

EXTRACTS FROM

# The Second Sex



SIMONE  
DE BEAUVOIR

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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## About the Author

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908. In 1929 she became the youngest person ever to obtain the agrégation in philosophy at the Sorbonne. She taught at the lycées at Marseille and Rouen from 1931 to 1937, and later in Paris from 1938 to 1943. After the war, she emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement, working with Jean-Paul Sartre on *Les Temps Modernes*. *The Second Sex* was first published in Paris in 1949. It was a groundbreaking, risqué book that became a runaway success. Selling 22,000 copies in its first week, the book earned its author both notoriety and admiration. Since then, *The Second Sex* has been translated into forty languages and has become a landmark in the history of feminism. Beauvoir was the author of many books, including the novel *The Mandarins* (1957) which was awarded the Prix Goncourt. She died in 1986.

Translators Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier are both graduates of Rutgers University, New Jersey and have lived, studied and worked in Paris for over forty years. They were faculty members of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques and jointly authored and translated numerous works on subjects ranging from grammar and politics to art and social sciences.

## About the Book

When this book was first published in 1949 it was to outrage and scandal. Never before had the case for female liberty been so forcefully and successfully argued. De Beauvoir's belief that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' switched on light bulbs in the heads of a generation of women and began a fight for greater equality and economic independence. These pages contain the key passages of the book that changed perceptions of women forever.

ALSO BY SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Fiction

*The Blood of Others*  
*She Came to Stay*  
*All Men are Mortal*  
*The Mandarins*  
*Les Belles Images*  
*The Woman Destroyed*  
*Old Age*

Non-Fiction

*The Ethics of Ambiguity*  
*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*  
*The Prime of Life*  
*The Force of Circumstance*  
*All Said and Done*  
*A Very Easy Death*  
*Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Extracts from

# The Second Sex

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# INTRODUCTION

It is probably fair to say that I approached Simone de Beauvoir the wrong way round: I visited her grave before I read a word she'd written.

This was not, you understand, my intention. Many years ago I was in Paris, with a handsome man who liked Sartre (my youth was filled with such men, several of whom also played the guitar. I have nothing to offer in my defence). He liked Sartre so much that he wanted to visit the great man's grave. Sartre was a bit recent for me, philosophically speaking: I had just graduated in Classics, so knew a reasonable amount about Plato and Aristotle, but very little about philosophers after, say, Marcus Aurelius. But since we'd already been to the Louvre to see a bust of Socrates – the father of Western Philosophy – it seemed only fair to head to Montparnasse Cemetery and check out one of his most celebrated descendants. And when we arrived, of course, I realised we were visiting two.

Sartre and Beauvoir share a headstone, an austere block with plain lettering. Just their names and dates. Him above her, because he died first. From a distance, it looked like it had been vandalised, or at least littered. A few dying flowers lay limply across the grave. But they were surrounded by paper scraps and pebbles, as though dozens of people had emptied their pockets and left the contents behind. As we drew closer, it became clear that it was covered with notes – which made perfect sense: people often write messages to authors, and death is no obstacle to that – and Metro tickets, which made no sense at all. I asked the handsome man why people left their tickets on

this grave, weighed down by small stones. He didn't know either.

It was surprisingly difficult to find the answers to such questions in the days before search engines. And once I got back to the UK, I forgot about it. I didn't think of it again even when I finally read Simone de Beauvoir. I just remembered it today, writing this introduction. A quick online query reveals that people leave the tickets to commemorate the couple's support of a political group that once gave Metro tickets away after a hefty price rise. The tickets are a neat symbol of Beauvoir and Sartre's socialist ideals. I find myself wondering if all the ticket-leavers know this, or if some just place their tickets on the gravestone because they see that other people have done so.

I knew from the moment I opened *The Second Sex* that, had I read it before that Parisian trip, I would have been tempted to leave her a note and a train ticket as well. I knew it from the first two sentences: 'I hesitated for a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new.' That's an audacious way to begin your masterwork. And this witty, astringent tone pings through Beauvoir's writing.

No wonder, when you consider who she was reading. On the second page, Beauvoir quotes one of my favourite lines from Dorothy Parker: 'I cannot be fair about books that treat women as women. My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, whoever we are, should be considered as human beings.' If I had to summarise my own feminism, it would boil down to this: women are the same thing as people. It's hard not to like someone who likes the same bits of Dorothy Parker as you do.

Beauvoir can flit between high-minded philosophy and a pointed remark without any trouble at all. Rebutting an article by Claude Mauriac, 'whom everyone admires for his powerful originality', she observes, 'Clearly his female interlocutor does not reflect M. Mauriac's own ideas, since



he is known not to have any.' Ouch. It's only on reading the second sentence that you realise just how deeply ironic she was being in the first. Everyone else may admire Mauriac, but you are left in no doubt that Beauvoir disagrees, and that she could give you eight perfectly formed reasons for why everyone else is wrong.

There is something dazzling about the certainty Beauvoir can bring to almost anything, from pseudo-biological determinism to the seclusion of women in ancient Athens. She is an expert in her subject, and she makes no apology for it. Only when you read her do you realise how many women write using a default uncertainty - maybe, perhaps, possibly. I do it myself: look at how I began this introduction. 'It's probably fair to say ...' I'm writing about my personal experience, so it isn't 'probably fair', it's actually the case. Yet still, I cannot resist adding a layer of ironic distance between me and my words - between my writing and your reading - which imparts a faint sense of doubt. I mean what I say, but I don't want to blare it out, like a spotlight. I place my argument in front of you, preferring you to come across it for yourself. Beauvoir shines her words into your face until your eyes water. It scarcely needs saying that you wait a long time to read the word 'maybe' in *The Second Sex*.

