Hiding In Plain Sight: the Rhetorical Workings of Simone De Beauvoir's Feminist Language

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HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE RHETORICAL WORKINGS OF SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR’S FEMINIST LANGUAGE

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Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies
To Emile. Thank you for being my companion.
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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir’s 1952 English rendering of *The Second Sex* translated into instant U.S. feminist acceptance, but by 1981 Julia Kristeva’s call for “Women's Time” coupled with the rise of poststructuralism in the academy essentially sounded the death knell for Beauvoir in the world of feminist language theories. Where the new French feminists explored experimental *écriture feminine*, Beauvoir’s language appeared unsophisticated and outdated. In the past twenty years a handful of feminists have slowly and intermittently begun to reconsider Beauvoir’s language from a variety of post-poststructuralist perspectives. My dissertation adds to this growing scholarship by exploring the rhetorical workings of five key language problems in Beauvoir’s feminist texts. Instead of accepting what Beauvoir and feminists in her lineage say about her language, I derive her language assumptions from how her language works. First, I look at the contradictions in *The Second Sex* not as problems to be overcome but as opportunities for Beauvoir to explain her philosophy. If, as Beauvoir argues, woman is an ambiguous category not grounded in biology but in ever-changing existential situations, then the interpretative plurality of the text enacts the same process. Next, I explore Beauvoir’s use of masculine language in *The Second Sex* as a reiteration with possibilities for feminists. After that, I examine Beauvoir’s non-representational language and the possibilities it allows
for variety of ambiguously ethical relations—both mutually and agonistically rendered. Then, I read “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” from the vantage of longstanding stylistic debate in rhetoric and feminism over the merits of clear versus opaque language and what those stylistic choices mean in terms of social change. Finally, I argue that even though *Privileges*, the work to which Beauvoir first points readers to her feminist philosophy and politics, seems to work toward different ends than *The Second Sex* or *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the place where most feminists begin to understand Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy and politics, these texts enact the very same critique of her “serious man” whose principle ethical problem is consistently applying abstract ethical principles in the face of changing situations. Ultimately, I argue that Beauvoir’s language, rhetorically conceived, imbues her feminism with an ambiguity that encourages an openness to the variety of feminist political and ethical possibilities.
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Chapter 1:

Introduction: A Hesitant Beginning

Like Simone de Beauvoir in starting The Second Sex, I began my dissertation project with hesitation. As Beauvoir reflects, “I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new” (Second 3). At our current point in feminism, some undoubtedly find The Second Sex “irritating” and “not new.” Haven’t we done all we can do with Beauvoir’s landmark feminist text? Aren’t our times firmly post-humanist, in stark contrast to the post-WWII context in which Beauvoir wrote? Perhaps.

Yet, the more I read both about and by Beauvoir, the more I was captivated by my initial misjudgment of her feminism and her most well-known book. For one, Beauvoir positions The Second Sex not as launching a women’s liberation movement, but rather, as a post-feminist analysis of woman. “The free woman is just being born,” she tells us in her 1949 work (Second 751). As Penelope Deutscher points out, at the time when Beauvoir wrote The Second Sex, French women had been enfranchised five years earlier, and access to education and employment had been widened (Philosophy 1). Particularly in her opening to The Second Sex, Beauvoir hints that woman, as a subject or issue to debate, had reached a point of cultural exhaustion. Feminism was practically over. “Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism,” she tells us, “it is
now almost over: let’s not talk about it anymore” (Second 3). Beauvoir’s description of woman’s position in her world could easily come from the mouth of a post-feminist woman of our world: “Many women today, fortunate to have had all the privileges of the human being restored to them, can afford the luxury of impartiality: we even feel the necessity of it. We are no longer like our militant predecessors; we have more or less won the game” (Second 15).

Yet for the next 700 pages Beauvoir explicates how women have not in fact “won the game,” how, through intersections of biological, psychological, economic, historical, and mythological situations woman’s lot has been that of man’s Other. “She is determined and differentiated in relation to man,” Beauvoir explains. “[W]hile he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (Second 6). Closely re-reading The Second Sex arrests us with its contradictory post-feminist and pre-feminist perspectives. Women have arrived, insists Beauvoir, and at the same time women have a ways to go.

Beauvoir’s rich contradictions initially signaled to me that there was more to her work than “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Second 283), that The Second Sex existed not only as a social constructionist-feminist text, but also as a text defined by rhetorical ambiguity. Yet, what initially drew American readers to The Second Sex was in part Beauvoir herself. After all, she seemed to embody what it meant to be a liberated woman: an educated, successful intellectual woman who refused both marriage and motherhood and instead created a seemingly equal partnership with Jean Paul Sartre. The 1952 English
translation and publication of *The Second Sex* sent shock waves through U.S. universities. “In the 1950s and early 1960s,” Toril Moi reports, “any young woman caught reading *The Second Sex* would be considered decidedly subversive” (Moi, “Changed”). In the 1960’s Beauvoir’s text goaded women in various civil rights and anti-war movements to create their own liberation movements. After reading *The Second Sex* Mary King and Casey Hayden, committed members of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), famously wrote a position paper calling for gender inequality in SNCC. Radical feminist Shulie Firestone aspired to become the “American Beauvoir” and New York Radical Women attempted to hand-deliver their *Notes from the First Year* to Beauvoir in appreciation for her influence (Brownmiller 42, 27). Where Betty Friedan seemed the liberal feminist interested in promoting women within systems already in place, Beauvoir was the radical Marxist feminist to these women, ready to overturn systems of oppression in favor of creating a more just existence for women.

However, as feminism turned toward the academy, it turned away from Beauvoir’s influence. “What was represented as Beauvoir’s loyal adherence to existentialism and implicitly to Sartre,” explains Ursula Tidd, “cast her theoretically adrift as a ‘first wave’ equality feminist, rooted in Enlightenment humanism, who appeared to be clinging to the life-raft of an autonomous rational subject at a time when feminine difference, the maternal erotic and sexual-textual jouissance were deemed to be the zeitgeist of French feminist thinking” (“État” 201). Poststructuralist feminist scholars like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and
Julie Kristeva readily wrote off Beauvoir as a “masculine” feminist, more interested in becoming assimilated into the male structures of power than creating a feminine world of difference.1 Within the academy, The Second Sex became shorthand for your mother’s feminism—fine for a certain place in time, but completely outdated and incapable of doing the kind of theoretical work necessary for real feminist change. Indeed, after psychoanalytic feminists criticized notions of autonomous subjectivity, language, history, and time, how could women go back to Beauvoir? After the very category of woman’s experience had been assessed as a discursive construction and not an empirically verifiable phenomenon, how, many wondered, could Beauvoir’s mix of existential and phenomenological feminism, which included her emphasis on individual choice, open up new possibilities for women outside of masculine structures? Identifying with Beauvoir or The Second Sex became a marker of an old-fashioned sensibility, now decidedly un-subversive.

Beginning in the mid-1990’s, however, the old became new again. Beauvoir’s revival expressed itself, in part, through Margaret A. Simons’s scholarship on Beauvoir’s influences outside of Sartre, Judith Butler’s work on how gender and sex work in which she credits Beauvoir as a major precursor, and Sonia Kruks’s reevaluation of Beauvoir as theorizing a situated subjectivity

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1 An interesting shift in perception given how Beauvoir was initially seen by U.S. feminists as the radical feminist interested in feminine difference.
rather than strictly adhering to a Cartesian subjectivity.\(^2\) The recovery work these scholars undertook slowly began the resuscitation of Beauvoir as more than simply a purveyor of Sartean thought and instead read Beauvoir’s work as post-poststructuralist—a feminist position which considers and accepts many poststructural critiques, but rejects discursive reductionism (i.e. woman cannot be reduced to a matrix of discourses) and values lived and embodied experience (Kruks, “Beauvoir’s Time” 306).

This dissertation project participates in the return to Beauvoir and starts with the assumption that we must find a different way of reading her work. Beauvoir is fashionable again, but not for the same reasons she was initially fashionable. My project stages an encounter between Beauvoir-the-feminist and Beauvoir-the-writer. The result enables us to re-see previously disparaged rhetorical elements of Beauvoir’s work, such as contradiction and her so-called “masculine language,” as powerful and creative. While Beauvoir’s language is generally taken to be flatly instrumental, “broadly realist and ‘committed’” (Tidd, “État Présent” 205), my restaging of Beauvoir suggests that her work possesses rhetorical nuance which has previously been overlooked.

Beauvoir’s language, I argue, hides in plain sight and scholars have often let what Beauvoir says about her language rather than what her language actually does, determine how we view and value her work. While Beauvoir tells us, "I think that I say what I say and that that is what you hear; there is a real

\(^2\) See Simons’s *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*; Butler’s *Gender Trouble*; and Kruks’s “Gender and Subjectivity: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism.”
connection created through language," that’s not the full story (Beauvoir qtd. in Holland and Renée 5n). As I will demonstrate throughout the project, when read closely Beauvoir’s language possesses more complex ambiguities than the instrumental equation she presents of thinking, saying, hearing, and connecting. While I do not think it possible or preferable to ignore Beauvoir’s descriptions of her own language, there must be a balance. As such, the first half of the project concerns itself with the text most people (but not Beauvoir) consider her primary feminist text: *The Second Sex*. In the second half of the project I look at a text less-frequently consulted by feminist scholars, *Privileges*, a work Beauvoir pointed to for those beginning to understand her feminist philosophy and politics.

Indeed, the motivation of this study comes from a longstanding debate in rhetoric: does rhetoric have to make itself visible or be consciously confessed in order to be recognized as rhetoric? In other words, is Beauvoir’s language overlooked as worthy of rhetorical study because she never laid claim to the title of rhetorician or called attention to her language? Certainly feminists have made this argument in terms of Beauvoir’s philosophy (Le Doeuff calls her a “tremendously well-hidden philosopher” (139)). By and large, Beauvoir deflects attention from the complexities of her language and rhetoricians and feminists have mostly accepted what she says about her language over what her language does. Why should Beauvoir’s refusal to call attention to her language exclude her work from rhetorical attention?

This tension between the visible, consciously confessed and the hidden, unconsciously performed, guides the study. How, I ask in each chapter, does
Beauvoir’s language hide in plain sight? What rhetorical issues does Beauvoir engage with that we as rhetoricians and feminists haven’t seen because she’s kept herself “tremendously well-hidden”? Why do we frame certain rhetorical elements as problems, mistakes, or shortcomings in Beauvoir’s work rather than operative? Considering both what Beauvoir says about her language and what her languages does, this project opens Beauvoir’s language up as more sensitive than previously recognized by rhetorical scholars.

Rhetoric, in the words of John Muckelbauer, “has enjoyed an extraordinarily promiscuous history” (“Returns”). It can mean, among other things, persuasion, analysis of tropes, engagement with civic discourse, or even the teaching of First-Year English. Given rhetoric’s winding history, it can take on orientations of ethics, politics, philosophy, pragmatism, pedagogy, social change, history, and the like. To clarify, when I call for rhetorical attention toward Beauvoir’s work, I exploit rhetoric’s promiscuity. While my guiding concern resides in the tension between the visible, consciously confessed and the hidden, unconsciously performed, in effect, this means I explore how Beauvoir manages the logic of a proposition, how she compromises between a desire for radical social change and a dogged pragmatism, how she attends to an ethics that accounts for difference, how she implements a language suited for social change, and the ethical roots of her language. Each chapter focuses on a discrete recognizable
rhetorical issue or question, but the range of issues and questions mirror
the promiscuity of rhetoric itself.

Although Beauvoir rarely receives attention as a rhetorical thinker, her
writing, particularly in *The Second Sex* and *Privileges*, offers rhetorical scholars
an opportunity to reflect on how language works across the consciously
confessed and the unconsciously performed. And in doing so in these particular
texts, she focuses on themes of interest to rhetoricians: ambiguity, clarity, and
representational language. From an even broader perspective, a reflection on
Beauvoir’s texts encourages rhetoricians and feminists to question assumptions,
such as certainty, directness, consciousness, representation, and transparency,
when it comes to the relationship between language and social change.

The project begins with the rhetorical issue of contradiction. Since
Beauvoir urges readers to take her at her word, once they encounter her
contradictions they usually read them as errors. However, I argue in Chapter
Two that Beauvoir’s contradictions enact a moment of rhetorical power and
conceptual explanation for women, an unknown creative possibility for woman. If
we read Beauvoir’s deployment of contradiction as irenic (accommodating) rather
than agonistic (combative), readers can learn capacities for thought and how to
read Beauvoir’s writing as they read it. While Beauvoir’s contradictions have
historically been read as obstacles to overcome, I argue that she works with
contradiction and teaches close readers an open responsiveness and an
acceptance of uncertainty.
However, while the surface level concerns of contradictions may be read as operative, poststructuralist feminists likewise question the larger structure of Beauvoir’s language in *The Second Sex*. These critics doubt the ability of what they deem Beauvoir’s “masculine language” to enable any meaningful change to women’s situations. In Chapter Three I urge a reconsideration of Beauvoir’s language on the structural level and explore the possibilities Beauvoir opens up with her reiteration of “masculine language.” Beauvoir’s language challenges structures of power in a different way than poststructuralist feminists and instead works with both “masculine” and “feminine” language structures. Beauvoir’s punctuation of her so-called “masculine language” through the use of semicolons, I argue, offers us a compromise and a relationship in terms of time, representation, and political inclusion.

In Chapter Four I continue to look at Beauvoir’s exploration of the relational, language, violence and difference in terms of the ethical and sexual as I switch from focusing on her language in *The Second Sex* to “Must We Burn Sade?” an essay from her *Privileges* collection. Beauvoir’s relatively optimistic reading of Sade’s relations in “Must We Burn Sade?” contradicts *The Second Sex*’s depiction of ethical, feminist, mutual reciprocal relations. Feminists must not burn Sade, Beauvoir tells us, because he raises the disturbing question of how to manage incomprehensible relations. I argue in this chapter that her non-representational language instantiates a feminism open to a variety of ambiguously ethical relations—both mutually and agonistically rendered.

Even within the confines of *Privileges* Beauvoir presents us with an
incomprehensible relation: in “Must We Burn Sade?” we witness an openness to ambiguity contrasted with “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” which snaps readers to attention with its stark dogmatism. What do we make of this sudden shift? In Chapter Five I explore “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” from the vantage of longstanding stylistic debate in rhetoric and feminism over the merits of clear versus opaque language. Does a clear, plain style work best in enacting feminist change by laying bare the obvious inequalities between the sexes, or is an opaque, difficult style necessary to embody the radical and complex work of substantial, genuine feminist change? Beauvoir refuses to subscribe completely to either of these camps. Despite her stated transparency imperatives, her own language tends to hide in plain sight. In this chapter I look at an example of Beauvoir’s supposed transparent language in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” and demonstrate how she uses clarity as a tool to obscure her own creative and ethical intervention in feminist social change.

Finally, I return and conclude my dissertation from a position of hesitation. In contradistinction to The Second Sex, Beauvoir asks feminists to enter her politics and philosophy through Privileges, a group of essays often accused of ignoring women’s issues and engaging in dogmatic language. As opposed to most critics who ignore this text, I find Privileges precisely the testing grounds for practiced ambiguity. Beauvoir presents readers with a variety of responses—both ambiguous and dogmatic in tone—and in doing so demonstrates an uncertainty in the very nature of language, politics, and philosophy. In Chapter Six I argue that even though Privileges seems to work toward different ends than
The Ethics of Ambiguity, both works enact the very same critique of her “serious man” whose principle ethical problem is consistently applying abstract ethical principles in the face of changing situations. The stated lesson of The Ethics of Ambiguity opens the way for reading the performed lesson of Privileges—that living an ethical life means generating one’s own ethical way.

Beauvoir’s writing, primarily explored in this project through The Second Sex and Privileges, merits a rhetorical inquiry for its thorough saturation in ambiguity and the political and ethical implications. Combined, these chapters give us a way into Beauvoir’s language and provide an opening for thinking about the relationship between language and social change. Ultimately, Beauvoir’s writings provide a generative case for an ambiguity full of creative possibilities, open to relational creations and compromises, and committed to the idea that political and ethical living is an uncertain gamble.

A closer examination of how Beauvoir engages with rhetorical issues and questions can help us live and approach problems differently. As I’ll demonstrate through the progression of chapters, Beauvoir asks us to live a full, complex, difficult ambiguity like the one she performs through her language. This dissertation project engages in larger rhetorical question of how language works and how it structures the way we think and act. As an existentialist, Beauvoir believed that language helps shape our realities. She warns us of “words as murderous as gas chambers” (Force 22) and encourages women toward active liberation when she declares, “words are crucial weapons for feminism and must be chosen carefully and used wisely” (qtd in Bair, “Simone” 151). Analyzing
Beauvoir’s language as obscure, invisible, and unstated offers an occasion to question the common sense of her allegedly simple writing. Is language an occasion for connection and understanding? For frustration and perpetual misunderstanding? From these assumptions of how language works follows a feminist politics rooted in ambiguity. Beauvoir injects a fundamentally ambiguous perspective into the language question whose endpoint is not indecision or despair but an open, difficult and vigorous sense of political action.
Chapter 2:

A Book is Not Born, But Rather Becomes: Contradiction as Rhetorical Power in The Second Sex

In reality, the struggle between [woman and man] cannot be clear-cut, since woman’s very being is opacity; she does not stand in front of man as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity; she assumes herself as both self and other, which is a contradiction with disconcerting consequences.

—Beauvoir, The Second Sex (755)

Simone de Beauvoir concludes The Second Sex certain of woman’s basic contradiction. She is both object and subject, other and self. Throughout the course of the almost 800-page work, Beauvoir’s writing accumulates additional contradictions in describing woman: she is fundamentally constrained by her body, yet should not let her biology limit her freedom; her situation as outsider to the world gives her a better vantage point to create through art, yet her situation restrains her from composing great art; she actively exercises her freedom and at the same time passively accepts her sex’s predetermined limitations imposed by societal institutions.

Contradiction sticks as a stasis point for contemporary feminists when it comes to accepting Beauvoir as a relevant feminist thinker. In describing the perception that many feminists have today, Nancy Bauer writes, “Beauvoir’s text
teeters precipitously on an unstable foundation of contradictions” (“Beauvoir’s First”). Jean Elshtain quips, “De Beauvoir launches volleys against her subjects in the name of liberating them” (307). Michele Le Doeuff concurs, adding, “What a strange mixture The Second Sex is for a feminist reader of today” (55). Those feminists whose interests lie in constructing an applicable philosophy “feel tempted to approach it selectively” (Le Doeuff 55). Le Doeuff explains that “side by side with…valuable analyses exploring women’s condition, and indeed preceding them, we find a whole conceptual apparatus which is now somewhat outdated and which makes the book less accessible to more recent readers” (55). Le Doeuff of course refers to Sartrean existentialism, the historical and conceptual albatross around Beauvoir’s neck that suggests subjects (male and female) are always free.\(^3\) What Le Doeuff and others find missing from such a philosophy is an explanation of Beauvoir’s structural contradiction: if we are all always free, then how do we account for systemic oppression? How can women be not-free, made Other by their situations, as Beauvoir suggests at points, and at the same time always free to create and take full responsibility for their life choices, as Beauvoir argues at other points?

Feminists taking a philosophical perspective have, in recent years, aggressively engaged with the issue of Beauvoir’s contradictions; however, rarely have her contradictions been addressed as a rhetorical problem, as a question of the very workings of her language. In this chapter I argue that contradiction in

\(^3\) Throughout Being and Nothingness Sartre argues for the fact of subject’s freedom: “In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom…thrown into freedom” (593).
The Second Sex enacts a moment of rhetorical power for women. Further, I contend that the contradiction of “thoughtful spontaneity,” which I will elaborate later in this chapter, constitutes an unknown creative possibility for woman. Through Beauvoir’s deployment of contradiction, readers learn capacities for thought and how to read Beauvoir’s writing as they read it. Instead of reading The Second Sex with already established assumptions about the nature of philosophical books—namely, that a text consistently justifies itself from a thesis—Beauvoir’s writing demonstrates her belief that woman is not a fixed, agreed upon entity, but a constantly composed and often contradictory and negotiated category. She does this by writing an uneven text, a text with which readers must actively struggle through the reading process. Through the rhetorical dimensions of contradiction, Beauvoir dissuades readers from ready-made language values such as linear, consistent progression, and presses them to accept a more uncertain, heuristic approach to understanding language, one in which readers often must accept contradictory pronouncements as true throughout the reading process.

In posing the problem of Beauvoir’s contradictions not as errors to overlook but as moments of conceptual explanation and rhetorical power, a number of questions follow: If The Second Sex is riddled with contradictory statements, how and when do we know which statements to trust? How do we know when subjects (particularly women) act in freedom and when they react in oppression and call it freedom? If we are to take Beauvoir at her word (which she urges us to do), which words do we believe? Or, indeed, is Beauvoir
challenging the very assumptions that we must choose between one and the other?

An approach to reading that starts with contradictions can work differently to the degree that it takes seriously that the contradictory may be a moment of rhetorical power, that there may be inventive and creative power in producing linguistic and conceptual uncertainty. In the case of The Second Sex, when readers wrestle with the contradictory statements Beauvoir makes about women, she challenges one-dimensional definitions—woman is womb, woman is an economic situation, woman is a psychological situation—and leads readers to struggle with woman as an inconstant becoming, marked by changing situations and contradiction. Through Beauvoir’s contradictory pronouncements about woman readers never yield a certain definition of woman, even though the book’s purpose is ostensibly to answer the question, “What is a woman?” Beauvoir answers the question through her language. Consenting to Beauvoir’s contradictory language in the beginning of The Second Sex prepares readers for the unpredictable possibilities for women, particularly along creative registers.

Although scholars have rarely framed Beauvoir’s contradictions as a rhetorical problem, The Second Sex demands a rhetorical inquiry, a close and critical reading of the operations of Beauvoir’s language. As Alison T. Holland and Louise Renée argue in Simone de Beauvoir’s Fiction, “there is still one lingering assumption, present even amongst Beauvoir scholars: that Beauvoir did not have a very sophisticated conception of language” (2). Contradictions in Beauvoir’s writing not only pop up in the content and style of her work, but also in
her conversations on language. Holland and Renée concede that Beauvoir at
times describes her language use as transparent and consciously controlled by a
unified subject, but insist that Beauvoir holds contradictory views that we cannot
ignore; Beauvoir at once argues that unbridled communication is possible and
that "the betrayals of language prevent any true communication" (Beauvoir qtd in
Holland and Renée 4n). In the same statement Beauvoir argues that "I think that
I say what I say and that that is what you hear; there is a real connection created
through language," and that "[L]anguage is opaque but it is also a vehicle of
meaning common to all and accessible to all" (Beauvoir qtd in Holland and
Renée 5n). Even Beauvoir’s seemingly direct pronouncements on language
obfuscate her position on language. Contradiction, far from constituting a few
mistakes, distinguishes Beauvoir’s thoughts on language as worthy of our
attention.

The rhetorical approach I deploy follows from Pope’s dictum that “[t]he
sound must seem an Echo to the sense” (74). In other words, I focus on the
interplay between what Beauvoir’s language both does and what it says in The
Second Sex. Beauvoir’s language does not solely transmit ideas, as others have
primarily assumed, but it also sounds an echo. If her language only transmitted
ideas, then Beauvoir’s contradictions would pose a significant problem—the
foundational propositions she sets forth could not logically hold. But when we
read her language as pedagogically enacting an argument—that woman is
contradiction—then her contradictions become indispensible. With this
approach, no longer are ideas and language discrete entities, but language
becomes the idea. Language exists not as auxiliary to thought, but enables the condition for thinking.

Instead of accepting only what Beauvoir says about her language, in this chapter I trace a portion of her accumulating contradictions regarding women as creators in *The Second Sex* and show how Beauvoir’s language echoes and enables her argument of woman as contradiction. Many times over, particularly in her discussions on motherhood, Beauvoir draws a stark conceptual line between men’s capacities for active, original creation and women’s propensities toward passive, derivative re-creation. However, Beauvoir deviates from this binary in her discussions of women and creativity with her concept of “thoughtful spontaneity” which suggests a strategy of contradictions as necessary and productive for women. Beauvoir explains this conceptual contradiction, the idea that creative women must inhabit a studied thoughtfulness and an intuitive naturalness at the same time, by enacting a stylistic contradiction where she never acknowledges her own contradictions as such.

Before demonstrating this, I will trace the assumptions that have constrained scholars from reading Beauvoir’s contradictions as operative. I will first explore how feminist scholars have theorized Beauvoir’s contradictions as an unforgiveable logical fault, or, more generously, as a fault to be carefully justified through historical, chronological, intellectual, personal, and psychological contexts. Meanwhile, rhetorical scholars have theorized contradiction along the lines of logical fault and epistemological confusion, to generative and psychological possibilities. These intersections and movements between
Beauvoir scholars and rhetorical scholars, I argue, lead to a fresh and compelling take on contradiction as a necessary condition for creative women.

2.1 CONTRADICTION IN BEAUVOIR STUDIES

Feminist scholars in Beauvoir Studies mostly agree that Beauvoir has a problem with contradictions; however, few of these scholars take up the concept of contradiction in the same way. There are those who deal with contradiction in the content of her writing, who point out how Beauvoir makes statements, for example, regarding women’s freedom only to contradict those statements pages later. There are those who instead focus on the contradiction of how Beauvoir spoke and wrote about her language philosophy, how she pledges a verbal allegiance to transparent and easily accessible language only to later grudgingly admit its fundamental opacity. Beauvoir, scholars point out, both calls to language to clarify ideas and contradictorily praises the ambiguity inherent to language use. Her vision of communication subscribes to both free and open connection between people and a stubbornly opaque barrier preventing true connections. So pervasive is Beauvoir’s association with contradiction that it spills over from writings on her language into her life. How, scholars ponder, could Beauvoir advocate for women’s equal rights with men, yet still subordinate her thought to Sartre’s? Beauvoir’s whole legacy as a thinker of language, writer, and person is thoroughly saturated with contradiction.

Elizabeth V. Spelman launches one of the most well-known critiques of Beauvoir’s contradictions. In her Inessential Woman, she ties Beauvoir to the same anti-woman philosophical heritage of Plato and Aristotle where the
supposedly broad concept of human gets figured as a very specific kind of human. In the case of The Second Sex, argues Spelman, Beauvoir enacts a damning contradiction: “Both her observations of differences among women and her more general theoretical perspective provide de Beauvoir with the ingredients of a very rich account of what it has meant to be ‘woman’ and how women have been treated—in fact, they suggest a much richer account than she actually gives us” (62). While Beauvoir’s theoretical apparatus to examine woman as a situation shows promise, paradoxically Beauvoir’s analysis flattens women to mostly white, middle-class women with a background similar to her own.

Spelman attributes this contradiction to a well-intentioned but blind privileging of Beauvoir’s own situation as a woman, as “part of the intellectual and political air she…breathe[s]” (75). In identifying Beauvoir’s contradictions, Spelman dismantles her credibility, the effects of Beauvoir’s particular account of “woman.”

Kristana Arp takes up the contradiction of depictions of the female body in “Beauvoir’s Concept of Bodily Alienation.” Particularly in book one of The Second Sex where Beauvoir focuses on the body from the perspective of biological functions, she negatively saddles women with biological passivity: “In intercourse the female is ‘taken’ by the male (1:56). In pregnancy she is ‘inhabited by another’ and in lactation still connected to it (1:58). In menstruation she feels her body to be ‘an obscure, alien thing’ (1:66)” (Arp 163). Yet in book two, at the very least, Beauvoir ameliorates these charges by elaborating on the social and psychological components of woman’s bodily experience and how women are compelled to feel negatively about their bodies. Arp reconciles these
two bodily accounts by “discounting [Beauvoir’s] remarks on female biology” (162). In dealing with contradiction then, Arp suggests we read the social and psychological accounts of the body from the second book onto the first book, in effect, ignoring half of the text in order to make sense of the text as a whole.

Penelope Deutscher takes aim at Beauvoir’s contradictions in her aptly titled “The Notorious Contradictions of Simone de Beauvoir” and asks, “Is any feminist philosopher of the twentieth century better known her for contradictory arguments than Simone de Beauvoir?” (169). She provides a survey of responses to inconsistencies in *The Second Sex*. For instance, one option consists of reading Beauvoir’s contradictions as the influence of Sartre. Here, one mostly blames Sartre for the textual, conceptual imperfections and reads Beauvoir selectively.\(^4\) In effect, Sartre gets credited with the existential elements of the text (the parts that declare woman always free), and Beauvoir with the parts that analyze women’s oppression (the parts that argue woman cannot always be free). Anything outside of the well-defined argument that woman is made Other by her situation and does not have the same degree of freedom as man, gets attributed to Sartre.

According to Deutscher there are those like Toril Moi who, in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, attribute historical and intellectual contexts to explaining Beauvoir’s contradictions. Another option, one that Julie K. Ward in “Beauvoir’s Two Senses of ‘Body’ in *The Second Sex*”

\(^4\) We have seen this impulse already in Le Doeuff’s *Hipparchia’s Choice*. 
offers, is a reading which de-emphasizes Beauvoir’s inconsistencies to the point of arguing that *The Second Sex* has no inconsistencies at all: “when confronted with apparent contradictions among an author’s claims, one needs to look deeper for some means of reconciling them” (qtd in Deutscher, “Notorious” 180). Scholars claim that her contradictions produce a dysfunctional feminism (Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*) while others praise it as tactically operational (Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*). The instability of the text, critics tell us, lies in the intellectual, personal or psychological.5

Amid the choices for how to read contradiction in *The Second Sex*, Deutscher chooses to read them as “facilitat[ing] Beauvoir’s arguments” (“Notorious”193). In regard to the tension of feminine embodiment, Deutscher declares, “It is fundamental to Beauvoir’s philosophy that there be no biological facts. However, it is also fundamental to Beauvoir’s philosophy that she designate (paradoxically, incoherently) biological facts, so as to say: in themselves these have no meaning. These facts may take on this or that meaning” (“Notorious”184). To make her logical point, Beauvoir must rely upon the “impossible gesture” of contradiction (“Notorious” 184). She must declare that something is and is not at the same time. In stark contrast against Spelman, Arp, Moi, and Ward’s arguments that contradiction functions as an obstacle to overcome, Deutscher reads Beauvoir’s contradictions in particular instances as participating in “rhetorical work,” as enacting concepts of feminine embodiment.

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5 These readings can range from the mean-spirited criticism Moi surveys in “Politics and the Intellectual Woman: Clichés and Commonplaces in the Reception of Simone de Beauvoir” to the more well-intentioned interpretations like Arp’s.
and, later, freedom ("Notorious" 176). For Deutscher, making particular contradictions seem natural in *The Second Sex* helps debunk the myth of the stable, consistent nature of philosophy.

Yet more often than not, readers have taken contradictions in *The Second Sex* and read them as aberrations or problems to be overlooked given Beauvoir's larger philosophical context. They subsume contradiction under historical context. Beauvoir is, after all, a woman of her time, not completely immune to the patriarchal structures she describes. Tina Chanter even goes as far as to suggest that Beauvoir "deprives herself... of the resources that she needs in order to complete [her] project" and "suffers from the fact that she wrote in the early stages of twentieth-century feminism" (13). Chronological time, Chanter suggests, constrains *The Second Sex* from becoming the fullest version of itself.

To ameliorate the sting of what to our contemporary ears might sound anti-woman, scholars more or less suggest taking into consideration historical context for a more situated and thus more sympathetic reading. Mary Evans, for example, puts passages from the "Biological Data" chapter where Beauvoir supports her idea that "instability is strikingly characteristic of woman’s organization in general" with evidence of how men and women metabolize calcium. Woman’s lack of physiological stability "underlies woman’s emotionalism…and on this account," Beauvoir claims, “women are subject to such displays of agitation as tears, hysterical laughter, and nervous cries”
(Beauvoir qtd in Evans 64-65).\(^6\) These moments should be excused as parts of an historical idiom Evans writes, for “the ‘facts’ of human physiology were not fully understood at this time” (65).

Historically speaking, Evans is correct; however, Beauvoir emphasizes throughout “Biological Data” how readers should be dubious of “modern biology” which “mesh[es] with medieval symbolism” (*Second* 29). In other words, we cannot trust an analysis of woman which explains social hierarchy and behavior exclusively through the body. We should be skeptical, Beauvoir tells us, of a biology that reinforces stereotypes which justify woman’s oppression. But if, as Beauvoir argues, “biological data take[s] on those values the existent confers on them,” (47) then how can she so confidently declare women more emotional due to physiological functions? This conceptual move cannot entirely be justified with historical context because, by her own logic, Beauvoir contradicts herself. To be sure, this is not a call to entirely dismiss context. Beauvoir’s thoughts on motherhood, for instance, strike a modern reader as retrograde, but might be better received knowing the circumstances of women in twentieth-century France.\(^7\) Context alone cannot assuage her contradictions.

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\(^6\) Even in Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s new translation the passage suggests gender essentialism: “Instability is a striking characteristic of [women’s] bodies in general...More instability and less control make [women] more emotional, which is directly linked to vascular variations: palpitations, redness, and so on; and they are thus subject to convulsive attacks: tears, nervous laughter, and hysterics” (43).

\(^7\) She depicts motherhood as “enslavement to the species” (*Second* 46), breastfeeding as an “exhausting servitude” (*Second* 42), and likens the fetus during pregnancy as a “hostile element...locked inside” woman (*Second* 42).
Historical readings like the one Evans provides lock *The Second Sex* into a historical time period and detracts from the text’s creative possibilities. When taking a contextualized reading, it is too easy for a contemporary readers to read the text as simply useful to a different generation, but not to our own. Readers can appreciate what *The Second Sex* did for a time period and firmly ensconce the text on the bookshelf of feminist history. Such an approach allows Chanter to pay due respect to *The Second Sex*’s place in feminist history and condescendingly dismiss the work as irrelevant for today: “Suffice it to say that, while her stance was a radical one in her time, feminism is now able to risk what Beauvoir could not manage” (14).

In contrast to limiting her to an historical period, beginning in the 1990’s feminist interpretations, while not totally uninterested in providing context, have veered toward performative readings. Scholars found that reading for what *The Second Sex* does rather than what Beauvoir says it does moves readers past significant impasses. Broadly speaking, this approach accounts for contradiction and responds to a current political need to include Beauvoir as an autonomous thinker in the philosophical canon. Of particular importance is how this reading affects the “Sartre problem.” Beauvoir constantly credited Sartre as the preeminent philosopher, as the singular influence on *The Second Sex*. For second wave feminists, particularly those struggling for recognition in the field of philosophy, these refrains were especially irksome. Beauvoir already had the reputation of a Sartrean puppet. Her continued insistence on his intellectual superiority acted as an annoying, albeit curious, block to her acceptance as a
thinker worthy of study. But with a performative reading, one that looks at what the text does, readers get a different story. Rather than vindicating Sartrean existentialism, as Beauvoir explicitly states, Beauvoir’s contradictions demonstrate its limitations for women. In other words, she may state her allegiance toward a Sartrean framework, but in attempting to demonstrate his points on woman’s situations, we see her failure through contradiction. Sonia Kruks puts it wryly, "Although Beauvoir said she worked within Sartre's framework, she did so rather unfaithfully" (Situation 84).

