

Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique

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Eighteenth-Century Critics of Rousseau's Views on Women

Since 1970 dozens of works have analyzed Rousseau's discussions of women's nature, education and proper role. Today, both feminists and non-feminists alike generally agree that Rousseau was a "male chauvinist" though they disagree about the implications of that fact. But what about readers in his own age? What did Rousseau's contemporaries think of his views on women?

Critics fall into three classes: the first are *philosophes* interested in scoring debating points against Rousseau not in giving birth to feminism. A second group includes female advocates. While modern readers may find him sexist, Rousseau had a devoted following among 18th-century women. Far from being secluded anti-feminists, some helped make the French Revolution and argued for larger roles for women. Finally, a third group is made up of British feminists. This paper looks at the responses of these groups to two works where Rousseau commented extensively on women, his *Letter to D'Alembert*, and *Emile*.

The *Letter* made three arguments about women. The first turned on the subject of modern plays: love.¹ This emphasis in drama increased women's importance in society, inverted the natural order, and varied from ancient practices. (The Spartans, for example, kept the sexes apart and the best women were spoken of least.) "Agreeable and virtuous women" had become rare "celestial objects" existing only on stage. In real life, there were "few women worthy of being listened to by a serious man".

A second argument concerned actresses.² Rousseau pointed to their dissoluteness, a quality at odds with women's natural chasteness. Actresses sold themselves in performance and would do so in person--they were merely prostitutes. Their immorality corrupted actors as well; the only cure was to remove the cause, namely theatre. Society should cultivate chasteness, natural or not, since there were "no good morals for women outside a withdrawn domestic life".

The final argument dealt with socio-political effects of gender

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D'Alembert on the Theater*, transl. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 47-49.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 79-92.

roles.³ These roles were crucial, for "never has a people perished from an excess of wine; all perish from the disorder of women." In republics, the sexes must be separated. Otherwise, women, lacking the strength to be men, effeminize males. Monarchies might tolerate this, but republics needed men. The triumph of effeminacy posed dangers in art as well as in politics, for Rousseau denied that women liked art, knew anything about it, or had genius or passion.

Rousseau rightly predicted his stand would be controversial. Three writers' works exemplify the range of criticisms raised.

L.H. Dancourt rejected appeals to the ancients and raised issues about women's education.⁴ Disagreeing that few women were worth listening to, he argued that there were surprisingly many estimable women given their poor education. He detached education from virtue. Education itself did not necessarily lead to virtue. If it did, there would have been fewer brutish men. Women's greater attachment to virtue made it worth listening to them. Inferior education also explained women's lack of genius. Dancourt noted that genius was rare among men. He suggested that women's true abilities would be known only after they received the same education as men. Experience would tell.

As for the political argument, Dancourt doubted that women, being weaker, could force men to become women. He denied that men are more necessary in republics. Monarchs, too, needed the counsel of patriots.

Marmontel's *Apologie du Théâtre* gave a detailed reply to Rousseau's views on women.⁵ To counter his call for segregation of the sexes, Marmontel provided an "historical" account explaining women's absence from public life. Government originated in physical force; this necessarily excluded women. In republics, where all men participated, the males preserved ancient prerogative. However, in monarchies, where access to political power was more limited, women acquired larger roles. They mixed more freely in society to "sweeten the mores of naturally ferocious men...to cultivate and nourish in their

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-113.

⁴ L.H. Dancourt, *Dancourt arlequin de Berlin à Mr. J.-J. Rousseau, citoyen de Genève* (Berlin: J.H. Schneider, 1760), pp. 164-203.

⁵ Jean François Marmontel, *Apologie du théâtre*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Marmontel*, Vol. X (Paris: Verdière, 1819), pp. 271-285.

soul the love of peace and order." Women were a force for peace, performing a public civilizing mission for them. They could end offensive warfare by weakening men's "thirst for blood" while nourishing the "love of honor and emulation of glory."

