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Cruelty, Suspense, and the Macabre in Five Crime Stories by Daphne du Maurier

Xavier Lachazette

- 1 In quite a few of Daphne du Maurier's short stories and novellas a murder is—or sometimes murders are—committed. In “The Birds” and “The Old Man,” the killings are actually meted out by animals. In the five crime stories that will be discussed here, the murderers are human beings, including a respectable middle-aged man (in “The Alibi”), two young women of striking beauty (in “The Little Photographer” and “Kiss Me Again, Stranger”), and a repulsive psychopathic dwarf (“Don’t Look Now”). In the fifth story (“No Motive”), *self*-murder gets committed when the young woman at the centre of the narrative suddenly awakes to the realization that she was raped at the age of fourteen.¹
- 2 In spite of the crimes perpetrated in them, du Maurier's stories only exceptionally qualify as “detective stories” or “police novels.” In “Don’t Look Now” and “Kiss Me Again, Stranger,” though the police do their work properly and catch the criminals, their detective work is kept at bay: only the footsteps and voices of officers are heard in the scary streets of night-time Venice, while it is only the day after the murder that the arrest of the woman who killed a third Royal Air Force pilot is confirmed on the front page of a newspaper. What's more, as far as the reader knows, the death of the “little photographer,” pushed off a cliff on the French Riviera, may never be investigated, while the man who confesses to turning on the gas jets in the kitchen to get rid of his landlady and her three-year-old son is actually guilty of neither crime. In other words, the stories mainly focus on the build-up to crime, and on the psychological motives behind it, not on the crime itself. In all instances but one, those crimes thus exist in a spatiotemporal dimension of their own, taking place off stage, unbeknownst to both the narrator and the reader, or in retrospect, in an act of involuntary remembrance.
- 3 It is only in “No Motive” that du Maurier wrote a regular “detective story” that abides by the rules of the genre—a genre she never returned to after that, possibly on account of Gollancz, her publisher, refusing to print it alongside “The Little Photographer” and

“Kiss Me Again, Stranger.” Nevertheless, the story did get printed in the United States, in book format and in at least two women’s magazines: *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Modern Woman*, respectively in January and June 1953.² Indeed, in conformity with the genre, the private investigator hired to look into the suicide of the pregnant wife starts by establishing a tight chronology of the fateful morning. The arrival of a travelling salesman is ascertained to have taken place at 11 a.m., the butler’s entrance into the room at 11:20, and the suicide itself around 11:30. The PI’s investigations then lead him first to the woman’s adoptive home in Switzerland, then across the south of England as he gradually uncovers the sequence of events in her life, from her schooldays in Kent, to her rape and loss of memory one summer in Hampshire, and finally to Cornwall where she gave birth to a son just before being traumatically separated from him. Yet in a final twist, the detective decides to keep from her husband the cause of his wife’s demise—in other words, her rape and the loss of her child—out of consideration for the peace of mind of her survivors.

- 4 Though Gollancz turned down that story rather peremptorily, he loved the other tales in the same collection, but warned du Maurier that she must “brace herself for shocked reviews—the violence in them would be noted and probably found abhorrent coming from the pen of the ‘romantic’ writer she was supposed to be” (Forster, *du Maurier* 259-60). He was right. One such reviewer—Nancy Spain, writing for *The Daily Express*—was “revolted” by them and severely took du Maurier to task. In a private letter to Gollancz, Spain maintained that the stories were “all concerned with malformation, hatred, blackmail, cruelty and murder” (qtd. in Forster, *du Maurier* 260). Anyone writing such stories, she asserted, could only be sick.
- 5 Spain’s calling du Maurier “sick” for penning disquieting stories of that sort was obviously ill advised and needlessly insulting. Such a statement also overlooked the links drawn by du Maurier between acts of cruelty and the social system which causes them in the first place. As Setara Pracha explains at two separate stages in her discussion of du Maurier’s stories, first specifically about “The Little Photographer,” then about the whole *Apple Tree* collection, “The narrative focus on deceit and sexual violence employs physical difference as the signifier for personal and social chaos” (*Pathology* 27) while “Spain’s literal reading misses the allegorical framework, mistaking an interrogation of normative values for gratuitous violence” (146-47). In a different article, bearing specifically on “Kiss Me Again, Stranger” this time, Pracha also shows how daring such a short story is in its interrogation of World War II “values and behaviour,” in expressing “an alternative take on nationalist fervour,” and in building a plot “in which the personal ideology of vengeance confronts the national narrative of a just war” (Pracha, “Kiss” 52-53). The same conclusion is arrived at by Laurie Huggett in her analysis of du Maurier’s treatment of the body in three of her stories from that period:

Her stories from the 1950s present bodies which serve as microcosms of the social anxieties of the decade, together with a social identity that is not only destabilised by a traumatic past and an uncertain future, but also fragmented by a pluralisation of meaning and disrupted notions of behavioural and biological “normality.” . . . Ultimately whether beautiful or non-human, the bodies within these texts reveal only the broad anxieties of the age: that “normality” is deceptive, that biology is subject to cultural interpretation and that masks conceal nothing more than themselves. (118-19)

