

Reception problems for women writers: the case of Simone de Beauvoir

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In Jauss's aesthetics of reception, the text that we read is never separable from the history of its reception. A special place in that history is assigned to the first generation of readers of each text—these are the readers whose 'horizon of expectations' (their 'mindset', as Robert Holub helpfully glosses the term) Jauss claims any text will set out to satisfy or challenge.¹ More than this, their reactions may set a pattern for successive generations of readers and, more still, they may affect the writer's subsequent production. In the case of Simone de Beauvoir, her first readers did not of course think of her as the author of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. In what terms did they think of her and how did she think of her readership? Did attitudes change after the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, as one might surmise? How has her reception, her image as writer, changed over time and is it possible to identify key moments or turning points? Which Beauvoir—Beauvoir the feminist, Beauvoir the novelist, Beauvoir the memorialist—is likely to emerge and why? How far do the topoi in the reception of her work which Toril Moi has identified and which, she argues, have remained distressingly fixed over time relate to general problems in the reception of women's writing?² What signs are there, finally, that the reception of any of Beauvoir's works influenced her later writing?

These questions are too large to be satisfactorily discussed in a single essay³ but they group themselves into three main areas, each of which I want to begin exploring here. Underlying each is the general issue of what role to

1 See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Brighton, 1982 and Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, London and New York, 1984, 59–60.

2 See Toril Moi, 'Politics and the Intellectual Woman: Clichés and Commonplaces in the Reception of Simone de Beauvoir', in *Simone de Beauvoir. The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Oxford, 1994. An earlier version of the chapter appeared in her *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir*, Oxford, 1990.

3 This essay is part of work which is currently in progress.

allot to gender, an issue which most of the theoretical literature dealing with reception appears to have left aside.

First generations of readers

The first area that I want to explore is that of the general shape of the reception given by the first generations of readers to each of Beauvoir's major texts, including Beauvoir's own reaction to that reception as she records it in her memoirs. I shall therefore begin with *L'Invitée*, Beauvoir's first novel, which received a sympathetic and encouraging reception, despite being published in Paris in 1943 during the German occupation of France. She describes in her memoirs how delighted she was with her first ever review, by Marcel Arland, which appeared in *Comoedia* on 28 August 1943: 'Arland parlait de mon roman avec chaleur, malgré quelques réserves, et il avait l'air de le prendre au sérieux: c'est cela surtout qui me ravit'.⁴ Arland mentions Sartre and Hemingway as influences and in fact the context of Sartre and of existentialism is heavily alluded to in reviews by many other critics and writers, including Maurice Blanchot and Georges Blin; Thierry Maulnier declares in the *Revue Universitaire* (1943) that she shows promise as a writer.⁵ When it was published in English in America (1954) the redoubtable Henri Peyre, amongst others, described it in the *New York Times* as 'the most original existentialist novel next to Sartre's *Nausea*' and Gaëton Picon described it favourably in his *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française* in 1948. Beauvoir had every justification for taking pleasure in what must be accounted a very favourable reception for a first novel, and one emanating from stalwarts of the literary establishment across the political spectrum. However, there was one aspect of the reception which took Beauvoir by surprise: 'Beaucoup dénonçaient l'immoralité du milieu que je décrivais (...); tout de même cette chatouilleuse pudibonderie me surprit: on s'allonge si peu dans *L'Invitée*!' (*La Force de*

4 Simone de Beauvoir *La Force de l'âge*, Paris, 1960, 637.

5 I am indebted for much of this information to the diligent research of Joy Bennett and Gabriella Hochmann, published in *Simone de Beauvoir. An Annotated Bibliography*, New York and London, 1988. Full publication details of all newspaper articles cited can be found in this bibliography.

l'âge, 637–8). This can be seen in retrospect as an early warning note and it is one to which I shall return.

Le Sang des autres, her second novel, published in 1945, initially received an even more rapturous response. Beauvoir writes in *La Force des choses*: ‘le succès dépassa de loin mon attente. Il fut beaucoup plus bruyant que celui de *L'Invitée*; tous les critiques placèrent mon second roman au-dessus du premier; il suscita dans plusieurs journaux des éditoriaux émus’.⁶ However, Beauvoir is also well aware of why her novel was so acclaimed—appearing in September 1945 it was the first (or one of the very first) to portray the Resistance in fiction and its pro-Resistance, pro-Communist line matched the mood of its readers. In fact reaction soon cooled, especially after Blanchot dismissed it as a ‘roman à thèse’ in an article published in 1945 and in *La Part du feu* in 1949 (*Simone de Beauvoir: An Annotated Bibliography*, 340). Extraordinarily, Beauvoir herself quotes Blanchot’s piece at length in her memoirs and hastens to agree that her novel suffers from didacticism. Beauvoir’s own self-denegation about her writing in her memoirs is often remarked upon and has itself to be taken into account as a factor in her later reception.

