SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR
AND THE REPRODUCTION OF MOTHERING

ELIZABETH RICHARDSON VITI

Understandably, feminists immediately link Nancy Chodorow to the "reproduction of mothering" and the mother-daughter dyad implicit in this notion. To my mind, however, Simone de Beauvoir is indelibly marked by this female relationship and equally synonymous with the maternal. As Yolanda Astarita Patterson points out in "Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood" (YFS 1986), the feminist Beauvoir was often acclaimed as the mother of the women's movement and of all liberated women. Nonetheless, it seems ironic that Beauvoir should assume this identity. Her description of pregnancy and maternity is the most controversial account of female experience in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, seen by many as a withering condemnation. Yet in a 1995 article entitled "Beauvoir’s Two Senses of the ‘Body’ in The Second Sex," Julia K. Ward argues convincingly that Beauvoir’s characterization simply demonstrates that the value of the entire mothering experience depends on the individual woman’s situation. If a woman freely chooses the maternal role and thus has a positive attitude toward this responsibility, and if her social and economic conditions adequately support her, motherhood can be very rewarding. Indeed, it seems to me that Simone de Beauvoir freely chose situations which permitted her to assume a maternal identity in both her private and public life.

In contrast to Catherine Portuges, who states in "Attachment and Separation in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter" that Beauvoir’s preoccupation with the maternal was resolved in a process of differentiation with her own mother and ended with her friendship with Elisabeth Mabille, I would suggest that this union with Zaza was a satisfactory integration of Beauvoir’s desire for simultaneous closeness and differentiation. It was the first relationship in which Beauvoir assumed the maternal role, and just the beginning of a series of mother-daughter relationships extending from Olga Kosakievicz to Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir.

Consequently, it is not a contradiction when Beauvoir recounts in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* that as a child, she reflected on her future and dismissed the idea of having children. She preferred, instead, the idea of forming young minds: "je me ferai professeur, décidai-je" (MJFR 79). As Deirdre Bair notes in her biography of Beauvoir, mother and educator were synonymous words during the period when the young Simone was attending the Cours Désir: "If a girl did stay [at the Cours Désir] for five years, she received little more than hard-core propaganda via uplifting religious tracts and formal courses in moral behavior stressing that the best future she could hope for was marriage, which was glowingly described as the ‘career’ of mère-éducatrice, or
mother-teacher” (Bair 89). Clearly this was not what Beauvoir had in mind for herself. Rather, she envisioned a reversal, a situation of her own design where she was instead an éducatrice-mère.

Focusing on Nancy Chodorow’s object relations description of the mother-daughter relationship, from primary oneness to permeable ego boundaries, provides a paradigm which makes this unexpected persona most evident. One of these relationships is revealed in Bianca Lamblin’s Mémoires d’une jeune fille dérangée, a telling response to Beauvoir’s autobiographical work whose title reflects, through its simultaneous similarity to and difference from the title of Beauvoir’s memoirs, a similar desire for both attachment and separation. In 1937, Beauvoir was appointed to the Lycée Molière, where Lamblin, then Bianca Bienenfeld, was a student: “Nous étions très excitées à l’idée de nous trouver face à cette belle jeune femme, au lieu du vieux monsieur barbant qui officiait dans la classe voisine” (Lamblin 23), she remarks. Lamblin recalls that Beauvoir, who prized intelligence above all else, singled her out for attention because she considered her the brightest student in the class.

Certainly the young Bianca’s brilliance privileged a Chodorovian double identification (Chodorow, “Family Structure”: 84) in which Beauvoir, the teacher/mother, related easily to the girl and identified with her so closely that she could experience Bianca as herself. She too had been the best student in the class. In fact, a careful reading of her chapter in Le Deuxième Sexe entitled “La mère” reveals that Beauvoir saw the mother-daughter relationship as dramatically different from that of mother-son. The use of the word “double” to describe the daughter is a virtual refrain:

La situation est différente selon que l’enfant est un garçon ou une fille (DS 2: 187) [. . .]. Dans une fille, la mère ne sait pas un membre de la caste élue; elle y cherche son double (DS 2: 189). [. . .] L’indépendance de l’enfant ruine ses espoirs. Elle est doublement jalouse: du monde qui lui prend sa fille, de sa fille qui en conquérant une part du monde la lui vole (DS 2: 192). [. . .] Elle n’accepte pas que sa fille devienne vraiment un double, un substitut d’elle-même. Cependant, il lui est encore plus intolérable qu’elle s’affirme franchement comme une autre. (DS 2: 193)

