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Rousseau's Moral Legacy: Hospitality and Alterity in *The Levite of Ephraim*

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Mortels, respectez la beauté, les mœurs, l'hospitalité; soyez justes sans cruauté, miséricordieux sans faiblesse, et sachez pardonner au coupable plutôt que de punir l'innocent.

Rousseau, *The Levite of Ephraim*.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that hospitality was an important aspect of moral behavior and ethical social practices; thus, the reception of the guest is a theme of central importance in many of his philosophical and fictional works. This analysis focuses the concept of hospitality in *The Levite of Ephraim* in order to expand our understanding of Rousseau as an individual and as a political philosopher. The initial depictions of welcoming the stranger with the subsequent ensuing perversion of hospitality in this work illustrate two separate but linked concerns: the moral development of the individual and the hope for a more evolved ethical society by bettering the behavior of individuals towards each other. *The Levite of Ephraim* is situated in the chronological and philosophical heart of Rousseau's œuvre and reflects his views balancing the needs of the individual and the demands of the larger society

The Levite of Ephraim begins after a jolting two paragraph prologue without a contextual introduction. It begins with the narrator's plea for clemency for the guilty party of an unnamed crime, then the narrative shifts to a love story. The basic plot of Rousseau's prose poem goes like this:

In the era before there was a king in Israel, a Levite falls in love with a young woman from Bethlehem.¹ Because she is not a Levite, they cannot marry, so she becomes his concubine and they settle in Ephraim.² Although lavished with attention and gifts, the concubine misses her parents and abandons the Levite only to return to her parents in Bethlehem. The Levite goes after his concubine and retrieves her, yet the father insists that they stay on two days longer than the Levite had intended, finally on the fifth day they set out for Ephraim.³

In canto two, while en route back to Ephraim, the couple are given shelter at nightfall by another Ephraimite in the Benjaminite town of Gibeah. There, a horde of young Benjaminite men crowd around the host's house and demand that the Levite come out – so that they can rape him. The host refuses and offers instead his virgin daughter.⁴ The Levite steps forward and silently hands over his wife to the Benjaminites. They rape and abuse her until the next morning, when the Levite finds her body on the doorstep. (It is not clear whether she is dying or already dead.) He returns to Ephraim, cuts up her corpse, and sends the body parts to the twelve tribes of Israel.

In canto three, the Israelites gather in Maspha where the Levite, in mourning garb, pours ashes over his head, tears his clothing, and tells the story in public about his wife's death. The other tribes of Israel vow to avenge the crime. The Levite then falls dead, and the tribes bury

1. The concubine has no name in the Bible nor in Rousseau's prose poem. Judith Still contrasts the young woman's indeterminate identity (attached to patriarchal groups or to husband) to the Levite's clearly defined identity as a priest. Judith Still, "Rousseau's *Lévite d'Ephraïm*: The Imposition of Meaning (on Women)," *French Studies* 42 (Jan. 1989), 18.

2. Rousseau offers an explanation based on the Book of Numbers: "Je sais que les enfants de Lévi pouvaient se marier dans toutes les tribus, mais non dans le cas supposé." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Levite of Ephraim, Oeuvres complètes*. Vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 1209. All references to Rousseau will be to this edition. I will modernize Rousseau's spelling. According to Mieke Bal, in *Death and Dissymmetry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. the concubine is of higher birth than the Levite and this prevents them from marrying.

3. This summary is based on a forthcoming collaborative project on Rousseau's *Levite* by Barbara Abrams, Karen Sullivan and Mira Morgenstern, because Rousseau uses "wife" we also use this term to refer to this character.

4. Kochin points out that the host is repeating a scenario from Genesis 19 where Lot offers his two daughters to a crowd of Sodomites who have demanded to abuse his two male guests. Since Lot's guests are angels in disguise, they smite the Sodomites blind before they can harm the girls. Kochin, 310–11. See note 32.

him with the reconnected body of his wife. A bloody war against the Benjaminites ensues in which both sides suffer immense losses, but the Israelite alliance triumphs – all Benjaminite women and children and all but 600 men are killed.

