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You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman: Gender Roles in Plato and Rousseau

In *Émile, or On Education*, Rousseau declares several times his debt to Plato. Near the beginning of his treatise, he says for example: “Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato’s *Republic*” (40). The extent of Rousseau’s reliance on Plato and other Ancient writers has been widely discussed. Many critics rightly point out that Rousseau was never content simply to repeat or quote his sources literally. Instead, he made the material he borrowed his own, through what he himself referred to as a process of “digestion” (Pire 62). In the process, he might contradict or at least considerably alter the sources, all for the purposes of his argument.¹ Numerous references to Lycurgus and Plutarch are found in *Émile*, and it might therefore seem more appropriate to compare Rousseau’s treatise to other Ancient texts or traditions than to the *Republic*, and especially to compare it to Spartan politics of education.² Rousseau also makes the point at the beginning of Book I that whereas Plato dealt with public instruction, he will rather be concerned with domestic education (40–41). However, the examination of the *Republic* and *Émile* yields crucial methodological parallels. My paper will be particularly concerned with Rousseau’s assessment of the role of women in society. I will argue that Rousseau accepts as well as rejects some of Plato’s conclusions on this issue. My contention is that both his acceptance of, and departure from the *Republic* draw at the same time on a particular position held by Plato on nature, which is generalized and radicalized by Rousseau.

More specifically for my purpose, I am interested in Plato’s position on woman’s nature, a point which is also fundamental to elucidate in Rousseau’s project. The knowledge of the nature of a thing is presented by Plato as that of the thing in itself, which is generally in contradiction with opinion’s assumptions (44).³ The inquiry conducted into the nature of a thing has often the effect of emphasizing a single trait, presented as the essence of the thing. Or more precisely, the nature of a thing or a concept is to be single, simple, pure, not multiple. For example, in the *Republic*, the unity of the city rests on the premise that each citizen will have a function appropriate to his nature: “Each of the other citizens too must be brought to that which suits his own nature — one man, one function — so that, each man, practicing his own, which is one, will not become many, but one; and thus, you see, the whole city will naturally grow to be one and not many” (101). The harmony between one’s nature and one’s function brings about

the desired unity of the city. Indeed, purity, simplicity and unity are generally valued, unlike multiplicity and variation, and are deemed equivalent to justice, one of the queries of the *Republic*. For example: “[Justice is] very high-minded simplicity” (26). Likewise, “[T]his — the practice of doing one’s own function [...] is probably justice” (111).⁴ Incidentally, Plato presents an exception to this principle in the figure of the philosopher-king. His function is also in congruence with his nature. But when guiding the city, and even the class of guardians, the philosopher-king is allowed to practice deceptions for the greater, just good of the city, which practice is in contradiction to the “simplicity” declared to be inherent to justice.

After Rousseau declares that he will expound the principles of a natural education, he immediately feels the need to clarify his use of the word “nature” (39). In the preface, he had used a formulation reminiscent of Plato’s understanding of the term to justify his own project: “[I]t suffices for the project to be acceptable and practicable in itself, that what is good in it be in the nature of the thing; here for example, that the proposed education be suitable for man and well-adapted to the human heart” (34). The model of Rousseau’s project of natural education is taken from the education given by nature. The two are not identical, the education of nature being “the internal development of our faculties and our organs” (38), whereas Rousseau’s project consists in emulating such a development. Rousseau argues that the reason why “the education of men” (38) must emulate that of nature is because the education given by nature is the only teaching that does not depend on man (38), though man can alter it (39). This argument may seem to beg the question, in that it takes for granted that nature is a surer guide than man where education is concerned. However, in a gesture which recalls Plato’s similar preference for unity, purity and simplicity, Rousseau shows that he is only privileging nature when it is untainted, or when it can be said to be nature in itself. In other words, it is only with respect to nature’s independence from man’s alteration that its teaching is valorized. Rousseau’s opposition between natural man and civil, “denatured” man, at least in good institutions, demonstrates this point. Both have nothing in common, he says, except insofar as each is single-handedly engaged in accomplishing what he must do: in the state of nature, man “is numerical unity, the absolute whole” (39) whereas in good institutions, civil man “transport[s] the *I* into the common unity” and “no longer feels except within the whole” (40). The radical opposites, natural man and denatured man, still have the common trait of being at one with one single function. The denaturation of man under this condition is not negative for Rousseau. But he finds that such a state does not exist any longer, the three examples of civil, denatured man (and woman) which Rousseau gives be-

