Review: Interpretive Practices and Political Designs: Reading Authenticity, Integrity, and Reform in Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Reviewed Work(s):
Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society by Mira Morgenstern
Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics by Ruth W. Grant
Domesticating Passions: Rousseau, Woman, and Nation by Nicole Fermon

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INTERPRETIVE PRACTICES AND POLITICAL DESIGNS
Reading Authenticity, Integrity, and Reform in Jean-Jacques Rousseau


It is customary when writing about Rousseau to begin with a sweeping gesture. To some extent, this is a function of the very divided and well-trod terrain through which any interpreter must move: the multiple reiterations of his individualist, collectivist, rationalist, passionate, democratic, and antidemocratic political vision are best surveyed from higher ground. So, too, Rousseau’s texts seem to authorize such gestures. His unabashed acceptance of paradox, as well as his persistently immoderate prose, bear witness to a textual overabundance that resists judicious address. Rousseau’s writings and their explication can thus provoke a language of expansive vision, an all-embracing perspective that recognizes multiple and contradictory political and narrative possibilities.

But this is only an opening move. Authors commonly follow up their rhetoric of largesse by announcing a need for interpretive discipline, and in short order the excesses are recast as extremes that require careful navigation. On these accounts, “getting Rousseau right” means steering between the myriad Scyllas and Charybdises that menace impetuous readers. Both textual and worldly, these monsters reflect the dire conclusions to which Rousseau’s
writings can lead and the fanatical ends to which his political insights can be put. He might invite, even initiate, outlandish readings through his own textual designs, but the interpreter’s task is to map a true and steady course by triangulating away from the extremes.

The three books under review all insist that Rousseau speaks in important ways to issues of ongoing political concern, and they all locate this importance in a “third way,” a temperate middle course between what Rousseau’s prose and previous readers often configure as sharply drawn alternatives. In *Rousseau and the Politics of Ambiguity: Self, Culture, and Society*, Mira Morgenstern links these alternatives to the axes of liberal thought—public and private, individualism and communalism, masculine and feminine—all of which Rousseau unsettles in his pursuit of the notion and ideal of authenticity. In *Hypocrisy and Integrity*, Ruth Grant teases out Rousseau’s political insights through a comparison with that master of extremes, Machiavelli. Rousseau emerges as neither nostalgic nor utopian but as a clear-eyed observer of politics who can countenance duplicity in the interests of preserving individual integrity. Nicole Fermon’s *Domesticating Passions: Rousseau, Woman and Nation* identifies a third way in Rousseau’s focus on the family: its institutional and sentimental reform, Fermon argues, was key to his republican agenda.

Threading through these very different analyses is a shared concern to overcome the conceptual and political dualisms that threaten to undermine the coherence and the relevance of Rousseau’s thought. A more complex, practical, subtle, and worldly political vision can be found in his work, they suggest, if one takes care to avoid the extremes. This is not a matter of selective reading (although the question of which texts assume prominence is not irrelevant) but of an interpretive imperative: as a misogynist, a democratic purist, or a righteously uncompromising moralist, Rousseau is easy to dismiss. The three authors thus set out to disabuse readers of these exaggerated impressions, and in so doing they offer alternative versions of a theorist more sensible, prescient, discriminating, and unironic than one might expect. But the middle is not necessarily middling, and each of these books makes a compelling claim for the political insights that emerge from a sobered up Rousseau. They also show how intemperate sobriety can be or, perhaps, how reading sobriety into his political vision introduces its own intemperance. My claim is not about performative contradiction, the curious replication of precisely what is being decried. Neither am I pointing to the inevitability of excess, in Rousseau’s or any text. My point is that these books tell us something about how interpretation works, in addition to telling us something about Rousseau.
There are multiple ways of imposing form, thus multiple meanings available in any text, and no imposition is benign: these are truisms of interpretive practice. Less self-evident is how to understand the relationship between imposing form on a text and the meanings we find there: how, in making sense of a text, we make claims about what is politically intelligible. It is tempting to assimilate the various sense-making moves used by Morgenstern, Grant, and Fermon to the paradigm of liberalism, inasmuch as each of them associates Rousseau’s relevance with his ability to circumvent that paradigm’s limitations. Thus, his contribution to political theory is distinguished by a refusal to be constrained by a choice between state and economy, interest and virtue, or individual and community, and likewise, Rousseau’s contribution becomes intelligible insofar as political theory is organized around these incommensurable choices. Within this political grammar of (a highly attenuated) liberalism, complexity is indeed an achievement, hard-nosed realism more impressive still, and sensitivity to historical variation nothing short of a miracle.

But these books also speak to issues that exceed liberalism’s definitive concerns. Specifically, they each address the issue of how one finds meaning in texts. Morgenstern’s exploration of ambiguity and authenticity, for example, derives from her commitment to read the text “on its own terms” (vii) in the course of pursuing a feminist interpretation “that unpacks the implications of Rousseau’s conclusions in a way that can ultimately prove liberating to women and to all of humanity” (xv). She introduces her approach by distinguishing it from “a certain ‘orthodox’ tendency in Rousseau scholarship” that assesses his contributions “in terms of a particular political agenda,” insisting that her own feminist reading will eschew this too convenient simplification (vii). These framing concerns—literalism, feminism, and the form emancipation takes—reappear throughout the book at every interpretive juncture.

