



VINTAGE

THE SECOND SEX

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Simone de Beauvoir

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Foreword

Translators' Note

VOLUME I: FACTS AND MYTHS

INTRODUCTION

Part One: DESTINY

Chapter 1: Biological Data

Chapter 2: The Psychoanalytical Point of View

Chapter 3: The Point of View of Historical Materialism

Part Two: HISTORY

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Part Three: MYTHS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

I. *Montherlant or the Bread of Disgust*

- II. *D. H. Lawrence or Phallic Pride*
- III. *Claudel or the Handmaiden of the Lord*
- IV. *Breton or Poetry*
- V. *Stendhal or Romancing the Real*
- VI.

Chapter 3

VOLUME II: LIVED EXPERIENCE

EPIGRAPH

INTRODUCTION

Part One: FORMATIVE YEARS

- Chapter 1: Childhood
- Chapter 2: The Girl
- Chapter 3: Sexual Initiation
- Chapter 4: The Lesbian

Part Two: SITUATION

- Chapter 5: The Married Woman
- Chapter 6: The Mother
- Chapter 7: Social Life
- Chapter 8: Prostitutes and Hetaeras
- Chapter 9: From Maturity to Old Age
- Chapter 10: Woman's Situation and Character

Part Three: JUSTIFICATIONS

- Chapter 11: The Narcissist
- Chapter 12: The Woman in Love
- Chapter 13: The Mystic

Part Four: TOWARDS LIBERATION

- Chapter 14: The Independent Woman

Conclusion

Notes

Selected Sources

Index

Copyright

About the Book

Why are so few women judges, university presidents or newspaper editors?

Why is equal pay for women still several generations away?

The Second Sex is required reading for anyone who believes in equality. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman'. In this book she defines the situation of women, explodes the myths of femininity and highlights the limits to women's freedom. She shatters our perceptions of the social relationship between men and women and argues that women's economic independence is the key to their freedom.

Drawing on sociology, anthropology and biology, *The Second Sex* is a passionate and important book as relevant today as when it was first published in 1949.

About the Author

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908. In 1929 she became the youngest person ever to obtain the agrégation in philosophy at the Sorbonne. She taught at the lycées at Marseille and Rouen from 1931 to 1937, and later in Paris from 1938 to 1943. After the war, she emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement, working with Jean-Paul Sartre on *Les Temps Modernes*. *The Second Sex* was first published in Paris in 1949. It was a groundbreaking, risqué book that became a runaway success. Selling 20,000 copies in its first week, the book earned its author both notoriety and admiration. Since then, *The Second Sex* has been translated into forty languages and has become a landmark in the history of feminism. Beauvoir was the author of many books, including the novel *The Mandarins* (1957) which was awarded the Prix Goncourt. She died in 1986.

Translators Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are both graduates of Rutgers University, New Jersey and have lived, studied and worked in Paris for over forty years. They were faculty members of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques and jointly authored and translated numerous works on subjects ranging from grammar and politics to art and social sciences.

Also by Simone de Beauvoir

Fiction

The Blood of Others
She Came to Stay
All Men Are Mortal
The Mandarins
Les Belles Images
The Woman Destroyed
Old Age

Non-Fiction

The Ethics of Ambiguity
Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter
The Prime of Life
The Force of Circumstance
All Said and Done
A Very Easy Death
Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre

To Jacques Bost

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

The Second Sex

TRANSLATED BY
Constance Borde and
Sheila Malovany-Chevallier

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Sheila Rowbotham

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

There is a good principle which created
order, light, and man,
and an evil principle which created
chaos, darkness, and woman.

Pythagoras

Everything that men have written about
women should be viewed with suspicion
because they are both judge and party.

