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Introduction

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The Enduring Appeal of Daphne Du Maurier's Fiction

Introduction

Introduction

NICOLE CLOAREC, ANNE HALL ET XAVIER LACHAZETTE

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Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : du Maurier Daphne, critique littéraire, Rebecca, gothique, genre, identité, psychanalyse, politique

Index by keywords: du Maurier Daphne, literary criticism, Rebecca, gothic, gender, identity, psychoanalysis, politics

Texte intégral

1 Entrenched in her adopted home of Cornwall, detached from literary trends and schools, avoiding media glare and appearing only rarely on radio or television programmes, Daphne Du Maurier owes her uninterrupted popularity to her works and her personality alone.¹

2 Few works have given rise, as her bestselling novel and her play *Rebecca* have done, to so many radio, television and film adaptations, to an opera, a musical comedy, an original film score and a pastiche, in addition to various prequels and sequels. Of very few writers can it be said that, for four decades, their next book was so eagerly awaited that it made them “a phenomenon, one of the best-selling authors in the world and one of the best paid.”² Even after their death, few authors can boast of inspiring not only the erection of a statue on publicly owned land (*The Rook with a Book*, 2018) but also an increasing number of film adaptations, like Charles Sturridge’s *The Scapegoat* (2012), Roger Michell’s *My Cousin Rachel* (2017) or Ben Wheatley’s latest take on *Rebecca* (2020). And a testament to the power of her paper-



and-ink creations, a festival called The Fowey Festival of Arts and Letters convenes annually in the town where she resided almost exclusively after she left the London of her youth, in part to discuss her stories while guided walks give inquiring readers a behind-the-scenes look at the sceneries and historically charged locales which she so often transcribed into her fiction.

3 In spite of all this, Du Maurier's relationship with literary criticism has been conflictual ever since the runaway success of *Rebecca* and the condescending perception of its author as "romantic." One of the reasons for this recurrent, but far from universal, critical contempt has been that, in the eyes of some reviewers, a work's popularity necessarily implies its lack of value. Also, beginning with *Gerald: A Portrait* (1934), her new publisher Victor Gollancz ran aggressive marketing campaigns which made available to the general public many inexpensive – but equally unflattering – editions of her works, sporting drab yellow dustjackets and printed tightly on second-rate paper. Moreover, women's magazines soon vied with each other to carry her latest novels and short stories, starting with the one-installment publication of the first few chapters of *Rebecca* in the August 1941 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal*, to be soon followed by the serialization of most of her works on both sides of the Atlantic. Usually lumped together as superficial organs of middle-class idleness and vapidness, even though some of them made a point of educating the modern woman and prided themselves on being in tune with their time, these magazines did not help Du Maurier's reputation, though they did bring her considerable sums of money.

4 Fortunately, in 1962, a full-page, four-column article published in the influential *Times Literary Supplement* contended that "two of Miss Daphne du Maurier's immensely popular novels do provide great literary interest" and "form part of an interesting stream of English-language fiction."³ The two novels thus selected for distinction were *Rebecca* and *The Scapegoat*, the latter work being described as "a good original novel" for which "Miss du Maurier deserves far more credit [...] than she has so far received."⁴ In spite of some scathing comments also made in the same review, this marked a change in how the intelligentsia viewed Du Maurier's fiction. One may therefore regret not only that this article left her brilliant shorter fiction out of the discussion, but also that it came out before Du Maurier released both her major novel *The House on the Strand* (1969) and her riveting collection of stories *Not After Midnight* (1971).

5 A few "serious" articles started to crop up in the 1980s. Mostly, these focused on the treatment of romance in Du Maurier's narratives, or on a comparison between so-called popular and canonical fictions, or on how she addressed key topics like class, female psychology, or female sexuality. It is also in the late 1980s that Richard Kelly wrote the first monograph devoted to Du Maurier, "in the hope that it may stimulate further discussion on her works" and to evaluate "her character as a writer and her unique contribution to literature and popular culture."⁵ The critical attention paid to her escalated after that. Beginning in the 1990s, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik breathed new life into the field of Du Maurier criticism by addressing various aspects of Du Maurier's fiction, not only its connections with feminism and female Gothic, but also its representation of issues related to identity, the body, or incest. They also laid stress on a macabre streak in her shorter fiction, on her rapport with France, and on the question of regional writing. Then, in the next decade, Helen Taylor undertook a couple of major critical initiatives when she edited two series of articles: one meant for the mainstream market, *The Daphne Du Maurier Companion*, published by Virago in 2007; the other for publication in an issue of the academic-oriented *Women: A Cultural Review* (2009). All told, as the two-hundred-plus-strong bibliographical list at the end of this issue amply demonstrates, academic scrutiny of Du Maurier's fiction is alive and well, and constantly conquering new territory.

