

# MANDERLEY IN REBECCA BY DAPHNE DU MAURIER: A HAUNTED HOUSE

## ABSTRACT

Manderley, la dimora immaginaria sulla costa della Cornovaglia che assomiglia a Menabilly, dove Daphne du Maurier visse e scrisse, costituisce il centro di *Rebecca*, un romanzo pubblicato nel 1938 che riscosse un enorme successo e divenne un film di Hitchcock nel 1940. La narratrice senza nome comincia il suo racconto informando il lettore che «Manderley was ours no longer. Manderley was no more». Ma è grazie alla sua straordinaria immaginazione che la residenza si staglia davanti ai nostri occhi con il suo viale sinuoso, invaso da mostruosi rododendri color rosso sangue. Modellato su *Jane Eyre* di Charlotte Brontë, *Rebecca* è un racconto cupo e romantico, comprendente una seconda moglie, un marito facoltoso, una proprietà inglese misteriosa che nasconde segreti oscuri. Ma mentre Bertha, la moglie di Rochester, è viva, la prima moglie di Maxim de Winter domina Manderley dal regno dei morti. In questo articolo mi concentro su *Rebecca* come romanzo che comprende la dimensione sentimentale, gotica e poliziesca, e include anche elementi della fiaba e del dramma psicologico: Daphne du Maurier utilizza questi generi e li mescola, contribuendo ad arricchire il tropo della casa infestata, una efficace costruzione immaginativa attraverso cui la scrittrice presenta livelli molteplici di consapevolezza ed esplora i motivi della sessualità e della sessualizzazione femminile. Si tratta di un *Bildungsroman* assai peculiare, in cui la narratrice si fonda su un'esperienza di vita che non è mai stata nel racconto che intreccia e che si svolge in un mondo che si staglia tra il naturale e il sovrannaturale. L'immagine di Manderley può essere definita anche un romanzo di fantasmi. L'immagine di Manderley di Daphne du Maurier, che esplora la psiche e la sessualità, si fonda su un'esperienza di vita che non è mai stata nel racconto che intreccia e che si svolge in un mondo che si staglia tra il naturale e il sovrannaturale. L'immagine di Manderley può essere definita anche un romanzo di fantasmi. L'immagine di Manderley di Daphne du Maurier, che esplora la psiche e la sessualità, si fonda su un'esperienza di vita che non è mai stata nel racconto che intreccia e che si svolge in un mondo che si staglia tra il naturale e il sovrannaturale.

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Manderley, the fictional estate on the Cornish coast resembling Menabilly, where Daphne du Maurier lived and wrote, is at the heart of *Rebecca*, an enormously successful novel published in 1938 and subsequently adapted by Hitchcock into a 1940 movie. The unnamed female narrator begins by telling us that «Manderley was ours no longer. Manderley was no more». But it is by the power of her vivid imagination that the house rises up before us with its serpentine drive, invaded by monstrous blood-red rhododendrons. Like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca* is a dark and romantic tale of second wives, upper-class husbands, and mysterious British estates concealing secrets. But while Bertha, Rochester's wife, is still alive, Maxim de Winter's first wife Rebecca rules Manderley from the kingdom of the dead. In this article I focus on *Rebecca* as a novel including sentimental, Gothic and crime narratives as well as cross references to the fairy tale and the psychological thriller: all these genres are exploited by Daphne du Maurier, and they contribute to enrich the trope of the haunted house, a powerful and imaginative construction through which du Maurier pres-

ents multiple layers of dissonant consciousness and explores the motifs of sexuality and female transgression. She also offers a very peculiar kind of *Bildungsroman*, in which the shy, self-effacing narrator is willing to find love and happiness. However, in this murder mystery, much is left uncovered, while the natural and the supernatural interact: for this reason, *Rebecca* can rightly be defined a ghost story. Daphne du Maurier's imagination, which explores the psyche of each character, represents shocks and traumas, and the readers are invited to look deeper and deeper into the dramatic story until the dénouement, which moves the plot back to the beginning of the novel.

People and things pass away, not places.  
Daphne du Maurier, *The Rebecca Notebook and other Memories* (1980)

## DREAMING

*Rebecca*, published by the British writer Daphne du Maurier in 1938, was an immediate success and it still sells around 4,000 copies a month.<sup>1</sup> This overwhelming popularity, however, has not been matched by critical acclaim since *Rebecca* has long been underestimated and labelled just as “women’s romantic fiction”. In 1962 an article in «The Times Literary Supplement» suggested that *Rebecca* would remain a classic.<sup>2</sup> Since 2000 Helen Taylor has undertaken two major critical initiatives, *The Daphne du Maurier Companion* (2007) and the du Maurier issue of *Women: A Cultural Review* (2009). Academic criticism has underlined, in a somewhat contradictory manner, a feminine Gothic, the treatment of race and class, feminism, a lesbian subtext, and the political problem of a bourgeois woman suddenly central to du Maurier’s novel.

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In her published works, which span from 1931 to 1989, du Maurier experimented with several genres: the romance, the Gothic novel, and the short story.<sup>3</sup> Alison Light describes du Maurier as «a displaced aristocrat»,<sup>4</sup> and charges the writer with «a romantic Toryism». <sup>5</sup> Daphne du Maurier seemed, superficially at least, to follow the pattern expected of upper-class women; in 1932, at the age of twenty-five, she married Major «Boy» Browning and during his active service in the Second World War, she took their three children to live in a cottage in Cornwall, moving in 1943 to Menabilly, which became the family home. There she found the peaceful atmosphere she needed to write during her marriage. However, her life was characterized by the rejection of conventional sexuality.

