“Tristan est un con,” exclaims Murielle in *La femme mouque* (1967) as she reviews all the failings of her ex-husband (92). The translation by Patrick O’Brian in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Woman Destroyed* (1969) reads “Tristan is a cunt” (94), giving the language of this timid yet angrily self-righteous middle-aged “bourgeoisie” a distinctly different tone. In thinking about the book she could write, Murielle says “mon livre serait plus intéressant que leurs conneries” (90), which the translation renders “my book would be more interesting than all their balls” (92). What is happening here? How do “conneries” (idiocies) become “balls,” and how does “con,” the common French slang term for “idiot,” become such a vulgar term in English? While it is true that “con” may once have been a neutral term for women’s genitals, both the English and French terms have been appropriated by conventional language and denigrated to such an extent that they can hardly be used in any literal sense, as feminist translator and theorist Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood has argued. This is one reason why the use of the English term here and elsewhere in the text is striking.

From the conventional perspective of textual equivalence the translation of “conneries” as “all their balls” is somewhat more puzzling than the translation of “con”; it is not even a literal translation. It maintains the
sexual nuance of the source text, yet skews the translation toward male sexuality.

This essay starts from the premise that every translation must change a text, a fact I accept. Translation as a textual operation that makes literary, scholarly, and pragmatic materials available across cultures is inordinately valuable; texts live on in translation, differently. The translation effect—the visible and verifiable changes a text undergoes in translation and the effect this has on its reception in a new culture—is, however, rarely discussed. I propose to focus on the translation of sexual terms and references to sexuality in a number of Beauvoir’s texts. I will examine the translation, compare it to the source version, comment on the effect it creates in English, and speculate on possible explanations for the changes.

Comparatively little has been written about the English translations of Beauvoir’s work. On the one hand this is surprising, considering the impact Beauvoir has had on postwar Anglo-American feminist philosophy and on the women’s movement. On the other hand, this state of affairs reflects the common approach to translated texts, which is to read and discuss them as though they had been produced in the translating language and to ignore the translation effect. While this tendency may be “characteristic of the insensitivity to translation common to members of all imperialist cultures,” as Sherry Simon has recently argued, it is also the source of numerous problems of reception.

The commentaries and analyses that do exist on Beauvoir translations can be divided into three main types: full-scale essays such as Margaret Simons’s work on Le deuxième sexe (The second sex) or Anne Cordero’s study of Mémoires d’une jeune fille ringée (Memoirs of a dutiful daughter); occasional endnotes or footnotes in articles by critics such as Toril Moi and Barbara Klaw; and references to mistranslations in more general works focusing on gender and translation. Most of the above address the issue from a feminist perspective, seeing an ideological patriarchal motivation in the apparent censorship and distortion of the source text. However, Terry Keefe’s brief analysis of Beauvoir’s 1972 interview with Alice Schwarzer, an expurgated version of which appeared in English in Ms. magazine in 1972 and was reprinted in New French Feminisms in 1980, takes a different tack: it points to a deliberate manipulation of Beauvoir’s text by the translator.
or publisher wanting to make her work attractive to mainstream American women. Keefe finds the translation distorted in questions “relating to sensitive and controversial matters of feminist ideology and strategy.” Among other things, Beauvoir’s socialist ideas as well as passages on lesbianism and women with children were deliberately censored, which, Keefe implies, may have served the purposes of a capitalist venture such as Ms. Thus while analyses of Beauvoir translations are sparse, they all point to more than just changes in the translated text; they imply that no change is innocent, but is part of a (sometimes deliberate) ideological or cultural agenda on the part of the translation/translator. This is a more recent twist on the truisms that every translation changes a text, and has been developed in some detail in contemporary work in translation and cultural studies. The basic idea is that translation is part of a process of creating meaning, the circulation of meaning within a contingent network of texts and social discourses. If this is so, then the cultural and ideological contexts in which a translation is produced and marketed will have an effect on the way a text is prepared, consciously or unconsciously, for the new audience. Further, the translator’s personality, identity, experience, and background will feed into the new text, also affecting the translated version.

Beauvoir’s oeuvre in English would doubtless benefit from a thorough contextualizing and analysis: Who translated her? When? For what reasons? Into what type of cultural setting? And who commissioned and financed the translations? Such an analysis might consider the translations of her work as materials produced, contingently, at a specific moment and for a specific purpose, and might incorporate an analysis of, say, the conditions obtaining in the United States publishing and culture industries of the early 1950s when large parts of Le deuxième sexe were deleted and sex scenes in Les mandarins were considerably censored. How much pressure was exerted by the publishers to accommodate American definitions of “perversion,” or did the translator simply conform to some internal censor? Such an analysis might also reveal what effect the British translations of most of Beauvoir’s subsequent work have had on the English versions, and on the reception of her work. And some light might be cast on the type of translation effects attributable to Patrick O’Brien, an author best known for his naval novels, who came to be Beauvoir’s most prolific translator. Finally,
such a study might investigate how Beauvoir’s almost exclusively male translators have consciously or unconsciously manipulated her texts, changing the voice and the perspective to reflect their own positions.

