What I love is this counterpoint that runs through your whole book—this sara-band of desires that are never satisfied.

*THE SECOND SEX* (1949) IS A BIG BOOK, but it was a small part of Simone de Beauvoir's intellectual production. Beauvoir wrote essays and fiction; she kept notebooks and diaries that she revised (significantly) for volumes of memoirs; she sent thousands of letters to her friends, lovers, and fellow intellectuals.¹ She wrote to place her life in history and, in classic existentialist fashion, to find meaning in her everyday encounters and relationships. She wrote tirelessly—creating, presenting, and reworking her self.² It was a high-profile act, and, her critics notwithstanding, an enormously

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popular one. Beauvoir received thousands of letters from her readers, now gathered in a rich but virtually unexplored collection at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. The archive takes us well beyond Beauvoir, to the public, to ordinary lives in the 1950s, and to the history of the relationship between author and audience. The letters suggest how Beauvoir was understood, but more important, they testify to how readers read, to readers’ preoccupations and purposes, and to their own efforts to explain and present themselves, which sometimes mirrored Beauvoir’s. This group of letters may be too personal and idiosyncratic to provide a platform for broad-gauged social history. That very singularity, however, opens onto what French historian Judith Lyon-Caen calls a history “attentive to individuals and to ways in which the self is constructed.”

The letters to Beauvoir offer rare close-up views of women and men in the 1950s struggling to write about a range of difficult subjects: work, the travails of a writer, marriages gone bad, unwanted pregnancies and unwanted children, frustrated or confusing desires and feelings, including homosexuality, childhood experiences, and so on. The letter writers’ ability to broach these topics was often limited by ignorance or isolation, by their having no language that seemed appropriate, and indeed by a sense of themselves as ordinary. What unlocked their inhibitions and prompted them to write to a philosopher? The answer involves several elements. Beauvoir raised topics made timely by France’s economic and cultural postwar transformation. More important, she invited readers to identify with her and engage her directly, through her memoirs and, though less directly, in _The Second Sex_—in a language that was at once shocking or disconcerting and also resonant. At the same time, highbrow intellectual production in postwar France became enmeshed in a rapidly growing mass culture, from radio and television to the mass-circulation weekly and monthly magazines. This media culture was not merely French: publications such as _Paris Match, L’Express, _and _Elle_ circulated well beyond the hexagon; Canadian radio featured interviews with Beauvoir and other existentialists; so did _Time_ magazine and German and Colombian newspapers. Beauvoir’s own writing combined with her construction as a media celebrity to make her, as one letter writer put it, “approachable.” Such familiarity could breed contempt, especially when, as

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of Existentialism (Lanham, Md., 1999); Simons’s introduction to Simone de Beauvoir, _Wartime Diary_ (Urbana, Ill., 2008); and Susan Rubin Suleiman, _Crises of Memory and the Second World War_ (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).


6 The classic account is Jean Fourastié, _Les trente glorieuses, ou la revolution invisible de 1946 à 1975_ (Paris, 1979); and the most recent, which covers Europe in general as well as France, is Tony Judt’s brilliant _Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945_ (New York, 2006).

7 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, November 23, 1959, May 7, 1960. The archive requires that the letter writers remain anonymous.

8 Ibid., July 7, 1957.
FIGURE 1: Elliott Erwitt, Simone de Beauvoir (1949). Reproduced by permission of Magnum Photos.
in this case, the author’s work included detailed treatments of female sexual experience. It is well known that The Second Sex ran into a thicket of critical disdain and misogyny, exemplified by the French conservative critic François Mauriac’s remark to one of Beauvoir’s colleagues at Les temps modernes that he “had learned everything about the vagina and clitoris of your boss.”9 The archive of readers’ letters, however, shows another side of the story: sympathetic readers appreciated the very aspects of Beauvoir’s work that repelled Mauriac, and they welcomed the forms of intimacy and self-disclosure that they believed her to be not only offering to but also eliciting from them. They did so in a moment, the 1950s, when the same mass culture that produced Beauvoir’s celebrity also offered a steady stream of feature stories about the lives and loves of ordinary people, letters to advice columns, opinion polls, questionnaires about personality, and so on. The popular psychology of the press offered some readers a primer for the more challenging forms of self-scrutiny and self-knowledge that Beauvoir called for, and for her sharper language of the frustration and fulfillment of desire. Mass culture, in other words, encouraged some of these letter writers to embark on their particular forms of active engagement with mandarin culture.

The most interesting letters in the archive are from the first decade and a half, the time before “the condition of women,” “feminism,” and “sexuality” congealed into set topics on which one adopted familiar positions, and about which it was appropriate to write to Simone de Beauvoir.10 From the mid-1960s on, letters poured in from activists organizing meetings and from journalists and scholars writing articles or asking Beauvoir to speak at conferences about women; a movement was in the process of making her its icon. In the earlier period, however, her correspondents were more varied, and they engaged her in interestingly unpredictable ways. The letters from that time are fresher and less formulaic, wrestling with topics that were not only taboo but also ill-defined. Whether or not they point toward the feminist horizon of the later 1960s and 1970s is an important question, but one not easily answered. The passage from the personal to the political, in the famous shorthand of second wave feminism, was far from self-evident.11 Moreover, Beauvoir’s work, with its emphasis on individual ethics, did not necessarily light the way. Her ambivalence about women’s movements and The Second Sex’s stance on feminism as, alternately, a movement whose time had passed (“perhaps we should say no more about it”) and an impossibility (“women do not say we”) remain part of her paradoxical legacy.12 The diversity of the readers who wrote to Beauvoir testifies to a wide

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9 See Galster, Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir, 22, 294–296.
10 The archive holds around 2,500 letters for 1942–1975 and roughly 250–300 for the years considered here. “The condition of women” had emerged as a topic by the 1950s, but one framed in terms of the modernization of French women and what could be done about their alleged political isolation and economic marginality, not what women might do by and for themselves. Chaperon, Les années Beauvoir, provides a good survey of the development of a range of women’s and feminist issues in the 1950s and 1960s.
11 The letters as I read them confirm Joan Scott’s characteristically clear and forceful argument against equating the personal and the political or seeing the “lived experience of women . . . directly leading to resistance to oppression, that is, to feminism.” Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” Critical Inquiry 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 786–787.
interest in the topics she raised, but that same diversity cautions against mustering the letter writers into the ranks of proto–second wave feminists. The letters do show women and men in the 1950s and early 1960s finding the wherewithal to face both internal and external obstacles in ways that prefigured feminist politics in the years that followed. A few mark different routes to what is plainly feminist consciousness. The issues these readers raised—as well as those they avoided—underscore some of the complexities of second wave feminism, which historians continue to explore in different national contexts. Above all, the letters constitute a remarkable archive of interior lives during the 1950s, testifying to the persistence of a nineteenth-century regime of pain, confusion, and ignorance in the sexual lives of many, to the fresh blasts of air of a changing cultural climate, and to the efforts—some stammering, some clear and unabashed—to speak about sexual feeling—or in more modern terms, to acknowledge desire.

Allier (London, 2009) has raised a commotion. Toril Moi, the leading critic of Parshley’s translation, has also pummelled the new one. See Moi, “While We Wait: The English Translation of The Second Sex,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 27, no. 4 (2002): 1005–1035; Moi, “The Adulteress Wife,” London Review of Books 32, no. 3 (2010): 3–6; and Carlin Romano, “The Second ‘Second Sex,’” Chronicle of Higher Education, June 20, 2010. Why the translation should be so difficult is an interesting question. Beauvoir’s philosophical terms were indeed multivalent and difficult, as Judith Butler shows in her brilliant parsing of “become” in “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex,” Yale Journal of French Studies 72 (1986): 35–49. In certain places, Parshley completely obscured Beauvoir’s philosophical premises; for instance, he translated the phenomenological “expérience vécue” (“lived experience”) as “woman’s life today.” Yet Parshley’s interest in and support for Beauvoir’s philosophy and her feminism comes through clearly in his correspondence with his impatient and skeptical editor at Knopf. See Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Records, Series III, Blanche W. Knopf, 1918–1966, bulk 1940–66, folder 689.13, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. The ongoing disputes about the translation have everything to do with the dilemmas of feminist politics and paradoxes of feminist discourse, for they bring to the surface both symptomatic problems with “woman” or “women” and disagreements about the importance of culture, psyche, embodiment, and so on in the formation of gender—a term that, to make things more difficult, Beauvoir did not use. See among others Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History (London, 1988); and Joan W. Scott, “Unanswered Questions,” American Historical Review 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1422–1429. Fortunately, the vast majority of letter writers considered in this essay read Beauvoir in French.

