Rousseau and the New Domestic Art of Women's Taste*

Katharine J. Hamerton
Columbia College

This article seeks to better historicize Jean-Jacques Rousseau's discussion of women's taste in *Emile* (1762). Clearly, Rousseau intended his comments, which were embedded within a complex, anxious, mid-century cultural context, to be reformist. Beyond this immediate context, though, Rousseau was intervening in a long-running debate about feminine taste. He thus contributed to an ongoing discursive evolution away from the *honnête* understanding of women's taste which he both inherited and altered.¹ By shifting feminine taste's site and purview into the domestic realm, he further undercut the *honnête* vision and refocused the discussion. His discursive appropriation within this mid-century environment explains the shape of his reforms and how his ideas could be attractive not only to male detractors of feminine taste, but also to eighteenth-century Frenchwomen. This discursive heritage also informed the

---

* Thanks to Naomi Andrews, Denise Davidson, Elizabeth Heath, Jennifer Palmer, and April Shelford for their comments.

reception of Rousseau's ideas in the next century under different circumstances.

While most feminists then and since have rightly found that Rousseau unjustly limited women's capabilities, his treatment of feminine aesthetic capacities had an undeniable charm to many contemporaries. I contend that this appeal was rooted in assumptions about women's transformative civilizing abilities, which derived (ironically enough) from progressive honnête and Modern discourse.² These inherited assumptions help explain the attractiveness of Rousseau's ideas to women and to those men seeking ready, facile solutions for complex contemporary conditions, which they experienced as troubling and destabilizing. While scholars have often noted the mixed feelings of contemporaries in responding to Rousseau's portrait of Sophie, we need not resort to Julie alone to explain his appeal to women.³ Certain elements of Sophie's depiction that related to the deployment of feminine taste within the marital relationship and domestic setting had their own attractions. While Rousseau's demands that women be excluded from the arbitration of French taste and the strict limits he set to girls' domestic education were appealing to many men, both were hoary propositions. More important and original, I argue, was the compelling substitution Rousseau effected of a comfortable, attractive, and eroticized domestic realm within which women's taste could flourish, in lieu of the contested honnête domain of polite discussion of letters and creative productions.

The full context for understanding Rousseau's intervention, its appeal, and how it figures into a longer story about women's taste have not been well understood. The domesticity of women's

² On progressive aspects of honnêteté and its relation to the Modern position in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, see Hamerton, "Feminist Voice."

taste has generally been considered a nineteenth-century issue. Four
Eighteenth-century scholars have focused on cultural forces that
sought to bar women's influence from French aesthetic judgment, and they have not devoted much attention to attempts to resituate women's taste within a potentially attractive
domestic setting. Recent work, though, nuances earlier visions of women's marginalization by registering the contingent
impacts of republicanism, revolutionary fallout, and separate-
spheres ideology on women's lives, and reminds us of the
positive or appealing elements of domesticity for women. I seek

---


to understand both the battles over women's public aesthetic judgment in the pre-revolutionary decades and the appeal of imagining taste as a feminine faculty perfectly suited to domestic matters. To this end, it is helpful to move beyond scapegoating Rousseau as "First Misogynist Cause" of modern gender inequality and domestic entrapment. By more sensitively contextualizing his ideas, we will better understand why his impact was so strong and what women might have hoped to gain through appropriating his vision of domestic taste to their own purposes.

