“I Recognized Myself in Her”: Identifying with the Reader in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

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A familiar feature of the novel of development, that prominent mode of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English fiction, is the experience of identification—the subject’s perception or projection, willing or reluctant, of significant similarity between herself and another. In the novel of development, identification typically appears in two registers: as part of narrative representation (intratextually) and as part of the reader’s experience of it (extratextually). Intratextually, the protagonist’s identifications may occur not only with other characters but also as effects of characters’ encounters with other texts. To cite one novel that exemplifies characters’ identifications, in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the child Jane identifies with the plight of the slaves about whom she reads in Oliver Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*; as a grown woman, she identifies with the desperation and anger of Bertha Rochester and Rochester’s other discarded mistresses. Such fictional moments of identification simultaneously mimic and solicit extratextual identifications—that is, readers’ own experiences of identification with fictional characters. These scenes thus underscore the fictional protagonist’s verisimilitude by representing her as a subject who is just like the reader in being an identifying reader herself. In this way, literary identification cements an ontological alliance between protagonist and reader by asserting the protagonist’s psychological verisimilitude. The novel’s staging of relations of identification amplifies not only these claims of realist fiction to psychological verisimilitude, but also a particular representation of the human subject as produced and explained by a coherent and singular narrative of intrapsychic orientations.

Because of this aggrandizement of the individual consciousness, the realist novel’s representation of identification is open and indeed central to the charge of ideological conservatism and bourgeois hegemony leveled at classical realism more generally in the Brechtian tradition of Marxist aesthetics.1 Because its destination is always ultimately the self, literary identification, in this view, tends to consolidate rather than expand the subject’s consciousness. In the influential terms defined by Louis Althusser, moments of literary identification might be taken as instances of the ideo-
logical work of interpellation, which “has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.” Drawing out the implications of Althusser’s argument specifically for literature, Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey argue that “any process of identification is dependent on the constitution and recognition of the individual as ‘subject.’ . . . In literature, the process of constituting subjects and setting up their relationships of mutual recognition necessarily takes a detour via the fictional world and its values” (p. 90). We might reverse the emphasis of Balibar and Macherey’s argument to say that the “detour via the fictional world and its values” that constitutes the subject within literature depends upon the process of identification. But the literary text does not produce its effects by its depiction of others with whom a preexisting self identifies; rather, it helps to constitute the self as someone who possesses a form of subjectivity legible only through the “mutual recognition” of identification.

As compelling and on some points incontrovertible this critique of literary identification may be, it notably takes no account of the identifying subject’s gender. In its sources in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, however, identification is above all an identification of the self as a gendered self, through the operation of the Oedipus complex, in which identification is understood to operate hydraulically with object-choice. Ideally, of course, a subject dissolves the Oedipus complex by identifying with (desiring to be) the parent of the same sex and orienting his or her desire toward (desiring to have) the parent of the opposite sex. An identification/desire opposition will thus reinforce and retrospectively appear to ground and make inevitable precisely the normative binary oppositions (masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual) whose naturalization Freud elsewhere calls into question (as in his emphasis on the subject’s initial bisexuality and on the difficulty of what he calls a “complete positive” resolution of the Oedipus complex). A

Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and other queer theorists have taken up as productive the tautologies, contradictions, and gaps in Freud’s understanding of identification, using them to produce accounts of identification that erode the boundaries between masculine and feminine and homo- and heterosexual identities and that thus call into question the naturalization of what Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” of subjectivity. “Reading Freud against Freud,” as Fuss says (p. 6), queer theory has dislodged the heterosexual subject from its position as embodying the identity formation in relation to which other identities are imitations or aberrations. Freud himself concedes in The Ego and the Id that the “normal positive Oedipus complex” with its definitively gendered and heterosexual outcome is by no means the most likely resolution of the “Oedipus situation,” which is made complicated by its “triangular character . . . and the constitutional bisexu-
ality of each individual” (p. 26). Whether male or female, the child has available alternative objects (male and female) of identification and desire, and there is no prima facie reason to suppose that he or she will assort them in the ways that produce a “normal positive” outcome or that identification and desire are mutually exclusive responses to the other.5

This pressure that queer theory puts on Freudian logic is directed not only toward undermining the support offered by psychoanalytic theory to a culturally enforced abjection of queer and other minoritized subjects but also toward accounting for the fact that such subjects persist and persistently experience identifications despite the considerable pressure of social and internalized prohibitions. José Esteban Muñoz theorizes a practice, on the part of queers of color, of what (following Butler and Eve Sedgwick) he calls “disidentification”—the productive and even protean ability to identify with abjected, shameful, or apparently inappropriate identities. In Muñoz’s analysis, performances of such queer identifications across race, class, or gender “[form] counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere” and “offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency” (pp. 1, 2).

Muñoz’s description of a counterpublic produced by identifications draws on an Althusserian tradition in its recognition of the intrapsychic content of political space.6 Such an account of identification would seem to suggest that not all identifications successfully or directly interpellate subjects into dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality. But Muñoz and Butler take as emblematic a particular kind of text: pop culture performances that self-consciously and sometimes with direct political intention challenge representations of identity. (The paradigmatic performance for both Butler and Muñoz is drag.) To what extent, then, can queer theory’s challenge to and complication of the notion of identification be read back into the tradition of classic realism?

For at least some texts and readers of that tradition, I want to argue here, a characterization of identification as a simple and conservative operation fails to capture either the complexity with which identification is often rendered within realist literature or the persistence with which readers of realist literature may experience identification with characters therein as transgressive or liberating. My concern is not so much with whether such a perception on the part of readers is accurate as with, first, how the experience of literary identification within realist narrative works both to sponsor and complicate such feelings; and second, to what extent and why that experience may remain finally limited in its efficacy as a foundation for progressive action.

