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On the “Misogyny” of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

The Letter to d’Alembert in Historical Context

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Evidence suggests that the feminist consensus on Jean-Jacques Rousseau “misogyny” is breaking down.¹ New studies are emerging that bring to light the many sympathetic portrayals of women in Rousseau’s works and the important role he ascribed to women within the family. Some modern feminists are even finding ways of reading Rousseau that speak to women’s concerns today. Overturning the notion that Rousseau was an arch-misogynist will be an uphill battle, however, given how very widespread it has become. Moreover, before we can arrive at a coherent and convincing appraisal of Rousseau’s views on women, a curious paradox needs to be addressed: even feminist admirers of Rousseau tend to accept the established feminist canon on him, and in fact build upon it. Therein lies a fundamental problem for Rousseau scholarship and for women’s studies in general.

Early works of feminist criticism not only exposed Rousseau’s patriarchal and “functionalist” attitude toward women but denounced it as the fatal flaw in his entire political theory. According to Eva Figes, Rousseau’s attempt to “put woman firmly back in the home” was driven by a desire to repress the female sex and the related self-serving belief that a woman’s role should be confined to providing domestic “entertainment” for men. This view of women was “ironic” and even “illogical” given Rousseau’s otherwise egalitarian principles; indeed, if taken to their logical conclusion, Rousseau’s ideas on women made “utter non-sense” of his whole political philosophy.² Similarly, Susan Okin notes that Rousseau held to his “reactionary” ideas on women, at times with “almost hysterical fervor,” despite the fact that they were “in flagrant contradiction” to his own values of freedom and equality.³ Other feminist critics thereafter picked up on this contradiction, the most damning of Rousseau’s many paradoxes: his advocacy of a male-female relationship based on the legitimation of force and the cultivation of “corrupt doll-like sentiments” in women.⁴ Carole Pateman denounces Rousseau from yet another perspective: despite his differences with the thinkers of the natural law school, Rousseau nevertheless agreed with their view of women as “permanently subversive of political order” and enthusiastically subscribed to their notion of a “sexual contract” between men and women that doomed women to a condition resembling slavery.⁵

¹ According to both *Webster’s* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *misogyny* means “hatred of women.”

² Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (London, 1970), 94, 96, 99.

³ Susan Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 99, 193.

⁴ Nannerl Keohane, “‘But for Her Sex...’: The Domestication of Sophie,” in *Trent Rousseau Papers*, ed. Jim MacAdam, Michael Neumann, and Guy LaFrance (Ottawa, 1980), 144.

⁵ Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford,

In France, Rousseau's reputation did not fare any better. Léon Abensour's often-cited study *La femme et le féminisme avant la Révolution* describes Rousseau as the "leader" and "chief" of the "anti-feminist school." An outrageous disparager of woman, uniquely antifeminist for his times, Rousseau denied women "all capacity, all political right."⁶ More recently, Sarah Kofman has done much to expose Rousseau's so-called phallogocratic ends, his "hackneyed and symptomatically masculinist" ideas about women.⁷ It is not surprising, then, given the considerable body of scholarship accumulated over the years, and the near unanimity about Rousseau's "misogyny," that feminists have continuously asked whether they should even bother to read him anymore.

This view of Rousseau as arch-misogynist permeates other areas of scholarship as well. In fact, recent feminist historiography of the French Revolution has done much to propagate and reinforce it. In particular, those who have argued that the Revolution was bad for women have also often placed considerable blame for this on Rousseau. It is claimed that Rousseau provided the rationale for the exclusion of women from citizenship, for their "dismissal from political life," their "banishment to the domestic sphere," and their ultimate "silencing."⁸ Carol Blum, for example, blames what she calls the "Jacobin-Rousseauvian male oligarchy" for depriving women of their rightful place in the new French polity.⁹ Joan Landes notes the "enormous" and "profound" impact of Rousseau's misogynist ideas on the revolutionaries. In Rousseau's work, women were "yoked to a conservative and ultimately passive function," confined to the privacy of their homes and thereby "barred completely from active participation in the very sphere that [gave] purpose to all [their] actions."¹⁰ No wonder, then, that the French Revolution's "stampede to the Rousseauist ethos," to use Madelyn Gutwirth's words, proved so disappointing to women.¹¹

Modern readers should be aware, however, that these now canonical appraisals of Rousseau are quite unsatisfactory, and they are so for several reasons. First of all, early feminist

Calif., 1989), 17; idem, *The Sexual Contract* (1988; rpt., Stanford, Calif., 2000).

⁶ Léon Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme avant la Révolution* (Geneva, 1977), 373, 423. All translations from the French are my own.

⁷ Sarah Kofman, "Rousseau's Phallogocratic Ends," trans. Mara Dukats, in *Revaluing French Feminism*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Sandra L. Bartky (Bloomington, Ind., 1992), 47.

⁸ Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 89.

⁹ Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), 209.

¹⁰ Landes, *Women and the Public*, 226, 269.

¹¹ Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992), 214.

criticism of political theorists was marred by a remarkably old-fashioned methodology.¹² Strangely, Okin's admittedly path breaking book seems much like another version of the "great thinker theory" except that the "great thinkers" are now shown to have been great (patriarchalist, functionalist) misogynists. These men are dealt with in abstraction, out of historical context, entirely divorced from the practical problems of political and social life of their times, and far removed from any real women. Their comments on women are repeatedly taken out of the discursive contexts within which they are made. They are then judged according to how well they measure up to our present egalitarian principles. The object of such an exercise more often seems to be to condemn the supposedly misogynist attitudes of men in general than to understand or explain the philosophy of the great thinkers.

A related problem is that these early appraisals were often impaired by an approach that failed to distinguish between a thinker's influence, or significance, and his meaning. Informing Okin's treatment of Rousseau, for example, is the belief that his ideas have contributed to the historical and on-going oppression of women. In this regard, Rousseau's thought is worth examining because it is "representative of the whole Western tradition."¹³ Figes justifies a similar approach by declaring that Rousseau "was more the father of his times than the child of his times."¹⁴ But looking at Rousseau through the lens of the effect he may have had on a whole tradition does not get us any closer to his own intentions or to the historical meaning of his thought.

Strangely, however, establishing the historical meaning of Rousseau's pronouncements on women seems to be becoming less, rather than more, important in certain circles. Modern feminists are increasingly arguing that something of value can be retrieved from Rousseau's thought by ignoring, overturning, or moving beyond what he meant to say.¹⁵ Some years ago, Margaret Canovan suggested that reading Rousseau was useful because his ideas "have implications extending far beyond his own intentions."¹⁶ More recently, Linda Lange has

¹² That is, it suffers from many of the problems explained by Quentin Skinner in his "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, N.J., 1988).

¹³ Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, 99.

¹⁴ Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, 94.

¹⁵ An important exception to this rule is Penny Weiss, *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics* (New York, 1993), which is, in my opinion, the best recent feminist critique of Rousseau available.

