truly could—to again anticipate Arendt’s critique—be the author of his own life story and give it meaning. Because Strong reads the *Confessions* as a “tracing” rather than an authored text, he insists that Rousseau avoids the transcendental position of the author.⁷³ Strong therefore prefers to see the *Confessions* as a book that is not about uncovering the “real” Rousseau per se, but about telling the story of the human, whom only the citizen (and not the author) can know. The moral of the story is “by knowing me, you know yourself.”⁷⁴ Yet this claim is not inconsistent with the point I am making here. By getting in the “last word” against the slandering philosophes and the tales told about him, Rousseau may not in fact redeem his reputation or authorize the beginning of a new life story. Yet by speaking to and enacting this fantasy of second birth he reaches out to the maligned heart and the sense of being misunderstood in everyone.

⁶⁹ Stelzig, 19.

⁷⁰ Trouille, 105.

⁷¹ Trouille, 105.

⁷² Trouille, 102.

⁷³ Strong, 18.

⁷⁴ Strong, 17.

The *Confessions* therefore shore up an important Rousseauian message: The modern world is a particularly cruel place for those who dare to feel. Yet given that Rousseau claimed to see the greatest joys and pleasures of life as requiring this dare—and daring to enjoy the feeling of being open to each other in particular—he thought it would be inhumane to ask men to steel themselves against the cruel world. Whereas contemporary discussions about the brutality of the world in the face of a politics of confession tend to ask the individual to do a better job of keeping things to her or himself, Rousseau takes the more ambitious—and perhaps impossible—path: He seeks to change the world to protect his sensitive and simple men.⁷⁵ This emphasis on protecting men from the cruel world that is prone to shame and mock them plays a significant role in *Emile*, wherein Rousseau tutors the boy in preparation for manhood and citizenship and the duties these roles require, specifically the ability to accept a woman as his (wifely) governor.

Rousseau the Tutor

What I hope to have emphasized at this stage is the extent to which Rousseau consistently presents his cherished, simple men as incredibly fragile and vulnerable to humiliation. To reemphasize Wingrove's point, Rousseau understands and accounts for autonomy through subjection; that is to say, *to be a man is to be under siege* from myriad social forces. Rousseau is not making the case that men should therefore retreat from the social world, because he believes that life's riches come from these encounters with others. But he *is* concerned about refashioning society in keeping with this fragile nature—in a word, striving to protect men from society's most humiliating forces. Saint-Preux cannot “win” the battle for Julie until the rules change; Rousseau will not “win” the battle with the philosophes until a new kind of republic emerges. Rather than modernize men so they can live more easily in the

⁷⁵ Coming from two very different philosophical traditions, both Thomas Nagel and Wendy Brown emphasize the cruelty of the public and the dangers of expecting the public to affirm or, in Nagel's case, resist attacking one based upon their personal confessions. See Thomas Nagel, “Concealment and Exposure,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27: 1 (1998) : 3-30 and Wendy Brown, “Freedom's Silences,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005):

world, Rousseau seeks to transform the world to accommodate his men. It is in this context that we might also understand Rousseau's desire to take "men as they are [simple] and laws as they might be."⁷⁶ This transformation does not make life "easier" or "kinder" for Rousseau's fragile men, but makes the subjection that is built into a life with others a site of pleasurable affirmation, rather than abject humiliation.

This idea of human fragility circulated throughout 18th Century European culture and was part of the transition into a Romantic world view in which individuals' hearts and souls had strings that could be pushed and pulled, opened and closed to one another. Paradoxically, as individuals developed the idea that they had a true self that could be known and revealed to others, the instability of this core self was also acknowledged. That is to say, if I can be closed or open to another; and if virtue is attached to that transparency or veiling, then I may be either virtuous or vice-ridden—who *I am* is unsettled and, ultimately, an open question.

Terry Castle's work on the advent of the thermometer captures the 18th Century's focus on fragility and flux with respect to the anxiety about the female body and its ability to vacillate—without warning—between boldness and modesty. As Castle argues, with the advent of the thermometer came the idea that individuals' insides could be measured and assigned a particular value on a scale. The "Female Thermometer," a satirical spinoff on the weather glass, promised to gauge women's modesty, indicating the extreme degrees that marked women's fluctuations. It could have jumped from the pages of Rousseau's works were they not so earnest.⁷⁷ "[A] glass tube filled with a chemical mixture derived

⁷⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1968), 49. Subsequent references in text.