The present study of the translation of Beauvoir’s discourses on primarily female sexuality deals with a topic that Beauvoir addressed directly and indirectly in many of her writings, and that has been the source of some concern to feminist critics. I will use Toril Moi’s definition of the term “sexuality,” which strikes me as wide enough for the topics I need to address. She writes: “By ‘sexuality’ I understand the psychosexual as well as the biological aspects of female sexual existence, or in other words, the interaction between desire and the body.”7 Moi’s focus (and ostensibly Beauvoir’s) is on women, which will also be my focus; as we shall see, however, the male translator may confuse the issue substantially. I have divided the field into three types of discourse: sexual terms used as expletives to express anger and frustration in a text such as La femme rompue; descriptions of sexuality in the more scholarly writing on sexual initiation in Le deuxième sexe; and “romantic” sex scenes in Beauvoir’s fiction.

Why focus on the translation of sexuality at all? In doing so, I single out a field that is notoriously difficult to translate for reasons of cultural and generational differences—a cas limite that in some ways serves as a test of translation. One important reason is that anglophone Beauvoir scholarship has repeatedly turned to issues of sexuality and female eroticism in her work, and as Jo-Ann Pilardi shows, much of this scholarship has been critical of Beauvoir’s “patriarchal” views on sexuality.8 While such criticism may not derive entirely from the translations, they play a not negligible role in establishing the reception of Beauvoir in English. A second reason for focusing on sexuality is the importance of this theme in women’s writing after Beauvoir, as well as the importance of the discussions that were raised over the translation of erotic writing by women. While translations of women’s attempts to “write the body” in French écriture féminine may offer the most obvious examples of translation difficulties and cultural differences in this domain,9 more standard forms of erotic writing by women have also proven difficult to transfer from one culture to another. Issues such as self-censorship and different target culture sensibilities and traditions serve to inhibit the translator.10 Returning to Beauvoir allows us to peruse the translations of a comparatively early writing of women’s sexuality.
From the Mouths of Angry Women

The "Monologue" from *La femme rompue* is a loose stream-of-consciousness text spoken by Murielle, a forty-three-year-old bourgeoisie who is spending New Year's Eve alone. She is slightly off-balance and anxious about the impending New Year's Day visit by her son and ex-husband. She vacillates between vicious anger, self-pity, nostalgia, self-righteousness, hatred of her friends and family, and self-destructive behavior. Over the course of her monologue, we discover that her seventeen-year-old daughter, Sylvie, committed suicide some time ago; her second husband has left her, taking their son with him; her mother accuses her of having driven Sylvie to her death; and she is painfully lonely, although she hears and reacts angrily to the sounds of partygoers in the apartment above her and out on the streets.

The monologue is studded with crude references to sex. It is vulgar and intense. Murielle's fixation on sex—in this case mainly the sexual encounters that she imagines others engaging in—is an important refrain in the text and underscores her apparent distaste for sex. This distaste can be traced to childhood experiences such as standing in a crowd on Bastille Day, "pressée entre leurs corps juste à la hauteur de leur sexe." It can also be seen in her references to her mother, whom Murielle suspects of engaging in incestuous sex with Nanard, Murielle's brother, of seducing Murielle's husband, and of paying for gigolos. Her anger is particularly visible in a passage where she links her mother's alleged lack of cleanliness with her lasciviousness; she says "elle ne se lavait pas ce que j'appelle se laver quand elle faisait semblant de se doucher c'était pour montrer son cul à Nanard" (105). Finally, railing at the party atmosphere in the streets and in the apartment house where she lives, Murielle angrily spells out what she sees as the purpose of these goings-on: sex; "ils le feront cette nuit même dans la salle de bain même pas allongés la robe retroussée sur les fesses suantes quand on ira pisser on marchera dans le foutre comme chez Rose" (91). Her tone is vicious, and expletives with sexual content are her self-lacerating weapons.

The English translation by Patrick O'Brian does not clean up Murielle's language. It does put a curious twist on it, though, which heightens its coarseness. Indeed, as in the example of the translation of "leurs
conneries” as “all their balls,” the translation masculinizes the language with numerous references to male sex organs. The translations of the citations above shall serve as examples of the new emphasis in the text brought about by the use of male-centered imagery and uninformed or derogatory references to women.

But first, a curiously male reference that sets the tone early in the piece: “I’ll make a cock of it” (90). In this passage, Murielle is worried about the next day’s visit with her son and ex-husband, and says “je raterai mon coup” (88). O’Brien, the translator, has presumably abbreviated the British term “cock-up,” meaning “mess” or “failure,” where he could well have written “I’ll make a mess of it.” He thus provides North American and British readers with a term that unmistakably connotes male genitals. This becomes a tendency of the translation: the crucial sentence where Murielle describes her childhood experience in the crowd of a July 14 event is even more indicative of a translation effect. The line “pressée entre leurs corps juste à la hauteur de leur sexe” is translated as “squashed between them just at prick level” (90, emphasis added). While this might be justified in that it underscores Murielle’s apparent aversion to heterosexual sex, the translation again reveals a male perspective. Beauvoir’s text clearly refers to both men and women; it goes on: “dans l’odeur de sexe de cette foule en chaleur,” in no way indicating that this is a crowd of only men, but a crowd of people in heat. The translation “randy crowd” does not convey Murielle’s crude reference to humans in the throes of animalistic physicality, a recurrent topic in Beauvoir’s writing on sexuality.