<sup>1</sup> LAING 2018.

<sup>2</sup> LASKI 1962, p. 808.

<sup>3</sup> See HORNER - ZŁOSNIK 1998. This is an attempt to relate du Maurier’s work to traditions and conventions (in particular, those of Gothic fiction), cultural context and the author’s writing of her own identity.

<sup>4</sup> LIGHT 1984, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> LIGHT 1991, p. 156.

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Du Maurier's sense of identification with Cornwall developed in such a way that this spatial and emotional experience allowed her to give creative shape to transgressive desires.<sup>6</sup> As Cornwall afforded «approved sites for romantic sublimity», du Maurier was able to make a connection between her admiration for the writing of the Brontës (and of the Yorkshire scenery) and her love of the Cornish landscape.<sup>7</sup> The intertextual relationship between *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre* is clear. Set in the early nineteenth century, *Jamaica Inn* (1936) also has many connections with the Brontë novels, and particularly with *Wuthering Heights*. The choice of the Brontës as literary forebears may be seen as part of du Maurier's search for a female writing identity.

*Rebecca*, widely acknowledged as a Gothic novel, works partly through the manipulation of its readers' awareness of the conventions of other genres. It is not difficult to note the textual reverberation of Bluebeard and Cinderella. While Carolina Nabuco's 1934 novel, *A Sucessora*, may be considered a model, none of these echoes proved as problematic for du Maurier as the direct charge of plagiarism brought against her in 1947 by the executors of American author Edwina L. MacDonald.<sup>8</sup> What du Maurier especially transferred from *Jane Eyre*, and adapted to her own vision, is the Gothic atmosphere of the Thornfield setting, with the analogies it establishes between the house and its «secret». In both cases, readers feel that they are in the presence of a patriarchal house full of mysteries, but, at the same time, the role of the haunted mansion is questioned: it is the house itself which is a device, and its very existence feeds on the irrational. Therefore, this intertextual connection begins with the geographical setting itself which, in both cases, remains vague. Though in *Rebecca* we suppose it to be Cornwall, no well-defined location is ever given and the world surrounding the house is undetermined. Moreover, as in *Jane Eyre*, the main concern, is the initial approach to the house and the revelation of the hidden world where the description of the landscape and the house itself are intertwined. The all-pervading vegetation is evocative of fairy tale.

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The title of the novel is *Rebecca*, but she is already dead when the novel starts, as her life is reconstructed by the narrator, a woman who never met her. The narrator is the main character, yet she remains unnamed throughout the novel. Or, perhaps, the real protagonist is Maxim de Winter, the husband of both women, and the owner of the estate and house of Manderley. The novel focuses on a triangular relationship: the representative masculinity of Maxim de Winter comes under scrutiny from two female points of view. In *Rebecca* the site of masculinity is located in a scion of the landed gentry, in a man of property who not only inhabits the landscape but whose male ancestors have owned it for centuries. In the description of Manderley, du Maurier provides us with a vision of a masculine

<sup>6</sup> In *Enchanted Cornwall*, she writes «Cornwall became my text». See DU MAURIER 1989, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. WESTLAND 2017, pp. 114-121. In her later years, du Maurier also wrote *Vanishing Cornwall* (1967), which includes a chapter entitled «The Brontë Heritage».

<sup>8</sup> WRIGHT 2013, p. 289. MacDonald alleged that du Maurier had copied her novel *Blind Windows*.

<sup>9</sup> BERTRANDIAS 2006, p. 25.

world that stretches from the past and still haunts the present. It is a man's world, as the name Manderley suggests.

Du Maurier's residence at Menabilly was a dream fulfilled, which afforded continued inspiration to the writer: Menabilly occupied a central place in her creative imagination. Her fictional exploration of the house is one of the ways in which she established her own sense of identification and empathy with it. The writer's home in Cornwall for 26 years was never owned by du Maurier's family. In 1943, when she signed a twenty-year lease for the house, it belonged to the Rashleighs. Her leasing of Menabilly thus commenced five years after the publication of *Rebecca* and was presumably funded, at least to some extent, by money she had earned from her writing career. At that time, the house was empty, had no electricity, water or heating and she spent many years and thousands of pounds restoring it. Its fairy tale quality, which clearly captured du Maurier's fantasy, is recalled in *Myself When Young* (1977). Her experiences were also based upon a rather rootless life by travelling near her husband's postings. There are several topographical parallels between du Maurier's majestic settings, and the extraordinary 1930s Gothic architecture of the hotel where she began to write *Rebecca* with its sweeping drive, dining room and terraces, located in the little town of Platres, growing out of the pine-clad hillside in Cyprus.<sup>10</sup>

Du Maurier's fifth work, which was not written in Cornwall, where it is set, and not even in England, but mostly in Alexandria, became her most famous. The fact that du Maurier wrote *Rebecca* in Egypt, during a period of temporary exile, may well have intensified the sense of longing for a lost place that the novel conveys so clearly in its opening pages.

