

## **The Construction of the Genevan “Woman” in Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality***

Diana Pearson

In 1791, French feminist Olympe de Gouges critiqued patriarchy by writing *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*. She was accused of treason and executed. This was not long after Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1754, was awarded second place for his response to the Academy of Dijon essay question: “What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?” His response, *Discourse on Inequality*, explains how men had progressed from a “natural state” into the artificial form of modern society within Rousseau’s time, which he claims is characterized by moral and political inequality. However, Rousseau does not address the gender inequality sanctioned through law at that period in history, which prohibited women from political, economic, and certain sexual rights. In *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau describes the *role* of Woman<sup>1</sup> as central, due to reproduction, to the maintenance of Man. His text shows women’s responsibility to sex in two ways. Women are described by Rousseau as honourable when they have careful control over sex, embodied as “the chaste guardians of our [society’s] morals and all the gentle bonds of peace,” whereas they are viewed as destructive when “loose” (12). This essay explores how Rousseau’s construction of the Genevan Woman ensures inequality even as he claims to explain the foundations and state of inequality. I will explore this construction as a compound process: first, women are placed in an inferior position (without rights) by men. Second, Woman is constructed to embody particular (“feminine”)

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<sup>1</sup> I capitalize “Woman” in reference to the construction of women in this period, as opposed to “women” which refers to women of that time period in general.

characteristics, such as gentleness and virtuousness, that serve to reproduce the very structures of inequality that hinder them. Finally, I explore the limited sexual power that women had in this era, specifically within the honourable confines of chaste servitude. In every instance, women are valued primarily in relation to men, for the well-being and maintenance of the state.

### **Natural and Moral Inequality**

Rousseau analyzes the state of inequality in modern society by reaching back historically to theorize man in his “state of nature.” This is less of an attempt to be strictly factual (24) and more so an ambitious attempt at explaining how the current society, in all its laws, morals, and institutions, may have come to be. Rousseau’s description of man in the state of nature is a conjectural attempt to answer the question by following “a few lines of ... hypothetical and conditional reasoning” (15-24). He declares that he has “ventured a few guesses, less in the hope of answering the question than for the purpose of clarifying it and reducing it to its true proportions” (15).

Rousseau begins his story by explaining that for the *human species* there are two forms of inequality: natural (physical) and moral (or political) inequality (23). He describes natural inequality as “differences in age, health, physical strength, and traits of the mind and soul” (23). He claims that the “source of natural inequality . . . is expressed by the very definition of the word” (23) and that this natural inequality has been solidified by institutional inequality (52). He dwells on the emergence of moral inequality, which “depends on a sort of convention and is established, or at least sanctioned, by the consent of men” (23). For Rousseau, moral inequality involves possessing more or less wealth, honour, power, and potential for domination (23). This establishment of law by men highlights the progression of natural inequality into

*structural* processes of moral inequality by Rousseau's period in history. Women were not considered citizens (121) and were denied political rights to consent to or reject the law. While Rousseau doesn't seem to explicitly promote women as inferior, he also does not challenge this notion and in fact refers to women later in the text as "the sex that ought to obey" (49). Once gender inequality has been established, what better way to maintain it than to prescribe for women responsibilities, expectations, and customs that will reproduce it?

### **Does Woman Make Man?**

Rousseau then considers the role of Woman in Geneva. To him, Woman is the precious half of the population, an honourable one who "assures the happiness of the other and whose sweetness and goodness maintain its peace and good morals" (11). In addition, the "destiny of [women] will always be to govern our destiny" (11). Afforded with status and citizenship, men deny these rights and privileges to women. "Man" stands in for everyone when it is the interest of men, but Woman is created to explain why women do not get the same advantages as men. In this case, language is used to praise women's servitude and at the same time to obscure the structural inequalities in place. Without political or economic rights, women were in a vulnerable position, and this particular construction of Woman is demonstrated by Rousseau's text, a construction which has historically served to reproduce inequality from generation to generation.

### **Woman: Another Word for Unequal**

Rousseau writes that the Genevan Woman must possess predefined qualities. The Genevan Woman is to be modest, graceful, amiable, virtuous, innocent, and subtle in her words and deeds (11-12). Rousseau states that these feminine characteristics

maintain public well-being, specifically in that the “barbarous man” cannot resist the “voice of honour and reason in the mouth of a gentle wife” (11). Rousseau addresses women by demanding of them to “[a]lways remain as you are, the chaste guardians of our morals and the gentle bonds of peace” (12). Rousseau claims women are peacekeepers; however, this is an encouragement to continue to reproduce the moral structure of inequality that women are born into. The good Genevan Woman is instructed to promote concord between the citizens through marriage of families that are divided (12). In other words, women were to be traded *as property* to satisfy social debts and obligations, and Rousseau’s implication is that because this maintains peace it is virtuous and honourable. But this suggests that *only* through marriage may women maintain peace, and so their power as peacekeepers is only by servitude through marriage, once again in relation to men. Finally, women have the virtuous duty to discourage, through their sweet and modest nature, “the excesses that our young people pick up in other countries” (12). In other words, it is a woman’s job to socialize youth so as not to threaten the morals that have been established in modern Genevan society.

