Introduction

Rousseau in Drag

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century political philosopher, essayist, novelist, playwright, and autobiographer, has become (in)famous for his relentlessly gendered political thought. At least, this has been the reigning consensus among his feminist readers. This interpretation (despite readers’ different philosophical and political perspectives and aims) has focused on the ways in which Rousseau, the theorist who championed democratic equality, ironically failed to include women—arguing (some theorists would claim with reference to nature, others claiming the appeal was to the political) for a strict binary and hierarchical account of sexual difference and a normative, heterosexual, familial economy.

Admittedly, at first I not only agreed with this reading but found it to be patently obvious and irrefutable. For the textual evidence to justify such a reading is plentiful and compelling. The most notoriously hyperbolic accounts of gender inequality can be found in the “Dedication” to Geneva in the Discourse on Inequality (the Second Discourse), the Letter to d’Alembert, the “idyllic” community of Clarens in Julie, and, of course, Book V of Emile. However, as I began to consider the entirety of Rousseau’s work, this interpretation seemed not only inadequate but fundamentally flawed. I was struck by what seemed to be a certain “blindness”—to use Paul de Man’s phrase in regard to the history of Rousseauan studies—to what he says elsewhere, a tendency to overlook ambivalences, and a certain inattention to the entirety of his writings. My increasing dissatisfaction with such readings led me to reconsider not only Rousseau’s gender politics but his politics in general.

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What struck me most in (re)reading Rousseau is that one finds what seems to be the instantiation of a sexual binary and strict gender roles but also, simultaneously, their disruption and
destabilization. That is, alongside what first appears to be a valorization of strict gender identities (masculinity and femininity) and roles (citizen and mother, public and private), one finds the opposite: the continual undermining, inversion, and critique of said ideals and values. Throughout Rousseau’s writings, we have various examples of “perverse” identifications and the inversion of roles: men who act like women, women who act like men, women who love women, “incestuous” love relations, a privileging of ménages à trois, and the continual denigration of both paternal and fraternal power.

Perhaps the best example is Rousseau himself. As the subject and object of his literary endeavors, Rousseau is an exemplary figure of perverse desire, ambivalent gender identity, and the abnegation of masculine and paternal authority. Indeed, Rousseau, as he depicts himself, exemplifies what Kaja Silverman has termed “deviant masculinity.” Deviant masculinities, according to Silverman, are those “whose defining desires and identifications are ‘perverse’ with respect not so much to a moral as to a phallic standard.”

Although Silverman’s focus is on later nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century film (as the privileged historical moment of a crisis of normative masculine ideology and representation), Rousseau, I would argue, is a prescient figure of this crisis, both naming it and encouraging it. It is well known that Rousseau’s libidinal investments and identifications were perversely nonphallic. As he repeatedly proclaims in his autobiographical texts and letters (written for the public and publication), he was from an early age masochistic, at times an exhibitionist, an excessive masturbator (by his own account), ambivalent about sexual intercourse, against the institution of marriage, unable to assume paternal authority, and even for a time—while living in exile in Motiers, Neuchâtel—becoming a cross-dresser. (Is it any wonder that the only time he “truly” fell in love was with a woman—“Sophie” d’Houdetot—who dressed like a man?)

In two letters written in the summer of 1762, having fled the Parisian and Genevan authorities after the condemnation of both the Social Contract and Emile, Rousseau explains his reasons for adopting “feminine” dress (actually an Armenian, fur-lined caftan and turban) and for taking up the “feminine” practices of ribbon weaving and lace making: “I have thought as a man and have been called bad. Well, now I shall be a woman.” And: “I wear a long
robe: I weave ribbons, me voilà more than half a woman. If only
I had always been one!” Leaving aside the obvious relationship
Rousseau implies among the “feminine,” the foreigner, and exile,
what is most striking about these passages is that they contradict
what he seems to say elsewhere about the necessity (and desirabil-
ity) of fixed gender identity.

