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The Adulteress Wife

Toril Moi

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier
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In June 1946 Simone de Beauvoir was 38. She had just finished *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and was wondering what to write next. Urged by Jean Genet, she went to see the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries, on show for the first time after the war. *Citizen Kane* was also being shown in Paris for the first time, and Beauvoir was impressed: Orson Welles had revolutionised cinema. Politics was not an all-encompassing consideration, for the Occupation was over, and the Cold War had not quite begun. In the short space of time since the Liberation, Beauvoir had established herself as a writer and intellectual. Her first philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, had been well received, and in 1945, her second novel, *The Blood of Others*, had been praised as the first novel of the Resistance. In the public realm, her name was firmly linked to Jean-Paul Sartre's, and to existentialism, which was becoming so fashionable that Sartre had to hire a secretary. No longer a beginner, no longer unknown, Beauvoir had nothing to prove; she could write about anything.

She decided to write about herself. She was inspired by Michel Leiris's *Manhood*, which had just been reissued in Paris with a new introduction comparing writing to bullfighting (the torero and the writer need the same kind of courage). She would write a confession. Thinking about the project, she realised she had to begin by asking: 'What has it meant to me to be a woman?' At first, she thought of the question as a formality, a preliminary exercise to get her into the real work: 'I had never had any feeling of inferiority, no one had ever said to me, "You think that way because you are a woman"; my femaleness had never bothered me in any way. "In my case," I said to Sartre, "it hasn't really mattered.'" Sartre urged her to think again: 'But still, you weren't brought up in the same way as a boy: you

should take a closer look.’ She did, and was amazed:

It was a revelation. This world was a masculine world, my childhood was nourished by myths concocted by men, and I hadn’t reacted to them in the same way I should have done if I had been a boy. I became so interested that I gave up the project of a personal confession in order to focus on women’s condition in general. I went to do some reading at the Bibliothèque nationale and studied myths of femininity.

The roots of *The Second Sex* are here, in Beauvoir’s realisation that her life had been affected in countless ways by her having been born a girl. This massive book was written fast: the first volume appeared in Paris in June 1949, the second five months later. But Beauvoir did not spend all the intervening time on her analysis of women’s condition. In January 1947 she travelled to the United States for the first time, and in 1948 she published *America Day by Day*, a deeply perceptive book about the experience. Moreover, she met Nelson Algren there. The writing of *The Second Sex* thus coincided with her discovery of America and with her passionate affair with Algren. It also coincided with Sartre’s transatlantic affair with the New York-based Frenchwoman Dolorès Vanetti, which caused Beauvoir much pain.

That much of Beauvoir’s personal experience went into the making of her investigation of the situation of women is beyond doubt. Judith Okely has drawn attention to Beauvoir’s ‘hidden use of herself as a case study’ in *The Second Sex*. The urgency of her style, the conviction that every scrap of evidence must be piled up to show the world the truth about women’s condition, surely comes from a sense that she was, after all, writing a kind of confession, offering the public intimate and unsettling truths about herself, and about other women.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir formulates three principles and applies them to women’s situation in the world. First is her foundational insight that man ‘is the Subject, he is the Absolute: she is the Other.’ Man incarnates humanity; woman, by virtue of being female, deviates from the human norm. The consequence is that women constantly experience a painful conflict between their humanity and their femininity.

The next principle is that freedom, not happiness, must be used as the measuring stick to assess the situation of women. Beauvoir assumes that woman, like man, is a free consciousness. In so far as the status of Other is imposed on her, her situation is unjust and

oppressive. But with freedom comes responsibility: when women consent to their own oppression and help to oppress other women, they are to be blamed. The epigraph to the second volume is ‘Half victims, half accomplices, like everyone else’, a line from Sartre’s 1948 play, *Dirty Hands*. But Beauvoir’s true yardstick is concrete freedom: institutions and practices are to be judged ‘from the point of view of the concrete opportunities they offer the individual’. Abstract equality (the right to vote, for example) is not enough: to turn freedom into reality, women must also have the health, education and money they need to make use of their rights.