In particular, I am interested in the identifications of consciously female
readers of classic realist texts, with whom identificatory modes of reading are most prominently associated. The readings that follow, of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1859-60) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1959), suggest two modifications for the critique of identification. First, realist narratives of female development, while they do indeed solicit and depend upon readers’ connections with characters who seem to offer likeness as a point of identification, are themselves prepared to entertain the possibility that such identifications have stultifying rather than liberating effects and may produce estrangement rather than solidarity. For example, as I shall argue, Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* represents identification for and with the novel’s protagonist, Maggie Tulliver, as a mise-en-abîme that ultimately forecloses paths to revision of her story. Second, the very readers who identify with these protagonists—such as Beauvoir—may themselves struggle with and attempt to ameliorate the potentially stultifying effects of identification. In particular, I will argue that Beauvoir’s autobiographical volume attempts, with mixed success, to reimagine the fatal identifications in *The Mill on the Floss* as relations of acknowledged and productive same-sex desire. That is, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* can to some extent be read as putting the kind of pressure on the “heterosexual matrix” represented in *The Mill on the Floss* that queer theory has put on Freud’s schematization of identification and desire.

In a scene of reading at the center of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver refuses to finish Madame de Staël’s novel *Corinne* (1807). She tells Philip Wakem, the suitor who has loaned her the book:

> As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I’m determined to read no more books where the blond haired women carry away all the happiness. ⑦

In the heterosexual romance plot to which Maggie objects, the reward for female conformity is always marriage, and the punishment for female rebellion is often death. Her response suggests that such plots were already axiomatic to nineteenth-century novel readers, even those whose circumstances, like Maggie’s, limited their access to books. Maggie correctly predicts the outcome of *Corinne*: the eponymous dark-haired heroine loses her lover to her half-sister—the “blond-haired young lady reading in the park”—and dies of grief. Maggie is less astute, however, about her own relationship to this plot. When Philip imputes to her a desire to “avenge the dark women in [her] own person,” she disclaims such an identification, asserting that she “care[s] most about the unhappy people; if the blonde girl
was forsaken, I should like her best” (p. 433). As Philip sees it, to identify with Corinne is to imagine rewriting her story through revenge. But from Maggie’s point of view, to identify with Corinne is to take on her fatal failure to negotiate the romance plot.

The vengeance that Philip imagines could only be wreaked by the female subject on the other woman, her romantic rival (Corinne’s half-sister Lucile in Corinne and Maggie’s blond cousin Lucy—whose name echoes Lucile’s—in The Mill on the Floss). The Corinne/Lucile and Maggie/Lucy pairings both offer opportunities for women’s homosocial relations other than those of revenge or rivalry, but the logic of the heterosexual romance plot nevertheless locates them in that position almost by main force, as Maggie becomes enamored of Lucy’s fiancé, Stephen Guest, and ultimately (although temporarily) destroys Lucy’s trust in her by an abortive elopement. This brief romance in fact offers Maggie the opportunity first to “avenge the dark women” by intervening in Stephen’s romance with Lucy and then to demonstrate her empathy with the “forsaken” blond girl by giving Stephen up; these actions lead, indirectly but certainly, to her death in the flood. The logic of revenge, which suggests that one woman’s gain must be another’s loss, is thus not completely reversed by Maggie’s renunciation of Stephen or by Lucy’s reconciliation with her since one woman still winds up dead and the other (as we are elliptically informed) married.

As Maggie grows more aware of her desire for Stephen, she attempts to elude this entrapping logic by eschewing both identification (with Corinne) and desire (for Stephen) in favor of identification with an ethical norm that espouses the claims of family and tradition. To provide an ethical norm is, in Freudian terms, the function of the superego; and although renunciation appeals to Maggie precisely because of its appearance of transcendent impersonality, it bears the history and weight of patriarchal convention, just as the superego, Freud argues, “retains the character of the father,” whose demands that the infant renounce its earliest object-choices are later reinforced by “the influence of authority, religious teaching, school and reading” (The Ego and the Id, p. 30). (Notably, Maggie first receives the norm of renunciation literally through masculine agency in Thomas à Kempis’s volume The Imitation of Christ, given to her by Bob Jakin.) The demands of renunciation are uneven with regard to gender because they are formulated within existing social prescriptions. Stephen lives, unmolested, to marry Lucy; but like Corinne’s, Maggie’s attempts to mitigate the heroine’s plot end with her death.

From the point of view of narrative rather than ethics, Maggie’s error in interpreting her own scene of reading seems both categorical and inevitable: as a representationally real but ontologically fictional character, she cannot recognize her own constitution by narrative conventions.
But the reader of Maggie's narrative, Eliot seems to suggest, should think twice if she is tempted to feel exempt from the error of overestimating her own agency. After all, to disavow a similarity to Maggie is, paradoxically, to repeat her error by identifying with her: she too believes herself to be exempt from the fictional conventions that determine Corinne's end. The moral of Eliot's mise-en-abîme here seems to be that readers equate reality with narrative freedom at our peril. We are not entitled to assume that, because the realist novel gives fictitious form to social conventions, social conventions are therefore fictitious, in the sense that we may alter their plotting at will.

The scene of Maggie's reading of Corinne, then, has a doubled and contradictory effect. Certainly Maggie's trajectory decisively resists the conventional closure of the heterosexual romance plot: Maggie is given not one but two suitors, toward both of whom she is shown as having romantic impulses and both of whom she rejects, and the novel's conclusion gives pride of place toward a homosocial bond (with Lucy) and an endogamous, not to say incestuous, one (with Tom), which closes the narrative. The conclusion's conventionally exogamous heterosexual coupling is periphrastic and vague (though it presumably refers to Stephen and Lucy): “One of [the two men] visited the tomb [of Maggie and Tom] again with a sweet face beside him—but that was years after” (p. 656). But having decentered and deferred the heterosexual romance plot's “happily ever after,” Eliot provides no alternative for her protagonist. The feminist reader may choose to view this lack as historically or narratively compelled, rather than eternal and inevitable, and Eliot's representation of it as a revelation rather than a reinscription. But even the most resisting reader will be hard-pressed to elude the pressure of the mise-en-abîme that Eliot creates, which relentlessly repositions the reading woman as the doomed protagonist of a conventional narrative of femininity. That mise-en-abîme, I have argued, emerges specifically from the logic of Maggie's identification with the protagonist of a prior inscription of the “heroine's text” (in Nancy Miller's titular phrase) and the reader's identification with Maggie.

