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Judith G. Coffin, *Sex, Love, and Letters: Writing Simone de Beauvoir*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. 328 pp. Notes, references, illustrations, and index. $32.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501750540. $15.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501750557.

Review by Susan Rubin Suleiman, Harvard University.

The title of Judith Coffin's book evokes, for those of us old enough to remember it, Steven Soderbergh's 1989 hit movie, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, whose main argument, according to the late and great Roger Ebert, was that "conversation is better than sex—more intimate, more voluptuous."[1] As Coffin shows, the letters that readers wrote to Simone de Beauvoir over a period of close to twenty-five years were intimate and on occasion voluptuous, some of them part of ongoing conversations with the author. We know that Beauvoir often responded, although only the letters she received have been preserved. *Sex, Love, and Letters* is an erudite and highly readable study of this huge archive, now part of Beauvoir's papers at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, comprising roughly 11,000 letters that Beauvoir received from readers all over the world (nearly a third of them written by men) between 1949 and 1972, that is, between the publication of *Le deuxième sexe* and *Tout compte fait* (*All Said and Done*), the last volume of her autobiography. If we consider the fact that almost all of the letters from the first five years were lost or destroyed, we can assume that Beauvoir received on average close to a thousand letters per year. At the height of the correspondence, in the early 1960s, she received fully that number, close to three letters per day, every day.

As Coffin notes, the fascinating thing about these letters is, that "ordinary women and men came to cast [Beauvoir] as an interlocutor in their everyday dramas" (p. 8). This means that they participated in a personal way—Coffin calls it a kind of appropriation—in Beauvoir's "ongoing interpretation of her life and times" (p. 243). Rare is the writer who can elicit that kind of engagement from her readers, especially if she writes books of serious philosophical import. For Beauvoir, all writing that sought to understand the meaning of the writer's experience in and of the world was philosophical, whether it was called a novel, an essay, a sociohistorical study, or an autobiography. Her readers responded to her work by sharing and seeking to analyze their own experiences, addressing her as both a writer they looked up to and as a woman who they felt would understand them. Some were themselves aspiring writers, but most were ordinary people who found Beauvoir's writing profoundly useful in their lives. Among the most compelling parts of *Sex, Love, and Letters* are the excerpts that Coffin reproduces from individual letters. Far from being traditional fan mail, many expressed reservations and criticisms or demanded answers. Like Beauvoir herself, these readers saw themselves as situated in a specific time and place, engaged in the discussions that dominated public discourse in the decades after World War II:

on the role of women in society and on relations between the sexes, on decolonization, on torture and the Algerian war, on birth control and abortion, on how to think about the Vichy years.

Even while she concentrates on the subject of letters to the author by readers, Coffin provides a sweeping view of French society during the *trente glorieuses*, the three postwar decades that saw more radical changes in French social, cultural, and economic life than any other time in recent history. The book's eight chapters are organized chronologically, each one linked to a particular work by Beauvoir and the responses it elicited. The first two chapters, focusing on *The Second Sex* (published in 1949) are a bit of an anomaly, since the archive contains virtually no contemporaneous letters from readers. *The Second Sex* is often mentioned in letters from the 1960s and later by readers who discovered it then, but responses from the time of its publication are limited to what appeared in print (and occasionally in private correspondences). In chapter one, "The Intimate Life of the Nation: Reading *The Second Sex* in 1949," Coffin studies the critical reception of the book in three quite different magazines: *Paris Match* and *Les Temps Modernes*, both of them new publications in 1949 (Beauvoir was one of the founding editors of the latter), and the more venerable *Figaro Littéraire*, whose chief literary critic was the Catholic novelist François Mauriac. *Paris Match* and *Les Temps Modernes* both lauded the book and published excerpts from it, though the popular weekly focused prudently on the first volume, before the more scandalous chapters discussing menstruation, sexual initiation, motherhood (Beauvoir's view of it was very negative, as we know), and lesbianism. If *Les Temps Modernes* and *Paris* Match liked the work, *Le Figaro Littéraire* expressed only outrage, and Mauriac jumped on the occasion to denounce the whole slew of new "doctrines" (p. 40) after World War II that threatened traditional French Christian values, chief among them existentialism and surrealism. Surrealism was of course not at all new, but Mauriac denounced its "cultivation of eroticism" (p. 40). (His now notorious remark that he had learned more about Madame de Beauvoir's clitoris and vagina than he needed in reading her book was made in a private letter to Roger Stéphane, but not publicly). It's unfortunate that we don't have private letters from readers from this time, but we know from later ones that the book had a life-changing effect on many people, not least because so many of the topics that Beauvoir discussed as part of most women's experience were totally taboo subjects in France. Coffin has an enlightening discussion of *pudeur* as an obstacle to free expression.

In the second chapter, "Beauvoir, Kinsey, and Mid-Century Sex," Coffin broadens the horizon to include the United States, where the Kinsey report on female sexual behavior (following a few years after *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male*, which Beauvoir had read while preparing to write her book) appeared the same year, 1953, as the English translation of *The Second Sex.* Coffin emphasizes the important differences between the two authors' approaches. One was strictly empirical and narrowly focused, based on quantifiable data, while the other was historical and phenomenological, exploring the totality of women's experience. Yet, she also shows that Beauvoir and Kinsey were often discussed together, as part of the new wave of interest in sex as a subject of study that characterized the postwar period. Coffin provides an excellent brief history here, starting with Krafft-Ebing's work in the 1880s.[2] She concludes that Beauvoir's connection to Kinsey "reoriented Beauvoir in the popular imagination, familiarizing her" (p. 73) and preparing the reception of the autobiographies that followed.

