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ESSAY; Lost in Translation

By SARAH GLAZER

"ONE is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in "The Second Sex" in 1949, shocking readers with her contention that the wife-and-mother destiny was a myth devised by men to deny women freedom. Rejecting such notions as the maternal instinct, her book attracted both controversy (it was banned by the Vatican) and sales (it sold more than 20,000 copies in France in its first week).

Today "The Second Sex" is widely acknowledged as the founding text of modern feminism. The English translation, a best seller when it was first published in this country by Alfred A. Knopf in 1953, has sold well over a million copies. A staple of women's studies courses, the Knopf translation -- available in Vintage and Everyman editions -- is still the only version in print in the United States today.

Yet American readers may not have been reading the real "Second Sex." In "The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir," a new collection of essays edited by Emily R. Grosholz, several Beauvoir scholars contend that the English-language translation is so badly botched that it distorts Beauvoir's intent and presents her as an incoherent thinker. One scholar, Nancy Bauer of Tufts University, says that she has counted "literally hundreds" of mistakes in translation ranging from elementary bloopers to misunderstandings of scholarly jargon. "Philosophical terms with a precise meaning in French are turned into the opposite of what Beauvoir says," according to another contributor, Toril Moi, a professor of literature and romance studies at Duke University. As a result, "Beauvoir comes across as a sloppy thinker in English."

Of course, even Beauvoir's devotees don't claim that "Le Deuxième Sexe" is perfect as she wrote it. Elizabeth Hardwick's assessment of the English translation -- "madly sensible and brilliantly confused" -- could probably speak for the original text as well (and the French critical reaction to the book was if anything more hostile than the American). In either language the book is often difficult to wade through, with few footnotes to guide the way, and it has a breathless, rough-and-ready quality that feels as though the author had been bursting to get all her thoughts down on the page at once -- a reflection of Beauvoir's having written quickly, over a period of about two years also devoted to other projects. And the tone of the book itself -- analytical, almost cold -- invited one of the most frequent criticisms: that she was unsympathetic and even hostile to women and to motherhood. "She has written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them, nor does she like being a woman," as Stevie Smith, the British poet and novelist, wrote in a review in 1953. Later, feminist critics complained that Beauvoir seemed to consider motherhood fundamentally incompatible with an independent life.

Scholars like Bauer and Moi maintain that these flaws are magnified by a bad and outdated translation, which in places amounts to a basic misunderstanding of what Beauvoir is saying. For example, Moi cites a sentence in which Beauvoir seems to generalize about women's limitations, when she writes that French mothers are stymied "in spite of" the availability of conveniently organized day nurseries. But this was a translation error. In the original French ("faute de crèches, de jardins d'enfants convenablement organisés")+Beauvoir was in fact attributing women's "paralysis" to the lack of child care -- a realistic comment on women's limited choices in France of the 1940's, when day care was scarce and both birth control and abortion were illegal. In addition to misconstruing words and phrases, the American edition deleted nearly 15 percent of the original French text (about 145 pages), seriously weakening the sections dealing with women's literature and history -- Beauvoir being one of the first to declare these as legitimate subjects for study. Gone were numerous quotations from women's novels and diaries, including those of Virginia Woolf, Colette and Sophie Tolstoy, that she used to support her arguments.

Little-known historical accounts of women who defied feminine stereotypes, like Renaissance noblewomen who led armies, also vanished from the English edition.
What went wrong with "The Second Sex"? The answer may be as simple as the word "sex." When Blanche Knopf, wife of the publisher Alfred A. Knopf and an editor in her own right, bought the book on a trip to France, she was under the impression that it was "a modern-day sex manual" akin to the Kinsey report, Deirdre Bair writes in her biography "Simone de Beauvoir" (1990). Alfred Knopf, who thought the book "capable of making a very wide appeal indeed" among "young ladies in places like Smith," sought out Howard Madison Parshley, a retired professor of zoology who had written a book on human reproduction and regularly reviewed books on sex for The New York Herald Tribune, to translate Beauvoir's book. Parshley knew French only from his years as a student at Boston Latin School and Harvard, and had no training in philosophy -- certainly not in the new movement known as existentialism, of which Beauvoir was an adherent.

"Parshley didn't read anything about existentialism until he'd finished translating the whole book and thought he should find out something about it to write his introduction," says Margaret A. Simons, professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, and author of "Beauvoir and 'The Second Sex' " (1999).

A close student of Hegel and Heidegger, Beauvoir often referred to their work using specific terms French philosophers would have recognized, but that Parshley did not. Toril Moi, who has made a detailed analysis of the translation, noted for example that the word "subject" generally refers in existentialism to a person who exercises freedom of choice, whereas Parshley understood "subjective" in its everyday English sense to mean "personal" or "not objective." In his hands, Beauvoir's discussions of woman's assertion of herself as a subject become platitudes implying women are incapable of being objective.
More damning, when Parshley encountered existentialist terms for existence -- such as pour-soi, or "being-for-itself" -- vis-à-vis women's lives, he often rendered them as woman's "true nature" or feminine "essence," notions that would have been anathema to Beauvoir, according to Moi. "The idea of existentialism is 'experience precedes essence.' Existentialism means 'You are what you do,' " she says.

