

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

edited by
sous la direction de

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Letter to M. Rousseau on the Theatrics of Gender

The letter that follows uses two strategies to challenge Rousseau's advocacy of sexual differentiation and separate spheres in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*. First, I voice the challenge in Rousseau's own words, changing only the object at which his remarks are directed from the theater to sexual differentiation. Using Rousseau's words demonstrates that his set of social concerns, as laid out in the *Letter*, can be used to argue for gender equality. The second strategy, perhaps more familiar but less prevalent here, is to respond directly to Rousseau's explicit pronouncements about gender in the *Letter*. But here, as well, I attempt to use his own arguments against him, in order to make a convincing internal critique. Both strategies express a certain degree of respect for the form Rousseau's argument takes in the *Letter*, and acknowledge the gravity of the social problems with which he is wrestling there. Ultimately, however, what I wish to demonstrate is that given his concerns, Rousseau's position on gender roles and relations should be otherwise.

As is clear in my 'Letter to M. Rousseau,' I do not confine myself to responses to or alterations in Rousseau's statements explicitly about gender; for example, I use his insights on the elderly and his general musings about personal and social relations to shed more light on questions of sex. This 'appropriation' seems to me quite justifiable, on two grounds. First, here, too, I mirror Rousseau's approach. Clearly, he did not confine his critique of the theater to remarks about the theater itself. His remarks focus on the political consequences of the theater in various circumstances. In my version, too, political consequences are absolutely central. Surely no more is at stake politically with regard to the theater than with regard to the more pervasive, influential, systematic, and intimate matter of sex roles, as Rousseau recognized.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is a grave error to see gender issues as affecting only such concerns as, in our day, affirmative action, sexual harassment, and legal equality. As in Rousseau's time, it should be understood that in challenging traditional gender arrangements, a challenge is presented to forces and practices ranging from the structure of the family to the structure of the government, from uses of the marital to uses of the martial. In this sense, then, I am not taking Rousseau 'out

of context.'

What, ultimately, does it mean that Rousseau can be used against himself on this question? For those interested primarily in Rousseau, at the very least it opens up the possibility that Rousseauian political commitments do not necessarily demand, or even allow, sexual segregation. At most it reveals a serious inconsistency with large implications for interpretations of his political thought. For those interested primarily in feminist studies, it reveals another way to frame a response to a certain set of opponents of feminism, a response that speaks to them in their language.

*Preface*¹

I am at fault if I [am... taking] up my pen without necessity. It can be neither advantageous nor agreeable for me to attack M. [Rousseau]. I respect his person; I admire his talents; I like his works; ... [I have written a book on him which earned me tenure.] I am aware of the good things he has said [about women].... I am in all decency obliged to every sort of consideration for him. But consideration outweighs duty only with those for whom all morality consists in appearances. Justice and truth are [wo]man's first duties' (3; V: 3).

Though M. Rousseau's letter 'is certainly the most agreeable and seductive picture that could be offered us ... [it] is, at the same time, the most dangerous advice that could be given us' (5; V: 5). Yet the path he recommends is now backed by his 'weighty ... authority,' and citizens will be 'swept away by ideas for which they already have only too great a penchant' (5; V: 5).

Lafayette, Indiana, 1995

Monsieur Rousseau,

'I have read, Sir, [your *Letter to M. D'Alembert*]. In rereading it with even more pleasure, it has provided me with some reflections which I thought I could offer... . There is much to commend in [your letter]' (9; V: 9). But 'to remain silent about [your] ... assertion [regarding the natures and duties of the sexes] was to appear to adhere to it; and that I am very far from doing' (14; V: 14). I feel a certain 'repugnance to putting my ... [sex] on the stage [which] has caused me to put off speaking of us as long as I could' (92; V: 84). Nonetheless, 'silence is not permitted me' (9; V: 9). 'I am not dealing here with vain philosophical chatter but with a practical truth important to a whole people' (6; V: 6).

¹All changes made in the Bloom translation of the text will be indicated with parentheses; thus, all other text within quotation marks can be assumed to be direct quotes from Rousseau. The only exception to this is that I have used 'morals' where Bloom uses 'morals/[manners].'

‘You have praised [women].... But, Sir, when one wishes to honor people, it must be done after their fashion and not [y]our own, lest, with reason, they be offended by harmful praises which, for all that they are given with good intention, nonetheless do damage to the estate, the interests [and] the opinions... of those [women] who are their object (9-10; V: 9). ‘You will tell me that it is a question of facts and not praises and that the philosopher has more respect for the truth than for [wo]men. But this pretended truth is not so clear or so indifferent that you have the right to advance it without good authorities’ (10; V: 9-10).