Performative readings offer scholars considerable latitude. They range from arguments like Judith Butler’s who cites Beauvoir as a precursor to her landmark poststructuralist, performative notion of gender that "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Gender 12) to Kruks who instead of reading Beauvoir as rehashing Sartre's concept of freedoms sees her as "revitaliz[ing his] … ideas in ways that significantly transform them" ("Gender and Subjectivity" 101). With this approach readers focus less on authorial intent than on the effects of the text and are able to still respect Beauvoir’s philosophical integrity. Wittingly or not, this reading approach does double duty, both recovering a female philosopher as an independent and original thinker and making sense of the contradictions in The Second Sex.

However, the problem with the way this approach usually gets applied is that it does not go far enough in thinking through the effects of how we read contradiction. Part of scholars’ uncertainty might be due to the fact that, as Holland and Renée argue, few critics see Beauvoir as a serious thinker in terms
of language. Even those who have envisioned Beauvoir’s language as performative ultimately stop short of reading her contradictions as integral to her thought. For example, Butler, stepping back from previous claims that Beauvoir maintains an ambivalence toward the Cartesian mind/body split later retracts: "it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms" (Gender 17).⁸ Kruks, instead of contending with Beauvoir’s contradiction, marks it as a type of confusion—she tries to follow Sartre but fails. Beauvoir, it seems to these critics, inadvertently exposes the shortcomings of the Cartesian cogito she nonetheless maintains in her own arguments.

Rather than looking at contradiction as a mistake or an error to be justified through creative contextual readings, I argue that we read contradiction as necessary to Beauvoir’s feminist project. The Second Sex has not persisted in the feminist canon despite its contradictions but because of its contradictions. Beauvoir’s argument in The Second Sex needs contradiction in order to generate woman as a powerful creator. In order for scholars in Beauvoir Studies to make this turn, we must look to rhetorical theory.

2.2 The Question of Contradiction in the Rhetorical Tradition

A turn to rhetorical theory enables Beauvoir scholars to navigate the tangles of contradiction in The Second Sex with more subtlety. So far in this chapter, we have seen how contradiction looms as a multiple and unanswered

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⁸ See Butler’s “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault” for an example of her earlier claim of Beauvoir’s ambivalence toward the Cartesian mind/body split.
question in the reading of *The Second Sex*. Contradictions pervade the text as problems of philosophical concept (How can we reconcile an existentialism that insists we are always free with a feminism that insists women are not?); as a problem of embodiment (How can woman be relegated to biological passivity through bodily functions like pregnancy yet still have the complete freedom to embody activity?); as a problem of intellectual autonomy (How can we take Beauvoir as a serious thinker when she constantly negates her role as a philosopher?); and as a problem of historical context (How do we know when to attribute problematic passages in *The Second Sex* to an era and when to read them as necessary to her philosophical project?).

The rhetorical tradition offers Beauvoir scholars a different way of framing contradiction other than as a problem or error. In what follows, we will see a brief survey of how contradiction has been theorized in rhetorical studies. Contradiction has moved from Aristotle’s descriptions where it was seen as a tool to enforce limitations and certainty onto arguments, to feminists’ re-envisionings of contradiction as a generative tool that accommodates multiple opportunities for creation. The possibilities for contradiction have opened up beyond the purely logical into the realm of the psychological. Indeed, rhetorical scholarship points to the ways in which contradiction itself is multiple and ambiguous.

Aristotle’s classical rhetorical theory ties the stakes of contradiction to certainty and truth. Aristotle, in Book IV of *Metaphysics*, reacts against the ideas of the Sophists that “it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be”
(Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.4).\(^9\) For Aristotle, entering into rhetorical demonstration presupposes a belief that the speaker has a definite position on the issue. From the speaker’s position comes appropriate evidence and arrangement of arguments. The speaker can ultimately argue that something is or is not, but by the rules of logic cannot argue both at the same time. As such, non-contradiction, holding a definite position, acts as “the most indisputable of all principles” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.4).

Contradiction, as figured by Aristotle, defies demonstration. If one argues that something is and is not at the same time, then there exists no real argument, in the sense of argument as fundamentally agonistic. The speaker gives his opponent nothing to oppose because the speaker’s contradiction opposes itself. The contradictory speaker essentially captures all ground and blocks his opponent from meaningful response. If a speaker sets out to demonstrate everything (being that he argues something is and is not) then he demonstrates nothing. To begin an argument, one must unequivocally say something. Contradiction aborts argument by disallowing an unambiguous assertion of position. An opponent cannot reason or persuade with contradiction because whatever the opponent’s position, the contradictory statement must already include it. Contradiction flattens distinctions, argues Aristotle, and encourages a nihilistic apathy where one choice is just as valid as another. Engaging with a contradictory argument, “it follows,” Aristotle reasons, “that all would then be right

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\(^9\) In tracing the rhetorical heritage, I begin with Aristotle because his arguments have influenced, wittingly or not, the way that most Beauvoir scholars have viewed her contradictions.
and all would be in error, and our opponent himself confesses himself to be in error. And at the same time our discussion with him is evidently about nothing at all; for he says nothing” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.4). Contradiction, it seems here, exists for Aristotle as an inimical force against rhetorical demonstration.¹⁰

Book III of *On Rhetoric* takes up contradiction more specifically as a way to trap one’s opponent in a forensic interrogation: “it is most opportune when an opponent has said one thing and [when] if the right question is asked, an absurdity results” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 278; 3.18.1418b). One such absurdity is when the interrogator “intends to show that [the opponent] is contradicting himself” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 279; 3.18.1419a). Here again we see non-contradiction as a standard of logic with which a speaker can defeat his opponent.

Aristotle also characterizes contradiction as a strategy for preventing counterarguments and limiting any invention potential. In listing the *topoi*, the common topics aimed at helping speakers generate arguments, Aristotle argues that a speaker could construct a line of argument “from a [previous] judgment…about the same or a similar or opposite matter, especially if all always [made this judgment]” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 196-7; 2.23.1398b). He supports this position with an example: “And at Delphi Agesipolis, [Aristipuus], after earlier consulting oracles at Olympia, asked the god if his opinion was the same as his

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¹⁰ For more on contradiction in classical rhetoric, see Edward Schiappa’s “The ‘Impossible to Contradict’ Fragment” in *Protagoras and Logos*. Although Aristotle sees himself combating Protagoras’s view on contradiction in *Metaphysics*, Schiappa reads more similarities than differences between the two. For starker contrasts look to the fragments of Parmenides or others of the Eleatic school.
father’s, implying it would be shameful for him to say contradictory things” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 197; 2.23.1398b). Here, Aristotle uses the threat of contradiction as an instrument of shame to limit inventional possibilities.

Contradiction, formulated as a tool of limitations, implies an agonistic rhetoric where a rhetor battles head-to-head against an opponent with the goal of winning. In both *Metaphysics* and *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle in part characterizes contradiction as a way to vanquish an opponent by trapping him into faulty logic. This type of rhetoric, argues many feminist rhetoricians, too narrowly defines rhetoric to the point of excluding women. Karen Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin report that they “struggled to find the connection between [Aristotle’s rhetoric] and women’s rhetorical activities,” (7) for rhetors in this context historically tend to be “famous, male, and white” (6).

Susan Jarratt expressly states her rereading of the first sophists emanates from a desire for an alternative to the divided, taxonomic, and hierarchical Aristotelian tradition in rhetoric with its narrow knowledge structure and negative gender implications for women (xv, 64). While Aristotle and Plato’s shadows loom large in our rhetorical history books, Jarratt insists we take a more comprehensive look at classical rhetoric and include the first sophists. One central dispute between these two traditions is how we structure knowledge. Where the Aristotelian tradition sees rhetoric in service to a truth determined by dialectic, the sophistic tradition believed the practice of rhetoric as constituting the truth. Based in part on their experiences with other cultures, the sophists “believed and taught that notions of ‘truth’ had to be adjusted to fit the ways of a
particular audience in a certain time and with a certain set of beliefs and laws” (xv). For the sophists, language plays a significant role in knowledge formation as knowledge comes from historically- and culturally-contingent human perception.

Given these fundamental differences, the sophists obviously read contradiction radically different. In Jarratt’s account, for Protagoras, *dissoi logos*—the notion that there are valid, contradictory positions on all issues—was a necessary outcome of any community discourse (49). Often criticized as opportunistic, *dissoi logos*, literally “different words,” was a practice where students would argue from multiple perspectives and make what might initially seem the weaker case, stronger. What we are here describing as contradiction, an ending point for Aristotle in terms of rhetoric, would be a starting point for Protagoras, since his epistemological perspective was not finding the one Truth. He was instead more interested in working with different, sometimes contradictory truths and forging a path of action forward (Jarratt 49-53). Where Aristotle characterizes contradiction as a limitation, the sophists would see it as naturally occurring and generative.

Robert J. Connors agrees that the dominant, Aristotelian rhetorical tradition operates off a narrow, conservative, and in effect discriminatory set of assumptions. “[A]s it had evolved from the classical period through the eighteenth century,” the Aristotelian rhetorical traditions “was almost absolutely
male” and “categorically refused entry to women” (27).11 From Connors’s estimation, this discrimination stems from a belief of rhetoric as an agonistic enterprise. As a counter, feminist rhetoricians began to explore alternative irenic rhetorics where accommodation is the aim and dialogue and equal participation are valued over individualistic competitions in which one person wins and another loses. In this view, contradiction becomes a generative tool to hear and create different perspectives without one winning out over the other. With irenic rhetoric, contradiction would be accommodated rather than rooted out. As Connors argues, with the rise of irenic rhetoric in American colleges in the early nineteenth century (a rise that was caused by co-education) came a change in the student-teacher relationship from adversarial to accommodating, from oral to written, and from abstract arguments to personal expositions (44). Foss, Foss, and Griffin, for example, see their mix of feminism and rhetoric not simply as an inclusion of women into men’s ways of knowing and participating in rhetoric, but as a more inclusive way to “understand and articulate the various ways individuals create and enact the worlds in which they choose to live” (7).

If, as Connors argues, men were trained to know rhetoric and its counterpart logic as a “fighting,” “contest” and “struggle,” (Connors 27) then these ways of knowing, Lorraine Code argues in What Can She Know?, are markedly androcentric. Given that philosophers have positioned epistemology as “neutral and universally applicable,” Code works to demonstrate how even epistemology

11 See Karlyn Kohrs Cambell’s Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1925, Cheryl Glenn’s Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity to Renaissance, and Andrea Lunsford’s Recovering Rhetorica for examples of recoveries of women rhetoricians.
is marked by sex: “[i]deals central to the project [of epistemology]—ideals of objectivity, impartiality, and universality—are androcentrically derived” (314). This is not to say that Code cedes logic and knowledge to the masculine. Instead she works from the contradiction that knowledge is “inextricably, subjective and objective,” not entirely one or the other (27). Indeed, dichotomous thinking—that one holds, for example, either an objective or a subjective knowing position—leads to a gendered underclass, a polarization where one way of thinking is valued over the other.

While Aristotle’s logic relies upon the power of the objective knower, it nonetheless offers ambiguous possibilities for feminism. Many feminists continue to find resources in his logic and abstraction. Marjorie Hass in “Feminist Readings of Aristotelian Logic” argues that the logical abstraction commonly criticized by feminists is in fact imperative for feminist political theory. Charlotte Witt in “Form, Normativity, and Gender in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective” questions the assumption that Aristotle’s cultural views caused his metaphysical views and suggests that the “objective” position be more fully articulated by feminists as a value-laden position. And Ruth Groenhout in “The Virtue of Care: Aristotelian Ethics and Contemporary Ethics of Care” argues that Aristotle’s virtue ethics based upon hierarchy and certainty could bolster the feminist ethics of care with a clearer sense of personal excellence and political participation.

In addition, it is important to remember, as Jan Lukasiewicz reminds us, that Aristotle discusses the law of non-contradiction not only through logic, but also through psychology. Kenneth Burke takes up this line of thought in “War,
Response, and Contradiction” and sees the possibilities and envisions contradiction as a curiosity of human nature that, when composing rhetoric, one must take into consideration. So, for instance, if a writer wishes to establish a feeling of the horror of war, the writer might do well to highlight the heroics of war. “[T]here are good grounds,” Burke believes “for suspecting that man’s responses are normally of a contradictory nature” (244). Assuming a mechanistic one-to-one response where humans follow the logical path presented to them is to ignore the sensitivities of human psychology.

Burke, like Aristotle, sees contradiction as irrational, but he differs in assessing its value. Even as he conceives of contradiction as irrationality, as not strictly error, he poses it as an outgrowth of human nature. Burke foregrounds emotions over logic as the motivation for actions, thus the illogic of a text might actually amplify its persuasiveness. Indeed, the very practical, logic-based civic rhetoric follows from the values formed by the more affective epideictic rhetoric: “the point of view which began as a poet’s irresponsible ‘inkling’ attains its embodiment in the very architecture of the state” (235). In order to attend to the more practical work of the state, Burke suggests, we would do well to take into consideration the epideictic, the level where values are formed in oftentimes contradictory ways.

The nature of human response, for Burke, is contradiction. When judging the effects of our rhetoric, we are incorrect in thinking of human response as synonymous with scientific or mechanistic response, that is, one-to-one. The author’s intentions, in fact, produce contradictory effects. Burke writes, “let war
be put forward as a cultural way of life, as one channel of effort in which people can be profoundly human, and you induce in the reader the fullest possible response to war, precisely such a response as might best lead one to appreciate the preferable ways of peace” (240-241). As opposed to logic, the best deterrent to war (and Burke concerns himself with the future anticipation of war rather than the past response) depicts the humanity, heroics, and honor of war. In other words, positive representations of war do not produce excitement about entering militaristic ventures, but discourage love of war by diffusing the adventurous dangers and risks. Humans are qualitatively different from the one-to-one cause and effects found in industrial factories where raw materials go in and come out in a different but recognizable form. Understanding how to work with contradiction as human psychology, Burke argues, would lead to more affective and effective rhetorical efforts.

Outside of Deutscher, Beauvoir scholars tend to read the contradictions in *The Second Sex* as signs of incompleteness, sloppiness, or lack of control. In other words, Beauvoir scholars favor an agonistic, Aristotelian perspective of contradiction. From this perspective, scholars hold contradiction suspect primarily for its ambiguity. If we believe that a certain Truth exists, then there exists no room for contradiction. Something either is or is not. This logic dictates that a successful writer would hold the same position consistently throughout the text in order to build a case for the Truth. Any hint of contradiction, from an agonistic perspective, weakens a position. From these assumptions it makes sense that Beauvoir scholars invested in recovering *The Second Sex* as an
important document would work tirelessly to justify or overcome the variety of contradictions in the text. In order to save the text, this perspective holds, you must rid the text of contradictions.

While Beauvoir scholars demonstrate her multiple contradictions in *The Second Sex*, rhetoricians can demonstrate the multiple ways of reading contradiction. Traditional classical rhetorical training favors an agonistic treatment of contradiction as a logical liability; however, irenic rhetoric accommodates contradiction as generative possibilities. While the logical components of contradiction still hold a great deal of force and can offer feminists a particular kind of intellectual capital, there exist different ways of reading and experiencing contradiction. Through the perspective of irenic rhetoric, we can take up the challenge of accommodating contradiction and assuming ambiguity. Irenic rhetoric allows something to both be and not be; it allows questions to linger open longer without rushing to conclusions; and it allows for an abundance of positions.

Similarly, Burke’s read of contradiction in terms of psychological appeal expands our vision of how contradiction can be experienced. Again, where the agonistic perspective characterizes contradiction as primarily logical, as something of a trap to set for your opponents to make them appear absurd or shameful, Burke suggests contradiction as fundamental to the psychological human experience. Humans respond not mechanistically to logic, but oftentimes contradictorily. Rather than a logically fallacy to avoid, contradiction, under this
perspective, becomes something to accept and work with as part of the rhetorical landscape.

Ostensibly charitable scholars either minimize or resolve the contradictions in *The Second Sex* to discipline it into making a particular kind of sense. At heart, they see it as a broken text that needs fixing. In taking the position of overcoming the obstacles of the text, readers enact a certain violence. They beat the text into submission. They read the text as they think it should be read—in a consistent manner, projecting a progressive, logical unity. Today, readers launch into the text from the well-rehearsed mantra, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” and read preceding and following chapters through this prism (283).

Accommodating contradictions as generative possibilities in *The Second Sex* and as fundamental to the text may revitalize Beauvoir’s feminist theory and allow it to do new work. Beauvoir has been pigeonholed as the feminist who brought women’s oppression and social construction as a gender theory to the forefront. However true these characterizations may be, the effect has been a stultifying one. Readers approach the text certain of what they will find. For younger generations of feminists who have grown up taking *The Second Sex*’s axioms for granted, Judith Thurman supposes the text seems “as quaint as a pair of bloomers,” (xvi) while Francine du Plessix Gray deems Beauvoir’s ubiquitous maxim outdated, a “preposterous assertion” for contemporary feminists. By myopically reading *The Second Sex* as “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” we reduce Beauvoir’s otherwise complex arguments that account for
ambiguous contradiction to a well-circulated, popularized, easily consumable catchphrase. As such we lose the struggle and contingency in reading the text. We lose the sense of undecided possibility.

2.3. The Contradiction of Woman as Creator

We have seen how Beauvoir Studies scholars have talked around contradictions in Beauvoir’s operations of language, but failed to fully explore the potential of contradiction beyond its negative role in logic. Contradiction can be read beyond assumptions of agonistic rhetoric where certainty trumps ambiguity and where rhetorical success equals individual winning through contest. Beauvoir scholars miss a unique opportunity in aiming to explain away contradiction from *The Second Sex*. Indeed, the rhetorical potential of the text rests precisely in its contradictions. The ambiguity that comes with contradiction amplifies the generative possibilities of the text. Irenic rhetoric allows for an accommodation of contradiction, for a full exploration of ideas that logically do no hold. This ambiguity, combined with Burke’s psychological assumptions of how contradiction works in persuasion, allows us to read the contradictions in *The Second Sex* as explanatory of Beauvoir’s concept of “thoughtful spontaneity” necessary for woman as creator.

In paying attention to Beauvoir’s contradictions, rhetorical scholars have the opportunity to pause with the ambiguity of her text. Beauvoir acts as a hidden theorist of contradiction, never plainly drawing our attention to her rhetorical device, but subtly echoing it. In this way, Beauvoir acts as an invisible rhetorical theorist, obliquely, perhaps even unconsciously, teaching us
contradiction as ripe with creative possibilities. While Aristotle and Burke explicitly theorize the logical and psychological dimensions of contradiction, Beauvoir weighs in on the level of implicit demonstration.

Once again, I argue that the way Beauvoir moves through her contradictions, her very language, echoes the concepts she seeks to explain. In the following reading, we see the contradiction of “thoughtful spontaneity” as necessary to woman as creator. What makes woman suited for creativity, blocks her from creativity: her passivity keeps her from working hard on her craft, yet it also opens up the possibility for originality; the discipline necessary to enter into the literary tradition and secure an intelligent audience, for instance, can also produce a tedious and pedantic artist. The content of what Beauvoir says about woman as creator moves from emphasizing the imperative of active control and totally rejecting the passive elements of creation (as seen in her passages on motherhood) to insisting upon the value of both active and passive components (as seen in her passages on literature). Her oscillation between the poles of activity and passivity produce moments of rhetorical power in its ambiguity.

While other scholars have focused primarily on Beauvoir’s philosophical contradictions—principally the contradiction implicit in an existentialist feminism—rhetorical scholars may find the layers of contradiction in Beauvoir’s discussions on woman’s creativity potentiality fruitful. In the final section of this chapter, I explore Beauvoir’s definition of creation as explicitly excluding what she considers the passive re-creation of childbirth and motherhood. Creation

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12 In these sections she usually pairs the creative outlets of art and literature together, but for ease of discussion I’ll only refer to woman’s writing or literature.
through creative arts like writing literature holds the most promise for extracting women from their position as Other, yet Beauvoir seems to trap woman by constructing a woman creator whose possibilities coincide with her limitations. Through the uncertainty of accepting contradictory propositions, I argue, comes the most interesting possibilities for woman in *The Second Sex*.

“As long as [woman] still has to fight to become a human being,” Beauvoir concludes in *The Second Sex*, “she cannot be a creator” (750). The ability to create marks the goal of Beauvoir’s existentialism. Particularly in her “History” chapters, Beauvoir contrasts woman’s imprisonment in repetition and immanence to man’s ability to transcend the given world through creation. In the following passage, Beauvoir summarizes her conclusions from her “Destiny” chapters and crystallizes how she has defined woman thus far in her analysis along the lines of active creation:

On a biological level, a species maintains itself only by re-creating itself; but this creation is nothing but a repetition of the same Life in different forms. By transcending Life through Existence, man guarantees the repetition of Life: by this surpassing, he creates values that deny any value to pure repetition. With an animal, the gratuitousness and variety of male activities are useless because no project is involved; what it does is worthless when it is not serving the species; but in serving the species, the human male shapes the face of the earth, creates new instruments, invents and forges the future. Positing himself as sovereign, he encounters the complicity of woman herself: because she herself is also
an existent, because transcendence also inhabits her and her project is not repetition but surpassing herself toward another future; she finds the confirmation of masculine claims in the core of her being. She participates with men in festivals that celebrate the success and victories of males. Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life, while in her own eyes Life in itself does not provide her reasons for being, and these reasons are more important than life itself. (Second 74)

Rather than framing woman’s ability to give birth as a gift of basic creation, Beauvoir sees it as “her misfortune.” There is the brute reality of biological life and then there is the meaningful existence created by men. As an existentialist philosopher, Beauvoir concerns herself with existence and how, in this instance, women have been at a disadvantage to enter into a fuller, more self-determined and engaged relationship with the world. Existence goes beyond maintaining life—for even animals manage to merely maintain life—and extends to creating the world with one’s actions and projects. While on the face of things biological creation, the form of creation exclusively reserved for the female sex, seems fundamental to both life and existence, Beauvoir dismisses this form of creation, or what she deems “re-creation,” for a creation that “shapes the face of the earth.” Where man actively “invents and forges the future,” woman is passively “complicit” in repeating the human race. Man’s creation of “reasons for being,” which include bringing values and human projects into existence, overshadow woman’s preserving capacities, and, as Beauvoir provocatively asserts, “are more important than life itself” (Second 74).
While Beauvoir could have made the distinction between the re-creation of life and the principal creation of existence and moved on, she dwells on woman’s diminished existence as creator-mother and does not let readers mistakenly confuse the two as holding synonymous effects on the world: “Motherhood as a natural phenomenon confers no power” (189). Although at one point Beauvoir admits that “some women say they felt creative power during childbirth” (549), she seems skeptical. She provides no compelling first-hand accounts to support this statement as she does for her more disturbingly discontent pictures of maternity, nor does she elaborate any further on this particular experience of women. Beauvoir’s limited space and energy directed to the joys of creation through childbirth strike at the heart of the feminine myths she aims to upset.

Creation on the order of biological imperative misses the creation Beauvoir points toward as an existentialist feminist. First, motherhood as a type of creation is a passive occurrence rather than an active choice. Beauvoir characterizes childbirth as merely a “perpetuation of the species” (524). Woman has no active hand in shaping the fetus, but acts as a vessel for the natural forces. Perhaps she facilitates nature’s creation, but carrying a child and giving birth does not qualify woman as an active creator in the world, for Beauvoir. Pregnancy happens to women; she is a “passive instrument of life” (538-9); she experiences it as a contradiction, as “an enrichment and a mutilation” (538). Beauvoir deems this contradiction as problematic and proof that women should view the trappings of pregnancy and motherhood suspiciously, for even woman’s enrichment comes passively to her. Woman is “proud of it; but she also feels like
the plaything of obscure forces, she is tossed about, assaulted” (538). Since woman cannot unambiguously experience pregnancy as an affirmative and active choice of creation, Beauvoir confidently declares it passive.

Second, given the social and institutional pressures directed toward cajoling women into thinking their whole identities lie in becoming wife and mother, woman’s freedom is dramatically compromised in choosing to be a mother. “From Childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children,” thus Beauvoir imbues motherhood with a compulsory rather than creative quality (532). Existentialist creation reacts against the repetition of preset values. Creation instead, she argues, should come from a place where the subject freely considers and chooses a project that speaks to her individual gifts and situation.

The creation that Beauvoir admires in her discussions of motherhood actively takes control and does not let biological or social forces exclusively drive a life. As practiced at the time of her writing *The Second Sex*, motherhood fails on both counts. Paradoxically, woman comes closer to realizing her potential as a creator through preventing and ending pregnancy. Beauvoir begins her chapter “The Mother” describing the legal, moral, and logistical constraints of birth control and abortion. In doing so she suggests the technologies that prevent perpetual pregnancy of the sexually active woman often bring women closer to becoming self-determined creators. If women\(^\text{13}\) seeking an abortion must overcome the law that “dooms young women to death, sterility, and illness”

\(^{13}\) Most of her examples deal specifically with her fellow French women.
and religious hypocrisy that “authorizes the killing of adult men in war…but…stands on intransigent humanitarianism for the fetus,” then women who successfully obtain an abortion must make a conscious choice or at least a concerted effort (526).  

In short, the crucial role of creator “attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom” (748). This amounts to an active role of origination where one must “unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom,” not falling for false indicators like motherhood, but consciously making a decision to embrace the “free movement of transcendence” (748). Of utmost importance to Beauvoir here and throughout *The Second Sex* is active steering by women in controlling, as much as possible, their destiny rather than allowing social institutions, customs, and biology to overdetermine their lives.

Beauvoir rejects the obvious role of woman as creator through motherhood on the grounds that passive creation is not really creation; however, she identifies one productive line of creativity for women: “Woman’s situation,” she insists, “encourages her to seek salvation in literature” (742). Through childbirth woman merely ensures the continuity of humanity, but through writing, she can disrupt the continuity of life and forge a new future, propose new values. Indeed, in her own life Beauvoir saw language as her way out of the traps in which many women found themselves: “[w]ords without doubt, universal, eternal, presence of all in each, are the only transcendent power I recognize and am

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14 However, Beauvoir also allows that abortion is not always a sign of woman’s choice. Often, “the seducer himself…convinces the woman that she should rid herself of the child” (529).
affected by” (*Force* 650). Words, for Beauvoir, hold the potential to affect woman and save her.

Woman inhabits an amorphous space of creator through her status as man’s Other. Her unfavorable circumstances as man’s Other, her occupancy at the margins of a masculine society, and bourgeois women’s abundant leisure time, predispose woman to seek refuge through words. Because of this, she “does not grasp [the masculine world] in its universal guise but through a particular vision” (*Second 742*). Here, creation not only extends beyond sustaining life, but as specificity, a particular exception to the general operations of life. As envisioned here woman’s creative writing “protests” against the accepted world because of her exclusion; her creation comes from her “feelings and emotions” of her experience as Other (742). Precisely because she has little hope of making it in the real world, woman can lose herself in the imaginary and creative world of writing.

Yet paradoxically these elements also keep woman from becoming a great writer.¹⁵ At the margins of the masculine world, woman rejects a universal, given-vision of her situation, but it is because of her inability to have a real hand in constructing herself and change the given world that she fails at writing (*Second 742*). If woman cannot successfully posit herself in a world she has

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¹⁵ Beauvoir takes the term “great” seriously: “Men we call great are those who…take the weight of the world on their shoulders” (*Second 749*). Rather than redefining the question, “Why are men greater writers than women?” she accepts the terms (“the great book *Middlemarch* does not equal *War and Peace*; *Wuthering Heights*, in spite of its stature, does not have the scope of *Brothers Karamazov*” (*Second 746*)) and argues that woman can match man once she has freedom equal to man’s.
helped create, she cannot rightfully be deemed a creator. Yes, her leisure time affords her the space to think, but since she “decides to paint or write just to fill the emptiness of her days,” woman hardly ever knows the “austere necessity of a discipline” that great writers need (Second 742). So while bourgeois women may have the luxury of space, time, and money to devote to their days to writing, they often lack the seriousness and rigor of writers who must actively struggle and work to become a professional writer. In other words, although bourgeois women often have an environment conducive to writing, if they passively fall into writing rather than actively choose it, then they are never forced to learn the discipline necessary to become a writer. Contradictorily, the opportunities for woman as artist coincide with her limitations as artist.

The definitional boundaries Beauvoir proposes for creators in her motherhood section stand in her writing section up to this point. Passivity holds a completely negative function while activity stands as a principal key to woman’s equality. Beauvoir complains that instead of women “constituting their work by a thoughtful effort, they put their confidence in spontaneity; writing or smiling is all one to them: they try their luck, success will come or will not” (Second 743). Writing, indeed creation itself, requires concerted work. Woman’s passivity constitutes a weakness and allows her to be dominated and controlled by man: “The curse on the woman vassal is that she is not allowed to do anything...when she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence” (Second 721). If woman wants to participate on equal footing with man in the world—economically, socially, or politically—then, Beauvoir argues, she has to work for it.
and not rely on the feminine myths created by men that imbue value to passive attributes only when attached to females.

Within the world of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir builds many of her points through an accumulation of binaries: there is the subject and there is the object; there is the One and there is the Other; there is the active creator of the world and there is the passive receiver of culture. Indeed, within the section where Beauvoir explores woman’s creative potential through writing she sets up a number of stark oppositions to amplify her points of how women often miss creative opportunities that men seize. Woman “believe[s] in the magic virtues of passivity” and as such “create[s] mirages” that please, but does not create art, which for Beauvoir in this section, is the meaningful creation (743). Women artists often “cheat,” they “[play] at working, but [do] not work,” they “[confuse] conjurations and acts, symbolic gestures and effective behavior,” they may “disguise” themselves as artists and she may “[imagine] she is a writer,” but eventually women’s “trickery [will be] exposed” (743). Beauvoir compares woman’s passive mirages that often get confused with artistic creation with real artistic creation. Art, Beauvoir insists, “is not a mirage, it is a solid object,” it must be consciously and thoughtfully “construct[ed]” (743).

Throughout this section Beauvoir continues to accumulate binaries. With confidence Beauvoir declares the obvious split between the writer as professional and amateur; the “discipline” necessary to become a professional and the “laziness” of “most women” writers (read: amateur writer) (743). What these binaries ultimately boil down to is the difference between an active creation
and a passive acceptance of the given. According to Beauvoir, the problem with most women artists is that they “always [consider] themselves as givens” as opposed to actively creating, knowing that “value can be acquired”; they “know only how to display themselves” as opposed to “constituting their work by a thoughtful effort”; rather than cultivate technique and craft, women rely on the gift of personality; they “try their luck” instead of investing the “effort” (743). Beauvoir finally arrives at the central problem for women writers: they misplace their “confidence in spontaneity” rather than in “thoughtful effort” (743).

By this point in the text, over 700 pages in, Beauvoir has taught readers how to read her binary shorthand: “amateur,” “laziness,” “given,” “personality,” “luck,” and “spontaneity” all point to an un creative passivity which, as Beauvoir has been arguing from the beginning of The Second Sex, is one of the central obstacles that keep women in the position of Other. “Professional,” “discipline,” “acquisition,” “technique,” and “thoughtful effort,” on the other hand, signal to readers a positive, active creation with liberation possibilities.

Yet the further Beauvoir explains the creative process in writing, the more complications and contradictions accumulate. Passivity, particularly in explorations surrounding spontaneity, begins to accrue positive and necessary attributes for writers. Beauvoir defines spontaneity in terms of writing as “nothing more than the immediate translation of the subjective impression” (743). This definition falls squarely into the passivity side of Beauvoir’s binaries: there’s no thought effort, just an instant, gut reaction. And Beauvoir certainly sees the trouble in relying on spontaneity as a writer: one must “[take] others into account”
when creating and one also runs the risk of “reinventing a banal cliché” (743). But even as she reprimands woman for ignorantly taking her written clichés as artistic originality, she confesses spontaneity “not as simple as it appears” (743).

After downplaying spontaneity as a passive, lazy trick women writers use to present pleasing mirages, Beauvoir admits that a greatness can come from unstudied writing: “of course, it is a precious gift to be able to dig down into oneself and bring up vibrant impressions to the surface of language” (Second 744). Here, this spontaneity, writing produced from an “immediate translation” rather than thoughtful effort, begins to gather positive attributes. No doubt, Beauvoir appreciates a spontaneous easiness in writing, those rare ideas that without premeditation or pretense spring from a writer, but how can she suddenly recommend the creative merits of passivity, where the ideas come from within the writer, without studied, active effort after reprimanding woman for her passive complicity in her own subjugation? More specifically, how can she recommend passivity given its role as the societal expectation for women and the condition of being which has led woman to be thought of as man’s Other?

Beauvoir acknowledges the odd place she’s written herself into with this turn: “these two terms” that is, spontaneity and thoughtful effort, “seem to contradict each other” (744). By the terms and definitions she’s given readers thus far, they do. Within the world of The Second Sex that Beauvoir has constructed for readers, one cannot write “the immediate translation of the subjective impression” and with thoughtful effort at the same time. Or, more precisely, male writers have not been able to do this. Colette, according to
Beauvoir, has.\textsuperscript{16}

And it is in Beauvoir’s sweeping, if brief, read of Colette where she marries the contradictory binary of spontaneity and thoughtful effort into a “thoughtful spontaneity,” into a creative possibility for women writers (744). Beauvoir has thus far made the case for women writers’ culturally-constructed predilection for spontaneity, and she has painted this leaning as a passive, re-creation of mirages. By combining these two terms that Beauvoir has set up as a contradiction, she points women writers toward the possibility of creating rhetorical power from a perceived passive weakness.

To be clear, Beauvoir does not use “thoughtful spontaneity” as an opportunity to redefine or reinterpret passivity as a strength for women. Beauvoir’s critiques of passivity in the previous 700 pages of \textit{The Second Sex} stand. She instead opens the transformative possibility of passivity when paired with its opposite and challenges women writers to live the full potential of contradiction. And it’s in living this contradiction that women can become great writers.

Unlike passages in \textit{The Second Sex} where the goal of woman as creator rests in becoming more active, here woman, Beauvoir suggests, at the same time needs an element of passivity. One of the few examples where woman possesses the most creative potentiality—through writing—is the place where woman must inhabit the contradiction of active control and passive spontaneity. The greatest generative and creative possibilities for woman come only from

\textsuperscript{16} Colette’s spontaneity is “not found in any male writer” and (744).
contradiction. Through Beauvoir’s construction here, creative limitations originate from certainty where one adheres with conviction to either an active or passive role, and the freedom to create emanates from the contradiction of inhabiting activity and inactivity at the same time. Contradiction, in this sense, opens up generative possibilities in ways that unambiguous, active, and conscious choices alone cannot.

Without a certain level of passivity women writers become “like a female student…assiduous and pedantic” (Second 745). Pure will alone cannot create a great writer, but contributes to derogatory stereotypes of tedious female students. An overreliance on activity can produce excellent descriptive writing, but it cannot produce writing that forges a new world. In this regard, women “make remarkable reporters” (Second 747) and a woman “may become an excellent theoretician” (Second 745), but in their current situation, woman cannot excel as a creator of the world through writing.

For Beauvoir, women fail to take their writing far enough. They clearly and sometimes beautifully describe scenes and situations. They can expose the hypocrisy of society. They can even intelligibly articulate their emotions. However, woman stops short of boldly proposing and creating new worlds, of opening new vistas of opportunity: “truth itself is ambiguity, depth, mystery: after

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17 For a like-minded take on the complicated and sometime contradictory elements of creativity, see Steven Johnson’s Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation, particularly his chapter on serendipity (97-128).
its presence is acknowledged, it must be thought, re-created” (*Second 747*). Upon observing and describing the unjust truths of the world, one must burst through the mirages and create anew. In other words, the problem here is that women ultimately assume the ready-made world they inhabit rather than composing a new one.