- 6 Nevertheless, Spain's stricture is perfectly accurate in its centre-staging of the ubiquity of violence in du Maurier's short fiction—not only that published in the early 1950s, one may hasten to add, but also in later works. Yet I will try to demonstrate that the heartless web of psychological and sociological forces visible in them is precisely one of their strengths, revealing as they do not only du Maurier's personal reaction to inner conflicts against which she battled all her life, but also the brutality of patriarchal power. To start with, the "macabre" label that du Maurier herself used to apply to her short stories will be analysed, together with what she wrote about the short form and suspense in four little-known essays or prefaces spanning nearly fifty years. Turning specifically to the five stories under study, the bitter facts and ironic twists of fate with which they are riddled will be underlined. This will be linked up with the seductive—but problematic—refuge which du Maurier's characters seek in make-believe, away from hard-edged realities. Finally, the idea will be submitted that the viciousness with which gendered roles and taboos are imposed on the fictional individuals in these stories may account for the cruelty at work in them.

The Source of du Maurier's "Macabre"

- 7 As previously underlined by her publisher, du Maurier was no romantic writer, especially in her short fiction, yet that epithet stuck to her all her life—and even after her death. A case in point is her obituary in *The Irish Times* of 20 April 1989, which bears the title, "Daphne du Maurier, the romantic, dies." Interestingly, the article mentions du Maurier's dislike of that classification, but dismisses her claim simultaneously:

She herself preferred to categorise her books as suspense and adventure rather than romance.

"Frenchman's Creek is the only novel I've written that I would call romantic," she on[c]e said. "It's about a woman falling in love with a pirate."

The critics demurred. She was, in their opinion, a romantic novelist though of the highest quality. (26)

- 8 Likewise, eight years later, in the "On this day" section of the *Burton Daily Mail*, "Daphne du Maurier, romantic thriller writer" was listed as having died on 19 April 1989—the same day of the year as Charles Darwin and "British romantic poet Lord Byron" (4). Even Margaret Forster, whose later biography of du Maurier was to change readers' and critics' perception of her person and her work quite drastically, called her obituary "Queen of menacing romance" in *The Sunday Times*.
- 9 These examples show that the "romantic" tag kept being applied to du Maurier, however much qualified by words such as "thriller" or "menacing," which connote a darker tone, but whose evocative power gets neutralised, or at least mitigated, by such close oxymoronic proximity with romance. Unsurprisingly, perhaps because they gave the lie to the hated romantic label that plagued her, du Maurier was rather proud or protective of the more ruthless strain in her short stories, defending her "macabre tastes" when readers from her intimate circle voiced their astonishment. This is corroborated by the fact that, published in the last thirteen years of her life, during a long period of psychological distress which incapacitated her from writing any new fiction, two major anthologies of her short stories were published as *Echoes from the Macabre: Selected Stories* (1976) and as *Daphne du Maurier's Classics of the Macabre* (1987).

- 10 As Forster argues, du Maurier's 1950s stories represented a marked change in the writer's treatment of her subject matter:

Now, women were often in control and making men suffer. Women had become quite vicious creatures, perfectly capable of tricking, and even killing, men as they had been tricked and killed in the early stories. Daphne's friends and family were rather taken aback at this strain of brutality she displayed, but she was unrepentant and talked cheerfully of 'my macabre tastes' without seeming to fear any significance being read into them. (du Maurier 260)

- 11 If the "macabre" tag that du Maurier sought to substitute for the lowbrow "romantic" label may have been a marketing ploy on the part of her publishing house,³ capitalising as this must have done on the more alluring quality which the former word must possess in the eyes of certain readers or reviewers, her own use of it was apparently sincere and corresponded to an attempt at introspection, or at self-definition, that she repeatedly put into words. For instance, in the very first letter quoted in Oriel Malet's edition of du Maurier's side of the two women's private correspondence, du Maurier mentions the short story she is currently trying to finish ("Monte Verità") before crowing that her "next story is one you will hate. Not macabre, really. About a sensual, rather foolish woman who, through idleness, lets a honky [i.e., common] man from a shop make love to her" (Malet 29). Malet evidently disagrees with her friend's judgement on that other story ("The Little Photographer"), introducing as she does *all* of *The Apple Tree* as "a collection of macabre short stories" (20). She adds that "Daphne believed this inner darkness to be a family trait, running like a black thread behind the mockery and laughter" (8). At the other end of her edition of her friend's letters, Malet even confesses that she never made any headway in understanding that part of du Maurier's psyche, however much she sensed its potency and seminality:

I never knew where this macabre streak sprang from; possibly from that nightmare zone of the unconscious which some writers tap at will, and others prefer to leave unstirred. . . . On the surface Bing [one of du Maurier's monikers] was blithe, always ready to turn events and people into mockery, but under the laughter, as in an empty room when everyone has left it, there was this twilight zone of secret fears and anxieties into which it was impossible to probe too far. (244)

