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Translating *The Second Sex*: Lived Experience

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Editor's Note

Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier's English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* has for the first time given English-speaking readers access to the full book, unabridged and unsanitized. The British edition, published by Jonathan Cape, came out in 2009, followed by the US edition by Knopf in 2010. Both editions are now available in paperback (distributed in Australia by Random House). In twenty days in November 2011, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier toured five Australian cities, speaking at eight universities, the Alliance française, and the Lyceum Club, with the final event of the tour being their plenary address at the 2011 conference of the Australian Society for French Studies. They also gave several media interviews including ABC Radio National's *The Book Show*

(podcast available on the AALITRA website at

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/translating-the-second-sex/3674356>).

The tour was organized by Associate Professor Bronwyn Winter (French Studies, University of Sydney), who wrote in her report in the *Carnet austral* (the newsletter of the Australian Society for French Studies): "At each event they not only wowed the crowds, but more importantly, renewed interest in Australia in this foundational work for so-called 'second wave' feminism as well as reminding us of Beauvoir's great talent and versatility as a writer and her extraordinary intellectual reach. For their varied audiences, Connie's and Sheila's talks brought new discoveries: of the mistranslations in the first English translation (such as lack of distinction between flesh-and-blood 'women' and the ideological construct of 'Woman') and the challenges in producing the new one, of the enormous intellectual research that went into both writing and translating the work, of its immediate and enduring impact among a range of women of all socioeconomic and national backgrounds, and, of course, of the linguistic and political importance of the semi-colon! Perhaps the most intriguing discovery for many was that *The Second Sex* not only provided inspiration—and, for the first time, a comprehensive theoretical basis—to generations of twentieth and twenty-first century feminists, it also, paradoxically perhaps, brought Beauvoir herself to feminism. The tour certainly proved, as Sheila and Connie put it themselves, that 'this book is as germane and relevant today as it was in 1949, when it came out in France and was a bestseller. Indeed, this is the book that changed the way women thought and talked about themselves because Beauvoir's philosophy showed the way.'"

In Melbourne Sheila and Connie spoke at RMIT and at the Alliance française – an event co-organized by the Alliance, Monash University, and AALITRA. After this event, Sheila and Connie kindly agreed, at my invitation, to send to *THE AALITRA REVIEW* a slightly modified version of the Translator's Note used in the introduction to their book.

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We spent three years – from 2006 to 2009 – researching *Le Deuxième Sexe* and translating it into English—into *The Second Sex*. It was 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.

Ours 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 modernize 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 modernize 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. Indeed, while we were tempted to standardize 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 meanings: “the woman” and “woman”. At times it can also mean “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 sometimes 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 young 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.

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, valorizing, and expanding upon her role as philosopher since the 1953 publication, thanks to the scholarship of Margaret Simons, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, Michèle Le Doeuff, 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 recognize the philosophical terminology in *The Second Sex*. Take the crucial word “authentic”, meaning “to be in good faith”. As experts have pointed 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. Many other examples have been unearthed and brought to light, such as the use of “alienation”, “alterity”, “subject”, and the verb “to posit”, which are by now well documented. One particularly striking example is the title of Volume II; “*L’expérience vécue*” (“Lived Experience”) was translated as “Woman’s Life Today”, weakening the philosophical tenor of the French.

The Second Sex is a philosophical treatise and one of the most important books of the twentieth 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.

Throughout our work, we were given the most generous help from the many experts we consulted. In every area Simone de Beauvoir delved into, whether in psychoanalysis, biology, anthropology, or philosophy, they helped us to produce the most authentic English version of her work. But the final translation decisions were our own.

Our goal in this translation has been to conform to the same ideal in English: to say what Simone de Beauvoir said as closely as possible to the way she said it, in a text both readable and challenging.