The archive presents the kinds of interpretive problems and riches encountered by any historian who works with letters. It is incomplete. Beauvoir’s heirs removed letters from well-known friends; Beauvoir herself threw away letters and haphazardly stashed those she saved in bags and boxes. She discarded the envelopes, complicating the process of dating and cataloguing that continues at the Bibliothèque nationale. In her memoirs, Beauvoir reported that *The Second Sex* elicited a spate of ugly and insulting letters. Only a few such letters are in the archive.\(^{14}\) *The Second Sex* did indeed create a scandal, but scandal is not the story to emerge from this collection. The letter-writing readers are not necessarily representative of the reading public, or even of Beauvoir’s followers. They are, however, a varied and intriguing group: writers and aspiring writers, teachers, clerical workers, women at home, schoolgirls, university students, factory workers, doctors, psychologists and psychoanalysts, and childhood friends. They are male (about one-third) as well as female, for Beauvoir’s subjects mattered to both men and women. The letters testify to the wide reach of postwar French culture; they are datelined Tunis, Rio, Jerusalem, Lausanne, Warsaw, New York, Mexico City, Bogotá, and Zagreb as well as provincial France. Their materiality captures very different moments and feelings, educations and social standings. Readers sent postcards, holiday greetings, professional business cards, clippings of reviews, and pictures (a few of which are in the archive). Most wrote by hand, which was considered more formal and polite than typing. Some did so fluidly and at great length, others with obvious difficulty, crossing out words and phrases. One letter makes it easy to envision how it—and others—had actually lain on Beauvoir’s desk. On the back someone wrote a shopping list for a gathering, apparently hosted by Beauvoir, for eight friends: “1 bottle vodka, 3 bottles whiskey, 1 foie gras for 8, 3 bottles of champagne; 1 bottle of Bourgogne (Bost), caviar, and petits pains.”\(^{15}\)

Did Beauvoir answer the letters? She marked a few “Replied.” Many of the writers thanked her for responding to them. In a handful of cases, such as that of a young man who was starting his military service in 1957 and asked her to be his “war godmother,” they corresponded for many years.\(^{16}\) She declined to answer love letters and marriage proposals, but seems to have treated many of her correspondents with respect.\(^{17}\) But more significant, many of the people who wrote to Beauvoir were not content to remain simply readers, hanging on her every word. Some cast themselves as critics in their own right, and as a group they may have pushed her toward a more feminist reading of her own work than she first conceived.

The letters, of course, show these readers at their best: demonstrating their attentiveness and intelligence, eager to explain that they had read her exactly as she


\(^{15}\) Beauvoir, lettres reçues, October 19, 1950. “Bost” is Jacques-Laurent Bost; see fn. 1.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., July 7, 1957. War godmothers supported soldiers by writing letters. The practice began during World War I. See also January 30, 1959. The archive does not hold copies of any of her answers, nor have Beauvoir’s correspondents contributed their letters from her.

\(^{17}\) She wrote to Algern about letters she received from readers. Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 289, 296, 305. See also Beauvoir, lettres reçues, September 13, 1958.
would have wanted them to, or modeling themselves on her characters.\textsuperscript{18} As Lyon-Caen says in her excellent study of letters from readers to Honoré de Balzac and Eugène Sue, “Readers’ letters never tell the real experiences of reading.”\textsuperscript{19} Nor did the writers recount their “real” life stories.\textsuperscript{20} Bound up in an intense and vividly imagined relationship with the author, they sought to distinguish themselves from other readers and to tell their stories in eye-catching ways. In the process they may have disguised as much as they revealed. Author, reader, and their relationship are all idealized or stylized, though they are no less significant for that.

This archive marks a mid-twentieth-century moment in a long tradition of correspondence with authors, a tradition of applauding, arguing, and explaining how the author’s work has helped decipher an “opaque” society, recognize a “problematic sexuality,” or retrieve an important memory—an epistolary tradition central to the history of social and self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{21} The letters offer a case study in reading, writing, and the relationship of both to self-reflection. They capture a turning point in the history of sexual discourse and feeling. Above all, they sketch a partial but unusually intimate portrait of the 1950s.

“\textit{MADAME DE BEAUVOIR, I HAVE} the pleasure of being among the most ardent admirers of your work and personality!!”\textsuperscript{22} So wrote a reader in 1958, capturing Beauvoir’s literary stardom and the way in which celebrity fused her writing to her persona. Like the other celebrity existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Beauvoir presented her ideas in challenging forms, notably \textit{The Second Sex} (1949), and more accessible ones, such as \textit{America Day by Day} (1948), which offered an easy read on a popular postwar topic. \textit{The Mandarins} (1954) won many readers and brought a blizzard of publicity even before it was tapped for the Goncourt Prize in

\textsuperscript{18} See, for instance, Beauvoir, lettres reçues, November 12, 1954, March 6, 1956.


\textsuperscript{22} Beauvoir, lettres reçues, September 13, 1958.
1954. That success paved the way for the even more popular *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, 1958), *The Prime of Life* (La force de l’âge, 1960), and *The Force of Circumstance* (La force des choses, 1963). “I have just finished your book *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, and I want to tell you how it swept me off my feet,” wrote a reader in 1958 who, like many others, had gone on to “devour” all of Beauvoir’s work, including *The Second Sex*. Readers spelled out the connections they saw between the different works, calling *The Mandarins* “a victory of your ideas” and “a delightful and warm complement to the sweeping objective and scientific overview of the woman in *The Second Sex*.” Beauvoir’s life, enthusiastic readers believed, buttressed her arguments: “It is good that this book was written by you, a person who embodies the very qualities one refuses to ascribe to a woman.”

Readers skipped from one of Beauvoir’s books to another; they read articles in *Elle* magazine, excerpts and reviews in *Le Figaro*, *France Soir*, and *L’Express*; they saw her profiled in *Match*, interviewed in *L’Humanité*, and photographed in *Jours de France*. Some were appalled by the press’s fascination with her. One woman angrily asked why *Elle* had published a story about such an “egotistical and cerebral monster.” She was grateful that the magazine had countered its report on Beauvoir’s view of marriage as an “alienation of liberty” with a feature story on the opposite page about two happy girls and their mother. In this case and others, reading meant reading about—and even that needs to be understood in the largest sense. While the *Elle* subscriber had reconstructed a debate from the pages of the magazine, another letter writer cheerfully acknowledged that she had studied only Beauvoir’s horoscope.

The distinctive literary culture of postwar France burnished intellectual prestige with a combination of moral seriousness and glamour, investing literature and philosophy with what were surely outsized hopes for restoring the nation’s status in the world. Intellectuals such as Beauvoir and Sartre peopled the pages of glossy postwar weeklies featuring personalities, fashion, world events, sports, and splashy visuals. The republic of letters found new outlets in magazines and journals, radio programming, and, to a lesser extent, television. Writers’ images and arguments were refracted through the kaleidoscope of this new medium, with its faster pace, greater commercial pressures, and larger and more demanding audiences.

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24 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, October 29, 1958.


27 She sent a copy of the letter to *Elle*. Ibid., September 24, 1960. *Elle* was covering *The Prime of Life*. See another reader’s response to the *Elle* feature, dated September 26, 1960.


29 On these hopes as well as these intellectuals’ political, ethical, and philosophical failures, see Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992).

30 On the press and the public, see the works in fn. 23 and Edgar Morin, *L’esprit du temps: Essai
agents pleaded for pictures and quotes that they might provide to reporters. Nescafé asked Beauvoir, as a celebrated café-goer, to endorse their coffee. Letter writers requested autographs and photographs, the better to visualize her life and person. “I have often seen your name, and I see excerpts and photos of you in the papers. That is why, I think, that I am writing to you,” wrote one for whom names, books, and photos apparently did not suffice: “There aren’t any records with your voice, are there?” For some—usually men—her reputation made her familiar and more approachable: “In a recent photo you seemed less distant, and I dared to write to you,” wrote one. “A one martini girl!” joked another, alluding to Time magazine’s coverage of Beauvoir’s memoir. “I do not hold the cafés against you, you know,” he added. “This is why one can write to you easily, as one would to an ordinary person.” “Simone de Beauvoir, you belong to all of us; that is why I do not call you Madame”: the phrase captured the new expectations of a more democratic mass culture.