ing all taken from Ancient Rome and Sparta (40). Indeed, he observes that there is not in his time any real sense of participation in a common unity, for it has been replaced by a sense of contradiction between social and natural urges. Part of Rousseau's project aims to suppress such a contradiction within modern man (40). Since he observes that there is no more "fatherland" nor citizenship (40), and therefore no possibility of communing with a transcendent unity, Rousseau proposes a model of education which he deems capable of renewing the lost unity between man and citizen. His purpose is to present a model of education that encourages "be[ing] always one" (40). The way Rousseau can think this model is, at this stage of his argument, in the form of a question, or a wager: "[W]hat will a man raised uniquely for himself become for others?" (41). As is also the case in his *Discourses* and the *Lettre à D'Alembert*, Rousseau is concerned with "imagin[ing] an authentic political order" (Coleman 11), in which man will possess "an enduring power of initiative" (Coleman 115). It seems that in order to achieve such a political order, Rousseau puts more faith in the emulation of nature's teaching than in the kind of denaturation praised in Sparta and Ancient Rome. In the process, however, nature is not simply recovered, but has to be reinvented (Coleman 11). This has important implications for women, whose function is described, not so much as it is, but as it should and could be, according to their nature, certainly, or so it is argued, but also to contribute to the sense of unity that we have mentioned.

Before addressing Rousseau's description of gender roles, it is worth recalling some of Plato's positions on the nature and function of women in Book v, because Rousseau makes in passing a critical reference to it when he tackles the education of the natural woman, Sophie, in his own Book v. Both Plato and Rousseau are aware that their delineation of woman's role will be in contradiction to the current opinion of their contemporaries. Socrates says that "it could be doubted that the things said are possible" (128), and Rousseau often anticipates strong objections: "I hear the clamor raised against me" (508). In the *Republic*, as is well-known, the only class in the city Plato considers with respect to woman's nature, is the guardian class; only to them is the discussion of the appropriate education and function relevant. This is important, because Socrates says that the philosopher-king of the city should be chosen out of this class. Given the plea in the Book v of the *Republic* for an equal function between male and female guardians, feminist critics have increasingly studied Plato's silence as well as his suggestions regarding the possibility of a Philosopher-Queen.⁵ His argument consists of three phases, or, as Socrates says, three dangerous waves that risk engulfing their proponent, the argument being so uncharted and unheard-of. The first phase consists in examining in what sense it can

be said that there is a difference between the natures of man and woman (132). On the one hand, Socrates admits that man and woman differ in their sexual roles: "the female bears and the male begets" (133), a point which Rousseau also mentions. Yet Socrates also complicates the question of nature by wondering "what sort of *different* and *same* nature" (132) is concerned when discussing men and women. He argues in that respect that "we did not refer to absolutely identical or different natures, but were guarding only that form of difference or identity which applies to the employments themselves" (132–33). In that sense, then, he finds that "Men and women [...] have the same nature with respect to guarding the city" (134). He does observe, admittedly, that in a group or class, men are on the whole apter than women, yet he adds that some women, individually, are superior to some men in many instances (134).⁶ But the general position towards women of the guardian class is to assign them the same nature as men, and therefore, the same function. The second phase or wave of Socrates's argument in favor of what he calls "the community of women and children" (136) has caused a lot of controversy, which was actually anticipated in the *Republic*. The benefit of such a community is to avoid separate family cells, or property in a larger sense, in order to foster a common interest for the class of guardians, who can therefore dedicate themselves to the defense and the running of the city: what was said before will "cause them not to draw the city apart, which would happen if each did not call 'my own' the same things, but different things" (144). Again, Plato recommends measures which favor unity and condemn division. The community is achieved through temporary marriages, arranged by magistrates, between the elite male and female elements among the class of guardians (138).

The terms of Rousseau's opposition to the community of women and children show that he does not accept Plato's distinction between "same" and "different" nature. Rousseau notes that "In his *Republic*, Plato gives women the same exercises as men. I can well believe it! Having removed private families from his government and no longer knowing what to do with women, he found himself forced to make them men" (362). For him, the biological and sexual difference between man and woman requires different "exercises," and in that sense, he reproaches Plato for having introduced "that civil promiscuity which throughout confounds the two sexes in the same employments and in the same labors and which cannot fail to engender the most intolerable abuses" (363). He finds it unlikely, for example, for a woman to be "nurse today and warrior tomorrow" (362). On the contrary, Rousseau aligns man's role and woman's position in society entirely on their biological difference, and argues that consequently, they cannot have the same function.

When Rousseau claims that “there is no parity between the two sexes in regard to the consequences of sex” (361), however, he does not only allude to woman’s possible pregnancy. For one thing, child-bearing means that woman ensures legitimacy in the family, and beyond, in the state. According to Rousseau, this entails a greater responsibility for woman, though it is often tinged by suspicion or surveillance on the part of man: “It is important, then, not only that a woman be faithful, but that she be judged to be faithful by her husband, by those near her, by everyone” (361). Rousseau draws from the different role in reproduction the conclusion that sexes are not equal, if only because of this “moral difference” (361), particularly with regard to illegitimacy. Moreover, Rousseau argues that the citizen’s dedication to the state is modeled on the child’s attachment to the family, and for that reason, he objects to what he calls in Plato “that subversion of the sweetest sentiments of nature” (363). In a sense, woman is and should always be a mother to man: “To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet — these are the duties of women at all times” (365).

