

Translating the Second Sex

Constance BORDE and Sheila MALOVANY-CHEVALLIER

Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier have published a new English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s famed *The Second Sex* sixty years after its initial publication. They explain for *Books and Ideas* how they set out to restore Beauvoir’s existentialist, but also very personal approach to the history of the Western notion of “woman”.

In November of 1949, *Les Editions Gallimard* brought out Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* in France. It was translated into English four years later. In 2009 and 2010, sixty years later, a new English translation of *The Second Sex* was published by two publishing houses belonging to the Random House Group, Jonathan Cape in the UK and Alfred A. Knopf in the USA.

To steal Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase, much ink has flowed on the subject of the English version. Howard M. Parshley, a zoology professor from Smith College, produced the 1953 translation, but upon the insistence of his publishers, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, he abridged, edited and removed significant and lengthy passages, restructured Beauvoir’s syntax and style, and simplified much of the complex philosophical language. Margaret Simons, one of the great experts of Simone de Beauvoir from the University of Southern Illinois, brought the issue of the faulty translation to the attention of the public as early as 1983 in a path-breaking article, “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What’s Missing from *The Second Sex*”, and then in a book, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*.¹ Thus, a

¹ Margaret A. Simons, “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What’s Missing from The Second Sex”, *Women's Studies International Forum* Volume 6, Issue 5, 1983, pp. 559-564, and *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: feminism, race, and the origins of existentialism*, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999.

new translation of this seminal work had been ardently desired and awaited for many years, above all by academics who have been using and teaching the first translation and who have long been very dissatisfied with it.

However, this article is not about the mistakes in the first translation, a translation that we rarely consulted while translating *The Second Sex*. But we were very much aware of the major problems Parshley confronted in transposing Beauvoir's personal, often philosophical style and voice into English, especially with a publisher who, for example, wanted "esoteric words" like "alterity" taken out of the American edition.²

Modernizing Beauvoir?

Our goal in this article is to show that, in translation, choice is the operative word, at every step, for every word. One such choice was not to modernize the language Beauvoir used and had access to in 1949, and this decision entailed important consequences. It precluded, in particular, the use of the word "gender," as applied today. Beauvoir used "*sexe*" and so did we. We often used etymological dictionaries to assure that words we used were in use in 1949 and have the same meaning today as then.

Nor did we update her language by making it gender-sensitive. Take, for example, the sentence, in the "Childhood [*Enfance*]" chapter, describing the infant's beginning affirmation of identity: "whether the mirror as such plays a more or less considerable role, what is sure is that the child at about 6 months of age begins to understand his parents miming and to grasp himself under their gaze as an object."³ It is jarring today to hear the masculine pronoun only for the word "child" when today we would say his/her. Beauvoir respected French grammar: "*le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin*" (the masculine takes precedence over the feminine); so did we.

Here is another example: "*Dans les toutes premières années, elle se résigne sans trop de peine à ce sort. L'enfant se meut sur le plan du jeu et du rêve, il joue à être, il joue à faire...*"⁴ which in English became "In her early years she resigns herself to this lot without much difficulty. The child inhabits the area of play and dream, he plays at being, he plays at

² From a letter by Knopf to Parshley.

³ All quotations in English are from *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, London, 2010.

⁴ All quotations in French are from *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir, Gallimard, 2004 (here vol. II p. 29).

doing...” (p. 307). Today we would have said: “she plays at being,” since it’s clearly about the girl.

One particularly complex and compelling issue in this regard was how to translate *la femme*. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the term has at least two meanings: “the woman” and “woman,” and also at times, “wife” and “women,” depending on the context. “Woman” in English used alone without an article captures woman as an institution, a construct, a concept, femininity, determined and defined by society, culture, history. Thus, in a French sentence such as *le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d’hommes* (p. 174), we used “woman” without an article: “the problem of woman has always been a problem of men.” (p. 150). Another example to show the use of “man” and “woman” without the article: “*l’homme est un être humain sexué ; la femme n’est un individu complet, et l’égale du male, que si elle est aussi un être humain sexué.*” (p. 478 [*La femme indépendante*]). We translated: “Man is a sexed human being; woman is a complete individual, and equal to the male, only if she too is a sexed human being.” (p. 739 [The Independent Woman]).

Beauvoir also occasionally uses *femme* without an article to signify woman as determined by society as just described. In such cases, we do the same. The famous sentence: “*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient,*” was translated by Parshley as: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Our translation reads: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.” Here we understand Beauvoir as talking about woman as a construct, not born, but determined, insisting that there is nothing essential to the second sex, that femininity is learned through socialization and is not “natural.”

Another significant change we made was to translate *la jeune fille* as “girl”. *La jeune fille* is the title of an important chapter, and it is the French term for a female in the period between childhood and adulthood. While it is often translated as “the young girl” (by Parshley and other translators of French works), we chose “the girl” as the more precise term to designate a female in this period. Grammatically, “jeune fille” is a nominal group and a collocation. “Young girl” does not have the same structure in English.