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novels have given rise, as *Rebecca*, to so many radio, television and film adaptations, sequels and sequels.<sup>12</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, directing his very successful film adaptation in 1940, greatly contributed to the success of the novel. The film was a «cult novel» and then into a classic.<sup>13</sup> This peculiar trajectory is due to its intriguing story of love and murder, which has been adapted into a film, *Jane Eyre* is rewritten in the natural landscape of Cornwall, near the sea. Described by the author herself as «a sinister tale about a woman who marries a widower... psychological and rather macabre»,<sup>14</sup> the main plot in *Rebecca* deals with a young woman who falls in love with an older man hiding a secret about his first wife. As Alfred Hitchcock acutely observed, «*Rebecca* is the story of two women, a man, and a house. Of the four... the house, Manderley, is the dominant presence».<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> WISKER 2003, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> DE ROSNAY 2017. Parts 3, 4 and 5 of this biography are dedicated to Cornwall and focus on the fact that du Maurier attaches so much importance to places and houses.

<sup>12</sup> TAYLOR 2017a, pp. 75-91.

<sup>13</sup> On the textual relationships between du Maurier and Hitchcock, see ALLEN 2004, pp. 298-325.

<sup>14</sup> FORSTER 2007, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in BEAUMAN 2003, p. vii.

The haunted manor or ghostly mansion is undoubtedly an essential part of the fictional Gothic world,<sup>16</sup> but it is especially connected with the female Gothic experience. As with the Gothic landscape, the Gothic mansion is also often home to the female «abject».<sup>17</sup> Like the scenery, the house embodies the uncanny, turning the domestic sphere into an unfamiliar and threatening place. This theory works on a psychological level, including the idea that the house itself is often depicted as a physically female space; specifically, the house is a maternal space reflected in the use of secret chambers, mysterious labyrinths, and locked doors to forbidden places. Therefore, it becomes both habitation and prison and is simultaneously associated with defence, penetration, and entrapment. In *Rebecca*, the approach to the house is linked with the entrance into a dark world so that Manderley itself comes to be associated with magic and remoteness. Manderley is the family seat of the de Winters, yet it is Rebecca who really possesses it. The Gothic mansion is a symbol of female oppression rather than a place of protection, with the fictional mansion of the Gothic as a metaphor for women's lives and their frustrations. The abject house proves to be unescapable: even when it is burned to the ground, social duties and strictures remain. Manderley is a dreamscape in which the traditional (English, masculine) authority is juxtaposed to the pleasure of performance and theatrical excess. From the outset, it is represented as an (en)closed space: «I could not enter, because the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and a chain upon the gate».<sup>18</sup> At the end of the novel the narrator exists only in transient spaces. She seems compelled to narrate her existence through her dreams.

Du Maurier explains how she decided to set the novel «in the present day, say the midtwenties».<sup>19</sup> There is no explicit reference in the novel to the later events of the outside world during that time, but the sense of where exactly Manderley is located is responsible for «feminising» the country house tradition of English literature; for «feminising» the country house tradition of English literature, she employs some of the tropes associated with the female Gothic. Although the disciplining of the land itself – most notably, in the representation of Rebecca through the rhododendrons that threaten to overwhelm the drive and which the narrator perceives as «slaughterous red, luscious and fantastic» and as «monsters, rearing to the sky».<sup>21</sup> In *Rebecca* the colour red connotes both sexual and physical violence: the night sky above Manderley is «crimson, like a splash of blood»;<sup>22</sup> the drive leading to Manderley is bordered by rhododendrons that have «crimson faces». Although the

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<sup>16</sup> BAILEY 1999, pp. 3-4. The tale of the haunted house, while rooted in the European Gothic tradition, has developed a distinctly American resonance.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the paradigm of abjection created by KRISTEVA 1980.

<sup>18</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> HORNER - ZŁOSNIK 1998, pp. 99-127.

<sup>20</sup> DODD 1998, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 428.

novel does not make it clear who set fire to Manderley, Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, is suggested to be guilty, and the final destruction signifies the end of Maxim's rule.<sup>23</sup>

*Rebecca* should be read either as a «failed romance» or not as a romance at all, because it «signally fails to deliver happy heterosexual romance with its conventional promise of domesticity and procreation».<sup>24</sup> The novel destabilises romantic fiction foundations, disturbs the trajectory of conventional narratives, and deconstructs the myths of romantic fiction. The ways in which du Maurier makes use of traditional genres shows her to be historically and politically engaged. She is radical in her questioning of the kinds of certainties these genres underwrite. Additionally, in intervening on the conventions and undermining patriarchal values, her fiction is essentially troubling, critical, and transgressive.<sup>25</sup>

Du Maurier's novel begins exactly where other romantic fictions end, namely with a marriage. For this reason, it cannot be considered a romantic tale. Rather than any specific character, the role of the villain in *Rebecca* is played by the haunting presence of an old-fashioned, strict patriarchal system, represented by Maxim's mansion and accepted as a hierarchical system. However, the novel portrays the characters' inability to fulfil the gender roles imposed by this system, which leads them towards hypocrisy, hysteria, and crime.<sup>26</sup>