Poulain de la Barre

Foreword

Reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in this new translation by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier is both a return and a revelation. Like many others of my generation, I began reading Beauvoir, along with the works of Sartre, when I was at school in the late 1950s. They travelled with me through the 1960s and, as a consequence, I had assimilated so much from the two of them by the time I wrote *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, in the early 1970s, that I took them for granted. They permeated how my thinking was structured. Yet I was not aware how much of the French version had been abridged and altered in the 1954 translation by H. M. Parshley. In an effort to make Beauvoir's work more accessible he muffled existentialist terms and cut out historical material.¹ Beauvoir herself did not realise the extent of the adaptations and omissions, declaring to Margaret A. Simons in 1983, 'I wish with all my heart that you will be able to publish a new translation.'² She would have been delighted by this scrupulous and insightful new work.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir is at once a thinker, a scholar and a creative writer. Her writing communicates on several levels simultaneously, reasoning and seducing at the same time. Like that other great advocate of women's emancipation, Mary Wollstonecraft, she expresses concepts with beguiling irony. On the young woman who believes she

is the exception and can circumnavigate male power, Beauvoir muses, ‘... she has been taught to overestimate her smile, but no one told her that all women smiled’ ([see here](#)). Abstractions become deft little cameos; when the girl making jam writes the date on the lid, ‘... she has captured the passage of time in the snare of sugar ...’ ([see here](#)).

Her challenge to male cultural hegemony drives the book, sweeping up prejudice in its transcendent energy. Beauvoir writes with passion against the physical, psychological and intellectual confinement of women, which she believes encourages them to accept mediocrity instead of grandeur. Each acquiescence confirms servitude, ‘... her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly’ ([see here](#)). Beauvoir, having penetrated the domain of male privilege, uses her skills to expose how the cards were stacked so unfairly against women. ‘Being on the fringes of the world is not the best place for someone who intends to recreate it: here again, to go beyond the given, one must be deeply rooted in it’ ([see here](#)).

However, in *The Second Sex* the woman is not simply determined by a male defined culture. She is at once invented by men and ‘exists without their invention’ ([see here](#)). Hence comes the male exasperation, as dream and reality fail to converge. For my generation the excitement of Beauvoir’s thesis lay both in its exposure of the con trick of blaming women for not being in accord with men’s fantasies *and* in the possibility she held out of women making themselves anew. Choice is always present, albeit from a specific situation in the famous assertion, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman’ ([see here](#)).

The boldness of Beauvoir’s subversion remains exhilarating. It was not that she was the first to notice male hegemony or seek out ways to resist it. Both are refrains in women’s writing about emancipation from the seventeenth century and indeed in a few cases even earlier. They would

be reiterated and linked to a broader change in society by Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century and disseminated far beyond Europe before *The Second Sex* was ever written. But Beauvoir's sustained critique takes 'femininity' by the throat to shake out illusion, examining women's circumstances along with the cultural sleights of hand which deceive and confuse. Nothing like it had been written before.

The scope of *The Second Sex* is dazzling indeed. Beauvoir launches herself into physiology, psychoanalysis, anthropology; ancient, medieval and modern history. She whizzes her reader through myths that define 'woman' in many cultures, demonstrating how the abstract ideal is superimposed on the actual experience of women. She then brings her argument closer to home by tracing how myths of 'the feminine' pervade nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature from Edgar Allan Poe to Henry Miller. These myths have material consequences. In one of her arch, carefully controlled asides, she remarks how, '... one of the most ardent zealots of unique, absolute, eternal love, André Breton, is forced to admit that at least in present circumstances this love can mistake its object: error or inconstancy, it is the same abandonment for the woman' ([see here](#)).

Exploring 'Lived Experience' in the second part, she breezes through child development, the cultural history of fashion and clothes, sociological surveys of prostitution, girls' attitudes to boys and to education, motherhood, ageing, and, of course, sexuality. Aware of the findings of the Kinsey Report and approving of the American young who were not restricted by European Catholic mores, her frankness scandalised many contemporaries. Resistant to biological reductionism, she argues that orgasm, '... can be qualified as psycho-physiological because it not only concerns the entire nervous system but also depends on the whole situation lived by the subject' ([see here](#)). Yet

heterosexual pleasure is, for Beauvoir, a precarious matter, bound up with pain and the threat of possession. Writing on the honeymoon, she quotes Nietzsche's *Gay Science*: 'To find love and shame in contradiction and to be forced to experience at the same time delight, surrender, duty, pity, terror and who knows what else, in the face of the unexpected proximity of God and beast! ... Thus a psychic knot has been tied that may have no equal' ([see here](#)).