To break through into the realm of creation, woman needs not only activate the conscious, active, intentional drives, but at the same time allow her latent, unconscious, passive skills to bear on her words. Woman must first “do writing” before creativity can “do her.” Rarely does Beauvoir attribute any positive merits to passivity, particularly when attached to women’s situations, but here contradiction generates creative possibilities for women. Beauvoir is not interested in rendering this contradiction explicit in *the Second Sex*, but by carefully following the movement of her contradictions and allowing for both active and passive elements, rather than assuming a logical progression to her argument, we see her suggesting a state in which passive forgetfulness and active control equals a positive contradiction for writers.

This state of what in one passage she deems “thoughtful spontaneity,” is “not found in any male writer,” marking one of the few categories where a woman writer surpasses a male in Beauvoir’s estimation (*Second 744*). “Thoughtful spontaneity” is not just the contradiction of inhabiting active and passive activities in one’s writing process (for example consciously studying and implementing rhetorical tropes and also allowing one’s unconscious the freedom to wander and

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18 Yet another contradiction here: recreation through childbirth is seen as less valuable than recreation of the world through words.
spontaneously produce rhetorical turns), but it also includes the capacity to
differentiate between good and bad writing and edit accordingly. Given woman’s
predisposition to using language as an expression of self, “thoughtful
spontaneity” as editing constitutes a more difficult task for woman than for man.

Precisely in the contradiction of “thoughtful spontaneity” do I argue
Beauvoir brings us back to the swirling contradiction of woman as subject and
object, as active and passive. Again, for Beauvoir, writing, at its fullest
potentiality, creates new worlds, but writing, for woman, too often becomes a tool
of expressing her very self: “editing or crossing out for her means repudiating a
part of self; she does not want to sacrifice anything both because she delights in
what she is and because she hopes not to become other” (Second 744). If
woman wants to move toward a productive contradiction rather than the
“contradictions with disconcerting consequences” (Second 755), then woman
must take responsibility for language, not as an extension of her self, but as a
tool for creating the world anew.

It is harder for women to inhabit this creative contradiction because
woman, unlike man, is a divided subject: “She refuses to confine herself to her
role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself; but it would also
be a mutilation to repudiate her sex” (Second 723). Creators must throw
themselves into a formalized, disciplined training and at the same time they must
discard tradition and break away for their own unique project. “[W]ithout serious
training, [woman] will never be more than an amateur” (Second 742); however,
just as dangerous to creators is the “overly conscientious female student [who]
kills her critical sense and even her intelligence” by following only the required readings of the university (Second 738).

The task of “thoughtful spontaneity,” Beauvoir hints, functions differently for men and women. The “world has always belonged to men” and as she argues throughout The Second Sex, men have been trained their whole lives through social institutions toward adventure, risk, self-reliance, and creation in terms of the masculine (Second 721). Women creators, Beauvoir suggests, have the difficult task of creating as women. There is a sense in “The Independent Woman” chapter that women are watching men, and their success, and trying to emulate them: “Sometimes [woman] rejects her femininity, she hesitates between chastity, homosexuality, or a provocative virago attitude, she dresses badly or like a man: she wastes a lot of time and energy in defiance, scenes, and anger” (Second 737). Creation, however, does not look the same in men and in woman. By ignoring her difference woman ignores her unique creative genius. Women need both activity and passivity for genius: “There are women who are mad, and there are women of talent: none of them have this madness in talent called genius” (Second 745). In ignoring her difference from man, she wastes her creative potential. If woman tries too hard in creating an independent life for herself, she becomes a joke, an imitation of man and not a full version of woman. Woman must emulate the discipline and the hard work of studying, analyzing, pondering the tradition, but often, Beauvoir observes, she unnecessarily imitates man working so hard to succeed that she is never able to forget herself or lose herself in her project: “Not being able to forget oneself is a failure” (Second 744).
Earlier, through the negation of mother as creator, Beauvoir marks existentialist creation as a full and consciously active choice; in discussing an arguably affirmative example of woman as creator through writing literature, Beauvoir not only contradicts her earlier implicit definition of an existentialist creator, she also plays with the complexities of contradictions in this account. To reach her creative potential, a potential where she can create her own world, woman must not simply work hard to change her situation, but she must also forget her situation.

Contradictions are not always problems in *The Second Sex*, but as with Beauvoir’s read of woman as creator, they can be read as rhetorical openings where sound echoes sense. Given that the goal of Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism emanates from a subject’s ability to create, her contradictory concept of “thoughtful spontaneity” as the way woman must create is not one concept among many. Inhabiting contradiction constitutes the crowning concept of her feminist philosophy by dictating not another ready-made value for how woman should experience the world, but generating multiple possibilities of how she might create new worlds of her own.

Not only does the sound, the style of *The Second Sex*, engage in contradiction in its seemingly unwitting slip from confidently renouncing woman’s passivity in childbirth to claiming the necessity of passivity in her writing, but the sense, the content of *The Second Sex*, also affirms contradiction as a creative necessity for woman. To create new worlds for herself woman cannot simply imitate the freedom of man and live her life on the side of active, conscious
choices. She instead must inhabit both the thoughtfulness of focused study and
the spontaneity of received impressions at the same time. Beauvoir responds to
the difficult question of “What is a woman?” and “How can woman obtain
freedom?” not through certainty, but the ambiguity of both the sound and sense
of contradiction. Far from constituting an intractable problem for *The Second
Sex* as a text worthy of study, contradiction instead shines as rhetorical power,
as the key to woman’s creative possibilities.

The accumulation of contradictions in the discussions of woman as
creator embodies a moment of rhetorical power in *The Second Sex*. Refusing a
pure moment of activity or passivity, Beauvoir’s rhetorical moves produce an
ambiguity that, when read closely and taken as a serious rhetorical choice, opens
up the possibilities for woman. Beauvoir relies on contradiction as the condition
of creative possibility for woman. One cannot know ahead of time which element
of Beauvoir’s contradiction to accept as truth, for woman’s very situation
constitutes ambiguity.

In the following chapter I follow a different line of contradiction in *The
Second Sex*. While my analysis in *The Second Sex* has thus far focused on the
interplay between the content of Beauvoir’s argument and the echo of her
argument through contradiction, in Chapter Three I address structural concerns
poststructuralist feminists have launched against the contradiction of Beauvoir’s
alleged “masculine language” in *The Second Sex*. How, these scholars ask, can
a text written in masculine language affect any real feminist change? In Chapter
Three I urge a reconsideration of Beauvoir’s language on the structural level and
ask readers to reconsider the possibilities Beauvoir opens up with her re-punctuation of “masculine language.”
Chapter 3:

“Vive le point-virgule!”:

Beauvoir’s Tendency Towards Compromise and the Relational

Although not quite a contradiction, Beauvoir’s perceived “masculine language” structure in *The Second Sex* poses a formidable tension for feminist rhetoricians, as she both acknowledges the power of language, and admits she has no intentions of creating what she calls a new feminist language.\(^\text{19}\) “I am not sure that I understand exactly what [new feminist languages] are, or even what they should be,” Beauvoir admits in an interview (Bair, “Politics” 151). “It is difficult,” she continues, “to describe new concepts and actions in existing words, but it is even more difficult to invent new ones…words are crucial weapons for feminism and must be chosen carefully and used wisely” (Bair, “Politics” 151). Elsewhere she grants her shortcomings in regard to feminist language practice, reflecting on how the younger generation of feminists taught her “vigilance” on even “trivial things like…ordinary sexism we’ve got so used to” (Schwarzer 70). “It starts at the level of grammar,” she tells us, “where the masculine always comes before the feminine” (Schwarzer 70). The importance of language, she suggests here, is that it allows us to think in different ways and as a result act in different ways and transform the world. Indeed, the very structure of our

\(^{19}\) The term “masculine language” is indeed a contested term. We will get to a more precise definition later in the chapter.
grammar works on us in unconscious ways predisposing us toward valuing the masculine over the feminine.

However, consciousness of the potentiality of language’s transformative powers matters little if one’s language remains consistently masculine. Beauvoir admits the fundamental importance of language for change, but she seemingly refuses to change her language. This becomes an egregious blind spot after the explosion of feminist language experimentation post-1968 by feminists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous. Juxtaposed against French psychoanalytic feminists, with a more pronounced language philosophy, it makes sense that Beauvoir has been overshadowed or ignored as a feminist language thinker.

If, as Carolyn Burke argues of Parisian women’s writing in the 1970s women’s movement, “it is possible to write one’s self into existence,” then *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir’s allegedly masculine text, coupled with her refusal to change her language in later writings, practically wrote her out of existence as a significant thinker of feminist language. The French, post-1968 generation saw Beauvoir’s language as contained by the dominant masculine ideology, reformist, even token, and caught up in old systems of thought.\(^2\) Kristeva, in her groundbreaking “Women’s Time,” implicates Beauvoir in the older generation of “suffragists and…existential feminists” (18) operating under “masculine,” linear conceptions of time (18), “logic[s] of identification” (19), and projects of political

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\(^2\) See Carolyn Burke’s reflections on her time in Paris from 1970-1943 in “Report from Paris: Women’s Writing and the Women’s Movement.”
inclusion in opposition to “women’s time” which favors difference and “specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realizations” (19).

Even English-speaking feminist scholars launched sometimes vaguely-evidenced yet boldly-worded attacks charging Beauvoir as male-identified based upon her language in The Second Sex. Bair explains these language choices where, “in keeping with her consistent stylistic third person [and] impersonal modes of narration, [Beauvoir] speaks of women as ‘she’ or ‘they,’ which has led to charges that she considers herself above, apart, or in some way removed from the condition of women” (“In Summation” 57-58). In response to what has been perceived as Beauvoir’s indirect condescension toward women, Carol Ascher addresses Beauvoir directly and demands answers: “In your despairing view, all those qualities that make women differ from men only lead to their demise. And so, while your picture of the world of patriarchy would lead the reader to feel that women must band together and go off on their own, your dislike of women…makes this an unpalatable direction” (110). Jean Leighton voices her unease with Beauvoir’s “misogyny” as she laments the allegiance to masculine values found in The Second Sex (221) while Stevie Smith opens her review of The Second Sex charging Beauvoir as having “written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them, nor does she like being a woman” (602). This set of feminists tends to think of Beauvoir’s language as divisive given her subject matter. Instead of expressing solidarity with women, Beauvoir’s language is seen as projecting a position of objectivity in order to observe and analyze a separate, unsympathetic Other.
Beauvoir, and to different degrees and definitions, French and Anglo- feminists, agree that *The Second Sex* traffics in masculine language. At best, this is taken as old-fashioned and ineffective in combating oppression and at worst, it is taken as outright misogynistic. While there exists little debate over the fact of Beauvoir’s masculine language, Beauvoir’s strategy of acknowledging the existence and problems of masculine language, yet claiming her own use of it remains puzzling.

Just because Beauvoir calls masculine language into question, we should not assume she aims to destroy it and create a new feminine language. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* reminds us that “[t]o call a presupposition into question,” in this case masculine language, “is not the same as doing away with it; rather,” she tells us, “it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims” (30). The expressed purpose of *The Second Sex* was never to upend masculine language, but in this and other texts Beauvoir shows an awareness of its limitations, particularly for women. And yet, she does not “[do] away with it” or even attempt to “[do] away with it.” She uses it, explores its political stakes for women, and, I argue, in doing so, enters into a different relation with masculine language, one where woman’s difference could be engaged. There is nothing inherently masculine or oppressive in masculine language, Beauvoir suggests, but rather, the problem is that what we term masculine language has evolved through time into an exclusive and oppressive
language structure. Likewise, this logic implies, masculine language can be punctuated in more politically productive ways.

Similarly, in Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*, her exploration where she frees masculinity from its biologically male moorings, Halberstam argues that masculine women aim not to imitate men, but to “[afford] us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” (1). In other words, by examining the masculine separate from the male body, we get a clearer picture of exactly what constitutes the masculine rather than conflating it with the male physiology. While French psychoanalytic feminists have consistently separated masculine and feminine languages as not simply following from respective male and female bodies, exploring charges of female masculinity launched against Beauvoir—particularly with her long history of being accused of Sartrean imitation—remains an important task in acquitting her of those charges.

More important, however, are the political stakes involved in how we read the feminist potentiality of *The Second Sex*. Language, for Beauvoir, allows us to think in different ways and as a result act in different ways to transform the world. If we read *The Second Sex* as irrecoverably masculine and thus politically ineffective or misogynist, then we clearly experience it as a severely limited feminist political text. If what French psychoanalytic and English-reading feminists define as masculine language automatically, by its very nature, discredits the feminist thought, then there’s nothing much we can salvage from *The Second Sex*. Its language rests irreparably on the side of the masculine value of sameness and representation, against women’s differences.
Encouraging a reading where masculine language is not inherently exclusive and oppressive but a mutable relation breathes new life into *The Second Sex* and begins from a place of generative possibilities rather than certain limitations. Language as an evolving relation between the masculine and the feminine re-opens the potentiality of *The Second Sex* and allows for thought and action aligned with connection and compromise.

In this chapter, I argue that while Beauvoir’s language in *The Second Sex* unequivocally exhibits masculinity, her punctuation—as in interruption or accentuation—of masculine language engages in a feminist reiteration. Perhaps Irigaray’s *The Speculum of the Other Woman* stands as the most recognizable examples of masculine language re-punctuated. In this text, Irigaray mimics the voice of male thinkers like Freud and Plotinus in order to interrupt the masculinist philosophical tradition. By Butler’s reading, Irigaray “enters into the language of philosophy as its shadow, to infiltrate its terms, to manifest the occluded feminine, and to provide a disruptive writing that casts the self-grounding authority of masculinist philosophy into question” (*Undoing* 200-201).

Beauvoir correctly realizes her language position in phallogocentrism, but rather than creating a new experimental feminine language as a way to remove herself from the compromise of a feminist masculine language position, she decides to work within her constraints and reinterpret masculine language through punctuation. Rather than mechanically repeating her inherited masculine language, Beauvoir punctuates it in such as way as to build compromise and different types of relations. Beauvoir does this not by outright
rejecting feminine language (as has often been the charge against her), but by rejecting what she deems the psychoanalytic style, a style that she disapprovingly describes as inaccessible to everyday women, her intended audience. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir does not simply stick with an easily recognizable masculine language, but, through her use of long, winding sentences, connected with semicolons, circulates masculine structures, transforming them by building feminine connections with masculine concepts.

This way of reading has only recently been possible to English-readers of *The Second Sex*. For nearly sixty years the only English translation of Beauvoir’s landmark text has been significantly curtailed by unmarked cuts, repunctuated sentences, and misinterpreted philosophical terms. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier’s 2010 translation allows English-readers, among other things, to reopen the question of punctuation. What is the significance of different types of punctuation? Do we get a different text with different punctuation? If so, how does punctuation shape our thought and connections between ideas? Rather than evaluating the original English translation as wrong or right in terms punctuation (or evaluating the translator’s judgment of Beauvoir’s punctuation choices), the question becomes one of punctuation’s rhetorical effects. Quite literally, how do the different punctuation choices between H.M. Parshley’s 1952 translation and Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s 2010 translation render a different text in terms of “masculine” or “feminine” language?

3.1 WHAT IS MASCULINE LANGUAGE?
The charges against Beauvoir for using masculine language resonate from both English and French corners of the feminist world. While the English-speaking feminists focus on the more practical-minded, surface-level elements of masculine language, French feminists tend to gravitate toward theoretical, structural components of masculine language. In terms of launching a definition and critique of masculine language, Beauvoir falls somewhere in between English and French feminists, providing a curious and slippery definition. In this section, I open by locating Beauvoir’s ambiguous “position” on masculine language and then unpack the prevalent French psychoanalytic definition. I will briefly reflect on the English definition of masculine language; however, for the purposes of this project, I use a French psychoanalytic definition of masculine language. Delving into the psychoanalytic definitions of masculine language provides a richer base from which to then analyze Beauvoir’s adherence and subversion of masculine language.

“The representation of the world as the world itself,” Beauvoir tells us in *The Second Sex*, “is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth” (*Second* 162). Language represents but one tool of representation that man has taken for granted as a natural, normal outgrowth of his dominance and very being. And while “[t]his world has always belonged to men” (*Second* 721), Beauvoir marshals her analysis to prove the masculine bent of the world came about as an active doing, not as a passive, natural state of affairs. As such, while Beauvoir never devotes large, continuous space to her critique of masculine language, she
obliquely and intermittently addresses the question of masculine language’s effects on woman. “Woman,” Beauvoir insists, “is certainly to a large extent man’s invention,” (Second 212-213) and she devotes roughly fifty pages in her “Myths” section to demonstrate the “singular and syncretic form” of influential writers’ impact on the creation of woman” (Second 214).

Beauvoir resists masculine techniques of naming and defining masculine language in The Second Sex. She leaves the precise qualities of masculine language unnamed; she instead principally cares about its effects. By calling masculine language into question, Beauvoir begins to reveal the political interests secured by it. Her concerns with masculine language in The Second Sex are two-fold: first, man uses language as a tool of oppression and second, woman cannot adequately express herself through man’s language.

Masculine language, as in the language that men have created and practiced, authorizes woman’s subordination. Beauvoir catalogues in her “History” chapters how woman came to be man’s Other and how man used language to shore up legal and value systems in his favor. He wrote laws that put the legal system “into harmony with reality,” (Second 88) and “strip[ped] woman of all her rights to hold and transmit property” (Second 90). Creation of private property only codified the machinery of women’s oppression; however, it also proved necessary to deploy language toward creating woman as Other: “Man feminizes the ideal that he posits before him as the essential Other, because woman is the tangible figure of alterity; this is why almost all the allegories in language and in iconography are women” (Second 196).
Throughout *The Second Sex* Beauvoir argues that man needs woman, the “essential Other,” in order to define himself. In order to continuously create the necessary Other to define himself against, man participates in the creation of myths to validate and naturalize the current social order where man oppresses woman.

Indeed, in her “Myths” section, where she devotes an entire chapter to each Henry de Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Paul Claudel, Andre Breton, and Stendhal, Beauvoir demonstrates how these writers use language to construct woman as Other in particular ways. While Montherlant may construct a sexual archetype where man “soars in the sky of heroes” while woman “crouches on the ground, under his feet” (*Second* 262) and Breton, contrastingly, envisions woman’s immanence as a venerated revelation of peace, through their writing, they each participate in the mythology of woman as a “privileged Other,” simultaneously a subject and object, yet neither wholly a subject or object, merely one who assists man to realize himself (*Second* 262).

As a type of epideictic rhetoric, the literature Beauvoir discusses in her “Myths” section creates and maintains the values that preserve woman as man’s Other. The more the values formulated in the realm of the epideictic are repeated, the more they become a naturalized way of thinking and the very justification for oppressive actions against woman through legal and legislative systems. In other words, language wielded by men participates in building foundational values and beliefs that make the concrete material realities of the world possible: “By way of religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, and film,
myths penetrate even into the existence of those most harshly subjected to material realities” (*Second* 272). Masculine language secures masculine interests to the detriment of women. Through writing laws and creating a cultural mythology, man exercises his dominion over the world and woman through language.

Yet, by this logic alone, there is no reason why woman could not use masculine language mechanically toward feminist ends. Why, for example, could women not also compose laws and create myths that constitutes her as fully subject as man has? Language, Beauvoir indicates, is not that simple. Because woman exists in a world created by men, she cannot simply employ her particular language of difference, of “bizarre genius” for her own devices because it cannot be recognized (*Second* 745). Woman struggles with a language she had no hand in creating, Beauvoir tells us. She “feel[s] crushed by the universe of culture because it is a universe of men: [woman] just babble[s]” (*Second* 745). While lamenting the “dull escapist” novels of women, Beauvoir also admits it “natural for women to try to escape this world where they often feel unrecognized and misunderstood” (*Second* 745). The “world of thinking and art” is a “masculine world” where woman, if she dares approach, does so with timidity and conformism (*Second* 745). Woman finds herself in a double bind: if she “disturbs and antagonizes” with her difference and originality she only “babbles” and if she uses the “masculine techniques” she “repudiate[s] everything in her that is ‘different’” (*Second* 745).
Unable to adopt the language of men with any force, when woman attempts a language of her own she can barely be heard: “To say that woman is mystery is to say not that she is silent but that her language is not heard; she is there, but hidden beneath veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances” (Second 269). There is a language that takes into account sexual difference, Beauvoir suggests here, but it cannot be heard yet. It exists as an ambiguity. Here, in The Second Sex, we see the double bind mentioned earlier by Beauvoir: woman’s inability to genuinely participate in masculine language, yet the deafness of the world to a feminine language. Once again woman finds herself in an impossible position: she is neither subject nor object; she can neither participate in the reigning language structure nor be heard in her own language structure.

While Beauvoir hazily gestures toward a critique of masculine language, English-speaking and those theorists generally labeled as “French feminists” offer more fully articulated positions. These two perspectives, Toril Moi summarizes, generally divide along lines of the practical English and the theoretical French:

Where we [English-speaking feminists] were empirical, they [French feminists] were theoretical; where we believed in the authority of experience, they questioned not only the category of experience, but even

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21 It should be noted that both Moi in French Feminist Thought and Christine Delphy in “Invention of French Feminism” have argued that this “French” position is only a segment of what feminism looks like in France and there are also more materialist-minded feminists doing work in France as well.
that of the ‘experimenter’ – the female subject herself. If we were looking for a homogeneous female tradition in art or history, they insisted that female writing could only ever be visible in the gaps, contradictions or margins of patriarchal discourse. And when we were looking for women writers, they sought feminine writing, which, they confusingly claimed, could equally well be produced by men. (*French Feminist Thought* 5)

As we saw in the opening critiques against Beauvoir’s language, Anglo-feminists tend to think of masculine language as something along the lines of a male-identified point of view. 22 For example, Kate Millett’s formative *Sexual Politics* demonstrates a male perspective to the Western literary canon. These definitions voice a similar concern as Beauvoir’s where “the masculine always comes before the feminine” (Beauvoir qtd in Schwarzer 70), a concern that the male perspective becomes the normalized universal perspective. The psychoanalytic French perspective, on the other hand, coincides with Beauvoir’s fear that the very structure of masculine language proves inadequate for woman’s speech. Rather than a pervasive tweaking of language toward more gender-neutral words, these feminists suggest an internal overhaul of language,

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22 For Anglo-feminist debates on what it means to write as a woman and complicate the English-French distinctions see Jonathan D. Culler’s *On Deconstruction*, p. 43-64, Shoshana Felman’s “Re-Reading Femininity,” Diana Fuss’s “Reading Like a Feminist,” Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s *Writing a Woman’s Life*, Mary Jacobus’s *Reading Woman*, Peggy Kamuf’s “Replacing Feminist Criticism,” Peggy Kamuf and Nancy K. Miller’s “Parisian Letter: Between Feminism and Deconstruction” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, Nancy K. Miller’s *Getting Personal*, Deborah L. Rhode’s *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Differences*, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* and “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year” in *Men in Feminism*, and Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks’s *The Female Imagination*. 

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asserting basic grammar and logic as ideologically loaded. Language, for example, cannot simply welcome the feminine by changing externalities like “chairman” to “chairperson.” Irigaray, like Beauvoir earlier, characterizes feminine language within the masculine, semiotic language system as “babble,” as incomprehensible, not made familiar through only a series of surface-level adjustments. Beauvoir certainly holds affinities with both sets of feminists; however, a French psychoanalytic definition of masculine language provides a richer base from which to then analyze Beauvoir’s adherence and subversion of masculine language.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, one cannot engage in a discussion of masculine language as a discrete entity without first contending with the tangle of time, history, values and subjectivity.23 “The future,” Cixous proclaims in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “must no longer be determined by the past” (1524). While the past certainly must be taken into consideration, she calls for a radical re-thinking of time, a break where she “refuse[s] to strengthen [the effects of the past] by repeating them” (1524). Kristeva, in “Women’s Time,” most explicitly takes up the question of time and history suggesting that before we discuss how one speaks—from a masculine or feminine register—we must first establish from where one speaks. She draws a sharp contrast between cursive time, a time attributed to a socialist political perspective and monumental time, a viewpoint

23 I launch my explanation of masculine language from the Kristeva/Cixous/Irigaray triumvirate. For their most notable influences begin with Freud’s 1922 “Medusa’s Head,” Lacan’s On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, and, although not psychoanalytic, Derrida’s “Linguistics and Grammatology” in Of Grammatology.
decidedly Freudian. The first is “readily labeled masculine” (18) and represents “the time of history” (17) in the sense of a linear, progressive arrangement of events unfolding. Those feminists adhering to cursive time concern themselves with political inclusion: “the struggles for equal pay for equal work, for taking power in social institutions on an equal footing with men” (18). The goal here resides in full, universal inclusion of women in a rational, nation-state.

While the benefits for women in such a plan seem obvious—women should have equal pay, full access to family planning tools, comparable professional opportunities as men, and the like—proponents of monumental time “distrust…the entire political dimension” of cursive time (19). The new generation of feminists, Kristeva tells us, questions the “common sense” of egalitarianism that sets up masculine values, the values that have reigned unquestioned, as universal values that women should easily and naturally accept (20). Universalism ignores the specificity of women or any Other-ed identity groups, leading differences to “only appear as nonessential or even nonexistent to the totalizing and even totalitarian spirit of this ideology” (21). As such, Kristeva points to atrocities committed in the name of a so-called objective Enlightenment Humanism, namely instances in which Jewish difference was answered with violence, as proof of the limitations of egalitarianism that take on a universal model (21).

Although useful for a period of time, the critique of a masculine conception of time and values is that it has “exhaust[ed]…its potential as a program for a new social contract” (21). It does not go anywhere new, but sublimes
difference into the dream of unity. By contrast, Freudianism can work within
socialism, but counters aims of universality by “posing the question of sexual
difference and of the difference among subjects who themselves are not
reducible one to the other” (20). The socialist political agenda has reached its
saturation point, argues Kristeva, because it does not take into consideration
difference and specificity. Rather than addressing this problem through a
political system, Freudian feminists work through symbolic questions, or
questions of language.

Kristeva explains this implicit criticism of masculine logic through the turn
toward questions of language as a mode of social change:

Sexual difference... is translated by and translates a difference in the
relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social
contract: a difference, then in the relationship to power, language, and
meaning. The sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion
brought about by the new generation will henceforth be situated on the
terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in
order to try to discover, first, the specificity of the female, and then, in the
end, that of each individual woman. (21)

The relationship of sexually differentiated subjects to language, the belief that the
transformation of language is the transformation of the social contract brings us
to the importance of rethinking masculine language. Cixous agrees with this line
of thought adding, “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space
that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (1526). Beginning with language, rather than with women’s political inclusion, offers the promise of substantial, broad-based change for women.

The masculine, then, becomes a symbolic marker for the logic of the same. Particularly in Irigaray’s “This Sex Which is Not One” and Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” psychoanalytic feminists use masculine and feminine bodies as metaphors for writing and language. “Write your self. Your body must be heard,” implores Cixous (1527). Both Irigaray and Cixous play with the idea of representational language, that is, language that clearly and directly represents phenomenon found in the natural world, through way of sexual organs. The phallus—linear, singular, visible—structures the very matrix of masculine logic and language. Just as “masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis” so does the “political anatomy” (Cixous 1533). Meanwhile, the vaginal, Irigaray contrasts, provides a vision of a fundamentally different way of inhabiting language:

As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other. (24)
Where man needs a tool to touch himself for sexual stimulation, woman, without intervention touches herself. Where man visibly and actively stimulates, woman imperceptibly and inadvertently touches herself. Where man is singular, woman is multiple. These metaphors of language, contrasted as they are through masculine and feminine bodies, demonstrate two attitudes toward language: the masculine as singular and empirically represent-able and the indefinable, multiple feminine.

Working from the Freudian reading of Medusa as a symbol of woman’s castration complex and lack, psychoanalytic feminists refigure the feminine with a positive, barely-visible-from-the-margins, excessive value. In Freudian thought, Medusa symbolizes the feminine sex—a beautiful yet repellent creature reminiscent of a vagina, that, when looked upon, seizes up man in terror by its lack of a phallus. Looking upon the feminine, there is nothing to see in the face of the monstrous snake-haired, grimacing being. Through the masculine logic of valuing the visible, the feminine lacks the authority that comes with the penis. While “scene[s] of representation” must necessarily reject woman’s “nothing to see” (Irigaray 26), scenes of non-representation can refigure Medusa not as ominous, but as playful and productively excessive: “[o]ur glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thought, our signs, our writing; and we’re not afraid of lacking” (Cixous 1526).

The critique of the masculine, here, enacts a double move of criticizing representation and the logic of the same. Man recoils from Medusa because he
cannot see her; instead he sees a terrifying, deadly monster of difference. The logic buttressing masculine language cannot see radical difference as difference but only as lack. With this obliviousness comes significant limitations for ways of approaching language. The logic of the phallus has a singular way of approaching the Other. In contrast, the feminine provides a playfully excessive alternative:

I don’t want a penis to decorate my body with. But I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female; because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives, and wanting it alive. Castration? Let others toy with it. What’s a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meager desire. (1535)

If the masculine economy runs off a scarcity model—assessing woman’s otherness as lack—then a feminine writing operates through abundance. The feminine answers the criticism of a masculine logic that overvalues coherence of meaning, reason, and conscious control. The history of writing, Cixous tells us, has unnecessarily been “confounded with the history of reason” that “enormous machine that has been operating and turning out is ‘truth’ for centuries” (1526, 1527). The over-privileging of reason as natural and self-evident leads to a construction of tradition as inevitable, a tradition that has consciously and actively suppressed the feminine. Woman counters these masculine aspects by writing her body in all its excessive multiplicities and anti-logics: “she sets off in all directions leaving ‘him’ unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers
are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason” (Irigaray 29).

Yet even with these highlighted differences and with the core belief in a fundamental difference between the sexes, the feminine is not incompatible with the masculine. While these thinkers work toward subverting masculine language, they do not aim to overthrow one god and replace it with another. “Women’s Time,” “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and “This Sex Which is Not One” sharply contrast the feminine and masculine, but, as Cixous reminds us, sexual difference is not the same thing as sexual opposition (1526). While sexual difference encourages respect and attention to difference, sexual opposition indicates an antagonism and a competition where one of the sexes must vanquish the other. None of these authors suggest totally replacing masculine symbolic systems with a feminine model, but shattering the symbolic system by fully incorporating difference. Both Kristeva and Cixous provide examples of what this incorporation of difference could look like.

Kristeva, for example, refuses an all-or-nothing model. She discusses the socialist-minded tack of the older, masculine generation of including and promoting women institutionally. Freudians are not necessarily against such masculine-minded measures—indeed, many would still find this work critical—however, the problem of women’s inclusion “is not, strictly speaking, [their] problem” (Kristeva 26). Women’s political inclusion represents part of feminism’s project, not its apogee. As Kristeva explains it, there exists no one correct
political program for feminism, but each of these strategies addresses specific questions and problems.

Cixous more aggressively claims her use of the masculine and the feminine: “Besides, isn’t it evident that the penis gets around in my texts, that I give it a place and appeal? Of course I do. I want all. I want all of me with all of him. Why should I deprive myself of a part of us? I want all of us” (1535). Tapping back into the concept of excess, the feminine does not limit itself to itself or to the same, and in doing so the feminine refuses the hierarchy and singular-mindedness of the masculine. As such, the feminine does not aspire toward a pure language position, but steals, mixes, creates, and transforms the symbolic social system. As Cixous famously quips, “For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to ‘fly’” (1532).

To clarify, the experimental and open attitude towards language is not an argument that biological women using masculine language would naturally transform it into feminine writing (otherwise there would be no charges against *The Second Sex* to respond to from the psychoanalytic set) or a case of appropriating masculine language for feminist ends. Kristeva unequivocally distinguishes woman’s writing and woman’s style (in the biologically constituted senses) from the feminine: “I am not speaking here of a ‘woman’s language,’ whose…apparent lexical specificity is perhaps more the product of a social marginality…nor am I speaking of the aesthetic quality of productions by women”

24 The French word here is *volver*, which translates as both “to fly” and “to steal.”
Kristeva does not deny the specificity that women’s social situation produces in her writing, but she does deny an essentialism that attributes woman’s writing as feminine: “does one not find the pen of many a female writer being devoted to phantasmic attacks against Language and Sign as the ultimate supports of phallocratic power…?” (32). Woman is not immune to the allure of phallic power—even if it works against her interests. As Cixous warns women writers, “don’t denigrate woman, don’t make of her what men have made of you” (1528).

Masculine language, from both Beauvoir and the French psychoanalytic perspectives, does not simply equal the language from biologically constituted male bodies, but is more about a type of violent language that effaces difference—in these cases, sexual differences. Beauvoir envisions masculine language as a habitual representation of the world from a perspective where any difference is met with a disciplining violence and where, in effect, men’s political and social interests are secured over and against women’s. Woman cannot level the sexual playing field by mechanically writing her inclusion into the world of men because by definition, her difference cannot be accounted for in the masculine world. The masculine, for the French psychoanalytic feminists, represents a way of thinking about the world that values linear time, progress, universal political inclusion, reason, common sense egalitarianism, unity, the singular, representation, and the logic of the same. Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous offer a vision of a feminine language of difference, one that encourages generative multiplicity in terms of subjectivity, meaning, and power.
Appropriating masculine language leaves women open to “a risk of identification” to which she should not “succumb” (Cixous 1532). Kristeva less optimistically sees this move as politically unviable for women: “How” she rhetorically asks, could woman “take hold of [the masculine] contract, to possess it in order to enjoy it as such or to subvert it?” (24). “The answer remains difficult to formulate,” she continues, “since, precisely, any formulation is deemed frustrating, mutilating, sacrificial” (24). The point remains that rather than accepting the masculine language presented to women with its traps of representation, imperatives of same-ness, valorization of reason, and attitudes of scarcity, the feminine transforms language into a productive machine of difference.

While Beauvoir, Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray all address the problematic nature of masculine language’s role in feminist projects, Beauvoir’s criticisms operate under sometimes contrasting sets of assumptions. As Kristeva accurately describes, Beauvoir mostly operates under “masculine,” linear conceptions of time (18), “logics[s] of identification,” (19) and projects of political inclusion. Where Beauvoir raises issues of how masculine language has been mobilized as a tool of oppression against women, prohibiting them from full and active inclusion in the world of creation, Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray focus on masculine language’s limitations in terms of representation and logics of the same. The chief problem with masculine language, from this perspective, is that it encourages blindness to difference.
Yet we can still identify common ground between these feminists in their desires to acknowledge woman’s difference as creatively productive. Beauvoir does not advocate simply for women’s inclusion into masculine language practices. She, like Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray, see it as fundamentally inadequate as a mode of expression for women. Rather than envisioning Beauvoir’s feminism as sharply contrasted with psychoanalytic feminism in terms of women’s use of masculine language, I argue they aim at different audiences. For example, both Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* punctuate masculine language to the point of transformation; however, Beauvoir worked from a more common, accessible stylistic register while Irigaray composed from a specialized, psychoanalytic style.\(^{25}\)

Beauvoir has a reputation as an outspoken critic of psychoanalytic theory.\(^{26}\) In a 1977 interview with Alice Jardine, Beauvoir mostly characterizes psychoanalytic practices as “absolutely disastrous” for women (Jardine and Beauvoir 228). Beauvoir felt Freud “understood absolutely nothing about women” and that “all of [Lacan’s] stuff still minimizes women” (Jardine and Beauvoir 228). Irigaray, even after the publication of *Speculum of the Other Woman*...

