THE

SECOND SEX

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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BY

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

TRANSLATED AND
EDITED BY
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

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, some three years ago, to read Mlle Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, then appearing in two successive volumes in France, and to offer my opinion on the advisability of its publication in English, I was not long in realizing that the unexpected had happened. My opinion, I need hardly say, was favourable, for the work displayed unique qualities of style and content which, I thought, would make it a classic in its often worked but far from exhausted field. And when, a little later, I ventured to undertake the arduous task of translation — not from any pretension to linguistic scholarship but because I had long been concerned with certain scientific and humanistic aspects of the subject (not to mention the subsidiary inducements of wealth and fame) — the ensuing more intimate acquaintance served to confirm and, indeed, to heighten my first impression of the work.

Much, in truth, has been written on woman from more or less restricted points of view, such as the physiological, the cynical, the religious, the psychoanalytical, and the feministic — some of it written even by women; but it has remained for Mlle de Beauvoir to produce a book on woman and her historical and contemporary situation in Western culture, which is at once scientifically accurate in matters of biology, comprehensive and frank in its treatment of woman's individual development and social relations, illuminated throughout by a wealth of literary and scientific citation, and founded upon a broadly generous and consistent philosophy. 'Feminine literature,' the author remarks, 'is in our day animated less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort towards clarity and understanding.' Her work is certainly a good example of this tendency, and if, in addition, it sometimes may provoke dissent and give rise to controversy, so much the better. Mlle de Beauvoir is in general more concerned to explain than to reform, but she does look forward to better things and, portraying with approval the independent woman of today, in the end gives persuasive expression to her vision of the future.

The author's philosophy is, as I say, a broad one, drawn from the many sources familiar to a former teacher of the subject; but, as she is at pains to point out in her Introduction, her 'perspective is that of existentialist

ethics': her philosophy is focused in the existentialism of Sartre.[1] *In the* same passage, to which the reader is referred, she states in general how certain existentialist concepts — which, it may be remarked, in themselves command intellectual and ethical respect — apply to woman's situation, and throughout the book she shows in multifarious detail that these basic concepts serve to define problems and to suggest solutions. This is no place to go more deeply into existentialism, and Mlle de Beauvoir's book is, after all, on woman, not on philosophy; the reader who is indifferent to existentialism or even in opposition to it will nevertheless gain pleasure and profit in plenty. In any case the serious reader will find that the occasionally recurring passages of existentialist thought and terminology will tend to lose their strangeness, and their meaning will take shape in his mind as his reading progresses. Whatever the fate of existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement may be, the chief concepts used by Mlle de Beauvoir in the present work and referred to above have general validity, and therefore they could be — and doubtless most of them have been — expressed more or less adequately in quite other terms.

Mlle de Beauvoir is a Frenchwoman, and though by no means lacking in first-hand acquaintance with the United States and other foreign countries, she naturally draws heavily upon French life and customs in her detailed account of woman's past and contemporary situation. Her account of female upbringing and education may strike English and American readers as in some ways peculiar; but we do not have to look very far into the past, or, indeed, very widely around us, to perceive parallels in plenty for almost or quite all the conditions Mlle de Beauvoir describes and deplores. Here as in France and elsewhere, despite changes in educational technique and with comparatively few exceptions, the vast majority of girls are still more or less explicitly directed towards predatory coquetry and consequent masculine support in marriage or otherwise as a prime aim in life, in contrast to boys, who are commonly schooled in violence and initiative and urged towards a life of productive activity. Thus the perceptive reader will constantly recognize the familiar in more or less foreign guise, and this is because the author's picture is fundamentally valid for our Atlantic civilization as a whole.

[1] The interested reader will do well to ignore the more or less sensational journalistic accounts of the Parisian café 'existentialists' (lately repudiated quite unequivocally by Sartre) and consult, say, the excellent, brief exposition of existentialism in its various forms available in Marjorie Grene's *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (University of Chicago Press, 1940). Reference may also be made to Sartre's *Existentialism* (Philosophical Library, 1947), in which certain aspects of the philosophy are set forth, and, for readers of French, to R. Campbell's pamphlet *Expliquez-moi l'existentialisme* (published by Foucher in Paris), in which the various schools are described and the existentialist terminology is explained.

