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GREATNESS OF SOUL AND THE SOULS OF WOMEN: ROUSSEAU'S USE OF PLATO'S LAWS

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Greatness of Soul and the Souls of Women: Rousseau's Use of Plato's *Laws*

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In his first public statement as a political philosopher, Rousseau condemned the public entertainments of his time and railed against a culture of luxury in which “men have sacrificed their taste to the Tyrants of their liberty.”¹ In a footnote to this statement, he offered an intriguing aside:

I am far from thinking that this ascendancy of women is a harm in itself. It is a gift bestowed upon them by nature for the happiness of the human race: better directed, it might produce as much good as today it does harm. We are not sufficiently aware of what advantages would arise from giving a better education to that half of the human race that governs the other. Men will always be what is pleasing to women: if then you want them to become great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul and virtue is. The reflections this subject

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¹ *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin & Marcel Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-1995), p. 21 [hereafter cited as *O.C.*]. All citations to Rousseau's work will be to this edition, and the translations are my own. Good English editions, keyed to the Pléiade pagination, can be found in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters & Christopher Kelley (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1990-2009); *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. & trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Rousseau: The Social Contract and other later political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

provokes, and which Plato made in bygone times, greatly deserve to be better developed by a pen worthy of following such a master and of defending a cause so great.²

The reflections to which Rousseau refers are found primarily in Plato's *Laws*, and are developed by Rousseau himself in his *Letter to D'Alembert on the Theater*. This article takes a new look at the education of women in the *Laws*, and then shows how Rousseau made use of the dialogue in addressing a specific issue of political reform during his own time. As I hope to show, the obvious parallels involving the political effects of imitative poetry and drama are not the only signs of Plato's influence on Rousseau, and perhaps not the most important. I will also argue that the apparent inconsistency between some of Rousseau's most important recommendations and those found in the *Laws* actually reflects a deeper agreement about the principles on which such reforms should be based.

I. Economic Equality and the Education of Women in the *Laws*

A. The Dorian Starting Point

Socrates is absent from Plato's longest dialogue, in which an elderly Athenian Stranger visits Crete and initiates a conversation with two even more elderly Dorians, a Knossian named Kleinias and a Spartan named Megillus.³ The most significant way in which the Stranger differs from Socrates lies in his willingness to promote and guide a political reform that is to take place in deed rather than in

² Ibid. note *.

³ The Dorians, a Greek tribe or ethnic group, controlled Sparta and Crete as well as a number of other cities during Plato's time. The Athenians belonged to a different tribe, called Ionians. Knossos was one of Crete's principal cities.

speech.⁴

After the Stranger entices his interlocutors with an extended and subtly provocative critique of the Dorians' understanding of politics and their own institutions, Kleinias discloses that he is one of ten men charged with drawing up laws for a new city to be established in Crete. These lawgivers are to begin with a presumption in favor of Knossian laws, but are free to adopt others that appear superior. Kleinias asks that they continue the conversation by constructing a city in speech, which he might find useful in the city that is going to be established in deed.⁵ The Stranger enthusiastically agrees to join in drawing up laws for the city he calls Magnesia,⁶ and he leads the Dorians through an elaborate analysis that mixes Athenian elements (often with significant modifications), along with some entirely novel proposals, into the laws and institutions with which Kleinias and Megillus are familiar.⁷

⁴ For a somewhat more elaborate discussion of this point, see Note A at the end of this article.

⁵ It is not easy to believe that the Stranger just happened to encounter Kleinias on the road up to Mount Ida, and just happened to initiate a very probing and sophisticated conversation about laws and regimes, only to be surprised to learn that Kleinias is about to participate in founding a new city. More likely, the Stranger sought Kleinias out in order to assist him with this project.

⁶ No explanation is given for assigning this name to the city in whose founding Kleinias is to be involved. Perhaps none was needed because the location described by Kleinias corresponded to the site of an abandoned city of that name. See Glenn R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 30-31. In any event, the name is provisional. *Laws* 969a5-6.

⁷ For a detailed comparison of the Stranger's proposals with institutions and practices that are known to have existed in the ancient world, see Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City*. Morrow's emphasis on Plato's innovations with respect to what we would call separation of powers, or checks and balances, is particularly valuable. What we often credit to Locke and Montesquieu may owe a lot to Plato's influence on the Romans, or perhaps it was simply forgotten through inattention to Plato. Either way, Plato's originality in offering proposals that we have come to regard almost as self-evident truths should provide an incentive to give serious thought to those elements of the *Laws* that may strike us as self-evidently wrong.

Among the many themes that Plato weaves together in the *Laws*, I will focus on two that stand out for their relevance to the *Letter to D'Alembert*: the dangers posed by commercial pursuits and economic inequality, and the opportunities offered by what might be called the liberation of women. These themes are closely connected. Before exploring them, however, we must follow the Stranger's effort to prepare his interlocutors for the modification of their traditionally Dorian views on manliness and virtue.

After advocating a novel practice of joining every law with a persuasive prelude, the Stranger proposes that the first law command every man to marry between the ages of thirty and thirty-five; violators are to suffer an annual fine and exclusion from certain honors.⁸ The prelude asserts that everyone by nature desires immortality, and that it is never pious (*hosion*) to deprive oneself voluntarily of the share of immortality that one's children promise — the law punishes this behavior in order to prevent the opinion that remaining single brings “profit and ease.”⁹

It is less than obvious why this should be the first law or why the prelude would be persuasive.¹⁰ Human beings, like other living things, reproduce quite successfully by nature and without legal compulsion or encouragement. Male resistance to marriage ordinarily stems from a reluctance to take on the burdens of supporting a wife and caring for her children, not from simple indifference to the kind of immortality that biological reproduction promises. It is therefore true that bachelorhood can sometimes be a source of “profit and ease,” and that punishment would discourage it. But the most obvious rationales for such punishment — to prevent depopulation

⁸ 721a-d.

⁹ 721b6-d6.

¹⁰ Sparta, at least, seems to have had some such law, but there is no reason to think it was “first” in any sense of the word. See Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* XV.1-2. In Book VI, when the Stranger begins to present the laws in their proper order, he begins with religious gatherings, which turn out to provide fitting occasions to prepare young people of both sexes for marriage. 771a-772a.

of the city and to prevent men from fathering children irresponsibly — are not the reasons given in the prelude. Instead, the prelude reads as though the law wants to do men a favor by encouraging them to satisfy their natural desire for immortality.

Accordingly, the Stranger soon points out that such an explanation is not the *logos* of the law, but only a prelude designed to make men more open to learning.¹¹ What might one who is subject to this law learn? A rational citizen might learn to weigh the value of the fine and loss of honor against the estimated value of the profit and ease of bachelorhood, so that he can decide which is greater. That is what the law standing alone would seem to encourage. Its effectiveness would then depend on the size of the fine and the nature of the dishonors imposed on bachelors, both of which the Stranger leaves unspecified.

The prelude is apparently meant to direct the citizen's thought away from this path, but not toward recognizing that marriage is a duty owed to the city, or to its women and his children. Instead, the prelude encourages the thought that doing what is manifestly good for the city, and for women and children, is good for oneself in a way that is both natural and lofty. Whatever the soundness of this thought may be, the prelude offers no argument to support it. Instead, the prelude offers high-sounding allusions to a qualified or even metaphorical kind of immortality, along with an appeal to religious sentiments or obligations.¹² One cannot help wondering whether a more reliable support for the law would consist in opinions about the forms of "profit and ease" that are good for oneself, opinions that work against strong selfish desires with which nature equips male human beings. The Stranger gradually introduces a number of laws designed to foster such opinions.

¹¹ 723a-b.

¹² An adequate argument would presumably have to explain the value to an individual of the limited and contingent share of immortality that results from having biological descendants.

Although the Stranger indicates that his initial statements about the use of precludes need some qualification, and seems inclined to pursue the matter in more depth, Kleinias is anxious to move the discussion along.¹³ The Stranger acquiesces, and launches into a very lengthy monologue that consumes almost all of Book V. In the course of gratifying Kleinias, and perhaps implicitly rebuking him for his impatience, the Stranger offers a singularly concise statement of his goal: “The purpose (*hupothesis*) of our laws was looking toward this: how [the citizens] will be as happy as possible and to the greatest extent friends to one another.”¹⁴ The Stranger never fully articulates a definition of the human virtue required for happiness, and he frequently acknowledges that civic friendship will inevitably be tenuous and incomplete.¹⁵

In order to see why the Stranger believes he has something useful to teach Kleinias, without seeking to lead him into Socratic

¹³ 723c-724a.

¹⁴ 743c5-6. As a means to achieving these purposes, the Stranger indicates that the lawgiver should aim to make the city (understood as something distinct from the citizens) free, prudent or intelligent, and a friend to itself. See the slightly different formulations at 693b2-5, 701d7-9. On the distinction between the city and the citizens, see also Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1975), p. 175: “By assigning the relatively trivial center of [Book XII] to private matters, he forces us to wonder whether the private is in the last analysis in the service of the public, or whether the public is essentially in the service of the private since it is designed to protect (cf. 920d7-e3) and to foster (666d10-e6) the private.”

¹⁵ Near the very end of the *Laws*, the Stranger aggressively focuses on the incompleteness or inadequacy of what has been said about virtue, and on the need for an institutionalized inquiry about virtue in the new city. See 960b et seq. At many points in the dialogue, the Stranger assumes that there will need to be punishments for deviations from the law, great and small, which indicates that civic friendship will have some pretty sharp limits. He also indicates that a sufficiently precise inquiry would show an incompatibility between the goals of the laws and the institution of private families. See 807b3-7.

philosophy,¹⁶ it may be helpful to begin with the fact that the Stranger offers a very brief description of the best regime, which we can recognize as the city constructed in the *Republic*.¹⁷ Kleinias and Megillus would never have heard of Socrates or his city in speech, and should have been expected to regard such a regime as ludicrous.¹⁸ The Stranger anticipates this by explicitly indicating what

¹⁶ The *Laws* contains only two express allusions to philosophy. One is a reference near the end of the dialogue to mindless attacks by poets on those who philosophize. 967c7-d1. The other is a description of a free physician speaking with a free patient, who uses “discourses (*logoi*) that approach philosophizing.” 857d1-2. For an interpretation of the dialogue that analogizes philosophic politics to a combination of scientific medicine and an effective bedside manner, see Randall Baldwin Clark, *The Law Most Beautiful and Best: Medical Argument and Magical Rhetoric in Plato’s Laws* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003).

At least part of the reason for the Stranger’s reticence about philosophy, which contrasts so strikingly with what we see in the Socratic dialogues, may be suggested by a strange little drama that the Stranger stages for the benefit of Kleinias. Just after acknowledging that males and females differ by nature and just before recommending that the sexes receive the same education, the Stranger makes a number of remarks about the unseriousness of human affairs, culminating in the claim that we are by nature for the most part puppets, sharing only in small portions of the truth. When Megillus strongly objects to this belittling of “our human race,” the Stranger claims to have spoken in this way only because he had been looking away toward the god. He then offers to proceed on the premise cherished by Megillus, that our race is worthy of a certain seriousness. 803a1-804c1. At least until Socrates, philosophers notoriously did seem to look away from and down on human affairs. Perhaps the Stranger wants to warn Kleinias about the lawgiver’s need to indulge many necessary but questionable assumptions, an indulgence that philosophy — including Socratic philosophy — does not permit to the philosopher himself.

¹⁷ 739c-e.

¹⁸ The Stranger mentions that his interlocutors are unfamiliar even with pre-Socratic philosophers. 886c-e. Catherine H. Zuckert argues that the dramatic setting of the *Laws* is pre-Socratic, in large part because the interlocutors mention historical events up to the end of the Persian Wars but say nothing at all about the Peloponnesian Wars. *Plato’s Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 53-54. As Zuckert recognizes, it is at least conceivable that the interlocutors might have avoided this topic in order to facilitate a friendly conversation. She rejects this as implausible, but the obvious allusions to the city of the *Republic* make her own conclusion implausible, for that city was

the *Republic* only implies, namely that such a city cannot be established in deed. The city being constructed in the *Laws* is characterized as one that is modeled on this most beautiful city, while being adapted to the constraints or necessities of action. The Stranger also indicates that Magnesia will presumably have to depart in some respects even from this second-best city in speech.

One consequence of the Stranger's approach is that he will not attempt to maximize both of his goals — individual happiness and civic friendship — but rather will accept tradeoffs in an effort to maximize the sum of what may in some respects be incommensurable goods.¹⁹ As we will see, he suggests that the most practical way to do this is through a modification of existing laws and institutions that already aim at civic friendship and at virtue.

Early in the dialogue, the Stranger elicits from Kleinias a very conventional Dorian understanding of politics. The aim of the Cretan laws, says Kleinias, is war, and it needs to be their aim because defeat brings ruin while the victors take from the vanquished all good

probably unheard of before Socrates began talking about it. See Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), p. 137. The allusions to Socrates' beautiful city are at least as hard to reconcile with Zuckert's thesis as the silence about the Peloponnesian Wars is hard to reconcile with a contrary thesis. In the *Menexenus*, moreover, Socrates recounts historical events that took place after his death, 245e-246a, which should caution us to refrain from assuming that the dramatic date of every dialogue can be inferred from its allusions to such events.

¹⁹ Later, the Stranger introduces Kleinias and Megillus to incommensurable magnitudes. 819d-820c. He says that all human beings are by nature in a laughable and shameful ignorance about this, which makes them seem more like pigs than humans, and he claims that after learning about this (rather recently it appears) he became ashamed not only for himself but for all the Greeks. 819d1-e1. This bizarre confession and indictment is most directly tied to the ensuing discussion, at 821a-822c, of education about the relation between the heavenly bodies or celestial gods and "the greatest god and the whole cosmos," 821a2. But that discussion may in turn help Kleinias to appreciate the difficulties that must arise when dealing with incommensurable political goals.

things.²⁰ Kleinias then agrees that a state of war also exists among villages and families and individuals. Finally, the Stranger asks whether an individual is an enemy to himself. At this point, Kleinias fairly gushes over the Stranger's success in showing why it is right to say that all are enemies of all in public, and that in private each is an enemy of himself.

What has so pleased Kleinias, it seems, is that his view of universal warfare among human beings has now been logically joined with an edifying vision of individual self-discipline and self-improvement. This seems to make perfect sense of the achievements for which the Dorians were most famous: military success against other cities and the self-discipline on which that success rested. But what about the intermediate relationships, among villages and households and individuals? If they are all enemies of one another, why should they treat one another any differently than cities treat each other, making war when victory seems feasible and treating peace as nothing but a truce?

The Stranger calls attention to this difficulty by asking Kleinias to consider a household in which more of the brothers are unjust and fewer are just.²¹ What judge would we choose for them? One who destroyed the worse brothers and gave self-rulership to the others? One who made the worthy brothers rule and the others willing to be ruled? Or (apparently as an afterthought) one "third in virtue," who could reconcile them all by giving them laws that would secure their lasting friendship? Kleinias thinks the third is obviously best, and the Stranger immediately points out that the aim of such laws would be peace, rather than war, contrary to the theory that Kleinias had embraced shortly before.

The second alternative resembles the one presented in the *Republic*; the one chosen by Kleinias is to guide the construction of

²⁰ 625c-626b.

²¹ 627c-628e.

Magnesia.²² As Kleinias should surmise from the contradiction between his understanding of Cretan institutions and his choice of the third alternative, this will require some fundamental modifications of those institutions. Two of the most important involve the distribution of property and the education of women.

