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SEX, GENDER, AND THE BODY

The student edition of

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

Toril Moi

Sex, Gender and the Body

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TORIL MOI

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SEX, GENDER, AND THE BODY

For
DAVID

Preface

This book is published in response to teachers who told me that they wanted their students to read the first two essays in my *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (1999). They had been using the essays in courses concerned with sex and/or gender in literature, philosophy, English, French, history, anthropology, political theory, sociology, and women's studies, and in all kinds of interdisciplinary contexts. Because the existing book is too big and expensive for students to buy, they asked for a smaller, cheaper book, pointing out that given the length of the two essays, a reasonably priced paperback would cost no more than a full set of photocopies, and would be far handier to use. This, then, is the student edition requested. It makes the first two essays from *What Is a Woman?* available in full.

In these essays I set out to find a third way for feminist theory, one that steers a course between the Scylla of traditional essentialism and biologism, and the Charybdis of the idealist obsession with 'discourse' and 'construction'. They are the beginning of a larger project, namely to rethink feminism without having recourse to the exhausted categories of identity and difference. For such a project, Simone de Beauvoir's feminism of freedom is an obvious cornerstone. These essays also arise from a wish to make feminist theory responsive to historical specificity. To be more precise: my project is to analyse key concepts in feminist theory in a way that makes it possible to reconnect them with history, society, and women's everyday experiences.

I started working on these essays in the late 1990s. At the time I was deeply dissatisfied with the state of feminist theory, and felt that a new way of thinking about old questions, particularly questions concerning the body and language, was desperately needed. It seemed to me that feminist theory had managed to paint itself into a corner, in which all it could ever do was to denounce 'essentialism', embrace 'constructionism', and generally proclaim the un wisdom of ever using the word woman (these are all subjects

discussed in Chapter 1). There had also developed, I felt, an unhappy divide between feminists committed to the personal (autobiography, narrative, confessions) and feminists dedicated to theory. The divide between the personal and the theoretical or the philosophical is often aligned with a series of oppositions that have long been contentious in poststructuralist theory: first person/third person, speaking as/speaking for, subjective/objective, personal/impersonal, and particular/universal (these are discussed in Chapter 2).

These essays try to undo the kind of thinking that makes such oppositions look compulsory for theorists. I found the intellectual resources required to do this in the existentialist feminism of Simone de Beauvoir and the ordinary language philosophy of Stanley Cavell, J. L. Austin, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These essays show that at least some of the oppositions that concern contemporary theorists are 'pictures that hold us captive', as Wittgenstein puts it (PI §115).

Poststructuralist feminist theory is based on the idea that language is a system, and that reference is particularly emblematic of the way language works. This book is based on a very different idea, namely that in most cases, the meaning of a word is its use in the language (see Wittgenstein, PI §43). In order to find out what meanings a word has, we need to consider who says what to whom under what specific circumstances. Only in that way can we hope to get clear on the criteria we are actually relying on, for example when we count a person as a woman.

A key idea underpinning these essays is that poststructuralist theory tends to 'absolutize' its central terms. This means that it tends to take them out of every conceivable context of significant use, to proceed without regard to the many different situations in which one might actually use the word in question. This procedure turns concepts into metaphysical entities that no longer respond to any specific criteria of meaning. In Chapter 1 I show that this is precisely what has happened to the word 'woman' in much feminist theory.

These essays also represent a return to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), not as a historical document illustrating a long past moment in feminist thought, but as a source of vital new

insights for contemporary feminist theory. *The Second Sex* is a gold mine for feminist theorists, and I certainly have not exhausted its riches. One Beauvoirean theme I pursue in these essays is her thought-provoking understanding of the body. In Chapter 1 I elaborate on her claim that the body is a *situation*, and show that this is a concept which undercuts the sex/gender division and gets us out of the usual stalemate between 'sex' and 'gender', 'essence' and 'construction'. In Chapter 2, I show that *The Second Sex* also contains another way of conceptualizing the body, namely as a *background*. These concepts are flexible, open to social and historical change, and allow us to grasp the body in its everyday incarnations, without ever assigning it one (or a set of) given meanings, and without finding ourselves obliged to deny the obvious, namely that there are men and women in the world.

Unfortunately, there is still no acceptable English translation of *The Second Sex*. To get a sense of what the difficulties with the English text are, I urge readers of this book to read Margaret Simons's pioneering essay on the translation, as well as my own recent article on the subject, which also contains information on the reasons why a new translation is unlikely to appear any time soon (see Simons, and Moi, 'While We Wait'). If anyone who reads this knows how to persuade Random House, the owner of the Knopf and Vintage imprints, to agree to the publication of a new English translation and edition of *The Second Sex*, I hope he or she will take immediate action.

The first essay in this book is entitled 'What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender and the Body in Feminist Theory'. It arose from my sense of astonishment at the trouble the word 'woman' was causing feminist theory. How did we land ourselves in a position where feminists genuinely felt that they had to surround woman by quotation marks to avoid essentialism and other theoretical sins? The aim of the essay is to liberate the word 'woman' from the binary straitjacket in which contemporary sex and gender theory imprisons it, so as to recuperate it for feminist use.

The essay starts by sketching the history of the rise of the sex/gender distinction in English, before engaging critically with the powerful poststructuralist revision of the sex/gender paradigm. This is followed by an account of a positive alternative,

namely Beauvoir's suggestion that the body is a *situation*. Finally, the resulting understanding of what a woman is, is tested, as it were, on some legal cases concerning femininity and sex changes. The last part of the essay (section V) is crucial to its overall goals, for it shows what it means to try to think concretely as opposed to metaphysically about what a woman is.

