

---

H-France Review Vol. 5 (October 2005), No. 117

Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*. Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. xvi + 195 pp. Preface, notes, bibliography and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7425-3476-6.

Review by Alison S. Fell, Lancaster University.

---

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has attained canonical status since its publication in 1949. Its reception, however, has been mixed. While it has been consistently referred to as a foundational text for second-wave feminism, it has also been the subject of virulent attacks. As Fredrika Scarth points out in her thoughtful and nuanced study of Beauvoir's essay, both positive and negative responses to *The Second Sex* have tended to be based on a limited engagement with the philosophical foundations and rhetorical strategies of the text itself. Beauvoir's iconic status in the history of feminism has, in particular, led to reductionist readings of her analysis of the female condition. In Rosi Braidotti's terms, Beauvoir has functioned as both "the 'good' founding mother of modern feminism [and] the 'bad' phallic perpetrator of humanist rationalism" (p. 18). This has meant that the subtleties and complexities of *The Second Sex* have been underemphasised in favour of readings that shore up either a hagiographic account of Beauvoir as "the mother of us all" (p. ix) or a damning critique that highlights her "masculinism" and "acceptance of patriarchal values" (p. 30). Many of these readings are, as Scarth points out, highly personalised, the products of an emotional engagement with Beauvoir's life-choices that are set up either as a model or as an anti-model for an authentic feminist life. Since the 1990s, however, several re-readings of Beauvoir's work have sought to approach *The Second Sex* as a serious work of philosophy rather than read it solely in terms of Beauvoir's life, relationship with Sartre, psyche, or feminist credentials. Scarth belongs to this growing trend; indeed, as she states in her preface, she is writing as part of "a collective project—a renaissance of Beauvoir studies that is also a revisionist project" (p. x).

Scarth productively employs two frameworks in her reading of *The Second Sex*—frameworks that have tended to be underexploited by pre-existing feminist analyses of Beauvoir's thought. First, she reads Beauvoir's essay in the light of the latter's little-known essays on ethics: *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (which is only available in the original French) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This allows her to show how Beauvoir's assessment of the female condition, and particularly her descriptions of the female body, do far more than simply repeat Sartre's masculinist assumptions, a criticism that has often been levied at these sections of Beauvoir's text. Second, Scarth attends to the socio-political context of *The Second Sex*, suggesting, for example, that the negative imagery used by Beauvoir to describe the pregnant body must be seen, at least in part, as a rhetorical strategy deployed in order to destroy patriarchal myths about pregnancy and maternity that were prevalent in 1940s France. Scarth is not the first to read Beauvoir's writings in the light of her essays on ethics [1]; nor is she the first to point to the importance of the socio-political context in which *The Second Sex* was produced.[2] However, her focus on the role and representation of the female body in Beauvoir's essay, and particularly on the maternal body, gives her analysis a clear and original focus. Her careful close readings of some of the most notorious passages of *The Second Sex* in which the pregnant woman is described in terms of metaphors of war and invasion, offering the reader horrifying images of women "devoured" or "consumed" by the species, productively encourage us to go back to the original text and reconsider Beauvoir's position.

The book begins by helpfully outlining the contexts in which *The Second Sex* has been received by its readers, feminist and otherwise, since its publication, and subsequently the contexts (socio-political and

philosophical) in which it was conceived and written. Thus, chapter two traces Simone de Beauvoir's often fraught relationship with her feminist 'daughters', and chapters three and four gloss with admirable clarity the ways in which Beauvoir both reproduces and diverges from the thought of her foremost philosophical influences (Hegel, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) in her philosophical writings. The key concept to emerge from *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is that of the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. In these essays, Beauvoir makes two important and interrelated assertions: first, we are "at once individual freedom and an object in the worlds of others" and second, we are both "freedom, or consciousness, and flesh: a body-subject" (p. 70). These insights distance Beauvoir from both Hegel and from Sartrean Existentialism, in that her ethics argues for the necessity of "assuming ourselves as both transcendent and immanent at once. We are both consciousness and a thing, both a freedom and a body born to die" (p. 71). This, Scarth argues, has far-reaching implications for Beauvoir's discussion of the self-other relationship and her descriptions of the female body in *The Second Sex*. In Scarth's view, Beauvoir wishes to demonstrate in her essay on the female condition that patriarchy denies the ambiguity of the human condition. In its relegation of women to the role of Other and its promotion of men to the role of Absolute Subject, patriarchal discourse constructs the female body as immanent and the masculine body as transcendent. This mythologizing of Woman and of the female body fails to recognise the fact that men *and* women are simultaneously both self and other, both freedom and flesh. The consequences of this are twofold: men and women are "stuck in a relation that is maintained through illusion, one about which neither party reaches clarity or lucidity" (p. 108), and "neither men nor women live their bodies authentically under patriarchy" (p. 100).