B. Economics and Women

Both of the Dorians had said that a well governed city must be oriented toward victory in war.²³ Consistent with Kleinias' subsequent conflation of victory in war with victory over oneself, the Stranger interprets him to mean an orientation toward the manly virtue of courage, which is associated with the love of honor and of accumulating honor through wealth.²⁴ The Stranger strongly praises Crete and Sparta for their orientation toward virtue, while showing his interlocutors why virtue cannot be adequately understood as courage or manliness alone. Aristotle presents the same critique from a more straightforwardly practical perspective, and a brief summary may usefully introduce a discussion of the Stranger's proposed reforms of Dorian institutions.

Aristotle singles out the Spartans for special praise, saying that their lawgiver was one of the few who took care about the upbringing and pursuits of the people — he denigrates the private freedom found in most cities as “Cyclopean.”²⁵ In his evaluation of the Spartan regime, Aristotle specifically cites with approval Plato's criticism in the *Laws* of an exclusive focus on a part of virtue, namely military virtue. He adds that this focus prevented the Spartans from knowing

²² The first alternative is taken up by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*. 293a-e; Seth Benardete, *Plato's "Laws": The Discovery of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pg. 15.

²³ 626c.

²⁴ 630b-632e. The Greek word for courage, *andreia*, literally means “manliness.”

²⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1180a24-29; see also 1102a8-11.

how to use their leisure from war or how to practice anything but war — they considered the fruits of victory to be better than the virtue that produces victory.²⁶

Aristotle also identifies numerous practical defects in the Spartan regime, many of which relate to the arrangement of offices. A more fundamental problem has been persistent difficulties with the helots, but he notes that Crete has a similar system that causes less trouble, apparently because the Cretan cities do not have neighbors with an interest in fomenting slave revolts.²⁷ Aristotle and Plato both cast serious doubt on the justice of slavery, but not on its necessity.²⁸ As we will see, the Stranger's proposed innovations concerning women are intimately connected with his economic proposals, and those proposals depend on the use of slaves.²⁹

Aristotle's most extended critique of the most fundamental Spartan institutions links greed with the failure to attend to the virtue of women. Sparta's slackness with regard to women, he says, harms both the plan of the regime and the happiness of the city.³⁰ "The lawgiver [i.e. Lycurgus], who wanted the whole city to be steadfast, was conspicuous in this concerning the men, but was negligent toward the women; they live intemperately in regard to

²⁶ *Politics* 1271a41-b10.

²⁷ *Politics* 1269a34-b12; cf. 1272b16-23 (noting that this Cretan advantage did not last forever).

²⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Note B at the end of this article.

²⁹ Cf. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, ch. 15, O.C. III, p. 431:

There are some unhappy situations in which one can preserve one's liberty only at the expense of another's, and the Citizen can be perfectly free only if the slave is perfectly enslaved. That was the situation of Sparta. As for you, modern peoples, you have no slaves, but you are slaves; you pay for their liberty with your own.

³⁰ *Politics* 1269b12-14.

every kind of intemperance and luxuriously.”³¹ Women, who could inherit and own property,³² made wealth a thing of honor by their influence over men,³³ and this was aggravated by defective land laws that allowed some citizens to become very rich while others fell into poverty.³⁴ The result was that the population declined,³⁵ and the dissolute women were worse than useless, even when the city itself was threatened by an invasion.³⁶

Why did Lycurgus make this mistake? Not because he failed to recognize a problem, it seems. The men for whom he legislated had already been prepared for the tough discipline of his laws by extended military campaigns against a series of enemies. Lycurgus apparently tried to subject the women to legal discipline as well, but he gave up when they resisted.³⁷

It is not hard to imagine why the women would have resisted, and resisted strongly. In a military culture, men do the fighting, and men get the honor. What would there be for women to do except to enjoy the goods that their men win in battle, not only against other cities but in the unending war against the helots? The kind of harsh discipline imposed by the laws of Lycurgus would hardly contribute to this role for women, and it would certainly have had no intrinsic attraction for them. Spartan women, moreover, were not passive consumers of booty won by their men. Aristotle indicates that they

³¹ 1269b19-23.

³² 1270a23-25.

³³ 1269b23-34.

³⁴ 1270a11-18.

³⁵ 1270a25-34.

³⁶ 1269b34-39.

³⁷ 1270a4-8.

became demanding consumers,³⁸ and were thus an important driving source of the Spartan error of giving more honor to the fruits of virtue than to virtue itself.³⁹

The Athenian Stranger sets out to solve the interrelated problems of undisciplined women and economic greed. The economic solution has two main elements. First, the arable land of the city will be divided into plots of equal productive potential, and every family of citizens will have one and only one of these plots (along with the equipment needed to put it to use). Citizens will support themselves through farming, an economic activity that can be performed largely by slaves, and one that has a natural limit on the wealth it can produce. The citizens will be forbidden to work as artisans or to pursue commercial activities. These occupations — which generally reward the practitioner in proportion to his talent and effort, and which have almost no limit either on the attention they can demand or on the material rewards they can bring — will be performed solely by metics or other aliens.⁴⁰ Second, the allotments of real estate will be inalienable, and no household will be permitted to acquire a total sum of wealth exceeding five times the value of that allotment.

The advantages of this scheme in promoting friendship among the citizens are obvious. By preventing anyone from falling into abject poverty, it guards against the disturbances that a population of pauper citizens always seems to generate. By preventing anyone from amassing huge amounts of wealth, it discourages the hubris to which the very rich are always prone. And it does so without appealing to dreams of political communism, a fantasy that Aristotle skillfully and

³⁸ 1269b23-34.

³⁹ 1271b6-10.

⁴⁰ Citizens will not even be permitted to use their own slaves for these purposes. 846d. The Stranger also proposes a number of other laws designed to keep this economic system stable, including a ban on the private ownership of precious metals, a refusal to make contracts among citizens legally enforceable, and a limit on the time that metics can remain in the city. See, e.g., 741e-742c; 850b-c.

concisely punctured long before it fired the modern imagination.⁴¹

No less important, this scheme serves the other purpose of the Stranger's laws. Material goods are useful to the individual only insofar as they benefit his body and soul.⁴² Some such goods are obviously necessary and beneficial, but pursuing material wealth beyond this point will simply divert one's time and attention away from the ends for which wealth is useful to oneself. This proposition is not hard to accept in the abstract, but it is extremely difficult to follow in practice. It is less than obvious what activities will best foster the well being of one's soul, what amount of wealth is needed for the pursuit of those activities, which of these activities require the renunciation of pleasures that wealth can buy, and how much wealth one should accumulate as a hedge against future contingencies.

Establishing a fixed limit on the amount of wealth that a family can accumulate will effectively force the citizens to turn their ambition in a different direction. But that will only create new and possibly worse problems if they are left in a position like that of the Spartan women: provided with leisure by their use of slave labor, but left without guidance in the prudent use of that leisure.⁴³ An important step in the Stranger's remedy for this problem comes in his proposals for the education of women.

C. The Education of Women

Consistent with his overall rhetorical strategy, the Stranger begins by praising the unique Dorian practice of common meals,

⁴¹ *Politics* 1263b15-29. Non-political communism is a somewhat different matter. See, e.g., *Laws* 678e-680e (and note that at 680a9 the Stranger says that even life before there were cities was already in some way a polity); Nelson Lund, "Philosophic Anthropology in Rousseau and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas," in *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon R. Kass*, eds. Yuval Levin, Thomas W. Merrill, & Adam Schulman (Lanham, Md.: Roman & Littlefield, 2010).

⁴² See 743d-e.

⁴³ See 806e-807a.

which he supposes must have arisen from accident or necessity during war, and then been found to be more generally beneficial.⁴⁴ With some hesitation, he suggests that Kleinias' new city might be able to do what would not be tolerated anywhere else, namely establish common meals for women as well. Like Aristotle, the Stranger regards the Dorians' failure to discipline their women as a serious mistake. His diagnosis of the problem, however, is considerably more elaborate.

In what sounds at first like a concession to the manly prejudices of his interlocutors, he says, "[T]he race of us humans that is by nature rather more secretive and wily on account of its weakness, the female, being in disorder, was incorrectly neglected by the lawgiver's yielding to it. . . . what relates to the women, overlooked and left in disorder, is not only half [of the lawgiving task], as it might seem; by so much as our female nature is inferior to that of the male with respect to virtue, it contributes to [the lawgiving task] being more than doubled."⁴⁵ It is a fact, however, not a prejudice, that women are by nature inferior to men *in the kind of bodily strength that most contributes to military virtue*.⁴⁶ In a military culture, or more generally a culture that celebrates manliness, women would have little choice but to pursue their own welfare through indirect means. Being "secretive and wily" is a natural and reasonable response to the

⁴⁴ 780b2-d1.

⁴⁵ 781a2-b4. My translation of this difficult passage has been influenced by Tormod Eide, "Including the Women in Plato's *Laws*: A Note on Book 6, 781a-b," *Symbolae Osloenses* 77: no. 1, 106-09 (Nov. 2010).

⁴⁶ Catherine McKeen believes that Plato regards women as "morally inferior" to men, and that his "clear implication" in this passage is that "women are inferior in virtue as a matter of nature, and not simply as a matter of bad training or teaching." Catherine McKeen, "Why Women Must Guard and Rule in Plato's Kallipolis," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87: 527, 541, 544 n.2 (2006). I believe that McKeen has conflated the impression that Kleinias and Megillus might easily have gotten with what Plato must have thought. For a careful reading of the text, which comes closer to my interpretation, see T.J. Saunders, "Plato on Women in the *Laws*," in *The Greek World*, ed. Anton Powell (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 591, 592-93.

subordination imposed on the physically weaker half of the population, for much the same reason that being secretive and wily would be a reasonable way for a slave to cope with the circumstances in which he finds himself.⁴⁷

The Stranger sets out to correct, or at least ameliorate, this defect in the Dorian regime. In some ways, his proposals correct the Dorian view of virtue, and in some ways they correct nature's disparate treatment of the sexes. The first major step is a reconsideration of marriage. As the Stranger emphasizes, sexual desire produces the most fiery madness,⁴⁸ a form of mental illness that marriage is meant to treat. But marriage cannot do this very well unless the spouses are physically attracted to each other. Accordingly, he proposes that young people of both sexes appear nearly naked during public dances "viewing and being viewed," thus helping to avoid mistaken nuptial choices.⁴⁹ As we will see, a version of these dances assumes an important place in Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert*.

The Stranger's institution of "mating dances" is supplemented with exhortations of a different kind: men are to be encouraged to lean in favor of a wife who comes from a family *below* his own economic class, and from a family whose natural dispositions seem

⁴⁷ These are also qualities that enable women to assist men who may not realize they need assistance. Plato, moreover, is himself a secretive and wily writer. Among countless examples, compare the Stranger's proof of the existence of the gods, 893b-899b, which assumes that the cosmos came into being, with his much earlier statement, 781e7-782a2, that "every man (*anēr*) needs to well understand this much, that the coming into being of human beings either had absolutely no beginning and will never have an end, but always was and surely will be, or that some immensely long time would have elapsed since its beginning." In their own very different way, the very manly men of the Spartan *krupteia* were also secretive and wily. See, e.g., Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 4.80; Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* XXVIII.1-4.

⁴⁸ 782e6-783a3.

⁴⁹ 771e-772a.

to complement rather than match his own.⁵⁰ Unlike the first proposal, the focus of this one is on channeling the citizen's thoughts toward what is good for the city rather than toward what seems most pleasant to himself. As can easily be seen, this set of proposals is analogous to the treatment of economic activities. In both cases, citizens are not asked to defy nature by adhering to a strict egalitarian or communistic principle, but are encouraged to temper their self-indulgence out of respect for the common interest.

A similar pattern is followed in the regulation of marital relationships. Childbearing and the rearing of children is to be treated as a public duty (which is not what we would have expected from the prelude to the "first law"), and female officers will be appointed to supervise parents by visiting their homes for inspections and exhortations — these inspectors, moreover, will prosecute recalcitrant parents for raising their children poorly.⁵¹ This defiance of parents' natural jealousy about the upbringing of their own children in their own homes is combined with a remarkable concession to natural human selfishness. Married couples are to procreate for no longer than ten years, which will provide leisure from the most onerous duties of parenthood during an extended period of life, especially for women.

The Stranger carries this policy even further. Adultery during these childbearing years, or with a married person who is in the years of childbearing, will incur legal penalties. For those beyond this age, however, there will be no legal penalties for adultery. Those who behave temperately should enjoy a good reputation, and as long as most people live in a measured way, the law should be silent.⁵² It is not clear whether the Stranger means that temperance and measured behavior refers to marital fidelity, or to adultery that is infrequent or discreet. What is clear is that the law will be much more tolerant of

⁵⁰ 773a-c.

⁵¹ 784a-d.

⁵² 784e-785a.

self-indulgent behavior in these circumstances than of self-indulgent behavior that interferes with the production and rearing of legitimate children.

This discussion ends with a comment that a woman will be eligible for public offices at the age of forty (approximately a decade after she would have had her last child) and a man at the age of thirty (approximately a decade after he becomes an adult).⁵³ The Stranger recognizes that nature imposes a distinct role for women in human life, but seeks to limit the effect of that distinction on their lives. More provocatively, he adds that men will be eligible for military service between the ages of twenty and sixty, and women from the end of their childbearing until the age of fifty.

The provocation is given a more elaborate form in the educational proposals that follow. Public education, conducted by metics under the supervision of public officials, will be compulsory.⁵⁴ Girls are to be given the same musical (or, as we would say, liberal) education as boys, with due allowance for the natural differences between the sexes. Thus, for example, music that is magnificent and inclined toward manliness should be called masculine, and what leans toward the orderly and temperate should be designated as more feminine in law and speech.⁵⁵ Much more surprisingly, the Stranger proposes that girls be given the same military training as boys.⁵⁶ This is shocking when one considers the extreme physical demands that were placed on soldiers in the ancient world. One might at least have expected the Stranger to exempt women from hoplite training, especially since Kleinias had mentioned early in the dialogue that the uneven terrain in Crete made hoplites less useful than in some other

⁵³ 785b.

⁵⁴ 804d-e; 813e.

⁵⁵ 802d8-e11.

⁵⁶ In a somewhat ambiguous passage, the Stranger seems to allow girls to opt out of the preliminary training in military exercises. 794c8-d2. He subsequently withdraws this suggestion. 804d6-805d2.

parts of Greece.⁵⁷ But no. Boys and girls will get the same gymnastic and military training, and women will be expected to serve in combat if they are needed.⁵⁸

The Stranger insists that women are capable of this, and he cites as evidence the Sarmatian and Amazon warriors.⁵⁹ He also develops a practical argument, according to which circumstances could arise in which the male warriors would be unable to protect the city (because of their insufficient numbers or because they are fighting elsewhere). By massively increasing the number of potential combat troops, the Stranger provides for such an eventuality; perhaps more important, he increases the deterrent effect that the city's military resources can be expected to have on would-be invaders. One could easily make analogous arguments about the advantages of making women eligible for public offices, a proposal that the Stranger offers almost in passing, presumably because it is less shocking and in any event almost a logically necessary consequence of requiring military service of women.⁶⁰

These arguments are not implausible, but I think that the

⁵⁷ 625d. Notwithstanding what Kleinias had said, the Stranger praises hoplite training because it develops steadfastness in a way that other modes of combat do not. 706b7-c7. Later, he pointedly makes the possession of heavy arms a condition of voting for certain offices. 753b4-7.

⁵⁸ 813d-814b. The Stranger had prepared this suggestion with a discussion of the relation between the right and left limbs of the human body: nature makes one side somewhat stronger, but we decide whether to cultivate that natural difference or compensate for it through training. In our time, a basketball player practices free throws with his strong arm only, but competitive pressures require him to become as ambidextrous as possible in making layups. The Stranger advocates a literal training in the ambidextrous use of weapons, and invites Kleinias to see the analogy in the city's training of women. 794d-795e.

⁵⁹ 804d-806c.

