

# La Grande Sartreuse?: Re-citing Simone de Beauvoir in Feminist Theory

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## Abstract

This paper has two goals: to show why Clare Hemmings' work, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), which focuses on the types and consequences of feminist "stories," should be applied to Simone de Beauvoir; and to argue that Beauvoir's place in the history of feminist thinking should be revisited. I propose to use some of the critical tools gleaned from Hemmings' text to think through the place of Simone de Beauvoir in feminist theoretical storytelling.

## Résumé

Cet article a un objectif double : démontrer pourquoi le travail de Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), qui met l'accent sur les types et les conséquences des « récits » féministes, doit s'appliquer à Simone de Beauvoir, et faire valoir que la place de Beauvoir dans l'histoire de la pensée féministe doit être réexaminée. Je propose d'utiliser certains des outils critiques du texte de Hemmings pour réfléchir à la place de Simone de Beauvoir dans la narration théorique féministe.

Why should we read *The Second Sex*?...She's out-of-date, male-identified and just Sartrean anyway. (Simons 2010, 909-910)

Most scholars and teachers of feminist theory will engage with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) at some point during their careers and many are also drawn to her memoirs, novels, and other political writings. In particular, the introduction to *The Second Sex* is widely taught to introduce feminist theory, second-wave feminism, existentialist feminism, and other topics. Despite this popularity, Beauvoir scholar Mary Dietz (1992) has argued that *The Second Sex* bears a striking resemblance to the Bible: "[it is] much worshipped, often quoted and little read" (78). To extend the analogy, *The Second Sex* also has translation issues, poses interpretive difficulties, and contains its own "golden rule" ("One is not born, but becomes a woman"). In trying to make sense of Beauvoir's position in feminist scholarship and teaching, I was struck by usefulness of Clare Hemmings' (2011) self-reflexive reading of feminist citational practices and storytelling, offered in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*.

Hemmings identifies what she calls the "stories" that emerge from feminist theorizing and describes how these stories build a picture of feminisms' past and feminisms' possibilities for the future. She argues that, while stories are informative and necessary explanatory vehicles, they often gloss and oversimplify the novelty of feminist intellectual work. Hemmings' analysis focuses on citational practices in some of the foremost feminist academic journals (*Signs*, *Feminist Review*, *Feminist Theory*, and others). By asking questions like "who do we cite..." she exposes the assumptions that emerge from feminist storytelling. For Hemmings (2011), stories are:

the overall tales feminists tell about what has happened in the last thirty to forty years of Western feminist theory and

indicate too their status as ‘myth’ or common opinion. By ‘narratives’ I mean the textual refrains (content and pattern) used to tell these stories and their movement across time and space. (227)

Stories and narratives, she argues, affect the direction of feminist theorizing and build a political grammar that delimits how one might position oneself as a feminist scholar. A set of recurring stories that Hemmings is interested in delineating is the various intellectual and activist trajectories of second wave feminism, as well as how critique and transformation led to new directions or waves.

In much of her analysis, Hemmings does not cite particular instantiations of these stories, but relies instead on their appeal as *familiar*. In other words, certain ways of telling and retelling feminist history often appeal to us without a need for justification because we recognize them. Similarly, my analysis here focuses on a sense of familiarity embedded in common stories told about Beauvoir and the “common opinions” and “myths” about her work and life (and especially the intersection of her work and life). My sense of familiarity is shaped by my own status as a scholar who moves between disciplines (philosophy, women’s and gender studies, and others). In some ways, I continue to try to make sense of how a philosophy professor could tell me in the second year of my undergraduate degree *not* to write a paper on *The Second Sex* because it was *merely* a sociological application of Jean-Paul Sartre’s ideas (so, write a paper on him instead). At the same time, I have occupied other intellectual spaces where Beauvoirian scholarship crackled with complexity. Broadly, using Hemmings’ provocative work, I want to examine the stories told about Beauvoir so that the *how* of the telling can itself be a further entry point for understanding feminist storytelling practices.