Take, for example, the Letter to d’Alembert. The Letter is filled
with a veritable plethora of hyperbolic misogynist rants advocating
the segregation of the sexes. The Letter, or so it seems, argues that
without such boundaries, the commingling of men and women in
a “commerce that is too intimate” will lead to a disastrous gender
confusion and the inability to tell one sex from another. Men will
become “womanly” and women “manly.” How does Rousseau’s
open and defiant cross-dressing lead us to read the Letter more
ambivalently than previously assumed?

Consider as well that the love of his life, Mme d’Houdetot, was
also a cross-dresser. Rousseau describes the day he fell in love with
her in the Confessions. Mme d’Houdetot (married and with another
lover) pays him an unexpected visit. This time she is “dressed as
a man,” and Rousseau immediately falls in love. “On this trip she
was on horseback and dressed like a man [en homme]. Although I
hardly like these sort of masquerades, I was taken by the romantic
air of this one, and this time it was love.” Thus we have Rousseau
(who soon after begins dressing like a woman) falling in love with
a woman in drag on horseback (his knight?). It would seem that,
contrary to what a straight reading of the Letter would suggest,
Rousseau was not against a certain gender-bending confusion.

In short, we have a man (Rousseau) who dresses and acts like
a “woman,” loving a woman who dresses and acts like a “man,”
who loves another man. Things will get even more complicated as
I outline more fully later. But for now, I merely want to suggest
that these examples call into question the orthodox reading of
Rousseau’s gender politics as founded on the attempt to instanti-
ate and police strict gender identities and borders based on the
binary male/female. How does Rousseau in drag (and his love
of Sophie in drag) problematize previous readings? Might this
lead us to understand gender in Rousseau to be something that
is unstable, contingent, and—to use Judith Butler’s contemporary
formulation—performative? In Gender Trouble, Butler cites drag
as an allegory of the way in which all gender is performative (rather
than natural) or an exercise in cross-dressing. Although Butler has more recently cautioned against reading drag as necessarily subversive (it can very well consolidate normative heterosexuality and gender paradigms) or as always political, it still can be thought of as allegory for the problematics of gender itself.⁸

*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure . . . is in the recognition of the radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.⁹

That is, drag highlights the contingency of the relation between sex and gender, denaturalizing this supposed natural relationship of sex to gender by showing that all expressions of gender, whether masculine or feminine, are accomplishments that must be repeated over and over.

It would be a mistake, though, to think of Rousseau’s “decision” to cross-dress/become a woman as, well, “decisionist” or voluntary. Nor was it momentary. Rousseau tells us in the first few pages of his *Confessions* that he always felt himself “floating” ambivalently between what are normatively construed as “masculine” and “feminine” attributes.

Such were the first affections from my entrance into life; in this way there began to be formed in me, or to show itself, that heart, at the same time so proud and tender, that effeminate but indomitable character, which—always floating between weakness and courage, between softness and virtue, has put me in contradiction with myself to the bitter end, and has caused abstinence and enjoyment—pleasure and wisdom, equally to escape me.¹⁰

Rousseau’s gender identity, as he describes it, was hopelessly and inevitably contradictory. This “contradiction” he labels femininity (“effeminate”) and masculinity (“indomitable”)—though it seems Rousseau is purposely ambiguous on which traits belong to the feminine and which to the masculine. For Rousseau, gender ambivalence rather than stability defined his character and was never (“to the bitter end”) resolved or stabilized.
Before continuing, let me address an anticipated objection. It might seem that I am placing an undue emphasis on Rousseau’s autobiographical works or on his “personal” life or idiosyncratic desires. My intention, though, is not to produce a psychobiographical interpretation or reduce his writings to some outside pathology (even in an inverted, positive vein). This is not some sort of case study. I am not searching for what Jacques Derrida has derided as “psychobiographical signified”—something outside of Rousseau’s texts (his sexuality) that would presumably “explain” his work. In writing on interpreting Rousseau and interpretation in general, Derrida states,

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general.11

But to include Rousseau’s autobiographical texts is not an attempt to locate the “real life” of Rousseau or the “flesh and bones” of Rousseau beyond his writings but rather to consider these texts as part of his overall oeuvre, as part of his literary, philosophical statement. As Thomas Kavanagh has remarked, “[T]here is an impossibility in Rousseau’s case of separating textuality from existence. Rousseau’s ‘life’…is itself an act of writing. And Rousseau’s writing is the essential adventure of his life.”12 The autobiographical works do not give us clues to Rousseau’s mental state but can be considered as fictive, philosophical treatises.