By the 1750s, the long-dominant honnête discourse of taste, in which refined salon women had been held to rightfully arbitrate literature, good taste, and sociability for male writers and other salon habitués since the seventeenth century, was under siege. The context for this aggressive sapping was complex. Women's activities in salons, as avoiders of parental responsibilities, and as consumers driven by luxury and fashion were seen as problematic. As readers, writers, and art patrons, they were perceived as influencing art, music and letters and damaging the excellence of French taste. Critics discursively framed, enunciated, and responded to these issues on a variety of


bases: a politicized neoclassical aesthetic discourse critical of the goût moderne, classical republican thought, religious conservatism, attacks on luxury, fashion, and philosophie, or medical and psychological discourses on sensibility and sexual difference. Broader developments such as France's losses in the Seven Years' War, fear of demographic decline and physical degeneration, and the burgeoning national debt, which was linked to anger over aristocratic dissoluteness, contributed to an environment of anxiety. Other factors prompting unease about French modernity and degeneration included the successes of the philosophic party and the development of the Counter-Enlightenment, and the increase of consumer goods and colonial commerce. Various constituencies, each focusing on the issues it found most problematic, formed a chorus, harshly charging women's tastes and taste-driven activities with troubling influence. Traditionalists averse to Enlightenment changes had long bemoaned the inroads of philosophie into worldly society and women's confidence in their literary judgment, and they complained of the damaging and inappropriate nature of their public interventions in the Enlightenment salons and of the superficiality of the judgments made there. Supporters of the return to le grand goût in art rendered similar judgments. Enlightenment supporters who were ambivalent about women's salon activities and libertine proponents of luxury eroticized women's taste, arguing that it should be used to please men.

Various observers condemned women's love of luxury and fashion. After 1750, medical theory, which held women's mental fibers responsible for their excessive nervous sensitivity, was increasingly invoked to depict women as subject to a flitting, frivolous taste. Like many of these critics, Rousseau found unacceptable the current objects, practices, and effects of women's taste in France. By seizing upon and unifying these critiques and endowing them with greater urgency, he crystallized their concerns. Like them, Rousseau was primarily worried about the exercise of women's taste in modern Paris—city of enlightenment, consumerism, and sexual mingling. His ideas about regulating women's taste in *Emile* were less reactionary in focusing on the domestic than than they were reformist of modern French society as he and other critics were experiencing it.

The *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) had criticized the negative impact of women's taste on French art and letters and the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758) had passionately defended the sexually segregated Genevan tradition that Parisian civilized corruption was threatening. Rousseau's prescription for educating and reforming modern women's taste came in *Emile* (1762). His solution was not premised on strict Genevan extra-familial sexual separation, impossible (and perhaps not even desirable) in Paris. Rousseau made an

---


11 For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Katharine J. Hamerton, "Women's Taste in the French Enlightenment: From the Honnête Model to the Domestic Paradigm, 1673–1762" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2002).

12 Rousseau accepted that taste was best learned in Parisian society (if generally by counter-example) and that it was critical to "the agreeableness of life." See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 344; see 340 ff (all parenthetical references in the text will be to this edition). He did not expect that Parisian mixed-sex sociability would disappear. Sophie's education before meeting Emile contains minimal exposure to the wider world beyond her family (396, 398-99). Sophie's
education in taste appear doable to many readers by showing how it would occur within the family of origin and during courtship. We can understand the potential appeal to women after a century of discussions naturalizing their special feminine taste and a century of critiques thereof (the latter of which had recently escalated). In Rousseau, they found their taste exalted in a new sphere and to a new purpose through the compelling image of their inherent feminine tastefulness being put to the service of moral, familial, and social regeneration. Undeniably, Rousseau sought to bar women from judging art and literature, declaiming:

Consult the taste of women in physical things connected with the judgment of the senses, but consult the taste of men in moral things that depend more on the understanding. When women are what they ought to be, they will limit themselves to things within their competence and will always judge well. But since they have established themselves as the arbiters of literature, since they have set about judging books and relentlessly producing them, they no longer know anything. Authors who consult the learned ladies about their works are always sure of being badly counseled.

But while Rousseau echoed the ongoing critical discourse of these years here, he went beyond it, concluding, "I shall soon have occasion to speak of the true talents of this sex, of the way to cultivate them, and of the things about which its decisions ought then to be heard" (341). Regulating women's taste meant many things to Rousseau, but above all it meant refocusing it away from its current culturally damaging realms.