⁶⁰ For this reason, I doubt that T.J. Saunders is right to think that if public offices are generally to be open to women it is "very strange that Plato makes no parade of the innovation." "Plato on Women in the *Laws*," p. 593. Saunders, however, rightly declines to infer that Plato necessarily rejects the innovation.

Stranger's larger aim is to curtail the contempt for women that naturally arises in men when they take on the role of protector for which their greater physical strength in fact suits them well. There is a simple and logical argument that men will almost always find congenial. We the stronger provide and protect, and you the weaker should therefore serve and be ruled.⁶¹ This argument looks all the more plausible when women respond, as they almost must respond, by becoming secretive and wily — the superiority of men is then confirmed in their minds by the effect that their claim to superiority has on women. The Stranger means to break this chain of logic, for the benefit of both sexes.⁶²

Given the natural differences between the sexes, in physical strength and in their reproductive roles, it is true that very few women could ever be expected to excel in military virtue. It is also true, however, that few men can truly excel in it either. Apart from the physical differences among males, moreover, military heroism does not confer a proportionately greater claim to rule.⁶³ That would be especially true in a city, like Magnesia, that is meant to shun wars of conquest. By including women as a part of the city's military force, even if as an auxiliary part, the Stranger's law will make it harder for men to argue or believe that women have less claim to rule than men. Even generals are not required to be heroes (although they certainly

⁶¹ In the *Republic*, Adeimantus articulates a version of this argument when he raises an objection to requiring the guardians of the emerging just city to be ill-paid servants of the weaker citizens. 419a1-420a8. Aristotle provides a different kind of illustration when he alludes to a madman who receives sound counsel from a woman he took as booty in war — counsel that would have saved him from destruction — and rebukes her with the comment that “silence brings adornment (*kosmos*) to a woman.” *Politics* 1260a30 (quoting Sophocles, *Ajax* 293).

⁶² The Stranger had hinted at his goal even before Kleinias had revealed that he was to participate in founding a city. See 689e-690d, where he lists seven disparate claims to rule without mentioning the claim of men to rule women.

⁶³ Even in the *Iliad*, the extraordinary prowess of an Achilles, an Ajax, or a Diomedes was primarily a source of glory rather than of political influence, and the mode of warfare practiced in Plato's time provided even less scope for claims to rulership based on individual feats of valor.

may not be cowards), and political rulers need not be distinguished military figures. The military education of women, and their availability for combat, thus serves to qualify them to participate in the city's public life and political offices, and I believe even in the highest offices.⁶⁴ In this city, the natural distinctions between men and women are to be less politically significant than the natural differences among people in their intellectual gifts.⁶⁵

One might think that giving the sexes a substantially common education, and substantially common obligations and opportunities to participate in public life, should be pretty adequate for curing the very serious defect that the Stranger and Aristotle both point out in the Dorian regimes. This thought seems to be confirmed by the Stranger's failure to demand strict equality of the sexes within the family, let alone to abolish the family as Socrates does in the *Republic*. Only men will inherit real property, and it appears that they will assume the traditional role as head of household.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Note C at the end of this article.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., 818a. At one point, the Stranger seems to suggest that military training for women, and perhaps education more generally, will help them avoid an unthinking reliance on religion as a response to serious problems. 814a-b.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., 923c-924a. It should be stressed that Magnesian women will have considerably greater rights and privileges in family life than Athenian women did. See Saunders, "Plato on Women in the *Laws*," pp. 598-602.

Susan Okin, whose interest in Plato is manifestly subordinate to her own commitment to promoting "the thoroughly equal treatment of women," appears to believe that "Plato's general attitude to and beliefs about women, which reflect much of the highly misogynic Greek tradition," prevented him from carrying out "his professed intentions in the *Laws* to emancipate women and make full use of the talents that he was now convinced they had." Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 10, 27, 50. Those who are wedded to political convictions like Okin's will presumably find Plato as disappointing as she does. Arlene Saxonhouse rightly stresses that the *Laws* (unlike the *Republic*) proposes a model that "takes men and women as they are, as they arrive from various communities around Greece." Arlene Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 57. Much more dubiously, she concludes that "in Plato's vision, [women can never] fit

The Stranger, however, is not satisfied to leave things here, and he returns yet again to the obstreperous problem of sex and sexual inequality. Early in Book I, he had annoyed the Spartan Megillus by mentioning that city's unsavory reputation for pederasty and for the looseness of its women.⁶⁷ Now, having completed the discussion of the education of the Magnesians, he describes their situation in a way that can remind us of the Spartan women: released from hard labor, forbidden to engage in commercial pursuits, and preoccupied throughout their lives with sacrifices, festivals, and choruses.⁶⁸ What would stop natural erotic desire from filling the leisured vacuum, upending families, and disordering public life?⁶⁹ Pederasty may serve to divert men from fathering illegitimate children, but the Stranger declares that on this issue he must completely reject the practices of Crete and Sparta, which have been found to be such excellent starting points in many other ways.⁷⁰

After presenting a very puzzling analysis that approves only of what we would call "platonic" loves among men, the Stranger secures the ready agreement of Megillus, which he interprets to mean that the Spartan has given up his defense of Spartan sexual practices.⁷¹ But

comfortably into the world of political activity." Ibid., p. 62.

⁶⁷ 636a-637c.

⁶⁸ 835d-e.

⁶⁹ We can see a somewhat similar state of affairs among modern college students, who are given leisure to cultivate the virtue of their own bodies and souls, and provided with analogues to sacrifices, festivals, and choruses.

⁷⁰ 836b-c.

⁷¹ 836d-837a. One commentator has sought to resolve the puzzles in this passage. V. Bradley Lewis, "Reason Striving to Become Law: Nature and Law in Plato's *Laws*," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 54 (2009), 67, 82-84. In doing so, however, Lewis concedes that he must "greatly simplif[y] a complicated text." Whether or not Lewis' simplified explanation is correct, I doubt that anyone could understand the Stranger's argument without considerable reflection. For that reason, Megillus' immediate acquiescence in its conclusion shows how much progress the Stranger has made in leading him away from fidelity to all things

how will the Dorian citizens of Magnesia be persuaded to forsake the pleasures of pederasty? The Stranger expects tremendous resistance, which he describes in colorful terms.⁷² At the same time, he holds out the hope of discouraging all non-procreative sex, not just homosexuality but also fornication and adultery, and apparently even onanism.⁷³

His main argument is that the taboo on incest shows that such self-denial is feasible since people everywhere have learned to regard the very thought of incestuous acts with horror.⁷⁴ Because people have proved that they can tolerate a prohibition against having sex with a few close relatives, they should apparently be able to tolerate a prohibition on having sex at all, outside of a monogamous marriage. Apart from the comically defective logic underlying this supposition,⁷⁵ the analogy to incest doesn't fit very well with the Stranger's claim that homosexuality (or non-procreative sex more generally) is wrong because it is unnatural. Even the most casual observations of the animal world indicate that the sexual drive has procreation as its natural purpose, but such observations also suggest that the incest

Dorian.

⁷² 839b. This may help to explain why Kleinias cannot be expected to decide just yet whether the Stranger's proposal is a useful one. See 837e, 842a.

⁷³ 838e. The Stranger also mentions abortions and infanticides, 838e7-8, a reminder that the desire to escape the expense and trouble of raising children, i.e. a desire for "profit and ease," 721d4, provides a significant incentive for choosing extramarital sexual outlets. The "platonic pederasty" that the Stranger had seemed to approve would of course also allow such an escape, but it would presumably be rare for such chaste relationships to be chosen as a complete substitute for physically gratifying forms of intercourse.

⁷⁴ 838a-e.

⁷⁵ The Stranger also notes that some athletes remain celibate during training, overlooking both the temporary nature of this self-restraint and the fact that serious athletic training resembles nothing so much as the excessive and illiberal physical labor from which Magnesian citizens will be released. See 835d8-e1, where the Stranger notes that such physical labor "most of all extinguishes wantonness."

taboo must have a different purpose.

I think the Stranger's effort to extend the incest taboo to other forms of non-procreative sex, and especially to male homosexuality, has little to do with what is natural and much to do with his goal of elevating women. Much of the appeal of homosexuality in Dorian culture must have arisen from the sense that men, being by nature superior to women, are worthier objects of love. That would explain Megillus' quick agreement with the Stranger's argument — an argument that is in fact quite puzzling — for the superiority of “platonic pederasty.”⁷⁶ It would also explain why the Stranger makes a point of noting that the homosexual act happens to involve one of the partners in “imitating the female.”⁷⁷ And it would explain why the most specific benefit that the Stranger expects to be gained by his reform of Dorian practices is that it will make “husbands friendly [or dear] to their own wives.”⁷⁸ Precisely because the sexual drive itself is so strong, a taboo against homosexual relations would do little to promote “platonic” friendships among men, and perhaps do a lot to promote conjugal friendships between men and women.⁷⁹

Consistent with his earlier willingness to tolerate a certain amount of adultery after the procreative period of life has ended, the Stranger concludes this discussion by offering a choice between two

⁷⁶ 837c-d.

⁷⁷ 836e1-2. In one sense, of course, this observation may reinforce the Stranger's claim that such acts are unnatural. More vividly, however, it reminds one that there is a certain illusion involved in supposing that pederasty transcends whatever grubbiness one might associate with opposite-sex intercourse.

⁷⁸ 839b1. The adjective *philos*, meaning “friendly,” has both an active and passive sense. The Stranger may be exploiting the ambiguity to suggest that his reform will lead to mutual affection between husbands and wives.

⁷⁹ For a subtle and erudite exploration of the role of homoeroticism in Greek political thought, see Paul W. Ludwig, *Eros & Politics: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Ludwig's brief discussion of women in the *Laws* (*ibid.*, p. 306 n.116) has a different focus than I offer in this article, but I do not believe the two are inconsistent.

laws, or two versions of one law. The first alternative demands perfect marital fidelity.⁸⁰ The second alternative seems to permit adultery, at least with slaves and concubines, so long as such activities are successfully concealed. What the two alternatives have in common is a strict prohibition against male homosexual relations. By saying that these two alternatives might be called one law, the Stranger suggests that this prohibition is the crucial one. What makes it crucial cannot be the non-procreative character of such relations, a feature that they have in common with many kinds of heterosexual relations and certainly with onanism, which is now not mentioned at all. Rather, the strict ban on homosexuality can be seen as an element in the Stranger's larger project of taming the contempt for women that contributes to the Dorian glorification of pederasty and helps to justify it.

D. Alternatives to the Equality of Women

The Stranger's extremely radical proposals about the role of women in the city had no basis in the practices of any known culture.⁸¹ The Dorians take manly virtue seriously, but have not thought enough about the virtue of women. Left to amuse themselves in private life, Dorian women are "liberated" for self-indulgence, and their ineradicable influence over men weakens the virtue of the men by helping to infect them with the love of wealth. At an opposite extreme are the Thracian barbarians who treat women as slaves to be used for manual labor.⁸² The Athenians take yet a different approach, depriving women of education and excluding them from public life, but assigning them to manage the home.

The Stranger frequently emphasizes the practical benefits for

⁸⁰ 841d.

⁸¹ 805d-806c.

⁸² Aristotle attributes this practice to barbarians generally, *Politics* 1252b5-6, though he may expect his readers to recognize that he is overgeneralizing. At the very least, this statement seems inconsistent with his highly favorable description of the (non-Greek) Carthaginian regime. 1272b24-1273b26.

the city, especially but not only with respect to war, of forcing women out of the home and into public life. He leaves little doubt, however, that his underlying goal involves the happiness of individual citizens, understood as something inseparable from the pursuit or practice of human virtue.⁸³ The Stranger's critique of manly virtue, and his implicit rejection of the Athenians' notion of feminine virtue, would seem to require a novel understanding of human virtue that can justify his novel proposals about the way to pursue that goal.

The Stranger does not purport to provide this new understanding to his Dorian interlocutors. The dialogue ends with the suggestion that the city will have to search for human virtue, and thus for the happiness of the citizens, under the leadership of the nocturnal council.⁸⁴ We might see the equality of women in the Stranger's city as a means of removing one of the most powerful obstacles to that search, namely the strong male propensity to confuse manly virtue with human virtue. We, in our turn, might be moved to conduct such a search for ourselves.

Rousseau, as I hope to show, used the *Laws* in a different way. Kleinias repeatedly indicates that he expects to choose what he finds useful among the Stranger's proposals after he has seen them all

⁸³ See, e.g., 790a8-b6; 828d5-829a8; 840c5-6; 858d6-9; 870b6-c1.

⁸⁴ The nocturnal council was first introduced as a body charged with helping misguided religious heretics to reform. 908a-909a. In Book XII, it is described in more detail, and assigned to debrief selected citizens who have traveled for the purpose of studying other cities. 951a-952e. At the end of the dialogue, this council is assigned to undertake a quest for the knowledge that will be needed for the preservation of the city. 960b-968e. It is not entirely clear that all three functions will be performed by exactly the same people. See, e.g., Harvey Flaumenhaft, "The Silence of the Spartan: City, Soul, and Study of the Stars in the Epilogue to Plato's Last and Longest Dialogue," in *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon R. Kass*, eds. Yuval Levin, Thomas W. Merrill, & Adam Schulman (Lanham, Md.: Roman & Littlefield, 2010), pp.74-75. More important, the Stranger emphatically denies that the conversation now coming to its end has disclosed what these guardians of the city will need to know about virtue, or its relation to "the beautiful and the good," 965c-966a, and he denies that the education they will need can be described in advance, 968d-e.

explained. Rousseau takes up this suggestion for himself, and adapts the Stranger's radical teaching about the education of women to serve a highly conservative goal.

II. Preserving Women from Miseducation: The *Letter to D'Alembert*

When Rousseau first mentioned that Plato was the master he would wish to follow in promoting an appropriate education for women, he could hardly have foreseen the occasion that would provoke him to take up his pen in defense of that cause. The *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in which he made this comment, together with the ensuing *Discourse on Inequality*, soon established his position as a major philosophical voice in the French Enlightenment. That voice, of course, was one of rebellion against core elements of the Enlightenment project itself, and against Rousseau's own circle of philosophical friends.

A public break with these friends, and especially with his close companion Diderot, came in response to D'Alembert's article on Geneva in the *Encyclopedia*.⁸⁵ The article itself was highly favorable to the city of Rousseau's birth. It described a prosperous, democratic polity populated with industrious and well educated citizens, largely free of conflicts between the civil and religious authorities, and open to scientific enlightenment.⁸⁶ D'Alembert singled out the Genevan

⁸⁵ As so often happens with Rousseau, his philosophizing and his personal life become entangled in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. For a brief and useful treatment of the factual background, see Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1754-1762* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 128-37. The subtleties and difficulties presented by Rousseau's use of personal elements in his writings, here and elsewhere, raise a myriad of interesting questions that I will not attempt to pursue in this article.

⁸⁶ "Geneva," in *Lettre de M. D'Alembert à M. J.-J. Rousseau sur l'article "Genève" tiré du septième volume de l'Encyclopédie Avec quelques autres pièces qui y sont relatives* (Amsterdam: Zacharie Chatelain & fils, 1759) [hereafter cited as "*Geneva Collection*"], pp. 1-40. An English translation of D'Alembert's "Geneva" is available in *Collected Works of Rousseau*, ed. Masters & Kelly, vol. 10, pp. 239-49, and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D'Alembert on the*

clergy for special praise, suggesting that they had largely jettisoned both political ambition and the superstitious elements of Christianity.⁸⁷ All in all, D'Alembert intimated, an admirable small model of what other European nations could aspire to become if the priests and the princes could ever be dislodged from their pernicious grip on power.