In a novel like *Rebecca*, for example, critics have underlined, in a sometimes contradictory manner, the presence of a mimetic class conservatism, a form of Gothic



in the tradition of the Brontë sisters, a liberating feminism, a lesbian subtext, or additional proof of the incest motif supposedly central to Du Maurier's fiction. In other words, the sheer number of articles now devoted to Du Maurier means that the wealth of interpretations to which her works lend themselves cannot be ignored anymore – that the time has come to officially expel Du Maurier and her literary production from the sort of middlebrow purgatory to which they were formerly consigned. Such is the aim of this issue, which will provide readers with new critical insights into Du Maurier's original and multifaceted works while placing them within broader perspectives thanks to contextual analysis.

7 To give honour where honour is due, the first part is entitled “Je Reviens’, or the Eternal Return of Rebecca.” This is a reference to the name of the dead protagonist's boat in Du Maurier's bestseller, whose two French words literally translate into “I'll be back”, thus sounding like a promise or a threat, as if the fictional boat in question powerfully asserted its perpetual presence or the imminent revelation of repressed truths. This part focuses on the enduring popularity of the novel, on its rivetingly protean ability to capture the imagination, and on its legacy over eighty years after its first publication.

8 As one might remember, Margaret Forster explains in her biography that Du Maurier was weary of being just the “author of Rebecca”:⁶

She was tired of it all, and especially of Rebecca. Never a month went by without someone informing her they were writing a sequel to Rebecca or asking her detailed questions about it which she could not answer. The most popular question was why the heroine had no name, which even Agatha Christie (with whom she enjoyed a short correspondence, though always refusing to meet her) wished to know.⁷

9 It seems, however, that readers and critics alike will never tire of asking such questions or of probing into what makes *Rebecca* such a fascinating work. As testified not only by Ben Wheatley's recent adaptation for Netflix but also by a new book on Hitchcock's 1940 adaptation,⁸ Du Maurier's novel has become both a modern classic and an unfailing popular success – still selling about 4,000 copies a month, as Olivia Laing noted on the eightieth anniversary of its publication.⁹ Appropriately for a novel obsessed with the motif of return, its enduring power has proved to have a lasting aesthetic impact. Likewise, although the latest rendition of the timeless classic claimed to revert to the source material, the critical failure of Netflix's new take on *Rebecca* has once again underscored the canonical status of Hitchcock and Selznick's adaptation as a masterpiece in its own right.¹⁰

10 Xavier Lachazette starts by highlighting the unfailing popularity of *Rebecca*, which was an immediate bestseller and has spawned countless adaptations in a wide array of mediums in the eight decades since the novel's publication, giving it a special status in European literature. Lachazette examines some lesser-known adaptations before detailing Du Maurier's own reaction to her bestseller. Looking more specifically at two 1962 reviews of her literary production and at various academic articles, Lachazette argues that the difficulty of “categorizing” Du Maurier's novel is precisely the source of her enduring success with readers and critics alike.

11 Jean-Loup Bourget, the author of a book-length study of Hitchcock and Selznick's adaptation of *Rebecca*,¹¹ examines the film along with the other two adaptations that Hitchcock made of Du Maurier material, *Jamaica Inn* (1938-39) and *The Birds* (1962-63). He then proceeds to analyse the complex network between Hitchcock and three generations of Du Mauriers, which comprises the friendly and professional relationship between Hitchcock and Daphne's father, the stage and occasionally film actor Gerald Du Maurier, and the possible thematic connections between Hitchcock and Daphne's grandfather George Du Maurier, the illustrator and author of *Trilby* and *Peter Ibbetson*. Bourget contends that this intricate network of relationships testifies to the director's abiding English roots and inspiration even while working in



Hollywood.

12 Milan Hain's article focuses on the production stage of Hitchcock and Selznick's canonical film, more specifically on the lengthy process of casting the unnamed female protagonist, by integrating adaptation considerations with star and performance studies. Drawing on archival documents, Hain first considers the convictions which guided independent producer David O. Selznick's art of literary adaptation. He then compares the surviving screen tests of several candidates for the main role to analyse how the casting of Joan Fontaine affected the characterization of the second Mrs. de Winter.