¹⁶ Margaret Canovan, "Rousseau's Two Concepts of Citizenship," in *Women in Western Political Philosophy: Kant to Nietzsche*, ed. Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus (Brighton, U.K., 1987), 78.

argued that Rousseau can be “surprisingly relevant to present problems” if we simply “turn [him] on his head”; reading Rousseau is a useful exercise in “knowing the enemy.”¹⁷ Nancy Holland agrees: despite what we already “know about Rousseau,” it is good to read “phallographic texts” like his as an exercise in exposing the ideology that still oppresses women today.¹⁸ The problem is, of course, that with such an unhistorical or even antihistorical perspective we can retrieve meanings from Rousseau that are diametrically opposed to the ones he actually intended. For example, Lange finds that Rousseau’s works prove the family to be “an immoral institution... inimical to the development of a good society.”¹⁹ These interpretations are all similar in that not only is Rousseau’s “misogyny” accepted unquestioningly but his own intentions and the historical meaning of his work have, in some strange way, become moot.

Another problem is that the frequently leveled charge of misogyny in reality offers little satisfaction as an explanatory tool for understanding political theory. Many feminist critics of Rousseau find themselves suggesting in a somewhat circular way that misogyny is both the cause and the effect of Rousseau’s attitude toward women. Attempts to attribute Rousseau’s views to various psychosexual neuroses abound. It is customary to refer to his “fear of women” or, more particularly, to his fear of “unbridled female sexuality.”²⁰ Some speak of his desire to take revenge on women (i.e., his “punitive nastiness”)²¹ as being triggered by unsuccessful love affairs or by the slights he felt he had suffered at the hands of socially prominent women. Others attribute his views on women to latent homosexuality, urinary tract problems,²² a secret desire to be a woman, or anger at his mother for having died too soon.²³ All these theories are similarly

¹⁷Lynda Lange, “Rousseau and Modern Feminism,” in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman (University Park, Pa., 1991), 94, 109.

¹⁸Nancy Holland, introduction to Kofman, “Rousseau’s Phallographic Ends,” in *Revaluing French Feminism*, 42, 43.

¹⁹Lange, “Rousseau,” 108. A similar problem of perspective allows Figs to claim that Rousseau wanted to defend “the wealth and power that history and the capitalist system” have given to the male sex (*Patriarchal Attitudes*, 108), while Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (“Introduction,” in *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Samia Spencer [Bloomington, Ind., 1984], 18) sees Rousseau as “the decisive prophet of male individualism in a competitive, capitalist society.”

²⁰Interestingly, Joel Schwartz has turned this type of interpretation on its head, arguing that this so-called fear of female sexuality is actually proof of Rousseau’s respect for women’s separate but equal power. Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Chicago, 1984).

²¹Gutwirth, *Twilight*, 125.

²²Victor Wexler, “‘Made for Man’s Delight’: Rousseau as Antifeminist,” *American Historical Review* 81 (1976), esp. 271, 284. Wexler notes that the literature on Rousseau’s “paranoia” resulting from latent homosexuality is vast.

²³Sarah Kofman, *Le respect des femmes: Kant et Rousseau* (Paris, 1982), 146–47, 125.

unfruitful in that they assume rather than prove his misogyny and, moreover, can shed no light on the actual meaning of Rousseau's political theories. Their usefulness is undermined further by the fact that misogyny is so often depicted as ubiquitous within the Western political tradition and that Rousseau is, in this regard, "representative" or "typical."

Finally, those who describe Rousseau as an arch-misogynist run into difficulty when they try to explain why women, and, indeed, so many highly intelligent and accomplished women, responded favorably to his writings. From a modern perspective, it is evidently embarrassing that women subscribed so "obediently" and "unquestioningly" to Rousseau's ideas and were so "touchingly loyal" to him.²⁴ We are encouraged to assume that these women must have been reacting emotionally, and not rationally, to his writings. With this argument, modern feminists come perilously close to describing women the way they do not wish them to be described: as irrational, emotional, and pathetically needy creatures who do not know what is best for them. It is suggested, for example, that rather than responding to Rousseau's thought with their intellects, women were "seduced" by the picture Rousseau drew of them in his novels:²⁵ he "fired their hearts" rather than their brains.²⁶ Because of the "profound sense of alienation" that some feminists regard as the "hallmark of the female condition in society," women would have related to Rousseau on an emotional or psychological level because, like them, he was a "victim" and an "outcast."²⁷ It has even been postulated that women's attraction to Rousseau was really "an unconscious temptation to surrender and even to destroy themselves - at the hands of men."²⁸ Underlying all these interpretations is the idea that if women liked Rousseau, they were profoundly mistaken and led astray by their emotions: "their Rousseauistic fervor" would not permit them to see the truth.²⁹ Women are repeatedly viewed as victims, of widespread and unrelenting misogyny or of their own irrationality or both.

²⁴ Gita May, "Rousseau's 'Antifeminism' Reconsidered," in Spencer, *French Women*, 311, 312.

²⁵ Fox-Genovese, "Introduction," 19.

²⁶ May, "Rousseau's 'Antifeminism,'" 310.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Fox-Genovese, "Introduction," 19. According to Madelyn Gutwirth ("Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the Woman Question," *PMLA* 86 [1971]: 102, 103), Mme. de Staël's "timid" reaction to Rousseau's misogyny, so deeply disappointing and embarrassing, is due to her "emotive side"; she is "obsessed with love." Moreover, Mme. de Staël's own works are proof of her "frenzied will to feminine self-sacrifice, to self-abandonment, even self-abasement." An important correction to this view of Rousseau's female readers is Mona Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Paris, 1999), 335–39. See also Mary Seidman Trouilles, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (New York, 1997).

²⁹ May, "Rousseau's 'Antifeminism,'" 312.

It is curious that this view of women subsists in some areas of feminist scholarship at the same time that great strides are being made in bringing to light the very active roles played and contributions made by women to various aspects of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution. In this regard, one could with benefit adopt the approach of scholars such as Olwen Hufton and Suzanne Desan and extend it further. Eschewing facile characterizations of women as innocent victims and of men as misogynist victimizers, these scholars have focused on the experiences and actions of real women and have tried to explain not only why they behaved the way they did but how women's own actions affected the course of the Revolution. When considering the measures taken and pronouncements made by the male revolutionaries, Hufton is guided by a desire to "fit the rhetoric issuing from the politicians on womanhood into context" and, in particular, to take into account how such pronouncements were prompted by real experiences with the actions of women.³⁰

I propose that we adopt a similar approach when we evaluate a philosopher like Rousseau. Indeed, recent trends in intellectual history have favored treating the great thinkers as flesh-and-blood individuals directly engaged with the contemporary issues and practical politics of their own day. It is now recognized that before it is possible to understand what any given thinker might have meant by what he said, the intellectual historian must try to reconstitute the thinker's historical context with particular sensitivity to the main problem or problems he might have been trying to solve. Careful consideration must be given to the range and multiplicity of discourses available to the thinker before his rhetorical strategies can be comprehended and evaluated. This methodology is also informed by the idea that no language is an island unto itself. Thus, the process of deciphering and disentangling the overlapping and intertwined discourses in a text, with the aim of arriving at the author's purpose and intended meaning, precludes hasty judgments and easy generalizations.

Those scholars who have tried to accord Rousseau a more sympathetic hearing, even from a feminist point of view, have paid surprisingly little attention to his historical context.³¹ Among these, Jean Bethke Elshtain has been a welcome voice of moderation and restraint. Unsatisfied by "monotone, unidimensional representations of Rousseau" and doubting whether

³⁰ Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto, 1992), xxiii.