Rousseau, who had himself contributed articles to the *Encyclopedia* and long been friendly with its editors, including D'Alembert, found amidst all this praise a mortal threat to the happy institutions that the article described. In what an ordinary reader might have seen as a peripheral and casual recommendation, D'Alembert suggested that Geneva could become even more agreeable a place if a theater were established there. In his view, the major obstacle was the Genevans' fear that a company of dissolute actors would corrupt the youth, but he thought this could be avoided by strict regulation of their behavior. A good theater would refine the atmosphere of the city, improve the tastes of the citizens, and

Theatre, ed. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 139-48.

⁸⁷ D'Alembert praised the "many" Genevan clergy who reject the divinity of Jesus, the existence of Hell, and all things called mysteries. In his somewhat intricate response to this allegation of deism, Rousseau argues that D'Alembert is either speculating that the pastors are heretics or betraying their confidences. *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 9-15. In response to Rousseau's criticism, D'Alembert denied that he had betrayed any confidences, and maintained that his claims were based on public statements by Genevan pastors. "Letter to Rousseau" in *Geneva Collection*, pp. 150-56. Whether or not D'Alembert's speculations or inferences were supported by the public record, the Genevan clergy repudiated the claims he had made about their beliefs. "Declaration of the Pastors of Geneva" in *ibid.*, pp. 41-60.

The most striking feature of Rousseau's criticism of D'Alembert lies in what is missing. Rousseau does not criticize the beliefs attributed to the clergy by D'Alembert, nor does he defend the clergy against the charge of having adopted them. Nowhere does Rousseau imply that he disbelieves what D'Alembert said or that he thinks that such heresies and hypocrisies on the part of the pastors would be pernicious. Later in the *Letter*, Rousseau mentions that he has abandoned his long-held opinion that virtue can do without the support of religion, leaving the reader to wonder about the reasons for both his previous and current views. O.C. V, p. 97 n.*.

promote the cultivation of civilizing literature: “Geneva would combine the sagacity of Lacedaemon with the refinement of Athens.”⁸⁸

Rousseau was horrified. In a lengthy open letter to D’Alembert, he attacked this proposal from virtually every angle. The actors would indeed have a corrupting effect, he thought, and one that regulations would be powerless to prevent. But this was only one of a series of objections that ranged from the narrowly economic to the profoundly moral and political. Rousseau marshals so many different arguments, and so well, that one wonders how a public spirited Genevan could have failed to find at least one of them persuasive. The *Letter* is an extraordinary piece of political advocacy, and was apparently an effective one.⁸⁹

The occasion for the *Letter* was dramatically different from the context in which Plato wrote. Plato’s philosophic fiction takes a form that is utterly different from Rousseau’s polemical contribution to a live political debate. Magnesia, moreover, is to be populated with insular Dorians, while Geneva is a modern commercial city in the center of an increasingly cosmopolitan civilization. Greek polytheism, which lacked what we would call a coherent theology,⁹⁰ strongly contrasts with eighteenth century Calvinism, the product of a rich heritage of theological disputes that often had complicated political ramifications.

All these differences were bound to affect how Rousseau used what he had seen in Plato, but there is one more that I think has a

⁸⁸ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 4 (quoting D’Alembert’s “Geneva”).

⁸⁹ See Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, pp. 137, 148. D’Alembert himself expressed a high opinion of the *Letter*, and actively promoted its publication, which suggests something about the quality of Rousseau’s polemic and of D’Alembert’s character. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹⁰ For an overview of Greek religion as it was practiced, which emphasizes the disconnect between this religion and the poets’ various stories about the gods, see Jon D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2d ed. 2010).

special significance. Kleinias is to participate in the establishment of a new city with new laws, which gives the Athenian Stranger an opportunity to propose radical reforms informed by an understanding of the impossibly beautiful city of the *Republic*. Even if it is too much to hope that Magnesia will be more than a third-best city,⁹¹ Kleinias' project justifies a most serious and wide-ranging investigation of the possibilities and limitations of political reform.⁹²

Rousseau is faced with an almost diametrically opposite situation. However Geneva arrived at its present condition, Rousseau believes that its current institutions promote both individual happiness and civic friendship to a degree remarkable in the modern world. Rousseau is under no illusion that "we will see Sparta reborn in the bosom of commerce and the love of gain,"⁹³ and his goal is to preserve and defend what Geneva has. Whether detached reflection would regard this as a third-best city or a fourth- or fourteenth-best, it is this Geneva with which Rousseau is concerned. His goal is conservation, not radical reform.

In light of these differences, it is striking how many echoes of Plato one finds in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. The most obvious, of course, is the detailed analysis of the moral and political effects of the theater. Rousseau includes a lengthy quotation, in Latin, from Book III of the *Republic*, where Socrates closes his city to poets who offer imitations of anything except decent and lawful behavior.⁹⁴ More generally, Rousseau's analysis of the corrupting effects that dramatic spectacles can have on those who view them, and the need to combat such effects through legal regulation, manifestly owes a great deal to

⁹¹ See *Laws*, 739e2-5.

⁹² Among many indications that the Athenian Stranger means to convey an understanding of political reform that has applications beyond the immediate task facing Kleinias, see *Laws* 736c-737b.

⁹³ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p, 61.

⁹⁴ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 109 n. *.

Plato.⁹⁵ Rousseau develops this Platonic theme as it applies to Geneva, and without reference to some of the issues raised in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, but the influence of those dialogues is easily visible.

Less strikingly, but no less significantly, the *Letter to D'Alembert* contains important echoes of the Stranger's analysis of the relations between men and women. On its face, the *Letter* seems to offer recommendations about the education of women that are almost the opposite of the Stranger's, for they resemble the Athenian alternative that was mentioned and implicitly rejected in the *Laws*.⁹⁶ The Stranger, however, does not explain what, if anything, is inherently wrong with the Athenian model, focusing instead on his rejection of the Spartan practice of leaving the female to live in a self-indulgent and disorderly way "while managing the male."⁹⁷

This passage does imply that the Stranger would not replace Dorian customs with those of the Athenians. But it leaves open the possibility that if he were advising a legislator who was offered the opportunity to improve on Athenian laws, rather than Knossian laws, his recommendations might differ significantly from those found in the *Laws*.

In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau takes up the task of giving advice about laws to a people whose existing customs resemble those of Athens more than those of Sparta or Crete. The superficial

⁹⁵ While working on the *Letter*, Rousseau wrote a kind of commentary on Plato's critique of the imitative arts. *On Theatrical Imitation*, O.C. V, pp. 1195-1211. For a provocative treatment of this writing, which argues that Rousseau taught that citizen virtue is subordinate and instrumental to philosophy, see Leonard R. Sorenson, "Rousseau's Socratism: The Political Bearing of 'On Theatrical Imitation,'" *Interpretation* 20 (Winter, 1992-1993): pp. 135-55. If Sorenson's analysis is sound, one might say that *On Theatrical Imitation* is to the *Letter to D'Alembert* as the *Republic* is to the *Laws*. For my thoughts on *Theatrical Imitation*, which are somewhat different, see Note D at the end of this article.

⁹⁶ 805e.

⁹⁷ 806c5.

dissimilarities between the Stranger's recommendations and Rousseau's do not necessarily imply that Rousseau has rejected Plato's teaching, or misunderstood it. Rather, Rousseau might have concluded, as I believe he did, that Genevan women are already receiving an education that is conducive to combining individual happiness and civic harmony in a modern bourgeois republic.⁹⁸ His task is to defend that education on the basis of a philosophically informed analysis against the false philosophy of D'Alembert and the Encyclopedists.

Knowing, as the Athenian Stranger maintains, that sexual passion is an especially dangerous natural source of threats to social harmony and individual happiness,⁹⁹ Rousseau views Geneva's stable, bourgeois family life as a fragile institution. In the circumstances in which Geneva finds itself, the great danger is not that women will be neglected by excessively manly men. Rather, the danger is that men will be unmanned by giving women excessive and inappropriate attention, to the disadvantage of both sexes. This danger is not just theoretical or abstract. It has a face, and that face is Parisian society.

A. Happy Families

Although Rousseau's Geneva is a commercial town, open to the world and filled with the spirit of industry, it has sumptuary laws designed to counteract the natural effects of the passion for accumulating honor through wealth. Immediately before proposing the establishment of a theater, D'Alembert himself had approved these laws, especially because they contributed to a profusion of "happy marriages," and discouraged the citizens from trying to avoid

⁹⁸ Rousseau does not describe that education, in part perhaps because describing it *as an education* might tend to undermine its effectiveness. From what he does say about life in Geneva, I believe we can infer that girls were generally raised to expect that their lives should be centered around their roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the household, and to accept this as the natural order of things.

⁹⁹ See, e.g., *Laws*, 782d10-783b1.

the expense that comes with having large broods of children.¹⁰⁰ Even if Rousseau had thought that the dissolute behavior associated with actors and actresses could be controlled through legal regulations, which he does not, the theater would still be a dagger aimed at the heart of the bourgeois family life that D'Alembert had so heartily praised.

The theater that D'Alembert wants Geneva to have will inevitably be that of Paris. In that theater, love is always the central preoccupation, and love is the realm in which the tastes of women rule. Rousseau develops this thought down to its fundamental basis and up through its political ramifications. Like most of the Athenian Stranger's discourse with his Dorian interlocutors, Rousseau's arguments are bounded and shaped by his practical purpose.¹⁰¹ They are for all that precise, subtle, and powerful.

Except for a passing reference to the ambiguous thesis of man's natural goodness,¹⁰² the radical anthropology of the *Discourse on Inequality* makes no appearance in the *Letter to D'Alembert*. In place of the solitary and speechless animal of the forests, or the happy savages content with rustic huts and the gentle pleasures of

¹⁰⁰ "There is perhaps no city where there are more happy marriages; Geneva is on this point two hundred years ahead of our *mœurs*. The regulations against luxury prevent the fear of having many children; thus luxury is not, as in France, one of the great obstacles to population." D'Alembert's "Geneva," in *Geneva Collection*, pp. 20-21. This same insight was part of what lay behind the Athenian Stranger's wish to discourage the "profit and ease" associated with bachelorhood, and Rousseau would later treat a high birthrate as the surest sign of civic health. See the discussion of the Stranger's "first law" above, and Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book III, ch. 9, O.C. III, pp. 419-20.

¹⁰¹ Leo Strauss characterizes the Stranger's arguments up through most of Book XII as "sub-Socratic." *The Argument and the Action*, p. 182. By "sub-Socratic," Strauss does not mean unphilosophic. See *ibid.*, p. 129 (calling Book X "the most philosophic, the only philosophic part of the *Laws*"). Whatever Strauss may have in mind, Rousseau's arguments are both non-Socratic and philosophically informed.

¹⁰² "[M]an is born good, I think it and believe that I have proved it." *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 22.

independent dealings among themselves, we get a portrait of human nature dominated by the love of the morally beautiful.¹⁰³ Instead of random and casual sexual encounters between free and equal men and women, we are now told that men are made to be the sexual aggressors, that feminine shame and modesty are the voice of nature, and that a woman's voluntary submission to a man is nature's way.¹⁰⁴

Rousseau recognizes that he must respond to the claim — common among the sophisticates of his time and ours — that sexual desire is equally strong in both sexes, that its satisfaction is normal and harmless, and that feminine shame and modesty is a social invention designed for the benefit of men.¹⁰⁵ He offers two counterarguments based on nature. First, sexual shame is a natural safeguard that inclines humans to conceal themselves while coupling in order to reduce their vulnerability to attacks during a time of weakness and distraction, much as nature inclines us to sleep during the night and moves animals to hide themselves when they are sick or injured.¹⁰⁶ Second, men cannot perform without being aroused, and they need to encounter a certain reluctance from women in order to avoid the “boring freedom” (*ennuyeuse liberté*) that would frustrate nature's procreative purpose.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Compare *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, pp. 159-60, 171, with *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 22 & n.*

¹⁰⁴ Compare *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, p. 158, with *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 77-78. The *Discourse on Inequality's* discussion of sexual relations in what Rousseau calls “the pure state of nature” treats sexual desire as a peripheral part of human experience, much as Socrates does in the *Republic*. Like the *Laws*, the *Letter to D'Alembert* restores this passion to the central place that it must assume in a more complete understanding of politics. For some suggestions about the basis laid for this restoration in the *Discourse* itself, see Lund, “Philosophic Anthropology,” especially pp. 127, 137 n.51, 151.

¹⁰⁵ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 76-77.

¹⁰⁷ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 77.

Apart from their inconsistency with the *Discourse on Inequality*, these arguments from nature are transparently deficient. Accordingly, Rousseau immediately substitutes a very different argument. In response to the fundamental objection that sexual desire is equally natural and naturally equal in men and women, Rousseau screams: “As if the consequences were the same on both sides! As if all the austere duties of the woman were not derived from this alone, that a child ought to have a father!”¹⁰⁸ Having presented this genuinely plausible reason for socially imposed constraints on natural inclinations, he then seems to rest his case on the dogmatic claim that women display shame and modesty because “[n]ature wanted it so, and it would be a crime to stifle her voice.”¹⁰⁹ Rhetorically, nature gets the first and last word, but Rousseau’s true argument is that stable families require that nature be overcome or refashioned.

In the following pages, Rousseau confirms that this is his argument. He begins with some amusing exaggerations of the physical softness and natural timidity of women, and with a manifestly fallacious argument that the modest women of the Swiss mountains must be more natural than the brazen ladies of Paris because they have less education. Then he rather belatedly concedes that examples drawn from the beasts prove nothing because “the holy image of the decent and the beautiful enters only the heart of man.”¹¹⁰ In an effort to blur the issue, however, he next points out that some animals do in fact have instincts that lead them to behave rather as he contends humans should behave.¹¹¹ The mating behavior

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 77-78. For a useful discussion of the different ways in which the term “nature” is used in the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Letter to D’Alembert*, see Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 33-40.

¹⁰⁹ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 78. Rousseau reinforces the clear implication that his real argument is not based on nature’s voice by dropping a long and eloquent footnote distinguishing appropriate male boldness from insolence and brutality.

¹¹⁰ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 79.

¹¹¹ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 79-80.

of pigeons, which Rousseau lovingly describes, obviously proves no more than the very different behavior of dogs and cats, and he now declares that nature's voice is not dispositive. "If the timidity, *pudeur*,¹¹² and modesty that are proper to them are social inventions, it matters to society that women acquire these qualities."¹¹³

Much of the *Letter* is devoted to exploring the ways in which the introduction of a theater into Geneva would undermine the family, and to shoring up that fundamental institution by defending social inventions on which it depends.

B. Unhappy Lovers

The central underlying thesis of the *Letter* is "that there are no good *mœurs* for women outside a withdrawn and domestic life; . . . that the quiet cares of the family and the household are their portion, that the dignity of their Sex is in their modesty, that shame and *pudeur* are in them inseparable from decency."¹¹⁴ As we have seen, Rousseau can find this proposition in nature only by blurring the distinction between what is natural and what is useful in political societies. Despite his hyperbole in appealing to "the unanimous voice of the human race,"¹¹⁵ moreover, Rousseau cannot and does not believe that such *mœurs* are so widely accepted as to have acquired quasi-natural status (like, say, the incest prohibition).¹¹⁶ Instead, he

¹¹² This word refers to sexual modesty or bashfulness, and especially the exhibition of this sentiment.

¹¹³ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 80.

¹¹⁴ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 75-76. "*Mœurs*" refers to customs or habits that have some kind of ethical or moral quality or effect.

¹¹⁵ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 76.

¹¹⁶ Perhaps the most significant exception for Rousseau was Sparta. "If the [northern] Barbarians of whom I just spoke lived with women, they nevertheless did not live like them; it was the women who had the courage to live like them, just as the Spartan women did. The woman made herself robust, and the man was not enervated." *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 94. Sparta (especially as it is described

adopts the assumption that families of the bourgeois type foster the optimal mix of individual happiness and social cohesion.

