Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

From Girls to Slaves: Rousseau, Gendered Education and the Prison of Vanity

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Received: February 16, 2019 Accepted: February 23, 2019 Online Published: February 26, 2019

doi:10.22158/sll.v3n1p84 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v3n1p84

Abstract

This article explores how Rousseau's gendered rendering of education prepares women for a life of slavery, primarily by holding them captive to the power of vanity. An understanding of the process of enslavement begins with an appreciation of Rousseau's conceptualization of freedom and the general will in The Social Contract, followed by a discursive analysis of his guidelines for the proper and desired education of men and women in Émile, including the pivotal role played by vanity in the inculcation of young women. The paper concludes by underscoring how Rousseau's description of the ideal education for women not only contradicts his definition of what it means to be fully human, it also replaces women's liberty and morality with vanity, thereby framing a woman's role and purpose in life in language the political philosopher usually reserved for slavery, a practice Rousseau purportedly found illegitimate and detrimental to society as a whole.

Keywords

Rousseau, Social Contract, Émile, gendered education, vanity, slavery

1. Introduction and Literature Review

> He was the victim of great internal tensions and intellectual conflicts. In one mood he was a "child of Nature"—impulsive, wayward, self-assertive, violently individualistic and almost a practicing anarchist. In another, he was the stern moralist, urging a sensitive awareness of duty to serve the common good as the highest civic virtue. So his philosophy was, not unnaturally, inconsistent and at times confused (Thomson, 1966, p. 105).

So reads the closing remarks of one historian's description of Rousseau and his social-political treatises. Although few historians, political scientists, philosophers or educational theorists would question the impact of Rousseau's philosophy, many have been baffled by apparent discrepancies in his writings, including contradictions internal to his political philosophy (Martin, 1981, p. 359; Canivez, 2004, p. 394). Of particular concern is Rousseau's depiction of women, which, depending on the scholar, has been criticized for bias in its inferior portrayal of women to outright misogyny including accusations that the philosopher's arguments rationalized rape (Darling & Van de Pijpekamp, 1994, pp. 124-127). Critical discussion regarding the political philosopher's treatment of women dates back to near contemporaries of Rousseau, most famously Mary Wollstonecraft's landmark *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a step-by-step refutation of Rousseau's thought beginning with the presupposition that women lack natural faculties such as reason with which to be full and equal citizens with men, including in the classroom through coeducation ([1792] 1994); indeed Wollstonecraft is credited with a sophisticated and holistic view of education that falls prey neither to rational instrumentalism nor the romanticism of Rousseau (Griffiths, 2014, p. 349). More recent theorists like Jane Roland Martin have underscored the dangers of Rousseau and similar philosophers of education that perpetuate the status quo through exclusionary practices that define education in terms of men rather than all human beings (1981, p. 371; 1985). Others have gone so far as to accuse the philosopher of relegating women to an "ontological basement" (Darling & Van de Pijpekamp citing Martin, 1994, p. 131).

While few scholars dispute that Rousseau's views on women are not unproblematic, some have suggested that the philosopher's portrayal of women has either been overstated or misrepresented and bears further contextualization (Weiss, 1990, pp. 604-605; Jonas, 2016, p. 145; Mulcahy, 2018, pp. 88-89). One interpretation, for example, proposes that the political philosopher's views on women are neither "bizarre inconsistency in his philosophical reasoning" nor "unabashed misogyny" but rather rooted in the belief that "men and women will be happiest when they inhabit certain sex roles—not because sex roles are valuable in themselves but because only through them can either men or women hope to be happy" (Jonas, 2016, p. 145). If "sexual role differentiation is not *necessarily* (italics in original) oppressive" in and of themselves, then the question remains as to whether or not Rousseau falls into the "different but equal category" (Lange, 1979, p. 42). A related question that bears exploration is to what extent and for what ends are the differences between men and women "damnable" or "to be celebrated" in terms of their "practical compability" (*sic*) "with equality, community, and social freedom" (Weiss, 1990, p. 625). Indeed another scholar suggests that "the central and distinctive difficulty of Rousseau's social thought" is "the problem of finding a stable equilibrium between denaturing education, political stability and adult autonomy" (Riley, 2011, p. 573). It follows that a particularly instructive point of entry into disentangling and clarifying Rousseau's complicated and contradictory writings on the differences between men and women would thus be an analysis of the manner in which educational sites become gendered (Weiler, 2006, p. 161).

