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## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION: READING DU MAURIER WITH NEW LENSES

### DAPHNE DU MAURIER AND THE SHORT STORY

Like many budding authors before her, the young Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989) turned first to the writing of short stories, poems, and essays before attempting a full novel. Her three models in those late 1920s, before her twentieth birthday and for a couple of years after that, were W. Somerset Maugham, Guy de Maupassant, and Katherine Mansfield, in whose footsteps she dreamed, and sometimes despaired, of following.

Half of the fifty short stories that she published in her lifetime date back to those early years. They are shorter than later productions, and must be read with the same dose of interest and indulgence granted to other writers, enjoying all the well-turned or imaginative passages while chuckling at the rather daring ones, noting all the while the themes that inspired her and the intratextual links between early and later short fictions, especially in terms of material and treatment. As for the other twenty-five stories, starting with “The Escort” (later, simply “Escort”), they were all penned in the run-up to World War II, or in the 1950s, or in the very early 1970s—the one exception being “The Breakthrough,” written in 1963. Brilliant pieces of writing nearly all of them, they demonstrate how adept she had become at writing tales in a variety of moods and styles.

Far from being a mere launching pad for her career, short stories were therefore a genre to which du Maurier reverted now and again, above all at critical moments in her life, even though she felt that it “still lack[ed]

recognition as a work of art,” tending to be “skimmed through because of its brevity” in order to while away the time at hotels or airports—if not “to induce sleep” (Preface, *Best Stories* 10). What du Maurier states, in the same reflection, about Phyllis Bottome’s approach to short stories thus applies just as well to herself, and can be regarded as her own informal *ars poetica*:

When she chose this particular form she did so deliberately, knowing that her thought could be transmuted in no other way, for only in this sudden brief exposure to the light could the essence of her idea be captured. (Preface, *Best Stories* 10)

Where her stories came from did not change much over time. Her early stories, she remembered in a later preface, were inspired by personal observation, or by the conversations in which her French friend Fernande Yvon or her father Gerald engaged with strangers, friends, or lunch guests alike. Such odds and ends of impressions and information could brew for months at a time, only to be abruptly succeeded by a sense of urgency when those disparate scraps of ideas started to coalesce and a story reared its insistent head:

Nothing definite, nothing solid or factual, but an impression, an association of persons, places and ideas, so that weeks, possibly months, later the germ of a short story suddenly became quite clear in my mind, and I knew that I must write it down and rid my system of it. Whether it would be published or not did not bother me; the writing down was all. (Preface, *The Rendezvous* 8)

Likewise, as mentioned in the “Note to the Reader” that she appended to the last (illustrated) short fiction anthology published in her lifetime, many ideas for later stories came to her “when I was travelling abroad, sparked off by observing people who for one reason or another caught my eye” (“Note” 11). To that first font of inspiration she added others, like atmosphere—e.g., “the eeriness of the back streets [of Venice] at night” and the “often depressing surroundings of the bombed-out buildings” of post-WW2 London—together with her “fascination with Greek mythology” and with “the unexplained, the darker side of life” (“Note” 11-12).

In between her early and later short fictions, of course, she had written an international bestselling novel, *Rebecca* (1938), nowadays considered a classic on a par with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which partially inspired it. On the erroneous assumption that the novel was a girlish romance and that bestsellers could only be sloppy works for the female masses, however, du Maurier’s mature works, including her stories, tended to be dismissed as middlebrow by the intelligentsia. Knowing perfectly well that, whatever they wrote, any book of hers would sell in the tens—or even the hundreds—of

thousands, critics either ignored her or downplayed her achievements. Expected to be in the romantic vein or simply “the mixture as before,” to use the title of one of Somerset Maugham’s short-story collections, any new fiction by her, it was often felt, hardly needed looking into. Conversely, if they did look into it and found it incompatible with their prejudiced opinion of du Maurier’s achievements, reviewers could reproach her for attempting to write “differently.”

Nevertheless, as blatantly made clear by titles of later anthologies, such as *Echoes from the Macabre* (1976) or *Daphne du Maurier’s Classics of the Macabre* (1987), her stories evince a disquieting, not to say shocking, quality that her novels do not. Consequently, though she acknowledged one of her novels, *Frenchman’s Creek* (1941), to have been written in the critics’ abhorred vein, she never applied such a description to any of her short stories—no reviewer ever thought of suggesting it either.