13 Finally, if *Rebecca* has been the subject of countless transmedial adaptations, Armelle Parey discusses a few examples of its "afterlife" in English-language literature to show that, like other classics, it is regularly submitted to literary rewritings of all kinds. From Antonia Fraser's "Rebecca's Story" (1976) to Lisa Gabriele's *The Winters* (2018), transfictions either change the novel's narrative perspective and focalisation, or offer narrative and temporal expansions – they can even transpose its plot and characters to contemporary America. As Parey demonstrates, all of these transfictions, while "preserv[ing] the traditional canon's centrality",¹² participate in the ongoing critical reassessment of the source text.

14 The second part is entitled "'Adieu Sagesse', or Troubled Identities in Du Maurier's Fiction." This time, the reference in the title is to the name of an earlier boat featured in a short story that Du Maurier first published in the October 1930 issue of *Cassell's Magazine*.¹³ In the story, a sixty-year-old man grows so dissatisfied with the narrow-minded bourgeois life he is leading that he suddenly decides to refurbish his old boat and set sail for good, leaving his wife and three daughters right behind. This boat, whose French name literally means "Farewell to Wisdom", thus comes to symbolise all the hidden feelings and half-conscious desires pent up in the protagonist's innermost being, as is made clear in the following passage:

Half-a-minute... wait... he'd nearly got it... it swung before him out of the mist, the first moment that the queer feeling was to come upon him. He had been sitting one evening long ago, last summer, in his favourite haunt. He must have dropped asleep because in his sleep he had heard a challenge. A challenge, a call, a summons from the depths of his being, clutching at his heart, seizing his mind.¹⁴

15 It also comes to symbolise the moment when a character has no choice but to give vent to inner struggles that can no longer be kept in check, thus creating a psychologically unsettling state which makes them throw caution, or "wisdom", to the wind.

16 Likewise, as the second part will show, Du Maurier's work is often disturbing, undermining as it does many a certainty or any fixed sense of identity. For their part, these articles mostly focus on lesser-known and relatively critically neglected works, such as her dramatic output or her very last novel, *Rule Britannia*, so often decried by Du Maurier fans themselves but which enjoyed a kind of renaissance when critics started to see it as foretelling Brexit. They also purport to reconsider the image of Du Maurier as a reclusive writer removed from contemporary life in the sense that her work shows her engagement with contemporary political issues, such as gender politics at the end of the Second World War or also Cornish identity during the rise of Celtic nationalism.

17 Building on comments by Alison Light and Nina Auerbach, Gina Wisker argues that Du Maurier's horror develops from the insidious undermining of the security of both the everyday normality of life and the inner narratives by which we construct and interpret our worlds. She shows how influenced Du Maurier was not only by Gothic horror but also by existentialism and its questioning of the relationship between words and things, self and world. To that end, Wisker focuses on *Rebecca* and on three short stories that are emblematic of internal narratives of self-deception



using liminal places where the familiar and the unfamiliar get inverted.

18 Nicole Cloarec's article deals with a lesser-known aspect of Daphne Du Maurier's work, i.e. her foraying into the dramatic genre, and with the film adaptation of her first original play. Although partly autobiographical, *The Years Between* tackles an uncharacteristically topical issue, documenting the profound upheavals that World War II was bringing about in Britain as a whole. Though retaining the surprisingly bitter tone of the play at a time when VE-Day was being celebrated, the film is very much a product of producer Sidney Box and his wife Muriel, who cowrote the screenplay. Cloarec contends that, unlike other adaptations of Du Maurier's works, the Boxes do not so much sentimentalise Du Maurier's play as give it a feminist and socialist agenda, underscoring both the wife's perspective and the social ramifications of Du Maurier's drama.

19 Helena Habibi's article examines *The Flight of the Falcon*, one of the relatively critically neglected novels in the Du Maurier canon. After highlighting how the motif of bird-men haunts Du Maurier's fiction, Habibi argues that this constant rewriting of the classical myth of Icarus finds its climax in this later novel, where the main characters reflect Du Maurier's interest in Jungian symbology as well as in the "Icarus complex", as identified by psychologist Henry A. Murray.

20 For her part, Eva Leung turns to an unusual feature in Du Maurier's fiction, namely the use of prologues and epilogues in two of her fictionalised family biographies, *Hungry Hill* (1943) and *The Glass-Blowers* (1963). She examines the plausible rationales for this narrative choice, in terms of contextualisation and characterisation, and how this aesthetic feature ultimately involves the readers. Leung concludes that far from being accidental, this narrative specificity is evidence of Du Maurier's narrative experimentation.

21 Finally, Ella Westland examines Du Maurier's last novel, *Rule Britannia*, which acquired uncanny resonance in post-2016 Brexit referendum discourse. She returns the work to its own political, geographical and biographical contexts and shows that the 1960s campaign to take Britain into the European Common Market had a clear bearing on the book, as did the rise of Celtic nationalism and Daphne's own autobiographical circumstances. Westland demonstrates that *Rule Britannia* actually marked a reorientation of Du Maurier's relationship to contemporary Cornwall just as she was about to retire from writing fiction.