In canto four, having won the war, the Israelites realize that the Benjaminite tribe will disappear if they do not find wives for the remaining 600 Benjaminites. However the Israelites had vowed not to give their daughters to the Benjaminites. They decide to massacre all but the 400 virgins from the town of Jabesh-Gilead – a town that had refused to participate in the war against the Benjaminites. Then, in order to provide women for the remaining 200 Benjaminites, they allow them to kidnap 200 virgins from another town, Shiloh. When the inhabitants of Shiloh object to this abduction, a village leader, the Old Man of Lebona (who had suggested the kidnapping over another mass slaughter in the first place), pleads with his daughter Axa to accept marriage to her Benjaminite captor, rather than her fiancé Elmacin, for the future harmony of Israel. Axa agrees to marry the Benjaminite, her fiancé Elmacin vows to become a Nazarean priest and remain celibate, and the remaining Shiloite virgins follow Axa's example.

In rewriting the story of the Levite from Ephraim, Rousseau recasts the story of his own betrayal of a woman and begins exploring and expiating, through (re)reading and writing, his own repressed trauma and guilt.⁵ Its subject matter connects the personal and the political – with the separation of a couple followed by local violence in a home, and incendiary language directed against a small group that then escalates into a bloody civil war. In recomposing and reimagining the story from Judges 19–21, Rousseau reshapes his self-image to his moral liking. Composing *The Levite of Ephraim* during his flight from France in 1762 and rereading the text thereafter allowed Rousseau to construct a lost narrative (later put forth in the *Confessions*) and helped him regain his sense of integrity. Rousseau's rewriting of Judges 19–21 thus offers an opportunity to examine the individual and group psychology behind trauma, scapegoating, and hate speech, particularly targeted against women and vulnerable ethnic groups.

5. Rousseau is very introspective and self-critical thus underscoring his focus on moral behavior. This fact is made evident all throughout Book II of his *Confessions*.

The following analysis considers these separate but inextricably linked questions: 1) How does Rousseau depict the behavior of a guest towards the host? 2) How does the host behave towards the guest? 3) How does the issue of the poorly executed welcome at the heart of the domestic story of the first half of the tale end up as a “national” tragedy with vast political implications at the end?

It is my contention that Rousseau’s choice to depict the theme of hospitality in *The Levite of Ephraim* is crucial to understanding how his personal psychological trajectory relates his political theory and development of his ideas in *The Social Contract* to the larger context of eighteenth-century France. In this light, the notion of hospitality can be read as a central thematic in *The Levite of Ephraim* rather than a minor or ancillary component of Rousseau’s social theory as previously thought.⁶ In fact, Rousseau’s version of this ancient story also provides the modern reader with new ways to directly comprehend the evolution of concepts such as “the stranger,” “the foreigner,” and “the other” in the context of eighteenth-century France.⁷

In biblical stories of hospitality, the replication of gestures and rituals of welcome conveys the overall message of diplomacy and compromise between guest and host. The rituals of hospitality are often codified in order to make the message of welcome clear across cultures. Whether occurring in the home or in a public venue, hospitality establishes civil relationships between diverse peoples and fosters a basic level of trust between strangers. Trust between strangers acquires even more importance when it takes place in a private space, especially when a host welcomes a stranger into his/her home.

When looking at the early modern European evolution of the notion of hospitality, the scholars in the latter half of the seven-

6. Judith Still and Mieke Bal both discuss hospitality and its implications, but not as the central thematic of the text.

