TWO FIGURES OF FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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There is a history of feminist theory, and one of its myths of origin is the publication of The Second Sex. So perhaps it is not surprising that Simone de Beauvoir is part of Michèle Le Dœuff's imaginary in her "essay concerning women, philosophy, etc.," Hipparchia's Choice. Her book is a kind of consequence of The Second Sex, creating the possibility of lineage and of generation, and leading us to the figure of mother and daughter. As "the mother of the book," Beauvoir is figured as the mother of modern feminism.

In an interview with an American journalist in 1976, Simone de Beauvoir said that her book influenced only women who wanted to be influenced and helped the development of only those women who had already started to develop by themselves . . . she is not doing herself justice. A book which puts an end to loneliness, which teaches people to see, has greater and more immediate importance than all the manifestoes in the world. . . . Simone de Beauvoir taught young women that we were to trust ourselves and to send the ball back—we who were too often sur
rounded by cruel words and glances quick to censure.¹

In the protective nature of the "cruel words and glances quick to censure," the pedagogical as a maternal function is expressed. And Le Dœuff notes that, as mother of the movement giving birth to this famous book, Beauvoir "still manages to highlight issues and put forward thoughts of which the least one can say is that they galvanized women's movements
pretty well everywhere and helped them get going."2 Le Dœuff writes of sensing "in these lines the ageing of a philosophy . . .," an expression carrying an image of the mother's face within it.

Another figure arises in Beauvoir's writing of philosophy because of her "marriage" to Sartre (the couple's informality notwithstanding). Beauvoir's own creation of this figure, the "author of the bride," through her autobiographical writing, has produced another textual role model for feminists. More generally, it has governed some interpretations of feminism and philosophy, which figure philosophy as masculine and feminism as feminine, modeling a relation between these two intellectual fields on the metaphor of courtship.

As Le Dœuff evokes this figure:

> The ethics underlying Beauvoir's thought are not hard to identify since she says herself that her point of view is that of existentialist morality. *The Second Sex* is also a labor of love, and as a wedding gift she brings a singular confirmation of the validity of Sartrism: your thought makes possible an understanding of women's condition, your philosophy sets me on the road to my emancipation—your truth will make me free.3

The book appears here as a wedding gift to a personal messiah—but Le Dœuff is not as tender toward Sartre. Her arguments against him are well done.4 However, dispatching Sartre, Le Dœuff also dispatches summarily the value of Beauvoir's own desire for, and loyalty to, him, with the notion of the "Heloïse complex," a syndrome in which "a woman establishes herself as a philosopher's loving admirer; the situation is profitable to him and fatal to her."5 Elsewhere, Le Dœuff mocks these "whoeverians," and tells us: "I have long been doing my best to show that it is time for women to stop being the devoted followers of one (and always only one) coryphaeus. . ."6

How does the image of the mother and of the bride operate, in Hipparchia's *Choice* and elsewhere in feminist discourse, to accomplish something that is unreachable by the argument alone? This is how, Le Dœuff has warned us, we will know the philosophical imaginary:

> . . . the meaning conveyed by images works both for and against the system that deploys them. For, because they sustain something which the
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system cannot itself justify, but which is nevertheless needed for its proper working. Against, for the same reason, or almost: their meaning is incompatible with the system's possibilities.\textsuperscript{7}

These two figures, their intersection, and the involvement of Le D\oeuff's philosophical writing in the romance of feminism and philosophy will help us to reflect on the place of sexual difference in philosophy and also in feminist theory. The erotics of seduction, of intellectual seduction, and, more generally, of \textit{the capture of theory by figure} seem to elude rational analysis. Le D\oeuff's own concept of the philosophical imaginary can help us to pose these questions for feminist theory.

\section*{THE PRIMAL SCENE}

What is the relation, then, between these two figures, of the mother and the bride? But in effect the figures are known, in culture and as a relation, classically as \textit{two aspects of a wider scene}. This scene is one that Le D\oeuff herself characterizes, in her discussion of Beauvoir's intellectual position, as a "primal scene."\textsuperscript{8}

The scene that Le D\oeuff has in mind, between Beauvoir and Sartre, is described by Beauvoir in \textit{Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter}, and is interpreted according to the logic of the "primal scene" figure as one of intellectual seduction, defloration, or even rape:

One morning in the Luxembourg Gardens, near the Medici fountain, I outlined for him the pluralist morality which I had fashioned to justify the people I liked but did not wish to resemble; he ripped it to shreds. I was attached to it, because it allowed me to take my heart as the arbiter of good and evil; I struggled with him for three hours. In the end I had to admit I was beaten; besides, I had realized, in the course of our discussion, that many of my opinions were based only on prejudice, bad faith or thoughtlessness, that my reasoning was shaky and my ideas confused. "I'm no longer sure what I think, or even if I think at all," I noted, completely thrown. . . .\textsuperscript{9}

Le D\oeuff questions her own desire in this part of her discussion of Beauvoir, suggesting that she is perhaps placing herself in a textual posi-
tion as Beauvoir's younger sister. She even goes so far as to propose her own equivalent primal scene, at the secondary school in Brittany where the philosophy teacher told her that *The Critique of Pure Reason* was too difficult for her, and set her instead a biography of Marie Curie. That may give us a nice explanation for the revenge she takes on Kant in the introduction to *The Philosophical Imaginary*, by finding his castration as the origin of that intellectual enterprise.

But it is not as sister but as her daughter that Le Dœuff would be figured in this primal scene, if it were one. Since Le Dœuff has invoked the Freudian notion, let me consider what, classically, the logic of the figure suggests. This primal scene, discovered by Le Dœuff in the pages of a book, would cast Beauvoir as the *mother* in the Luxembourg Gardens in a seduction witnessed (in the telling) by the child/reader. Laplanche and Pontalis summarize the psychoanalytic concept of the “primal scene” as “[s]cene of sexual intercourse between the parents which the child observes, or infers on the basis of certain indications, and fantasizes. It is generally interpreted by the child as an act of violence on the part of the father.”

Since the primal scene is the child’s scene, not the mother’s, then this is *Le Dœuff’s* “primal scene,” not Beauvoir’s, despite the way it is presented by Le Dœuff in her text. And it is as the child that Le Dœuff positions herself to witness a dreaded event already suspected in Beauvoir’s account of it, namely, the capture of this philosophical woman by this man. The dreadful event is that the *father is the mother’s lover*, which is to say that, despite the child’s desire, the mother has a lover and it is the father. This is what a child “sees” in the primal scene. The truth is dreadful not because sex is a scandal for the child/reader—but because it undoes her own vain pre-Oedipal hopes for union with the mother.

The castration drama is frequently accompanied in psychoanalyses of it by a disavowal; in *Hipparchia’s Choice*, it brings on a textual invention by Le Dœuff predictably aimed at denying the father/Sartre’s power to do this. Le Dœuff employs the familiar “kettle logic” of the disavowal. Firstly, through the assertion of an “Hélôïse complex,” the act is declared not to be a real act of love between Beauvoir and Sartre. Secondly, through the arguments that discredit Sartre’s own philosophy, the act is declared to be not a genuine one of love on “logical” grounds; that is, he couldn’t be her desire, since he is not desirable. Her analysis of the failure of Sartre’s philosophy to overpower her, in the manner the Luxembourg scene sug-
suggests he did, indeed presents him as impotent. Finally, through the suggestion that Beauvoir herself had written a work of philosophy in *The Second Sex* that gave more to existentialism than it took from it, the act of love is denied in the third fashion of the “kettle defense,” that is, it was not an act of love because, although it was strictly Sartre’s penetration, such penetration was only possible because of *what Beauvoir had given him*.

At this point, it can be said that Beauvoir has been finally figured as the phallic mother. Psychoanalytic theory analyzes this image for the disavowal as a figure whose impossibility can protect against the state of affairs depicted in the primal scene by affirming the moment before, when desire was intact. Le Dœuff invests a significant amount of theoretical attention to *The Second Sex* (as “mother’s phallus”), and its defense. In pursuit of this, she records that she corresponds with Beauvoir about the reading of *The Second Sex* that she, Le Dœuff, desires to make; namely, that it is a work of philosophy that does not declare itself as such in order to protect male privilege in philosophy.

But, significantly, Beauvoir refuses to endorse this reading, or to denounce Sartre, and Le Dœuff is left, she concludes, to “sort it out for herself.” In refusing to confirm the (mis?)interpretation that the feminist reader makes of that scene, Beauvoir no doubt defends her own desire. Le Dœuff’s analysis ignores the erotic in that heterosexual scene, despite the fact that there is a pleasure posited for Beauvoir (and for Sartre) in his dominance and her submission. That it was Beauvoir’s pleasure is borne out by the fact that it is her story; she desired to write the scene in her memoir and, indeed, continuously wrote the mythology of their love.