Her third novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1946) is a difficult text dealing with the twin themes of history and immortality and it was almost universally declared to be a disappointment, although its ambition was recognised. Beauvoir was taken aback by the general reaction but since it matched that of some of her friends was inclined to take it philosophically. It was after this that she started work on *Le Deuxième Sexe* but, while she was still working on it, made her first visit to the United States in 1947 and published her impressions in *L’Amérique aujour le jour* (1948). Even where critics disagreed with her description of incipient fascism and racism in America, her talents as an observer and lively writer were generally commended. We then come to the reception of *Le Deuxième Sexe* itself in 1949. The first volume was published by Gallimard in June, was received with interest and sold well—22,000 copies in the first week. But that volume 1 was not the volume 1 we read today in paperback—it contained the first part on ‘Destin’ examining

6 *La Force des choses*, Paris, 1963, 59.

what biology, psychology and marxism can tell us about the meaning of the term 'woman', the section on history and the section on myths (including the readings of male authors which are excluded from more recent editions). Some of this had already appeared in *Les Temps modernes*. However, in May, June and July, extracts from the second volume on 'L'initiation sexuelle de la femme', 'La lesbienne' and 'La maternité' appeared in *Les Temps modernes* and the second volume itself was published in November. It sold as well as the first but caused a storm in the press, as did the chapters published in *Les Temps modernes*. Mauriac led a campaign lasting several months in *Le Figaro littéraire* to get young people to condemn pornography in general and *Le Deuxième Sexe* in particular. Beauvoir received sackfuls of letters from men offering to cure her of her frigidity or, alternatively, of her nymphomania. Even well meaning commentators called it 'courageous' whilst many others suggested that Beauvoir suffered from an inferiority complex and had evident difficulties in dealing with her sexuality.

Beauvoir writes in her memoirs that she had never before been conscious of having been attacked as a woman and she goes on to say that 'ensuite, c'est souvent en tant que femme qu'on m'a attaquée parce qu'on pensait m'atteindre en un point vulnérable' (*La Force des choses*, 262–4). Asking herself why her book created this reception (and without making the link with the remarks about *L'Invitée*'s indecency which I mentioned earlier) Beauvoir goes on to analyse the average French male need to reduce her to a sexual object as a knee-jerk reaction to feeling that their superiority was being questioned. She also suspected that they were deeply threatened by her claim that many French women did not lead blissful sex lives. She concludes: 'La chiennerie, c'est la vieille grivoiserie française, reprise par des mâles vulnérables et rancuneux' (*La Force des choses*, 262). We might add that it also fits into general patterns of the reception of women writers.

Interestingly, however, it was Beauvoir's very next publication, *Les Mandarins* (1954) which was to win her highest literary accolade in the form of the Goncourt prize. The reception of *Les Mandarins* has been studied in an

interesting and useful book by Bjorn Larsson.⁷ Larsson draws attention to the fact that 1954 was the year of the defeat of the French in Indo-China and the start of the Algerian War; Beauvoir's novel, dealing with political and moral issues, was thus ripe for its time. She was also, according to Larsson, one of the very few writers with a well known name to produce a novel for the 1954 *rentrée*, which may explain why a large number of articles were published on it even before she was awarded the Goncourt prize (Larsson counted at least 70 *comptes rendus* and another 40 or so briefer *aperçus*). Over a hundred more appeared after she got the prize, many discussing her life and the possible identity of characters in the book (*La Réception des Mandarins*, 19–20). Surprisingly few critics seem to have made overt links with *Le Deuxième Sexe*, no doubt precisely because the text was perceived as being concerned with the problems of political and ethical choice for the French intellectual in the context of the Cold War.