Back to Philosophy

The first English-language translation did not always recognize the philosophical terminology in *The Second Sex*. Take the crucial word “authentic”, meaning “to be in good faith.” Parshley changed it into “real,” “genuine,” or “true.” The distinctive existentialist term “*pour-soi*”, usually translated as “for-itself”, became for Parshley “her true nature in itself”; his “being-in-itself” is truly a reversal of Beauvoir’s meaning. Scholars have unearthed and brought to light many other examples, such as the use of “alienation”, “alterity”, “subject”, “intentionality”, “ambiguity”, “bad faith”, “embodiment”, to mention a few. This vocabulary was essential to existentialism but was most of the time dumbed down in the first translation. Particularly striking is the earlier translation title of Volume II, where “*L’Expérience Vécue*” (“Lived Experience”) was translated as “Woman’s Life Today”, weakening the philosophical tenor of the French and making it sound a bit like a ladies’ magazine.

We opted to maintain, as much as possible, Beauvoir’s philosophical language and expression instead of a more quotidian register. “*Penser le monde*” became “to think the world” and not the more conventional “think of the world”. “[*Stendhal*] *s’éprouve lui-même comme une liberté translucide*” (p. 304) was translated as “[Stendhal] experiences himself as a translucent freedom”, although a human being is not “a freedom” in most registers of English language use. Compare with Parshley’s “Stendhal feels that he is himself a clear, free being.”

Tenses, especially the use of the present tense for the historical past, posed another, no less philosophical, problem. Many translators from French ponder the question as to how to translate this specific tense use, but again, we followed the author’s lead, switching from present to past when Beauvoir did, and it makes sense. Here’s a paragraph from the part called “History” showing this intentional inconsistency:

<i>Puisque l’oppression de la femme a sa cause dans la volonté de perpétuer la famille et de maintenir intact le patrimoine, dans la mesure où elle échappe à la famille, elle échappe donc aussi à cette absolue dépendance ; si la société niant la propriété privée refuse la famille, le sort de la</i>	Since the cause of women’s oppression <u>is</u> found in the resolve to perpetuate the family and keep the patrimony intact, if she <u>escapes</u> the family, she <u>escapes</u> this total dependence as well; if society <u>rejects</u> the family by denying private property, woman’s condition <u>improves</u>
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<p><i>femme s'en trouve considérablement amélioré. Sparte où prévalait un régime communautaire était la seule cité où la femme fût traitée presque à égalité avec l'homme. Les filles étaient élevées comme les garçons ; l'épouse n'était pas confinée dans le foyer de son mari : celui-ci n'était autorisé qu'à lui faire de furtives visites nocturne ; et son épouse lui appartenait si peu qu'au nom de l'eugénisme un autre homme pouvait réclamer de s'unir à elle : la notion même d'adultère disparaît lorsque disparaît l'héritage ; tous les enfants appartenant en commun à toute la cite, les femmes ne sont pas non plus jalousement asservies à un maître : ou inversement on peut dire que ne possédant ni bien propre, ni descendance singulière, le citoyen ne possède pas non plus de femme. Les femmes subissent les servitudes de la maternité comme les hommes celles de la guerre : mais sauf l'accomplissement de ce devoir civique, aucune contrainte ne restreint leur liberté.</i></p>	<p>considerably. Sparta, where community property <u>prevailed</u>, <u>was</u> the only city-state where the woman <u>was treated</u> almost as the equal of man. Girls <u>were</u> brought up like boys; the wife <u>was</u> not confined to her husband's household; he <u>was</u> only allowed furtive nocturnal visits; and his wife <u>belonged</u> to him so loosely that another man could claim a union with her in the name of eugenics: the very notion of adultery <u>disappears</u> when inheritance <u>disappears</u>; as all the children <u>belonged</u> to the city as a whole, women <u>were</u> not jealously enslaved to a master: or it can be explained inversely, that possessing neither personal wealth nor individual ancestry, the citizen <u>does not possess</u> a woman either. Women <u>underwent</u> the burdens of maternity as men <u>did</u> war: but except for this civic duty, no restraints <u>were</u> put on their freedom.</p>
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Respecting Ambiguity... and Style

Beauvoir used few footnotes in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, for which scholars have severely criticized her. We did not annotate arcane references, of which there are many, especially for today's reader, but we translated all Beauvoir's footnotes as she wrote them. And we added as few translators' notes as possible, and only when we felt an explanation was absolutely necessary, often for an error in Simone de Beauvoir's own text. There were times that a thought or punctuation or an expression remained obscure and even our French experts were stumped. So we maintained the ambiguity and respected her punctuation, syntax, and vocabulary. To take an example, from « Social Life » a chapter of volume II: "*Par la parure, la femme s'apparente à la nature tout en prêtant à celle-ci la nécessité de l'artifice; elle devient pour l'homme fleur et gemme: elle le devient pour soi-même. Avant de lui donner les ondulations de l'eau, la chaude douceur des fourrures, elle se les approprie.*" (p. 315). We kept the same ambiguity in the English: "By adorning herself, woman is akin to nature, while

attesting to nature's need for artifice; she becomes flower and jewel for man: she becomes this for herself. Before giving him watery undulations or the soft warmth of furs, she takes them for herself." (p. 586).