Finally, there is the insight that women are not born but made, that every society has constructed a vast material, cultural and ideological apparatus dedicated to the fabrication of femininity. Throughout *The Second Sex* Beauvoir attacks ‘femininity’ in the sense of patriarchal or normative femininity. To her, a ‘feminine’ woman is one who accepts herself as Other; ‘femininity’ is the badge of the unfree. For women to be free, ‘femininity’ must disappear. Taken together, Beauvoir’s major insights are the foundation of modern feminism. Whether they acknowledge it or not, all contemporary feminists build on Beauvoir’s achievement.

To face the French reception of her book, Beauvoir would need the courage of a bullfighter. The first volume was an unexpected success, selling 22,000 copies in the first week. But when the second volume appeared, with its detailed studies of female sexuality, Beauvoir was deluged: ‘Unsatisfied, cold, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother. People offered to cure me of my frigidity or to satisfy my ghoulish appetites.’ The Vatican put the book on the Index; Albert Camus accused her of having made the French male look ridiculous.

When *The Second Sex* was published in the US in the spring of 1953, it leaped onto the the bestseller lists. It has sold well ever since. In the 1950s, it was the only book women who wanted to think about their status in the world could turn to. From the 1950s to the 1970s, women all over the world were exhilarated and shocked by Beauvoir’s message. ‘It changed my life,’ is the refrain. Curiously, some of the best-known feminist pioneers of the 1960s failed to acknowledge her influence: there are hardly any references to *The Second Sex* in *The Feminine Mystique* or *Sexual Politics*; it was years later that Betty Friedan and Kate Millett admitted that *The Second Sex* had been a major source of inspiration for them.

In the 1970s, Beauvoir’s book became controversial in new ways. Second-wave feminists interested in building a strong sense of female identity, committed to valuing women’s

traditional activities and to various theories of female difference, took Beauvoir's critique of patriarchal femininity to be an expression of her hostility to women. Beauvoir's existentialism is incompatible with identity theory. Many 1970s feminists disliked Beauvoir's emphasis on freedom, her claim that 'femininity' is a form of ideological oppression, and her insistence that women are often all too happy to collaborate in their own oppression.

However intensely Anglophone feminists debated *The Second Sex*, the English translation, by H.M. Parshley, did not become an issue until 1983, when Margaret Simons, a professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, drew attention to it in her essay, 'The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir'. Beauvoir had offered Parshley no help; she was already hard at work on *The Mandarins* before he was half-way through his translation. Now Simons estimated that Parshley had cut at least 10 per cent of the original text, and showed that the most savage cuts affected Beauvoir's account of exceptional women in history. She also demonstrated that Parshley had made a hash of Beauvoir's philosophical vocabulary. After reading Simons's essay, Beauvoir replied: 'I was dismayed to learn the extent to which Mr Parshley misrepresented me. I wish with all my heart that you will be able to publish a new translation of it.'

Simons's discovery had no impact on Random House, which owns the English-language rights to the book through its imprints Knopf (for the hardback) and Vintage (for the paperback). By the time of the 50th anniversary of *The Second Sex* in 1999, there were still no plans for a new translation: that year, Elizabeth Fallaize and I decided to draw attention to the situation again. Fallaize, whose premature death at the end of last year Beauvoir scholars mourn, analysed the effects of the vast cuts Parshley made in the chapter on 'The Married Woman'. I wrote about Parshley's philosophical confusions, drew attention to a number of elementary French mistakes, and showed the way his mistranslations had affected recent feminist theory. I also wrote about the publication history, and stressed that Parshley should not be seen as the villain of the piece. A professor of zoology at Smith College, he was genuinely enthusiastic about Beauvoir's book. It was the publisher, not Parshley, who insisted on cutting the text; in the end he cut 145 of the original 972 pages, or almost 15 per cent of the original.

