Commentary

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Simone de Beauvoir has been an inspiration to many of us who came of age during the heady days of second-wave feminism—a movement that was touched off by the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949 and its subsequent translation into more than three dozen languages. Perhaps that is why I cannot say just when I became aware of Beauvoir, both her life and her work. It cannot have been at the all-girls' school I attended in suburban Australia, where we learned French from a Frenchwoman—known to us, in the way of girls' schools of that era, simply as "Madame"—and who set Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) for us to read. But I do recall it was in Japan that I first read Beauvoir—her *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, during the summer holidays of 1982, the year I was an exchange student at Tsuda College. The other day I opened my battered copy for the first time in many years and was interested to see that it was translated from the French by the British poet James Kirkup (1918-2009), who taught English in Japan for more than thirty years.[1]

A sense of how important Beauvoir was to Japanese intellectuals began to dawn a few years later, when I briefly studied French again, this time at Japan Women's University. After an introductory semester of grammar, we were set an abridged version of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, complete with explanatory notes in Japanese, to read. Our teacher was a Japanese man, who had participated in the student protests of the late 1960s—in Paris or Tokyo or perhaps both, I no longer recall—and, now faced with classrooms of apolitical young women, would occasionally attempt to shake us out of our somnolent apathy by reminiscing about the dramatic struggles he had experienced and the liberated way in which he and his friends had sought to live. "We were Sartre and Beauvoir!" he would exclaim. "We would live and die for love and never let convention tie us down!"

[1] Kirkup's translation of *Mèmoirs d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958) was first published by André Deutsch and Weidenfield & Nicholson in 1959. Rpt. Penguin Books, 1963. For details of Kirkup's career, see the obituary by Glyn Pursglove and Alan Brownjohn in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/16/obituary (accessed 19 May 2019).

Thanks to Julia Bullock's paper today, as well as her several published essays,[2] we know a great deal more about where my French teacher was coming from, and just how widespread that view of the Sartre-Beauvoir partnership was among left-leaning intellectuals—the antithesis of the ideal of married domesticity that, as Jan Bardsley showed in her paper today, was modeled by Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko during the same period.

Given the inherent conservatism of the imperial institution—indeed, of any hereditary monarchy—it's worth noting that present members of the imperial family continue to demonstrate a profound commitment to the radical pacifism of Japan's postwar constitution. Forbidden to comment on politics though they are, their decision no longer to visit Yasukuni Shrine since the controversial enshrinement in 1978 of fourteen Class-A war criminals nonetheless speaks volumes. (The last visit to Yasukuni Shrine made by a member of the imperial family was that of the Showa Emperor in 1975.)

So—the years passed, and one day I found myself preparing a course about Japanese women's writing for undergraduates in the School of International Liberal Studies at Waseda. Students' common language would be English: all readings would be in English and our discussions would also take place in English. Searching the shelves of my office, I was delighted to come across a copy of Beauvoir's essay "Women and Creativity," a translation of the lecture "La femme et la création" that Beauvoir gave in Japan when she and Sartre visited in 1966.[3] The translation appears in a collection edited by Toril Moi (b. 1953) entitled *French Feminist Thought*; looking at it again took me straight back to my graduate student days, when so-called "French feminism" was a big thing.

In "Women and Creativity," delivered to an audience at Hibiya Public Hall on September 22, 1966, Beauvoir suggests answers to questions about women as artists and writers that continue to plague us today. It's the perfect catalyst to spark discussion at the beginning of a course focusing on women writers. The main question Beauvoir seeks to answer is why—and I quote from Mallaghan's English translation here—why "the achievements of women in every sphere—politics, the arts, philosophy, etc.,—have been, in terms both of their quantity and of their quality, inferior to the achievements of men." (p. 17)

Whatever we might think of this view today, Beauvoir finds it a useful position from which to launch her polemic. She ranges widely, drawing upon Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the examples of Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966), and Japan's own Murasaki Shikibu, who

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[2] Julia C. Bullock, "Fantasy as Methodology: Simone de Beauvoir and Postwar Japanese Feminism," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* no. 36 (2009): 73-91; "From 'Dutiful Daughters' to 'Coeds Ruining the Nation': Reception of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in Early Postwar Japan," *Gender and History* 30.1 (2018): 271-285.