³¹ This is true of Schwartz, *Sexual Politics*, despite the fact that the author criticizes others for neglecting the "larger social and political context" (2). See also Joseph Losco, "Rousseau on the Political Role of the Family," *History of Political Thought* 9 (1988): 91–110, which nevertheless makes several astute observations.

his intent could really have been “straight-forwardly misogynist,” Elshtain prefers to speak of his “ambivalence” toward women.³² It is precisely the ambivalence or even “contradictions” in Rousseau’s thought that have elicited sensitive and refreshingly sympathetic readings by Mira Morgenstern and Lori Jo Marso. Regretting that Rousseau is so often “seen through the lens of the critic rather than in terms of what he is trying to say,” Morgenstern promises to examine Rousseau’s thought “on its own terms.” Strangely, however, her examination does not involve reconstructing Rousseau’s historical context. Noting somewhat contradictorily that “great books resonate with a depth beyond their authors’ intentions,” Morgenstern suggests that we read Rousseau as “speaking directly to twentieth-century concerns.” Paying careful attention to Rousseau’s literary works, she rightly notes the “near-reverential terms” with which Rousseau describes women as “the moral centers of the family” and highlights the “empowerment of women” that this entails. However, because the female characters in Rousseau’s literary works meet with tragic ends, Morgenstern concludes that Rousseau must have been “torn” with regard to women. Thus, she bids modern readers to ponder why Rousseau’s own “consciously proffered solutions to the social and political issues . . . effectively *fail*.”³³

Similarly, Marso highlights Rousseau’s obvious “sympathy” toward his female characters and believes that the most instructive aspect of Rousseau’s thought with regard to women is the way in which it “fails.” “The success of Rousseau’s male citizens,” she argues, “is had only in light of the demise of his women”; Rousseau’s “carefully constructed gender boundaries fail to buttress, and ultimately serve to undermine his social contract.”³⁴ Once again, then, it is not Rousseau’s intended meaning that interests these recent scholars, because that would be like saying that Rousseau wrote stories (*La nouvelle Héloïse* and *Emile*) in order to disprove his own theories (*The Social Contract*), an awkward proposition at best. It is instead what modern readers can learn from the purported “failures” and “contradictions” in his work that interests Marso and Morgenstern. And Marso readily admits to bringing a number of

³² Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Meditations on Modern Political Thought: Masculine/Feminine Themes from Luther to Arendt* (University Park, Pa., 1991), x; idem, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 1981), 157.

³³ Mira Morgenstern, *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society* (University Park, Pa., 1996), vii, ix, 214, 228, 190, 240 (my italics).

³⁴ Lori Jo Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Germaine de Staël’s Subversive Women* (Baltimore, Md., 1999), 2, 5–6.

insights to Rousseau's works that were "not on [his] mind" when he wrote them.³⁵ Uncovering the hidden suppositions of Rousseau's works, rather than his express intentions, is also the goal of Elizabeth Wingrove's *Republican Romance*.³⁶

That the time is ripe for a serious reevaluation of Rousseau's intended meaning is evidenced by several recent works that are paving the way for a more self-consciously historical approach to his views on women. Lieselotte Steinbrügge shows how coherent, understandable, and interesting Rousseau's notions of female nature can become when seen in the context of the debates on womanhood taking place during the French Enlightenment. Moreover, she convincingly argues that far from contradicting his political thought, Rousseau's notions of femininity "derive their logic from the total context of his theory."³⁷ Anne Vila further elucidates Rousseau's views on women as expressed in *La nouvelle Héloïse* by situating them within the contemporary discourse on "the moral hygiene of sensibility."³⁸ Finally, Nicole Fermon has suggested that many so-called contradictions in Rousseau's thought disappear when he is seen within his own historical context. Highlighting what also she regards as the essential continuity of Rousseau's thought, Fermon explores the ways in which Rousseau identified women as "powerful agents for political revitalization."³⁹

This article contributes to the recent reevaluation of Rousseau's attitudes toward women by reconstructing the historical context of Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert*, in which some of his most outrageously "misogynist" statements are made. Many feminists unaware of the Genevan context have reacted particularly strongly to this text. Gutwirth, for example, believes that Rousseau wrote the essay out of a real "vendetta against women."⁴⁰ According to Landes, he wrote it in a "near frenzy of misogynistic hyperbole."⁴¹ Linda Zerilli believes that it betrays Rousseau's "fear of becoming woman" and his dream of a society "without a female voice."⁴² When the *Letter* is seen within its Genevan context, however, it conveys an altogether

³⁵ *Ibid.*, viii.

³⁶ Elizabeth Wingrove, in her *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), argues that Rousseau's republicanism is inseparable from his "gender ideology"; it entails "compulsive heterosexuality."

³⁷ Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (New York, 1995), 56.

³⁸ Anne Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md., 1998), esp. chap. 6.

³⁹ Nicole Fermon, *Domesticating Passions* (Hanover, N.H., 1997), 50.

⁴⁰ Gutwirth, *Twilight*, 124.

⁴¹ Landes, *Women and the Public*, 88.

⁴² Linda Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 34.

different meaning.

A fact of primary relevance to any understanding of Rousseau is that he was a Genevan, not a French, thinker. Born and raised in that independent, republican, and Calvinist city-state, Rousseau remained, throughout his life, closely attached to its values and concerned by its political travails. It is a culture that informed all of his writings, but none more than the *Letter to d'Alembert*, which, among all of his political work, and along with the rarely read *Letters Written from the Mountain*, most resembles an *oeuvre de circonstance*.

The highly charged political atmosphere of eighteenth-century Geneva has been described elsewhere, but a few points bear repeating and are elaborated upon here.⁴³ Throughout much of the eighteenth century, a contest took place in Geneva between an increasingly disgruntled and politicized bourgeoisie wishing to regain the political rights it had lost during the previous century and an increasingly wealthy patrician government refusing to relinquish its hold on power.⁴⁴ In this contest, the patriciate resorted to social contract theory in order to legitimize its absolutizing regime. It also used the language of *doux commerce*⁴⁵ in an effort to depoliticize people, vindicate its own wealth and style of life, and justify its stranglehold on power.

The argument went something like this: Geneva's form of government had long ago been established by a social contract that conferred political authority on a small council of twenty-five men and that was now irrevocable. This system was good for everyone since government should be in the hands of experts who know what is best and have the requisite leisure time to rule, while the rest of the population should tend to their real interests - in other words, their private lives and businesses. Under the protection of such a benevolent government, a depoliticized citizenry should enjoy all the advantages of *doux commerce*.

For our present purposes, it is important to realize a much neglected fact: connected to patrician social contract and *doux commerce* theory was also an ethos of sociability that accorded a vital role to women. To understand how this worked one has to keep in mind that

⁴³ Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (New York, 1997).

⁴⁴ The term *bourgeois* in eighteenth-century Geneva designated a citizen with voting rights in the General Council.

⁴⁵ The term *doux commerce* invokes the notion, increasingly widespread during the eighteenth century, that through economic trade and social interaction men are enriched in both a material and moral sense. The classic text on this is Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).

patrician versions of social contract theory actually predicated themselves on a very negative appraisal of human (male) nature.⁴⁶ A contract of submission to a governmental authority was repeatedly justified on the grounds that men were highly self-interested and unsociable creatures, passion-driven and prone to violence.⁴⁷ Men were likened to “tigers in the woods” or “ferocious beasts” who, if unchecked, would threaten society with anarchy and dissolution.⁴⁸ The social contract that established the government and to which all men submitted made no claims to altering their passionate, violent natures.