The strength of Parshley's 57-year-old translation is that it is lively and readable. Parshley was, on all evidence, an excellent writer of English. When he understood the French, he usually found the right phrase and managed to convey nuances of irony and poetry. The most serious weaknesses are the unannounced cuts; but his complete lack of familiarity

with Beauvoir's philosophical vocabulary and the deficiencies in his knowledge of French also undermine his version of the book.

Demand for a new translation gathered force, but the publishers resisted. In 1988, Ashbel Green, then Knopf's vice president and senior editor, summarised their view: 'Our feeling is that the impact of de Beauvoir's thesis is in no way diluted by the abridgment.' After all, the book was making money: 'It's a very successful book that we want to continue publishing.'

In August 2004, Sarah Glazer published an article about the situation in the *New York Times*. Whether her article was the deciding factor is hard to say. In any case, at the end of 2005 Ellah Allfrey, then an editor at Cape, the British publisher of *The Second Sex*, persuaded Knopf to split the cost of a new translation. According to *Le Monde* the final cost was €35,000 (£30,000 or \$50,000), one third of which was paid by grants from the French state.

Given the profile of the book, Beauvoir specialists hoped that the publishers would turn to a first-rate translator with a track record in the relevant field: maybe Carol Cosman, the translator of Sartre's multi-volume study of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, and of Beauvoir's *America Day by Day*; Lydia Davis, a translator of Proust; or Richard Sieburth, translator of Leiris, Michaux and Nerval. Instead, the publishers chose Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, two Americans who have lived in Paris since the 1960s and worked as English teachers at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques. They have published numerous textbooks in English for French students (*My English Is French: la syntaxe anglaise*), and many cookery books (*Cookies et cakes* and *Sandwichs, tartines et canapés* among others). Their track record in translation from French to English, however, appears to be slim (I have found only two catalogue essays for art exhibitions in Paris, both translated by Malovany-Chevallier).

In a 2007 interview with Sarah Glazer, published in *Bookforum*, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier dismissed doubts about their competence. They explained that they first heard about the problems with the English translation at the 50th anniversary conference on *The Second Sex* in Paris. After the conference, they contacted a former student, Anne-Solange Noble, the director of foreign rights at Gallimard, to propose themselves for the job, and in due course Noble told Allfrey that she 'already knew the perfect translators'.

Now we have the new translation. Many will turn to it with high hopes. Is it the definitive translation? Does it convey Beauvoir's voice and style? Unfortunately not. Here is a sentence, chosen almost at random:

Ordinarily she can be taken at any time by man, while he can take her only when he is in the state of erection; feminine refusal can be overcome except in the case of a rejection as profound as vaginismus, sealing woman more securely than the hymen; still vaginismus leaves the male the means to relieve himself on a body that his muscular force permits him to reduce to his mercy.

The sentence doesn't stand out as immediately 'wrong'. On my first reading, I felt that I got Beauvoir's point, but only after a struggle, for the sentence is cumbersome, and several expressions, above all 'the state of erection', and 'relieve himself' struck me as strange. I checked the French:

Normalement, elle peut toujours être prise par l'homme, tandis que lui ne peut la prendre que s'il est en état d'érection; sauf en cas d'une révolte aussi profonde que le vaginisme qui scelle la femme plus sûrement que l'hymen, le refus féminin peut être surmonté; encore le vaginisme laisse-t-il au mâle des moyens de s'assouvir sur un corps que sa force musculaire lui permet de réduire à merci.

