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978-0-521-41585-9 - Justice and Difference in the Works of Rousseau: *Bienfaisance* and *Pudeur*

Judith Still

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This book addresses the problem of the precariousness of justice in relations between non-equals (men, and men and women), via an analysis of Rousseau which uses techniques of reading associated with literary theory, and draws particularly on the work of Derrida, de Man and Starobinski. The best possible relationship between unequals, according to Rousseau, is one of *bienfaisance*, giving, receiving and repaying benefits. To function successfully the practice of beneficence should be inspired by a passionate impulse and governed by a rational code. It should be distinct from aristocratic magnanimity and from a market economy, starting from an assumption of hierarchical difference but working to mitigate that inequality. The book includes study of classical sources for eighteenth-century thinking on beneficence; including Seneca, Cicero, Aristotle and Plato.

Rousseau also notoriously claims that to preserve social existence women must adhere to the code of *pudeur*. Dr Still argues that ultimately it is sexual difference, constructed defensively as a fixed opposition, which disturbs beneficence. This emerges through analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of Rousseau's ethics and of the gaps and contradictions in some of his 'minor' texts which present more excessive scenes of transgression than his lengthier, more harmonious and more influential works. Rousseau's reworking of the classical inheritance on ethical and political issues in a revolutionary historical moment, his peculiar combination of Enlightenment rationality and near-pathological sensibility, his oscillating self-identification with virility and femininity, make his work a particular pressure point for the question whether it is possible to have just and generous relations where there is difference.

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Bienfaisance and Pudeur

JUDITH STILL

*Lecturer in Critical Theory, Department of French, University of
Nottingham*



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To my mother

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Earlier or expanded versions of sections of chapters have already appeared as follows: from Chapter 2, 'Elements of the Classical Code of Beneficence Presupposed in Rousseau's Writing' in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*; from Chapter 5, 'From Eliot's "Raw Bone" to Gyges' Ring: Two Studies in Intertextuality' in *Paragraph*; from Chapter 6, 'Lucretia's Silent Rhetoric' in *The Oxford Literary Review* and 'Rousseau's *Lévite d'Ephraïm*: The Imposition of Meaning (on Women)' in *French Studies*. I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to reprint.

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[More information](#)*A preliminary note on vocabulary and conventions*

I have generally chosen to translate Rousseau's term *pudeur* by the rare English term 'pudicity' (from the Latin *pudicitia* or 'shamefacedness') when *pudeur* is used to refer to a code structuring the possibilities of virtuous feminine identity or women's adherence to a strict moral reserve in order to protect men from the consequences of unbridled amorous passion. The usual modern translation of *pudeur* is 'modesty' (from the Latin *modestia* or 'moderation'), but the primary and secondary meanings of modesty are 'moderation; freedom from excess; self control; clemency; the quality of being modest' (defined as 'well-conducted, orderly; not domineering; having a humble estimate of one's own merits'). Only the third meaning listed by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* suggests 'womanly propriety of behaviour; scrupulous chastity of thought, speech and conduct'. By employing 'pudicity' as well as Rousseau's *pudeur* I want to reverse the order of connotation for the English reader, tie *pudeur* closer to the feminine, and, by the strangeness of 'pudicity' to the modern ear, reinforce a point which can easily be elided, namely that here *pudeur* is understood as a social construct and not simply as a natural emotion. Feminine *pudeur* or 'pudicity' is unusual amongst the virtues which Rousseau prizes, as there can be no split between inner assent and outer appearance: the veil of pudicity is a social display (or rather non-display) with crucial apotropaic and economic functions, saving men from excessive expenditure and thus enabling reproduction. By employing a somewhat alienating archaism I am emphasising the seemingly archaic quality of Rousseau's analysis of (his fears and fantasies around) femininity; but I

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hope that it is obvious to readers that the fears and fantasies survive in various forms, reworked in modern vocabularies of provocation, negligence or emasculation, for example. To trace the genealogy of the policing of specifically feminine thought, reading, speech, conduct, dress and so on to control and to excite desire is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present work.

Wherever possible citations from Rousseau will be from the *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 4 vols. (Paris, 1959–69). Citations from the *Lettre à d'Alembert* will be from the edition by M. Fuchs (Geneva, 1948). Citations from the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* will be from the edition by Charles Porset (Paris, 1970). Citations from Rousseau's correspondence will be from the *Correspondance complète*, edited by Ralph A. Leigh, 40 vols. (Oxford, 1965–82).

All page references will be given in the text. All spelling in quotations from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors has been modernised. Publication details of all works cited are in the bibliography.

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