Simone de Beauvoir's representation of her reading of The Mill on the Floss a century later is animated, I shall argue, by the hope that a change of the genre of the narrative of female development—from fiction to autobiography—might effect a change in that narrative's outcome. This scene of reading occurs in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, the first of Beauvoir's four volumes of autobiography. Beauvoir is of particular significance as a reader of The Mill on the Floss for three reasons. First, just as George Eliot was an iconic female intellectual figure for the nineteenth century, Beauvoir is, as Toril Moi claims, “the emblematic intellectual woman of...
the twentieth century." Second, as part of her intellectual project, she analyzes and disrupts the conventions of the heterosexual romance plot in her novels and short stories as well as in *The Second Sex* (1949). Third, the life-narrative that she constructed publicly and recorded in memoirs, interviews, and published letters also challenges the social conventions and primacy of that “plot” as it takes or took effect in twentieth-century Western culture. By making herself simultaneously subject and object of representation, Beauvoir aims in the act of producing autobiography to correct and transcend not only Maggie’s plot but also Eliot’s pessimism. But despite Beauvoir’s efforts, in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and after, to separate the reader’s agency (in taking up authorship) from the character’s determination by plot, she remains at least partly caught within the circle of identification.

In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir represents her reading of *The Mill on the Floss* as a central moment in her youthful intellectual formation. Maggie Tulliver as an adolescent identifies with the protagonist of *Corinne*; so Simone, though with greater optimism, identifies with Maggie Tulliver. For the sake of clarity and also to resist collapsing the represented with the writing subject, I refer to the author and the first-person narrator of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* as “Beauvoir,” and her protagonist, the younger self whose story she tells, as “Simone.” Beauvoir writes:

George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* made an even deeper impression upon me than *Little Women*. I read it in English, at Meyrignac, lying on the mossy floor of a chestnut plantation. Maggie Tulliver, like myself, was torn between others and herself: I recognized myself in her. She too was dark, loved nature, and books and life, was too headstrong to be able to observe the conventions of her respectable surroundings. . . . The others condemned her because she was superior to them; I resembled her. . . . I couldn’t see myself dying of solitude. Through [Maggie], I identified myself with the author: one day other adolescents would bathe with their tears a novel in which I would tell my own sad story.12

Beauvoir reads *The Mill on the Floss* in English, not French, and alone in the woods in the summer, not in school. What she reads is a description of a social order different from hers, belonging to another country, century, and class of people—and yet not so distant as to be incomprehensible or without resonance. Balibar and Macherey emphasize that it is the location of literature within national linguistic and educational practices that enables it to reproduce the dominant bourgeois ideology (pp. 96-97). The young Simone’s scene of reading outside of these linguistic and institutional spaces lends her identification with Maggie an appearance of transgression. Nevertheless, as a reader Beauvoir accedes to a particular form of subjectivity and to preparing herself to assume what Balibar and Macherey
call the “rights and duties, the obligatory accompaniments” (p. 90) of the individual in her world. In identifying with Maggie, she is interpellated as a particular kind of female subject—the “dark” or rebellious woman—whose characteristics and conventions of literary representation, though certainly not transcultural or transhistorical, are constant enough, from Victorian, Protestant, petit bourgeois, provincial England to 1920s Catholic, bourgeois, provincial France, to make Maggie recognizable to Simone—just as Corinne, incarnating the values of yet another culture, time, and place, was recognizable to Maggie. Simone’s reading of *The Mill on the Floss* captures the paradox of literary identification: while the effects of a given identification on the psyche of an individual reader may be genuinely liberating, the subject whom it psychically liberates remains socially subject to the ideological regime that makes identification possible.

The young Simone is both a more naïve and a more aggressive reader than Maggie; if she disavows her likeness to Maggie less sharply than Maggie does hers to Corinne, that is partly because she does not hesitate to engage in some enthusiastic misreading. First, Simone, already losing her religious faith, ignores the growing Evangelical fervor that causes Maggie to reject fiction entirely because it might “make [her] long to see and know many things” (p. 402); Simone understands Maggie as more rebellious than Maggie conceives herself to be. Second, Simone’s interpretation of Maggie’s death is strained: Maggie dies not of or in solitude but rather of an act of nature or God (drowning in the flood), clasped in the arms of the brother from whom she has been alienated. The novel’s last words give the pair an Old Testament epitaph: “In their death they were not divided” (p. 657). Maggie’s death thus turns her away from the splendid artistic and existential isolation that Simone envisions and back toward not only the Bible but also the literally stifling grasp of her family of origin, the Dodsons. Eliot represents this return as a desired (if fatal) reconciliation; by contrast, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* ends with Simone’s escape from her parents’ home.

