

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 118

Emily R. Grosholz, ed., *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xl + 200 pp. Select bibliography and name index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-19-926535-6. \$43.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-926536-7.

Review by Catherine Rodgers, Swansea University.

Editor Emily R. Grosholz, explains in her preface how this volume emerged partly from a colloquium she organised in honour of *The Second Sex's* fiftieth anniversary, with a goal of enabling that text to receive "greater recognition as a work of "philosophy" and assuring it a place in the canon (vii). [1] Other chapters were specially commissioned. Grosholz also summarises the articles and contextualises them in an expert and precise manner. She arranges contributions into three sections: historical, philosophical and literary.

The first part, the historical context, starts with Claude Imbert's article, "Simone de Beauvoir: A Woman Philosopher in the Context of Her Generation." Imbert first describes the philosophical context of Paris in the thirties and forties and establishes a comparison between Beauvoir and Simone Weil, two young women who benefited from the opening of higher education to women. Both wanted to use philosophy for a critique of social reality, but at the time there was no philosophy available to analyse consciousness in its historical situation. When Beauvoir tries in *The Second Sex* to philosophise about woman's consciousness, therefore, she is attempting to answer a question that cannot be framed in terms of an existing philosophy. Imbert argues that Beauvoir nevertheless does not create a new philosophy either. In fact, *The Second Sex* "must simultaneously affirm and deny that Simone de Beauvoir is a philosopher" (p. 5). In their search to capture philosophically the reality of a historical situation, Weil and Beauvoir challenged philosophical parameters and boundaries. The difficulty for Beauvoir was that she was trying to remain faithful to existentialism, while in fact her examination of the situation of women exposes existentialism's limits. For Sartre, a consciousness must experience itself as free, but Beauvoir argues that this is not the case for a female consciousness. By insisting on this limitation, Beauvoir makes the whole system collapse: existentialism "was unable to grasp the concrete reality of womanhood" (p.13). Imbert concludes by considering recent biological knowledge which would have further helped Beauvoir's thesis in *The Second Sex*.

In "Towards a Friendly, Transatlantic Critique of *The Second Sex*," Michèle Le Doeuff criticises Beauvoir's lack of knowledge and dismissal of U.S. feminist achievements. She notes that what needs explaining in a text changes with each generation. She takes the following passage from *The Second Sex* as an example: "The action of women has always been merely symbolic agitation; they won only what men felt like conceding to them; they didn't take anything; they received it" (quoted, p. 23). In 1976, after experiencing a recent period of solidarity through which they had obtained changes in the law, French women dismissed Beauvoir's remark out of hand. Beauvoir's comment was, however, not criticized at the time of the first publication of *The Second Sex*, Le Doeuff explains, then further analyses the background for Beauvoir's assessment. If Beauvoir was contemptuous of French women's achievements, it was because the French suffragette movement had been so ineffectual. French women's winning of the vote owed less to their own actions than to those of Anglo-American feminists. The French government conceded them the vote because they did not want political maturity to be granted women by the Allies. However, Beauvoir did not like to be reminded of American feminists, and as a result, she felt ambivalent about this new right.

Le Doeuff's point is that this new right was crucial; it may have spurred Beauvoir to write *The Second Sex*. It forced her to wonder why, given women's achieved political equality, it was still so difficult for women to insert themselves in the human *Mitsein*.<sup>[2]</sup> While the juridico-political level was improving, on the metaphysical-imaginary level, noticed Beauvoir, woman remained the "other" and an essence (Le Doeuff explains that this survives in the writings of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva). This made Beauvoir reflect on the lack of reciprocity in the relations between the sexes. Le Doeuff suggests that Bergson may have been a source of her inspiration. At the end of her essay, Le Doeuff returns to Beauvoir's unfortunate tendency to minimize North American feminists' achievements, stressing the need for French feminism to recognize the inspiration it drew from the U.S., and for feminism to abandon a narrow national perspective.