Teacher and student began to meet regularly outside of class after Lamblin wrote to Beauvoir to express her interest in philosophy and her admiration: “Son accueil fut chaleureux; nous prîmes la décision de nous voir en dehors du lycée, cette année même, pour nous mieux connaître” (Lamblin 28). Lamblin made it clear that she wanted to follow in Beauvoir’s footsteps by completing a degree in philosophy and teaching. Consequently, in Chodorow’s scheme of things, the student/daughter’s identification was personal. She observed her role model on a daily basis, but in the classroom rather than in the home.
According to Lamblin, their intellectual intimacy became physical intimacy on a hiking trip after her graduation. Lamblin also reveals that it was Beauvoir who orchestrated her eventual relationship with Sartre from beginning to end, believing that she might in this way have some control over his ties to other women: "Ma vie était donc affectivement double et unifiée en même temps: d’une part, j’étais séduite et intéressée par l’attention et la prévenance de Sartre, d’autre part, ma passion pour le Castor subsistait" (Lamblin 52). In Lamblin’s eyes, they were a “threesome,” although Beauvoir claimed in her Lettres à Sartre that Lamblin only imagined this, wanting to see their relationship as comparable to the one they had had with Olga Kosakievicz. Lamblin maintains that because Beauvoir was threatened by this equal partnership, she decided to get rid of her rival by creating a negative image of Lamblin for Sartre which prompted him to write a brutal letter breaking off the relationship.

That this threesome represented for the young Bianca Bienenfeld the classic triangle of the closed family unit is undeniable. Indeed, Jacques Lacan, her analyst later in life, told Lamblin that the unresolved conflict that tormented her was the result of Beauvoir and Sartre playing the parental role. He explained that it was as if she had pushed away her natural mother and father and replaced them with new, almost mythical parents. Lamblin goes on to say, "non seulement j’avais comme tous les humains inconsciemment souhaité, dans ma petite enfance, des rapports charnels avec mes parents, mais cette fois ce souhait s’était réellement accompli" (Lamblin 204). She felt that she had committed a serious sin because of her strong identification with the Mother Beauvoir, whom she sought to replace as the object of the Father Sartre’s desire. Lamblin cites her carnal involvement with Beauvoir as the reason that she could never put enough distance between herself and the older woman and therefore felt compelled to reestablish the relationship after World War II, seeing Beauvoir about once a month.

What is revealing from an object relations perspective is the way in which the mother-daughter dyad remains constant in this threesome. Similar to the primary oneness of the biological mother and child, the Beauvoir-Lamblin twosome was the initial affective unit. As Chodorow explains, as far as the daughter is concerned, the Father never replaces the Mother. He is simply brought into the mother-daughter relationship, a type of add-on whose presence is never essential (Family 87). In the Beauvoir-Lamblin relationship, it seems to me, the primary oneness of mother and child is quite evident. As Dorothy Dinnerstein points out in The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, an excellent complement to Chodorow’s work because of its similar object relations perspective, adult sexual relations represent an effort to return to this idealized symbiosis with the Mother (Dinnerstein 28-29). Moreover, imbued with the interpenetration, the lack of separateness, which, Chodorow observes, characterizes the mother-daughter bond, women bring to the female couple a mutual understanding and intimacy that the heterosexual couple simply cannot create.
Beauvoir herself appeared incapable of a definitive break with Lamblin and seemed to regret the way in which she and Sartre had treated her. Lamblin cites one of Beauvoir’s letters to Sartre: “Je suis secouée [...] Elle m’a remuée et pétrie de remords parce qu’elle est dans une terrible et profonde crise de neurasthénie—et que c’est notre faute, je crois” (Lamblin 158). In fact, Chodorow cites Beauvoir, among other women writers, as someone who has superbly portrayed female embeddedness, this “loss of self in overwhelming responsibility for and connection to others” (Family 90).