Scarth argues that what Beauvoir is doing in *The Second Sex* is to attack such patriarchal discourse that refuses to allow men and women the possibility of assuming the ambiguity of the self-other relation, of recognising themselves as both freedom and object. Beauvoir's text equally reveals, for Scarth, the extent to which a life lived under patriarchy does not give men or women the possibility of accepting their bodies as ambiguously immanent and transcendent at once. The only situation in which individuals are able, albeit briefly, to assume the ambiguity of their embodied condition is in the erotic embrace which "involves the recognition of the other, and the acceptance of the body-self" (p. 123). Chapter five then goes on to consider the implications of Beauvoir's ethics for her negative depictions of the pregnant body in *The Second Sex* as invaded, or even as "monstrous." Here, Scarth contends that what Beauvoir is describing is not the pregnant body *per se*, but rather the ways in which it is experienced by women under patriarchy. The imagery of invasion and resistance in her descriptions of pregnant women is thus not a repetition of masculinist assumptions, nor is it related to Beauvoir's own (conscious or unconscious) prejudices. Rather, such descriptions must be seen as a deliberate rhetorical strategy deployed by Beauvoir in order to allow the reader to understand "the experience of maternity when the mother's subjectivity is not recognized and when women are given no concrete choices or opportunities in the world" (p. 138). If women were to choose to have children freely, to consider reproduction as an "engagement", then, it is argued, women would not necessarily experience their bodies in this way, and could have an altogether different understanding of what it means to engage with the "other within."

This, however, is the problem with Beauvoir's analysis of pregnancy and maternity in *The Second Sex*. Her attacks on patriarchal myths are without doubt radical and convincing. But what she is not able to do as effectively is to formulate an alternative conceptual framework in which women's relation to their maternity could be understood more positively. Scarth's study becomes speculative when it attempts to apply Beauvoir's presentation of the erotic encounter as a potential "act of generosity, a gift of the self as flesh, and an abandonment to the flesh to reach out to the other" (p. 153) (and thus as an acceptance of the ambiguity of the human condition) to her depictions of pregnancy. In these sections in chapter five, it is unclear where Scarth stops reading Beauvoir and begins instead to sketch out what Beauvoir might have gone on to theorise had she not been limited by the constraints of her own situation as a lone voice in a patriarchal society that saw pregnancy as a blissful fusion of mother and foetus, and maternity as the pinnacle of women's achievements. In sum, Scarth's study is an excellent introduction to some of the

key debates that have sprung up in recent years in relation to *The Second Sex*. It offers a well-informed, subtle and often persuasive analysis of Beauvoir's text in the light of her essays on ethics. The only slight flaw, perhaps, is Scarth's unwillingness to align herself, however reservedly, with the school of feminist thought that sees Beauvoir's representation of the female body as problematic. Whilst it is certainly the case that Beauvoir is not simply reproducing patriarchal assumptions about male and female biology, it is equally true that her text betrays contradiction and vacillation in her thinking on women's embodiment. Bringing out these contradictions in the text would have productively flagged up the impossibility, in 1949, of imagining fully the ways in which an "ethics of ambiguity" could be applied to all areas of women's lives.

---

#### NOTES

[1] See Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[2] See Alison S. Fell, *Liberty, Equality, Maternity in Beauvoir, Leduc and Ernaux* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003); Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (London: Athlone, 1996).

Alison S. Fell  
Lancaster University  
a.s.fell@lancaster.ac.uk

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172