### Telling Feminist Stories

Telling stories about where feminism has been and where it is going not only locates the speaker, but also reveals a set of concepts animating the history of feminist analysis. Within these stories, Hemmings (2011) in particular identifies three “interlocking narratives of progress, loss, and return that oversimplify this complex history and position feminist subjects as needing to inhabit a theoretical and political cutting edge in

the present” (3). The temporal structure of these narratives often leads to narratives of disavowal or being “beyond” past thinkers. Not only do these narratives have a temporal structure, but they also carry an affective tone. Narratives of *progress* track what feminist analysis has “overcome” through critique and provide a positive account of excitement and delight for the future (35). Narratives of *loss* centre on how feminism’s radical political potential has given way to the institutionalization of feminism (in the academy) and political individualism and thus have an affect of disappointment or grief (64). Progress and loss narratives share a common structure, but differ in affective texture:

They both construct a heroine who inhabits a positive affective state or a negative affective state in progress or loss narratives respectively. Both require emotional attachment to the tale told in order to remain its subject and continue to safeguard or transform feminist meaning in heroic mode. Both make use of prior, atextual attachments to feminism, assume that the reader wants to be a ‘good’ feminist and not a ‘bad’ one, and propose that there is only one way to be properly feminist in the current moment. (62-63)

Because of temporal positioning and affective tone, narratives that oversimplify a thinker’s position in feminist debates and struggles also lend themselves to a reductive and dichotomous moral reading that encourages the reader to take sides.

In describing how some feminist intellectual practices tend toward the reductive, Hemmings’ analysis itself runs the risk of reductive readings. Her focus, however, allows for thinking carefully about framing practices themselves, especially how affect attaches to feminist stories. Drawing our attention to feminist affect in intellectual practices is especially helpful, I think, since feminist scholarship is not simply about knowledge production, but aims for social change; sometimes one might be energized and hopeful about this possibility, and other times one might be (rightly) pessimistic or frustrated. An example of these feminist affects is a common response to loss narratives, which are *return* narratives that attempt to spark an affect of hope where one can return to the “good old days” (Meagher 2012, 601). Hemmings (2011) gives a voice to return narratives: “We may have been convinced by the turn to language, a poststructuralist capacity to deconstruct power

and value difference, but we know better now” (4). Even though each narrative has different affects, Hemmings argues that one of affect’s unique qualities is that it permits all three narratives to overlap in one’s thinking without overt contradiction (5).

Hemmings further captures a particular form of feminist framing that encourages a linear temporal displacement of thinkers through a narrative teleology of idea -> critique -> overcoming critique. One consequence of linear displacement is that ideas are sweepingly dismissed as no longer relevant because they did not survive an overly harsh critique. Conversely, overcoming critique in linear displacement might also suggest that an idea has *solved* more problems than it actually did, thus marking the perhaps still relevant critique as ‘having been overcome’. Ladelle McWhorter (2004), for example, has expressed reservations about intersectionality that speak to the problems associated with linear displacement of critiques. Though intersectionality has vast potential for rethinking multiple overlapping forces of oppression and how power operates within oppositional politics, for McWhorter, it can also be used as a catch-all to avoid charges of racism and classism (39). Consequently, many important critiques in feminist analysis remain unaddressed and unfortunately, they are marked as having been addressed. Paying attention to these practices of critical displacement, Hemmings argues, reveals operating assumptions about what scholarly problems require feminist attention. In general, loss, return, and progress narratives narrow the pool of available feminist theoretical resources. Thus, she endorses feminist practices of revisiting thinkers constructed as “past” to complicate stories and open possibilities for new ways of thinking and forms of critique in the present. According to Hemmings, canonical figures ought to be revisited not just because they are part of an existing feminist canon, but as a way of retracing how framing practices have produced current problems.