One day, towards the end of her life, Beauvoir asked Lamblin what she thought of their friendship. Lamblin replied, with typical filial ambivalence, that she had suffered because of her, but that, on the other hand, she would not have become who she was—a much admired philosophy teacher—without Beauvoir, who had also given her a broader view of the world. However, Lamblin reversed this opinion after reading Beauvoir’s Lettres à Sartre and Journal de guerre. “Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir ne m’ont fait, finalement, que du mal” (Lamblin 207).

Indeed, key to all mother-daughter relationships is the question of separation and individuation. Thus it is not surprising that Mémoires d’une jeune fille dérangée is the result of a less beneficent attitude toward the Mother, just as is Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée. Beauvoir writes in Une Mort très douce that on the day this first volume of her memoirs was published, her sister “Poupette” tried to placate their mother in every way possible and that she herself brought her mother a bouquet of flowers. Lamblin metamorphoses the idealized Mother who had singled her out as her favorite child into someone who “puisait dans ses classes de jeunes filles une chair fraîche à laquelle elle goûtait avant de la refiler, ou faut-il dire plus grossièrement encore, de la rebattre sur Sartre” (Lamblin 11).

When she adds that the couple was acting out a commonplace version of Les Liaisons dangereuses, Lamblin suggests that she played Cécile de Volanges to Beauvoir’s Mme de Merteuil, another female who chose to mother without the encumbrance of biological children. However, rather than retreating to a convent when she discovered what she thought to be the truth about her mentor’s mothering after reading the Lettres à Sartre and the Journal de guerre, Bianca Lamblin seeks to expose Beauvoir in the same way that Merteuil was exposed. Ironically, then, Beauvoir is done in by her own words, as was the Marquise.

Lamblin felt that it was time to give the daughter’s perspective on the mother-daughter duo and to correct what she saw as misleading assumptions about the Beauvoir-Sartre couple: “Par-delà la mort, elle m’avait envoyé cet ultime message: j’avais reçu en plein visage la figure de sa vérité et de la vérité de nos rapports anciens” (Lamblin 207). Lamblin’s criticism knows no bounds and resonates with that of the child who wishes to blame Mother for everything. As a Jew, she accuses Beauvoir of being anti-Semitic at a time when, as a public figure, she was declaring her support for Israel, thus revealing what is, in her opinion, Beauvoir’s hypocrisy, a refrain throughout the book. She labels
Beauvoir a self-promoter whose excessive literary ambition was devoted to a very careful crafting of her public image. And she claims that the celebrated feminist was nothing more than a follower of Sartre, “le maître qui tranchait de tout” (Lamblin 165).

Lamblin’s ultimate condemnation brings us full circle to a reproach of Beauvoir for her resounding rejection of motherhood. It was through biological mothering that the daughter Lamblin chose to separate herself from the mother Beauvoir. Pregnant, Lamblin met with Beauvoir and Sartre to request that they not use her as the model for any of their fictional characters, as they had done with another “daughter,” Olga Kosakievicz, most notably in L’Invitée. She says that their utter disgust at the thought of pregnancy prevented them from even looking at her (Lamblin 162), and even remarks that Beauvoir’s repugnance toward motherhood was so intense that she avoided eating anything made from milk (184). She goes on to suggest that Beauvoir paid a high price for this aversion to traditional female roles in general. In her opinion, it forced Sartre to adopt a daughter at the end of his life, thus stripping his lifelong companion of all legal effectiveness: “Je me faisais la triste réflexion que Simone de Beauvoir avait elle-même creusé le lit de son propre malheur: le fait qu’elle n’ait jamais accepté le mariage a forcé Sartre à adopter une fille. Du point de vue de la loi, Simone de Beauvoir n’était plus rien dans la vie de Sartre” (Lamblin 191).

Yet it seems to me that the daughter understood the mother no better than Beauvoir understood Lamblin, something that Beauvoir’s own mother observed was frequently the case. Françoise de Beauvoir commented one day shortly after the publication of Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, “Les parents ne comprennent pas les enfants, mais c’est réciproque” (UMTD 105). Lamblin lets pass without comment the fact that Beauvoir herself chose to adopt a daughter, Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir, at the end of her life. Even more revealing, however, is her selective reading of “La mère” in Le Deuxième Sexe. Lamblin chooses passages on pregnancy itself, quoting Beauvoir’s description of woman: “prise aux reins de la nature, elle est plante et bête [...] un instrument passif de la vie” (DS 2: 156). Lamblin evaluates this observation by saying, “Il est clair [...] que la thèse du caractère purement charnel de la maternité n’est que l’envers du spiritualisme. Un être humain déchoit, selon elle, de son statut d’être moral et spirituel en se laissant emporter par l’instinct de reproduction” (Lamblin 169).

