

To Be Her or to Be with Her: Female Identity and Romance in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* opens with one of the most quintessential lines in literary history: "Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again" (1). Immediately, the nameless narrator of *Rebecca* establishes the prominent intrigue of the historical gothic romance, replete with mystery, memory, and the clear hint of tragedy. Published in 1938, *Rebecca* follows the haunting tones of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* by the Brontë sisters, but du Maurier's writing journey was arguably more entwined with *Rebecca*'s development, reflecting the personal secrets of the author herself. In "How Daphne du Maurier Wrote *Rebecca*," Matthew Dennison of *The Telegraph* explores du Maurier's struggle with her creation. Notably, following her publication of *Jamaica Inn*, when *Rebecca* was a mere idea in her publishing deal with Victor Gollancz, du Maurier married Frederick "Tommy" Browning, who had recently been engaged to another woman. Whether or not he remained infatuated with his former love became a quick source of conflict between the couple; as a result, du Maurier became focused on the theme of jealousy as an instigator of mystery and romance, and her personal experiences clashed with her writer's block: "To Gollancz she wrote a desperate apology [after failing to produce a first draft]: 'The first 15,000 words I tore up in disgust and this literary miscarriage has cast me down rather'" (qtd. in Dennison). After finishing *Rebecca* over Christmas of 1937, du Maurier's relationship with the piece and its characters—especially the titular Rebecca, inspiring suspicion and admiration in equal measure—remained strained at best, describing the finished product as "a sinister tale about a woman who marries a widower," overall "rather macabre" (qtd. in Dennison). Since the book became a hit, spawning sequels, play adaptations, and most famously, Alfred Hitchcock's movie of the same name, readers and critics have been asking variations of the same question: how much of the historical gothic romance, the tense and heartbreaking

mystery, and the ominously complex relationships between women directly mirrors du Maurier's personal life? Arguably, *Rebecca* echoes du Maurier's complicated romances with men and women, specifically highlighting the simultaneous sexual and hateful tension between Rebecca, the late Mrs. de Winter, and the nameless female narrator, the new Mrs. de Winter.

Admittedly, *Rebecca* confuses literary placement. Although it is traditionally referred to as a historical gothic romance, it also carries signatures of feminism, gender dynamics, and queer subtext, combining to deconstruct the heteronormative ideologies normally attributed to romance fiction. As studied in Janet Harbord's "Between Identification and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*," the traditional goal of romance fiction is heterosexual marriage, as demonstrated in classic romances like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but it is "the pleasures of the meandering path" when approaching that end that provide an opportunity to dismantle the conventional genre: "The appeal of the genre then is in part the pleasure of transgression on the way to conformity" (96). Indeed, the sensual Rebecca exalts transgression; while *Rebecca* follows the coupling of the nameless female heroine and wealthy but widowed Maxim de Winter, it is the protagonist's obsession with the nonconforming Rebecca that has made the novel so well known, focusing more on the developing relationship between the two women than the heterosexual romance with Maxim. As Harbord argues, *Rebecca* utilizes queer theory to remove the limitations of heterosexual fantasies, undone by Rebecca herself even as a memory. Despite Maxim's tangible and handsome presence, Rebecca's ghost is who inspires the protagonist to feel such emotional conflict typical in romance fiction, where "the axes of identification (with the same sex) and desire (for the opposite sex) are . . . significantly imbricated, allowing the reader a vicarious blurring of textual pleasures" (96). Ultimately, the protagonist cannot seem to differentiate whether she wants to *be* Rebecca or be *with* Rebecca. It does not matter that Rebecca turns out to

be villainous, as "we"—characters and readers—are already so enamored with her confidence as an erotic and promiscuous woman (100). In fact, it is Rebecca's juxtaposition against romance fiction and the culture that produces it that results in the protagonist longing to emulate her identity, no less her sexuality, to make up for the distinct fact she is given no identity herself. Arguably, such desperation raises the question of whether she acts to try and fill the role of Maxim's new wife or try to grow closer to Rebecca. It is the latter possibility, brimming with queer suggestion, that drives the mystery forward, as "what Rebecca is ultimately condemned for within the text is also what makes her appealing: her transgression of the categories of class, gender, and sexuality" (102).

Yet, the implications between the new Mrs. de Winter and the late Mrs. de Winter would hardly exist without the alarmingly evocative presence of Mrs. Danvers, housekeeper of the infamous Manderley estate and close companion of Rebecca. In "'A Little Strain with Servants': Gender, Modernity, and Domesticity in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*," Judy Giles examines the relationship between Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers, no less how the memory of the relationship impacts the protagonist once she arrives as Maxim's new wife. By recognizing the eroticism between Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers, the structure of a mistress-servant relationship is radically changed, unable to return to normal even with Rebecca's death. Thus, between Mrs. Danvers and the protagonist, the relationship is clearly one of a servant resentful against a new mistress, but more notably, their interactions liken to an ex-lover enraged at a new love interest; Mrs. Danvers and the new Mrs. de Winter are "inextricably linked" by the sensual remains of Rebecca's presence, perverting the bonds between women in the sphere of the home (36). The complicated dynamic between the protagonist, Rebecca, and Mrs. Danvers is best illustrated in one of the most unnerving scenes of the novel, when the protagonist at last braves Rebecca's former

bedroom in "the forbidden west wing of Manderley . . . undisturbed since Rebecca's death" (1). Mrs. Danvers quickly catches her unsettling Rebecca's belongings and, despite the protagonist's obvious discomfort, the housekeeper begins to revel in her intimate memories of her mistress:

"Now you are here, let me show you everything," she said, her voice ingratiating and sweet as honey, horrible, false. "I know you want to see it all, you've wanted to for a long time, and you were too shy to ask. It's a lovely room, isn't it? The loveliest room you have ever seen."

She took hold of my arm, and walked me towards the bed. I could not resist her, I was like a dumb thing. The touch of her hand made me shudder. And her voice was low and intimate, a voice I hated and feared.

"That was her bed. It's a beautiful bed, isn't it? I keep the golden coverlet on it always, it was her favourite [*sic*]. Here is her nightdress inside the case. You've been touching it, haven't you? This was the nightdress she was wearing for the last time, before she died. Would you like to touch it again? . . . I did everything for her, you know," she said, taking my arm again, leading me to the dressing-gown and slippers.

. . .

She stared at me curiously. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Sometimes, when I walk along the corridor here I fancy I hear her just behind me. . . . Do you think she can see us, talking to one another now?" she said slowly. "Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?"

. . .

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know." My voice sounded high-pitched and unnatural. Not my voice at all.

"Sometimes I wonder," she whispered. "Sometimes I wonder if she comes back here to Manderley and watches you and Mr. de Winter together."

We stood there by the door, staring at one another. I could not take my eyes away from hers. How dark and somber they were in the white skull's face of hers, how malevolent, how full of hatred. (du Maurier 200-06)

The disturbing scene is further emphasized in Hitchcock's film adaptation, capitalizing on the horror essential to both filmmaker and author. In both story and on screen, Mrs. Danvers' tantalizing care for Rebecca's personal items is sensually indicative, and the force in which she urges the protagonist to admire along with her is voyeuristic. As Giles points out, "The bed with its golden cover, the wardrobe of clothes, the scent bottles, the hairbrushes, the slippers, the monogrammed nightdress case, and of course, the flimsy, see-through nightdress all function as markers of Rebecca's sexuality and femininity," all of which the new and inferior Mrs. de Winter lacks (1). The "erotically charged bedroom, 'the most beautiful room in the house'" serves as where the axes of identification and desire meet and conflict; Mrs. Danvers "[tempts] both narrator and reader to consume the erotic and aesthetic symbolisations [*sic*]" of Rebecca, daring the protagonist to become the titular woman, arguably consummating the relationship with Rebecca's ghost, or else be dominated by her, further decimating any opportunity for an autonomous identity (1). Ultimately, Mrs. Danvers fetishizes Rebecca and she demands the same be done by the protagonist and reader alike.

Notably, the power struggle between women and identifying femininity comes from how du Maurier blends, rather than differentiates between, feminine and masculine expressions. The

fact that Rebecca, even as a ghost, stands as the most dictatorial force of the novel, followed quickly by Mrs. Danvers, establishes women as dominant; thus, womanhood drives *Rebecca*, replete with sensuality, defiance, and maternity, and the protagonist cannot come into her own until she recognizes that force of femininity. However, *Rebecca* would also not exist without Rebecca's death. As Maria Purves notes in "'Don't Look Now': Disguised Danger and Disabled Women in Daphne du Maurier's Macabre Tales," du Maurier "[conforms] to the (perhaps uncomfortable) romantic stereotype of female illness as a form of containment for female independence," where Rebecca's initial demise comes as her being "'devoured from within . . . by some variety of female cancer'" (182). Because Rebecca no longer autonomously exists, her ghost is controlled and misshaped by those alive—like her actual murderer, Maxim. As theorized in Márta Kőrösi's "'Disembodied Spirits' Revisiting Manderley: The Construction of Female Subjectivity in du Maurier's *Rebecca*," the authority of Rebecca's femininity enrages Maxim on a patriarchal level, as she has overpowered him. The only way to conquer her is to physically expel her from life, subsequently becoming her killer: "The murder is a conscious effort on Max's part to silence, discard, and dissolve Rebecca, since she has become too 'disobedient' as a living woman, with all her eccentricity, 'inadequate' behaviour [*sic*], and sexual drives. Max hopes that by killing Rebecca he can gain absolute control over her" (II). Similar to whether the protagonist feels sexual attraction for Rebecca or Maxim, the power struggle between Rebecca and Maxim confuses who exactly serves as the villain; although Rebecca is clearly depicted as the antagonist, it is impossible to truly judge Rebecca's character when she is no longer alive. Yet, considering Rebecca's power as a woman is also clearly established, it raises the question of if Maxim killed her because she was a destructive force or so he could reestablish his patriarchal dominance.