Simone’s final misrecognition lies in extending identification a transitive power: “Through [Maggie],” she writes, “I identified myself with the author” (p. 140). She assumes that, just as Maggie’s fictionality makes her available to Simone’s appropriation, the author’s biographical existence makes her a representative of relatively unconstrained historical agency. For perhaps the first but not the last time, she imagines herself transcending the distinction between representation and action: “My life,” she declares, “would be a beautiful story come true, a story I would make up as I went along” (p. 169). Such an assumption is consistent with Beauvoir’s later commitment to existentialism, with its emphasis on individual agency; in the identification with Eliot, however, it is ironic since Eliot
does as much as any author devoted to the narrative of development can to resist such a collapse. Eliot wrote no memoir and deprecated biography. Even the ontological status of the author "George Eliot" is more than usually unclear. The name is a public fiction whose announced gender is at odds with the identity of the biographical person to whom it is attached; and the "real" name used, for example in signing her letters, by the person behind the pseudonym—Marian Evans Lewes—is equally fictitious. Since Marian Evans could not marry the already-married G. H. Lewes, Marian Evans Lewes had no legal existence.13

In contrast, Beauvoir embraces autobiographical alongside fictional narrative. Autobiography presents itself to her as a medium for making particular kinds of truth claims, both about the events she describes and about her relationship to her reader. As Elizabeth Fallaize writes, "The memoirs have a different status [from the novels] and create the possibility of a different kind of reading bond because Beauvoir speaks them in her own name and offers an explicit guarantee of their authenticity, if not of their completeness."14 In Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, unlike The Mill on the Floss, author, narrator, and protagonist share a name and, implicitly, an ontological status: Beauvoir's memoir undertakes to narrate, not the plots of fictional, but the lives of real, persons. The detailed account that Beauvoir provides in this text of her youthful intellectual development casts that development, retrospectively, as the root of her historical status as a celebrated intellectual woman; her attainment of that status is simultaneously the narrative's raison d'être and the story it tells.15 The memoir asserts by its existence as well as in the events it narrates a potentially redemptive distinction between literature and life or convention and action. By producing hundreds of pages on the subject of her own intellectual development and unconventional life choices, Beauvoir makes her autobiographical rejection and revision of feminine plots explicitly available to a variety of readers in a way that Eliot does not.16

Yet the representation of an explicitly autobiographical subject cannot be taken to provide direct access to the "true" historical subject Simone de Beauvoir, a limitation of which Beauvoir was well aware. She does represent her memoirs as gestures toward an ideally unmediated communication between a historical author and historical readers: "No book takes on its full meaning without the reader knowing the circumstances and background of its inception, and having some acquaintance with the personality of its author. By addressing my readers directly I hope to perform this service for them," she writes in introducing the last volume of her memoirs. But she remains aware of the fictionality of representation. Indeed, she complains that readers of the third volume of her memoir "did not fully realize the distance that lies between the flesh-and-blood writer and the
character he brings into existence by the act of writing—a character endowed with a fictitious constitution.”17 If autobiography resembles fiction in having characters “endowed with a fictitious constitution,” this blurring of generic boundaries is most prominent, according to Beauvoir, in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*:

> All through my childhood and my young days, my life had a distinct meaning: its goal and its motive was to reach the adult age . . . For my people and for me, my duty as a child and an adolescent consisted of forming the woman I was to be tomorrow. (That is why *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* has a fiction-like unity lacking in the later volumes. As it does in novels dealing with apprenticeship to life, in that book time runs straight on from beginning to end.) *(All Said and Done, p. 14)*

Notably, in this account, her life story has a “fiction-like unity” not because Beauvoir has retrospectively “endowed” it with that unity but because mimetic fidelity demands that the memoir be novelistic: the young Simone conceives of her life in novelistic terms. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, then, does not abandon fiction in favor of autobiography; rather, it elects fictional convention as the most appropriate form for the dutiful daughter’s autobiographical narrative. In this text, Beauvoir aims to reformulate, not reject, the conventions and the outcome of the novel of female development with which Simone identified in *The Mill on the Floss*, and to a point, she is successful. Rebellious Simone, unlike Maggie, does avenge the “dark women”: she reads what she wants to read, negotiates the plot of heterosexual romance without losing her intellectual or sexual freedom, and survives to write her own story.

But if the turn from fiction to autobiography cannot guarantee a move from representation to truth, so too it cannot guarantee a move from constraint to freedom. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* tells two intertwined stories: that of Simone and that of her best friend, Zaza Mabille, who does not survive its conclusion.18 If, as I am suggesting, we read Simone’s relationship to Zaza as, in part, a rewriting of the Maggie/Lucy plot in *The Mill on the Floss*, then Beauvoir’s narrative does not escape the gendered determinations of the plot to which it is indebted. Beauvoir’s relationship with Sartre, as related in her writing, certainly represents an attempt to live the heterosexual plot differently, but it is barely begun by the end of this volume. The narrative concludes instead with Zaza’s death and Simone’s guilt over it. Simone evades the murderous intention of revenge that Maggie fears, but her narrative does not evade its outcome, expressive at once of a homicidal rage (inasmuch as the “other” woman is destroyed) and a suicidal desperation (inasmuch as Beauvoir represents this “other” woman as an avatar of the self). *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* pushes much further than *The Mill on the Floss* in its representation of female homosocial and homo-
erotic relationships and thus in its challenge to the boundary between the homosocial and the homoerotic; but that challenge comes at a cost that haunts both the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and Beauvoir as a writer. 19

Beauvoir's revised plot not only grants the rebellious protagonist life but also goes much further than *The Mill on the Floss* in blurring the boundaries between identification and desire and thus in challenging, though not abandoning, the requirements of the heterosexual romance plot. This may seem a rather roundabout way of saying that Beauvoir's text opens possibilities of lesbian representation, but as an adjective or a noun "lesbian" remains difficult to apply to or within this text and indeed all of Beauvoir's writing. Although the memoir's stated purpose is a conscious excavation of past motives and drives, and Beauvoir emphasizes the role of desire in the relationship between Simone and Zaza, she does not represent that relationship as explicitly or consciously erotic. Although various forms of written testimony by Beauvoir (for example, some of her letters) as well as by others (for example, Bianca Lamblin, who published a memoir of a triangulated affair with Beauvoir and Sartre) make it clear that she had erotic relations with some women, such relations were never part of her self-representation, and in at least one interview she flatly denied having had such relationships. 20 Lesbianism in Beauvoir's texts, then, is a latent rather than a manifest meaning; and my goal here is not to claim the identity they represent as lesbian but to stress the ways that *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* confounds the identification/desire opposition that structures a more general narrative of heterosexual identity. 21