Most correspondents, though, did not believe that Beauvoir was “just anyone.” To the contrary, they were acutely self-conscious about their distance from her. They apologized for their inability to write, for being “lyrical” or “childish” (puerile)—in other words, seeking advice and intimacy from a powerful person as if she were a parent, and unable to recognize, as an adult surely would, the gulf that separated them from a philosopher-writer. A woman who loved Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter said that she could not “resist the slightly childish desire to respond to you”—as if Beauvoir had written to her first. Another correspondent captured the difficulty of striking the right tone and noted the self-expressive traps into which one could easily tumble. She had started her letter to Beauvoir three times: “To reduce the distance between the ‘woman of letters’—the famous writer whom I imagined—and the anonymous student, all too aware of my limits and my unpromising future, I put on the grand style and rhetoric—so much so that my starchy prose kept me from getting to the point for several pages.” Her evocation of the distance between the woman of letters and the anonymous reader highlights the challenge of this kind of letter.

The intensity of feeling and self-dramatization in these letters is striking. A great


32 Ibid., February 14, 1960.

33 Ibid., July 7, 1957.

34 Ibid., March 16, 1960. This letter is filed in the dossier January–June 1957.


36 See Lyon-Caen’s discussion of Balzac’s readers in La lecture et la vie, 247.


38 Ibid., February 13, 1959. See also May 11, 1957.

many readers opened their letters by saying that they had not wanted to write, or that they had resisted the impulse to do so but had been unable to help themselves. That opening gesture partly paid tribute to the author, whose work had touched them powerfully enough to sweep away their hesitation and, in the process, to make them characters she might admire: willing to rise above their insignificance, take risks, or put “honesty ahead of pride.”

Through this gesture, the letter writers thus also paid tribute to themselves. Their phrases echoed Beauvoir’s own tropes; The Second Sex opened with “I have long hesitated to write a book on women,” and she prefaced The Prime of Life with remarks on the “imprudent adventure” of writing about oneself. In addition, the people who wrote were not sure that they understood their contradictory feelings or that the subjects they wanted to raise were appropriate. Whatever the different motives and meanings, the effect is one of inner turmoil, or an excess of feeling that needs to be released. (The word épanser, “to pour out,” recurs throughout the letters.) And this rhetorical effect calls forth another, of intimacy and trust.

The surprisingly intimate tone of the letters was also a response to Beauvoir’s self-presentation. Beauvoir was never far from the center of her work. The Second Sex began as an experiment in existentialist autobiography and emphasized “lived experience.” She denied that the Parisian intellectuals in The Mandarins were actually her circle of friends, but this only encouraged readers to try to identify the characters, especially Beauvoir herself. “I feel as if I’ve known you for two years, and all thanks to a book. Could you tell me how much of yourself you have put in The Mandarins?”

“I think you must resemble Anne: How I would like to meet you!!” They described the act of reading in intimate terms: “I have just spent two days in bed with, as a wonderful companion, your latest book.” “I want to thank you for this passion that I could feel while reading this book [The Mandarins]. For an entire night, I lived among the Dubreuilh.”

Readers wrote that they now knew Beauvoir; she was down to earth, with a “wide angle of vision,” and able to understand everything. “Your intelligence intimidates me but at the same time it inspires trust, because you are very understanding.” They wanted to move from text to author, as one revealingly put it, “to know the real face of the person toward whom I have projected myself so entirely in the imagination, and to listen to her voice.”

Projection, identification, and longing for attachment escalated sharply after 1958 with the publication of Beauvoir’s memoirs. “I didn’t have to read your memoirs to admire you, but they permitted me to love you.” Professions of recognition and self-recognition poured into her mailbox. Letter writers explained that they had been born in the same year as Beauvoir or into the same kind of household, that, like her, they had broken with the Catholic Church, that they wanted to write, or that they were “free.” Some wrote that they had been stunned to find on her pages exactly what

41 Ibid., 1957, n.d. Larsson, La réception des Mandarins, 30.
42 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, 1957, n.d.
43 Ibid., January 14, 1959. See also November 30, 1954.
44 Ibid., May 11, 1957. See also postcard, March 4, 1955.
46 Ibid., January 1, 1955.
48 Ibid., February 25, 1959. See also December 13, 1958.
they had written in their own diaries. As several correspondents remarked, Beauvoir offered them a flattering mirror. If so many rushed to recognize themselves in her, it was with a swell of pride, or because she offered them a better version of themselves: “Everything you say in your memoirs I have felt; I would have liked to be able to say it, but I explain myself very poorly.” “I was a girl like you, a young woman like you! This is what thousands of women surely think—with pride—when they read you.”

The Beauvoir letters aptly illustrate literary scholar Nancy K. Miller’s point that reading memoir is a process of “interactive remembering.” As Miller puts it, “You follow the threads that take you back, even if then there was no story, just the loose threads you see now woven into a readable fabric, material for another story: your own.” The letters make vivid the forms that “interactive remembering” could take: painful, nostalgic, passive, energetic, and defiant. A young woman in Germany who had never read a word of Beauvoir but had learned about Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter in a Catholic newspaper asked, “Would you like to write the history of MY life?” This was perhaps the most lopsided engagement with the book, but a revealing extreme: the reader-author bond ranged from recognition (I know you!) to affinity and shared experiences (I am like you!) to something more passive and trusting (Tell my story!). Most of the letter writers believed Beauvoir to be uniquely well-qualified to interpret their feelings, understand their families, bring them out of their isolation, and give public significance to their lives. The young German woman simply turned over her biography; others used Beauvoir’s “understanding” to reconsider and to rewrite their own.

Projection, identification, and imagined intimacy, however, ran both ways. Beauvoir actively elicited her readers’ responses. In an eye-catching passage from The Prime of Life that set out her goal as a writer, she imagined her voice reaching readers almost unmediated, entering their hearts, and in the process attaining literary (and not only literary) immortality.

What I wanted was to penetrate so deeply into the lives of others that when they heard my voice they would have the impression they were speaking to themselves. If my voice were multiplied through thousands of human hearts, it seemed to me that my existence, reshaped and transfigured, would still, in a manner of speaking, be saved.

This was strong stuff, melding religious and psychological imagery. Beauvoir’s use of the word “penetrate” (pénétrer) bespeaks a willful entry into intimate connection.

50 Ibid., May 3, 1959.
52 Nancy K. Miller, “But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?” Yale Journal of Criticism 13, no. 2 (2000): 421–436. Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter brought in scores of letters on childhood; The Prime of Life and then The Force of Circumstance brought in many on World War II and its aftermath, about which memories were even more painful and complex. For example, November 15, 1960, December 15, 1960, December 27, 1960, January 21, 1964, and January 30, 1964. These letters are beyond the scope of this article but figure in my work in progress.
53 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, 1958, n.d.
54 Beauvoir, La force de l’âge (Paris, 1960), 644; my translation. La force des choses made even more dramatic gestures toward readers, to which many responded; see the letters from 1964.
It is not surprising to find that many readers cited the phrase to her—or that the desired response got out of hand. One of several readers wrote that her feelings were running amok and the author was to blame:

I would like to retreat behind a dignified reserve . . . But I do not know how to wait: I never knew how . . . I have participated in so many moments of your life, this book [The Prime of Life] has clarified so many things that have been blurry to me, that I am even more disappointed to be without news from you.

You speak of “penetrating into the lives of others.” You have reached this goal, and it gives you responsibilities, and speaking for myself, I can no longer consider you a stranger. To such an extent that when I read your name in magazines about things of which I’m unaware, I’m so angry not to be up to date—it’s as though I had rights over you.

There: reactions like these are probably unpleasant, and you had not envisioned them. But I do not feel responsible.