Like Morgenstern’s, Fermon’s account promises to attend to how Rousseau’s texts speak of and to women; unlike Morgenstern, she does not label her account feminist. She opens with the claim that Rousseau’s appeals to sentiment, love, and the family show how he “questions traditional and modern tools of knowledge, and does so in the voice of woman, in the feminine voice, because the Other voice, that of the patriarchy and of the male subject, is inadequate alone to discuss the complicated human movements of politics” (3-4). Thus Fermon ties Rousseau’s narrative performance to his project of institutional reform: the relationships necessary to his self-ruling community entail reworking the passions, most centrally through imagined and remembered experiences of the mother. The dangers and possibilities of passion,
and the need to transpose meaning between text and world: these initial configurations indicate the terms on which she reads Rousseau.

A tension between formal principles and the practice of politics frames Grant’s study, which opens with a comfortingly familiar condemnation of hypocrisy that is quickly made less so. “But is hypocrisy always such a bad thing?” she asks, pointing to the counterexample of the destructively and unattractively self-righteous antihypocrite. In the course of puzzling through this question (whose answer, as I have already suggested, is no), Grant situates her texts on one or the other side of an ancient-modern divide: does Rousseau’s apparent commitment to virtue mean that he is too premodern to offer viable alternatives to liberalism? Her subsequent interpretation of his ethical contributions takes its bearings from a world emptied of political ideals.

In highlighting questions of interpretive procedure, these books issue an invitation, perhaps a challenge, to consider how their different conclusions reflect and incorporate different reading protocols. Again, the observation that they present three incommensurable versions of Rousseau’s “teachings” is, in and of itself, neither surprising nor particularly interesting. But what warrants closer inspection is how their different readings illuminate the relationship between interpretive and political designs: they exemplify how reading practices establish a logic of political intelligibility, and thus how any conclusions about the political sense that, for example, freedom, equality, or sex can make depend on prior and typically untheorized interpretive choices. What emancipatory and feminist political ideals emerge from a reading protocol that strives to be literal and agenda free? How does an interpretation that adjudicates between the author’s historical referents and his fluctuating narrative voice define a reformist politics? And what counts as a realistic political ethic within a framework that pits ancient virtue against modern self-regard?

**AMBIGUITY WITHOUT AMBIVALENCE**

For Morgenstern, the commitment to read Rousseau’s texts on their own terms means finding coherence in their apparently multiple claims. Of particular concern are his portrayals of women, which she presents as being of two, disparate sorts. The first corresponds to the familiar model of submissive devotion and coquettish excess, while the second suggests a woman willing and able to assert independent views. Morgenstern suggests that the key to making sense of these different representations lies in the denouements of Rousseau’s literary works. That his heroines die, his romances fail, and his natural family leaves “terror and bloodshed in its wake” (4) point to some-
thing more complex than previous interpreters have acknowledged. Furthermore, to accept the conclusion that women are the victims of a patriarchal project oriented toward liberating men, or that the project as a whole derives from a despairing vision of irreconcilable alternatives, is to ignore the possibility of a unified and positive scheme. Morgenstern finds this scheme and thus Rousseau’s political and narrative coherence in the notion of ambiguity.

Ambiguity characterizes a life in which indeterminacies are endemic. Sketched in contrast to liberalism’s rigid demarcations—where “there is no middle ground, no shades of grey”—ambiguity introduces change and instability as the definitive features of Rousseau’s worldview (6). To thrive in this world requires recognizing a complexity whose navigation Morgenstern likens to moving along a continuum: what appear as antithetical dispositions, attitudes, and drives are indissolubly linked together, not as binary pairs but as adjacent positions. Successfully negotiating this tightrope characterizes authenticity, a moral and personal imperative that Morgenstern suggests is both unique to an individual and a “shared human trait”: achieving an authentic “sense of Self” confirms a common humanity (xiii).

Morgenstern repeatedly underscores the difficulties inherent in such a project. They arise not only from an unpredictable world but also from the necessary links between ameliorative and degenerative ways of being. “Consequently,” Morgenstern concludes, “the greatest threat to the achievement of authenticity—particularly where women are concerned—is the ability of inauthenticity to masquerade as its opposite (i.e., authenticity) and therefore potentially to doom all of humanity to perpetrate its own moral and spiritual destruction” (6-7). The tragic outcomes that Morgenstern identifies in Rousseau’s stories of moral and sexual maturation illustrate this point: Sophie, Emile, Julie, and the civilizing savages of the Discourse on Inequality all bear witness to the personal and political consequences of inauthentic choices. But an emancipatory scheme is embedded in this litany of failure inasmuch as the characters reveal how social values and principles can militate against authentic choosing, particularly for women. Thus, according to Morgenstern, Rousseau invites his readers to rethink their own political and personal limitations, by grappling with his imperfect literary resolutions. In so doing his writings “serve as a metatext of political theory, engaging the audience not merely as passive spectators but also as active participants in the ongoing enterprise of formulating a dynamic and authentic political theory” (241).

A great deal hinges on how one interprets failure. Some readers will question whether Julie’s death in La Nouvelle Héloïse signals the inauthenticity of her marital choice, for example, or whether the failure of Emile’s marriage and his decision to leave his country reveal that he also “opts out of authenticity” (119). Both the conventions of the romance form and the uncertain status
of Emile's unfinished sequel might suggest that a narrative of loss is not unequivocally a representation of failure. But Morgenstern holds firmly that to leave the contradictions between these stories' ideal beginnings and their monstrous ends unresolved is "grossly to misread them" (2). And yet, while she insists on the self-evidence of the stories' tragic ends, the critical interpretive work of her book is to construct justifications for them: what unresolved dilemmas are being signaled by adultery, enslavement, and death?