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Notes

1 “Daphne Du Maurier” is the English spelling we have opted for in this issue, except in quotes where other writers chose not to capitalise the particle *du*. Likewise in French, our preferred spelling is “Daphne du Maurier”.

2 Liz McManus, “The Phenomenon of Du Maurier”, *The Sunday Tribune*, 11 August 1991, Books 1, 2.

3 Marghanita Laski, “Archangels Ruined”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 October 1962, 808.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Richard Kelly, *Daphne Du Maurier*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987, n.p.

6 In her memoir, Daphne’s daughter Flavia recalls that during the war the huge success of *Rebecca* “had brought many fans in the shape of American GIs to Menabilly”: “the peace of the gardens became spoilt at weekends by curious Yanks in groups of a dozen at a time, coming right up to the house and saying ‘Say, does the author of *Rebecca* live here?’” Flavia Leng, *Daphne Du Maurier: A Daughter’s Memoir* [1994], Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing, 2007, 67.

7 Margaret Forster, *Daphne Du Maurier*, London: Arrow Books, 2007, 391.

8 Patricia White, *Rebecca*, BFI Film Classics, London: British Film Institute, 2021.

9 Olivia Laing, “Sex, jealousy and gender: Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* 80 years on”, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/23/olivia-laing-on-daphne-du-mauriers-rebecca-80-years-on>>, accessed on 8 July 2021.

10 Netflix’s *Rebecca* has been found to suffer considerably in comparison to Hitchcock and Selznick’s adaptation. For example, Sheila O’Malley argues that “the new adaptation for Netflix [...] highlights the strengths of the 1940 version, and underlines its own lack, in terms of style, atmosphere, and general understanding of the story itself.” (Sheila O’Malley, “*Rebecca*”, 16 October 2020, <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/rebecca-movie-review-2020>>, accessed on 7 November 2021). Likewise, as Joshua Rivera asserts in *The Verge*, “It’s hard to live up to Hitchcock, but the new film falls short in more ways than one.” His unflattering conclusion goes as follows: “Good art is often determined by what is left unsaid. Filmmakers working in Old Hollywood dealt with a tremendous amount of industry-imposed limitations and still managed to create enduring art. Liberated as the new *Rebecca* may be, it falls into an old trap: telling too much when showing will do. In a world where it is free to say whatever it wants, Netflix’s *Rebecca* fails to communicate anything of substance.” (Joshua Rivera, “Netflix’s *Rebecca* flattens a classic”, 24 October 2020, <<https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/24/21531089/netflix-rebecca-review-hitchcock-disney-remake>>, accessed on 7 November 2021).

11 Jean-Loup Bourget, *Rebecca d’Alfred Hitchcock*, Paris: Vendémiaire, 2017.

12 Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace*, New York: Columbia UP, 2016, 5.

13 Daphne Du Maurier, “Adieu Sagesse”, *Cassell’s Magazine*, October 1930, no. 223, 116+. Later reprinted in Daphne Du Maurier, *Early Stories*, London: Todd Publishing, 1954.

14 Daphne Du Maurier, “Adieu Sagesse”, *Early Stories*, London: Todd Publishing, 1954, 60.

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Introduction
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The Secret Life of Secret Agents: Alan Bennett and John Schlesinger's *An Englishman Abroad* (1983) and *A Question of Attribution* (1991) [Texte intégral]

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Paru dans *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, vol. XIV-n°2 | 2016

Tous les textes...

Anne Hall

After Comparative Literature and French studies, Anne Hall taught French at the University of California at Berkeley and later, English at the Facultés of Tours and Aix-Marseille. She is the author of *Sur les pas de Daphné du Maurier* (Cherche-Lune, 2010), *The Du Mauriers Just as They Were* (Unicorn, 2017) and *Angela Thirkell: A Writer's Life* (Unicorn, 2021). She is currently researching various novelists' holidays in France.

Xavier Lachazette

A member of his University's research unit (3LAM) and an associate member of the University of Angers' CIRPaLL (with a focus on short forms), Xavier Lachazette teaches 19th- and 20th-century English literature at Le Mans University. Besides being the coeditor of this issue and the convener of the first Daphne Du Maurier conference in France, he is currently coediting an issue devoted to Du Maurier's short stories, to be published in Spring 2022 in the *JSSE*. He has already published five articles on Daphne Du Maurier, together with other contributions on works by W. Somerset Maugham, E.M. Forster, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Darwin.

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