Since Beauvoir in effect refuses to interpret her intellectual seduction as unequivocally an act of male violence, Le Dœuff is propelled into intense intellectual curiosity (as Freud predicts), and the discussion in the “Third Notebook” of the place of sex in the subjectivity of philosophy, represents the outcome:

[This third notebook will be devoted to these questions ... first, how does the issue of appearing to be a philosopher discriminate between women and men and in what unexpected and remote places does it lurk? Second, what is the relationship between a commentator and a writer; what definition of philosophy should one propose to locate Beauvoir’s]
work as philosophical, even though she claimed nothing of the sort? And third, to return once more to the Sartre/Simone "case," how did the emotional aspects and the modes of their relationship as lovers become fixed around an event... They were two students, a man and a woman, who were more or less equals in the university system, and yet, in being together, the first became the century's most visible philosopher and the second a tremendously well-hidden philosopher.  

What will be the theoretical consequences, if they were two students, a man and a woman, equal and yet...? In this primal scene, the child/reader encounters the problem of sexual difference.

CAN THIS BE CALLED A PRIMAL SCENE?

Despite Le Découf's stated theoretical differences with psychoanalysis, she makes use of psychoanalytic concepts when she analyzes an Héloïse "complex," when she evokes the notion of a "primal scene," and in the prospect of a philosophical "imaginary." In The Philosophical Imaginary, she distinguishes the psychoanalytic from her own method:

The perspective I am adopting here differs, as will be seen, from both these approaches, since it involves reflecting on strands of the imaginary operating in places where, in principle, they are supposed not to belong and yet where, without them, nothing would have been accomplished.

In saying this, she seeks to define her work "against the Bachelorian (and broadly psychoanalytic) problematic on which I had initially relied at least for an understanding of primary symbolic material." She writes,

The simple idea that imagery has a relation to what we call "conceptualized" intellectual work, or at least that it occupies the place of theory's impossible, was already enough to distance me from a perspective which assumes the radical heterogeneity of reverie and objective knowledge.

However, that heterogeneity can be contrasted with psychoanalytic approaches (including Freud's own) in which the primary process thinking (of which reverie partakes) underlies rationality, and founds it-
That there is a traffic between them may be what is most threatening to philosophy in the postulation of an unconscious:

When one realizes that imagery copes with problems posed by the theoretical enterprise itself, it is no longer thinkable to attribute it to some primitive soul which, endlessly reworking the same themes, produces analogies, arbitrary valorizations and seductive images whose sweet solicitations abstract knowledge must absolutely oppose.... And when one is led to postulate the existence of images specific to a work, denying precisely that there are themes that are everywhere "the same," then one can no longer subscribe to Bachelard's poetics.16

But characterizing the difference between her own and psychoanalytic intuitions here as one between a universalizing habit (of psychoanalysis) and a "historical intertextuality" (of her own) can seem to observe the letter rather than the spirit of earlier texts. Some psychoanalytic ways of reading do not reduce as simply; beginning with Freud's sixth chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the logic and the rhetoric of the specific image in the psyche and in the text is explored, through a method built on a theory of desire. Far from ruling out the "sociohistorically determined," Lacan's notions of the relation between image and experience entail it. Thus, to distinguish the analysis of the specifically "philosopher's desire" from that of the "primitive soul" cannot credibly serve to establish a distinction between Le Dœuff and psychoanalysis.

But perhaps, in fact, it is the *proximity* of her method to certain intellectual forebears, the relation she has with these father figures that troubles her discussions, and calls for emphatic defense against them? Perhaps Le Dœuff's desire that what is owed theoretically to the mother should be fully recognized is mirrored in a correlative anxiety to disown an intellectual debt to the father. Does the tactical need to break away from being an "whoeverian" extend this far? The place of Bachelard in the paternal origins of her concerns are explicitly acknowledged, but not the influence of Lacan's concept of the imaginary, nor yet of Derrida's discussions of metaphor in philosophy. Indeed, elsewhere in the discussion of philosophy in the third notebook, she writes of these as rivals.