This epistolary relationship recalls the relationship between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his readers, memorably analyzed by Robert Darnton. Beauvoir’s readers, like Rousseau’s, were drawn into felt intimacy and the effusion of emotion, including love and jealousy. The requests for photographs, for more “news,” and for more intimate details, however, arise from distinctively twentieth-century forms of culture and celebrity. The author-reader relationship in the 1950s was built not only on texts, but also on news coverage, profiles, candid photos, and interviews on radio and television. It was enmeshed in the web of “mediations, communications, and contacts” that the brilliant French sociologist Edgar Morin considered constitutive of mass culture in his time. Some of the letters to Beauvoir plainly resemble letters to movie stars, with their over-identification and “fetishistic” search for information. “Every news item whispers a little secret, one that allows the reader to possess a little intimacy with a star,” Morin wrote. Not all of the correspondents were starstruck; many read carefully and critically, and none necessarily lacked resources, ideas, or ambition. Even so, the broader cultural production of intimacy with celebrities seems to have eased the letter writers’ way. Moreover, there is a striking affinity between the way mass culture in the 1950s proffered doses of intimacy with famous persons (interviews that focused on their personal lives, reports about their everyday routines, and furtively snapped photographs) and Beauvoir’s insistently intimate self-presentation and her expectation that readers would hear her “voice” as their own. The female press, in particular, fetishized—to use Morin’s term—not only intimacy with celebrities, but also intimacies among readers themselves, nurturing a sense of belonging, and of sharing concerns, experiences, and outlooks in a way that rendered seemingly mundane matters relevant and meaningful. Beauvoir complained that the culture of “publicity” in 1950s France “disfigured” intellectual work. What Lauren Berlant has influentially called the “intimate public” of mass culture, however, may well have helped Beauvoir’s words “penetrate the lives of others.”

55 Beauvoir, lettres recuees, November 30, 1960. See also April 19, 1960.
57 Morin, L’esprit du temps, 136.
58 Morin, Les stars, 83.
59 Cited in Chaplin, Turning On the Mind, 38.
60 Lauren Gail Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American
Sexuality was not the only or even the primary concern of Beauvoir’s different correspondents, but it occasioned some of the most unexpected and interesting letters, largely because the language in which to discuss it was not ready to hand. Letters that broached sexuality provide an excellent example of how Beauvoir’s work “landed,” and how readers might respond to topics that she raised while ignoring or misunderstanding her arguments. They dramatize some of the changes (discursive, political, and social) under way in the 1950s. They illustrate, too, the unevenness of those changes, for the letter writers testify to a strikingly diverse set of experiences of and perspectives on sexuality. They raised issues that ranged from contraception, which was relatively straightforward, to sexual pleasure, desire, and pain, which were confusing and pushed many to the limits of their ability to express themselves.

One of the earliest letters came in 1950 from a woman pharmacist, whose profession put her on the front line of private struggles over sexuality, reproduction, and health. Beauvoir had observed that women had two confessors, the priest and the doctor. But in women’s everyday lives, the letter writer added, neighborhood pharmacists mattered even more; they were trained in medicine and more accessible than doctors, for their counsel was free and readily available in the course of women’s daily errands. As a pharmacist, she was besieged by women’s “confessions” and requests for information and help. Women asked her general questions about their own and their families’ health, and more specific ones about sexuality, frigidity (her term), unwanted pregnancies, and abortion. The pharmacist had observed firsthand how often women induced early abortions with quinine or uterine injections that escaped detection by doctors or hospitals—and criminal inquiries from the state. Beauvoir’s discussion of abortion had become one of the most incendiary parts of *The Second Sex*. The pharmacist contended that the abortion rate was even higher than Beauvoir had suggested, and the crisis even graver. Laws banning contraception, in place since 1920, in her view had led to catastrophic consequences: they made sexual pleasure impossible, ruined marriages, and turned French women old before their time.

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61 Correspondents wrote about work, domestic and international politics, and, frequently, their own struggles with writing. Authorship was a point of identification, a shared passion, a source of prestige in postwar France, and so a way for readers to project themselves into what, as we have seen, appeared to be a charmed circle of public intellectuals. On writing, see Berne, “Elles écrivent.”

62 Beauvoir, lettres recuées, March 20, 1950. This letter is marked “repondu.”

63 The law criminalized contraception and all “anti-conceptional propaganda,” which meant describing or offering to divulge “procedures that would prevent pregnancy or facilitating the use of these procedures.” In the early 1950s, France was on the cusp of changes that would roll back these restrictions. By the early 1960s, the Movement for Family Planning was trying not only to revise the law but also to circumvent it, with centers that provided contraceptive information to members and by working with gynecologists to win acceptance for the birth control pill. Contraception was legalized in 1967, and abortion in 1975. Marie-Françoise Lévy, “Le mouvement français pour le planning familial et les jeunes,” *Vingtième siècle: Revue d’histoire*, July–September 2002, 75–84; Melanie Latham, *Regulating Reproduction: A Century of Conflict in Britain and France* (Manchester, 2002); Le planning familial: Histoire et mémoire, 1956–2006 (Rennes, 2006); and Janine Mossuz-Lavau, *Les lois de l’amour: Les politiques de la sexualité en France de 1950 à nos jours* (Paris, 1991). The most comprehensive social histories of sexuality, including contraception, are Sohn, *Chrysalides*, which is abridged as Anne-Marie Sohn, *Du premier baiser à l’alcôve: La sexualité des français au quotidien, 1850–1950* (Paris, 1996); and Martine...
ty-nine-year-old woman who reportedly had had four children, ten miscarriages, and “no pleasure, ever.” Her husband’s days off were “torture,” the woman had said. “I know that I must do my duty and besides, my husband is young, but I am afraid.” As the pharmacist grimly observed, the husband was young at age twenty-nine—his wife was not.

The pharmacist wrote to report, not to speak of herself. She likened her customers, alone with her at the pharmacy counter, to “beasts caught in a trap.” “They do not dare demand in public what they weep for in private,” she wrote, not very sympathetically. “Is there a minority that dares? I would like to know.” She argued that fatalism, passivity, and notions of virtuous maternal suffering muffled protest. To those who touted the heroism of French motherhood, she retorted harshly, with tellingly postwar language: “Just because one gets through the ordeal of childbirth ‘honorably’ does not mean that one can claim to be some kind of heroine. When one has given birth, one may have learned to suffer, but the Inquisition, or the Gestapo . . . that is another thing, and very different.”

The pharmacist’s impatience with the rhetoric of maternalism was shared by many French journalists, writers, and intellectuals during the 1950s. Traditional ideologies had been discredited by Vichy and by a humiliating occupation; France had to be able to stand up to a changed world, and resignation and passivity—easily associated, wrongly or not, with women’s traditionalism and Catholic positions on maternal virtue and sexuality—sapped the nation’s ability to do so. For those reasons, education, knowledge, and self-mastery (in sexual matters, among others) belonged to the project of modernizing postwar France.

Women and medical experts were not the only ones who wrote to Beauvoir about contraception. One extraordinary letter came in 1957 from a man, married for six years, already the father of three (with a fourth on the way), and intent on learning what Beauvoir knew about birth control. The letter is detailed, matter-of-fact, at once well-informed and revealing about the human costs of ordinary ignorance. The author, too, is an interesting character: while he adopts a peremptory tone vis-à-vis Beauvoir, he sympathizes with his wife’s confusion and, as he says, her sense of being dominated by bewildering biological facts:

Madame, what I want to ask you is very simple: you speak on several occasions of a “blocked woman” or a plug that seems to protect the woman. Here is my question: where can I obtain such protection?

Perhaps I should explain myself. Married in 1951, I’m expecting my fourth child next January. The first one was from our marriage, the second was from carelessness, but the third

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64 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, March 20, 1950.


66 The author refers to a diaphragm, which was available only in England, Switzerland, and the U.S.
one was conceived two days after the end of [my wife’s] period, and the fourth when the flow
had not yet ended. As you can imagine, my wife is now more afraid than ever of this biological
fact that she does not entirely understand but the effects of which she has to suffer.

If we want to continue to have some natural relations, my only option is to find an unfailing
form of protection; the Ogino method certainly does not offer that.

I would like you to give me the address where I could obtain such an instrument if, of
course, my request does not seem rude or tiresome.

p.s. And if possible, give me the exact name of this device.

