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The Grand Rectification: Review of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier.

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The Grand Rectification

The Second Sex

By Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 776 pp., \$40.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Meryl Altman

confidence, enlightenment, and pleasure. Which is a good thing indeed, because the challenges Beauvoir issued to thinking women everywhere are not only still relevant but more urgent than ever. I hope this new translation will encourage scholars who may have hesitated to work with or quote from a text that was known to be poorly translated to revisit *The Second Sex*, or perhaps to take it seriously for the first time, and that it will also give Beauvoir's thought a new afterlife for readers well beyond the academy.

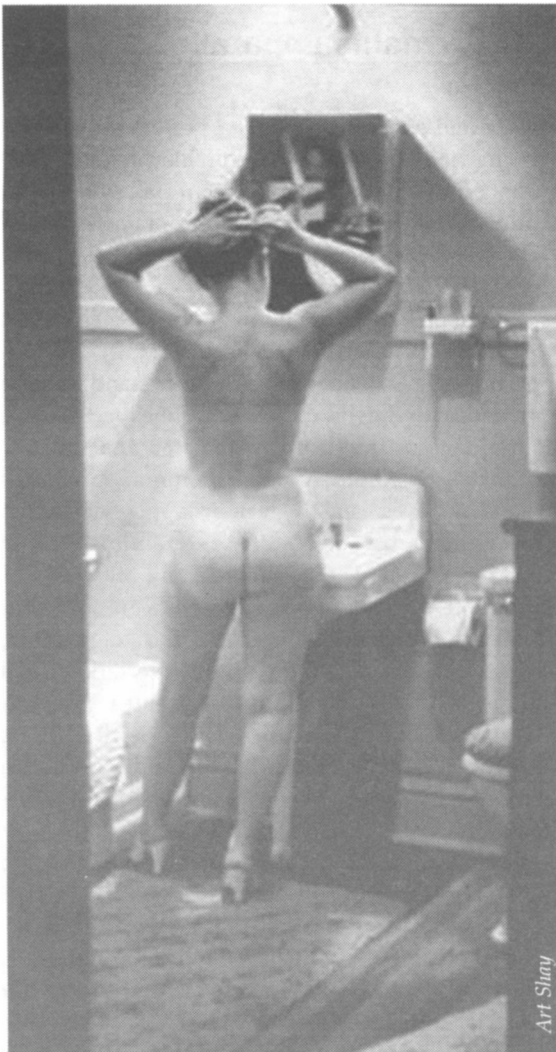
Many may wonder why the editors chose, not a philosopher or other Beauvoir scholar to translate *The Second Sex* but rather, these two, who describe themselves as activists and language teachers, and who don't seem ever to have taken on such an ambitious project before. But in some ways I think the choice was a good one, since Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have no particular professional stake in what Beauvoir "really meant." Each of us, of course, wants to be as faithful as possible to Beauvoir—that is to say, to *our* Beauvoir,

“The new translation isn't perfect. How could it be? But it's very much better and can be read with confidence, enlightenment, and pleasure.”

The integrity of this new translation matches the earnest purpose with which the book was originally written: to account encyclopedically for just about every impasse women face and to point a way out of them, as Beauvoir says, “towards independence.” Parshley may have meant well; but he felt he knew more than Beauvoir did on a variety of topics, and betrayed that condescension not only through cuts and distortions but also in occasional knowing asides, totally at cross-purposes to Beauvoir's points. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier, in contrast, have attempted to be faithful, down to a microscopic level. Their insistence on minimizing the truth that every translation involves interpretation reveals some of the impossible, intractable problems that any translator faces; and they have sometimes made things unnecessarily harder for themselves (and for readers). But their systematic choices were made with integrity and are explained clearly in an honest and transparent way.