That assumption is completely reasonable in the context of the *Letter's* immediate purpose because it is one shared by the Genevan laws and by D'Alembert himself.¹¹⁷ Accordingly, Rousseau's arguments are devoted to showing how the roles of men and women can best be structured to foster bourgeois family life. The central proposition to which the arguments lead is that these roles must be differentiated, with men assuming a bolder and more publicly active way of life. Rousseau uses his extended attack on the Parisian theater to explore the effects of apparent social equality between the sexes, which he contends is tantamount to actual female dominance.

Rousseau agrees with D'Alembert that Geneva approaches the ideal polity toward which liberal or Enlightenment principles point. Its citizens are industrious and peaceable. The city has no hereditary nobility or massive inequalities of wealth. The clergy are tolerant and respectful of secular authority. And, as D'Alembert had stressed, Genevan families are stable and fecund. But Rousseau emphatically does not believe that these happy features have been *caused* by the writings or theories of Hobbes, Locke, or the French *philosophes*. On the contrary, Geneva's happiness is largely the product of chance factors, including its geographic position, its soil and climate, and accidents of history.¹¹⁸ Those factors have established the *mœurs* that

by Plutarch) is almost always Rousseau's exemplar of achievable civic excellence, see, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 122, but Rousseau also discreetly alludes in passing to the reputation Spartan women had for sexual promiscuity, *ibid.* p. 81-82.

¹¹⁷ Rousseau's description of mankind's happiest state in the *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, pp. 169-71, is conspicuously silent about the optimal structure of family life, and he notoriously did not conclude that his own happiness called for him to become a traditional paterfamilias.

¹¹⁸ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 68. One such accident, the political genius of Calvin, is passed over in silence, though Rousseau comments on it elsewhere. *Social Contract*, O.C. III, p. 382 n.*. At least one reason for the omission of this factor in the *Letter* may be that a discussion of Calvin here would invite a discussion of the relation between Calvin's political and theological thought. His

give Geneva its distinctiveness, and those *mœurs* are in considerable tension with the sophistication of Parisian society and the philosophers, including of course Rousseau himself.

D'Alembert made the characteristic intellectual's error of overestimating the political power of reason, and so of believing that Geneva could "combine the sagacity of Lacedaemon with the refinement of Athens."¹¹⁹ The *Laws* makes clear just how difficult and perilous such a project would be, even under the most favorable of circumstances. Geneva, moreover, is no Sparta and Paris is no Athens. Geneva is more like Republican Rome and Paris more like the Roman Empire, by which I mean that Parisian society is just what Geneva could easily degenerate into. And a theater, Rousseau argues, is just what could accelerate that degeneration.

Introducing a theater into Geneva would destabilize Genevan family life in multiple ways, but above all by publicly and excessively glorifying romantic love. That glorification, whether it comes through the theater or from other sources, is the great threat to Geneva's domestic *mœurs*. Unlike countless moralizers and fretful parents through the ages, Rousseau does not take the easy path of denouncing the kind of public art, mediocre at best, that must have filled the theaters of France, as it does the airwaves of modern America. Instead, he sets out to show that even the very best art produced by the geniuses of a great civilization can be at least as dangerous as the vacuous fare that no one would seek to defend on its merits.

Beginning with tragedy, Rousseau denies that it can perform a useful social function. All public entertainments must please the audience if they are to have any effect at all, and overtly didactic dramas will not give pleasure to anyone who needs its lessons.

rebuke of D'Alembert for describing the theological views of the Genevan clergy suggests that Rousseau believed that no good could come of discussing this matter openly in the *Letter*.

¹¹⁹ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 4. (quoting D'Alembert's "Geneva").

Generally speaking, therefore, public art can only reinforce existing *mœurs*. Tragedies, in any event, portray gigantic characters who inhabit a distant world. A talented artist can easily make the audience sympathize with a virtuous hero, but such sympathy is a costless emotion, whereas an effort to achieve heroism — or even to act on one's sympathies for heroes — would require real effort and self-denial outside the theater. The heroes of the tragedies, moreover, are so alien in so many ways that their depiction cannot even point the audience toward admiration for the more pedestrian virtues that can actually be cultivated in modern societies. At best, then, such performances are morally useless. And when one adds the ease with which playwrights can and do make us sympathize even with execrable heroes, little or nothing is left of the hope that popular tragedies could improve the *mœurs* of any modern people.

If this were all, perhaps such entertainment would not be much more than one of a thousand distractions from more useful pursuits. Unfortunately, Rousseau maintains, tragedies can have one very big and bad effect on their audiences. By portraying love and love affairs in the monumental style of the tragic theater, the artist plays on a very natural and highly flammable passion. In that way, these spectacles induce an emotional experience that can indeed affect the way that ordinary people live their ordinary lives.

Rousseau develops this point with two examples, Racine's *Bérénice* and Voltaire's *Zaïre*. It so happens that the plots of these plays resemble the plots of two of Shakespeare's dramas, which are more familiar to us and are thus perhaps especially useful illustrations.¹²⁰ Furthermore, if Rousseau's critique can fairly be applied to the works of a dramatist who is a greater genius than either of the French playwrights, that would confirm his claim that the best tragedies can have the worst effects. Here is how I think Rousseau would have seen our English analogues to *Bérénice* and

¹²⁰ In *Bérénice*, Titus must choose between marrying the queen of Palestine, with whom he is in love, and remaining the emperor of Rome. *Zaïre* presents the story of a Christian slave with whom the Sultan of Jerusalem falls in love, and whom the Sultan eventually murders because of an imagined infidelity.

Zaire.

Consider *Antony and Cleopatra* first, beginning with its well known plot. During the factional struggles after the destruction of the Republic, Mark Antony followed the elder Pompey and Julius Caesar to Egypt and the bed of the world's greatest seductress. Unfortunately, Antony encounters repeated conflicts between this liaison and his Roman duties and ambitions. He gets a lucky break when his wife dies, as he had wished she would, but soon finds it politically expedient to marry the sister of one of his political rivals, Octavius Caesar. Unwilling to abandon Cleopatra, however, Antony attempts to compete in Roman politics while living in Egypt with his paramour. The cool and prudent Octavius, whose sister has been dishonored, lures Antony into a sea battle in which Caesar has the advantage. Compounding his mistake, Antony allows Cleopatra to accompany him at the head of her own fleet. During the battle, Cleopatra loses her nerve and flees, with Antony chasing after her. Faced eventually with the inevitability of Caesar's triumph, Antony commits a clumsy suicide after failing to persuade one of his men to assist him. Cleopatra enters into negotiations with Caesar, hoping to retain her throne at least in name, but learns that Caesar means to display her as a prize in Rome. She kills herself, and Egypt is absorbed into the Roman Empire, of which Octavius is now the unchallenged ruler.

Anyone who has seen or read the play will instantly recognize how misleading this summary is. Thanks to the speeches that Shakespeare gives his characters, what we see on stage is among the great love stories in Western literature. Cleopatra is presented, unforgettably, as a woman who could truly rival or surpass Rome itself as an object of a great man's preoccupation. When a Roman soldier who has never seen Cleopatra remarks that political necessities will require Antony to leave her, the perceptive Enobarbus declares:

Never! He will not.
Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy

The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish.¹²¹

Antony, for his part, is transformed by his love for Cleopatra from a Roman larger than life to a spirit larger than the pedestrian world itself. After his death, Cleopatra tells Dolabella what he became through her:

His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
A sun and moon which kept their course and lighted
The little O, the earth . . .
His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world; his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn it was
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket.¹²²

Cleopatra herself calls this a dream, but it is one so powerful that it induces Dolabella to betray his leader and tell the conquered Cleopatra the truth about Caesar's plans for her. Tellingly, Antony warned Cleopatra to trust none of Caesar's men but Proculeius —

¹²¹ Act II, sc. 2, ll. 244-50. (All citations are to the Arden Shakespeare.) When Antony tells Enobarbus that he wishes he had never met the queen, Enobarbus disagrees: "O, Sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal would have discredited your travel." Act I, sc. 2, ll. 160-62. Enobarbus surely knows that Antony agrees, and he probably hopes that Antony will come to be satisfied with *having* seen Cleopatra, who is deeply threatening to Antony's self-interest and his own.

¹²² Act V, sc. 2, ll. 78-91.

and when she tells him what Antony had said, Proculeius lies to her. Her interview with Dolabella comes afterward, and her dream accomplishes what Proculeius' memory of the living Antony could not.

Sustained reflection on the play in all its complex detail would lead well beyond what one might expect either from the plot summary or from Shakespeare's dazzling spectacle of immortal longings, a lass unparalleled, a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished, and a world where 'tis paltry to be Caesar, who not being Fortune is but Fortune's knave. But what effects would this play have on an audience, and especially its younger members?

Often, no doubt, not much. But what about a sensitive and restless young woman, raised in a small town, and aware of the attention she has begun to draw from boys? She won't think of becoming an actual queen, or that amorous adventures will lead to her doom. But Cleopatra can fill her with lots of ideas of what to look for in a relationship, and how to seek it. If she's reasonably attractive, there will be no shortage of obliging young men, though probably none who finds that custom cannot stale her infinite variety. Few boys are likely to find the Antony of this play very interesting or admirable, but all will want to enchant a fetching girl, and some will be enchanted. It won't be hard to say, and sometimes feel, that "the nobleness of life/Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair/And such a twain can do't."¹²³

One play, of course, would hardly ever alter one person's life, let alone corrupt the *mœurs* of a whole community. But let the extraordinary power of the poetry in *Antony and Cleopatra* come atop a diet of mediocre dramas in which romance is glorified and civic life deprecated, where great heroes have great affairs, where every member of the audience is made to identify for a moment with doomed lovers. All of this may be harmless amusement in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of a great metropolis, and Shakespeare's art is easily redeemed there by the pleasure he provides to all and the subtleties he offers for those who can attend to them. But what

¹²³ Act 1, sc. 1, ll. 37-39.

exactly would this do for the children of a city like Rousseau's Geneva? It might encourage some to flee to Paris, hoping perhaps to find that one great love, or at least a larger stage on which to make the search. Others might stay, marry, and raise an ordinary family, but with a nagging dissatisfaction and a heightened sense of possibilities foregone. Not a promising recipe for a happier city and happier families.

Rousseau would see the very genius of *Antony and Cleopatra* as a contributor to the miseducation of women, and a goad to their misuse of their natural power over men. Antony repeatedly senses, and sometimes recognizes, that he loses his Roman nobility in allowing himself to be ruled by his love for Cleopatra. His inability to give her up in favor of Roman duties and aspirations is in significant part a consequence of the instability in Roman *mœurs* that accompanied the transition from republic to empire.¹²⁴ Cleopatra, a non-Roman who does a far better job than Antony at managing the tensions between her loves and her political needs, is also given more beautiful speeches (both by and about her) and a bigger place in the hearts of the audience.¹²⁵ She overshadows Antony, who is attractive

¹²⁴ For a detailed and thoughtful analysis of the relationship between the instability in Rome and the instability in the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, see Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

¹²⁵ As a monarch ruling in the shadow of Roman hegemony, Cleopatra had effectively employed sexual diplomacy with the elder Pompey and Julius Caesar. When reminded of how she had once talked about this Caesar, she waves it off as the stuff of "My salad days, / When I was green in judgment, cold in blood." Act I, sc. 5, ll.76-77. But her alliance with Antony was not at all a bad political bet. He was militarily the strongest of the Roman rivals, and it actually took a series of very foolish mistakes on his part to lose out to Octavius. Had she been more schooled in Roman affairs, and more ruthless, Cleopatra might have managed Antony much better than she did. One can wonder whether she was more deficient in ruthlessness or in prudence, and one can wonder whether Antony would have fallen for her so completely if she were less deficient. In any event, until all hope was gone Cleopatra did keep looking for a way to save her crown and her life, and to pass the throne to one of her sons — presumably Julius Caesar's child, not one of Antony's.

primarily because of the way he is attracted to her.¹²⁶ It is she who would be a real threat to Genevan *mœurs*.

Perhaps *Antony and Cleopatra* is a little too easy an example to use in support of Rousseau's argument. Might *Othello* be a counterexample? Desdemona is an anti-Cleopatra. She is pure womanly virtue, devoted and completely faithful to her husband. She erects no obstacles to Othello's performing his civic duties, even as she accompanies him to war.¹²⁷ So far is she from Cleopatra's sexual voracity that she saw Othello's visage in his mind, falling in love with the man she knew from what he said about how he had lived. Fittingly, Othello is an anti-Antony. Cleopatra's lover is a dissatisfied aristocratic leftover in the new, decadent Rome. Othello is a new arrival, and a self-made man who rose quickly in Venice through his talents, his virtue, and fidelity to his adopted home.

The action of the play arises from Iago's campaign — apparently triggered by professional or sexual jealousy — to destroy this glorious marriage by tricking Othello into a jealous fury over his wife's imagined adultery.¹²⁸ Iago's campaign succeeds, and Othello

¹²⁶ If Octavius looks contemptible compared with Antony, it is mainly because he is impervious to Cleopatra's charm. The only characters who appear more contemptible are Lepidus, who ineffectually seeks to foster civic friendship, and the younger Pompey, who anachronistically and inconsistently struggles to maintain the old ideals of Roman virtue. The youth of Geneva would hardly benefit from juxtapositions like these.

¹²⁷ Desdemona accompanies Othello as his wife. It is inconceivable that she would actually participate in war, either incompetently like Cleopatra or competently like Fulvia.

¹²⁸ As the play opens, Iago tells Roderigo that he hates Othello because he gave Cassio an undeserved military promotion that Iago thought should have been his. Act I, sc. 1, ll. 7-65. In subsequent soliloquies, Iago attributes his hatred to rumors or suspicions that he has been cuckolded by Othello. Act I, sc. 3, ll. 384-88; Act II, sc. 1, ll. 290-93. There are no other indications in the play that Iago deserved the promotion or that his wife had been unfaithful (or even that she had been rumored to have been). When Iago, "for mere suspicion in that kind,/Will do, as if for surety," we have to suspect that he himself does not fully recognize the sources of his hatred for Othello.

kills Desdemona, who endures her murder with the grace of an angel. When he learns the truth, Othello has no more defense than to call himself “one that lov’d not wisely, but too well.”¹²⁹ He pronounces a just verdict on himself and speaks his last words to his wife’s corpse: “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee, no way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.”¹³⁰

Hard to see any pernicious lessons lurking here. As Rousseau notes in his discussion of *Zaïre*, however, no one who sees such a spectacle can come away more disposed toward the moderate love on which happy families are generally founded.¹³¹ One might well think: “Ah! Would that I were given [such a woman]; I would arrange things so as not to kill her.”¹³² But Rousseau believes that the audience most of all wants a woman who can inspire the towering passion that an Othello exhibits.¹³³

¹²⁹ Act V, sc. 2, l. 345.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 359-60.

¹³¹ As Mera J. Flaumenhaft points out, it is somewhat difficult to imagine Othello and Desdemona as successful parents. “Begetting and Belonging in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *Interpretation* 4 (Spring 1975): 197, 210-12.

¹³² *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 51.

¹³³ Rousseau dismisses the popular and superficially appealing theory that tragedy provides a healthy catharsis of dangerous passions. Only reason can purge the passions, and reason has no effect in the theater. *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 20. It may well be that tragedy leads to pity through fear, but this pity is only a temporary and vain emotion. *Ibid.*, p. 23. And perhaps most persuasively:

It is pretended that we are cured of love by the depiction of its weaknesses. . . [B]ut I see that the spectators always take the part of the weak lover, and that they are often vexed that he is not more so. I ask: is this a great way to avoid resembling him?

Ibid. p. 48. Rousseau is well aware of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which he quotes with approval in a different context. *Ibid.* p. 25. But Rousseau argues that tragedy had a distinctive function in Greek political life, where it had far different effects than in our culture. See *ibid.*, p. 26 n.*; 31.