The key to the ultimate source of fear and anxiety in du Maurier's novel lies in Maxim's statement: «I accepted everything – because of Manderley».<sup>27</sup> Reading Maxim de Winter as a representation of the early-twentieth-century crisis of masculine identity implies that «Maxim de Winter might be... masking his true personality with his “doubtful, genteel landowner».<sup>28</sup> What turns Mrs de Winter into “someone” is the fact that she is not just a “doubtful, genteel landowner” on Light: «It is not just that place that is the key to her identity, but that it is a place that is the repository of the past, where we have lived, and where we are still living, and where we are still to live, but that they house “us”: who we are, and who we are not, and who we are not to be... “We” are best discovered on this sense of identity, a private, individual place, somewhere deep inside, which is then the true subject of history».<sup>29</sup>

And, as Light adds, this idea «can be a source of consolation or of terror, for if identity is attached to places and places are vulnerable locations in time, identity itself is potentially unstable, always in danger of being uprooted and of needing to be re-housed».<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, when Manderley is burnt down at the end of the novel

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<sup>23</sup> PETERSEN 2009, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> WATSON 2005, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> WISKER 2003, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> PONS 2013, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 308.

<sup>28</sup> BUTTERLY NIGRO 2000, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup> LIGHT 1991, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

and Mr and Mrs de Winter are forced to go into exile, they become ghostly figures; when Maxim loses his patriarchal estate, he becomes the “nobody” that he really is.

As a Gothic novel of the twentieth century, *Rebecca* introduces a new setting, the mysterious and haunted mansion, instead of the Medieval castle; this variation allows the genre to overlap with or merge into domestic and psychological realism. Du Maurier’s biography deeply affected her professional career and many of her characters and settings can be traced back to her own life or to some aspects of her personality. This is also true of *Rebecca*, where details which reflect the author’s experience can be detected.

Du Maurier started planning *Rebecca* at a very difficult point of her life: her beloved father, Gerald, had died just a few years before and she was pregnant with her second child. In addition, she was accompanying her husband on a military mission in Egypt, a place she loathed. Writing and publishing *Rebecca* covered the years 1936-38, during which time, Italy invaded Abyssinia, civil war broke out in Spain and Hitler sent the German army to reoccupy Rhineland. Europe was threatened by Fascism and a neutral and detached attitude was impossible. In *Rebecca* the plot is set in the contemporary world and the troubles of the historical moment are embodied in the anxieties of the romantic fictional genre. The peculiar tones of horror and crime undermine the romantic foundations of the narrative and destroy traditional beliefs upholding eternal bonds, true love, family values, and social hierarchies.

*Rebecca* is a Gothic heroine and her husband, Maxim, a Bluebeard figure who not only murdered his first wife, but also oppresses and alienates the second Mrs de Winter. Du Maurier’s novel starts with the marriage of a rich aristocrat to a naïve, inexperienced young woman. The marriage is characterized by the coldness, and the condescension of the husband, and the question of whether it is a marriage of love or a convenient arrangement for a widower who needs a new wife in his house. As a consequence of her husband’s death, Mrs de Winter is isolated, not only from the upper-class world that Manderley represents, but also from the world of adult femininity, of which this version of Alice in Wonderland remains ignorant. It is this sense of discomfort, together with her frustrated attempts to fit in, that makes her both hate and identify with Maxim’s dead wife, Rebecca, whose ghostly presence embodies the beauty, the cleverness, and the knowledge that Mrs de Winter is longing to possess. This suffocating pressure is increased by Mrs Danvers, who tortures Mrs de Winter by keeping the memory of Rebecca alive. Mrs Danvers serves the dead rather than the new Mrs de Winter, whose story is based on her struggles to compete with Rebecca as mistress of the house and as object of Mrs. Danvers’s affection.<sup>31</sup>

The narrator finds that she is to inhabit the East Wing, far from the sound of the sea, while the West Wing was the domain of the previous wife, who becomes the heroine’s obsession as much as she is the housekeeper’s obsession. Mrs. Danvers thus doubles the heroine’s own obsessions by fetishizing Rebecca’s clothes, her handwriting, her

<sup>31</sup> BLACKFORD 2005, p. 242.

pen, her books, her telephone. The final revelation in the plot concerns Rebecca's secret, not even known by Mrs Danvers, her cancer. It is this discovery that makes Rebecca's suicide a believable resolution, although, in the meantime, the second wife has understood that Rebecca was killed by her husband.<sup>32</sup>

Like other monsters of literary fiction, Rebecca is the monstrous double of the narrator. Mrs Danvers asserts that Rebecca is the real Mrs de Winter whereas the narrator is the "shadow" and the "ghost", thus invoking the uncanny by bringing Rebecca back to life and dismissing the narrator into the realm of the dead. Her character is always associated with the colour red, her very emblematic flowers being rhododendrons, «great bushes of them, massed beneath the open window, encroaching onto the sweep of the drive itself».<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the sea becomes a symbol of her independent and strong character: from her bedroom in the West Wing of Manderley she would listen to the wild sound of the waves crashing against the rocks. And it is near the sea that Rebecca has her erotic affairs in the beach cottage, where we learn that she was murdered by de Winter; her body taken into the bay and her boat drowned to make her death look like a drowning. Ironically, in *Rebecca*, the only residual representative of the brave Cornish sailor is an idiot, a simpleton, Ben, who spends his life on the beach.

The reading of Maxim as a Bluebeard figure is confirmed when Mrs de Winter discovers that her husband hides a dark secret: contrary to everyone's belief that Maxim adored Rebecca, it turns out that he actually hated and murdered her. It is after this crucial revelation that the story moves away from its fairy tale pattern: Mrs de Winter is not going to be rescued from her murderous husband by another man, but will voluntarily become his ally, helping him hide his secret and escape the law.

