



While We Wait: The English Translation of "The Second Sex"

Author(s): Toril Moi

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2002), pp. 1005-1035

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175942>

Accessed: 13/12/2010 20:44

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Signs*.

While We Wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*

That the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is bad has been well known ever since Margaret Simons published her pathbreaking essay "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from *The Second Sex*" (1983). So why write another essay on the same topic in 2001? The first and most obvious reason is that English-speaking readers still have to use the text so cogently criticized by Simons, namely, H. M. Parshley's "edition and translation." Since Simons wrote her essay, a new generation of readers have started reading Beauvoir. In 1983, "French feminist theory" was usually taken to mean Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous. Today, it might just as well mean Beauvoir, for *The Second Sex* is again being widely read and discussed across the disciplines. A new wave of rigorous Beauvoir scholarship is in its first flourish. This new wave has already produced increased recognition of Beauvoir's philosophical importance, but there is still a long way to go before her place in the history of philosophy is secure.¹

The renewed interest in Beauvoir means that more readers than ever are spending more time scrutinizing the fine details of Beauvoir's arguments.

A first version of this essay was presented at the "Legacies of Simone de Beauvoir" conference at Pennsylvania State University in November 1999, on the kind invitation of Emily Grosholz. A different version was presented at a panel on "The Most Underrated Masterpiece of the French 20th Century," organized by Jeffrey Mehlman, at the MLA Convention in Chicago in December 1999. I want to thank my research assistant Erin Post for finding books and articles for me and Li Li Hsieh and Eva Gothlin for providing last minute references. I also owe thanks to Anne-Solange Noble, foreign rights director at Gallimard in Paris, for supplying information about the rights situation for *The Second Sex*. Finally, I want to thank Elizabeth Fallaize and Nancy Bauer for their advice and support.

¹ The philosophical revision of Beauvoir started in Europe with Kruks 1990 and continued with Le Dœuff 1991; Moi 1994; Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; and Vintges 1996. Recently, so many books have been published on Beauvoir's philosophy that I cannot mention more than a few: Bergoffen 1997; Moi 1999; Simons 1999; and Bauer 2001. All focus on the philosophical strengths of *The Second Sex*. Finally, I should mention three recent anthologies of essays on Beauvoir, which taken together give a splendid overview of the energy and passion of contemporary Beauvoir studies: Simons 1995; Fallaize 1998; and Evans 1998.

Inevitably, this has also increased the interest in the state of the translation. Over the years it has become clear to me that the translation is, if anything, even worse than Simons suspected. This is particularly true with respect to its philosophical shortcomings. Readers of Beauvoir in English need to know this. In French, *The Second Sex* is almost one thousand pages long. In English there are mistakes and omissions on every page. Only a tome as long as the book itself could document all the flaws in this translation. Simons opened the way, but her essay is quite short, and there is room for a lot more work on the subject. In Britain, for example, Elizabeth Fallaize has recently written an excellent essay on the cuts and omissions in the chapter on “The Married Woman” (Fallaize in press).² More work will surely follow, until the day that there is a new, reliable English text of this feminist classic.³

One might think that once the sorry state of the translation was brought to the attention of Beauvoir’s publishers, they would be eager to rectify it. Not so. Thanks to Simons’s efforts, Knopf (the original hardback publishers) and Vintage (responsible for the paperback) have known about the problems with the English text since the early 1980s. (Knopf and Vintage are imprints of Random House.) They have repeatedly refused to do anything at all. To be sure, the translator, H. M. Parshley (1884–1953), must share responsibility for the state of the text. But whatever Parshley’s linguistic and philosophical shortcomings may have been, he is not responsible for the fact that Knopf/Vintage still refuse to commission a new translation or to let some other publisher try its hand at the task.

Beauvoir’s text first entered the U.S. best-seller lists in the spring of 1953. In the intervening years, the paperback edition of the English trans-

² Fallaize is also the author of a study of Beauvoir’s fiction (1988).

³ To my knowledge, there are five other essays partly or wholly concerned with Beauvoir and translation, but only Simons 1983 and Fallaize in press have original things to say about the translation of *The Second Sex*. Anna Alexander discusses reasons why Beauvoir has been neglected and includes a brief account of Simons’s essay (1997, 113–14). Terry Keefe analyzes the translation of Beauvoir’s interview with Alice Schwartz included in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron’s much-used anthology *New French Feminisms* (Keefe 1994). Anne D. Cordero has written an excellent essay on the translation of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1990) and another on the translation of the short story “The Woman Destroyed” (1995). Finally, Sheryl A. Englund has written an essay entitled “A Dignified Success: Knopf’s Translation and Promotion of *The Second Sex*,” which in fact is not about the translation itself but about the correspondence between Knopf and Parshley, and the marketing and promotion of the book. The essay quotes documentary evidence from Knopf archives and is of some historical interest, although Englund appears to be unaware of Simons’s pioneering work: “There has been no thorough study of the specific alterations that Parshley made in the translation of *Le Deuxième sexe*” (1994, 17).

lation has sold well over one million copies.⁴ It remains politically urgent to continue to draw attention to the deplorable state of the English text. Perhaps it may even help to persuade Knopf/Vintage to relent. But I am not writing for the publishers. They already know all they need to know about the state of the text. The main purpose of this essay is to alert contemporary readers of Beauvoir to the shortcomings of the existing translation of *The Second Sex*. While we wait for a new translation, we need to be able to teach and read Beauvoir's epochal essay without being trapped by Parshley's mistakes.

Drawing on the work of Simons and Fallaize, I shall first discuss Parshley's cuts and omissions. Then I shall go on to show that the philosophical incompetence of the translation produces a text that is damaging to Beauvoir's intellectual reputation in particular and to the reputation of feminist philosophy in general, and that the translation at times makes it difficult to discover what Beauvoir actually thought about important feminist issues. My example here will be Beauvoir's discussion of motherhood. Finally, in the last section of the article, I shall discuss the story behind the text: the publishing history, the translator's role, and what the chances are of getting a new translation and edition in the near future. I hope that this article will be useful to anyone reading the English text of *The Second Sex*. Given that the introduction to *The Second Sex* is particularly widely used in interdisciplinary feminist contexts, I have paid special attention to this part of the book, but I also provide a wide range of new examples and analyses from the rest of the text. Throughout I stress the philosophical and theoretical consequences of Parshley's misunderstandings of the text.⁵

Simone de Beauvoir died in 1986. Her works will not enter the public domain until 2056. I sincerely hope that we won't have to wait until then before we can read her pathbreaking essay in a decent English translation. While we wait, I offer this essay as a stopgap measure. Read alongside

⁴ "Paperback sales of the American edition of *The Second Sex* reportedly have passed the million mark" (Gillman 1988, 40).

⁵ The difference between this article and Simons's pioneering essay (1983) is that she pays more attention to the cuts in the text and I pay more attention to the philosophical and theoretical inadequacies of the English text. Nevertheless, I too shall speak of cuts, and although she only spends one densely printed page documenting philosophical mistranslations, Simons was the first to draw attention to some of the most egregious philosophical errors in the English text. Fallaize provides a full and sensitive discussion of the effects of the severe cuts in the "The Married Woman" chapter (in press) and relates these to the lack of recognition of Beauvoir's analysis of housework in the work of Betty Friedan and Anne Oakley.

Beauvoir's text it should help English-language readers of *The Second Sex* to deal with the shortcomings of a text that they are still obliged to use.

A sorry mess: Cuts and omissions

In an admiring essay on Parshley, written partly in response to Simons's 1983 critique, Richard Gillman states: "In his correspondence with Alfred Knopf and others at the New York publishing house, Parshley refers specifically to cutting or condensing the equivalent of 145 pages from the original two-volume, 972-page French edition" (1988, 40).⁶ I own the original edition and can certify that it is indeed 972 pages long. If Parshley did what he said he was doing, then he cut 15 percent of Beauvoir's text, even more than the 10 percent that Simons estimated to have been deleted.