- 12 On top of these private letters, the same attempt is discernible in various little-known non-fictional writings. For instance, her "Note to the Reader" makes clear at the beginning of *Classics of the Macabre* (1987) that the occult always enthralled her, not at all as a distant concept, but as an actual feeling experienced both in her quotidian life and as a creator of fictional characters:

Though not at all psychic—I have never seen a ghost or dabbled in spiritualism or the occult—I have always been fascinated by the unexplained, the darker side of life. I have a strong sense of the things that lie beyond our day-by-day perception and experience. It is, perhaps, an extension of this feeling that makes me live through the characters that I create. ("Note to the Reader" 12)

- 13 A much earlier piece of writing, published at the height of the international furore excited by *Rebecca*, reveals that du Maurier was already looking for the source of that dark strain as far back as 1938, i.e. nearly half a century before. Indeed, in "A Writer is a Strange Creature," she posits both hereditary and personal causes for such a character trait, thus confirming the "family trait" to which Oriel Malet's statement previously referred. She starts by quoting her grandfather's intermittent "melancholy" and "wistful" nature as potential precedents transmitted by the family genes (6). Soon afterwards, however, she quite intriguingly associates her taste for the dark side with

identity issues at the core of her father's and her own professional and personal lives. Gerald, her actor father, was "a thousand different people" on the stage, while hers was a "childhood of dressing up, of forever being a character other than oneself, being an Indian, a Cavalier, a Huguenot, a smuggler followed by an adolescence when one read too much, thirstily, greedily, by the light of a fire" (6). Whereas one would be inclined to deduce that such a passionate and precocious dose of role-playing must have served as wonderful preparation for life as an author, du Maurier drily concludes, "Small wonder the result is a little distorted" (6).

- 14 One naturally wonders what the nature of such a "distortion" might be. Likewise, when du Maurier tantalisingly remarks that the "element of the macabre which runs through many of my books has, I think, grown stronger over the years, especially in my short stories" ("Note to the Reader" 12), one necessarily wishes she would explain why, and whether it is precisely that peculiar driving force which, consciously or not, attracts her to the genre. Indeed, as she makes clear in her preface to a selection of stories by Phyllis Bottome, a short story is an art form with its own rules, which writers do not espouse for the mere sake of brevity, but because they are pursuing a form of purity, or of truth to feeling, whose epiphanic essence can only be fittingly encapsulated by the short form:

When she [Bottome] 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 10)

- 15 The "essence" and "brief exposure" of du Maurier's macabre stories thus also beg explanation.

The Long Road to Personal Problem Solving

- 16 In the wake of the popular and critical success of *The Scapegoat* (1957), du Maurier took the unprecedented step (for her) of submitting a personal analysis of her own novel to *The New York Times*, in an essay entitled "It's Not a Case of Whodunit but How It Will All End." Knowing that the work had been termed a "suspense novel" in Great Britain and in the United States, du Maurier focused her 1,700-plus-word article on that label, indicating right from the start what "true suspense" looked like to her. Interestingly, her description of the genre is conveyed through the metaphor of a road—"a road of uncertainty toward an unseen goal"—thus laying stress on the original process of hesitant self-discovery with which she intrinsically equates it:

What is a suspense novel? The term is a loose one today, covering any story from a whodunit to a frivolity turning on which dark stranger gets the blonde. People in doubt, people mystified, people groping their way from one situation to another, from childhood to middle age, from joy to sorrow—these are the figures in the true suspense novel. They are traveling along a road of uncertainty toward an unseen goal. The suspense novel succeeds if the reader says to himself at the final page, "Yes—it couldn't happen any other way." In its end (to paraphrase Mary, Queen of Scots) is its beginning. ("It's Not a Case")

- 17 That the genre as she sees it should be defined by the psychological bent of "people" (not "characters," one notices) "groping their way" is confirmed by her preface to Bottome's short stories. In essence, what she argues in that introductory text, reading which one often feels compelled to apply to du Maurier the "truths" she somewhat peremptorily sets out in her discussion of Bottome's stories,⁴ is that whether writers

like it or not, their works reveal the road they have travelled, including the blatant errors they have committed along the way. As she puts it, “phases and moods, beliefs and opinions, once held and then forgotten, stand like milestones in a writer’s life, and however much we may wish them obliterated they point a finger, sometimes an accusing one, to the road travelled” (Preface 11-12). What this implies is that writing amounts to delving deeper and deeper in search of one’s “hidden secret self” (“It’s Not a Case”) or of the roots of some inner malaise that can only come to light through narrative. Du Maurier’s aesthetic vision can therefore be called *dolorist* in the sense that only through a certain amount of painful introspection can one’s quest be achieved or one’s self-questioning be solved. As she remarks,