However, a major turning point in Beauvoir's literary image took place four years later, with the publication of her first book of memoirs *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), which created a great deal of public interest. This volume stops just as she meets Sartre, so critics were unable to read it as a disguised biography of Jean-Paul. It was well received, sold enormously and Beauvoir has described how this reception encouraged her to go on to write the later volumes, also best sellers. The third, *La Force des choses* (1963), made a strong mark on the way in which Beauvoir was perceived by her public because of the famous last line in which she writes: 'j'ai été flouée' (508). This was essentially intended as a political remark, proceeding from her observation that she had been brought up as a child to expect to take her place in a world full of happiness and opportunity but instead has discovered as an adult that the world is a place full of starving and warring humanity. However, since she also discusses the problems of aging in the last few pages, her last line was universally understood as an admission of defeat and failure. Her political enemies were delighted, her admirers disappointed and disconcerted. *Une mort très douce* (1964), an account of her mother's death, did

7 Bjorn Larsson, *La Réception des Mandarins*, Lund, 1988.

nothing to help in that Beauvoir's detractors were able to claim that she was so politically and ideologically obsessed that she would use even the details of her own mother's death to demonstrate a point about wealth and privilege in French society. The *topos* of Beauvoir the unfeeling journalist never parted from her notebook at even the most emotional or delicate of moments was here established, ready to be brought out again nearly twenty years later in 1981 when she published an account of Sartre's last ten years, *La Cérémonie des adieux*.

However, in 1966 and 1968 she returned to fiction with first *Les Belles Images* and then the three short stories of *La Femme rompue*. Although they sold very well and are clearly amongst the most sophisticated and literary of Beauvoir's fictional texts they were widely derided and badly misunderstood. This seems to be much more an effect of the publication of the memoirs than of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Why should this be? I shall be returning later to this question, but the essence of the matter seems to be that Beauvoir had done two things by publishing her memoirs: first of all she had made herself extremely well known and had created a huge readership, of a kind bound to excite envy. Secondly, she had created this stature and publicity for herself by writing about her own life, that is to say by making it crystal clear what kind of life she led, who her friends and allies were, what her personal strengths were, and what her weaknesses were too.

The final group of Beauvoir's publications are situated just before and just after her death. *La Cérémonie des adieux* published a year after Sartre's death and five years before her own, was widely received as a round in the battle between herself and Sartre's literary executor, Arlette El Kaïm Sartre, for control of Sartre's image. There was widespread indignation at the details given of Sartre's physical diminution, not seen as evidence of Beauvoir's determination to record and be observant of all circumstances of life but as a petty desire to take revenge on and diminish the man. The publication of the *Lettres au Castor*, the letters Sartre had written to her (1983) and that, after Beauvoir's own death, of her *Lettres à Sartre* (1990) and her *Journal de guerre* (1990), written in the early years of the War, led to a torrent of criticism, as the extent to which the two had complacently plotted and discussed their sexual adventures at the expense of the emotions of others became clear. In their turn,

these unleashed a series of publications by people who had been part of the so-called 'family' at one time or another. The most damaging was Bianca Lamblin's, entitled *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée*.⁸ Sartre in fact emerges from this account much worse than Beauvoir, but the title itself refers only too clearly to Beauvoir and the sense of emotional betrayal felt by the writer is also directed at Beauvoir, despite the fact that she continued to see Bianca Lamblin regularly right up to her death, whereas Sartre simply broke with her in the early part of the War and left it at that.

So far I have been discussing Beauvoir's reception without taking into account scholarly analyses of her work. Of course from 1958 onwards, when the first monograph was published by Geneviève Gennari, there has also been an increasing volume of serious critical studies—books, articles, literary histories and so on. They no doubt form the image of Simone de Beauvoir which we have in British and American universities. However, there is little evidence that they have made an impact on the French media image of Beauvoir, and it seems to be the case that Beauvoir's literary reputation in France has been hardly touched by the body of critical work available on her. This is rather a pity, given that one might expect newspaper reactions to a writer to be politically motivated and to reflect the general line of the paper. This is sometimes avoided when well-known university critics who have worked on authors are asked to write in newspapers—thus Michel Contat frequently writes on Sartre in the press. But there is no equivalent figure for Beauvoir. Indeed, it is notable that no major French academics work on Beauvoir. As Toril Moi points out, before 1980 the authors of monographs on Beauvoir were predominantly French (although many of them were curiously hostile). Since 1980, studies of Beauvoir have almost exclusively been written in English (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 76–7). Between 1972 and 1992 only 14 completed theses with Beauvoir's name in the title were recorded at French universities. In the same period there were 51 on Sartre, 55 on Balzac and 80 on Camus. Colette scored a respectable 33 and Duras 31. How far has Beauvoir's poor reputation in the media, since the mid 1960s, affected the

