

### **Origin and Ownership: Stage, Film and Television Adaptations of Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca**

Daphne du Maurier wrote Rebecca as a novel between 1937 and 1938, whilst living in Egypt with her husband, Major Frederick 'Boy' Browning, who was stationed there. It was her seventh book, her most popular bestseller, and has been 'seen as the template for the modern gothic romance which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s' (Tuttle, 1997: 196). It was itself inspired by Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847), an important point, for here we can see the way in which one text generates another, without the need for complete fidelity. Indeed, the term 'adaptation' 'implies that there is more than one text and more than one author' (Whelehan, 1999: 27). Rebecca has proved particularly malleable in this respect, having a long afterlife that stretches to the present day. Its publication first occurred in serial form in British and American newspapers, then as a book, before being turned into a radio play by Orson Welles's Mercury Theatre. Du Maurier herself adapted the novel for the stage in 1940, the same year that Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated film appeared. Thus, the stage and film versions were circulating at the same time in the public domain, with the novel still in the first flush of its success. There were two notable productions for television; one for the BBC in 1979, and another for ITV in 1997, and a stage adaptation by the Irish playwright, Frank McGuinness, in 2005. In the tradition of Jean Rhys's addition to Brontë's book, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), female novelists have been fascinated with Rebecca, writing sequels (Susan Hill's Mrs. De Winter, 1993; Sally Beauman's Rebecca's Tale, 2001), literary allusion (Maureen Freely's The Other Rebecca, 1996) and 'faction' (Justine Picardie's Daphne, 2008). By focusing here on the stage, film and television adaptations of Rebecca we can consider the ways in which notions of origin and authorial ownership can be problematized, as a means of exploring the effect of context and form upon subjectivity and meaning.

#### Staging Englishness during the Second World War

Daphne du Maurier was easily persuaded to adapt Rebecca for the stage by John Gielgud, who was originally to take the role of Maximilian de Winter. As her biographer tells us, she had no ideas for a new book, and needed distraction from the political turmoil (Forster, 1993). Immediately, she realized the difficulties of changing one form for another, especially as there was little scope on stage for the narrator's

interior monologues or detailed descriptions of her surroundings. As it happened, the outbreak of the war allowed her, the director, George Devine, and set designer Roger Furse, to concentrate on another aspect of the novel, its encapsulation of Englishness. Just before the play opened in the West End, Norway and Denmark were invaded and there were fears that this would have a detrimental effect on the theatre. Instead, what happened was that audiences were ripe for images of England's heritage, here represented by Manderley and the noble De Winter family. This meant that the play was an immediate and resounding success during much of the 1940s, with 380 performances in the West End of London, as well as touring productions around the country.

Significantly, Daphne du Maurier's stage adaptation can be seen as 'unfaithful' to her own novel. Whilst the original story was a way of representing difficult subjects such as fractured identity, dangerous sexuality, and the decline of the aristocratic house, the focus here is on its opposite: the importance of unity, stability and defeat of threatening forces. The ambitious set design included a winding staircase at the side of the stage decorated with family portraits as reminders of the house's ancestral past (*The Bystander*, 1940: 172-73). This imaginative construction of the aristocratic house, with its suggestions of tradition and history, followed on from contemporary propaganda in stressing the importance of English culture. Philip Page's review captured public opinion: 'to see on the stage in these days a stately home of England which is neither a war hospital nor a hive of evacuated children is something of a relief' (Page, 1940: n.p.).

The script itself is efficient, but not startlingly original. It could be argued that this was because du Maurier's dramatic abilities were limited, even if they had been honed by the time of her next play, *The Years Between* (1945). Equally, though, this quality of theatrical conventionality can be seen as its strength. Several reviewers saw it as a melodrama, with exaggerated plotting and heightened emotions. This was a genre equally popular on stage or film during the Second World War, providing a release from everyday suspense and tension. Beyond this, the casting can be seen to place the melodrama within safe boundaries, helpful for a wartime audience. Owen Nares, a seasoned film and stage actor, and matinee idol of the 1920s, before Ivor Novello came on the scene, eventually played Max. He usually took roles that suggested a romantic solidity. Celia Johnson's ordinariness suited the role of the second Mrs. De Winter, an attribute she exploited in future films like *In Which We*

Serve (1942), This Happy Breed (1944) and Brief Encounter (1945). Actors known for their reliable competence also took lesser parts, and while Margaret Rutherford frightened audiences as Mrs. Danvers, she was mainly identified with comic roles, and therefore her danger was destabilized.

