

Standing on their shoulders

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- Galster, Ingrid (ed.) (2004) *Le Deuxième Sexe de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne) 365pp. ISBN 978-2-84050-304-0 (pb).
- Roberts, Mary Louise (2002) *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press) xi + 353pp. ISBN 978-0-226-72124-8 (hb).

How strange the past is. The tendency of those stuck in the present (that is, all of us, however shadowily we may know our own circumstances) is to believe both that people from the past were grappling in the dark with problems we can scarcely imagine and at the same time that, startlingly, they were human beings with many of the same thoughts and wishes as us. When I teach a course on feminist theory to MA students, they are shocked to discover that girls in 1950s England had to reach a higher level than boys to pass the Eleven Plus (for the sake of 'equality', of course) or that women in France got the vote only in 1944: how different things are today. Such facts never show up more than part of the story. When critics showered Simone de Beauvoir with excited and mainly scathing reactions to the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* [*The Second Sex*] in 1949, many of them were amazed that she thought there was still an issue to debate. Curiouser still, she herself told Francis Jeanson that she was very surprised by all these responses, 'car elle avait eu plutôt en l'écrivant, la désagréable impression "d'enfoncer des portes ouvertes"' (Galster 2004: 250) ['for she had had the rather unpleasant feeling, as she wrote it, that she was pushing at an open door']. There may just be nothing new under the sun. Should we be pleased at that rebuke to our complacent contemporaneity – or should we worry that, if we can be sure of anything, it is that the days of post-feminism have not yet arrived?

To continue to cite Jeanson:

Bien sûr, il y avait aussi les revendications féministes, celle du droit de vote par exemple, et d'une façon générale le souci, manifesté dans la plupart des pays du monde par une certaine proportion des femmes, de devenir des *citoyennes* au même titre que les hommes. Mais précisément la mise en avant de semblables revendications risquait de différer la prise de conscience d'exigences plus fondamentales. Et c'est en effet ce qui n'a pas manqué de se produire : le problème a semblé résolu, quand sa solution même – tout en apportant d'utiles modifications à divers *facteurs objectifs* de la condition féminine – demeurait en réalité purement formelle, et à peu près inopérante. Finalement, cette solution a servi d'alibi à tous ceux et à toutes celles qui redoutent par-dessus toute la contestation de leurs propres attitudes, et *l'effort subjectif* qu'il leur faudrait accomplir pour les modifier de façon profonde et durable. (Galster 2004: 250; Jeanson's italics)

[Of course there were also the demands of the feminists, for example the right to vote, and more generally the wish, expressed by a certain proportion of women in countries all over the world, to have the same entitlement of *citizenship* as men. But precisely when such demands are at the forefront, more fundamental issues run the risk of disappearing behind them. And that is in fact what has happened: it seems as though the problem is solved, when actually the solution – although of course there have been real improvements to many *objective factors* in women's lives – has remained purely formal, and more or less useless in reality. Ultimately, that solution has provided a smokescreen for all those people, male and female, who fear nothing more than having their own attitudes questioned, or having to commit themselves to the *subjective effort* of changing those attitudes in a profound and lasting way.]

I will return to this.

What these books have in common is the history of the shock of feminism and how it fares in its moment and place. The place in both cases is Paris; the moments are about fifty years apart. Mary Louise Roberts's protagonists are the 'new women' who both exploited and counteracted the prevalent caricature of the 'New Woman': the editor and writers of the entirely female-run newspaper *La Fronde*, edited by Marguerite Durand, which first appeared in 1897. Galster's is Simone de Beauvoir who, at the time of the publication of extracts from the first volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in *Les Temps modernes* in 1948 and 1949, was well known as a member of the circle of existentialist philosophers around Sartre; her book is a compilation of press responses both in 1949 and later. Hovering at the end-point of one century and the mid-point of the next, what does the feminist demand have to do to survive the shock-waves it seemingly inevitably creates?