In contrast, and surprisingly in a text written in the late 1940s, Beauvoir remarks: 'Between women love is contemplation; caresses are meant less to appropriate the other than to recreate oneself slowly through her; separation is eliminated, there is neither fight nor victory nor defeat; each one is both subject and object ...' ([see here](#)). As Toril Moi observes the chapter on lesbianism is confused, perhaps revealing the difficulty in writing it.³ Nevertheless Beauvoir presents love between women as an option, a possibility, though not an absolute alternative to heterosexuality. She says that lesbianism '... is an attitude that is *chosen in situation* ... It is one way among others for women to solve the problems posed by her condition in general and by her erotic situation in particular' ([see here](#)).

The Second Sex shattered other taboos in its negative portrayal of marriage, its courageous defence of contraception and abortion, its references to women taking young lovers. These all provoked comment and criticism, but most disturbing to the defenders of the status quo was the *mix* of sex and philosophy. A woman theorising in sensuous language broke all the rules of containment. Beauvoir contrived to embed her theme of the woman defined by others and yet struggling for her existential freedom in the structure of the book and in her mode of communication. She merged female and male zones, and this combination disturbed as much as what she actually said.

Her own background stood her in good stead in expressing the consequences of living the double life of a woman in a man's world. She was born in 1908 into an haute bourgeois family in straitened circumstances, and her childhood was strictly controlled by her mother. She was sent to a Catholic girls' school where mothers were encouraged to attend classes, her letters were opened and censored until she was eighteen. Individual thought and autonomous privacy were thus to become precious. In contrast to her mother's dutiful propriety, her irreligious father spent his time on amateur theatricals and enjoyed a social life outside the family. The second son of a landowner, with right-wing views, he was inclined to regret that his talented daughter was not a boy. During summer holidays on her father's family estates, novels and a close friend, Elisabeth Le Coin, were her only immediate forms of escape.⁴

In the long term, the only way out of this enclosed world would be education. Despite their sharply contrasting outlooks, both parents encouraged her interest in literature, and the brilliant pupil made her way laboriously through an exacting series of examinations to the Sorbonne. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, she had not received an elite education; the French system, despite recent modifications, was still based on distinct corridors of gender.⁵ Nevertheless, though Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex* how women's education discourages 'the habit of independence', ([see here](#)) she herself displayed a remarkable will towards freedom. Uncharacteristically for a young woman, she inclined to philosophy at the Sorbonne. She regarded it in heroic terms as a discipline that, '... went straight to essentials. I had never liked fiddling detail'. Other subjects appeared as 'poor relations'; only philosophy went 'right to the heart of truth'.⁶

At university she became friendly with a talented coterie of young men who had studied at the École Normale

Supérieure, including Merleau-Ponty. In 1929 Beauvoir began an affair with the attractive married student Rene Maheu, a friend of Sartre's. When Maheu failed his exams and left Paris, a smitten Sartre began his courtship in earnest, mustering philosophy in his effort to woo her.

Sartre could not compete with the handsome Maheu in terms of looks. His trump cards were philosophy, his strength of character, which freed Beauvoir from her parents, and his encouragement of her dream of becoming a great writer. Beauvoir always insisted that the relationship that began in their early twenties was reciprocal, but she quickly instituted a division of labour, deciding Sartre possessed the original brain of a great philosopher and her destiny would be literary. Aware of her own abilities, she was less confident and assured than the charismatic and ugly young man who became her lover. Even at this stage, Sartre took his brilliance for granted while Beauvoir's was earnestly acquired. However, given the difference in their education, Beauvoir's accomplishments were actually the greater. Ironically she would find creative writing much harder than academic work, while Sartre, with her encouragement, would write novels and plays.⁷ The agrégation jury of the Sorbonne were divided but eventually awarded Sartre first place and Beauvoir second.⁸

The new partnership did bring with it a certain power. Judith Okely suggests that Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre enabled her to enter Parisian intellectual circles. The alternative way in for a woman would have been the salon, and this she despised, even if she had possessed sufficient wealth.⁹ Moreover the 'essential' bond with Sartre, despite all the strains of jealousy, for it was never exclusive, turned them into a formidable bloc of two. The 'contingent' lovers were thus loners and, because they were often younger, and sometimes students, were in a less powerful position.