Just as Maggie Tulliver's moment of identification with the fictional Corinne is elaborated in her relationship with Lucy Deane, so too Simone's recognition of herself in the fictional Maggie is both subordinated to and elaborated in her relationship with Zaza. Zaza, the daughter of a large Catholic family wealthier and more socially prominent than Simone's, joins her class at school when Simone is ten. Immediately, she becomes an object of identification: "In Zaza," Beauvoir writes, "I could glimpse a presence, flashing as a spring of water, solid as a block of marble, and as firmly drawn as a portrait by Dürer. I compared this with my own inner void, and despised myself" (p. 112); further, "I loved Zaza so much that she seemed to be more real than myself: I was her negative; instead of laying claim to my own characteristics, I had to have them thrust upon me which I supported with ill grace" (p. 113).

This relationship between a "negative" or inchoate self and a "solid" other has been read psychoanalytically as suggesting that Simone's relationship with Zaza represents an iteration of her connection to her
mother. But reading Zaza as an avatar of the mother displaces the libidinal energy of the Simone-Zaza coupling chronologically and developmentally backwards, so that emphasizing the maternal relation has the effect of disavowing Beauvoir’s representation of desire for Zaza herself as a part of Simone’s adolescence and young adulthood. Although these psychoanalytic readings capture the aspects of the relationship that mark it as a rehearsal of a foundational scene of identification, they obscure those aspects that make it available to interpretation as itself a foundational scene of lesbian desire—in this text, a potential and, as we will see, ultimately foreclosed, path out of the mise-en-abîme created by literary identification. Butler argues, “To identify is not to oppose desire. Identification is a phantasmatic trajectory and resolution of desire; an assumption of place; a territorializing of an object which enables identity through the temporary resolution of desire, but which remains desire, if only in its repudiated form.” Simone’s early identification with Zaza is inseparable from both desire for her and the aggression suggested by Butler’s words “assumption” and “territorializing.” This combination of identification, desire, and aggression will lead Simone, at the end of the narrative, to take on a guilt caused by her assumption of Zaza’s “place” as the surviving and flourishing female subject.

Initially, Simone’s attraction to Zaza, like her identification with Maggie, seems to have its basis in the kind of “jubilant” identification with an aspirational version of the self that Jacques Lacan discusses in “The Mirror Stage.” Zaza is Simone writ large. “Zaza, like myself, liked books and studying,” Beauvoir writes:

In addition, she was endowed with a host of talents to which I could lay no claim. Sometimes when I called at the rue de Varennes I would find her busy making shortbread or caramels. . . . She used to hectograph a dozen or so copies of a Family Chronicle which she edited and produced herself each week . . . . She took a few piano lessons with me, but very soon became much more proficient and moved up into a higher grade . . . . [W]hen the first fine days of spring came along . . . Zaza would run into a field and do the cartwheel, the splits, the crab, and all kinds of other tricks . . . . In everything she did, she displayed an easy mastery which always amazed me. (p. 93)

If Zaza displays tomboyish “mastery” of gymnastics, she also incorporates intellectual achievements (the production of the Family Chronicle) and more conventionally domestic accomplishments (cooking, playing the piano). She both more clearly repudiates conventional femininity than Simone and more closely attains it. In the remainder of the narrative, however, the conventions of Zaza and Simone’s social world, Simone’s own attitude toward Zaza, and Beauvoir’s retrospective narrative all conspire to deprive Zaza of her display of “easy mastery.”
Zaza’s apparently effortless incarnation of conventionally feminine and less conventional attributes exceeds the boundaries of the mastering identification that Simone can feel with literary others such as Maggie. Her relationship with Zaza threatens from the start to tip from the mode of pleasurable recognition into more disruptive modes of disavowal, aggression, and desire. She repeatedly asserts her independence from and impregnability to Zaza: “Love is not envy. I could think of nothing better in the world than being myself, and loving Zaza” (p. 96); “If it had been suggested that I should be Zaza, I should have refused; I preferred owning the universe to having a single face” (p. 114). As Alex Hughes points out, Simone twice imagines Zaza’s death before that death actually arrives, suggesting that the three representations of Zaza’s death function partly as wish-fulfillments: “For all her idealization of Zaza, Beauvoir’s narrator/heroine is manifesting . . . an implicit but powerful need to remove a resented obstacle to her own autonomy” (p. 128). (Beauvoir’s submerged hostility toward Zaza has precedents in The Mill on the Floss, in which Maggie’s betrayal of Lucy by eloping with Stephen is adumbrated in almost the first interaction we see between them—Maggie pushing Lucy into the mud, p. 164.)

If Simone’s hostility toward Zaza is not quite acknowledged as such, the intensity of her desire for her friend is at first also unintelligible to her: “Zaza was my best friend: and that was all. In a well-regulated human heart friendship occupies an honourable position, but it has neither the mysterious splendour of love, nor the sacred dignity of filial devotion. And I never called this hierarchy of the emotions into question” (p. 94). Nevertheless, Simone soon realizes that “I loved Zaza with an intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions” (p. 118). She fetishizes objects associated with Zaza: “I could touch all the objects that were expressions of her presence; but they did not give her up to me . . .” (p. 120). Since “we kept well within the bounds of modesty, for we were both of the opinion that our innermost feelings should not be exposed” (p. 118), Simone cannot know whether Zaza shares her feelings, and she suffers because Zaza remains unreachable: “I would not even admit to myself with what fevered torment I paid for the happiness she gave me” (p. 120). What she will not admit to herself, the “intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions,” may be read as a desire that exceeds or is considered as inappropriate to its object—that is, a lesbian desire.