Roberts's premise is that a certain hard-headed exploitation of the obsessions of an age is needed if a liberation movement is to make itself felt; its forerunners, working against prejudice and ridicule, must find a way to ride the wave of these expectations rather than abrade them. This may not always be deliberate: the ambivalences of a range of innovative women – Marguerite Durand, Séverine, Gyp and Sarah Bernhardt chief among them – allowed them to answer the question 'how could one be a seductress and a feminist at the same time?' positively and resourcefully (244). How ironic or self-conscious these tactics were Roberts is not sure (see for instance 95, 105, 113, 147, 163, 202–3) – but she is certain that they worked, by undermining stereotypes of domestic and virtuous womanhood in a quietly or spectacularly relentless way.

As I suggested above, we stand on the shoulders of our forerunners but inevitably fail to understand properly how it was to make claims, whether of equality or difference, in an age where women lacked many of the political and intellectual privileges we take for granted. So we prepare ourselves by trying not to assume our own knowledge as truth or even our principles as normal. On the other hand, we are liable to the opposite failure of the imagination: failing to recognize that these people were just as clever and complex as we are or, to put it another way, that we are just as ideologically trapped as they were. To marvel at these women's ways through the mire of prejudice, including their own, may entrap us as well.

Roberts begins by setting out the myth of the 'New Woman' – which she is careful to distinguish from the historical existence of 'new women' – especially as it appeared on the Paris stage at the very start of the twentieth century. The image was drawn from the anglophone world, 'England and America, where new women emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, partly in the context of feminist activism but also in conjunction with bohemian artistic circles and the rise of women's colleges' (21). The term 'New Women' was coined by Sarah Grand in a 1894 article for *North American Review*. From here it was a small step to the representation of this worrying phenomenon in naturalist dramas. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was first performed in 1879 and appeared on the Paris stage without much impact in 1894, but things began to move in 1896, after a feminist congress in Paris in April there was much discussion in the press: 'the New Woman entered France on the tailcoats [*sic*] of the feminist, confusing those two figures in the popular imagination' (23). Many journals published cartoons of a cigarette-smoking, bloomer-wearing, akimbo-standing female oppressing her husband and neglecting her children. Fiction appeared too, but 'as vehicles of identification, the New Woman novels were clearly bankrupt' (27). In October 1901, Jane Misme, the drama critic of *La Fronde*, set out to describe this phenomenon: "women [...] are now in the process of no longer being the same" (19 *et passim*) and particularly how it was made visible on the stage. Roberts takes up this focus in order to argue for the fundamental performativity of this period of innovation.

In French realist theatre, the New Woman was the sister of Nora. The heroine of Paul Hervieu's *Les Tenaïles* (1895), for example, was a 'restless creature with a wandering eye for selfhood' (30). This peculiar phrase – it is not clear how far Roberts is being ironic – dramatizes the difficulty of the context and the decade. The protagonists remain enigmatic: what they want is still a dark continent, and their demands are most often so isolated, selfish and unconvincing that Misme herself is irritated. For whatever reason, the heroines' choice of adultery, their poor record as mothers and the contrasting figures of other women characters around them serve to undermine whatever expression they were giving to the 'problem without a name'. It may not be entirely irrelevant that all the playwrights Roberts cites are men: 'male dramatists were less interested in what the New Woman did with her liberation than in its feared impact on the men in her life – that is, on them. In other words, they were mostly keen on exploring the image as a negative fantasy' (36). Who, by contrast, were the real 'New Women'? At this point Roberts jumps forward to a drama of 1913, Maurice Donnay's *Les Éclairées*, which represents a varied group of women very like the staff of Marguerite Durand's newspaper. No longer carrying the connotation of her foreign origins, this New Woman was presented under a French epithet meaning 'scout' or 'pioneer' and, more important, she was allowed to be beautiful.

It is Roberts's main contention that the physical attractiveness of a generation of French proto-feminists (famously for students of 'French feminism', they were reluctant to use the term) made them both more acceptable, to men and other women, and more French. Her premise is essentially Darwinian: what does an intelligent and ambitious woman have to do to survive in the time and place she finds herself? The answer is to be not too visible, or visible only in a way that will allow her to get on

with the job. If the cultivation of a certain theatrical 'femininity', on stage or off, helps the horses not to get too frightened, it is a small price to pay, and of course it satisfies the narcissism too. Thus, in a panel discussion held two months after the opening of *Les Éclaircissements*, Durand herself expressed great enthusiasm for the image it presented, and this view was shared by many male critics quoted by Roberts: they 'saw the play as proof positive that "bit by bit, feminism was losing the aggressive character which has provoked so much hatred against it"' (43).