I am convinced that ‘[w]hen a [wo]man cannot believe what [s]he finds absurd, it is not [her] fault; it is that of [her] reason’ (11; V: 11). Even when ‘a learned man’ like yourself ‘order[s] me ... to believe that the [male]... is greater than the [female]... . what could I think within myself other than that this man came to order me to be mad?’ (12; V: 12). Even ‘if the Scripture itself gave us some idea of ... [woman] unworthy of [her]... . we would have to reject it on that point, just as you reject in geometry the demonstrations which lead to absurd conclusions’ (13; V: 12).

‘How many questions I find to discuss in what you appear to have settled! Whether [sex roles are] good or bad in [themsel[ves]]? Whether [sexual differentiation] ... can be united with morals?’ Whether socially gendered people can be ‘decent’ and ‘well behaved’? ‘Whether good laws suffice for repressing the abuses [most likely to result from separate spheres]?... Everything is still problematic concerning the real effects of [socially enforced sex roles] ... for, since the disputes that it occasions are solely between the men of the church and the men of the world’ (15; V: 14-15), all that have been revealed are the ‘prejudices’ of those men’ (16; V: 15). ‘It is possible that there are in the world a few []men worthy of being listened to by a serious [wo]man; but, in general, is it from []men that [s]he ought to take counsel, and is there no way of honoring their sex without abasing our own?’ (47; V: 43-44). ‘The heart of a man is always right concerning that which has no personal relation to himself’ (24; V: 22). ‘But when [his]... interest is involved, [as it is here, his] ... sentiments are soon corrupted’ (24; V: 22).

‘There can be all sorts of [sexual divisions of labor] ... There is, from people to people, a prodigious diversity of [gendered traits and functions].... But man [and woman] modified by religions, governments, laws, customs, [and] prejudices ... become[] so different from [the]msel[ves] that one ought not to seek among us for what is good for men [and women] in general’ (17; V: 16).

‘To ask if ... [sexual differentiation] is good or bad in itself is to pose too vague a question ... it is only by its effects on the people that one can determine its absolute qualities’ (17; V: 16). ‘[T]he general

effect is to strengthen the [male's position]' (20; V: 19). '[T]he principal object [of gender arrangements] is to please [men]; and, provided that the [men] enjoy themselves, this object is sufficiently attained' (18; V: 17). 'To please [men], there must be arrangements which promote their penchants' (18; V: 17). 'What more advantageous treaty could [man] conclude than one obliging [women] to be just, so that [women] will faithfully render unto [men] what is due [them], while he renders to no one what he owes?' Indeed, man 'loves virtue [in woman] because he hopes to profit from it' (24; V: 22). 'I ask in what way morals can profit from all this?' (28; V: 26) '[W]hat is needed are [gender arrangements] which would moderate' men, not indulge them (18; V: 17).

'[M]y mind [is] filled with the abuses that [patriarchy] necessarily engenders and with the general impossibility of preventing these abuses' (75; V: 69). 'I see that in every country [the female sex] is one that dishonors, that those who [are female] are everywhere despised; and that even where they are most respected a man would be afraid to [resemble them]. These are incontestable facts. You will tell me that they are only the results of prejudice. I agree; but since these prejudices are universal, a universal cause must be sought, and I cannot see that it can be found elsewhere than in [patriarchy] itself' (76; V: 70).

'What is the talent of the [female]? It is the art of counterfeiting [her]self, of putting on another character than h[er] own, of appearing different than [s]he is of saying what [s]he does not think as naturally as if [s]he really did think it' (79; V: 72-73). 'What, then, is the spirit that [woman] ... receives from h[er] estate? A mixture of abjectness, duplicity, ridiculous conceit, and disgraceful abasement which renders h[er] fit for all sorts of roles except for the most noble of all, that of [hu]man [being], which [s]he [necessarily] abandons' (80; V: 73). '[T]he author makes [woman] a ridiculous figure. This is already enough, it seems to me, to render [him] inexcusable' (37; V: 34).

'But why is this dissoluteness inevitable? Oh, why! In any other [system of sexual politics] ... there would be no need to ask; but, in this age when [sexual] prejudices reign so proudly and error gives itself the name of philosophy, men, besotted with their vain learning, have closed their minds to the voice of reason and their hearts to that of nature' (81; V: 74).

Ultimately, 'the vices [of sexual differentiation] divide those whom common interest ought to unite' (91; V: 84). 'People think they come together in ... [gendered relationships], and it is there that they are isolated' (16-17; V: 16), unable to put aside the 'fables' and myths of gendered individuals in order to attend to the real needs of those around them (17; V: 17). You admit that the formation of 'bonds of friendship' requires bringing people 'frequently together' (99; V: 90).