8 Bianca Lamblin, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille dérangée*, Paris, 1993.

willingness of French academics to take an interest in her? And how far has the lack of university interest reinforced the media image? There are in fact some small signs that a change may be taking place, but I want now to turn to the question of the recurrent topoi in attacks on Beauvoir, identified by Moi, and to see to what extent these can be linked to a more general theory of the reception of women writers.⁹

Topoi in the reception of women writers

Moi's analysis of Beauvoir criticism focuses mainly (but not exclusively) on academic writing and sets out to 'explore the striking hostility of Beauvoir criticism: the fact that there is a surprisingly high number of condescending, sarcastic, sardonic or dismissive accounts'. She goes on to say that: 'Comparable French women writers are not treated in this way: nothing in the criticism of say, Simone Weil, Marguerite Yourcenar, Marguerite Duras or Nathalie Sarraute matches the frequency and intensity of virulence displayed by so many of Simone de Beauvoir's critics' (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 75). Her argument is that Beauvoir's critics of this type never enter into debate with her work but instead seek to discredit her as a speaker through a number of recurrent stereotypes, which Moi identifies in a very striking series of quotations and examples. These include the 'personality *topos*' in which Beauvoir's looks, life and morality are passionately discussed with the implication that whatever a women says or thinks or writes is less important than what she is; the by-products are the '*midinette*' *topos* which reduces everything to the confessional commonplace, and the sexist personality *topos* which presents all Beauvoir's political choices as emotional reactions, in an attempt to depoliticise her work. To this can be added the cliché of the cold, non-maternal woman, used to suggest a disregard for the human race, and the '*mégère*' or 'shrew' *topos*, sometimes blended with that of the hysterical. But Moi finds two of the clichés to be particularly significant: the *topos* of the bluestocking, the desexualised schoolmarm who has worked hard to get on and please her

9 Hopeful signs include the appearance of a special issue of a French journal on Beauvoir's fiction (*Roman 20/50*, XIII, 1992).

father (this is in contrast to the playful, laid back, male, that is real intellectual) and the naivety *topos*—the one that turns Beauvoir into a naive schoolgirl, a false intellectual, an epistemological imposter. What they reveal, Moi argues, is that Beauvoir is subjected to this degree of malevolence because she claims to speak as an intellectual woman. The chapter closes with this remark: ‘woman’s right to intellectual activity—and particularly to philosophy—has always been hotly contested by patriarchal ideology. Simone de Beauvoir’s fate at the hands of her critics shows that the struggle is by no means over today’ (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 92). Both this conclusion and Moi’s general line of analysis are powerful ones, which go a long way towards explaining academic treatment of Beauvoir. However, I shall argue that the bluestocking *topos* can be accommodated within a more general framework of a gendered reception theory.

Although there has not been much serious academic attention given to the general theorisation of the reception of women writers, there have been two books written with a verve and polemical spirit that have much to recommend them. One is Dale Spender’s *The Writing or the Sex? Or Why You Don’t Have to Read Women’s Writing to Know It’s No Good*, and the second is Joanna Russ’s *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*.¹⁰ Russ’s book is a hardhitting and brilliantly funny exposé of the ways in which women as a group have historically both been informally prevented from writing and been subjected to strategies for ignoring, belittling or condemning their work. Chapter by chapter Russ details these strategies. Her first is what she calls denial of agency, or the attempt to deny that the woman ever wrote the book at all—a strategy familiar in the French context from Madame de Lafayette onwards. The second strategy is the argument that a woman has made herself look immodest or improper. In the twentieth century this has been replaced, according to Russ, by the use of the term ‘confessional’ or a synonym which conveys simultaneously that what has been written is not art and that such writing brings

10 Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? Or Why You Don’t Have to Read Women’s Writing to Know It’s No Good*, New York, 1989; Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, London, 1984.