The concept of a philosophical imaginary seems broadly psychoanalytic in at least the sense that it implies an intuition of "the unconscious":
for it is the operation of an image deployed outside the author’s conscious/theoretical intent that is studied, along with its consequences, which, in terms of that consciousness which authors it, are ambivalent and unpredictable. Le Doeuff also seems implicitly to accept a psychoanalytic account of the relation between desire and subjectivity, since her next question of an image in the text of philosophy is: What subjectivity is constructed by the figure as used? A desire is posited that can be satisfied in relation to an identity (although this isn’t to claim she anywhere endorses a Lacanian picture of the subject).

There is one point, she writes, in an interpretation of an imaginary, where one “cannot do without a poetics, a psychoanalysis in the loose sense of the term.” This is the point at which one answers the question: How does the image work, on the subjective level?17 It follows that in seeking the explanation for the “affective charge” that an image carries, one needs to take up a theory of desire. Le Doeuff’s reading of Kant’s island, which begins her discussion of a specifically philosophical imaginary, is a psychoanalysis “in this loose sense,” isolating the seduction and the “libidinal sacrifice” at work in the Critique of Pure Reason.

It is a certain affective charge on her own images that leads me to explore, “psychoanalytically,” Beauvoir as mother and bride in Le Doeuff’s book. An affective charge that almost amounts to rancor in other corners of Hipparchia’s Choice provokes questions about the feminist theoretical enterprise that cannot be addressed through the notion of the reasonable alone. The reasonable is that which takes its force, by definition, in being justified; but the affective is a force (unlike the force of reason) that takes effect in an order unrelated to justification:

... it seems doubtful to me whether any political or social force has ever had the power to make any circle of listeners whatsoever adopt a cultural product which did not answer a question meaningful to that social group.18

I see no reason why this does not extend to feminism; and I suggest that this question is clearly laid out, and covered over, by the image of the primal scene, which thereby cannot occur by accident in Le Doeuff’s reflections. As I have argued, the scene brings to light the urgent question, “Why a man and a woman, equal and yet ...?” Why would we be surprised to find that the question that animates the circle of feminist listeners is the question of
sexual difference? The figures then, of mother, bride, and primal scene, operate (as Le Doeuff argues of Kant's island) to picture a satisfaction for the reading subjectivity that produces feminism as its consciousness.

A FEMINIST IMAGINARY

In the philosophical imaginary, Le Doeuff finds herself "somewhere between these two extremes: between the location of a difficulty and that of a contradiction." That is, she is torn between accusing the image of standing for a tension in the theory and of psychoanalyzing it as that which appears because its meaning is "incompatible with the system's possibilities." It is something that appears without warrant, as a contradiction, to satisfy something the system cannot itself supply. Such a theoretical occasion is itself a disavowal, in a quite technical sense; as something that serves to gratify a desire that is all the while denied.

Feminist consciousness, seeing the violence between men and women in characterizing the "struggle," does not necessarily seek to enforce a sexual repression that will keep the question of sex out of the feminist question of gender (despite what some critics believe). Rather, does Le Doeuff's analysis of Beauvoir's book deny the mother's desire, precisely because she has directed it so painfully away from the child/reader? The erotics of the primal scene might be said to contradict the reader's own desire, that desire for the mother figure expressed as jealousy for Beauvoir.

The feminist attraction to the figure of Beauvoir, through the image of the mother/bride, can be accounted for on just these grounds—the disavowal of a desire. It is also the case that the satisfaction in representing her this way cannot be accounted for "reasonably"—and this, too, the figure of the primal scene describes. At the very least, it cannot be done reasonably because of a lingering ambivalence in the sexual relation. The child, in viewing the primal scene, "perceives" a scene of apparent violence when in fact she witnesses the act of coitus; but do we reliably know the difference?

It is a difficult question, how to take up in feminist terms that ambivalence in heterosexuality that is related to the question of violence at the same time as it is related to the question of love. But it is a crucial one, since the opposition occurs at the center of feminist inquiry into its "subject," the
nature of the sexual relation. In the primal scene the child makes a “mistake,” a misinterpretation; and yet, one cannot completely leave the violent out of the act of love. We lack a feminist discussion of heterosexuality that approaches precisely this, the love and the violence found together.

Le Dœuff’s reading puts aside the ambivalence of the sexual relation in order to protect the desire of the child/feminist. But the theoretical cost is that she can then only see the mother’s desire for the father, that is, in the heterosexual scene, as complicity in violence, and therefore the ambivalence returns as the query of “a man and a woman, equal and yet....” This is a “return of the repressed” with real effects, some of which we are seeing in feminist politics currently: the resistance of some women to their “liberation,” the disaffection of young women, the lack of satisfaction in the role of “career woman,” and the exhausting remedy of the “superwoman.”