Maxim identifies himself with the legendary Bluebeard in the English. Only a very uneasy, disbelieving, and hardly inspired by the novel's plot, before the flashback, and the second wife haunted with horrific dreams of the first wife, the second wife entirely taken back by monstrous plants, its very rampant among its rooms. The banned and the hidden, the cracks and the fissures open up and grotesque, wild growth overtakes. Wedded bliss and wealthy lifestyles are both deceiving.<sup>34</sup>

The narrative unfolds entirely through the memories, dreams and fantasies of the unnamed narrator. The moment of her transition from outsider to confident wife is marked by her first sexual intimacy with her husband, which occurs immediately after his confession of Rebecca's murder. The fulfilment of sexual desire confers her a maturity that finds its public display in the ability to manage the domestic organisation of Manderley.<sup>35</sup> Even though Mrs de Winter knows what her husband has done, she does not take Rebecca's killing as a warning. Instead, she feels relieved and affirms that «none of the things that he had told me mattered to me at all. I clung to one thing

<sup>32</sup> HALLETT 2003, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> WISKER 2003, p. 89.

<sup>35</sup> GILES 2003, p. 39.

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pouring of a troubled mind tormented by nightmares and unpleasant memories. The narrating voice points to her self-conscious, evasive mode of underreporting by explicitly stating what she will permit herself to remember and share. Once at Manderley, moving uncertainly in Rebecca's footsteps, the narrator seeks to flesh out that shadowy form. Becoming a sort of detective, she seeks clues that will materialize Rebecca's beauty. She remarks: «I would glean little snatches of information to add to my secret store».<sup>44</sup> Manderley too has become the expression of the absence and, at the same time, of the presence of Rebecca, bearing in its rooms and gardens the footprints of its first mistress: «It's not only this room», Mrs Danvers says. «It's in many rooms in the house. In the morning room, in the hall, even in the little flower room. I feel her everywhere».<sup>45</sup> Rebecca is also associated with the white azaleas of the Happy Valley (the ironic name given to one part of the estate) and especially to their scent: «There were no dark trees here, no tangled undergrowth, but on either side of the narrow path stood azaleas and rhododendrons, not blood-coloured like the giants in the drive, but salmon, white and gold, things of beauty and of grace, drooping their lovely, delicate heads in the soft summer rain».<sup>46</sup>

The iconic significance of rhododendrons and roses in the novel is juxtaposed to that of «the tiny statue of the naked faun, his pipes to his lips' standing in a clearing made in the rhododendrons which mass against the morning-room window».<sup>47</sup> The narrator perceives this clearing as «a little stage, where he would dance and play his part».<sup>48</sup> This diminutive figure is emblematic of masculinity and, through the words «stage» and «part», is also associated with artifice and masquerade. Certainly, the Manderley Ball episode foregrounds the concern with masquerade, which permeates the novel. In attempting to bury the past, the narrator, like the second wife, the narrator finds herself in a position of masquerade, which she compares to Bluebeard-like anger in Maxim de Winter's eyes. She remarks: «The second wife would appear as Alice in Wonderland, Lady Crowe as the Dresden shepherdess»<sup>49</sup> and Frank

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Crawley as child-like, pastorally pure and full of virginal integrity; they also pinpoint an idealized femininity through which she is encouraged to structure her adult female sexuality. The Manderley Ball provides only one of several key moments in the text when we see a merging of Rebecca and the narrator. As in many Gothic novels which feature a double, the plot, while being superficially resolved with the death of the second self, very often presents the narrator as haunted by the «doppelgänger» figure.

A dreamlike noble mansion, Manderley is nevertheless rather austere, its rooms being tableaux of artificial lives, empty of meaning and activity. On arrival at her new home the second wife is expected to act up to the occasion, to be wearing something

<sup>44</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 137.

<sup>45</sup> Ivi, p. 194.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 216.

rather more suitable than her current clothes. Her domestic functions are entirely taken up by Mrs Danvers and it is Mrs Danvers who suggests that the domestic functions are still, and much more appropriately a prerogative of the dead first wife. Through the memory of the shadowy second wife, Du Maurier conjures for us a fantasy image of Manderley, the inheritor of the grand English country house setting. Maxim, like his dwelling, is a dangerously deceptive representative of a comfortable past age.

In its mapping of the conventional fictional settings (mansion, bedroom, dining room, garden, seascape), which embody and contain the heroine's ambitions, *Rebecca* redefines the cultural values and meanings of the spaces outside the traditional romantic narrative. The unnamed narrator is obsessed with an initial: the consonant R. This R stands for the first letter of the name of the protagonist's first wife. Emblazoned on stationery and embroidered on linens, this R forms the signature of the infamous Rebecca. At one point, the narrator's sense of identity becomes so tenuous that she does not even recognise herself;<sup>50</sup> on answering the phone, she does not remember that she is Mrs de Winter, telling her caller: «I'm afraid you have made a mistake, [...] Mrs de Winter has been dead for over a year».<sup>51</sup> The clues in the text are insufficient to make readers discover her «unusual» name. Once married, Maxim calls his young bride possessively either «my wife» or «my dear». Other characters address her more formally as «Mrs de Winter», a title so unfamiliar to the narrator.