He enclosed a picture of his children.67

It is a remarkable document, and not what one expects in a letter to Simone de
Beauvoir! In 1957, when it was written, public discussion of abortion and contra-
ception had picked up in France, sparked in part by a high-profile investigative study
of underground abortions by the journalist Jacques Derogy (whose real name was
Jacques Weitzmann). Titled Des enfants malgré nous? (1956), Derogy’s book was
prefaced by Dr. Weill-Hallé, head of the newly founded Maternité heureuse, which
would become Le mouvement pour le planning familial in 1960. Derogy offered the
shocking statistic that in any given year, French women had as many abortions as
live births. The well-known editor of L’Express, Françoise Giroud, reviewed the book
and took to the television as well, denouncing the “conspiracy of silence and denial”
that surrounded abortion, which also enabled lawmakers to persist in maintaining
a regime that criminalized contraception.68 Very few readers’ letters in the 1950s
referred to these debates. The subject was still “obscene,” and, more important,
Beauvoir did not at that point particularly affiliate herself with the cause. Yet the
letters from this man and from the pharmacist are a window onto sexual life in a
world where contraception was illegal and reliable information about it was a rare
and valuable commodity, one traded quickly through semi-clandestine networks of
knowledge.69 It is revealing of the atmosphere of the time that when Beauvoir began
to publish on sexuality, men and women furtively visited her apartment and the

67 Beauvoir, lettres recues, November 30, 1957. This letter was from Thiers, France. See also April
7, 1955. Ogino-Knaus calendars, which explained how to calculate the safe periods in a woman’s men-
strual cycle, were developed by a Japanese doctor and an Austrian sexologist. Jacques Derogy, Des
enfants malgré nous? (Paris, 1956), 197–198. Kate Fisher, “‘She Was Quite Satisfied with the Arrange-
ments I Made’: Gender and Birth Control in Britain, 1920–1950,” Past and Present, no. 169 (November
2000): 161–193, which insists that men played important roles in making decisions about contraception,
is a provocative challenge to received wisdom on the subject. Quite apart from the different national
cultures of Britain and France, my evidence here is too singular to confirm or refute her arguments. But
this man’s letter does illustrate men’s interest in birth control, which, Fisher aptly points out, concerned
everyday sexual activity as much as it limited the number of children in a family. Ibid., 169. While he
is concerned with his wife, he is also speaking about his own sexual desires.

68 Derogy, Des enfants malgré nous? 17. Derogy’s articles, under the title “Are Women Guilty?” were
first published in Libération in October and November 1955; the Françoise Giroud book review, “Les
malades de samedi,” was in L’Express, February 15, 1956.

69 The Institut national d’études démographiques (National Institute for Demographic Studies)
summarized the state of knowledge (or ignorance) about contraception in France in “Une enquête sur
l’opinion publique à l’égard de la limitation des naissances,” Population 11, no. 3 (July–September 1956):
481–506. It did not capture exactly how unevenly knowledge was distributed. See also Hélène Bergues
et al., La prévention des naissances dans la famille: Ses origines dans les temps modernes (Paris, 1960);
and Henri Léridon et al., La seconde révolution contraceptive: La régulation des naissances en France de
editorial offices of *Les temps modernes* to ask for addresses of abortion providers.\(^{70}\) That a “family” man, a father of four, would write to a well-known woman writer about birth control testifies not only to a widespread hunger for knowledge, but also to an emerging sense that such knowledge was legitimate, that it should no longer be confined to the worlds of midwives, brothels, and erotic books, traditionally the realms of France’s reputed sexual “knowingness.” The topic of contraception was not new, but the circles in which it might be broached, which had expanded during the 1930s and had then been shut down during World War II, were widening again, in a new atmosphere of economic optimism, political renewal, and generational change.\(^{71}\)

Since we do not usually imagine Simone de Beauvoir dispensing advice to ordinary people, it is striking to see how many letters “importuned” her for help.\(^{72}\) Even before the memoirs invited the kinds of intimacy considered above, *The Second Sex*, *The Mandarins*, and Beauvoir’s public persona persuaded many that she was “understanding” both about women of “all conditions” and about the “paradoxes of modern society.”\(^{73}\) Readers asked her to help them find work and apartments. They wrote of conjugal unhappiness—of a husband’s jealousy or abusiveness; of boredom; of meeting a new partner; of marrying young in order to escape their parents’ home, only to find themselves trapped in marriage; of class differences that created marital tensions; of divorce and the courage it would take to initiate one.\(^{74}\)

Many letter writers described their disillusionment with myths of romantic love, marriage, and motherhood, echoing themes in Beauvoir’s work. “Since your first books, then *The Second Sex*, then the memoirs, I have wanted to ‘talk’ to you,” wrote a weary and discouraged thirty-nine-year-old divorced mother of three. “I admire how you have escaped the big traps of life: having children, being jealous, leaving work, breaking up . . . In reading your books I have the sense of having wasted my life.”\(^{75}\) Another woman offered a particularly painful (though terse) account of how love and family had gone wrong in her life.

Let me explain the problem about which I would like your advice. After certain “unhappy experiences” from which I did not know how to learn a lesson, I got married; I had decided to take the risks, without knowing exactly what they were, and to trust in love one more time. The successive births of my two children absorbed all my physical and mental energy: the second birth was a “semi-catastrophe”: the child was afflicted with a congenital deformity of

\(^{70}\) Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 263, 289–290. She seems to have known several doctors who performed abortions. Ibid., 298.


\(^{73}\) Beauvoir, lettres recues, October 31, 1957, August 29, 1957.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., August 29, 1957, November 30, 1957, May 1, 1958, October 18, 1961.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., December, 1960.
the face: although she was operated on at the age of one and developed normally, she remains very marked. I was profoundly troubled by this event: I have not yet managed to come to terms with the complexity of my feelings toward my daughter.

. . . reading two of your books has plunged me, again, into reflection, into a vertigo of illumination and solitude. 76

Having an ill or handicapped child was a relatively common experience. It was rarer to acknowledge a tangle of love and repugnance toward the afflicted child—or to confess to feeling not only inadequate as a mother, but resentful about motherhood. It is as if Beauvoir’s blunt analysis of the physical and psychological perils of motherhood and her irreverence about maternal virtue enabled this reader to describe her own experience as nearly “catastrophic.”

Others who wrote were even more overwhelmed by their emotions and memories—so much so that their letters recall nineteenth-century tropes of women who had “fallen,” or been led astray by their “passions.” The language, though, is less that of moral failure, and more that of psychological despair, of love, sex, and marriage being sabotaged: “youth, which people find so wonderful, was for me a dreadful period when the passions drag you into a ghastly abyss from which there is no escape.” 77 Another letter, very moving, said:

I still know nothing—a milieu like ours destroys love. I go out on Sunday. I go to the Saturday dance like everyone—it’s so depressing and I flirt—but never would I let myself be seduced. I am twenty years old, and I keep this thing in me pure—maybe sometimes I have the desire to—but I am a bourgeoise . . .

I would like so very much for you to understand me. If I could only have you before me, I know you would find the words to make me speak, but on this poor piece of paper . . .

You could never understand me, you with your wonderful and free life—ah! Everything seems so easy when I read you, and yet I can’t express to you everything that I feel. 78

Many of the letters in the archive were penned in anguish. Lonely, isolated, and trusting Beauvoir’s intelligence and humanity, the writers rushed to confide in her. “Please excuse me; I did not want to write my confession or trouble you, but you seem to understand the unhappiness of women of all conditions. Tell me honestly.” 79 To discuss contraception was risky; to recount betrayed promises of love, marriage, and motherhood was painful. Sexual feeling was even more difficult. By the 1950s, strong currents of medical and journalistic opinion (from L’Express to Elle and Marie Claire) were deploring French girls’ ignorance about sexuality and arguing that French mothers, presumed to preside over such things, needed to be less reticent, more knowledgeable, and, in a word, more modern. Commentators sounded the same unsympathetic notes as the pharmacist who spoke of her customers as “beasts caught in a trap.” Adolescents and their mothers were less clueless than experts and the press in the 1950s suggested. Still, the letters in this archive testify to a widespread pudeur (modesty, or restraint) and to real discomfort concerning sexual feeling.

A middle school teacher from Belgium began her letter as follows, an excellent

76 Ibid., December 2, 1958.
77 Ibid., October 13, 1958.
78 Ibid., 1961, n.d.
79 Ibid., August 29, 1957.
illustration of how one would struggle to ask a question about sexuality—in this case arousal and orgasm—without using any of those terms:

I have redone this letter so many times that I must make up my mind to send it as it is. I wanted it to be short so as not to bother you, and I did not want to give in to a need to pour out my heart. On the other hand, when I explain myself you will be able to judge how much I need your help.

The wisdom of your observations, the courage and the generosity of your intellectual position show that you clearly can recognize the importance of the subject of my letter (I cannot yet make up my mind to just set it out) . . .