It will be seen, therefore, that the writing of a suspense story is not easy. There is no trick way of solving difficulties. The writer does not sit before a typewriter, tongue in cheek, thinking, “Here’s a good way out. This will fox ’em.” It means sweat and blood and tears. And very often a temperature as well. (“It’s Not a Case”)

- 18 Yet, “pain and realization of pain” alone remain insufficient “unless the source is found,” she further argues, that is to say if answers are not provided to the basic questions that the characters, people, or writers ask themselves: “Why are we unhappy? Why are we hungry? What are we looking for?” (“It’s Not a Case”). Consequently, suspense stories do not fascinate du Maurier because of the crimes committed in them, or the detection work involved, but because they set in motion a number of psychological situations whose dynamics it then becomes the task of the narrative to follow to their fictional conclusion. The power of literary creation thus lies in its ability to give shape to doubts, fears, or desires which, consciously formulated or not, gnaw at us and stand in the way of self-awareness or self-fulfilment. Hence the importance of “how it will all end,” as stated in the title of her *New York Times* article, for only by completely playing out imaginary scenarios can the writer hope to lay those troublesome feelings to rest. Du Maurier even asserts that the success or failure of the literary work thus created is an indication of how competently the writer has travelled down his or her road to self-discovery:

The inner problem, unknown to the conscious self, comes to the surface as a book or poem, and somebody, beset with troubles, sets forth on the uncertain journey. In what shape he reaches his destination, whether triumphant or downcast, or indeed whether he comes to journey’s end at all, is not just a matter of technique or craftsmanship: it depends upon the progress of the writer’s inner man. (“It’s Not a Case”)

- 19 Reading this passage today, long after Forster’s epoch-making biography revealed the “inner problem” which perplexed du Maurier all her life, though she freely alluded to it in her correspondence with a very few chosen friends, one cannot help but think that the phrase “the progress of the writer’s inner man” is a rather daring, though coded, reference to what she called her “boy in the box.” As one might remember, the young du Maurier thought of herself as a boy, and even created a self-assertive male *alter ego* for herself, called Eric Avon, until puberty and menstruation set in (Forster, *du Maurier* 14). Her astonishing theory was that the occasional sexual attraction she felt to women stemmed from the repressed presence of that boy who sometimes let himself out of the box. Where she was wrong was in her belief that the boy “could sometimes be shut up in the box inside her, it seemed, *without causing any strain*” (italics mine; Forster, *du Maurier* 39), not only because she lived a heterosexual life on the surface, but also because the man inside craved self-expression and clamoured to become the (male) narrator in quite a few of her novels and stories. She never envisaged herself as

bisexual, and “by God and by Christ if anyone should call that sort of love [that she felt for Ellen Doubleday, her American editor’s wife] by that unattractive word that begins with ‘L,’ I’d tear their guts out” (qtd. in Forster, *du Maurier* 222).

- 20 Unsurprisingly, the sort of suspense du Maurier favoured had to do with identity, loss of self, and the opportunities which various situations offered her characters to become other... and see what happens. In her essay on *The Scapegoat*, she asserts that the detection of the narrator’s deception, which some readers felt was the main thrust of the story, did not concern her “for one moment.” Rather,

I wanted to discover, for myself, what happened to a man who was no longer himself. Would he, assuming the identity of another, shed his own? Would he take on the sins and the burdens and the emotions of the man he had replaced, or would his own hidden secret self become released in the other’s image and so take charge? (“It’s Not a Case”)

- 21 Moreover, in her discussion of Phyllis Bottome’s short fiction, she claims that more than any other art, writing necessarily entails revealing, or even “betraying,” one’s inner self:

The writer, more than any other artist, stands self-betrayed. The painter can catch a living scene on canvas, or a sitter’s mood, and still stay hidden from his or her contemporaries, and from posterity too; but 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 9)

- 22 If one takes into consideration the personal pain described previously and the potential dangers which such revelations may present, a writer’s “driving instinct” to solve their inner problem must therefore be unconceivably powerful—and irresistibly enthralling—for them to persist in taking the risks involved, against all odds.

Bitter Facts and Ironic Twists of Fate

- 23 In the du Maurier short stories that we now set out to study, bitter facts and ironic twists of fate are some of the characteristics that render the narratives intriguingly cruel and macabre. For instance, the victim in “The Little Photographer” turns out to be a naïve, but likeable young man, fatefully infatuated with a vacationing aristocrat and placed at a pitiful disadvantage by his clubfoot when his life literally hangs in the balance. As for Anna, the impoverished Austrian girl stranded in London by her former lover in “The Alibi,” she comes to depend on her unexpected tenant, both financially—because of the weekly rent he pays her—and emotionally, seeing that she ends up craving the presence of the man who, simply out of boredom, initially planned to strangle her and her son.
- 24 An ironic fate or a twisted kind of logic presides over the crimes committed in those stories. The would-be killer in “The Alibi” decides to murder a person residing in the next street he comes across, the street number of that person’s house being determined by the number of letters in the street name. Likewise, the woman who targets RAF pilots does so because her own parents died in a bomb attack in World War II. The fact that it is the Germans who should be held responsible for her parents’ demise makes no difference to her deranged mind (“‘It’s all the same, they’re killers, aren’t they?’ she said” [241])—though, as Pracha argues, patriotic or gender expectations are precisely