\(^{25}\) For an excellent comparative reading of Beauvoir and Irigaray’s styles and how it shapes their philosophy, see Moi’s “‘I Am a Woman’: The Personal and the Philosophical.”

\(^{26}\) While writing *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir attended a handful of Lacan’s lectures, but she held a general skepticism toward psychoanalysis in terms of its ability to account for human behavior. Yet later in life she admitted: “I wish I had paid more attention to psychology. That I had read more, tried to understand it better. I wonder why I was so afraid of Freud when I was young[?]” (Beauvoir qtd in Bair, *Simone* 633, n23). Even still, Lacan in particular, remained an “enigma” she “never really cared to understand beyond what [she] used in *The Second Sex*” (Beauvoir qtd in Bair, *Simone* 655, n34).
Woman and This Sex Which is Not One, according to Beauvoir, “is trying to do something” but “hasn’t gone quite far enough in my opinion” (Jardine and Beauvoir 228). Tellingly, Beauvoir provides no elaboration on how Irigaray’s work stops short.

With such vague criticisms and either an inability or refusal to expand when Jardine asks follow-up questions, it seems as if Beauvoir underestimates and misunderstands psychoanalytic feminist projects. She does not seem to have a specific problem with Irigaray’s or Cixous’s content, but rather with not being able to understand (and asserting the common woman cannot understand) their language. On Irigaray she confesses:

I found [Speculum of the Other Woman] laborious to read because of the Lacanian style, which persists in spite of everything…but I read her second book with far greater pleasure, Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un. It’s written in a much simpler style, much more direct, without a ‘scholastic’ vocabulary—psychoanalysts have fallen into a kind of horrifying, almost Aristotelian, scholasticism. On the whole, however, I am interested in the kind of work she is doing and I found her book very interesting. (Jardine and Beauvoir 228)

And of Cixous, she readily admits to being of the older generation that “can’t read her, understand her” (Jardine and Beauvoir 229). She elaborates:

I think it’s wrong to write in a totally esoteric language when you want to talk about things which interest a multitude of women. You can’t address
yourself to women by speaking a language which no average woman will understand. In my opinion, it’s wrong. There is something false in this search for a purely feminine writing style…to create a language all of a piece which would be a women’s language, that I find quite insane.

(Jardine and Beauvoir 229-230)

And as far as Kristeva’s work, Beauvoir confesses, after faulting Tel Quel, the journal most closely associated with her, “I don’t know [her] work very well” (Jardine and Beauvoir 232).

These interview excerpts suggest that Beauvoir disagrees with these psychoanalytic scholars based upon their stylistic language choices. She never points to any conceptual disagreements (indeed, she reports her “interest” in the kind of work Irigaray does), but always goes back to the psychoanalytic style as evidence of its supposed misguidance. Marked as “laborious,” derogatorily assessed as exhibiting a “scholastic” and “esoteric” manner, the psychoanalytic style, and thus the whole project, fails for Beauvoir as she and a “multitude” of women are unable to “understand” these stylistics. Not only does the project fail by her standards, but she even goes as far as making moral claims that their stylistics are “wrong,” “false,” and “insane.”

The difference between Beauvoir and French psychoanalytic feminists in terms of masculine and feminine language is largely a difference of audience. As such, they make different stylistic choices. Irigaray agrees that her feminine language is “somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason” (29), but she takes
the risk that her audience, one immersed in the psychoanalytic tradition, has the training or will at least work to participate in a feminine language system. Beauvoir, meanwhile, casts for a more general audience in works like *The Second Sex*, one that might not be trained in such a particular school of thought. Certainly Beauvoir has different philosophical assumptions than Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous, but when it comes to language, these differences are more a matter of audience, degree, and by extension, stylistic choices, than fundamental conceptual disagreement over how or if one can escape masculine language and create a purely feminine language.

None of these thinkers believes it possible to completely opt out of phallogocentrism. Instead, the question for these feminists is how to punctuate—as in interrupt or accentuate—masculine language in the most politically transformative way.\(^{27}\) Where Irigaray, for instance, punctuates the masculine philosophical tradition by interrupting Freud’s language in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, by repeating his

‘Ladies and Gentlemen...Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity—...Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem.’ (Irigaray, *Speculum* 13)

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\(^{27}\) Moi, in “‘I Am a Woman,’” works through a more thorough comparison between Irigaray and Beauvoir’s opening passages in order to prove how “philosophical style becomes a record of subjectivity” (177).
only to subvert it in the following paragraph, Beauvoir punctuates the masculine by echoing the perspective of the eternal feminine in order to better emphasize her own, contrasting position:

True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, ‘Even in Russia, women are still very much women’; but other well-informed people—and also at times those same ones—lament, ‘Woman is losing herself, woman is lost.’” (Beauvoir, Second 3)

After representing the eternal feminine position as contradictorily universal and contingent, Beauvoir accentuates the illogic of the position. Neither Irigaray nor Beauvoir shy away from masculine language. Both integrate it into their introductions, but, more significantly, they punctuate it in such a way as to question its operations. Irigaray interrupts the Freudian tradition; Beauvoir accentuates the illogic of the eternal feminine line of thought.

Just because Beauvoir refuses psychoanalytic projects on the whole and disagrees with their audience choice and writing style does not mean she inhabits an unmitigated terrain of the masculine, as has often been supposed. What Beauvoir suggests in her comments on Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous, is that she simply disagrees with what she calls the Lacanian style because of its limited audience. Beauvoir’s style is decidedly more accessible to a general audience (women of all classes read The Second Sex when it was originally published in France), and no doubt circulates masculine structures; however, Cixous, too, celebrates her language as phallic: “isn’t it evident that the penis gets around in my text, that I give it a place and appeal? […] I want all…Why
should I deprive myself of a part of us? (1535). Beauvoir, like the psychoanalytic feminists, admits to working in a compromised language, one that embraces both the feminine and the masculine.

As I argued in Chapter Two, Beauvoir’s sound echoes her sense in *The Second Sex*. In this project I am not interested in attempting to separate her style from her content, but in examining the interplay between and inseparability of the two. Nonetheless, Beauvoir herself does make these distinctions. In Beauvoir’s criticisms of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous she values the rhetorical dimension of audience above all else: “You can’t address yourself to women by speaking a language which no average woman will understand” (Jardine and Beauvoir 229). She conceptualizes language compartmentally, where style and content are discrete language entities. This distinction allows her to sharply criticize Irigaray’s “laborious,” “Lacanian style” but still show interest in the work she undertakes (Jardine and Beauvoir 228); it enables her to morally repudiate Cixous, not for her ideas, but explicitly for her “esoteric” style that excludes women (Jardine and Beauvoir 229); and it frees her to confidently dismiss Kristeva by the mere association with a particular academic journal.

If, as Beauvoir argues, “a purely feminine writing style” and “a language all of a piece which would be a women’s language” are “insane,” and at the same time language “is inherited from a masculine society” with “male prejudice” that “we must rid language of,” then one sane option for feminists would be to punctuate masculine language toward feminists ends (Jardine and Beauvoir 229-230). Try as she may to disassociate herself from psychoanalytic feminism,
Beauvoir proposes a gesture similar to Cixous’s—volver, “to fly” and “to steal”—in prescribing what women should do with language. Women “simply have to steal the instrument; they don’t have to break it, or try, a priori, to make of it something totally different. Steal it and use it for their own good” (Jardine and Beauvoir 230). In Cixous’s use of “volver,” she delineates her position from the masculine: “For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to ‘fly’” (1532). Beauvoir and Cixous use the term “steal” in a different sense than Audrey Lorde’s famous response, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Beauvoir and Cixous do not suggest stealing as a way to “take possession” or repeat masculine language in a mechanical manner only to achieve the power enjoyed by men. Their uses of “steal/fly” instead suggest a critical reiteration.

The critical reiteration for Beauvoir comes in her second critique of masculine language in The Second Sex where she argues masculine language eludes woman because she had no part in its creation. Woman’s duty may be to steal and appropriate masculine language, but she can only repeat it with a difference because she had no part in its creation. In this two-pronged critique of masculine language, Beauvoir suggests yet another impossible contradiction—woman cannot be heard through masculine language, but woman must nonetheless arrogate masculine language to herself in order to create.

Since the question for Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous is not “How do we get out of masculine language?” but rather, “How do we punctuate masculine language for a transformative politics?” I argue that feminine
alternatives take a variety of shapes. One can punctuate the masculine by interrupting its operations, by accentuating its feminine margins, by creating a cartoonish parody of its workings, or, as Beauvoir does in *The Second Sex*, by developing a compromise and connection between the masculine and feminine.

In what follows, I demonstrate not only how Beauvoir relies on masculine structures of thought in *The Second Sex*, but also how she literally punctuates the masculine with the semicolon.

3.2 “VIVE LE POINT-VIRGULE!”

Judged by the standards of Kristeva’s comparisons in “Women’s Time,” *The Second Sex*’s structure of thought points to a masculine-undergirded language. First, we see her motivating logic of unveiling of the previously mysterious object known as woman. Throughout the course of the text, she sets out through categories and subcategories to rationally account for the denigrated situation of woman. Originally published in two volumes, the first half of *The Second Sex* sets out to demonstrate—through science, psychology, history, and literature—how woman became and is maintained as man’s Other. In “Volume 1: Facts and Myths,” Beauvoir analyzes woman’s becoming through prisms of “Destiny,” “History,” and “Myths.” Within these parts she methodically carries readers through chapters like “Biological Data” where she provides empirical evidence of sexual differentiation from the natural world of simple, one-celled animals to complex and contingent facts of humans, along with the almost impossible to separate philosophical explanations of how these facts should be read. In her “History” chapters, she wields a sweeping existential and Marxist
(and thus masculine, according to Kristeva) narrative of woman and man’s relationship from prehistoric primitive hordes to Beauvoir’s present-day, gathering support from historians and philosophers to defend her linear argument that man has worked through legal, economic, and social means to secure his freedom to the detriment of woman’s. Likewise her “Myths” chapters prove the assault against women on a cultural front, charting the oeuvre of five Western, canonized authors’ distinctive methods for Other-ing woman. Volume two considers woman in her experiences of biological, psychological, and sexual maturation, as well as the social situations (such as wife and mother) available to her. While the second volume relies on markedly less scholastic, empirical logic, it does hold to the organizational structure of the first where the category of “Lived Experience” is subdivided into parts (“Formative Years,” “Situation,” Justifications,” and “Toward Liberation”) that are then narrowed to specific chapters (for example, “Childhood,” “The Girl,” and the like under the “Formative Years” part).

In this structure we see an empirical impulse to dissect the entity of woman in order to reveal mastery and a more reasoned argument for woman’s inclusion as a fully human subject. Beauvoir works through a linear and logical progression assuming a cursive time structure where events unfold to produce woman as Other. All of Beauvoir’s support points us toward women entering the “human Mitsein” (Second 17) and men and women working “beyond their natural differentiations” to “unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (Second 766). Identification, rather than difference, bookends The Second Sex’s stated aims. Beauvoir relies on these masculine structures of thought for authority. At first
blush, she adheres to a phallocratic economy of signification, occasionally questioning particular masculine values, but continuing to use the masculine as her language base.

In this final section I demonstrate how Beauvoir breaks from these masculine language structures. Rather than reading *The Second Sex* as hopelessly masculine, in this section I will show how the more recent Borde and Malovaney-Chevallier translation presents English-reading audiences with a newly punctuated text that offers compromise and a relationship between feminine and masculine languages. I will explore the issue of punctuation, specifically the semicolon, and how it connects the feminine with the masculine in *The Second Sex*.

A radical feminist perspective might well read any subversion of the masculine in *The Second Sex* as fully contained, and thus, not *really* subversive. The dominant, masculine order, this line of argument goes, absorbs any break or criticism of itself. Whatever attacks on the masculine Beauvoir might make are so intimately implicated in old, socialist (in Kristeva’s sense of the word) thought, that no significant, fundamental language critique is possible. However, one can repeat masculine language and one can repeat masculine language with a difference. Butler, in *Undoing Gender*, rightly claims it a “mistake if we think that [certain types of] mimesis result only in a slave morality, accepting and fortifying the terms of authority” (201). By experimenting with different ways of punctuating masculine language, as Beauvoir does in *The Second Sex*, she undermines operations of cursive time, representation, same-ness, and reason.
For English-reading audiences, such subtleties were lost in H.M. Parshley’s 1952 translation. Granted, Parshley encountered significant obstacles. As a professor emeritus of zoology at Smith College, he was drafted to translate Beauvoir’s philosophy under confusing circumstances;\(^2^8\) was unable to locate many of Beauvoir’s French sources; lacked the philosophical specialization to translate concepts specific to Existentialism; and when problems and questions arose, was only able to communicate infrequently with a reluctant, unhelpful Beauvoir. During the taxing translation process Parshley landed himself in the hospital for exhaustion, and only three months after the publication of his translation, he died.\(^2^9\)

As the first English translator of *The Second Sex*, Parshley initially understood his job as heavily editing Beauvoir to the end of making her more palatable to American audiences. “[Beauvoir] certainly suffers from verbal diarrhea,” Alfred Knopf told him. “I have seldom read a book that seems to run in such concentric circles,” he explains, “Everything seems to be repeated three or four times but in different parts of the text, and I can hardly imagine the average person reading the whole book carefully” (Knopf qtd in Bair, *Simone* 433). Parshley tried to enlist Beauvoir’s assistance in making what he deemed

\(^2^8\) Blanche Knopf, while visiting the Gallimard family, misunderstood her translator as describing *The Second Sex* as a “modern-day sex manual, something between Kinsey and Havelock Ellis” (Bair, *Simone* 432).

\(^2^9\) For an historical account of how Parshley was selected to translate *The Second Sex* (and how *The Second Sex* was chosen as a French text to translate into English) as well as his attempts and difficulties in translating an unfamiliar philosophical text, see Bair’s *Simone de Beauvoir* p. 432-439.
necessary cuts, assuring her he did not want to change her ideas, but to abridge her work “in part to effect some reduction in bulk, but primarily to make the work more attractive to English and American readers” (Parshley qtd in Bair, Simone 434). Without explicitly calling her long sentences held together with numerous semicolons into question, Parshley obviously saw her punctuation as separate from her ideas as he edited them into shorter, separate sentences.

Beauvoir claimed plausible deniability when it came to the English translation, but Margaret A. Simons took up her case in “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What’s Missing from The Second Sex”. In this article, Simons launches the initial criticisms against Parshley’s translation: ten per cent of the original French edition is missing from the, at that time, only English translation (most of these cuts were women’s stories from the “History” sections); no ellipses mark the edition’s deletions leading Simons to trace line by line the differences between editions; and, finally, the translator botches Beauvoir’s philosophical concepts mistranslating la realite humaine (as literal rather than as a Heidegger reference) and confusing pour-soi and en-soi (a distinction central to Existentialism). Parshley failed to indicate with his punctuation the changes he made to the text and as a result, Simons argues, he gives us a different text, one where we get a different sense of how Beauvoir related to women.

\[30\] Beauvoir gave Parshley “carte blanche” as long as he included a statement at the beginning of the text relinquishing her of any responsibility for the English translation (Bair, Simone 435).
Given Parshley’s translation choices Simons proceeds with an *ad hominem* claim that “the pattern of some of his other deletions adds to the evidence of his sexism” (66). Rather than attend to the problems of the text, Simons attacks the translator adding Parshley “obviously found women’s history boring, but he apparently found some sections more irritating than others. He did not care to have discussions of women’s oppression belabored, although he was quite content to allow Beauvoir to go on at length about the superior advantages of man’s situation and achievements” (66). Even though Simons’s argument takes a turn away from the text, her larger point remains valid: to read Parshley’s translation is to read a male-identified text, unsympathetic to woman’s oppression.

Twenty years later, Moi, in “While We Wait,” continues raising awareness of Parshley’s un-punctuated omissions finding that his cuts reach closer to 15 percent of the text rather than the 10 percent that Simons estimated. Not only did he cut large sections from the “History” chapters, but also from Beauvoir’s “extensive documentation of women’s lived experience” (42). Rather than focus on the alleged sexism of Parshley’s omissions, she instead points to the numerous mistranslations that give the impression of Beauvoir as unsympathetic to different types of women’s situations and as a sloppy thinker (39). Moi identifies mistakes that insinuate Beauvoir’s error rather than Parshley’s: not only mistranslations of existence, essence, and subjectivity and misunderstandings of Hegel and the concept of alienation, but also syntactical gaps that resulted from his deletions. Like Simons, Moi identifies a larger politics behind this particular
bad translation, and resultant readings. Given the hard fought battle for women in the philosophical canon, Moi suggests that these errors “have more pernicious ideological effects than similar linguistic inadequacies in translations of male philosophers” (46). Failure to commission a new, scholarly edition of The Second Sex cedes ground to sexists who “believe women in general and feminists in particular” are “fuzzy thinker[s]” (65).

With the stakes of a new translation relying in part on punctuation, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier ultimately aimed to include all of the original text and to preserve Beauvoir’s original style (formal) and punctuation (semicolon-heavy) in their translation. Initially, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier found Beauvoir’s semicolons made for an “unreadable” text (Glazer, “A Second Sex”). Attempting a fidelity to Beauvoir’s original grammatical structures and formal language, they soon uncovered what they argue is a method to her semicolon madness. “A whole idea is developed within the semicolons; there’s a flow,” insists Malovany-Chevallier (qtd in Glazer, “A Second Sex”). They claim that Beauvoir condemns other people’s opinions to semicolon-laden sentences; for her own thoughts she allegedly reserves more simply constructed sentences (Glazer, “A Second Sex”). Beauvoir composed with semicolons, they argue, as a way to bury her opponents, as a way to include counterarguments and discount them at the same time. For her own arguments, they claim, she retains simple, “readable,” semicolon-free sentences, a masculine syntax, by terms presented above. While this may be the case in some of the passages in The Second Sex, I disagree that Beauvoir wielded the semicolon primarily as a tool of obstruction against her
opponents. The inclusion of the semicolon into the newest English translation makes for a more difficult text, but that difficultly yields a series of more complicated relations in terms of time, representation, and inclusion. The inclusion of semicolons enables her to connect elements of the feminine with the masculine that Parshley’s translation overlooked.

While the simple inclusion of the semicolon into Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s 2010 English translation of *The Second Sex* may seem like a minor change, the translators champion their restoration of the semicolon as a major accomplishment. The semicolon, in fact, has become a battle cry for the necessity of their revisions. The new translators, the foreign-rights director at Gallimard, and Beauvoir’s adopted daughter upon first meeting supposedly toasted “*Vive le point-virgule!*” (“Long live the semicolon!”) to commemorate the occasion of *The Second Sex*’s new English translation (*Second xx*).

Interestingly, however, the French were historically more skeptical and slower to adopt the semicolon as an acceptable form of punctuation (Parke 52). While Italian printers in the early 16th century regularly included semicolons, they were not included in Etienne Dolet of Lyons’s 1540 work enumerating the six punctuations recognized in the French language (Parke 52). Although the rules of semicolon usage have evolved over time, it has historically had “the properties of a compromise”—as signaling a longer pause than a comma, but a shorter pause than a colon or a period (Parke 49). Ben Jonson likewise distinguishes the semicolon from the comma as “distinction of an imperfect sentence, wherein with somewhat a longer breath, the sentence following is included” (334).
Punctuating the masculine—in the literal sense of written notations to clarify meaning—is no small matter. At its very inception, punctuation held the responsibility to “resolve structural uncertainties in a text,” to “signal nuances of semantic significance which might otherwise not be conveyed” (Parkes 1). Punctuation’s purpose, in other words, lies in reducing textual ambiguity. Developed in the early Middle Ages as an aid to writing Latin, punctuation was refined and codified in the West so that the language of scriptures, liturgy, scholarship, and diplomacy could be more easily understood by wider, newly literate audiences (Parkes 1). Earlier, in oral cultures, readers and speakers inserted their own punctuation as a signal to pause—for a breath, to maintain a desired rhythm, and to indicate meaning (Parkes 19). Indeed, the effect of pausing in different places and thus giving different meanings to the text became such a hermeneutic concern that scribes and authors began working together to leave less interpretive choice to readers (Parkes 19).

Aristotle, in *On Rhetoric*, saw punctuation as a way to manage ideas and arrange language in such a way as to help audiences psychologically. In Book 3, part 9 he compares the “unsatisfactory,” “free running style” with the “compact” style. The “free running style” is “united by nothing except the connecting words,” it “has no natural stopping-places, and comes to a stop only because there is no more to say of that subject.” Compare this with the “compact” style where there is obviously “a beginning and an end.” This compact, punctuated style pleases an audience more because “the hearer always feels that he is grasping something and has reached some definite conclusion.” Not only does
regularly punctuated language help your audience remember your speech through breaking ideas into more manageable chunks, it also provides a psychologically satisfying experience for the audience because it creates more of a sense that the composer is in control and bringing the audience along a definite and obvious line of argument.

Quintilian, too, in *Institution oratoria* worries about the ambiguity that comes with a less cultivated, punctuated language; yet he also feels the need to define artistic structures like punctuation as a virile, rhetorical necessity. Quintilian admits that the lack of artistic structures in language seems to some writers “more natural and even more manly”; however, just as we cultivate animals and plants for a higher yield, he reasons, so must we cultivate our language through artistic structures (IX.iv). Structures like punctuation are ultimately more manly and stronger, he argues, in that they “giv[e] more force and direction” to our thoughts (IX.iv). “How can a style which lacks orderly structure be stronger than one that is welded together and artistically arranged?” questions Quintilian (IX.iv). “Why,” he implores, “should it be thought that polish is inevitably prejudicial to vigour” (IX.iv). Incorporating punctuation creates a rhythmic language not feminine and cosmetic, “not merely for charm[ing] you the ear,” but a virile, profound, tactical rhythm capable of “stirring the soul” (IX.iv). After all, Quintilian argues, even the military relies on musical rhythms to move men to action and sooth them into “orderly repose” at the end of the day. Quintilian, then, envisions artistic punctuation as a masculine attempt to control and guide readers toward a desired response.
While Aristotle and Quintilian define punctuation in the rhetorical sense of artistic structure, modern readers are probably more familiar with punctuation as it was handed down from 19-century American educators. Robert Connors, in Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy, argues that during this time, educators transformed punctuation into an issue of mechanical correctness. Punctuation, under the larger rubric of correctness, is seen less as a series of choices to help direct readers toward certain responses and more as a certain and rational test of good writing. Whereas earlier instructors of rhetoric might focus on how different punctuations and structures would produce different rhetorical effects for readers, this mode of instruction, one Connors terms composition-rhetoric, would tend to judge a sentence as either punctuated correctly or punctuated incorrectly. The focus on writing in general in the 19th century shifted from “error avoidance rather than any sort of genuine communicative success” (Connors 130).

A more rhetorically-minded punctuation attempts to establish relationships between words, not represent an abstract correctness. Different marks allow composers to suggest connections or juxtapositions between ideas. Some marks, like the comma, allow brief pauses and signal to the reader that an idea is still being developed or explained. Others, like the period, signal a more definite break, an end to one complete thought. The semicolon, for instance, came into its modern form at the end of the fifteenth century and was created as a compromise between a comma and a colon. As Aldus Manutius the younger in 1566 explains, the “semi-circle on its own [i.e. the modern comma] is not
sufficient, and that the mark, which is transcribed with a double point thus : slows up the *sentential* too much” (qtd in Parke 49). Thus the semicolon offers an ambiguously medium-sized pause between ideas. However arbitrary these hesitations may seem—what, for instance, is the threshold between a short and a long pause?—they direct the reader to respond in particular ways.

For Lacan, however, punctuation exists as a way of pausing or ending a psychoanalytic session. Lacan agrees with classical rhetoricians that “the absence of punctuation…is a source of ambiguity” (258). “Punctuation,” he argues, “once inserted, establishes the meaning; changing the punctuation renews or upsets it; and incorrect punctuation distorts it” (258). Lacan references punctuation in at least two general ways. He references it in terms of how the analyst ends the session at a predetermined time, as “determined purely by the clock” (209). “The ending of a session,” Lacan tells us, “cannot but be experienced by the subject as a punctuation of his progress”; however, such a rigid punctuation can “be fatal to the conclusion toward which [the subject’s] discourse was rushing headlong, and can even set a misunderstanding in stone” (258). Instead of relying on a cursive, linear conception of time to punctuate sessions, Lacan suggests punctuating sessions in ways that assume a monumental conception of time and that take into account the subject’s discourse. For Lacan, the question of punctuation is what is going to take precedence—chronological time (cursive time) or discourse (monumental time)?

If, as I suggest, punctuation should be read as instrumental in building relationships within discourse rather than as a mechanical test of arbitrary
correctness, then the semicolon calls forth an exaggerated attention to the connection between ideas. Patricia T. O’Conner in her *Woe is I* describes the semicolon to contemporary readers as a signal to readers to slow down: “If a comma is a yellow light and a period is a red light, the semicolon is a flashing red—one of those lights you drive through after a brief pause” (139). Martha Kolln’s *Rhetorical Grammar* builds on O’Conner’s metaphor, and argues that semicolons in compound sentences slow down readers and implores them to “notice the connection” (53). Scott Rice in *Right Words, Right Places* describes the relationship the semicolon makes possible as “more compact,” as “suggesting a close relationship between the clauses, which may be parallel in structure, clearly contrasted in meaning, or linked by implicit logic” (371). Semicolons, in other words, have a distinctive reputation for slowing down readers and encouraging them to discover compromise and create connections.

Given the affiliative impulse of semicolon usage, then it makes sense that so much would rest upon the semicolon in the 2010 English translation of *The Second Sex*. If before feminists were anxious about the effectively male-identified text Parshley’s omissions created, then now Beauvoir’s unabridged text, complete with full semicolon inclusion can provide a different relationship to the masculine. I do not go as far as arguing her restored content and semicolons suddenly create a female-identified or even feminine text, but her semicolons slow down readers and encourage them to make connections between ideas that would otherwise, in the words of Borde and Malovany-Chevallier, seem “unreadable.” Beauvoir inhabits masculine language’s structures of cursive time,
representation, and inclusion, but she also uses semicolons to create connections between the feminine and the masculine and stretch what masculine language can do.

Particularly at the beginning of her “History” chapters, Beauvoir gives readers a relatively familiar Marxist (masculine) history with an emphasis on woman. Initially she sticks close to Engel’s narrative where because of clans’ reproductive needs woman’s lot obtained a harsher character (“[woman] is destined to be subordinated, possessed, and exploited” (Second 82)) and only worsened with the introduction of property, institutions, and laws. Yet her use of punctuation occasionally overwhelms masculine structures. While she has the backdrop of masculine narrative, through her use of the semicolon she affects a more feminine style within the masculine, creating a compromise and relationship between the two.

In the following passages, chosen from the “History” chapters which are the most problematic sections in terms of omissions according to Parshley’s feminist critics, we see Beauvoir uses semicolons to play with more feminine notions of time, create textual situations of excess, and critique linear, cohesive arguments. Take for instance a lengthy sentence close to the end of her “History” chapters:

The single woman most often remains a servant in the father’s, brother’s, or sister’s household; she only becomes mistress of a home by accepting a husband’s domination; depending on the region, customs and traditions impose various roles on her: the Norman peasant woman presides over
the meal, while the Corsican woman does not sit at the same table as the men; but in any case, as she plays one of the most important roles in the domestic economy, she shares the man’s responsibilities, his interests, and his property; she is respected, and it is often she who really governs: her situation is reminiscent of the place she held in ancient agricultural communities. (153)

Ten lines, one hundred twelve words, four semicolons, and two colons later we reach the end of her one sentence. If semicolons primarily serve as connectors, then the five general ideas Beauvoir puts into conversation with one another are: 1) the single woman remains a servant in her home of origin; 2) she becomes mistress only by accepting her husband’s domination; 3) the contingency of different cultural situations produce different lived experiences for women; 4) woman holds an important position in the domestic economy; and 5) often woman really governs. All of these parts connected in one sentence by semicolons suggest an implicit logic more readily identified as feminine.

The logic that holds these different parts together is the logic of cyclical time. Ostensibly, time moves forward in this sentence as the single woman moves from her family home of origin to her home with her husband. But instead, the experience of servitude repeats itself. Where woman was once a “servant” to her father and siblings, she now becomes the servant to her husband. Time, in this passage, exists as cyclical, never quite moving forward into a new future, but repeating itself, as Beauvoir writes later in the sentence, as a reminiscence, as an experience of the past played out again.
Her sentence comes at the end of the “History” chapters where Beauvoir sums up woman’s current place in the world. French peasant women largely experience the same situation as they did in “ancient agricultural communities,” she claims. Although she exercises power within the “domestic economy,” and shares in her husband’s responsibilities and prestige, her “concrete condition is much harsher” (Second 153). She manages both the heavy manual labor of rural life and the repetitious, monotonous tasks of the household chores, pregnancy, and child care. While acknowledging the difficulties of agricultural life in general, it particularly wears hard on women because of the repetitive nature of their work and the denial of any leisure time that man often gets to enjoy.

Enabled by an excessive use of semicolons, this particular sentence resists a linear conception of time. Readers experience no progressive movement from the beginning to the end. The sentence begins with the single woman in her original family, moves to her similar life as a wife, takes a tangential path describing the different regional customs for wives, veers back toward general statements concerning woman’s pivotal role in the domestic economy, and winds up in the past, ancient times. Beauvoir enacts a cyclical conception of time, beginning and ending her sentence with woman, spanning time, in the same place.

Her serpentine structure echoes the content of the sentence. She expresses no one central idea in the sentence, but demonstrates an excessive winding from woman in the universal (the single woman) to woman in the (relatively speaking) particular (Norman and Corsican). She oscillates between
the present to the past, between the general and the specific, producing an excessive, unwieldy, even feminine quality to her language.

Compare the subtle effects of Beauvoir’s sentence construction as translated by Borde and Malovany-Chevallier with Parshley’s English translation:

Customs vary in different regions: the Norman peasant woman presides at meals, whereas the Corsican woman does not sit at table [sic] with the men; but everywhere, playing a most important part in the domestic economy, she shares the man’s responsibilities, interests, and property; she is respected and often is in effective control—her situation recalls that of woman in the old agricultural communities. (Parshley trans. 134)

Parshley’s rendering cuts the passage into nearly half of the original without marking the omission, in effect removing Beauvoir’s play on conceptions of time and logic. Here we see the effects of Alfred Knopf’s initial impulse to tame her language’s excesses. Beauvoir’s “verbal diarrhea,” her language which runs in “concentric circles,” repeating itself “three or four times but in different parts of the text” are not testimonies to her need of an editor, but instead examples of her compromise and relation building between masculine and feminine languages (Knopf qtd in Bair, Simone 433). In Parshley’s revision of her language, the feminine flattens into a cohesive, linear, masculine account of Norman and Corsican women’s customs. Gone are the ambiguous meanderings and connections between woman in the universal sense, across time, and women in the specific sense, across regions. The older translation assumes a masculine
vision of time and language and in doing so, distorts Beauvoir’s sophisticated push against masculine limits.

As Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s translation allows, Beauvoir’s reliance on the semicolon produces a more excessive feel, and thus more of a push against the masculine, than Parshley’s edition. While certainly not all of her semicolon-heavy sentences produce a sophisticated mix of time, accounts of woman in universal and specific senses, and critiques of linear, cohesive arguments, they do lend her language an excessive, chaotic air that strikes against the heart of a phallocratic economy of the same. The rhythm in such sentences creates a multiplicity, perhaps not as fully or consistently as Irigaray’s or Cixous’s writing, but perceptible enough against the parameters of a masculine framework to echo as dissent.

Take for instance her 158-word sentence earlier in her “History” section, punctuated by eight semicolons and four colons, where Beauvoir charts the independence and freedom of eighteenth-century intellectual and creative women:

Salon life once again blossoms: The roles played by Mme Geoffrin, Mme de Deffand, Mlle de Lespinasse, Mme d’Epinay, and Mme de Tencin are well-known; protectors and inspiration, women make up the writer’s favorite audience; they are personally interested in literature, philosophy, and sciences: like Mme Du Chatelet, for example, they have their own physics workshops or chemistry laboratory; they experiment; they dissect;
they intervene more actively than ever before in political life: one after the other, Mme de Prie, Mme de Mailly, Mme de Chateauneuf, Mme de Pompadour, and Mme de Barry govern Louis XV; there is barely a minister without his Egeria, to such a point that Montesquieu thinks that in France everything is done by women; they constitute, he says, ‘a new state within the state’; and Colle writes on the eve of 1789: ‘They have so taken over Frenchmen, they have subjugated them so greatly that they think about and feel only for themselves.’ (120)

Even as this sentence cohesively and linearly narrates the progress of women in eighteenth-century salon culture, it repeats these masculine structures in an excessive, breathless, feminine manner, loading names, disciplinary prisms, and references into one complex sentence. The nine parts of the sentence linked by semicolons carry a more apparent connection as the sentence collects and describes eighteenth-century women’s accomplishments. Even as the sentence moves single-mindedly forward, it touches upon arts, sciences, and politics and spreads from the superficial to the grounded. Even as the section depicts a straightforward Golden Age of Woman, a laundry list of eighteenth-century women’s progress, a finite period where women linearly progressed toward independence and freedom, it hints toward the cyclical.

In the passage’s opening, “once again” marks a temporal emphasis and points to an existence for women that has already happened, gone away, and been once more restored. It provides a cyclical perspective of time that enables a repetition to the historical dimension in the midst of an otherwise cursive
history. The sentence with its cyclical and cursive conceptions of time illustrates abundance, holding both the feminine and masculine.

The content, although inclusive and celebratory of women, does not fundamentally work against a model of masculine scarcity as much as the structure of a muted, masculine excess. Beauvoir runs through her case citing a litany of examples, at times refusing support to her evidence as it is allegedly all too “well-known” or superficially gesturing to areas of “literature, philosophy, and sciences” to make her point while at other times incorporating quotations.

Such evidence out of context may seem appropriate, but this sentence comes roughly half way through Beauvoir’s nearly 100-page “History” section where she mixes philosophy and anthropology with socialist, historical narratives and as a result produces, from the perspective of a traditional historian, an unevenly supported account. So uneven is the text that Christina Hoff Sommers likens Beauvoir’s “History” section to something an inexperienced student might write. Sommers accuses Beauvoir of making “no effort to distinguish relevant from irrelevant material,” and of “gather[ing] together every scrap of information she could find on the topic of women and jamm[ing] it all into [The Second Sex]” (“Not Lost”).

Given this context of not only massive amounts of information being deposited in the text, but also the variety of methods used, sentences like this one are often perceived as gratuitous. The chapter itself fails as a linear march through the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth-century, as it circulates between times periods, countries, classes, and familiar and unfamiliar historical figures. We
cannot simply read the sentence as unambiguously masculine, although there are certainly masculine elements to it, the semicolon-filled sentence, in its full context, represents an accumulation of excessive, non-linear, non-hierarchical content and language. Beauvoir’s language lingers with its multiple semicolons, colons, and commas, amplifies with its inclusion of quotations and examples of intellectual and creative eighteenth-century women, and touches upon twelve female figures before heading in another direction.