Du Maurier's refashioning of her book can be seen most obviously in the eradication of the narrator, and consequent dispersal of the viewpoint amongst several characters. One paper saw it as a 'psychological study of a nerve-wracked man' (London News, 1940: n.p), and another described 'Miss Johnson's part [as] negative, the authoress having omitted to give the second Mrs de Winter any quality but that of being prettily terrified' (Observer, 1940: n.p.). Her earlier role as companion to Mrs. Van Hopper is excised, and the play starts from the perspective of Max's sister and brother-in-law as they wait for the arrival of the new bride. Any focus on the second wife that this would suggest is dissipated almost as soon as she appears, and the audience has its attention scattered between the heroine 'very plainly dressed in grey' (du Maurier, 1940: 14), Maxim and Frank Crawley, discussing the estate, and the stage business of Beatrice and Giles. The concentration on the external rather than the internal nature of the drama means that audience identification is not so readily available, and this is aided by the quick pace of the play. Whereas the novel unfolded slowly, with each mention of Rebecca divulged, and dwelt upon, here the fateful costume ball is brought up in the first scene, and Jack Favell makes his appearance at the beginning of the next. The interiority of the young woman is replaced by dialogue between all the characters, and of necessity the play deals with the narrative, rather than the subtleties of underlying emotions. Whereas practically every chapter in the book ended on a new revelation, or the introspective comments by the narrator, who pulls the reader into her world of paranoia and delusion, the stage curtain pulls the audience away from their suspension of disbelief, and into an awareness of the theatrical world as a constructed one. Because the set is confined to the drawing room, in keeping with a number of other plays at the time, several crucial scenes are left out or altered, sometimes drastically: there is no confrontation between the heroine and Mrs. Danvers in Rebecca's bedroom, the attempted suicide scene takes place at the top of the stairs, not at a window, and the inquest is reported, not created onstage. The ending itself is entirely different, so that a phone call is made to Rebecca's doctor to establish the motivation for her suspected suicide, rather than a last minute dash up to London to receive the news about her cancer. Radically, there is also no dramatic fire,

which destroys Manderley. Instead, Mrs. Danvers attempts to threaten the de Winters, but her power has been dispelled, and as she is the one to be banished, husband and wife reunite in the family home where they will remain to weather the gossips, rather than going abroad. Here the evil is ousted from the stately home, which in this instance can stand in for Britain and its hoped-for victory over Germany. As the novel's framework of the exiled couple has been cut for dramatic simplicity, the bringing together of the couple at the finale follows through those conventions of romance that du Maurier was at pains to eschew in the novel. The critics of the time were certainly reassured by du Maurier's new ending, which they felt was in tune with the turbulent times, so as husband and wife stand together in perfect accord, the aristocratic Manderley unravaged, the audience are faced with a potent symbol of Englishness at a time of renewed energy in nationalistic pride.

#### Filming the Feminine in the 1940s

Whilst the stage adaptation has been generally overlooked, Alfred Hitchcock's film has attracted a vast array of critical commentary. At the time, it was lauded with praise, gaining eleven Academy Award nominations, and winning two: one was for Cinematography, and the other Hitchcock's only Oscar for Best Picture, although he lost out on an award for his direction to John Ford's Grapes of Wrath. Hitchcock's dismay over being given Rebecca as his first Hollywood film has been well documented. He thought it was nothing more than a melodramatic novelette, and did his best to add his own trademarks to it. That is, he wished to 're-author' it in his own fashion. Sometimes these efforts were stymied before they got off the drawing board. The producer, David O. Selznick, rejected Hitchcock's attempts to add humour to the story, and demonstrated a considerable understanding of du Maurier's intent, and of the relationship between female readers and the central narrator, even if this was reductive: '“little feminine things” like “nervousness,” “self-consciousness,” “gaucherie,” and “embarrassment” that he believed made the novel's heroine so attractive to female readers' (Hollinger, 1993: 18). His memo to Hitchcock tetchily states, '[Your changes in the script] have removed all the subtleties and substituted big broad strokes which in outline form betray just how ordinary the plot is and just how bad a picture it would make without the little feminine things which are so recognizable and which make every woman say, “I know just how she feels...I know

just what she's going through" ' (Modleski, 1988: 43). Yet, if Hitchcock did try to distance himself from what he saw as the 'feminine' qualities of the book, it is therefore ironic that in filming Rebecca he was inspired 'to enrich' his later films 'with the psychological ingredients...initially discovered in the Daphne du Maurier novel' (Truffaut, 1983: 129). This is done most succinctly in Hitchcock's film in the marrying of du Maurier's Gothic elements (which in turn, of course, had been taken from Charlotte Bronte), with the 1940s woman's picture.