what that story deconstructs in the wake of such a traumatic period as World War II: “To the girl, a killer is a killer irrespective of nationhood; just as she is a killer irrespective of gender” (Pracha, “Kiss” 57). As for the youngish couple in “Don’t Look Now,” it is a ruthless fate that kills their daughter, then sends their son to the hospital with appendicitis before having the father farcically die at the hands of an ugly dwarf, exclaiming, “Oh God, . . . what a bloody silly way to die...” (58). In that sense, the two older women in the story—the blind psychic and her sister—form a sort of tragic chorus charged with heralding the husband’s death in Venice. The later addition of the female dwarf transforms the duo into a modern representation of the Greek Moirai, or of the Roman Fates, the mythological trio of women whose occupation it was to spin, measure, or cut the thread of life allotted to each individual mortal.

- 25 No compassion or sign of empathy is to be found in these stories, where fate strikes both unflinchingly and heavy-handedly, and where man (and woman) is wolf to man. Unlike Mr. Hyde in Stevenson’s tale, once their craving for murder, sex, or money is satiated, these characters are not wracked by guilt or moral anguish of any sort. Unaware that he indirectly caused his mother’s death, the young travelling salesman in “No Motive” actually glories in the idea that he swindled such a “big nob” out of twenty pounds, a sum she will not need now that she has taken her own life. As he explains to the detective, “I said would she make out the cheque to bearer—I tried it on, see; she had that dumb sort of face that’s easy to fool—and she didn’t bat an eye, but went to the desk and wrote out the check” (317). The fact is, the woman would never have died had the butler not chanced to make an innocuous remark, couched in words which unwittingly allowed the horrifying memory of her rape to rush back upon her.
- 26 A strong sardonic tone thus prevails in the stories under study because of their grim blend of violence and irony as well as the grotesque—all at the characters’ expense, while constantly stressing their moral flaws or their physical disabilities. For that reason, modern readers are often reminded of the short fiction of Flannery O’Connor, except that there is no room in du Maurier’s stories for Christian realism or the potential awakening of any of the characters to Divine Grace. The pain felt by *her* characters does not lead them to any higher spiritual level, and she could never have written, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. . . . Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does” (O’Connor 307). On the contrary, it is as if what du Maurier had in mind were a form of profane humiliation, the systematic (and sometimes final) bringing low of faulty and rather commonplace characters with whom life has often already proved merciless in the past. For that reason, du Maurier is indeed “a mistress of mockery” (Pracha, *Pathology* 188), and one can only be struck by the parallel which Pracha draws between her fiction and the concept of laughter as defined by Bergson, most notably in the following quotation:
- Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (qtd. in Pracha, *Pathology* 188)
- 27 Such a definition of the role and scope of laughter explains the relentless brutality of some of the happenings in du Maurier’s stories (“it must make a painful impression”), together with their secular outlook (“society”), as opposed to a belief in religious transcendence. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned on the subject of post-WWII patriotism, for instance, or on that of the idiosyncratic stress that the 1950s placed on

“normality,” du Maurier’s relationship with society was often conflictual. The “liberties taken with it” were therefore low on her agenda compared with the violence which society itself dealt out to its members. In other words, on a few subjects she held dear, du Maurier could prove society’s contemnor, much more than its champion.

Make-Believe and the Fear of Emotions

- 28 What du Maurier’s ruthless or ignorant characters have in common is their inability to face the world of quotidian realities, together with the problematic refuge they seek in a world of make-believe. This feature of their psychological makeup is particularly noticeable in “The Alibi” and “The Little Photographer,” two stories with striking similarities. In the former, such is Fenton’s dissatisfaction with the humdrum rut into which he has fallen and with his lack of control over his own life, that murder seems to him the only way to regain possession of himself—to turn a puppet into a puppet-master. Fortunately for his landlady, he takes a sudden interest in painting, just like du Maurier herself in the 1950s, so that the life he now creates on canvas makes the craving to shed innocent blood superfluous:

He began squeezing the remaining tubes on to the second pallet and mixing them, and now all was riot—sunsets that had never been, and unrisen dawns. The Venetian red was not the Doge’s palace but little drops of blood that burst in the brain and did not have to be shed, and zinc white was purity, not death, and yellow ochre... yellow ochre was life in abundance, was renewal, was spring, was April even in some other time, some other place... (“Alibi” 28)

- 29 Similarly, the young woman in “The Little Photographer” has disliked the endless repetitive tasks and boring visits imposed on her ever since she married into the French aristocracy, so that she sees taking a lover as a refreshing (and emotionless) way out of deadly routine. The opening paragraphs of that other story show her carefully choosing the dabs of colour she means to apply to her fingernails and toes. Reminiscent of Fenton, she is “like an artist” who works “with swift, deft strokes” (175) to create just the right impression of her (unstable) self which she requires that day. The text underlines her theatrical (that is to say, unnatural) attitudes and poses, the creative power which she believes emanates from her, and the thirst for control that she shares with the would-be painter in “The Alibi.” The following quotation makes these qualities clear:

When she had finished she leant back in her chaise longue, exhausted, waving her hands before her in the air to let the varnish harden—a strange gesture, like that of a priestess. She looked down at her toes, appearing from her sandals, and decided that presently, in a few moments, she would paint them too; olive hands, olive feet, subdued and quiet, surprised into sudden life. (“Photographer” 175-76)

- 30 Positioning themselves at the centre of a (fake) universe of their own making, Fenton and the Marquise necessarily relegate others to the remote fringes of their consciousness and can never acknowledge the reality or value of other people’s emotions. Taking a sexual interest in Monsieur Paul’s deformity, instead of becoming oblivious to it, the Marquise makes a fetish of his clubfoot and ends up sadistically tormenting him when she decides to use him “as a person whose feelings she could wound” (“Photographer” 203). As Huggett puts it, quoting Lennard J. Davis in the process, “the Marquise, as an individual who identifies as medically ‘normal,’ is thus bolstered by ‘a network of traditionalist ableist assumptions and social supports’ which

lend a superficial, and it turns out dangerous, authority to her gaze” (110; see Davis 128). Likewise, Fenton causes his landlady’s suicide and her murder of her own son by not understanding why his sudden decision to terminate the lease that binds them should cause her pain and distress. Along the same lines, by not being able to confront the two horrifying experiences that she endured as a teenager, the rape victim in “No Motive” has built her whole life around a lie which ultimately destroys her when the safety of memory loss is suddenly shattered. Similarly, in “Don’t Look Now,” the husband overplays the part of the protective, reassuring male, thus denying his own need to mourn his daughter. It is *he* who turns out to be in need of protection, not his wife, seeing that she has started to find consolation in the supernatural conviction that their daughter is still with them.

- 31 Foster comments that, in “Kiss Me Again, Stranger,” du Maurier was trying to resolve inner conflicts of so powerful a nature that they “made her feel on the edge of madness” (du Maurier 278). As du Maurier herself confesses in her letters to Ellen Doubleday, such conflicts stemmed in part from her inability to relate to others. She wrote for instance that she suffered “the torments of hell, because I felt no one I had ever loved was real (except the family). In other words, the tribe, the original social group, were real, nobody else” (qtd. in Forster, du Maurier 278). She also had the nagging impression that “she was always pretending to be someone else unless she was completely alone” (278). Forster’s own conclusion, however, is that du Maurier’s anguish actually came from “confusion over her sexual identity” (278), that is to say from her refusal to acknowledge the lesbian or bisexual component of her personality—which du Maurier herself derisively downplayed as her “Venetian tendencies.”
- 32 While acknowledging Forster’s hypotheses, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik advise critics not to jump to hasty conclusions as far as du Maurier’s sexuality is concerned, if only because the letters from which Forster quotes are still under embargo at Princeton University, so that no one else has read them in full (Horner and Zlosnik 11). They also feel that, though her biography *does* mention bisexuality as a possibility, Forster mostly presents “the author’s ambivalence concerning her sexual identity as indicative of repressed lesbian desire” (Horner and Zlosnik 10), as in a paragraph from her afterword, in which the biographer contextualises the British attitude to female homosexuality from the 1920s:

The fury she felt at being thought a lesbian was because she truly did not see herself as such. . . . In many ways, she reflected the sexual judgements of her era. During the twenties and thirties, when she was growing up, women who were lesbians were thought of as women who should have been born men. . . . Today a lesbian would define her sexuality differently; a man is precisely what she would not wish to be. A lesbian is now simply a woman who loves women, and to whom intimacy with a man is abhorrent.⁵ (Horner and Zlosnik 10)

The Violence of Gendered Roles and Taboos

- 33 A third possibility, not suggested by Horner, Zlosnik or Forster, could be that du Maurier suffered from gender dysphoria, i.e. a form of distress caused by a person’s feeling of mismatch between the sex assigned to them at birth and their “gender identity,” a concept defined by Morrow and Messinger as “an individual’s personal sense of identity as masculine or feminine, or *some combination thereof*” (8; *italics mine*). Indeed, as Nathalie Abi-Ezzi comments, du Maurier had long shown an interest in the

“psychology of duality.” When she read the works of Jung and Adler on that subject in 1954, she “immediately applied their theories to her own sense of inner division” (239). These theories she took as “scientific confirmation of what she had realized for a long time” (240), namely the presence of “dual aspects” (239) within herself—or rather of two separate personalities or selves within her. Based on Forster’s biography, Abi-Ezzi explains that du Maurier:

wrote to her daughter that there were indeed two personalities within her, and that one of these, her ‘No. 2,’ was a boy, and was in addition directly associated with her writing. Consequently, when she wrote, as she explained, she was entirely this ‘No. 2,’ whereas when not writing, ‘No. 2’ caused her endless trouble by forcing her to pretend to be someone she was not. (240)

34 On the strength of the pattern evidenced by those various comments, one may suggest that the cruelty at the heart of human interactions in du Maurier’s macabre stories is not only the tormented expression of inner struggles over her own identity, but also an oblique critique of the silent violence of socially admitted gendered roles and of sexual taboos.