"Feminism owes a great deal to my blond hair", Marguerite once declared' (49). An erstwhile actress whose looks were universally admired, she believed – according to Roberts – that her 'political enterprise [...] was advanced by conventional feminine wiles' (50). Thus she 'enacted a theatrics of self that was both deliberate and politically successful' (51). In this way, mimicry, both on stage and off, is the essential 'disruptive act' of the book's title, which makes female identity, on the one hand, 'volatile and precarious' (55) and on the other potentially rich, various and changeable. It is the traditional status of actresses as disreputable and of the acting career as transgressive and yet one of 'the very few ways that women might earn an income and compete professionally with men' that made performance a route to change (57). Expectations of conventional womanhood – the good wife and mother – were marginalized, and yet could still be kept in play. For Durand's very activism was based in her 'inner conflict between freedom and decorum' (59). 'Beauty, she argued, was a political act' (61).

At this point, a key turn of phrase begins to enter the argument of this book: the possibility of being something '*but not quite*' (Roberts's italics). Durand 'was a pretty blond *but not quite*' (66 and 92); in a similar way, the *frondeuses* were like women dressed as men '*but not quite*' (82), but they were 'reporters *but not quite*' (88 and 100) and they 'had access to the centres of power in France – *but not quite*' (90) – all because they were visibly and unashamedly women. On the other hand, they were women '*but not quite*' (100) and they may pretend to be a loving wife like Pug (a pseudonym used by Séverine) '*but not quite* because she is also a journalist intervening in a wider debate in the press' (101; see 105) or, like Clothilde Dissard, "'good" *but not quite*' (103). In a fascinating chapter on the role of women reporters on either side of the Dreyfus Affair, we find the *frondeuses* entering the Affair

for conventional reasons: political loyalty and professional obligation. But their presence there quickly took on a specific meaning – one that bears exploration. Just as they were reporters *but not quite*, they were also Dreyfusards *but not quite* by the sheer fact of being women. (110)

This relation of complex mimicry is applied also to the objects of the *frondeuses*'s discourse: thus Séverine presents 'French officials as figures of authority, *but not quite*, whose power was nothing more than bad performance' (146) or the anti-semitic Gyp satirizes Jews as being 'French *but not quite*' (155); and to parts women play: thus the roles selected by Sarah Bernhardt make her both feminine and queer '*but not quite*' (179) or a female character in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, walking dressed up 'in slummy costumes [is] a maid *but not quite*' (233). In sum, if Marguerite Durand was 'a real

woman *but not quite*' (243) this is because the strategy of fin-de-siècle feminism was 'not slow death but a seemingly inane kind of acting up, including posing, mimicry and parody. However innocuous its appearance, this sort of performance did succeed in destabilizing the liberal ideology of womanhood' (243).

In the course of this argument, Roberts takes us through a litany of figures of the new womanhood that is her subject. Not the least fascinating is Sarah Bernhardt, whose body we see in a copiously illustrated chapter, carrying the force of the unique role – both quintessentially French and utterly foreign, both excessively woman and entirely intersexed – assigned to her in this over-loaded period. The book has many flaws: it is often repetitious, has too many poor translations from French and errors of English; but it makes an important case about an important time in the life of French women.

Ingrid Galster's book is a collection of texts that appeared mainly in the months after the first appearance of sections of *Le Deuxième Sexe* published in *Les Temps modernes* in advance of the first volume. Between May and July 1949, three sections appeared under the title: 'La femme et les mythes' ['Women and myths'], including Beauvoir's most angry chapter, an attack on the writing of Montherlant; but it was the first of these, 'L'initiation sexuelle de la femme' ['The sexual initiation of women'], that (predictably) produced the most vociferous reaction. That section is reproduced in facsimile; it looks quite tame to a present-day reader, and we need to remind ourselves of the context in which – as this book reveals – the Christian lobby of both sexes, mainly Catholic, was extremely vocal in both society and the intellectual press.