It seems particularly praiseworthy that they resisted the temptation to modernize and create a sort of “*Beauvoir pour nos jours*”—by changing “he” to “he or she,” or “sex” to “gender” for example. That would have damaged our ability to read Beauvoir historically and to sift out what continues to be valuable. In addition, in the case of “sex” versus “gender,” it would not always have been clear when to use which term. While Beauvoir's work helped second-wave feminists see the difference between “natural” sex and socially constructed gender, she herself never formulates the distinction in those terms. To impose it anachronistically would have obscured more than it would have illuminated.

for there are many. Some (though not all) of what Moi, in her review, labels “errors” look like errors based on Moi's own interpretation of Beauvoir's work—an interpretation I find brilliant, but that's not the point. Beauvoir's theory is rich enough to have generated controversies about how to interpret it. (For instance, she has been accused both of paying too much attention and of not paying attention enough to differences between men and women.) Academically based translators would undoubtedly have been more opinionated, and people who teach *The Second Sex* regularly (as I do) might have succumbed to the temptation to “help Beauvoir out” by inserting a word here, a gloss there. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have remained admirably and responsibly neutral throughout.

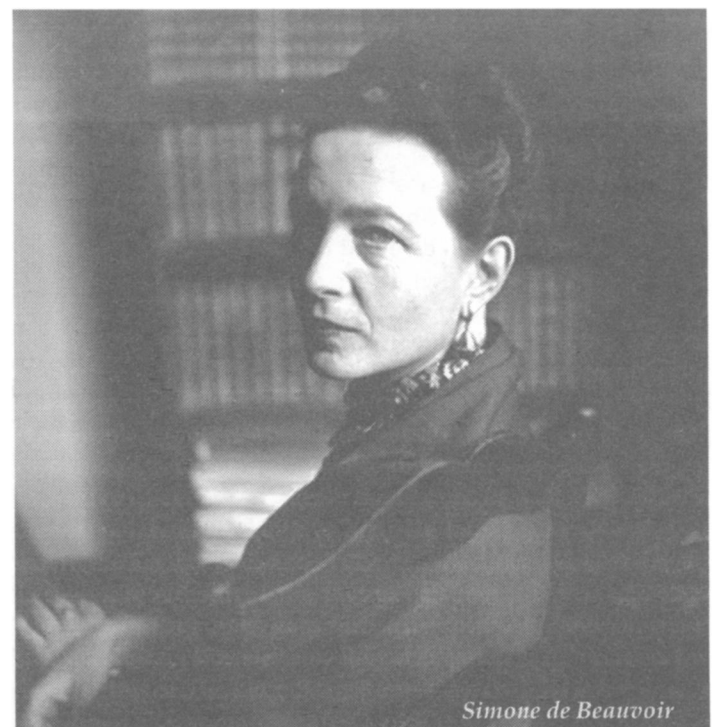


Simone de Beauvoir in a Chicago hotel room, 1952.

It was a scandal of modern intellectual misogyny. For almost sixty years, the major work by the major feminist philosopher and thinker of our time, Simone de Beauvoir, could be read by Anglophones only in a translation that silently deleted some fifteen percent of the text; that carelessly mangled philosophical terms, garbling the argument; and that distorted Beauvoir's position on a number of other things that have turned out to matter rather badly, such as her attitude toward maternity, her acknowledgment of the historical contributions of women, and her attention to material conditions. Now, thanks to agitation by scholars such as Margaret Simons and Toril Moi, journalists such as Sarah Glazer, and (I'd like to think) feminist bookbuyers everywhere, we at last have the Grand Rectification. Translators Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier have brought us an English version that, in their words, will “say what Simone de Beauvoir said as close as possible to the way she said it.”

But the controversy is not over. Toril Moi, who did so much to alert us all to the flaws in H.M. Parshley's 1953 translation, has expressed her keen disappointment with the new version in the *London Review of Books* (February 11, 2010). Other scholars and common readers have weighed in as well, and by the time you read this, there will undoubtedly be a sheaf of conflicting reviews.