35 Du Maurier would never have regarded herself as a feminist. The very notion would have carried too many negative connotations in her eyes. She also valued collective struggles much less than she did individual gestures of distrust or personal acts of rebellion. Nevertheless, one is often taken aback by how violently her fictional battles of the sexes rage, or by how contemptuously one sex looks down on the other in her stories. A case in point is “The Alibi,” in which the protagonist—himself a married man—enumerates for his own benefit the characteristics of womanhood as he sees it:

That’s right, he thought. Stay put. Keep your place. If there was one thing he could not stand it was a woman who argued, a woman who was self-assertive, a woman who nagged, a woman who stood upon her rights. Because of course they were not made for that. They were intended by their Creator to be pliable, and accommodating, and gentle, and meek. The trouble was that they were so seldom like that in reality. It was only in the imagination, or glimpsed in passing or behind a window, or leaning from a balcony abroad, or from the frame of a picture, or from a canvas like the one before him now . . . that a woman had any meaning, any reality. (“Alibi” 31)

36 Conversely, in her stories centre-staging female criminals, du Maurier consistently deconstructs gendered stereotypes. Likened to a “gazelle” (196), the little photographer in the eponymous story reads romances and is so tender-hearted that “hysteria” (207) seizes him when the Marquise makes short shrift of his plans for a future together.⁶

37 As for the mechanic from Hampstead, his maleness is seemingly asserted in the opening paragraphs of “Kiss Me Again, Stranger” through his enjoyment of the work he does in “greasy overalls under a car’s belly, or a lorry’s, with a spanner in [his] hand” and “the smell of oil” about him (225). Nevertheless, he soon turns out to be both bored with the “good sort” of women and afraid of “the opposite kind,” that is to say “the ones that grab you and nearly eat you” (234). Later on in the same story, with a murderess on the rampage, gendered roles also get reversed when a man strikingly advises a fellow male to avoid going out at night: “‘You want to watch out, in that uniform,’ said the conductor to the Air Force fellow, ‘or you’ll end up like those others. It’s late too, to be out on your own’” (du Maurier, “Kiss Me” 236). In that sense, twenty-seven years before Angela Carter rewrote traditional fairy tales with a feminist twist in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), du Maurier had already given “Little Red Riding Hood” a

modern (and merrily sarcastic) slant by telling *men* to “keep their place” and beware of the wolf.

- 38 These stories allow du Maurier to boldly assert her right—or any woman writer’s right—to create stories complete with (literally) striking beauties, revolting male and female psychopaths, or even an occasional sex worker who asks her unsuspecting tenant to dump in a garbage bin somewhere the product of the backstreet abortion she has just performed on herself. Du Maurier thus makes the point that creative powers are not gendered-based and that an “authoress” also can use fictional violence to staggering effect, while laying bare a patriarchal society’s deep-rooted misogyny—and her own ambivalence on the subject of female emancipation.

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- 39 As du Maurier informed *Wings* readers in 1938, her husband once said (or joked?) that she would never become a great writer until she wrote “a happy story about happy people.” She would give the world, she explained in the same article, “to make people split their sides with mirth. But it does not happen. The laughter will not come.” She added:

They creep so insidiously, these creatures of the imagination, before I am aware, and they fasten themselves upon the hidden places of the mind, and feed there, and take root, and once they are securely lodged I cannot banish them. (“A Writer” 6)

- 40 Inspired by “insidious” and imaginary creatures that crouch in the dark recesses of her mind, du Maurier’s crime stories may well be “sick,” as Nancy Spain claimed, or simply cruel and macabre. They do not conclude on an enhanced post-disruption state that might satisfy her readers’ yearning for retribution, or completion, or moral gratification, for example at the sight of wrongs being made right again. Far from it, the disturbing human failings and base instincts that they centre-stage outlive her narratives. Nevertheless, their violence serves a purpose, revealing as it does the heartless psychological and sociological forces at work in any given group ruled by patriarchal normativity.
- 41 If we are to believe Ernst Kris, an Austrian friend and follower of Freud’s, this violence could serve yet another purpose. Indeed, in his *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952), Kris construes aesthetic creation as a form of problem-solving behaviour. Cynthia Griffin Wolff summarises his theory in the following fashion:
- whereas a woman might not be able to experience her deepest fears and desires within the context of her real life, these same potentially threatening feelings can be experienced “safely” when they are attached to some structured piece of original composition (like a story or a novel) because in that context, which is formally limited in its very definition, the feelings cannot get out of control. (qtd. in Petersen 51)
- 42 In that sense, repressed material could be consciously experienced and tapped by the writer, though “in a nonthreatening form” (qtd. in Petersen 51), thanks to the “safe” structure created around that material. Though du Maurier’s stories come across as exceedingly brutal or cruel to some of her readers or reviewers, they could in fact amount to a mechanism geared towards alleviating the pain caused, or relieving the pressure exerted, by unspoken fears and desires.