This is where women come in.⁴⁹ The great natural law thinker Samuel Pufendorf had said that marriage was the “nursery of the human race.” His followers elaborated upon this idea, accentuating not only marriage’s procreative purpose but its role in the moral improvement of mankind.⁵⁰ Thus, the Genevan natural law thinker and patrician spokesman Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694–1748) claims that marriage is not only “like the nursery of humankind,” it also inclines man marvelously toward sociability.⁵¹ Elaborating on this idea, Burlamaqui notes that “the most difficult and unsociable natures become moderate, human, and manageable” through the influence of women.⁵² He provides a very telling example from Roman history: the story of Coriolanus, a “proud Republican,” disinterested, wise, and respectful of the laws, yet “hard & impetuous” and too inclined to become politicized. Once when he was angered over an issue concerning tribunes, no one could assuage his wrath, not even the priests, and so it was decided to

⁴⁶ I do accept the part of Pateman’s and others’ argument that holds that the “men” discussed in social contract theories were indeed men, and not women.

⁴⁷ Men are “sociable” in patrician social contract theories only because they need others to survive, not because they are naturally inclined to harmonious behavior.

⁴⁸ Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, 139, 155, 126–27, 133–34.

⁴⁹ This is also where religion comes in. See *ibid.*, esp. 135–40, 150, 155–57.

⁵⁰ For Gershom Carmichael’s and Frances Hutcheson’s contributions in this regard, see Jane Rendall, “Virtue and Commerce: Women in the Making of Adam Smith’s Political Economy,” in Kennedy and Mendus, *Women in Western Political Philosophy*.

⁵¹ *Lettre de M. Burlamaqui sur le mariage, écrite à Mylord Kilmorey* published as a supplement to the *Principes du droit naturel et politique* (Geneva, 1764), 3:290. Some of Burlamaqui’s most interesting arguments explicitly link man’s sex drive and sexual pleasure to sociability. It is the sexual pleasure principle that draws man to woman and here the socializing begins. Much of this fascinating text reads not just as an apology but as a veritable celebration of sex, somewhat surprising given the prevailing image of Calvinist Genevans. Moreover it shows that Rousseau did not invent “sexual politics” (on this see Schwartz, *Sexual Politics*); he only redirected it. Burlamaqui suggests that without sexual pleasure, men would not likely produce children, would not be able to live harmoniously with their wives, and would not be prone to raising their children once they had them. Sex is the “physical principle of sociability.” Men are socialized by their wives through the nuptial bed. Clearly, it would be misleading to say that this social contract theorist thought women and, in particular, “women’s bodies” to be subversive of political order; moreover, these ideas call into question the overly neat separation between “public” and “private” spheres. For an example of the view I am here contesting, see Pateman, *Disorder*, esp. 4, 6, 17, 21.

⁵² *Lettre de M. Burlamaqui*, 291.

send in the women. Upon seeing his mother, wife, and “a host of other Roman ladies,” the proud republican immediately broke down and gave up his fight. He was unable to resist the “powerful and enchanting qualities,” the “solicitations and tears of the women,” the “natural inclinations that have such force on the heart of man.”⁵³ It is noteworthy that this view of women’s pacifying role was reinforced by contemporary Calvinist moral theology: according to Bénédict Pictet (1655–1724), one of the important duties of wives was to labor “to subdue the bad humor of their husbands.”⁵⁴

One can readily understand why this role of women was so highly prized and promoted by patrician spokesmen in Geneva, since rendering men sociable and manageable meant making them docile toward their government as well. Indeed, the Genevan patriciate both celebrated and promoted this pacifying role for women. At moments of political tension, ministers favorable to the government used church sermons to remind mothers, “No one can sooner than you inspire *submission* in children, and the respect due to the [established] laws.”⁵⁵ Through the “gentle bonds” of marriage, the family, and private “commerce,” women could accomplish this important task.

Of course “women” in eighteenth-century Geneva did not constitute a unified, homogeneous group. During the previous century, while Geneva’s form of government grew more oligarchical, sociopolitical developments created a situation in which the experience and outlook of patrician women differed greatly from that of less-privileged women. Patrician ladies were the wives and daughters of the fortunate few, those Genevans lucky and clever enough to have successfully switched from artisanal manufacture to banking, thereby enriching themselves and their families in unprecedented ways. As they prospered through banking and commerce, these men progressively segregated themselves and their families in the upper town of Geneva, where they could install themselves in the vast and luxuriously decorated apartments suitable to a rich governing class. Exempting themselves from, or simply breaking, Geneva’s sumptuary ordinances against luxury, they hired servants, sometimes as many as eight or nine, ate with expensive silverware on elegant porcelain, dressed in the latest finery,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 293–95.

⁵⁴ Bénédict Pictet, *La morale chrétienne, ou l’art de bien vivre* (Geneva, 1710), 2:378. Born and educated in Geneva, Pictet became a minister in 1679 and professor of theology in 1686. A prolific and influential writer, he was also twice rector of the Genevan Academy.

⁵⁵ Ami Lullin, sermon delivered in Geneva 12 December 1729, fol. 27 (my italics), further discussed in Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, esp. 135–41.

drove around in their liveried coaches, and acquired sophisticated art collections. They fell more and more under the cultural and intellectual influence of France. Their daughters were often given extensive private instruction, including music and dancing lessons. And when these patrician girls reached adolescence, there were several exclusive little clubs, called “*sociétés des demoiselles*,” to which they could be sent, where they mixed together for card games and conversation in preparation for their debut into society.⁵⁶

Wealthy Genevans and their wives made frequent trips to Paris, where they could learn the manners of polite society, cultivate their taste for the arts, and, in particular, go to the theater, an art form specifically disallowed in Geneva. As the biographer of one patrician young woman points out, wealthy Genevan newlyweds considered a trip to Paris the ideal honeymoon: “One took the opportunity to initiate oneself into real society, to learn how to make conversation and entertain.”⁵⁷ Upon their return, the lifestyle of the Genevan rich closely resembled that of the noble and upper bourgeois elite of French cities such as Lyon and Paris.⁵⁸ Mme. d’Epinay, on a visit to Geneva, described a very pleasant social life. At gatherings where men and women mixed together, tea, café au lait, chocolate, and “excellent pastries” were served and various activities took place: “One plays a lot of games, one works, one sometimes makes music.” In particular, Mme. D’Epinay noted that the highly educated patrician women had a surprisingly strong predilection for card games.⁵⁹ For all these reasons, then, a young lady of the Genevan patriciate probably had more in common with a French *demoiselle* than she had with girls of the lower classes in her hometown. Indeed, experts note that in eighteenth-century Geneva, “wealthy young ladies did not mix with the people.”⁶⁰

Ami Lullin must have had these young patrician ladies in mind when he wrote his essays on “the woman of merit.” Lullin (1695–1756) was certainly well attuned to the outlook

⁵⁶ Here I have used almost the exact words of Clarissa Campbell Orr, “Albertine Necker de Saussure, 1766–1841: Themes and Contexts for the Interpretation of l’Education Progressive” (master’s thesis, University of York, 1988), 15. On the patrician “*sociétés des demoiselles*,” see Etienne Causse, *Madame Necker de Saussure et l’éducation progressive* (Paris, 1930), 1:44; and Jean- Barthélémy-Gaïfre Galiffe, *D’un siècle à l’autre* (Geneva, 1878), vol. 1, chap. 3.