Hemmings further observes that one of the important dimensions of loss narratives is the story about how feminism has lost its radical political edge. This narrative suggests that, for example, Judith Butler and other queer theorists are too poststructuralist and not political enough. At the same time, progress narratives operate as a parallel narrative of *improvement* in the temporality of feminist theory. We are “beyond” the

mistakes of the 1980s, 1990s, and especially the 1940s when Beauvoir was writing. Thought in this way, temporalities of progress create a drive to be current in the present, which allows the dismissal of past feminisms as necessarily “old-fashioned.” Hemmings urges us to think through ideas on their own merit—to think with theorists that appeal to us in the context in which we are doing our work, instead of focusing on what is necessarily cutting-edge. This poses a larger question about feminist intellectual practices: What happens to storytelling when one becomes aware of and tries to shift feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return? If we can draw normative advice from Hemmings’ analysis, it suggests that we no longer construct a future teleology wherein we surpass and disavow theorists—like Beauvoir—who may be useful for making sense of current debates in feminist politics.

### Beauvoir’s “Star Status”

Linda Zerilli (2012) is also engaged in reflecting on feminist intellectual framing practices. She argues that Beauvoir has become an especially salient figure for thinking through what amounts to “good” or “bad” feminism (n.p.). One’s position on Beauvoir, Zerilli argues, becomes a test of acceptability to the normative standards of academic feminism. She writes:

Our rhetorical productions of the good (feminist) Beauvoir versus the bad (not so feminist or not the right kind of feminist) Beauvoir are symptomatic of our reluctance to accept a feminist theory without solace, by which I mean a feminist theory that refuses to yield the identities of victim and victor, oppressed and oppressor, and, consequently, a feminist theory that resists our understandable but also potentially dangerous desire for directives in the face of social injustice. (n.p.)

Zerilli’s challenge to feminist theory offers a way of reflecting on how a theorist, such as Beauvoir, fits into the tradition of feminist storytelling, especially in light of how feminism generates normative politics. Hemmings (2011) writes that it is especially feminist theorists with “star status” who are used in citational practices to frame feminist intellectual work. Scholars with “star status” are seen as moving a discipline forward, are widely cited, are often fixed to a particular decade, and are positioned at the top of hierarchies of thinkers so as

to represent entire schools of thought (e.g., one scholar is taken to represent postmodern feminism or psychoanalytic feminism) (176-177). Individual thinkers are often positioned as responding to previous ideas and moving the set of questions they confront into a new zone of inquiry. One result of this process is that theorists with “star status” become bigger targets of feminist critique and a touchstone for the framing of intellectual projects. Beauvoir’s place in framing practices reveals her “star status” and my argument is that this ongoing practice affects how her ideas are interpreted and taught. For example, many feminist texts that have little to do with Beauvoir will begin by quoting “one is not born a woman” in order to set up gender as a social construction, an interpretation that, as I discuss below, is not faithful to her text.

According to Hemmings (2011), one dimension of “star status” is to be “decade-fixed.” For example, Butler’s theoretical “moment” is decade-fixed to the 1990s, when she contributed to a poststructuralist, and maybe anti-essentialist, turn in feminist theory. Interestingly, Beauvoir’s decade positioning is ambivalent. Although *The Second Sex* came out in French in 1949 and 1951 and the first English translation was available in 1953, it remained relatively obscure in Anglo-American feminist circles and reached wider circulation only once the second-wave feminist movement was underway a decade or so later. Because *The Second Sex* is closely associated with second-wave feminism, Beauvoir’s work is often positioned in progress narratives as something that has been overcome. A familiar story is that *The Second Sex* is essentialist and negative about the female body (Ruhl 2002) and thus, is no longer relevant for queer and postmodern thinkers who “overcame” essentialism during the postmodern turn in the 1990s. At the same time, Beauvoir is also read along other lines/temporalities. Karen Vintges (1999) enacts a kind of return narrative, when she argues that not only is *The Second Sex* not essentialist, but that it also contains the relevant seeds for a poststructuralist approach to the self that buttresses many of the criticisms of Beauvoir’s text. Loss narratives could focus on the radical accountability of the existentialist feminism in *The Second Sex*, in that it urges women to refuse complicity in their oppression. Perhaps I too am enacting a loss narrative in arguing for Beauvoir to be revisited.