Morgenstern's constructions cover a range of texts and themes, beginning, appropriately enough, with language. Language, she suggests, "serves as a paradigm of all human development" in that its complexities reflect and enter into the ambiguity of every relationship (10). On one hand, language includes an "individualistic/humanistic" dimension that promotes uniqueness; on the other hand, it includes a "social" element that establishes community through the communication of love and need. Rousseau's paradoxical observation, according to Morgenstern, is that this twofold nature, of humans and their language, can leave them both internally rent: individual interests might appear at odds with social interests, and the expressions of a common humanity might be used for manipulation. What contains the threat of contradiction inherent in language and men is Rousseau's narrative design: by offering two different pictures of individuality and community, he points to an authentic and an inauthentic resolution.

Morgenstern identifies the first of these doubled visions in the Essay on Languages's twofold originary story of southern and northern languages. She then turns to the Social Contract, where concerns about authentic language emerge in discussions of the legislator's task; to the Letter to d'Alembert, which introduces the problem of theatricality together with its liberatory variation; and to La Nouvelle Héloïse, where an everyday theatricality directed by Wolmar perpetuates a life of inauthenticity that passes for its contrary. The book's subsequent discussions of pity, imagination, love, and the family all move along this explanatory route, where integration is simultaneously promised and threatened. Imagination, for example, "makes people able to reach out to one another in conceptual and practical terms, [but] it also establishes the basis for a Self-referential and selfish social relationship" (72). This is similar with love, whose "Self-referential" and "Other-directed" dimensions each pull in destructive and salutary directions (81-83), and the family, which can "nurture whatever embers of authenticity might exist within an inauthentic world" (181) but can likewise produce the "false consciousness" on display at Clarens (212).

As the elaborations of ambiguity multiply, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic choice grows more urgent and more tenuous. Perhaps for this reason, Morgenstern repeatedly invokes the need for close and
careful reading. Chiding the likes of Starobinski and de Man for missing Rousseau’s univocal message, she musters a ferocious textual detail to document an ambiguity whose transcendence serves as the measure of correct interpretation. Here the evidence of narrated alternatives—the portraits of authentic and inauthentic resolution—gives way to reading between the lines, as the promise of an uncompromised middle begins to rely on substantiating what is not there. My point is not that Morgenstern is making things up; rather, she is insisting on the significance of the characters’ failure ever to realize an implicit ideal. But as her persistent worry that authenticity can be mistaken for its opposite suggests, this literalism is anything but self-evident. Morgenstern’s central task entails holding apart what Rousseau’s representations always show as interwoven or coincident.

Consider the elucidation of Julie’s inauthenticity. Morgenstern reconstructs the situation of the heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* by imagining it through the complex array of love’s possibilities. On one hand, Julie’s decision not to run away with her lover St. Preux indicates a selfless motivation: giving up the exclusivity of passionate love underscores her commitment to broader social goods and goals. On the other hand, passionate love also threatens a loss of self, by destabilizing interpersonal boundaries; thus, “it is precisely her own Self-concern that motivates her denial of love” (101). In her search for individual happiness, Julie opts for the passionless love of friendship. But “friendship does not always bring with it true honesty or happiness,” Morgenstern observes, and the Clarens household reveals just how insidious friendship can be: “The friendly air of the estate masks a centralized system of authority, devised by Wolmar and executed by Julie” (102). Julie’s subsequent confession that she is unhappy at Clarens announces the failure of that system. The moral to the story is thus revealed: having fled from love out of self-concern only to find that self destroyed by a loveless marriage, Julie realizes that she cannot do without love. But of what sort? She needs a “dynamic, authentic, and mutual” relationship, which means one that is not shaped by the unfreedoms and inauthenticities characteristic of the world that the novel represents (106).

Morgenstern derives a crystal-clear message from Rousseau’s ambivalent story line, through an interpretive method that perforce exceeds the text: authenticity is always what fails to materialize. As a result of this representational failure, we are presented with an ideal that knows no worldly or narrative form. To be sure, this is often the way with ideals. But having been urged to recognize Rousseau’s liberatory complexity, it is odd to see this figured as an exercise in futile designs. So, too, it is difficult to see Morgenstern’s often ingenious formulations disciplined into predictability by the algorithm for authenticity. Most troubling about her commitment to unambivalent ends is
that it removes politics from the texts. Like the language, pity, imagination, and love on which Morgenstern persuasively shows that it depends, Rousseau’s politics is made intelligible by being made authentic. Thus a narrative of citizens who are “forced to be free” implicates no actual political designs, inasmuch as that narrative remains a literal impossibility. And so Morgenstern’s close reading of the Social Contract, like her close reading of La Nouvelle Héloïse, makes the text meaningful by positing a series of distinctions that can only be imagined: authentic politics entails alienation but of a “good” sort (149), and it enables positive transformation but only when “the people [are] in charge” (169).

At some point it is fair to ask, why labor to maintain distinctions that the text consistently fails to keep clear? Whence this petition to authenticity as the circumvention of everything upsetting, lurid, equivocal, and rhetorically exacting that Rousseau wrote? Why are political representations authentic only when they elude the struggle, confusion, intemperance, and pain that he repeatedly represents? Since I do not share Morgenstern’s belief that reading texts “on their own terms” requires clarifying the author’s intentions, I will not guess at hers. But the consequences of her choices are clear enough. Thus, while she celebrates Rousseau’s “metatextual” invitation to readers to actively theorize their political lives, her own interpretive strategy figures the text as hazardous without the direction of an interpreter who reads carefully enough to make intelligible an absent ideal. Lacking this firm hand, a reader might conclude that love actually gives rise to impossible choices, that democratic rule never renders state power benign, and that Rousseau’s admiration for women’s wills is not a sign that he meant to relieve their suffering. Abandoned to reading these texts “on their own terms,” one might come to believe that in Rousseau’s ambivalent representations—of contracts, romance, and men—he shows how perverse a realized ideal can be.