In "*Rebecca* and Romance," Nina Auerbach follows the latter possibility and viciously argues against classifying *Rebecca* as a romance when its story is actually barbarianism masked as romance: men, "hulking, presiding," trapping women as "prey" (101). Despite it being told through a female perspective, *Rebecca* is not a novel for women, glorifying a man's "browbeating and submission" of women (103). Herein critics begin to connect *Rebecca* to du Maurier's personal experiences, where gender complications ruled her early life; for example, it has been noted in several biographies that her relationship with her father was a dysfunctional one, and du Maurier never seemed to know whether she hated or loved him. In "Dreaming of Manderley," Gale Harris uses reader response criticism to study Margaret Forster's biography on du Maurier and works to see if the rumors regarding her father are true, discovering how Gerald du Maurier "was one of the most popular actors of his generation," complete with "backstage affairs" and "a complicated double standard [governing] sexual relations" (329). The fact that du Maurier "was tormented by a desire to be a boy, not only to have greater freedom but also to satisfy her father's craving for a son" continues to contribute to the curiosity of if *Rebecca*'s nameless protagonist suffers from similar psychological conflicts; in fact, it has been theorized that, in the early installments of the novel, du Maurier named the heroine after herself only to remove all traces of an identity come release (329). However, if any character of *Rebecca* is to be likened to du Maurier, it is arguably Rebecca herself: compare Rebecca's sensual nonconformity, her refusal to be or do anything she did not desire, to the point where she chose to have Maxim kill her rather than die slowly of cancer, and how much her presence as much as her ghost shocked society around her, to du Maurier's drive for autonomous direction:

[Daphne] du Maurier was convinced that she *was* a boy and her outward form was a mistake. At 22, after exploring physical attractions to men and women, du

Maurier concluded that the boy within her had no chance for survival and must be locked in a box inside of her. She resolved to live as a woman, to "run the race with the rest of the pack instead of being a damned solitary hound missing the game." . . . Her initial writings portrayed . . . women longing for 'something greater' and rebelling against being female. . . . du Maurier was a "chameleon." . . . deftly [reconstructing] the development of the writer's confused sexual identity and her career as a novelist. (329)

Although analyses can only infer so much connection between du Maurier and *Rebecca*, let alone her titular character, it is not so implausible to recognize the late Mrs. de Winter and the new Mrs. de Winter as two sides of the same coin of du Maurier's persona. In the end, the protagonist may act out du Maurier's struggles with the men in her life, her indecisive identity, and her whimsical fantasies of an adventure, but it is Rebecca's defiance of the gender binaries, exalting her feminine sexuality with enough masculine strength to topple the patriarchy, that empowered du Maurier as a female writer.

Ultimately, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* continues to be an enigma within literary history. On one hand, it evades all forms of criticism, masquerading as a historical gothic romance in order to shield its true malleable depth; on the other hand, it displays *all* forms of criticism, expanding upon its textual significance as well as its authorial foundation. However, significant emphasis must be awarded to the women of *Rebecca*: from the queer subtext between the nameless heroine and Rebecca, to the feminist hierarchy employed by Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers onto the protagonist, and finally, Rebecca's gender destabilization of Maxim and whether or not the new Mrs. de Winter will follow a similar path—all avenues of study explore and embrace *Rebecca's* womanhood, simultaneously a celebration and a deconstruction.

Furthermore, du Maurier's psychoanalytical touches, discovered through reader response, illustrates how the force of femininity portrayed in *Rebecca* ascends from the page to the author. As a mystery, as a historical gothic romance, and most importantly, as a woman's work, *Rebecca* will continue to haunt readers.

Works Cited

Auerbach, Nina. "Rebecca and Romance." *Daphne du Maurier, Haunted Heiress*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2000. 101-23. Print. Personal Takes.

- Dennison, Matthew. "How Daphne du Maurier Wrote *Rebecca*." *The Telegraph* (2008): n. pag. Web. 9 Jan. 2016.
- Giles, Judy. "'A Little Strain with Servants': Gender, Modernity, and Domesticity in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Celia Fremlin's *The Seven Chars of Chelsea*." *Literature and History* 12.2 (2003): 36-50. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 14 Feb. 2015.
- Harbord, Janet. "Between Identification and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*." *Feminist Review* 53 (1996): 95-107. *Palgrave Macmillan Journals*. Web. 22 Feb. 2015.
- Harris, Gale. "Dreaming of Manderley." *Belles Lettres* 9.3 (Spring 1994): 23-24. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt. Vol. 113. Gale, 1999. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 1 April 2016.
- Körösi, Márta. "'Disembodied Spirits' Revisiting Manderley: The Construction of Female Subjectivity in du Maurier's *Rebecca*." *Anachronist* (2002): *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.
- Maurier, Daphne Du. *Rebecca*. New York: Avon, 1938. Print.
- Purves, Maria. "'Don't Look Now': Disguised Danger and Disabled Women in Daphne du Maurier's Macabre Tales." *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature*. 181-96. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 15 Feb. 2015.