My answer to the question 'What Is a Woman?', then, is that there is not one answer to that question. If pressed, I would simply answer: 'It depends.' The criteria that make us count a person as a woman depend on who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, what they are talking about, in what situation they find themselves. This is, I think, a far better way of thinking about the question than to lay down theoretical requirements for what the word 'woman' *must* mean, which is simply another way of removing it from its contexts of significant use.

Chapter 2, entitled ' "I Am a Woman": The Personal and the Philosophical', goes further than Chapter 1 in engineering an encounter between Beauvoir and Cavell, Wittgenstein and Austin. It does so by focusing on the question of voice and style in theory and philosophy. How can I write theory without losing myself? How can I speak for others without silencing them? Do women always speak as women? What else can we speak as? How would you react if someone said to you in a theoretical discussion: 'You think that because you are a woman'? Can a woman intellectual insist on being called an intellectual, not a woman intellectual, without betraying her sex (or gender)? In short: What is at stake in the innocuous little sentence 'I am a woman?' and its equally innocuous companion: 'You are a woman'?

This chapter uncovers Beauvoir's radical analysis of a dilemma that women in a sexist society regularly have to confront. This is the situation in which women are invited to 'choose' between being imprisoned in their gendered subjectivity (their 'femininity') and having to eliminate that subjectivity altogether in the name of some ungendered general humanity. A woman, in short, is often invited to choose between calling herself a woman, and calling herself a human being. (Through a brief discussion of Frantz Fanon's *White Skin, Black Masks*, I show that raced subjects in a racist society often find themselves in a structurally similar dilemma.)

The genius of Beauvoir's analysis is that she shows that both options are equally disastrous for a woman's aspirations to social justice and equality. In the first case she is locked up in her particularity, and so loses the right to represent humanity, to speak for all. In the second case she is forced to abandon her particularity in favour of an impossibly ungendered generality. Then she can aspire to speak for all (or to speak the truth, as Beauvoir puts it) only if she pretends that her gendered experiences in the world are of no relevance to her words. ('I am a writer, not a woman writer' is a phrase exemplifying this attitude.) Men do not have to choose between their masculinity and their humanity. I have never heard a male writer say, 'I am a writer, not a male writer'. He does not need to, for it goes without saying that there is no contradiction between his gendered particularity and his access to the universal category, in this case that of writer. This analysis explains, in part, why Beauvoir insists that the goal of feminism must be for women to gain access to the universal as women, not as some curiously ungendered person.

This crucially important theory in *The Second Sex* has often been overlooked. As a result, feminist theorists have found themselves caught on the horns of the dilemma described by Beauvoir. Instead of refusing its terms, they have ended up generating theories in which 'sameness', 'equality', and 'identity' are pitted against 'difference' with tedious predictability. But Beauvoir is precisely not recommending that we choose 'difference' against 'identity'. She is not recommending that we choose a (poorly defined) sense of 'sameness' or 'equality' against 'difference' either. Were we to choose either one, we would not escape, but rather be caught in the sexist trap she analyses.

Chapter 2 is concerned above all with women's ambition to write theory and philosophy, that is to say, to write with the aspiration to the universal. The question is how to find a personal voice for such a project. Through a detailed reading of the beginning of *The Second Sex* I show that Beauvoir managed to find a voice, a way to write personally and philosophically at the same time, without abandoning the outrageous ambition of speaking for all, and without silencing others. This is what makes Beauvoir's use of herself in *The Second Sex* exemplary.

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The philosophical groundwork for the essays in this volume—the intense study of Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell, and the rereading of Beauvoir and Sartre—was done at the National Humanities Center. At the NHC I profited immensely from conversations with my philosophical colleagues Richard Moran and George Wilson, and with my literary colleagues Sarah Beckwith and Jonathan Freedman. Above all, however, I owe great thanks to Martin Stone who first showed me what I could learn from turning to ordinary language philosophy. I have learned a lot from his philosophical example. Further acknowledgements will be found in the notes to each essay.

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This student edition was prepared with the help of my wonderful research assistant Fiona Barnett. Without the steady support of my editor at OUP, Sophie Goldsworthy, this edition would simply not exist.

T.M.

A Note on the Text

The text that follows is the text of the two first chapters in the 1999 hardback and the 2001 paperback editions of *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. No changes have been made, except that some quotations, notes and references have been updated to reflect the publication of texts referred to as 'forthcoming' in 1999.

In this book I use the MLA reference system, as outlined in the MLA Style Manual. As far as possible references are given in the text. Cumbersome and very long references are nevertheless exiled to footnotes. The context is supposed to make it clear what author and what work is being cited. Full references can be located by consulting the list of Works Cited at the end of the book. Multiple entries under one author's name (Beauvoir, Cavell, Freud) are organized alphabetically. I list quoted translations under their English title, but add the original reference whenever I feel it should be there.

Throughout this book the abbreviation 'TA' indicates that the published translation has been amended by me. This happens particularly often when I am quoting *The Second Sex*. In this volume I always refer both to the English translation and the French original of *The Second Sex*. Page references to some frequently used texts are preceded by the following abbreviations. The editions used are those listed in the 'Works Cited' section at the end of the book.

By Simone de Beauvoir:

<i>DSa</i>	<i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol. i
<i>DSb</i>	<i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol. ii
<i>FA</i>	<i>La force de l'âge</i>
<i>FC</i>	<i>Force of Circumstance</i>
<i>FCa</i>	<i>La force des choses</i> , vol. i

- FCb* *La force des choses*, vol. ii
MDD *Memories of a Dutiful Daughter*
MJF *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*
PC *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*
PL *The Prime of Life*

By Freud:

- SE* *Standard Edition*

By Wittgenstein:

- PI* *Philosophical Investigations*

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In truth there is no divorce between philosophy and life.
(*Simone de Beauvoir*)