O’Brien’s use of the verb “to stuff” deserves mention. He uses it to translate “se coller des Boules Quiès mentales dans les oreilles” when Murielle’s family “stuff” earplugs into their ears to stop her nagging voice; to translate “me fourrer mes trucs dans le cul” when Murielle debates whether to insert the suppositories that her doctor has prescribed; and to translate the verb “baiser,” whose tone in this text would probably best be reproduced by the English “fuck.” Occasionally, O’Brien avails himself of the euphemistic and more friendly “make love,” but not once does he use “fuck” where the vehemence of Murielle’s monologue would warrant it. Again, the focus is male; in vulgar British parlance, men “stuff” women, and the translation evokes intercourse from an aggressive male perspective. Murielle says, “les nuits de fête où tout le monde rigole buffé et baise les
solitaires les endeuillés ont le suicide facile” (99). O’Brian translates this as “everybody laughing gorging stuffing one another”; in a later passage on the “youth of today,” “ça s’entre-baise” (108) becomes “they stuff one another” (110). While an argument could be made that “stuff one another” at least has something reciprocal about it, it nevertheless remains a euphemism—and maintains a male slant. Might an English-speaking Murielle of that generation have selected the same euphemism?

Barbara Klaw has commented on the weakening of certain vulgar references to sex in Leonard Friedman’s translation of Les mandarins (1954; The mandarins, 1956). She points out that in French, Nadine, the teenage daughter of one of the main woman characters, is quite bold and crude. Talking about her relationship with boys, she says to her mother, “Comment veux-tu que j’aie des histoires avec des types si je ne baise pas.” 12 In English this statement becomes “How do you expect me to have affairs with guys if I don’t go to bed with them?” (373). Klaw suggests that this should read “if I don’t fuck.” 13 Here, the toning down elides the effect of Nadine’s crude discourse, a crucial aspect of her relationship with her mother and an element that reveals her own cynical and alienated condition. Though decades and cultures apart, both translations are thus reluctant to put the word “fuck” into a woman’s mouth. O’Brian occasionally uses “fucking” as an adjective, but generally the solution is to take refuge in euphemisms or, as in La femme rompue, in semantic choices from a clearly masculine repertoire.

Finally, in two of the passages about Murielle’s mother as an incestuous femme fatale, the translation seems oddly ill-informed, rendering the text far more crude than Beauvoir’s. Setting the scene, O’Brian translates “son bordel de chambre” (89) as “her brothel of a room” (91), going to the surface meaning of “bordel” and ignoring the colloquial, though aggressive, use of the term: “messy.” The sexual slurs Murielle utters about her mother thus appear justified when the mother is literally set in a brothel. Murielle’s envy of her brother Nanard is evident in her comment “ça lève le coeur les mères avec leurs petits mâles” (89). In the translation, this becomes “it makes you really sick mothers with their little male jobs” (91). The term “jobs” is interesting here, evoking a tool or an instrument rather than a “little man.” It renders the already heightened (brothel) scene more squalid. Similarly, the translation of the passage cited above, “quand elle faisait semblant de se doucher c’était pour montrer son cul à Nanard” (105), makes
for an extremely debauched scene in English. O’Brian renders it as “when she pretended to use a douche it was only to show Nanard her backside” (108). In this version the mother does not take a shower, which would fit with the preceding comments on her lack of cleanliness, but performs a contraceptive operation in full view of her son.

It is easy to criticize translations. It is difficult to translate. Keeping this qualification in mind, it is still appropriate to point to the substantial effects that an apparent (and perhaps unconscious) male bias can have on a work such as Beauvoir’s *La femme rompue*. Its vulgarity is heightened through literal translations and male sexual imagery, references to women’s sexuality are misunderstood or misrepresented, and an aging bourgeois starts sounding like a British sea captain.

**The Terms of “Sexual Initiation”**

H. M. Parshley’s translation of *Le deuxième sexe* (1949; The second sex, 1952) has been extensively criticized for the way the text was selectively abridged. Although Parshley wrote in his preface that the changes do not “involve anything in the nature of censorship or any intentional alteration or omission of the author’s ideas,” it has been shown that this claim is doubtful. However, we also know that Parshley worked under considerable pressure from the publisher Knopf and their attorneys to shorten and censor the text, and that he cut the text reluctantly. While his translation of the chapter on sexual initiation in *The Second Sex* is in many ways painstakingly exact, the abridgements require commentary. Further, Parshley’s tendency to render Beauvoir’s language more polite by softening some of the coarser expressions is an important translation effect. Finally, his understated or poeticized translations of women’s experiences substantially alter the tone of the entire text.

The third chapter of volume 2 deals with a girl’s initiation into heterosexual sexuality, a traumatic event as Beauvoir describes it and one that she says contrasts significantly with the relative ease, clarity of purpose, and means with which young men experience sexual initiation. For girls, sexual initiation is fraught with pain, confusion, uncertainty, and danger. The interplay between a woman’s psychological and physical conditions, the effect that her upbringing and social conditioning have on her sexual
responses, and the importance of the context within which she experiences sex are discussed at length. Beauvoir’s analysis relies heavily on examples drawn from Wilhelm Stekel’s *La femme frigide*, a French translation from German of a psychoanalyst’s findings.\(^8\)