Where would you find such a woman, and how would you go about securing her love if you did? Othello is an exotic in ways more profound than his place of birth, the color of his skin, or the religion in which he was presumably raised. For her part, Desdemona is truly the rarest “gem of women.”¹³⁴ What Antony demands — for “the world to weep/We stand up peerless” — might more soberly be granted to Othello and Desdemona. But that is not what the audience wants. Instead, we want to believe that this is what love could be for ourselves. And what it could have continued to be in the play if not for the freakish bad luck of Iago’s overwrought malevolence and daring shrewdness.¹³⁵ A great many women, for their part, will watch the death of Desdemona with a certain sanguine composure: “a sensitive woman sees without terror the transports of passion [on the stage]; for it is a lesser misfortune to perish by the hand of her lover than to be weakly loved.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act III, sc. 13, l. 113 (Antony describing Octavia). Rousseau makes this point in the following way:

The most charming object in nature, the one most capable of stirring a sensitive heart and turning it to the good, is, I acknowledge, an amiable and virtuous woman. But where is this celestial object hiding itself? . . . If a young man has seen the world only on the Stage, the first means of pursuing virtue which offers itself to him is to seek a mistress who will conduct him there, quite hoping to find at least a Constance or a Cénie. Thus, on faith in an imaginary model, on a modest and touching appearance, on a counterfeit sweetness, *nescius aurae fallacis* [ignorant of the deceptive breeze], the young madman quickly loses himself while thinking that he is becoming wise.

Letter to D’Alembert, O.C. V, p. 44 (footnote omitted).

¹³⁵ On this, as on many other points, one’s understanding of the play is apt to change as one gets to know it better. For purposes of understanding Rousseau’s argument, however, the initial impression (especially on the impressionable) is more important.

¹³⁶ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 51. Ironically, and fittingly, Rousseau’s writings were a smash hit among the ladies of Paris. According to one of their own number, they “praise him with enthusiasm, although no Author treats them with less respect. . . . he has mentioned them with contempt, but with an air of passion, and passion excuses everything.” Melissa A. Butler, “Eighteenth-Century Critics of

Rousseau's general point is that love well depicted overshadows everything that accompanies it, and thereby usurps the place that virtue ought to have. Cleopatra, for example, overshadows Antony, a decayed representative of republican virtue, and Octavius, the emerging embodiment of imperial virtue. Like Cleopatra, Othello gets the most beautiful poetry and his passion overshadows Desdemona's moderate and virtuous love. Rather than watching captivating characters with whom we fall in love because of their love for each other, "young people should learn to be on guard against the illusions of love, to flee the error arising from a blind propensity that always believes that it is based on respect for merit, and to fear that one will sometimes deliver a virtuous heart over to an object that is unworthy of its cares."¹³⁷ Tragedies in their nature simply cannot do that.

Comedy may be able to do it, by ridiculing the madness of love. Unfortunately, comedy debunks virtue just as it does love.¹³⁸ Once again taking as his target the best of the genre, Rousseau demonstrates this point in an extended and justly celebrated analysis of Molière's *The Misanthrope*.¹³⁹ His key point is that Molière placed

Rousseau's Views on Women," *Rousseau and Criticism*, ed. Lorraine Clark & Guy Lafrance (Ottawa: North American Ass'n for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1995), p. 133 (quoting Mme. de Genlis). D'Alembert drew the same conclusion: "[M]any sins are forgiven him because he has loved so much." Ibid. (quoting D'Alembert's "Jugement sur *Emile*").

¹³⁷ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 52.

¹³⁸ We can see an example of this even in a blackly comic interlude in *Othello*. Roderigo is so taken with Desdemona that he contemplates suicide after learning of her marriage to Othello. When Iago mocks him, Roderigo confesses that he is ashamed of his infatuation, "but it is not in my virtue to amend it." Iago responds: "Virtue? a fig! . . . But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts . . . [and reason will show the way to cuckold Othello, thus enabling you to] doest thyself a pleasure." Act I, sc. 3, ll. 317-72.

¹³⁹ Rousseau appears to believe that his critique of tragedy applies to all tragedy, including ancient plays presented to modern audiences. Although he says that all comedy is "bad and pernicious," *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 31, his evidence is drawn exclusively from the French theater. I have no reason to question Rousseau's claim that even the best French comedies that would be staged in

a virtuous man in a corrupt society, giving the character just enough shortcomings and inconsistencies to render him fatuously unsociable. In that way, Molière “seduces by an appearance of reason.”¹⁴⁰ The audience gets the pleasure of a laugh at virtue’s expense, and is confirmed in the easy lesson that it’s best to get along by going along, “that to be a decent man (*honnête-homme*) it suffices not to be a downright scoundrel.”¹⁴¹ The culmination of the playwright’s seduction through sophistry comes with the comically virtuous Alceste’s foolish love: “To make the misanthrope fall in love was nothing; the stroke of genius was to make him fall in love with a coquette.”¹⁴²

Rousseau is perfectly willing to concede that the theater, including both great art and the mediocre productions that must predominate in any form of popular entertainment, may actually have a variety of beneficial effects in a corrupt culture like that of Paris.¹⁴³

Geneva were all “bad and pernicious,” but his broader generalization is questionable. Had Rousseau been familiar with Shakespeare’s comedies, which I do not believe he was, he might have qualified his denunciation of all comedy.

¹⁴⁰ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 42.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. Ruth W. Grant captures the essential point in the dispute between Molière and Rousseau: they agreed that the *honnête-homme* is the proper model, but Molière had identified this type with the worldly man (*homme du monde*) whereas Rousseau regarded these as opposing alternatives. *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 92-93. Grant rightly notes that this is a radical change. Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁴² *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 52.

¹⁴³ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 59. He had previously developed this point at somewhat greater length in the “Preface to *Narcisse*,” O.C. II, pp. 971-73. In the *Letter*, Rousseau also suggests in passing one art form suitable for a modern bourgeois society: the novel. In the course of offering relations between English men and women as an illustration of the benefits of sharply differentiating between the roles of the sexes, he approves the English taste for contemplative readings and novels. O.C. V, p. 75. In a curious footnote, he says that English novels are, “like the men, sublime or detestable,” and bestows the most extravagant praise on Richardson’s *Clarissa*. The *Letter to D’Alembert* was written and published just as

But he shows just how serious he is in attacking even the greatest art by expressing a preference for the crude and even smutty amusements that are tolerated in Geneva's marketplace. Although he disapproves of them, he says: "If these insipid entertainments lack taste, so much the better; they will become tiresome more quickly; if they are crude they will be less seductive. Vice hardly insinuates itself by shocking decency, but it does so by taking on its likeness; and dirty words are more opposed to refined manners than to good *mœurs*."¹⁴⁴

C. Men Unmanned

Parisian society shows what Parisian theater will lead to in Geneva: a degenerate form of Athenian refinement *at the expense* of a sagacity somewhat reminiscent of Lacedaemon. Here is life in the salons of Paris, as Rousseau saw it through his Genevan eyes:

[C]ravenly devoted to the wills of the sex that we ought to protect and not serve, we have learned to despise it in obeying it, to insult it by our ironic attentions; and every Parisian woman assembles in her apartment a harem of men more feminine than herself, who know how to render to beauty all sorts of tributes, except the tribute of the heart of which it is worthy. But observe how these same men, always constrained in these voluntary prisons, get up, sit down, go ceaselessly back and forth to the fireplace, to the window, pick up and put down a

Rousseau was completing work on a novel of his own, which he hoped would be unneeded in Geneva but beneficial elsewhere. In that book, one of his characters says: "Novels are perhaps the last form of education left for a people so corrupted that every other would be useless." *Julie, or the New Heloise*, O.C. II, p. 277.

¹⁴⁴ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 113. It would of course be even better if Geneva were rid of these low entertainments, and that we would "draw our pleasures and our duties from our state and from ourselves." *Ibid.*

decorated face screen¹⁴⁵ a hundred times, leaf through books, run their eyes over some paintings, turn and pirouette about the room, while the idol reposes without moving on her couch, active only with her tongue and her eyes. From where does this difference come unless it is the case that nature, which imposes on women this sedentary and homebound life, prescribes for men the exact opposite, and that this restlessness indicates a true need in them?¹⁴⁶

A kind of modern Egypt, full of faux Cleopatras and little imitation Antonys who resemble him only in their professions of admiration for the queen and their underlying dissatisfaction with serving her. Corresponding to the physical atrophy of Parisian men, Rousseau sees a suppression of male intellectual force. “Given over to these puerile habits, to what that is great could we [men] ever raise ourselves? Our talents and our writings smell of our frivolous occupations, agreeable if one wishes, but small and cold like our sentiments; they have as their whole merit that facile turn that one has no great trouble in giving to nothings.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ In Rousseau’s time, fashionable ladies had a problem dealing with fireplaces, which could melt the makeup on the side of the face that was turned toward the flames. For that reason, they kept handheld screens handy for protecting themselves against such a disaster. These screens were made of a variety of materials, and were often artfully decorated.

¹⁴⁶ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 93.

¹⁴⁷ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 94-95. Rousseau appends to this passage a footnote in which he claims that women are in general bereft of artistic genius. He acknowledges that there are exceptions, but he knows of only two: Sappho and one other whom he does not name. In an effort to provide a kind of proof that he is not just manifesting male chauvinism, Rousseau offers this: “I would wager anything in the world that the *Lettres portugaises* were written by a man.” *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 94-95 n.*. Twentieth century scholarship has uncovered strong evidence, though not absolutely conclusive proof, that Rousseau was correct. See, e.g., F.C. Green, “Who Was the Author of the *Lettres Portugaises*?” *Modern Language Review* 21, No. 2 (April 1926): 159-67; Charles R. Lefcourt, “Did Guilleragues Write ‘The Portuguese Letters?’” *Hispania* 59, No. 3 (Sept. 1976): 493-97; Anna Klobucka, *The Portuguese Nun: Formation of a National Myth* (Lewisburg,

Rousseau is confident that “instead of gaining by these practices, the women lose,” for the obeisance paid them is cynically ironic.¹⁴⁸ The men, for their part, actually lose themselves. The refined manners of Paris are already being aped in Geneva, and the sight is appalling:

It is certain that the boys know how to bow better, that they know how to offer their hand more gallantly to Ladies and to say to them an infinity of genialities for which I myself would have them whipped, that they know how to decide, to interrogate, to interrupt adult conversations, to pester everybody without modesty and without discretion. . . . [T]he only thing the women do not exact from these vile slaves is that they consecrate themselves to their service in the Oriental fashion. Except for this, all that distinguishes them from the women is that, nature having refused them women’s graces, they substitute ridiculous affectations. On my last trip to Geneva, I already saw several of these young ladies in tight jackets, with white teeth, plump hands, piping voices, and pretty green parasols in their hands, rather maladroitly counterfeiting men.¹⁴⁹

D. Republican Entertainments

As one might anticipate from his contemptuous description of mincing French manners, and from his disapproving remarks about the crude entertainments in the Genevan marketplace, Rousseau must look for a healthy and authentically Genevan alternative to the French theater. He finds it in the small clubs of a dozen-odd men who

Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2000), pp. 11-15. In any event, Rousseau’s point is that men who adopt criteria of literary excellence designed to increase the proportion of women whose work will qualify should be suspected of offering compliments arising more from diffidence than honest admiration.

¹⁴⁸ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 95.

¹⁴⁹ *Letter to D’Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 102.

rent quarters where they can eat, drink, and relax in one another's company, and who sometimes walk or hunt together. Women have similar groups, which meet at one another's homes. These so-called *cercles*, private versions of the segregated common meals in Magnesia, provide simple and innocent amusements, the kind that fit with republican *mœurs*. Even more important, they provide forums where men can be their masculine selves, without the need to adapt to women's tastes, and women can be relieved from the endless work of bending men to those tastes. "[T]he two sexes should sometimes gather together and should ordinarily live apart. . . . Our *cercles* still preserve among us some image of ancient *mœurs*."¹⁵⁰

The *cercles* were apparently not the object of universal approbation in Geneva. Along with his praise of what they do well, Rousseau defends even their shortcomings. The women's groups are blamed primarily for gossiping that leads to scandal mongering. Rousseau thinks there may be more good than bad in this feminine vice, which almost performs the office of the ancient censors. It is certainly far better than the Parisian alternative, where ladies can hardly endure the company of other women, and want instead to gossip with men.

Rousseau acknowledges that the men's *cercles* have more serious disadvantages, such as drinking and drunkenness. While conceding that excessive drinking degrades the soul, Rousseau emphasizes that it "makes a man stupid, not evil," that its effects are temporary, and that it is actually a sign of social health when men do not "dread a state of indiscretion in which the heart reveals itself without deliberation."¹⁵¹ In any event, perfect men and perfect cities do not exist, and "[n]ever has a people perished through an excess of wine; all perish through the disorder of women."¹⁵² As the Athenian Stranger's discussions of wine and women confirm, he and Rousseau

¹⁵⁰ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 92, 96.

¹⁵¹ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 99-100.

¹⁵² *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 100.

agree about this proposition, and Rousseau expressly invokes the *Laws* as support for allowing old men to reanimate their spirits with drink.¹⁵³

Later, toward the end of his long response to D'Alembert, Rousseau comes as close as he ever does in the *Letter* to imitating the Athenian Stranger by offering an affirmative reform (in contradistinction to a defense of existing practices). That reform is modeled on one of the Stranger's own proposals.

After celebrating the Genevans' passion for public festivals and games, which promote civic friendship, and encouraging the establishment of more such events, Rousseau notes that winter in these mountains favors private entertainments. In the one significant innovation that he proposes, Rousseau attacks the scruples and worries that are apparently associated in Geneva with dancing. At some length he insists that if you want to promote happy marriages, the worst way to do it is to prevent young men and women from coming together in public. Instead, Rousseau recommends that elaborate balls be conducted for the express purpose of assisting young people to find appropriate mates. In terms that closely track the Stranger's reasoning on this subject, Rousseau argues that the institution of such balls would make it likelier that marriages would be founded on mutual personal attraction, that they would be less circumscribed by social rank and contribute less to the formation of political factions based on family connections, and that economic inequality would be tempered and the spirit of the political constitution promoted.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 109 & n.*. The discussion of drinking and drunkenness in the *Laws* arises from a dispute between the Stranger and Megillus, beginning at 636a, involving a comparison between the Athenian vice of drinking and Sparta's reputation for male homosexuality and female promiscuity. The Stranger argues that drinking could be put to good use in a well ordered city, a claim that he never makes about pederasty or promiscuity. See also 790a8-b6 (arguing that a stable community depends on the correct legal regulation of private households, as does the happiness of both the household and the city).

¹⁵⁴ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, pp. 119-20. Cf. *Laws*, 771e-773e.

By opposing the prudish disapproval of dancing,¹⁵⁵ Rousseau seeks to give nature's most dangerously insistent passion a respectable outlet at just the point in life at which it can determine an individual's fate. The balls, however, are designed with more than this in mind. In one important respect, Rousseau's proposal is quite different from the Stranger's, and that difference illustrates how Rousseau adapted the teaching of the *Laws* to the circumstances of Geneva.