The importance of the role of motherhood, as developed by Rousseau in *Émile*, is repeatedly stressed, and cannot be overstated. The first sentence of the preface mentions that the whole project was first undertaken “to gratify a good mother who knows how to think” (33). Likewise, a great emphasis is devoted to mothers in Book 1. In the same way that nature was found to be an unclear concept, so is the term “mother” declared to be still ambiguous: “Moreover, the sense I give to the name *mother* must be explained” (38). Rousseau insists that for a mother to be such, she has to breast-feed her child, instead of sending him away to a nurse. In the *Republic*, on the contrary, nursing children is conceived of as a communal task: “[T]he officers [...] will invent every device so that none [of the women] will recognize her own [offspring], and provide others who do have milk if the mothers themselves are insufficient” (139). Rousseau argues in favor of preserving the child, but in a larger sense, nursing the child fosters the possibility of an unprecedented family, in which ties will become strongly knit through the example of the mother: “The bother of children, which is believed to be an importunity, becomes pleasant. It makes the father and mother more necessary; it tightens the conjugal bond between them” (46). Every social tie is anticipated by the mother’s tie to her child, which in turn acts contagiously on the father, and consequently on the citizen: “Let women once again become mothers, men will soon become fathers and husbands again” (46). In that sense, the family unit repre-

sents the unity desired in the social order. This leads Rousseau to conclude that once motherhood as he defines it has been reasserted, everything will improve in the state: "But let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be re peopled. This first point, this point alone, will bring everything back together" (46).

In spite of the pleasure he takes in dwelling on this picture of familial harmony, however, what is specific to Rousseau are his recommendations for best achieving the unity of the state. As Patrick Coleman has pointed out in his study of the *Lettre à D'Alembert*, "for men to be what they should, women should lead the way by retiring from public life" (108). Rousseau even says in *Émile* that "the true mother of a family is hardly less of a recluse in her home than a nun is in her cloister" (387). In Coleman's analysis, Rousseau's recommendation that women be confined to the domestic sphere is a way to "give life to public opinion and action" (108). Woman's participation in the public life is supposedly detrimental, because it induces man's paralysis, his failure to act. Rousseau sees woman's public role as an usurpation of man's faculties, as he says for example in *Émile* (364). Correlatively, he maintains, as we have already mentioned, that men's and women's respective faculties are different. Hence, the strength of the state is greater when each keeps to, and indeed develops, his or her respective faculties, because this ensures a complementarity, and ultimately, a unity: "All the faculties common to the two sexes are not equally distributed between them; but taken together, they balance out" (363). In Rousseau's estimation, the body politic is stimulated when men's and women's bodies have as little commerce as possible (in private), or when they meet in public, preferably in separate groups. For example, in *Émile*, he praises the fact that in Sparta, "the young girls appeared often in public, not mixed in with the boys but gathered together among themselves" (366). Likewise, in the *Lettre à D'Alembert*, Rousseau favorably recalls the custom of "cercles," in which men and women gather separately.

Everything that we have mentioned so far seems, therefore, to show that while Rousseau follows Plato in his determination of an employment fit for the nature of man and for the nature of woman, he also radicalizes Plato's position by narrowing down the sense of "nature." Whereas in the Book v of the *Republic*, Plato disregards the different roles in reproduction as secondary to his inquiry, Rousseau thinks that this difference unavoidably directs any subsequent examination of gender roles. It would be hasty, however, to conclude from their contradictory assessments on this point that Plato's depiction of woman's role is entirely satisfactory, whereas Rousseau's is absolutely unacceptable. For one thing, if we look only at

Plato's *Republic*, exclusive of his other more misogynist works, we have to remember that the description of woman's role applies only to the class of guardians, not to the inferior class of artisans and producers. This is why, granting that Plato's Book v presents a notion of equality between men and women, Elizabeth Spelman points out that risks are still involved in casting one class as superior: "one can argue against sexism in a way that leaves other forms of oppression intact" (87). Furthermore, as many critics note, it is difficult to "reconcile Plato's belief that men and women are equal in nature and yet women are always inferior in capacity" (Bluestone 84). Other pointed comments include the remark that Plato failed to consider the "inequality of the sexes [...] as an injustice" (Annas 314) in a work such as the *Republic*, which examines the nature of justice.