To oppose Rousseau's Spartans, Marmontel offered cultural relativism. Where nature had not spoken, "modesty in one country is not that in another. With the Greeks, custom forbade women to show themselves in public. With us, custom authorizes it." He agreed that chasteness is natural to women, and believed that attacking is the natural role of men and defending, of women. Yet this implied no need to sequester women; it carried with it only "a duty of resisting or forbidding attack." The rest varied with the place and time. Applying Spartan principles to republican Geneva showed Rousseau's "overheated imagination." Garrison-state discipline did not suit peaceful Geneva which needed vigorous trade and industry instead. Marmontel agreed that luxury could bring corruption. But in blaming women [and the theatre], Rousseau had mistaken the true cause of the problem: "Women have nothing to do with it; all vice is in riches."

Marmontel criticized Rousseau's passage on art and genius. Even if women had no natural taste for beauty, it was but a minor flaw; they might appreciate truth, justice and goodness. Women lacked men's educational advantages; but, 18th-century women had attained a great deal. They demonstrated that "healthy reason, a right spirit, and a moderate sensibility" belonged to both sexes. Genius for producing art is not essential to a good life. One need not be "a Demosthenes...to be a good citizen, a good parent, a good friend."

Marmontel agreed that "man is born good" and explicitly included women in that claim. Nature made women reasonable, sensible, good, and virtuous, with souls like men. Did Rousseau have evidence to show women had abused these gifts? Marmontel denied that virtuous women were rare, and that everything disposing men to love women led to vice. Instead, he said, softening one sex by the other drew man away from the class of beasts and hid the shame of physical love under the goodness of moral love.

To counter the characterization of actresses as prostitutes, Marmontel appealed to the dignity of labor and pointedly asserted that a performer's sale of talent at imitation did not differ from a playwright's sale of imagination.

When D'Alembert himself replied to Rousseau, he pleaded women's cause "less on what they are than on what they are able to

be."⁶ He, too, focused on arguments about the lack of women of genius and virtue, and denied their rarity. Momentarily giving Rousseau the benefit of the doubt, however, D'Alembert asked how that might have occurred. He offered four answers: 1) the enslavement and abasement to which men consign them; 2) the shackles put on their mind and soul; 3) the humiliating jargon men use with them; 4) the education men prescribe for them. D'Alembert rejected appeals to universal customs of nations because "everywhere men are stronger and everywhere the stronger is the oppressor of the weaker."

Reviewing women's contributions to art, D'Alembert disagreed that they could not show passion. Any reader of the *Letters of Heloise to Abelard* knew better. If 18th-century women had become more coquettish than passionate, men, not nature, were to blame. Furthermore, physical frailty did not imply mental weakness. Feeble men had produced works of genius. A solid, manly education could bring women similar successes.

Rousseau taught that the culture of the mind is pernicious to virtue among men, and more so among women. In reply, D'Alembert articulated a central article of Enlightenment faith: "Men become more virtuous in the proportion that they know better the true sources of their happiness." He argued that enlightenment remained unequally dispersed. Were it lavished more generally, men would "cease to hold women under the yoke and in ignorance...[then] love between the sexes will be a...true amity between virtuous people." He called on fathers to hasten that day by giving sons and daughters the same education.

Responses to Rousseau's *Letter* defend the culture of salons. For a *salonnière* to defend vigorously women's genius, passion, virtue or civilizing influence on society would stand him in good stead in a social world organized by rich and powerful ladies. But the ideas themselves became important for feminism, especially two points underlined by these critics: first, an acknowledgement that gender roles vary from culture to culture; second, a suggestion that gender inequalities depended on education, and would diminish if children received similar educations.