Adults of all ages are to attend the new balls, but the old and the married will be spectators, and married women in particular will be forbidden to "profane conjugal dignity" by dancing.¹⁵⁶ By spotlighting the young people in this way, Rousseau's rules will offer the girls a regulated opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of displaying themselves in just the manner that corrupt Parisian women want to do throughout their lives. Rousseau goes even farther, and recommends that a Queen of the Ball be elected by the oldest spectators (who will sit in a special place of honor and be saluted by everyone who enters and leaves the hall). The judges are to choose the girl who has behaved most decently, modestly, and pleasingly during the past year.¹⁵⁷ A public official will bestow the crown, and her parents will be honored for raising her so well. In a particularly

¹⁵⁵ Rousseau goes out of his way to anticipate the mocking suggestion that he would even like to revive the Spartan practice of naked dancing by young women. This provides him with an opportunity to remind the reader of the great gulf between Spartan *mœurs* and those of people who are "merely decent." *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 122. In this passage, he simultaneously reminds us that artful dress is more provocative than absolute nudity and that "I propose for [Genevans] only the Lacedaemonian institutions of which they are not yet incapable." His praise of Sparta very near the end of the *Letter* may also serve to remind us that the Athenian Stranger's reform of Dorian institutions aims at a kind of equality and friendship between men and women that is beyond the reach of Geneva. Perhaps Rousseau wants to leave a hint that he does not regard such relations as inherently unattainable.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁵⁷ Rousseau recognizes without great alarm that even elderly judges may be a little too influenced by the physical beauty of some of the contestants. Better that, perhaps, than that the city breed a bunch of old bourgeois Octaviuses.

clever touch, Rousseau recommends that the girl receive additional honors or emoluments if she marries during the following year.

The girls will inevitably be the focus of these balls, in a way that they would not be in the Magnesian dances. This is what Rousseau wants, and it is not an oversight that there is to be no King of the Ball. In the Geneva that Rousseau seeks to preserve, men will have their whole lives to display themselves publicly, to achieve civic honors, and to enjoy the dignity that comes with the role of head of household. In many ways, women will always rule these men, but they will largely do it privately and indirectly. Rousseau believes this is desirable, for the sake of everyone's happiness, but he also recognizes that it does entail a real sacrifice by women. Rousseau's proposed balls reflect a recognition that they should be asked to sacrifice no more than reason demands.

Conclusion

The common ground on which Rousseau and the Athenian Stranger stand emerges from an understanding of the advantages that would arise from giving an appropriate education to "that half of the human race that governs the other."¹⁵⁸ In Magnesia, that requires a more masculine education for women, and a moderation of the masculinity of their men. In Geneva, it means the defense of bourgeois manliness, and educating women to seek their happiness primarily in their roles as wives and mothers. The differences in the prescriptions, which are striking enough, should not be allowed to conceal the underlying agreement about the fundamental requisites of social life.

It is no doubt true that the *Laws* points toward the cultivation of a kind of virtue, and happiness, to which the Genevans cannot aspire. But it is also true that the Athenian Stranger does not claim to have identified that virtue, or to have shown in any but the vaguest way how the Magnesians might discover it. The women of Magnesia

¹⁵⁸ *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, O.C. III, p. 21 n.* (quoted in context at the beginning of this article).

are certainly to be offered the possibility of cultivating their own happiness and of serving their city beyond the confines of their families, though only after they have fulfilled their duties as wives and mothers. Plato leaves us to wonder how well this measure of equality between the sexes would work out before the nocturnal council has succeeded in its task of discovering what human virtue truly is. Rousseau appears to have reflected on this question, and concluded that it could not work out well at all in modern Europe. And he leaves us to ask whether we have subsequently discovered the solution to a dilemma that he believed was insoluble.

Rousseau is quite precise and vivid in describing what he regards as sound *mœurs* for Genevan women, and the proper aim of their education. He is less precise and less vivid about men. This is striking when one recalls his early statement: “Men will always be what is pleasing to women: if then you want them to become great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul and virtue is.”¹⁵⁹ In the *Letter to D’Alembert*, we are largely left to infer that men should be good providers, faithful husbands, and solid citizens who participate responsibly but not obsessively in republican politics. We are apparently also expected to infer that if women are committed strongly enough to their own roles as wives and mothers, they will be able to discipline their men and keep them happy in this role. One can easily imagine that such a life would be seen as one of virtue, but is it so easy to think it would be regarded as “greatness of soul,” either by men or by women?

For all his focus on bucking up Genevan men, and keeping their women from usurping the place they should occupy, Rousseau does not forget about male *thumos*, about the desire to be recognized for greatness, or about the dangers of excessive manliness.

In one of the strangest of the many digressions in the *Letter to D’Alembert*, Rousseau discusses the failed efforts of the King of

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. (quoted in context at the beginning of this article).

France to outlaw dueling. The occasion, or excuse, for this digression arose from D'Alembert's assumption that the behavior of a company of actors could be regulated by law and thus prevented from corrupting the Genevan youth. Rousseau has any number of reasons for considering this assumption naïve, but his principal objection is that D'Alembert misunderstands the relation between laws and *mœurs*.

“Where is the lowliest legal scholar who cannot draw up a moral code as pure as that of Plato's laws?”¹⁶⁰ To the extent that laws require coercion for their enforcement, their power is extremely limited. The real challenge is to influence public opinion, as the Athenian Stranger emphasizes through his discussion of preludes, and this is much more difficult than issuing commands and regulations.

Rousseau chooses as an example the tribunal of the Marshals of France, which was set up to adjudicate points of honor. The underlying problem is that the conventions of honor, including the duel, are a vestigial residue from a time when martial attitudes and martial skill had been taken for virtue. Whatever useful function such quasi-Dorian traditions may once have served, the conventions are manifestly contrary to reason, for it is absurd to suppose that the justice of one's claims could be a function of one's ability to kill an opponent.¹⁶¹ In a modern society, moreover, the conventions are subversive of the social order. A man's honor means more to him than the laws of a republic or the commands of a monarch.

So long as men exhibit their natural share of *thumos*, honor will have meaning, and the challenge in France was to detach the convention or prejudice in favor of duels from the underlying natural sentiments that had been channeled into this tradition. Rousseau believes that the French effort to replace duels with the resolution of

¹⁶⁰ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 61.

¹⁶¹ In the *Laws*, the Stranger rebukes Megillus for thinking that victory in battle necessarily implies anything at all about who deserved to prevail. 638a3-b9.

disputes in a legal tribunal was badly designed in many particulars. But he does not think that the case is completely hopeless.

His first key point is that the tribunals should consist only of respected soldiers, i.e. representatives of the tradition of virtue with which dueling is associated,¹⁶² and that the only sanctions available to the judges should be honor and disgrace. Second, the tribunal should have the authority to forbid particular duels, to pass judgment on those who engage in unauthorized combats, and to give advance authorization to some duels. Third, the tribunal should be completely independent of the King's will, and he should even be subject to its judgments. Even if the "laws" administered by the tribunal make no real sense, it is important that the judges be seen as applying the code of honor without arbitrary interferences provoked by the interests or whims of the sovereign. Fourth, the tribunal should be given general jurisdiction over insulting speeches in general, not just those involving the social classes in which formal duels have been traditional. Nobles and soldiers fight because others talk, and duels will never be abolished without changing the way everyone talks.

Rousseau thinks that it is crucial at the beginning not to condemn every duelist, and even to authorize some duels before they take place. This would have the effect of legitimating the judgments of the tribunal, and of causing those who dueled in secret to be suspected of doing so for disreputable reasons. Eventually, as the tribunal acquired respectability, it could gradually reduce the number of occasions on which duels would be approved until, perhaps, they could be abolished altogether.

Rousseau doubts that even these devices will succeed without the intervention of women, "on whom men's manner of thinking in great part depends."¹⁶³ And even if all his advice were taken, he

¹⁶² This had in fact been done, and it is one feature of the King's effort that Rousseau approved.

¹⁶³ *Letter to D'Alembert*, O.C. V, p. 66.

doubts that the project could succeed in France because it is contrary to the spirit of monarchy: duels may be a sign of the incompleteness of the King's sovereignty, but the establishment of a formal body that answers to any kind of law beyond his will would put a flashing neon sign on that incompleteness. Rousseau's proposed improvement on the King's scheme is inherently subversive of the King's sovereignty.

This calls attention to one very important point on which Rousseau agreed with D'Alembert: France would never achieve the kind of happiness seen in Geneva while its regime, or political form, remained unchanged. Rousseau believed he should contribute to defending what Geneva had, but without endorsing the Encyclopedists' far more ambitious project of political and intellectual reform. In the two and a half centuries since Rousseau attacked D'Alembert's proposal, Enlightenment philosophy has made spectacular progress, both in science and technology and in the spread of liberal and bourgeois institutions. In recent decades, these developments have produced, or at least accompanied, some fairly dramatic transformations of the relations between the sexes and the structure of family life. It is surely too soon to declare that Rousseau's reservations about the assumptions of the *philosophes* were unjustified. It is therefore not too late to take seriously the reasons for his dissent, and for his decision to look to Plato as a guide.

Note A

In his political activism, the Stranger looks less like Socrates than like Plato himself, or at least the Plato of the *Seventh Letter*, who sought to help bring about philosophically informed laws in Syracuse. There are obvious differences, perhaps most notably the absence of any prospect that a young tyrant might provide the quickest and best way to implement the Stranger's laws in Crete.¹⁶⁴ But neither Plato's involvement with Syracuse and its tyrant nor the Stranger's

¹⁶⁴ Compare *Laws* 709d10-710d5 with *Seventh Letter* 335c3-336c1.

involvement with Kleinias resembles anything in the life of Socrates as that life is presented in Plato's dialogues.¹⁶⁵

In his one public account of his life, Socrates says that he has never been a teacher of anyone, after having said that he will be a teacher today at his trial.¹⁶⁶ Taken together, these statements suggest that he means that he has never offered the kind of political instruction that the Athenian Stranger offers to Kleinias.¹⁶⁷ In his commentary on the *Laws*, Aristotle appears to identify the Stranger with Socrates, but he later attributes statements made by the Stranger to Plato.¹⁶⁸ Resolving this puzzle would presumably require, at a minimum, a systematic investigation of Aristotle's treatment of Socrates and Plato in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ In the *Republic*, 540d1-541a7, Socrates suggests that the quickest and easiest way to establish the best city would entail the expulsion of everyone over the age of ten. This passage illustrates the kinship between Socrates and the Athenian Stranger as well as the significant difference between them.

¹⁶⁶ *Apology* 33a5-6; 21b1-2.

¹⁶⁷ For a penetrating analysis of Socrates' presentation of himself in the *Apology*, which suggests to me why Socrates did not, and perhaps would not, undertake a project like the Stranger's, see David Leibowitz, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's Apology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). A very different reason for distinguishing the Stranger from Socrates is suggested by Seth Benardete, who says that "Socrates is conspicuously absent from the *Laws*, for after he has defined law in the *Minos*, the elaboration of a written code would seem to be of no interest to him." *Plato's "Laws": The Discovery of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 353.

¹⁶⁸ *Politics* 1265a1-9, 1271a41-b1.

¹⁶⁹ Ronna Burger has persuasively shown that the attacks on Socrates in the *Ethics* mark out a dialectical path in which the disagreements between Aristotle and Plato diminish and may finally vanish. *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). In order to understand the meaning of Aristotle's equivocation about the identity of the Athenian Stranger, one would presumably need to undertake a similarly careful examination of the *Politics*.

However the relationship between Socrates and the Athenian Stranger should most precisely be understood, Rousseau could easily have agreed with Leo Strauss' claim that the *Laws* is Plato's most, and perhaps only, political work.¹⁷⁰ That, in turn, might help explain why this dialogue appears to have shaped Rousseau's reflections on a topic that later became a central concern in his most vigorous and successful literary effort to inject himself into political affairs.

Note B

Aristotle distinguishes natural from legal slavery, and defines the natural slave as one so limited in his mental capacities that he would probably need to be cared for, rather than being a source of much useful labor.¹⁷¹ In the *Laws*, the Stranger secures even from Megillus an acknowledgment that slaves may sometimes be superior in virtue to free men,¹⁷² and then offers Kleinias advice on using them efficiently and humanely.¹⁷³ The Stranger recommends that slaves be drawn from a variety of foreign sources, thereby discouraging the solidarity that naturally arises when a culturally united group of people is held in bondage. He also recommends that masters treat

¹⁷⁰ *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1975), p. 1.

¹⁷¹ *Politics* 1253b-1255b. In a prescient comment, Aristotle notes that slaves are living tools, and that if we could enable machines to do the work of slaves, we would have no need for human slaves. 1253b33-1254a1.

¹⁷² 776a-e. The Stranger also cites Homer for the proposition that slaves are untrustworthy because slavery makes their souls unhealthy. 776e-777a. Homer's text makes the plausible suggestion that slavery takes away half one's virtue because slaves must be forced to do what they should, but the Stranger alters the quotation so that it advances the much less plausible claim that slavery takes away half one's intelligence. Beyond this, Homer ironically puts the assertion in the mouth of a remarkably trustworthy and intelligent slave. *Odyssey*, Book 17, ll. 322-23. If, as the Stranger hopes, the *Laws* will be studied in Magnesia, 811c-e, or wherever statesmanship is taken seriously, intelligent readers will be able to discover the Stranger's own irony.

¹⁷³ 777b-778a.

their slaves firmly and fairly, but without familiarity, pointedly noting that slavery may be more corrupting of the masters than of the slaves because it offers so much opportunity to commit injustices that will go unpunished.

Later, the Stranger analogizes the recommended treatment of slaves to the way that children should be treated when they have to be disciplined.¹⁷⁴ This calls attention to a certain difficulty with the Stranger's anti-solidarity point. Assuming that the descendants of slaves brought from foreign lands will remain as slaves in Magnesia, the cultural barriers between the slaves can be expected to diminish over time, for the descendants will in a significant sense be children of Magnesia. Magnesia's novel orientation toward virtue might eventually render politically problematic the practice of enslaving some of the city's children on the basis of their birth and without regard to their natural capacity for virtue.¹⁷⁵

For the Stranger's purposes, one advantage of Crete over Sparta may have been that the Cretans had less need to employ the kind of brutality for which the Spartan treatment of the helots was

¹⁷⁴ 793e-794a.

¹⁷⁵ One can imagine a variety of responses that might be adopted by the Magnesians. They might, for example, sell the children of their slaves and purchase substitutes from other lands, which would follow the model provided by the Stranger's law on metics. Such a practice, however, would encourage slave revolts. The Magnesians might also consider some system of selective emancipation adapted from existing Greek practices (a strategy that Rousseau would later recommend in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, O.C. III, p. 974). The Stranger leaves such questions unaddressed, perhaps because he sees the tension between the necessity of slavery and its natural injustice as one that the city's founders cannot attempt to resolve at the outset. Subsequent European history — which saw the persistence of slavery well past the time when Christianity threw its injustice into a new light and well after new technologies rendered it unnecessary — suggests that the Stranger's reticence was not without justification. Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, pt. 1, ch. 3 (claiming that even the great writers of antiquity were blind to the injustice of slavery, asserting the necessity of Christ's appearance on earth to make it understood that all people are alike and equal, and leaving it to the reader to notice how long slavery persisted after the Christian era began).

notorious. Early in the dialogue, Megillus mentions the “secret police” (*krupteia*),¹⁷⁶ but the parallel institution in Magnesia has a very different function.¹⁷⁷

The Stranger’s acceptance of the traditional institution of slavery appears to be a concession to necessity. Once he determines that his goals require that the citizens have leisure without the inequality that would inevitably accompany large economic surpluses, it follows that they must be restricted to agricultural occupations and that they must be freed from occupying themselves with agricultural work. Given the technology of the time, only slavery offered a way out of this dilemma.

Note C

Many commentators have assumed that Plato excludes women from voting and/or from high office, or that the question of their political role does not merit serious attention. Thoughtful exceptions include T.J. Saunders, who argues that the text is indeterminate but that the spirit of the dialogue favors including them,¹⁷⁸ and David Cohen, who argues that women are expected and required to participate in all aspects of political and civic life.¹⁷⁹

The text of the *Laws* is quite obscure about which offices are to be open to women. A few offices are reserved for them: only women may become priestesses (presumably for service to female deities, in

¹⁷⁶ 633b9-c1.