The new translation isn't perfect. How could it be? But it's very much better and can be read with



Simone de Beauvoir



I wish I could say the same for Judith Thurman's breezy and patronizing introduction, which seems aimed at a popular audience. Thurman is the author of *Secrets of the Flesh* (1999), a pretty good biography of Colette (and more recently of a delightfully wry piece in a recent *New Yorker* about shopping for wrinkle cream). Philosophers may feel one of their number would have been more suitable. But Beauvoir does not belong exclusively to the philosophers, and the choice of a biographer of Colette—whose influence throughout *The Second Sex* is as pervasive as Hegel's—makes some sense. The problem is that Thurman doesn't seem to have taken her task especially seriously. She rightly celebrates the fact that the original translation of *The Second Sex* reached a broad, nonacademic audience and became highly influential. But she makes the old dismissive move of reading Beauvoir's thought through her biography, emphasizing especially her relationships with men; rehashes some clichés; adopts a surprisingly judgmental tone; and seems unaware of recent scholarship.

Where the translators leave it up to us to decide which parts of the book are outdated, Thurman rushes in:

[Beauvoir's] single most famous assertion—"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman"—has been disputed by more recent feminist scholars, and a substantial body of research in biology and the social sciences supports their argument that some sexual differences (besides the obvious ones) are innate rather than "situational."

Oh really? Since Thurman provides no footnotes, it is hard to know exactly who or what she means, but the blanket statement hardly describes a universally accepted feminist view. Thurman continues,

Instead of rejecting "otherness" as an imposed cultural construct, women, in [recent feminist scholars'] opinion, should

“Beauvoir's honest lucidity about the way class and race loyalties are impediments to female solidarity is hardly outdated. Her discussion of the predicament of the adolescent girl, who is condemned to be seen rather than to do (and which includes a reflection on what we now call eating disorders), remains unparalleled.”

cultivate it as a source of self knowledge and expression, and use it as the basis to critique patriarchal institutions.

If that sentence is meant to direct us to the “new French feminists” of a few decades ago, it's worth remembering that Beauvoir lived long enough to encounter, and dismiss, that rather dangerous bout of silliness. But Thurman is less interested in arguing through any of these positions than in establishing the book's appeal to a middlebrow audience, suggesting that younger readers might best appreciate it as a “personal meditation.”

This is help *The Second Sex* does not need. Young readers will find Beauvoir speaking quite directly to questions they actually have, for instance, “Is feminism over?” and, “Can I be a feminist without denying that being a woman is important to me, and that biology matters?” Beauvoir's honest lucidity about the way class and race loyalties are impediments to female solidarity is hardly outdated. Her discussion of the predicament of the adolescent girl, who is condemned to be seen rather than to do (and which includes a reflection on what we now call eating disorders), remains unparalleled. It is not superfluous to be reminded that the cult of normality is what she calls an “*ersatz de morale*,” an “*ersatz morality*,” whether one locates that cult in Freud (as Beauvoir does) or in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, where it now lives. She makes a good, still relevant case for what might be called “romantic” feminism—that is to say, that equality might make relationships between men and women better, rather than worse. And I think it is still worth reflecting on how Beauvoir might have answered the question the psychologist Virginia Valian has formulated as “Why So Slow?”:

As long as perfect economic equality is not realized in society and as long as customs allow the woman to profit as wife and mistress from the privileges held by certain men, the dream of passive success will be maintained in her and will hold back her own accomplishments.

Despite the unmistakable fact that this is a work of serious philosophy, ordinary women readers will frequently meet themselves in these pages—and in this translation, will meet themselves more sympathetically. For instance, at the end of the chapter on “sexual initiation,” the new translators have, “Not all women agree to give their sexual problems the one classic solution officially accepted by society.” Parshley had, “Not all women are able and willing to solve their sexual problems in the standard fashion, the only manner approved by society.” Indeed, many of us *don't* accept the “standard fashion”—marriage—and not because we can't, whatever Parshley may have thought. In some cases, the translators have restored a feminist

vigor and energy to the text: I prefer “the principle of marriage is obscene” to Parshley's “marriage is obscene in principle,” which leaves open the possibility that in *practice* there may be nothing obscene about it at all—which may be true, but it's not what Beauvoir meant.