The translation is not heavily abridged, but those elements that have been cut are of some importance. Beauvoir incorporates lengthy statements by women patients and descriptions of sexual encounters that she has culled from Stekel’s work. These are often narratives told in the first person or accounts that include direct quotes from dialogue by the patients. For example, when Beauvoir argues that a woman’s frigidity can be the result of psychological suffering about her abnormal or “ugly” body, she cites and paraphrases Stekel’s patients: “Toute jeune fille porte en elle toutes sortes de craintes ridicules qu’elle ose à peine s’avouer dit Stekel. . . . Une jeune fille par exemple croyait que son ‘ouverture inférieure’ n’était pas à sa place. Elle avait cru que le commerce sexuel se faisait à travers le nombril. Elle était malheureuse que son nombril soit fermé et qu’elle ne puisse y enfoncer son doigt. Une autre se croyait hermaphrodite. Une autre se croyait estropiée et incapable d’avoir jamais de rapports sexuels.”\(^9\) The translation paraphrases Beauvoir and considerably abbreviates the passage: “According to Stekel, all young girls are full of ridiculous fears, secretly believing that they may be physically abnormal. One, for example, regarded the navel as the organ of copulation and was unhappy about its being closed. Another thought she was a hermaphrodite” (382). Of particular interest is Parshley’s removal of the naive “ouverture inférieure,” just as later in the text more vulgar expressions such as “tu as un grand trou” (143) are eliminated. In contrast to O’Brien, and in accordance with this more scholarly text, Parshley avoids all colloquial terms for genitalia. By doing so in these quotes from dialogues and patients’ accounts, he strikes the individual woman from the narrative, making it a more academic treatise. In the passage above, the deletion of the reference to the girl handling or exploring her body, seeking to introduce her finger into her navel, removes the personal element from the text. It makes it less descriptive, more scholarly and detached. Subsequent accounts by Stekel’s patients are also abridged to eliminate the subjective aspect. For instance, hurtful comments and situations that have rendered women sexually unresponsive and that they recount verbatim—“tu m’as trompé, tu n’es plus vierge,” “comme tu as les jambes
courtes et épaisse, “Mon Dieu, que tu es maigre” (143)—appear in elegant summary in the translation. Parshley writes, “her husband accused her of deceiving him in regard to her virginity,” “another husband made uncomplimentary remarks about how ‘stubby and thick’ his bride’s legs were,” “her husband brutally deplored her too slender proportions” (382). The politer, more literary formulations, here emphasized, as well as the quotation marks around “stubby and thick,” indicate Parshley’s distance from the text and, perhaps, his distance from such discourse. He reproduces the gist of these hurtful comments in a different language register, substantially undermining Beauvoir’s point.

Such abridgements can have a more sinister effect. In several cases, the young women in question come across as coy, hypocritical, or hypersensitive, rather than wounded or insulted. In a section where Beauvoir discusses the danger of pregnancy as a reason for women’s lack of sexual response, she cites the case of a young girl, pregnant at nineteen, who “démanda à son amant de l’épouser; il fut indécis et lui conseilla de se faire avorter, ce qu’elle refusa. Après trois semaines, il se déclara prêt à l’épouser” (159). The woman “punishes” her lover with frigidity for three weeks of “torment.” Parshley’s translation deletes the man’s callous suggestion that the woman have an abortion: “becoming pregnant, she demanded marriage, but her lover hesitated for three weeks before acceding. She could not forgive him the three weeks of anxiety” (393). It is incomprehensible why this crucial piece of information should be deleted from the text, since it is vital to understanding the full extent of the woman’s pain or torment (translated here as mere “anxiety”). Was abortion a greater taboo in 1950s America than in 1949 France or 1920s Austria, where the citation originates? In any case, the deletion of this brutal suggestion by the lover makes the girl’s frigidity appear as a hysterical, exaggerated reaction.

Another example shows how the use of the English passive voice can remove the subject of the action and render a woman’s decisions invisible. Again referring to the danger of pregnancy, Beauvoir writes: “Dans le mariage même, souvent la femme ne veut pas d’enfant, elle n’a pas une santé suffisante, ou il représenterait pour le jeune ménage une trop lourde charge” (149). Here the woman does not want a child because she is not strong enough or is worried about the economic burden this would represent. In the translation, the fact that such decisions need to be made and
often are made by the woman is deleted through use of the passive voice and through elegant condensation: “And even in marriage a child may not be desired, for reasons of health or economy” (387). The woman’s agency and her decision-making powers clearly written into the text by Beauvoir are removed through the translation. The female agent along with her concern for her own health and the couple’s ability to support a child disappears.20

In *The Second Sex*, almost all of the citations from Stekel or other psychoanalysts and sexologists have been abridged or rendered more literary, and the same applies to Beauvoir’s own writing. On several occasions Beauvoir refers to sexual arousal in men as “le rut” (131, 134, 147). According to a number of dictionaries, this term is applied exclusively to animals and refers to the period in which mammals are in heat. At each occurrence of the term, the English translation finds a way to soften the animalistic connotations: “sex excitement” (372, 375) and “masculine passion” (386). These euphemisms significantly understate Beauvoir’s ironic commentary on the social and cultural representations that assign splendor and heroism to men’s rut while ignoring or shaming women’s interest in sex.

