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Note from the Book Review Editor / Note de la responsable des recensions

In “The ‘Running Thread’ Connecting Me to Beauvoir,” Annie Ernaux explains that she has heard many people criticize *The Second Sex*—especially the passages of the book on motherhood.¹ Some critics, she writes, believe that Beauvoir refuses “to consider motherhood in any terms other than alienation.”² For Ernaux, however, Beauvoir’s “demystification” of “the image of the mother” is what makes *The Second Sex* so powerful and ever-relevant.³

But it’s not only Beauvoir’s views on motherhood in *The Second Sex* that continue to speak to readers. This semester, I had the privilege of co-teaching a course on Beauvoir and her feminist legacy at Princeton, and what fascinated me was that, of all the things we read throughout the semester, the students were most interested in Beauvoir’s writings about her own mother, Françoise de Beauvoir, in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.⁴ They wanted to know why Beauvoir includes so many passages about how others view the beautiful and enigmatic Françoise. Why does Beauvoir’s aunt say odd things like, “Your Mama’s always going somewhere, isn’t she?”⁵ And why does Beauvoir’s governess, Louise, mock Françoise’s clothing and singing?⁶ By the time we read Beauvoir’s novella *The Woman Destroyed*, the students were eager to compare the main character, Monique, to Françoise.⁷ The questions that intrigued them most were these: Is Monique a “good” mother even if she lives in bad faith? Is Françoise? What, for Beauvoir, would it mean to be a good mother?

1 Annie Ernaux, “‘Le fil conducteur’ qui me lie à Beauvoir,” *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 17, 2001, 1–6, p. 1. See in particular Simone de Beauvoir, “La Mère,” in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2, *L’Expérience vécue*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio,” 1987 [1949], pp. 330–392, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier as “The Mother,” in *The Second Sex*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2009 [1949], pp. 537–584.

2 Ernaux, “‘Le fil conducteur,’” p. 3, my translation.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 3, my translation.

4 Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup, London, Penguin, 2001 [1958]. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *MDD*.

5 *MDD*, p. 15.

6 *MDD*, p. 18.

7 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, London, William Collins, 1969 [1967].

As I read the two book reviews in this issue, I began to reconsider my answers to these questions. In the first review, Lucie Boulay, a doctoral student in philosophy at Université Bordeaux Montaigne, analyzes *Françoise de Beauvoir et sa fille, Simone* by Annik Houel.⁸ According to Boulay, Houel highlights a fascinating tension in Beauvoir's oeuvre: on the one hand, Beauvoir "*essaie d'accéder*" (tries to reach) the figure of the good mother in her biographical writings; on the other, she focuses on "*une image de mauvaise mère*" (an image of a bad mother) in her theoretical writings.⁹ Boulay also commends Houel for adopting an unusual method, which consists of writing in Françoise de Beauvoir's voice. While Houel's psychoanalytic approach has many merits—it compels readers to adopt a different perspective, for instance—it also has its limits. Boulay points out that Houel largely neglects to consider social class, and she suggests that a Bourdieusian analysis of Françoise de Beauvoir's education would help answer some of the questions Houel raises.

In the second review, Dana Rognlie, a professor at Old Dominion University, turns her attention to Lauren Elkin's new English translation of *Les Belles Images*, Beauvoir's last novel.¹⁰ I had not read the book for some time, and was happy to be reminded that one of its central themes is, as Rognlie puts it, "mothering": the story is about a young mother, Laurence, who struggles to differentiate herself from her mother, Dominique, while taking care of her own daughter, Catherine. Rognlie compares Elkin's translation to Patrick O'Brian's 1966 translation and concludes that Elkin has avoided many of O'Brian's mistakes.¹¹ Nevertheless, she observes that Elkin does not always take Beauvoir's "deliberate stylistic and philosophical choices" seriously. For example, Elkin turns Beauvoir's "*travaillant comme un cheval*" into "working like a dog," when, according to Rognlie, the word "*cheval*" is particularly important in the novel—and connected to Beauvoir's understudied thinking about Catholic/Jewish friendships and antisemitism in France.¹² Rognlie also wonders why Elkin and Yale Uni-

8 Annik Houel, *Françoise de Beauvoir et sa fille, Simone*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2025.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

10 Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *BEL*. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Image of Her*, trans. Lauren Elkin, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2026.

11 Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, London, William Collins, 1968 [1966].

12 *BEL*, p. 8. Reading Rognlie, I looked up "*travailler comme un chien*," the more common idiomatic expression in French, and discovered that "*travailler comme un castor*" (to work like a beaver) exists too. What a great expression, and one that Beauvoir scholars should use more often!

versity Press chose the title *The Image of Her*, given that the novel is about *several* kinds of alluring images that Laurence will come to reject—including the image of the “dutiful” daughter, wife, and, of course, mother. Despite these issues, Rognlie praises Elkin’s work overall. We can hope that Elkin or another skilled writer will translate more of Beauvoir’s novels in the near future.

At the end of the semester, the students in my course on Beauvoir worked on a final Wikipedia project. Each chose a Wikipedia article to edit, and some created new articles. To my surprise, there was no Wikipedia article in English about *A Very Easy Death*, Beauvoir’s moving portrait of her mother and my favorite of her books.¹³ My student Caroline chose to create a new page about the book, and, in her reflection that accompanied the project, she wrote, “A final challenge I had while researching this assignment was finding an image in the public domain. I wanted to include a picture of Françoise de Beauvoir [...], but I could not find any non-copyrighted images. I felt that an image of Françoise, especially with Simone de Beauvoir, would add a lot of information to the page.”¹⁴ That it is difficult to find images of Françoise and her daughter (and especially of Françoise near the end of her life) seems, to me, strangely fitting. Beauvoir devoted a great deal of time to writing about her mother, but, in some ways, the more one reads about Françoise, the more inscrutable she becomes. The reviews in this issue suggest that we should—and will—keep trying to find new ways to see her.

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13 Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, New York, Citadel Press, 1965 [1964].

14 Caroline Rasmussen, “Wikipedia Reflection,” May 8, 2026.