⁵⁷ Causse, *Madame Necker*, 34.

⁵⁸ Corinne Walker, “Les pratiques de la richesse: Riches Genevois au XVIIIe siècle,” in *Etre riche au siècle de Voltaire*, ed. Jacques Berchtold and Michel Porret (Geneva, 1996).

⁵⁹ *Mémoires et correspondance de Mme d’Epinay* (Paris, 1818), 3:208–12.

⁶⁰ *En attendant le prince charmant: L’éducation des jeunes filles à Genève, 1740–1970*, published under the direction of Chantal Renevey Fry (Geneva, 1997), 29.

and values of the Genevan patriciate.⁶¹ Heir to the largest banking fortune in Geneva, he was consecrated minister in 1718. He became a pastor in 1730 and then rose through the ranks to become a professor of ecclesiastical history in 1737 and rector of Geneva's academy in 1753. Well-connected with Geneva's governing councils, he was also a close friend of Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui. Lullin's essays deserve our attention because they express the patrician ideal of womanhood in the early part of the eighteenth century in Geneva.⁶²

Taking issue with the pessimistic views of Saint-Evremond, Lullin enumerates a long list of feminine virtues, "rare" and "difficult" but "possible" for a woman to obtain. Top on the list is her attention to the management of her household, the "good order" she keeps in her home, the care with which she tends to her family and to the "domestic economy." Naturally, she must "second" her husband and "please" him in every way possible. She must also practice "a solid piety," go to church regularly and display pure morals, and, in particular, be chaste and faithful.

But equally important to Lullin is the attention this woman pays to "the duties of civil life." "In particular," he writes, an essential part of a woman's real merit lies "in the way she contributes to the amenities of her husband *and society* [my italics]. A man with taste, buoyed by a pleasant fortune, whose domestic servants are numerous and whose house is well appointed ... must desire to turn his home into a refuge of good company and pleasure for his worthy friends." In fact, one of the good offices of "opulence," Lullin explains, is that it enables one to "form a *kind of court* [my italics]." And here the role of a good wife is crucial. Lullin's "woman of merit" knows that "the first obligation we have to Reason is to make ourselves sociable." Thus, she must cultivate and exercise some very special qualities in order to perform her socializing task. She must be obliging, welcoming, and eager to please. She must be able to anticipate her guests' desires and direct their conversation so that "each person is pleased and finds his amour propre satisfied." To accomplish this she must not only "entertain" her guests but know "how to enter into the minds of others" so as to help them "develop their ideas" and even "give birth to them." She must do all this modestly, "without their realizing it," hiding any trace of superiority with charm and affability.

⁶¹ For some details on Lullin's lifestyle and spectacular wealth, see Corinne Walker, "Le banquier, le pasteur et l'héritier: Figures de la richesse au XVIIIe siècle," *Revue du vieux Genève* 28 (1998): 31–43.

⁶² Geneva, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, ms. Lullin 51 (unpaginated). The fact that these essays were passed around and read in Geneva is alluded to in the essays themselves.

To Lullin, it goes without saying that a woman who can do all this is also “an enlightened woman,” since everyone knows that “Enlightenment [*les Lumières*] is inseparable from real merit. An ignorant woman has only a stupid merit. . . . She is virtuous less by principle than by a sort of instinct.” Having thus provided an ambitious list of qualities and talents and what seems to be quite a demanding social role for the patrician woman, Lullin adds, “Such is her sphere; she does not leave this circle.” Interestingly, Lullin interjects, with no further comment, that “little boys have their duties, for which a mother is rarely useful.” It is striking to consider how very closely Lullin’s description of woman’s socializing role resembles the ideology subscribed to by the French *salonnières*.⁶³ Indeed, Lullin sent his own daughter to Paris on her honeymoon and arranged for her to meet and thereafter be invited several times by Mme. Geoffrin.⁶⁴ He organized a similar trip for his granddaughter, who was invited not only by Mme. Geoffrin but by Mme. Necker as well.⁶⁵ But it is important to realize that Geneva was a very different place from Paris and that therefore the political connotations attached to salon sociability were also of a different sort.

Recent historiography has painted a rather rosy picture of salon sociability, which makes a good deal of sense given the nature of Ancien Régime France. According to Carolyn Lougee, seventeenth-century French salons functioned like a “melting-pot which blurred distinctions of birth and profession,” thereby helping to expand the social elite.⁶⁶ Dena Goodman highlights the “distinctively republican form of government” exercised by *salonnières*.⁶⁷ And Daniel Gordon suggests that salons might be seen as part of a rise of “egalitarian sociability” based on a highly optimistic view of the “progressive power of conversation.”⁶⁸ Viewed from the perspective of a politicized member of the artisanal Genevan bourgeoisie, however, salon sociability connoted something very different. It was immediately tainted by its association with a patrician elite seeking to monopolize power and subvert republican and democratic values. It was, after all, an ideal attendant to “opulence,” as Lullin himself explained. It was also a particularly French type of ethos.

⁶³ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996).

⁶⁴ Causse, *Madame Necker*, 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁶ Carolyn Lougee, *Les Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, N.J., 1976), 170.

⁶⁷ Goodman, *Republic*, 91.

⁶⁸ Daniel Gordon, “‘Public Opinion’ and the Civilizing Process in France: The Example of Morellet,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1988–89): esp. 305, 321. Gordon emphasizes, however, that this egalitarianism was not democratic; in fact in many ways it involved a repudiation of political action; see his *Citizens without Sovereignty* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

French authors often celebrated sociability as a distinctly French contribution to civilization. Judging by the many trips to Paris discussed above it would seem that the Genevan patriciate agreed. French culture was seen as the best in the world because it was the most sociable and the most polite; it had reached the highest point civilization had yet attained.⁶⁹ And women were seen as particularly adept agents and purveyors of this French style of culture. To a disgruntled Genevan citizen of the middle or lower orders, however, the fact that Genevan men were acquiring the manners of the French aristocracy through the agency of women and salon sociability was no cause for celebration.

In Geneva, theater attendance became the very symbol of patrician corruption, moral and political, as the wealthy and Frenchified men and women of the upper town circumvented, or simply broke, the city's ordinances and attended - and sometimes performed in - theatrical performances staged at Voltaire's home on the outskirts of Geneva.⁷⁰ Here again, however, patrician *women* seemed particularly implicated. Voltaire's own views on the interconnectedness of French culture, sociability, and women are well known. In the introduction to his tragedy *Zaire*, performed to the delight of a Genevan audience in the spring of 1755,⁷¹ Voltaire claimed that "of all the nations France is the one which has most experienced society," adding that "the continual commerce between the two sexes, so lively and so polite, has introduced a politeness quite unknown elsewhere. Society depends on women."⁷² While d'Alembert believed Geneva would benefit from having a theater, Voltaire undoubtedly thought that Genevan women could play an important civilizing role as a complement to the advent of theater. One can well imagine the joy with which patrician women embraced their new vocation.

In other words, in Geneva, one's socioeconomic position and political opinions would have determined how one viewed salon sociability and the role of women in promoting it. Whereas in France salons might be seen as having served a democratizing role in that they helped the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie learn the aristocratic manners they needed to be admitted into the elite, in Geneva, they could be seen as places where people who already were

⁶⁹ I am here using Dena Goodman's words (*Republic*) almost to the letter.