Toril Moi, pursuing the work of Margaret Simons, looks at the inadequacies of the English translation of *The Second Sex*.<sup>[3]</sup> She also refers to Fallaize's essay on the translation of the chapter on the married woman.<sup>[4]</sup> Through clear examples, Moi demonstrates that because of omissions, rewritings, a lack of philosophical knowledge on the part of the English translator, H. M. Parshley, and sheer, elementary mistakes, the English translation is unacceptable. It misrepresents Beauvoir's thought and propagates the impression that she is a fuzzy philosophical thinker; it is therefore, she argues, detrimental to feminism as a whole. Moi ends her essay on the reasons why it is unlikely that a new English translation will be produced as long as Knopf possesses the rights to the English market since they judge that the venture may not be profitable enough for them.<sup>[5]</sup> As usual, Moi's text is a model of clarity and persuasive power, and her article should be required reading for anyone unlucky enough to have to read *The Second Sex* in its appalling English version.

The first essay in the second part—the philosophical context—is Susan James's "Complicity and Slavery in *The Second Sex*." Although recognizing the relevance of the Hegelian framework to an understanding of Beauvoir's philosophical reasoning in *The Second Sex* and in particular her analysis of the woman as other, James chooses to go back in time, to seventeenth-century French philosophers and their understanding of social hierarchy and the passions that sustain it. James finds a parallel between the way Beauvoir understands the relation between man and woman and Malebranche's analysis of the relation between have and have-nots. But whereas Malebranche tolerates domination, Beauvoir affirms that woman's subjugation can be overcome. In the past, social hierarchy was justified by heredity: the courtier was supposed to suffer from a lack of noble blood. This indicates that woman's inferior status, also anchored in a supposed ingrained inferiority, can be turned around too. James brings a novel angle to *The Second Sex* that complements well the usual Hegelian approach.<sup>[6]</sup>

In "Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity," Catherine Wilson considers Kant's reflection on dignity and its limitations. She claims that Beauvoir brings clarity to the question by treating dignity in its social dimension and showing it to be linked to objective values. Beauvoir's conceptualisation of dignity means that we need to improve society until everybody can have social dignity. For Beauvoir, women can gain dignity through work, in the same way men have done through making things and transforming nature. Wilson points out that we must however be circumspect since not all work brings human dignity. In fact, with the help of Elise Boulding, Wilson shows it is only specialised work that confers dignity, and women have, unfortunately, been generalists.<sup>[7]</sup> Finally, Wilson answers three objections to Beauvoir's view. The first is that it is not women who should change their ways, but rather society that should change the way it views women. Wilson argues that this approach is unlikely to bring about an improvement for women and that the two things will happen simultaneously, the second as a result of the first. The second objection is that only an elite can hope to specialise. True, says Wilson in reply, but this is the thin end of the wedge that will open the door for all women. The third objection is that Beauvoir's thinking is rife with masculinist ideas inherited from male philosophers. Why are transformation, expansion and accumulation higher values? Wilson admits that it may be difficult for the moment to attach value to immanent activities, but she projects that this could change.

This is an interesting article that articulates Beauvoir's thinking on the concept of dignity and contextualises it in relation to Kant. It shows the strengths and shortcomings of Beauvoir's thought, and presents it as a stage in a process of evolution.

In her article "Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir?" Nancy Bauer constructs a convincing affirmative answer to her own question. She begins by listing the reasons why *The Second Sex* has not been read or has been read badly. As daughters, feminists have difficult relations to Beauvoir as a mother figure. When *The Second Sex* was published in the United States in 1953, it appeared in a feminist void; then feminism looked more toward Marxism; in the sixties and seventies Friedan and Millett were its main figureheads. So, although it is a founding text, if not *the* founding text of feminism, *The Second Sex* is seen as a "flawed artefact" (p. 116), and this failure to take it more seriously is a loss to feminism and feminist theories. Philosophy needs theorists who can offer a new vision of the world, one that will encourage readers to live differently, and this is what *The Second Sex* offers. Bauer points out that it is hard to read *The Second Sex* because of the defective English translation and because the philosophical grounding of the text tends to go unnoticed since Beauvoir does not highlight her use of key philosophical terms. Bauer explains that the writing of *The Second Sex* came at a point when Beauvoir had been grappling for years with philosophical concepts. One problem that had preoccupied her was the self's metaphysical isolation. Some feminists (Simons[8]), as part of an effort to extract Beauvoir from Sartre's shadow, have tried to show that Beauvoir's thought on that issue goes back to her student days; others (the Fullbrooks[9]) went further and said that it was Sartre who had followed in Beauvoir's footsteps.

