

To Form a More Perfect Union: Citizenship and the Marriage of Sophie and Emile

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Lyndsay Spear presents a compelling argument that we cannot understand Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political project without reading his *Emile* cover to cover. Often, Book V, the chapter which describes not only Sophie's education, but also her courtship and relationship with Emile, is considered ancillary to the text as a whole. When Book V is overlooked, the entire impetus for Emile's entry into civil society, that is, his marriage to Sophie, is missing from Rousseau's pedagogical account of growing into political adulthood. However, just as frequently, Book V is read independently of the rest of *Emile* and is held up as a classic example of misogyny and the domination of women in the home and their exclusion from public life. Spear reminds us that Emile's and Sophie's educations are inextricably linked. Indeed, they form a single body (Emile is the hand, Sophie is the eye) that Rousseau believes will exercise independent judgment untrammelled by custom or prejudice in civil life. We cannot have an Emile without a Sophie, and we cannot have a Sophie without an Emile.

However, in asking the question, "Who is educated for participation in a democracy, Sophie or Emile?" Spear invokes the very same split that she criticizes at the beginning of her essay. Just as it would be an error to presume that Emile is a "self-sufficient political actor," it is also a misstep to take Emile's and Sophie's educations separately and even more of a tangent to compare their educations in terms of quality since they are different in kind.

Spear connects the education of Emile to Plato's education of the guardians. I would like to draw attention to one significant difference between the political utopias these philosophers devise: While Plato disbands the family unit, Rousseau designates the family unit, that is, the marriage of Sophie and Emile, as the primary building block for authentic participation in civil society. It is only through his impending marriage to Sophie that Emile becomes interested in politics. Jean-Jacques asks Emile:

In aspiring to the status of husband and father, have you meditated enough upon its duties? When you become the head of a family, you are going to become a member of the state, and do you know what it is to be a member of the state?... Before taking a place in the civil order, learn to know it and to know what rank in it suits you.¹

Sophie is instrumental (both in the necessary and mediating sense) to Emile's entry into civil society, but she is also essential in his participation in it. There is a difference in the education of the future couple: Emile learns to follow the laws of nature and Sophie learns to follow the laws of society by cultivating *amour-propre*. The union of the two results in the couple's ability to navigate civil society without being corrupted by it.

I believe that the union between Sophie and Emile epitomizes Rousseau's ideal for democracy. For it is only as a unit that they can function as effective members of society — for without an eye, a hand makes arbitrary movements and without a hand, the eye may judge, but cannot act. Only by taking the union of Sophie and Emile as a corpus can there be informed citizenship. The origin of inequality arises

The moment the people considers one or more of its members individually, the people is divided. A relation is formed between the whole and its part which makes them into two separate beings: the part is one, and the whole, less the part, is the other. But the whole less a part is not the whole. Therefore, as long as this relation subsists, there is no longer a whole but two unequal parts.²

The weakest moments of Spear's essay occur when she departs from Rousseau's texts. Her use of Amy Gutmann's definition of a democratic citizen and Gutmann's description of the appropriate education for such citizens serves as more of an anachronistic distraction than a useful set of concepts. Why not rely on Rousseau's robust descriptions of the citizen and education? What is gained by bringing Gutmann into the argument? While I am sensitive to the argument that we have much to learn by considering contemporary and historically recessed philosophies side by side, in this case it seems that Spear is asking Rousseau to satisfy a set of contemporary conditions, rather than reading his work hermeneutically.

The crux of Spear's argument regarding Rousseau's legitimization of rape relies on a secondary source that I have not read. However, my reading of Rousseau's description of Sophie and Emile's courtship and relationship is far from one of violation and domination. There seems to be a playful give and take throughout their courtship in which each holds sway over the other's passions. Each lover must learn to acknowledge and gain control over their passions. True freedom, Jean-Jacques exhorts Emile, arises not by needing nothing, but by learning to "command your heart," and "reign over" your passions.³ This holds for both Emile and Sophie. True happiness, Jean-Jacques explains, depends on mutual desire. With phrases such as, "hearts are bound in marriage, but bodies are not enslaved," and "Let each of you always remain master of his own person and his caresses and have the right to dispense them to the other only at his own will. Always remember that even in marriage pleasure is legitimate only when desire is shared," I have a difficult time accepting the abject "suffering" that Spear claims Sophie must endure.⁴ In fact, I read Rousseau as attempting to establish a more perfect union — certainly not perfect by our contemporary standards, but a union predicated on interdependence and mutuality.

As Spear moves forward with this project, I would encourage her to pursue what I view as her strongest line of inquiry: What does Sophie bring to the relationship that is essential for the functioning of democracy? What might it mean to have differentiated education in a democracy? In particular, I am intrigued by Sophie's role as moral compass. What does the mutual dependence of Sophie and Emile's relationship teach us about democracy? Might we think of masculine and feminine modes of democratic engagement? If we think of Emile and Sophie as constituting a democratic body, what forms of control and authority are necessary in a democratic society? What kind of education would this necessitate?

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 448.
 2. *Ibid.*, 462.
 3. *Ibid.*, 445.
 4. *Ibid.*, 477.