

**Lectures** | **Reading**  
**de** | *La Nouvelle*  
*La Nouvelle* | *Héloïse*  
*Héloïse* | **Today**

publié sous  
la direction de

edited  
by

**Ourida Mostefai**

Pensée libre, n<sup>o</sup> 4

Association nord-américaine des études Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
North American Association for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Ottawa 1993

**CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN  
PUBLICATION DATA**

Main entry undert title:

Lectures de la Nouvelle Héloïse =  
Reading La Nouvelle Héloïse today

(Pensée libre ; no. 4)  
Text in French and English.  
Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 0-9693132-3-3

1. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 1712-1778.  
Nouvelle Héloïse. I. Mostefai, Ourida  
II. North American Association for the  
Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. III.  
Title: Reading La Nouvelle Héloïse  
today. IV. Series.

PQ2039.L43 1993  
848'.509 C94-900020-5E

**DONNÉES DE CATALOGAGE  
AVANT LA PUBLICATION (CANADA)**

Vedette principale au titre:

Lectures de la Nouvelle Héloïse =  
Reading La Nouvelle Héloïse today

(Pensée libre ; no. 4)  
Texte en français et en anglais.  
Comprend des références  
bibliographiques.  
ISBN 0-9693132-3-3

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études Jean-Jacques Rousseau. III. Titre:  
Reading La Nouvelle Héloïse today. IV.  
Collection.

PQ2039.L43 1993  
848'.509 C94-900020-5F

Ouvrage publié grâce au concours de l'Association nord-américaine des études Jean-Jacques Rousseau, grâce à une subvention des Services Culturels français de Boston, et grâce à l'aide de la Faculté des Arts et des Sciences de Boston College.

The publication of this volume was made possible by the cooperation of the North American Association for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by a grant from the French Cultural Services in Boston and by the support of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Boston College.

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ISBN 0-9693132-3-3

Collection « Pensée libre » dirigée par Guy Lafrance.  
Revision de textes, typographie et mise-en-page par Daniel Woolford.

*Pensée libre* series editor: Guy Lafrance.  
Text editing, typesetting and layout by Daniel Woolford.

Imprimé au Canada  
Printed in Canada

## ST. PREUX OR THE NEW *HONNÊTE HOMME*

“*Suivre nature et plaire*” — these were the watchwords of the *honnête homme*.<sup>1</sup> As Nannerl Keohane pointed out, here “following nature” meant something “wholly unlike what Rousseau later meant by acting according to nature.”<sup>2</sup> Though Keohane does have a great deal more to say about Rousseau, she does not explore this statement, nor does she connect him to the development or downfall of the idea of the *honnête homme* in French thought. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, however, the frequency with which the characters refer to each other as *honnêtes hommes*, or discuss the ideal character of the *honnête homme*, or criticize the actions of supposed *honnêtes hommes* in Parisian society, is striking. One might read *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as Rousseau’s effort to criticize *honnêteté* as a social ideal and to offer an alternative model of *honnêteté*. That is what I propose to explore in this paper.

### I. The *honnête homme* in French society

The *honnête homme*, introduced into French literature by Nicholas Faret in his *L’honnête homme ou l’art de plaire a la cour*, closely followed the model of his Italian counterpart and inspiration, Baldesar Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*. For Faret, as for Castiglione, the ideal was first and foremost a military man, but one who also possessed other, tamer virtues that helped him fit in well in polite company. Following the tumult of the *Fronde*, the French Court came to appreciate the usefulness of an ideal which made peaceful social intercourse possible. At first the *honnête homme* retained his martial bearing, but gradually, this hero was housebroken and no longer a fighter. In fact, not only would he cease being a professional soldier, he would have no trade at all.<sup>3</sup>

1. The *honnête homme* was an ethical ideal type found in seventeenth century literature, but one that continued to hold sway well into the eighteenth century as well. A. J. Krailsheimer, *Studies in Self-Interest from Descartes to La Bruyère* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 82.
2. Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 284.
3. Domna C. Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in 17th and 19th Century French Literature* (New York: Columbia