Once again, Parshley’s compressed version of this passage offers a sharp contrast:

The salon took on new splendor; women protected and inspired the writer and made up his public; they studied philosophy and science and set up laboratories of physics and chemistry. In politics the names of Mme de Pompadour and Mme du Barry indicate woman’s power; they really controlled the State. (Parshley trans. 106)

Roughly one third of the passage has been cut: the temporal element has vanished, two of twelve names remain, two sentences (each still containing semicolons) replace the one long sentence, summarization takes the place of quotations. These differences indicate Parshley’s sense of Beauvoir’s abundant, but from his perspective, unnecessary language. Parshley’s rendition gives readers a decidedly more masculine text, stripping it of its long excesses and shrinking it to a manageable summary of eighteenth-century salon life.

The examples I have gathered suggest Beauvoir’s language operates not as a mechanical repetition of masculine language, but as a compromise between
the relatively masculine lines of thought (Marxist history and time, the logic of rationally mastering the concept of woman, and the political goal of women’s inclusion into a rational nation-state) with the more feminine-minded ways of thinking (cyclical time, valuing the excessive, and creating through non-linear, non-hierarchical registers). Beauvoir’s semicolons connect the feminine and the masculine and as a result exhibits a productive compromise, a possibility ignored by other scholars. Beauvoir provocatively critiques and engages in masculine language, exceeding charges of token reformism. She punctuates masculine language with the feminine, transforming and overwhelming the previous masculine language structures, producing a sophisticated mix of time, accounts of woman in universal and specific senses, and critiques of linear, cohesive arguments.

While the feminist language experimentations of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous garner more attention from scholars, it is a mistake to overlook Beauvoir’s more subtle punctuations of masculine language. By calling masculine language into question as a tool of woman’s oppression and as an obstacle for expressing woman’s difference, Beauvoir raises the issue of language as a “crucial weapo[n]” for feminism, but she refuses to completely destroy masculine language in favor of creating a purely feminine language (Bair, “Politics” 151). Instead of outright rejecting masculine language, Beauvoir rejects the psychoanalytic style, a style she sees as “laborious,” “esoteric,” and “insane” (Jardine and Beauvoir 228-230). Beauvoir punctuates her language with an eye toward compromise and connection between the masculine values of linear time,
progress, universal political inclusion, reason, common sense egalitarianism, unity, the singular, representation, and the logic of the same with the feminine values of difference and generative multiplicity.

For English readers of The Second Sex, this has only recently been a possibility with the Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2010 translation. Their new English rendering with restored passages, re-translated philosophical terms, and corrected punctuation allows us to re-open the question of how rhetorical work gets done through punctuation. In the Parshley translation the subtleties of punctuation were lost in translation. Parshley saw his job as simplifying Beauvoir’s sentences for a U.S. audience; in doing so, however, he erased the rhetorically interesting aspect of Beauvoir’s language in terms of the masculine and the feminine. Beauvoir’s semicolons in The Second Sex suggest a compromise and demonstrates a connection between the feminine and the masculine as more explicitly articulated by Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous. The returned semicolons restore nuance to the text that was previously panned as thoroughly masculine.

Beauvoir’s rhetorically-minded punctuation of masculine language aims to establish relationships between concepts, not represent an abstract correctness or politically pure language position. While Beauvoir has been critiqued for her use of masculine, reformist language, as inhabiting a kind of imitative Sartrean slave morality, I see Beauvoir refusing a self-righteously principled feminine or masculine language position in favor of a complicated, continually negotiated, relational mix of the feminine and masculine. In moments of excess found in The
Second Sex, created in part by Beauvoir’s use of the semicolon, her punctuation does something different than masculine moments of cursive time concerned primarily with issues of representation and political inclusion. These moments have the possibilities to take readers of The Second Sex somewhere different, to raise questions of how time and logic operate. Rather than viewing Beauvoir’s double move of critiquing and using masculine language as a limitation, I argue that it signals a productive possibility the establishes relationships. Granted, Beauvoir’s language is not as consistently or starkly radical as those feminine languages of French psychoanalytic feminists, but her language mix allows for broader ways in which the world can be transformed. Given her target audience of the common woman, such a compromise seems appropriate.

Beauvoir’s punctuation of masculine language allows everyday women more access to her ideas while questioning masculine structures of linear time, reason, identification, and scarcity. Beauvoir never promises nor does she deliver a radical unmooring of masculine language, but loosens the soil of phallocratic language structures. She repeats masculine language, but with a difference. She offers feminists a way to gradually work and transform their language systems from within. Beauvoir is not interested in writing herself into a new existence, as Carolyn Burke characterizes French feminist writing in the ‘70s, but beginning the long transformation process, subtly, sometimes imperceptibly, moving language so that language may move readers in unexpected ways.
Beauvoir’s language in The Second Sex points to the limits of representation in favor of the relational. A focus on representational language produces a myopic, singular vision unable to account for woman’s difference. At heart, what Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous object to in masculine language is the violence it performs on difference—be it sexual or otherwise. The feminine, they hope, holds the potential for attending to difference in a non-violent and creatively generative way. Beauvoir exploits the rhetorical potential of the semicolon—with its distinctive reputation for compromise and connection—in making her relational stand on language’s potential.

In the following chapter, I explore how Beauvoir’s interests in the relational, language, violence, and difference play out in interesting ways in her essay “Must We Burn Sade?” Just as she demonstrates a refusal to name or define what exactly is or is not masculine language or what a new feminist language should look like, so she refuses to define and confine what an ethical sexual relationship should look like. In “Must We Burn Sade?” Beauvoir challenges feminists to expand what ethical relations between men and women might look like beyond the representational and communicable.
Chapter 4:
Unreadable Relations:

Beauvoir on Why Feminists Must Not Burn Sade

One of the biggest mistakes that feminists make in reading Beauvoir is in assuming her world begins with things rather than words. Beauvoir, as seen in the previous chapter, envisioned words as “crucial weapons” for feminism (Bair, “Politics” 151); she saw language as an unconscious force upon women, wielded by men as an oppressive constraint on women’s very existence. Masculine language, then, creates a reality in which woman is the ultimate alterity, man’s Other. A masculine world sees language as a tool, as a means to an end, to be used against women in securing man’s own interests. Barbara Cassin describes this perspective of beginning with things rather than words as “a matter of getting to the things under words as quickly as possible, of producing the unity of being under the difference of languages, of reducing the multiple to the one…” (362). In other words, this perspective often attributed to Beauvoir is a masculine perspective that values representation and sameness. As I argued in the previous chapter, Beauvoir does not merely parrot masculine language but punctuates it in a way that builds relations between the masculine and the feminine. Rather than bowing to representation, Beauvoir works toward a relation. Beauvoir’s world begins with words. Language acts as a relational force creating and sustaining our world.
Nonetheless, feminists still project representational assumptions onto Beauvoir’s work. In an interview with Deidre Bair, over thirty years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discussed one of her more controversial essays, her 1952 “Must We Burn Sade?,” an essay that in part constitute the origins of her feminist philosophy and politics. In this interview, Beauvoir describes Sade as a “fascinating man who for twenty years brutally loved and hated women and then spent the rest of his life in jail writing about what he couldn’t do any more...Next to him [Henry] Miller is a child and Genet an angel” (Bair, *Simone* 432). On hearing this, her interviewer is both horrified and perplexed. Bair later candidly assesses the text as “a hodgepodge of Existentialism philosophy, faulty Freudian psychoanalysis and ill-considered views about pornography and her own contemporary society...It is one of her writings,” she continues, “especially since chronologically it comes so soon after *The Second Sex*, that outrages feminist critics and scholars by its inconsistency and contradictions. It is of interest today only because she wrote it” (662-3 fn9).

And Bair is not alone in her criticisms. Andrea Dworkin derides the piece as an apologia for a rapist. Debra Bergoffen, in an attempt to reclaim the text, reads the erotic margins of Beauvoir’s work and argues for the essay’s importance as an embodiment of patriarchal eroticism. As such, the object lesson resides in the negative: if we need to understand patriarchy in order to combat it, then we need to understand Sade.

However, in this chapter I argue that Beauvoir remains relatively sanguine
when it comes to assessing the potentialities of Sade’s relations. Rather than focusing on masculine concerns of representation and sameness in Sade, Beauvoir instead cares about his fascinating and maddening incoherence. In large part this comes from her performative read of Sade’s language. Where feminists in a Beauvoirian tradition tend to focus on Sade’s implications for feminism based upon representational language assumptions, I argue that in “Must We Burn Sade?” she frames Sade’s language as performative, as allowing for a feminism of unreadable and incoherent relation-making.

For Beauvoir scholars, this is an unanticipated strategy. Not only does she ignore concerns broadly construed as “women’s issues” in her essay—that is, issues that directly affect concrete women such as violence and consent—she also challenges harmoniously reciprocal notions of the relational she champions in *The Second Sex*. In doing this, she signals her conceptual reliance on ambiguity and the situational complexities of relation-building. As such, some of the elements that have historically shocked feminists in “Must We Burn Sade?”—namely, Beauvoir’s treatment of women and her move from supporting the concept of peaceful, cooperative gender relations to implicitly endorsing a violent, Sadeian eroticism—illustrate the abundant range of ethical, relational modes available in a Beauvoirian feminism.

Writing, not his eponymous sadistic acts alone, begins to approach Beauvoir’s interest in Sade. While she does not find him to engender particularly skillful or “good” writing on a representational level, she does allow that “[i]n its gaiety, its violence, and its arrogant rawness,” Sade’s style “proves to be that of a
great writer” (“Must” 36). However, she saves her more spirited writing on barbs against Sade as an author. Before granting him any literary merit she writes, “His very form tends to disconcert us. He speaks in a monotonous, embarrassed tone, and we begin to be bored” (“Must” 36). And later, she assures readers that “[N]o one would think of ranking Justine with Manon Lescaut or Les Liaisons dangereuses” (“Must” 37). Immediately after applauding Sade for not succumbing to the overly sentimental poetry of the eighteenth century, she clarifies that “Sade was in no way disposed to great literary audacity” (“Must” 35). Beauvoir deems most of Sade’s work as “unreadable” and asserts it “escapes banality only to founder in incoherence” (“Must” 4). Even contemporary theorists like Judith Butler feel the need to acknowledge Sade’s stylistic faults of “[b]aroque and sometimes tedious descriptions of debauchery” (“Beauvoir on Sade” 172).

Sade misses Beauvoir’s exacting standards when she examines him from representational rubrics, and outside of “Must We Burn Sade?” she almost exclusively appeals to those standards. In her famous debate “What Can Literature Do?” Beauvoir unambiguously argues on the side of “committed” literature.31 Ursula Tidd assesses the consensus on Beauvoir’s approach to

31 She, Sartre, and Jorge Semprun shared an allegiance to committed literature in this debate. Within this context, committed literature holds that authors have a responsibility to address political issues of their time. Jean Ricardou and Jean-Pierre Fay opposed the committed position in favor of the “new novel” while Yves Berger supported the “uncommitted literature” viewpoint. See Moi’s “What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist” for further background on the debate.
literature as “broadly realist and ‘committed’” (‘État Présent’ 205).\textsuperscript{32} Even in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir exhibits such a narrow, representational vision of literature as to exclude women writers from the heights of truly “great literature.” She laments that while some women writers like Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf and (sometimes) Mary Webb begin to approach great writing, “[n]o woman ever wrote *The Trial, Moby-Dick, Ulysses, or Seven Pillars of Wisdom*” (*Second 748*).

Taken together the evidence points toward Beauvoir as having conservative, pragmatic, and instrumental language leanings.

Judged by these standards, Beauvoir finds Sade’s writing wanting, but taken on the level of performative language, that is, language that demonstrates the concept it seeks to explain, Beauvoir judges his language as instructive. Reading from a performative standpoint, precisely Sade’s “incoherence” and “unread[ability]” make him interesting as both a writer and a creator of relations. Indeed, in “What Can Literature Do?” Beauvoir distinguishes her interest with writing as concerned with a doing, as “an activity carried out by human beings, for human beings, with the aim of unveiling the world for them, and this unveiling is an action” (qtd in Moi, “What Can Literature Do?” 191).

Performativity, a concept coined by J.L. Austin and modified and popularized in feminist circles by Butler, presumes a doing over a being or representing.\textsuperscript{33} In feminist circles, performativity harkens back to poststructuralist

\textsuperscript{32} In this context Tidd puts Beauvoir in contrast to psychoanalytic French feminists whose theories explore experimental, feminine writing.

\textsuperscript{33} Performativity is not to be confused with performance, which has a longer etymological history. Performance is “a fluid, bilingual term that bridges sport (performance in the sense of a record), technique (performance in the sense of
associations of gender as a verb rather than a noun. Gender, and by extension sex, is not an expression of one’s innate being, it is not an attribute argues Butler, but a series of reiterated doings. In *Gender Trouble* Butler cites Beauvoir’s work in *The Second Sex* as a precursor to her contentious concept. Beauvoir’s “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” has “radical consequences” (Butler, *Gender* 142) that leads to gender as an active doing: “if gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (Butler, *Gender* 143).

Butler insists that we do not do gender, but that gender does us. It is precisely this point—the primacy of discourse in constituting subjectivity rather than a decision-making subject forming her own existence—that formed an initial round of critiques to the notion of Butler’s performativity. Some saw performativity as simply incompatible with feminism. According to Seyla Benhabib, feminism needs the “I,” the ability to lay claim to an authentic self so women can have their own subjectivity, voice, and story. “[H]ow,” Benhabib asks, is “the very project of female emancipation...even...thinkable without such a regulative principle on agency, autonomy, and selfhood?” (21). If there is no discernable “I” who consciously acts, Benhabib holds, then Butler’s theory of performativity undermines feminism’s whole enterprise.

the output of a machine), psychology (performance of a test), linguistics (performance/competence), and modern art (performance in the sense of happening)” (Cassin 350).
More recently, the lines between performativity (verb) and the performance (noun) have been blurred. Jane Monica Drexler references the “power of performativity” as an alternative to (masculine) rational deliberation with aims of inclusion and persuasion. In this context, the performative is a form of political action that does something, that “moves the event beyond the bounds of the proper,” (12) that “disrupts or arrests a system’s inertia” (11). In contradistinction to Butler’s performativity, Drexler’s presumes a doer behind the political deed.

Scholars in rhetoric, too, have recently developed an interest in exploring the “performance before the performative” and destabilizing the relationship between the two (Cassin 351). The difference between Austin’s locutionary (a constative statement that states the verifiably true or false), illocutionary (a performative statement that does something in saying it) and perlocutionary (a performative statement that does something by saying it) turns out to be, by his own admission, difficult and permeable, not an easily classifiable taxonomy (Cassin 350). Cassin, in “Sophistics, Rhetorics, and Performance; or, How to Really Do Things with Words,” identifies at least two types of language acts under the umbrella of performance—speech acts and what she calls “tongue acts,” acts that “transfor[m] or creat[e] the world” (349). It is precisely here, in the realm of language acts where we have “world effects” (Cassin 349) that we see an overlap with Beauvoir’s interest in language as a force both constituting and constituted, as an action, as an “unveiling.”

The action worth unveiling in Sade’s writing, for Beauvoir, centers on his creating relations. Beauvoir writes, “it is neither as author nor as sexual pervert
that Sade compels our attention; it is by virtue of the relationship which he created between these two aspects of himself” (“Must” 4). Foregrounding the relationship between his writing self and sexual self, not the relationships between Sade and his sexual partners as those employing a representational language would do, Beauvoir poses his language as integral to understanding his relations between his “psycho-physical destiny” and his ethics, between his individuality and the universal, and his individuality and his community.

Language, far from clarifying these sets of relations, obscures them by the very act of explanation. The more Sade tries to explain his relations the more mystifying they become. Sade’s “incoherent” and “unreadable” language rather than a fault to be overcome through clarity and polish becomes operative. His language enacts the incomprehensibility of his relations. Indeed, Sade’s language does not obfuscate the message; language functions as the very message of obfuscation. Sade’s language brings to the forefront his necessarily indecipherable relations.

Sade’s writing highlights a contradiction at the heart of his ethic: his seeming hatred of people coupled with his obsession to justify his actions through writing. The easy read of Sade, one that Beauvoir briefly considers and rejects, characterizes him as a misanthrope, disdainful of people and society. But if Sade simply hated people, Beauvoir speculates, and only wanted to shock them, if he merely wanted to convey his criminal and explicit sexual fantasies, then he would not attempt to persuade a wide audience of his sexual ethic. Only through writing and developing his erotic ethic in an imaginary realm was Sade
able to demonstrate that at core, his sexual ethic is not about misanthropy or misogyny but about creating incommunicable relationships absent from theoretically deduced terms like universality, equality, and mutual reciprocity.

From this perspective, Sade’s writing escapes the mimetic, easily communicable facts of his sexual acts or fantasies and peers into the performative, unintelligible territory of relation-making. Far from describing, explaining, and advocating for his principled sexual practices, which are his stated writing goals, Sade fails to fully reveal these practices. Sade can never do the thing he explicitly sets out to do. Beauvoir writes, Sade “tri[ed] to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is…a tendency to be incommunicable” (“Must” 4). In trying to explain and justify the sexually violent relations between himself and women, between his characters, and between himself and society he makes himself even more “unreadable” (“Must” 4).

Compare this set of language assumptions with Dworkin’s representational assumptions that criticize Beauvoir for not dismissing Sade out of hand as a rapist and child abuser. Dworkin reads Sade’s biography and life holistically, as “of a piece, a whole cloth soaked in the blood of women imagined and real” (Pornography 70). Sade fantasized; he performed; or he transcribed. She never lets readers forget the “twisted…scurvy knot” of Sade as “rapist and writer” (Pornography 70) and produces for readers a biography of an entitled man who exploited his station in life by taking advantage and torturing mostly poor servants and prostitutes. Even in his imprisonment Sade received preferential
treatment as he was allowed cohabitating mistresses, sometimes with an age
different as much as sixty years. Although Dworkin seems more interested in the
flesh-and-blood women who were harmed by Sade, a category, she claims,
ignored by most biographers and literary critics who suggest that most of Sade’s
violent offenses were on the written page and thus of no criminal or “real” offense
(“The abused bodies of women, piled up in heaps through a cruel and
conscienceless life, are dismissed by facile distortion or complete denial”
(Pornography 81)) she depicts Sade’s writing as both inciting violence against
women and children and fueling the already-present cultural value of men’s right
to brutalize women.

Violence against women and children are the products of Sade’s writing,
Dworkin passionately argues. She marks the exigence of her study with the
1966 torture and murder of two children by a “self-proclaimed disciple of Sade”
(Pornography 71) and more tenuously links Sade’s legacy to the rise in snuff
pornography, videos where women are actually kill for sexual pleasure.
Following her descriptions of these atrocities she moves into reporting the
cultural resurgence of Sade’s writings and biography (Pornography 71). With this
transition she leads readers to make the connection that with increased
circulation of Sade’s writings, we should expect to see more violence against
women and children. Sade’s fantasies, Dworkin strongly suggests, whether
acted out or written, potentially have the same effects.

Even suggesting violence in his writings—apart from his practices or the
practices he might encourage—leads to a gratuitous violent eroticism that
creates an ethic where women and children are dispensable, argues Dworkin. She warns that accepting Sade as a significant writer or thinker demonstrates society’s acceptance of men’s right to rape women: his “spectacular endurance as a cultural force has been because of, not despite, the virulence of the sexual violence toward women in both his work and his life” (Pornography 99). The writers Dworkin calls out (Beauvoir among them) claim that Sade’s writing rings of freedom; she reads it as the male privilege to treat women however they wish.

Sade’s sexual relations harm women, and his written words lead to women and children’s abuses and predispose readers to accept his values and actions as common and acceptable. With these derived language assumptions, the ethical action that follows is a metaphorical burning of Sade, rejecting his misogyny and perhaps a literal burning of his writings. Put another way, if as a culture we valued women and children’s safeties, Dworkin tells us, Sade’s writings would have no widespread sanctuary in literary or philosophical circles.

If Dworkin reads Sade’s ethic as “the absolute right of men to rape and brutalize any ‘object of desire’ at will” (Pornography 71), Beauvoir reads his ethics as an exemplar of the incommunicability of relations. With such a reading the representation of women, for example, matters less than how Sade’s language acts and conceals even in attempts to reveal.34 Adopting this notion of language precludes sets of questions concerned with women as representable

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34 Irigaray, too, shows little interest in categorizing Sade’s practices as “good” or “bad” for women: “One could ask pornographers many other questions. Without even confronting the issue of whether one is ‘for’ or ‘against’ their practices. After all, it is better for the sexuality that underlies out social order to be exercised openly than for it to prescribe that social order from the hiding-place of its repressions” (“Frenchwomen,’ Stop Trying” 202-203).
subjects. On reading his violent relations Beauvoir does not assume readers will in turn enact the same violence, but she does see his writing relationally pedagogical: his incoherent language suggests the possibility of an ethical life absent of communicable, universal relational norms.

In this way, The Second Sex and “Must We Burn Sade?” hold significant similarities. While each text focuses on different expressions of relations—The Second Sex canvassing the myths and realities of women’s experiences and “Must We Burn Sade?” focusing on the relations of one man—together they demonstrate Beauvoir’s supple and expansive concept of reciprocity. An equal meeting of minds, a generous sharing of bodies, and a skewed exchange of violence all encompass potentially ethical reciprocal relations. If, as Beauvoir suggests in The Ethics of Ambiguity, relational acts have no intrinsic ethical value, then acts in certain contexts could constitute reciprocal, ethical relations and in others contexts constitute a breach of ethics.

Perhaps the most basic and ubiquitous gender relation explicitly addressed in The Second Sex and obliquely hinted at in “Sade” is that of marriage. Beauvoir barely mentions any women at all in “Must We Burn Sade?” and one of the few women she does reference by name is negatively portrayed as tedious and fully implicated in her husband’s villainous sexual escapades. And in this relation, feminists experience a frustration over Beauvoir’s inconsistency from The Second Sex to “Must We Burn Sade?”

A longstanding outspoken critic of marriage in general, Beauvoir credits Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil, Sade’s wife, for acquainting him with “all the
insipidity and boredom of virtue” (“Must” 11). Yet in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir describes marriage as particularly monotonous for women rather than men. While marriage exists as one choice among many for men, during Beauvoir’s and previous eras, she argues, it acted as women’s aspired destiny (*Second* 439). According to Beauvoir’s 1949 analysis, rather than two subjects freely entering into a reciprocal relationship, in practice, man takes a wife and woman is passively given in marriage, essentially becoming man’s vassal: “She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other ‘half’” (*Second* 442). But in her account of Sade, we see few signs of female passivity or slavishness. Indeed, Beauvoir attributes more active intention to Sade’s wife in “Must We Burn Sade?” than to the general state of women in *The Second Sex*.

While in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir analyzes marriage from the standpoint of women, asserting that even in the twentieth century marriage is “imposed far more imperiously on the young girl than on the young man” (*Second* 443), in “Sade” she seems to look almost exclusively and sympathetically from the husband’s beleaguered perspective. As late as the nineteenth century, she tells us in *The Second Sex*, “girls were barely consulted” in their marriage suggesting that women could not reasonably be held responsible for their unhappy marriages (*Second* 441), but in “Sade” she marks Renée-Pélagie as “a choice victim, a willing accomplice” in the marquis’s sexual exploits (“Must” 11). Sade,  

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35 Nevermind for now that Sade himself held marriage in high esteem, priding himself on only committing adultery with courtesans, prostitutes, and young domestics—hardly ever a married woman. In a letter he brags, “For a dozen girls…I’ve tried to seduce you won’t find three married women” (qtd in Gray 243).
on the other hand, was the one who passively married out of a sense of duty to his parents (“Must” 7). In *The Second Sex* marriage arrests women in a state of immanence disallowing them from anything more than tedious housework and, oftentimes, mothering duties, but in “Sade” Beauvoir ascribes no dull, wifely limitations. Renée-Pélagie finds adventure, actively conceals her husband’s indiscretions, orchestrates his escape from prison, encourages an affair between her sister and husband, helps plan orgies and harems, and even willingly incriminates herself on her husband’s behalf (*en passum* 11-13).

Theses inconsistencies and contradictions between *The Second Sex* and “Must We Burn Sade?” from favoring a woman’s to a man’s marriage perspective and from reading women as passive objects to a woman as an active player in her unorthodox marriage, might contribute to feminists’ negative judgments of the text. For those who read *The Second Sex* as a proto-feminist tome, one that makes the case for women’s oppression as a political class, Beauvoir seems to undercut her whole argument with her insistence on Renée-Pélagie’s active and willing participation in her husband’s violent infidelity. If we agree with Beauvoir’s earlier assertions that if woman has no choice in her marriage she cannot be held responsible for an unhappy marriage, then how can we also agree with her claim that Renée-Pélagie holds responsibility for her husband’s unhappiness in their marriage? Was the wife’s freedom not impinged upon as much or even more so than her husband’s? How can we agree with Beauvoir’s implications of Renée-Pélagie in her husband’s violence against non-consenting women?

Beauvoir’s read of Renée-Pélagie seems typical of the sexism she combats
in *The Second Sex*: a benign but persistent sexism where the myths of the universal male experience dominate and supersede those of woman’s. The problem her reading faces, some feminists might argue, is that Renée-Pélagie’s situation seems especially ripe for the kind of reading Beauvoir provides in *The Second Sex*: she had no say in her arranged marriage, her husband’s earlier dalliances were condoned while she was expected to remain faithful to him, and she was expected to mold her behavior to suit her husband. Renée-Pélagie’s eventual divorce provides supporting evidence that she was not as game for Sade’s sexual adventures as Beauvoir leads us to believe.

But to get lost in the representation of women in “Must We Burn Sade?”—to get caught up in discerning Renée-Pélagie’s innocence or complicity—misses Beauvoir’s point. In this essay Beauvoir resists positive or negative representations of women. The pattern from *The Second Sex* to “Must We Burn Sade?” moves toward performative language assumptions with an increased focus on the relational. Indeed, the fact that contradictions and inconsistencies exist between these two accounts proves the fundamental ambiguity of marriage as a relation.

The very problem of relations anchors each of these texts. After all, Beauvoir organizes “Must We Burn Sade?” around the question “Can individuals, without effacing difference, integrate into a community?” (“Must” 4). Both Sade’s life and his writings served as the ideal case study for such a meditation. Although she finds no easy answers, ultimately Beauvoir deems Sade instructive as a moralist on this issue. For example, Sade resisted taking for granted
predetermined relationships between himself and others based on abstract principles of equality and reciprocity and instead creates the terms for relationships as he experiences them. The complication, of course, comes from how these relationships often play out un-consensually and violently. Even still, Beauvoir concludes her essay declaring "[t]he supreme value of [Sade's] testimony lies in its ability to disturb us. It forces us to re-examine thoroughly the basic problem which haunts our age in different forms: the true relation between man and man" ("Must" 64). At heart, Beauvoir concludes, Sade's writing expresses a deep concern with the relational.

Likewise, the problem with woman’s situation in the world, as outlined in *The Second Sex*, is one of misguided, asymmetrical, and predetermined relations. According to Beauvoir, man, unlike woman, never has to ask himself "What is a man?" or in defining himself begin with his sex. Man equals a neutral humanity that needs no special qualifications. Man, unlike woman, never struggles with the mystery of his sex. While early men and women questioned and feared the mystery of woman’s fertility, man’s phallus was unquestioningly worshipped. Man, unlike woman, possesses a sexual liberty that allows him to explore pleasure with a variety of partners both in and outside of marriage. Conversely, women are discouraged from following their sexual whims and receive harsher punishments for their infidelities.

Sufficiently correcting these relations, however, goes beyond equalizing asymmetries like the ones listed above. The gauntlet Beauvoir throws down is not taken up by ensuring universal equality within the current societal structure.
Elsewhere, Beauvoir critiques such logic, as heralded by feminists like Betty Friedan, who see women’s liberation achieved by gaining and maintaining equal power and hierarchical position with men. Working toward reciprocity—the exchange between equally recognized subjects Beauvoir points towards in *The Second Sex*—is a movement toward the more ambiguous *Mitsein*.

Borrowing the term from Heidegger, Beauvoir sees *Mitsein*, often translated as “being with,” as both responsible for perpetuating un-reciprocal gender relations and the condition of possibility for reciprocal relations. On the one hand, women and men constitute the “original *Mitsein*” a necessary, primordial bond that makes it troublesome for women to see themselves as a collective (*Second 9*). While other politically oppressed classes can easily identify their oppressors and set their sights on resistance efforts, woman, because of her deep, biological bond with man, their shared history in various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious groups, tend to not recognize themselves as members of an oppressed class apart from men. Women “live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women” (*Second 8*). The “original *Mitsein*” between man and woman stubbornly prevents women from establishing widespread solidarity to oppose men’s dominance (*Second 9*).

On the other hand, Beauvoir orients the goal toward reciprocal relations through a “human *Mitsein*” at the end of her *Second Sex* “Introduction” (17).

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36 See Betty Friedan’s “A Dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir.”
While acknowledging the mindless acceptance of woman’s situation that can come from men and women’s original *Mitsein*, Beauvoir still holds out hope for a qualitative equalizing of relations through a human *Mitsein*. Since humans are born into a world of Others and develop individually and historically into subjects, hope exists for progressing reciprocal relations between the sexes. Indeed, this hope is written into the very ethics of her existentialist philosophy: “Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future” (*Second 16*). *Every* subject, both men and women, have the potential to posit their own freedom projects and create their own futures. Current gender relations suggest not a natural progression, but a matrix of accumulated choices against women. “A situation created over time,” writes Beauvoir, “can come undone at another time” (*Second 8*). Critiquing Engels’s historical materialist analysis of women’s oppression as a result of men’s harnessing bronze and iron tools thus amplifying their strength and productivity, Beauvoir sees women’s exclusion from the human *Mitsein* as emanating from her differences from man’s “way of working and thinking” (*Second 86*), an unnecessary exclusion. She recognizes a tendency to establish an Other and that human society constitutes both *Mitsein* and separation making woman’s entrance into the human *Mitsein* all the more possible.

At this point, Beauvoir’s *Mitsein* easily melts into her appropriation of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, the framework upon which she bases her
gendered One/Other schema. Here, Beauvoir describes relations as they currently exist: an essential One (Man) and the oppositional, inessential Other (Woman). Confronting difference, Beauvoir argues that two consciousnesses naturally consider themselves essential and the other inessential (*Second 7*). However, in contrast to men, women internalize the other perspective of themselves as inessential and Other. “How is it,” Beauvoir wonders, “that between the sexes this reciprocity [of being both One and Other] has not been put forward, that one of the terms has been asserted as the only essential one, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative, defining the latter as pure alterity?” (*Second 7*). Woman begins in a distinctively disadvantaged position towards reciprocal relations. The situations that create woman as structurally man’s Other—biology, accumulated mythologies, economics, technologies, psychologies—“heavily handicap[s]” her from easily entering into an equally reciprocal relation with man (*Second 9*). This imbalance can only be overcome by a reciprocal recognition between the two individuals as equally One and Other.

Exactly how this transformation happens remains an open issue. Beauvoir alternates between agonistic and mutual renderings of how these reciprocal relations can come to be. At times, she envisions these relations as necessarily confrontational, “always tense” individuals meet “face-to-face,” “impos[ing]…sovereignty on the other” (*Second 71*). Yet at other times, the sexes lay down their weapons and the exchange seems weightless and pleasurable. In a “happy” erotic encounter, “each partner feels pleasure as being
his own while at the same time having its source in the other” (Second 415).
Man and woman as the original Mitsein, as One and Other may be lived out in conflict or harmony.

Engaging in the varying types of reciprocal relations remains an unsure, instable gamble; one that many Beauvoir scholars are unwilling to take when it comes to the violently realized relations of someone like Sade. The potential hostility present in relation-making has been a component recent feminist scholars have minimized because of its conceptual similarities with Sartrean existentialism. By instead focusing on Beauvoir’s distinctiveness apart from Sartre, many feminist scholars work to move Beauvoir from the shadows of Sartre into her own light. Bergoffen listens to Beauvoir’s “muted…philosophical voice” (3), Sonia Kruks argues that although Beauvoir tried to elaborate Sartre’s philosophy, she failed (“Gender and Subjectivity” 96), and Nancy Bauer characterizes the larger effort to defend Beauvoir’s philosophical importance distinctive from Sartre’s as the topic for relevant scholars today (Simone de Beauvoir 131). Given such a project, these and other scholars have worked tirelessly to recognize Beauvoir’s work focusing on women’s subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and generosity.37

In this context reciprocity represents an equal exchange of common respect and pleasure between individuals. Beauvoir certainly supports this perspective in The Second Sex when she writes “in a concrete and sexual form

37 For a range of texts that distinguish Beauvoir as a thinker separate from Sartre see Claudia Card’s Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir and Emily R. Grosholz’s The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir.
the reciprocal recognition of the self and the other is accomplished in the keenest consciousness of the other and the self” (Second 415). There is still recognition of the other, however in Beauvoir’s description of “normal” and “happy” feminine eroticism, “alterity no longer has a hostile character” (Second 415). This reciprocity constitutes a “union of bodies” who “together passionately negate and affirm their limits are fellow creatures and yet are different” (Second 415). Whereas earlier in the text, the sexes met on a battlefield to duke out their differences, here, “harmony” is achieved by a “reciprocal generosity of body and soul” (Second 415).

With the new scholarly focus on Beauvoir’s harmonious, generous, and pleasurable relations, feminists mistakenly cast “Must We Burn Sade?” as inimical to Beauvoir’s work in The Second Sex. However, Beauvoir’s vision of reciprocal relations relies just as heavily on the agonistic as the mutual.38 While this reframing of Beauvoir as a separate thinker from Sartre has helped her reputation as a distinct feminist philosopher, it comes at the cost of neglecting the discordant aspects of her work. Indeed, far from contradicting the reciprocal relations she elaborates in The Second Sex, “Must We Burn Sade?” embodies reciprocity through a hostile, but no less ethical, exchange. Sade’s gender relations fall under the category of eighteenth-century French male writers who relayed a period when “men regarded women as their peers” (Second 273). These eighteenth-century writers wrote of women “without mystery” and

38 Certainly some recent scholars, such as Julie K. Ward, acknowledge both strains in Beauvoir but claim she prefers a model of “mutual recognition” to replace “dialectical opposition” (“Reciprocity and Friendship” 44).
successfully wrote the “dramatic relations between the sexes” without losing the “diversity…richness…or… intensity” (*Second 273*) of heterosexual relations.

The drama between the sexes Beauvoir alludes to in Sade’s writing does not equate sadism. Sade and sadism hold two different definitions and sets of associations for Beauvoir. Sade’s actions resist an easy characterization of wholesale sadism. And sadism, meanwhile, withstands simplistic definitions where the act of sexual gratification comes through inflicting bodily pain on another. Beauvoir, while unequivocally opposed to sadism, finds Sade and violent, painful sex intriguing.

Opening her essay on Sade, Beauvoir indicates the misperceptions tied to this name alone causing his reputation to “buckled under the weight of such words as ‘sadism’ and ‘sadistic’” (3). Sadism carries connotations of destructive cruelty, intentional malice, and disfigurement of the others, according to Beauvoir. Sadistic behaviors maim consciousnesses into a state of abjection; they train towards attitudes of broken, incomplete subjectivity. Under these conditions, coupled with Beauvoir’s philosophical aims toward whole, active feminine agency and transcendence, sadistic behavior constitutes a clear enemy to woman's liberation and creation of ethical relations.

In *The Second Sex* she delineates the differences more explicitly. Sadism indicates a relational intention to destroy; violent sex does not.  