In *Emile*, Rousseau detailed his views on women and education. First, he gave them a prominent role in the education of

⁶ Jean de la Rond d'Alembert, *Lettre à J.J. Rousseau* in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. II (Paris: A. Belin, 1821), p. 432-458.

their young, calling on mothers to save their sons from the social conditions which would stifle nature. He exhorted women to "raise a wall 'round your child's soul; another may sketch the plan. You alone should execute it."⁷ He demanded that mothers breast-feed their own infants, and not rely on wet-nurses.

Later, Rousseau sketched a plan to rear Sophy, Émile's perfect mate, based on a belief in the complementarity of the sexes.⁸ Her education would reflect the sex differences that distinguished her from Émile:

Sophy ought to be a woman as...Emile is a man...But for her sex, woman is man. She has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties...The difficulty of comparing them lies in our inability to decide...what is a matter of sex and what is not...General differences present themselves...they seem not to be a matter of sex yet they really are sex differences, though the connection eludes our observation...These... differences must have moral influence.

In practice this meant that Émile's education prepared him for independence while Sophy's had another end in view:

A woman's education must...be planned in relation to man. To love, to train him in childhood, to tend to him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time.

These tasks required special preparation:

Girls should be attentive and industrious...they should early be accustomed to restraint...They must be trained to bear the yoke from the first, so that they may not feel it, to master their own caprices and to submit themselves to the will of others...[T]each them above all things

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, eds., Vol. IV (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969), Book 1. Translation used here is by Barbara Foxley (New York: Dutton, 1977).

⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, Bk. IV.

self-control...[T]he life of a good woman is a perpetual struggle against self; it is only fair that woman should bear her share of the ills she has brought us.

Women's education emphasized ornamenting themselves and appealing to men through appearance. Men were taught to be independent of public opinion, but women would be judged by a different standard. For women "worth alone will not suffice, a woman must be thought worthy...A woman's honor does not depend on her conduct alone, but on her reputation...[W]hat people think of her matters as much as what she really is."

In *Emile* Rousseau again offered a double standard: "No doubt every breach of faith is wrong, and every faithless husband is cruel and unjust; but the faithless wife is worse;...her crime is not infidelity, but treason."

Despite support for female education among *philosophes* responding to the *Letter*, Rousseau's ideas on women's education in *Emile* drew little fire. D'Alembert may have sounded feminist notes replying to the *Letter*, but no such criticisms appeared in his review of *Emile*. Evaluating the discussion of woman, he pronounced "practically everything" in it to be "true, well thought out, and especially practicable."⁹

J.H.S. Formey, author of *Anti-Emile*, was not anti-Sophy but found her portrait "less chimerical than that of Émile."¹⁰ He defended wet-nursing but agreed that "when women again become mothers, men will become fathers and husbands." Yet, Formey objected to Rousseau's double standard, arguing that men's infidelity was as damaging as women's. He found the assertion that women were passive, weak, and made to be subjugated downright indecent. Nor did he see why women had to be kept at home. Instead, he sought "a middle ground between dissipation and tight confinement," where women determined the activities appropriate to them. Formey disagreed that the life of a good woman was perpetual self-combat or that woman should share in the pains she had caused man. Here he used strong rhetoric, likening Rousseau to "someone who sails rapidly

⁹ Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Jugement sur Emile*, in *Oeuvres Posthumes de D'Alembert*, Vol. I (Paris: Charles Pougens, 1799), p. 135.

¹⁰ J.H.S. Formey, *Anti-Emile* (Berlin: Joachim Pauli, 1763), p. 190-195.

on a river believing that the shore is moving."