### **Sex Power**

Let us look for instances in Rousseau’s work in which women *do* in fact have power. Once again, it is under strict guidelines, for their “chaste power, exercised only within the marriage bond, makes itself felt only for the glory of the state and the well-being of the public” (11). Women may use their power of sex and desire, strictly sanctioned by marriage, to honour the state and mediate morals, but once again only in relation to men. This becomes glaringly evident when Rousseau warns youth against acquiring “childish manners and ridiculous airs ... from loose women” (12). In Rousseau’s time *loose* meant unfixed, free, unchaste, immoral (“Loose”). Thus even

women's sexual power is limited, and the paradox that women "deserve to be in command in Geneva" (11) can only refer to a chaste, virtuous, and limited form of power. The use of this sexual power might be considered political in its effects; but if so, it is indirect.

Rousseau theorizes a particular form of sexual desire that developed in modern society:

Among the passions stirring the human heart, there is one that is burning and impetuous, and makes one sex necessary for the other, a terrible passion that braves every danger, defies every obstacle, and in its fury seems destined to destroy the very human race it is designed to preserve. What will become of men, who are prey to unbridled and brutal rage, without shame, without modesty, without restraint, fighting every day over their loves at the cost of their lives? (48)

Rousseau believes that in the "natural state" of man, sexual desire was physical and served only to "unite the one sex with the other" (49). But he suggests that this desire was the result of combined ideas of merit and beauty which were fostered by imagination. Rousseau believes this desire is a corrupted, unnatural sentiment, which he calls the "moral side of love" (49). This moral love is possessive as it "shapes desire... [and] makes the desire for the chosen object more forceful" (49). In Rousseau's narrative, it becomes the role of Woman to mediate this forceful sexual desire through her chaste power. This requires the strategic and careful denial of sex until the bonds of marriage, as this moral love is "honoured by women with much care and skill" (49). Rousseau considers this important because he sees sexual desire as a threat to the well-being of the public; without women's careful control of their female sexual power, this

desire evoked in men threatens to instigate “the vengeance of husbands” (50) and lead to duels, murders, and “even worse deeds” (51). And so, it is up to women to mediate this, “in order to establish their power over men and so make dominant the sex that ought to obey” (49). In Rousseau’s modern society, sex is evidently women’s most substantial form of power; however, since they were bound to a chaste moral code, they were only free to exercise their power in relation to men within the bonds of marriage. Thus, women were oppressed by not only denial of political and economic power at that historical period, but also constricted to a very limited and particular sexual power, as Rousseau suggests in his text.

### **Conclusion**

Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* that, “[i]f we examine some of the books on women, we see that one of the most frequently held points of view is that of public good or general interest: in reality, this is taken to mean the interest of society as each one wishes to maintain or establish it” (16). While Rousseau’s is not a book on women, specifically, I would argue that a piece written on inequality is not thoroughly critical without including an analysis of gender relations. Among the many ideas Rousseau explores in the *Discourse on Inequality*, it seems he has unfortunately disregarded this significant inequality. Perhaps he truly believed women to be naturally inferior. Maybe he was so corrupted by modern Genevan society that he failed to see a very substantial social inequality of that time. Rousseau’s possible lack of clarity is particularly fascinating, because he is known to have criticized other social theorists for being unable to see clearly what was “natural” and true. He does provide a fascinating exploration of many societal concepts: namely, the moral consequences that emerge from the invention of property (greed, envy, vanity misery, jealousy) (55), as well as the

structural inequalities formed by the mutual enslavement of master and slave (78), which Rousseau sees as (in his time) “the ultimate degree of inequality to which all the other [inequalities] lead to until new revolutions dissolve the government altogether or bring it closer to legitimacy” (79). However, I do feel that Rousseau’s oversight of gender inequality somewhat undermines the thoughtfulness in these other explorations within his text. Overall, I find the construction of Woman laid out in Rousseau’s text to be strict and confined in a way that seems to both *ensure* women’s servitude and oppression, and also work to *reproduce* this inequality for future generations.

Works Cited

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