I hope that you will not consider it inappropriate if I turn to you for information on hygiene.80

Only on the second page did this letter writer reach the subject: she had never felt either “love or voluptuous excitement,” and no one had ever made her “quiver with desire.” A combination of reticence and confusion made it impossible for her to say more than that on paper; she asked Beauvoir to meet with her in person. A remarkable number of correspondents from the 1950s did the same. Beauvoir could write about the specifics of “women’s eroticism,” masturbation, and vaginal pleasure, using terms quite acceptable in scientific and medical discourse, but hardly any of these readers could bring themselves to use remotely the same language.81

Finally, several readers found themselves almost unable to write. They were torn between their inability to name their problems and the need to break out of their isolation and silence, and they trusted Beauvoir to understand what they were talking about.

December 28, 1957
Please excuse me for the liberty I take in writing you. I have read your excellent book The Second Sex, and I think that you are the only person who can give me advice.

I am facing a difficult problem, one that is conjugal and familial. I sometimes feel quite alone and very discouraged. I cannot bring myself to write to some Courrier du Cœur [a women’s advice column, lit. “letters from the heart”]. I think that you can give me advice that would be useful and wise, because you have a very general, very understanding view on all these problems. If it would not be too much trouble, would you be able to meet with me?82

April 19, 1957
Dear Comrade and, if I may, friend,
I found your book The Second Sex fascinating. I have read and reread it several times, I have given it to several people, and will give it again without growing tired of it. I’ve also lent The Mandarins, and I’ll lend that again. I am a factory worker without a high school diploma . . .

I have behind me a wretched past, a childhood without a father, and some abominable adventures [aventure means “adventure,” but also “love affair”], which I find difficult to write about or describe.

What I would like is your personal address, to be able to confide in you, to talk about things that one usually reserves for friends.

80 Ibid., December 3, 1952. “Conjugal hygiene” was a common nineteenth-century term.
82 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, December 28, 1957.
I would like your photograph, with your signature. That is very important to me. If one day I come to Paris, where I think you live, I will come to see you.83

1961, undated
Maybe my nightmare is just something ordinary, but I hate my father, he is . . . oh, you can imagine. Prostitution is nothing . . . Saint Mary Magdalene, I was 12, that’s really nothing. But that . . . I want to die.84

To read these letters is to see, up close, the isolation and ignorance that could compound sexual unhappiness, the humiliations and torments of abusive families, and the vulnerabilities of young women who needed to be protected by—or from—their fathers. It is also to see the resonance of Beauvoir’s analysis of women’s sexuality as a bundle of fears, repulsions, and impossible, or at least systematically frustrated, desires. For Beauvoir, sexual initiation was something like a formative failure: an experience suffered rather than initiated, often violent, which sealed a young woman’s alienation from her body and her personhood. Sexuality was a “terrain of truth” for women, and it was rough territory.85 All these readers refer to The Second Sex, and one would not have had to read the whole book to get the picture: skimming a few pages in a bookstore or reading excerpts in a magazine would suffice, for memorably graphic passages on sexual violence, psychological trauma, and erotic frustration jump off virtually every page of the chapters on sexuality in the second volume.86 Those chapters evoked a firestorm of critical outrage, but they encouraged some readers to articulate what was almost unspeakable at that time.

By the mid-twentieth century, as French historians have shown, much in Beauvoir’s rendering of female sexuality was out of date. The Second Sex drew heavily on nineteenth-century sources such as the diaries of Marie Bashkirtseff (1860–1884) and Countess Sophia Tolstoy (1844–1919) and on Honoré de Balzac’s Physiologie du mariage (published in 1829), perhaps a particularly poor guide to women’s sexual feeling in the 1940s.87 Anne-Marie Sohn, one of the leading historians of private life in France, has made this point forcefully. By the time The Second Sex was published, Sohn shows, honeymoon nights on which a young virgin found herself handed over to a man she had not chosen (Beauvoir’s phrase) were rare, even in the French countryside.88 The Catholic Church’s teaching and parental controls had lost force in the late nineteenth century, and the two world wars had weakened them further. Arranged marriage was a relic of the past. Women as well as men put more emphasis on choosing their partners and invested more time in the courting that choice entailed. In the countryside, mobility and sociability had increased; towns and cities offered the erotic tutelage of movies (un baiser américain meant a kiss on the lips) as well as dance halls and parties. Everywhere, magazines and advertising aimed at women invited more spending on hygiene, cosmetics, clothing—in a word, on the

83 Ibid., April 19, 1957.
84 Ibid., n.d., 1961; ellipsis points in original.
87 Beauvoir, Le deuxième sexe, 2: 235–236. Beauvoir also drew on Stendhal, Proust, and Colette.
female body—and that attention, in turn, encouraged more sexual activity. The Second Sex, then, does not provide a social history of mid-century sexuality. On the other hand, letters in the Bibliothèque nationale archive show that Beauvoir’s analysis of sexual unhappiness struck a chord. So did her language of female desire. That language was not particularly poetic or creative—there is a lot of “shuddering” and “ardor” in addition to her famous description of female arousal as “the soft throbbing of a mollusk” (la molle palpitation d’un coquillage). Still, to discuss sexual feeling outside the context of erotic or libertine literature was to reach a broader public with a different language. To associate sexual feeling with women’s aspirations to existential fulfillment, as Beauvoir did, resonated for many. One reader put it beautifully in responding to The Mandarins: “What I love is this counterpoint that runs through your whole book—this saraband of desires that are never satisfied.”

The letters in the archive, however, also caution us against making sweeping conclusions about the practices, knowledge, or language of ordinary people. Even a small sample reveals the effects of very different levels of education or even personal resourcefulness. They illustrate very different stances toward sexuality: impatient and determined (the husband seeking reliable birth control); overwhelmed (his wife); reflective about conflicting feelings and what they might suggest (the woman who wrote of the “saraband of desires”); and conflicted and desperate (“You will never understand, your life has turned out so differently”). Experience and knowledge were particularly dependent on some combination of family, milieu, class, gender, age, and religion and religiosity.

Homosexuality, to which there are only a few fascinating references, provides a case in point. A young man wrote from Mexico City to thank Beauvoir for taking bold stands. “The world is so oppressive and indifferent. Your tolerance toward homosexuals in particular is valuable. I wish you would write about them.” Young, cosmopolitan, and self-confident, he was able to wield a modern vocabulary of sex-

89 The new sexual regime of early-twentieth-century France brought new vulnerabilities. While traditional conceptions of morality and “sin” may have faded, Anne-Marie Sohn argues, social reputation still mattered enormously. To be considered “légitère” (light, or loose) was to court opprobrium. If a young woman was in a relationship, she tried to negotiate that relationship without getting pregnant. In the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, pregnancy meant procuring an abortion, getting married, or turning to one’s family, and these were all common options. In 1911, 60 percent of marriages reportedly came after pregnancy. An enduring double standard created contradictory expectations: on the one hand, extramarital sex was increasingly tolerated and expected; on the other, a woman’s virginity still had value, considered a gift, or a form of dowry for girls or women with few material resources. How to act in the face of such contradictions remained confusing: in a 1964 study, 72 percent of those interviewed were in favor of virginity at marriage, but 50 percent of them had had premarital sex. In other words, whatever they had done themselves, they believed it had not worked. Cited in Sohn, Du premier baiser à l’alcôve, 227, 237–238. Letters to Menie Grégoue in the 1960s offer abundant firsthand accounts of dealing with contraception, pregnancy, reputation, and family. Archives départementales d’Indre-et-Loire, Archives contemporaines, J 66, 230–231.

90 Beauvoir, Le deuxième sexe, 2: 165. See 151–154 on the myth that men “awaken” women, young women’s search for pleasure, and the “uncertain and burning call of her flesh.”


92 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, November 12, 1954. A saraband is a slow and particularly sensual dance.