Over the next ten years the young Sartre mapped out his philosophical belief in the existence of a material world independent of consciousness, while she struggled to write her first novel. Both continued to have affairs, in Beauvoir's case with women as well as men; their practice of confiding in one another served as a defence against the external world. Love, work and talk consumed their energy. Existentialism did not lend itself to an appreciation of the social and political traumas of depression, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Though it did provide a philosophical basis for rejecting the conventional framework of morality, it did not indicate any alternative. In her memoir, *The Prime of Life* (1960), Beauvoir explains how, while she had gradually abandoned her sense of absolute autonomy, 'it was still my individual relationships with separate people that mattered most to me'. Her aim in life was 'happiness'. She adds: 'Then, suddenly, History burst over me and I dissolved into fragments. I woke to find myself scattered over the four quarters of the globe, linked by every nerve in me to each and every individual. All my ideas and values were turned upside down.'¹⁰

War changed everything, yet there are few references to it in *The Second Sex*. By the late 1940s the fear, the hunger, the uneasy compromises with the occupying Germans, the unsuccessful attempts at resistance had been set aside.¹¹ Much later, in *The Prime of Life*, she would record how she scrounged for cabbages and beetroots, took to wearing a turban because she could not have her hair done, gave up smoking - unlike Sartre who pursued dog-ends in the gutters.¹² She also remarked how hard it was '... to speak of those days to anyone who had not lived through them', explaining how she made her fictional character Anne in *The Mandarins* reflect in her stead, 'The real tragedies hadn't happened to me, and yet they haunted my life'.¹³ The war taught Beauvoir that abstractions were

not sufficient: ‘... it *did* make a very great difference whether one was Jew or Aryan; but it had not yet dawned on me that such a thing as a specifically feminine “condition” existed’.¹⁴

When Paris was liberated in 1944 life continued to be hard. Food was scarce, her room was too cold for writing. However, ‘the future had been handed back to us’.¹⁵ Briefly the left intelligentsia imagined a wider social change; on founding the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre proclaimed a commitment to ‘la littérature engagée’.¹⁶ The wily General de Gaulle left them with the literature and took political power, but the stark minimalism of existentialism resonated with the thoughtful young whose childhood and adolescence had been dominated by war. Ironically Sartre and Beauvoir became alternative celebrities and Beauvoir was forced to write in the basement of a bar to evade interruptions.¹⁷

From 1946 she was working on *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The war had made her more alert to the constraints of circumstances. Prepared to engage with Marx’s thought, while distrusting the teleological momentum of dialectical materialism, Beauvoir rejected the denial of the individual’s autonomy demanded by the Communist Party despite the respect it had gained for its role in the Resistance.¹⁸ Both she and Sartre struggled to create an alternative to the polarities of Soviet Communism and American capitalism through the medium of *Les Temps Modernes*. The journal brought Beauvoir into contact with the American left-wing writer Richard Wright, who was moving away from the Communist Party. Wright brought black American writing to her for the journal in 1946, introducing her to W. E. B. Dubois’ idea of the ‘double consciousness’, which enabled African-Americans to survive racism while internalising elements of the inferiority projected on to them by white dominance.¹⁹ In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir explored

the concept of the complicity of the oppressed which would be important in *The Second Sex*.²⁰

While colonialism, racism and anti-Semitism were very much part of left discourse in France after the war, discussion of the emancipation of women was less visible. Feminism had not been a strong force even before the war. The Vichy regime had celebrated the eternal feminine by excluding women from many jobs and giving out long prison sentences to anyone who distributed contraceptives. In 1943, Marie-Jeanne Latour had been guillotined for performing abortions.²¹ While there was a Marxist legacy in the work of Engels and Bebel on the 'Woman Question', with which Beauvoir was familiar, the contemporary French Communist Party stressed motherhood and the family. However, there did exist an awareness of the role women had played in the Resistance. This had both political and cultural implications. French women would finally be given the vote in 1944, and, in 1948, the historian Edith Thomas would dedicate her study of the early socialist women, *Les Femmes de 1848* to the women of the Resistance.