These cuts are not signaled in the text. The only trace of them is the one line on the title page that proclaims that the book is "translated and edited" by Parshley. Coincidentally or not, the acknowledgment that some "editing" had been going on was missing in the original 1953 edition.⁷ Simons has shown that the women's history section is hard hit. Here Parshley cut seventy-eight women's names and eradicated just about every reference to socialist feminism (see Simons 1983, 560, 562). Within the history section, the chapter on the Middle Ages has fared the worst: it is reduced to a third of the original length.⁸ According to Simons, Parshley also cut descriptions of women's anger and women's oppression, while keeping intact references to men's feelings: "Parshley apparently found evidence of woman's oppression, and genuine struggle between the sexes irritating, [and] systematically deleted misogynist diatribes and feminist arguments" (1983, 562). I can attest to this. As an example, I offer one of my own favorite "Parshleyisms," from the introduction:

Beauvoir: "La légende qui prétend que les Sabines ravies ont opposé à leurs ravisseurs une stérilité obstinée, raconte aussi qu'en les frappant de lanières de cuir les hommes ont eu magiquement raison

⁶ Although Gillman's rhetorical strategy is deplorable (he seems to believe that in order to defend Parshley, he has to attack feminists in general and Simons in particular), his essay provides a gold mine of information about Parshley, which I have found very useful in writing this essay.

⁷ Although the copyright page gives 1952 as the date of the edition, the American translation of *The Second Sex* was published on February 24, 1953. Parshley finished his translation on August 7, 1951 (see Gillman 1988, 41).

⁸ I have this figure from Fallaize's table of cuts in *The Second Sex*, included as an appendix on p. 9 in the manuscript version of her essay (in press).

de leur résistance.” (*DS*, 1:20)⁹

Literal translation: “The legend that claims that the ravished Sabine women opposed their ravishers with stubborn sterility, also tells us that the men magically overcame their resistance by beating them with leather straps.”

Parshley: “In the legend of the Sabine women, the latter soon abandoned their plan of remaining sterile to punish their ravishers.” (*SS*, xxvi)¹⁰

Simons was also the first to point out that almost half the chapter (about thirty-five pages) on “The Married Woman” was cut by Parshley. Included in the cuts are entire pages from Beauvoir’s pathbreaking, Bachelard-inspired analysis of housework (see Simons 1983, 562).¹¹ In the “Married Woman” chapter Parshley “drastically cuts much of [Beauvoir’s] supporting evidence,” Fallaize writes (in press, 3). According to Fallaize, Parshley routinely expurgates quotations from French sources while occasionally expanding Beauvoir’s references to American sources. He also eliminates her copious literary references and has little time for psychological or psychoanalytic evidence. (Although Fallaize writes only about the “Married Woman” chapter, all this is true for the rest of the book as well.) Moreover, Fallaize shows, Beauvoir’s brilliant analysis of the Manichean battle between good and evil enacted in a housewife’s everyday struggle against dirt is reduced to incomprehensible jumble in Parshley’s attempt to turn eleven pages in French (*DS*, 2:260–71) into five pages in English (*SS*, 448–52): “Whole pages consist of a mishmash of half sentences and summaries cobbled together in a mess which cannot be dignified with the name of translation” (Fallaize in press, 4).

In general, Fallaize demonstrates that Parshley’s cuts hit hard Beauvoir’s extensive documentation of women’s lived experience. Her lively quotes from women’s diaries, novels, and letters; from male novelists describing women; and from psychoanalytic case studies disappear without trace. “There is a loss of anecdote told from women’s point of view, making the text seem less rooted in women’s experience,” Fallaize writes. The text comes across as “Beauvoir’s personal opinion,” she concludes, rather

⁹ Beauvoir 1986, 1:20. Further references to the French text will be given in the text and abbreviated as *DS*.

¹⁰ Beauvoir 1989, xxvi. Further references to the 1989 Vintage edition of the English translation will be given in the text and abbreviated as *SS*.

¹¹ One example can be found in *SS*, 451, where Parshley summarizes in six and a half lines three full pages in Beauvoir’s original (see *DS*, 2:263–66).

than as well-supported analysis of a specific historical and cultural situation (Fallaize in press, 4).

Here's a small example to help bring out the importance of Fallaize's conclusion. "A text by Virginia Woolf shows how reality is concentrated in the house, while the space outside collapses," Beauvoir writes (*DS*, 2: 262; my translation).¹² This sentence is followed by six lines by Woolf making precisely this point. Parshley, on the other hand, writes: "Reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse" (*SS*, 450)—before briskly moving on to the next paragraph. There is no trace of Woolf here. The sentence is no longer a commentary foregrounding the powers of observation of an admired woman writer but a dogmatic proclamation of dubious validity.

Such cuts are not ideologically innocent. According to Fallaize, they impoverish Beauvoir's text by depriving us of the rich variety of women's voices that make up the French text. In my view they also make it particularly easy for hostile critics of Beauvoir to claim that she was uninterested in women, and therefore "male-identified," yet even the most cursory reading of the French text shows that this accusation could not be more unfair.¹³

One of the conclusions one can draw from reading Fallaize's suggestive essay is that whereas in French Beauvoir's book provides an intimate view of French culture in the mid-twentieth century, in English it does not. Inspired by Fallaize, I took a closer look at the eleven pages on housework that Parshley cut to five. In these eleven pages Beauvoir's French text quotes Colette, Colette Audry, Madeleine Bourdoux, Bachelard, Marcel Jouhandeau, Violette Leduc, and Francis Ponge. She even includes a brief quotation from James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.¹⁴ In English, the quotes have all disappeared. Saved from the general hecatomb, however, is a passage in which Rilke tells Lou Andreas-Salomé that Rodin had

¹² "Un texte de V. Woolf nous montre la réalité se concentrant dans la maison, tandis que l'espace du dehors s'effondre" (*DS*, 2:262).

¹³ See also my *What Is a Woman?* for evidence of Beauvoir's use of women's texts in *The Second Sex* (Moi 1999, 181–87).

¹⁴ This is simply a list of authors included in *DS*, 2:260–71 but omitted from *SS*, 448–52. It is not intended to be a list of writers who influenced Beauvoir. Fallaize writes about the whole chapter that "examples from women writers such as Violette Leduc, Colette Audry, or Virginia Woolf are gone" (Fallaize in press, 4). Simons writes, more generally, that the "massive cuts from Book II obscure the influence on Beauvoir of writers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Colette, Virginia Woolf, Colette Audry, Bachelard, and Violette Leduc" (Simons 1983, 563).

absolutely no interest in house and home (see *SS*, 449; *DS*, 2:261). What could possibly justify such editing?

Parshley constantly covers up the syntactical gaps left by his own cuts by rewriting Beauvoir's text. Sometimes he adds a brief summary of the content of the quote he has just axed. The result is often bizarre. At one point Beauvoir discusses Hegel's analysis of marriage. Here is Parshley's translation:

I have heard a pious mother of a family inform her daughters that "love is a coarse sentiment reserved for men and unknown to women of propriety." In naive form this is the very doctrine enunciated by Hegel when he maintains that woman's relations as mother and wife are basically general and not individual. He maintains, therefore, that for her it is not a question of *this husband* but of *a husband* in general, of children in general. Her relations are not based on her individual feeling but on a universal; and thus for her, unlike man, individualized desire renders her ethic impure. (*SS*, 435)

In this passage everything from "when he maintains that" to "renders her ethic impure" is Parshley's attempt at summarizing a quotation from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which covers over half a page in Beauvoir's text (see *DS*, 2:235). Beauvoir did not write this, and neither did Hegel. In French, there is something magnificent about Beauvoir's juxtaposition of a sexist maxim from a conservative French mother and a long, verbatim quotation from the equally conservative Hegel. In precisely such moments we see in action Beauvoir's unique power to see the philosophy in women's most practical and everyday concerns. Presented as Beauvoir's own words, Parshley's potted summary loses the contrast between Beauvoir's presentation, the mother's voice, and Hegel's voice and also gives the impression that Beauvoir is something less than a stellar reader of Hegel.¹⁵ This is not an isolated example: such cuts and cover-ups abound.

Finally, there are Parshley's silent deletions of sentences or parts of sentences. Such brief cuts are ubiquitous. Unless one reads the French and the English texts side by side and line by line, they are hard to detect, yet they are utterly damaging to the integrity of Beauvoir's analysis. We have already seen what happened to the Sabine women's resistance in English. Here's another crucial omission from the introduction:

¹⁵ There are innumerable examples of this kind. For more examples, curious readers can consult the next few pages (*SS*, 435–37), which are an extremely abbreviated rendition of *DS*, 2:235–43.

Beauvoir: “Il est clair qu’aucune femme ne peut prétendre sans mauvaise foi se situer par-delà son sexe.” (*DS*, 1:13)

Literal translation: “Clearly, no woman can without bad faith claim to be situated beyond her sex.”