Although I am very familiar with *The Second Sex*, the new translation freshens certain sections, particularly that on myth. And our standpoint has moved with time in curious and unexpected ways. The parts of the biology chapter dealing with prenatal development and nonhuman animals, at which my eyes used to glaze over, now looks much more interesting in light of the feminist science studies of Anne Fausto-Sterling and Marlene Zuk. Beauvoir's discussion of what we would now call “intersexuality” no longer seems like a digression.

Another happy feature of this translation is that in restoring all the long quotations, it restores the feeling of thinking-with, writing-with, Colette, Sophie Tolstoy, Wilhelm Stekel, and a myriad of other creative and scientific writers. Pruning the quotations obscured the function of *The Second Sex* as a minianthology and eliminated the feeling of “thick description.” In the chapter on the married woman, for instance, we were deprived of apt quotations from Virginia Woolf, Gaston Bachelard, James Agee, Francis Ponge, Dorothy Parker, and Colette Audry (whose work deserves to be better known)—as well as the statement that “the poetry of housework has been highly praised,” and a rather lovely discussion of jam-making. Some of the quotations are tragic, some are unpleasantly clinical, some are surprisingly funny—and taken together, they create the sense that women's “lived experience,” while it has some shared aspects, is varied and multifaceted. Beauvoir was careful to supplement her own experience with other voices; muting those voices changed the texture of what she wrote, giving her account the feeling of a polemical, isolated harangue.

That undergraduates and other newcomers will continue to find the book hard going is inevitable—*The Second Sex* is not a work you can skim through on the stairmaster while watching Tyra. But then, reading Parshley wasn't easy, either. The difficulty arises in part because of the cultural allusions: Who was Clovis? Who was Montherlant? Who was Veronica Lake? The new version does not even pretend to help us out: it is a translation and not an annotated edition, and while Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have occasionally supplemented and in some places corrected Beauvoir's sporadic footnotes, to really do that job would have taken another five years.

The greatest difficulty posed by Beauvoir's text, though, continues to be her (French, intellectual) tendency to provide long, ironic but precise paraphrases of views she is about to reject. Beauvoir took on a vast array of cultural myths and assumptions only to overturn them—or at least, to mostly overturn most of them—and to show that they are socially contingent rather than

ontologically or naturally necessary, though none the less socially powerful because of that. The temptation to clarify by constantly inserting "are thought to" or "are seen as" is one the translators rightly resisted. No translation can make this easier to unknot, and I don't think it's a good idea to try.

But is the new edition readable? Is it accessible? Is it elegant? Above all, is it clear? Since I felt poorly placed to judge the last question (after all, I already know what it says), I photocopied a few chapters from both versions and dragooned a random set of students and friends into comparing them. One of the seniors in my feminist theory class wrote,

The language in the new translation is less daunting and formal than the old one. In my opinion, it also flows much more seamlessly and logically.... As a student, I think that the new translation is a lot more accessible, and it provides a stronger foundation on which to build as one continues reading.

Another student wrote,

I was able to grasp difficult theoretical ideas rather easily in this translation. Chapter 3 was especially good ... the first time I read this piece, it was hard; the language was clunky and "old," and it made me tired to read it; I didn't want to put this one down.

In contrast, an English department colleague wrote, "As I compared the paragraphs to Parshley, the older translations struck me as clearer. A bit old-fashioned in phrasing, but more consistent and stately." Tastes differ. And some of us may miss Parshley's wording just because it is familiar to us.

