

**Rousseau and the Ancients**  
**Rousseau et les Anciens**

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**Ruth Grant**  
**&**  
**Philip Stewart**

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## **Rousseau and Plato on Women: An Analysis of Book v of *Émile* and Book v of the *Republic***

Plato and his *Republic* were important to Rousseau. Scholars may differ on their precise influence on Rousseau's life and works, but few deny their significance.<sup>1</sup> Rousseau cited Plato more frequently than any other author except Plutarch and the Bible (Silverthorne 235). In the *Confessions*, he claimed to have been influenced by Plato when he abandoned his children: "I believed I was performing an action of a citizen and father and I looked at myself as a member of Plato's *Republic*" (299; *OC* 1: 357). Rousseau was troubled by the same political problems that bothered Plato. Like Plato, Rousseau took as a central concern the pernicious effect produced when rank, power, and status were out of synch with true merit. Like Plato, Rousseau sought political unity and an end to faction. Rousseau responded to these problems differently — with modern solutions and what Allan Bloom called "an egalitarian politics that rivals Plato's in moral appeal" (*Émile* 6).

The influence of the *Republic* on *Émile* is extensive. The dialogue was clearly on Rousseau's mind while at Montmorency. A laundry list of topics he drafted there included "examination of the *Republic* of Plato" (*OC* 3: 473). Structural parallels between the two works suggest that *Émile* may have been organized to correspond to the organization of the *Republic* (Masters 99). One author has suggested that a letter from Theodore Tronchin helped push Rousseau to consider a work on education (Hendel 2: 63). Tronchin, to whom Rousseau had confided about abandoning his children, pointed out that neither the *Republic* nor its educational plan were possible under modern conditions. Instead, Tronchin maintained, education had to be a domestic affair, the responsibility of parents themselves.

In opening his work on education, Rousseau acknowledged the *Republic* to be "the most beautiful educational treatise ever written" (*Émile* 40; *OC* 250).<sup>2</sup> But, in effect agreeing with Tronchin's point, he continued that the public education of which Plato wrote was no longer possible "because where there is no longer fatherland, there can no longer be citizens." Public education in Rousseau's day produced "double men" who appeared "to relate everything to others" but related "to themselves alone" (41; *OC* 251). According to Rousseau, Plato tried to remove this contradiction from his city by "purify[ing] the heart of men" (40; *OC* 250), a purification

that, as Roger Masters has suggested, consisted of finding one's self interest in the good of the whole and expanding one's ties of kinship to embrace the whole city (Masters 24). For Plato, the individual was subordinated to the whole and the private was obliterated. By contrast, in *Émile*, Rousseau set out to remove the same contradiction by working with one pupil, preserving his individuality, teaching him self-preservation, and fitting him for private life in a world where public life was impossible. Ironically, however, though bound by narrower ties than the citizens of the *Republic*, in the end, the product of *Émile*'s educational plan would be able to behave as a virtuous citizen, as one capable of conquering his affections (445; *OC* 819), of conquering himself, and sacrificing his own interest to the public interest (473; *OC* 858).

Rousseau appreciated many specific aspects of the *Republic* and incorporated several of its features into his own educational plan. Plato and Rousseau both claimed to proceed toward their ends by following what they called "principles of nature." Rousseau hailed Plato an educator who, though "believed to be so austere, raises the children only by festivals, games, songs, and pastimes" (107; 344). Like Plato, Rousseau often drew approvingly on Spartan models. Finally, both Plato and Rousseau insisted on the critical importance to the community of getting the roles of women right (*Republic* 449c).

Despite considerable admiration for Plato, Rousseau also wished to distance himself from him. Although Allan Bloom called Rousseau "a philosopher poet like Plato" (*Émile* 21). Rousseau's relationship to Plato demonstrated the same sort of ambivalence Socrates felt toward Homer: "[A] certain friendship for Homer and shame before him, which has possessed me since childhood, prevents me from speaking. For he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragic things. Still and all, a man must not be honored before the truth" (*Republic* 595b). Rousseau believed that truth demanded a radically different approach to women's roles. On the issue of the nature of women and their roles, the two philosophers had perhaps their greatest divergence. Each recognized that the education of women was an important subject and, accordingly each devoted considerable attention to it. Yet it was here that Rousseau was most critical of Plato (*Émile* 25) and where Plato, rather than Rousseau, appeared to be more modern (Masters 22n). This paper concentrates on that aspect of Rousseau and Plato's thought, focusing on Book v of the *Republic* and Book v of *Émile*.