However, many readers, especially those interested in his politics, have neglected the autobiographical works, considering them to be, at best, a retreat from the political and a lapse into subjectivity, passivity, and negativity and, at worst, an example of his increasing paranoia and even outright madness.13 But we might ask, in what ways does this dismissal of Rousseau’s autobiographical works (and fifteen years of textual production) produce a sort of gendered understanding of not only his writings but also the political itself? To read some of Rousseau’s works as political and others as not is to set up an artificial division among his works
(those that are rational, active, i.e., “masculine” and those that are passive, hysterical, mad, i.e., “feminine”) as well as to implicitly suggest what constitutes the properly political. This lack of attention to the autobiographical works is especially strange among his feminist readers, since part of the feminist project has been to show the ways in which the political is located beyond legalistic and institutional structures. I argue that the autobiographical works are not just idiosyncratic memoirs (which Rousseau tells us they are not) but themselves political—not anomalous or contradictory to previous works but a continuation and perhaps a culmination of his thought. Rather than works of defeat or madness, these works signify a continuation of his political vision: one of critique, otherness, and exile.

**Feminist Readings of Rousseau**

It is perhaps helpful to briefly survey the feminist literature in order to delineate the specificity of the current argument. As stated earlier, it has become commonplace among feminist readers to view Rousseau as producing works that are the worst example of patriarchal/masculinist excess. Paul Thomas, in his essay “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sexist?,” has summed up the prevailing approach to Rousseau’s sexual/textual politics. The question mark in his title refers not to “if” but to “how.” “The question is not whether Rousseau should be identified as a sexist. The question is how we should set about characterizing him as such.” Rousseau’s sexism has come to be taken as a given; the only work left to do is explain the form and aim.

The main feminist critiques of Rousseau can be divided into two different trajectories. The first has been to understand Rousseau’s theory of gender as a continuation of the patriarchal discourse that permeates all of Western political thought. That Rousseau was able both to be committed to the new values of democratic freedom and equality and to insist on the subordination of women and their exclusion from the public sphere and political life attests, according to these critics, to the persistence and entrenchment of patriarchy despite the progressivism of the politics. As Susan Okin writes in *Women in Western Political Thought*, “Rousseau argues the commonly held assertions that have, as part of patriarchal culture, rationalized the separation of women throughout the history
(those that are rational, active, i.e., “masculine” and those that are passive, hysterical, mad, i.e., “feminine”) as well as to implicitly suggest what constitutes the properly political. This lack of attention to the autobiographical works is especially strange among his feminist readers, since part of the feminist project has been to show the ways in which the political is located beyond legalistic and institutional structures. I argue that the autobiographical works are not just idiosyncratic memoirs (which Rousseau tells us they are not) but themselves political—not anomalous or contradictory to previous works but a continuation and perhaps a culmination of his thought. Rather than works of defeat or madness, these works signify a continuation of his political vision: one of critique, otherness, and exile.

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of the Western world.”
Sarah Kofman comes to a similar conclusion. Kofman asserts that Rousseau’s language is that “of the most traditional phallocratic discourse.” Although I would agree that most of the canonical figures (even those considered politically progressive) of Western philosophical/political theory subscribe to some form of repressive gender ideology (whether consciously or not), this interpretation seems misplaced in regard to Rousseau. For, most obviously, patriarchal (and masculine) authority is consistently undermined in Rousseau’s writings.