Beauvoir's trajectory was, however, from her own subjectivity. Once *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was finished, she began to contemplate writing about herself. After a discussion with Sartre, she decided this involved thinking through what it meant to be a woman - one of those fiddling details she had contrived to ignore. This project of exploring her own subjectivity fused into the broader project of *The Second Sex*. She was adamant, however, that it was not a *feminist* work ([see here](#)). Typically women of her generation on the left wanted to surpass feminism, which was regarded as narrow and restricted. Indeed it was right-wing writers such as the Americans, Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg who held forth about 'Woman'. Beauvoir was sufficiently irritated to mention their diatribe against emancipation, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947) several times in *The Second Sex* (see [here](#),

[here](#)). This contretemps with the American right contrasted with a bemused appreciation of the more radical aspects of American mores, deepened by her passionate love affair with the writer, Nelson Algren, while writing *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir was intent on producing an existentialist analysis that recognised and demolished social and cultural constraints. As Judith Okely notes in demonstrating the myriad ways in which women became the Other in relation to men, Beauvoir's existentialism inclined her to see knowledge as 'arising from each individual's specific circumstance'.²² This led her to take into account not only surveys of women's attitudes, but sources that disclosed subjectivity such as the autobiography of Isadora Duncan and the diaries of Sophia Tolstoy. She used novels by women ranging from Virginia Woolf to Colette Audry. Two of her childhood favourites also appear, Jo in *Little Women* and Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss*. As a girl Beauvoir had grieved over Jo's compromise and Maggie's death.

Beauvoir's charting of women's subjectivity is, however, problematic. Not only does she treat fiction as evidence of actuality, as Okely notes, she universalises from individual instances chosen to support her thesis. Okely suggests an ethnographic reading - Beauvoir is the buried case study.²³ While this is never explicit in the text, she is mirrored in the examples taken from life and literature. Despite the range of her reading, her source material focuses on women in her own image, including hardly any references to working-class women or to women of colour. Beauvoir is certainly alert to non-European cultures, but she plucks examples without situating them.

The modern historical material is scrappy and at times inaccurate. She has the militant suffragettes in the British Women's Social and Political Union joining with the Labour Party, when the reverse was the case ([see here](#)). She dismisses Jeanne Deroin and the women around the 1848

journal *La Voix des Femmes* with an hauteur that denies the significance of their ideas and their understanding of solidarity ([see here](#)). It is as if association and collective action by women in movements had never occurred. This is not simply because these were topics outside her experience or not her field of study, but because they do not fit into her theoretical approach. Patriarchy is boss; women are losers.

Beauvoir's ingenious strategy of entering male culture in order to undermine it is comparable to the difficulty John Milton encountered with his heroic Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Her dramatic construct inadvertently invests masculine culture with a depth and allure lacking in the female Other – who are assigned the less attractive parts as those ever inferior, bungling, moany women. Beauvoir's loathing of fixed ideals of femininity made it difficult for her to ascribe value to the lives and actualities of women, even though her intention was to show how women were not only 'diminished' but 'enriched' by the 'obstacles' they had to confront.²⁴ This partiality affected both her theoretical approach and the subject matter of *The Second Sex*. Her impatience with Romanticism's association of woman with nature blocked any questioning of the assumed virtue, in all circumstances, of control over nature, a critique present in the utopian socialist literature she mentions.

Beauvoir's abstraction 'patriarchy' occludes how differences in the degree of women's subordination are all important; it was after all preferable to be an Anglo-Saxon woman than a Norman. Space to manoeuvre, leeway to live your life, ideas of entitlement emerge from such distinctions. An historical approach would have yielded greater ambiguities in women's predicament and differing forms of male dominion instead of the intractable structure of 'patriarchy'. Some aspects of women's lived experience such as domestic labour are hardly mentioned though they had been extensively debated by feminists, women

reformers and socialists, and Beauvoir makes only passing references to how children are to be cared for. Mothering did not adapt itself easily to her theoretical approach.