Rousseau's *Emile* won him many women followers. Though Marmontel was a bitter enemy, his wife did not share his views.¹¹ While Monsieur thought Rousseau had "camouflaged vice in the colors of goodness and the complexion of virtue," Madame saw only a champion who had "persuaded women to nurture their children." She held it "necessary to forgive something to one who taught us to be mothers." To 20th-century feminists, Rousseau's reception by women of his day may seem perverse. It perplexed some 18th-century critics, too. Mme. de Genlis described his effect:

[I]t is to the Ladies that the Author...owes his greatest success; for they...praise him with enthusiasm, although no Author treats them with less respect...He accuses them...of deceit and coquetry. In short, he loved but did not esteem them...he has mentioned them with contempt, but with an air of passion, and passion excuses everything.¹²

D'Alembert also thought Rousseau had failed to give women proper respect yet this had not damaged his cause with them. D'Alembert concluded simply that "many sins are forgiven him because he has loved much."¹³

Emile is often credited with starting a revolution in the treatment of infants. French women throughout the social hierarchy used wet-nurses extensively. When Rousseau called upon mothers to breast-feed, as Genlis remarked, "he did not advise, he commanded, and was obeyed."¹⁴ But literary sources may not tell the whole story. Rousseau may have had an impact among upper-class women, but the effect is harder to document elsewhere. Reflecting on her travels in southern France, Catherine Macaulay claimed that "the sagacious Rousseau has not yet been able to effect any general reformation in

¹¹ Jean François Marmontel, *Mémoires*, Vol. I (Clermont-Ferrand: G. De Bussac, 1972), p. 292-295.

¹² Mme Comtesse de Genlis, *Adèle et Théodore ou Lettres sur L'éducation*, (Dublin: Luke White, 1783), p. 111.

¹³ D'Alembert, *Jugement sur Emile*, p. 135.

¹⁴ Genlis, p. 52.

the mode of treating infants in France."¹⁵ Recently, social historians studying French nursing placement agencies found no observable, lasting change in nursing patterns among the general population prior to the French Revolution.¹⁶

Nonetheless, during the Revolution, Rousseau became a patron saint to bourgeois women who accepted his child-rearing advice and created a "cult of republican motherhood."¹⁷ Now Rousseau thought good republican mothers should stay home, and produce strong, virtuous, patriotic sons for the republic. He did not see them actively involved in politics, or playing an authoritative public role. What Rousseau and his revolutionary women followers had in mind were not always quite the same thing. For example, a revolutionary pamphleteer complained that half the human race [women] had been deprived of natural rights and argued for their restoration.¹⁸ Rousseau had not gone far enough. "By charming women, [he] restored one of their most beautiful and sweetest functions," yet he did not recognize the need for a general system to rehabilitate women. Nonetheless, the oversight was forgiven, for even if Rousseau had recognized the need, "the time, the customs, the habits would not have permitted it." The author argued that women deserved legal recompense for their work in producing and rearing children. Instead, revolutionary women had been told that the rights of man did not include them. To this proto-feminist, Rousseau was still a hero. What 20th-century critics might

¹⁵ Catherine Macaulay [Graham], *Letters on education with observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London: C. Dilly, 1790), p. 27.

¹⁶ See for example Olwen Hufton, "Women and the Family Economy in 18th Century France," *French Historical Studies IX* (Spring, 1975), pp. 1-22 and George D. Sussman, *Selling Mother's Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France 1715-1914* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

¹⁷ On this see especially Candice E. Proctor, *Women, Equality and the French Revolution* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) and Ruth Graham, "Rousseau's Sexism Revolutionized" in Paul Fritz and Richard Morton, eds., *Woman in the 18th Century and Other Essays* (Toronto: Hakkert & Co., 1976), pp. 127-139.

¹⁸ *Du Sort Actuel des Femmes*, in *Cahiers de Doléances des Femmes en 1789 et Autres Textes* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1981), pp.117-118.

call sexism only made him "a creature of his time."

Other revolutionary women adopted Rousseau's assumptions but built different (unRousseauist) political agendas on them.¹⁹ They accepted arguments about natural sex differences and made their homes schools of patriotism. They also took seriously Rousseau's idea about women's moral ascendancy and made this a basis for greater claims including a call to create Tribunals of Virtuous Women. These bodies, composed of mothers of high moral character, would be guardians of public morality. During the Revolution women embraced Rousseau's ideals about the positive role for women as mothers, but did not always acknowledge limitations entailed by this role. Instead of seeing motherhood as a compensation for prohibited political roles, some used it to justify enlarged roles.