In Rousseau's case, when rehearsing his plan for the separateness of gender roles, one may unwittingly tend to reinforce the strictness of its unfolding in Rousseau's text, by contagion as it were. In fact, as most attentive readings of Rousseau have demonstrated, the rigor of his dogmatic precepts is constantly undermined by contradictory passages. The general effect of the text where woman's role is concerned is therefore far from clearly established at the end of *Émile*. Two examples will illustrate this. First, Rousseau counterbalances woman's retirement from the public sphere with what he calls woman's "ascendancy on men" (390), a noble undertaking which he says he finds an example of in Sparta, where "the ambition of women [...] was to command men" (393). This means that woman's supposed constant subjection to man's good opinion and judgment is rather a deliberate self-effacement, which is made to contribute to the greatness of the state. But there is more. Rousseau alternates statements which cancel each other out, and make his position difficult to ascertain. He remarks for instance that "[women] never cease to be subjected either to a man or to the judgments of men and they are never permitted to put themselves above these judgments" (370). Yet, he also declares that "[Woman] becomes the judge of her judges; she decides when she ought to subject herself to them and when she ought to take exception to them" (383). These two recommendations make any attempted application impracticable. Secondly, if woman's role has to be at times narrowly circumscribed, it is because for Rousseau, woman always risks triggering doubt in man, a point that is forcefully made in the given example of a child who might be passed off as legitimate to the unfortunate father. Likewise, Rousseau's strong support of the economy of "pudeur" partly rests on the fear that if she were allowed to express her desire, woman, who is, as he notes, always sexually willing, could become aware of, and expose man's potential or temporary impotence. This physiological limitation on man's part is metaphorized by

Rousseau in political and public terms. In effect, sparing man this “narcissistic wound” (Kofman 51) is one of the great motives behind woman’s confinement. Yet, in spite of his anxiety to contain a doubt which woman does not entertain herself, Rousseau often relishes what is this time described as the pleasure of doubt, uncertainty, or undecidability. This is for example the case in Rousseau’s well-known discussion of sexual intercourse, in which man’s supposed sexual strength, always precarious according to Rousseau, is activated by woman’s playful yielding: “Then what is sweetest for man in his victory is the doubt whether it is weakness which yields to strength or the will which surrenders. And the woman’s usual ruse is always to leave this doubt between her and him” (360). “Woman’s empire” over man (360), which is moreover declared to be natural (360), is partly due to such a seductive undecidability: “the stronger [sex] appears to be master but actually depends on the weaker” (360). These passages cannot be dismissed because they contradict the thrust of Rousseau’s project of education for women. Instead, they have to be understood as part and parcel of the very elaboration of his plan, and have to be taken into account when evaluating the general effect of his natural education, and of his determination of woman’s role. For in Sarah Kofman’s words, the reverse of Rousseau’s phallocracy is also “as always, a *feminism*” (57).

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Notes

¹For an example of such a rewriting, see Clifford Orwin’s “Rousseau’s Socratism.” For Orwin, Rousseau has radicalized “the Socratic tradition by presenting ‘ignorance’ as a blessing” in the first *Discourse* (182).

²Judith Shklar has studied Rousseau’s debt to Sparta in “Rousseau’s Two Models: Sparta and the Age of Gold.” Shklar argues for instance that Rousseau tended to identify Geneva with Sparta (32).

³I have generally used Allan Bloom’s translation of *The Republic*. However, I have also consulted Richard Sterling and William Scott’s translation (New York: Norton & Company, 1985), and a French translation by Robert Baccou (Paris: G-F Flammarion, 1966), and have sometimes silently modified Bloom’s translation.

⁴In Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates discusses several kinds of imitation to be taught to guardians of the city. The same characteristics as those affecting justice are mentioned in that context. What is valued are pure, singular forms of imitation. For example: “Human nature [...] is unable [...] to make a fine imitation of many things” (73). “[T]here is a certain form

of style and narrative in which any good and true man narrates whenever he must say something, and again, another form, unlike this one, in the man who is by nature and rearing the opposite of this other, always keeps and in which he narrates" (74–75). "[I]f someone assigns the appropriate harmonic mode and rhythm to the style, it turns out that the man who speaks correctly speaks mostly in the same style and in one mode" (75).

⁵See for example Natalie Harris Bluestone's *Women and the Ideal Society*, which traces the critical reception of Plato's passages on women guardians. She argues that "Plato [...] calls for Philosopher-Kings, and — if the terminology be properly extended, as it rarely is — Philosopher-Queens to rule" (12). Yet her book explores both "inconsistencies in Plato's total view of women" (84), and the prevalent anti-female bias in Plato scholarship.

⁶For Julia Annas, such a position (and in her analysis, not the only one) invalidates the claim made by some that Plato is the first feminist: "Now it is hardly a feminist argument to claim that women do not have a special sphere because men can outdo them at absolutely everything" (309).

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