The extensive use of the *on* form in French often presents problems requiring syntactic changes to avoid awkwardness in translating into English. In some cases it is easy enough to put into English, such as with the famous "*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*", which translates easily into "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." But many others of these *on* phrases have to be put into the passive mode as using "one" sounds stilted in English: "*On en parle encore cependant*", "Yet it is still being talked about." And some get a different treatment: "*On ne sait plus bien s'il existe encore des femmes, s'il en existera toujours*" becomes "It is hard to know if women still exist, if they will always exist."

Other translation problems, while seemingly more superficial, prove no less important in rendering Beauvoir's thinking and style. Her extensive use of the semi-colon, a punctuation mark that has suffered setbacks over the past decades in English and French, as well as her use of the colon had to be dealt with. We were tempted to standardize the punctuation, adhering more to convention, but we maintained hers as much as possible:

<p><i>Dans ses souvenirs, Maurras raconte qu'il était jaloux d'un cadet que sa mère et sa grand-mère cajolaient : son père le saisit par la main et l'emmena hors de la chambre : "Nous sommes des hommes ; laissons ces femmes", lui dit-il. On persuade l'enfant que c'est à cause de la supériorité des garçons qu'il leur est demandé davantage ; pour l'encourager dans le chemin difficile qui est le sien, on lui insuffle l'orgueil de sa virilité ; cette notion abstraite revêt pour lui une figure concrète : elle s'incarne dans le pénis ; ce n'est pas spontanément qu'il éprouve de la fierté à l'égard de son petit sexe indolent ; mais il la ressent à travers l'attitude de son entourage. Mères et nourrices perpétuent la tradition qui assimile le phallus et l'idée de mâle ; qu'elles en reconnaissent le prestige dans la gratitude</i></p>	<p>In his memoirs, Maurras recounts that he was jealous of a younger son his mother and grandmother doted upon: his father took him by the hand and out of the room: 'We are men; let's leave these women,' he told him. The child is persuaded that more is demanded of boys because of their superiority; the pride of his virility is breathed into him in order to encourage him in this difficult path; this abstract notion takes on a concrete form for him: it is embodied in the penis; he does not experience pride spontaneously in his little indolent sex organ; but he feels it through the attitude of those around him. Mothers and wet nurses perpetuate the tradition that assimilates phallus and maleness; whether they recognise its prestige in amorous gratitude or in submission, or whether they gain revenge by seeing it in the baby in a</p>
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<p><i>amoureuse ou dans la soumission, ou que ce soit pour elles une revanche de le rencontrer chez le nourrisson sous une forme humiliée, elles traitent le pénis enfantin avec une complaisance singulière. Rabelais nous rapporte les jeux et les propos des nourrices de Gargantua ; l'histoire a retenu ceux des nourrices de Louis XIII (p. 18-19)</i></p>	<p>reduced form, they treat the child's penis with a singular deference. Rabelais reports on Gargantua's wet nurses' games and words; history has recorded those of Louis XIII's wet nurses. (p. 298)</p>
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How to treat the long paragraphs is another example of the decisions that had to be made: Parshley broke them up to render them more “readable”; should we follow him? Our decision was to respect Beauvoir’s paragraphing. Her long paragraphs, semi colons and colons are part of her logic and the development of her ideas.

Finally, Parshley also excised whole parts, particularly one chapter in the History section. To quote from Simons, “Politicians, military leaders, courtesans, saints, artists, poets, and an eighteenth-century writer, Mme de Ciray, ... are all missing from the English version of *The Second Sex*”, thus depriving us of some of the most narrative, even romantic parts of Beauvoir’s work. Take the following story:

The chatelaine Aubie, after having a tower built higher than any donjon, then had the architect's head cut off so her secret would be kept; she chased her husband from his domain: he stole back and killed her. Mabel, Roger de Montgomerie's wife, delighted in reducing her seignury's nobles to begging: their revenge was to decapitate her. Juliane, bastard daughter of Henry I of England, defended the château of Breteuil against him, luring him into an ambush for which he punished her severely (p. 111).

Readers of all stripes – men and women, students, professors, professional women – are still intrigued and still seek the answers to the problematic Beauvoir expressed in her memoirs: “It is strange and stimulating to suddenly discover, at the age of forty, an aspect of the world that was blindingly obvious but that I had never seen.... this world was a masculine world, my childhood was nourished with myths created by men.” “I would not have reacted at all in the same way if I had been a boy.” We have tried in our translation to give back to *The Second Sex* all the richness with which Beauvoir tried to illuminate this essential insight.

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