

## SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S LES BOUCHES INUTILES: A SARTREAN COCKTAIL WITH A TWIST

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For those of us who are ardent admirers of Simone de Beauvoir, criticism which questions her place as a committed feminist and original thinker is disturbing. Jean Leighton, in her study of Beauvoir's novels, autobiography, and Le Deuxième Sexe, claims that the author displays a paradoxical ambivalence towards women and that she equates them with passivity and dependence. Leighton asks, "Why should a liberated woman, the author of a brilliant polemical feminist document, fail to create in her novels a single woman who embodies the feminist ideal of independence, freedom of spirit, and strength of character?"<sup>1</sup>

But Leighton fails to consider a unique fictional work by Simone de Beauvoir entitled Les Bouches inutiles. In this little known and too frequently ignored play, one has a fine example of feminist writing and role models where the principal heroines are strong, independent, and authentic human beings. Despite their lack of political power, they utilize the only means they know to save their own lives: their voices, silence, and their influence with the men they love who dispose of their fate.

Leighton also maintains that "Simone de Beauvoir was exceedingly dependent on the opinions of Sartre"<sup>2</sup> and that "it is striking how Sartre dominates the couple, not only by his intellectual virtuosity, but also emotionally."<sup>3</sup> Les Bouches inutiles can also serve to counter this assertion of Sartrean dominance over Beauvoir. For although a close reading reveals the play's debt to Sartre's Les Mouches, a work which predates it by two years, one also finds resemblances between Les Bouches inutiles and Sartre's Morts sans sépulture, which follows Beauvoir's play by one year. It is more appropriate and fruitful, then, to explore the interdependence of their work rather than to see the Sartre/Beauvoir couple as yet another example of a female artist subjugating herself to a male artist/lover.

Secondly, a comparison of the female roles in Les Bouches inutiles and Les Mouches reveals a significant difference in Beauvoir's and Sartre's visions, a difference which can be broadly characterized as feminist versus sexist. This paper, then, will examine both these issues, dealing first with the similarities of situation and character in Les Bouches inutiles, Les Mouches, and Morts sans sépulture, and, second, exploring the feminist nature of Beauvoir's play. These analyses are unified by a common purpose: to respond to those critics like Leighton who would question Beauvoir's independent, feminist spirit, both in her relationship with Sartre and in her writing.

Some concrete examples will illustrate the interdependence of Sartre's and Beauvoir's theatre. From the beginning, the parallels between Les Mouches and Les Bouches inutiles are striking. Both take place in the distant past, Sartre basing his play on a Greek myth, Beauvoir basing hers on the Italian chronicles of Sismondi. The

cities of the dramas are threatened, Argos attacked by flies, Vaucelles besieged by the Burgundians and the ousted Duke, much as France had been under siege by the Germans at the time these plays were written. In both cities, the inhabitants are victimized by their government: Égisthe imposes remorse on the citizens of Argos, Louis and the council impose a death sentence on those citizens of Vaucelles they deem the useless mouths: the elderly, the handicapped, the women and children. But the people are saved from the injustices of their governments by the intercession of a young hero: Oreste in Les Mouches and Jean-Pierre in Les Bouches inutiles. Thus the basic outlines of these two plays are quite similar.

An analysis of character further illustrates the parallels between the two plays. At first, the heroes of the dramas choose disengagement: Oreste refuses to participate in Électre's plan of vengeance, and Jean-Pierre refuses to participate in the government of Vaucelles, stating: "No, I will keep my hands clean." <sup>4</sup> Neither Oreste nor Jean-Pierre has experienced love because both have always refused commitment, political and emotional. Both Georges, Clarice's brother, and Oreste find their sisters beautiful, and while incest is only hinted at in Les Mouches, Georges tries to take Clarice by force in Beauvoir's play.

The women of Les Mouches and Les Bouches inutiles also share significant character traits. Électre and Clarice are both ambitious but powerless young women, each a rebel against parental and governmental authority. Électre dreams of revenge and murder, but is unable to carry out her plan without Oreste's help. Clarice dreams of ruling Vaucelles, but can only find expression of her desire for control by choosing suicide over a death sentence.

In addition, both women refuse to acknowledge their likeness to their mothers. Clarice declares, "I am not like my mother." (p. 19) and Électre vehemently objects when her mother notes their similar features: "No! Don't say I'm like you!" <sup>5</sup> It is of interest to note that the same actress, a friend of Sartre's and Beauvoir's, was cast in these two roles.

But if Beauvoir's play owes much to Sartre's Les Mouches, Sartre is certainly influenced by Beauvoir in his rendering of the love scenes between Jean and Lucie in Morts sans sépulture. When Jean-Pierre in Beauvoir's play realizes that he loves Clarice after she is condemned to die, he declares: "This dreadful pain in my heart - it is you, Clarice - and yet, it is I. You are my life since I will die from your death." (p. 48) In Sartre's play, Lucie, a Resistance fighter, has been raped by collaborationists, and her lover Jean tells her: "This pain that escapes you is mine . . . It waits for you. If you come into my arms it will become **our** pain. Trust me . . . and . . . we'll bear everything together, even your death." <sup>6</sup> In both plays, then, the male lover seeks unity with his loved one through her suffering and death.