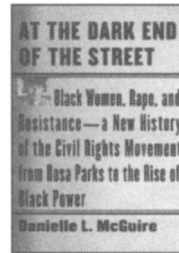
As I said, the new translation isn't perfect. There are tricky situations where Borde and Malovany-Chevallier acquit themselves with admirable dexterity, but others where I found myself wanting to blue-pencil sentences that were more awkward than necessary, sometimes because of cognates or sequence of tenses and moods, more often because of word order. Sometimes when they had to choose between "his" and "its," or "hers" and "its" (French doesn't make the distinction), I would have made the opposite call. There were three or four times I had to go back to the French to figure out what was going on. And there are some "howlers," although perhaps no more than are to be expected in a work of almost 800 pages. Moi is right when she points out that "viol" should be "rape" not "violation of law" (they make this error once but get it right elsewhere); the couple in John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* live in an abandoned boiler, not a "jalopy"; "cadet" almost certainly means "younger brother," not "cadet." Most of these don't matter much but all of them—plus a fair number of what seem to be typos—should be corrected in the next printing.

Another friend, an experienced translator largely unacquainted with feminist theory, felt bothered by what he called "translationese," especially an over-reliance on cognates: "sentiment" rendered as "sentiment," rather than "emotion" or "feeling"; *signification* as "signification" rather than simply "meaning"; and so on. He went on to say, "*une fuite inauthentique*" is perfectly clear in French, but 'an inauthentic flight' is not clear English: we would say 'an easy way out' or something like that." He's right, and using the English idiom is just the sort of thing Parshley would have done with this key existentialist phrase—and that's why Parshley's version erases and garbles the philosophical terminology.

How strongly the "translationese" bothers you may depend on your taste and what you care about. For instance, "We are shown women solicited by two kinds of alienations; it is very clear that to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap." The first part of the sentence does take a moment to decode. However, the translators were right to use the technical term "alienations," so that we can see that this point is connected to Beauvoir's discussion of alienation elsewhere. They could probably have improved upon "solicited." But could anyone really misunderstand what Beauvoir is saying here? The sentence puts paid to those who are still saying, "Why bother with Beauvoir? She was just a liberal feminist who thought women should imitate men"; yet should also give those who see *Sex in the City* as the best kind of up-to-date "empowerment feminism" something to chew on. I'd hate to see people deprived of that insight, and feminism deprived of that renewed conversation, because a reviewer's preference for different diction discouraged them from buying the book.

Borde and Malovany-Chevallier leave us in no danger of forgetting that we are reading a translated work. But is that so very bad? Some translation scholars now argue that a "foreignizing" version, which preserves traces of the translator's labor and a sense of the distance meaning has to travel from one language, culture, time, and space to another, is actually to be preferred to a

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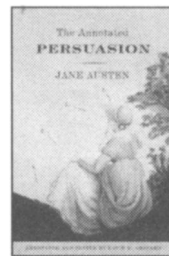
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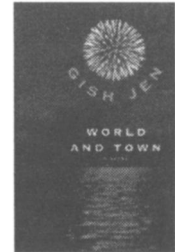


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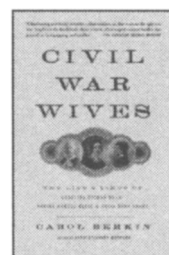
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“domesticating” one, which aspires to cancel out or wish away that distance. I think there’s a good case for “foreignization.” The aim of translating this text was not to help us forget that Beauvoir was not an American and lived in a different time, or to make us think, “Wow, she’s just like us.” In fact, there’s a long history of problematic readings of Beauvoir based on the assumption that she either was, or should have been, “just like us”—ranging from arguments that she sings the praises of marriage, *écriture féminine*, or the “ethic of care” to howls of betrayal about her failure to anticipate 1970s analyses of lesbianism and race. Whether Borde and Malovany-Chevallier did it on purpose or not, the feeling of slight estrangement induced by (among other things) preserving Beauvoir’s paragraphing and punctuation was probably a good idea.