The *honnête homme*, as a new moral ideal invented in the seventeenth century, provided a means of softening the rough edges of warrior courtiers. Magendie, in his extensive study, showed how, as the ideal evolved, it contained two rather distinct strands: one worldly and aristocratic, emphasizing such matters as proper behavior at court; and the other, a moralistic, bourgeois strain.<sup>4</sup> The ideal of the *honnête homme* could be used either to include or to exclude: thus, one might argue that true *honnêtes hommes* belonged to the social elite, those who qualified according to a class definition. On the other hand, those of inferior birth who nonetheless lived the lives of *honnêtes hommes* could hope for promotion and preferment on that basis. Still, there were definite economic limitations. As continental philosophy would later divide itself into two camps by seizing on different halves of Hegel's famous dictum, "the real is rational; the rational is real," in the seventeenth century the idea of the *honnête homme* played a similar role, thus we have the possibility that "gentlemen are *honnêtes hommes* or *honnêtes hommes* are gentlemen."<sup>5</sup>

The period covered in Magendie's study extends from 1600 to 1660, yet, for good or ill, the influence and importance of the idea of the *honnête homme* continued well into the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> It was an ideal that La Bruyère could poke some fun at when he noted in his *Characters* that "the well-bred man [*honnête homme*] is one who commits neither highway robbery nor murder, whose vices, in short, cause no scandal. Everyone knows that a good man is well bred, but it is amusing to reflect that not every well-bred man is good."<sup>7</sup> In the eighteenth century the *philosophes* attacked the ideal of the *honnête homme*, but, as more than one writer has suggested, it was Rousseau's fate to administer the "coup de grace" to the philosophy of *honnêteté*,

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University Press, 1980); Remy Saisselin, "L'évolution du concept de l'honnêteté de 1660 à 1789" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

4. M. Magendie, *La Politesse Mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle de 1600 à 1660* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1925).
5. Thomas Crow, "Moralists and the Legacy of Cartesianism," in Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 332.
6. André Leveque, "L'honnête homme et l'homme de bien au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *PMLA* 72 (1957), pp. 620-632 at 620.
7. Jean de La Bruyère, *Characters*, tr. Jean Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 229.

replacing it with a new commitment to the *sensibilité du moi*.<sup>8</sup> *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was one of his principal vehicles for delivering this attack. Before looking at his challenge, we need to form a better idea of his target.

What did it mean to be an *honnête homme*? A full, detailed answer to that question would be long, complicated and well beyond the scope of this essay. For one thing, as a seventeenth century commentator wrote, the term "*honnête homme*" had become synonymous in popular usage with several similar phrases: *le galant homme*, *homme de bien*, and *l'homme d'honneur*.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we can simplify matters here by focusing on what it meant for an *honnête homme* to follow nature and please.

First of all, as Keohane rightly observed, nature to the mind of the *honnête homme* was certainly different from what it would become in Rousseau's vision. "Nature" was nature in the classical sense, not something original, primal, savage, or uncivilized. Nature was not *sans fard* — unvarnished, raw — but rather nature at its most privileged and embellished. The *honnête homme* thought of "natural" in the sense that a fifth century Greek sculptor might have. Greek statuary represented the true nature of man — but let's face it, no human being fashioned by the hand of God ever looked quite like a statue carved by Myron or Praxiteles. The sculptor's work revealed man's nature — that is, an eternal idea of man or man in his most perfect form, the goal to be attained. The natural could be revealed by stripping away all that was individualistic and instead seeking out what was best in order to create an ideal representation.<sup>10</sup> The *honnête homme*, in following nature, was trying to "be all that he could be" by imitating the ideal. One exemplary *honnête homme*, the chevalier de Meré, suggested that a person could make *honnêteté* a part of his nature by acting *honnête* both in public and in private. But since "external appearances are only images of internal acts," the result of this play-acting would be that *honnêteté* would become habitual.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Saisselin, p. 204; Jean Pierre Dens, *L'Honnête Homme et la Critique du Goût* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1981), p. 138.

9. Letter from Corbinelli to Bussy-Rabutin. Roger de Rabutin, Comte de Bussy, *Lettres* (Paris: Delaulne, 1697) I, pp. 338-9.