Any enactment of such a desire, however, remains in abeyance, and the women’s paths diverge as the memoir draws toward its conclusion. Simone is headed to university; Zaza, whose mother has forbidden her further study, struggles with the expectation that she make an arranged marriage. At this moment of divergence, the passion that Simone feels for Zaza
receives its only physical recognition. While staying with Zaza’s family, one evening Simone watches her play Chopin, “this passionate music which really expressed her true self.” She begins to fear that

there was that mother and all that family between us, and perhaps one day she would disown her real self, and I would lose her. I felt such piercing sadness that I got up, left the room and went to bed in tears. The door opened; Zaza entered and came over to my bed, leaned over me and kissed me. Our friendship had always been such an undemonstrative one that her action filled me with joy. (p. 281)

This moment apparently has no sequel, but when Simone leaves Zaza, she has “decided to fight with all my strength to prevent her life becoming a living death” (p. 282) from the stifling Catholic-bourgeois conventions of the world of the Mabille family with its arranged marriages and distrust of the intellect, particularly in women.

Simone’s rage at the Mabilles and the contrast between Zaza’s doomed impulses toward romantic and intellectual freedom and Simone’s attainment of both in the person of Sartre reproduce a conventional strategy of the heterosexual romance plot: a potential critique of the compulsory quality of heterosexuality in general becomes a critique of particular enforcements (by family or church) of specific heterosexual arrangements—here, the arranged marriage. Simone’s attitude somewhat resembles Philip Wakem’s toward Maggie, when he brings her books and upbraids her for the “narrow self-delusive fanaticism” (p. 427) of her self-denial—an insight whose effect is vitiated by the reader’s recognition that it reflects largely his desire that Maggie not deny him. Simone, as a woman, cannot finally, in Beauvoir’s conception, take on the role of rescuer with success (a disability that she shares with the hunchbacked, feminine, unemployable Philip Wakem himself). The relationship between Simone and Zaza never seriously challenges the narrative power of the heterosexual plot. Instead, as the memoir draws to a close, the differences between the two women come to the fore.

No longer capable of the heterogeneous display licensed by adolescence, Zaza becomes both the representative and the victim of conventional femininity, torn between her sense of duty and her passionate convictions:

Doubtless it was her Christian duty to obey her mother in everything; but . . . [by] allowing herself to be diminished and her intelligence to be misused was she not acting contrary to God’s will? . . . She was afraid of the sin of pride if she surrendered to her own judgment, and of being cowardly if she gave in to pressure from outside. (p. 277)

By this time, Simone has renounced her Catholicism, and Beauvoir describes Zaza’s state of mind with distance as well as sympathy. Beauvoir still maintains that “Zaza and I agreed on almost everything” (p. 281), but
Simone consciously resents Zaza’s continuing attachment to her family: “I could no longer accept such a division of personality. . . . By not coming over to my side, Zaza was throwing in her lot with enemies who were set on destroying me, and that made me feel resentful towards her” (p. 287). Yet Beauvoir realizes that she herself continues to maintain the values of her clan: “Sexual taboos still haunted me to such an extent that I longed to become a drug addict or an alcoholic, but never for a moment did I contemplate sexual indulgence” (p. 308). If she does not experience herself as subject to “division” in the way that Zaza is, the reason is partly that Zaza enacts that conflict for both of them. In doing so, however, she begins to embody precisely that aspect of bourgeois female subjectivity—the double bind caused by equating morality with convention—that Simone has become determined to disavow.

In their last summer together, the two women both find male suitors—for Beauvoir, Sartre, and for Zaza, “Jean Pradelle” (the name Beauvoir gives to Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Among other summer activities, the two women and Pradelle go boating together, recapitulating the setting that provides the occasion for Stephen Guest’s abortive seduction of Maggie. As the relationship between Zaza and Pradelle proceeds toward the conventional conclusion of romance, Simone, despite her interest in Sartre, appears as a rival who must be overcome. An occasion arrives on which Zaza confesses her happiness that “for the first time . . . she had not felt like an intruder with Pradelle and me . . . The same day, . . . Pradelle told me how highly he thought of my friend. . . . One of my dearest dreams was about to be realized: Zaza’s life would be a happy one!” (p. 330). After this climax, Beauvoir writes, “I still went out frequently with Pradelle and Zaza, and now it was I who began to feel I was an intruder” (p. 332). Pradelle has assumed the role of Stephen Guest—a catalyst for heterosexual desire—and Simone and Zaza contract into the roles of Maggie and Lucy.

But even more than Eliot, Beauvoir complicates the representation of female rivalry: Simone’s description simultaneously opposes the two women, makes them parallel, and finally collapses them into one. Each at some point feels herself to be an “intruder” in the other’s relationship with Pradelle, so that even their opposition stresses their likeness; then, in a remarkable elision, Zaza’s happiness becomes Simone’s dearest dream. This collapse begs the question of whether Zaza’s happiness will in fact interfere with Simone’s dreams, either by removing Zaza as her companion or by arrogating to Zaza the narrative outcome of a successful heterosexual union. Simone, meanwhile, begins to find her own happiness with Sartre, who “corresponded exactly to the dream-companion I had longed for since I was fifteen: he was the double in whom I found all my burning aspirations raised to the pitch of incandescence” (p. 345). This description makes
clear the extent to which this heterosexual doubling both inherits and replaces the earlier, now disappointing bond with Zaza. At the same time, however, it demonstrates Beauvoir's refusal to observe conventional oppositions between and gender assignments of identification and desire. Within both relationships, identification and desire seem virtually inseparable, and Zaza's ultimate unsuitability as a reflection of "burning aspiration" emerges from the socially determined stunting of her ambitions rather than from an essential (feminine) deficit.