7. Mira Morgenstern in her article *Strangeness, Violence, and the Establishment of Nationhood in Rousseau*: describes ‘the stranger’ as Rousseau conceives of this notion: “The stranger plays an important role in social commentary and drama, serving as a contrast to and, by implication, a critique of the status quo. It is important to note in this connection that the category of stranger refers not just to geographically distant origins. In the sense described here, the term ‘stranger’ refers to anyone whose existence or belief system is deemed to be dangerous to or different from the accepted conventional arrangements.” Mira Morgenstern, “Strangeness, Violence, and the Establishment of Nationhood in Rousseau,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41.3 (2008), 367.

teenth century who collaborated on the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*,⁸ framed hospitality as not merely a privilege accorded to the stranger, but rather as an act of charity and a sacred duty.⁹ By pointing out who belongs and who is excluded, these categories establish the socio-politically delineated nation. Paradoxically, hospitality is described both as an obligation to make the stranger feel welcome and at the same time as an action/concept that unintentionally defines what is other. The people who receive the offerings know that they are being welcomed. These actions are specifically demonstrated by the acts performed by the host. The overt gestures that have become part of the ritual of hospitality act as a kind of language, and, because they are largely extended to strangers, transcend oral communication.¹⁰

The establishment of hospitality rituals represented the height of civilized society and had great social implications as the first step in the recognition of the other.¹¹ The code of etiquette developed in the royal court of France from the time of Louis XIV until the time of Louis XVI as part of an established court ritual and an effort to receive guests especially from foreign lands, in grand style.¹² With the establishment of the centralized monarchy in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, increasingly elaborate notions and codes governing the reception of guests in the *Ancien Régime* evolved into rituals of etiquette among the court aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie.

8. *L'Académie française* was an institution inimical to Rousseau and his circle. The different editions of this dictionary are often used to determine the evolution of terms in the Ancien Régime France.

9. "HOSPITALITÉ.: s.f. 1.Charité, libéralité qu'on exerce en recevant & logeant gratuitement les étrangers, les passans. *Exercer l'hospitalité. L'hospitalité ne se trouve guère parmi les Barbares. L'hospitalité étoit grande chez les anciens Germains.* [2] ... se dit aussi De l'obligation où sont certaines Abbayes de recevoir les voyageurs pendant quelques jours. *Il y a hospitalité dans une telle Abbaye* [3] ... étoit aussi parmi les anciens Grecs & Romains un droit réciproque de loger les uns chez les autres. Il étoit de ville à ville, de particulier à particulier, & de famille à famille. *Droit d'hospitalité. Il y avoit hospitalité entre ces deux familles. Violer les droits d'hospitalité. Il y avoit droit d'hospitalité entre Alcibiade & Lacédémone.*" *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th ed. (Paris: Veuve Brunet, 1762), 888.

10. Gestures such as the washing of the feet of the stranger and the offering of food and drink are but a few examples of welcome.

11. John Taylor, *Classics and the Bible: Hospitality and Recognition* (Bristol: Bloomsbury Press, 2007).

12. Antonia Fraser, *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2007).

The code became so elaborate that, ironically, it often deformed the very concept of welcome. This type of hospitality became artificially ritualistic and so perverted by the notion of class and precedence that even Marie Antoinette rebelled against its constraints.¹³

In the same era, Diderot begins his article in the *Encyclopédie* on *politesse* by a definition that begins to tease out the differences between etiquette, which he calls “flattery,” and manners or “civility.”

Pour découvrir l'origine de la politesse, il faudrait la savoir bien définir, et ce n'est pas une chose aisée. On la confond presque toujours avec la civilité et la flatterie, dont la première est bonne, mais moins excellente et moins rare que la politesse, et la seconde mauvaise et insupportable, lorsque cette même politesse ne lui prête pas ses agréments.¹⁴

For Diderot, the co-editor of the *Encyclopédie*, hospitality was very directly linked to politeness, in eighteenth-century France *politesse* – the only term that comes close to defining the nuances between etiquette and hospitality. The notion of “civility” as Diderot describes it is but a small and basic part of Rousseau’s idea of hospitality, while *politesse* is the more educated, refined, and developed form of behavior towards the stranger:

Tout le monde est capable d'apprendre la civilité, qui ne consiste qu'en certains termes et certaines cérémonies arbitraires, sujettes, comme le langage, aux pays et aux modes; mais la politesse ne s'apprend point sans une disposition naturelle, qui à la vérité a besoin d'être perfectionnée par l'instruction et par l'usage du monde. Elle est de tous les temps et de tous les pays; et ce qu'elle emprunte d'eux lui est si peu essentiel, qu'elle se fait sentir au-travers du style ancien et des coutumes les plus étrangères.¹⁵

13. Caroline Weber discusses many instances of the Queen’s reactions to the authority of manners in the court. Later, opposition to rules of etiquette became one of the great reactions of social upheaval during the French Revolution. By opposing court etiquette, the court itself was marginalized, but it is a way to compare and contrast why society changed; why it happened in 1789 and not before is an enigma (as there had been governmental insolvency and peasant uprisings during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV). Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

14. “Politesse,” in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1765), 12: 916.

15. *Ibid.*

Politesse is one important element of the early modern concept of hospitality, and what is culled from Diderot's definition of *politesse* in the paragraph above is that some rules of etiquette can prove a false welcome even though they evolve from a common expression of welcome and a general sense of politeness or *politesse*. The French *Petit Robert* dictionary offers a modern definition and further describes the provision of hospitality as an unwritten yet fundamental code of civilized human behavior. Hospitality is free and reciprocal and ultimately distinguishes the civilized from the barbarous and uncivilized.¹⁶ In the environment of the family, it is the theme of hospitality, or the lack thereof, that contextualizes the issue of morality for Rousseau.

In *The Levite of Ephraim*, Rousseau presents hospitality as a measure of basic social behavior. In doing so, he traces three concentric spheres of social organization. Each sphere of society sets a boundary within which established practices of hospitality (including rituals of etiquette) take place: 1) the home: comprising the individual, the couple, and the family; 2) the small community: interactions between the home and the community (in the town of Gibeah); 3) and, finally, the society as a whole, forming the perimeter. These spheres are delineated in *The Levite of Ephraim* in order to demonstrate how practices of normative hospitality would be violated. In the environment of the family, it is the theme of hospitality, or the lack thereof, that contextualizes the issue of morality for Rousseau.

In Rousseau's thinking, the home is at the center of his moral philosophy. This point is especially highlighted in *Émile*, where Rousseau discusses the importance of the environment to a child's life. He explains that since children are largely at home and spend the bulk of their time there, the importance of this environment cannot be underestimated. He explains to mothers in particular that they are the central force in the young person's education.¹⁷

16. According to the modern French language dictionary the *Petit Robert*, the historical definition of the meaning of the French word *hospitalité* includes the idea of being housed by the host and derives from: "Droit réciproque de trouver logement et protection les uns chez les autres." "Hospitalité," in *Le Petit Robert: dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Le Robert, 2011), 1282.

17. «C'est à toi que je m'adresse, tendre et prévoyante mère, qui sus t'écarter de la grande route, et garantir l'abrissage naissant du choc des opinions humaines!» Rousseau, *Emile*, 4: 245–46.

Manners that evolved from the strict codes established by Louis XIV in the seventeenth century found new meaning in eighteenth-century Europe. Both etiquette and manners were conflated and considered part of a noble person's upbringing and obligation. The bourgeois classes aspired to behave in such a way as to be presentable in "polite society." Another relevant form of sophisticated etiquette was being taught in the domestic sphere in Lausanne in 1747, not far from Rousseau's hometown of Geneva. Mme. Marie Le Prince de Beaumont took it upon herself to educate female pupils on manners in her home. In her *Magasin des enfans: dialogues entre une sage gouvernante et plusieurs de ses élèves*, she, like Rousseau, uses biblical examples as her principal pedagogical tool.¹⁸ The microcosm of the home and moral conduct that is learned and practised in the domestic sphere for Rousseau is the base for moral behavior which is then carried into the larger ethical, public and political sphere. By the time the reading public had *Emile*, mothers of all classes were at the forefront of educating children in good manners.¹⁹