Here we can see the influence of the second 'author' of the film adaptation. Helen Hanson has described how Selznick 'can be seen as a key figure in initiating the transfer of the literary female gothic to the screen in the 1940s', influenced by a belief in the growth of female audiences (Hanson, 2007: 44-45). This was a popular cinematic genre for just a decade or so, starting with Rebecca, and continuing with others such as Suspicion (1941), Jane Eyre, and Gaslight (both 1944), three of which had Joan Fontaine as their unassuming heroine. Much has been made of the female Gothic in cinema. Mary Ann Doane has referred to it as the paranoid women's film (Doane, 1987), and Thomas Elsaesser the Freudian feminist melodrama (Elsaesser, 1987). Misha Kavka suggests that this form brings together 'the tropes of the nineteenth-century haunted house story with the style and themes of the 1940s/50s film noir' (Kavka, 2002: 219). The woman is uncertain as to whether her husband is a threat to her or not, as in films like Rebecca, Suspicion, Dragonwyck (1946), and Secret Beyond the Door (1948), and the romance plot turns into the nightmarish Bluebeard. The focus is on the way in which a woman is menaced in her house. This is emphasized in Rebecca through the way in which Hitchcock dwelt on the brooding Manderley, rather than the surrounding Cornish landscape. This was partly caused by the fact it was filmed in Hollywood, using miniatures of the house, but also because the lack of realism was used to heighten the setting's fairytale quality, often filmed shrouded in mist with a specific score to underpin the 'haunting impression' (Truffaut, 1983: 131).

It is obvious that Selznick had an affinity with adaptations of popular classics befitting female audiences, as with Anna Karenina (1935) and Gone With the Wind (1939). In line with this, he allowed Rebecca to take its part in 'the gradual development of a "meta-text" ', as Sarah Cardwell puts it, which 'recognises that a later adaptation may draw upon any earlier adaptations, as well as upon the primary source text' (Cardwell, 2002: 25). So, just prior to Joan Fontaine's role in Rebecca,

her sister, Olivia de Havilland had taken a similar role as the shy and long suffering Melanie, in Selznick's epic production of Gone with the Wind, a point that was made in several of the reviews. Indeed, the film was advertised as Selznick's Rebecca rather than du Maurier's, or even Hitchcock's, and specific reference was made to its place 'as a successor to Gone with the Wind' (Light, 1996: 29). Four years after appearing as the second Mrs. de Winter, Joan Fontaine also appeared in Jane Eyre, one of the influences on du Maurier's book, where her acting and appearance was deliberately exploited to make similarities between the two literary heroines.

Yet though Selznick had a profound influence upon the making of Rebecca, history has rightly labelled it Hitchcock's film. He imbued it with his own directorial identity, thus bearing out his early declaration before the film went into production, that it would 'reflect no personality other than his own' (Kapsis, 1992: 24). It is certainly true to say that the film took up a number of Hitchcock's key motifs, particularly anxiety about female sexuality, often expressed through the figure of the woman under threat. With this, we can identify a difference of subconscious intent between du Maurier and Hitchcock. The novel shows the heroine becoming obsessed with Rebecca, not just as a rival for the affections of her husband, but as someone who suggests a different, more transgressive, way of living. In part, this may have been to do with du Maurier's own same sex desires, and her attraction to a number of strong and independent women (Forster, 1993). The film gives a different view, best expressed in the erotically charged scene in Rebecca's bedroom. Here, as Alison Light has indicated, there is no encompassment of the female Gothic's subliminal concern with female desire and empowerment. Rather, it 'shows Joan Fontaine's humiliation, disgust and nausea at being situated as voyeur. It conveys little of the voyeur's satisfaction' (Light, 1996: 30).