## Heterocitation

Hemmings’ analysis helps to make sense of the reading of Beauvoir as merely *applying* Jean-Paul Sartre’s ideas to the situation of women. Not only is Beauvoir a “star,” but she was also in a long term relationship with a “star,” which also complicates how she has been interpreted (though their relationship rarely influences how Sartre is interpreted). Libraries continue to brim with secondary (and feminist) literature that places Beauvoir and her intellectual work in a derivative subject position (for example, Leighton 1975; McMillan 1982; Hekman 1990; Moi 1993) in relation to Sartre and his work. In philosophical circles, her work is still often disregarded and devalued; it is framed as a sociological application of Sartre’s ontology and is rarely seen as making a unique contribution to existential-phenomenology (Simons 1999, 51). Zerilli (2012) rightly notes that if Beauvoir’s text merely applied Sartrean ontology to gender, then it would have been a much shorter work.

The reading of Beauvoir as derivative fits into a larger pattern that attaches to theorists with “star status” that Hemmings labels “heterocitation.” In heterocitation, a male intellectual precursor is identified as the *primary* and *exclusive* influence on the female feminist thinker’s ideas. Just as heterosexuality is closely tied to monogamy, a female feminist thinker is usually connected to a *single* intellectual precursor. Two examples immediately come to the fore: Michel Foucault is often cited as a primary influence on Butler and Jacques Derrida is cited as a primary influence on Gayatri Spivak. Beauvoir’s heterocitation to Sartre fits squarely in Hemmings’ analysis. As Hemmings argues, heterocitation is a heteronormative reading that ignores other possibilities, such as Butler’s lesbian connections to Monique Wittig as well as Beauvoir’s ambiguous sexuality (whose relationships with women are rarely explored save for Simons 1992).

Beauvoir did not block some of the interpretations of her work as derivative because she regularly disavowed the label “philosopher.” She often insisted, as she does in *Force of Circumstance* (1965), that Sartre was the philosopher, but she was not (12). However, Margaret Simons (1999) interprets Beauvoir’s disavowal as meaning that she did not create a systematic philosophy to understand and shed light on all aspects of philosophy (ontology, ethics, and so on) (103). Some

have argued for Beauvoir's influence on Sartre's work as a way of elevating her status to that of philosopher (Fullbrook 1999). Charlotte Witt (2006) cautions against such an interpretation, calling it the "best supporting actress" approach because it does not acknowledge the originality or independence of her work (542). On the question of influence, Simons (1999) has argued that Beauvoir and Sartre's works cannot be understood without reference to *each other*. In other words, their work should be approached as a conversation that involved critique and the development of different trajectories of thinking over time, rather than a one-way, exclusive relationship (103).

Heterocitation can be especially pernicious when it is used to mark the feminist thinker's *departure* from feminism. Sartre's ideas have been quite rightly criticized as misogynistic, somatophobic, and pessimistic, but they are not *merely* so. If Beauvoir's personal and intellectual relationship with Sartre is considered *ipso facto* a departure from feminism, her thinking is not understood as properly independent and creative. An unsettling conclusion when applying heterocitation to Beauvoir and Sartre would be that Sartre is responsible in part (or more) for the radical *feminist* ideas contained in *The Second Sex*. Sartre's involvement in Beauvoir's life and writing is often used as a way of marking her departure(s) from feminism or a corruption of her otherwise feminist sensibilities, and as proof that she did not transcend her situation. How do we police these departures and what is it that she is departing *from*? The intellectual losses that result from policing ideas at the outset deplete the pool of available feminist theoretical resources in general and, according to Hemmings, actually move feminism *away* from *itself* through a process of narrowing.