shame upon the author (the writer should not have felt or done these things, and, if she has, should not have made them public). This is a recognisable feature of the reception of *L'Invitée* (the accusations of indecency to which I drew attention early in this paper), and of some of Beauvoir's autobiography, and an overwhelming feature of the reception of the letters and journal. Russ's third strategy is the double standard of content: in other words, what women write about. Russ's point is that, given that men and women often have very different experiences of life, the double standard works by labelling one set of experiences as more worthy of artistic treatment than the other. Beauvoir was so aware of this danger that she went to extreme lengths to present her early novels as primarily philosophical; when she lectured in Japan in the 1960s she several times attacked the narrowness of what she calls 'ouvrages de dames' from which she is careful to disassociate herself.¹¹ When she did allow herself in the later fiction of *Les Belles Images* and *La Femme rompue* to write exclusively about women and their concerns, the triumph of the critics in scornfully dismissing her was of course all the greater.

A fourth strategy identified by Russ is false categorising: the woman artist is removed from this category and relabelled as the sister, mother or lover of a man. In Beauvoir's case she becomes of course both the lover and the disciple of Sartre. Fifthly we have isolation, or anomalousness. If by any chance a woman does break into the canon this mechanism operates either to keep her achievement to a single work (the myth of the isolated achievement) or she is labelled as perhaps good but nevertheless peculiar—not fitting in to the main tradition. This is often of course merely a result of being an isolated woman. In Beauvoir's case this reinforced the critical dismissal of her 1960s fiction—since she could not be compared to other serious women writers writing on the same topics she could then automatically only be compared with Sagan and the writers of popular romantic fiction, thus demoting her immediately. Other women writers of the period with a serious literary reputation, such as Sarraute and Yourcenar, kept resolutely away from any such subject matter,

11 Simone de Beauvoir, 'La femme et la création' in Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Les Ecrits de Simone de Beauvoir*, Paris, 1979, 471.

and indeed such a response on the part of women writers may be the only way of keeping a foothold in the literary scene in cultures particularly hostile to women's writing. Nevertheless Beauvoir, who clearly began in this mould, eventually felt able to break away from it, though she may have regretted her decision in the light of its consequence. It is now time to consider whether the favourable response of women readers to her work may have contributed to a shift in Beauvoir's writing in the direction of women readers.¹²

Beauvoir's response to women readers

It was in her memoirs that Beauvoir was first able to speak as a 'je' identified as that of a woman, and it was also in the autobiographical period that she began occasionally to publish extracts of her work in *Elle*—a clear indication of expectation of a female readership. This experiment reached its height with the publication of one of the short stories of *La Femme rompue* in *Elle*—a disastrous miscalculation as far as her literary reputation was concerned since it readily allowed her critics to reduce her to the level of pulp romantic fiction, even though her text could not in all conscience be read simply in this way.¹³ However, if we want to trace the evolution of Beauvoir's attitude to her readers there are a number of remarks which she makes in the course of her writing history which are worth returning to. In discussing, for example, the reception of *Le Sang des autres*, Beauvoir declares herself irritated that the novel had not been seen first and foremost in philosophical terms—the universal and philosophical thrust of writing is for her a clear way of inscribing her text in a serious and therefore necessarily male-identified tradition. I have already mentioned Beauvoir's analysis of the reception of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. But what is perhaps even more interesting is that she balances her account of

12 I am indebted for this line of thought to Catherine Brosman, who suggests it in her *Simone de Beauvoir Revisited*, New York, 1991, 37, though to a rather different purpose. Brosman's book shares some of the features of those who feel ambiguous about Beauvoir's writing, but it is often suggestive.

13 For further exploration of this see Elizabeth Fallaize, 'Resisting romance: Simone de Beauvoir, "The Woman Destroyed" and the romance script' in Margaret Atack and Phil Powrie (eds.), *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, Manchester and New York, 1990, 15–23.

the misogynistic public reception with a warm account of the reaction she had from women readers, and after citing at length from their letters she concludes: ‘On m’aurait surprise, et même irritée, à trente ans, si on m’avait dit que je m’occuperais des problèmes féminins et que mon public le plus sérieux, ce serait des femmes. Je ne le regrette pas (...) Elles m’intéressent; et j’aime mieux, à travers elles, avoir sur le monde une prise limitée, mais solide, que de flotter dans l’universel’ (*La Force des choses*, 269). This is a real road to Damascus declaration for Beauvoir—this new view of who her readers were and in what terms she could speak to them must surely account in great part for her decision to speak of herself as a woman in her autobiographical period. This also clearly affects her decision to write, in her last two works of fiction, about and for women.