A similar situation arises when Beauvoir discusses contraceptive methods and their inhibitive effect on women’s sexual interest. Beauvoir describes the woman having to “courir au cabinet de toilette pour chasser de son ventre le germe vivant déposé en elle malgré elle” (149). She argues that this postcoital technical operation puts a considerable damper on a woman’s desire to participate in sex. She continues with an enumeration of the necessary gear: “La répugnance pour la poire à injection, le bouch, le bidet est une des causes fréquentes de la frigidité féminine” (149). Again, the translation skirts the issue, rendering the situation less demeaning and thereby undermining Beauvoir’s argument: the woman “takes measures to rid herself of the living sperm” (387), she doesn’t “run to the toilet,” and the technical equipment becomes simply “the apparatus of injection and cleansing” (387).

There doubtless are reasons for these changes. Are they due to a certain reticence on Parshley’s part? To American prudishness or modesty? This may be debatable if we consider that Mary McCarthy’s novel *The Group* appeared only a year later and included graphic descriptions of struggles with contraceptive gear. The important point is, however, that the
translation effect renders Beauvoir's point far less concrete, less tangible, less credible.

Other minimal changes in the translation reinforce this tendency to understate the text: women's "refus" (133) to have sex becomes their "disinclination" (374); the fact that they may "se refuser à l'homme fait" (137) is transposed as women "avoid[ing] grown men" (377). Beauvoir's reference to the verb "baiser" as a vulgarity (134) is completely left out in the translation (375). Finally, a passage in which Beauvoir develops a description of a young woman as "une chose de chair sur laquelle on tiraite a prise" (143) is considerably weakened when this image of a "girl as a thing of flesh to which anyone can lay claim" is not translated at all (382). The deletion further weakens the subsequent point about a girl's physical experience of being handled and "livrée au mâle" (144); when Parshley translates this as "she is in his power" (382) rather than "she is delivered up to the male" he presents the situation as a fait accompli rather than a painful process in which the woman is handed over.

A final point in Parshley's translation has been briefly addressed in Toril Moi's Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman.21 Parshley's multiple translations of the term "aliénation" reveal what Moi describes as his "tendency to lose sight of the philosophical aspect of Beauvoir's arguments." On the topic of women's experience of true sexual arousal Beauvoir writes, "le désir du mâle est violent et localisé, et il le laisse ... conscient de lui-même; la femme, au contraire, subit une véritable aliénation. . . . Cette fièvre la délivre de la honte" (155). She expands this idea later in the text, again stressing the notion of alienation: "On a déjà dit qu'elle désire en se faisant objet demeurer un sujet. Plus profondément aliénée que l'homme, du fait qu'elle est désir et trouble dans son corps tout entier, elle ne demeure sujet que par l'union avec son partenaire" (162). As Moi explains, the terms "aliénée" and "aliénation" are crucial to Beauvoir's philosophical idea that posits woman as a being divided against herself; here, she is both the object of the man's purposeful sexual activity and the subject of her own sexual interest and response. Moi writes of Beauvoir casting women as "subjects painfully torn between freedom and alienation" (153), a condition that seems exacerbated or particularly visible at moments of sexual involvement.
In the translation, “aliénée” and “aliénation” read “being beside herself” (397) and “really los[ing] her mind” (391), creating the impression that a woman in the throes of sexual intercourse goes slightly mad. The translation errs on the side of literalness and dictionary meaning, erasing Beauvoir’s philosophical overtones and casting women as inherently mentally unstable. Its “effect is clearly to divest [Beauvoir] of philosophy and thus to diminish her as an intellectual,” as Moi points out. But Moi comments insightfully, “the sexism involved in this process has more to do with the English-language publisher’s perception and marketing of Beauvoir as a popular woman writer, with all the stereotypes that implies, than with the sexism of individual translators.” Moi’s comment does not apply only to this “aliénation” example; she is responding to the more general charge that Parshley, the translator, was deliberately sexist. I would say that his sexism was cultural, an effect of his time, and greatly tempered by his learning and his scholarly aims. Nonetheless, the effect of the mistranslations and deletions, whether unconscious or deliberate, is felt on a number of levels: the text becomes less concrete, drawing less support from the narration of actual human experiences; it loses the personal, subjective element provided by these narrations and reads like an abstract, scholarly work; through the deletion of vulgarities and colloquialisms related to sex, it sacrifices liveliness and becomes drier, more tedious, though perhaps more tasteful. Finally, the misinterpretation of key terms such as “aliénation” causes important slippages of meaning. And yet, as Yolanda Patterson has pointed out, Parshley accomplished an enormous task in translating this work; it is the reader’s job to remember that The Second Sex is a translation, and a translation is inevitably a different text.

(De)Sexing the Sex Scenes in Beauvoir’s Fiction

Beauvoir’s fiction is not studded with sex scenes. Indeed, it is quite a project to locate scenes where she evokes or describes “the interaction between [sexual] desire and the body,” as Moi’s definition goes, rather than the interaction between desire and the intellect. In the three works I have looked at—L’invitée (1943; She came to stay), Les mandarins (1954), and Quand prime le spirituel (When things of the spirit come first); a collection of early
texts published by Gallimard only in 1979)—sex scenes and sexual desire are present, but are often expressed elliptically or used as the material for much intellectual agonizing.

*L'invitée* describes the attempt by an intellectual couple to set up and live a ménage à trois of sorts with a young, sexually inexperienced woman. It traces the development of this complicated relationship to its murderous end. The charged atmosphere of constantly changing allegiances and attractions where sexual desires, uncertainties, and jealousies as well as social inhibitions clash is the stuff of much discussion between Françoise and Pierre, the older couple, and between Xavière (the younger woman) and Françoise or Pierre. Xavière’s young lover, Gerbert, who is also Pierre’s student/disciple, appears tangentially and becomes important only when Françoise manages to seduce him.