Simone's dream of Zaza's happiness does not come true: Pradelle's passivity and parental opposition undermine the relationship between Pradelle and Zaza. Zaza succumbs to a mysterious illness that Beauvoir represents as the somatic manifestation of thwarted desire:

The doctors called it meningitis, encephalitis; no one was quite sure. Had it been a contagious disease, or an accident? Or had Zaza succumbed to exhaustion and anxiety? She has often appeared to me at night, her face all yellow under a pink sun-bonnet, and seeming to gaze reproachfully at me. We had fought together against the revolting fate [le destin fangeux] that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death.27 (p. 360)

In these, the last words of the memoir, the jaundiced Zaza grotesquely recalls the "light-complexioned" heroine on whom Maggie Tulliver could not quite imagine exacting revenge. Beauvoir, of course, is not the cause of Zaza's death, but she has been unable to save her. In Zaza's death, the two women are divided. The dutiful daughter's memoirs can be written only when the dutiful daughter—the role that Zaza has taken over—has been expelled from the text.

With Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter as the first of four volumes of autobiography, however, Beauvoir's narrative pauses but does not end with Zaza's death. In her preface to The Prime of Life (1962), the second volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir explains that she originally intended to stop with Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter:

When I had completed my Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter no voice spoke to me out of my past, urging me to continue the story. . . . [But] little by little I became convinced that, from my own point of view, the first volume of my Memoirs required a sequel. There was no point in having described how my vocation as a writer was acquired unless I then went on to show its realization.28

The "sequels" that Beauvoir produces—not only three further volumes of memoir but also autobiographical narratives such as America Day by Day (1948), A Very Easy Death (1964), and Farewell to Sartre (1981); the col-

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lections of letters to Sartre (1990) and Nelson Algren (1997); and interviews, including those with Alice Schwarzer collected in *After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone de Beauvoir* (1983)—through their very descriptions of her “vocation as a writer” seem to enact Beauvoir’s triumph over the tragic narrative (Maggie Tulliver’s narrative) of female development.

These sequels reflect as well Beauvoir’s belief in the possibility of achieving real presence and unmediated communication through this vocation: “Whether it is a question of a novel, an autobiography, an essay, an historical work or no matter what, the writer attempts to set up communication with others by the uniqueness of his personal experience” (*All Said and Done*, p. 115). But as Beauvoir acknowledges, this attempt is realized more frequently in its frustration than its achievement. Speaking of the reception of the third volume of her memoirs, Beauvoir writes, “The I that speaks stands at a distance from the I that has been experienced. . . . If the public had not confused them, *Force of Circumstance* would not so easily have given rise to misunderstanding” (p. 115). Beauvoir’s desire for unmediated communication leads inevitably and paradoxically to a dizzying proliferation of texts. She can never stop producing texts that comment upon, repeat, and revise each other since even texts that have the stylistic markers of direct address (such as memoirs and interviews) become, once published, representations in which “the I that speaks stands at a distance from the I that has been experienced” and thus are once more open to misreading and in need of further explanation.

The result—again paradoxical—is that, as Moi observes, “Simone de Beauvoir” becomes almost entirely a figure produced by text:

> The intertextual network of fictional, philosophical, autobiographical and epistolary texts that she left us is our Simone de Beauvoir. In addition to this we have all the texts about her: letters, diaries, newspaper interviews and reviews, scholarly studies, films, biographies, personal recollections by friends and enemies—all contribute to the production of the network of images and ideas we recognize as “Simone de Beauvoir.” (p. 4)

Maggie Tulliver, the reading girl, is trapped in a circle of representation, helpless to read differently or, therefore, to be differently read. Beauvoir, the writing woman, is strapped to a Xeno’s arrow of textual production, unable ever to arrive at the resolution toward which she aims. The apparent difference between these two abysses is that Maggie’s is recursive, leading the novel’s reader ever further into the determination of narrative, whereas Beauvoir’s is projectile, aiming beyond the narrative horizon altogether, toward the vanishing point at which experience and its representation become one.

But as Beauvoir herself recognized, even that utopian arrow becomes
trapped in the circle of identification. The textually produced “Simone de Beauvoir” becomes an object of identification for new readers: “Many [readers] turn me into an image and at the same time identify themselves with me” (All Said and Done, p. 116); “What disappointed some readers [of her novel Les Belles Images, 1966] was that they could not identify themselves with any of the characters” (All Said and Done, p. 123). One might object that these readers whose responses dismay Beauvoir are only doing what Simone does in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter: taking their place in a chain of identifications that narratives of female development model and solicit even as they warn of the dangers of identification. Yet the thrust of Beauvoir’s complaint is that for such readers self-recognition becomes a reification (“they would like to think that I am immutably dedicated to serenity,” she grumbles in All Said and Done, p. 116) rather than a starting point for a projection of self into world-historical activity. For Beauvoir, the identification with Zaza does come to ground a larger effort to rescue other women from the “living death” and “revolting fate” that claimed her childhood friend—an effort, however, that itself never escapes the interwoven impulses of desire and hostility characterizing the initial connection.

In closing, then, I return to the problem of literary identification’s dual registers as individual experience and as ideological effect. Because the kind of literary identification I have been discussing always occurs within a narrative of development that precedes as well as awaits the subject, it does have a recursive and socially reproductive function: it subjects the reader to those ways of being a subject that are already available. Yet for the individual reading subject, it can be powerful because it offers a recognition (“I recognized myself in her”) that is also experienced as a precognition of an effective future (“I identified myself with the heroines of novels, and through them I caught glimpses of what my life would be,” All Said and Done, p. 138). Literary identification may offer to adult consciousness something like the “flutter of jubilant activity” that Lacan’s infant experiences on apprehending in the mirror its previously unimagined wholeness.29 While feminist criticism must be wary, therefore, of the proximity of identification to an ideological abyss, it seems neither useful nor truthful for such criticism to disavow identification’s pleasures and significance. We can, however, attend, as I have tried to do here, to the ways in which works that function as favored objects of feminist identification themselves question, complicate, and attempt to move us beyond the immediate and essentially individual pleasures of self-recognition.
NOTES