Rousseau provided a far-reaching solution to the problems each camp of critics had identified by resituating women's taste in the domestic sphere. Just as substituting breast-feeding for wet-nursing was an essential regenerative goal from which Rousseau expected other social improvements to follow, his inadequate preparation for urban life explains her subsequent downfall in Emile et Sophie, ou Les Solitaires (1780), according to Trouille, Sexual Politics, 32, 37; and Akkerman, Women's Vices, 76.
focusing of women's taste and pleasing capacities within the marital sphere was likewise intended to regenerate the family, society, and gender identity and relations. While his critique responded to the concerns of various mid-century constituencies, he built his case on his notion of reformed femininity, proposing a new solution to what seemed to many a cultural crisis. He offered a coherent, welcome response to the perplexing dilemma created by believing that women had a special kind of taste, that they rightfully exerted some kind of moral empire over men, and yet that their influence was promoting a degeneration in French taste, as contemporary cultural trends attested. Given Rousseau's perpetual insistence that "all the natural inclinations are good and right in themselves" (370), he agreed with the long-held view that women were creatures of taste, yet he sought to show how the exercise of this faculty could avoid current drawbacks, thus benefitting society, if its purview (and that of women generally) were restricted to the home. "Everything that characterizes the fair sex," said Rousseau, "ought to be respected as established by nature. . . . Prevent these alleged failings from degenerating, but take care not to destroy them" (363). Such inclinations as their superficial taste for baubles were really women's "good qualities" (363); properly directed, these tastes could serve family and society well.

Significantly, Rousseau inherited his conception of women's taste, specifically the belief that women had dramatic cultural influence via their naturally heightened taste, directly from honnête discourse. He too believed that women's taste exerted remarkable, society-wide influence on the men who produced art and literature, though like earlier observers such as Montesquieu he thought it dependent upon national mores that held it in check to a greater or lesser degree. In France, thought Rousseau, when

---

men set out to please women—a driving male instinct—they were doomed to produce the trivial, ephemeral and luxurious, because French women had excessive freedoms to consume and influence art and letters, objects inappropriate for their judgment. Rousseau thus closely followed the honnête theorists who had emphasized men's needs to please women and French women's formative influence on men's taste and on their artistic and literary productions. Unlike them, though, he strongly disapproved of this influence and its effects. Accepting that women were naturally driven to make taste judgments and believing that, because of this, women were to blame for the current state of French taste, which he and others despised, Rousseau developed an alternative, reformed role for women's taste in *Emile*. Although he addressed the issue of preserving Emile's natural and pure taste, it was Sophie's education that was most critical for national taste reform. Only by channeling women's taste within the domestic setting would French writers, musicians, and artists be freed from corrupting feminine influence and would women be able to remain the discerning creatures they were naturally meant to be.

Like honnête writers, then, Rousseau saw taste as an essential component of femininity. And he found taste deeply connected to love, agreeing with earlier critics who had strongly eroticized women's taste, normatively focusing it *solely* on pleasing men. He took this trend to its monogamous conclusion, providing Sophie and other women with a marital, familial outlet for their inherent taste. "It is especially in the relations between the two sexes that taste, good or bad, gets its form," he declared. "Its cultivation is a necessary effect of the aim of these relations" (341). With pleasing a lover or spouse the motor of taste, much of his discussion was bound up with Emile and Sophie's relationship. Emile was only to learn about taste as a young man being readied to meet Sophie, for "philosophizing about the principles of taste . . . is the study which suits him during this period" (340). In general, Emile's taste was to be cultivated just enough to prevent corruption of his natural appetites and his
focusing on wealth; it was a means to the good life (344). Explicitly, it had nothing to do with his "needs" (340). Such disinterested taste was impossible for Sophie, whose taste education would be wrapped up in her psychological, existential, moral, and material needs to please a man. Cultivation of her taste would be fundamental to her identity as woman, lover, and wife. The simple, pleasing, "natural" adornment of the self and domestic space that she was to learn was essentially utilitarian.