Yet you also urge ‘that the two sexes ought to come together sometimes [but] ... to live separated ordinarily’ (100; V: 92). They should ‘live apart and each in his [or her] way’ (107; V: 98). Accordingly, requiring the sexes to live in separate worlds deprives their relationships of the possibility of being firmly grounded on friendship.

‘In this decadence o f... [sexual differentiation], we are constrained to substitute for” true relationships, false and unequal ones “capable [only] of impressing the... [male ego]’ (47; V: 43). ‘Thus everything compels us to abandon this vain idea that some wish to give us of the perfection of a form of ... [the feminine] directed toward public utility’ (27; V: 25).

You condemn both women and the theater for ‘inflaming a [man’s] sensitive heart’ (52; V: 48). You are, at best, a father overprotective of his sons. The greatest threat against which you aim to protect them is women. Without all diligence women will, you say, ‘crush [y]our sex’ (49; V: 45). You describe as ‘imperious’ any woman who ‘sets the tone, who judges, resolves, decides, pronounces, assigns talents, merit, and virtues their degrees and places’ (49; V: 45). Yet men will ‘ignominiously beg[]’ (49; V: 45) for the favor of such women. They need your help to keep them away from such women, in the theater and outside of it. Shield them from these decisive, judgmental females. Shield them by confining women and restricting public representation of them. Then men can be men, as you have socially designed and defined them.

The theater is dangerous because it reinforces ‘the love interest’ (47; V: 43). Why is it dangerous to reinforce that? Because doing so ‘extend[s] the empire of the fair sex’ (47; V: 43). So the theater is dangerous because it empowers women. What, dear sir, is wrong with women’s power? Nothing, you will say. Nothing, unless it endows women with a greater public voice. That you cannot tolerate, on the grounds that private women effectively govern their private men, but public women do not.

I ask you, sir, how can you believe that women will have power over men in the private realm when their abilities—their entire sex—are not only ignored but ridiculed in the public? Indeed you go so far as to recommend the practices of the ancients, which allowed women to be represented in drama only if they were ‘slaves or prostitutes’ (49; V: 45). This, you claim, is evidence of their ‘very great respect for women’ (48; V: 44), and of yours as well, no doubt. But compare this with an argument you make about age. You ask: ‘Who can doubt that the habit of always seeing old persons in the theater as odious characters helps them to be rejected in society?’ (50; V: 46) Indeed! And by analogy, by your own reasoning, who can doubt that the habit of always seeing

women in the theater as odious characters helps them to be rejected in society?

In a footnote, you cite a female playwright and acknowledge her talents. This is no real contradiction, you say, because you mean not to close the public gates to every or to any particular woman, 'but to women' (48n; V: 44n). To say you would welcome with open arms such an extraordinary woman is misleading, since it is extraordinarily unlikely that she can merge in your preferred scheme. Suppose I tell you that roosters are nasty animals. 'You don't want them,' I say, 'for they're mean and aggressive, to chicken and human alike. They're noisy and they don't even lay eggs.' I admit that some roosters are probably either trainable or just plain nice. But I stick to my general point. It would be understandable if, in response to my information, you decide not to build a coop for roosters in your backyard, you warn others about these shortcomings, you generalize about all roosters based on the information, and you are hard pressed to explain a calm rooster. In your letter, you tell me that women are this way and that way. You, too, admit there are exceptions, either from training or innate character. But still you insist upon your general point. It would be understandable if, after listening to your advice, a political community decides not to bring women into the public sphere, rationalizes this exclusion by generalizations about all women, and can not and cares not to explain exceptions. Despite your claim, from which exceptional women were perhaps supposed to take consolation, and on which both exceptional and unexceptional men could pretend open-mindedness, when you define and direct women, every woman feels the impact. I am unconvinced by your argument 'that you do not attribute the sentiments of which you speak to the whole [female sex]. But you do attribute them to many; ... [and] the whole must be affected by them' (10; V: 10).

'To forestall the disadvantages which could be born ... you would want [men] to be forced to be decent men. By this means, you say, we would have both [sexual differentiation] and morals ... [Sexual differentiation] and morals! This would really be something to see, so much the more so as it would be the first time. But what are the means that you indicate to us for restraining the... [men]?' (65; V: 60) 'I know of only three instruments with which the morals of a people can be acted upon: the force of the laws, the empire of opinion, and the appeal of pleasure. Now the laws have no access to the ... [men] where the least constraint would make it a pain and not an amusement. Opinion does not depend on ... [women], since, rather than giving the law to the public, ... [woman] receives the law from it. And, as to the pleasure than can be had ... [by men via sex roles], its whole effect is to bring ... [them] back more often' (22; V: 20-21). Too, what do you mean by 'decent men?'