93 Here “experience” refers both to accumulated wisdom and to the feelings said to flow from a given event or encounter. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 781, citing Raymond Williams.

uality without being overwhelmed by fear and confusion. An older woman in the outskirts of Paris wrote very differently:

I am so cold among males and females. I am looking for a rare bird who, before feeling male or female, is conscious of being human. It seems that this rare bird is found often enough among men, but to approach it one has to be of the same sex. Finding such a bird among women would only be possible for persons of the opposite sex. If this is the case, what can be done? I know that you are one. Could I talk to you?95

Beauvoir must have answered the letter, for the woman wrote again, explaining in a less confusing or oblique way: “While I am absolutely normal, I do not fit into any category.”96 Yet the contrast between the tone and the images of sexual feeling and identity in the two letters remains striking: the man from Mexico City is able to write “homosexuality,” while the older woman struggles with more formal “allusion and metaphor.”97 As Michel Foucault pointed out long ago, the issue is not silence, but “the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.”98

Simone de Beauvoir was not discreet. That a woman would write about sex as a woman, with an emphasis on “lived experience,” proved one of the most disconcerting features of her work, and pushed at the limits of propriety. Highbrow critics such as François Mauriac disdained her self-revelatory tone as well as her subjects.99 Hannah Arendt, invited to review the English-language manuscript of The Second Sex for Knopf, lamented Beauvoir’s “preference for a very dubious kind of confession literature [that] lower[s] the level of discussion.”100 Reviewers deemed The Mandarins “embarrassing,” or “unrestrained, in the style of most women writers.”101 These critics, however, were neither simply obtuse nor blindly misreading; readers who loved Beauvoir’s work read it much the same way. Her subject and her emphasis on experience (often her own) invited letters that were self-revealing.

The French historian Mona Ozouf has described The Second Sex as “an immense courrier du cœur.”102 One could find the analogy preposterous. Beauvoir confronted subjects well beyond the pale of “Miss Lonelyhearts” columns. Her themes were not women’s romantic disappointments, but their self-deceptions, traps, and failures.

95 Ibid., April 3, 1956.
96 Ibid., November 21, 1956. For another example, see Rebreyend, “Sur les traces,” 66.
98 Ibid., 27.
99 On Mauriac, see Galster, Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir, 22, 294–296. On the tangle of sexuality, shame, and secrets in postwar France, see Coffin, “Historicizing The Second Sex.” Mauriac complained that the erotic scenes in The Mandarins made him want to “vomit.” L’Express, November 13, 1954, 16. In a letter to Beauvoir (in English), an enthusiastic reader wrote: “All the warmth contained in the sexual act is brilliantly expressed in many pages of your novel, and one never doubts that the author has had a fulfilled sexual life.” Beauvoir, lettres reçues, March 27, 1955.
102 Mona Ozouf, Les mots des femmes (Fayard, 1995), 295.
Her work presented sexuality as an existential minefield or high-stakes adventure; the French women’s press, by contrast, long tiptoed around the subject. Love, a sentiment that cultivated virtue, selflessness, and happiness in the everyday, inundated the postwar French women’s press. Sexuality—which in that press evoked “egotistical pleasure”—was edgier. Until the early 1960s, even progressive publications that were suffused with eroticism, such as *Elle*, felt the need to shroud sex with romance and love. Homosexuality, abortion, and sexual violence, which Beauvoir confronted without flinching, were off limits.¹⁰³

On the other hand, sharing confidences, breaking out of one’s isolation, believing that confusions, wounds, anxieties, and what some would consider errant sexual desires were not singular—these were features of columns such as “Letters from the Heart” and of the “intimate public” that was assuming new prominence in the landscape of 1950s culture. Readers with no “head for metaphysics” trusted that Beauvoir would take their confidences seriously: “reading you, I felt the warmth of a friend’s voice.”¹⁰⁴ The letter writer cited above underscored that she could not pose her question to “some Courrier du Cœur.” Another actually apologized for addressing Beauvoir as if the philosopher “were a columnist with a courrier du cœur!”¹⁰⁵ The “advice column” provided an important point of reference, a map of the new communicative terrain of mass culture, a guide that helped letter writers with fewer resources participate in the more “elevated” discourse about private feelings. Moreover, many of the letters were peppered with tropes and language of the kind of sentimental fiction that often ran alongside the courrier du cœur: references to “dreadful adventures,” “frightful abyss,” “whirlwind,” or, for instance, “At the moment that I write this, I hear the stationmaster announcing the arrival of the train for Paris—what torture.”¹⁰⁶ Sentimental fiction, like the advice column, offered a ready-to-hand source of tropes and metaphors with which to take on the difficult subjects that Beauvoir’s work raised.

**Confidences, then, may have instilled confidence. Did identifying with Beauvoir become a way to forge a new female, and eventually feminist, identity? There are**


¹⁰⁶ Beauvoir, lettres reçues, June 14, 1958. This one was written on paper torn from a notebook. On existentialism as melodrama, see Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 98–104.
good reasons to look before making this leap, first among them Beauvoir’s mixed feelings about feminism. The Second Sex maintained that unlike civil rights or anticolonial struggles, feminism could not be a real movement. Women do not say “we,” as Beauvoir put it. Until the 1970s, she considered the subjugation of women too deeply embedded in other structures to make feminism viable as its own political force. The letters themselves advise some interpretive caution. Readers took away from Beauvoir’s work a classically existentialist call to shoulder individual responsibility. They felt asked to be mature, or courageous. “You’re right . . . I need to leave my adolescence behind, not burrow into it.” Without The Second Sex, one reader might never have taken on “the trial of the real.” Beauvoir’s words sustained some during crises: “I read your book in a borderline moment, when I was at the end of my rope.”

A few readers expressed explicitly feminist politics or purposes. The pharmacist hoped for a “liberating storm” to sweep away bans on contraception; a journalist believed that The Second Sex might “open eyes.” One thirty-two-year-old working woman penned this classic tribute: “Thank you. Thank you for your books, for The Ethics of Ambiguity, and then—above all—thank you for The Second Sex, which I read a few years ago . . . It’s something else—it is an enormous rock in a frog pond . . . it is a clap of thunder in a deceivingly serene sky—it is the slave who looks at his chains. I am not exaggerating.”

For every letter that envisioned some kind of feminism, however, another explicitly ruled it out of court. One reader chastised Beauvoir for her politics, saying she should have championed collective action rather than individual ethics, but even that reader could not conceive of a women’s movement. “Of course I don’t think you should have called on women, as the oppressed, to create a revolutionary party!!” Another rued that women would never emancipate themselves: “The proletariat will

107 Beauvoir’s own account of her relationship to feminism is in La force de l’âge, 654, and La force des choses, 1: 258–268; see also Gennari, Simone de Beauvoir, 68; Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, 210.
110 Ibid., October 13, 1958.
111 Ibid., date illegible, 1956. See also October 14, 1960.
112 Ibid., January 12, 1958.
113 Ibid., June 18, 1957.
114 Ibid., March 10, 1950.
fight for itself; so will black people; but this ‘negre’ [sic] will not change UNTIL MEN WANT HER TO CHANGE.” Beauvoir’s analogy between the subordination of women and class, colonial, or racial domination was at once fundamental to the structure of *The Second Sex* and also hesitantly drawn. It is not surprising, then, that the book’s highbrow reviewers almost completely ignored that provocative argument, and so did almost all of the letter writers.

The most revealing exception to this silence is a remarkable document that demonstrates exactly how that analogy might be received. One young woman wrote in an effusive and slightly scattershot way about her children, existentialism, communism, and Sartre, enthusing that Beauvoir’s fictional characters “continued to live” with her “to the point where they become tiresome!” She had discussed *The Second Sex* with a friend, a woman doctor whom she greatly admired. The doctor had followed up on their discussion with a letter, which the young woman enclosed along with her own. The doctor was “eager to clarify [her] ideas on . . . this rich and new book.” “It expressed, and so beautifully, what I could only think.” She objected to the psychoanalysis in *The Second Sex*, but praised the sections on “lived experience.” “As for your objections,” the doctor explained to her friend (we do not know what those objections were), they would apply to all struggles for liberation. “Of course none of this happens without drawbacks or dangers (look, for instance, at the decolonization that is under way). But this certainly should not prevent or slow down the business of liberation, and the weight of the mistakes that may be committed falls on the oppressors, not on the oppressed—the apprenticeship of liberty happens surprisingly fast, as history shows.”

The doctor wrote in February 1958, as French public opinion was turning against the French colonial war in Algeria, indeed three months before the crisis sparked by the war would bring Charles de Gaulle to power. She used the events unfolding in Algeria to make Beauvoir’s arguments concrete, to evoke the tumult and upheaval that might result from women undertaking to dismantle their own subordination, and to reassure her friend about the quickening pace of historical change. It is a striking glimpse of politicization, how self-understanding, along with affinities and felt “experiences,” can be rendered differently and transformed, the power of thinking by analogy, and the capacity of events to alter the horizons of the possible.