However, a more thorough reading of this chapter belies the aversion to motherhood that Lamblin describes, and furthermore has much in common with Nancy Chodorow’s research, which was warmly greeted by feminists when The Reproduction of Mothering appeared in 1978. The increase in the number of married mothers working for pay, at least in the United States, where the figure reached 69% in 1994 (Hochschild 6), throws into question the degree to which Beauvoir’s and Chodorow’s theories are still applicable today. The similarities in both women’s observations about the maternal role are nonetheless striking.

Chodorow’s work indicates that the Western middle class woman considers child care her most important responsibility. Even if she works
outside the home, the middle class working wife and mother is still unlikely to have a crucial economic role in the family and society is still apt to consider her work less important than that of her male counterpart. She cannot look forward to increased status and prestige with age. It is difficult, then, for daughters in Western middle class families to develop self-esteem: "female gender identification means identification with a devalued, passive mother, and personal maternal identification is with a mother whose own self-esteem is low" (Family 96). According to Beauvoir, "Il y a une mauvaise foi extravagante dans la conciliation du mépris que l'on voue aux femmes et du respect dont on entoure les mères" (DS 2: 198).

Despite an assumption by many of her readers that Beauvoir totally rejected psychoanalysis, the late feminist would undoubtedly agree that social and psychological oppression is perpetuated in the structure of personality. She notes in her chapter on "La mère" that:

[. . .] une des grandes vérités que la psychanalyse a proclamées, c'est le danger que constituent pour l'enfant les parents "normaux" eux-mêmes. Les complexes, les obsessions, les névroses dont souffrent les adultes ont leur racine dans leur passé familial; les parents qui ont leurs propres conflits, leurs querelles, leurs drames, sont pour l'enfant la compagnie la moins souhaitable. (DS 197-198)

Though Beauvoir’s use of quotation marks makes clear her unease with certain psychoanalytical criteria, she and Chodorow nonetheless agree that the best mother is one who has chosen the role freely and who has some occupation outside the home as well. Beauvoir states that "c'est la femme qui travaille [. . .] qui a la grossesse la plus facile du fait qu'elle ne se fascine pas sur sa propre personne; c'est la femme qui a la vie personnelle la plus riche qui donnera le plus à l'enfant" (DS 2: 200).

Nancy Chodorow emphasizes that "boys need to grow up around men who take a major role in child care and girls around women who, in addition to child care, have a valued role and recognized sphere of legitimate control" (Family 96). The reciprocity which Beauvoir called for in her healthy adult couple is expanded to include shared responsibility in child care in the Chodorow model. In short, both feminists are saying that it is never wise for any woman to invest herself solely in motherhood.

Here Simone de Beauvoir took her own advice, fittingly reversing the priority that most women follow. While foregrounding her writing, she complemented this activity with mothering, which, as I pointed out earlier, played out on a very public level as well. Here, interestingly enough, her contributions parallel those of Chodorow to feminist psychoanalytic theory. Chodorow made three pivotal changes in Freud's explanation of child development: She privileged the Mother over the Father; she focused on the
mother-daughter relationship; and she questioned the former explanation of gender identity formation by placing it in the preoedipal rather than oedipal stage.

Simone de Beauvoir did exactly the same thing for feminism in general and for feminist theory in particular. There is no question, as Patterson suggested in her 1985 interview with Beauvoir, that *Le Deuxième Sexe* made her the Mother of virtually all contemporary feminist theorists. Textbooks on feminist theory second this. Rosemarie Tong, in her introduction to *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, states that *Le Deuxième Sexe* is "probably the key theoretical text of twentieth century feminism" (Tong 6), and points out that it allowed women to sidestep male discourse as the source of their own ideas for the first time.