In his taste education program for both sexes, Rousseau eschewed traditional honnête mechanisms of taste formation in which exposure to and engagement with works of art and literature, refined social commerce, and polite conversation had perfected taste—with influential women having the advantage of instinctive sensitive delicacy and refinement. While accepting the premise that men were driven to please women, Rousseau inverted the honnête emphasis on men needing to learn this, especially in conversation; instead, he emphasized that women should please men and form their own feminine taste accordingly. To honnête discourse's emphasis on women being effortlessly pleasing, Rousseau added didactic and functional components. Women, he declared, had not received from nature "such agreeable and nimble minds" (364) for housekeeping alone; "every woman wants to please men and should want to" (365), which was the purpose of those pleasing minds and that feminine taste. "Man says what he knows; woman says what pleases," Rousseau flatly stated. "He needs knowledge to speak; she needs taste. Useful things ought to be his principal object and pleasing things ought to be hers" (376). Girls, he concluded, "ought to impose a law on themselves to say only what is pleasing to those to whom they speak" (376). In honnête discourse, such demands had been made of both men and women, but Rousseau shifted the burden primarily to women to cultivate their taste to please men: "Regarding what is not immediately connected with their duties, all the reflections of women ought to be directed to the study of men or to the pleasing kinds of knowledge that have only taste as their aim;
for, as regards works of genius, they are out of the reach of women” (386). Again in opposition to the honnête framework, women's taste could not judge (let alone create) art and literature. Women's taste could, however, exert tremendous influence on the men with whom women must live, so it was far safer to channel it towards pleasing men, instead of influencing their taste. It is important to realize, though, that Rousseau did not insist that women be pleasing only for men's benefit. As with women's natural guile, this taste-derived ability to please was a weapon in nature's gendered arsenal that women needed and wisely deployed to make more equitable their relations with the stronger sex that might otherwise enslave them (370-72). Undoubtedly, this was a compelling argument to some women—though not to Mary Wollstonecraft!

It was thus natural and right for women to "love adornment almost from birth" (365) and to cultivate physical attractiveness, and Rousseau took issue with religious conservatives and educational reformers (382) who wished women to focus less on the agreeable arts. "I know," he expostulated, "that severe teachers want neither song nor dance nor any of the pleasing arts to be taught to young girls. That seems amusing to me! And to whom do they want them to be taught? To boys? To whom, men or women, do these talents specially belong?" (373). Rousseau had no doubts. Nor did he doubt the consequences of this trend: "By enslaving decent women only to gloomy duties, we have banished from marriage everything which could make it attractive to men. . . . So much has been done to prevent women from being lovable that husbands have become indifferent. . . . I would want a young Englishwoman to cultivate pleasing talents that will entertain her future husband with as much care as a young Albanian cultivates them for the harem of Ispahan" (374). Although Rousseau acknowledged that husbands disapproved of the cultivation of these talents because they were employed for "impudent young men," this would cease to pose a problem if "a lovable and pure woman who possessed such talents . . . consecrated them to the entertainment of her husband." Then
they would "add to the happiness of his life" and prevent him from seeking other recreations "when he left his office exhausted" (374). The desire to develop such pleasing talents was something that normally would naturally emerge in girls without the need of encouragement or formal training (373-75), influenced "above all [by] their own taste" (375).

To assess how much weight Rousseau placed on the argument that the taste for pleasing—and on pleasing through taste—was natural to women, consider the important passage on the generic little girl, innately drawn to dolls. "The doll is the special entertainment of this sex," Rousseau observed, concluding:

*This is evidently its taste, determined by its purpose.* The physical part of the art of pleasing lies in adornment. This is the only part of that art that children can cultivate.