The first response was that of François Mauriac, a long-time opponent of all that emanated from Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a code-word for Sartre and his circle. Many of those who sided with Mauriac cite names we might expect to ring similar alarm-bells: Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Gide all count as highly respectable compared with the new dangers identified on the one side with surrealism and on the other with the existentialists. Mauriac used the columns of the *Figaro* and the *Figaro littéraire* to launch a survey addressed to contemporary youth, focused on the following broadly worded but clearly tendentious question:

Croyez-vous que le recours systématique, dans les Lettres, aux forces instinctives et à la démesure, l'exploitation de l'érotisme qu'il a favorisée constituent un danger pour l'individu, pour la nation, pour la littérature elle-même, et que certains hommes, certaines doctrines en portent la responsabilité?

Nous demandons aux jeunes intellectuels et écrivains appartenant aux divers courants qui se partagent la jeunesse d'aujourd'hui d'exprimer ici leurs vues sur ce grave problème du moment. (29)

[Do you believe that the systematic reference in literature to the forces of instinct and insanity, and the exploitation of eroticism that this has encouraged, constitute a danger for the individual, the nation and literature itself, and that certain people (*hommes*) and certain doctrines are to blame for this?

We appeal to the young intellectuals and writers of today, of whatever shade of thought, to express their views on this major problem of our day.]

The responses poured in and forty are cited here. It is difficult to know how proportionate or how typical the selection is, and it is interesting to note that, out of this collection, only two are from women. Galster heads each extract (did Mauriac?) with the identification of the respondent: Christian, surrealist, 'pagan', law student, medical student, and so on; each extract is helpfully headed also by a sentence or two representing its key argument. Few refer directly to Beauvoir; many refer to God; many take up the challenge of weighing the 'eroticism' of current publications against the health of the French nation just four years after the end of the Second World War. Some argue that the concentration camps, the Occupation, the atomic bomb or war more generally are far more significant threats. Many refer to Sade, Freud or Genet (explicitly mentioned by Mauriac) or to Kinsey's study of men's sexual behaviour, which had been published in France in 1948. Many take issue with Mauriac's squeamishness, others share it. Some are sarcastic, others panicky. Françoise d'Eaubonne asks: 'Pourquoi diable l'érotisme est-il le loup-garou de l'intelligence catholique? [...] Comment des gens intelligents ne peuvent-ils pas comprendre que le temps de la terreur théologique de la chair est dépassée depuis Methusalem?' (73) ['Why the devil is eroticism the werewolf of the Catholic intelligentsia? [...] Why can't intelligent people understand that the days of the theological terror of eroticism went out with Methusalem?']. Mauriac himself rounds off the survey results with a letter he happens to have just received from an 'angelically named' (89) student, Cécile Gariel, who laments: 'La dernière heure approche. Depuis vingt siècles, elle approche et nous tardons à y croire' (90) ['The final hour is coming. It has been coming for twenty centuries, and we are only just beginning to believe in it']. The fall-out continued to appear until a halt was called. The last cited 'marginal' articles are by Pierre de Boisdeffre and Roger Nimier, who ridicule the whole exercise.

The next section of the book moves on to reviews and articles in the press focused specifically on *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Again, all shades of opinion are represented, and immersing oneself in them is a lively experience. Some authors are identified behind pseudonyms or initials, others remain 'anonymous'. Many of the writers take issue with Beauvoir's writing style, finding it stodgily 'médico-philosophique' (122; see also 127) ['medico-philosophical'] or a 'vocabulaire agrégée' (132) ['over-educated vocabulary']; a typical response is: 'l'écrivain joue en même temps, avec une virtuosité égale, des deux registres : le plus hautement abstrait et le plus crûment concret' (194) ['the writer plays at the same time, and with equal virtuosity, on two registers: the most supremely abstract and the most crudely concrete']. Among her defenders are Marcel Thiébaud (168–74), Maurice Nadeau (197–202), Emmanuel Mounier (225–31), comparing, as several do, Beauvoir's study with the very different *Psychology of Women* by Helene Deutsch), Colette Audry (234–6) and of course Francis Jeanson (249–52). Of the eleven articles signed by women, several are very critical – particularly those who are defending an orthodoxy, whether Christian or communist.

