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## Éric Touya de Marenne. *Simone de Beauvoir: Le combat au féminin*. Presses Universitaires de France, 2019.

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**Abstract**

Review of Éric Touya de Marenne. *Simone de Beauvoir: Le combat au féminin*. Presses Universitaires de France, 2019. pp. 128.

**Keywords**

Beauvoir, feminism, philosophy, novels

Éric Touya de Marenne. *Simone de Beauvoir: Le combat au féminin*. Presses Universitaires de France, 2019. pp. 128.

Éric Touya de Marenne's 2019 publication *Simone de Beauvoir: Le combat au féminin* ('Simone de Beauvoir: Women's Struggle') is part of the "Que sais-je?" ('What do I know?') series, a longstanding collection of books intended to offer a concise account of a singular subject. Offering lay readers an accessible overview, the book provides an introduction to the life and works of the twentieth-century French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir. Touya de Marenne sets the focus on Beauvoir's relationship to feminism, leaving less room to explore her contributions to existentialism and political philosophy. A major objective of this introduction to Beauvoir studies is to consider the relevance of her philosophy for twenty-first century postmodern and posthumanist approaches to understanding how to live as gendered human subjects.

Touya de Marenne presents Beauvoir as a controversial figure whose place in intellectual and feminist histories remains uncertain. The book begins by categorizing reactions to Beauvoir's life and intellectual contributions as either enthusiastic or antagonistic. The subtitle, *Le combat au féminin* ('Women's Struggle'), highlights Touya de Marenne's deep investigation into feminists' conflicts with *The Second Sex*, in particular accusations of Beauvoir's indifference to sexual difference. The final chapters delve into the impact of Beauvoir's books and involvement in various political and feminist movements, such as the American Civil Rights Movement, the War for Algerian Independence, and the Women's Liberation Movement (*Mouvement de libération des femmes--MLF*). Situating Beauvoir among French and American feminist thinkers, Touya de Marenne gives particularly detailed accounts of Beauvoir's influence on Julia Kristeva, Élisabeth Badinter, and Judith Butler's theoretical stances.

The title of the book's second chapter, "*Une vraie philosophe?*" ('A real philosopher?') might shock an informed reader, but it underscores the fact that Beauvoir's philosophical contributions have long been overlooked among French academics, something Touya de Marenne attempts to rectify. This chapter examines how Beauvoir developed her own philosophy in *The Second Sex*, drawing from the Hegelian master-slave dialect (particularly as Alexandre Kojève explained it in his lectures), Marxism, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of the body as the expression of an individual's relation with the world. Touya de Marenne likewise elucidates how Beauvoir's notion of the relationships between freedom and individuals' situations opposes Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of freedom as situated but absolute. It is only after investigating these philosophical influences on Beauvoir's 1949 essay that Touya de Marenne very briefly summarizes her earliest philosophical works, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). As a result, Touya de Marenne obscures how

these two texts, in which she first laid out her theory of freedom and recognition, are paramount in Beauvoir's concept of woman as the absolute Other. Nonetheless, Touya de Marenne's comparisons between *The Second Sex* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* exemplify the importance of her autobiographies as historical and philosophical reflections on a woman's lived experiences. He offers a useful overview of the sources to which Beauvoir had recourse while writing *The Second Sex* in addition to describing how the reception of this landmark publication evolved.

Unlike many works on Beauvoir, Touya de Marenne's text gives an introduction to all of her book-length publications and adequately incorporates her life as an author into her biography. The beginning of the chapter dedicated to Beauvoir's novels offers an outline of her belief in the task of literature that could benefit any first-time reader of Beauvoir. Touya de Marenne's presentation of her novels includes succinct plot summaries, historic contextualization, and brief critical analyses. For Touya de Marenne, Beauvoir's novels, despite having garnered significant success at the time of their publication, currently do not receive the attention they merit because, in many studies on the philosopher, her autobiographies, relationship with Sartre, and *The Second Sex* outshine her contributions to French literature. Following in the footsteps of numerous critics, Touya de Marenne stresses a connection between Beauvoir's novels and autobiographies by presenting certain novels, *She Came to Stay* (1943), *The Blood of Others* (1945), *The Mandarins* (1954), and *When Things of the Spirit Come First* (1979), as romans à clef inspired by Beauvoir's life. Ignoring the philosophical and political stakes of *Les Belles Images* (1966), Touya de Marenne qualifies Beauvoir's last literary texts written in the 1960s as domestic fiction with few connections to their historical context when, in fact, Beauvoir's later fictional works make the personal political. The strength of Touya de Marenne's introduction to Beauvoir's corpus lies in the inclusion of often forgotten publications such as *Who Shall Die* (1945) and *All Men are Mortal* (1946). He also makes the astute observation that all of Beauvoir's novels demonstrate a struggle to think about human experience after the Second World War. In a similar vein, he shows how the Nazi occupation of France left an indelible mark on her philosophy and praxis reminding us that, for Beauvoir, no separation exists between life and philosophy.

Drawing from a wide variety of critical studies on Beauvoir, this book provides readers with a glimpse at different critical positions among Beauvoir scholars. Not meant to present a groundbreaking new approach to Beauvoir's work, this introduction to her life and corpus is an accessible resource for scholars, students, and the general public seeking to understand what Beauvoir did during her lifetime and her legacy. I recommend this book, written in concise and clear prose, for an undergraduate or graduate course taught in French on existentialism, feminist history, or Beauvoir's texts.

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