Within *The Second Sex* there are, however, interesting tensions between Beauvoir's abstract conceptualisation and what she observes. During the war she had met a number of women over forty who had confided in her. At the time she did not see their accounts of their 'dependence' as significant. Her interest, nevertheless, had been 'aroused'.²⁵ Perhaps she remembered their stories in noting a resolve among women to be mothers while also engaging in economic, political and social life. She ponders the problems this would entail (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)). She had located a contradiction in women's predicament which would become of crucial significance in the coming decades. Moreover, at times she provides a theoretical opening that negates the accumulative pessimism of the specific instances of women as the marginal Other. 'In truth, all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go beyond itself, it must maintain itself, to thrust itself towards the future, it must integrate the past into itself, and while relating to others it must confirm itself in itself' ([see here](#)). This observation, made in passing in relation to marriage, intimates a new balancing of human activity that could encompass not simply gender, but the social organisation of life and culture. While Beauvoir's work contained evident flaws, her mode of enquiry also suggests opposing perceptions of what might be.

Regardless of what Beauvoir did not do in *The Second Sex*, her originality and intellectual courage meant that one woman had mapped out terrains of thought and enquiry that would engage many thousands in the decades to come. The first volume of the book sold twenty-two thousand copies in the first week and the two volumes went on to sell in many countries.²⁶ The response to *The Second Sex* would

transform its author's life. Paradoxically, Beauvoir, the solitary walker seeking existential freedom, would be constructed by others as a mythical antithesis to women's lot. To some this meant she was frigid and a nymphomaniac, to others a feminist heroine. Beauvoir's autobiographical writings navigated a way through the misunderstandings that assailed her. She sought to create herself in these books; and so, indirectly, *The Second Sex* did lead to her writing about herself after all.

If she was often uncomfortable with being the epitome of the emancipated woman, good also came from her new position. After so many years as Sartre's disciple, Beauvoir's writing inspired many. Among those who visited was a shy young woman called Sylvie Le Bon. She first arrived in 1960 and gradually a deep affection grew between the two women which lasted until Beauvoir's death. About this relationship and her attraction to other women, Beauvoir, who told so much about her life, remained warily silent.²⁷

When the Women's Liberation Movement appeared in France in the early 1970s, Beauvoir was there defending abortion and thinking through the ideas that were being developed in many countries.²⁸ She told Alice Schwarzer that 'Women should not let themselves be conditioned exclusively to male desire any more'.²⁹ She became a feminist because she decided it was necessary to 'fight for the situation of women here and now', though she still believed that wider socialist changes were also needed.³⁰ During the 1970s she became more prepared to acknowledge that women's lack of power had resulted in positive qualities such as 'patience, sympathy, irony', which men would do well to acquire.³¹ But she remained suspicious of strands in feminism which exalted women's essential difference from men. 'I find that it falls again into the masculine trap of wanting to enclose us in our

differences,' she told Margaret A. Simons and Jessica Benjamin in 1979.³²

The dilemmas raised by Beauvoir would be encountered again and again in the Women's Liberation Movements that spread around the globe. To what extent are we defined by biological difference? How is women's singularity to be at once affirmed and transcended? What makes women resist and what makes women comply with subordination? *The Second Sex* demonstrated the necessity of cultural resistance that went beyond complaint and even beyond critique. Beauvoir's left libertarian message was that new ways of being women and men would be created not simply theoretically but through human action, '... freedom can break the circle' and revolt 'create new situations' ([see here](#)).

In 1949 Beauvoir could see that women would be able to shed their old skins and cut their own clothes, only 'if there is a collective change' ([see here](#)). But what is to be done when this achieves partial successes, only to be confounded by force of circumstance? How was she to envisage that some aspects of equality would be achieved and new forms of inequality intensify? This is the conundrum facing women today. In rediscovering *The Second Sex* a new generation will find new insights and draw their own conclusions. Beauvoir's work retains its relevance, despite the changes that have occurred in women's position since the first publication in 1949. Moreover, she illuminates an ongoing process of exploration, resistance and creation, which is as exciting now as it ever was. Her voice echoes over the decades: 'The free woman is just being born' ([see here](#)). Her prescient vision of '... new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive' ([see here](#)) carries hope for women - and for men.

Professor Sheila Rowbotham, August 2009

Translators' Note

We have spent the past three years researching *Le Deuxième sexe* and translating it into English - into *The Second Sex*. It has been a daunting task, and a splendid learning experience during which this monumental work entered our personal lives and changed the way we see the world. Questions naturally arose about the act of translating itself, about ourselves and our roles and about our responsibilities to both Simone de Beauvoir and her readers.