Her concealed name is also reminiscent of a trope common to fairy tales, in which the young protagonist finds protection from an evil spirit through safeguarding her name. Likewise, as in a confessional tale, the narrator keeps her name unsullied from the scandal she hears: Rebecca's sexual depravity and Maxim's role in Rebecca's death. In *Rebecca*, the evil spirit is the past, which haunts the narrator and eliminates the remaining letters. The narrator's name is a puzzle, a mystery, a challenge for the narrator. Rebecca's picture is a symbol of her death, a symbol of her nemesis. The flames make «the slanted [...] possible to distinguish» with one exception: «Contributo ritirato per non-compliance con il codice etico della rivista».<sup>52</sup> The flames make «the slanted [...] possible to distinguish» with one exception: «Contributo ritirato per non-compliance con il codice etico della rivista».<sup>53</sup>

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## BURNING

In the concluding episode of the novel, as Manderley, the place of patriarchal power and erotic transgression, burns, the narrator has a dream. Several Gothic motifs emerge. Her identity visually overlaps with that of Rebecca, whom she sees as a mirror image. At the same time, the mutual destructiveness of the relationship between Rebecca and Maxim is featured in the Medusa locks which wind around the second wife and which are turned into a kind of noose by Maxim, figuring his collusion in Rebecca's death, and the oppression, for Maxim, of her constant memory. Manderley

<sup>50</sup> DODGE ROBBINS 2016, p. 70.

<sup>51</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 64.

is destroyed by a fire, which cannot cleanse the guilt. The transgressive Rebecca remains fascinating beyond the confines of the narrative. For Maxim, Rebecca has all the qualities of the “other”: she was promiscuous, rebellious, adulterous, and possibly lesbian or bisexual. Her body returns in the text as signature (the imposing letter R) and fine clothing and then as corpse in a sunken boat.

A horrific and grotesque atmosphere is evoked throughout the novel. Manderley itself is defined «a sepulchre» and «a desolate shell».<sup>54</sup> The mansion symbolizes the physical body of Rebecca and her coming back from the world of the dead. This supernatural invasion is enhanced by the discourse of hunting through plants. Those toxic rhododendrons around the house were loved by Rebecca and refer to her lascivious desires. At Manderley the dead and the living coexist. Rebecca’s influence has not declined since her death. Her lingering presence is everywhere, both inside and outside the house, in the West Wing in particular. Maxim does not offer Rebecca’s room to his second wife; instead, he cuts her off from the dangerous appeal of the view and the sounds of the sea. On entering Rebecca’s Wing the second wife starts to trespass on her predecessor’s glamorous life. She is out of place in the writing room, where first she breaks a small object, a Cupid, and covers up the fragments. She is shown a wardrobe of clothes, which do not fit her. The places Rebecca filled cannot be inhabited by the new wife but their seeming mystery and magic are a deception. Rebecca’s actual abode was the rather dirty beach house where she met her lovers. The grand parties, balls and meetings, calling cards and whirl of social life are terrifying to the new wife, and seem meaningless (as they were, perhaps, to Rebecca).

The narrator is plain and socially awkward, with «lank hair»<sup>55</sup> and sloping shoulders; Rebecca, «seems, was a confident, sophisticated and very beautiful». Whereas the narrator is shy and timid, Rebecca was a confident and very beautiful. The differences between the two women are highlighted by the narrator, which, as in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, functions as a witness. The narrator, finding a book of poetry in the glove compartment of Maxim’s car, takes it back to the hotel to read. Picking it up later, she notices the dedication. Rebecca surfaces most clearly through her handwriting, which uncannily inscribes her body’s presence despite its absence.

Rebecca is associated throughout the novel with several features that traditionally mark the vampire: facial pallor, plentiful hair and voracious sexual appetite. And like the vampire she has to be killed more than once.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, in the plot’s triple killing of Rebecca’s body (she was shot; she had cancer; she drowned) and the final encryption of her corpse, the novel offers both a conservative confirmation of gender values and a quasi-parodic version of patriarchal denial of the transgressive woman.

Du Maurier locates the perception, interpretation and response to female beauty at the heart of her morally ambiguous novel. Beauty exists neither as a force nor as a

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> HORNER - ZŁOSNIK 1998, p. 111.

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passive attribute, but rather in the tense relation between Rebecca and her unnamed successor. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik classify Rebecca not only as a «femme fatale» whose «rather morbid sexuality connects her beauty with barrenness, lack of production, and death», but as a «vamp», a figure distinguishable from the femme fatale, they argue, by her «conscious desire to destroy».<sup>57</sup> Reading Rebecca's beauty as a monstrous or destructive creature ultimately permits the narrator (and potentially, by extension, the reader) to establish an equation between female beauty and vice, an equation that provides the basis for justifying Maxim's murder, as well as the second Mrs de Winter's eager complicity in that crime. Such an equation rests on the assumption that the narrator is not beautiful, a belief she both promotes and subtly undermines and is therefore morally as well as aesthetically distinct from her predecessor.<sup>58</sup>

Rebecca's presence definitively haunts Manderley: «Her footsteps sounded in the corridors, her scent lingered on the stairs. . . . Rebecca was still mistress of Manderley. Rebecca was still Mrs de Winter».<sup>59</sup> She is strong and vibrant; the epitome of the erotic woman, like female characters in Gothic romance who are damned; either killed by their male partners or imprisoned because they are deemed mad. The device of the haunted house and its gendered and ideological construction as woman's place is used by du Maurier to signify the containment of women within traditional power structures, whereas the standard motifs of violence and eroticism in the novel combine to create the uncanny that typifies the genre.