The translation turns out to have a number of problems. 'Man' and 'woman' should be 'the man' and 'the woman', since we are dealing with generic examples (as in 'the woman leads, the man follows'), not with universals ('woman is night; man is day'). 'Feminine refusal' is also wrong: we are not dealing with a specific kind of refusal (the feminine as opposed to the masculine kind), but with the woman's refusal or resistance. (Beauvoir is not trying to tell us how the woman resists, just that she does.) The sentence structure and the punctuation are awkward. There are several translation errors: *s'assouvir* doesn't mean to 'relieve oneself' but to 'satisfy' or 'gratify'; in this context *profonde* means 'underlying' or 'deep-seated,' not 'profound'. The phrase 'reduce to his mercy' piles up errors: *à merci* is not the same thing as *à sa merci*; *réduire* in this context doesn't mean 'reduce' but rather 'dominate' or 'subdue'; thus *réduire à merci* actually means 'subdue at will'. And *force musculaire* means 'muscular strength' not 'muscular force', which is a phrase mostly used by scientists trying to explain the physics of muscle contractions; *permettre* here means 'enable' or 'allow', not 'permit'.

This isn't an isolated example. After taking a close look at the whole book, I found three fundamental and pervasive problems: a mishandling of key terms for gender and sexuality,

an inconsistent use of tenses, and the mangling of syntax, sentence structure and punctuation.

Key terms first. Throughout *The Second Sex* Borde and Malovany-Chevallier confuse ‘woman’ and ‘the woman’, and ‘man’ and ‘the man’: *le mythe de la femme* is sometimes translated as ‘the myth of woman’ and sometimes as ‘the myth of the woman’, as if there were no difference; *la femme* becomes ‘women’ and ‘a woman’ on the same page. Even the most famous sentence in *The Second Sex* is affected. Parshley translated ‘On ne naît pas femme: on le devient’ as ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’ Borde and Malovany-Chevallier write: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.’ This is an elementary grammatical mistake. French does not use the indefinite article after *être* (‘be’) and *devenir* (‘become’), but no such rule exists in English. (*Comment devenir traducteur?* must be translated as ‘How to become a translator?’) This error makes Beauvoir sound as if she were committed to a theory of women’s difference. But Beauvoir’s point isn’t that a baby girl grows up to become woman; she becomes *a* woman, one among many, and in no way the incarnation of Woman, a concept Beauvoir discards as a patriarchal ‘myth’ in the first part of her book. ‘I am woman hear me roar’ has no place in Beauvoir’s feminism.

The next mishandled key term is *féminin*. The translation teems with references to the ‘feminine world’, ‘feminine literature’, ‘feminine reality’, ‘feminine individualism’, ‘feminine magic’, ‘feminine destiny’, ‘the feminine body’, and so on. But this is very misleading: *la littérature féminine* really means ‘literature by women,’ not, as some readers might assume, a particular kind of ‘feminine’ as opposed to ‘masculine’ writing. While Borde and Malovany-Chevallier sometimes do translate *féminin* appropriately, they seem to have little awareness of the different ideological and cultural connotations of ‘feminine’ in English as opposed to *féminin* in French. Given that *The Second Sex* is intended as a critique of traditional femininity, this is a major problem.

Viril, consistently translated as ‘virile’, is another botched key term. The English ‘virile’ has much stronger sexual connotations than the French *viril*. In most cases the word in French simply means ‘manly’ or ‘masculine’, or as *Le Petit Robert* tells us, ‘having the moral characteristics often attributed to men: active, energetic, courageous etc’. In the chapter on ‘The Lesbian’, Beauvoir is constantly made to speak of ‘virile’ and ‘viriloid’ women, when she means women who are energetic and enterprising.

The second fundamental problem is the use of tenses. The translators stress that they decided to stick closely to Beauvoir’s use of tenses, particularly her use of the historical

present. In the 'History' section, sentences lurch from past to present and back again without rhyme or reason. They don't always respect Beauvoir's use of the perfect tense and often overlook her frequent recourse to the conditional to indicate scepticism. When the translators write, 'Engels retraces woman's history from this point of view in *The Origin of the Family*; this family history depends principally on the history of technology,' they ignore the more sceptical view that Beauvoir takes in her original sentence: 'C'est selon cette perspective qu'Engels dans *L'Origine de la Famille* retrace l'histoire de la femme: cette histoire dépendrait essentiellement de celle des techniques.' To convey this, something like 'according to him' or 'supposedly' is needed in the sentence. (That the second occurrence of *histoire* becomes 'family history' is another problem.)