Parshley: [Omits the sentence on *SS*, xx].

The sentence disappears from a particularly important juncture in the text, namely, the moment where Beauvoir is discussing the hopeless “choice” between having to claim that women are essentially different from men or that they are simply human beings, just like men.¹⁶ This sentence is the first step toward Beauvoir’s radical reformulation of the question of women’s difference. In general, Parshley’s translation makes it very difficult to see that Beauvoir has a coherent and deeply original philosophy of sexed subjectivity, one that never degenerates into a general theory of “femininity” or “difference.” The English text therefore makes it all too easy to accuse Beauvoir of “wanting women to become like men.”¹⁷

At this stage, readers with a smattering of French may be heading for the nearest bookstore or library to pick up the first available copy of the French text. Before rushing out the door, they should consider a few facts. The best existing French edition is the first, 1949 edition, the so-called *édition blanche*.¹⁸ It is still in print. French paperbacks are traditionally liable to change without warning. As far as I know (but I have not carried out a systematic comparison), the currently available folio pocket edition—the one that has “*premier dépôt légal 1986*” on the back page—is a fairly correct reprint of the original *édition blanche*.¹⁹ Because so many readers have it, this is the one I quote from in this essay.

¹⁶ I discuss this dilemma in *What Is a Woman?* (Moi 1999, 200–207).

¹⁷ “Beauvoir’s final message is that sexual difference should be eradicated and women must become like men” (Chanter 1995, 76).

¹⁸ I have found one hilarious misprint in the *édition blanche*, carried over to the *folio* edition, namely, a passage where both editions make Hegel speak of the foyer *érotique* rather than *ébhique*. Both editions print: “Dans le foyer du règne érotique, il ne s’agit pas de ce mari-ci mais d’un mari en general, des enfants en général” (*DS*, 2:235; also in the 1949 *édition blanche* 2:207). What Hegel actually writes in §457 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is this: “In the ethical household, it is not a question of this particular husband, this particular child, but simply of husband and children generally” (Hegel [1807] 1977, 274). As we have just seen, however, this misprint does not affect English-language readers, since Parshley, true to form, leaves out this long quote, replacing it with a three-line summary of his own making (see *SS*, 435).

¹⁹ New misprints have crept into the *folio* edition. All versions of the *folio* edition print: “elle se découvre et se choisit dans un monde où les hommes lui imposent de s’assumer contre l’Autre” (*DS*, 1:31). Here *contre* should be *comme*. This misprint introduces a severe contradiction with Beauvoir’s earlier claim, namely, that women have not posited themselves

Owners of older French paperback versions should be very careful. For a long time Gallimard published a *Collection Idées* version of *Le deuxième sexe* (available until the *folio* edition came on the market). In this edition, inexplicably, the whole of the second chapter of the “Myths” section—seventy-five pages containing analyses of Henri de Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal—is nowhere to be found. When Gallimard published the book in the *folio* edition, the missing chapter was restored. But readers should also know that the *folio* edition marked *dépôt légal* 1979 is seriously defective. The biology chapter is missing two-thirds of its pages, including every reference to the fact that biology is not immutable and unchangeable.²⁰ The 1986 edition restores the missing pages, but as a result page references to the first volume of the *folio* edition vary considerably in scholarly works.

Traduced by translation: Parshley and philosophy

Intellectual women have always struggled to be taken seriously as intellectuals. In the eighteenth century they were called bluestockings and compared to dogs walking on their hind legs. In the nineteenth century they were told that their ovaries would atrophy if they kept diverting their precious vital energy to the brain. Women philosophers, in particular, have had enormous difficulties in gaining respect for their work, even when they were working on ostensibly “universal” questions. And women philosophers working on questions of special interest to women have always had even less of a chance to be taken seriously than other intellectual women. In my experience, the problem has not disappeared in the year 2002 (just ask women literary critics about the “theory boy” syndrome in contemporary graduate schools). This is why, in my view, the philosophical inadequacies of Parshley’s translation of *The Second Sex* have more pernicious ideological effects than similar linguistic inadequacies in translations of male philosophers.

The most striking thing about existentialist vocabulary is that it often uses words that also have a perfectly ordinary everyday meaning. It is therefore easy to overlook the philosophical implications of Beauvoir’s

as subjects, that they have not organized in a unit that would gain identity from their opposition to other units (see *DS*, 1:19; *SS*, xxv). The 1949 *édition blanche* prints the correct version, namely: “elle se découvre et se choisit dans un monde où les hommes lui imposent de s’assumer comme l’Autre” (1:31). For once, Parshley, who translated from the *édition blanche*, gets it right: “she finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (*SS*, xxxv).

²⁰ For further examples, see Deuber-Mankowsky and Konnertz 1999, 10.

language. *Authentique*, for example, is a common French word, which usually can be translated as “genuine,” “real,” “original,” or “authentic,” according to context (an “authentic” Louis XVI chair, a “genuine” signature, etc.). But in Beauvoir and Sartre’s vocabulary, an “authentic” act is one that is carried out in good faith, that is to say, one that does not try to deny freedom and the responsibility that comes with freedom. To be “inauthentic” is to be in bad faith, which means trying to escape the awareness of choice, responsibility, and freedom.

These terms, then, have to do with subjects who either assert themselves as subjects (they “assume” or “shoulder” their freedom, Beauvoir would say) or seek to deny their status as agents responsible for their actions. Given that much of Beauvoir’s essay is taken up with a searching analysis of the ways in which a sexist society encourages women to take up positions of bad faith—that is to say, to hide their freedom, their status as subjects, from themselves—the word *authentique* is crucial to *The Second Sex*. When Parshley freely transforms Beauvoir’s “authentic” into “real,” “genuine,” and “true,” he turns her questions about women’s freedom into moralizing sentimentality:

Beauvoir: “Car le dévouement maternel peut être vécu dans une parfaite authenticité; mais en fait, c’est rarement le cas.” (*DS*, 2:372)

Literal translation: “For maternal devotion can be lived in perfect authenticity; but in fact this is rarely the case.”

Parshley: “For while maternal devotion may be perfectly genuine, this, in fact, is rarely the case.” (*SS*, 513)

Parshley here turns Beauvoir’s recognition of the possibility of freely chosen, good-faith motherhood into an insinuation that most mothers engage in false displays of “maternal devotion.” One does not need to believe that Parshley was the ringleader of a sinister sexist plot to find this translation inadequate. What vitiates Parshley’s work, quite simply, is his inability to recognize a philosophical term when he sees one.

Examples of Parshley’s philosophically deaf ear abound. I shall draw attention to just four important types of mistakes. There are many more, but I hope that this will be enough to convince most readers of the gravity and extent of the problem. I shall now briefly back up the following claims: (1) Parshley turns terms for existence into terms for essence. (2) Parshley tends to take words for subjectivity (*sujet*, *subjectivité*) to mean “unsystematic,” “personal,” or “not objective.” (3) Parshley completely fails to recognize Beauvoir’s pervasive references to Hegel. (4) Finally, a brief variation on this last point: Parshley has no idea that Beauvoir’s central concept of “alienation” (*aliénation*) is a philosophical term taken from

Hegel and Lacan, and he therefore makes her important theory of the production of women's subjectivity under patriarchy invisible in English.

Beauvoir's existence, Parshley's essence

Beauvoir was an existentialist. She believed that "existence precedes essence," which is another way of saying that women are made, not born. Nowhere in the French text does she deviate from this fundamental philosophical position. Parshley's text, however, introduces, from time to time, references to human or female nature. Nothing could clash more completely with Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy, and nothing could make her look more self-contradictory. Here's a simple example from the introduction:

Beauvoir: "La femme a des ovaires, un utérus; voilà des conditions singulières qui l'enferment dans sa subjectivité." (*DS*, 1:14)

Literal translation: "Woman has ovaries, a uterus; there we have the particular circumstances that imprison her in her subjectivity."

Parshley: "Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature." (*SS*, xxi)

Although this quote comes from a passage describing sexist attitudes, Parshley's explanatory addition about the "limits of her own nature" is bound to produce misunderstandings. This is simply not the kind of vocabulary that Beauvoir would use.