In fact, du Maurier was perfectly aware that a sinister streak had “grown stronger over the years, especially in [her] short stories” (“Note” 12), though she never provided any rationale for such an evolution. The stark cruelty or cynical sense of doom in many of her stories had to stem from some inner source, nevertheless. Indeed, the link between a writer’s stories and their own psychology is the most startling point she makes in her presentation to Bottome’s stories—though it is certainly much easier to see a fellow writer’s production with the kind of unflinching clarity of thought that one usually fails to achieve when considering one’s own works. In that preface, she delivers as maxims the ideas that “[t]he frailties of others are better dissected when one has analysed one’s own” or that “no one can better portray the damaging effect of pride coupled with strong will and a desire to domineer than someone who has spent a lifetime recognising these instincts in herself and determining to subdue them” (Preface, *Best Stories* 10-11). More than the painter, she argues, the writer stands “self-betrayed” before his or her work, for the following reason:

the writer, in the very choice of words and subjects, admits and indeed confesses, the problem within. Compelled by some driving instinct to spill words upon paper transmitting belief or interrogation, the writer reveals, sometimes in all unconsciousness, the spiritual battle of a lifetime. (Preface, *Best Stories* 9)

In that sense, the bleakness of du Maurier’s stories “betrays” the doubts, interrogations, and psychological failings that were her own. Yet what her short fiction makes even more blatantly clear is her talent for the genre, as other writers have abundantly remarked. Thus for instance, in his introduction

to his personal selection of nine of du Maurier's stories, no less a writer than Patrick McGrath calls one of them a "subtle tale of psychological horror," and another "an instance of narrative ingenuity from this consummate storyteller," while yet others are described as "models of clarity and economy" or as examples that demonstrate a "facet of her restless narrative intelligence" (viii-xi). Seeing well beyond any reductive epithet attached to du Maurier, he concludes:

She plotted superbly, she was highly skilled at arousing tension, and she was, too, a writer of impressive originality and range. Not least, she showed real depth of understanding with regard to relationships between men and women, and much as she is celebrated as a writer of romance, suspense, and the supernatural, she is also a perceptive and skeptical interrogator of quotidian human experience. (xiii)

It is precisely with new lenses such as McGrath's that this issue would like to encourage readers and critics to look at du Maurier's short fiction.

#### PRESENTATION OF THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

That Daphne du Maurier became a specialist of the short-story genre will be apparent to anyone perusing her three main collections—*The Apple Tree* (1952), *The Breaking Point* (1959), and *Not After Midnight* (1971).<sup>1</sup> One may then compare her mature work to her juvenilia, most of which were published in *Daphne du Maurier: Early Stories* (Todd, 1954) or in later editions like *The Rendezvous and Other Stories* (Virago, 2005) and *The Doll: Short Stories* (Virago, 2011).

Nevertheless, possibly because of that kind of reluctance which literary critics showed in the past, a systematic study of the entirety of du Maurier's short stories has yet to be written. Meanwhile, it is a real pleasure to present this issue to critics and readers alike, attesting as it does to the growing number of academics who wish to contribute to renewing appreciation of her works by open-mindedly scrutinising them on the sole strength of their own merit. Comprised of eight articles, a complete list of du Maurier's published short stories and a full-length critical bibliography of her works, this issue bears the title *Sundered Selves and Opaque Others*. Indeed, as we will see, the protagonists in du Maurier's short fictions often feel alien to themselves and

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1. Due to the particular success of one of their stories, the first of these three collections was renamed *The Birds and Other Stories* while the third became *Don't Look Now and Other Stories*.

prove incapable of interacting with the individuals around them, thus creating a sense of hopelessness and anguish, a disturbing and disillusioned form of existential malaise—in her readers just as in her characters.

The articles in this issue are organised as follows:<sup>2</sup>

#### SECTION 1: REDISCOVERING DU MAURIER

Taking literally the premise set out in the introduction to this section that a rediscovery of du Maurier is called for, Xavier Lachazette examines a trio of stories published between 1928 and 1931, but never reprinted since. His article, “Rediscovering Three Short Stories by Daphne du Maurier: ‘Terror,’ ‘A Man of Straw,’ and ‘Portrait of an Actress,’” begins by explaining how he came by them. He then argues that the self-pitying protagonist of “A Man of Straw” allows the writer to pitilessly deconstruct masculinity and the phallographic foundations of society. “Terror” and “Portrait of an Actress” are then presented as stories in which du Maurier underlines not only the artificiality of human interactions, but also the difficulty of voicing one’s emotions.

#### SECTION 2: GENDERS AND GENRES

The second section contains three articles with a focus on the debunking of gendered representations in du Maurier’s short fiction and on her use of the Gothic and time-travel genres to lay bare our self-complacency and our false sense of security.

First, in “Gothic Hauntings and Representations of Gender in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘The Apple Tree,’” Ashleigh Taylor Sullivan examines the instability of the gendered characterisation of the protagonists, together with the resulting tensions that arise from their inability to fulfil the binary gender roles imposed by the Gothicised marital or familial home. She argues that the true horror at the centre of this text is an oppressive masculine and submissive feminine identity which ultimately leads the reader to question the ideological construction of gender within society. In that sense, “The Apple Tree” can be read as an allegory for the inherent (self-)destructiveness of traditional gender roles and identities.

