"To Care for Her Beauty, to Dress Up, Is a Kind of Work": Simone de Beauvoir, Fashion, and Feminism

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It is now over sixty years since the publication of *The Second Sex*, a pioneering text written well before most of the so-called seminal texts of "second wave" feminism. Although many women, as Toril Moi (2010) has reminded us, have stressed that this particular book actually changed their lives in the 1950s, in later years, she argues, it was not always accorded the respect it might deserve. Feminists of the 1970s seemed to misread the text; it is, I would suggest, a passionate and personal polemic clearly shaped by the sociohistorical context of a traumatized postwar France. The book is a mixture of philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and a kind of fieldwork, a subjective sociological methodology; it could not be written within our specialized academy.

If some second-wave feminists mistook her intention, seeing a seemingly elitist universalizing of her own milieu, many still pounced with delight on the half chapter she devoted to dress. Here we find a seemingly straightforward equation of elegance with bondage in a description of the *haute-bourgeoise*, the "woman of fashion" who "has chosen to make herself a thing" ([1949] 1997, 550) in order to showcase her social status and to please her affluent husband. This gave second-wave feminists invaluable ammunition in their sustained attack on fashion as a man-pleasing manipulation of the "natural" woman.

In 1985, Elizabeth Wilson in *Adorned in Dreams* argued convincingly that fashion, feminism, and socialism could happily coexist; she started with the observation that Beauvoir's seeming strictures had become the "orthodox view within feminism" (100). So persistent has been this read-
ing of Beauvoir that later feminist writers on fashion still feel compelled to dismantle her arguments (see, for example, Bruzzi 1997).

I would argue that Beauvoir has been unjustly treated, first by those who did not appreciate the overtly political nature of her intervention in 1949 and second by those who still read the pages on “fashion” as an unambiguous attack on pleasure in dress and self-adornment. It is problematic to separate the section on dress in the chapter “Social Life” from the full text of a book that itself may best be understood through a full appreciation of its context.

Its genesis was the political turbulence of postwar France, perhaps doubly difficult for women after the comparative though problematic freedoms of the war years. Daniel Purdy argues that because “it had such a strong influence, the book has been read today too often as a historical document” (Purdy 2004, 126) But what he means here is that the book has a “historical” place within feminist literature; he is not so much concerned with postwar Paris.

In 1948 and 1949, France was still damaged, physically and psychologically, and struggling to readjust. The country had suffered humiliation and division during the war years under the collaborationist Pétain regime. Some had colluded with the government, others were quietly resigned, while the most politically active—including Sartre and Beauvoir—either joined or supported the French Resistance. The aftermath was a series of bitter reprisals, including the public trials of known collaborators; there was the shaming and ritual on-street head shaving of women known to have slept with Germans, so eloquently captured by the camera of Henri Cartier-Bresson. However, leading fashion designer Coco Chanel, who had spent the war years living in luxury at the Ritz Hotel with her Nazi lover, was fortunate; she was simply exiled to Switzerland. Perhaps this simple fact helped fuel Beauvoir’s suspicion of high fashion, particularly when coupled with Christian Dior’s “New Look” of 1947. This much copied collection, whose influence lasted for nearly a decade, imprisoned women in waist-cinching corsets and long skirts evocative of the early years of the century.

In France there was widespread poverty during the postwar reconstruction of its devastated infrastructure. Here, as across Europe, this reconstruction was funded by the American Marshall Plan, which meant the necessity of accepting American supremacy. Women, meanwhile, in
France as elsewhere were expected to return to their prewar subservience and, in the upper social echelons, to reassert their femininity. Dior’s New Look collection was not innocent in any way; it was also designed to reassert Parisian supremacy in the world of couture, if nowhere else. Despite fabric shortages and rationing, it duly swept across the high streets of Europe and the cinema screens of Hollywood.

Wilson suggests of Beauvoir’s hostility to high fashion that it “might be significant that she was writing at a time when fashions, with Dior’s New Look, had become unusually nostalgic—backward looking and shackling” (1985, 100). These new silhouettes and endless expensive, impractical accessories—tiny hats and handbags, pointless parasols—were also a reassertion of class supremacy after the seeming democracy of the war years. English novelist Nancy Mitford, living in Paris and dressed by Dior, in her long letters home makes this same point—that her outfits, a silent reminder of class privilege and financial power, provoked complete strangers to shout obscenities at her in the very streets of Paris itself (1993, 124).

Other high-canonical feminist texts originally had particular and specific political aims. Mulvey’s essay of 1975 on the “male gaze” was intended by the author, then radical filmmaker as well as academic, to provide a manifesto for feminist filmmaking. Judith Butler (1990) has told us herself in the preface to the second edition of Gender Trouble that she was prompted by the desire and the need to make a political statement in a growing homophobic climate. Beauvoir was also intent on a pragmatic intervention, to create the first sustained survey of women’s position in this supposedly modern Europe and show it as untenable. Her critique of fashion is only one aspect of that. She does indeed judge the high-status housewife who is her “woman of fashion”; she also sees that she can find pleasure and satisfaction in adorning herself. There is at times an ambivalence, a clear indication that in this “feminine narcissism” ([1949] 1997, 543), this dressing-up to create herself as “erotic object” (543), there is sensuous potential; “woman allies herself to nature while bringing to nature the need of artifice; for man she becomes flower and gem—and for herself also” (544).

Even when she is describing the excesses of New Look evening gowns, there is an appreciation of their appeal and their construction. She describes the women in these dresses as “open blooming flowers” (546) with exposed bosoms, shoulders, and backs rising up out of boned bod-
ices. Dior himself had called this silhouette “La Courolle,” implying that the women who wore it would indeed resemble flowers in full bloom. She can admire even as she admonishes.

All the restrictive clothes she criticizes, which do not “further” women’s “projects but thwart them” (543) are the creations of high fashion, of bourgeois elegance. To suit the manifesto she is writing, when she describes unconventional or subversive modes of dress, they are rendered so bizarre as to suggest that the wearers might be “found in asylums for the insane” (545). There is of course a very different kind of becoming and acceptable “antifashion” aesthetic, such as the one Beauvoir herself created and enjoyed, however. All extant photographs show us a woman who throughout her life dressed with care and thought, who created for herself a chic and simple style, braided and arranged her hair most carefully, wore strong, noticeable pieces of jewelry, and was never without bright-red lipstick. An Italian blogger, Patrizia Finucci, devoted a post to “Beauvoir style,” requiring a subtle mix of Anne Demeulemeester’s avant-garde designs and Chie Mihara’s innovative accessories.

Beauvoir sees an obsession with meticulous self-presentation as one forced on women by well-heeled wifehood. The distaste some see here for these women of privilege is missing the point. She chooses to focus on the “woman of fashion” precisely because her supposedly enviable life is not only restrictive but also seductive. This lifestyle is only one among several that she selects others include those of prostitutes and “high-class hetairas” (578) or courtesans. The book moves toward a consideration of different ways in which women might live. Beauvoir herself had found such a mode of life but was aware that she was fortunate as well as clever. The elaborate “toilette” involving the hand of high fashion that she criticizes as emblematic of bourgeois aspiration is still with us, as is the woman’s body as a site of display. So too is the fact that “woman . . . is even required by society to make herself an erotic object” (543). Now, as then, she can certainly refuse—but this does not involve either a rejection of style or of pleasure in dress.

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Gender, Power, Pornography (British Film Institute, 2003). She is working on a second edition of Fashion Cultures and a monograph that examines the history of fashion documentaries.

Works Cited