The political implications of Morgenstern’s version of literalism also inform her feminism. As already indicated, she introduces her analysis by underscoring the unintelligibility of the claim that Rousseau might have meant women to suffer, and she returns to this theme in the book’s closing discussion. And her decision not to address questions of gender in between is utterly consistent with the general interpretive plan: retrieving Rousseau’s emancipatory vision entails steering clear of the inauthenticity of actual political representations, be they the forced freedoms represented in his writings or the “particular political agenda” that feminism represents. So when Morgenstern reassures readers that Rousseau’s emphasis on breast-feeding is just “his attempt to reestablish the family on an emotionally honest basis” (182), we recognize in this sobering simplification another consequence of the decision to keep politics at a distance from the text: sexual equality, too, is
an ideal made meaningful only in its absence, and sexual emancipation will depend on the same literalism that leaves readers reliant on the interpreter’s steadying gaze. In the end, it seems that while Rousseau’s genius was to give form to an inescapable flux and ambiguity, it is unimaginable that he might teach ambiguous lessons. And when this becomes the necessary condition of the text’s intelligibility, we encounter a feminist Rousseau unburdened by gender, a democratic Rousseau who transcends political subjection, and an ideal of freedom that is sometimes indistinguishable from its opposite.

**A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO VINCENNES**

Fermon is also attuned to textual ambiguities, but her method for negotiating them is not to press harder on the text. Rather, she is interested in parsing the unity of Rousseau’s project against the historical backdrop of ancien régime France: “As a study in the history of political thought, this work proposes to trace, through the interpretation of various texts and diverse experiences, the influences that led Rousseau to the ardent advocacy of his particular political vision” (14). The particular political vision Fermon sketches is centered on a republic of sentiment, a political community where “emotionally secure citizens, confirmed in their individual and communal identity,” make possible an association of self-ruling men (6). She underscores at the beginning that “the political problem” of gender and women figures prominently in her analysis: as mothers, which is to say, as agents and objects of emotional and material intimacy, women are pivotal to Rousseau’s project (4). Readily acknowledging his ambivalence about women’s effect on men, Fermon argues that the family’s transformative potential depends on women’s domestication: as creatures of passionate excess, they will always threaten to disrupt civic life.

Fermon suggests that Rousseau’s political vision had its real-life counterpart in a reform project oriented toward the aristocratic household. Motivated by a twofold antipathy toward emerging bourgeois values and the corruption of ancien régime France, Rousseau turned to the relatively self-sufficient patriarchal demesne for a model of domestic sociality: “this is because the nobility alone combines both an inclusive household and an ethos of responsibility to an entity more significant than the individual” (28). The archetype is Clarens, which represents less an ideal than “a difficult accommodation meant to correct the worst abuses of material and social life in the ancien régime” (29). Among its corrections are a marriage unencumbered by sexual passion, a parental pedagogy oriented toward the reform of character and the
acceptance of social roles, an extended community that avoids overly privatized interests and identities, and an autarkic system of production that minimizes market influence. Unpersuaded that the heroine’s death signals failure, Fermon reads it instead as “the real and tragic cost” that Julie (and “those who need her”) must pay, as well as a sign of a successful familial reform: “institutionalization precedes loss,” she observes in comparing Julie’s death to the disappearance of the legislator in the Social Contract (52).

Fermon’s central text is thus La Nouvelle Héloïse, but she elucidates its reformist message by drawing on a wide range of work. She reads in Emile, for example, confirmation of a theory of politics that aims for “accommodation rather than revolution”: moral freedom depends on the development of judgment and understanding, not on any particular form of rule (117). While the family’s absence or, rather, its elimination in Emile might give pause, Fermon sees this as a “negative strategy” in pursuit of the same educational end: to promote properly social sentiments by reining in passion (114). The Social Contract also points to familial sociability as the linchpin of self-rule and group cohesion by emphasizing the importance of procreative abundance, the need for patriotic attachment, the pernicious effects of partial associations, and the significance of mores (the “only law Rousseau ultimately thinks is important” [105]). Her argument about domestic reform thus joins an analysis of Rousseau’s explicit familial depictions with an exploration of the broader social, emotional, and economic contexts in which his families would appear.

And as indicated in Fermon’s introduction, these contextual figurations are not limited to Rousseau’s writings. Reading in his appeals to Rome and Geneva an attention to real-world designs, Fermon suggests that he offers “what he believes to be sound, practical advice based on his opinion as a student of history and a political reformer, not as a prophet or philosopher” (34). Thus, she includes a discussion of Calvin’s sixteenth-century initiatives concerning marriage and Augustus’s introduction of the Julian Laws in response to Rome’s crises of civic and marital mores. These events are important for understanding Rousseau’s approach, Fermon suggests, because they substantiate the importance of state intervention to the maintenance of republican families while offering a method to “transfer [l]oyalty and power from the clan to the state” (80). In other words, these juridical reforms sketch a logic and a historical practice of precisely what Rousseau’s political vision would entail.

In a similar fashion Fermon contextualizes Rousseau’s attraction to agrarian communalism through discussions of Cato’s exemplary virtue and Quesnay’s agrarian capitalism. The latter—together with English industrialization—constitute developmental possibilities against which Rousseau was
reacting. Fermon borrows from Walt Rostow to characterize Rousseau's attempted reform of the aristocratic household as "a prophylactic to the take-off model" (132). She then assesses the patriarchalism of this preventative by perusing historical debates on authority. The dilemma of state and paternal power sketched by Filmer, Locke, and others makes Rousseau's otherwise "incomprehensible" preference for an autarkic feudal household less jarring. Fermon concludes: his egalitarian impulses never ruled out imperfect but extant remedies to pressing problems of corruption and an ascendant bourgeoisie (155).