⁷⁰ For more about theater attendance as a symbol of corruption, see Rosenblatt, *Rousseau*, 219–27.

⁷¹ See Graham Gargett, *Jacob Vernet, Geneva, and the Philosophes* (Oxford, 1994), 116.

⁷² Voltaire, "Letter of Dedication to Monsieur Falkener" (1736), *Zaire* (Paris, 1889), 20, as quoted in Daniel Gordon, "Philosophy, Sociology, and Gender in the Enlightenment Conception of Public Opinion," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1992): 902.

members of the elite forgot their republican duties and values. A disgruntled Genevan citizen of a lower order would not have been impressed by what he would have seen as Genevans mimicking the manners of French high society. And if women's role in history was to promote this kind of behavior, it was not to their credit. Moreover, the disgruntled citizen would have been aware that the very women attending theater performances at Voltaire's home, and practicing this form of sociability in their uppertown apartments, also subscribed to some very undemocratic political views that they were not shy about expressing.

Because of both a paucity of sources and a seeming lack of scholarly interest, very little is known about the political views and actions of Genevan women in the eighteenth century. There is, however, the famous case of Elizabeth Beaulacre, a patrician woman of extraordinary entrepreneurial ability who single-handedly built and managed such a highly profitable business that her son inherited one of the largest fortunes in Geneva. A century later Geneva's watchmakers union was still grumbling over her practice of buying elections by forcing those who worked for her to vote her way.⁷³

Careful reading of archival sources reveals that other patrician women not only supported their husbands' causes but sometimes acted in blatantly abusive and arrogant ways toward the bourgeoisie. One such text is a journal entry describing a particularly tense moment in Geneva when a group of citizens were about to deliver a petition to their magistrates demanding a return of their lost political rights. As they walked in solemn procession through the upper town, patrician women apparently looked down at them from their windows and ridiculed them and then encouraged their husbands to be disdainful and uncompromising:

The wives of these men made insolent and rude speeches against the Citizens and Bourgeois ... the women were the first to animate their husbands saying that it was an embarrassment to allow themselves to be led around by a band of good-for-nothings. When they [the women] saw some of them [the citizens] passing under their windows with their swords at their sides they would say there go the sovereigns, - and when they were together playing cards and one of them lost she would play the fool and say mockingly that she wanted to consult the General Council to see if it would pay her back—Is this the way one should behave . . . in small state like ours in which all conditions are, so to speak, equal?⁷⁴

⁷³ Anne-Marie Piuz, "Un aspect de l'économie genevoise au XVIIe siècle: La fabrique de dorures d'Elisabeth Beaulacre," *Mémoires et documents publiés par la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Genève* 40 (1961): 525–26.

⁷⁴ "Journal de Gaudy," Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève, Ms SHAG 317, fol. 39v.

Another source, by the bourgeois leader François d'Ivernois (1757– 1842), describes the behavior and attitudes of patrician women similarly. D'Ivernois recalls with obvious frustration that Genevan women who traveled to Paris with their banker husbands were frequently disposed to acquiring a “French tone” there. In France they learned to prefer theater and poetry to “serious discussions” and to prefer “French gallantry” to “our sumptuary laws.” They also came back enthusiastic supporters of “the mingling of the two sexes.” Indeed, upon their return to Geneva these patrician women apparently propagated “a perpetual stream of mockery and sarcasm against the austere manners of Republicans.” What is worse, they returned believing that a democratic form of government was hopelessly old-fashioned and that Geneva would be better served by a more aristocratic regime. D'Ivernois scornfully ascribes the following words to patrician women: “Amongst a commercial people, a Democracy, even limited, is a chimera. Different manners [*moeurs*], different laws; we are no longer poor like the Spartans such that we can submit to their austere institutions... let us force our compatriots to give up these periodic convulsions [assemblies of the General Council]. Let us make them adopt the practices of the likeable and gay people [the French] that surround us.”⁷⁵

Salon sociability was of course not a “merit” accessible to Genevan women of the lower orders. Sixty-five percent of Genevan women could not even sign their own name in 1700.⁷⁶ Calvinist reformers had made ambitious promises about free public schooling in 1536, but no one seems to have been very interested in providing education for poor girls. In 1730, however, they were invited to attend the free and confessionally private schools created by the newly established Société des Catechumènes. In these schools, girls and boys learned basic reading skills and memorized the catechism, thought to be good training for their future lives. Presumably, however, such people would only be able to aspire to the “stupid” kind of virtue referred to by Ami Lullin.

Most Genevan women who worked outside their own homes were domestic servants;

⁷⁵ François d'Ivernois, *Tableau historique et politique des deux dernières révolutions de Genève* (London, 1789), 136. The role of banker wives, “those itinerant women,” in spreading corruption is also highlighted by another politically active Genevan, Isaac Cornuaud, in *Mémoires de Isaac Cornuaud sur Genève et la Révolution de 1770 à 1795* (Geneva, 1912), 435.

⁷⁶ William Monter, “Women in Calvinist Geneva (1550–1800),” *Signs* 6 (1980): 205; and Laurent Haerberli, “Le taux d’alphabétisation à Genève au XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue du vieux Genève* 12 (1982): 60.

a 1788 census indicates that *domestiques* formed 55 percent of the female labor force.⁷⁷ Hampered and restricted by various ordinances against women's work passed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by the increasing division of labor within industries, women who engaged in manufacturing in the eighteenth century were always relegated to the most undesirable, unhealthy, and low-paying jobs - never earning more than half the salary of men.⁷⁸ Women's particular vulnerability is testified to by the fact that poor- house hospital lodgers were most frequently single women, including widows and abandoned wives with children.⁷⁹

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, new employment opportunities opened up for women in the cloth-printing industry, just beginning to take off in Geneva. Economic historians note that this was the first sector of the economy to see factories in the modern sense of the term. With no guild regulations to restrict it, the cloth-printing industry profited from employing large numbers of women and children. But the poor conditions, low pay, and irregular work has caused recent experts to liken the people who engaged in such work to a "proletariat."⁸⁰ Demographic specialists ascribe the decrease in female life-expectancy rates during the eighteenth century in Geneva to the generally deplorable working conditions for women in an otherwise expanding economy.⁸¹ As mothers' health deteriorated, it is not surprising that infant mortality rates also went up.⁸² In contrast, patrician little girls were so healthy and well taken care of that their fathers devised the famous "Genevan formula" for making money: a lucrative life annuity scheme based on the presumed longevity of their daughters' lives.⁸³

A third group of Genevan women probably counted themselves lucky to be able to work

⁷⁷ Monter, "Women," 200.

⁷⁸ Liliane Mottu-Weber, "Les femmes dans la vie économique de Genève, XVIe–XVIIe siècles," *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Genève* 16 (1979): 395.

⁷⁹ Joceline Legast-Ducret, "Pauvreté et assistance à Genève au dix-huitième siècle" (mémoire de licence, Faculté des Sciences économiques et sociales, Université de Genève, 1975), esp. 28–33. Married couples were the least likely group to require charitable assistance.

⁸⁰ Anne-Marie Piuz and Liliane Mottu-Weber, *L'économie genevoise, de la Réforme à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Geneva, 1990), 460.