In most of the letters, the politics are more introspective and the voice is from the interior. “Your close and faithful personal analysis is valuable for all women. No one has done this before. (And I say that as a Freudian.)” Your voice reaches “deep inside me.” Readers felt that Beauvoir summoned them to feeling fully and mastering those feelings: “to understand the feelings that trouble me, which I didn’t see clearly, and which I had a tendency to repress.” They used her characters to think about themselves. “I never get tired of imagining these characters and hearing

115 Ibid., March 17, 1960; emphasis in original. See also September 12, 1961.
120 Ibid., January 27, 1961.
121 Ibid., March 10, 1950.
their intelligent and eye-opening conversation. Rarely has a novel made me reflect as much as yours.”\textsuperscript{122} They felt called upon to write about themselves, as an “affirmation,” “deliverance,” or way to bring order to themselves.\textsuperscript{123} One, in fact, refused that summons. She would be willing to talk about her childhood but had “no desire to speak of it in writing [sic], and no impression that doing so would either ‘do me good’ or help me to see clearly.”\textsuperscript{124}

That readers often cited the passage from The Mandarins in which Beauvoir hoped that “when they [readers] hear my voice they would have the impression they were speaking to themselves” suggests not only what they took away from reading Beauvoir but also how they took it, as a form of inner dialogue. On this, one last example: an American woman who had an extended correspondence with Beauvoir. An unabashed fan, she was articulate and fluent in French. Like many letter writers, she wanted to meet Beauvoir in person—and unusually, it seems, she did. She wrote after that meeting, plainly inspired. Her first priority was to excavate her own past: “Thank you so much for meeting with me. Now I am sure I will do psychoanalysis!” She understood that rigorous self-reflection would lead outward as well as inward, that both her own self-understanding and women’s sexuality more broadly were bound up in social and cultural taboos, prohibitions, and myth—and that they might involve political action. “For the moment, I have many concerns with feminism. But that is still abstract, on the level of discourse. Two of my student friends . . . have decided to tackle The Second Sex as soon as the fall semester begins. I am very pleased.”\textsuperscript{125}

The politics of these letters, then, take multiple forms. There is an emancipatory politics of struggling to find a voice and in these readers’ moving efforts to break out of their loneliness, to glean more information, and to bridge the distance between themselves and the kinds of freedom that Beauvoir represented. There is a similar politics to the way in which Beauvoir provided resources, discursive and other, to those who were hemmed in by isolation, by ignorance, and by a sense of themselves as unexceptional or unworthy of interest.\textsuperscript{126} There is a politics to the author-reader relationship, which in this case could be (or seem) intimate without being egalitarian. These readers may have trusted Beauvoir, but many cast her alternately as a celebrity, a model, an advice columnist, and an oracle. There is a politics to the silence on race and colonialism. The politics of these letters point in different and sometimes contradictory directions. Still, the issues they highlight would remain central to feminism’s twentieth-century history, and to the movement’s strengths and weaknesses. The personal transformations that accompanied recognizing desire, or how it was thwarted—what John Gagnon calls “bringing the sexual in from the cold”—were powerfully radicalizing for many individuals and would bring many into politics.\textsuperscript{127}

Feminism’s shared struggles with civil rights and anticolonial movements would swell

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., n.d., 1958.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., n.d., between July and December 1958. See also January 30, 1959.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., November 8, 1958.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., December 31, 1961.
\textsuperscript{126} Rebreyend, “Sur les traces”; Horowitz, Rereading Sex.
\textsuperscript{127} “For when the sexual was brought in from the cold, it was more than an intellectual act; it had the deepest emotional resonance and for many people it necessitated integrating the new fact of the sexual into the entire fabric of their lives.” John H. Gagnon, An Interpretation of Desire: Essays in the Study of Sexuality (Chicago, 2004), 32.
its ranks—and its misrecognitions and blind spots on questions of race would make it seem narrow and exclusive.

A PHILOSOPHER WHO ALSO WROTE best-selling literature; an author who received effusive letters from readers; a thinker who insisted on fundamentally reexamining human nature and whose subject was the relationship of self to other and to the social; a literary celebrity whose work would become essential to a generation of revolutionaries—Simone de Beauvoir cannot but bring to mind Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Between the two stood a century and a half of rethinking the self—most obviously the female self. Any of Rousseau’s women characters—Julie, the virtuous mother-martyr in Julie; or, The New Heloise (1761), or Sophie, cast as Emile’s helpmate in Emile; or, On Education (1762)—could exemplify the target of Beauvoir’s critique: woman as the inessential Other around whom the myths, culture, and psycho-social formations of modern Western culture had taken shape. Beauvoir proposed a version of the female self who could speak—and to whom she spoke—frankly, with the lines of communication cleared of self-annihilating sentiment. Her mode of connecting with her readers was not the Rousseauian communion of hearts, but existential argument and psychological introspection. Her currency was emphatically neither confession, paying tribute to a higher authority, nor sentiment. She called on women to “lay claim to a consciousness” and “win possession of themselves,” and to do so on the intimate terrain where gender relations were negotiated—a call every bit as revolutionary as Rousseau’s to renegotiate the social contract. Many of these letter writers took the gamble. If some of their ways of doing so seem oblique—asking for information about a diaphragm or an abortion, writing about having mixed feelings as a mother or feeling hatred for a father, declaring that love had been sabotaged—Beauvoir’s existentialism, with its insistence on the meaningfulness of the everyday, helped to draw them out in this mode.

“Feeling,” too, had been revised. For Rousseau and the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility in general, feelings needed to be extracted from encrustations of society and civilization but were not themselves problematic. Social manners might be artificial; feelings were genuine and ennobling. As Charles Taylor and others have shown, first the nineteenth-century Realist critique of Romantic illusions and the banality of sentiment, and then the late-nineteenth-century reconceptualization of nature as a “great reservoir of amoral force” combined to deepen the image of human interiority. “Feelings” in a Freudian world (to use a shorthand) were tangles of raw, inadmissible, or unarticulated desires, not concealed but distorted by repression—by society and class, by familial or patriarchal structures. Plumbing one’s


129 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 715. Philippe Lejeune helpfully distinguishes between a confession, in which the confessor acknowledges having made a mistake, and an aveu (admission), which is more defiant. As Lejeune also argues, an aveu does not mark a “liberation” from the rule or expectation defied, for the rule still stands, and is relevant. Lejeune, “L’autobiographie et l’aveu sexuel,” 43.

feelings could not be a matter of simply opening one’s heart; “the requirements of modernity [had] escalated.”

One way to capture the historical transformation, at least as it registers in Beauvoir’s readers’ letters, would be to say that these individuals spoke less of “feeling” and more of “desire,” and that the latter was experienced as harder to master, less coherent or rational, and often, though not exclusively, in more bodily ways, as sexuality.

The cultural position of autobiography had also shifted. Rousseau cast himself as a pioneer in the realm of self-disclosure: “I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator.”

By the twentieth century, autobiography had become a more popular “structure for enunciating the self and also a mode of cognition,” in Carolyn Steedman’s words, and was no longer confined to writers or the well-known. Beauvoir’s readers’ struggles to write about themselves, about which many were so articulate, show the force field of this larger cultural change—an “incitement” to autobiography—as well as Beauvoir’s particular existentialist summons to take themselves in hand and to make their life stories meaningful—to ask whether they were “wasting their lives.”

The route from Beauvoir to feminism was no more straightforward than the route from Rousseau to revolution. In fact, Beauvoir’s own route to feminism was circuitous, and her correspondence with readers such as these may well have pressed her toward a different politics and self-conception as a writer. She certainly suggested as much in her memoirs. In 1963 she mused that before the war, as a young writer she would have been “surprised and even irritated to hear that [she] would be concerned with the problems of women, and that [her] most serious readers would be

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women.” She did not regret that development. If *The Second Sex* had been valuable for readers, readers had been no less important to her work; “they had reciprocally conferred on it its truth.” To summarize, in this author-reader relationship politicization, like projection and the search for intimacy, was very much a two-way street. If some of the letter-writing readers were simply enthralled with Beauvoir’s fame, others cast themselves as critics in their own right. Criticism was usually a province restricted to “fine minds” (*les meilleurs esprits*), wrote one reader; now this reader wanted to “participate out loud.” Fans, critics, and interlocutors; unusual, quirky, and thoughtful: the readers who wrote to Simone de Beauvoir caught her attention, and they amply repay ours.

135 Beauvoir, lettres reçues, March 8, 1950.

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