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39 Beauvoir’s U.S. radical feminist inheritors like Women Against Pornography (WAP), Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPAM) and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) often overlooked such differentiations. See Susan Brownmiller’s “The Pornography Wars” chapter in her *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. 

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experienced through rough sex has the capacity to “unit[e]” bodies in a “reciprocal joy” (412); sadistic sex practiced on women further chips away at their subjectivity and ability to engage in reciprocal relations. Sade too testifies to the unifying power of his violent sex in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*: “Sexual pleasure is…a passion to which all others are subordinate but in which they all unite” (Sade qtd in Beauvoir 38). Beauvoir beautifully and sensually describes non-sadistic sexual torment as “a sharp light bursting out in the carnal night” that “removes the lover from the limbo where he is swooning so that he might once more be thrown into it” (*Second* 412). This mode of relations relies on a more dynamic sense of erotic movement and exchange—as contrasted with a static mutuality—necessary in relations.

Although Beauvoir amplifies the subject/object binary throughout *The Second Sex* as a framework of gendered relations, she does not confuse this with dominant and submissive sexual roles, again, a distinction overlooked by Beauvoir’s U.S. radical feminist followers. Dominant and submissive roles do not equate greater or lesser subjectivity, but instead together work to compliment and unite individuals. Such binaries “limits and denies” subjects and proves “necessary” for subject formation (*Second* 159). The dominant relies upon the submissive just as much as the submissive depends on the dominant in that both subject “[attain]” themselves “only through the reality that [each one] is not” (*Second* 159). Sexual suffering, without aims of annihilation, do not exacerbate

40 See Dworkin’s formative book *Intercourse*, particularly her infamous line, “Violation is a synonym for intercourse” (154) which usually gets misquoted as “All sex is rape.”
power differentials between the sexes, but aid in building reciprocal relations by temporarily destroying boundaries that separate the self and other and allow the union of two bodies. “There is a wrenching from oneself in eroticism,” Beauvoir muses, where “suffering...destroys the limits of the self, it is a going beyond” (Second 412). This type of sexual relation “expresses a desire to merge and not to destroy” (Second 412). While this could happen in a variety of sexual experiences, violent sex, Beauvoir suggests here, heightens one’s sensitivity to individuals’ alterities and convergences.

Beauvoir works to correct the misperception that the Sadeian libertine seeks to destroy the Other or fails to take an Other’s consciousness into consideration at any level. Sade’s relations hold constant tensions and inconstant bonds, but he always writes a concrete relation where the libertine needs a particular kind of Other. Indeed, not every victim is “[worthy] of torture” (“Must” 60). For this type of relation to work ethically, the submissive must be able to fully submit to the torture or transform suffering into pleasure. Rather than seeing this unbalanced power relation as an example of women’s objectification, Beauvoir envisions this union as “the closest of bonds,” as constituting a “genuine couple” (“Must” 60). From the violently asymmetrical relationship between the dominant and submissive comes the knowledge that we are at once separate and connected, One and Other. The fully realized Sadeian libertine experience concludes in a recognition of both One and Other: “in doing violence to an individual, we force him to assume his separateness, and thereby he finds a truth which reconciles him with his antagonist” (“Must 60). “Torturer
and victim” Beauvoir claims, “recognize their fellowship in astonishment, esteem, and even admiration” (“Must” 60).

Beauvoir principally, although not exclusively, reads Sade as a creator of non-sadistic, violent relations. In fact, for the first section of the essay Beauvoir remains blasé regarding the particularities of Sade’s offenses. Orienting readers to Sade’s biographical trajectory, Beauvoir refers to vague “excesses committed in a brothel” (“Must” 7) instead of detailing the specific offenses. Within the confines of her introductory remarks, only indirectly does she expound upon the violence of his sexual exploits and even then she deems his vices “not startlingly original” (“Must” 4) and later comments that his “chief interest for us lies not in his aberrations” (“Must” 6). Relative to aristocratic sexual desires of the time, “whipping a few girls,” Beauvoir tells readers, “is rather a petty feat” (“Must” 8), and other libertines “indulged with impunity in orgies even worse” than Sade (“Must” 9). Even his “perverse bucolics have the austerity of a nudist colony” (“Must” 38). Further into the text, Beauvoir discloses her mild titillation, if not prurient interest, with Sade’s eroticism as she moves from clinical descriptions of “algolagnia” (sadomasochism) and “coprophilia” (pleasure in feces) to the more colloquial “masochist” and “sodomite” to her colorful descriptions of Sade supplying a prostitute with sugar almonds in the hopes that “they would make her break wind” (Sade qtd in Beauvoir 25). Given her mild characterizations of Sade’s sexual relations, Beauvoir mostly denies that Sade’s relational violence reaches the levels of destructive sadism.

Instead of condemning Sade as a sexual criminal, as a representational
reading would do, Beauvoir tells us that he should be “hailed as a great moralist” (“Must” 40) whose relational orientations come not from a hypocritical, repressive, and unjust society, nor from an inherently violent, cruel, and destructive nature, but from concrete experiences. By overlooking the representation of women in Sade’s writing, Beauvoir finds a relational lesson that can be nonetheless instructive for feminists. Precisely in Sade’s commitment to concrete, lived experience does Beauvoir pinpoint Sade’s lesson in relations.

But Beauvoir primarily derives Sade’s lessons from the negative, from what he dictated should not constitute relation-making. Most emphatically, Sade rages against the society’s relational prescriptions. Society, as expressed most concretely through the law and more abstractly through virtue, at best enforces arbitrary rules and at worst amplifies the injustices it ostensibly seeks to correct. For example, through the virtues of benevolence and charity, Sade argues that the rich dispensing assistances act as partial measures, building weak-minded dependence rather than encouraging self-sufficiency, further securing that the poor remain poor and that those in a position to help continue their charity. Charity serves the rich’s vanities more than unsettling conditions of poverty.

These virtuous relations ring false and disguise self-interest as genuine concern and care for others. Far from uniting the classes through acts of kindness, Sade contends these virtues function as alienations between individuals.

In a similar vein, juridical practices put into place ostensibly to protect people, do greater harm, Sade insists, by aiming to impose abstract values onto all uniformly. Under the guise of universal equality, laws are constructed which
benefit the class interests of those writing the laws. More than that, the law presumes a fundamental sameness to subjects and situations. Given the heterogeneous situations in which individuals exist, “no universal morality is possible,” insists Sade (“Must” 48). Law, as a structure for how ethical relations should be lived, exists as a baseless, cold accounting that fails to consider individual differences and experiences.

Although preferable to society’s prescriptions, even natural law fails as a guide for ethical relations. Nature—destructive and indifferent toward humans at its core—offers no definite lead. Certainly Sade marshaled nature as a justification for his crimes, but he also argued for a radical separation from the forces of creation. As such, humans hold no responsibility or duty to imitate nature (although Sade himself chose to do so).

If he rejects standards of virtue, law, and nature, what guides the relational moralism of Sade? Or, more important for our purposes, what, in the affirmative form, does Beauvoir see as worthwhile in Sade’s relations? Why does she want us to read Sade? Is she suggesting feminists replicate his violence or submit ourselves to abuses? No. Such a reading destroys the nuance Beauvoir sees in Sade’s complex mix of writing and sexuality and reduces his work to a pragmatic list of acceptable feminist relations. Beauvoir’s valuation of Sade lies precisely in his refusal to conform to a set of predetermined relations.

“To sympathize with Sade too readily is to betray him,” Beauvoir reminds readers. The literal conclusion to following Sade is “misery, subjection, and death” and “every time we side with a child whose throat has been slit by a sex
maniac, we take a stand against him” (“Must” 61). While distancing herself at the end of her essay from the particular ways Sade sometimes expresses his relations, she reminds us of the value behind the fundamental incoherence of Sade’s relations. Sade offers up a lesson on the “struggle between irreconcilable existences” (“Must” 61). Beauvoir, as she readily admits in an interview, considers Sade, macabre and “fascinating” (Bair, Simone 432). While unambiguously declaring the wrong ways to engage in relations, he is unable to fully reveal and explain his relations. To answer Dworkin’s rhetorical question from Pornography—“Why did someone do (make) this?” (Dworkin 92)—Beauvoir might well respond: “I don’t know.” And that drives Beauvoir’s interest and exploration of the strange mix of Sade’s sexuality and language use. His language interests Beauvoir in its demonstration of thoughts “not quite coherent” and “constantly developing” (“Must” 46). Even as he attempts to show his sexual relations in his writing, he withholds, “he try[s] to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is...a tendency to be incommunicable” (“Must” 4).

Un-virtuous, violent relations break through alienations and provide a concrete, definite way to recognize the Other and have the Other recognize the One. Sade’s relational violence admirably tries to “destroy the concrete barriers of flesh which isolate human minds” (“Must” 59). The ethical, reciprocal relation connects and separates, allows both subjects to be recognized as One and Other.

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41 Jane Gallop also, to her surprise, finds her “original attraction to Sade is to a site of perversions” (“The Student Body” 53).
Violent sexual relations are not necessarily a problem for Beauvoir. Instead of primarily using “sadism” as an expression of violent eroticism, the term pops up in discussions of troubling motherhood in *The Second Sex*. The situation of motherhood often allows women an outlet to direct their frustrations of immanence. Out of “hostility and sadism” mothers often enlist the eldest daughters to household chores (*Second* 300); under the guise of “wanting to ‘shape’” her children, mothers act on “capricious sadism” (*Second* 558); and little girls in particular must beware a mother’s “domineering and sadistic instincts” to curb their autonomy (*Second* 308). Beauvoir marshals the term “sadism” not as a specialized masculine violence directed at women, but as a term of everyday violence women direct toward their children. The man with the whips is less menacing than the mother trapped in a situation of anger. The real danger to women is not a relation that allows rough sex, but the institutionalized relation that traps women in a state of immanence.

Clearly, both expressions of forceful combat and mutual tenderness have a place in Beauvoir’s vision of reciprocal relations. Reciprocity in *The Second Sex* is not necessarily the warm embrace of mutual exchange and not for the faint of heart. Conflict between the sexes can be overcome, Beauvoir promises, but not without a cost. In order to achieve the “reciprocal movement” of “free recognition of each individual in the other” we must inhabit difficult virtues, assume an endless struggle that “demands constant effort” and even then, one’s “life is a difficult enterprise whose success is never assured” (*Second* 159-160).
Even in constant deliberation between mutual or agonistic relations, reciprocal relations can remain illusive and incoherent.

Feminists must not burn Sade because he raises the disturbing question of how to manage incomprehensible relations. Engaging with Sade as a feminist project upsets self-certain and abstracted feminists notions of reciprocal relationships. To be sure, Beauvoir does not prescribe violent exchanges as assurance of ethical, reciprocal relations, but she does offer it as an option. As she suggests in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, subjects must assume a fundamental ambiguity and decide their relational mode on a contingent basis. Subjects never get reassurance of ethical living. Careful deliberation and thoughtful weighing of options are still necessary, but never guarantee unambiguous ethical decisions. We never get to fully know the consequences of our actions or what success looks like in each situation. Beauvoir indicates the same uncertainty holds true in striving for reciprocal relations. No relational litmus test exists. Reciprocal movement it would seem cannot happen by following replicable steps, nor will reciprocal relations look the same in every situation. Beauvoir challenges feminists to assume the ambiguity of relation-making and to consider the ethical potentialities in relations as incomprehensible, incoherent, and unreadable as Sade's.

Beauvoir encourages an open attitude toward uncertainty in “Must We Burn Sade?” yet she quickly shifts to self-certain dogmatism in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” a companion essay in the collection *Privileges*. The following chapter contrasts with the arguments I put forth in this chapter: in
“Sade” she urges readers to consider and be open to a variety of relations, no matter how incomprehensible, as they come; in “Merleau-Ponty” she demands of her intellectual peer a definite reckoning. How do we make sense of Beauvoir’s competing demands to attend to the ambiguity of relations and her insistence on a singular, clear truth? In the next chapter I explore Beauvoir’s morality and style and argue that she takes the longstanding rhetorical debate to a place where clarity as an element of style acts as a stealth disguise for her commitment to ambiguity.
Chapter 5:

Morality and Style:

Beauvoir’s Difficulty through Clarity

Thus, it is clear that if one composes well, there will be an unfamiliar quality and it escapes notice and will be clear.

--Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* (3.2.1404b)

As I have argued thus far, Beauvoir’s language inhabits a space of ambiguity; it operates through rhetorical uncertainties like contradiction and a mix of masculine and feminine styles. However, Beauvoir certainly did not see herself this way. Contrasting herself with Merleau-Ponty, a fellow public intellectual and colleague at *Les Temps Modernes*, Beauvoir saw herself as definite and concrete to Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous and abstract leanings: “His writing revealed a sense of nuance, and he talked hesitantly; I was for clear-cut opinions. He was interested in the peripheries of thought, in the nebulous fringes of existence rather than in its hard core; with me it was the opposite” (*Force* 61). Where Beauvoir prides herself on straightforward transparency, she ensconces Merleau-Ponty on the side of more meandering complexities. Depicting these differences in her memoir produces tender rendering their relationship (“I brought to our discussions a vehemence to which he submitted with a smile” (*Force* 62)), but in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” an essay from her *Privileges* collection that responds to Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre’s defense of
communism, their differences take on the weight of clear, honest writing versus willfully misleading, dishonest writing (Merleau-Ponty’s “excess of errors” committed through a series of rhetorical “ruse[s],” according to Beauvoir, “must be denounced” (“Merleau-Ponty” 448, 452)).

In pitting their two styles against one another on the backdrop of morality, Beauvoir engages in a familiar binary for those in rhetorical studies. By her construction here, on the one stylistic side we have transparency, clarity, and truth, and on the other, we have opacity, obscurity, and crafty deceit. The more complicated, difficult-to-read language, Beauvoir suggests here and other places, needlessly complicates and obscures the truth. Strip away the ornamental, the academic jargon, or any embellishments of language and one reveals the “hard core” of the matter, Beauvoir argues. Language, this perspective often goes, should aid in uncovering the truth, and not act as layer of obfuscation. Successful language, Beauvoir indicates, does not get in the way of the message, but works as a transparent vessel for the facts, leaving little doubt that truth speaks for itself.

Despite Beauvoir’s stated transparency imperatives, as I have argued throughout this project, her own language tends to hide in plain sight. Beauvoir’s language, when treated to a closer rhetorical examination, yields more than “committed” or realist or representational language assumptions. In The Second Sex, although she never calls attention to her language by explicitly explaining or defending it or by involving herself in experimental feminine writing, she masks

42 See my summary of Beauvoir’s critique of psychoanalytic feminist writing in Chapter Three.
her language’s operations through contradictions that enact her argument of woman; she interrupts and accentuates her masculine language with semicolons, and in doing so, engages in a reiteration of language that values connection and compromise.

For all of her reliance and faith placed in transparency to reveal truth, Beauvoir’s comments extolling the virtues of transparent language ironically conceal her language’s complexities. In other words, since she characterizes her own language as plain, straightforward, and transparent, people tend to believe her and not examine it further for themselves. Just as Beauvoir’s constant refrain that Sartre, not she, was the philosopher contributed to the public’s perception of his intellectual preeminence (Le Doeuff deems her a “tremendously well-hidden philosopher” because of Beauvoir’s insistent denials (139)), so does her advocacy against psychoanalytic and difficult writing conceal the difficulties of her own language.

After all, “The real art,” Ovid reminds us, “lies in concealing the art.” His maxim points toward a theme in rhetoric of non-rhetoric or at least of constructing a rhetoric that conceals the very means of its existence. Italian humanists called it sprezzatura, the idea that the rhetorically educated should not make their art visible, but perform their words as effortless and unstudied.43 The logic behind such a renunciation of explicit rhetoric posits that the more natural and spontaneous one’s words appear, the more persuasive and effective the rhetor

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43 See Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier.
and message will become. Concealment of rhetorical art, then, could potentially perform even greater persuasive efficiency with an author like Beauvoir who devoted most of her life to what she considered revealing the unadorned truth.

In Chapter Five, I explore Beauvoir’s appeal to clarity in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” how it conceals her rhetorical art, and as a result, complicates our notions of how feminist social change works. First, however, I take a closer look at Beauvoir’s mixed perspectives on clarity as a writing style both necessary and insufficient in terms of aiding and changing women’s social situations. I will then pair her reading on clarity and social change with Judith Butler’s and secondary readings about Butler’s writing. The binaries erected around Butler’s writing ring false to Beauvoir’s own use of clarity as she suggests a more supple and situational way to evaluate the possibilities of clear or difficult writing. Finally, I will look at an example of Beauvoir’s supposed transparent language in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” and demonstrate how she uses clarity as a tool to obscure her own creative and ethical intervention in feminist social change.

5.1 STYLE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Beauvoir’s contemporaries often criticized her language for its overly abundant transparency. She had a reputation for revealing content—be it philosophical, ethical, political or personal—through a frank, lucid writing style.

44 For a more recent reflection on the rhetorical strategy of non-rhetoric see Carolyn R. Miller’s 2010 Carolina Rhetoric Conference keynote address, “Should We Name the Tools?: Concealing and Revealing the Art of Rhetoric.”
Particularly in France, readers were shocked by Beauvoir’s lack of concealment in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s literary hero turned adversary Francois Mauriac, after reading the forthright renderings of women’s biological and sexual experiences in *The Second Sex*, wrote to one of Beauvoir’s employees, “Your employer’s vagina has no secrets from me” (Bair 410). Those close to her who did not share her commitment to revealing one’s life publicly felt betrayed by her disclosures. Nelson Algren, Beauvoir’s American lover she based her Lewis Brogan character on in *The Mandarins* and wrote about un-anonymously in *America Day by Day* and *Force of Circumstance*, felt enraged and humiliated by the candid depiction of their love affair: “I’ve been in whorehouses all over the world and the woman there always closes the door, whether it’s in Korea or India,” the seventy-two-year-old Algren reflects, “But [Beauvoir] flung the door open and called in the public and the press…I don’t have any malice against her, but I think it was an appalling thing to do” (Algren qtd in Rowley 305).

The transparency these two find vulgar and appalling, however, offered Beauvoir a sense of mission and honesty. In closing her memoir *Force of Circumstances*, Beauvoir defends her “success” of a uniquely personal, philosophical, political, and professional relationship with Sartre marked by their shared sense of duty to “criticiz[e], correc[t], or ratif[y]” each other’s thoughts (643). For her this in part meant a public, transparent rendering of her life and

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45 Algren did in fact harbor malice toward Beauvoir for both choosing Sartre over him (she refused to marry Algren because of her and Sartre’s commitment as each other’s “essential love”) and sharing the intimate details of their affair with the world. For evidence of this, see Algren’s review of *Force of Circumstance* in *Ramparts* and *Harper’s* as well as his poem “Goodbye Lilies, Hello Spring” dedicated to Beauvoir in *Zeitgeist*.  

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thoughts, in an effort to uncover the truth. By clarifying and revealing her thought and life through words, Beauvoir points toward a belief that words can shine a light on the truth of a situation.

While evidence abounds of Beauvoir’s attachment to the idea of language as a tool of clarity in pieces where she and others reflect on her writing, when we look at texts like *The Second Sex* she takes a more situational approach to clarity’s boundaries. She still poses clarity as the first step, but ambiguity must follow. “Lucidity,” Beauvoir argues, “is a conquest [women] are justly proud of but with which they are a little too quickly satisfied” (*Second* 746). In praising clarity in women writers like George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters who reveal the reality of women’s situations, she also asserts that when clarity stops at description and inhibits women from thinking abstractly about relations, then women limit their horizons for change. Given women’s largely confined and dependent situation at the time Beauvoir wrote, she appreciates the first steps of uncovering oppression—“in trying to be lucid, women writers render the greatest service to the cause of women”—but she immediately criticizes the call to clarity where women “remain too attached to serving [lucidity] to adopt…the disinterested attitude that opens up wider horizons” (*Second* 746, 747). In other words, clarity, when taken as a language imperative, becomes a hindrance to women.

These passages suggest a Beauvoir that envisions language’s crowning achievement as something more than lucidity, clarity, or transparency. Language for the sake of lucidity works as a necessary step as it “pull[s] away the veils of
illusion and lies,” but clarity’s “negative daring,” Beauvoir provocatively asserts, “still leaves us with an enigma; for truth itself is ambiguity, depth, mystery” (Second 747). Beauvoir here suggests writing for a contingent, difficult-to-explain truth that cannot be serviced by transparency. Such difficulties require difficult or at least some form of re-created language along the lines of syntax. Beauvoir explains that where women writers usually stay to the surface of language’s capabilities, excelling primarily through “vocabulary,” “savory adjectives and sensual images,” instead they miss the possibilities of affecting “relations” through “syntax” (Second 747).

To get to the truth of a situation through language, which is what Beauvoir is interested in here and in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” she proposes first a gesture toward clarity in the fullest commitment possible, but then, as if tacitly admitting the impossibility of transparency, a working through with language in its “ambiguity, depth, and mystery” (Second 747). As I have argued throughout this dissertation project Beauvoir’s language is best read through a performative lens, not separating form and function, style and content, but reading her operations of language as deeply integrated into her message of feminism. Clarity, then, inseparable through style and content, while always a necessity, is never the goal, is never the ultimate channel for change in women’s situations. Affecting change in women’s situations requires more complex operations at the level of syntax.

Structures of language and its connection to social change have been, in recent rhetorical debates, a contentious site for discussions regarding the validity
of difficult-to-read writing and even the definition of good and bad writing.

Feminist theorist and rhetorician Judith Butler has acted as a lightening rod for many of these debates that have spilled over from the academy into the public.\(^{46}\)

Both Martha Nussbaum, University of Chicago Law professor and Denis Dutton, editor of Philosophy and Literature, reinvigorated questions of clarity’s role in social change and truth by targeting Butler’s writing. In an essay for The New Republic Nussbaum argues for the proud tradition in American feminism of pragmatism and making real changes for women even through academic feminism; however, lately, she laments, there has been a “turning from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women” (“Professor”). Butler, for Nussbaum, represent this disruption in feminism’s political progress by convincing the younger generation of feminists that radical social change happens “in academic publications of lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness”

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\(^{46}\) I use Butler here as a way to give boundaries to the arguments surrounding what gets termed as clear and unclear language. For a broader look at the role of clarity in rhetoric and composition studies see Christa Albrecht-Crane’s “Whoa—Theory and Bad Writing,” Anis S. Bawarshi’s Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition, particularly her discussion of Locke’s dictum that rhetoric’s terrain is that of imposing “order and clearness,” William E. Cole Jr’s “Freshman Composition: The Circle of Unbelief,” Culler and Lamb’s Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena, particularly their “Introduction,” Teresa L. Ebert’s “Manifesto as Theory and Theory as Material Force: Toward a Red Polemic,” James L. Kastely’s “The Earned Increment: Kenneth Burke’s Argument for Inefficiency,” Susan Peck MacDonald’s Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Gary Olson’s “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline,” David Orr’s “Verbicide,” Dan Smith’s “Ethics and ‘Bad Writing’: Dialectics, Reading, and Affective Pedagogy,” Victor Vitanza’s “Three Countertheses: or, A Critical In(ter)vention into Composition Theories and Pedagogies,” and Susan Wells’s “Just Difficult Enough: Writers’ Desires and Readers’ Economies.”
and that there “is little room for large-scale social change” like the work that
Catherine MacKinnon undertakes, a feminist academic she positively assesses
(“Professor”).

Since language constitutes politics in this new model, Nussbaum defends
the American pragmatic tradition by attacking Butler’s writing. She characterizes
it as “ponderous and obscure,” thick with thinly supported theoretical allusions,
and guilty of “advancing highly contestable interpretations that would not be
accepted by many scholars” (“Professor”). The effects of such writing is not a
radical politics, as Butler forwards, but, for Nussbaum, a “hip quietism” and a
“collaborat[ion] with evil” (“Professor”). Butler’s obscure writing, argues
Nussbaum, does nothing to help real women, but instead pulls young academic
feminists away from a pragmatic tradition into a false sense of believing that by
writing obscure, esoteric academic prose as Butler does, one “[does] something
bold” when in reality “[h]ungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not
sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not
achieve legal protection through it” (“Professor”).

Language, Nussbaum’s critique tells us, need not necessarily be accessible
to a general audience, but it would help. Key to Nussbaum’s assessment is the
pragmatic tradition where language’s importance rests in its ability to directly and
quantifiably improve the lives of women. In other words, feminist language must
transparently account for how it positively affects the lives of women. For
example, while the legal language of MacKinnon might be unrecognizable to the
layperson, if it strives toward feeding hungry women, sheltering battered women,
finding justice for raped women, or protecting gays and lesbians, then it sufficiently practices feminist social change. Butler’s language fails by this rubric in large part not because it is hard to understand, but because it is written to an academic audience that, according to Nussbaum, does not aim to improve the lives of women. The specific difficulty that Nussbaum opposes in Butler’s writing is what she sees as obscurity for obscurity’s sake under the guise of radical activism.

Denis Dutton, editor of *Philosophy and Literature* and creator of the Bad Writing Contest, also deems bad writing as using unnecessarily difficult language as a way to obscure dubious thought. While Dutton cares less about the implication of language’s connections to social change than Nussbaum does, Butler and her stylistic ilk constitute a dangerous cultural politics where her language obscures “inept philosophy,” and attempts to “elevate a trivial subject” ("Language Crimes"). He contends that bad writers themselves are just humanities professors “showing off” or “mimic[ing] the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work” ("Language Crimes"). Dutton cites Butler as an example of his last insult arguing her writing is a “desperate incantatio[n]” that “hope[s] to persuade…not by argument but by obscurity that [she] too [is a] great min[d] of the age” ("Language Crimes").

By Dutton’s account, Butler’s bad writing has nothing to do with its lack of connection to solving the real problems of women, but with her lack of clarity she uses as a mask for her flimsy ideas and weak reasoning. Dutton’s attack resonates with the 1996 Sokal hoax where physics professor Alan Sokal
submitted a science article to the cultural studies journal *Social Context* with the expectation that even if it were non-sense, an article would be published if it “sounded good” and “flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions” (“Physicists Experiments”). While Sokal explicitly pointed to postmodernism and cultural studies as his targets, Dutton constructs a contest where it just so happens that all of the “winners” (add to the list not only Butler, but also Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha) work on broadly construed postmodern and cultural studies projects.

Dutton leans heavily on an enthymematic argument as to why Butler’s writing in particular is bad. He simply quotes her and leaves a space for readers to fill in their own conclusions as to why the writing is bad. Apparently neither Dutton nor the nominator is subject to the strictures of rigorous reasoning or solid evidence he requires of Butler. Dutton simply deems the sentence bad and lets Butler’s sentence stand on its own. The force of Dutton’s argument comes from its populist appeal. For those un-acclimated to Continental philosophy, of course Butler’s sentence reads as non-sense. By simply presenting the sentence to

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47 See *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*, a collection of essays that includes the offending and explanatory essays, a response from an editor of *Social Text*, and responses from national and international scholars and laypeople.

48 Butler’s award-winning bad sentence reads: “The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power” (qtd in Dutton).
analytic philosophers or a general audience, out of context, without any explanation, Dutton plays to the stereotypes of the out-of-touch academic in an ivory tower, divorced from the real world, who *seems* smart, but only hides behind fancy, complicated language. Faith in the power and prominence of lucidity connects Dutton and his audiences without need of further support.

Whereas Dutton’s defense of clarity takes on a slash-and-burn style, devoid of proof, Chris Holcomb’s interrogation of Butler’s difficult writing style targets an audience of rhetorical scholars and does a better job of articulating specifically what he finds problematic with Butler’s writing: “When Butler’s writing is at its most difficult and demanding…it is also more conservative and exclusionary in form—a souped-up version of the technobureaucratic style” (Holcomb 189). Holcomb bypasses the *ad hominem* arguments of Butler being either dumb (Dutton) or colluding with evil (Nussbaum) and instead qualifies her writing as simply not capable of the work she says it does. Like Nussbaum, Holcomb has no problem with difficult language if it serves a pragmatic purpose and unlike Nussbaum he takes Butler’s explanation of her difficult writing (“radical thought needs a radical language” (Holcomb 189)) into account; however, after a rhetorical analysis of her language, he “wonder[s] if Butler is writing checks her prose can’t cash” (195). Butler’s writing is not bad by grammatical standards of Edited American English, but, for Holcomb, the problem comes as it “strains the conventions and limits of comprehensibility” (195). In other words, her writing is not clear. Butler’s style demonstrates an affinity with a conservative technobureaucratic style: “abstract nouns, pervasive use of nominalization, weak
verbs…the passive voice, and strings of prepositional phrases that displace actions into nouns” litter Butler’s prose (Holcomb 195). Hers is the language of a bureaucratic, Holcomb claims, not of a radical social critic or activist.

The technobureaucratic style, an idea borrowed from Richard Lanham’s *Analyzing Prose*, also described by Lanham as “The Official Style,” marks the dominant, formal language of business. Lanham’s situational plain speak recommendation, along with his prescriptions of clarity, brevity, and sincerity respond to what he sees as overly fussy, excessive, inefficient, confusing language of the bureaucrat.49 By Holcomb and Lanham’s logic, technobureaucratic language favors the static concept rather than dynamic action (Lanham 28), the stodgily formal and undemocratic over the energy of egalitarianism (Lanham 160-161). In short, technobureaucratic language is conservative by structure while the clarity-brevity-sincerity style offers more radical social possibilities.

Nussbaum, Dutton, and Holcomb all ultimately construct Butler’s difficult language as either a social or cultural problem in that it inhibits communication with others. Nussbaum laments, “It is difficult to come to grips with Butler’s ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are” (Nussbaum); Dutton grumbles, “to ask what [Butler’s writing] means is to miss the point…Actual

49 Lanham supplies numerous, contrasting examples of “The Official Style” versus his suggested style: “a psychologist does not say that more people think of suicide at Christmas than at other times of the year. He says, ‘There is an upsurge in suicidal ideation for some.’…And a building owner does not say, ‘The air conditioning is wearing out and it has the superintendent worried,’ but ‘The continuing deterioration of the ventilation system is generating a considerable amount of ongoing concern to the superintendent of the facility’” (*Analyzing* 160).
communication has nothing to do with it” (Dutton); and Holcomb concludes that the structure of her writing “frustrate[s] and impede[s] comprehension” (Holcomb 195). If virtually no one can understand your writing, cries this chorus of critics, then how can your writing do anything? How can anyone act based upon your ideas?

Ironically, given the charges against Butler’s language as unfit for enacting radical social change, she defends her language as engaging with the “most profound” social, political, and pedagogical “problems of our time” (Butler, “Changing” 330). But rather than defining clear communication as the motor for social change, Butler takes a broader look at what is behind the very call for clarity. “[O]ur social responsibility is to become attuned to the fact that there is no common language anymore,” Butler explains, “Or if there is a common language, it is the language of a commercialism that seeks to extend the hegemony of commercial American English, and to do it in a way that violently effaces the problem of multilingualism” (Butler, “Changing” 330). The demand for clarity resists attention to differences and works to erase the multilingualism that pervades our current world. Caving to demands of lucid language in pursuit of understanding not only enacts a violence enforcing a commonality, but also presumes we all agree on what constitutes clarity, transparency, lucidity, and commonality.

The desire for common sense that drives calls for clarity, Butler argues, is often deeply conservative. “Why,” Butler provocatively prods, “are some of the most trenchant social criticisms often expressed through difficult and demanding
language?” (Butler “Bad Writer”). To break with naturalized, normalized, and neutralized thought known as common sense requires a break with comfortable, easily intelligible styles. Butler explains the radical social change that can come from “difficult and demanding language”:

If common sense sometimes preserves the social status quo, and that status quo sometimes treats unjust social hierarchies as natural, it makes good sense on such occasions to find ways of challenging common sense. Language that takes up this challenge can help point the way to a more socially just world. (Butler “Bad Writer”)

Difficult language, Butler implies, best challenges the common sense of unjust social hierarchies.

Butler often leans heavily on Adorno for amplifying the necessity of difficult language for difficult thought. The “familiar,” Adorno argues in *Minima Moralia*, in all its “loose and irresponsible formulation,” in all its “shoddiness” is “rewarded with certain understanding” and is “taken as a sign of relevance and contact” while “precis[e],” “conscientious[s],” “appropriat[e],” “pur[e],” “rigour[ous],” and “specific” language and grammar conversely “appears inconsiderate, a symptom…of confusion” (101). The radical work of critical thinking cannot come from clear communication, in the sense that others will easily understand your writing, because precise language and grammar require work and resist easy consumption, Adorno insists. “Those who would escape [alienation],” he warns, “must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate” (101). The more precise the writer, the less comprehensible her
writing will initially appear. According to Adorno, when striving for new, more just social possibilities, incomprehensibility paves the way for what could be possible in the future. Nothing radical can come from the familiar language of clarity.

The familiar comes not only from vague content of insidious common sense that makes injustices seem natural, but also, according to Butler, through familiar grammar: “It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xviii-xix).

Grammatical structures allow and limit certain ways of thinking. If the grammatical structure of subject-acting-upon-an-object has produced a certain way of thinking about gender, as in, I, as a woman, choose to be feminine, then to challenge and change those views, we might begin by challenging and changing our grammars.

Take for instance Butler’s experimentation with passive voice in *Gender Trouble*, a style element Holcomb identifies as problematic. Butler has been widely criticized for her passive voice, for the subjects of her sentences not taking direct action on the objects of her sentences and as a result obscuring the clarity of her thought. The following passage offers an example of how her experiments with grammar enact her idea of subject formation:

Recently, this prevailing conception of the relation between feminist theory and politics has come under challenge from within feminist discourse. The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of ‘the
subject’ as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. The domains of political and linguistic ‘representation’ set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended. (Gender 4)

Butler’s style acclimates readers to her ideas. The subject of Butler’s first sentence hides at the end and lets the object drive and define the sentence. Notice that feminist discourse does not challenge the relationship between feminist theory and politics, but through passive voice, the relationship between feminist theory and politics “comes under challenge.” Use of the passive voice here slows down readers, makes the sentence wordy, and emphasizes the object and the action over the actor. Indeed, the very structure of the sentence calls into question who or what does the acting. Continuing through the paragraph, however, the passively voiced sentences support the content of her argument: namely, that the subject is not a naturally occurring actor in the world, but is acted upon and produced by various political and linguistic systems. The very grammar of Butler’s opening sentences introduces the idea of a subject more acted upon than acting. The passage fails as an exemplar of easily and quickly understood clarity because Butler attempts to more thoroughly demonstrate her concept through her grammar. Her very language instantiates her concept of a subject made recognizable through discursive forces.
This example of Butler’s language does a certain kind of work: if read closely and taken on its own terms, it can encourage readers to think differently about the common sense of subject formation. But could the same argument not be made by what is generally considered clear, comprehensible language, free of passive voice? Of course social change and interrogation of common sense can come from difficult language, but can it not also come from transparent language?