The existentialist term *pour-soi* is usually translated as "for-itself." This conveys Sartre's understanding of consciousness as a lack of Being, as negation of any particular being, as ceaseless negativity. The opposite of being-for-itself is being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*). This is the mode of being of things, of nonconscious phenomena. It is probably the most fundamental distinction in French existentialist philosophy. Simons first drew attention to the following example of Parshley's art:

Beauvoir: "La femme se connaît et se choisit non en tant qu'elle existe pour soi mais telle que l'homme la définit." (*DS*, 1:233–34)

Literal translation: "Woman knows and chooses herself not as she exists for herself, but as man defines her."

Parshley: "Woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself but as man defines her." (*SS*, 137–38)²¹

Here are some more examples in the same vein:

²¹ See also Simons 1983, 563.

Beauvoir: “leur attitude ontologique” (DS, 1:76)

Literal translation: “their ontological attitude”

Parshley: “their essential nature” (SS, 36)

Beauvoir: “savoir comment en elle [la femme] la nature a été reprise au cours de l’histoire” (DS, 1:77)

Literal translation: “know how nature has been taken up (transformed) in her [woman] in the course of history”

Parshley: “discover how the nature of woman has been affected throughout the course of history” (SS, 37)

Eva Gothlin has shown that Henri Corbin introduced the term *réalité humaine* for Heidegger’s *Dasein* in 1938 (Gothlin in press, 4). Readers of Sartre and Beauvoir need to recognize the term. *Dasein* could be translated as “human existence,” “being-in-the-world,” or even “for-itself,” and Corbin’s *réalité humaine* should therefore be translated in the same way. Alternatively, one could use *human-reality* and signal its specific meaning in a separate note and glossary, as translator Hazel Barnes does in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1992). To do what Parshley does, however, is to turn Beauvoir’s philosophy into a travesty of itself. Again, Simons was the first to cite the following example:

Beauvoir: “réalité humaine” (DS, 1:40)

Literal translation: “human reality” or “human existence”

Parshley: “the real nature of man” (SS, 7)²²

All this is fairly elementary, in the sense that we are dealing with obvious errors of translation. Here’s a more subtle example, one that arises in a context where Beauvoir starts pushing the philosophical terms of her male colleagues in a new direction to accommodate her revolutionary analysis of women’s existence. To understand this example, we need to realize that when Beauvoir writes *réalité féminine* and puts it in quotation marks, she is first of all alluding to Corbin’s *réalité humaine* and, second, introducing a subtle understanding of sexed existence in a concept that Sartre and Heidegger thought of as universal. At the end of the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir gives a brief overview of the book she is about to write. First she will investigate how woman is understood by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. Then she will (the reference here is to the rest of volume 1 in French) go on to show:

Beauvoir: “positivement comment la ‘réalité féminine’ s’est constituée,

²² See *ibid.* Alexander 1997, 114, alludes to the same example.

pourquoi la femme a été définie comme l'Autre et quelles en ont été les conséquences du point de vue des hommes. Alors nous décrirons du point de vue des femmes le monde tel qu'il leur est proposé" (*DS*, 1:32)²³

Literal translation: "positively how women's being-in-the-world has been constituted, why woman has been defined as Other and what the consequences have been from men's point of view. Then I shall describe, from women's point of view, the world such as it is offered to them"

Parshley: "exactly how the concept of the 'truly feminine' has been fashioned—why woman has been defined as the Other—and what have been the consequences from man's point of view. Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live" (*SS*, xxxv)

One might say that this is not too grievous an error. Since Parshley puts "truly feminine" in quotation marks, the reader gets the (correct) impression that Beauvoir is critical toward such a concept. But to a philosopher the difference is immense. Parshley's translation indicates, and rightly so, that *The Second Sex* is going to be an investigation of ideology, but it entirely obscures the radical philosophical project that is also under way, namely, a transformation of a universal theory of *la réalité humaine* or *Dasein* to an analysis of situated, sexed existence.

Subjectivity

In Parshley's version *sujet* is only occasionally rendered as *subject*. This makes it difficult to see that Beauvoir actually has a sophisticated theory of female subjectivity.

Beauvoir: "s'affirmer comme sujet." (*DS*, 1:21)

Literal translation: "to affirm/assert oneself as a subject."

Parshley: "affirm his subjective existence." (*SS*, xxvii)

²³ After "proposé" there is a footnote, which states that this will be the purpose of a second volume. What Beauvoir is doing here, then, is to specify that the first volume will be devoted to an examination of women's situation as the other from the point of view of men, whereas the second volume ("Lived Experience") will be devoted to women's own experience of their situation. This is a distinction often overlooked by readers of Beauvoir. Thus, the pioneering feminist historian Gerda Lerner accuses Beauvoir of identifying with the "patriarchal world view": "De Beauvoir assumes the patriarchal world view and thinks from within it; thus, she never sharply distinguishes between patriarchal myth about women and the actuality of women's lives" (Lerner 1987, 158). But Lerner only quotes from the first volume of *The Second Sex*, namely the "History" section.

Beauvoir: “elles ne se posent pas authentiquement comme Sujet” (*DS*, 1:19)

Literal translation: “they do not authentically posit themselves as subjects”

Parshley: “They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude” (*SS*, xxv)

Confronted with the previous example, readers may well wonder why women can’t just be objective. The same problem arises with another Parshley gem. In certain situations, Beauvoir writes, sexism obliges her to “remove her subjectivity” from her claims. Her words are: “éliminant par là ma subjectivité” (*DS*, 1:14). Parshley writes: “thereby removing my subjective self” (*SS*, xxi).²⁴

Here’s a final example, where Parshley shows that for him, subject is pretty much the same thing as “ego” and “self.” This example can also serve as a transition to the next section, in which I shall discuss Parshley’s translation of *se poser*:

Beauvoir: “Le drame de la femme, c’est ce conflit entre la revendication fondamentale de tout sujet qui se pose toujours comme l’essentiel et les exigences d’une situation qui la constitue comme inessentielle.” (*DS*, 1:31)

Literal translation: “The drama of woman is the conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential.”

Parshley: “The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential.” (*SS*, xxxv)

Hiding Hegel

Even more disastrous from a philosophical point of view is the fact that Parshley seems unaware of the pervasive references to Hegel in Beauvoir’s text. In the introduction she uses the verb *poser*, which is the French translation of Hegel’s German *setzen*. Problems arise because this verb is also a perfectly ordinary French verb meaning “to place” or “to put.” Parshley is clearly thrown for a loop by Beauvoir, who uses it in contexts

²⁴ The important distinction between having to eliminate one’s sexed subjectivity and being imprisoned in it is almost impossible to spot in English. I discuss it in *Moi* 1999, 204–19.

where she speaks of the subject (either a person or a group) “positing itself”—coming to consciousness of itself as a subject—through opposition to some other person or group.

There is here a transparent allusion to Hegel’s account of the development of self-conscious subjectivity in the master-slave dialectic. For Beauvoir, the verb *poser* indicates that the subject has a mediated or self-conscious relationship to what it posits: itself, reciprocity with the other, or whatever it is. For her the verb indicates self-conscious subjectivity, agency, and conflict. Every time this verb turns up, the Hegelian overtones are there. When it disappears, the text loses the dynamic understanding of female subjectivity and agency and the alienation that threatens it, which is so characteristic of Beauvoir’s thought. I shall now show exactly how this happens.

The expressions *poser* and *se poser* are used well over a dozen times in the introduction alone. Parshley translates them variously as “pose,” “stand face to face with,” “regards,” “assume,” “make a point of,” “readily volunteer to become,” “plays his part as such,” and “postulate,” or he simply does not translate the French phrase at all. No reader of the English text could guess that there is some philosophical rigor behind all this. It is quite obvious that Parshley never realized that *poser* was a philosophical term for Beauvoir. Here are some examples:

Beauvoir: “elles n’ont pas les moyens concrets de se rassembler en une unité qui se poserait en s’opposant.” (DS, 1:19)

Literal translation: “They lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which could posit itself (as a subject) through opposition.”

Parshley: “Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit.” (SS, xxv)

Beauvoir: “C’est que dans le rapport du maître à l’esclave, le maître ne pose pas le besoin qu’il a de l’autre.” (DS, 1:20)

Literal translation: “This is because in the relation of master to slave, the master does not posit the need he has for the other.”

Parshley: “In the relation of master to slave the master does not make a point of the need that he has for the other.” (SS, xxvi)

Beauvoir: “Aucun sujet ne se pose d’emblée et spontanément comme l’inessentiel.” (DS, 1:17)

Literal translation: “No subject posits itself spontaneously and right

away as the inessential.”