10. Dens, pp. 65-68.

11. [Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de] Meré, *Œuvres Complètes*, (Paris, 1930), III, p. 141.

Others were less sanguine about the success of this strategy. One observer of seventeenth century society wrote: "most men are artificially honnête. . . their *honnêteté* is merely counterfeit."<sup>12</sup> Another suggested that people were merely masquerading, substituting what they wanted to be for what they were.<sup>13</sup> All this suggests the underlying tension inherent in the command to follow nature, namely the dichotomy between being and seeming — *être et paraître*.

What of the other half of the injunction, *plaire*? Pleasing meant working toward harmony in society. It meant recognizing that everyone desired happiness and that the best way to achieve one's goal was to discover means of reconciling one's own happiness with the happiness of others. Sometimes reconciliation may necessitate a degree of self-sacrifice. *Honnêteté* is accommodationist. The *honnête homme* realizes that a display of vanity or aggressiveness will only invite retaliation. As Damien Mitton suggested, *honnêteté* is nothing but a well-regulated *amour propre*.<sup>14</sup> It is the management of one's own *amour propre* and that of others. *Honnêtes hommes* know better than to try to catch flies with vinegar — they always use honey. Meré and other *honnêtes hommes* were able to discover ways of captivating others by appealing to their egos.<sup>15</sup> How? The best method is through politeness — some people can resist talent or keenness of mind.<sup>16</sup>

The *honnête homme* especially desires to please distinguished women.<sup>17</sup> He is, after all, in many ways the creature of the salon. Central to salon life was the art of conversation; so, the *honnête homme* had to be a fine conversationalist. According to Meré, the art of conversation meant avoiding pedantry and making thoughts accessible and less abstract. It also meant fitting one's own comments into a conversation in a natural and constructive way, thereby supporting the harmony of the group. To do what *honnêteté* required, obviously a person had to be flexible. One modern critic has counterposed the

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12. Morvan de Belleregarde, *Reflexions sur ce que peut plaire ou déplaire dans le commerce du monde* (Paris: Arnoul Seneuze, 1688) p. 119.
  13. Marie de Hautefort in Gustave Lanson, ed. *Choix de lettres du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1909), p. 270.
  14. Henry A. Grubbs, *Damien Mitton (1618-1690): Bourgeois Honnête Homme* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), p. 55.
  15. Stanton, p. 68.
  16. Morvan de Belleregarde, quoted in Stanton, p. 132.
  17. Magendie, p. 895.

flexibility of the *honnête homme* to the "ponderous rigidity of *gens d'honneur*."<sup>18</sup>

Not everyone was cut out for the life of an *honnête homme*. For one thing, the life required a good deal of leisure, hence the root of the class bias associated with the type. *Honnêtes hommes* had no time for or interest in productive activity. Consequently, only wealthy aristocrats or bourgeoisie had much hope of succeeding as *honnêtes hommes*. Domestic servants could not hope to be *honnêtes hommes*.<sup>19</sup> Aside from this class bias, there were other barriers. Chief perhaps was the simple fact that not everyone would have *le bon goût* — the ability, as Meré expressed it, to sense to what extent things will please and to prefer the excellent to the mediocre.<sup>20</sup> It took a certain natural instinct or a "hyperacuity of superior beings" able to see things at a glance and not through a gradual reasoning process.<sup>21</sup>

The *honnête homme* was not a savant; though the *honnête homme* was well educated. He had read the classics, possibly under Jesuit tutelage. Nevertheless, he would avoid ostentatious displays of learning as well as disputation and such forms of verbal conflict.

Finally, in his search for harmony, the *honnête homme* avoided things that might rock the boat — anything that smacked of true originality. In the salons he frequented, life consisted of "obedience to common usage and identical taste, arranging the day according to a uniform timetable, wearing the same costumes, speaking the same language, having the same interests, playing the same games and indulging in the same distractions."<sup>22</sup> He "transposed, reflected, reproduced but he did not start anything."<sup>23</sup> His taste remained purely imitati. He was, in twentieth century parlance, quite other-directed.