The "political problem" of women receives some of this contextualizing treatment. Fermon links the theme of virtuous love threading through La Nouvelle Héloïse to contemporaneous concerns about women's conduct, in and outside of marriage, and concludes that the bourgeois ideal of companionate marriage and the aristocratic reality of libertinage motivated Rousseau's literary creation. She also finds a significant correlation between the content of his reform agenda and the form through which he pursued it: novel reading was the cultural practice of the targeted social classes and the particular passion of women. And while casting women as "specialists in sentimental education" reflects a general shift in social values, she writes, Rousseau memorialized that role by placing it at the center of his literary and political tale (46). In these ways Fermon draws on extratextual resources to bring coherence to his apparently disparate and ambiguous representations: a unified political agenda emerges out of narrative complexity through the mediations of historical forms.

Sometimes these mediating moves are abrupt. Consider the shift from a discussion of Cato's patriotism and thoughts on husbandry, to a reiteration of Rousseau's preference for the sentimental and political virtues of the aristocratic household, to a gloss on the "practical climate" surrounding debates on French economic development (131). These sharp turns can be challenging and not only to readers worried that the analysis might be conflating two historical figures—Cato the Censor and Cato the Younger—in elucidating Rousseau's real-world ideal. A more general challenge is how to understand the relationship between historical antecedents and textually wrought visions. Whether or not one is persuaded that Rostow is a helpful resource, this inventive possibility signals a new interpretive imperative: finding reformism in his novel designs means subjecting them to the terms of historical inquiry. While one might quibble with Fermon's particular choices—why so much Rome and so little Sparta? Why Quesnay and not Morelly?1 And why so little attention to the Brenner debates?2—the more pressing concern is whether the world beyond the text can offer the remedy of unreconstructed originals: prototypes, free of all narrative adornment.
This is emphatically not to reject history, as context for or subject of Rousseau’s political thought, but merely to point out that neither antiquity nor ancien régime France is any more transparent or fixed in its terms than the stories Rousseau writes about them. So when we read that “just rule, administered by Julie’s more ‘passionate nature’” would help “roll back the bourgeoisie’s privatization of the familial and, most significantly, its hegemonic determination of sentiments” (88), it is uncertain whether the novel’s figurations of gender are being read off of changing class mores or whether our need for a politically coherent narrative is giving form to bourgeois hegemony. And when, several paragraphs later, Fermon writes that “with the eclipse of romantic love as a public mode of discourse between spouses, the social function of aristocratic women became clearer,” it is entirely unclear whether we are supposed to be in Rousseau’s text or in his world (89). It might seem safe to assume the former, given that the alleged eclipse defies standard periodizations of class-based ideologies of love; but we can ill afford to lose sight of the latter, given Fermon’s emphasis on the determinative power of bourgeois sentimentality.

What might help to clarify the matter is an elaboration of historical discourses: the notion that Rousseau’s world was also a world of texts and thus of socially negotiated ideological forms. This clarification might in turn make more evident how Rousseau’s relationship to historical figures was necessarily rhetorical: his vision of history, whether unified or not, was mediated by narrative. Fermon’s sensitivity to these complexities is evident when she zeros in on the book’s eponymous concerns. Both her discussion of Rousseau’s fear of women’s sexual power and her concluding chapter on his figuration of the nation-state as feminine body stay trained on his textual abundance, rather than on the fit between fiction and history. In these discussions, her prose seems to join in the narrative extravagance of her subject matter. Reflecting on his metaphors for patriotism and the body politic, she writes that “Rousseau attempts an ideology of substitution as transparent as it is illusive: to hijack the thrill of sexual love, of passion with the body (and ancient soul) of one’s interlocutor—in this case of the sexual woman—in order to lubricate the uncertain hydraulics of the political project” (174).

The return to literary excess is not surprising, inasmuch as it parallels the twofold nature of what Fermon presents as Rousseau’s unified vision: re-creating the family as a scene of political socialization entails both its institutional and imaginary transformation. On Fermon’s reading, Rousseau found a juridical method and rationale for the former in his study of Geneva and Rome; the latter, by contrast, seems to exceed this strategy of historical explanation. Hijacked thrills and passionate lubrication are not the stuff of doctrinal and organizational reform but of the sensibility that Fermon imparts to
Rousseau's readers. Moreover, insofar as this sentimental transformation is said to depend on the body (and soul) of woman, it includes fantasized and remembered dimensions that will frustrate every attempt at verification. “Woman is ahistorical,” Fermon writes, explaining Rousseau's fear of feminine sexuality: never wholly in or under control, women constitute a passionate threat to the institutional, chronological, and moral orders that political life represents (66). But then insofar as historical context makes Rousseau's vision of political life intelligible, perhaps women's centrality, to that life and to that vision, will elude the interpretive method. At issue is not whether history confirms or disproves his fantasies of femininity but whether we can ever make sense of the “political problem” of women and gender given the terms of Fermon's analysis.