⁷⁷ Rousseau writes in Book V: "Will she change temperament and tastes as a chameleon does colors? Will she suddenly go from shade, enclosure, and domestic cares to the harshness of the open air, the labors, the fatigues, and the perils of war? Will she be fearful at one moment and brave at another, delicate at one moment and robust at another?" (E, 362). Rousseau also invoked the barometer as a gauge of his own feelings in the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: "I shall perform upon myself the sort of operation that physicists conduct upon the air in order to discover its daily fluctuations. I shall take the barometer readings of my soul and by doing this accurately and repeatedly I could perhaps obtain results as reliable as theirs. However, my aim is not so ambitious. I shall content myself with keeping a record of my readings without trying to reduce them to a

from distilled extracts of lady's love and maidenhair and 'wax of virgin-bees,'" the Female Thermometer was worn to measure "'the exact temperature of a lady's passions.'" On one end of the scale was "Inviolable MODESTY" and the other "Abandoned IMPUDENCE." The median points were "gallantry, loose behavior, innocent freedoms, and indiscretions."⁷⁸ It revealed an underlying fear of the eighteenth century: There were not two categories or species of women who were either modest or audacious; rather, the capacity for both extremes resided in every female body. At any moment, the modest girl country girl could become the Parisian harlot.

As Rousseau's work so clearly illuminates, these questions of openness and fragility were marked with anxiety about the instability and fragility of gender difference, as well. Custom and ultimately law may have announced the "truth" of sexual difference in Enlightenment Europe,⁷⁹ but the constant proclamation of it belied a broader cultural anxiety about the possibility that sex difference was, as Linda Zerilli has argued, a semiotic economy in which the signs—the signs of man and woman, for example—had no reliable, natural referent.⁸⁰ With this idea of a fluctuating identity—be it the general identity of the person or a particular sex/gender identity—came a broader suspicion that everyone had something to hide and was engaged in some form of deception. Rousseau's repeated insistences that republics require "men," and that under the aristocracy and high society there are not any "men" to be found represented broader fears of the period, and illuminate Rousseau's repeated fears that certain conventions—a theater, for example—can turn men into women.

The threat of the female body that is perpetually in flux and therefore not to be trusted (and the less acknowledged flux of the male body, as well) recurs throughout Rousseau's oeuvre, and it is especially significant in the *Emile*, where Rousseau goes back to the beginning of manhood, tutoring a

system." Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth, 1979), 33. Cited in Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 35.

⁷⁸ Castle, 21.

⁷⁹ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1992), Chapter 6.

⁸⁰ Linda M.G. Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1994), chapter 2.

man who can be a republican citizen and a republican legislator from the “ground up.” Emile is educated in strength and endurance—so as not to become “soft,” he is neither swaddled nor coddled. He is taught the lessons of the school yard, made to sleep in an uncomfortable bed, and sent outside to play in winter wearing summer clothes (*E*, 125-140). The tutor indulges Emile’s vanity to the point of mockery in order to teach him a lesson about how not to make himself vulnerable to others.⁸¹ His education is in fact designed to strengthen him against the vexing forces of society, to escape the “stupidity” that comes from being “raised indoors” (*E*, 124-5). Emile is not to be afraid of the dark because, the tutor tells him, that is “womanish”; he learns tennis rather than shuttlecock, which is “a woman’s game,” and so on (*E*, 134, 147). As feminist interpreters have long noted, Rousseauian manhood is not “natural,” but an achievement. Many have also pointed out the ways in which Rousseauian manhood comes at the cost of autonomy for woman, who is purportedly just there to be Emile’s helpmeet. Once Emile appears to be ready, the tutor introduces the *idea* of Sophie—the form of the woman for Emile, who will be perfectly suited for him—even in her “defects” (*E*, 329).