Although Butler briefly hints at the range of her writing styles (in “Changing the Subject” she begins her stylistic defense recognizing that one must “shift registers…to work at various levels, to communicate what they’re communicating in various ways” (328)), the tenor of discussions surrounding clarity and social change tend to polarize, flatten, and minimize rhetorical standards like purpose and audience. Given the preponderance of cries against difficult language, perhaps a mostly one-sided defense of difficulty proves necessary; however, Butler’s grounding in rhetoric betrays her seemingly hard-line insistence that radical social change requires radical language. In both “A ‘Bad Writer’ Bites Back” and “Changing the Subject,” Butler explains her language through a transparent style. If, as she approvingly cites Herbert Marcuse, “what [a radical philosopher] says could be said in terms of ordinary language he would probably have done so in the first place” (Marcuse qtd in Butler, “Bad Writer”), then how can she use ordinary language to explain her difficult language? If one can

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50 Here, the context in which Butler uses “ordinary” does not refer to ordinary language philosophy, but to the more mundane usage indicating commonplace or everyday.
only express radical ideas in radical language, then explanations of her radical ideas into easier-to-read language would be impossible. While Butler clearly indicates in her stylistic defenses that difficult language best challenges common sense and unjust social hierarchies, she never explains why it operates better than easy-to-read language, and while non-specialists benefit from Butler’s more popular explanations in forums like The New York Times, it also questions the necessity of difficult language in the first place. If, indeed, difficult language is necessary to the idea itself, then it should stand on its own, free of explanations rendered in a clear style.

5.2 RENDERING CLARITY THROUGH OPACITY

So far in this chapter, we have covered the well-worn terrain of questioning clarity as a language imperative, particularly when it comes to enacting feminist change. On the one hand, advocates for clarity champion its democratic nature. Everyone, they insist, can understand and engage with clear language: it is transparent, which leads to the possibility of a more dynamic exchange between a wide range of people and ideas. The desire of transparent language represents a desire for honesty, accountability, and certainty. On the other hand, those skeptical of clarity question its fitness to do the kind of social work that needs to be done. Clarity, these critics contend, is not a common language: it conceals differences and discourages a radical rethinking of the common sense undergirding our social order. Between the intersection of rhetoric and feminism this has generally been the stalemate throughout the modern feminist movement; however, Beauvoir’s take on clarity as a first step that ultimately must be followed
by ambiguity, offers us a constructive compromise between these two entrenched positions and gets us beyond the either-clarity-or-opacity positions. While, to a certain extent, Beauvoir values and encourages what she calls “lucidity” in language—she applauds women who reveal the reality of women’s situations, who use evocative language to paint a more representative picture of women’s lots in life—she also insists that clarity alone inhibits women from becoming great, abstract thinkers who can create new futures for themselves. Only through embracing the ambiguity of existence (as I will discuss further in Chapter Six) and experimenting with the relational (through punctuation as we saw in Chapter Three and through broadly construed reciprocal ethical-sexual relationships as we saw in Chapter Four) can women transform their future.

Beauvoir’s “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” complicates these stylistic debates by calling attention to Merleau-Ponty’s rhetoric, forcing readers to look at his language (creating an opaque style) and in effect rendering Beauvoir’s language as less noticeable (creating a transparent style). Ostensibly Beauvoir champions clarity by pulling back the veil on Merleau-Ponty’s language and characterizing his language as a series of rhetorical ruses, but in effect she obscures her own style and content. Although most scholars have read “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” as a dogged defense of Sartre, I contend Beauvoir creates, through the contradiction of clarity and obscurity, her own argument on subjectivity (not merely recycling or defending Sartre’s arguments).

Given “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism”’s placement in Privileges,
the collection of essays that Beauvoir points feminists interested in her feminist philosophy and politics toward, this essay and the fact that it traffics in debates of style also implicitly engages in the question of communication as the goal for feminist social change. Whereas we have seen Nussbaum, Dutton, and Holcomb subscribe to a communication-driven model of social change, Beauvoir suggests a different model, one where creation (and the contradiction inherent in creations) drives social change. I will briefly explore Lanham and Aristotle’s definitions of clarity which will allow me to make the case that Beauvoir’s “Merleau-Ponty” enacts the contradiction at the heart of women’s creative potential. By engaging in feminist social change primarily through an obscured creation, Beauvoir teaches us feminist social change is not about agreeing beforehand on a clearly defined subject, but it is about taking positive, creative, and sometimes ambiguous steps to make that change. Beauvoir does this through engaging in lines of discussion about transparent and opaque language.

For as certain as some scholars are in the superiority of transparent language, ironically, few can offer up an unambiguous definition of stylistic clarity. As we saw earlier in the chapter, Dutton refused to provide a clear definition of clarity, choosing instead for a Justice Potter Stewart-esque definition of “I know it when I see it.” Holcomb offers up concrete examples of why Butler’s writing impedes communication, but he stops before positively defining transparency itself. In Analyzing Prose, however, Lanham gives the difficult task of defining clarity his best shot. Writing with clarity is not a matter of enacting an abstract, simplistic formula (replacing “is” verbs with active verbs, revising passive voice
for an active voice, decreasing the number of prepositional phrases), but
“‘clarity,’” Lanham posits, “really mean[s] ‘success’ in communication” (8).
Success in communication gestures toward another set of vague and ambiguous
definitions. How do we measure success? Who gets to determine if a
communication act succeeds? “My opacity,” Lanham admits, “may be your
transparency” (189). Lanham rejects the notion of certain style metric promising
transparency. Determining transparent or opaque style, he indicates, embodies
ontological and ethical ambiguities.

Further, Lanham argues, communicative success comes not merely, or
even primarily, from the author’s conscious handling of language but from the
audience. “‘Clarity,’” Lanham adds, “can only indicate a reader’s decision, for
whatever reasons, to look through a style rather than at it, to concentrate on
content and ignore style” (189). Drawing from Aristotle’s Rhetoric, Lanham
describes clarity not as a concrete and discernable textual pattern, but as “the
results of [a] process…[that] aims at maximizing content and minimizing style, at
minimizing our self-consciousness about words (190). Clarity turns out to be a
slippery style, dependent in large part upon the composer’s readership and their
expectations. A transparent style, Lanham tells us, must paradoxically deny itself
as a conscious style in order to realize itself as successful.

Clarity’s imperative, one of stylistic self-immolation and our cultural
preference for this self-immolation originates with Aristotle. In Book III of Rhetoric

51 I use Lanham’s definitions of clarity for his modern take on style analysis. However it should be noted that overall he reads Aristotle critically and does not subscribe to a clarity-above-all stylistic philosophy.
he pronounces his preference for clarity as an ethical virtue: “let the virtue of style...be defined as ‘to be clear’ (speech is a kind of sign, so if it does not make clear it will not perform its function)” (1404b). Aristotle does not value language as language, but instead sees language as primarily instrumental in communicating ideas. As such, the more transparent language can make itself, the higher function it serves. Aristotle believed that language should seem natural, invisible, and ultimately be in service to an idea. “Authors should compose without being noticed,” Aristotle contends, “and should seem to speak not artificially but naturally. (The latter is persuasive, the former the opposite; for [if artifice is obvious] people become resentful, as at someone plotting against them, just as they are at those adulterating wines.)” (III.1404b). While Aristotle admits the un-naturalness of a natural style, he also holds that the more readers are aware of language, the more likely they are to feel duped. If the truth is really the truth, then it should need no extraneous, persuasive, stylistic ornament. The truth, Aristotle assumes, should speak for itself.

Analyzing style through Aristotle’s ubiquitous influence proves troublesome in terms of neutrally describing a style as transparent or opaque. Aristotelian ethics with its binary categorizations of vice or virtue too often seep into our stylistic analyses. In Aristotle’s framework, if language does its job honestly, then it gets out of the way of the content. But why, Lanham asks, should the “At/Through choice\(^\text{52}\)…equal a good/bad choice” (193)? If the Aristotelian system we have inherited “want[s] to make words invisible,” then we must

\(^{52}\) The At/Through choice being that of a reader looking at words (opaque style) versus through words (transparent style).
measure the invisible in order to measure clarity (Lanham 190). The line
between a transparent and opaque style distinguishes between an audience’s
awareness of words and/or the extent to which an author calls attention to her
style. To obtain a clear style, Lanham explains, one “fiddle[s] with the medium
until it is no longer noticeable” (192).

It is precisely this invisibility that, as we saw earlier in the chapter, worries
Butler. If readers fail to notice the language, then, Butler reasons, how many
dubious ideas might we unwittingly accept? Such reasoning has led to an
acceptance of the “common sense” of various forms of discrimination. Sexism
becomes naturalize, in part, through language. “What travels under the sign of
‘clarity,’” Butler questions, “and what would be the price of failing to deploy a
certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced...What does
‘transparency’ keep obscure?” (Gender Trouble xix).

Beauvoir points to Merleau-Ponty’s obscurity in her essay, pressing readers
to look at his language and through her language. Although scholars have
chastised her essay as self-certain in content and style, Beauvoir’s transparency
paradoxically obscures her creative read of Sartre, a read which significantly
transforms his ideas on subjectivity to such an extent that she creates her own.
By engaging in the rhetorical question of clarity and opacity’s fitness for
persuading readers to change, Beauvoir presents us with a vision of feminist
social change coming through creation—not clarity of the given situation.

From the perspective of a post WWII, French, Les Tempes modernes
audience, Beauvoir’s “Merleau-Ponty” piece sounds all too common: another
example of her fiercely defending Sartre and clarifying his philosophical legacy. She takes her colleague Merleau-Ponty to task for what she considers his irresponsible Sartrean interpretations, and turns his own instructions “to learn how to read” against him (“Merleau-Ponty” 448). She organizes the essay by presenting the Sartre of Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic*, what she coins “pseudo-Sartreanism,” against her Sartre, or by her account, “authentic Sartrean ontology” (449).

Her intercession comes on the heels of a building personal and professional disagreement between the Sartre and Merleau-Ponty beginning around 1950 when Merleau-Ponty disassociated himself from the Communist Party. The Korean War initiated his break from Soviet communism, and, according to Sartre, his position that *Les Tempes modernes*, the journal they, along with Beauvoir and others, created and edited together, should not comment on the war. Shortly after, in 1952, Sartre went in a different direction, throwing his weight behind the Communist Party and publically pronouncing his conversion in the journal. Not surprisingly, Sartre’s views and methods of announcement alienated many writers for *Les Tempes*. While Merleau-Ponty remained silent, his student Claude Lefort decided to engage Sartre in a series of, often vicious, public debates published in *Les Tempes*. Merleau-Ponty found himself in the uneasy position of mediator, convincing both parties to remove their more savage insults about their interlocutor, leaving all three men feeling bitter toward each other.

53 All of the context from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty’s dispute comes from Jon Stewart’s edited collection, *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*. For further details, including correspondences and Merleau-Ponty’s “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism,” see p. 327-447 in this work.
Later, in 1953, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty went head-to-head over an article sympathetic to Communism to be published in *Les Tempes*. Merleau-Ponty thought an apologetic note should be attached, while Sartre believed the piece should speak for itself, and each edited as he saw fit without consulting the other.

On a more personal note, Sartre was offended by comments Merleau-Ponty allegedly made about him at a college lecture on the relationship between philosophy and politics. Merleau-Ponty insisted he said nothing that should offend Sartre and suggested a public space in *Les Tempes* where he could transparently distinguish his political position from Sartre’s. Sartre refused him the forum. Merleau-Ponty, in turn, resigned from *Les Tempes* and wrote *Adventures of the Dialectic*, a work generally believed (particularly “Sartre and Ultraboshevism”) to be the response essay he had hoped to publish in *Les Tempes*. Here, after the publication of *Adventures of the Dialectic*, “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” makes its debut.

For Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty’s readings of Sartre take on dimensions more monumental than mere personal disagreements regarding politics. His reading constitutes a “travesty” and “must be denounced” (“Merleau-Ponty” 448). At least part of the essay’s rhetorical purpose seeks to persuade readers of Sartre’s intellectual superiority and Merleau-Ponty’s willful misrepresentation. Granted, mis-readings are the price of doing business for writers, however, as Beauvoir argues, readers expect a higher level of textual fidelity from someone who has both the intellectual standing and personal history that Merleau-Ponty does with Sartre. This leads her to conclude his mistakes “not…inconsequential” (451) and
that Merleau-Ponty should and does know better.

Much like *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir structures her essay as the revealing of truth. She constructs a series of quotations and claims from Merleau-Ponty to which she offers counter-quotations and counterarguments interspersed with certitude and condescension. She holds the “authentic Sartrean ontology” while Merleau-Ponty presents a “pseudo-Sartreanism” (449). She enlists readers to join her in her condescension and “[feel] sorry to have to remind Merleau-Ponty of…elementary truths” (487). So certain is she in her case, in believing that the facts clearly support her reading she writes that “[e]ven a layperson will easily realize the enormity of [Merleau-Ponty’s] falsification” (449). Without reading closely or comprehensively readers supposedly share in her outrage of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretive trespasses. “It would suffice,” she tells us, “to skim through just one of Sartre’s books to be dumb-struck with astonishment in the face of [Merleau-Ponty’s] assertions” (451).

While Beauvoir positions herself as the clear and honest broker of Sartrean thought providing plenty of textual evidence from Sartre’s writings and utilizing a plain writing style, she paints Merleau-Ponty as a knowing manipulator, a cunning rhetor. Her criticisms of Merleau-Ponty stem from what she deems rhetorical slights of hand. While she points to ways Merleau-Ponty’s style obscures the truth, she projects a mantle of transparency for her own writing and ideas. She supplies a vast amount of quotations and shorter paragraphs, while Merleau-Ponty paraphrases and uses longer more analytical paragraphs in his chapter. Beauvoir claims to strip down the debate to the essential truths. He,
conversely, must employ a series of ruses to convince readers. She attributes “the ruse of paradox” (452) to Merleau-Ponty where he allegedly posits Sartre does not think what he says he thinks; “the ruse of oversignification” (452) which takes a passage out of context and assigns it a greater meaning than originally intended; “the ruse of gratuitous affirmations” (464) attributing thoughts shared by Marx and Lenin and Sartre as singularly Sartrean; and “the ruse of dichotomy” trapping Sartre in a false alternative (464).

Calling readers’ attentions to look at Merleau-Ponty’s language and through hers, Beauvoir demystifies the language trickery of her self-imposed rival and pulls her audience onto her side, diminishing Merleau-Ponty’s rhetorical moves as laughable. In the face of his, according to Beauvoir, attempted obfuscation she encourages readers to “smil[e]” (453) along with her at Merleau-Ponty’s antics. With the assistance of her revealing, “we” too “are tickled” at denials (471) and “feel compelled to smile” at his naïveté when it comes to his read on Sartrean thought.

The starkest characteristic of this essay to readers today is its dogmatic tone. Beauvoir’s response to disagreement relies heavily not only on appeals to clarity, but also on dogmatism. That is, she constructs a logic where she (and by extension, Sartre) are incontrovertibly and clearly right, and Merleau-Ponty is wrong. By uncovering Merleau-Ponty’s rhetorical strategies, Beauvoir would have readers believe she exposes his artifice and his lies. Critics who have read the pertinent texts among Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir virtually all agree that Beauvoir overreacts to Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms. Kruks deems the piece
“Manichaeist in its tone and claims” ("Ambiguity" 215). Simons sees it only as a misguided and dogged defense of Sartre’s philosophy ("Beauvoir and Sartre" 167-168). Bair characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s piece as “a meticulous analysis of Sartre’s flirtation with Communism that was a monument of understated yet clearly expressed disagreement” while Beauvoir’s response represents a “howl of outrage” and “does not approach the subject dispassionately…thus making any real rebuttal of Merleau-Ponty’s argument impossible” (Bair Simone 452).

Beauvoir seems, then, to be playing into the binaries just as the critics cited earlier do. She plays by the Aristotelian game, calling attention to Merleau-Ponty’s language as language. She sides with transparent certainty and chides Merleau-Ponty as knowingly obscuring Sartre’s position. She champions her style of engagement and writing as obviously correct while attacking Merleau-Ponty’s style as misguided. Paired with dogmatism, her clarity comes across as the one appropriate persuasive tool. It initially seems, rhetorical attentiveness gets overruled by rigid, self-certain standards of universal truth through clarity. Beauvoir here seems to proffer clarity as a panacea for all uncertainties. In her own words she envisioned this essay as an exercise in clarity, as “laying bare the practical truths” by “contradict[ing] point by point, the allegations Merleau-Ponty had made” (qtd in Bair, Simone 452).

However, once again, her written language betrays her stated position. Beauvoir may commit herself to laying bare the truth of Sartrean thought through plain speak and straightforward point/counterpoint organization, but she, not Merleau-Ponty, makes the bold and creative argument regarding Sartre. As
Judith Butler points out, Beauvoir has the atypical Sartrean reading, seeing his work specifically through non-Cartesian-colored glasses (“Sex and Gender”). Breaking from her self-professed transparency or even the formulation Butler voices that radical thought requires radical language, Beauvoir conceals her radical-leaning thought under the stylistic rubric of clarity. Beauvoir, through her dogmatic, allegedly transparent language makes Sartre’s arguments more palpable and interesting to feminists than they might be otherwise: namely, she emphasizes Sartre’s non-Cartesian account of subjectivity and as such creates her own account, however obscure, of intersubjectivity.

As was hinted at in Chapter Two, Sartre has been the target of feminists aiming to construct a subjectivity that accounts for women’s oppression without blaming women for their oppression. “[H]ow,” questions Kruks, are we to “theorize the ‘subject’ [?] How are we to think about consciousness and the body, about the gendering of the subject, about agency and its limits…?” (“Freedoms” 28). A key feminist criticism against Sartrean existentialism is that it does not account for oppression, that it attributes too much power to sheer individual will in creating a subject’s situation. Particularly in regards to women, feminists correctly point out that Existentialism does not explain how one can be free and not free at the same time. Hartsock deems Sartre’s conception of the subject as the “walled city” view (241). Each subject constructs itself separately and, as influenced by Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, retains a hostile characters

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54 See my explanation of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic in existentialist terms in Chapter Four.
towards others. In short, Sartre’s subjectivity gets attributed as subscribing to an Enlightenment-era, Cartesian notion of the self: singular, consciously self-determined, and irredeemably masculine.

Certainly these charges hold up in part through *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre’s early and one of his most-cited works.\(^{55}\) In terms of being, Sartre urges readers to “think of Descartes” (Sartre, *Being* xii). He claims that “consciousness is a real subjectivity” (x) and “What can properly be called subjectivity is consciousness (of) consciousness” (xi), leading many to place Sartre in a Cartesian lineage in that consciousness, apart from the body or social, historical, and political circumstances, primarily defines subjectivity. Further, in discussions of relations with others, Sartre distinguishes between subjectivity as consciousness and the body. The beloved, in order to transform into the lover, Sartre tells readers, must “project being loved…if what he wishes to overcome is not a body but the Other’s subjectivity as such” (351). As we see here, the body plays a separate and auxiliary role to consciousness. Whereas Merleau-Ponty theorizes a thoroughly embodied subjectivity—“I am my body” he famously penned in *Phenomenology of Perception* (231)—Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, attributes negative attributes to the body\(^{56}\) and envisions it as a

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\(^{55}\) For a study on how Sartre’s work evolved regarding his thoughts on subjectivity, see Thomas W. Busch’s “Beyond the Cogito.”

\(^{56}\) He often gets accused of associating particularly negative attributes to women’s bodies. Take for example Sartre’s infamous “holes and slime” passage: “[the slimy] invites me; for a body of slime at rest is not noticeably distinct from a body of very dense liquid. But it is a trap…[the slimy] leave its traces on me…Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge which will be symbolized on another level by the quality ‘sugary.’…A sugary sliminess is the ideal of the slimy; it symbolizes the sugary death of the
separate “instrument” and “a thing outside my subjectivity” (*Being* 329).

Merleau-Ponty, too, saw these distinctions between his and Sartre’s philosophies of subjectivity and in “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism” identifies “Sartre’s entire theory of the party and of class is derived” in part “from his philosophy...of consciousness” (“Sartre” 363), which is to say, of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty’s read of Sartre’s subjectivity is that the individual will forms the subject more than circumstances: “the revolutionary will of the militant is more himself than his life...The will believes only in itself, it is its own source” (364).57 One of Merleau-Ponty’s key criticisms of Sartre rests upon his assumptions of a Cartesian-leaning subjectivity where the subject is never produced by the world, but “the subject is...the sun from which the world radiates” (436).

In no uncertain terms Beauvoir rejects this read as unfounded. She begins “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” by paraphrasing pseudo-Sartreanism, Merleau-Ponty’s read of Sartre’s philosophy of the subject: “The relationship between the I and the other is reduced to the look; each subject lives alone at the heart of the subject’s own universe, a universe of which that subject is the sole sovereign: there is no interworld” (449). Sartre’s philosophy, claims Beauvoir, has never been about the subject and Merleau-Ponty wrongly conflates and attributes “consciousness, the Ego [Moi], and humanity” under the umbrella of

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57 Merleau-Ponty uses different terminology here of “the will” and “the militant” only because he responds directly to Sartre’s *The Communists and Peace* and the language Sartre uses there.

For-itself (like that of the wasp which sinks into the jam and drowns in it) (*Being* 634). See Margery L. Collins and Christine Pierce’s infamous “Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre’s Psychoanalysis” for what became a typical feminist take on Sartre and feminine embodiment.
the subject (449). Yet when Sartre does discuss the Ego in relation to the world, Beauvoir claims that he insists upon a “reciprocal conditioning” between the two. Leaning heavily on *Being and Nothingness* Beauvoir supports her claim that Sartre purports a self that needs the world for formation: “Without the world, there is no selfness, no person; without the person, there is no world” (Sartre qtd in “Merleau-Ponty” 450).

Merleau-Ponty also criticizes Sartre as elaborating no interworld—no relationships or existences other than subjects and objects: “Contrary to appearance, being-for-itself is all Sartre has ever accepted, with its inevitable correlate pure being in-itself…There is no hinge, no joint or mediation, between myself and the other” (“Sartre” 388). As Beauvoir points out, this would mean no history, no dialectic, no reciprocal relations between subjects. Again, Beauvoir fervently debunks the alleged myth of Sartre’s Cartesian subjectivity through citing numerous passages from *Being and Nothingness*: “We ought to quote all the pages where Sartre describes this sort of ‘internal hemorrhage’ through which my world flows toward the other” (454). She begins her quest for an exhaustive list of Sartrean support, but mercifully supplies us only with three quotations.

Contrary to the perception that Sartre draws a hard line between consciousness and the body, she argues for Sartre’s “passion of the embodied consciousness” (451) and claims that from a Sartrean ontology, “my consciousness can only go beyond the world by engaging itself in it…this is why there can be only an embodied consciousness” (450). Claiming a near
inseparability between the body and mind, Beauvoir has a more difficult time directly referencing Sartrean passages that support her read of an embodied subjectivity, but she holds fast to her argument nonetheless by structuring implied arguments from Sartre’s quotations.

These points represent only a small taste of the textual support Beauvoir supplies from Sartre’s writing, and constitutes far more direct quotations than Merleau-Ponty provides. While she maintains her arguments finds support “from *Nausea* to *Saint Genet,*” she primarily pulls from *Being and Nothingness* for evidence (451). Merleau-Ponty conversely circumscribes his argument in “Sartre and Ultrabolshevisim” to examining the current state of communist politics and as such expressly looks at Sartre’s read of the proletariat in *The Communists and Peace.*

“Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” constitutes not a Beauvoirian intervention in the stubborn feud between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, but a creation, a demonstration of her own concept of intersubjectivity that she attributes to Sartre. Just as Butler’s use of the passive voice pointed to her concept of a posthumanist subject, so does Beauvoir’s reliance on *Being and Nothingness* indicate her valuation of the Other in creating the subject.

While Merleau-Ponty’s take on Sartre’s Cartesian-leaning subjectivity is generally the more accepted read, it is worth noting the greater amount of citations Beauvoir uses to bolster her point in comparison to Merleau-Ponty. Beauvoir’s read constitutes the less obvious one, yet she structures her essay in such a way that makes her argument seem indisputable in its empirical
transparency. She, after all, provides direct quotations from Sartre as counterpoints to Merleau-Ponty’s assertions, composing a seemingly clearer case for Sartre as a thinker of intersubjectivity and embodied subjectivity.

I contrast Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty’s reads of Sartre not to argue that one read is right and the other wrong, but to point to the conceptual impasse between these two scholars intimately acquainted with Sartre’s thought and writing and to show how the more radical read comes through the more transparent language. While one can make a case for Sartre’s subjectivity as embodied and interconnected, it necessitates a radical creativity, particularly when most of the evidence originates from Being and Nothingness.

Through stylistics of clarity—copious quotations, explicit references to counterpoints, and direct and certain (often to the point of dogmatic) pronouncements—Beauvoir’s less obvious and more palatable-to-feminists argument on Sartre’s subjectivity remains largely undetected as radically feminist. While Butler’s earlier cited difficult-to-read style announces her conceptual challenge, Beauvoir’s style moves undetected on the register of conceptually challenging. Not only does Beauvoir’s style in “Merleau-Ponty” challenge Butler’s “radical thought needs a radical language” rationale, but it also supports Butler’s challenge and skepticism of the supposed transparency expected with the announcement of clarity. Clarity can conceal. It can conceal not only nefarious ideologies, but also radically feminist components into an otherwise problematically masculine philosophical schema.

Keeping in mind Beauvoir’s insistence that the essays in Privileges
constitute the starting place for her feminist philosophy and politics, “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” suggest a covert approach to social change. Though her style seems from the outset to fall into the category of transparency, it conceals an opaque and radical argument of subjectivity that has now become axiomatic for feminists. Once again Beauvoir’s language contradicts its surface-level pronouncements, creating ambiguity where certainty was once presumed.

I have pushed on the seams of Beauvoir’s language, how she describes her language, the widespread assumptions of her language philosophy, and how her language acts in her most popular and feminist-identified text (The Second Sex) and one of her least popular, but Beauvoir-identified-feminist text (Privileges, including “Must We Burn Sade?” and “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism”). Although Beauvoir often characterizes her writing and language as derivative, “committed,” realist, and representational, her language holds so much more.

Beauvoir rarely receives attention as a rhetorical thinker, even though her writing in The Second Sex and Privileges offers rhetoricians an opportunity to reflect on how language works across the consciously confessed and the unconsciously performed. In the concluding chapter, I put Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity into conversation with Privileges, and in doing so, I direct rhetoricians’ attentions to Beauvoir’s ultimate relevance for our field: her explicit articulation and implicit performance of ambiguity.
Chapter 6:
Conclusion:
On Being Frustrated With Beauvoir

Beauvoir’s stated and lived relation to feminism has long left many *Second Sex* devotees frustrated by what they perceive as a series of basic contradictions. Infamously, only in her 60s, twenty years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, did Beauvoir even self-identify as a feminist. In a peculiar move to some feminists, when surveying her life accomplishments in *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir considered not her writings or political activism, but her more than 50-year relationship with Sartre as an intellectual interlocutor and lover as her greatest achievement. And when Betty Friedan traveled to Paris for advice on how to lead U.S. feminists “out of rhetoric that did not open up new possibilities in life” (Friedan 391), she was not prepared for the particular “new possibilities” Beauvoir’s rhetoric suggested. Beauvoir, in this interview, endorses a feminist politics of not “tak[ing] part in politics” (406); she flatly tells a shocked

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58 As stated by Beauvoir, “I began to call myself truly a Feminist and to lend myself to the goals and needs of the movement” around 1969 (qtd in Bair, *Simone* 652, fn9). And in a famous 1972 interview with Alice Schwarzer she publicly declared, “I am a feminist” (*After* 32). Elsewhere, she admits that she would have been “surprised and even irritated if, when I was thirty, someone had told me that I would be concerning myself with feminine problems and that my most serious public would be made up of women” (qtd in Bair, *Simone* 382).
Friedan, “politics as it exists does not interest me…I do not vote” (406); she argues against the idea of compensating stay-at-home mothers telling Friedan “no woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children” (401); and she suggests that if women really want to change society, “it’s not by accepting ‘honorable’ jobs or important posts” (398). Given her record of unexpected responses, perhaps it should not surprise us too much that instead of recommending *The Second Sex* as a starting place for understanding her feminist politics and philosophy, she asks us to begin with her 1955 work *Privileges*, a collection of three essays.59

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, which focus on two essays from *Privileges*, Beauvoir’s advice to start with *Privileges* strikes those familiar with her work as strange. Beauvoir biographer, Deirdre Bair bluntly writes that “[t]hroughout her lifetime, [Beauvoir’s] regard for these essays remained much higher than that of scholars or critics of her writing” (663 fn 9). Part of the oddity comes from an absence of any substantive mention of women in these works. As seen in the previous chapters, the first article in *Privileges*, “Must We Burn Sade?” takes a sympathetic reading of the Marquis d e Sade, a notorious sexual torturer of women, as a moralist we can all learn from; the second, “Right-Wing

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59 According to Bair’s biography, Beauvoir had a “lifelong insistence that the essays in *Privileges* remained the starting point for any explication of her political position and philosophical thought” (453). Even more specifically, in a 1982 interview when asked “where someone interested in learning about the development of her feminist philosophy (both as part of her Existentialist position and separate from it) should begin, [Beauvoir] insisted that these three [essays] offered the most appropriate place to start and were examples of her most significant philosophical and sociopolitical commentary” (Bair, *Simone* 663 fn 9).
Thought, Today,” attacks all non-Marxist thought, both on the right and left, as “counterthought”; and, finally, in “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism” she attacks point-by-point Merleau-Ponty’s measured criticisms of Sartre’s politics and accuses her estranged friend of irresponsibly misrepresenting Sartre’s ontology. For a writer who composed books and articles that explicitly analyze women’s situations, asking readers to begin with a text that ignores women qua women challenges even basic definitions of feminism.

Second, this set of writings contradicts the spirit of ambiguity so prominently hailed in Beauvoir’s philosophical and literary writings. In The Ethics of Ambiguity Beauvoir insists upon humanity’s ontological and ethical ambiguity. As such, we never get to know ahead of time if our choices and actions are useful or good. Rather than possessing a static value, concepts like “useful” and “good” function as complementary terms, changing in the face of different ethical situations. Living a politically responsible and ethical life, Beauvoir tells us, “resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (Ethics 133). Compare this emphasis on ambiguity with her self-certain glorification of closed-mindedness in “Right-Wing Thought, Today” where she writes, “There is only one truth, but error is infinite” (qtd in Kruks, “Ambiguity” 215). Sonia Kruks concurs that Privileges seems uncharacteristic of Beauvoir’s philosophical and literary writings which otherwise value the ambiguity that political action presents. Instead, readers are presented with a “stridently opinionated and judgmental” text through Privileges (“Ambiguity” 214). The essays “do not attend to nuance or complexities,” Kruks declares, “and they stand in stark contrast to her embrace of
ambiguity elsewhere” (“Ambiguity” 214). When critics do mention the collection
Privileges (indeed, most overlook it), they typically reference it as an
uncharacteristic text for Beauvoir. Given her history of advocacy for ambiguity
and (albeit late in life) women, why would Beauvoir have us start with Privileges
to understand the development of her feminist politics and philosophy? Why
begin with a work that virtually ignores women and encourages political
dogmatism and sympathy towards men many consider misogynists?
Throughout this dissertation project we have seen Beauvoir refuse the
logic of non-contradiction, refuse to define a certain masculine and feminine
language, refuse to define what a stable, ethical, reciprocal relationship looks
like, and refuse a consistent stylistic. After all of this, where does Beauvoir leave

In my concluding chapter I argue that ambiguity—as a philosophical,
rhetorical, and experienced concept and performance—saturates Beauvoir’s
language and provides rhetoricians and feminists alike with a sometimes
frustrating, potentially productive, yet often interesting way to approach social
and political change. I argue that feminist scholars have failed to read Beauvoir’s
invocation of Privileges to its fullest possibility and by doing so we have missed
an opportunity to experience her ambiguity. While scholars have either ignored
or commented upon the oddity of Beauvoir’s dogmatic tone or lack of women’s
representations, I argue that it is precisely in Privileges’ “odd,” uncharacteristic-
of-Beauvoir moments that we see her opening up new possibilities for feminism.
Beauvoir presents us with difference—through non-representation and a
dogmatic style—that both demonstrates her responsiveness to changing situations and challenges us to become responsive and open up our definitions of feminist ethics to account for changing situations. Even though Privileges seems to work toward different ends than The Ethics of Ambiguity (the former ostensibly encouraging dogmatism, the later ambiguity), in fact, they both enact the very same critique of her “serious man” whose principle ethical problem is the demand for abstract ethical principles even in the face of ambiguous, changing situations. The stated lesson of The Ethics of Ambiguity opens the way for reading the performed lesson of Privileges—that living an ethical life means living a life responsive to ambiguity.

In this final chapter, I contend that rather than shy away from Privileges, rhetorical and feminist scholars should embrace it as Beauvoir’s performance of ambiguity par excellence. Indeed, understanding Beauvoir’s multidimensional concept of ambiguity unites her work. While generally Beauvoir sides with the ambiguous and the power of a broad spectrum of women’s representations, in specific instances, such as in Privileges, she puts these tactics aside and responds to the situation’s particularities, which may ignore women (as we have seen in Chapter Four and Chapter Five) and be expressed clearly through a dogmatic style (as we saw with Chapter Five). Only through the ambiguous contradictions found in The Second Sex are women’s creative potentials unleashed (as in Chapter Two), and through the ambiguous semicolon Beauvoir links the masculine and feminine worldviews producing a relation (rather than a certain representation) of compromise and connection (Chapter Three).
When we take *Privileges* as Beauvoir’s primary feminist text, we get a different picture than the ones presented at the beginning of this project: “theoretically adrift,” “clinging to the life-raft of an autonomous rational subject” (Tidd, “E’tat” 201). When we begin with *Privileges* in the fuller context of *The Second Sex*, we see a picture of a Beauvoirian feminism concerned chiefly with keeping the possibilities for the content of feminism open rather than representing and/or promoting women within current power structures. By focusing on subject matters other than women in *Privileges*, Beauvoir performs an inconsistent attitude necessary to an authentically ethical life. One should not, Beauvoir insists, approach ethical and political situations (as we will see later, she considers the ethical and political one in the same) in the same way. Instead of representing narrowly defined “women’s issues,” instead of projecting ways of seeing situations from outside, in *Privileges* Beauvoir works from within and inconsistently (sometimes with sensitive nuance, sometimes with harsh dogma) responds to seemingly un-feminist issues from Sade to Merleau-Ponty’s response to Sartre to right-wing politics.

A deep-rooted ambiguity holds together Beauvoir’s feminism, as expressed in *Privileges*. She rejects projecting an absolute, unified Cause onto situations in favor of listening and responding to the multiplicity of political opportunities as they present themselves. Here I trace Beauvoir’s explicit articulation of her position on ambiguity in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a generative, ethical platform that discourages subjects from taking certain ethical positions. From here we will better understand how to read “Must We Burn Sade” and “Merleau-Ponty and
Pseudo-Sartreanism” as embodiments of her feminist politics and philosophy—not aberrations. Next, I will examine her “serious man” as a central concept explicitly articulated in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and implicitly performed in *Privileges*. Through her explanation of the “serious man” we get a starker case for what she sees as the problems with an ethics which responds consistently to problems and what an ethics based on ambiguity means. It is precisely Beauvoir’s reliance on ambiguity that opens up the gamble on the possibilities of a feminism expressed through dogmatism or a feminism with no women.