The imaginative and institutional dimensions of Rousseau's vision seem to pull Fermon in different directions: the first toward a logic of signification, the second toward a logic of historical practice. The book's framing discussion positions these concerns in intimate relation one to the other. But in tying the unity and ultimately the utility of Rousseau's political thought to its practical orientation, Fermon resitutes them as opposites: his politics are rooted in institutional effects, thus not in philosophic or prophetic desires. And so she sees in his famous “illumination” on the road to Vincennes the moment of historical engagement, and from its rhetoric of bedazzled transport Fermon derives the origins of a reformist bent. This derivation consolidates an interpretive position: the heady excesses of the text are pertinent only to maternal fantasies, while its political insights are determined by what could constitute practicable reform. Thus, birthrates and landholding patterns figure prominently in Fermon's explication of Rousseau's imagined state, but the notoriously unempirical general will is mentioned almost not at all. To be sure, one should not be obliged to choose. But when the grammar of Rousseau's politics is circumscribed by an ideal of factuality, his paradoxes will make sense only as poetic abstractions. Conversely, his fictions appear insightful or baffling, depending on whether they confirm or violate that factual ideal. A sufficient explanation of his assertion of natural sexual inequality is thus to point out that it does not make sense: “Here Rousseau the theorist contradicts himself. The inequality between men and women is most assuredly a human, civil institution” (95).

This way of deciding what does and does not make sense risks (re)producing a methodological and conceptual divide that typifies and I would suggest troubles the analysis of gender: law, economics, and demographics comprise the realm of the politically coherent, while an affective realm of desire, memory, and imagination remains persistently disordered. Insofar as gender is constructed through fantasies of nurturance and sexuality, it remains on the
politically unintelligible side of the divide, and insofar as juridical and institutional structures derive their coherence from extratextual evidence, they always remain at a remove from the effects of gender. The problem, finally, is not that Fermon ties gender’s intelligibility to its historical articulation but that she takes historical articulation to be something that happens outside texts.

On one hand, Fermon’s interest in teasing out the possibilities represented by Julie, Clarens, and a reading public captivated by them suggests a keen awareness of narrative’s historical effects. On the other hand, what she understands to be represented there are either literal correspondences or “inexplicable” elisions, both of which obscure the practice of narrative interpretation: the second by mystifying it, the first by denying that it even takes place. But Fermon’s own insights introduce a politics of interpretation that invites us to rethink both literal and imagined truths and thus the interpretive methods through which these differences are secured. If, as she claims, Rousseau’s goal is to establish a republic of sentiment, then his state is as implicated in metaphor as are his unreal women. And to make political sense of his republicanism requires refusing any interpretive choice that opposes passionate to practical intentions and narrative to historical designs.

THE POLITICS OF DECEPTION

Grant is also interested in the fit between Rousseau’s ideals and political practice, but she does not pursue this relationship through a model of historical correspondence. Her central questions are when and how one might justify departures from a “purely principled stance,” most particularly in the realm of politics (2). The departures that interest her are those associated with hypocrisy, a dissimulating practice that plays on the gap between appearance and reality: it entails seeming to be what one is not or seeming to believe what one does not. Grant suggests that this practice is an indispensable feature of political and social life. Entertaining this possibility forces us to confront what she presents as the uncritical—naive or optimistic—appeal to reason and reasonableness made by liberal theorists. It also invites us to consider how one might meaningfully discriminate among better and worse ways of being hypocritical. To this end, Grant introduces the notion of integrity, which is the attribute of one “who can be trusted to do the right thing even at some cost to himself.” Her goal is to consider the possibility of an ethically unprincipled politics, and for this she turns to Machiavelli and Rousseau, both of whom appreciated “the problematic character of any attempt to conduct politics honestly and rationally” (16).
Grant thus takes her bearings from the political insights that Machiavelli and Rousseau shared, and these are not, as some readers would have it, best characterized as a civic republican bent. She points instead to their similar understanding of dependence, passion, and "pressures toward evil" as constitutive features of all political relations (13). Extensively surveying the kinds of deception that Machiavelli endorses, she concludes that his conviction concerning the exploitation of principles derives from an understanding of both the particular nature of political relationships and the more general tendencies of men. Human frailty as much as unadorned duplicity warrants recognizing and using the fact that men will regularly break faith, and in relations of dependence with uncertain allies, manipulation is needed to motivate action or acquiescence.

Grant canvasses this familiar terrain to argue for the comprehensive nature of Machiavelli's conviction: deception is neither a last resort nor an unfortunate byproduct of particular regimes but an essential political tool. This applies equally to situations in which people's particular interests would appear to coincide. Here Grant addresses the alternatives represented by a model of economic rationality, whose account of negotiated trade introduces the possibility of an honestly self-interested politics and a realpolitik model of openly pursued national interest. Turning to Mandragola as a study in psychological and ethical affects, she shows how outcomes that benefit every character in the play require deception: individual satisfaction depends on maintaining the appearance of propriety. "In this situation," she observes, "to ask why hypocrisy is necessary is to ask why law, religion, and honor—or public morality altogether—are necessary" (48). The inevitability of deception arises from the simple fact that men are often immoral and yet society cannot do without morality. So, too, it arises from the less simple reality that political discourse makes appeals to vanity, ambition, and other passions not reducible to a rational calculation of interest, and this passionate realm "create[s] opportunities for hypocritical manipulation" (52). The full force of these observations is achieved when Grant traces out their implications for a democratic politics: because the principles of egalitarianism and governmental accountability increase both dependence and the value of candor, hypocrisy is apt to be especially prevalent in democracies.

Rousseau enters the analysis after the political stage has been set. Grant insists that his political prescriptions do not mandate a righteous inflexibility but rather a combination of "purity and the pragmatism" that characterizes integrity (61). She elaborates this point by contrasting Molière's characters and Rousseau's critique of them in the Letter to d'Alembert. The contrast is captured in a two-by-two matrix that categorizes moderate and moralist versions of integrity and hypocrisy. The moderate categories comprise degener-
ate and genuine ways of being morally flexible: while both types exhibit the practical morality characteristic of "cool-headed, tolerant, and forgiving peacemakers," the degenerate one is marred by a complacent and ultimately craven willingness to rationalize injustice (89). The moralist categories introduce similar distinctions between ways of strictly adhering to principle: the degenerate and genuine types are equally passionate moralists, but only the latter remains disinterested, unsanctimonious, and thus concerned about justice. Grant emphasizes that Rousseau intended the genuine moralist—his own ideal of integrity—to impress and inspire his readers: "it is precisely Rousseau’s aim as an author to alter the objects of our admiration and to improve our moral judgments" (78).