Other feminist readers, though agreeing essentially with the previous verdict (that Rousseau’s thought is based on a hopelessly rigid account of sexual difference), have argued that his writings are not the effect of an entrenched patriarchy but rather constitute and reflect the emergence of a specifically modern perspective. For example, Joan Landes in Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution argues that Rousseau’s thought is emblematic of a particularly modernist “masculinist ideology” that sought to exclude women from political participation through a new understanding of gender based on the theory of incommensurable difference. Thomas Laqueur, in Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, concurs with Landes’s theory that the eighteenth century marks a shift (and Rousseau is one of the leading proponents) from a “one-sex” model in which women are lesser men to a “two-sex” model of absolute difference based on anatomy. This new biologistic account of gender was used as a justification for the demarcation between a masculine public sphere and a domestic, feminine sphere. Liberal and republican discourses of the eighteenth century were not contradictory (the residual effect of hegemonic patriarchal culture) but rather premised on the exclusion of women from political life. The fear that women might gain access to the new public spaces opening up with reference to the egalitarian rhetoric of liberal and republican discourse engendered new justifications for the exclusion of women based on a model of rigid sexual difference.

Moreover, this shift (with Rousseau leading the way), Landes argues, was actually one of regression. Rousseau’s writings (among others) signify “the shift from an iconic, spectacular public life to the textualized symbolic order.” In other words, the shift from iconic, spectacular (absolutism) to the discursive (republicanism/liberalism), according to Landes, represents the shift from a
“feminine” (stylized, artistic) visual public to one of “masculine” (rational, legalistic, disinterested) discursivity and symbolic representation. The effect of this shift was the creation of a masculine, public sphere and the silencing of women and their relegation to the private, domestic sphere. Rousseau’s discursive elaboration of gender difference and hierarchy, Landes believes, has become “constitutive of the organization of public and domestic life in the post revolutionary world of bourgeois propriety.” The modern world thus became one that was organized around the idealization of masculinity, rationality, and legalism and the denigration of femininity, passion, style, and artistry.

Although Landes’s argument certainly applies to other Enlightenment thinkers, particularly in terms of the emphasis on reason, objectivity, and universal truth, it seems curious in regard to Rousseau. Reading the Letter and the Second Discourse, Landes claims Rousseau was one of the key figures to advocate for a “masculine,” rational, disinterested public sphere and a “feminine” private, subjective sphere. Yet rather than denigrating passion, Rousseau argued in both the Second Discourse and Essay on the Origin of Languages that passion was prior to reason. Or, as he succinctly states in the Confessions, “I felt before thinking: this is the common fate of humanity.” For Rousseau, political laws and institutions always remained secondary to customs, beliefs, and passions. People would always be swayed by their passions and interests and persuaded by rhetoric rather than by logic, reason, and objective laws.

Numerous feminist readers, though, have reiterated this interpretation of Rousseau as the leading figure responsible for the creation of a gendered public/private split. Even readers who have sought to reevaluate Rousseau’s understanding of gender in a more “positive” vein (by reading him “against the grain” or “turning him on his head”) have fundamentally agreed with the previous assessment. For example, Jean Elshtain, Lynda Lange, Penny Weiss, and Mira Morgenstern have all argued that it is precisely Rousseau’s attention to and idealization of familial and domestic issues—ostensibly to the “feminine” private realm—that makes him conducive to a feminist reinterpretation. As Morgenstern states in Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity, “Rousseau’s location of woman and family at the center of this new worldview supports his insistence that the family is destined to be the harbinger of
social change.” This argument emphasizes the importance of the private realm, the family (albeit the normative, heterosexual, bourgeois family), and the “female subject” (to use Elshtain’s phrase) play in Rousseau’s work. What is problematic about this account is that it reiterates the very gender norms that Rousseau himself purportedly instantiates. Despite the intent to point out the porousness of the private and public spheres (and the importance of the former for the latter), it ends up reiterating a model of the heterosexual couple and idealized bourgeois nuclear family as the inevitable and unquestioned norm. More importantly, this reading ignores the ways in which Rousseau himself is critical of both the heterosexual couple and the bourgeois, nuclear family.