Sex is obviously an issue in the text, but it functions primarily as a factor in the power struggles between the characters. For Pierre, it is often the source of condescending remarks: having made a play for the sexual favors of Xavière and persuaded her to kiss him, he describes her lying in his arms “avec un air de total abandon.”

He, of course, is in complete control. For Françoise, things are more complicated. On the one hand her virtually platonic relationship with Pierre is important to her; on the other, she finds Xavière as well as the idea of a threesome attractive. Sex with Gerbert is a passing holiday fancy that confirms her powers of sexual attraction and conveniently annoys Xavière, bringing on the close of the story. Homoerotic desire between Françoise and Xavière is evoked though never consummated; its possibility, however, places Françoise in a more vulnerable position than Pierre. In the end, the reality of the threesome turns out to be psychologically untenable, precisely because sex is hardly engaged in yet is constantly available as a cudgel in the relations between the characters. An incident that demonstrates the psychological (self) abuse this instrument can trigger occurs when Françoise, overwrought and ill, is in the hospital; Pierre recounts his evening with Xavière, concluding that “elle aime bien ma conversation, mais elle souhaite les baisers d’un beau jeune homme,” upon which “Le déplaisir de Françoise s’accentua; elle aimait les baisers de Pierre. Est-ce qu’il l’en méprisait?” (213). A throwaway comment by Pierre, admittedly preceded by a blow by blow account of his evening with Xavière, quickly takes on a painful and destructive meaning.
for Françoise, deepening her uncertainty and suffocating any sexual élan the text might develop.

The first American edition of *She Came to Stay* is derived from the British version first published in 1949 and presumably translated by Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse. It follows the source text closely, and there is little in the way of translation effects in its rendering of the understated sex scenes. At times, a certain impatience with Beauvoir’s reticence becomes evident in the translation, as does a desire to provoke the reader by concretizing the activities being described. Thus, Pierre’s comments about Xavière’s “air de total abandon” is translated as “she lay in my arms in a state of complete surrender” (299). These two versions conjure up two different situations—in the French, Pierre knows there are histrionics involved in Xavière’s “air of total abandon”; in the English, Pierre believes he has conquered her—her state (not air) is one of complete surrender. Meanwhile it is clear that they have spent the evening only “necking,” as the translation of “embrasser” reads, and there has been no consummation. The English version may thus render somewhat more believable Pierre’s aggressive reriminations when he confronts Xavière about her relations with Gerbert (358; 328). Another example of the English concretizing the allusive French occurs when Pierre and Françoise speculate on Gerbert’s possible interest in Xavière. Françoise comes to the conclusion “je suis sûre que Gerbert ne lui fait pas la cour” (213). The English version renders this as “I’m sure Gerbert isn’t making love to her” (195), significantly confusing the issue because the actual lovemaking occurs much later in the text.

In regard to Françoise and Xavière’s relationship, the homoerotic interest also remains understated and vague in French: Françoise “sentait contre sa poitrine les beaux seins tièdes de Xavière, elle respirait son haleine charmante; était-ce du désir? Mais que désirait-elle?” (271). These questions are never answered clearly but are touched on in several ways, notably one page earlier when the two women go to a dance hall together. Xavière holds Françoise’s arm because “elle ne détestait pas quand elles entraient dans un endroit, qu’on les prit pour un couple” (270). The English translation of this line reads “she did not dislike having people take them for Lesbians when they entered a public place” (246). Although the English version maintains the double negative of “elle ne détestait pas,” thus also maintaining the careful approach to the subject, it is impatient, less euphe-
mistic, in its rendering of “un couple” as “Lesbians.” It pushes the text along, stating more precisely what Françoise spends considerable time agonizing over. Similarly, when Elisabeth, Pierre’s sister, tries to shake off the memory of her physical passion for Claude, a former lover, by proclaiming “on ne m’a pas comme ça . . . je ne suis pas une femelle” (75), she implies that she can control her physical reactions to his embrace. The English substantially overstates this assertion: it reads “I’m not to be had like that . . . I’m not a bitch.” Not only is the overstatement striking—a “femelle” is not a “bitch”—but the tone changes dramatically. “Bitch” in English generally refers to a bad-tempered, unpredictable, nagging woman, not a sexually responsive female. Moreover, the animalistic and/or biologic connotations of “femelle” that are important to Beauvoir’s theories about women’s socially determined sexual inhibitions are replaced by a derogatory masculinist interpretation.