2. Overview and Major Findings

This paper makes a unique contribution to ongoing critical analysis of Rousseau's confounding portrayal of women by discursively analyzing the pivotal role that vanity plays in the gendering of their education and eventual enslavement. Such enslavement cannot be properly understood without a broader appreciation of what constituted freedom for Rousseau. The paper thus begins with a textual analysis of Rousseau's definition of man and his sense of freedom in society through the general will as outlined in *The Social Contract*. The interrelationship between man, education and preparation for participation in the general will as advocated in *Émile* will next be explored, followed by a discursive analysis of Rousseau's ideal education for women and the integral role played by the inculcation of vanity in their instruction. The conclusion elucidates how this gendered rendering of education not only contradicts ideals that form the basis of Rousseau's political philosophy as well as his vision of education, it does so in a way that frames the education of women with the same values and lack of agency the philosopher usually reserved for slaves, and in so doing, enslaves society as a whole.

3. *The Social Contract,* the General Will and the Education of Men

"To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties" (Rousseau [1762], 1913, p. 7). For Rousseau, nature intended man to be free, and no man gives up his freedom willingly. *The Social Contract* carefully delineates how no one has natural authority over another. The rule of nature is the only rule that man should live by, and it includes two principles: benevolence and self-preservation. Man is not compelled by impulse, property or reason. To Rousseau, man is simply a relaxed, complacent brute, but he is happy and free, and his freedom is without structured content because it is free of learning.

"What specifically distinguishes man from all other animals is not so much his intelligence as the fact that he is a free agent" (Bair, 1974, p. 153). For Rousseau, it is thus not simply enough to say that man is "free"; rather, he is a self-directed agent in his freedom. His choices reconstruct the surrounding world, and, over time, can result in a fundamental change in man's very essence. Such change is evident in man as he gradually placed himself in society. Rousseau cannot explain why man was attracted to society (not being naturally inclined to it), but he does feel this transition was unfortunate. For society perverts one's freedom by not accepting it and stifling it through various social institutions. While a truly free man lives within himself, social man is always "outside himself, can live only in the opinion of others, and it is only from their judgment that he draws, so to speak, the feeling of his own existence" (Bair, 1974, p. 200). Rousseau calls this vanity, or the evaluation of one's own actions through another's eyes; vanity generates shame, envy, and ultimately the loss of freedom. Man in society lives contrary to the laws of nature. His natural benevolence has been corrupted by his own knowledge. Since "socialized" man cannot be transported back to the brutish state of nature, man's freedom must be regained another way, through what Rousseau calls the "general will".

"The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before" (Thomson, 1966, p. 96). This quote from *The Social Contract* illuminates several important features of the general will. Foremost, the general will "forces" each citizen to recognize his freedom through self-legislation. That is, each individual under the general will is both sovereign (by participating in the formation of laws) and subject (by following those laws he has legislated for himself and the community). A citizen under the general will thus forfeits natural liberty to gain civil liberty. This general will establish a proper authority of a completely different nature than a Hobbsian "Leviathan" or "commonwealth" (Curley, 1994). For the general will not only defines liberty and justice, it does so in such a way that it provides man with those principles according to which he can again become free. Thus, by creating the general will Rousseau has confronted two potential problems, that of metaphysics (the maintenance of individual autonomy) and politics (impersonal authority) (Dyke, 1928, pp. 22-27).

Furthermore, in order to fully appreciate the general will, one must realize that it is more than a practical corrective for the societal perversion of man's freedom: the general will generates both legal and moral equality. The general will also embodies standards of morality by pursuing a "common good". This common good is not attained in a nationalistic mode of voting where majority rules; rather, it is achieved through debate and ultimately consensus concerning what will be good for the entire community; in this way, the general will is inherently intersubjective, emerging only through interaction with other members (Canivez, 2004, p. 404). Instinct is replaced by justice, thereby giving man's actions the morality they lacked, and creating men free instead of slaves to vanity. Thus, the general will is both a legal and moral vehicle in which each individual associates himself with the whole while retaining his individual freedom. In this way, participation in the general will is both integrative (by increasing one's sense of belongingness to the extant community) and educative (by forcing man to be free as master of impersonal laws that are good for all) (Pateman, 1970, pp. 24-27).