Parshley: “No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential.” (SS, xxiv)

Beauvoir: “Tout sujet se pose concrètement à travers des projets comme une transcendance.” (DS, 1:31)

Literal translation: “Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely through projects.”

Parshley: “Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence.” (SS, xxxiv)

Beauvoir: “elle éprouve le lien nécessaire qui la rattache à l’homme sans en poser la réciprocité.” (DS, 1:21–22)

Literal translation: “She feels the necessary tie that connects her to man without positing the reciprocity of it.”

Parshley: “She feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity.” (SS, xxvii)

Beauvoir: “ils ne *posent* pas la femme comme une inférieure.” (DS, 1:27)

Literal translation: “They do not *posit* woman as inferior.”

Parshley: “They do not *postulate* woman as inferior.” (SS, xxxi)

These examples also show that Parshley adds entities that have nothing to do with Beauvoir’s understanding of consciousness, such as “ego” and “self”; that his formulations tend to deprive women of agency; and, of course, that the translation completely obscures Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel for her own radical purposes.

Alienation alienated

Finally, I will take a quick look at the term *aliénation*.²⁵ This term has quite specific meanings in philosophy (Marx, Hegel) and psychoanalysis (Lacan). Beauvoir uses it correctly and rigorously with specific reference to both Lacan and Hegel. Her understanding of the formation of women’s sexed subjectivity, in particular, is influenced by Lacan’s understanding of alienation in the mirror stage. Parshley, as one might expect, never realizes that this is a philosophical concept. From time to time he does translate it as “alienation.” But at other times he has other ideas:

²⁵ Various examples of mistranslation of *aliénation* can be found in Simons 1983, 563, and in Moi 1994, 156–64.

Beauvoir: “il [l’enfant] essaie de compenser cette catastrophe en aliénant son existence dans une image dont autrui fondera la réalité et la valeur. Il semble que ce soit à partir du moment où il saisit son reflet dans les glaces—moment qui coïncide avec celui du sevrage—qu’il commence à affirmer son identité:²⁶ son moi se confond avec ce reflet si bien qu’il ne se forme qu’en s’aliénant.” (*DS*, 2: 15)

Literal translation: “He [the child] tries to compensate for this catastrophe by alienating his existence in an image whose reality and value will be established by others. It appears that it is at the time when he recognizes his reflection in a mirror—a time which coincides with that of weaning—that he starts to affirm his identity. His I [ego]²⁷ merges with this reflection to the extent that it is only formed through its own alienation.”

Parsbley: “He [the child] endeavors to compensate for this catastrophe by projecting his existence into an image, the reality and value of which others will establish. It appears that he may begin to affirm his identity at the time when he recognizes his reflection in a mirror—a time that coincides with that of weaning: his ego becomes so fully identified with this reflected image that it is formed only in being projected.” (*SS*, 269)

This is one of Beauvoir’s most Lacanian moments, but anyone who reads the English text (which does contain a footnote referring to Lacan) would have to wonder how well she had understood Lacan. How could *anyone* take “alienation” to mean “projection”? But there is more:

Beauvoir: “la fillette sera encouragée à s’aliéner dans sa personne tout entière, et à considérer celle-ci comme un donné inerte.” (*DS*, 2: 27)

Literal translation: “The little girl will be encouraged to alienate herself in her whole body, and to consider it as an inert given.”

Parsbley: “The little girl will be led to identify her whole person [*sic!*] and to regard this as an inert given object.” (*SS*, 278–79)

²⁶ Here Beauvoir’s text has a footnote referring to Lacan’s *Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l’individu*, a text first published in 1938. For a modern reprint, see Lacan 1984.

²⁷ The French “moi” translates Freud’s “Ich,” which James Strachey translates as “ego” in the *Standard Edition*, but this is a translation that many writers consider quite misleading (Freud 1953–74).

Beauvoir: “Plus profondément aliénée que l’homme.” (*DS*, 2:183)

Literal translation: “Being more profoundly alienated than the man.”

Parshley: “Being more profoundly beside herself than is man.” (*SS*, 397)

Most of the examples of philosophical incompetence that I have provided here come from the first thirty pages of the French text. Imagine the cumulative effect of reading such a corrupt text for almost a thousand pages. Imagine the effect on philosophers looking for clarity of thought and consistency of concepts. How could they escape the thought that in spite of her brilliance, Beauvoir must be a careless and inconsistent thinker?

Traduced by translation

The translation is not only bad in itself, it also frequently leads Anglophone readers astray. In my classes, for example, my students are usually upset at Beauvoir’s failure to appreciate the situation of transgendered people:

Beauvoir: “En refusant des attributs féminins, on n’acquiert pas des attributs virils; même la travestie ne réussit pas à faire d’elle-même un homme: c’est une travestie.” (*DS*, 2:601)

Literal translation: “One does not acquire virile attributes by rejecting female [feminine] attributes; even a transvestite doesn’t manage to turn herself into a man—she remains a transvestite.”

Parshley: “One does not acquire virile attributes by rejecting feminine attributes; even the transvestite fails to make a man of herself—she is a travesty.” (*SS*, 682–83)

Feminist philosophers face more serious obstacles. Here’s just one important example, concerning Beauvoir’s understanding of the body:

Beauvoir: “Cependant, dira-t-on, dans la perspective que j’adopte—celle de Heidegger, de Sartre, de Merleau-Ponty—si le corps n’est pas une *chose*, il est une situation: c’est notre prise sur le monde et l’esquisse de nos projets.” (*DS*, 1:73)

Literal translation: “Nevertheless, one will say, in the perspective I am adopting—that of Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty—if the body isn’t a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp of the world, and a sketch [outline] of our projects.”

Parshley: “Nevertheless it will be said that if the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting—that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty: it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects.” (*SS*, 34)

On the evidence of this sentence, Beauvoir has been taken to task by many

thinkers for getting Merleau-Ponty wrong and for being a Cartesian believer in the body-mind split. Judith Butler, for example, writes that “Beauvoir insists that the body can be the instrument and situation of freedom” (Butler 1990, 153 n. 21). She also speaks of Beauvoir’s “normative ideal of the body as both a ‘situation’ and an ‘instrumentality’” (Butler 1990, 152 n. 20). Apart from the fact that I can’t quite see why it’s normative to say that the body is a situation, the “instrumentality” invoked by Butler is clearly Parshley’s. Parshley may think of the body as an instrument and as a limiting factor for some inner spirit, but Beauvoir does not. She thinks of the shape of the human body as showing us in outline the kind of projects that human beings can have. This is more like Wittgenstein’s “the human body is the best picture of the human soul” than it is like Descartes’s mechanistic picture of body and soul (Wittgenstein 1968, 178).

In the same way, the Australian philosopher Penelope Deutscher uses Parshley’s Cartesianism against Beauvoir: “Beauvoir’s account of feminine embodiment is disturbing not only because of its negativity, but also because it takes for granted that female embodiment simply is a limitation. Beauvoir presents these facts with the explanation that she is adopting the perspective ‘of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,’ for whom the body is ‘a limiting factor for our projects.’ This is an extremely contentious representation of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty” (1997, 177). Like Butler, Deutscher is reading Parshley, not Beauvoir. Completely betraying Beauvoir’s thought, the English text leads Anglophone feminist philosophers into error. The effect is to diminish the feminist intellectual enterprise as a whole.²⁸

The translation of motherhood

We have seen that the cuts and omissions in *The Second Sex* place serious obstacles in the way of readers who want to find out what Beauvoir’s

²⁸ Since the 1970s the introduction of the word *gender* in everyday English has further complicated the task of translating Beauvoir’s 1940s French, in which the sex/gender distinction does not appear. A new translation of *The Second Sex* would have to take the utmost care with words such as *femme*, *féminin*, *femelle*, *homme*, *masculin*, *mâle*, and *sexe*. The misleading implications of Parshley’s translation of various expressions of sex and gender differences probably have more to do with the ways in which usage in the 1950s differed from contemporary usage than with any specific shortcoming of Parshley’s. He nevertheless tends to impose “femininity” on women in a way that is foreign to Beauvoir’s thought. Thus, he routinely speaks of “feminine behavior” where Beauvoir means “women’s behavior,” and he will say “feminine legs” where Beauvoir actually speaks of a “woman’s legs” (*jambes de femme*).