Second, in “Filtering the Truth through Gothic Lenses: The Undermining of Relationships and Realities in Daphne du Maurier’s Short Stories,” Gina Wisker uses a literary Gothic lens to explore predatory and deceptive relationships in du Maurier’s short stories. It is argued that, as a

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2. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Nicole Cloarec and Anne Hall for their contribution to the editing process.

Gothic woman writer, du Maurier offers no cosy domestic scenarios or safe families: self-delusion dominates, families are undermined by selfishness, and romance dissolves into dangerous dullness. There is no generous sense of any other humans. No one is worthy of any behaviour modification or duty of care. Daphne du Maurier undermines myths and the narrative trajectories which sustain certainties of both everyday life and dreams, thereby destroying a form of ontological security.

Thirdly, in “Simultaneous Immediacy in Two Stories by Daphne du Maurier: ‘The Birds’ and ‘The Split Second,’” Troy White examines du Maurier as a writer of popular-fiction genres, the Gothic story and the time-travel story. Both share a central mechanism involving *time categories*, i.e. groupings of time, based on a particular historical period, but chiefly built on ideas associated with that period. The Gothic and time-travel mechanism places opposed time categories in *simultaneous immediacy*, or simultaneous presentness. Daphne du Maurier uses this mechanism to position flexible and inflexible characters on the threshold of time categories, defining the “modern” category in relation to her characters’ anxiety over its loss.

### SECTION 3: THE BODY SPEAKS

The two articles in this next section show how du Maurier’s representation and treatment of the human body allowed her to engage with key cultural, psychological, political, and social issues of the 1950s.

First, in “Misreading the Body: Mutants and Masks in Three of Daphne du Maurier’s Post-War Stories: ‘The Little Photographer,’ ‘Kiss Me Again, Stranger’ and ‘The Blue Lenses,’” Laurie Bernadette Huggett discusses the bodily horror and viscerality present in du Maurier’s 1950s collections, which exemplify the peculiar iconography of the body in British post-war society. The first two stories portray post-war displacement and an interaction between individuals based upon the reading of physical norms. “The Blue Lenses” provides an interesting counterpoint, being still explicit in its engagement of “reading the other,” but establishing a more prominent relationship between cultural narratives and psychology—an increasingly psychological approach into whose origin this article inquires.

Second, in “Corporeality in Daphne du Maurier’s Short Stories,” Setara Pracha argues that du Maurier employs the gendered and non-gendered, disabled and maimed human form as a recurrent symbol for social, political, and domestic misalignment. Such a conceptual framework of corporeality unifies her works and blurs the boundary between psychological study, cautionary tale, horror narrative, and the *Künstlerroman*. Based on a



rereading of “Monte Verità,” “The Alibi,” and “The Little Photographer,” the argument establishes the context of corporeality in which those short stories are to be read, and postulates that they illustrate the results of frustrated desire by recurrent reference to the incomplete or impaired human form.

#### SECTION 4: TOURISTS IN “OTHER” LANDS

The two articles in this section study stories in which du Maurier depicts the tourist experience as a disquieting encounter between the protagonists’ fluid selves and the foreign others with whom they suddenly find themselves thrown in.

First, in “Venice and the Novella: The Construction of Cultural Otherness in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘Don’t Look Now’ and Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers*,” Francesca Pierini analyses two instances of the modern and contemporary anglophone creation of a literary Venice associated with the mysterious and the uncanny. In light of Michel Foucault’s concept of *heterotopia*, she studies the descriptive patterns specific to such a creation, their affiliation to colonialist and orientalist discourses, and their ability to generate narratives based on a spatial and temporal albeit imagined margin. She also demonstrates that by challenging the symbolic order of the (British) self, these narratives reiterate a taxonomical geography of selfhood and otherness based on largely unquestioned literary and discursive conventions.

Second, in “Tourists in Lands of Myths: Daphne du Maurier’s Touring of Venice and Crete in ‘Ganymede’ and ‘Not After Midnight,’” Emmanuel Vernadakis examines how du Maurier combines myth with tourism to address the theme of metamorphosis. Loaded with myths, or rather with the specific versions of myths that tourists project onto them, Venice and Crete take on an unsettling quality that rubs off on the protagonists and alters them, as if myth had the power to blind those who foster it and to reveal their deficiencies to others. Back in England, the protagonists cannot recover their former self or status: infected by myth, they move to the margins of society, from where their stories emerge as pathetic pleas framed by irony.

#### SECTION 5: BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Two bibliographies conclude this issue on du Maurier’s short fiction.

First, the reader will find a complete list of du Maurier’s fifty published stories, in order of first publication. The names of the magazines or books in which they were first printed are indicated, together with the publication dates.

Second, a full-length critical bibliography of du Maurier's works is provided—not limited to her short stories but taking into account all of her literary production. This bibliography aims at allowing researchers to better apprehend, and make use of, the extensive secondary sources already at their disposal—thus taking up and passing on the torch of critical analysis of the works of such a captivating and compelling writer.

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