While *The Social Contract* describes man's nature and sense of freedom as seen in the general will, *Émile* explains how to raise citizens so that they are effective participants in the general will. The relationship between Rousseau's definition of man (in the general will) and education is briefly explored below. Considered by some as one of the pillars of modern pedagogy, *Émile* invokes several of the ideals of Platonic education, including the notion of education as the pursuit of self-knowledge (Cavinez, 2004, p. 395; Storey, 2009, p. 251; Osterwalder, 2012, p. 435). A critical function of education is the inculcation of freedom from corrupting influences, particularly the sway of one's passions (Nichols, 1985, p. 536; Cress & Gay, 1987, p. xv; Tröhler, 2012, pp. 483-486). Rousseau believed that the kind of government in which the general will is master presupposes the right kind of education. This education comes from three sources: nature, which man cannot control; "things", which man can partially control; and man, which theoretically man should be able to control. As things are it

is impossible to make a youth both a man and a citizen, for education must be in opposition to either nature or various institutions in society. Education defined by nature is private and makes a man who is valued in and of himself, and whose relationships are only between him and other men. On the other hand, education defined by society is public and makes a citizen who is valued in relation to society, and whose relationships reside in society.

Rousseau believes that good citizens will ultimately lead to good men. A good citizen is one whose freedom possesses "content", for freedom informed by content enables man to act responsibly through the general will. The purpose of education is to give content to man's freedom and to equip him with a sense of such concepts as liberty and justice that will confront him later as he participates in the general will. However, Rousseau's definition of man and his sense of freedom as expressed in the general will contradicts his description of the proper education for women in *Émile*. The next portion of this paper recounts this education, and then demonstrates how it is discrepant with Rousseau's definition of man in *The Social Contract*.

4. *Émile,* the Education of Women and the Pleasing of Men

The following excerpt from *Émile* describes one of woman's inherent weaknesses, her natural gluttony and greediness:

> I said that Sophie was a glutton. She was naturally so. The case is not the same for girls as for boys... It is too dangerous to be left unchecked. When little Sophie went into her mother's cupboard as a child, she did not always come back emptyhanded, and her fidelity was not above every temptation so far as sugarplums and bonbons were concerned (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 395).

Most of *Émile*, with regard to the proper education of women, reads in such a fashion. The reason for including this passage was to give the reader an appropriate feel for the text, because the following description of this education may appear florid in parts-as Rousseau's was. This paper will follow Rousseau's argument of first describing the characteristics and duties of women, followed by their early education, later training, and finally the products of such an education. It should also be noted that all of the education in *Émile*, including the education of young men as well as young women, delineated individual education by the tutorial method as the ideal upbringing for a child. For Rousseau, this portends as complete a separation as possible from all the ordinary social ties to family, neighborhood and state, an approach decried by some scholars as unnatural (Ozar, 2015, p. 91).

Rousseau begins his description of women and their duties by saying that "... woman is made specifically to please man... woman is made to please and be subjugated" (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 398). If men happen to please women, it is less of a necessity that they do so. All their lives women require patience, sweetness, zeal, and affection. The guiding rule in educating women is to follow nature, and nature intended that women should improve their understandings in order to be fit

companions of men. Thus, a woman should be taught only what is useful for her to know. Having described women and some of their duties, Rousseau then gives a brief overview of preferred early studies for women.

Rousseau suggests that the early education of women should be conducted in a convent. As for playthings, jewelry and especially dolls should be made available to the little girl. Jewelry should be provided to play with because a woman's purpose is to please, and the physical part of that pleasing lies in adornment. The doll, too, is the "special entertainment" of this sex. For occupation with a doll gives a girl miniature training in her life's work. Furthermore, in wishing to make her doll attractive, the girl learns to earn the good will of others by her own industry. This industry is important to foster in a girl's youth since her later "harsh dependence" on her husband may encourage complacency. Rousseau concludes this section on a young girl's early education by saying that girls should only be taught those subjects that will later be useful to her in pleasing men.