Rousseau's discussion closely follows Plato's. Both men broach the discussion of women using the metaphor of drama. In Book v of the *Republic*, Socrates agreed that having "finished the male drama" he would

begin the “female drama” (451c). Rousseau described the role of women in Book v of *Émile*, the section dedicated to “last act in the drama of youth” (357; *OC* 692). Book v of the *Republic* opened after a lengthy search in which justice had been located and defined. Socrates was about to embark on a discussion of the fit between souls and regime types in respect to justice when he was interrupted by Glaucon and Adeimantus. The two had been struck by the provocative comment Socrates had made earlier, in Book iv (423e), that “for women and children the things of friends will be in common.” They refused to allow Socrates to continue without obtaining a full description of this aspect of the guardians’ lifestyle. After all, Adeimantus remarks, “It makes a big difference [...] the whole difference in a regime’s being right or not” (449c). Thus, Plato launched his consideration of women’s education as an apparent digression, but one critically important to the whole of the work. Indeed, Socrates showed his awareness of the serious business he was undertaking when he noted that it is “a lesser fault to prove an unwilling murderer of someone than a deceiver about fine, good and just things in laws” (451b). In Plato’s time, the penalty for involuntary homicide was exile — a severe sentence (Dillon and Garland 62–64).

Book v of the *Republic* was organized in “three waves” of argument. The first dealt with women’s nature and their fitness for the guardian class; the second, the community of spouses, children and property, and the final wave, the establishment of philosopher-kings. At the outset, Socrates returned to the analogy introduced in Book ii of guardians as guard dogs. He asked whether, among guard dogs, females “guard in common or stay indoors as if incapacitated by bearing and rearing pups?” (451c) Told that they guard alongside male dogs, Socrates concluded that if human females likewise are to guard alongside men, they must receive the same education — in music and gymnastic. This, his listeners noted, would cause quite a stir, as it would entail women exercising naked — a ridiculous sight. Socrates inquired whether such things were ridiculous because they were against nature; or, merely because they were uncustomary. After all, he pointed out, the Greeks had not always had the practice of exercising naked. Socrates then returned to the most basic principle of the *Republic*: namely, one nature, one practice; different natures, different practices. To decide whether or not women should work as guardians it was necessary first to discover their true nature and see if it was like men’s nature.

Here Plato attempted to investigate the implications of natural characteristics — what sorts of differences among people really mattered when it came to determining the occupation for which each was best suited? While bald and hairy men may look very different from each other, this difference

had little to do with the training they were fit to receive or the tasks for which they were suited. What was the difference between the sexes? If it boiled down to no more than “bearing” versus “begetting,” Socrates said, “we’ll assert that it has not thereby been proved that a woman differs from a man. [...] We’ll still suppose that our guardians and their women must practice the same things” (454e). But how was it possible to discover whether a person was suited for a particular pursuit or not? Plato’s answer turned largely on mental abilities: for each discipline, we know those suited to it by how easily they learn things connected with it and by how able they are to push discovery forward (455b). There was a physical component as well — the body must give support to the mind. While Socrates allowed that, on the whole, the class of men excelled the class of women in all practices, nonetheless, the natures that fit individuals for particular pursuits were to be found in both classes, hence some women were better at specific pursuits than many men (455d). Thus, the difference between male and female guardians was shown to be a difference of degree, not of kind.

“No practice of a city’s governors[...] belongs to woman because she’s woman or to man because he’s man; but the natures are scattered alike among both animals; and woman participates according to nature in all practices [...]. But in all, woman is weaker than man” (455d).

In Rousseau’s view, Plato’s approach was fundamentally misguided, but one that the ancient philosopher was doomed to follow given his earlier declaration that “as for women and children the things of friends will be in common.” Rousseau believed that Plato was forced to be wrong, to accept error as truth. Plato had no choice, Rousseau claimed, for “having removed private families from his regime and no longer knowing what to do with women, he found himself forced to make them men” (362; *OC* 699–700). That is, he had to deny what Rousseau saw as the essential differences between the sexes. Plato’s response to the “first wave” rested on a distinction between the characteristics of the group as a whole (or the characteristics of the average member of the group) on the one hand and those of a specific individual on the other. The general difference, or difference in kind, between the sexes came down merely to the difference between women bearing and men mounting, characteristics no more related to defining one’s purpose in life than were baldness or hairiness. Aside from bearing and mounting, other differences between the sexes were merely matters of degree.