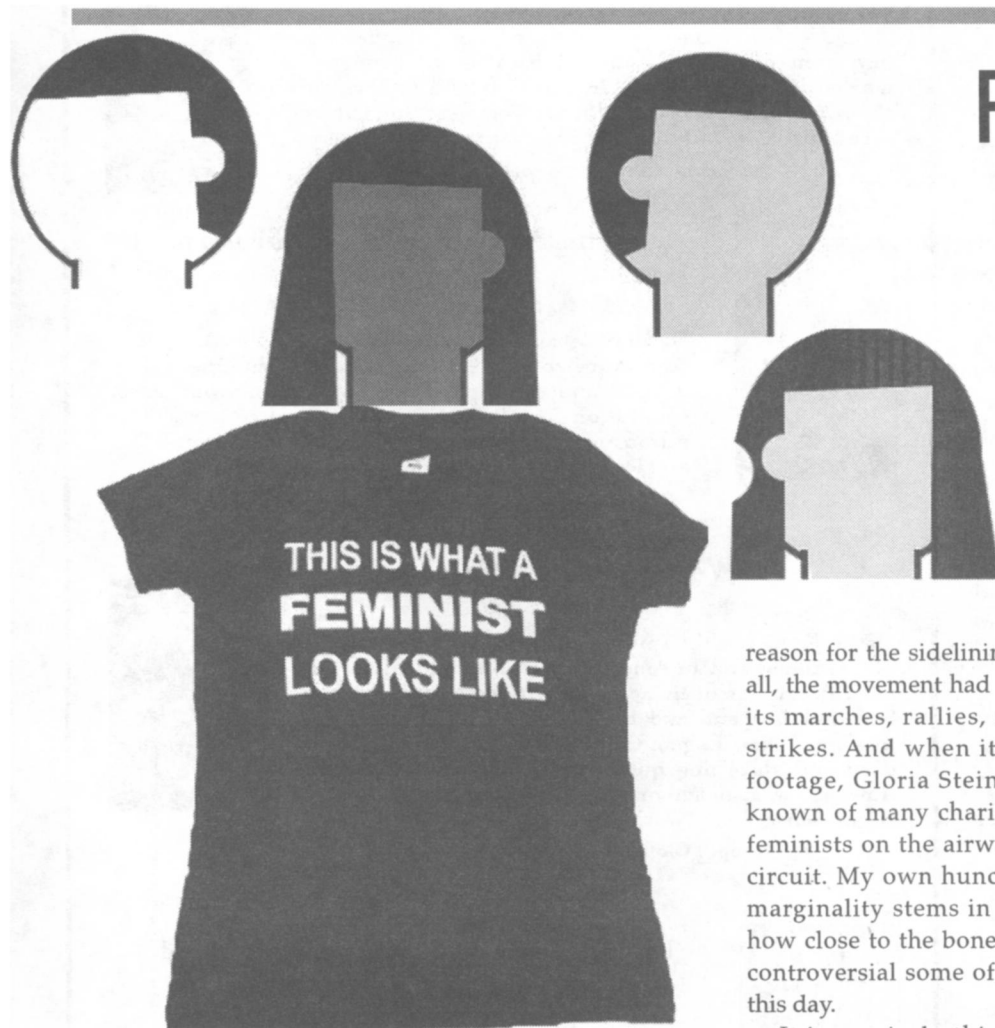
Different translations have different audiences and different purposes. When I work with classical texts, I use the Loeb editions, which have the Greek on one page and an English version on the facing page that sticks closely to the original. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have produced something like the English half of a Loeb Beauvoir. Parshley was doing something different: trying to turn Beauvoir’s text into one ordinary Americans would buy. An accurate, word-by-word account, though, is what scholars and students have urgently needed. We may not agree with everything we read in it, but at least we’ll know we’re disagreeing with Beauvoir, not her translator.