What did Beauvoir herself think of the translation? In his introduction, Parshley says nearly all his "modifications" (i.e., cuts) were made "with the author's express permission, passage by passage." But according to Bair's biography, Beauvoir was so upset by the changes that she wanted the Knopf edition to carry a statement dissociating herself from them. The publisher ignored the request -- just as, to be fair to Knopf and to Parshley, Beauvoir had ignored their repeated requests for consultation on the text. As for the mistranslations, she became aware of them only in 1982, four years before her death, when Margaret Simons wrote an article about it and sent it to her. Beauvoir wrote to Simons: "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."

The current controversy over the Knopf translation is the result of a resurgence of interest in the 1990's among feminist scholars who have studied the original French texts of Beauvoir's works. This new generation believes Beauvoir deserves more recognition as a philosopher than she has received -- being perhaps better known, at least in this country, as the lover and follower of Jean-Paul Sartre, her lifelong companion. Beauvoir distinguished herself in 1929 as only the ninth woman in France ever to have passed the prestigious agrégation examinations in philosophy; at 21, she became the youngest student, man or woman, to pass. (She came in second to Sartre's first.) Some Beauvoir scholars argue that she anticipated existentialist ideas assumed to have originated with Sartre. According to Simons, Beauvoir's student diaries show she was interested very early in the problem of the Self and the Other, a term she used to describe the lower-caste status of women in "The Second Sex," but which also became central to existentialism. "People said she got that from Sartre. But that was two years before she even met him," says Simons,

who is a co-editor of a seven-volume translation of Beauvoir's writings, including her diaries (the first volume of which is due out this winter).

Existentialism was in fact crucial to ''The Second Sex'' -- even though, in the course of writing it, Beauvoir realized that the existentialist framework articulated by Sartre didn't quite work for women. As Claude Imbert, a professor of philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, writes in ''The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir,'' Beauvoir concluded that instead of freedom of choice, ''a woman encounters a destiny'' with ''a limited range of roles.'' To read the Parshley translation, however, is to remain unaware of the issues at stake.

In May 2000, Beauvoir's adopted daughter and literary heir, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, called for a new translation. ''This edition is a scandal and we have wrongly tolerated it for too long,'' she wrote to Beauvoir's French publisher, Gallimard, citing ''numerous protests from scholars.'' Beauvoir ''was appalled by the cuts,'' she added, ''but worse, by the mistranslations that betrayed her thinking, and she complained frequently about this.'' Yet when Gallimard approached Knopf and its paperback division, Vintage, which together hold the exclusive rights to the English-language translation, about commissioning a new one, they declined to act on it. ''We were astounded by their lack of interest,'' said Anne-Solange Noble, Gallimard's foreign rights director. Harvard University Press, among other American publishers, was also interested in commissioning a new ''Second Sex,'' but has been discouraged by the rights situation. ''It is a masterwork of 20th-century philosophy, but in English it is in chains,'' an executive editor at the press, Lindsay Waters, says.

Spokesmen at Knopf and Vintage declined to comment on their decision not to authorize a new translation. But Toril Moi says that in 2000 the publishers told her the audience for the book wasn't large enough to justify the cost of a new edition. Currently, about 12,000 copies of the Vintage paperback and 1,000 copies of the hardback Everyman edition are sold annually, according to Russell Perreault, vice president and director of publicity for Vintage; college courses account for about 40 percent of those sales. Anne-Solange Noble, for one, believes an up-to-date translation could attract readers far beyond that college base -- as the Oslo publishing house Pax found in 2000, when it published a new translation to replace its edition from the 1960's. It sold 20,000 copies in just a few months.

OF course, a new translation won't necessarily answer the question of whether ''The Second Sex'' still has relevance for today's women. Beauvoir's critics say her portrayal of women's sex lives is dated, that she identifies more with men than with women and neglects race and class by generalizing from her experience as a white daughter of the French bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, on recently rereading ''The Second Sex,'' the psychologist Carol Gilligan says she was struck by how much Beauvoir's 1949 analysis anticipated her own research findings -- that girls who are ''frank and fearless'' at the age of 9 become submissive as they approach adolescence. ''Beauvoir saw that,'' she says.

A new translation would at the very least mean that English-speaking readers would finally have access to Beauvoir's words free of Howard Parshley's 1950's prism. But unless Knopf changes its mind, American readers will have to wait until 2056, when ''The Second Sex'' goes into the public domain, to find out what Beauvoir really meant.
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