The actual girl named Sophie to whom Emile is introduced is more complex than many traditional feminist interpretations allow.⁸² Sophie is not Julie, but she does have (at least the appearance of) an independent streak. Rousseau elaborates:

She has never allowed French customs to enslave her to the yoke of affectations.... When an affected gallant offers [to take her hand when passing from one room to the next] ... she announces that she is not crippled and, leaving the officious fellow, bounds up the stairs and into the room with two leaps (*E*, 398).

⁸¹ I am referring to the scene in Book III where the tutor indulges Emile’s vanity and allows him to be humiliated by the magician as a lesson in the dangers of *amour-propre*.

⁸² For an example of Sophie as evidence of Rousseau’s misogyny, see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), Chapter 5. For a more nuanced reading of Sophie’s status, see Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens*, chapter 2.

Sophie is raised to be simple but also strong, and this strength is important because it is also her job to be virtuous:

Sophie loves virtue. This love has become her dominant passion. She loves it because there is nothing so fine as virtue. She loves it because virtue constitutes woman's glory and because to her a virtuous woman appears almost equal to the angels. She loves [virtue] as the only route of true happiness and because she sees only misery, abandonment, unhappiness, and ignominy in the life of a shameless woman (*E*, 397).

Moreover, as the critique by Susan Okin make clear, Sophie's virtues do in fact benefit Emile. Her virtue allows him to relax his guard, to be assured that the woman who is made for him is in fact his woman and his alone. Emile and Sophie can live happily, blissfully, and full of desire for each other because her virtue will leave Emile certain that his children are in fact his own. And, as Wingrove has noted, there is also a romantic payoff for loving a woman schooled in *pudeur* (feminine modesty):

“[*Pudeur*'s] fears, its tricks, its reserves, its timid avowals, its tender and naïve delicacy, say better what it believes it hides than passion could have said without it.” Indeed, *pudeur* says more because, unlike pure passion, it says “no,” and thus it lends more value to what is given, as well as “sweetness to rejection.” Resistance and limitation are central to the successful articulation of desire, or at least to the “sweetest sentiments” of a well-fulfilled heart.⁸³

This “successful articulation of desire” and trust that is cultivated through the expression of *pudeur* is part of the way in which women can care for men. *Pudeur* is a brake that keeps women from becoming audacious and is therefore the thing that guarantees that women care for men. So long as *pudeur* is intact, care for men and men's sexual desire can be assured.⁸⁴

⁸³Wingrove, 183; quotations translated by Wingrove from *Lettre to d'Alembert*.

⁸⁴Rousseau explains, “instinct impels them, and instinct stops them. *What will be the substitute for this negative instinct when you have deprived women of modesty?* To wait until they no longer care for men is equivalent to waiting until they are no longer good for anything” (*E*, 359, my italics).

Yet Sophie's *pudeur* and her love and care for Emile are not assured. Like the modest country girl who—often without warning—becomes the Parisian harlot, Sophie goes from the girl who loves virtue and modesty as the expression of her authentic self to someone who comes to understand her authentic self and its needs in ways that are fundamentally at odds with Emile and the needs of their marriage. Part of this had to do with the independence that was nurtured by her parents and part of her appeal to Emile. Sophie was educated to be her own person; she is told that her body is her own and that she will choose her own husband. She is, in fact, the first to propose marriage to Emile, whom she tells (rather than asks) the following: “[T]ake this hand. It is yours. Be my husband and master when you wish. I will try to merit this honor” (E, 441). Emile becomes so rapt with adoration for her—such a “slave of [his] desires,” who is vulnerable to so “many pains [that] can now attack [his] soul,” that the tutor sends him on a two-year journey to study government to combat his womanish desire (448-450, 443). Throughout the *Emile* the reader is reminded that Sophie's love for Emile and her willingness to care for him are a gift that she can take away just as readily as she has given them.

On their wedding night, Sophie steps out of the script, taking away the gift of her body that she was supposed to consent to lend to Emile. To Emile's “great regret and in spite of all his appeals, he had had to sleep in a separate bed [on] the [wedding] night.” The tutor laments, “the imperious girl had hastened to make use of her right” (E, 478). This “right” is the right to decline and demur, which is necessary in Rousseau's romantic economy not only to preserve women's chastity but also to fuel the “republican romance” so poignantly illuminated by Wingrove. Sophie's modesty was part of her sexual charm. But it was never indeed to be misunderstood or misapplied as bold refusal; it was always to serve Emile's desire and the romantic tension between them. And Sophie finds this boldness intoxicating: “As for Sophie, she [was] gayer than the day before.” The tutor “see[s] satisfaction gleaming in her eyes” (E, 478).

