16 Responses to The Second Sex: 1962–79

There is an extensive literature on The Second Sex, enough now to justify a book in its own right. I propose to devote three chapters of the present work to summarizing this secondary literature; then I shall offer a further, final chapter in which I propose to reply to the main criticisms of The Second Sex and defend de Beauvoir against these criticisms. The present chapter concentrates on the responses contained in the following works: M. Cranston, ‘Simone de Beauvoir’, in J. Cruickshank (ed.), The Novelist as Philosopher (1962); R. Cottrell, Simone de Beauvoir (1975); J. Leighton, Simone de Beauvoir on Woman (1975); and K. Bieber, Simone de Beauvoir (1979).

Maurice Cranston appears to be in two minds about The Second Sex. On the negative side, he feels that it has been ‘in a way impoverished by the author’s repudiation of motherhood and family life’.1 He is not unwilling to see it as ‘a brilliant and belligerent book’;2 but ‘precisely because it goes on and on about women being like men, and thus fails to explore the uniqueness of woman, it is something of a disappointment as a study of its subject’.3 Cranston is not even sure she is particularly well qualified to write such a book; as he puts it himself, ‘Unmarried, and uninterested in motherhood, living, in fact, to all intents and purposes just like a man, Simone de Beauvoir is not ideally qualified by experience to write the kind of book she hoped to write.’4 At the same time he is prepared to acknowledge that, ‘read as a corrective to the old-fashioned patriarchal ethos which still prevails in Latin societies, Le Deuxième Sexe must at least be acknowledged as a forceful and opportune polemic’.5

On the fully positive side, Cranston acknowledges it as ‘another long book, fortified by a great wealth of psychological, sociological and other empirical material’.6 But its central argument, he observes, is a simple one: once again in de Beauvoir’s writing, freedom is posited as the supreme ideal, ‘and the author claims that in past and present societies women as a sex have been and still are being denied freedom’.7
The past, as de Beauvoir represents it, belongs to the male sex, but she wants the future to be shared equally between the sexes. Equality would not worsen the position of men; on the contrary, it would 'free men from those shameless acts of cruelty to which women have hitherto had to resort to defend themselves in a man's world'. Women are at best educated for submission; the spirit of revolt is crushed in them. Simone de Beauvoir believes that they should be educated just as boys are and, as she puts it, 'educated for liberty'.

In sum, *The Second Sex* is a forceful and timely polemic against old-fashioned patriarchal value systems, written by a woman who was not ideally qualified to write such a book.

Robert Cottrell, likewise, is divided in his opinions about *The Second Sex*, but he supplies a much fuller discussion of it than Cranston. His most interesting point about it has to do with the role he assigns to it in relation to de Beauvoir's later writings. *The Second Sex*, he advises, should be seen as a long preamble to the four volumes of the autobiography which she would later write. In other words, 'while analyzing the situation of women in general, Beauvoir was preparing the way for a study of a particular woman – herself'.

Cottrell goes on to describe *The Second Sex* as a mammoth edifice that rests on two slender postulates: first, that man, conceiving of himself as the essential being, the subject, has made woman into the inessential being, the object, the Other; second, that there is no such thing as feminine nature and that all notions of femininity are therefore artificial.

Both postulates, he declares, are enunciated in the Introduction, 'and are derived from concepts elaborated by Sartre in *L'Être et le Néant*, a book to which Beauvoir frequently refers as if to a sacred text whose validity and authority no right thinking person could question'.

The second postulate – that there is no feminine nature – is derived, he says, from one of the most fundamental of existentialist principles, namely, that there is no human nature:

If there is no archetypal human nature, there obviously can be no feminine or masculine nature. As Beauvoir expresses it in one of the most telling aphorisms in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: 'One is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman.'