A third set of critics includes British writers Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft. Macaulay's *Letters on education* provided a plan for the education of children of both sexes. Since she researched the literature thoroughly, the *Letters* often refer to *Emile*. Macaulay criticized severely Rousseau's views on women and dismissed his theory of sex differences:

Among the most strenuous asserters of a sexual difference in character, Rousseau is the most conspicuous...never did enthusiasm and the love of paradox...appear in more strong opposition to plain sense than in [his] definition of this difference... . [I]t is not reason, it is not wit; it is pride and sensuality that speak in Rousseau, and...lowered the man of genius to the licentious pedant.²⁰

Macaulay saw sex differences as a result of situation and education. Girls' education had always been organized around supposed natural differences between the sexes. This debilitated mind and body, and atrophied moral sense. As long as people believed in "the absurd notion of a sexual excellence," it would be impossible to perfect an educational plan for either sex.

Macaulay proposed the same rules for males and females. If children were brought up together, "both sexes will find that

¹⁹ Mlle. Jodin, *Vues Législatives pour les Femmes, Ibid.*, pp. 183-199.

²⁰ Macaulay, pp. 203-5.

friendship may be enjoyed between them without passion. The wisdom of your daughters will preserve them from the bane of coquetry...Your sons will look for something more solid in women, than a mere outside..."

The last critic to consider is the one undisputed feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft. After replying to Burke's attack on the French Revolution, she took on Rousseau's description of women's nature, purpose, and proper education.²¹ Wollstonecraft read, reviewed, and borrowed from Macaulay, but with a different end. She specifically championed the rights of women, and only incidentally discussed education. Like Macaulay, she argued that virtue is the same in both sexes. Women, as moral and rational creatures, should "acquire...virtues by the same means as men" (i.e. education). She insisted that Rousseau's scheme benefitted neither sex. It cramped girls' reason to make them alluring; but Wollstonecraft knew this did no good:

The woman...taught to please will soon find that her charms...cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day...How then can the great art of pleasing be such a necessary study? it is only useful to a mistress; the chaste wife and serious mother should only consider her power to please as the polish of her virtues...

Nor would a Rousseauist education fit women to teach their own children. Wollstonecraft saw a discrepancy between the two discussions of women in *Emile*. Women reared as Sophie would be incapable of caring for the next generation of *Émiles*. This education would not help widows encumbered with children, or those who never married. Instead, Wollstonecraft would have women learn that "their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next...as citizens, is that...of a mother." By being independent of men, they could acquire the strength of affection needed by good wives and mothers; dependence produced cunning, mean and selfish women. Only through legal and financial independence could women become virtuous. Unlike Rousseau, Wollstonecraft would open careers to women, so that they would not need to marry for support. Wollstonecraft's educational plan was diametrically opposed to

²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), *passim*.

Rousseau's; but, in sketching its advantages, she used a familiar metaphor from *The Social Contract*:

Would men but generously snap our chains and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers--in a word, better citizens.

In summary, the 18th-century critics of Rousseau's views on women range from *salonières*, to republican mothers, to famous feminists. They include women seeking independence and expanded roles. Some embraced his ideas on the value of motherhood and the complementarity of the sexes, yet saw these as ways to expand rather than limit their possibilities. The result looks odd today—efforts to put forth a kind of feminist agenda using parts of Rousseau's thought which 20th-century Anglo-American feminists find incompatible. While the disjunction did not appear to bother 18th-century French women, it did bother British feminists who built their arguments on different principles—individualism giving rise to political equality based on equality of natural rights, education beginning with a *tabula rasa*, and reason and virtue common to both sexes.

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