feminism is like. I have also shown that Parshley's translation of *The Second Sex* is not doing philosophers any favors. But there is more. It is widely believed, for example, that *The Second Sex* polemicizes against motherhood. A typical example of this attitude can be found in Drucilla Cornell's original and thoughtful *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality* (1998). Given its title and its impassioned plea for a feminism based on freedom—one toward which I feel very sympathetic—one might have expected *The Second Sex* to be a central point of reference for Cornell. It is not. There are surely all kinds of reasons for this, but the one that Cornell explicitly states is that Beauvoir "urged" or "advocated" the avoidance of motherhood in the name of freedom: "To argue that one has to give up mothering, as many of our own symbolic mothers in the feminist movement have urged us to do, as the only way to make ourselves an end in ourselves, is an enforced sexual choice.[*] Part of our struggle is to explode the barriers of such enforced sexual choices. Mothering has meant enslavement to many women, but that is because women have been forced to take on a particular persona only because they are mothers" (1998, 27). I have marked with [*] the point where there is a footnote in Cornell's text. The footnote reads as follows: "De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. She writes, 'There is one feminine function that it is actually almost impossible to perform in complete liberty. It is maternity'" (199, n. 65).²⁹ Elsewhere in the book, Cornell repeats this claim, invoking the same passage in support.³⁰ But, of course, Cornell is quoting Parshley, not Beauvoir:

Beauvoir: "Il y a une fonction féminine qu'il est actuellement presque impossible d'assumer en toute liberté, c'est la maternité." (*DS*, 2: 618)

Literal translation: "There is one female function which it is almost impossible to undertake in complete freedom today, namely motherhood."

Parshley: "There is one feminine function that it is actually almost impossible to perform in complete liberty. It is maternity." (*SS*, 696)

Parshley has made an elementary French mistake. *Actuellement* in French does not mean "actually," "as a matter of fact," or "really"; it means "now," "today," or "nowadays." Parshley turns Beauvoir's reference to

²⁹ Cornell's page reference is to p. 774 in the 1974 Vintage edition of *The Second Sex*, which corresponds to p. 696 in the 1989 Vintage edition.

³⁰ "Less extreme feminists like Simone de Beauvoir simply advocated the avoidance of motherhood in the name of freedom" (Cornell 1998, 130). At this point there is a footnote. The footnote refers to the very same passage in *The Second Sex* (Cornell 1998, 221, n. 43).

the circumstances prevailing in France in 1949 into a general, universalizing claim. (The sentence comes from the last section of *The Second Sex*, entitled "Towards Liberation," which explicitly deals with the situation of "independent women" in France at the time.) Beauvoir's point, in fact, is precisely the same as Cornell's, namely, that current concrete conditions prevent women from freely choosing motherhood.

But Cornell's claim appears to be overstated even in relation to Parshley's mistaken rendering of Beauvoir's point. (I still can't see any "urging" in Parshley's sentence.) Like so many other feminists, Cornell probably does not ground her claim about Beauvoir's attitude toward motherhood on one single sentence but on a more general and widespread impression that *The Second Sex* is hostile to motherhood. Once I took a closer look at the translation of the passages concerning mothers and motherhood in *The Second Sex*, I realized that Parshley's translation techniques have a lot to do with this.³¹ In the paragraph from which Cornell's citation is taken, for example, he goes on to produce a simply astounding *contresens*:

Beauvoir: "Il faut ajouter que faute de crèches, de jardins d'enfants convenablement organisés, il suffit d'un enfant pour paralyser entièrement l'activité de la femme." (*DS*, 2:618)

Literal translation: "I should add that given the lack of appropriately organized day nurseries and kindergartens, having a child is enough to paralyze a woman's activity entirely."

Parshley: "It must be said in addition that in spite of convenient day nurseries and kindergartens, having a child is enough to paralyze a woman's activity entirely." (*SS*, 696–97)

To translate *actuellement* as "actually" and *faute de* as "in spite of" (and *convenable* as "convenient") in the very same paragraph is quite a feat. As a result of Parshley's dismayingly elementary mistakes, Beauvoir sounds as if she thinks children are always going to be a paralyzing burden for women regardless of how many excellent nursery schools and crèches there are. This is the exact opposite of what she is actually saying in the paragraph we are dealing with here, which I shall now quote in its entirety, in a slightly amended translation:

There is one female function which it is almost impossible to undertake in complete freedom today. It is motherhood. In England

³¹ There are other reasons why feminists persist in misunderstanding Beauvoir's views on motherhood, but in this essay I shall only discuss matters of translation.

and America and some other countries a woman can at least decline maternity at will, thanks to contraceptive techniques. We have seen that in France she is often driven to painful and costly abortion; or she frequently finds herself responsible for an unwanted child that can ruin her professional life. *If this is a heavy charge, it is because, inversely, custom does not allow a woman to procreate when she pleases.* The unwed mother is a scandal to the community, and illegitimate birth is a stain on the child; only rarely is it possible to become a mother without accepting the chains of marriage or losing caste. If the idea of artificial insemination interests many women, it is not because they wish to avoid intercourse with a male; *it is because they hope that freedom of maternity is going to be accepted by society at last.* I should add that given the lack of appropriately organized day nurseries and kindergartens, having a child is enough to paralyze a woman's activity entirely; she can go on working only if she abandons it to relatives, friends, or servants. *She is forced to choose between sterility, which is often felt as a painful frustration, and burdens hardly compatible with a career.* (SS, 696–97; DS, 2:618; emphases added; translation amended)

I can't find any advocacy of childlessness in this passage. What I do find, however, is a strong plea for true freedom of choice, an explicit recognition that it can be a "painful frustration" for a woman to be forced not to have children and that the reason why an unwanted child can be such a disaster in 1949 is that society does not allow a woman to procreate when it suits her. Beauvoir's ideal is *la maternité libre*, not childlessness. Her point, obviously, is that in 1949 this ideal was nowhere near realization.

Here's a quote that a lot of people devoutly believe is not to be found in *The Second Sex*—and for once Parshley gets it more or less right: "Woman is lost. Where are the women? The women of today are not women at all! We have seen what these mysterious slogans mean. In men's eyes—and for the legion of women who see through men's eyes—it is not enough to have a woman's body nor to assume the female function as mistress or mother in order to be a 'true woman.' *In sexuality and maternity the subject can claim her autonomy*; the 'true woman' is one who accepts herself as Other" (SS, 262; emphasis added; translation slightly amended).³² Beauvoir does believe, then, that a woman's sexuality and her procreative function can be freely chosen, "authentic" projects. Yet they don't have to be. They can also be carried out in the deepest

³² See DS, 1:406 for the original French text.

alienation. Beauvoir refuses to essentialize motherhood: the meaning of motherhood will depend on the woman's attitude and total social and personal situation. Both here and elsewhere, Beauvoir explicitly says that to have a child can be a project, an exercise of freedom, autonomy, and choice:

Beauvoir: "Enfanter, c'est prendre un engagement." (*DS*, 2:386)

Literal translation: "To have a child is to undertake a commitment."

Parshley: "To have a child is to undertake a solemn obligation." (*SS*, 522)

The translation obliterates the emphasis on *engagement* ("commitment"). When that word disappears, the connotations of freedom, project, authenticity, and good faith that the word *engagement* carries for French existentialists disappear with it. Instead we get sentimental pieties about "solemn obligations." Traduced by translation, indeed.

Finally, some readers may think that I have chosen atypical passages to exemplify Beauvoir's views. Does she not start the chapter entitled "The Mother" by an impassioned plea for abortion rights? Yes, she does. Doesn't that prove that she is more interested in abortions than babies? Not at all. Beauvoir began writing *The Second Sex* in 1946. Marie-Jeanne Latour, the last woman to be guillotined in France, was executed in 1943. Her crime? She had performed abortions.³³ Why did she have so many customers? Because during the Vichy regime, contraception, including the act of spreading information about contraception ("contraceptive propaganda"), was illegal.³⁴ "Contraception and legal abortion would permit woman to undertake her maternities in freedom," Beauvoir writes (*SS*, 492; *DS*, 2:343).

What this shows is that Beauvoir believes (and I agree) that we will never have freedom of choice unless the choice *not* to have children is understood as a choice that can be as affirming and positive for women as the choice to *have* children. Unless we manage to undo the sexist and heterosexist ideology that posits that motherhood is every woman's destiny, that only a mother is a real woman, and that women's true nature can be found in mothering, women will never be able to genuinely choose

³³ This horrific story is told in Claude Chabrol's film *A Story of Women* (*Une affaire de femmes*) from 1988, with Isabelle Huppert as Marie-Jeanne Latour.