Under the influence of Christianity in Europe, early modern rules of etiquette often derived from ancient biblical precepts of welcome and hospitality. These are often related directly to and ritualized by the Abrahamic traditions and further defined according to diverse cultural norms. In this way, even the western notions of social etiquette that we recognize today are a permutation of the ancient notions of hospitality that have developed over time and were adapted from culture to cul-

18. Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, *Magasin des enfans, ou dialogues entre une sage gouvernante et plusieurs de ses élèves de la première Distinction* (Londres: J. Haberkorn, 1756). In this manual, stories, including Samson and Delilah and Sodom and Gomorrah, are used as critical tools for children. The Levite story from Judges, however, is not part of Beaumont's discussion. Julie in *La Nouvelle Heloise*, also draws on biblical tales in instructing her children.

19. An early exponent of the politics of hospitality, Judith Still, argues: "In *The Levite of Ephraim*, it is not the case that the individual host fails with regard to the ethics of hospitality ... Rather it is the relation between the ethics of hospitality (what can happen between individuals) and the politics of hospitality, where it is the role of the collectivity or the State which is of interest." (Judith Still, "Acceptable Hospitality: from Rousseau's Levite to the Strangers in our Midst Today," *Journal of Romance Studies* 3.2 (2003), 11. The relationship between host and guest is what Still refers to as "ethical behavior," meaning there is a moral quality intrinsic to the dynamic. Further on in this work, Still is among the first to recognize that hospitality in Rousseau's work is aligned with the problems of society as a whole, yet even she does not go so far as to link it to the root causes of the decadence of the state.

ture. The notion of hospitality that we derive from reading Rousseau's *Levite of Ephraim* is that the treatment of the guest is an act of kindness. Hospitality is also meant to mask cruelty, and it is a show of human decency based on knowledge of ill manners. In general, hospitality may also be corrupted by etiquette if sincere gestures of welcome are replaced by convoluted rituals fueled by social pressure.

The reactions towards the hospitality (or lack thereof) manifest in *The Levite* are reflected stylistically in the work's structure of prefaces and four cantos. The discussion of hospitality in this work showcases Rousseau's view that morality in the home predicts political behavior in the public sphere. In both prefaces, the narrator's tone reflects intense feelings of rejection and estrangement. More precisely, these feelings are expressed through the textual exploration of rituals of welcome and hospitality in the first half of *The Levite*.²⁰

A key motivation for Rousseau's autobiographical writing derives from his feelings of being misunderstood, and *The Confessions* offer ample testimony to his feeling of psychological and social alienation. He often felt marginalized from the elite intellectual milieu organized by members of the Court, the *salonnières*, and the *philosophes*.²¹ It is apparent that in *The Levite of Ephraim*, as in his other works, Rousseau is more comfortable in the role of active critic and observer.²² He would

20. See Levite 1205–1206.

21. "As an ongoing institution, the salons served as a kind of model in the "art of living," whose lesson, while not directly political, had clear civic implications: the salon was where appearances reigned supreme, the realm "of the mask of fine words" – hence an organ of social control." (Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 444.) See also Dena Goodman, "Philosophes and Salonnières: A Critique of Enlightenment Historiography," in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 53–89. Not surprisingly, Rousseau railed against the phenomenon of the salon and regarded the *Salonnières* as pampered, overeducated objects of desire who provided self-interested and at times insincere hospitality in their homes, facilitating the artistic and intellectual presentations and debates that arose and thereby wielding a new power. The discussions had certain "house rules" that were based on etiquette and hospitality.