In Quand prime le spirituel (1979), translated in 1982 by Patrick O’Brien as When Things of the Spirit Come First, the situation is similar. Few sex scenes, few references to sexuality, much earnest demonstration of women’s psychological and emotional initiation to their lot in life. The one scene of heterosexual intercourse on Marcelle and Denis’s wedding night occurs early in the first story. While large parts of the translation follow Beauvoir’s text closely, there is some tendency to use expressions that again foreground male sexual imagery—“les mains impérieuses [de Denis]” (28) becomes “masterful hands” (32), for example, and terms describing Marcelle’s physical rush take on a curiously penile aspect: “so piercing a pleasure” (32) for “une jouissance si aigüe” (29), “a jet of passion” (33) for “un transport passionné” (30), and “a shame whose stab was sweeter than the sweetest caress” (32) for “une honte dont la brûlure était plus douce que la plus douce des caresses” (28). On the whole, however, the translation reads as blandly as the French source text. For instance, the abortive lesbian sex scene in Quand prime le spirituel (240) is rendered in a tone similar to Beauvoir’s French. It is experienced and described by Marguerite, Marcelle’s younger sister, who is staying overnight with Marie-Ange: “elle [Marie-Ange] caressait ma poitrine” (241), she reports, choosing the euphemistic “poitrine” (chest/bust) over “seins” (breasts). The English reads “she fondled my bosom” (206), using a curiously Victorian term, doubtless an appropriate counterpart for the French euphemism.
The story is somewhat different in *Les mandarins*. Two graphic sex scenes occur early in the book, helping to situate the characters in relation to each other and to themselves; a love affair in Chicago receives some attention; and Nadine, the teenage daughter, keeps up a constant patter of sexual innuendo and information. The sex scenes involve Paule and Henri, a couple with a tenuous ten-year history who are on the verge of a breakup that Paule tries to stall with sexual histrionics (25); Anne, the psychiatrist, who agrees to have sex with Scriassine, a Russian "émigré" and political activist, partly in order to compete with her daughter Nadine's hyperactive sex life (72); and Anne and Lewis Brogan, who actually make passionate love (327). While these encounters are described more graphically than similar scenes in *L'invitée*, they are a miniscule part of the book, which is much more concerned with postwar politics and the positions held by French intellectuals. The fact that two graphic sex scenes occur within the first hundred pages of the five-hundred-page tome probably is one reason why it made it onto the list of books banned by the Catholic Church shortly after its publication in French.

The American translation considerably understates the sexual content of the cynical and passionless encounters early in the book as well as the passionate love scenes between Anne and Brogan. Censorship for cultural reasons is doubtless involved, as Barbara Klaw has pointed out. Citing Beauvoir's memoirs, Klaw refers to a talk Beauvoir recorded with the American publisher in which he said he "was happy with the translation of *Les mandarins* but apologized for having to cut some lines here and there: 'in our country, one can talk about sexuality in a book,' he explained to me, 'not about perversion.'" 25 It is interesting, however, that while actual descriptions of sex are toned down, and all references to oral sex are cut out of the translation, the imagery around the event is often heightened. For instance, in the course of Henri's dutiful lovemaking with Paule, he thinks "en elle il faisait rouge comme dans le studio trop rouge" (26). The English reads, "inside her it was red, a deep dark red as in the too-red living room" (30). The "deep dark red" is a melodramatic addition to the text, perhaps compensating for more lurid details that were censored for a mid-1950s American reading public. Similarly, in the Anne-Scriassine love scene, oral sex is censored (74; 83) but the baroque description of Anne's psychological response to this event is heightened: "j'allais échouer dans l'oubli, dans la
nuit” (73) becomes “about to be stranded in oblivion, in the blackness of night” (81). Here, the added “blackness” of the night deepens the color of an otherwise rather pallid adventure.

It is inevitable that translation should change the way a text reads, yet it is odd that translations of Beauvoir often render the woman characters’ roles or language slightly more vulgar. The love scene between Paule and Henri, for instance, emphasizes the routine aspects of their lovemaking: “il embrassa la bouche brûlante qui s’ouvrit sous la sienne selon la routine ordinaire” (23). The fact that the reference to this “routine ordinaire” is placed at the end of the French sentence increases its visibility and importance. In English, the focus is on Paule’s demands rather than on the tired aspects of their lovemaking: “he kissed her burning mouth which, as always, opened greedily at the touch of his lips” (29). The adverb “greedily” clearly has been added to the text, a good example of a translation effect that imports the traditional topos of women’s sexual insatiability and ignores the source text perspective. Later in the book, when Anne debates which man she might contact for companionship during her remaining week in the United States, she knows she has sex on her mind. Perplexed at her motivation, she says, “je me suis considérée avec scandale: je n’ai pas eu Philippe, alors je vais me jeter dans les bras de Brogan! Qu’est-ce que ces moeurs de femelle en chaleur?” (310). Like Elisabeth in L’invitée, she compares her interest in sex to that of a mammal in heat, but does not desist. The translation reads, “I looked inside myself and felt ashamed: I couldn’t have Philip, so I was going to throw myself into Brogan’s arms. What about those morals of a bitch in heat?” (332). Not only does this version turn the “scandale” into “shame,” thus introducing a moralistic note not evident in the French, it again renders “femelle” as “bitch.” The terminology is coarser, and the rhetoric more judgmental. Interestingly, in counterpoint, male sexuality is treated rather differently. In the scene between Paule and Henri, Henri tries to ignore Paule’s histrionics, yet they are so disconcerting that “il lui semblait violer une morte ou une folle, et il n’arrivait pas à se délier de son plaisir” (26). Henri is so put off he is physically unable to come to a climax. In the translation, Henri has no such trouble: “It seemed to him as if he were raping a dead woman, or a lunatic, and yet he could not keep himself from enjoying it” (30). This is an odd reading, especially given the context, which makes it clear that Henri is complying with Paule for old
times' sake, because he feels sorry, and he wants to get it over with as soon as possible. There is no enjoyment. Does the translation tell us something about 1950s male culture in the United States? Or is it an innocent mis-translation?