Rousseau saw the matter as more complicated. At first, as Book v of *Émile* opened, Rousseau appeared ready to adopt a stance similar to Plato’s: “In everything not connected with sex, woman is man. She has

same organs, same needs, same faculties. [...] The difference between them is only one of more or less" (357; *OC* 692). Yet, it was difficult to determine what differences were due to sex since "general differences" that did "not appear connected with sex," in fact, were, he maintained. But, he continued, human knowledge about these differences was limited. It was impossible to perceive the relationships or their extent. Thus Rousseau concluded, "the only thing we know with certainty is that everything man and woman have in common belongs to the species and everything which distinguishes them, belongs to the sex" (358; *OC* 693).

In his unfolding argument, however, Rousseau claimed that sex differences were substantial. He called it "one of the marvels of nature to have been able to construct two such similar beings who are constituted so differently" (358; *OC* 693). While men and women shared the same goals, they engaged in different labors (363; *OC* 701). Furthermore, the "faculties common to the two sexes are not equally distributed between them," rather "they balance out" (363; *OC* 701). The sexes were complementary. Indeed, Rousseau's analysis of the complementarity of the sexes recalls the description of the sexes found in another Platonic dialogue, namely in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* where he describes men and women as two halves of a whole being divided by the gods, now trying "to reintegrate, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another" (191d). Not only were the differences between the sexes great, they had moral influence, that is, they determined what the members of each sex ought to do. In fact, the different consequences of sex shaped all of woman's life: "The male is male only at certain moments. The female is female her whole life or at least during her whole youth. Everything constantly recalls her sex to her; and to fulfill its functions well, she needs a constitution which corresponds to it" (361; *OC* 697).

Because a female was "female her whole life," *bearing* (to use Plato's terminology) thus became the defining characteristic. Thus the difference between the sexes dictated woman's appropriate pursuit: "To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them to make their lives agreeable and sweet — these are the duties of women at all times and they ought to be taught from childhood" (365; *OC* 703).

Sex differences extended to both body and mind. Rousseau was impressed by Plato's proposal that women guardians exercise naked alongside the men; that passage was underscored in his own copy of the *Republic* — the only passage in Book v so marked.<sup>3</sup> But he would have none of Plato's approach. His account of a race between Émile and Sophy presents

a striking contrast to the description of naked women and men exercising in Plato's imaginary gymnasium. In Rousseau's account, Sophy "truss[ed] up her dress on both sides . . . more concerned to display a slender leg to Émile's eyes than to vanquish him in this combat."<sup>4</sup> Just as the race served a different purpose for Sophy than for Émile, women and men themselves had different purposes. Rousseau wanted each sex to fulfill "nature's ends according to its own particular purpose." And what was woman's purpose? To produce children (362; *OC* 698). Thus Rousseau would not expect young girls to lead sedentary lives, but rather would have them participate in pursuits designed to make them physically fit to bear children.

In reaching his conclusion about woman's nature and purpose, Rousseau formulated his position on what he believed to be the essential defining characteristic of the group as a whole. In contrast to Plato, Rousseau claimed that individual exceptional cases were irrelevant. He poked at the logic of opponents who would reason from exceptions to the rule. To those who might dispute his position by citing as evidence those modern city women who had few children, he responded,

What! Because there are a hundred big cities in the universe where women living in license produce few children, you claim that it is proper to women's status to produce few children! And what would become of your cities if women living more simply and more chastely far away in the country did not make up for the sterility of the city ladies? . . . Finally, what does it matter that this or that woman produces few children? Is woman's status any less that of motherhood, and is it not by general laws that nature and morals ought to provide for this status? (362; *OC* 698)

Rousseau used his analysis of woman's physical needs as the groundwork on which to establish her moral role as mother:

She needs care during her pregnancy; she needs to rest at the time of childbirth, she needs a soft and sedentary life to suckle her children; she needs patience and gentleness, a zeal and an affection that nothing can rebuff in order to raise her children. She serves as the link between them and their father; she alone makes him love them and gives him the confidence to call them his own. (361; *OC* 697 )

For women, the impact of sex is all-pervasive and this apparently led Rousseau to accept Plato's dictum, "one nature, one pursuit." Men, however, were not similarly circumscribed by sex. After all, Rousseau told us that "the male is only male at certain moments," so it is perhaps no surprise that "begetting" did not fully determine his pursuits. Rousseau made no effort to apply the "one nature, one pursuit" idea to men. His plan was designed to teach men the job of living, to raise them for "their common



calling, [...] man's estate," rather than for the "sword, the church, the bar" (41; *OC* 251–52). Émile (like a good liberal arts college graduate) demonstrated ability in many areas. In contrast to the Republic which was rooted in the division of labor, Émile's fundamental principle was "always to learn to do without the help of others in regard to everything he could do himself" (425; *OC* 790). He was a teacher (to Sophy) of physics, mathematics, and philosophy (425; *OC* 791), an agricultural expert (435; *OC* 804), a carpenter (437; *OC* 807), and a competent harpsichord repairman (425; *OC* 790). It was inconceivable to Rousseau, however, that a woman could be "a nurse today and a warrior tomorrow" (362; *OC* 699).

In the "second wave" of Book v, Plato dealt with the apparent contradiction between these two roles for women in the guardian class by minimizing their maternal role. Their children would be raised by women (and men) particularly suited to that task. These people would "take the offspring of the good and bring them to the pen to certain nurses who live apart in a certain section of the city." They would "supervise the nursing...leading mothers to the pen when they are full with milk, inventing every device so that none will recognize her own, and providing others who do have milk if the mothers themselves are insufficient." They would "supervise the mothers themselves seeing to it that they suckle only a moderate time and that the wakeful watching and the rest of the labor are handed over to wet nurses and governesses." All this, as Glaucon saw it, would make for "an easy-going kind of child-bearing for women guardians," which Socrates agreed "is fitting" (460b–d).

Plato, who appreciated the great inequality among people, proposed a rigidly hierarchical system, a meritocracy where status was strictly in accord with natural gifts and where natural inequalities could not be transformed and magnified by adding on layers of conventional inequalities. For Plato, the ruling class might have philosophical temperaments and fine fighting skills, but they could not use these advantages to pile up treasure or preferment for themselves or their children. For the guardians, Socrates said, "There mustn't be private houses [...], nor land, nor any possession." Instead, members of this class would have to "get their livelihood from others and use it up in common" (464c). In this atmosphere, "lawsuits and complaints vanish from possessing nothing private but the body free from faction [over possession of money]" (464d).

The survival of the system set forth in the *Republic*, hence the continued happiness of the whole, depended on the production of offspring who would be philosophically inclined. Thus Plato was very concerned that his guardians find the best possible mates and devoted considerable discussion to this. For Plato, the women in the guardian class were to be

“selected [...] in the same way” that the men had been, “with natures that are as similar as possible” (458d).

While guardians weren't allowed money or possessions, they were permitted one reward that could threaten to become a cause of faction in the city: the right to mate more frequently and with the most desirable partners. The reason, of course, was not to reward their performance, but rather, to produce the best possible children through a process of selective breeding. To achieve this end, Socrates noted that rulers “will have to use a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled” (459d). In particular, he suggested that “subtle lots” be used at festivals to reward the most talented guardians with mates. These lots were to be “fabricated so that the ordinary man will blame chance” (459e), not themselves or their rulers for their failure to secure mates.

In the *Republic*, Plato's task was to eliminate private attachment and create communal ties among the whole class of guardians. Guardians would say “‘my own’ and ‘not my own’ at the same time” (462b). They would live in a “community of pleasure and pain” which was “the greatest good for a city” (464). Here, according to Rousseau, was the real flaw in Plato's approach. Rousseau's criticism is direct; Plato had been guilty of no less than

the subversion of the sweetest sentiments of nature, sacrificed to an artificial sentiment which can only be maintained by them — as though there were no need for a natural base on which to form conventional ties; as though the love of one's nearest were not the principle of the love one owes the state; as though it were not by means of the small fatherland which is the family that the heart attaches itself to the large one; as though it were not the good son, the good husband, and the good father who make the good citizen! (362; *OC* 700)

Plato had posited a guardian class whose reason kept appetites and spirit in check, thus enabling the expansion of their hearts to include all. But Rousseau discounts this possibility in the face of the strong passion of jealousy. For, “in love,” he wrote, “the factors which are not exclusive are an insult. A sensitive man would prefer a hundred times over to be the only one ill treated than to be caressed with all the others and the worst thing that can happen to him is not to be singled out” (384; *OC* 733).