The country estate is at the core of the narrative. *Rebecca's* Manderley may be a symbol of a magnificent England, the Eden from which the new Mrs de Winter and her husband are expelled. At the beginning of the novel, nostalgia for the past is the root of all evil. . . . For the narrator, the past is the train of memories. The imagination produces a world of knowledge shared by the heroine with the dead. . . . In the dream sequence, the past is not and never could be somewhere else. . . . The emotional incipit of the novel depicts a path that has been abandoned. . . . The drive was a ribbon now, a thread of its former self, with gravel surface gone, and choked with grass and moss. The trees had thrown out low branches, making an impediment to progress; the gnarled roots looked like skeleton claws. [ . . . ] Ivy held prior place in this lost garden, the long strands crept across the lawns, and soon would encroach upon the house itself».<sup>60</sup>

In this dream sequence, the narrator is possessed with supernatural powers and passes «like a spirit through the barrier». The landscape surrounding the house is dominated by nature and depicted as a witch who «in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers». The woods are «crowded, dark and uncontrolled», and the hydrangeas are of «monster height» and «black and ugly».

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<sup>57</sup> HORNER - ZLOSNIK 2000, p. 210.

<sup>58</sup> MITCHELL 2009, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 261.

<sup>60</sup> Ivi, pp. 1-3.

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as the nameless parasites that grew beside them».<sup>61</sup> Violence and eroticism combine with the natural world described as deviant and “unnatural”.

After the dream sequence, the narrative moves on to the narrator and her husband Maxim who are living in exile in Europe. Part of du Maurier’s narrative strategy is to create mystery by withholding information. It is not made clear at this point of the narrative why they are living in exile. What is clear is they lead boring empty lives. The narrator’s only escape from the social necessity of marriage and the domestic horror of confinement is through her imagination, where she returns to Manderley in order to live her real life, which is to join Rebecca whenever she likes: «for if I wish I can give rein to my imagination, and pick foxgloves and pale champions from a wet, streaking hedge».<sup>62</sup> There is of course a sexual resonance to that natural imagery. The retrospective narrative moves to the present and concludes with the image of Manderley on fire: «The road to Manderley lay ahead. There was no moon. The sky above our hands was inky black. But the sky on the horizon was not dark at all. It was shot with crimson, like a splash of blood. And the ashes blew towards us with the salt wind from the sea».<sup>63</sup>

The destruction of the manor coincides with the end of Maxim’s rule. On the other hand, female supremacy is confirmed by Mrs Danvers’s uncanny role in the novel – she is the one who blurs the boundaries between life and death, a ghostly shadowy figure who also validates the lesbian subtext, especially in the erotic scene in Rebecca’s bedroom. Introduced as a highly efficient housekeeper within the realist mode and as a Gothic Life-in-Death figure (much reference is made to her skeletal appearance and to the fact that she is always dressed in black), she appears as a quasi-parodic version of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*. Mrs Danvers is a sinister character suggestive of liminality, transgression, and the blurring of boundaries. The housekeeper is a key figure in the world of the novel, the one who keeps the boundaries between the spheres of upstairs and downstairs, between the worlds of the living and the dead, between the worlds of transgression and conformity, life and death, masculine and feminine.

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Though the housekeeper’s role is central to the novel, *Rebecca* subverts the role of the English country house as romantic setting and locus for all the English values of propriety, honesty, inherited wealth, and paternalism. This feminist and political reading deliberately undermines the romantic fiction and equates decayed place with decayed values. Since childlessness characterises both the union between Maxim and Rebecca and that between the landlord and the second Mrs de Winter, there will be no inheritance of wealth and the conservation of family strengths and traditions. From a literary point of view, the foundations of English stability and the nostalgic, comfortable conservatism of romantic fiction are entirely destroyed. In *Rebecca*, du Maurier questions the conservative traditions, which she seems to be upholding in terms of upper middle-class rites as embodied in the house.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> *Ivi*, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Ivi*, p. 428.

When Manderley is burnt down and Mr and Mrs de Winter are forced to go into exile, they become ghostly figures. The preservation of Manderley and what it represents with regard to class and patriarchal power is, therefore, a persistent obsession in du Maurier's novel and, as such, it is also the most prominent source of evil and suffering. In *Rebecca*, the mainspring of the plot is the desire to go back, to live earlier times again through the imagination. This nostalgia and the constant need to return to what is familiar and reassuring show how the characters can never actually break away from the world that Manderley stands for. This is the reason why, when Manderley vanishes, Mr and Mrs de Winter do not feel liberated, but displaced; they cannot find a satisfying alternative once the house is burnt down. At one point in the novel, it is mentioned that «all these big estates will be chopped up in time and bungalows built»,<sup>64</sup> a remark which, being uttered by an anonymous character, seems trivial and may pass unnoticed, but which gives instead an important piece of information by signalling that the story is set at a time when deep social changes are taking place. And change inevitably brings about anxiety about the future: «For Manderley was ours no longer. Manderley was no more».<sup>65</sup> Isolated and labyrinthine, Manderley is the last statement of a forlorn aristocratic past made of servants and formal dinners, which modernity threatens to cancel. The past uncannily returns upon the present through the ghost of the first Mrs de Winter, a true “revenant”.