5 In The Ego and the Id, Freud temporizes about how the Oedipus complex actually produces a gendered outcome: “In both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or the mother” (p. 28). Since “masculine and feminine sexual dispositions” are what Freud presents the Oedipus complex as producing, it is unclear what can ground the prior existence of those “dispositions.” (For an argument that the “dispositions” are, in fact,
effects of an unacknowledged [by Freud] social prohibition, see Butler, Gender Trouble, pp. 57-65). In Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, he concedes the ambivalence of identification in its relation to both disavowal and desire: “The little boy notices that his father stands in his way with his mother. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and becomes identical with the wish to replace his father in regard to his mother as well. Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone’s removal” (p. 37; see also The Ego and the Id, p. 27). Freud tends to present these observations as minor qualifications that do not significantly alter the logic of his argument, and it is the achievement of queer theorists’ readings of Freud to draw out the significant impact of such qualifications. Often Freud “resolves” contradictions by assigning them hierarchical locations within a developmental narrative so that, for example, a confusion between identification and object-choice is “primitive”: “At the very beginning, in the individual’s primitive oral phase, object-cathexis and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other” (The Ego and the Id, p. 23). José Esteban Muñoz, in his Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), provides a useful schematization of Freud’s developmental model of identification and its representation of same-sex desire as “pathologized and regressive” (p. 202, n. 16); subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

For the intellectual lineage of Muñoz’s conception of “disidentification,” see pp. 11-12.

George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, ed. A. S. Byatt (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 432-33; subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. In the scene to which Maggie refers, we learn only that the reader—Lucile, Corinne’s half sister—is “very engrossed in her reading” (Germaine de Staël, Corinne, or Italy, trans. Avriel H. Goldberger [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987], p. 317), not what the book is, and Lucile lays it aside when she meets Oswald, whom she will marry. She ceases to be the reading woman and becomes, instead, the heroine of the heterosexual romance plot. For a reading of Corinne as “a feminist text engaged with issues of subjectivity as process,” see Nancy K. Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 165; for a reading of Corinne as “openly celebrat[ing] the value of European book culture,” see Carla L. Peterson, The Determined Reader: Gender and Culture in the Novel from Napoleon to Victoria (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), p. 80.

Lucy is “a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them” (p. 477), and she and Maggie enjoy an affectionate relationship, admiring each other’s different kinds of charisma. Maggie finds Lucy a “dear tiny thing” full of unselfish delight in the happiness of others (p. 481); Lucy, admiring (although not understanding) Maggie’s passionate enjoyment as she listens to Stephen sing, “could not resist the impulse to steal up to her and kiss her” (p. 532). After the catastrophe of Maggie’s abortive elopement with Lucy’s fiancé, the two women cry in each other’s arms and part with “a last embrace” (p. 643), which proves to be Maggie’s penultimate embrace.
before dying in the arms of her brother.


15 For an argument that Beauvoir’s adult commitment to existentialism retrospectively shapes her representation of her childhood, see Moi, pp. 26-30.

16 For a discussion of whether Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter is best read as autobiography or fiction, see Christina Angelfors, “Mémoires d’une Jeune Fille Rangée: Autobiographie ou Fiction?” Simone de Beauvoir Studies, 15 (1998-99), 64-71. Angelfors connects the fictional qualities of the memoir with, among other aspects of the text, Simone’s identifications with Maggie and other extratextual literary characters: “Il semblerait donc que la fiction offre à la jeune Simone de Beauvoir de meilleurs modèles d’identification que la réalité. De là à transformer la réalité en fiction et elle-même en un personnage de cette fiction, il n’y a qu’un pas” (‘It would thus seem that fiction offers the young Simone de Beauvoir better models of identification than reality. From there to transforming reality into fiction and herself into a character in this fiction is but a step’; p. 68, my translation). I agree with this conclusion, although, as my discussion demonstrates, I do not think such a transformation is finally simple or conclusive.


18 Beauvoir uses pseudonyms for some characters in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter. Zaza’s family name, given by Beauvoir as “Mabille,” is Lacoin.

19 On Beauvoir’s repeated attempts to tell Zaza’s story, see Angelfors, pp. 64-66, and Beauvoir, The Prime of Life, trans. Peter Green (New York: Lancer Books,


astonishment that human beings can go through such great and momentous phases of their love-life without heeding them much, sometimes even, indeed, without having the faintest suspicion of them: or else that, when they do become aware of these phases, they deceive themselves so thoroughly in their judgment of them. . . . One must agree that the poets are right who are so fond of portraying people in love without knowing it, or uncertain whether they do love, or who think that they hate when in reality they love. It would seem that the knowledge received by our consciousness of what is happening to our love-instincts is especially liable to be incomplete, full of gaps, or falsified.

The observation seems to apply particularly well to Beauvoir’s representation of her relationship with Zaza.

See Catherine Portuges, “Attachment and Separation in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*,” *Yale French Studies*, 72 (1986), 107-118, who analyzes “the formative influence of Simone de Beauvoir’s relationship with her mother—and the mothering elements of other, subsequent attachments—on her own psyche and her view of women” (p. 110); and Alex Hughes, “Murdering the Mother in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, pp. 120-31, who reads Zaza as an image of “the phallic mother . . . the one means by which Simone hopes (erroneously) to elude the mother-related anguish evoked in Part I whilst avoiding the ‘exile’ to which she knows definitive mother/daughter separation condemns her” (126-27). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.


25 Beauvoir writes in *All Said and Done* of her adolescent reading that it was “the
key that opened the world to me. It foretold my future: I identified myself with the heroines of novels, and through them I caught glimpses of what my life would be" (p. 138).

Hughes argues that Sartre replaces Zaza as "a partner in a mirror-relationship" who takes on the status of the phallic mother (p. 129).

In Beauvoir's French, Zaza does not "seem" to gaze reproachfully at Simone but simply does so: "elle me regardait avec reproche" ('she regarded me reproachfully'); see Beauvoir, *Memoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1958), p. 503.