Observe a little girl spending the day around her doll, constantly changing its clothes, dressing and undressing it hundreds and hundreds of times, continuously seeking new combinations of ornaments—well- or ill-matched, it makes no difference. Her fingers lack adroitness, her taste is not yet formed, but already the inclination reveals itself. In this eternal occupation time flows without her thinking of it . . . She even forgets meals. She is hungrier for adornment than for food. But, you will say, she adorns her doll and not her person. Doubtless. She sees her doll and does not see herself. She can do nothing for herself. She is not yet formed; she has neither talent nor strength; she is still nothing. She is entirely in her doll, and she 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 (367; emphasis added).

Being natural, this taste for pleasing and adornment must not be denied, according to Rousseau's basic tenets, but it must be regulated. Girls' natural predilection for adornment was dangerous if left unchecked; they needed to be led to recognize how their attractions would be heightened if they dressed in simple home-made outfits instead of following fashion or dressing in finery (372-73).
Rousseau considered how to regulate taste for both sexes, as we see when we compare his treatments of teaching drawing to Emile and to girls. "Good taste in drawing" might never, in fact, be developed in Emile, but his "taste for the beauties of nature" would be carefully protected (144). Here, drawing was about learning "the laws of perspective," training the eye and hand, learning to distinguish between true and false imitations, and gaining an understanding of nature by drawing only and always from nature. Emile would "sketch a house from a house, a tree from a tree, a man from a man," for "my intention is that he be able not so much to imitate objects as to know them" (144). Drawing was about learning to merit "the honor of the plain frame," which his tutor would use only for the most exact drawings, and learning to scorn "the gilded frame" used to embellish his first and "crudest" depictions. These picture frames would "serve as proverbs" as to the dissembling, almost shameful nature of adornment (145), a moral lesson Emile would later apply to his clothing (338; see 372 for girls). In contrast, girls were not to learn drawing from nature, for they did not need to *know* physical objects through drawing. They needed to know them only instrumentally, that is, how to imitate them tastefully for self-adornment. After readily learning sewing, embroidery, and lacemaking (though learning reading and writing only with repugnance) and eager to gain skills for future self-adornment, which they would dream of while making their dolls' clothes (367-68), girls would voluntarily learn drawing, "for this art is not without importance for the art of dressing oneself up tastefully." Here, Rousseau carefully limited their studies in a way very different from those of Emile: "I would not want them to apply themselves to landscapes, still less to figures," he specified. "Leaves, fruits, flowers, draperies, everything which is useful for giving an elegant turn to clothing and for making an embroidery pattern for oneself when one does not find any to one's taste—that is enough for them." Rousseau concluded with a favorite observation: "if it is important for men to limit their studies to useful knowledge, it is even more important for
women," because of the duties, cares and interruptions of their lives (368). Women did not need to know how to judge art and literature—they could not and should not. Women needed only to judge how to be most tastefully pleasing to particular individuals, primarily men, in particular circumstances.

Another significant reversal from the honnête model in which women influenced men's taste was that, as part of their courtship and journey into becoming an indivisible complementary pair, Emile would teach Sophie and form her taste.¹⁴ Like a garden, Sophie's mind had been prepared for this final, marital cultivation and taste dissemination:

Her education is neither brilliant nor neglected. She has taste without study, talents without art, judgment without knowledge. Her mind does not know, but it is cultivated for learning; it is a well-prepared soil that only awaits seed in order to bear fruit. . . . She will be not her husband's teacher but his pupil. Far from wanting to subject him to her tastes, she will adopt his. She is better for him as she is than if she were learned: he will have the pleasure of teaching her everything (410).

Emile, "a man with morals and taste, loving the beautiful, doing the good," has been prepared to become Sophie's instructor in taste and life (418; also see 419). Wooing her, Emile learns "the value of the agreeable talents with which he has provided himself. . . . he teaches her music. . . . He dances with her; . . . he trains her. . . . By watching Emile sketch and imitating him [again, not nature], she becomes more skillful. . . . She cultivates all the talents, and her charm embellishes them all. . . . Love has adorned their entire home" with drawings and music (425). Emile "needs to adorn" Sophie, and naively teaches her subjects she will never be able to master, such as philosophy, physics, mathematics, and history (425). Sophie "gets a conception of everything and does not remember very much. Her

---

greatest progress is in ethics and in matters of taste" (426). But to fulfill her womanly purpose and be a happy wife, this, Emile asserts, is the education she needs.