- 43 Maggie Humm argues that one of the characteristics of feminist detective fiction writers is that, like anthropologists, they try to see through and overcome the “boundaries” that all human groups set themselves. By boundary crossing, Humm contends, those writers shed light on “[the] agenda, either hidden or explicit, of what a society takes to be legality” (240). She adds that,
- To break out of the interpretative framework of Western culture is to identify with the Other. The Otherness of other cultures, like the Otherness of the criminal or the Otherness of women, is paradigmatic of cracks between the paving stones of capitalist ideology. (240)
- 44 By displaying the working of the minds of victims and criminals of both sexes and by placing egregious instances of extreme Otherness at the heart of her narratives, du Maurier allows her readers to see through the cracks of patriarchal ideology. One can therefore detect an intrinsically destabilising element in her crime fiction, one whose potency is much greater than the “gently subversive” quality (Petersen 70) with which du Maurier’s stories are usually credited.

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NOTES

1. "The Little Photographer" and "Kiss Me Again, Stranger" both come from *The Apple Tree: a Short Novel and Several Long Stories* (London: Gollancz, 1952). "No Motive" was published in the United States only at first, in *Kiss Me Again, Stranger: A Collection of Eight Stories Long and Short* (New York: Doubleday, 1953). "The Alibi" appeared in *The Breaking Point* (London: Gollancz, 1959), while "Don't Look Now" opened *Not After Midnight: Five Long Stories* (London: Gollancz, 1971).
2. As Margaret Forster explains, "The whole collection thrilled him [Gollancz], but he was firm in telling Daphne that he did not at all like two other stories she added—'No Motive' and 'Split Second.' She was, he told her, 'one of the few authors . . . with whom I can be frank.' 'No Motive' jarred on him and 'Split Second' was poor. Daphne, as ever, accepted his judgment and dropped these two stories" (du Maurier 259).
3. As Victor Gollancz died in February of 1967, he himself had no share in the choice of both those titles. Called *The Treasury of du Maurier's Short Stories* (1960), a previous anthology of du Maurier's short stories, merging *The Apple Tree* (1952) and *The Breaking Point* (1959) into one impressive volume, stressed their literary quality rather than the genre to which they were supposed to belong.
4. For instance, in a sort of La Rochefoucauldian maxim, she asserts, "The frailties of others are better dissected after one has analysed one's own" (Preface 11).

5. The two missing parts in Horner and Zlosnik's quotation go as follows: "she thought of herself as 'a half-breed,' attracted to both men and women, as she told Frank Price, bisexual himself" and "If two women were in a lesbian relationship there was always speculation from outsiders as to 'who plays the man'" (Forster, *du Maurier* 418).
 6. *Hysteria* originates from *hysteria*, the Greek word for "uterus," and medical science for centuries presupposed that responses to stress were sex-related, making women more susceptible to mental or behavioural conditions than men.
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ABSTRACTS

Far from the "romantic" label that her novels erroneously carry, Daphne du Maurier's short stories evince a macabre and cruel strain of which the writer was perfectly aware and occasionally wrote. Wishing to understand the prevalence of such a distinctive feature, this article starts by analysing the source and semantics of du Maurier's macabre. It then lays stress on the bitter facts and ironic twists of fate which punctuate the five crime stories studied here, namely "The Little Photographer," "Kiss Me Again, Stranger," "No Motive," "The Alibi" and "Don't Look Now." The complex rapport of both victims and villains with reality is then underlined, together with the problematic refuge they seek in make-believe. It is then suggested that du Maurier's cruel and macabre strain is a response to her own unease with the sexual taboos and gender bias dictated by a patriarchal society.

Loin de l'étiquette « romantique » que ses romans portent à tort, les nouvelles de Daphne du Maurier sont empreintes d'une cruauté macabre dont l'écrivaine était parfaitement consciente et qu'elle a parfois décrite. Dans le but de comprendre la prévalence d'un tel trait distinctif, cet article commence par analyser la source et la sémantique du macabre chez du Maurier. Il met ensuite l'accent sur les désagréments et les ironies du sort qui ponctuent les cinq nouvelles à teneur policière étudiées ici, à savoir "The Little Photographer", "Kiss Me Again, Stranger", "No Motive", "The Alibi" et "Don't Look Now". Le rapport complexe des victimes aussi bien que des malfaiteurs à la réalité est ensuite souligné, ainsi que le refuge problématique qu'ils cherchent dans un monde illusoire. Il est enfin suggéré que la cruauté macabre de du Maurier est une réponse à son propre malaise face aux tabous sexuels et aux préjugés sexistes dictés par une société patriarcale.

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