³⁴ This was during the Vichy regime. But contraception and "propaganda" about contraception was first outlawed in France in 1920 and did not become legal until the so-called *loi Neuwirth* was passed in 1967. Abortion, also outlawed in 1920, remained illegal until 1974. For a brilliant account of French legislation on these issues, see Duchen 1994, particularly chap. 4.

whether to have children or not. As women in 2002 struggle with the harsh reality of trying to combine work and motherhood, as we worry about losing the race against the biological clock, and as we strive to resist pressure to have children, we measure again how radical Beauvoir's analysis of motherhood really is.

"It's a very successful book . . .": Some notes on the publishing history and the current situation

In the mid-1980s, Simons asked Knopf to publish a new, full translation. Knopf turned the proposal down. Here is the *New York Times Book Review* account of the story in 1988: "Ms. Simons felt so strongly about the deletions she tried to persuade Knopf to publish an expanded, fully translated version of the volume. Knopf turned her down because, as Ashbel Green, the firm's vice president and senior editor, says: 'Our feeling is that the impact of de Beauvoir's thesis is in no way diluted by the abridgment'" (Gillman 1988, 40). In the publishers' version the problems with Parshley's text have been reduced to one of "deletions," although Simons also documented philosophical inaccuracies. The *New York Times Book Review* continues: "Knopf also said no to Ms. Simons' request that the rights to reprint the book be given to another publisher for republication purposes. Mr. Green explains: 'It's a very successful book that we want to continue publishing'" (Gillman 1988, 40).

This is still Knopf's (or Knopf/Vintage's) position. On December 21, 1999, I sent a letter by Federal Express to Knopf/Vintage, proposing that they commission a new translation and edition. In putting together the letter I was much helped by Elizabeth Fallaize, Emily Grosholz, and Margaret Simons. The letter emphasized the potential for substantial new sales of the new translation. I also wrote that I thought that it would be possible to raise money from various foundations and other philanthropic sources to fund the work required to produce a translation and an edition that would satisfy scholars as well as general readers. I then summarized the problems with the Parshley translation as follows:

- About 10 percent of the text is missing.³⁵
- Philosophical terms are horrendously mistranslated or simply not recognized as philosophical throughout the text.
- Sentences are edited or rewritten in misleading ways.
- There are elementary mistranslations of French.

³⁵ As mentioned above, it is actually more likely to be 15 percent.

With the letter I enclosed a copy of Simons's 1983 essay, a copy of Fal-laize's in press essay on "The Married Woman" chapter, a condensed overview of the examples in this article, and a draft of the first three sections of this article. I also sent a copy of all this paperwork to Anne-Solange Noble, the foreign rights director of Gallimard, Beauvoir's French publisher.

For the longest time, I heard nothing. After various attempts to ex-tricate a reply, I finally got two, one e-mail from Luann Walther at Vintage, dated March 17, 2000, and a letter from Judith Jones at Knopf, dated March 18, 2000. Together, the two responses made five general points:

1. Everyone associated with the book back in the 1950s had the best of intentions; in particular, there was no intention of trying to minimize Beauvoir's feminist positions or to make her look like an in-coherent thinker.
2. Beauvoir did agree to the translation and the cuts Blanche Knopf and Parshley made, so there is a strong case for leaving things as they are.
3. The cutting of the English version was not the result of a sexist plot but simply an attempt to make the book less daunting in length, and so more accessible to the American reader; a new full translation would make the book monumental.
4. Translations are always subjective; translators always leave traces of themselves in their texts, which is why translations date so often.
5. Knopf and Vintage feel that there would not be enough of an au-dience to make it worthwhile to retranslate and publish the full text. When they decide to let the current edition go out of print, another publisher, perhaps a university press, might want to do a new edition. Until then, however, interested readers will have to consult the French original to find out what Beauvoir actually wrote.

There are three different kinds of considerations here: the intentions and wishes of the parties involved back in the early 1950s; the nature of translation; and, finally, the commercial considerations.

The question of what one can expect from a translation is always in-teresting. The publishers' argument seems to be that if we agree that all translations are subjective, then there is no reason to find fault with Par-shley's particular efforts. This amounts to saying that since no translation can ever be a perfect rendering of all the nuances of the original (which is true enough), then all other criteria for quality are moot. Or, in other words, since the ideal translation can't be had and all translations are subjective, it really does not matter whether we are given an excellent or

a deplorable subjective translation. Beauvoir would surely have called this a bad faith argument.

As for the question of the intentions of Blanche Knopf and Parshley in the early 1950s, it's a red herring. I don't have to prove criminal intent to show that a new text is badly needed; all I need to do is to prove that the current text is bad. Parshley had never translated French before. As Gillman writes, Parshley "knew the language solely from Boston Latin School and his undergraduate years at Harvard" (1988, 40). He had no training in philosophy and knew nothing of the then brand-new form of philosophy called existentialism. Barnes's brilliant translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which contains a glossary of existentialist terms, did not appear until 1956 (Sartre 1992). Given his limited qualifications, Parshley must have found the task of translating *The Second Sex* daunting indeed.

Parshley was probably chosen for the job of translating *The Second Sex* for two reasons: his strong advocacy of the text and his reputation as an expert on sexuality. "He wrote the script for and also co-starred in the 1931 Universal Pictures film 'The Mystery of Life,' which traced the history of evolution," Gillman writes. "His co-star was . . . the famed Scopes 'monkey trial' lawyer Clarence Darrow" (1988, 40). He also, Gillman tells us, published a book entitled *The Science of Human Reproduction: Biological Aspects of Sex* (1933) and was a regular reviewer of books on sex for the *New York Herald Tribune* until he died in 1953. And he was a great admirer of Beauvoir's essay. When Knopf asked him whether the book should be published in America, Parshley replied that he found it "a profound and unique analysis of woman's nature and position, eminently reasonable and witty, and it surely should be translated."³⁶ It is quite likely that Parshley would not have cut Beauvoir's text if Knopf had not required him to do so. The cuts were implemented on the publishers' orders, to save money and to make the book less expensive.³⁷

Parshley, who was born in 1884, started work on the translation in November 1949. He suffered a heart attack in April 1950 but continued work from his hospital bed. In August 1951, he sent the finished manuscript to Knopf. The book was finally published on February 24, 1953. Parshley lived just long enough to see the book enter the best-seller lists and to hear that Beauvoir had written to Blanche Knopf to say: "I find

³⁶ Letter from Parshley to Knopf, quoted in Gillman 1988, 40.

³⁷ See Gillman's account of his interview with William Koshland, a former chairman of the board of Knopf (1988, 40).

the book superb. The translation seems excellent" (quoted in Gillman 1988, 41). He died suddenly in May 1953, from another heart attack.

Parshley's personal commitment to the book is not in doubt. His intentions were noble, although Beauvoir's biographer, Deirdre Bair, goes too far when she claims that Parshley was "a kind of hero" (quoted in Gillman 1988, 40). But none of this changes the fact that the translation produced by the heroic Parshley fails to convey Beauvoir's philosophical subtlety and depth. We can celebrate Parshley's personal courage and good will without concluding that his translation must be preserved for all eternity. New generations of readers deserve to experience the pleasures and insights of a new text.

In his apology for Parshley, Gillman writes: "[Parshley] has become a controversial figure among de Beauvoir scholars, some of whom consider his translation sexist. It is an arresting paradox in view of the fact that Parshley was not only the translator and editor of *The Second Sex*, but probably the book's most important proponent this side of the Atlantic. He figured heavily in the Knopf decision to publish an American edition, and then struggled to keep the translation essentially true to the original" (Gillman 1988, 1). There is no paradox here. My argument is not that Parshley set out to undermine *The Second Sex*, but that his translation is unsatisfactory in many ways. Most important, it is philosophically incompetent and, therefore, makes Beauvoir look like the fuzzy thinker that sexists believe women in general and feminists in particular actually are. We should, in other words, distinguish between sexist intentions and sexist effects. The latter may well be unintentional, but that does not necessarily make them less damaging.