## II. *Honnêteté* and the *Honnête Homme* in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

How does *La Nouvelle Héloïse* attack this ideal? Not directly. Readers soon become aware that the characters themselves have not abandoned their own versions of the *honnête homme*. Repeatedly, Julie or Claire

18. Stanton, p. 49.

19. Saisselin, p. 78.

20. Meré, *Œuvres Complètes*, II, 29; also Dens, pp. 101-102.

21. Stanton, p. 202.

22. René Bray, "Honnête Homme," in *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises: Le Dix-Septième Siècle* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1954), p. 502.

23. Dens, p. 107.

or St. Preux or even Baron D'Étange make positive comments or generalizations about the conduct or character of *honnêtes hommes*. Frequently these are used to describe the letter writer or recipient, or to enjoin one or the other to appropriate conduct. Thus, for example, we have St. Preux noting in a letter to Julie, that "one might imagine you more beautiful, but more lovable and more worthy of the heart of an *honnête homme*, it is not possible."<sup>24</sup> Or, St. Preux writing to Baron D'Étange that "the marriage of one *honnête homme* never dishonors another."<sup>25</sup> Or Julie, enlisting St. Preux's aid for Fanchon, remarking, "I say too much about it to an *honnête homme*." Or Bomston, writing to console St. Preux, "Life is an evil for a villain who prospers, but a good for an *honnête homme* who is unfortunate."<sup>26</sup> Or, Julie describing Wolmar as "the *honnête homme* whose hopes she has fulfilled."<sup>27</sup> Nor are these versions of "*honnêteté*" so idiosyncratic as to be unrecognizable; they do fall well within the bounds of the traditional discourse concerning *honnêteté* and the *honnête homme*. Baron D'Étange calls upon Julie to renounce St. Preux, arguing that "it is time to sacrifice a shameful passion to duty and *honnêteté*."<sup>28</sup> The implication is clearly spelled out — only a "malhonnête homme would sacrifice his duty and his faith to a vile interest." In the end, given Julie's "conversion" and St. Preux's "cure," much of the Baron's call is heeded. And calls to individual sacrifice for the good of the larger society are, of course, consistent with the idea of *honnêteté*.

There is a class difference between Julie and St. Preux. When the Baron enquires about the young man's birth, he is told that it is "honnête" — not aristocratic. Recalling that Magendie claimed that *honnêteté* could be an inclusionary as well as an exclusionary ideal, St. Preux's class background need not automatically have ruled him out as a suitor for Julie, as Bomston later tries to convince the Baron. But Baron D'Étange himself represents less an *honnête homme* than an *homme d'honneur*. He comes from a family of soldiers and this background suggests the pre-*honnête homme* era. To prevent St. Preux from duelling with Bomston, Julie tells her lover that her father once

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24. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes*, edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: 1964-69), II, p. 31. Hereafter this work will be cited as "O.C."

25. O.C., II, p. 327.

26. O.C., II, p. 388.

27. O.C., II, p. 256.

28. O.C., II, p. 349.



killed a good friend in a duel. Honor carried to such lengths would seem to be the antithesis of *honnêteté*. Julie counsels St. Preux not to follow her father's example, but to be reconciled with Bomston.

So, how does Rousseau challenge the "*honnête homme*" in this text? He does so in both theoretical and practical ways. Like the moralists who put stock in the *honnête homme*, Rousseau accepts the value of a harmonious society ordered according to nature. But nature has a very different meaning and harmony a different manner of achievement. By allowing St. Preux to view the species in its natural habitat, the Parisian salons, he offers criticism of *honnêteté* as practiced. By designing an alternative society at Clarens, he gives new meaning to what it might mean to be *honnête* in a social setting.

### III. St. Preux and the Salons

Much of the negative part of Rousseau's case against the *honnête homme* can be made by reviewing St. Preux's letters concerning Parisian life. St. Preux's task is to study man in his various relations. He expects Paris to be a great source of illumination. He praises the tone of conversation he hears, "neither ponderous, nor frivolous; knowledgeable without pedantry, gay without riotousness, [and] polite without affectation." In Paris, people reason without arguing. They don't plumb questions too deeply for fear of boring. No one attacks another's words with any heat, nor does anyone defend strenuously his own opinions.<sup>29</sup>

In this, St. Preux offers a textbook description of the conversation of *honnêtes hommes*. But on closer inspection, the delightful conversation of the salons is missing something — substance. What does one learn from all this? St. Preux asks. Does one learn "to judge soundly the things of the world?" Far from it. Instead, all this fine talk serves only to "plead with art the cause of falsehood, shake with the strength of philosophy the principles of virtue, color passions and prejudices with subtle sophisms and give error a certain fashionableness in the maxims of the day."<sup>30</sup> People in Paris do not say what they think, but what suits them to say they think before their audience. A few men and women do the thinking for the rest, and each salon develops its own set of rules and

29. *O.C.*, II, p. 232.