¹⁷⁷ Leo Strauss assumes that Magnesia’s rural police (*agronomoi*, or *kruptoi* as the Stranger calls them at 763b7) would help the citizens to recover runaway slaves. *The Argument and the Action*, p. 89. This may be true, but such work would not have anything like the central importance that controlling the helots had for the *krupteia* in Sparta. See 763b-c.

¹⁷⁸ “Plato on Women in the *Laws*.”

¹⁷⁹ “The Legal Status and Political Role of Women in Plato’s *Laws*,” *Revue Internationale des Droits de L’Antiquité*, 3d series, book 34, pp. 27-40.

accord with Greek custom), inspectors of married couples and young children, and supervisors of women at their segregated common meals.¹⁸⁰ With respect to most of the highest offices, nothing is clearly and unambiguously specified. Although we are often left with the impression that males will fill these offices, this is largely because of a Greek linguistic convention according to which the masculine gender is used when referring to people whose sex is not necessarily specified. The impression that we are left with is not required by the text.

I have found three especially important offices for which there is a clear textual indication that they will be filled only by males: the superintendent of education, the auditors, and the nocturnal council.¹⁸¹ The Stranger's statement that the superintendent of education should be a father with legitimate children might simply reflect the fact that he says this before he has broached his proposals for the education of women, which means that his interlocutors are not yet prepared to consider the possibility of women holding high offices. Later, however, he does use the term *anēr* (male human being) when describing the auditors and the nocturnal council. Even these references, however, should be read in light of a speech in which the guardians of the laws are told that they will need to fill in the sketch provided by the *Laws*.¹⁸² In the course of this speech, the Stranger refers to a good man (*anēr*), having the virtue of soul of a human being (*anthropos*), *whether his nature be male or female*.¹⁸³ With this exceedingly strange formulation in mind, one can easily imagine that women should be allowed to assume any office for which they show themselves qualified.

It may well be that a variety of factors — such as the unequal burden placed by nature on women in reproduction, certain tastes or

¹⁸⁰ 759a-e, 783e-784a, 794a-c, 806e.

¹⁸¹ 765d4-7, 946a1, 946b7, 969b8.

¹⁸² 770b4-771a4.

¹⁸³ 770d1-5 (emphasis added).

dispositions that may naturally be more common among women than among men, and the auxiliary role they are to play in the military establishment — will conspire to limit the numbers of women in high office. The Stranger certainly does not propose anything like the kind of affirmative action that pervades our own society, but the text of the *Laws* at least permits the inference that women should have an equal opportunity to participate in the city's most influential public offices. The formulation at 770d1-5 leads me to believe that this conclusion is not only suggested but implied.

A competing alternative to my interpretation — and the only serious alternative of which I am aware — has been presented by Michael S. Kochin.¹⁸⁴ On the basis of a careful and thoughtful analysis of the text, Kochin contends that women are excluded from the highest offices, and that this exclusion reflects a fundamental defect in the Magnesian regime. That defect, in his view, arises from the Stranger's related decisions to preserve the institution of patriarchal families, and to rely on the rule of law rather than the rule of wisdom or intellect. These decisions, in turn, go to the root of why the city of the *Laws* is second-best compared with that of the *Republic*.

Plato's text will certainly bear Kochin's interpretation. I believe that our disagreement turns ultimately on whether the Stranger believes that his laws can — if not immediately then eventually — be modified to admit women into the highest offices, and especially to the nocturnal council. A confident answer to that question would depend on understanding how far the nocturnal council can go in discovering the unity of human virtue, and how far the law can go in recognizing that unity without abolishing private families. The Stranger leaves us to wonder what those limits are, and I am not persuaded, as Kochin appears to be, that women can never be admitted to the nocturnal council. Thus, in only one respect do I disagree with his statement that “[s]ince the laws of the *Laws* fail to promulgate properly the unity of human excellence in a single

¹⁸⁴ *Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

individual, they contain within themselves a permanent tension.”¹⁸⁵ The tension might not prove to be permanent, or at least not permanently so severe, if the nocturnal council comes to recognize that the sought-for unity of human virtue demands that women be allowed to join in its pursuit. However unlikely that recognition may be, the *Laws* does not seem to me to imply that it is inherently impossible.

Note D

On Theatrical Imitation, which Rousseau wrote while he was working on the *Letter to D’Alembert*, presents itself as a kind of extract of arguments in Plato against conventional artistic imitation. At the head of the essay, Rousseau placed a notice informing us that he himself did little more than convert Plato’s writing from a dialogue form to a coherent discourse, and that Rousseau had inadvertently released it for publication before deciding what, if anything, to do with it.¹⁸⁶ There are enough echoes from the *Republic* to make the first assertion superficially plausible, and the second assertion would be hard to disprove.

The notice also mentions that Rousseau had been unable to fit this writing “conveniently” into the *Letter*, and that assertion is manifestly credible in a way that calls the other two into question. *Theatrical Imitation* is written in the first person (except for four footnotes in Rousseau’s own voice), and it thus constitutes an inexact imitation of Plato’s inexact imitations of Socratic conversations. If for no other reason than this use of the first person, the essay could not have fit conveniently in the *Letter*. But Rousseau’s use of the first person also creates uncertainty as to whether, or to what extent, the paraphrases of speeches from Plato should be attributed to Socrates, or to Plato, or to Rousseau. In this way, the rhetoric of *Theatrical Imitation* imitates Plato’s refusal to indicate whether, or what extent,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 126.

¹⁸⁶ O.C. V, p. 1195.

the imitations of Socrates in the dialogues are speeches of Plato. Put this together with the irony of attacking imitations in an essay that is an imitation of an imitation, and you find yourself on notice against taking anything in *Theatrical Imitation* at face value.

The thesis of *Theatrical Imitation* is that dramatic authors are “corrupters of the people, or of whomever, allowing himself to be amused by their images, is not capable of considering them under their true point of view, nor of giving these fables the corrective they need.”¹⁸⁷ As this formulation intimates, two somewhat different correctives turn out to be required.

The opening strand of argument in *Theatrical Imitation* seems to treat each thing in the sensible world, including human artifacts, as an imperfect image of models or original ideas that exist “in the understanding of the Architect [or human craftsman], in nature, or at the very least in its Author together with all the possible ideas of which he is the source.”¹⁸⁸ Because painters and poets imitate sensible things, their works are imperfect images of imperfect images, and are thus in the order of being “always one degree further from the truth than one thinks.”¹⁸⁹ God is assumed to be the author of the idea that the architect or craftsman imitates in the work he produces.¹⁹⁰ *Theatrical Imitation*’s example of an imitation of an idea is a human artifact, namely a palace.¹⁹¹ This is instantly puzzling. If anything in the world looks intelligible without the assumption of a divine mind, it would seem to be the things that human beings make.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 1196.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 1197.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Plato’s Socrates is more tentative or equivocal in attributing the authorship of the ideas to a god. *Republic* 597b.

¹⁹¹ In the *Republic*, Socrates uses household furniture for examples. 596a *et seq.*

The puzzle is deepened a little later when *Theatrical Imitation* argues that the architect or craftsman does not have a “true understanding” of the thing he makes.¹⁹² It is Hector the charioteer, not the saddler, who knows what reins should be. More generally, “[i]f the utility, the goodness, the beauty, of an instrument, of an animal, of an action relates to the use drawn from it, if it belongs only to the one who puts them to work to provide the model and to judge whether this model is faithfully executed,” neither the craftsman nor his imitator (such as a painter or poet) can properly judge the qualities of the artifact.¹⁹³ It is easy enough to agree that the utility, and perhaps the goodness, of an instrument is best judged by its user. But the “model” then turns out to be specifications of which the user may have no clear idea before a craftsman produces an artifact that does or does not perform in a satisfactory manner. An animal, moreover, is not produced by a human craftsman, and it is difficult to conceive why God the author of all the ideas should be confounded with charioteers and other users of animals. And who exactly is the user who puts a human action to work?

These puzzles arise from a conflation of two different objections to painting and poetry, one of which is intellectual and the other moral. One objection is that paintings and poems provide illusions about the world, and thus interfere with the search for truth. In the case of paintings, this is manifestly false. As *Theatrical Imitation* acknowledges when it seeks to avoid “false analogies,” our senses constantly deceive us about the physical world, and we can at least to some extent correct these misleading impressions by reasoning with the aid of “[t]he suspension of the mind, [and] the art of measuring, of weighing, of counting.”¹⁹⁴ Paintings deliberately play upon the susceptibility of the senses to illusions, as with the art of perspective. But the viewer knows that the painting is only an image, and an artful one at that, so viewing the painting does nothing to

¹⁹² O.C. V, p. 1203.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 1204-05.

enhance or aggravate the mistakes about the physical world to which our senses make us prone. Viewing a painting will not make one any more likely to believe that the moon is larger when it is close to the horizon than when it is higher in the sky.

Poetry is different. A sufficiently talented poet might persuade a credulous audience that the moon does shrink as it ascends in the sky, perhaps with a story so charming as to deter the suspension of the mind that must occur while one tests one's sense impression by taking measurements. More obviously, poets (and sometimes painters, too) present us with pictures of the world and models of human action that "imitate what appears beautiful to the multitude, without caring whether it is so in fact."¹⁹⁵ This affects us adversely for two somewhat different reasons. First, we may think that a successful poet like Homer "must possess the science of all the [moral and political] things he treats."¹⁹⁶ Could any intelligent reader leave Homer without at least suspecting as much? Second, poets cause us to yield with a sort of pleasure to passions that embarrass and harm us when they overcome us in our own lives, thus making it harder to control them.¹⁹⁷

Theatrical Imitation suggests two different "correctives." One is quite straightforward. Banish poetry from our lives unless and until the friends of the poets can persuade us of their usefulness.¹⁹⁸ The other corrective, offered only obliquely, is philosophy. This second suggestion comes in a passage where *Theatrical Imitation* responds to an objection that "the philosopher himself does not know all the arts about which he speaks, and that he often extends his ideas as far as the Poet extends his images."¹⁹⁹ The response offered is that the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 1204.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 1200.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 1208-10.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 1210-11.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 1204.

philosopher does not present himself as knowing the truth and “even instructs us through his mistakes.”²⁰⁰ Not a bad description of Socrates, as he is presented in Plato, but neither the objection nor the response occurs in any of the passages from Plato paraphrased in *Theatrical Imitation*. It also leaves the usefulness of philosophy in considerable obscurity, and leaves us to wonder how we are to be instructed by *Theatrical Imitation*, whose author seems to have mistakenly adopted a more dogmatic rhetoric than Socrates employs in the passages paraphrased in the essay.

One clue is provided in a particularly glaring mistake near the end of *Theatrical Imitation*. Not once but twice, the essay substitutes the name Glaucus for Glaucon in its paraphrase of the discussion that opens Book X of the *Republic*. Glaucus is a mythical god of the sea, whose once human form became unrecognizable through damage from the action of ocean waves and an encrustation of shells, seaweed, and rocks. Socrates likens Glaucus to the human soul “as we see it now.”²⁰¹ He offers this image after his argument for the immortality of the soul that immediately follows his attack on imitation and the poets, and shortly before he presents his own poetic myth of Er. The statue of Glaucus (an imitation of a mythical being) is used in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau’s most openly philosophic work, as an image of the human soul encrusted with an accumulation of effects from social life.²⁰² The mistaken use of the name Glaucus thus instructs us about the necessity of something that is absent from *Theatrical Imitation*: philosophic poetry.

One of the ways that *Theatrical Imitation* distorts the *Republic* is by starting at the beginning of Book X and paraphrasing part of Book III later in the essay. This reversal of Plato’s order calls attention to important differences between the contexts in which Socrates criticizes poetry in Books III and X. Book III’s attack on

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ 611b-d.

²⁰² O.C. III, p. 122.

poetry primarily involves Adeimantus as founder and educator of imaginary men in an imaginary city in speech. There is no claim that he and Glaucon should themselves stay away from poetry, or that they are “not capable of considering [such fables] under their true point of view.”²⁰³ When Socrates returns to the topic in Book X, he has already taken Glaucon and the others on a most fantastic imaginary journey out of the cave and into the realm of intelligibles illuminated by the idea of the good, and instructed them, so to speak, about the order of being through the image of the divided line. This is the necessary background (wholly absent from *Theatrical Imitation*) that allows Socrates to invoke the so-called doctrine of ideas when speaking with Glaucon at the beginning of Book X, where it seems less instantly puzzling than it does at the beginning of *Theatrical Imitation*.

Glaucon’s intervening journey has also shifted the emphasis from Glaucon as educator of imaginary citizens to the question of Glaucon’s own education, or to put it another way, from the requirements of a just city to those of a just soul. *Theatrical Imitation*, like the discussion of imitation in Book X of the *Republic*, points toward questions about the role of poetic imitation in private education. This may help to explain why Rousseau’s initial release of *Theatrical Imitation* occurred when he sent the manuscript to a publisher along with the plates to the *New Heloise*.²⁰⁴ That novel, and the private education it depicts, supplies an appropriate complement to *Theatrical Imitation* in a way that the *Letter to D’Alembert* does not.²⁰⁵

The *Letter to D’Alembert* attacks imitative poetry in a less uncompromising manner than *Theatrical Imitation*, focusing as it does on the theater (not imitation in general) and acknowledging as it does that its “correctives” are finally applicable only to a city like Geneva.

²⁰³ O.C. V, p. 1196.

²⁰⁴ O.C. V, p. 1831 (editor’s note).

²⁰⁵ Fittingly, the only quotation from Plato in the *Letter to D’Alembert* is from Book III of the *Republic*. O.C. V., p. 109 n.*.

In these respects, the *Letter* resembles the *Laws*.²⁰⁶

Some of the Athenian Stranger's statements about poetry resemble some of Socrates' statements in the *Republic*.²⁰⁷ Unlike Socrates, however, the Stranger introduces comic imitations into Magnesia, where they will serve the purpose of discouraging ridiculous and shameful behavior.²⁰⁸ So-called serious or tragic poetry, for its part, will be permitted in Magnesia only if and only to the extent that it conveys exactly the same teachings that the laws of the city do.²⁰⁹ Those teachings are to be conveyed primarily through the preludes to the laws, and by the *Laws* itself, neither of which contains anything like the philosophic poetry found in the *Republic*. That is why the Stranger can call the polity or political regime of the *Laws* "the truest tragedy," or "the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life."²¹⁰

As we shall see, the *Letter to D'Alembert* adopts a somewhat similar approach. Rousseau treats the lowest form of shameful comedy as tolerable for Geneva, and preferable to the high comedy of Paris. He also advocates the introduction of a more serious kind of theater consisting of celebrations of what he thinks is the most beautiful and best way of life available to the Genevans. Thus, the

²⁰⁶ *Theatrical Imitation* itself points toward the *Laws*, though very indirectly. In a footnote, Rousseau interprets Plato as drawing a sharp distinction between a poet's success in becoming popular and a poet's success in teaching useful things. Rousseau then says that Tyrtaeus might be offered as an example to refute Plato, but contends that Plato could "extricate himself" by treating Tyrtaeus as an orator rather than a poet. *O.C. V*, p. 1202 n*. Tyrtaeus is never mentioned in the *Republic*, but he is discussed several times in the *Laws*. Whereas the *Republic* replaces traditional poetry with the philosophic poetry of Socrates, the *Laws* replaces traditional poetry with philosophic oratory.

²⁰⁷ Cf., e.g., *Laws* 801c-d with *Republic* 398a-b.

²⁰⁸ 816d-817a. Comedy is attacked along with tragedy in the *Republic*. 606c.

²⁰⁹ 817a-d.

²¹⁰ 817b2-5.

Letter has a more direct kinship with the *Laws* than with the passages from the *Republic* that are imitated in *Theatrical Imitation*.