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Tamela Ice, *Resolving the Paradox of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Sexual Politics*. Lanham, Md., and Plymouth, U.K.: University Press of America, 2009. xiv + 86 pp. Notes and bibliography. \$18.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7618-4477-8.

Reviewed by Joel Schwartz, Independent Scholar.

Tamela Ice's slim volume is the latest contribution to what is already an extensive literature examining Rousseau's views on sexual relations and the differences between the sexes. Although I do not find her interpretation of Rousseau fully persuasive, it is nevertheless thoughtful and original.

Ice defines the "paradox" that she seeks to resolve as follows: "Rousseau is the philosopher of freedom for men and yet the philosopher of servitude for women" (p. ix). She rejects various other attempts to resolve the paradox, among them "feminist-friendly" readings of Rousseau that argue that he did advocate some measure of equality between the sexes (ix),<sup>[1]</sup> and the view that Rousseau did not seek even to liberate men, since he was a hierarchical thinker rather than a "philosopher of freedom" (p. x).<sup>[2]</sup> Instead, like Carole Pateman<sup>[3]</sup> she posits that Rousseau is interested "*only* in the freedom and equality of men" (p. x), viewing women solely as a means to achieving that end. Nevertheless, Ice also takes issue with Pateman, who contends that "in rejecting Rousseau's philosophy of servitude for women, one must also reject his philosophy of freedom for men" (p. x). Unlike Pateman, Ice asserts that "we can reject Rousseau's philosophy of servitude for women, and his definitive philosophical project for men, but appropriate his philosophy of freedom and apply this to *all* humans" (p. xi).

Ice sees Rousseau as the philosopher of servitude for women because of his insistence that women inevitably depend on men: "Women depend on men to give them what is necessary to their station, and women depend on men to *want* to give them what is necessary to their station, to consider them worthy of what they can only get from men" (p. 19). Rousseau's emphasis on women's dependence (and on women's resultant need to exploit their desirability, to make men comparably dependent on them) leads Ice to the following harsh judgment: "Woman, in Rousseau, is partially dehumanized and sexually objectified" (p. 24).

I am the author of a "feminist-friendly" reading of Rousseau, so it is not surprising that I believe that Ice's verdict on Rousseau is excessively harsh. It may help clarify Rousseau's position if we compare it to that of one of his earliest--and most perceptive--feminist critics, Mary Wollstonecraft: arguing against Rousseau, Wollstonecraft maintained that "it is not empire, but equality, that [women] should contend for."<sup>[4]</sup> Rightly or wrongly, Rousseau believed that women can achieve equality with men only by asserting their empire over men. For Wollstonecraft (and, I surmise, Ice) women can be equal only if they make themselves as independent of men as men are of women; for Rousseau, women can be equal only if they make men as dependent on women as women are on men.

Ice is also harsher than she should be in a second respect, asserting that “there is absolutely nothing new or original in Rousseau’s theoretical treatise on woman. Rousseau is defending the patriarchal family, the traditional family, and advocating a return to this” (p. 31). It may well be true that not a single one of Rousseau’s observations of and recommendations for women is original. Nevertheless, one of Ice’s own contentions—that Rousseau saw women as the key to reforming men and, more broadly, society as a whole—seems to me to point to the originality and importance of his thought. One should look not only at the specific things that Rousseau said about women, but also at his purpose in saying those things, the broader social goal that he hoped to achieve.

Ice argues that the feminine dependence that Rousseau emphasized leads women to act (in Ice’s existential terminology) in bad faith. Here she focuses on Sophie, the heroine of Rousseau’s educational treatise cum novel *Émile*. More precisely, she focuses on Sophie as she is depicted in Rousseau’s fragmentary and unpublished sequel to *Émile*: *Émile et Sophie ou Les Solitaires*. In the sequel Sophie commits adultery. Ice sees her adultery as a product of the faulty education that she received, an education that is faulty because it emphasizes her dependence on men: “Sophie has been conditioned (educated) for that one moment he *sees* her and she *becomes someone*. Sophie’s awareness of her existence will be determined by a man. Moreover, Sophie’s upbringing has conditioned her to Be-for-Others—to live insincerely, inauthentically, in bad faith” (p. 49).

The second half of Ice’s monograph consists largely of her readings of fictions in which nonfeminist women act in bad faith: *Émile et Sophie*, *Madame Bovary*, and a novelette by Simone de Beauvoir, “*La femme rompue*.” I am not familiar with Beauvoir’s novelette, but I found the comparison between Rousseau’s fragment and Flaubert’s novel illuminating: Ice deftly shows how Flaubert’s Emma can better be understood when seen in a context provided by Rousseau’s Sophie, and vice versa.

On the other hand, the existentialist solution that Ice puts forth, to resolve the paradox of Rousseau’s sexual politics, seems to me to be too abstract to be helpful. With Beauvoir, Ice contends that we must reject all notions of “essentialism”—the belief that women have some sort of fixed nature (p. 65). Instead Ice calls for the adoption of Beauvoir’s existentialist understanding of liberty, with which she finds affinities in Rousseau: “We need not entirely reject Rousseau. . . If we are willing to face our demons, accept responsibility for our own lives, and *choose* to overcome, perhaps we shall. Individual liberty (understood as freedom from psychological dependence) [and] *perfectibilité* (the ability to become other than what one is—for example, dependent, subjugated, alienated, psychologically oppressed, and living in bad faith) . . . provide the starting point” (p. 81).