It is certainly true that other feminist critics have read Rousseau more ambivalently. For example, both Linda Zerilli in *Signifying Woman: Culture, Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* and more recently Lori Jo Marso in *Manly Citizens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Germaine de Staël’s Subversive Women* have argued that despite his intentions and conscious desire, Rousseau’s writings reveal (perhaps more than his contemporaries) the instability of gender and gender roles he wishes to uphold. That the categories of gender are undermined are, for Zerilli, an inevitable effect of the impossibility of the categories themselves. The signifier “woman” (and “man”) is a phantasmatic production elaborated to keep women in their place (the home) and guarantee the autonomy and privilege of the male subject. According to Zerilli, throughout Rousseau’s writings we find the incessant, hysterical production of the masculine citizen/subject and the expulsion (abjection) and fear of the figure of woman. Yet this attempt to guarantee the borders of sexual difference is undermined by its very rhetorical excess:

What Rousseau teaches and fears is that natural man and woman are pedagogical constructions and highly unstable ones at that. There is a profound sense in his writings that gender boundaries must be carefully fabricated and maintained because they have no solid foundation in nature, because what announces “man” and “woman” is not anatomical difference but instead an arbitrary system of signs that stands in permanent danger of collapsing into frightening ambiguity of meaning and a loss of manly constitution. *For what haunts the writer Rousseau, above all else is the similitude of his sexual other, his dread of becoming a woman—his*
own terrible recognition that, to borrow Shoshana Felman’s words “femininity inhabits masculinity, inhabits it as otherness, as its own disruption.”

Although I am sympathetic to Zerilli’s theoretical approach (her antiessentialism) and her semiotic reading of political theory, it seems misplaced in regard to Rousseau. For it seems that Rousseau hardly fears the “loss of manly constitution,” and he certainly does not “dread becoming a woman.”

Marso has also noted, but in a different manner, the ambivalence of the figure of woman in Rousseau. For Marso this ambivalence is to be read not in the unconscious excess of Rousseau’s language (as Zerilli maintains) but in the tragic fate of Rousseau’s most famous heroines: Julie in Julie and Sophie in Emile or more specifically in the sequel, Emile et Sophie, ou Les Solitaires. Marso argues that there is, in these two figures at least, the suggestion that Rousseau was self-critical of his own masculine political theory. Thus Marso claims (implicitly critiquing Zerilli) that the ambivalence is more overt and more than just unconscious (a function of language).

It is my contention that Rousseau’s ambiguity about his own “solution” (masculine public sphere and the silencing of women) of the social contract points towards a similar recognition. In his impulse to heal the wounds created by the inequalities of the Old Regime, Rousseau seems to advocate a fraternal brotherhood based on male will. But when we shift our perspective to the women the fraternity excludes, Rousseau’s trust in his own solution begins to quake…. Is it the case that Rousseau’s women are merely “celestial objects” who inspire men to become manly citizens? Or does a reading of Rousseau from the perspective of his women point elsewhere? These women clearly realize that they cannot live in a man’s world, the model of manly citizen excludes them and their feminine desire. The results of this exclusion are clear from the fate of Sophie and Julie.

Reading from the perspective of Rousseau’s heroines, Marso argues that it is possible to trace “an alternative conception of citizenship” and an other politics “built on the art of sociability, the value of civil conversation, sensitivity to diversity, and the necessity of engaging radically different perspectives.” I certainly agree with Marso that the “fate of Julie and Sophie” should give
pause to an unequivocal acceptance of Rousseau’s sexism. And indeed, it was largely Marso’s reading of *Emile* and *Julie* that led me to reconsider my initial reading of gender in Rousseau. Where I depart from Marso is that I read both narratives as explicitly critical (rather than implicitly) and as a continuation of Rousseau’s thought rather than a last-minute hesitation in which the “trust in his own solution begins to quake.” I contend that in both stories, Rousseau can be seen as putting forth a very explicit critique of the desirability and inhabitability of a strictly masculine economy instead of an unintentional one; *Emile* and *Julie* are not extraordinary exceptions. And finally, I read both *Julie* and *Les Solitaires* in terms of their overall structure rather than just from the perspective of the female characters (though I do this as well).