But whether genuine moralism represents a viable political position remains unclear: Grant suggests that its premise of a natural goodness and unity and its tendency to encourage withdrawal raise concerns. She alleviates them by reassessing the uncompromising aspect of the ideal. Observing that both Considerations on the Government of Poland and the Social Contract include prudential political prescriptions at odds with Rousseau’s principles of egalitarianism and political freedom, she suggests that his ideal is less about moral rigidity than it is about a consequentialist calculation. Furthermore, his reflections on lying sketch a practical morality in which a clear conscience depends on pursuing just ends. In these ways, Rousseau's writings support the possibility of justifiable political deception even as they make problematic what the terms of this justification might be: he both introduces a distinction between moral and factual truth and "seems to sever the connection between the two" (123).

Turning to the examples of justified deception represented by the legislator, Emile's tutor, and Wolmar, Grant identifies in all three an orientation toward securing their deceived beneficiaries' freedom. This "distinctive understanding of freedom," she elaborates, concerns the "absence of personal dependence, that is, the absence of subjection to the private will of another individual" (132). And although it is produced through manipulation, this freedom is not necessarily illusory inasmuch as it allows for "the psychological experience of autonomy" (134). The project might well fail and it might be unacceptably paternalistic, but one must nevertheless confront the particular quality of Rousseauian freedom: "self-consciousness is simply not a necessary requirement" (138).

Having established that deception does not per se compromise individual integrity, Grant takes up Rousseau's own bleak estimation of how infrequently his prudential politics succeed. She ties this bleak vision to his understanding of a human tendency toward corruption. A retracing of the First and Second Discourse's devolutions provides opportunities to reiterate one of
Grant’s central claims, that dependence—social, sexual, and economic—is the source of all that threatens integrity. And the greatest of these is social: “Dependence on opinion,” Grant concludes, “emerges as the true source of corruption” (153). Because the mechanism of this dependence is *amour propre*, the relative sentiment of self-love tied to vanity, jealousy, and ambition, the key site of corruption is in men’s minds: “The transformation of natural man, free and good, into social man, dependent and corrupt, is fundamentally a psychological transformation” (154). The reason for Rousseau’s pessimism becomes clearer: corruption can be avoided only by avoiding the social dependencies that appear to be the necessary condition of our political lives. But Grant insists that this dire conclusion also suggests a strategy for maintaining personal integrity inasmuch as the dependence relations that Rousseau depicts are not of a piece: “Dependence that is just and also either mutual, impersonal, or personal but hidden, can actually nurture integrity” (167).

What, then, are the lessons to be drawn for living ethically in the modern political age? Insofar as Rousseau’s writings depict the simultaneous pursuit of moral purity and prudential compromise, they substantiate the possibility of an ethical departure from principles. What preserves moral purity are the character and sentiments of the one who would depart. Thus, the terms of integrity pertain ultimately to how we feel: “Rousseau issues a challenge to open a path to the heart through the sophisticated and sophistic moral wrangling of the modern age. And because the heart speaks clearly and with a voice common to all, his ideal does not collapse into the pure subjectivism of authenticity. It has a genuine moral core” (174). This characterization echoes Grant’s earlier claim that self-consciousness is not germane to Rousseau’s ideal. It also highlights the decidedly un-Machiavellian position readers must assume to find that ideal viable: the clear and common voice of the heart speaks neither to foxes nor to lions. Or rather, if it speaks, it speaks only of opportunities for manipulation. But could this indicate that Grant’s Rousseau is more Machiavellian than the original? After all, she insists that his goal is precisely to change the ways readers choose their ideals: he teaches that “we must learn to judge people more by the heart than by the head, more by their sentiments and character than by their principles and actions” (84). In a world characterized by persistent deception, it is difficult to imagine a more Machiavellian project than one that would sentimentalize political judgment.

To entertain this possibility is to confront the profound ambiguity of Grant’s own conclusions. While she never directly identifies this sentimentalization as a Machiavellian moment in Rousseau’s argument, neither does she close the gap between the subjective experience of integrity and objective, worldly power. Indeed, she solidifies that gap by figuring dependence,
passion, and "pressures toward evil"—the definitive features of a politics understood to be insistently hypocritical—as fundamentally psychological conditions. Whether it is the feeling of autonomy or the perception of a common interest, the characters who exemplify Rousseau's ideal do so in their hearts and minds, even as they remain deeply identified with a political society over which most of them exert no control. Grant is of course aware of this irony, but by expressing it as a problem of Rousseau's paternalism, she obscures how her own interpretive design severs the determinants of ethical action from the world in which that action must be taken. We are thus led to the conclusion that the ethical possibilities of modern politics apply primarily to affective states.

Consider her reading of the Second Discourse, which follows a well-known line—that dependence breeds corruption—to arrive at the less-known conclusion that this corrupting dependence is best understood as a function of internal developments. There is, of course, nothing extraordinary about emphasizing the significance of amour propre in Rousseau's tale. What is notable is Grant's gently persistent reiteration that it must be understood separately from social and economic developments. In other words, sociopolitical inequality—whether shaped by juridical, economic, or sexual difference—is not unjust in and of itself but in its psychological effects. Like his commitment to freedom, Rousseau's egalitarianism bears ultimately upon our inner conditions. As a result, justice becomes a function of our sentiments and perceptions and pertains only secondarily to economic or political arrangements. In these ways, Grant's interpretation urges us to look beyond the mere appearance of unequal privilege, power, and control to grasp the reality represented by character and disposition. So we need not be troubled by the disparate freedoms Rousseau sketches for his virtuous women and virtuous men because in every case we are presented with an honest and admirable character: they can all be trusted to "do the right thing," never mind how different those things might be.