Ice contends that “*if* the deeply imbedded beliefs a woman has internalized about herself surface (if the unconscious becomes conscious) and *if* a woman can find the courage to accept that she has acted as her own oppressor, that she is responsible for her choices, deciding for herself who she will be (i.e., defining herself), *then* . . . it is possible to overcome alienation, psychological oppression, and bad faith” (p. 62). But as I’ve already intimated, I’m not sure what this means concretely. Problematic as his view may be, I understand what Rousseau was getting at when he argued that women must strive to make men as dependent on them as they are dependent on women; it’s far less clear to me what Ice is getting at when she concludes her monograph by asserting that “women must *believe* that they are free, and they must embrace that freedom” (p. 86).

Having outlined and assessed Ice’s overall argument, I want to conclude by examining what I think is her most original contribution to Rousseau scholarship—a contention that I found

intriguing but ultimately not persuasive. Ice claims that according to Rousseau, “women do not develop compassion” (*pitié*) (p. 23). This is an argument that she makes from silence; she rightly notes (and I’m grateful to her for calling to my attention something that I’d never considered) that *pitié* is extensively analyzed in Rousseau’s discussion of Emile’s education but ignored in his corresponding discussion of Sophie’s education. That omission, in turn, figures importantly in Ice’s argument: “In excluding the cultivation of compassion in his theoretical treatise, Rousseau adds to the dehumanization of woman” (p. 24).

There are obvious counterarguments to be made, and it is to Ice’s credit that she acknowledges them. Thus in the *Second Discourse* “Rousseau compares [*pitié*] to the actions of a mother when her child is in danger” (p. 7).<sup>[5]</sup> Similarly, Ice observes that—even if Rousseau’s theoretical discussion of women’s education says nothing about inculcating compassion—Rousseau’s “literary heroines care for the ill and less fortunate ... [though they] do not develop social relations outside of the family unit” (p. 24).<sup>[6]</sup>

I strongly suspect that in fact Rousseau attributed to women the same capacity for compassion that he attributed to men. Consider how the benevolence of Julie—one of Rousseau’s literary heroines—is described by her former lover St. Preux: “She is extremely sensible to ill-being, both hers and others’, and it would not be easier for her to be happy seeing people in misery than for the upright man to preserve his virtue ever pure while keeping constant company with the wicked. She has not that heartless pity [*pitié*] that is content to turn away its eyes from ills it could relieve. She goes seeking them out in order to heal them; it is the existence of unfortunates and not the sight of them that torments her; to her it does not suffice not to know there are some, for her peace of mind she must know that there are none, at least around her; for it would be going beyond the bounds of reason to make one’s happiness dependent on that of all men. She inquires about the needs of her neighborhood with the warmth she puts into her own interests; she knows all its inhabitants; she extends to it, so to speak, her family circle; and spares no care to hold off all the sentiments of suffering and pain to which human life is subjected.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The rhetorical question that Rousseau asks in the context of discussing Emile’s education in compassion seems to me to apply just as well to Julie as it does to Emile: “How do we let ourselves be moved by pity if not by transporting ourselves outside of ourselves and identifying with the suffering animal, by leaving, as it were, our own being to take on its being? We suffer only so much as we judge that it suffers. It is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer. Thus no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself.”<sup>[8]</sup> Emile’s imagination transports him out of himself, enabling him to identify with and therefore to strive to aid sufferers; to judge from the passage that I quoted above, Julie’s imagination seems to work in exactly the same way. (And Rousseau portrayed Julie—unlike her cousin Claire—as being thoroughly feminine; so it can’t be argued that Julie is compassionate because there is something masculine about her. In this context, it is also significant that in *Émile* Rousseau called “pity [*pitié*] the first relative sentiment which touches the human [not the male] heart according to the order of nature.”)<sup>[9]</sup>

Why, then, did Rousseau not discuss Sophie’s education in compassion in *Émile*? My guess—and I will concede that it is nothing more than a guess—is that Rousseau thought that his readers would take the compassion of women for granted. The novelty that Rousseau introduced was the contention that *men* could and should be trained to be compassionate. He didn’t argue for the compassion of women because he didn’t think he needed to argue for it; but he did need to argue and therefore did argue for the compassion of men.

In short, Ice's claim that Rousseau denied the compassion of women does not convince me. Still, I am grateful to her—as other readers should also be—for the textual observation that resulted in her claim.

## NOTES

[1] Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Nicole Fermon, *Domesticating Passions: Rousseau, Woman, and Nation* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

[2] Penny A. Weiss, *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1991).

[3] Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Thought* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1989).

[4] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Charles W. Hagelman, Jr., ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 162.

[5] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, Roger D. Masters, ed., Roger D. and Judith R. Masters, trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 130.

[6] See Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Allan Bloom, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 441, and Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché, trans. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997), pp. 436, 442.

[7] Rousseau, *Julie*, p. 436.

[8] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 223.

[9] Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 222.

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