Most interesting, I think, are the texts imbued either by that peculiarly perennial attitude of 'surely it's all been solved by now' or the only slightly less complacent attitude of 'we knew all this already!'. Both these attitudes can come from either 'side'. In the former category are Pierre Lœwel's

Nous croirons donc être sage en disant que 'nos sœurs et nos compagnes' ne sont ni meilleures ni pires que nous, et que cette égalité à laquelle elles aspirent si justement et qu'elles ont presque entièrement conquise n'est malheureusement pas de nature à modifier le destin du monde : on le voit assez aujourd'hui qu'elles votent un peu partout. (209)

[We hope we are being reasonable if we point out that our 'sisters and companions' are neither better nor worse than we are and that the equality they aspire to so justly and which they have almost entirely achieved is unfortunately not likely to change the destiny of the world – this is clear now that they have the vote pretty much everywhere.]

or Julien Benda's 'Personne, fût-ce le pire réacteur, ne s'étonne plus de voir des femmes détenir des plus hauts postes de l'administration, du législatif, de l'enseignement' (240) ['no one, even the most reactionary person, is surprised any more to see women holding the highest offices, whether in the civil service, the legislature or the teaching profession']. In the latter category, as well as various dismissive instances, we find those that use the point in order to argue in favour: Mounier's 'il n'est rien là qui n'a été écrit cent fois de diverses façons. L'originalité du livre, c'est l'éclairage existentialiste qui est donné à ces faits et à ces mythes' (226) ['there is nothing here that has not been written a hundred times before in different ways. What is original about this book is the existentialist light it throws on these facts and myths'] or Dominique Aury's 'Non pas que la thèse qu'elle défend soit particulièrement audacieuse. Ni les revendications, nouvelles (elles ne prétendent pas l'être)' (266) ['Not that her thesis is particularly bold, or her demands particularly new – they don't claim to be'].

Who the 'we' are who already knew this or who think the problem is solved by the granting of the vote is another fascinating question. Everyone speaks – and accuses Beauvoir of speaking – for more and other than just themselves. Thus 'Anonyme' ['Anonymous'] appeals to the reader with 'En vérité, il s'agit d'un être humain comme vous et moi' (203) ['In reality, (women) are human beings just like you and me'], or the scarcely less pseudonymous 'M[ichel de] S[saint-] P[ierre]' – Galster's square brackets, not mine – has a probably unconscious echo of Freud as well as Goethe when he declares: 'Qui de nous a pénétré le problème essentiel de l'éternel féminin?' (232) ['who among us has got to the bottom of the essential problem of the eternal feminine?']. Another speaks for his sisters and companions, as we have seen; a fourth affirms 'Pour moi, qui ne tiens pas du tout les femmes pour inférieures, il m'est pénible de penser que c'en est une qui a écrit tel chapitre de cet ouvrage' (212) ['As far as I'm concerned, and I speak as someone who certainly does not think women are inferior, it pains me to see one of them writing a chapter like the one in this book'].

The best bit is saved for last. In a sadly short closing section, Galster cites texts from the 1960s onwards, beginning with Beauvoir's own memoir *La Force de l'âge* (1960) [*The Prime of Life*], in which people look back on the text and the furore it caused. We learn, if we did not know it already, that Beauvoir had not set out to write a feminist study, thinking, just like everybody else, that there was no longer any problem. She was about to begin her autobiography when 'voulant parler de moi, je m'avais vu qu'il fallait décrire la condition féminine [and as she did so] j'allai de surprise

en surprise' (287) ['wanting to write about myself, I realized I needed to describe the situation of women (and as she did so) I went from surprise to surprise']. Once the reactions followed publication, she was equally shocked: she cites the hotly denied but reasonably well-sourced remark of Mauriac to one of the *Temps modernes* writers: "'j'ai tout appris sur le vagin de votre patronne'" (289) ["Now I know everything about your boss's vagina"] and describes the spectrum of accusations from vulgarity to misogyny. This section also includes facsimiles of the placing of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, along with its author, on the papal Index, and a few theories as to who 'betrayed' Beauvoir to the Vatican. It finishes on a couple of histories of far-left feminism, creating a nice balance with the Mauriac survey.

This is a fascinating read with hardly a boring page. The only criticism I could level against it is its sometimes obscure choices and the fact that, like so many French books, the binding is so poor that the pages are already falling out!

So, where are we now? Standing on their shoulders, I dare say, but at more risk if we think 'we know it all' than if we go on listening to their knowledge and examining our own debt to it.

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