In reconceptualizing women's taste as he did, Rousseau was rehabilitating a longstanding feminine faculty that had fallen upon hard times, rescuing it—in line with his guiding assumption that everything natural is good—from a powerful set of critiques. Having embraced the honnête principles of the naturalness and power of women's taste, while radically departing from honnête assessments of the positive impact of feminine taste in France, Rousseau found that correctly aligning women's taste with domestic objects and with the drive to please within marriage would lead towards social improvement. In this, Rousseau cannot be reduced to pure instrumentality, paternalism, bad faith, or misogyny. He believed that women would themselves find happiness with their faculties of taste channeled into and fulfilled within the appropriate sensual, material, and non-intellectual fields, because it was their fate and nature to exist in a marital relationship and to be creatures of taste, not intellect. Men would benefit too, of course, and from this domestic rejuvenation a greater social reform would spring. Women's taste, rightly regulated, would reconcile them to a familial and social order that necessarily and appropriately constrained them. This development, crystallized by Rousseau, represents a major step away from the honnête discourse of taste, then under fire on various fronts, one that ironically drew upon Modern and honnête beliefs about feminine influence that had accompanied and justified the social developments that Rousseau found so troubling. Rousseau helped make it possible for modern French women to become the natural arbiters and consumers of fashion and domestic decoration, rather than of serious literature, by turning the honnête model of women's taste inside-out, yet leaving intact the naturalized notion of a heightened feminine taste with its own particular objects. This vision of women's taste in its new domesticated guise—appealing, naturalized and

Volume 37 (2009)
valorized, but with its honnête remnants of distinction, refinement, and Frenchness intact—would have a long future in modern France, whether in the image of the tasteful, civilized domestic haven, a respite from the brutalizing world of bureaucratic or capitalist work, or in the still popular idea that taste is especially developed among French women.

Reading Rousseau's discussion of taste in *Emile* from this perspective, his concerns appear as part of a larger eighteenth-century shift in the gendered discourse of taste. Through his intervention, Rousseau became pivotal in the later stages of this shift. Undermining modes of taste associated with women, femininity or effeminacy was not simply a war over legitimate judging authority waged by the progressive *philosophes* against conservative and aristocratic *salonnières*, nor did it result only, or even straightforwardly, in marginalizing salon women from aesthetic arbitration.¹⁵

Many eighteenth-century women might have had mixed feelings about Rousseau's domesticated taste model with its focus on male pleasure. But just as the fashion industry and revolutionaries readily adopted and co-opted elements of Rousseau's ideas for their own purposes, surely individual women did the same with his ideas about their taste.¹⁶ Women did not need to embrace all of Rousseau's arguments to find appealing the idea of a tasteful, eroticized domestic imperium that he rendered attractive and important during a period of increased consumption and of growing interest in taste, comfort, adorning the respectable home, and marital satisfaction.¹⁷ This likely seemed an easier and less freighted task than breastfeeding, a practice which had been entirely unacceptable

---

¹⁵ Peckacz, *Conservative Tradition*.


for fashionable women and an ideal of Rousseau's that many women found compelling, but did not often achieve, and that remained controversial. Given other restrictions on women's lives, this model had considerable attractions in dignifying and rendering virtuous, moral, and powerful, acts of creativity, fashionable consumption and family nest-building (as it still does). These domestic attractions, moreover, were now held out to many more women than those empowered by the elitist discourse of honnêteté. It is almost impossible to state whether this rechanneling of taste should be judged more as constraint or empowerment for women. As Rousseau intended—though not always in the ways that he intended—it was both.

18 Senior, "Aspects"; Quinlan, Great Nation.
19 However, see Garson on the pitfalls of "the natural taste that requires only cultivation," Moral Taste, Introduction.