22. Rousseau felt strongly alienated from salon society, as Dena Goodman has emphasized: "while the Republic of Letters was structured in theory by egalitarian principles of reciprocity and exchange, the reality of intellectual practice fell far short of this ideal. French men of letters in particular found themselves increasingly engaged in divisive quarrels . . . rather than in constructive debate." (Dena Goodman, "Governing the Republic of Letters: The Politics of Culture in the French Enlightenment," *History of European Ideas* 13.3 (1991), 183–84.) Clearly, critics would spring up

write his observations and correspond with individuals rather than directly confront his public or the representatives of institutional authority. The following passage, also from *The Confessions*, strongly suggests that Rousseau's feelings of rejection from the French, and, specifically, the Parisian milieu contributed to his drafting of *The Levite of Ephraim*:

Dès le lendemain de mon départ j'oubliai si parfaitement tout ce qui venait de se passer, et le Parlement, et Madame de Pompadour, et M. de Choiseul, et Grimm, et D'Alembert, et leurs complots, et leurs complices, que je n'y aurais pas même repensé de tout mon voyage, sans les précautions dont j'étais obligé d'user.²³

We have only to glance at the list of the celebrated names from the passage above to identify the circles from which he felt rejected.²⁴

While Rousseau's understanding of the plight of the Levite may be seen as a personal identification with the protagonist, Rousseau expands the story to reflect a more profound truth concerning the lack of morals within society as a whole. From this vantage point, *The Levite of Ephraim* is much more than a parable to explain Rousseau's personal narrative. By focusing on the Levite as a person and attributing feelings and the power of reason to him, Rousseau adds psychological and social dimensionality to his character.²⁵ In the fourth canto, following the evolution of the biblical story and after adding new characters, Rousseau adapts the biblical story, universalizes his message for all individuals, and advances *Emile's* original directives on hospitality.

Rousseau harkens back to biblical tales of hospitality to provide a context of widely known and understood moral stories. The Bible contextualizes hospitality as a moral and ethical code of behavior.

in this situation, among them Rousseau who, as Roche notes, was "quite resistant to social relations of this type" and took up his position in "the debate over 'the mask and fine words' [that] was one of the century's central controversies." (Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, 446.)

23. Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1: 587.

24. Serving to deepen his alienation, a few years prior to Rousseau's writing of *The Levite of Ephraim* a particularly difficult rupture occurred in his friendship with his long-time friend and mentor Denis Diderot: "Et toi aussi Diderot, m'écrirai-je? Indigne ami!" (*Confessions*, 1: 586.)

25. The Bible version does not concentrate on personality traits of the Levite; rather, it describes his actions in a perfunctory manner.

Because *The Levite of Ephraim* derives from a biblical tale, it is helpful to note other biblical tales of hospitality in order to compare the morals, rituals, and values that appear in them. While many early Hebrew biblical stories focus on acts of kindness, such as washing the feet of strangers and giving them food and drink, some descriptions of Hebrew biblical hospitality also emphasize another duty of the host: to protect the guest from harm. This is especially apparent in the story of Lot and the men/angels he shelters at Sodom from the wrath of the crowd.²⁶ Often, hospitality involves personal sacrifice because the host is expected to offer up something of value in order to honour the guest.²⁷

The lesson of this biblical episode is clear: hospitality is part of a moral and ethical code of civilized behavior. The home space is sacrosanct and should not be violated. The most positive instances of hospitality appear early in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, for example, hospitality involves ritual and encourages openness towards strangers.²⁸ Many of the stories tell of the generosity of Abraham and Sarah, whose behavior towards others provides the baseline of good conduct because they open their home to welcome strangers.²⁹ Most

26. René Girard comments extensively in his work on this point. This parallel is not accidental, as the sacrifice of animals and goods to the deity through fire is regarded as a sacred meal, and biblical law is replete with allowances for sharing certain sacrifices with the priests, and with the poor and the stranger. René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), 11–12.