In chapter three, "Readers and Writers," the longest in the book, we encounter actual letters that have been preserved, a veritable flood of them arriving after the publication of *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*) in 1958 and *La Force de l'âge* (*The Prime of Life*) in 1960. Although Sartrean existentialism was by then starting to be overtaken by the burgeoning human sciences (structural anthropology, semiotics, Foucauldian history) and by the *nouveau roman*, Beauvoir's autobiographical books were an international success, not least because they created the enduring myth of the ideal intellectual couple in the persons of Sartre and Beauvoir. I can testify to their power personally, because I was a student in Paris in 1960-61 and read *La Force de l'âge* that year. Although I never wrote to the author, I can still remember the almost breathless excitement with which I followed the adventures of that perfect pair, and the dreams of my own that they inspired. Coffin offers an excellent analysis of the depth and range of readers' responses as recorded in their letters, and once again provides some mini-histories: of the epistolary genre in France and of diary writing as well, for many of Beauvoir's readers were engaged in their own life-writing, even if they didn't publish. Above all, they felt enabled to reveal themselves to her, since she had revealed so much of herself to them. Today, we know (and Coffin points out) that Beauvoir also left out many things from her autobiographical works, most notably her sexual involvements with women, while she was quite open about her affairs with men. Still, she made readers feel that they were her intimates. "One can write to you easily, as one would to an ordinary person," wrote one (p. 77). "You listen to me, I listen to you, isn't that a dialogue?" wrote another (p. 87). Beauvoir herself encouraged such expressions of intimacy. She wrote in *La Force de l'âge* that she "wanted to penetrate so deeply into the lives of others that when they heard [her] voice they would have the impression they were speaking to themselves" (p. 99).

After 1960, which Coffin calls the "high water mark" (p. 101) of Beauvoir's relation to her readers, things got more complicated, partly on account of politics. The Algerian war was winding down (Coffin points out that Beauvoir wrote the first two volumes of her autobiography in the shadow of that war, even though the years they cover are much earlier), but the violence persisted. The question of torture, which had first been raised in Henri Alleg's *La question* (1958), was brought front and center by the case of Djamila Boupacha, a young Algerian woman who was imprisoned and tortured (the torture included being raped with a bottle) by French troops in early 1960.[3] She was accused of having participated in a failed bomb attempt, which she denied, a few months earlier. Beauvoir became involved and teamed up with Boupacha's lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, to have the jurisdiction in the case moved to France. She and Halimi published a book on the case in 1962, by which time the war was over. Many of Beauvoir's readers agreed with her position on Algeria, but many did not, arguing that the other side also tortured its prisoners. In addition, some reproached her for mentioning rape in her report on Boupacha's torture, considering it "obscene." (p. 117) (*Pudeur* reared its head again).

The following year, Beauvoir published the third volume of her autobiography, *La Force des choses*, which Coffin interprets (in chapter five, "Shame as Political Feeling") as primarily a book about shame: shame at the role of Vichy France in World War II, shame at what France had done in Algeria. Once again, some readers were not willing to follow her there. And many were also upset by the book's epilogue, which ended with the famous statement that when she looked back at the high hopes of her adolescent self, Beauvoir could measure just how much she had been duped ("je mesure avec stupeur à quel point j'ai été flouée" (p. 141)). Many readers couldn't forgive her for what they considered her hopelessness, her sense of approaching death, and her disgust at feeling like an old woman. Beauvoir responded that they had misunderstood her, that she was not disillusioned by her ageing self but by history, and Coffin seems to agree with that. Yet, if one reads the concluding pages of *La Force des choses*, one cannot but be struck by Beauvoir's personal disillusionment. She was fifty-five years old, but she wrote as if her life were over.

More than twenty years and several important books (including her study of old age, *La Vieillesse*, and her book about her mother, *Une mort très douce*), were still left to her, however, and Coffin valiantly pursues the story of Beauvoir's relation to her readers, who returned to her in droves after the rise of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, in France and abroad. Some tensions and misunderstandings persisted, in what Coffin calls a "fraught relationship." (p. 178) Beauvoir claimed, for example, that many of her female readers had misinterpreted her 1967 novel *La femme rompue* (*The Woman Destroyed*), identifying with the abandoned wife instead of seeing Beauvoir's critique of her. Furthermore, as Coffin writes in her conclusion, by the 1970s Beauvoir's views on personal freedom, authenticity, and the autonomous self could seem downright obsolete in the face of Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction, which rejected such notions. Indeed, the letters to Beauvoir fell off precipitously after the publication of her last volume of memoirs, *Tout compte fait* (*All Said and Done*) in 1972. Yet her role as an ally and as a venerated precursor in the new French feminist movement was considerable, even in the absence of letters from readers. And (although Coffin doesn't mention this), many thousands accompanied her coffin to the Montparnasse cemetery when she died in 1986. She had become a monument.

NOTE

[1] Ebert's review of the film can be found at https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/sex-lies-and-videotape-1989, accessed 30 January 2023.

[2] Richard von Krafft-Ebing's principal work was *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (*Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study*) (Stuttgart: F. Enke, 1886).

[3] Henri Alleg, *La question* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1961).

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