It is interesting to compare and analyze translations; in the work of comparing we see the many problems raised by cultural and linguistic transfer. However, to identify these problems is in no way to solve them. In the case of Beauvoir translations into English, and more specifically, the translation of sexual terms and references, issues of cultural sensitivity are encumbered by issues of gender stereotyping and cliché, perhaps made more severe by the fact that Beauvoir's translators were almost all men.26

What conclusions can be drawn, then, beyond the obvious one that a translation produces a different text? And how much of an impact can be assigned to the translation effects that I have identified? Does a translation that injects pleasure into an act clearly presented as unpleasurable reveal a motivation on the part of the translator? Or is it a mistake that anyone translating a text of more than five hundred pages could make? If the mis-translation of Henri's experience with Paule is innocent, it stands in contrast to other aspects of these translations, in particular those dealing with women's sexuality. The vulgarization of these aspects of the texts—the issue of the "douche" in The Woman Destroyed, the translations of "femelle" as "bitch" in The Mandarins and She Came to Stay—the systematic masculinization of sexual terms, and the use of censorship or euphemisms in English certainly indicate that writing and rewriting that explores or thematizes women's sexuality comes up against ingrained cultural beliefs. On the other hand, the tendency in English to get to the point and to concretize French euphemisms may contradict such an assertion. It is likely that the era in which the translations were completed affects how they read: the 1950s American translations by Friedman and Parshley are more likely to use euphemisms and to censor passages that might be viewed as perverted or vulgar, while a text such as The Woman Destroyed, produced in the Britain of 1969, uses more sexually provocative, though often misogynist or sexist, language.

This conclusion reflects my consternation at the changes I found in the English rewrites of Beauvoir. It will perhaps motivate careful reconsideration of other aspects of Beauvoir's work in English.
Notes

5. Ibid., 20.
8. Pilardi, “Feminists Read *The Second Sex*.”
9. Canadian writers and translators have discussed this issue at some length due to the intensive translation work that was triggered by feminist “writing the body” from Quebec. Gail Scott (1989) surmises that some of the difficulties in transferring erotic or sexualized material from French to English may stem from the difference in consciousness and conscience—the French Catholic writer can work with the notion of absolution in the confessional in the back of her mind while the more puritanical and rigid Anglo-Protestant has no such recourse. Other debates over these issues have been aired in a 1984 issue of *Yale French Studies*, addressed in terms of a critical problematic in collections such as *The Future of Difference*, ed. H. Eisenstein and A. Jardine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983), analyzed subsequently by Bina Freiwald in “The Problem of Trans-lation: Reading French Feminism” in *Traduction Terminologie Reédition* 4.2 (1991): 55–68, and discussed at some length by Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 86–110.
11. Beauvoir, *La femme romande*, 88. Further references to this novel, as well as to the translation (*The Woman Destroyed*), will be given in the text. Since my point is to offer critical analysis of how Beauvoir has been translated, I will not automatically cite the standard published English translation after each French citation.
16. Patterson, “Who Was This H. M. Purshley?”
17. Moi repeatedly comments on Beauvoir’s simplistic and sanguine view of male sexuality; see *Simone de Beauvoir*, 148ff.
book is strictly limited to members of the medical profession, Psychoanalysts, Scholars and such adults who may have a definite position in the field of Psychological or Social Research." It may give some indication of an attitude still prevalent in 1950s America that motivated some of Parshley's abridgements.

19. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 142. Further references to this and to Parshley's translation will be given in the text.

20. Feminist analyses of English grammar, for example in Mary Daly's *God/\ Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), have repeatedly pointed out the use of the passive voice to hide the agent of a particular action. Here the female agent is eliminated.


22. Ibid., 281, note 19.

23. Beauvoir, *L'inévitée*, 327. Further references to this and to the translation will be given in the text. In cases where two references are given together, the first refers to the French edition and the second to the English translation.

24. Although the first American edition closely follows the British version closely, it diverges occasionally. For example, it understates the sexual activity between Gerbert and Xaviere that the voyeuristic Pierre and Françoise comment on: In the American version, the two are suspected of "necking"; in the British version, they are "making love." Yet the American version overstates such activity in other places, notably in the translation of "faire la cou"; the British version reads, "I'm sure Gerbert isn't making up to her"; the American says, "I'm sure Gerbert isn't making love to her." Finally, the American version is also more aggressive about Françoise's lesbian fantasies: "she did not dislike having people take them for Lesbians." The British version reads, "She did not dislike having people take them for a couple." Overall, it seems that the American version is more outspoken and direct; only the use of the term "necking" would contradict this. But both English-language texts are far less ambiguous and careful than the French.


26. Such a statement is obviously a controversial generalization; however, several instances in Canadian translation practice and criticism have shown how male translators simply do not see or do not understand certain slight differences that are important to the women writers they translate, or for the women characters. The most famous example is F. R. Scott's translation of Anne Hébert's *Le tombeau des rois*, Hébert had to point out to Scott that his translation of "En quel songe / Cette enfant fut-elle liée par / la cheville / Pareille à une esclave fascinée?" as "In what dream / Was this child tied by / the ankle / Like a fascinated slave?" ignored the fact that "this child" was a girl.