



Interview with Professor Yolanda A. Patterson¹

Magda Guadalupe dos Santos².

Sapere Aude: Professor Yolanda Patterson, It is really a great pleasure for us, from Sapere Aude, especially on this special issue on Beauvoir, having you as interviewee.

Sapere Aude: First of all, I'd like to ask you about the Simone de Beauvoir Society. Could you, as its president, tell us about the Society, about its purpose? Why think of gathering people from distinct places around the world to meet year after year and study and debate Beauvoir's work?

Yolanda Patterson: The idea for the Society was brought up after a very successful session about Simone de Beauvoir at a Modern Language Association convention in New York in 1981 chaired by Jacques Zéphir, a professor of French at New York University, who suggested that it was time for such a Society to be organized. It was at that session that I first had the pleasure of meeting Liliane Lazar, an enthusiastic member of the audience and lively participant in the discussion session that followed the presentations that day. The Modern Language Association already had numerous allied organizations devoted to

¹ Emerita Professor of French and Women's Studies for the California State University-Hayward, USA, as well as President of the Simone de Beauvoir Society. Selected Publications: Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood. Yale French Studies.

² Professor of Philosophy. PUC MINAS. Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

specific authors, but very few, if any, devoted to a woman author. Women's Studies courses were just beginning to be organized on American university campuses and the time was ripe.

Sapere Aude: We're here creating questions for this interview while you, in the 1960's, I guess, met with Simone de Beauvoir herself precisely to propose her an interview, wasn't it? How was her reception? How did turned out the dialogue between an American academic professor and a French feminist philosopher in the prime of the 1960's – a decade of great social, moral and political transformations?

Yolanda Patterson: My first association with Simone de Beauvoir was through her writing, about which I chose to write my Master's thesis at Stanford University, entitled "The Problem of Communication in the Works of Simone de Beauvoir" and completed in March 1960. One of my professors at Stanford had cautioned that I should probably not choose a live author to analyze since she would undoubtedly be writing more books and I couldn't say anything definitive about her. My retort was that although that was true, since she was alive, I might have the opportunity to meet with her and ask her questions about her life and her work. And so I did, but not until June 1978, when I had written to her before heading for Paris and received a letter advising me to call her at her home telephone number at a particular time on a particular day. I had recently taught a graduate course devoted entirely to Beauvoir at California State University, Hayward (now East Bay), where one of my colleagues wondered how I would find enough material to fill an entire three-month course. *Aucun problème!* The class was heavily enrolled and we never ran out of lively material for discussion, particularly as the women's movement was gaining momentum at the time. I had the privilege of becoming acquainted with Simone de Beauvoir's sister, Hélène de Beauvoir, in 1978, whom my husband and I visited in the little town of Goxwiller where she and her husband Lionel lived, and whom I continued to see and correspond with for many years afterward. It was Hélène who asked me when I was in Paris with her in September 1985 if I was planning to see her sister about the book I was writing about Beauvoir's treatment of motherhood and suggested that she had mentioned

languages, and also with our son, who was a delight to raise and with whom I continue to have a very close relationship. I was therefore intrigued by the primarily negative presentation of motherhood in Beauvoir's works and suggested that she had somehow "mothered" many women influenced by her writings. Her immediate response was "I am happy that there are women who are fond of me, when I think that I may have helped them live their lives, that I have helped them to think more clearly, to liberate themselves. But that does not in any way link us like a mother and daughter." We ended by my asking her what she would say to women who want to have children. Her answer was "If they wish to have children, why should they deprive themselves of that experience? Then let them manage afterward to reconcile motherhood with a certain independence. One should be very careful not to become enslaved."

Sapere Aude: The translations of Beauvoir's writings have always been a great concern to American researchers. Many write about it and I think that after so many questionings, especially of the first translation to English of *The Second Sex*, the comprehension of Beauvoir's texts took up a new course. The very reception of Beauvoir as a feminist became legitimate enlightened by both those questionings and the new translations occasioned by them. What are your thoughts on the subject? Does it still seem to you a theme worth discussing about?

Yolanda Patterson: I really am not in a good position to comment on the translations because I always go back to the original text in French for any research I am doing.

Sapere Aude: Once you told me your favorite theme on Beauvoir was her autobiographical work; her *Memories*. Why do you assume her Autobiography as a central theme on her writings? And among those, which one exactly you have in highest esteem? *Une mort très douce*? Could you tell us something about the book?

Yolanda Patterson: After many decades of being a member of a monthly book group and an avid reader, I have always been intrigued to know everything I can find out about the authors of the works we discuss. The way one has lived one's life certainly influences the ideas that appear in that person's books. As you will see in Volume 28 of the Simone de Beauvoir Studies which was just mailed out to our members, comments by Asa Moberg sent me back to *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* to reexamine its presentation of Beauvoir's friendship with Zaza. I have often returned to that book and to *Une Mort très douce* because of my interest in relationships between family members and between best friends which have fortuitously been a very important part of my life.

Sapere Aude: We thank you so much for the kindness of granting us this interview. As I once had the opportunity to say to you in person, on the occasion of the 18th International Conference on Beauvoir, that took place in Cagliari, you are a really special person to the reception of Beauvoir's texts in this turn of the 20th to the 21st century. Without your continuous wisdom to allow the conferences to occur annually and always in different countries, researches on Beauvoir would, possibly, be concentrated only in books and periodical's articles. No doubt that Beauvoir would deeply appreciate your continuous effort, as well as Professor Liliane Lazar's, in carrying on the Simone de Beauvoir Society, always in a dialogical relation with contemporary history.

Thank you once again!