In Maxim de Winter, the author has created a modern villain – the nobleman with a terrible secret. His surname reveals his coldness, while Maxim is also the trademark of a gun: «His face was arresting, sensitive, medieval in some strange inexplicable way... Could one stab him of his English tweeds, and put him in a sack, with lace at his throat and wigs on his head, and send him to a long distant past – a past which he had never known, and which he had never seen in the dark, of shimmering rapier blades, of silent, courteous».<sup>66</sup>

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The dark, brooding villain, the nobleman with a terrible secret, and whose family cross the dominant history of Cornwall is a recognisable type in romance fiction – whether we think of Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, or Carne of Maythorpe in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*, published just before *Rebecca*. Like Maxim de Winter, the villains are tied to the past, to a place or region, with an identification which is reasserted by the apparent certainties of patriarchal power when threatened or thwarted by uncontrolled, passionate female figures. In this sense, the romance provides du Maurier with a set of conventions through which to question both gender and place.

In du Maurier's novel, some intersections are drawn among Monte Carlo, London, and Cornwall. Monte Carlo implies modernity, and de Winter's class, wealth, sports car, and his ability to fascinate women, at first suggest Monte Carlo as his natural

<sup>64</sup> Ivi, p. 287.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ivi, p. 15.

home. The south of France and, later, London are seen as arenas for a loose-living, detached masculinity, epitomised most particularly by Rebecca's lover, Jack Favell.

Monte Carlo and the Mediterranean signal not only a certain kind of masculinity but also, as Alison Light suggests, a flight from femininity. The construction of English life between the wars as feminine and domesticated was partly the result of the many male writers who chose to travel and live abroad rather than suffer the humiliations of what they saw as middle-class English domesticity. The post-First World War retreat of masculinity, the sense of exhaustion, the feeling that the peacetimes were effeminate, and the alarm about changing relationships between the sexes, all led to the exploration of other places, as more hospitable to manliness or to the search for new powerful male models such as those hailed by Fascism.<sup>67</sup>

De Winter's love of his Cornish property is his only sense of stability and certainty, and it is equally his undoing. He talks of the land as the greatest love a man can have. But the male values are called into doubt at Manderley. The feminising, modernising process had been set in train some time in the eighteenth century: «It [Manderley] would still be gay, but with a certain grace and dignity, and Caroline de Winter... would walk down the wide stone stairs in her white dress to dance the minuet».<sup>68</sup> Rebecca identifies with this feminine power and chooses Caroline's dress from a portrait in the house as her fancy dress costume for the annual ball at Manderley.

The only place completely untouched by this modernising femininity is the library, a traditionally masculine place, which has the deathly atmosphere of a sepulchre. If Rebecca continues the modernising cultural work of Caroline de Winter, the second wife longs for a contemporary inflection by making the library the incarnation of old Cornwall, the mother of three sons and a daughter. The house has been destroyed by the modernising process of the middle-class gentility. Yet, the masculine of Manderley cannot accommodate the modernising femininity of Rebecca or by the domestic femininity of the narrator.

When the script of *Rebecca* was submitted to the American Production Code Administration, they insisted on the impossibility of showing on screen a murderer getting away with his crime and, therefore, Rebecca's death in Hitchcock's adaptation became accidental: the producer David Selznick's wish for a hundred percent faithful adaptation of du Maurier's text had to be revised. Nonetheless, the film diverges from the novel's narrative not only in portraying an innocent Mr de Winter, but also because other scenes were annexed to the original plot, which are, indeed, as effective as Maxim's exoneration from his crime. The novel's and film's ending, with Manderley burning, crucially establish the full circle of the story, adding to Gothic adventure psychological and supernatural intrigue. The concluding revelation that Rebecca was sterile and terminally ill resonates symbolically. It implies that no good can come out

<sup>67</sup> See the introduction in LIGHT 1991.

<sup>68</sup> DU MAURIER 2011, p. 236.

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of evil, even though this final destruction of the house does not restore peace, because Rebecca's devilish spirit and insidious power will never vanish.

As the fairy tale on which du Maurier's novel is based, *Rebecca* is filled with allusions to thresholds, doors, locks, and keys. The dark secrets of Maxim de Winter are bound to certain places: the cottage by the sea and the West Wing of Manderley hide «guilty knowledge»<sup>69</sup> which the narrator collects like an obsessed detective for her secret store. Mrs de Winters transgresses borders during Maxim's stay in London by visiting the cottage where Rebecca spent the nights with her lovers and the West Wing, which still looks as if Rebecca herself would come back into the room.

The transgression of borders, which implies a desire of knowledge and offers a chance for further development, is one of the central elements of fairy stories and in particular of the Bluebeard tale.<sup>70</sup> In the haunted house, du Maurier deposited emotions, memories, and fantasies. She built emotional landscapes in which imagination and desires found their proper place. In her worlds, people and houses are mysterious and mutable; in haunted rooms, disembodied spirits dance in total liberty.

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<sup>69</sup> Ivi, p. 137.

<sup>70</sup> NUNGESSER 2007, p. 221.

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