The central thesis of Mlle de Beauvoir's book is that since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. This, the author maintains, has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievement in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. Genuine exceptions are doubtless becoming at present more numerous than formerly, but the commonly cited facts that many henpecked husbands exist, that many women exert a considerable influence upon men in positions of authority, and that especially in the United States a large proportion of wealth and property is held in women's names can easily be shown to uphold rather than to disprove the author's contentions, however serviceable such facts may be in jocose and superficial assertions regarding woman's dominance of American life.

In the United States, to be sure, perhaps more frequently than in some other countries, a good many women do succeed in attaining positions of professional independence, and some of them nevertheless marry sooner or later — and even have children — without lessening their competence or disrupting their careers. But their paths are still beset with peculiar difficulties of one kind or another. It is a scarcely noted fact, for example, that such married women, especially in academic communities, often become uncomfortably aware of the existence of a more or less subtly expressed prejudice against them on the part not only of the non-professional and homebound wives of their male colleagues, but also — for different though equally understandable reasons — on the part of their unmarried female colleagues. This prejudice is possibly to be attributed in part to jealousy and more or less conscious resentment — 'They are having their cake and eating it, too!' — but however that may be, it certainly testifies to the strength and persistence of the traditional feeling that if a woman has a home her place is in it. Similarly, successful business-women are often conscious of the fact, noted by the author, that neither men nor women commonly enjoy working under feminine direction, which again

indicates the weight of tradition – in this case to the effect that the boss should be a man.

The traditional belief that man should be the provider has remained strong, especially in middle-class circles, in spite of the fact that in the United States, for example, some twenty millions of women – half of them married and many with children – are gainfully employed outside the home; and the social and psychological problems involved, many of which are referred to in Mlle de Beauvoir's pages, seem to occupy an increasing place in the press, in radio programmes, in discussion groups, and in other more or less efficient agencies of public enlightenment. The situation, with its attendant problems, is not new, since it originated in the industrial revolution, the rise of the factory system, and the entrance of women into business mostly on lower levels of employment; but it has gained new interest and importance from, on the one hand, wartime demands for woman's participation in ever widening fields of activity, and, on the other, a growing realization of the bearing of home atmosphere upon the psychological development of children and their ultimate welfare as adults. Yet in the still existing traditional situation all this extensive employment of women has little to do with the author's ideal of the independent woman, for the vast majority of unmarried workers entertain the hope – often enough illusive – that marriage will release them from work in which they have no real interest and which they regard as a temporary burden, and the married ones gain no real independence through work done only to supplement the perhaps temporarily inadequate earnings of their 'providers'.

It is only the highly trained professional woman and the highly placed woman in business – both genuine existents with a profound and permanent interest in their work and projects – who can attain under present circumstances the position of independence and equality envisaged by Mlle de Beauvoir as the one firm basis for ideal human relations between men and women. To refer here to only one relevant matter of perennial discussion, the question of whether women's higher education should be different from that of men in its greater emphasis on 'domestic science', marriage problems, and the like, with consequent loss of rigour in professional training, can have but one answer in the light of the author's analysis.[1] She would approve the bold determination of the founders of a number of American colleges for women to provide an education identical with that of men, and she would deplore any departure from that ideal. It is just such differences in training, at whatever age level, that in the

[1] See especially Part VII, chap. I.

author's view are to be held largely accountable for the weaknesses of 'femininity'. In any case, whatever study of marriage problems may seem desirable in higher education is surely needed as much by men as by women.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe* Mlle de Beauvoir, a practised writer, employs a style which, while often in a sense informal, is for the most part precise and sometimes elevated and poetic; and I have conceived it my duty as translator to adhere faithfully to what she says and to maintain to the best of my ability the atmosphere she creates. Thus my intention has been in general to avoid all paraphrasing not required by language differences and to provide a translation that is at once exact and — with slight exceptions — complete. At the publisher's request I have, as editor, occasionally added an explanatory word or two (especially in connection with existentialist terminology) and provided a few additional footnotes and bibliographic data which I thought might be to the reader's interest; and I have also done some cutting and condensation here and there with a view to brevity, chiefly in reducing the extent of the author's illustrative material, especially in certain of her quotations from other writers. Practically all such modifications have been made with the author's express permission, passage by passage.

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