⁸¹ Alfred Perrenoud, "Surmortalité féminine et condition de la femme (XVIIe–XIXe siècles): Une vérification empirique," *Annales de démographie historique* 16 (1981): 89–104.

⁸² Piuz and Mottu-Weber, *L'économie genevoise*, 119. In fact, Genevan infant mortality rates fluctuated enormously, depending on the profession and socioeconomic status of the child's father.

⁸³ For a detailed explanation of this ingenious system by which many Genevans made sizable fortunes, see Marc Cramer, "Les trente Demoiselles de Genève et les billets solidaires," *Revue suisse d'économie politique et de statistique* 82 (1946): 109–38.

within their own homes. They were the wives and daughters of Genevan artisans who owned and operated their own workshops, usually within the watchmaking industry. For these people the home often was the workshop; in the words of experts, “the frontiers between the private and the public sphere were blurred.”⁸⁴ Traditionally, artisan wives would tend to the daily provisioning of the household, supervise the servants, and partake in the often complicated and time-consuming tasks of food preparation, housecleaning, and laundry, while they ministered to the needs of the children, the sick, and the old. But whenever they had time and were needed they would also work alongside their husbands.

Eighteenth-century Geneva experienced a “golden age” of economic prosperity during which certain groups of people became very wealthy.⁸⁵ While the patriciate prospered through their banking and money-lending businesses, a sizable group of artisans also gained wealth as the watchmaking and related industries experienced a spectacular boom. Not surprisingly, these artisans’ lifestyles changed considerably. They acquired more leisure time and a taste for many of the same luxuries appreciated by the patriciate. They worked shorter hours. They got wise to the life annuity schemes by which one could make easy money by investing in the French public debt. So the very rich were not the only ones who gambled with their money this way; it is also because of the investment patterns of prospering artisans that by the mid-eighteenth century, Geneva was rapidly acquiring the reputation of being a city of rentiers living off their capital placements.

The dangers of this overexposure to the French public debt and related disinvestment in local industry have been discussed elsewhere.⁸⁶ The point to retain here is that the wives of the prospering watchmakers and other artisans seem to have begun adopting the manners of the patriciate, particularly in matters relating to their appearance and luxury consumption. Women, including those of the bourgeois artisanal order, were the most frequent offenders of the sumptuary ordinances. Apparently, they often needed to be reminded by their social superiors about the unseemliness of “pretending to belong to a higher rank.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *En attendant le prince charmant*, 22.

⁸⁵ Patrick O’Mara, “Geneva in the Eighteenth Century: A Socio-Economic Study of the Bourgeois City-State during Its Golden Age” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1954).

⁸⁶ Helena Rosenblatt, “‘Colonne de la patrie’ ou ‘froids égoïstes’: Les capitalistes genevois vus de chez eux,” *Revue suisse d’histoire* 50 (2000): 304–24.

⁸⁷ Corinne Walker, “Images du luxe à Genève,” *Revue du vieux Genève* 16 (1986): 23–24. The idea that women are especially prone to vanity and that ordinances against luxury (e.g., elaborate hairstyles, lace, jewelry) therefore apply particularly to them goes back at least to John Calvin. On this point, see André Bieler, *La pensée économique*

After all, one of the important qualities of a “woman of merit,” according to Ami Lullin, was her awareness that “decorum and her own interests demand that she styles her hair and dresses herself according to her age *and rank*” (my italics). Moreover, women of the bourgeois order acquired the habit of using wet nurses for their babies, contributing to an unusually high infant mortality rate for their socioeconomic group. In fact modern experts have noted that Genevan babies of the middle order died at a higher rate than poorer babies whose own mothers nursed them.⁸⁸

Rousseau’s *Letter to d’Alembert* has a clear political message: it warns Genevans that because of their comportment the city’s constitution is in serious danger. Through a critique of the theater, Rousseau delivers a devastating attack on the patriciate and its Frenchified values. Geneva is not France, he says, and Geneva’s particular constitution needs re- republican values to sustain it. Purposefully he disassociates virtue from learning and refinement in order to reassociate it with patriotism and the republican values he thought necessary to sustain a democratic constitution. Pointedly he criticizes an ethos that could only concern the very rich and in fact mainly glorified them and legitimized their absolutizing rule.

With a fuller understanding of the Genevan context we can now understand why Rousseau also criticized patrician women and the patrician ideal of womanhood. We can see that the *Letter to d’Alembert* was not about refusing women a political role; and it was certainly not about banishing women to a “narrow”, “restricted” domestic sphere where they could “entertain” their men; in fact, it should be read as conveying the very opposite message. With the *Letter to d’Alembert*, Rousseau sought to reorient Genevan women’s priorities away from frivolous, dangerous habits and toward the right kinds of political and economic values needed to sustain a democratic republic.

Thus, the *Letter to d’Alembert* was really a follow-up to what Rousseau had already said to the women of Geneva in his “Dedication” to the *Second Discourse*. There he uses ostensible flattery to deliver a biting critique of the ruling regime, including its women.

et sociale de Calvin (Geneva, 1961); and Marie-Lucie de Gallatin, “Les ordonnances somptuaires à Genève au XVIe siècle,” in *Mémoires et documents publiés par la Société d’histoire et d’archéologie de Genève* 36 (1938): 193–275. For women’s unique affinity for luxury as understood later in the eighteenth century, see Jean-François Butini, *Traité du luxe* (Geneva, 1774), esp. chap. 5. For the perspective from France, see Jennifer Jones, “Repackaging Rousseau: Femininity and Fashion in Old Regime France,” *French Historical Studies* 18 (1994): 940.

⁸⁸ Piuz and Mottu-Weber, *L’économie genevoise*, 120.

Betraying not just a hint of sarcasm, Rousseau compliments Genevan women for the beneficent role they are playing in the city. He praises them for their “simple and modest attire,” their disdain for luxury, and the admirable way in which they inspire “love of the laws within the state and concord among the citizens.” His writing rises to the level of farce when he actually thanks women for correcting the bad habits that “our young people adopt in other countries... among debauched women.” In conclusion, he asks Genevan women always to be just what they are: “chaste guardians of our morals and the gentle bonds of our peace.”⁸⁹ No wonder that upon reading the “Dedication” the Genevan magistrate Jean-Louis Du Pan remarked, “You represent us as we should be and not as we are.”⁹⁰ His comment undoubtedly referred to Genevan women as well as men. Rousseau’s similar message in the *Letter to d’Alembert* would not have been lost on his Genevan audience. Here, too, he lectures the patriciate and warns the citizens not to adopt its Frenchified ways and values. And with regard to Geneva’s women, Rousseau’s critique was indeed biting. But it would have been clear to everyone in Geneva that Rousseau’s denunciation of the “shameless” women “with no honor,” who flock to the theater and prance around all “decked out” in their luxurious finery referred to the women of the upper town and their misguided imitators. As for the patrician ideal of womanhood, Rousseau ingeniously adopted it only to turn it against the patriciate: if indeed women make men “gentle,” “soft,” and docile, then they threaten the constitution and should be reprimanded for doing so. He ridicules the “chatter of women’s societies” and blames women for emasculating men, in fact for turning men into women.⁹¹ By calling into question their masculinity, Rousseau is goading patrician men to give up their Frenchified ways as well. He criticizes the whole notion of salon sociability, seeing it for what in many ways it was, a devalorization, or even a repudiation, of the political domain.⁹² Rousseau could not abide an ethos that turned would-be citizens into verse-writing “wits” and thereby caused them to forget their “real duties.”⁹³ He lashes out against women’s much vaunted role in distracting men from their duties: men should be “spared from having to lower their ideas to the level of women” so that they might “devote

⁸⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, 1959–), vol. 3; all quotations are taken from p. 120.