Rousseau then discusses the proper "training" of women; like the text, this paper will divide such training into social, religious, and moral training. Socially, girls should be trained to speak what pleases, for "... talent at speaking holds first place in the art of pleasing" (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 378). Discretion is advised for a young girl's religious training, for they are even less able to form an idea of Divinity than boys when young. Besides, since women must live under the rule of authority it is not so important to explain to them their belief as to prescribe and describe it concisely.

"Idleness and disobedience are the two most dangerous defects for them (women)..." (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 369). So begins Rousseau's advice for the moral training of young girl's. As they are so prone to such laziness and incorrigibility, girls must be taught to be energetic and industrious. Furthermore, since subjugation is their lot in life, young girls must be:

> ... exercised in constraint, so that it never costs them anything to tame all their caprices in order to submit them to the wills of others... Dissipation, frivolity, and inconstancy are defects that easily arise from the corruption and continued indulgence of their (young girl's) first tastes. To prevent this abuse, teach them above all to conquer themselves. Amidst our senseless arrangements a decent woman's life is a perpetual combat against herself (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 369).

Thus, girls should be taught constraint from the earliest years; their "fancies" must be crushed to subject them to the will of others, for that is the type of life they must eventually lead.

Finally, in the moral training of women it is especially important to allow young girls very little liberty, since they "... never cease to be subjected to a man or the judgements of men" (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 370). Girls are also inclined to carry what little liberty they do have to excess. A young girl's eagerness for amusement should also be checked, for it is the source of a woman's fickleness. While one can allow young girls to indulge in gaiety and laughter, they should not be free from restraint of their entire lives. Such restraint develops in women a good temper that will make it easier later for

women to obey men; for a woman "... ought to learn early to endure even injustice and to bear a husband's wrongs without complaining" (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 370).

And what will the products of this mode of education be as the young girl embarks on her "womanhood" (at about the age of fifteen)? Rousseau lists several, beginning with the acquisition of temperance, even though young women are greedy and gluttonous by nature. The young woman will also have a mind that is "... agreeable without being brilliant, and solid without being profound" (Rousseau [1762], 1979, p. 395). Though her mind may be less accurate and penetrating, a women's temper is easy but uneven. Her religion should be simple, and broadly speaking, with few dogmas. While the end of a man's education is to make him useful, that of a women's education is to make her agreeable. Ultimately, Rousseau believes, the goal of a women's education is to please men.

5. Nature, Politics and Society: Defining Men, Subjugating Women and the Prison of Vanity

The first portion of this paper recounted Rousseau's definition of man and his sense of freedom in the general will in *The Social Contract*. The relationship between this definition of man and education was next explored, as well as the ideal education for women as prescribed in *Émile*. Examining three different states of existence (nature, politics and society), the penultimate portion of this paper highlights discrepancies between Rousseau's definition of man and his description of the proper education for women, and the pivotal and powerful role that vanity plays in holding women captive through education.

For Rousseau, the key role played by the general will in effecting man's freedom through participation in it are based on his presuppositions about man in the state of nature. To elaborate, man in the state of nature is simply a relaxed, complacent "brute". He is not compelled by impulse, property, or reason; he is simply "there", and completely free. While this freedom enables him to make choices that reconstruct the world around him, it is a freedom devoid of content because it has not been tainted by learning. For man to deny this freedom is to renounce his very humanity. Women, on the other hand, possess several natural attributes that give their essence and sense of freedom content before any learning may have been imposed upon them by society.

In Rousseau's words, women are naturally idle and disobedient. They should be allowed very little liberty, for their fickle natures carry what little liberty they are given to excess. Nature also intended women to increase their understanding only to be fit companions for men. If a woman's existence is defined by man's needs, then by extension Rousseau is coming dangerously close to placing vanity (or the evaluation of oneself through another's eyes) in the state of nature. Even in the state of nature a woman's essence and sense of freedom have not been given an entirely flattering content. Such content may deny women the opportunity to be free agents whose choices reconstruct the world around them. Such content may not enable their lives to be free from the natural authority to which Rousseau claims everyone in the state of nature is entitled. One begins to wonder if Rousseau ever intended for women