‘[T] hose gentle, moderate people who always find that everything is fine because it is to their interest that nothing be better?’ (39; V: 36) ‘I dare to accuse this author of having missed an opportunity for greater harmony, for greater truthfulness, and perhaps for new beauties of situation’ (41; V: 38).

‘The rule for choosing is simple. When the good surpasses the evil, the thing ought to be accepted in spite of its disadvantages; when the evil surpasses the good, it must be rejected even with its advantages’ (107; V: 98). ‘Now, if the benefit is non-existent, the harm remains; and since the latter is indisputable, the issue seems to me to be settled’ (27; V: 25). ‘[I]t is [only] true that ... [sex roles] will not harm us if nothing at all can harm us any more’ (65; V: 60).

‘Who, then, is the [feminist] ... ? A good [wo]man who detests the morals of h[er] age and the viciousness of h[er] contemporaries; who, precisely because [s]he loves h[er] fellow creatures, hates in them the evils they do to one another and the vices of which these evils are the product. If [s]he were less touched by the errors of humanity, if [s]he suffered less from indignation at the [sexual] iniquities [s]he sees, would [she be more humane [her]self?’ (37; V: 34)

‘Hence, it is not of man that [woman] ... is the enemy, but of the viciousness of some and of the support this viciousness finds in the others. If there were neither knaves nor flatters, [s]he would love all humankind. There is no good [wo]man who is not a [feminist] ... in this sense; or, rather, the real [man-haters] are those who do not think as [s]he does’ (38; V: 35). Nonetheless, ‘having declared war on the vicious, [s]he must expect that they in turn will declare it on h[er]’ (40; V: 37)

Afterthoughts

I once wrote a paper, ‘Gender Bias in Political Theory,’ in which I used the strategy of reversal. In my story ‘real’ theorists were women, and the proper subjects of theorizing were women and all things associated with them. Gender reversal is a tactic used to make visible the invisible, taken-for-granted, and unconscious. Turning Rousseau on himself by turning his thoughts on the theater into thoughts on gender is a similar tactic. So many Rousseau scholars—myself included—have expended so much effort in the attempt to fit the parts of Rousseau’s thought into a coherent and meaningful whole. That is a worthy enterprise, as falling prey to the tempting tendency to call every puzzle in Rousseau an inconsistency, a fatal flaw, is not. But we do need tools to analyze him carefully from without as well as from within. Audre Lorde wrote, with great insight, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ But Rousseau’s tools—his words, his approach, his

set of concerns--can be used to dismantle at least one room, and to open the way for a reconstruction.

This altered letter rebuts some simple defenses of Rousseau's sexism. For example, those who would argue that we should focus on all the positive things Rousseau says about women can be reminded: 'when one wishes to honor people, it must be done after their fashion and not [y]our own' (9; V: 9). 'Harmful praise,' or praise defined by a particular political perspective, is a persuasive tactic Rousseau recognizes and uses for his own ends.

Some misinterpretations of Rousseau's views on gender can be righted using this altered letter. For example, many have said that Rousseau simply believes that the sexes are different by nature. But truly Rousseau is no biological determinist. He recognizes the malleability and diversity of sexual differentiation, as of other social constructs. His words about how humans are 'modified by religions, governments, laws, customs [and] prejudices' (17; V: 16) should in fact be held to apply to gender as much as to the theater.

In this altered letter, Rousseau has provided a unique framework for understanding the feminist and the anti-feminist backlash. Applying his thoughts on the misanthrope to the subject of feminism shows the true intentions and the intentional misinterpretations that accrue to political stances like feminism.

Finally, my appropriation of Rousseau allows a critique of him that makes important use of his political standard: 'To ask if [sexual differentiation] is good or bad in itself is to pose too vague a question ... it is only by its effects ... that one can determine its absolute qualities' (17; V: 16). One can make a Rousseauian argument against the sexual division of labor focusing on its effects—effects which, to Rousseau, are absolutely critical. The analogy of gender to the theater puts the spotlight on his assertions regarding, for example, the private power of private women, or the companionship possible between radically sexually differentiated individuals.

As the opening of Rousseau's letter says, on matters of great social consequence, silence may be a more blameworthy choice than expressing disagreement. For me, if 'my sister[s] have been] insulted, ... I must get revenge for them or dishonor myself.'

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