30. *O.C.*, II, p. 233.

opinions. These rules may differ greatly with the result that an "*honnête homme* in one house is a knave in the neighboring house."<sup>31</sup> Since individuals commonly frequent more than one salon, they need the flexibility of Alcibiades "to change their principles as they do their assemblies."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the same men are "molinists in one [salon], Jansenists in another, vile courtisans in the home of a Minister, mutinous frondeurs in the home of a malcontent."<sup>33</sup> The *honnêtes hommes* in Paris are not "those who perform fine actions, but those who say fine things."<sup>34</sup>

Despite all that the great city had to offer, St. Preux was left to conclude that the men there were no more humane, moderate or just than those elsewhere. Furthermore, while appearing open and agreeable on the outside, in fact, they hid their hearts away.<sup>35</sup> In short, St. Preux concludes that for these *honnêtes hommes*, *paraître* had replaced *être*.

A major factor contributing to this problem was the role played by women in Parisian society. While among the Swiss, men and women are scarcely ever together, in Paris it is totally the opposite. "Women like only to be with the men; they are only at ease with them."<sup>36</sup> The mistress of a salon is surrounded by a circle of men, men who seem to multiply by circulation. There, "a woman learns to speak, act and think like the men and they like her."<sup>37</sup> The critical strain introduced by St. Preux is continued later by Claire when she compares Genevan and Parisian women. She praises the simplicity and taste of Genevan women as well as the Genevan practice of separating the sexes and occupying each with its own particular duties and amusements. The effect of this separation is to increase the enjoyment of each other when they finally do come together: *s'abstenir pour jouir*.<sup>38</sup>

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31. *O.C.*, II, p. 234.

32. *O.C.*, II, p. 234.

33. *O.C.*, II, p. 241.

34. *O.C.*, II, p. 254.

35. *O.C.*, II, p. 255.

36. *O.C.*, II, p. 269. Rousseau expands considerably on this same theme in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre*.

37. *O.C.*, II, p. 269.

38. *O.C.*, II, pp. 661-662. This line of criticism resembles closely the arguments developed much more fully in the *Letter to d'Alembert*. Rousseau also has a great deal more to say about *honnêteté* there as well.

#### IV. *Honnêteté* at Clarens

St. Preux's description of the order that prevails at Clarens parallels Abelard's description of the appropriate rule for Heloise's community of sisters. Old passions and energies that brought trouble have been purified and channeled into the constructive activity of community building. This is similar to the task *honnêteté* was expected to perform in French society; but, the methods of going about the task at Clarens would be quite different.

Several times in the text Wolmar is described as *honnête* or as an *honnête homme*.<sup>39</sup> It is Wolmar whom Julie credits with establishing the order observed at Clarens. That order mirrors the order in his soul and in the government of the world.<sup>40</sup> Though Wolmar directs things, he does so ever so subtly and according to nature. Thus, "one recognizes the hand of the master [but] never feels it . . . [things seem] to go by themselves and one enjoys at the same time rule and liberty."<sup>41</sup>

At Clarens, in contrast with the milieu of *honnêtes hommes* in France, men and women will follow the Swiss practice of having limited contact between the sexes. After all, their inclinations, functions, duties and amusements are different; they "come toward a common happiness by different routes."<sup>42</sup>

Like Paris, Clarens is no classless society. Yet Rousseau has attempted to reconstruct *honnêteté* in a manner that strips away its class-based aspect. The first requirement for servants at Clarens is that they be "*honnête*, . . . love their master and serve of their own accord."<sup>43</sup> Now '*honnête*' here and in subsequent passages could be translated simply as 'good' or 'honest' without all the connotations associated with the *honnête homme*, yet a close look at the full texts in which Rousseau discusses what he means by *honnêteté* among servants suggests otherwise. One suspects that Rousseau was recalling his own days as servant when he allowed St. Preux to point out that "servitude is so unnatural to men that it is not known to exist without some discontentment."<sup>44</sup> Normally, harmony among servants is purchased only at the expense of the master. Servants who are not "*honnête*" steal.