6.1 **AMBIGUITY AS THE PLAINLY STATED**

The ambiguity that constitutes, in the words of Debra Bergoffen, a “driving force” in Beauvoir’s work begins as a muted voice in her earlier work (4). From *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944) to *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) to *The Second Sex* (1949) ambiguity operates as a philosophical stand toward the undecided nature of ethics, politics, and being. Tenuously, Beauvoir begins considering ambiguity in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, while vigorously interrogating the problem of action. In her organizing illustration Cinéas essentially asks, “What’s the point?” to his king, Pyrrhus, as the king elaborates his plans for world conquests. If, after conquering the world, you plan to come back home, if the job of conquering is never finished, then why, Cinéas questions, leave home at all? Why even begin the task? Instead of acquiescing to a determinism that accepts the vanity of human action based upon an ethical ambiguity, Beauvoir answers Cinéas’s question by locating the driving “élan of [human] spontaneity” (*Pyrrhus* 91) as the

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60 For another argument on Beauvoir as the philosopher of ambiguity also see Monika Langer’s “Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity.”
motivating imperative to make sense of how we might live our lives. We act because we must. The fact of ambiguity does little to mitigate our responsibility toward action, Beauvoir argues in this early piece. On the contrary, it makes decisive action all the more necessary: “my relationship with things are not fixed...I create them minute by minute” (Pyrrhus 94). Subjects must define their own way, Beauvoir holds in Pyrrhus and Cinéas, and accept from the beginning the constraints that there exists no unqualified good action.

Continuing to explore ambiguity in a more concerted effort, The Ethics of Ambiguity describes how contemporary humans may feel like passive subjects acted upon more than active agents in the world, but how existentialism teaches us not to flee from this uncertainty, but to assume it. There is no clear purpose to life or set of moral imperatives that all should adhere to, but instead the responsibility lies with individuals to create meaning for their lives. Beauvoir asserts in The Ethics of Ambiguity that our task is not to get rid of ambiguity, to seek a politically pure place from which to act, but to assume our fundamental uncertainty. As such, one who genuinely accepts his responsibility in the world does not rely on ready-made values to justify his existence. Instead, he decides the conditions under which he wants to live and moves toward those conditions.

While The Ethics of Ambiguity can be read as an abstract study of ambiguity, indeed, this was Beauvoir’s own later, self-criticism of the text, The Second Sex functions as a concrete case study of woman’s ambiguity. By beginning with the question “What is a woman?” Beauvoir teases apart the

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61 Here, I keep Beauvoir’s use of masculine pronouns.
constitutive and often contradictory elements of woman. If woman’s ontological identity rests neither in womb, the unconscious, or historical construction, but a mutable situation, analyzing the elements of woman’s current becoming remains crucial in discovering a path to woman’s liberation. Beauvoir’s trajectory towards ambiguity concretizes ambiguity into the very foundation of human subjectivity.

But *Privileges* (1955), a text Beauvoir wrote after *The Second Sex*, seemingly upsets this trajectory with her peremptory tone with little regard for how ambiguity could effect, say, right-wing politics or Merleau-Ponty’s read of Sartre. I argue that this is not a blip in Beauvoir’s otherwise smooth line of argument for ambiguity, as some scholars have claimed. Just as Beauvoir made her case for ambiguity concrete in *The Second Sex*, and, as we have seen in Chapters One and Two, manifested her concept of ambiguity through language, she demonstrates her case for ambiguity in a different way by performing her critique of the serious man in *Privileges*. However, before we can understand how she performs in *Privileges*, we must first explore her explicit articulation of ambiguity in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

For Beauvoir, ambiguity exists as both an ontological state (“As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt [a] tragic ambiguity of their condition” (*Ethics* 7)) and as a generative force, as an ethical attitude to inhabit. Rather than vainly attempting to eliminate or somehow surpass our ontological ambiguity, Beauvoir calls for us to engage ambiguity with ambiguity. We should “assume our fundamental ambiguity” and “draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” from ambiguity (*Ethics* 9), we “must not attempt to
dispel the ambiguity of [our] being but...accept the task of realizing it” (*Ethics* 13).

Penelope Deutscher reads Beauvoir’s hope as invested in “humans who might affirm, rather than attempt to fill or overcome, the tension of ambiguous” (*Philosophy* 41). In Beauvoir’s estimation, every human “is not granted...to exist without tending toward this being [a certain, all-controlling god] which he will never be” (*Ethics* 13). In other words, we might aim for certainty in our existence and ethics, but must also accept that certain existence and ethics are a striving, a target that we can never unambiguously hit.

Assuming our ambiguity should not cripple us in a state of uncertain anxiety; it need not throw us into a nihilistic angst. Beauvoir insists we seize ambiguity. She confesses, “I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph, not as a defeat” (*Ethics* 12). She presents readers with an ambiguity full of verve, as an energizing life force, as an exciting, generative force full of possibilities. As such, Beauvoir emphatically insists that there is an ethics at stake in the ambiguous that does not “suppress my instinct, desires, plans, and passions” but enables subjects to create their own ethics (*Ethics* 14). Beauvoir refuses an overdetermined ethics where objective ethics are mandated by institutions or any outside judge. At stake for Beauvoir is the creation of an ethics that would refuse to tell subjects how to act and demands they perpetually create and generate their own ethics.

The task of an ethics of ambiguity, then, is to first realize one’s own ontological ambiguity (something that happens to you, that envelops your entire being), and then ultimately inhabit an attitude of working with our ambiguity (a
position of active engagement). Beauvoir’s two moves—envisioning ambiguity as both a force beyond our control and as an attitude we can control—together perform (as in a force both constituting and constituted) her ethics. As she argues in “Moral Idealism and Political Realism” ethics is “not an ensemble of constituted values and principles,” but “the constituting movement through which values and principles are constituted” (188). Her ethics, then, is an active creation enabled by the ambiguity of our existence.

Working with our ambiguity (as opposed to through our ambiguity to reach a place of certainty) means not getting to declare an action unequivocally good or bad, useful or useless. “Useful,” Beauvoir tells us, “has no more meaning if taken by itself than the words high, low, right, and left” (Ethics 49). As I have argued in the previous chapters, Beauvoir cares more about the situational creation of relations—creating a relation between masculine and feminine languages, negotiating the terrain of reciprocity in sexual relations—than establishing any objective, idealized relation. She goes on to explain that words like “useful,” “simply designat[e] a relationship and requir[e] a complement: useful for this or that” (Ethics 49). Working with our ambiguity is in part, then, an action of creation, of defining our project and then creating an ethical relationship between our project and the way we live in the world. In this way, ambiguity functions as a generative ethical platform for Beauvoir. Since everyone must create their own project, and there are no objective standards to which we can in good faith appeal, Beauvoir provides us with an open ethical platform where each person must generate her own ethical way.
For Beauvoir, the notion of an ethics that must be created by the subject, rather than a universally accepted ethics imposed upon a subject, differentiates absurdity from ambiguity. Absurdity stops with ambiguity as an ontological state. “To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning,” Beauvoir clarifies (Ethics 129). Absurdity not only accepts that existence holds no fixed meaning, but it is also content with its meaninglessness. The ambiguity of her ethics, on the other hand, “assert[s] that [existence’s] meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won” (Ethics 129). Generative creation marks the ethics at stake in an ethics of ambiguity.

If Beauvoir’s ambiguity encourages a generative approach to ethics, it also discourages what she calls “dream[s] of purity” where one could ever live a perfectly ethical life, inflicting no harm (“Moral” 189). Since the ethics she proposes does “not agree to recognize any foreign absolute,” “abandon[s] the dream of an inhuman objectivity,” and “understand[s] it is not a matter of being right in the eyes of a God, but of being right in [one’s] own eyes” then, indeed the perfectly pure ethical life does not exist because we are operating, according to Beauvoir, under subjective conditions where the only judge is one’s self—complete with imperfect knowledge (Ethics 14).

This is not to say Beauvoir lacks empathy for desiring the ethical “dream of purity.” Of course one feels the desire to unequivocally do the right thing, one feels the tension between the two poles of ambiguous deliberation and certain action in The Ethics of Ambiguity where Beauvoir discusses the “antinomies of action,” how in spite of the fact that “no action can be generated for man without
its being immediately generated against men,” we must still act in order to live an ethical life (Ethics 99). Deutscher reads Beauvoir’s ambiguity as taking part in a difficult paradox: “We might say that what could be realized [in Beauvoir’s ethics], and only with great difficulty, is the kind of affirmation of ambiguity that was really an affirmation of the impossibility of the very affirmation” (Philosophy 43). “There could never,” Deutscher clarifies, “be a definitive reconciliation with ambiguity” (Philosophy 43). Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity brings us back to the seeming impossibility of contending with her contradictions as moments of rhetorical power.

But once again this failure to reconcile contradictions should not be read as a failure of Beauvoir’s ethics. For human action always involves failure to some degree, she tells us. As humans, we have no choice but to “[accept] defilement, failure, horror; it means admitting that it is impossible to save everything and that what is lost is irreparably lost” (“Moral” 190). Pretenses otherwise are a flight from responsibility. The goal of ethical living is not to escape ambiguity but to assume it and learn how, despite our lack of perfect knowledge, to assume the risks and responsibilities that come with existence: “if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely” (Ethics 119). Beauvoir insists the ethical exists in the ambiguous and difficult position of being aware of the (potential) harmful impact of your actions, but nevertheless acting: “the man of action [i.e. the ethical man], in order to make a decision, will not wait for a perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice” Beauvoir tells us (Ethics 123). “[H]e must first choose and thus help fashion
history,” she continues, “A choice of this kind is no more arbitrary than a hypothesis; it excludes neither reflection nor even method; but it is also free, and it implies risks that must be assumed as such” (Ethics 123). Working with ambiguity does not mean turning a blind eye to the wider impact of your actions, but assuming an attitude where your actions contain ambiguous effects.

In other words, the full performance of an ethics of ambiguity is a necessary gamble. One faces the ontological fact of ambiguity and takes a risk: “political choice is an ethical choice: it is a wager as well as a decision; one bets on the chances and risks of the measure under consideration,” Beauvoir declares (Ethics 148). An ethics of ambiguity wages, it suggests ethical methods, but it cannot provide a recipe for ethics. “Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naïve abstraction,” Beauvoir tells readers (Ethics 134). An ethics of ambiguity will not prescribe an ethical course of action: “We don’t ask the physicist, ‘Which hypotheses are true?’ Nor the artist, ‘By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?’ Ethics,” Beauvoir reasons, “does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art” (Ethics 134). Instead, we engage in methods, methods that “can not define a priori the moment of invention, still less foresee it” (Ethics 134). Beauvoir’s heuristic ethical method insists “there must be a trial and decision in each case” (Ethics 134). She asks us to “consider what genuine human interest fills the abstract form which one proposes as the action’s end” (Ethics 145) and later that our method “confron[t] the values realized with the values aimed at” (Ethics 152). Further, the method behind an ethics of ambiguity refuses an instrumentality of
immediate or certain results: “just as the physicist finds it profitable to reflect on the conditions of scientific invention and the artist on those of artistic creation without expecting any ready-made solutions to come from these reflections, it is useful for the man of action [i.e. the ethical man] to find out under what conditions his undertakings are valid” (*Ethics* 134). Beauvoir castigates the prescriptive ethical life as too narrow and rigid given the very undefined nature of subjectivity. We must approach an ethics of ambiguity as a wager and, as best we can, act confidently upon our choices.

With this ambiguous ethical performance, this wager, we must lose any kind of self-certainty or self-righteousness. Ambiguity should not arrest us in a state of deliberation (“Uncertainty should not keep [us] from pursuing [our] goals” (*Ethics* 148)), but it should also not lure us into a sense of unreflective relativism where every decision is equally ethical. The fact of an ontological ambiguity does not give one license to retreat into solipsism. In response to Dostoyevsky’s “If God does not exist, everything is permitted,” Beauvoir insists on the contrary (*Ethics* 15). Precisely because God does not exist, says Beauvoir, because no ultimate judge or cosmic orchestrator of our lives has a plan, then it’s up to us to protect and create the world in which we want to live. “A God can pardon, efface, and compensate,” she explains, “But if God does not exist, man’s faults are inexpiable” (*Ethics* 16). In rejecting an ethical self-righteousness and refusing to retreat behind endless deliberation or self-absorption, Beauvoir tells us instead that “morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning” (*Ethics* 133). We never get to know if our actions are ethical, but we nonetheless constantly
question our actions and live and act within the tension of ambiguity, which “can not fail to appear on the scene” (*Ethics* 153).

Overall, Beauvoir emphasizes both the ontological and ethical aspects of ambiguity, ambiguity’s generative qualities as an ethical attitude, and as such, our inability to know with certainty the effects of our actions. On one level, Beauvoir scholars have been happy to accept her emphasis on an ethical ambiguity. Beauvoir’s stated belief in ontological and ethical ambiguity strikes against a certain and singular masculinity. Ambiguity, as expressed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, provides a multiplicity of ways of being in the world rather than the masculine One that has not been able to see feminine difference. Feminist scholars have attended to Beauvoir’s ambiguity, when expressed along these lines. However, as Deutscher rightly points out, Beauvoir may thematize ambiguity in works like *The Blood of Others*, but “as a piece of writing it is entirely unambiguous” (*Philosophy* 51). In other words, Beauvoir generally unambiguously argues for ambiguity. And so is it assumed for most of her writing. “It is the exigencies of Beauvoir’s own work that open up the question [of ambiguity], and yet the question is not articulated within her work” (*Philosophy* 51). Beauvoir often defines and defends ambiguity, so says Deutscher, but she rarely embodies and performs the concept herself. *Privileges*, however, provides feminist rhetoricians such a performance.

6.2 AMBIGUITY AS THE TACITLY PERFORMED

As we have seen with “Must We Burn Sade?” and “Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” *Privileges* constitutes an odd mix of essays, not
immediately or recognizably related to feminism. No women are substantively discussed or analyzed, the two figures she defends, Sade and Sartre, have (rightly or wrongly) reputations as misogynists, and in two of the essays she takes on a masculinist, dogmatic tone. Nothing about this collection outwardly declares itself as a feminist collection.

However, Beauvoir taught us in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, that there is no one way of ethically engaging with the world; she instead emphasizes ambiguity as a generative, ethical platform. Perhaps this is the reason Beauvoir points feminists to *Privileges* as the starting place for those interested in her feminist politics and philosophy. In *Privileges* she performs in a different feminist key and demonstrates her critique of the serious man as an insufficient ethical attitude.

Precisely in *Privilege*’s moments of seemingly textual confusion where Beauvoir’s content and style diverge from her previous writings can feminists discover her ambiguity. Beauvoir performs ambiguity by writing against type. Rather than writing about women, she writes about Sade. Rather than writing with a tentative style, she figuratively shouts down Merleau-Ponty. Yes, she explicitly communicates ambiguity as a concept multiple times in her written words, but in ostensibly dissonant moments where Beauvoir’s content and style seem self-righteously certain, she provides readers of *Privileges* an opportunity to experience ambiguity. As Deutscher argues, in Beauvoir’s philosophical and literary works that explicitly prize ambiguity, one rarely finishes her pieces and wonders where she stands. She unambiguously endorses ambiguity. But by pointing readers toward *Privileges* to understand her feminist philosophy and
politics, a text that alternates between rehabilitating male thinkers with contentious views on women and engendering political dogmatism, readers experience an uneasy ambiguity. Beauvoir gives readers no consistent feminist apparatus with which to enact or judge feminist ethics. By varying the content and style of her writing, she does not allow us to hold a consistent position of self-certainty of what feminists should do.

For example, moving from the impossible moral dilemma in her political novel *The Blood of Others* where her protagonist wrestles with his role in a Resistance group, acknowledging the dangers of both action and inaction, to her peremptory attitude in *Privileges*, Beauvoir plants seeds of gnawing doubt in those with an eye toward feminist ethics. Where *The Blood of Others* establishes an acute sense of uncertainty of the right course of action, *Privileges* provocatively asserts the right action or thought in each essay. In *Privileges* readers witness little hesitation and minimal deliberation. For students of Beauvoir, such shifts could impart an ambiguity to feminist action. The inconsistency of the attitudes she sympathetically writes about and inhabits seem to suggest that there remains no one correct way to enact feminist politics. Dogmatism, far from contradicting her philosophical and literary orientations toward ambiguity, exists as a mode of ambiguity. Perhaps, as in “Right-Wing Thought, Today” and “Merleau Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism,” dogmatism has a role in feminism. Perhaps, as in “Must We Burn Sade?,” feminists can learn something from even the most despicable, anti-woman character. Going back to the lesson of *Ethics of Ambiguity*, feminist action, whether thematized
ambiguously or not, remains a gamble. We simply do not get to know which version of politics will work. Our only consolation lies in assuming and acting in the face of ambiguity.

For Beauvoir, the ethical red flag comes through consistently approaching ethical problems in the same way. The center of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* concerns itself with working through different ethical attitudes that stand in the way of an authentically ethical life. There is the sub-man who exists dully in the world only in fact, having no project, no passions, and never questioning the world around him (*Ethics* 42-45); there is the nihilist who decides to make nothing of himself (*Ethics* 52-57); there is the adventurer who only sees the world as conquest (*Ethics* 58-63); there is the passionate man who projects objects as absolutes (*Ethics* 63-68); and the independent man who, although possesses a free-thinking, assumes she can escape reproach (*Ethics* 68-70). However, the “most widespread” of the inauthentic, ethical attitudes is that of the serious man (*Ethics* 46).

The serious man never questions the absolute values he learned as a child and consistently suppresses his freedom for the sake of the Cause\(^{62}\) (*Ethics* 45-46). In doing this he “loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity” and as a result moves through the world with an armature of certainty (*Ethics* 45). The Cause the serious man devotes his life to could manifest itself through Christianity or Marxism or even Feminism. The problem with adopting a serious attitude in terms of an ethics of ambiguity is that it “can

\(^{62}\) Also designated as the Object or Thing by Beauvoir in *Ethics*.
not save the individual insofar as he is a concrete and separate existence,” it embodies a “deceitful stupidity,” and such an attitude “gets rid of [the individual’s] freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned” (Ethics 46). The serious man attempts to “escap[e] from the stress of existence” by unquestioningly adopting a Cause as unambiguously of absolute value (Ethics 46). A serious attitude, then, gets an individual out of the constant questioning, generating of ethics, and overall uncertainty Beauvoir described earlier in Ethics.

For the serious man, the world appears as a given, not something that she has a hand in shaping and creating, and as such, the serious man knows ahead of time which choices to make and can be expected to make those choices fairly reliably. The serious invests and values consistency. Rather than wagering and deciding with each situation the appropriately ethical action, the serious man relies on the predetermined values of his Cause. The serious operates with a self-certainty, stubbornly hunkering down in the Cause, denying the ambiguity of her situation, and as result does not acknowledge or recognize the unforeseen political possibilities. “The thing,” Beauvoir tells us, “that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it” (Ethics 47).

The ethical danger in adopting such an attitude is not only that nothing is questioned, but that the serious man projects her own values onto others and judges others as if these values were objective. Beauvoir uses the example of the colonial administrator. For him, the highway constitutes unquestionable value and use and he has no qualms sacrificing himself or the subjective
freedom of others to serve his Cause: “The colonial administrator who has raised the highway to the stature of an idol will have no scruple about assuring its construction at the price of a great number of lives of the natives; for, what value has the life of a native who is incompetent, lazy, and clumsy when it comes to building highways?” (*Ethics* 49). In short, the serious man can myopically, self-righteously, and dangerously ignore the subjective freedom of others.

Within feminism, one way a serious attitude might express itself is through a version of representational politics where the circulation of more women’s representations is the goal. Take for instance the 2008 Democratic presidential primary. A serious feminist position might have supported Hillary Clinton because she was the woman candidate—not because of her policies or her experience or her electability against the Republican nominee. And when Clinton lost the primary, the same serious attitude would lead to support of Sarah Palin. The serious attitude would assume by virtue of her sex she represents women’s interests or even that we can isolate women’s issues from the larger fabric of politics. In this example, the presence of women in positions of power represents the uncontested value regardless of the situation. From the serious attitude, the female nominee would be supported and defended no matter what. By contrast, the genuinely ethical position, by Beauvoir’s standards, would be one that embraced the ambiguity of the situation and did not automatically support the woman nominee or single-mindedly consider only narrowly defined women’s interests.

Even as she defines it, Beauvoir herself could be accused of taking serious
feminist positions later in her public life. Elsewhere in her writings and political activism, Beauvoir subscribes to a recognizably materialist feminism that concerns itself first and foremost with the concrete lives of women. Her interest in the material existence of women lead her to projects concerning legalizing abortion, protecting women from violence, and encouraging futures other than the customary roles of motherhood and housekeeping for women. She edited a column in *Les Temps Modernes* on “daily sexism,” was president of the “League for the Rights of Women,” co-directed “Choisir,” and was central in forming “S.O.S. Batter Wives” (Cordero 48). Additionally, the feminist work she describes as “particularly important” in her 1977 interview with Alice Jardine (that of dealing with issues of battered wives and rape) all center on political projects that engage with women as an accepted and agreed upon category. Even though she ultimately finds the French women’s liberation group Psychanalyse et politique (Psych et po) “very capitalist” and thus “exploitative,” she finds their mission to publish and extend visibility to women’s writing laudable and clearly within the purview of necessary feminist work (Beauvoir in Jardine 225).

As an existentialist feminist Beauvoir believed in the mutability of the world

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63 Mary Warnock broadly characterizes existentialism as “the deliberate and intentional use of the concrete as a way of approaching the abstract, the particular as a way of approaching the general” (133). An existentialist feminism, then, by definition values the concrete lives of women.

64 For overviews of 1970’s era women’s movements in France see Carolyn Burke’s “Report from Paris: Women’s Writing and the Women’s Movement,” Elaine Marks’ “Women and Literature in France” and Toril Moi’s *French Feminist Thought*. Also see Deidre Bair’s *Simone de Beauvoir* (552-3) for background on Psych et po.
and of women’s possibilities. She also, however, pragmatically believes in working in the world and with women as they currently exist. With this logic Beauvoir deems non-representational political projects like Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* as utopian, missing the mark of engaging in the present world. Of their work, Beauvoir quickly dismisses it because it “doesn’t really address itself to women’s problems” (Beauvoir in Jardine 228). Add to this her work with Choisier La Cause des Femmes,65 League for Women’s Rights, *Nouvelles Questions féministes*66 (née *Questions feminists*) and numerous other protests and petitions that assume a fundamental representational politics and readers can clearly see her focus on extending legitimacy to issues explicitly articulated as women’s.

For as much as she dedicated herself to a representational style of feminist politics later in her life,67 she also felt the accusatory sting of not appropriately representing women or the feminine. Despite the role *The Second Sex* played in igniting women’s liberation movements in France and the US, some feminists deemed its goals and language as masculinist.68 In the same vein, 1970’s French feminist groups threw stones at Beauvoir for being “Sartre-fixated” and

65 An abortion rights organization.

66 This feminist journal, co-founded by Beauvoir, sees itself as an antidote to the glut of psychoanalytic and philosophical interpretations of women’s oppression at the time. Instead, the journal focused on Marxist analysis of women’s situations.

67 Just as Beauvoir only committed to feminism later in life, so too did she take to sustained political activity. Lawrence D. Kritzman marks the Algerian War and Beauvoir’s defense of Djamila Boupacha, a member of the Algerian resistance who was raped with a broken wine bottle by members of the French army, as her initiation into viewing the personal as political.

68 See Chapter Three for a full articulation of these charges.
writing for *Les Temps Modernes*, what they considered a male publication (Schwarzer, “Introduction” 13). These charges that Beauvoir, while recognizably a woman, fails at being a political woman in the right way, illustrate how contentious the seemingly obvious category of “woman” remains as well as how ambiguous something like feminist politics can be.

Even though in her practiced politics Beauvoir embraces a representational style, her non-representational feminist content in *Privileges* tacitly anticipates problems of a feminist philosophy and politics concerned exclusively with narrowly defined women. More recently and explicitly, Lisa Jervis, third wave feminist media maven, validates the absence of women in feminism, by arguing that “[t]he biggest problem with American feminism today is its obsession with women” (Jervis). She goes on to elaborate that “much of the contemporary American feminist movement is preoccupied with the mistaken belief…that having more women in positions of power, authority, or visibility will automatically lead to, or can be equated with, feminist social change…and that isolating feminist work as solely pertaining to women is necessary or even useful” (Jervis). The problem with this logic is that it accepts the current political, social, and linguistic structures without questioning the category of woman or the ways in which society’s current structures create and maintain rigid and oppressive categories of sex. Critiques of this kind, one that the constellation of *Privileges* and Beauvoir’s earlier mentioned critics imply, holds that feminism’s project rests less in representing and promoting women within the current system, and more with critiquing the normative boundaries of gender or other societal inequalities.
The ethical feminist dilemma for Beauvoir might ask how to protect women from violence and rape and support their reproductive rights and creative endeavors without making these things absolute, uncontested values in every situation. In protesting the old phallic idols, Beauvoir might ask, how do we not make narrowly defined “women’s interests” into a new idol? While abundantly clear that Beauvoir in the majority of cases supports a representational politics, this only makes her exclusion of women in *Privileges* all the more pointed. She directs readers toward her most non-representational feminist work in order to open up possibilities for the content of feminism. By focusing on subject matters other than women, Beauvoir performs an inconsistent attitude necessary to an authentically ethical life.

Readers of *Privileges* remain unsure about what Cause Beauvoir works toward and how it relates to feminism. Of course readers can find discrete targets and modes of engagement in the individual essays, but read as a whole text, Beauvoir’s project appears murky and her organizing Cause indistinguishable. Looking at the range of these three essays, she inconsistently responds to seemingly unrelated issues. The essays, instead of coalescing around a contrived theme, read like a series of unconnected, loosely political questions.

Since a unified Cause does not drive this political, ethical, and philosophical collection, we instead get a varied sense and scope of Beauvoir’s coalition politics. While she may not have consciously created this political bricolage, it demonstrates her version of responsible politics: she resists an artificial, unified
Cause letting the multiplicity of political opportunities present themselves. Instead of imposing the same Cause on every problem she encounters (as the serious man would), she allows the situation to dictate the appropriate reading and response to the problem. In refusing to suppress her freedom to an already decided upon Cause, Beauvoir widens her available response range and embraces the relevance of different relations to feminism. For example, by not already assuming a static set of feminist precepts, Beauvoir can discuss content from Sade to contemporary right-wing thought to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical criticisms. Since Beauvoir assumes a fundamentally unknowable future, and since she cannot know ahead of time the appropriate decisions to make, she creates the varied political discourse she wishes to see—one in which she assumes an ambiguity to the world and where she does not assume a certain future and impose a politics or a Cause on her life. She lets the situation rather than an outside Cause call forth an appropriate line of action.

Looking at the *Privileges* collection as a whole, Beauvoir suggests feminist philosophy should not adhere to a rigid code, but assume a more supple ambiguity. Characterizing *Privileges* as a regrettable text because of its dogmatic style or its inconsistent, non-representational content is a mistake for feminists. Beauvoir looks to the future of feminism in *Privileges* and demonstrates the range of attitudes and subjects feminism could open itself up to. Beauvoir contends that there are no definite Causes feminism is married to, but in fact feminists are always negotiating feminism’s territory.

By having those interested in her feminist politics and philosophy begin with

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Privileges, Beauvoir protects herself from potentially serious attitudes and showcases her multidimensional concept of ambiguity. She takes a noticeable gamble by performing her critique of the serious man and not writing in a manner consistent with her other, recognizably feminist texts. True, Beauvoir generally leans towards ambiguity (recognized as a concept and not necessarily a practice) and representation, but in Privileges we get a more pronounced sense of Beauvoir’s full practice of ambiguity. Upon engaging in her methods of an ethics of ambiguity, Beauvoir declares “new perspectives are disclosed” (Ethics 135). By directing feminists to Privileges, Beauvoir generates new perspectives for feminism and discourages a self-certain attitude of what a feminist should do. Instead, the essays inconsistent with Beauvoir’s feminist oeuvre encourage an attitude of thinking about what feminists could do.

6.3 Conclusion: A Hesitant Ending

As I stated in my Introduction, I began this project, like Beauvoir began The Second Sex, with hesitation. Although I always felt ambiguity key to seeing The Second Sex and Beauvoir’s writings with fresh eyes, I wasn’t quite sure what that exactly meant. And perhaps that’s what attracted me to this project in the first place—a sense of uncertainty, the possibility of surprise, the unknown potential in Beauvoir’s language that many feel comfortable writing off as sloppy intellectual work.

But as I pushed forward, the texture of what I perceived as significant and interesting about ambiguity changed. I expected to build up to ambiguity as the lynchpin to Beauvoir’s language use in two chapters, unpack ambiguity in the
third and then resolve her ambiguity through exploring how it influences practical feminist social change. The more I sat with her writing, the more it resisted such a tidy read. And the longer I sat with her ambiguity, the longer I sat. As current research on the brain and productivity has shown, the more uncertain one becomes about her situation, the less likely she is able to perform (Rock). And so Beauvoir’s ambiguity, what I initially took to be my solution, became my messy problem. I could have fit Beauvoir’s writing into my predetermined form, but then I would lose the bits that made her interesting to me. I would lose the emotional connections of curiosity, uncertainty, and yes, frustration.

My frustration, a frustration many before me and I’m sure many after me will continue to experience is an emotion lodged in a desire for a somewhat reliably consistent Beauvoir. This emotional response comes from the expectation that Beauvoir reigns as one of the mothers of feminism yet she responds in often bizarre, inconsistent, and what many would consider un-feminist ways. She writes with contradictions. She justifies her use of masculinist language. She defends Sade as a moralist. She vindicates Sartre to the bitter end. And yet she also writes with non-contradictory certainty, admits women’s need for a new language, castigates Sade’s treatment of women, and reformulates Sartre’s ideas to the point of transforming them into her own.

Beauvoir performs these complicated, potentially frustration-inducing rhetorical feats with little fan fare when compared to other influential feminists. The language of feminists like Irigaray and even Butler announce their difference and their complexity with visible markers. Can one begin more ostentatiously
than Irigaray’s Freud-crossed-with-circus-ringleader “Ladies and Gentlemen...Throughout history” opening? Butler’s radical feminist language even inspires “awards.” With their visible difference, both of these feminists have cemented themselves in rhetorical canons. Agree or disagree with their philosophy and politics that undergird and inspire their style, there’s definitely something there that’s happening on a rhetorical level that calls readers to sit up, take notice, and respond. Once readers respond, both writers have had opportunities to explicitly affirm, justify, explain, and teach their rhetoric. Not so with Beauvoir.

By refusing to call attention to her language, Beauvoir may escape rhetorical acknowledgement, but her invisibility allows her to enter places more visibly radical thinkers could not. Beauvoir’s ambiguous rhetoric affords us an opportunity to consider the power of the invisible. Take for example Beauvoir’s plain speak explored in Chapter Five. Beauvoir generates a creative reading of Sartre, but does so imperceptibly. The invisibility of Beauvoir’s language, in this case a plain, matter-of-fact style, allows her to make boundary-pushing arguments unnoticed.

Indeed, the whole premise for this project rests on the notion that there’s power to hiding in plain sight. I build this case by exploring five rhetorically inflected “problems” scholars have attributed to Beauvoir and how they should be reconfigured as tremendously well-hidden, generative rhetorical opportunities. Beauvoir’s contradictions, one of the most cited disputes scholars have with Beauvoir, open up generative creative opportunities—particularly for women
writers and artists. The “problem” of Beauvoir’s singular, blind-to-difference masculine language, instead opens way to the ambiguous compromise of the semicolon. Beauvoir’s seeming defense of sadism instead gives way as a well-articulated defense of making room for difference in our definitions of ethical relations. What once seemed like a problem of blind, dogged devotion to Sartre can instead give occasion to look at the transformational reading that takes into account difference. And of course there’s no hiding in plain sight without ambiguity.

Beauvoir’s ambiguity is inextricable from her rhetoric. Ambiguity gives us a framework for approaching the contradictions and the masculinist language in *The Second Sex* and it gives us a perspective for reading the essays of *Privileges* as fundamental to Beauvoir’s feminism. The uneven trajectory of both Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* in feminism can be best understood by this deep seated ambiguity: neither writer nor book clearly or unambiguously stand for a Cause or transparently represent one Thing but must be translated for each generation.

But even this reading fails to do justice to the connection between Beauvoir’s language and ambiguity. It’s not exactly a one-to-one: understand ambiguity, understand her language (although to a certain degree that helps us get an initial grasp). Beauvoir’s performance of ambiguity functions not as a messy problem to solve but as a generative tool, as an ethical solution to living in an ambiguous world.

In many ways, the first equation of understand ambiguity, understand
Beauvoir’s language feels more satisfying; it allows us to “get” Beauvoir. The second opens up a variety of emotional responses—including frustration. Ambiguity, an uncertainty, a multiplicity of options and choices, halts a particular sense of progress. It blocks the clear path forward. It muddies the waters of which direction to take. While Beauvoir’s ambiguity is productive in the sense of producing many options and choices, it also arrests productivity, in the sense of efficiently making choices and quickly moving forward.

In accepting the full integrity of Beauvoir’s ambiguity—as a concept, performance, and experience—Beauvoir asks us to reject an arc of certain progress. In contrast to Dan Savage’s LGBTQ anti-bullying project, Beauvoir would probably tell us, “It doesn’t necessarily get better.” Ambiguity means accepting there’s not a steady, logical march to progress, but a halting, zigging and zagging which, if we’re lucky, can be coordinated and marshaled toward progress.

Beauvoir’s work contributes not simply as a repetition of the rhetorical interest in ambiguity, but as an extension by thoroughly saturating her work with the sometimes emotionally frustrating experience of ambiguity. By oftentimes performing ambiguity through her language, Beauvoir adds a layer of emotional experience. We get the full circle of what a commitment to ambiguity means; we experience the gamble, the realization that the potentiality that comes with ambiguity can be painful, angry, frustrating, and not necessarily successful. However, Beauvoir might argue, if we aim to change our social and political landscape, we cannot afford not to take the risk.
Embracing Beauvoir’s larger body of work—not only *The Second Sex* and *Privileges*, which I focused on throughout the project, but also her interviews, memoirs, and fiction, which I touch upon—paints a nuanced picture of how she engages ambiguity. Elizabeth Hardwick’s often quoted description of *The Second Sex* as “madly sensible and brilliantly confused” captures the contradictory experience of Beauvoir’s ambiguity: thrilling yet frustrating.

What good comes from a rhetorical reading of Beauvoir? If we perceive our language as more or less representational, then we will no doubt live our lives in a much different way than Beauvoir asks us with her ambiguous language. Carolyn Miller describes the draw of representational language assumptions like this: “If the speaker says what he or she sincerely believes, spontaneously, without premeditation or artifice, then words will reveal the truth unproblematically.” Language, from this view, becomes an occasion for connection and understanding. However, a rhetorical reading and experiencing of Beauvoir’s language, hiding in plain sight, open to the ambiguities and generative nature of contradiction, masculine and feminine language, incomprehensibility, and clear and opaque stylistics encourages readers not only to question the simple logic of “common sense,” but it also asks us to learn how to live with the uncertain. Beginning with an assumption of ambiguity opens up the inherent numerous possibilities—including connection, understanding, frustration, misunderstanding—available to us in the experience of language. In other words, a rhetorical reading of Beauvoir generates more questions and uncertainties than answers and absolutes. Beauvoir wants us to confront and
struggle with her work and her choices (political, personal, ethical, and otherwise). By participating in the ambiguity of Beauvoir’s language, by responding to it on intellectual and emotional registers, we acknowledge ambiguity as fully difficult. The big question Beauvoir’s work, particularly in *The Second Sex* and *Privileges*, opens us toward, but refuses to answer, is how might we live this fully difficult ambiguity?
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