In fact, Bauer's thesis is that it is not until Beauvoir questioned herself about her identity as a woman that she really formulated her ideas. What is sure is that with *The Second Sex*, Sartre and Beauvoir's ideas on the concept of the other diverged greatly. Unlike Sartre, Beauvoir believed that mutual respect could exist, even if men tended to think of themselves as subjects and women as others. Beauvoir also thought that freedom could not entirely escape from oppression. Beauvoir was thus not evolving in Sartre's philosophical shadow; in fact, her thought was indebted to other philosophies than his. Bauer looks at Sartre and Beauvoir's interpretations of Heidegger's *Mitsein*, illuminating their differences and concluding that Beauvoir's view, as she makes use of it to resolve the question of sexual inequality, is more perceptive and fruitful. What Bauer admires in Beauvoir is her ability not only to think abstractly, but also to keep referring back to her concrete experience of being a woman.

In her second article, which heralds the third and final part of the volume on the literary context, "Meaning What We Say: The 'Politics of Theory' and the Responsibility of Intellectuals," Moi wonders whether theoreticians can make a political difference through their writings. *The Second Sex* is a good example for her of a theoretical work that has made a difference. Moi takes comfort from Beauvoir's measured approach to language, and advocates that one must take responsibility for one's words—hence the need to take intentions into consideration. While for Moi, we cannot take intentions as sources of meaning, we must take them to be sources of responsibility. Moi argues that although Beauvoir was only interested in writing for a particular group of French men and women, she in fact managed to reach other readers too by means of showing them an aspect of the world to which they were able to respond: the oppression of women in patriarchy. All intellectuals, however, cannot hope that their writing, even if committed, will prove significant. So Moi shifts the question that she raised at the beginning of her article, from a general, absolute justification of committed literature to a more contextualised reflection, using the example of Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*.

Anne Stevenson's "Saying What We Mean" is an answer to—a prolongation of—Moi's article, in which she agrees up to a point with Moi. She differs from Moi about the intentions of the author, believing, unlike her, that those intentions should be taken into account when determining the meaning of a text; she thus reopens the case of the intentional fallacy. Using Steven Pinker, Stevenson also challenges the "popular misconception that we always think in words" (p. 164).[10] By means of one of her own

poems, she illustrates how the meaning of the poem appeared to her, and considers the different meanings it can further acquire, depending on your perspective. As a consequence, she argues, it is not always easy to know what we mean. Although of interest, this article strays quite a way from the subject of Beauvoir.

In the beautifully written “The House We Never Leave: Childhood, Shelter, and Freedom in the Writings of Beauvoir and Colette,” Emily Grosholz reads Beauvoir—especially the first chapter of volume two of *The Second Sex* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*—in light of Colette, and in particular, of Colette’s evocation of her childhood and her mother, Sido.<sup>[11]</sup> Whereas Beauvoir is critical of her mother, Françoise, and in her own texts contrasts nature with her childhood home—the first offering freedom, the second experienced as a prison— Colette appreciates her mother and through her childhood home, reconciles nature and culture. Colette, unlike Beauvoir, undoes dichotomies; she knows how to draw strength from her childhood home, memories and her mother’s experience. Grosholz concludes by regretting that Beauvoir neglected the insights both “her own mother [and...] her literary mother Colette” had to offer on the problematic life of women” (p. 191).