27. It seems that Judges 19–21 is a cruel echo of the Lot story since readers would be expecting a *deus ex machina* of angels to interfere, but in this story they do not, and chaos ensues. Humankind is on its own. This theme of “hospitality gone wrong” appears again generations later in Judges 11 in the story of Jephtha, infamous for sacrificing his own daughter to fulfill a vow. The context is one in which the enemies of Israel are accused of having withheld safe passage and of harassing and attacking the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Later, in Judges 19–21 the sin is even greater when hospitality among the Israelites themselves is perverted so that the sacred covenant binding the people with their deity has been violated. The abuse of hospitality results in the direst of consequences, a civil war in Israel that almost leads to the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin. The code of hospitality, the basic expression of the covenantal bond that united the politically chaotic, barely settled Israelite tribes, was abrogated. In the absence of a formal confederation of tribes, relations between members of different tribes, including travelers and strangers, were guided by inherited codes of behavior for both the host and the guest. Throughout the book of Judges, a constant refrain reminds us, “each man did what was right in his own eyes.”

28. Genesis 18:1–8.

29. The book of Genesis suggests that in biblical times, a host shouldered the responsibility to provide, food, water, and shelter to the wayfarer or guest, as illus-

important, the ancient codes of hospitality suggest that the host will guard the stranger from harm.

In *The Levite of Ephraim* the perversion of hospitality is reminiscent of other Hebrew biblical stories that treat the same subject.³⁰ In contrast to the early stories of welcome to strangers in Genesis, other stories in Genesis and later books portray perverted and destructive behavior towards the guest, most notably in Sodom and Gomorrah.³¹ But divergent elements focus Rousseau's version of the tale on the theme of the shameful treatment of a guest.

In the first two cantos, Rousseau carefully distinguishes between two distinctive parts of the original story from Judges 19–21. The first part in Rousseau's version focuses on the Levite's relationship with his concubine with particular attention paid to the individuals, the couple, and the family. There is a discussion of the possibility of creating a home. In the second part, the small community and the interactions

trated by positive stories such as Abraham's hospitality to the three strangers who arrive at his tent in Mamre and Rebeccas's kindness to Eliezer, servant of Abraham. Many biblical examples underscore that *what* is offered as hospitality is important by describing scenes in which the host gives of his own store of food or wine to make the guest feel welcome. These biblical examples prove that the code was indeed ritualized and socially important to ancient Near Eastern civilization.

30. Marie-Thérèse Inguenaud comments on this subject in her article "Israël Réconcilié: la signification religieuse et politique du *Lévite d'Éphraïm*," in *Modernité et pérennité de Jean-Jacques Rousseau: mélanges en l'honneur de Jean-Louis Lecercle*, ed. Colette Piau-Gillot, et al. (Paris: Champion, 2002), 105–17.

31. These two biblical stories provide a moral and ethical comparison of perverted hospitality to a very wide readership. When laying the groundwork for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the text seeks to justify the annihilation of the people of these towns by demonstrating how utterly depraved the townspeople were. In the case of Lot, two strangers appear on his doorstep. Lot, Abraham's nephew, welcomes the visitors into his home, exhibiting proper behavior to guests according to the Israelite code of hospitality. Lot himself has only recently settled in the region, and the strangers politely indicate that they do not wish to impose on Lot's kindness. Lot insists that they accept his offer of shelter; he feeds the guests and gives them a place to sleep. Soon, a vicious mob surrounds his home, calling upon him to give up his guests so they may rape them and do them more harm. As a last resort, to appease the mob and not violate the sacrosanct provision of hospitality to his guests, he offers his virgin daughters to the mob. Still, the mob continues to insist that Lot offer up the strangers. Then it is revealed that the strangers are not ordinary human beings, but angels. The supernatural visitors afflict the mob with blindness, saving Lot, his daughters, and, of course, the guests. It is then proclaimed that God will destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and their inhabitants because of their sinfulness, with the exception of Lot and his family because they were hosts and they acted correctly.

between the couple, the home and the community are in question. In the third canto, the community in Gibeah forms the perimeter, and, finally, in the fourth canto, all Israel becomes involved in what began as a rift between two people. After Rousseau states his purpose in rewriting the Bible's story in the prefaces, the narrator of the first canto employs the tone of a moral tale.³² Rousseau's philosophical exploration of hospitality begins, and the definition of the other emerges in the analysis of these social categories.