Wouldn’t it be great, though, also to have a series of commentaries to *The Second Sex*, like the ones we have for Plato and Herodotus—or, for that

matter, James Joyce—which would go through the book line by line, clarify allusions and other opacities, adduce parallel texts from other works by Beauvoir, perhaps quote relevant passages from Heidegger or Merleau Ponty, and identify competing readings by subsequent scholars? These might not raise the same copyright issues as another full edition, and they might be fun to do. But for now, we have a reliable English version on which such commentaries and other scholarship in English can be based. That’s a significant step forward and a remarkable achievement.

So if you’re one of those people who always meant to read *The Second Sex*—why not now? 📖

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Feminist Mothers and Daughters

The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present

By Christine Stansell

New York: Modern Library, 2010, 528 pp., \$36.00, hardcover

Reviewed by Alice Echols

Feminism transformed the world—split it wide open, to paraphrase the title of one terrific history (*The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*, by Ruth Rosen [2006 revised]). Yet for all its shattering changes, in today’s culture, the history of feminism is little known outside the world of academic specialists. Feminists of the sixties and seventies are now often dismissed in the same terms in which their foremothers were—as prudish and racist. Indeed, when it comes to the movements of the “long sixties,” feminism trails behind the black freedom movement and the New Left in the number of scholarly monographs, popular books, and serious documentaries it’s generated. It’s true, of course, that much of the drama in feminism’s story took place behind the scenes—in bedrooms, kitchens, and workplaces—and the combat was largely verbal. But surely this cannot be the sole

reason for the sidelining of feminism. After all, the movement had its public moments—its marches, rallies, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. And when it comes to newsreel footage, Gloria Steinem is only the best known of many charismatic and eloquent feminists on the airwaves and the lecture circuit. My own hunch is that feminism’s marginality stems in some measure from how close to the bone it cut and how very controversial some of its causes remain to this day.

It is precisely this diminishment that Christine Stansell seeks to rectify in her beautifully written, indeed sublime, new book. *The Feminist Promise* is not the first effort to counter the near negligibility of feminism’s history. But what sets Stansell’s history apart is its unflinching honesty, intellectual ambition, and unusually broad scope—from 1792 to the present. Her decision to begin with Mary Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution that inspired her not only makes this something of a transatlantic story but is also critical to Stansell’s argument—which is that feminism’s origins lie in the democratic surges of the French (and the American) Revolution. In contrast to feminist theorists who focus on the shortcomings of liberal democracy, Stansell argues that however blinkered its vision, and however dedicated to women’s subordination, liberal democracy nonetheless enabled women’s political aspirations. Feminism, she says, really is democracy’s “younger sister.” Beginning with the “wild wishes” of

Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* also allows Stansell to reveal that the ironies and tensions usually associated with twentieth-century feminism have a much longer history. Whether it’s the sort of feminism that’s made queasy by actual women or that asserts the meaninglessness of gender only to fall back upon apparently bedrock gender differences, it’s all there in Wollstonecraft.

The Feminist Promise does not contribute to the “re-waving” of American feminism that some scholars have advocated. (The period between the 1930s and the 1950s remains feminism’s lost years in this account.) But Stansell’s interventions—her examination of feminism’s unexplored corners and the themes she presses—are significant, original, and potentially field-changing.

For one, she contends that American feminism is marked by tensions between the politics of the mothers—cautious and pragmatic in an effort to improve women’s condition without upending the status quo—and the politics of the daughters—daring and visionary in their determination to move as freely through the world as they imagine men do. Although Stansell, like other historians of feminism, has been associated with the politics of the daughters, it is often the mothers who capture her empathic imagination. This generosity does not extend to Gilded Age suffragists, who receive an understandably scornful response, but it does to second-wave liberal feminists, who are in many ways the heroines of this narrative. When it comes to employment and