This primal scene, presented as an intellectual seduction, is doubly problematic for feminism and for philosophy, since it raises the question how a woman could take pleasure in having her mind ravished. Not merely because this might imply that ideas are in our repertoire of sexual practices, and that a notion like “sublimation” could be more carefully examined; but also the intellectual ravishment, as a sexual satisfaction depicted in his dominance and her submission, implies a sexualized mind, and a gendered rationality, two theoretical impossibilities in virtue of the very mind/body distinction through which they are produced.

Analysis of a feminist imaginary might lead us to explore the occurrence of transferences within feminist theory. Thinking feminism as a tradition draws us into the metaphors of “female relations”: mother, sister, daughter. In pondering the relation, Le Dœuff appropriates the philosophical desires of the mother figure, or rather, in the case of Beauvoir, overlooks that woman’s antipathy to the role. Beauvoir becomes surrounded by dutiful daughters, in the next theoretical generation, taking up this problem in the family all over again.

Perhaps it has been overlooked that relations to tradition (philosophical and otherwise, and however admirable) are relations to authority. When we invoke the mother figure, do we know—and are we ready for—what will follow from it? As can be seen from this fragment of a “primal scene,” anxiety about the maternal is reproduced in unpredictable ways at the level of theory.

Likewise in courtship—in employing the metaphor, consciously and
especially unconsciously, will we reproduce in theory the vexed power differentials between a man and a woman? Will we be able to conclude anything other than that we are abused? For, certainly, woman is not loved by philosophy.

But "philosophy" is not a man, neither is "feminism" a woman. Even "woman" is not a woman, but a figure. Conceiving of the relation of women and philosophy on the model of a courtship forces the issue of sexual difference immediately. It may underline something important about the two, but it also occludes other possibilities. It blinds us to feminism as a historical moment, for example, or to philosophy as an art.20

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 56.
3. Ibid., p. 59.
5. Ibid., p. 162.
6. Ibid., p. 59.
8. This image appeals to Toril Moi also, and is used as one of three anchoring points in her book, Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual (London: Blackwell, 1994). Cf. Moi’s argument and the Fullbrooks, who have “proven” that Sartre’s brilliant work was anticipated, or at least contributed to at its heart, by Beauvoir.
10. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Roudalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 335. They also note, “Freud brings out different aspects: first, the act of coitus is understood by the child as an aggression by the father in a sadomasochistic relationship; secondly, the scene gives rise to sexual excitation in the child while at the same time providing a basis for castration anxiety,” adding that Ruth Brunswick draws attention to the scene as interpreted according to the child’s preoedipal desires for mother.

Psychoanalytic theory predicts that a scene with implications of castration anxiety will become an important drama for subjectivity—for Lacan, at least, that
which stimulates the anxiety plays a part in forming identity. Further, the scene is not witnessed by a disinterested observer, but its interpretation is colored instead by the child's own desire (which in both girls and boys is supposed by psychoanalysis to be desire for the mother at this time of childhood).

11. In psychoanalysis, this disavowal occurs through the figure of the phallic mother—the father's "power to castrate" is associated with the father's cutting off of the child's desire, in an important theoretical sense for Freud. See my discussion of the conceptual ends served by the figure of castration for Freud in Passion in Theory: Conceptions of Freud and Lacan (London: Routledge, 1996), chap. 6.

13. Ibid., pp. 138–39; emphasis added.
15. Ibid., p. 5.
16. Ibid., pp. 5–6.
17. Ibid., p. 12.
18. Ibid., p. 20.
19. Ibid., p. 3.
20. My own position in the mise-en-abyrne that I have conjured between Beauvoir's scene, Le Doeuff's, and its present textual frame raises squarely the question of the desire of the analyst, whose role is to interpret transference and countertransference in the text, not to deny it. The reader might identify with any of the several subject positions depicted; as the father, as the mother, as child, as sibling. The role of analysis suggests not that one can or should avoid taking up a position, but that one make conscious the effects of this imaginary—a term I must use here with the resonances of both Le Doeuff and Lacan.
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Title:
Two figures of feminism and philosophy

Date:
2000

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34236

File Description:
Two figures of feminism and philosophy

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