Like his exemplary women, Rousseau's social contractors present a striking example of how minimally his genuine moralism depends on real-world effects: their integrity as citizens remains undiminished by the fact that, beneficently duped by the legislator, they "do not understand what they are doing" (137). What, then, are the implications for those who would wield actual power, in and on the political world? Is it enough that in maneuvering through the "moral wrangling of the modern age," Wolmar, Emile's tutor, and lawgivers mean well? Again, Grant's conclusions are less than clear. She elucidates "three distinct standards"—truth, justice or morality, and freedom—that might obtain in evaluating their apparent deceptions: "'Beneficial manipulation' seems to violate the first and the third in the name of promot-
ing the second. It sacrifices truth and freedom to promote justice or virtue” (128). We never read a direct account of what justice might be or entail, even as Grant reflects on the “serious abuse” to which this standard remains open. But in concluding that its “final test” is “the moral character and happiness of the ‘ruled,’” she appears to suggest that Rousseauian justice has nothing to do with democracy; rather, it has everything to do with maintaining democracy as a state of mind, perhaps mindlessness (131).

Are we then to conclude that the integrity of those who would exercise actual political power depends on their antidemocratic convictions? No doubt, some readers will find this a curious conclusion to draw from Rousseau. But it becomes intelligible through an interpretive practice that constructs integrity as a quality of heart and head whose connection to political practices and institutions is at best oblique. Thus, in Grant’s description of Rousseau’s legislator as a Machiavellian actor enmeshed in dependence relations that necessitate deception, one can lose sight of the fact that he plays no role in actual political operations. A direct comparison between Machiavelli’s lawgiver and Rousseau’s might have made that clear: while the former is advised to “concentrate all authority in himself,” the latter “does not and must not have any legislative right,” even if the people themselves should think otherwise. This introduces the possibility that precisely the legislator’s political disenfranchisement authorizes his deceptions. But that interpretation awaits an analysis of sovereignty, and Rousseau’s principled justification of power remains extraneous to an analysis of integrity.

This is not to say that Rousseau’s elusive argument on the moral truth of majoritarian outcomes could not benefit from Grant’s inquiry into how republicans understand themselves to “do the right thing.” On the contrary, Rousseau’s vision of direct democracy seems to offer a prime interpretive opportunity: is his modal voter a prudent moderate, a moderate moralist, or something else altogether? But Grant chooses not to explore the integrity associated with direct political participation in the state. Given the form that I have imposed in reading these three books—that interpretive practice is itself a political act—it is difficult to avoid assessing this choice in light of Grant’s own political insights and convictions: is it an example of a just deception? Is an interpretation that transforms Machiavelli’s “dangerous political realities” into a problem of psychological corrosion occluding as much as it reveals? But to answer these questions would require assessing authorial intentions, and while Grant offers her typologies of integrity to facilitate just such assessments, it seems more prudent to stick to appearances. And it appears that in choosing to figure Rousseau’s general will as a unity of interest and sentiment, but not as a unity of practice, Grant sustains an interpretive
vision that sharply differentiates between a politics of the state and of the soul and, in the process, leaves questions of democratic practice unaddressed.

In retracing the arguments these books make, with particular regard to the terms in which they make them, my aim has not been to guide readers through a dense field toward more accurate renditions of Rousseau. Of course, the truism of multiple interpretive possibilities does not mean that all accounts are equally viable or that all imposed forms are equally fitting. But if canonical texts are not profitably approached as Rorschach inkblots, neither are they Rosetta stones, and interpreters will always face choices about how to make meaning in what they find there. My aim has thus been to elucidate the ramifications of different choices, even or especially when they are not recognized as such. This opens up interpretive practice to a political engagement that does not reduce to whether the argument "gets Rousseau right." Instead, the issue is how different terms of "rightness" foreclose on some possibilities and enable others and, in so doing, shape the conditions in which our own politics makes sense. In this murky middle, steering between the Scylla of textual correctness and the Charybdis of limitless designs allows us to consider how the practices of sense making are neither prior to nor transcendent of politics but are its urgent, emphatic expression.

The politics that take shape through these three books' interpretive practices are not, to be sure, of a piece. The tightrope that Morgenstern would have her readers negotiate bears little resemblance to the matrix of good and bad characters that Grant organizes for hers. And neither authorizes the combination of readerly care and daring required by Fermon. But I want to suggest that common to all of these books' reading protocols is the representation of a nonconflictual politics. Limited to the quest for, alternatively, unrealizable ideals, a good character, or practicable reform, the politics that take shape through these readings of Rousseau perforce restrict our notions of intelligibly political confrontation, opportunity, and change. So perhaps the authors have succeeded in their shared goal to reclaim Rousseau's contemporary significance inasmuch as, on their interpretations, his work bears a striking resemblance to current political searches for a "third way." And while it is undoubtedly intemperate to conjure images of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton when assessing these Rousseaus, it is also sobering to notice the common political pose—dedicated to emancipation but weary of any attempt to specify its content, committed to a democratic ideal but obscure about its practice, and attentive to human differences but blind to the worldly power that sustains them.

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NOTES

1. Jean Morelly’s *Code de la Nature* (1755) included an attack on property very similar to Rousseau’s, as well as making moral claims for a social order based on reciprocating and interdependent productive relations.


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