

A REVIEW OF TORIL MOI'S *SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: THE MAKING OF AN INTELLECTUAL WOMAN*

ÅSA MOBERG
LIMA, SWEDEN

Writers of texts that become classics are constantly reevaluated by posterity. Some who seemed great while they lived disappear, for a while or forever, when they die. Others become more interesting after their death. That Simone de Beauvoir can be counted in the latter category is fully in accordance with her intentions. After her death in 1986, one spectacular revelation about her life and work has followed another. In 1990 her letters to Jean-Paul Sartre were published and in them we find open and detailed descriptions of lesbian relationships that had so far been kept secret. The same year Deirdre Bair's excellent biography was published, providing new perspectives on the relationship of a "free woman" and her dependence on a charming intellectual male chauvinist like Sartre.

With Toril Moi's new book *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Beauvoir's place in posterity seems secured, at least for as long as literature is studied at any university in the world. Moi has accomplished something as unusual in academic circles as a well written and entertaining book. At the same time it is a scientifically solid study of how women in the early twentieth century got access to the male reservation that universities had been to that point.

Since her death, Simone de Beauvoir has remained as controversial in her native France as she was while she was alive. Toril Moi, who is herself Norwegian, writes that it has probably been a great advantage for her to have worked in North Carolina, where she is a Professor of Literature and Romance Studies at Duke University, and thus has been able to see beyond the sparse treatment accorded to Beauvoir in her own country.

Many admirers of Beauvoir have seen the revelation of human shortcomings in their idol as a personal betrayal. Moi, on the contrary, is refreshingly free from hindsight opinions on how Beauvoir ought to have lived and written. She has made an unbiased study of a literary production that marked an era, considering its deficiencies as well as its more well known merits. The result is a portrait of the intellectual bourgeoisie of an entire society. That environment is naturally marked by male double standards of morality. To my knowledge, no one else has made such a clear-sighted analysis of exactly how the male prerogative influences the way in the public views the problem. In chapters with headlines like "Freedom and Flirtation: The Personal and the Philosophical in Sartre and Beauvoir," Toril Moi succeeds in showing how the fact that men are unconscious of the supremacy of their own sex marks the way both men and women think.

By cross-referencing Sartre and Beauvoir and examining how various themes in Beauvoir's text come back in different kinds of texts, Moi presents a new picture of the writings and philosophies of both writers. Whereas Sartre now and then appears remarkably unconscious of certain issues, Beauvoir grows in width and depth. The way in which Beauvoir struggled with the same questions at different levels in a variety of her writings becomes obvious through Toril Moi's analysis.

If I interpret Moi correctly, she thinks, just as I do, that readers come closest to the truth in the literary texts. The comparison between theoretical reasoning in *The Second Sex* and literary representation in *She Came to Stay* is particularly interesting. This first novel was published in 1943 and it was a great success. It tells the story of a triangular drama involving an established couple and a young woman which ends with the older woman murdering the younger one. The book has certain literary deficiencies which may explain why it has never been translated into Swedish. In two of her chapters, however, Toril Moi makes such an interesting analysis of those weaknesses that the moment has

undoubtedly come when it would be appropriate to publish a translation of the novel which includes those two essays. They are the best texts I have read so far about what you could call the feminine aspects of literature; that is, about how women writers handle their material within a framework that they themselves have not had a part in shaping.

Toril Moi states that she cannot understand the rage over the new facts that have recently been published about Beauvoir's private life. Moi is far from uncritical of Simone de Beauvoir, but her attitude is understanding, as it would be toward a dear friend whom you basically love even though she has some undesirable traits, traits generally found in most people with artistic talent.

Beauvoir's writing also leaves something to be desired, and Moi points out the unevenness of her literary style. Sometimes her writing is brilliant, sometimes rather tiresome. Whereas Sartre had Beauvoir to proofread everything he wrote and sort things out for him, she did not have anyone who was such a devoted first reader and organiser of her texts.

Toril Moi concludes that the obvious differences in the quality of Beauvoir's writing depend on her relation to the events she writes about. Simone de Beauvoir is, according to Moi, a writer of depression, at her best when she writes about her own anguish in the face of separation and loneliness, aging and death, as in such books as *She Came to Stay*, *The Second Sex*, *The Mandarins*, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *A Very Easy Death*. When she tries to deny pain and conflict, the text dies, and that happens now and then in the memoirs.

With Simone de Beauvoir as an example, Toril Moi has written a book that can become an effective weapon in every thinking woman's struggle against a narrow-minded patriarchal society.

Editor's note: This article is Åsa Moberg's free translation of her article entitled "Mer än bara upprättelse," which appeared in Swedish in *Aftonbladet* on March 17, 1994.