One way in which the interpretation of Beauvoir's thinking as derivative affects how she is understood lies in relation to the central arguments of *The Second Sex*. For example, Susan Hekman (1990), a feminist commentator on Beauvoir, has argued that,

The source of the problem is that there is a contradiction between the first and the second parts of her [Beauvoir's] book. In the first part she defines woman the other as primordial and necessary...In the second part of the book, however, she takes an entirely different tack. In her analysis of how woman is made, woman becomes a socially

constituted being that can, by implication, be constituted differently if different social practices were instituted. (76)

Sara Heinämaa (2003), who reads Beauvoir as more closely aligned with Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty than Sartre, maintains that this reading of Beauvoir is contradictory because of its over-association with Sartre's (1966) ontology in *Being and Nothingness*. Further, she cautions that, "[a]s long as we interpret her claims within the sex/gender framework or within the framework of Sartrean philosophy, the book seems self-refuting" (xvi). Unlike Hekman (1990), Heinämaa argues that there is a change in *focus* between volume one and volume two of *The Second Sex*, but not a shift in the general theory. The first half of the book focuses on what has been said about women (in philosophy, biology, psychology, and so on), while the second half concentrates on how one experiences oneself in response to what has been said about women. Many Beauvoir scholars have argued that Beauvoir's text amounts to a substantial critique of Sartrean individualism and absolute freedom (Zerilli 2012, n.p.). Heterocitation, then, robs us of complicated readings of Beauvoir by narrowing her work down to a Sartrean framework.

For scholars of feminist theory, it was exciting and encouraging to have a new translation of a canonical work such as *The Second Sex* published in 2010. Many hoped that this translation would provide a fresh look at Beauvoir's intellectual legacy. In a review that I co-wrote with Emily Parker (2012), we discussed problems with the volume that Knopf Publishing commissioned from translators Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. If one chooses to teach the new version (and, as Parker and I discuss, it is not clear that we should), I strongly caution *against* reading the introduction by Judith Thurman (2010), which reiterates outdated interpretations of Beauvoir's intellectual achievements, falling into many of the problematic storytelling traps I have identified. She emphasizes that Beauvoir felt inferior to Sartre, thus setting up the interpretation of Beauvoir in a secondary subject position. The introduction focuses on Beauvoir's personal psychology, her romantic attachments, and her personal struggles with feminine expectations and whether she "lived up" to the critique contained in *The Second Sex* in her personal relationships. Thurman presents Beauvoir as a constructivist who denies the biological realities of

the body and who is horrified by the female body in particular. Beauvoir's negative characterization of female bodies is interpreted as once again undercutting her feminism (xv).

### Feminist Futures: Re-citing Beauvoir

In Beauvoir's case, her intellectual and intimate partnership with Sartre continues to obviate considerations of her work as relevant to contemporary feminism. This coupling is, in part, secured by reading Beauvoir without a background in existential phenomenology, which is necessary for understanding the conversations in which she was intervening. Her work is not easy to read; for example, she often quotes philosophers that contradict each other, she is not explicit about her methodology, and she is less than concise. If Beauvoir is not approached as an inventive and agential thinker, it may be tempting to attribute her dense philosophical ideas and their obscurity to Sartre's influence. Penelope Deutscher (1997), however, cautions against a recuperative reading of Beauvoir that enforces conceptual clarity and hierarchical explanations (see also Parker 2012, 941). She argues instead that Beauvoir's work must be approached as troubled, full of tensions and difficulties because the situation of oppression she was trying to describe was *itself* riddled with ambiguities (Deutscher 1997, 90-91).