To my knowledge, there has been only one feminist critic to actually suggest that Rousseau’s writings are overtly and intentionally critical of a masculine, political, and sexual economy and are even protofeminist. In her compelling analysis, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy*, Juliet Flower MacCannell, reading Rousseau through a post-Freudian psychoanalytic framework, asserts that he is critical of not only the patriarchal discourse of the *ancien régime* but also its substitution, what she terms the new Enlightenment “regime of the brother.” MacCannell argues that the effect of Enlightenment discourse was to supplant the oedipal patriarchal framework with a post-totemic one in which the brother has gained ascendancy and thereby excluded not the mother (who was already irrelevant) but the sister. Rousseau’s critique, though, is not a nostalgic call (or even lament) for a mythical matriarchy (perhaps a critique of Derrida’s reading) but rather an ode to the recently excluded sister under the new regime of *fraternité*.

MacCannell’s reading thus coincides oddly with Landes’s (and others) in that both claim that Enlightenment discourse inaugurates a new fraternal order. The crucial difference is that Rousseau, in MacCannell’s view, is neither a contributor to nor an apologist for the fraternal symbolic but rather the first writer (to be followed by Stendhal, Marguerite Duras, and Hélène Cixous) to provide both a sustained descriptive analysis of this transition and a critique.  

I find MacCannell’s argument to be persuasive and exciting and a much warranted intervention in feminist readings of Rousseau. However, I wish to pursue a slightly different line of argumentation
and within a different theoretical register. As mentioned earlier, MacCannell reads Rousseau via Freud and particularly a Lacanian framework. Though I am not averse to referring to some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I am wary of imposing this framework in toto—particularly its insistence on the primacy and intractability of sexual difference. In its focus on a binary account of sexual difference (despite caveats of the emptiness or formality of this difference) as the foundation of culture, it tends to lead to a normative account of sexual and societal arrangements. I am afraid that this focus on the “two” leads to essentialism.

Of course, part of MacCannell’s project in reading Rousseau is to show the ways in which the feminine has been symbolically excluded (and the costs of this exclusion, not just for women but for men as well) through a hypervaluation of masculinity. The task thus becomes to revalue the feminine through, as Drucilla Cornell has stated, “the power of refiguration through metaphor and, indeed, fantasy and fable.”27 But this refiguration of the feminine doesn’t necessarily have to lead back to a binary of sexual difference—and this is my central disagreement with MacCannell’s position and reading of Rousseau. Rousseau does sometimes take up the position and voice of woman as the ultimate outsider, the abject, but not to restate a binary of sexual difference; instead it is as a means of creating a dissonance, a rift, or displacement of expected gender roles/stereotypes. Consider also that Rousseau’s female characters/protagonists are often coded “masculine”: the reasonable Julie, the independent Claire, and, of course, Sophie d’Houdetot. These are Rousseau’s most important and positive examples of women who exceed any easy gender identification.

The question is, then, in order to revalue the feminine (which has been either devalued or excluded), is it necessary for this reevaluation to keep the old dyadic structure of sexual difference? Might not multiplicity, as Butler has argued, be a more desirable framework?

It seems to me that the future symbolic will be one in which femininity has multiple possibilities where it is... released from the demand to be one thing, or to comply with a singular norm, the norm devised for it by phallogocentric means. But must the framework for thinking about sexual difference be binary for this
feminine multiplicity to emerge? Why can’t the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity?  

This multiplicity Derrida has named the dream of the “innumerable.” But this dream beyond the two to multiplicity or the innumerable is not a dream of sexual neutrality or asexuality; it is as John Caputo has remarked “the displacement of the binarity, of the two sexes, of the figure 2, of the oppositional polarity, of the male/female opposition, which is the very form of the ‘war between the sexes.’” And Rousseau, I would argue, doesn’t just want to include the feminine alongside the masculine but attempts to rethink ways of being and desiring outside of the “two,” the couple. He re-creates throughout his writings new forms of love/desire beyond the familial structure, generating new, possible kinship relationships based on voluntary associations of love and friendship.