Translation has always been fraught with such questions, and different times have produced different conceptions of translating. Perhaps this is why, while great works of art seldom age, translations do. The job of the translator is not to simplify or readapt the text for a modern or foreign audience but to find the true voice of the original work, as it was written for its time and with its original intent. Seeking signification in another's words transports the translator into the mind of the writer. When the text is an opus like *The Second Sex*, whose impact on society was so decisive, the task of bringing into English the closest version possible of Simone de Beauvoir's voice, expression and mind is greater still.

This is not the first translation of *Le Deuxième sexe* into English, but it is the first complete one. H. M. Parshley translated it in 1953, but he abridged and edited passages and simplified some of the complex philosophical language.

We have translated *Le Deuxième sexe* as it was written, unabridged and unsimplified, maintaining Beauvoir's philosophical language. The long and dense paragraphs that were changed in the 1953 translation to conform to more traditional styles of punctuation – or even eliminated – have now been translated as she wrote them, all within the confines of English. Long paragraphs (sometimes going on for pages) are a stylistic aspect of her writing that is essential, integral to the development of her arguments. Cutting her sentences, cutting her paragraphs, and using a more traditional and conventional punctuation do not render Simone de Beauvoir's voice. Beauvoir's style expresses her reasoning. Her prose has its own consistent grammar, and that grammar follows a logic.

We did not modernise the language Beauvoir used and had access to in 1949. This decision precluded the use of the word 'gender', for example, as applied today. We also stayed close to Beauvoir's complicated syntax and punctuation as well as to certain usages of language that to us felt a bit awkward at first. One of the difficulties was her extensive use of the semi-colon, a punctuation mark that has suffered setbacks over the past decades in English and French, and has somewhat fallen into disuse.

Nor did we modernise structures such as 'if the subject attempts to assert himself, the other is nonetheless necessary for him.' Today we would say 'if the subject attempts to assert her or himself ...' There are examples where the word 'individual' clearly refers to a woman, but Beauvoir, because of French rules of grammar, uses the masculine pronoun. We therefore do the same in English.

The reader will see some inconsistent punctuation and style, most evident in quotations and extracts. Indeed, while we were tempted to standardise it, we carried Beauvoir's style and formatting into English as much as possible. In addition, we used the same chapter headings and numbers that she did in the original two-volume

gallimard edition. We also made the decision to keep close to Beauvoir's tense usage, most noticeably regarding the French use of the present tense for the historical past.

One particularly complex and compelling issue was how to translate '*la femme*'. In *Le deuxième sexe*, the term has at least two translations: 'the woman' or 'woman' and at times, 'women', depending on the context. 'Woman' in English used alone without an article captures woman as an institution, a concept, femininity as 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*, we have used 'woman' without an article: 'The problem of woman has always been a problem of men.'

Beauvoir occasionally - but rarely - uses *femme* without an article to signify woman as determined by society as just described. In such cases, of course, we do the same. The famous sentence, *On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*, reads, in our translation: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.' The original translation by H. M. Parshley read, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.'

Another notable change we made was in the translation of *la jeune fille*. This is the title of an important chapter in [Volume II](#) dealing with the period in a female's life between childhood and adulthood. While it is often translated as 'the younger girl' (by Parshley and other translators of French works), we think it clearly means 'girl.'

We have included all of Beauvoir's footnotes, and we have added notes of our own when we felt an explanation was necessary. Among other things, they indicate errors in Beauvoir's text and discrepancies such as erroneous dates. We corrected misspellings of names without noting them. Beauvoir sometimes puts into quotes passages that she is partially or completely paraphrasing. We generally left them that way. The reader will notice that titles of the

French books she cites are given in French, followed by their translation in English. The translation is in italics if it is in a published English-language edition; it is in roman if it is our translation. We supply the sources of the English translations of the authors Beauvoir cites at the end of the book.

We did not, however, facilitate the reading by explaining arcane references or difficult philosophical language. As an example of the former, in Part Three of [Volume II](#), 'Justifications,' there is a reference to Cécile Sorel breaking the glass of a picture frame holding a caricature of her by an artist named Bib. The reference might have been as obscure in 1949 as it is today.

Our notes do not make for an annotated version of the translation, yet we understand the value such a guide would have for both the teacher and the individual reading it on their own. We hope one can be written now that this more precise translation exists.