Although the book ends with Sophie being disciplined back into her proper feminine role and the couple expecting a child, which will “form a relationship between those who have given life that is no less sweet and often stronger than love itself,” (479) the reader is haunted by the threat of Sophie’s audacity and its tyrannical effects on Emile. That this transformation occurs in spite of Sophie’s extensive education in virtue and the apparent success of this education is all the more striking. Perhaps as a result of being taught that virtuous modesty is her authentic self she becomes piqued by the possibility of exploring that authentic self and its requirements further. Whatever the impetus, Sophie’s transformation mirrors the stages of the “female thermometer,” as she bids farewell to her modesty and the care for Emile it guarantees. Women’s temperature can always change and men are the worse off because of it. It would appear that Emile can never relax his guard so long as he loves women. Since he is destined to love women, he must keep his guard up. In spite of the laborious tutelage, Emile is not only fragile, but not safe at all.

Rousseau the Legislator

In this third and final discussion of the “three Rousseaus,” I turn not to the *Social Contract*, as one might expect, but to the *Lettre to M. d’Alembert on the Theatre*. In *Julie* and the *Confessions* Rousseau opens up the world of the misfit and draw attention to the injustices of his shame. In the *Emile*, he seeks to solve—at the level of education—the problems caused by this affirmation and invitation to an authentic life. It is in the *Lettre* that we see Rousseau rush to take the most protectionist tack, invoking state power to regulate—if not solve altogether—the potential problems brought about by the affirmation of the individual’s need to live a life that feels “true.” I will turn to the *Social Contract* in the concluding section, but for reasons that I hope become clear, find the legislative moves Rousseau makes in his *Lettre* to be especially illustrative of his effort to protect his simple men and play the role of

founder, making a world (if not “the” world) that will protect the ordinary Genevan from the things that bring him shame.

The *Lettre to d’Alembert* was written in 1758, prior to the *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, and shortly after Rousseau’s falling out with Madame d’Epinay while living at l’Ermitage. In his *Confessions* he describes it as a three-week interruption to his work on *Julie* (C, 459). The *Lettre* is an indictment of M. d’Alembert’s “Geneva” entry in the *Encyclopedia*—a project to which Rousseau himself had contributed. It represents Rousseau’s most specific attack on the ubiquitous march of Enlightenment, which had begun to permeate his idyllic (and idealized) village.⁸⁵ D’Alembert had insisted that Geneva would be improved by an official theater and that its traditional morals were strong enough to withstand whatever power the theater may bring. According to Rousseau, the Genevans’ simple virtue and simple men are not strong enough to withstand this power. Genevan women would become enamored of the theater, and the resistance of simple men would not stand a chance against this sister to the salon, the space of flapping tongues, notorious artifice, and imperious femininity.⁸⁶ The specter of Paris is presented as follows:

Every woman in Paris gathers in her apartment a harem of men more womanish than she, who know how to render all sorts of homage to beauty except that of the heart, which is her due. But observe these same men, always constrained in these voluntary prisons, get up, sit down, . . . turn and pirouette about the room, while the idol, stretched out motionlessly on her couch, has only her eyes and her tongue active. (*L d’A*, 101-2).

⁸⁵ The attack on Enlightenment is twofold: Both in terms of the audacity of the Encyclopedia entry itself, which assumes that a person like d’Alembert could know Geneva and represent it on the page and in terms of the content—the representation of Geneva as a place that is culturally lacking because it lacks an official theater.

⁸⁶ Every woman in Paris gathers in her apartment a harem of men more womanish than she, who know how to render all sorts of homage to beauty except that of the heart, which is her due. But observe these same men, always constrained in these voluntary prisons, get up, sit down, . . . turn and pirouette about the room, while the idol, stretched out motionlessly on her couch, has only her eyes and her tongue active. (*L d’A*, 101-2).