Beauvoir spawned many daughters at home and abroad, privileges the mother-daughter relationship over the father-son connection in the theoretical arena. The interconnectedness of the earlier feminist and those who followed her is undeniable, although many contemporary French feminists appear to repudiate Beauvoir. Ironically, their rejection is frequently based on accusations of a misogyny which includes unease with and distaste for the female body, particularly in its ability to reproduce.

There certainly appears to be a wide gap between a writer like Hélène Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir. The unconscious link between the female body and writing is a notion that Beauvoir would have found unacceptable. Although "l'écriture féminine" has been widely publicized in American academic circles, interviews with a variety of contemporary French feminists published in the 1988 issue of *Yale French Studies* entitled *The Politics of Tradition: Placing Women in French Literature* show an even split between those who support this idea and those who do not.

Despite certain areas of disagreement, no one can deny the overriding link between Beauvoir and feminists who followed her: The concept of woman as Other is indisputable. Most important is the way in which discussions of woman as Other have moved feminists into the realm of construction of gender identity. Indeed, two of the most prominent feminist theorists in this area, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, were inspired by Beauvoir and her celebrated "One is not born a woman" statement. Wittig notes that for lesbians, as for Beauvoir, "woman" is only a myth. Butler is freed from a heterosexual framework and envisions instead a "carnival of gender confusion" (Butler 260).

Why then is there such an enormous disparity between the way in which Beauvoir is viewed at home and abroad? Ironically, it seems to me that, once again, the mother-daughter relationship provides an answer. French feminists feel a closeness to Beauvoir in the form of a cultural similarity that compels them, in Chodorovian terms, to separate and individuate from the Mother she represents for them. Michèle Fitoussi, in her *Le Ras-le-bol des Superwomen*, takes Beauvoir to task, casting her in the "bad mother" role and characterizing her with the venom and sarcasm of a wronged daughter: "Tranquillement drapée dans ses certitudes et ses fameux turbans, elle donnait
mine de rien--le genre 'c'est pour leur bien'--le coup de pied de l'âne à des millions de malheureuses qui ne lui avaient rien demandé" (Fitoussi 141).

The criticism of the contrast between what Beauvoir said and what she did is a traditional criticism an adolescent child makes of a parent. American feminists seem less concerned with this contradiction—Who among us ever feels that she is constantly adhering to some arbitrary feminist model?—and they more openly cite and rely on Beauvoir. Clearly there are natural affinities that make this understandable, most notably Beauvoir’s call for equality between men and women that so resonates with pervasive American liberalism. But I think we can add to that the distance that exists between Beauvoir and American feminists, one which allows them to sidestep issues of separation and individuation and to view the celebrated feminist as, if you will, an indulgent "aunt."

It seems to me that as we feminists leave the twentieth century behind, we are compelled, once again, to look to Beauvoir as its most crucial figure. Appropriately, Simons and Benjamin say about their 1979 interview with Beauvoir for Feminist Studies, “we have no theoretical source of comparable sweep that stimulates us to analyze and relentlessly question our situation as women in so many domains—literature, religion, politics, work, education, motherhood and sexuality. As contemporary theorists explore the issues raised in Le Deuxième Sexe, we can see that in a sense all feminist dialogue entails a dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir. And a discussion with her can be a way of locating ourselves within our feminist past, present and future” (Simons 336). In short, for us as feminists, though we may wish to deny it, there truly is one Mother of us all.

WORKS CITED


ELIZABETH RICHARDSON VITI is a Professor of French and currently holds the Distinguished Teaching Chair in the Humanities at Gettysburg College, where she teaches in the French Department and the Women's Studies Program. Much of her work has examined Proust and his portrayal of women. Professor Richardson Viti’s book entitled *Mothers, Madams and Lady-like Men: Proust and the Maternal*, which provides a feminist reading of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, was published by Summa Publications in its Proust series (1994). Her interest in feminist scholarship has also led her to publish articles on pedagogy, such as “He Said, She Said: A Feminist Approach to Teaching the Twentieth Century Novel in the Twenty-first Century” (*The French Review*), as well as on women writers. “Colette’s Renée Néré: Simone de Beauvoir’s Existential Heroine?” has appeared in *French Forum*. A study of Annie Ernaux entitled “Passion simple and Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris: That’s MY Desire” is forthcoming in *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* and “P.S.: Passion simple as Post-Script” is forthcoming in *Women in French Studies*.