



Listening to the Past

Gender Constructions and Education for Girls

Emile, or On Education (1762), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is one of history's most original and influential books. Sometimes called a declaration of rights for children, it pleads for the humane treatment of children and lambasts widespread indifference and harsh discipline.

Rousseau's long, rambling work, part novel and part philosophical treatise, also had a powerful impact on theories of education. Emile argues that education must shield the unspoiled child from the corrupting influences of civilization and allow the child to develop naturally and spontaneously. Children should learn what they—not their teachers—find interesting and useful. As this selection shows, Rousseau constructed sharp gender divisions. Girls and boys were basically equal as human beings, but sex made them both similar and different, intended by their natures for different occupations. Whereas Emile would eventually tackle academic subjects, Sophie, his future wife, would receive only lessons in household management, good mothering, and wifely obedience. The idea of educating girls and boys to operate “naturally” in their “separate spheres” would flourish in the nineteenth century.

Sophie ought to be a woman as Emile is a man—that is to say, she ought to have everything which suits the constitution of her species and her sex in order to fill her place in the physical and moral order. Let us begin, then, by examining the similarities and the differences of her sex and ours. In everything not connected with sex, woman is man. She has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties. The machine is constructed in the same way; its parts are the same; the one functions as does the other; the form is similar; and in whatever respect one considers them, the difference between them is only one of more or less.

In everything connected with sex, woman and man are in every respect related and in every

respect different. The difficulty of comparing them comes from the difficulty of determining what in their constitutions is due to sex and what is not. . . .

There is no parity between the two sexes in regard to the consequences of sex. The male is male only at certain moments. The female is female her whole life or at least during her whole youth. Everything constantly recalls her sex to her; and, to fulfill its functions well, she needs a constitution which corresponds to it. She needs care during her pregnancy; she needs rest at the time of childbirth; she needs a soft and sedentary life to suckle her children; she needs patience and gentleness, a zeal and an affection that nothing can rebut in order to raise her children. She serves as the link between them and their father; she alone makes him love them and give them the confidence to call them his own. How much tenderness and care is required to maintain the union of the whole family! . . .

Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way in either character or temperament, it follows that they ought not to have the same education. In following nature's directions, man and woman ought to act in concert, but they ought not to do the same things. The goal of their labors is common, but their labors themselves are different, and consequently so are the tastes directing them. . . .

All the faculties common to the two sexes are not equally distributed between them; but taken together, they balance out. Woman is worth more as woman and less as man. Wherever she makes use of her rights, she has the advantage. Wherever she wants to usurp ours, she remains beneath us. . . .

To cultivate man's qualities in women and to neglect those which are proper to them is obviously to work to their detriment. . . . Believe me, judicious mother, do not make a decent man of your daughter, 'as though you would give nature the lie. Make a decent woman of her, and

be sure that as a result she will be worth more for herself and for us.

Does it follow that she ought to be raised in ignorance of everything and limited to the housekeeping functions alone? Will man turn his companion into his servant? . . . Surely not. It is not thus that nature has spoken in giving women such agreeable and nimble minds. On the contrary, nature wants them to think, to judge, to love, to know, to cultivate their minds as well as their looks. These are the weapons nature gives them to take the place of the strength they lack and to direct others. They ought to learn many things but only those that are suitable for them to know. . . .

The children of both sexes have many common entertainments, and that ought to be so. Is this not also the case when they are grown up? They also have particular tastes which distinguish them. Boys seek movement and noise: drums, boots, little carriages. Girls prefer what presents itself to sight and is useful for ornamentation: mirrors, jewels, dresses, particularly dolls. The doll is the special entertainment of this sex. . . .

Observe a little girl spending the day around her doll. . . . [S]he puts all her coquetry into it. She will not always leave it there. She awaits the moment when she will be her own doll.

This is a very definite primary taste. You have only to follow and regulate it. It is certain that the little girl would want with all her heart to know how to adorn her doll, to make its bracelets, its scarf, its flounce, its lace. . . . In this way there emerges the reason for the first lessons she is given. They are not tasks prescribed to her, they are kindnesses done for her. In fact, almost all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance. But as for holding a needle, that they always learn gladly. They imagine themselves to be grown up and think with pleasure that these talents will one day be useful for adorning themselves.

Once this first path is opened, it is easy to follow. Sewing, embroidery, and lacemaking come by themselves. Tapestry is not much to their taste. . . .

Whatever humorists may say, good sense belongs equally to the two sexes. Girls are generally more docile than boys, and one should even use more authority with them, as I shall say a little later. But it does not follow that anything ought to be demanded from them whose utility they cannot see. The art of mothers is to show them the utility of everything they prescribe to them, and that is all the easier since intelligence is more precocious in girls than in boys. This rule banishes—for their sex as well as for ours—not only idle studies which lead to no good and do not



Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), portrayed as a gentle teacher and a pensive philosopher. (The Granger Collection, New York)

even make those who have pursued them more attractive to others, but even those which are not useful at their age and whose usefulness for a more advanced age the child cannot foresee. If I do not want to push a boy to learn to read, all the more I do not want to force girls to before making them well aware of what the use of reading is. In the way this utility is ordinarily showed to them, we follow our own idea far more than theirs. After all, where is the necessity for a girl to know how to read and write so early? Will she so soon have a household to govern? There are very few girls who do abuse this fatal science more than they make good use of it. And all of them have too much curiosity not to learn it—without our forcing them to do so—when they have the leisure and the occasion. Perhaps girls ought to learn to do arithmetic before anything, for nothing presents a more palpable utility at all times, requires longer practice, and is so exposed to error as calculation. If the little girl were to get cherries for her snack only by doing an arithmetical operation, I assure you that she would soon know how to calculate.

Questions for Analysis

1. What similarities and differences between women/girls and men/boys does Rousseau see? In your opinion, which appear more important to Rousseau? Why?
2. Were Rousseau's views on gender differences and education reactionary or progressive?

Source: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Alan Bloom. Copyright © 1979 by Basic Books, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, a member of Perseus Books, L.L.C.