With a theater, Rousseau reports that the virtuous Genevan woman would become the salonnière; the actress would become a Genevan; and Genevan masculinity would be poisoned and extinguished. The play of forces at work in Geneva are near and dear to Rousseau's heart: The scrutiny of the Encyclopedist, a waning artisanal culture, an ascendant patrician class enamored of Paris and Parisian things, an already-existing informal theater, and economic distress. It calls, he rescues.

At the time of publication, d'Alembert's judgment and the lack of controversy surrounding it reflected socio-economic tensions in Geneva at the time. As Helena Rosenblatt reports in her work on Rousseau's Geneva, an ostensibly intractable division between a politicized "artisanal Genevan bourgeoisie" and the "patrician elite [that was] seeking to monopolize power and subvert republican and democratic values" had emerged in earnest.⁸⁷ It was patrician Genevan women who were influential in this transformation of values and social practices. The patrician class modeled itself on Parisian society, and often travelled to Paris in order to absorb its sensibilities. It sent its sons and daughters to honeymoon there.⁸⁸ Equally significant for this study, the theater had already found an informal but powerful place in Geneva; it was not as foreign as Rousseau's *Lettre* suggests. Rosenblatt elaborates: "In Geneva, theater attendance became the very symbol of patrician corruption, moral and political, as the wealthy and Frenchified men and women of the upper town circumvented, or simply broke, the city's ordinances and attended---and sometimes performed in---theatrical performances staged at [none other than] Voltaire's home on the outskirts of Geneva."⁸⁹ Rousseau's fears that Parisian society would drown out Geneva's republican virtues were, therefore, not necessarily overdrawn. It is not a question of whether or the Genevan morals Rousseau wanted to preserve could resist the theater, as they could not. The open question was whether or not the new morals would improve Geneva's character.

⁸⁷ Helena Rosenblatt, "On the 'Misogyny' of Rousseau: the *Letter to d'Alembert* in Historical Perspective," *French Historical Studies*, 25:1 (Winter, 2002), 91-114: 104-105.

⁸⁸ Rosenblatt, "On the 'Misogyny,'" 102.

⁸⁹ Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge University Press: 1997), 219-27.

Moreover, and central to Rousseau's concern about the simple man's fledgling self-esteem in the face of high society, the patrician class's envious disposition toward Paris communicated the inadequacy and shamefulness of the artisanal culture with which Rousseau identified. As Rousseau had written in the *Second Discourse*, men only learned to be ashamed of themselves once the world became big enough for them to compare themselves to others.⁹⁰ The mere fact of Genevans' knowledge of opulent Paris made it impossible for simple men *not* to be ashamed of who they were, and this shame made it impossible for them to cultivate the "life with others" (Strong) that was so central to Rousseau's idealized Genevan republicanism.⁹¹

There is a clear sense in Rousseau's *Lettre* that as society becomes more powerful, simple men have only two options. The first option is to join right in. This is the path Rousseau believes d'Alembert and the Philosophes to have taken, and it amounts to nothing less than an abdication of citizenship and, more pointedly, manhood in his mind. The second option—to remain committed to your simple virtues while the rest of the town (and your wife, in particular) ascends to sociability—is impossible. The salon and theater culture will change everything. He laments: "Every day there will be real time lost for those who go to the theatre, and they will no longer go right back to work, since their thoughts will be full of what they have just seen; they will talk about it and think about it" (*L d'A*, 63). Rousseau describes the dynamic by which Genevan women become attracted to Parisian finery and will want to wear the

⁹⁰ Rousseau writes, "Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a value. The one who sang or danced best; the handsomest, the strongest, the most skillful, ... came to be the most highly regarded, and this was the first step at once toward inequality and vice: from these first preferences arose vanity and contempt on the one hand, shame and envy on the other; and the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, in *The First and Second Discourses and Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1990: 175.