[3] "Women and Creativity," translated by Roisin Mallaghan, in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp.17-31. Another translation, by Marybeth Timmerman, appears in Simone de Beauvoir, *Feminist Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmerman (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp.155-169. Ursula Tidd's "Introduction" to this translation, pp.149-154, provides much useful context.

she describes as "your great writer" (p. 26) and *The Tale of Genji* as "the greatest work in the world, I believe, written by a woman." (p. 27)[4]

First, Beauvoir argues, "it is absolutely fallacious to claim that the opportunities of men and women have been equal over the last twenty years." (p. 18) Women may have entered the professions, but there are few of them, they earn far less than men, they are tied down by domestic drudgery, etc.—it all sounds horribly familiar, doesn't it—and therefore "the professional mediocrity of women can be explained by a wide range of circumstances which are a product not of their nature but of their situation." (p. 21)

Second, Beauvoir goes on to argue that "the internal conditioning of women is much more important in explaining the limitations of their achievements than the external circumstances." "Everything," she states, "conspires to encourage the young boy to be ambitious, while nothing encourages the young girl to be likewise." Beauvoir uses as an example here the famous passage in Murasaki Shikibu's diary, where "she tells how when her brother was studying Chinese he had difficulty learning the Chinese characters, while she was able to master them very quickly indeed; and her father said…what [a] shame that she is not a boy!" (pp. 26-27)[5]

As for the adult world, Beauvoir observes, "this world is a man's world, the important decisions, the important responsibilities, the important actions fall to men." (p. 27). More than half a century later, *how little has changed!* we might ourselves observe. Beauvoir continues: "Women live on the side-lines of this world…they are used to being spectators, and this is a privileged position for anyone who wants to write." (p. 27) This is why, Beauvoir argues, "there are a large number of important and successful works by women." (p. 28) The examples she gives are Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, and *La Princesse de Clèves* by Madame de La Fayette.[6]

And yet, Beauvoir goes on to argue, "both these women…remain fundamentally in agreement with the society of their time." Whereas "truly great works are those which contest the world in its entirety" and "this is something which women just do not do. They will criticize, they will challenge certain details; but as for contesting the world in its entirety—to do that it is necessary to feel deeply responsible for the world." (p. 28)

At least as far as *Genji* is concerned, one sees what Beauvoir means: Murasaki Shikibu subtly criticizes the workings of power at court, she undercuts even her hero's pretensions,

[4] The complete French translation of *Genji* by René Sieffert (1923-2004), *Le Dit du Genji*, was not published until 1977-1985. Presumably, then, Beauvoir's knowledge of *Genji* was derived either from a reading of Arthur Waley's English version, published 1925-1933, and/or the partial French translation by Yamata Kikou 山田菊 (1897-1975), published in 1928, and based on the first volume of Waley's translation that comprised the chapters "Kiritsubo" through "Aoi."

[5] In English, see Richard Bowring, trans., *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1996), pp.57-58.

[6] Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne (1634-1693), countess of La Fayette. *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) is an historical novel set at the court of Henri II (1519-1559; r. 1547-1559), in which most of the characters, except for the Princess herself, are real people, and all the anecdotes relating to court life are true. In English, see the translation by Nancy Mitford (1950), revised by Leonard Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1978).

but she does not "contest the world in its entirety"—by which Beauvoir seems to mean live dangerously like Van Gogh or Giacometti. Of course, I cannot agree with Beauvoir that this makes Murasaki Shikibu's tale less than "truly great."

At the end of her lecture, Beauvoir talks about creativity. "People have a totally erroneous view of the nature of creativity," she argues. "They conceive of it as some sort of natural secretion; the artist, the writer, will produce works of art just as the cow produces milk." (p. 31) But creativity is much more complex than that, she goes on to explain. "Creativity is…conditioned by all aspects of society." (p. 31) And because women have always been conditioned by traditional models, their circumstances entirely different from men, it's understandable that their achievements so far have been inferior to that of men.[7]

Beauvoir concludes her lecture with a rousing call to action:

> I want women to realize…that it is because they have not had a real chance that they have not done more; that if they fight for greater opportunities, they are at the same time fighting for their own achievements. (p. 31)

I hope that my short summary of one of Beauvoir's 1966 lectures in Japan has at least suggested how productive it is to discuss with students. To give an example from my own experience, one of the points that someone in the class will always make is that the conditions that deter and prevent women from achieving more are also problems for underprivileged men and members of minorities—that the problems are of class and "intersectionality" and are not limited to gender.

Still, disagree though we may with aspects of Beauvoir's argument, and especially with her idealization of the male creative genius who does battle with the world, seemingly alone, it is heartening to think that her work lives on, both in our own lives, and, as Julia noted in her paper, in the lives of those who heard her speak, or met her, or later read and translated her work.

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[7] Germaine Greer made a similar point in *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979. Rpt. London: Tauris Parke, 2001), p.327: "There is then no female Leonardo, no female Titian, no female Poussin, but the reason does not lie in the fact that women have wombs, that they can have babies, that their brains are smaller, that they lack vigour, that they are not sensual. The reason is simply that you cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged, with wills that are defective, with libidos that have been driven out of reach and energy diverted into neurotic channels."