It is not until this final period that there is an accompanying change in her attitude about writing for a mass public. Writing in her third volume of memoirs about the success of the second she describes her reaction when told that forty thousand copies had been sold prior to publication: ‘j’en fus désagréablement affectée: étais-je devenue un de ces fabricants de bestsellers qui ont leur public attitré, la valeur de leurs œuvres n’entrant plus en ligne de compte?’ (*La Force des choses*, 398). Yet, by the time of the critical assault on *Les Belles Images* she writes defiantly, in *Tout compte fait*, that the book ‘a tenu 12 semaines sur la liste des best-sellers, on en a vendu environ cent vingt mille exemplaires’, with the clear implication that this is the real test of her writing.¹⁴ She misjudged her audience, however, with her final work of fiction, *La Femme rompue*. There are all sorts of structural and cultural reasons why many readers did not read (and still often do not read) the main story in the volume in the way Beauvoir intended—but instead of asking herself why, Beauvoir, after noting ‘même succès de vente que pour *Les Belles Images*’ strikes out savagely at her women readers in a determined attempt to put an ironic distance between them and herself: ‘je fus submergée de lettres émanant de femmes rompues, demi rompues, ou en instance de rupture (...) Leurs

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait*, Paris, 1972, 139-40.

réactions reposaient sur un énorme contresens' (*Tout compte fait*, 143). She never wrote another line of fiction.

Conclusions

My first conclusion is that the first generation of readers to whom Jauss attributes particular significance do seem to have had a marked effect on the reception of Beauvoir's work. *L'Invitée*, so sympathetically received in 1943, remains by far one of her most commented on and apparently favoured fictional texts, with *Les Mandarins* in second place.¹⁵ The fiction of the 1960s remains relatively forgotten, in France at least. A second *constatation* is the extent to which there has been a carry over effect from the first journalistic criticism to French academic criticism, in terms both of the works preferred and of the hostile tone; it seems likely that this will remain the case until the body of critical work becomes much more developed.

Both these points lead to a third, which is that both *Le Deuxième Sexe* and the autobiographies have, in different ways, had a markedly damaging effect on Beauvoir's reputation as a writer. The taboos surrounding myths of maternity and female sexuality which the publication of the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* so openly breached created an automatic opposition to her work which was displayed with particular ferocity whenever she spoke of herself as a woman. I have also suggested that it may have been decisive in convincing her to write for a mass female readership.

The renewed attention which Beauvoir drew to her own life by publishing her volumes of autobiography in the midst of her fictional production seems clearly to have damaged her status as a novelist. I would suggest that this may be because it accumulates several of Russ's strategies and Moi's topoi in one. First of all, the great success she attained in the genre itself seems likely to have worked against her. As Russ remarks, if success is conceded then it is likely to be isolated and contained, in this case within a single genre. Second, the autobiographies play into the hands of commentators who always want to

15 The special issue on Beauvoir's fiction (1992) referred to above focuses for example on *L'Invitée* and *Les Mandarins*.

discuss the woman, and not what she wrote (Moi's 'personality *topos*'). Third, they are confessional—they deal with sexual liaisons and make Beauvoir more vulnerable to the 'improper woman' accusation to which her work had been subject from the publication of her first novel, and which the opponents of *Le Deuxième Sexe* were particularly eager to make.

More broadly, the fit between Russ's strategies, Moi's *topoi* and the history of Beauvoir's reception which I reviewed at the beginning of this essay leads me to conclude that Beauvoir can indeed be fitted into a general schema of reception of women's writing. The fact that Sarraute or Yourcenar have not been received with as much malice as Beauvoir does not so much remove Beauvoir from such a schema as underline how women who deliberately avoid writing as women (as is the case with both Sarraute and Yourcenar, both of Beauvoir's generation) can sometimes succeed in protecting themselves.¹⁶ Beauvoir's initial instinct to place herself squarely in the male tradition was undoubtedly a safer course. It remains to be seen, however, whether her continuing popularity with the French general reading public and with a section of (largely female) Anglo-American scholars will eventually effect a shift in her status in France.

16 The case of Marguerite Duras is of course rather different; however, comparing the entries on her in most standard French literary histories with those on Beauvoir, I have found hostility to both to be on occasions so offensive that it seems pointless to try to measure which is worse.