⁹¹ In addition to making Genevan men ashamed of who they were and how they lived, there were express economic implications here, as well. The ascent of the patrician class and the banking industry with which it was associated would override the artisanal culture, destroying a simple, honest way of life and an endogenous economy, as well. When d'Alembert represents Geneva in terms of its failures to be Parisian enough, he taps into political divisions on the ground as well as Rousseau's fear that (Geneva's) Spartan virtues cannot in fact be reconciled with the urbanity of Athens, as d'Alembert promises. Rousseau's letter can be read as a eulogy for ordinary Geneva that is under assault on multiple fronts. D'Alembert's entry represents this broader assault; and in responding to d'Alembert Rousseau writes back to Paris and those who would spread its values. See Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*.

prettiest and most luxurious dress to the theater in terms that emphasize how humiliating it would be for a man not to be able to afford to buy his wife a fine dress. To avoid this humiliation, he will risk bankruptcy, which of course itself will be humiliating. He writes:

[The wives,] going first to see and then to be seen, will want to be dressed and dressed with distinction.... Out of this will soon emerge a competition in dress which will ruin the husbands, will perhaps win them over, and which will find countless new ways to get around the sumptuary laws" (*L d'A*, 63).

Again we see Rousseau's preoccupation with the relationship between shame and envy; it is only because of the presence of Parisian-styled opulence that the Genevan woman learns to be ashamed of her sartorial simplicity. That this new practice of theater going makes for less time at work and prompts Genevan men to spend money they don't have in order to meet their wives' new need for self-display only makes matters worse.

The idea that Genevan customs and Parisian-styled theater could peacefully and unobtrusively co-exist is central to d'Alembert's commentary about Geneva, and he argues that Genevan traditions would in fact improve upon the more debased elements of theater life. But for Rousseau there is no possibility of co-existence, as in a small town, the theater will literally engulf everything else. He explains this in terms of the Genevan social circles,

... Our *circles* still preserve some image of ancient morals [manners] among us. By themselves, the men, exempted from having to lower their ideas to the range of women and to clothe reason in gallantry, can devote themselves to grave and serious discourse without fear of ridicule. They dare to speak of country and virtue without passing for windbags; they even dare to be themselves without being enslaved to the maxims of a magpie. (105).

The arrival of an official theater would make the transvaluation of values in Geneva complete. It would destroy everything that keeps Genevan men simple and honest, and the things that keep them men at all. In large cities like London, Rousseau acknowledges, the theater can be relatively innocuous; but in small Geneva, it becomes the central feature of the town. The *circles* are, by Rousseau's account, a necessary institution for protecting men from the ridicule of women.

The *Lettre* probably produced far less fan mail from Rousseau's female readers; it is not a text that would inspire them to see themselves as autonomous subjects in their own right. Mary Trouille attributes the harsh shift in Rousseau's treatment of women to this falling out with d'Epinau, which left Rousseau humiliated and feeling very much alone.⁹² For Rosenblatt, the *Lettre* simply corresponds to the changes that were already underway in Geneva, specifically with respect to the increasing urbanization of the bourgeoisie, and the loss of power of the artisan class with which Rousseau identified.⁹³ Not to dismiss these explanations, but the *Lettre* was undoubtedly an occasion for a personal attack on d'Alembert and the philosophes who spend their days and nights at the salons, as well. Rousseau's depiction of men who are "always constrained in these voluntary prisons [salons], get[ing] up, sit[ing] down, ... turn[ing] and pirouette[ing] about the room, while the idol, stretched out motionlessly on her couch, has only her eyes and her tongue active" described much of d'Alembert's life (*L d'A*, 101-2). D'Alembert had a long friendship with the influential salonnière Julie Lespinasse, with whom he lived and collaborated for the enjoyment of other men of letters. In a typical collaboration, Lespinasse would dictate the letter to d'Alembert, whom she referred to as her "secretary"—she spoke, he transcribed.⁹⁴

⁹² Trouille, 136-7.

⁹³ Rosenblatt, "On the 'Misogyny,'" 102.