Issues pertaining to hospitality troubled Rousseau personally, but they were also linked to his wider ideas about society. His curiosity about hospitality informs his use of a biblical story of a man and woman mistreated by their supposed kinsmen to explore questions of hospitality. Judges 19–21 is well chosen for Rousseau's purpose: it is one of the few biblical tales that explores the metatext of hospitality. By incorporating the social and textual themes of misguided, and, at times, absent hospitality in his adaptation of *The Levite of Ephraim* Rousseau is able to explore his personal feelings about the treatment of the other as well as to address the troubling question of how an entire tribe could nearly perish because of their own series of failures to welcome the stranger. The text defines the stranger as someone in need of kindness and welcoming. The other is often innocent, and the victim, someone who needs to be treated especially well. But "otherness" is not resolved in *The Levite of Ephraim* especially in the fourth canto and the episode of Axa. Axa's presence is written into Rousseau's version, and she acts as an example for the women of Israel who are required to sacrifice and reproduce in order to preserve a people.

Rousseau's own life circumstances are never far from the surface as inspiration and impetus for this recasting of the biblical tale – arguably one of the most disturbing and morally perplexing in the sacred corpus. The home is where moral values are inculcated. But in the case of *The Levite of Ephraim*, these lessons have been poorly taught. The political nature of the text resides in Rousseau's emotional connection to the issues and his literary use of foreshadowing in the first two

32. The first part of the tale addresses a forbidden liaison to a foreigner: "Fille de Juda, tu n'es pas de ma Tribu ... je ne puis t'épouser selon la loi du Seigneur." (Rousseau, *Le Lévitte d'Ephraïm*, 2: 1209.) Rousseau uses the word *Seigneur* or Lord here instead of *Dieu* or God, which provides evidence that Rousseau used the most widely used translation of the Bible in Catholic countries, the Sacy edition of Port Royal.

cantos. His insights allow him to examine the political sphere over the last two cantos. The scenes of violence underscore how this story functions as a reflection of the political climate that serves as the backdrop of the French Revolution.³³

In Rousseau's work as a whole, the domestic, private sphere of the family and home, the individual, and the absence of the mother serve as a microcosm of the sociopolitical and public spheres (and vice versa). The lack of moral understanding is connected to the absence of a mother figure in the text. This lack of a mother figure is a commentary on the way in which hospitality functions in the text. It suggests how poor upbringing is due to the lack of a mother. The inhospitable behavior of the Benjaminites and a corrupt moral code are linked to the lack of a political infrastructure. This is precisely how the fourth canto and the added episode of Axa prove the failure of the solution of "othering" the women. This text draws a parallel between biblical times and the eighteenth century. It also demonstrates how Rousseau misreads the role of women in his own context in both instances. Rousseau seems to say through this tale of the ancient world that he wants women to be subservient to the nation. In this way, he relegates women into the domestic sphere with a caveat. If they enter the political sphere they can only be used as sacrificial objects for the greater good.

The Levite d'Éphraïm might not appear to be an overt commentary on hospitality, yet it is in this particular piece that Rousseau demonstrates that rupturing the welcome of hospitality affects societal norms and contributes to moral corruption. He supports this general idea by demonstrating how societal norms influence the way in which individuals function in the home, tribe, and eventually, the nation. Rousseau further defines the difference between authentic acts of hospitality and corrupted practices. These acts emerge as one of the core problematics in this tale. As a platform for a critique of the degradation of social mores in a society facing abrupt change and in need of political and social reorganization, Rousseau could not have chosen a better vehicle than this biblical tale of destruction and violence.

33. A concise description of this atmosphere is given in an essay by Sarah Maza, "Politics, Culture, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *The Journal of Modern History* 61.4 (December 1989), 704–23.