It should be disheartening to read this book now, and realise how little has changed since it was first published. 'Misogynists have often reproached intellectual women for "letting themselves go"; but they also preach to them: if you want to be our equals, stop wearing make-up and polishing your nails.' If Beauvoir was calling out the double standards applied to women in 1949, how are we still having to live with them today? 'The woman ... knows that when people look at her, they do not distinguish her from her appearance: she is judged, respected or desired in relation to how she looks.'

I prefer not to be disheartened. We've achieved a lot since 1949. We're still a long way off equality, but we're travelling towards it, even if the journey includes occasional back-sliding. Beauvoir never resists drawing parallels between racism and sexism, and the world hasn't stopped being racist yet, either. Still, it's better than it was in 1949. Reading *The Second Sex* is like having someone cleverer and more articulate than you remind you that you aren't paranoid. It *is* difficult working in a field where there aren't many women. It *is* annoying that you are sometimes given a choice between being considered a slattern (no make-up, sensible shoes) or a bimbo (polished nails, nice hair). Articulate it and you're more likely to notice it and fight it, for yourself and for other women, too.

'Throwing oneself boldly towards goals risks setbacks; but one also attains unexpected results,' writes Beauvoir. 'Prudence necessarily leads to mediocrity.' It's advice that we should all bear in mind. No one wants to fail, but we all do sometimes, and it is undeniably better to fail at something difficult and risky than at something easy and safe. Besides, if there is a single skill that will get you through life above all others - more important than cleverness or passion or imagination - it is resilience. Without it, even the most brilliant person can be crushed. And no one can develop resilience in a vacuum. You have to fail in order to learn how to recover from failure.

There are people who dislike thinkers like Beauvoir, because she was angry. Anger, you probably know, is not considered a virtue, and nor is it ladylike. But anger can be intensely powerful: how would anyone fight injustice without being angry that it exists at all? There is a difference between anger - which can be clean and pure - and petulance. The latter makes us petty and mean-spirited, interested only in our own advancement and not in that of others. But life is not a zero-sum game. There isn't a limited quantity of success or happiness, meaning that if

one person achieves something, the rest of us take an automatic step backwards.

So please remember as you read that while anger may not be very ladylike, neither was she. Nor am I. And, hopefully, neither are you. And that's not a bad thing at all. I'd rather be a woman than a lady, any day.

Natalie Haynes, 2015

## EDITOR'S NOTE

From May to July 1948 the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, directed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, published three extracts from a 'forthcoming work on the situation of woman', with the general title 'Woman and Myths'. They were part of the third section of the first volume of *The Second Sex* and dealt with the image that Montherlant, Claudel and Breton gave of women in their novels. Her analysis was harsh, her tone biting, and the often-virulent criticism was not long in coming. Simone de Beauvoir wrote on 3 August to the American writer Nelson Algren, with whom she was involved for a year: '[*The Second Sex*] is a big and long work that will take at least another year. I want it to be really good [...]. I hear it said, and this really pleases me, that the part published in *Les Temps Modernes* infuriated several men; it is a chapter devoted to the absurd myths that men cherish about women, and to the ridiculous poetry they manufacture about them. The men seem to have been hit where it hurts.'

'The first volume was finished in autumn,' recalled Simone de Beauvoir in *Force of Circumstance*, 'and I decided to take it right away to Gallimard. What should I call it? I thought about it for a long time with Sartre [...]. I thought of *The Other*, *The Second*: that had already been used. One evening, in my room, we spent hours throwing words around, Sartre, Bost and I. I suggested: *The Other Sex*. No. Bost proposed: *The Second Sex*, and upon reflection, it fit perfectly. I feverishly set to work on the second volume.'

As of May the following year, *Les Temps Modernes* published three new extracts from the second volume: 'Sexual Initiation', 'The Lesbian' and 'The Mother'. The first two are in the part called 'Formative Years' and the third in 'Situation'. François Mauriac, a journalist at *Le Figaro* newspaper, was particularly outraged by Simone de Beauvoir's writing on sexuality and started an inquiry into the 'so-called message of Saint-Germain-des-Prés' and expected 'young intellectuals and writers' to totally disavow the surrealist and existentialist movements whose influence he claimed to see in Simone de Beauvoir's work. Reactions were not long in coming and the Catholic writer, probably to his great surprise, did not find the unanimous condemnation he was expecting. Authors brought quite nuanced answers to the question that rather proved, with all due respect to Mauriac, that an inevitable evolution was occurring in post-war France, an evolution in morals and mentalities and in men's and women's relations.

In June 1949 the first volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), subtitled 'Les Faits et les mythes' ('Facts and Myths'), was published by Gallimard (with the author's name in black capital letters on an ivory cover, and the title in red capitals). It carried a strip embellished with a picture of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre at the Café Flore, with the caption 'Woman, this unknown'. The book was dedicated to Jacques Bost, and the dedication was followed by quotations from Pythagoras and Poullain de la Barre, one of the first, in the seventeenth century, to have defended the equality of the sexes. Twenty-two thousand copies were sold in the first week, while reviewers went wild.

In August *Paris-Match* published extracts from the second volume in its issues of 6 and 13 August: 'A woman calls women to freedom,' the weekly proclaims. This volume, subtitled 'Lived Experience', came out in November. It carried two quotations as epigraphs, one by