I realize that this meta-analysis of how we do feminist theorizing paints feminist theory with too few brushes. It is meant to be evocative and to disrupt the narrative temporalities that we have learned so that we may "briefly glimpse a different history that emerges in the retelling" (Hemmings 2011, 82). This is why Hemmings re-cites Butler by interpreting her through the influence of Wittig, rather than Foucault. In so doing, she opens up interpretations of Butler that link her more closely to lesbian and radical politics—something that does not come through as clearly when she is read solely as influenced by Foucault. Further, a re-citation of Butler *via Beauvoir* could prove to be fascinating future work since it influenced Butler's (1988) significant essay on gender constitution.

Hemmings draws out the affective attachments that are cultivated by narratives and the ways in which they form the basis of possibilities for future theorizing. Do negative feminist feelings towards Sartre foreclose future interpretations of Beauvoir's work? If so, how

could we re-cite Beauvoir in ways that disrupt these affects? Who is the Wittig through which she can be re-cited? Both Heinämaa (2003) and Deborah Bergoffen (1997) read her through Husserl, which runs the risk again of heterocitation, though not as sharply as in the case of Sartre. A possible re-citation for *The Second Sex* would be to think through her work on women as influenced by her interest in racism, as she draws many analogies and dis-analogies between the situation of women and Black people in America. She credits the descriptions of racism in Richard Wright's 1930 novel, *Native Son*, as awakening her to greater consciousness of how oppression affects one's ability to express their freedom in the world. There are, however, good reasons to approach such a reading with caution, as *The Second Sex* contains serious issues with regard to race and racial analysis that I do not intend to gloss over (Markowitz 2009). That said, if we re-cite *The Second Sex* in this way, would it change the radical possibilities contained in the text? Would it reveal novel connections to anti-racist feminism and possibilities for coalition in Beauvoir's work? Thinking through Beauvoir with Wright could open up new possibilities for reading complexity about race and gender back into *The Second Sex*, which is sometimes too quickly dismissed as (and rightly criticized for) focusing too heavily on the situation of white women. Further, it may be useful to understand *The Second Sex* in relation to some of her subsequent works, such as the English publication of her preface to her work on the Djamila Boupacha case (Beauvoir 2012), which extended her theory of the Other to the case of French colonization of Algeria. In this vein, scholarship on Beauvoir as an anti-colonial theorist is beginning to emerge (Kruks 2005; Nya 2014).

### Conclusion

Zerilli (2012) captures the continually vexing position of analyzing and interpreting Beauvoir's intellectual work. She argues that the contemporary interpreter of Beauvoir will likely encounter an either/or choice between interpretive narratives. She writes:

It is not my purpose here to convince readers that Simone de Beauvoir is the most important feminist intellectual of the twentieth century or that *The Second Sex* changed the lives of thousands of women. I want to resist the temptation to shower Beauvoir with accolades or to rescue the

so-called mother of second-wave feminism from her feminist critics, if not her murderous daughters. I am reticent to assume the unlikely position of knight errant - Beauvoir is no lady in distress. More importantly though, I suspect that to give in to that temptation or wish would be to contribute to what appears to be the either/or interpretive approach to Beauvoir: namely, as Moi herself notes, the twin tendencies in feminist scholarship either to idealize Beauvoir as the perfect feminist or to condemn her for having betrayed feminism. Either she criticized the masculine subject of modernity or she embraced it as a model for women. Either her relationship with Sartre was the model of free union or it was an instance of female subordination. Either she felt solidarity with women or she refused to identify herself as a woman. And so on. (n.p.)

I hope that what I have offered here about heterocitation and feminist storytelling practices will, in part, help to undo some of the force of the dichotomous reading of Beauvoir that Zerilli identifies. My ending is necessarily speculative, since I do not know the best or most creative ways to suggest that Beauvoir should be re-cited. I hope that she will be revisited not because she is a "star," but because reading her in multiple registers can make us think carefully about the feminist intellectual project of reading Beauvoir and what we are doing when we tell feminist stories.

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