The third fundamental problem is syntax, sentence structure and punctuation. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier decided to reproduce Beauvoir's long sentences connected by semicolons in English, on the grounds that they are 'a stylistic aspect of her writing that is essential, integral to the development of her arguments'. In French, her long, loosely connected sentences convey speed, passion, and sheer delight in piling up her discoveries. If English sentences are strung together in the same way, however, the impression won't be the same. French and English differ significantly in their tolerance of relatively vague connections between sentence elements. The translation theorist Jacqueline Guillemain-Flescher has shown that English requires more explicit, precise and concrete connections between clauses and sentences than French and, conversely, that French accepts looser syntactical relations. In other words, if French syntax is imported directly into English, sentences that work in French may come across as rambling or incoherent in English. This is precisely what happens here.

While Borde and Malovany-Chevallier fetishise Beauvoir's semicolons, they fail to respect the structure of the sentences and clauses between the semicolons. Throughout the book they habitually move sentence parts around so that words and phrases placed in a stressed position by Beauvoir no longer receive any stress in English. The consequences are evident on every page. Far too often the translation fails to convey the nuances of Beauvoir's arguments and destroys the rhythm and balance of her prose. The last sentence of the book offers a striking example of the translators' tin ear:

Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom prevail; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and above and beyond their natural differentiations, affirm their brotherhood

unequivocally.

C'est au sein du monde donné qu'il appartient à l'homme de faire triompher le règne de la liberté; pour remporter cette suprême victoire il est entre autres nécessaire que par delà leurs différenciations naturelles hommes et femmes affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité.

The English version deprives 'freedom' and 'brotherhood' of the stress they receive in French, adds the extremely awkward 'among other things and above and beyond', and even manages to end Beauvoir's book on 'unequivocally' rather than on the word she chose, 'brotherhood'. The result is a rebarbative, bureaucratic sentence, rather than a utopian vision of a world of freedom and solidarity between men and women.

The book is marred by unidiomatic or unintelligible phrases and clueless syntax; by expressions such as 'the forger being', 'man's work equal', 'the adulteress wife', and 'leisure in château life'; and formulations such as 'because since woman is certainly to a large extent man's invention', 'a condition unique to France is that of the unmarried woman', 'alone she does not succeed in separating herself in reality', 'this uncoupling can occur in a maternal form.' The translation is blighted by the constant use of 'false friends', words that sound the same but don't mean the same in the two languages.

And then there are the howlers. A character in Balzac's *Letters of Two Brides* is made to kill her husband 'in a fit of passion', when what she really does is kill him 'par l'excès de sa passion' ('by her excessive passion'). In the chapter on 'The Married Woman', Beauvoir quotes the famous line from Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*: 'Ne commencez jamais le mariage par un viol' ('Never begin marriage by a rape'). Borde and Malovany-Chevallier write: 'Do not begin marriage by a violation of law.'

At one point, Beauvoir discusses Hegel's analysis of sex. In the new translation, a brief quotation from *The Philosophy of Nature* ends with the puzzling claim: 'This is mates coupling.' *Mates coupling*? What does Hegel mean? It turns out that in Beauvoir's French version, Hegel says, 'C'est l'accouplement'; A.V. Miller's translation of *The Philosophy of Nature* uses the obvious term, 'copulation'.

In a discussion of male sexuality, Beauvoir points out that men can get pleasure from just about any woman. As evidence she mentions 'la prospérité de certaines "maisons d'abattage"', which Borde and Malovany-Chevallier translate as 'the success of certain "slaughter-houses"'. But for a prostitute, *faire de l'abattage* is to get through customers

quickly; as the context makes abundantly clear, a *maison d'abattage* is not an abattoir, but a brothel specialising in a quick turnover.