⁹⁰ R. Leigh, ed., *Correspondence complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva, 1965–91), vol. 3, #303.

⁹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à d’Alembert sur son article Genève* (1758) (Paris, 1967), 172, 114, 205.

⁹² See Gordon, *Citizens*, esp. 112; and idem, “Philosophy,” esp. 902.

⁹³ Gordon, “Philosophy,” 140, 220.

themselves to solemn and serious speech without fear of ridicule.”⁹⁴ These were clearly the words of a man who had been offended by patrician women’s mockery of republican values and who was deeply disturbed by the influence they were having on their husbands and other women. In fact, with his *Letter to d’Alembert*, Rousseau delivered a deliberate slap across the face of the women of the upper town. Upon reading it, the Genevan Antoine-Jacques Roustan immediately identified Rousseau’s targets: “our little women of the upper quarters, our Demoiselles of taste.”⁹⁵ A patrician woman remarked, “Nothing is more mad and made *for the rabble*.”⁹⁶

Rousseau’s warning also contains an important economic dimension with particular relevance to women. He warns Genevans about the nefarious effects that the division of labor is having within their manufacturing industries, as well as “the slackening of work,” the “increase in spending,” and the “decrease in sales” taking place in the city as it is prospering.⁹⁷ He wants Genevans to consider the dangerous political consequences of the growing “inequality of fortunes.”⁹⁸ Rousseau advocates “austere parsimony” and reminds his compatriots that “the affluence of the great majority comes from diligent work, economy, and moderation.”⁹⁹ As important consumers and as managers of their “domestic economies,”¹⁰⁰ women were the principal targets of Rousseau’s warnings about Genevan spending habits and his denunciation of luxury.¹⁰¹ Rousseau reminds all Genevans, including women, of the “connection between luxury and misery;” he exhorts them not to become lazy and lose their taste for useful work: “We all have only our industry. The Genevan people sustains itself only by virtue of work.”¹⁰²

In contrast to the salon-governing, luxury-consuming patrician hostess so celebrated by

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹⁵ *Correspondance complète*, vol. 5, #724.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, #727 (my italics).

⁹⁷ Rousseau, *Lettre à d’Alembert*, 137, 138.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217, 218.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185, 183.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, David Hiler, “Les sept jours gras du patriciat genevois: Le livre de ménage de Marie Gallatin (1753–58),” *Revue du vieux Genève* 16 (1986): 29–37.

¹⁰¹ In her “Repackaging Rousseau,” Jennifer Jones has rightly pointed out the links between commerce and politics. Her insights into the French view of women as consumers of fashion are relevant here as well.

¹⁰² Rousseau, *Lettre à d’Alembert*, 182, 184. Rousseau warns against the growing tendency to “search for ways of subsisting without doing anything” (140) and asks wealthy Genevan bankers to reinvest their capital in Genevan industry: “May those whose work heaven has blessed bring home, like the bee, the fruit to the hive ... [and] enrich their country with their wealth” (244)

Ami Lullin's ideal of womanhood, Rousseau honors the ordinary woman who tends to her home and family and thereby does her part in sustaining both the economy and the constitution. His message is that women do not acquire virtue through learning, fancy clothes and hairdos, stylized speech, or salon sociability. Only by shunning French values and by embracing republican ones does a woman earn respect and "merit." Rousseau revalorizes the ideal of the artisanal wife who works within her family home, which is the very cradle of republican values: "This is when she shows herself in all the dignity of an honest woman; this is when she commands respect and beauty shares with honor the homage paid to virtue."¹⁰³

In several ways, then, one can see that Rousseau both speaks to women and defends them in the *Letter to d'Alembert*. First, he defines virtue so as to make it accessible to all women, not just an elite. Second, he shows obvious admiration for the simple, frugal, hardworking woman. Finally, he questions whether the patrician ethos does even its own women justice: "It would not be difficult to show that instead of gaining anything by these customs, women lose by them. They are flattered without being loved; they are served without being honored."¹⁰⁴ Often these theater-going patrician women are treated like merchandise; Rousseau remonstrates against "the exhibition of ladies all dressed up as best they can and placed on display in boxes [*loges*] as if in front of a boutique, waiting for buyers."¹⁰⁵

Like many, if not most, people of his times, Rousseau believed in the power of women to influence men. This is why he says, "Do you want to know men? Study women."¹⁰⁶ This is also why he says, "All perish through the disorder of women."¹⁰⁷ Women are crucial to the moral health of the republic. The problem in Geneva was that the wrong kinds of women, mainly patrician women, were exercising the wrong kinds of influence. And, increasingly, the wives of ordinary citizens were copying them. Rousseau's message to these women was: Get political. Stop subverting republican values; stop mimicking the manners of French aristocracy; and stop your pernicious luxury consumption. Start remembering that you are citizens of a republic and play your part in reviving both the constitution and the economy.

Another way Rousseau tried to reorient women's values toward republicanism was by

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 176. For a useful and relevant discussion of the Protestant view of family, marriage, and home, see Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 176.

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, *Lettre à d'Alembert*, 200.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

extolling the women of ancient Sparta and speaking of the great respect they commanded. Spartan women loved the laws and knew how important it was for the laws to be loved; they were not soft; they educated their sons to be patriotic citizens. Rousseau knew how important it was to “direct public opinion” in ways favorable to the republic.¹⁰⁸ This was the vital role he wanted Genevan women to play.

They had to use their power to politicize, not depoliticize, their sons and husbands.

Later, in *Emile*, Rousseau spelled out the reasons “every virtuous nation has shown respect to women.” These reasons have nothing to do with a woman’s “softening” influence; in fact, the reasons the ancients admired women are diametrically opposed to those of the Genevan patriciate: “Every revolution began with the women. Through a woman Rome gained her liberty, through a woman the plebeians obtained the consulate, through a woman the tyranny of the decemvirs was ended; it was the women who saved Rome [when besieged by Coriolanus].”¹⁰⁹ A final point should perhaps be made. A basic consensus existed in Geneva that a woman’s terrestrial destiny was to marry and bear children and that, in large part because of this obligation, her status was unavoidably dependent on a man’s. Nobody was advocating the enfranchisement of women during this time; indeed, most of Geneva’s women would have regarded such a proposal as pie in the sky. The patriciate, whose flattering ideas of womanhood are brought to light here, were trying to limit, not extend, the electorate. In the eighteenth century, out of a population of about twenty-five thousand, only fifteen hundred men had the vote, and the patriciate thought this system too democratic. As late as 1762, Rousseau voiced his concern about Genevan men’s political apathy and lack of interest in their own political rights. Expanding the vote to include women was simply not on anyone’s mind in Geneva at the time. Still, one might want to speculate why Rousseau, who was such an original and creative thinker in other ways, did not break out of the mental confines of his time and place and advocate active political rights for women. In other words, why did Rousseau not become Condorcet? To answer this question fairly and responsibly one would have to take into account many factors; “misogyny,” however, is not one of them.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ *Oeuvres complètes*, 4:742.