⁹⁴ Susan Dalton, *Engendering the Republic of Letters: Reconnecting Public and Private Spheres in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 45. Dalton elaborates: "The very idea that Lespinasse is the creative force and d'Alembert is the scribe is in itself humorous, given that it is usually Lespinasse's job to promote, guide, and comment on the work of the philosophes. At the same time, the discipline of which Lespinasse subjects d'Alembert in forcing him into an inferior position in the letter-writing process satirizes the real power that she has to impose discipline in the salon. [In one letter] ... d'Alembert writes, in parentheses, that 'the secretary [himself] would have liked to

Irrespective of Rousseau's motivation, it is not hard to see a marked shift in the tone from *Julie* to the *Lettre* with respect to the status of women. If anything, the *Lettre* would have appealed to Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment disciples, who sought their own opportunities to "write back" to the philosophes in the name of tradition and natural order. They would have appreciated Rousseau's idealizing of the simple, country man and the desire to protect him from the humiliating aspects of *le monde*.⁹⁵

Conclusion: Rousseau's Fragile Authenticity

Rousseau's romantic invitation to lead a life that is free of shame and social injuries was clearly well received. Indeed, it authorized a set of political practices that are far removed from Rousseau's sober Genevan circles and the community in which the "*I*" melds into the "common unity" (E, 40). The men and women of letters presented here saw Rousseau's tribute to the misfit as authorizing a most unruly and indecorous politics, which involved high stakes political battles and the agonizing, writing, speaking, performing, risking, and judging that goes along with them. This is true even of the so-called "traditionalist" men of the Counter-Enlightenment, whose invective was just as flamboyant as their Jacobin counterparts'. As should be fitting for people who were drawn to live a life that was "true," the men and women who read and took up Rousseau's invitation to an authentic life seem less concerned with being protected than the opportunity to have a political life itself. Indeed, to read the reception history it seems that the mere chance at self-actualization and finding a speaking voice was the therapeutic moment. To crave a life free of shame did not seem to be the same thing as expecting to have it.

This stands in such sharp contrast to the fragility of the Rousseauian men who animate his concerns about the misfit that it deserves some further consideration. As mentioned previously,

have offered his reflections on the matter, but he is forbidden to do so and it is the very least little sacrificed that he could make."

⁹⁵ Rousseau discusses the reception of the *Lettre* in his *Confessions*, where he reports that it was "met with great success" even if it made him "a new enemy among [the very touchy] ... men of letters" (C, 465).

Rousseau never seems to trust his citizens (much less their wives and daughters) to engage in the work of self-actualization themselves. He is to identify the sources of their shame (sexual indiscretions, Parisian salonnières, philosophes, and so on) and protect them from them. And they need protection because, apparently, they become entirely unraveled in the presence of anything that does not affirm their existence. It is through the protective cover of the Rousseauian republic, most dramatically manifest in the *Social Contract*, that citizens are able to enjoy the benefits of their fragility—to see their neighbors as themselves. That is to say, the goal of Rousseau’s republican politics is not to escape this fragile state, but to “remain as free as before.”

In the readings of the “Three Rousseaus” I have tried to show the ways in which these two elements of Rousseau’s work—the commitment to authenticity and the belief in human fragility—strain against each other. Rousseau presents his “fragile authenticity” as if it is coherent; that it makes sense that if one wants a life that feels true one will need a force larger than himself to guarantee it. But as his own works show, once protection from psychological suffering is the thing that one desires most, the reach of his authenticity closes down. What I am trying to say is that there seem to be two aspects to Rousseau’s account of authenticity. The first is to want a life free of shame; the second is to expect to be protected from it. Once protection becomes the overriding quality, as I believe it is in the end for Rousseau, the salonnière, for example, can never strive for authenticity, because the mere presence of her living a life on her terms threatens Rousseau’s fragile men. By repeatedly emphasizing men’s fragility as well as their need for authenticity, Rousseau systematically disables the most democratic aspects of his romantic invitations. That his readers ignored this disabling and did what they liked in his name certainly warrants more attention.

I was drawn to Rousseau and his readers as a way to make sense of the dyadic relationship between shame and authenticity that seems to be in play in contemporary political debates. On the one

hand, there is a proliferation of lamentations about the death of shame, civility, decency, and other social mores that are said to be necessary. As we hear Rousseau decry the death of modesty among modern women and in modern society, he appears to be a progenitor of these lamentations about moral and social decline. And yet, if you listen to the lamenters' sirens wail about people doing whatever they please with no regard for manners and civility, they are, in a sense, attacking the legacy of Rousseau. By looking at the ways in which Rousseau both opens up the public through his romantic invitations and closes them down through his more didactic and legislative prescriptions, we might garner a broader perspective on the persistent allure of an authentic life and the equally persistent fears about what that actually means.