Aware of the widespread criticism of Parshley's failure to recognise Beauvoir's philosophical vocabulary, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier claim that they have 'maintained Beauvoir's philosophical language'. This is not entirely accurate. First of all, the problems discussed so far also affect the philosophical aspects of the text. Mistranslation of key terms and unclear syntax do not promote philosophical clarity. But this isn't all. Parshley mistook philosophical terms for ordinary words: Borde and Malovany-Chevallier treat ordinary words as if they were philosophical terms. They consistently translate *s'accomplir* (to 'fulfil' or 'realise' oneself, 'to find satisfaction') as 'to accomplish oneself'; man is mysteriously said to be 'unable to accomplish himself in solitude'; he also 'hopes to accomplish himself as being through carnally possessing a being'. Parshley had no idea what 'alienation' means to Marxists, existentialists and psychoanalysts, and translated it as 'identification' or 'projection', or even, at one point, as 'being beside oneself'. In contrast, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier doggedly translate 'alienate' and 'alienation' every time the word turns up, regardless of what it means. The result is that they translate 'aliéner les biens immeubles' ('dispose of landed property') as 'alienate real estate'.

The translators fail to recognise many of Beauvoir's references. Adler's 'masculine protest' becomes 'virile protest'; the 'sexual division of labour' becomes, on the same page, 'the division of labour by sex' and the 'division of labour based on sex'; Bachofen's 'mother right' becomes 'maternal right'; and Byron's epigram, 'Man's love is of his life a thing apart; 'Tis woman's whole existence,' loses all its wit on the round trip from English to French and back again: 'Byron rightly said that love is merely an occupation in the life of the man, while it is life itself for the woman.'

The treatment of quotations is baffling. The headnote of the bibliography claims to list books 'we consulted to translate Simone de Beauvoir's French quotes'. This is only partly true. It seems to me that they have used the originals for fiction in English (Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield etc), and to a certain extent published translations for French fiction (Colette but not always Balzac), and for medical literature (Stekel's *Frigidity in Woman* is quoted correctly), and sometimes, but not always, for philosophy. Some quotations from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* are taken from published translations, but, as we have seen, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have translated quotations from *Philosophy of Nature* themselves, although they list A.V. Miller's translation in their bibliography of 'consulted' works. In the chapter on biology a sentence from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of*

Perception loses all meaning, since Borde and Malovany-Chevallier drop a vital ‘not’, which Colin Smith’s translation (not used, but still listed in the bibliography) preserves.

The notes, bibliography and index are riddled with mistakes. Names are misrecognised and bibliographical references are botched. According to the translators, Stekel’s *Frigidity in Woman* was first published in French in 1949; in fact it appeared in 1937 (Sartre quotes it in 1943, in *Being and Nothingness*). Oxford University Press may be amused to learn that A.V. Miller’s Hegel translation is listed as published by Galaxy Press, the publishing house of the Scientologists. In the index, references to Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* turn out to be references to Stendhal’s Mme Grandet, a character in *Lucien Leuwen*. There is one entry for Johann Bachofen and another one for a character called ‘Baschoffen’ with no first name. In general, far too many index entries fail to provide first names. After all, to find out who Samivel was, all it takes is to type the name into Google.

The best I can say about the new translation of *The Second Sex* is that it is unabridged, that some of the philosophical vocabulary is more consistent than in Parshley’s version, and that some sections (parts of ‘Myths’, for example), are better than others. The translators claim that their aim was to bring ‘into English the closest version possible of Simone de Beauvoir’s voice, expression and mind’. The ambition is laudable, but the result is what Nabokov, a great champion of literal translation, called ‘false literalism’ (as opposed to ‘absolute accuracy’). The obsessive literalism and countless errors make it no more reliable, and far less readable than Parshley.

Whenever I try to read Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s translation like an ordinary reader, without constantly checking against the French, I feel as if I were reading underwater. Beauvoir’s French is lucid, powerful and elegantly phrased. Even in Parshley’s translation young women would devour *The Second Sex*, reading it night and day. It’s hard to imagine anyone doing that with this version.

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