Furthermore, it is significant that in these two plays, love means sharing one's whole life, especially one's political commitment. Clarice asks Jean-Pierre, "How does one love on this earth?" and he replies, "Just by joining in a common fight." (p. 48) Jean and Lucie have shared their fight for France's freedom from German occupation and Jean

declares, "[Love] was our whole life, no more and no less than our whole life. Everything that happened, we went through together." <sup>7</sup>

Despite the similarities, Beauvoir's play differs in a significant respect from Sartre's. Its tone is feminist and women are assigned a role in defending their human rights. Virginia Fichera, in her article discussing this play, writes, "Les Bouches inutiles was an early exploration in the then relatively uncharted territory of modern feminism, and as such it contains the seeds of many of the most challenging and important debates of our modern and postmodern culture." <sup>8</sup>

The most important proponent of feminism in the play is Catherine, the wife of one of the three leaders of the ruling council. She is first introduced distributing her own food to the starving inhabitants of Vaucelles, not an isolated gesture of generosity. We learn that Catherine has also adopted two abandoned children and has participated actively in the affairs of the city. She has placed the first stone for the symbolic belfry and has sewn the flag flying above the City Hall. She believes in action and responsibility, themes dear to Beauvoir and Sartre. She urges Jean-Pierre to accept a position of power, stating, "Without our kind, this world would be faceless. It belongs to us to shape it with our hands." (p. 28)

Catherine's faith in government is profoundly shaken, however, when her husband Louis decides with the rest of the council to exile the women and children, the elderly and the sick, in order to feed the men of Vaucelles. She then becomes an adversary to the powers that be, accusing them of robbing her of her dignity: "I used to be a woman, and I am now nothing more than a useless mouth to feed. You have taken away from me more than my life. All that is left to me is the power to hate." (p. 38) She proclaims that those whom they call useless mouths are the flesh and blood of the city, and denounces the men for choosing life for themselves and death for the rest.

Later, alone with her husband, Catherine reproaches him for his betrayal: "Death is nothing, but you have erased me from the world." (p. 53) When Louis pleads with her to accept the council's decision, she replies: "Can I betray my own truth? . . . I was a free woman facing you . . . And now you have disposed of me as one disposes of a stone." (p. 53)

In order to prevent them from being separated, Catherine tries to kill Louis. Her desperate act finally causes Louis to reconsider his position. He calls another meeting of the council and proposes the same plan that was first suggested by Catherine: that all the townspeople unite to attack the Duke's army and either share in the victory or die together. The drama ends with the fate of Vaucelles unresolved. The citizens have finally eaten their fill and are prepared for the attack, ready to set fire to their city if they are defeated.

It is significant that in this work the actions of the women are confined to a non-political role. They are without representation on the ruling council, and are even excluded from addressing this body. Like women throughout history, they are forced to rely on the good will of their leaders, and when this fails, to use their influence in the personal sphere. despite these limitations, Catherine eloquently defends her right to

choose her own life, or, if necessary, her death, and refuses to accord her husband this ultimate power over her.

Catherine's impassioned speeches are the most successful moments of the drama. Her assertion of selfhood in the face of tyranny underscores the most significant difference between Les Mouches and Beauvoir's play. For while both Électre and Catherine urge the young heroes of the play to act, only Catherine ultimately remains true to her ideals and vision. Électre rejects responsibility for her participation in the murder of Égisthe and her mother and accepts Jupiter's proposition that she replace her mother as an example to the people of Argos of repentance. Électre incarnates bad faith, the refusal of the Sartrean ideals of freedom and responsibility, while the female characters in Beauvoir's play incarnate feminist ideals: active participation in community affairs and government, independence, and advocacy of cooperative action.

Thus, although Beauvoir's and Sartre's theatrical works are intimately connected on many levels - through similar situations and characters, philosophical themes of commitment and responsibility - Beauvoir's exploration of feminist themes and her representation of strong, independent women is a unique contribution to the genre. If, as Fichera laments, "the play does not present radical solutions because it fails to present new, collective action by women,"<sup>9</sup> this, I believe, is because Beauvoir's play was not meant to be utopic, but rather realistic. Certainly in the medieval society of the play's setting, but also in 1945 when the play was written, power **was** male, and women had not yet realized their potential for bringing about change and sharing power. This is still our challenge today. As Fichera so justly points out, Les Bouches inutiles illustrates the vulnerability of those whose interests are not safeguarded by equal, democratic representation.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Jean Leighton. Simone de Beauvoir on Woman. (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1975), 20.
2. Leighton, 210.
3. Leighton, 56.
4. Simone de Beauvoir. Who Shall Die? translation of Les Bouches inutiles by Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier. (Missouri: River Press, 1983), 22. Further quotations from this source will be indicated in the text.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre. No Exit and Three Other Plays. The Flies. translated by S. Gilbert. (New York: Random House, 1955), 70.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre. The Victors. Translation of Morts sans sépulture by Lionel Abel. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 253.
7. The Victors, 252-53.
8. Virginia M. Fichera, "Simone de Beauvoir and 'The Woman Question': Les Bouches inutiles." Yale French Studies 72 (1986), 54.
9. Fichera, 64.
10. See Fichera, 50-64, in particular 54 and 62.