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39. *O.C.*, II, pp. 369, 511.

40. *O.C.*, II, p. 371.

41. *O.C.*, II, pp. 370-371.

42. *O.C.*, II, pp. 450-51.

43. *O.C.*, II, p. 445.

44. *O.C.*, II, p. 461.

But what they steal is harmony. Heads of households have two bad choices: they can protect themselves only by “preferring their interest to *honnêteté*” and inciting servants to spy one on another and report; or, they can let the thieves run wild.<sup>45</sup> Wolmar’s household avoids the two alternatives by refusing to tolerate any but *honnêtes gens* who have no desire to trouble the order.<sup>46</sup> St. Preux suggests that, in general, one might conclude that *honnêteté* and servitude were incompatible and that one might never hope to find domestic servants who were also *honnête gens*.<sup>47</sup> Things at Clarens are different, however. Interaction among servants and between servants and masters is itself characterized by openness and honesty. The masters at Clarens do this by showing the servants their own character: they speak always in the same language and have one moral system for all. Servants see a master who is just, righteous, equitable, etc. and themselves strive to imitate such characteristics.<sup>48</sup> Servants at Clarens become more gracious, *honnête* and superior than their station in life. What spurs this development is the light of their master and mistress and also a well-directed self-interest.<sup>49</sup> The sentiments expressed here go well beyond what is required for simple honesty or goodness and recall Milton’s description of *honnêteté* as well-regulated *amour propre*.

Rousseau’s new version of the *honnête homme* attacks class differences in another way as well. At Clarens there are no idlers; everyone joins in the productive labor of the estate. St. Preux, for example, helps with the grape harvest. The leisure of the Parisian *honnête homme* is forgotten.

There are no idlers and there is also no idle talk. People at Clarens do not converse for effect; they say what they think.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, they need not always talk; they are capable of observing silence and being contemplative.

For the inhabitants of Clarens good taste, whether in gardens or other things, consists in simplicity and truth, in good order rather than in magnificence. Good order results not from the opinions of people but from the concord that exists between things and nature. Taste is not

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45. *O.C.*, II, p. 461.

46. *O.C.*, II, p. 467.

47. *O.C.*, II, pp. 467-468.

48. *O.C.*, II, pp. 468-469.

49. *O.C.*, II, pp. 469-470. Rousseau’s terms here are “*grand intérêt*” and “*l’intérêt . . . si sagement dirigé.*”

50. *O.C.*, II, p. 468.

the result of marketplace decisions — “nothing is scorned because it is common; nothing is esteemed because it is rare.” Nor are things considered tasteful because they bear the marks of art or contrivance. Good taste doesn’t let art show.<sup>51</sup>

The new *honnête homme*, in Rousseau’s plan, lets nature reveal itself instead of attempting to mold or correct it. In considering an educational plan for the Wolmar children, St. Preux suggests that the best method is to form a perfect model of the reasonable and *honnête homme* and then bring each child into conformity with the model through education — thereby “correcting nature.” Wolmar’s response is to laugh St. Preux out of court. “Correct nature? That’s a good one!”<sup>52</sup> Instead, at Clarens, education will give full play to children’s nature, channeling only ever so gently and with hidden hands. The constraints of the Jesuits’ classical education, familiar to the *honnêtes hommes* in Paris, would be absent at Clarens.

The result of Rousseau’s redefinition of *honnêteté* would be that “the good and *honnête* would depend not on the judgement of men but on the nature of things.” He would eliminate the old difficulty of *honnêtes hommes* by elevating *être* over *paraître*.

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51. *O.C.*, II, pp. 480-482, 545-550, 1610.

52. *O.C.*, II, p. 564.