Although Rousseau's goal in *Émile* was the happiness of an individual, not the happiness of polis, the choice of mates was just as critical to him there as it was to Plato. For Rousseau, the problem was how to attach men to family life; much of woman's role in society was dictated by the need to convince man that he was the true father of her children and to bind

him to her and to them. Sophy, the mate Rousseau destined for Émile, was to be perfectly educated to do just this (at least until the sequel!). The tutor's advice to Émile stood in marked contrast to Plato's selection criteria for guardians. "Desire mediocrity in everything, without excepting even beauty," he counseled (410; *OC* 769). This reminds us that Plato's program was geared toward producing an elite cadre of guardians, the best and the brightest. Rousseau repeatedly claimed that the educational plan he put forth was designed for pupils who were ordinary human beings, not prodigies. Rousseau would not look to match the best with the best, but he would attempt to find a woman whose character suited (that is, complemented) Émile's.

While Rousseau's ends were different from Plato's, the means he used to achieve them were often similar. To be sure that the right men and women ended up together, both Plato and Rousseau were willing to employ elaborate deceptions. The tutor took Émile on a trip to search for his mate, but in reality, he knew exactly where she was to be found. The tutor used this "feigned search" for a mate as a "pretext for making [Émile] learn about women so that he will sense the value of the one who suits him" (407; *OC* 765). Although assuring the readers that "for Émile... it is not I who will make this determination [of his future wife], it is nature," the tutor introduced this further clarification of his position: "I would have refused to raise him if I had not been the master of marrying him to the woman of his choice — that is, of my choice" (407; *OC* 765). Émile, manipulated throughout his whole life, continues to be manipulated here as well. Sophy, too, is manipulated — most dramatically in the sudden revision of her character to make her suitable for Émile; more subtly, by her mother and the tutor (415; *OC* 776).

In the end, despite their manipulations, both Plato and Rousseau knew that their plans could never be realized. The reasons became plain in their analysis of the subject of women. Plato was skeptical of what was conventional. He acknowledged the individual case, the exceptional, but rejected the particular. He built his state on a recognition of individual talents but to keep those talents in check, structured a society that denied particular attachments. Rousseau saw that, and organized his own effort around particularity of sentiment which would bind husbands and wives to each other and thence to state and society. In doing so, however, Rousseau built on the general case and left out what Plato saw as decisive, not the species, nor the sex, but the individual.

Melissa A. Butler  
Wabash College

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For just a few authors who have commented on the importance of Plato to Rousseau, see Vaughan, Barker 388–90, Hendel, Havens 68–69, Plamenatz 1: 388–391, Grimsley's ed. of the *Social Contract* 53–55, Masters 14–15, 22–24, 99 ff., 443, Silverthorne, Miller, and Kelly.

<sup>2</sup>All subsequent references to the text of *Émile* give the pagination in the *Collected Works*, followed by that in the *Œuvres complètes*.

<sup>3</sup>A copy of a Latin edition of Plato's works owned by Rousseau may be found in the British Library: *Divini Platonis operum a M. Ficino tralatorum tomus primus [-quintus]*, 5 vols., Lugduni: J. Tornaesius, 1550; the library shelf mark is G16721 (1–5). See also Silverstone.

<sup>4</sup>Rousseau continued with a reflection on the general abilities of women as runners: "Women are not made to run. When they flee, it is in order to be caught. Racing is not the only thing they do maladroitly, but it is the only thing they do gracelessly, their elbows drawn back and glued to their bodies, give them a ridiculous aspect and the high heels on which they are perched make them appear like grasshoppers who want to run without jumping." Yet Sophie proved a better runner than other women; she "is light and wears low heels. [...] She takes the lead with such rapidity that *Émile* has just enough time to catch this new *Atalanta*" (437; 807).

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