These are but a few of the issues we dealt with. We had instructive discussions with generous experts about these points and listened to many (sometimes contradictory) opinions; but in the end, the final decisions as to how to treat the translation were ours.

It is generally agreed that one of the most serious absences in the first translation was Simone de Beauvoir the philosopher. Much work has been done on reclaiming, valorising, and expanding upon her role as philosopher since the 1953 publication, thanks to the scholarship of Margaret Simons, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, Michèle Le Dœuff, Elizabeth Fallaize, Emily Grosholz, Sonia Kruks and Ingrid Galster, to mention only a few. We were keenly aware of the need to put the philosopher back into her text. To transpose her philosophical style and voice into English was the most crucial task we faced.

The first English-language translation did not always recognise the philosophical terminology in *The Second Sex*.

Take the crucial word 'authentic' meaning 'to be in good faith'. As Toril Moi points out, Parshley changed it into 'real, genuine, and true'. The distinctive existentialist term *pour-soi*, usually translated as 'for-itself' (*pour-soi* referring to human consciousness), became 'her true nature in itself'. Thus, Parshley's 'being-in-itself' (*en-soi*, lacking human consciousness) is a reversal of Simone de Beauvoir's meaning. Margaret Simons and Toril Moi have unearthed and brought to light many other examples, such as the use of 'alienation', 'alterity', 'subject', the verb 'to posit', by now well documented. One particularly amusing rendition was of the title of [Volume II](#), where '*L'Expérience Vécue*' ('Lived Experience') was translated as 'Woman's Life Today', making it sound like a ladies' magazine.

The Second Sex is a philosophical treatise and one of the most important books of the 20th century upon which much of the modern feminist movement was built. Beauvoir the philosopher is present right from the start of the book, building on the ideas of Hegel, Marx, Kant, Heidegger, Husserl and others. She developed, shared and appropriated these concepts alongside her equally brilliant contemporaries, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss, who were redefining philosophy to fit the times. Before it was published, Beauvoir read Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* and learned from and used those ideas in *The Second Sex*. Although the ideas and concepts are challenging, the book was immediately accepted by a general readership. Our goal in this translation has been to conform to the same ideal in English: to say what Simone de Beauvoir said as close to the way she said it, in a both challenging and readable text.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the indomitable Anne-Solange Noble of Gallimard Editions, who for years believed in this re-translation project. Anne-Solange begged, badgered and persuaded ('I shall never surrender!') until she found the editor who was willing to

take on the monumental task. That exceptional person is Ellah Allfrey of Jonathan Cape, a patient and superb editor who astutely worked with us step by step for three years, strongly supported by Katherine Murphy at Jonathan Cape and LuAnn Walther of Knopf. Anne-Solange introduced us to Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Simone de Beauvoir's adopted daughter, and our relationship has been a very special one ever since that first lunch on the rue du Bac where we four toasted the moment with, '*Vive le point-virgule*' ('Long live the semi-colon')!

Ann (Rusty) Shteir, our Douglass College friend, classmate and feminist scholar, now Professor of Humanities and Women's Studies at York University, Toronto, Canada, was always available to provide source material and to solve problematic issues, often many times a week. She, like we, felt that no task was too great to repay the debt women - and the world - owe to Simone de Beauvoir. Michael Mosher and Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz were extremely helpful with philosophical language and concepts. Gabrielle Spiegel and her generous colleagues took on the esoteric research required for the History chapter, notably the passages on the French Middle Ages of which Gaby is a leading expert. James Lawler, the distinguished professor, merits our heartfelt gratitude for re-translating, specially for this edition, the Paul Claudel extracts with such elegance and grace. Our thanks to Beverley Bie Brahic for her translations of Francis Ponge, Michel Leiris and Cécile Sauvage; Kenneth Haltman for Gaston Bachelard; Raymond MacKenzie for François Mauriac and others; Zach Rogow and Mary Ann Caws for André Breton; Gillian Spraggs for Renée Vivien. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky allowed us the special privilege of using parts of their magnificent translation of *War and Peace* before the edition appeared in 2008; their views on translation were an inspiration to us. Donald Fanger helped us with Sophia Tolstoy's diaries.