The volume closes on a very selective bibliography (citing only books in English on Beauvoir) and a name index.

All essays are clearly argued, in precise, jargon-free language, and accessible to any reader, even to those who have no philosophical training. Although coming from different angles and disciplines, all the writers share a common belief that feminist theories should take a cue from Beauvoir. They anchor their thinking in women’s everyday life, insisting that philosophical thought must not be disconnected from reality. Another point they have in common is that most writers express frustration and anger with the existing English translation.

This volume is a significant contribution to Simone de Beauvoir studies and will surely constitute a reference work in the appraisal of Beauvoir’s legacy. It will contribute to the recognition of Beauvoir as a philosopher in her own right and help remove her from Sartre’s shadow. Importantly, it encourages us to return to *The Second Sex* and consider it afresh, freed from the prejudices that have dulled its impact and blunted Beauvoir’s formidable power as a philosopher.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Claude Imbert, “Simone de Beauvoir: A Woman Philosopher in the Context of Her Generation”

Michèle le Doeuff, “Towards a Friendly, Transatlantic Critique of *The Second Sex*”

Toril Moi, “While We Wait: Notes on the English Translation of *The Second Sex*”

Susan James, “Complicity and Slavery in *The Second Sex*”

Catherine Wilson, “Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity”

Nancy Bauer, “Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir?”

Toril Moi, “Meaning What We Say: The ‘Politics of Theory’ and the Responsibility of Intellectuals”

Anne Stevenson, “Saying What We Mean”

Emily R. Grosholz, “The House We Never Leave: Childhood, Shelter, and Freedom in the Writings of

Beauvoir and Colette”

## NOTES

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

[2] This is a philosophical term (inherited from Heidegger) that Beauvoir uses in *The Second Sex* and that Le Doeuff also uses as a consequence. In fact Nancy Bauer looks at this concept in her article in this volume. She explains that for Beauvoir, it means that “human beings live in a world that is through and through marked by the existence of other people” (p. 133).

[3] Margaret Simons revealed how bad the English translation of *The Second Sex* is in her essay “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What’s Missing from *The Second Sex*,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 6/5 (1983): 559-64.

[4] Elizabeth Fallaize, “Le Destin de la femme au foyer: traduire ‘la femme mariée’ de Simone de Beauvoir,” in Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon, eds. with assistance from Kate and Edward Fullbrook, *Cinquantenaire du Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Syllepse, 2002), pp. 468-74.

[5] Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are working on a new English translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. It will come out first as a hardback (under the Jonathan Cape imprint) on 5 November 2009, ISBN 9781857151374. This will be followed the year after by a Vintage edition in paperback, ISBN 9780099499381.

[6] Several critics have made use of the master-slave dialectic discussed in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to make sense of the way Beauvoir presents the relationship between men and women in *The Second Sex*, in particular, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex*, trans. Linda Schenck, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) and Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[7] Elise Boulding is a social historian, and Catherine Wilson draws on “Nomadism, Mobility and the Status of Women” in *Women in the Twentieth-Century World* (New York and London: Sage, 1977) as well as *The Underside of History* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992). Boulding explains that in prehistoric time, women and men were social equals, but after the Neolithic age, men became specialists whereas women remained generalists, and as a consequence women lost their freedom and dignity.

[8] Simons claims that Beauvoir’s thinking about the concept of the other was elaborated during her days as an undergraduate student and did not change right up to the writing of *The Second Sex* (Margaret Simons, “Beauvoir’s Early Philosophy: The 1927 Diary,” in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999]).

[9] Kate and Edward Fullbrook claim that the main points that Sartre makes in *Being and Nothingness* were present in the first pages of *L’Invitée*, published the same year, but written earlier by Beauvoir (Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* [New York: Basic Books, 1994]).

[10] In *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London: Penguin, 1994), Steven Pinker shows how our thoughts may differ from the words we use to attempt to communicate them.

[11] Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1959).

Catherine Rodgers  
Swansea University  
c.rodgers@swansea.ac.uk

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172