to be free, even in the state of nature. For if to renounce one's freedom is to renounce one's very humanity, and women are not completely free to begin with, are they ever able to be considered fully human? Perhaps that is why Rousseau referred to a decent woman's life as a constant battle against herself. Secondly, this contradiction between Rousseau's definition of man and the proper education for women can be explained through the context of politics. Rousseau's concept of the general will was constructed such that man could regain the freedom that society had stifled; this freedom would be regained through self-legislation. Man is forced to be free by being both sovereign and subject, for he legislates for himself and his community those laws that he must live by. Yet how can women ever regain this lost freedom (if it was even theirs to begin with) if they are not allowed to legislate for themselves? According to Rousseau, women must lead lives of harsh dependence on their husbands. Women should be given very little liberty since they never cease to be subjected to the judgments of man, even if it includes bearing a husband's injustice. In this light, Rousseau's hope that the general will would come from all and apply to all have been frustrated by his description of women according to his vision of their proper education as advocated in *Émile*.

Furthermore, this general will is not only a legal vehicle for man's freedom, it is a moral vehicle as well. It is fully a general will, in an idealized sense, only when it "aims at the common good and when it is spontaneously supported by all citizens of good will who have at heart whatever reason and experience and their own private consciences tell them is for the common good" (Thomson, 1966, p. 97). If a woman is not given the opportunity to fully experience life and exercise her reason (if she even has any) but can only experience particular events allowed to her, and if women must assume a mind that is agreeable and without depth, how can she ever participate in this common good? Is even a woman's sense of morality prescribed to her? This is an oddity considering the importance Rousseau places on motherhood in *Émile*.

Finally, Rousseau's definition of man in *The Social Contract* and his description of the proper education for women in *Émile* contradict themselves in a social context. For the goal of a woman's education is to please men. This was encouraged in social gatherings through the "art of speaking" (speak only that which pleases men). This pleasing was additionally encouraged by a young girl's playthings (jewelry and dolls, so as to nurture in young girls an awareness of being physically appealing to men); this pleasing was also fostered by the subjects a young girl must study (young girls should study only that which will make them "useful" companions for men). As such, a woman's very existence and the goals of her education in *Émile* were defined by her relationship to man.

Rousseau's depiction of women is both Marxist and utilitarian in implication, the former through their objectification and alienation, the latter by defining women in terms of their means (the art of pleasing men) as opposed to ends in themselves. In this way, a woman's education and the life for which it is preparing her are essentially dictated by that which Rousseau abhorred most of all: vanity. To reiterate, vanity is the appraisal or evaluation of one's thoughts, actions and values through another's eyes such

that over time these concerns and behaviors are no longer one's own but rather defined by the people around him or her. Configured around the pleasing of men, Rousseau's proscribed education of women is nothing less than an exercise in vanity. Even if some scholars, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, can justify Rousseau's sexual role differentiation and portrayal of women through further explication and deeper contextualization, her slavery still stands to reason: A woman cannot be true even to an "ontologically debased" version of herself if it is forever subject to the estimation of others.

6. Conclusion: Women, Dehumanization and Slavery

If women are not to be considered fully free and to not be so renounces one's very humanity, then what are women being portrayed as in the philosophical writings of Rousseau? Perhaps Rousseau described women's plight best in his section on slavery in *The Social Contract*:

> To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties. For him who renounces everything no indemnity is possible. Such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts. It is an empty and contradictory convention that sets up, on the one side, absolutely authority, and, on the other, unlimited obedience... From whatever aspect we regard the question, the right of slavery is null and void not only as being illegitimate, but also because it is absurd and meaningless (Rousseau [1762], 1913, pp. 7-9).

By his own definition of humanity, Rousseau is essentially renouncing a woman's by removing her liberty and morality through education, and replacing it with vanity as proscribed in *Émile*. Such debasement, ironically, also undermines what Rousseau saw as one of the great virtues of education, which is the capacity for liberation through the removal of social blinders and the unfettering of self by empathetically imagining the other (White, 2008; Scott, 2012, p. 464). Further, while women obviously bear the burden of dehumanization, they are not the only ones who become enslaved. As Rousseau stated, "For what right can my slave have against me, when all that he has belongs to me, and his right being mine, this right of mine against myself is a phrase devoid of meaning?" (Rousseau, 1913, p. 7)

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the formative influence that the Department of Philosophy at the University of Scranton continues to have on young scholars and alumni alike. This particular work benefitted from the guiding influence of Professors Richard Klonoski and Harold W. Baillie. Of course all oversights are my own.

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