*L’Amour à Trois*

It is no secret that Rousseau had a fondness for threesomes. Rousseau’s most important love triangles can be found in *Emile*, *Julie*, and the *Confessions*—though a version of *l’amour à trois* can be found in almost every single one of his writings. Although there have been numerous commentators that have remarked on the prominence of the *ménage à trois* in Rousseau’s writings, there has been much less sustained commentary on its significance as other than another of his odd perversions—MacCannell excepted. (Perhaps this more than anything is a testament to the power of the ideology of the couple and nuclear family?) I would like to suggest, though, that the *ménage à trois* functions in Rousseau’s writings as a critique of both patriarchal and masculine authority and, most importantly, as a possible allegory for new democratic, sexual relationships.

As is typical of Rousseau’s writings, we have both negative and positive versions of *l’amour à trois*. The former can be found in *Emile*, the second part of *Julie*, and the *Confessions*. The latter can be found in the first half of *Julie* and the *Confessions*. The first we might term, rather anachronistically, oedipal and an allegory for tyranny (in the case of paternal or fraternal rule) or nostalgic loss (in the case of mother rule). The second is postoedipal (with
feminine multiplicity to emerge? Why can’t the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity? 

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**L’Amour à Trois**

It is no secret that Rousseau had a fondness for threesomes. Rousseau’s most important love triangles can be found in *Emile*, *Julie*, and the *Confessions*—though a version of *l’amour à trois* can be found in almost every single one of his writings. Although there have been numerous commentators that have remarked on the prominence of the *ménage à trois* in Rousseau’s writings, there has been much less sustained commentary on its significance as other than another of his odd perversions—MacCannell excepted. (Perhaps this more than anything is a testament to the power of the ideology of the couple and nuclear family?) I would like to suggest, though, that the *ménage à trois* functions in Rousseau’s writings as a critique of both patriarchal and masculine authority and, most importantly, as a possible allegory for new democratic, sexual relationships.

As is typical of Rousseau’s writings, we have both negative and positive versions of *l’amour à trois*. The former can be found in *Emile*, the second part of *Julie*, and the *Confessions*. The latter can be found in the first half of *Julie* and the *Confessions*. The first we might term, rather anachronistically, oedipal and an allegory for tyranny (in the case of paternal or fraternal rule) or nostalgic loss (in the case of mother rule). The second is postoedipal (with
an absence of both the father and mother) and an allegory for democracy.

This post-oedipal triangulation of desire leads to a reformulation of kinship relations beyond the nuclear family. Thus Rousseau, I would argue, is not idealizing the family but perhaps calling for its dissolution—at least in its contemporary form. Rousseau is most critical of the authority of the father figure. In a long footnote to the Second Discourse, he writes, “[A]re there not a thousand more frequent and even more dangerous cases in which paternal rights openly offend humanity?” The father represents undemocratic, arbitrary power and despotic rule.

Rousseau will be less critical of the mother. She will be figured as either absent or without much power. (The death of Rousseau’s mother soon after his birth as described in the Confessions, the motherless Emile, and his relationship with Mme de Warens are the most obvious examples.) Of course, as a boy, Rousseau took pleasure in being punished by a strict mother figure (Mlle Lambercier, Mlle Goton, Mme Basile, etc.), but this was a fleeting passion. In all of Rousseau’s writings circle the same themes: a critique of paternal authority, nostalgia for the (absent) mother and maternal love and an intermittent desire to be punished by her (perhaps a propaedeutic stage of love), a critique of contemporary fraternal power, and lastly the evocation of the possibility of reciprocal, generalized love of others. In sum, Rousseau’s writings contain a critique of paternal/fraternal authority, a brief nostalgic longing/desire/guilt for the (now powerless) mother, and finally the dream of a same generation of equal love of others unmarred by competition, jealousy, or the desire for profit. This Rousseau will figure in terms of a positive ménage à trois in which the oedipal framework will be rethought beyond traditional kinship relationships. Rousseau’s articulation of a positive l’amour à trois will articulate love and desire beyond the couple and child, the nuclear family, in egalitarian relationships that always include more than two.

Structure of the Text

In order to elucidate what I have been reading as Rousseau’s critique of paternal/fraternal politics and his gesture toward a protofeminist politics of egalitarian sexual/political relations, I will