For all his good intentions, however, Parshley (like so many other academics in the 1950s) was not untouched by sexist ideology. "Mlle de Beauvoir's book is, after all, on woman, not on philosophy," he writes in his introduction to the text (SS, xxxviii). As if women and philosophy were mutually exclusive! But there is more: "A serious, all-inclusive, and uninhibited work on woman by a woman of wit and learning! What, I had often thought, could be more desirable and yet less to be expected? When I was asked . . . to read Mlle Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième Sexe* . . . I was not long in realizing that the unexpected had happened" (SS, xxxvii). This reminds me irresistibly of Mary Ellmann's send-up of backhanded praise by sexist reviewers: "[The critic] had despaired of ever seeing a birdhouse built by a woman; now *here* is a birdhouse built by a woman. Pleasure may mount even to an admission of male envy of the work examined: an exceptionally sturdy birdhouse at that!" (Ellmann 1968, 31).

Finally, there is the question of Beauvoir's attitude to the translation. Her remark in the letter to Blanche Knopf is probably mere *politesse*. Even Bair calls it "a white lie" (quoted in Gillman 1988, 41). When Beauvoir learned about the problems with the translation, she was dismayed. Simons, who sent her essay on Parshley's translation to Beauvoir in the early 1980s, writes: "That Beauvoir did not realize the dimensions of the problems in the English translation until recently is evident from a letter she wrote me in response to this article: '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 1983, 564).

Ultimately, then, the answer to the question of why we can't get a new, complete translation of *The Second Sex* does not come down to the finer points of translation theory or to Beauvoir's or Parshley's intentions: it comes down to publishing policy, and so, ultimately, to money. In their letters to me, Knopf/Vintage imply that it will cost too much to do a new translation, let alone a proper scholarly edition. There just is not a market for that kind of investment, they say. Yet they do not say that the current text is selling so badly that it is on the point of going out of print. It is obviously selling well enough to make the idea of letting another publisher do a proper edition look unattractive. According to Knopf/Vintage, we're in a double bind: the book sells too well to go out of print but not well enough to warrant a new edition. The status quo can be prolonged forever; interested readers will just have to learn French.

This is not the attitude of publishers in other countries. In May 2000, the small publishing house Pax in Oslo published a new complete edition of *Le deuxième sexe* to replace their own highly defective edition from the late 1960s. Public interest was remarkable. In a country with a population of 4.5 million, the eight-hundred-page tome, freshly translated by Bente Christensen, sold 20,000 copies in just a few months. In Sweden (nine million inhabitants), Åsa Moberg, with philosophical assistance from Gothlin, is just finishing her new, complete translation. Apparently, then, small Scandinavian publishers can afford to retranslate *Le deuxième sexe*, whereas the giant Random House, with exclusive rights to the huge, worldwide English-language market, cannot.³⁸

My understanding is that Gallimard, Beauvoir's French publishers, want a new English translation.³⁹ Unfortunately, it appears unlikely that they

³⁸ Moreover, the defective English text also has effects in other countries. Thus, the new Chinese translation published in Taiwan only a few years ago appears to be a translation of Parshley, not of Beauvoir.

³⁹ E-mail from Anne-Solange Noble to the author, January 15, 2001.

have the necessary legal grounds on which to challenge Knopf. In May 2000 Continuum/Athlone in London asked Gallimard for rights to do an academic edition of *The Second Sex*. In March 2001, the Modern Library (another division of Random House) in New York inquired about rights for a new translation. Neither publisher received a reply.⁴⁰ At the moment, then, there simply is no way around Knopf and Vintage. Although they have full knowledge of all the evidence to the contrary, editors at both imprints continue to insist that there really is no need for a new translation. There is no need to elaborate on what this tells us about the state of commercial publishing in America.

What is needed, of course, is a new scholarly *edition*, not just a translation. English-language readers need a new text, but they also need enough information to understand Beauvoir's exceptionally wide range of references to people, authors, texts, political events, and social phenomena. In the introduction alone, for example, we are expected to know something about the political affiliations and intellectual status in France in 1949 of Claude Mauriac, François Mauriac, Julien Benda, Emmanuel Lévinas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Montherlant. We must also be able to place politically and socially two ephemeral magazines, *Franchise* and *Hebdo-Latin*. In addition to such explicit references, there are oblique allusions to Colette and Colette Audry, quite invisible to the nonspecialist. And who on earth is Madeleine Bourdhouxe? (see p. above). Moreover, like so many other French essay writers, Beauvoir frequently either omits references or garbles the names, dates, and titles that she does supply.⁴¹ Succinct, unobtrusive notes explaining such matters would make the text far more accessible to contemporary readers.

A new edition of a fresh, complete, and correct translation would decisively advance the study of Beauvoir, of feminist theory and philosophy, and of French postwar culture all over the English-speaking world. It would sell well too. Sadly, it looks as if there is little chance of getting a new text any time soon, let alone in time for the centenary of Beauvoir's birth on January 9, 2008.⁴² Yet Simone de Beauvoir deserves nothing less. Feminism deserves nothing less.

⁴⁰ E-mail from M. J. Devaney (Modern Library) to the author, March 5, 2001; e-mail from Tristan Palmer (Continuum, formerly Athlone) to the author, April 2, 2001.

⁴¹ A reference to Dorothy Parker in the introduction is wrong. Beauvoir also gets the title of Lundberg and Farnham's execrable *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* slightly wrong and in fact never bothers to supply the names of the authors (Lundberg and Farnham 1947). See *Moi* 1999, 181–84, for a discussion of the effect of such inaccuracies.

⁴² In November 2001, I sent an e-mail to Gallimard asking if there had been any development on the English rights front. I received no reply.

References

- Alexander, Anna. 1997. "The Eclipse of Gender: Simone de Beauvoir and the *différance* of Translation." *Philosophy Today* 41(1):112–22.
- Bauer, Nancy. 2001. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. (1949) 1986. *Le deuxième sexe*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio.
- . (1952) 1989. *The Second Sex*. Ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage.
- Bergoffen, Debra B. 1997. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chanter, Tina. 1995. *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*. New York: Routledge.
- Cordero, Anne D. 1990. "Simone de Beauvoir Twice Removed." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 7:49–56.
- . 1995. "Gender Terminology in Simone de Beauvoir and her Translators." *Platte Valley Review* 23(2):51–61.
- Cornell, Drucilla. 1998. *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid, and Ursula Konnertz. 1999. "Einleitung." *Die Philosophin* 20 (October): 5–12.
- Deutscher, Penelope. 1997. *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Duchen, Claire. 1994. *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France, 1944–1968*. London: Routledge.
- Ellmann, Mary. 1968. *Thinking about Women*. New York: Harcourt.
- Englund, Sheryl A. 1994. "A Dignified Success: Knopf's Translation and Promotion of *The Second Sex*." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 10(2):5–18.
- Evans, Ruth, ed. 1998. *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex: New Interdisciplinary Essays*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth. 1988. *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*. London: Routledge.
- . In press. "The Housewife's Destiny: Translating Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Married Woman.'" In *Cinquantenaire du deuxième sexe*, ed. Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon. Paris: Syllepse.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth, ed. 1998. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1953–74. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London: Hogarth.
- Gillman, Richard. 1988. "The Man Behind the Feminist Bible." *New York Times Book Review*, May 22, 1, 40, 41.
- Gothlin, Eva. In press. "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger."

- In *The Cambridge Companion to the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1807) 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keefe, Terry. 1994. "Another 'Silencing of Beauvoir'? Guess What's Missing This Time." *French Studies Bulletin* 50:18–20.
- Kruks, Sonia. 1990. *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1984. *Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu: Essai d'analyse d'une fonction en psychologie*. Paris: Navarin.
- Le Doeuff, Michèle. 1991. *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* Trans. Trista Selous. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lerner, Gerda. 1987. "Women and History." In *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Elaine Marks, 154–68. Boston: Hall.
- Lundberg, Ferdinand, and Marynia L. Foot Farnham. 1947. *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*. New York: Harper.
- Lundgren-Gothlin, Eva. 1996. *Sex and Existence*. Trans. Linda Schenk. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan.
- Moi, Toril. 1994. *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1999. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square.
- Simons, Margaret A. 1983. "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from *The Second Sex*." *Women's Studies International Forum* 6(5): 559–64.
- . 1999. *Beauvoir and "The Second Sex": Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Simons, Margaret A., ed. 1995. *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Vintges, Karen. 1996. *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir*. Trans. Anne Lavelle. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. 3d ed. New York: Macmillan.