In relation to this, we can observe the way that Hitchcock shifts the novel's viewpoint away from female subjectivity towards the male gaze. The film starts by imitating the narrator-guide; using Joan Fontaine's voice-over, the camera moves up the driveway as if we are seeing through her eyes. Other tracking shots continue this perspective, especially along the dark corridors of Manderley, emphasizing the role of woman as victim. This is also seen in the way that Fontaine's character 'is continually dwarfed by the huge halls in which she wanders, and even the doorknobs are placed at shoulder-level so that the viewer receives a subliminal impression of her as a child peeking in on or intruding into an adult world that provokes both curiosity and dread'

(Modleski, 1988: 47). By the end of the film, though, the perspective of the narrator-guide is lost. The heroine is left behind at Manderley while it is up to the 'homosocial grouping' of five men – Maxim, Frank Crawley, Colonel Julyan, Jack Favell, and Dr. Baker - to be privy to the final unravelling of the mystery (Wheatley, 2002: 140). Maxim and Frank return to the burning house, whereupon the heroine is saved by her husband. By the last part of du Maurier's novel (which actually appears at the beginning in the 'framework' story of their life in exile), the heroine has grown in stature: she is an equal of her husband, even his saviour through the care with which she looks after him; this further references Bronte's heroine, where Jane leads the literally and figuratively blinded Rochester towards Christian redemption. In the film of Rebecca, however, Fontaine's character is diminished through her assumption of a deeply traditional female role. There were a number of influences at work here. Firstly, because it was released after war had already broken out, a depressing ending was not considered suitable. Again, the Hollywood Production Code meant Maxim could not murder his wife and get away with it, as he does in the book. Moreover, even whilst the Gothic opens up issues of so-called 'perverse sexuality', censorship required the 'conventional reaffirmation of heterosexual marriage' (Hollinger, 1993: 19) at the end. Mary Ann Doane concludes that 'the ideological upheaval signalled by a redefinition of sexual roles and the reorganization of the family during the war years' (Doane, 1987: 4) caused this peculiar situation, where films were made for a female audience, yet presented women as vulnerable or dangerous. So, it is not surprising that Hitchcock opted to stress the Gothic's paranoia about women, perhaps, rather than female empowerment.

### Sexuality, Consumerism, and Heritage Television

The television costume drama, including adaptations of 'classic' novels, has gone in and out of fashion over the last forty years or so. Latterly there has been a seismic change in the way in which these novels have been approached, particularly in terms of the notion of 'fidelity' to the text. So, classic dramas before the 1990s were more 'dialogue-based', whereas later ones become more 'televisual...and...less afraid to tamper with its source in order to create gripping television' (Giddings and Selby, 2001: 82). This can be seen this with the two TV productions of Rebecca in 1979 and 1997. The later version deliberately alludes to the earlier one through the casting of

Joanna David's daughter, Emilia Fox, who takes the role of the second wife previously played by David nearly 20 years earlier. As with the Rebecca novels of Maureen Freely and Justine Picardie mentioned earlier, and Selznick's clever use of casting during the 1940s, the 'intertextual referentiality' of the classic drama exploits 'the viewers' capacity and willingness (their desire, even), to engage with the text as active readers' (Cardwell, 2002: 93).

Fox's casting also shows a generational shift in television audiences. The earlier series draws on du Maurier's novel, in the way that it concentrates on the gaucheness of the heroine, and her role as class outsider, shown in her inability to act as hostess of the rather flatly replicated Manderley or as wife of the cold and forbidding Maxim. In the later version, however, with a society shaped by feminism, consumerism, and changing notions of nation, the emphasis is on equality between the sexes, and high production values, which make much of cars, costumes and settings. The opening tracking shot is of the heroine, sketching a beautifully sunny coastline in Monte Carlo. The gentle music shows us that this will be a romantic drama. Indeed, the narrative focuses almost solely on the way on the love between the central couple, with Maxim declaring his feelings early on, and the heroine reciprocating in kind. Several scenes show them in bed, making clear that theirs is a marriage based on mutual attraction. The heroine is much stronger than is usually depicted, meeting people's gaze with little evidence of shyness, appearing confused and upset by Maxim's outbursts, rather than fearful. Charles Dance works with his image of a sophisticated gentleman, as did Owen Nares, but imbues the role with more wit, becoming less mysterious and more available in the process.

Apart from the importance placed on the mutual love between the two main characters, and the confidence they gain from this, a major change is that for the first time Rebecca is literally shown. Rather than being represented fetishistically, through a painting, her clothes, or the haunted presence which exists at Manderley, here she is seen in long shot, from the back, or in parts. Kim Wheatley notes that she is shown 'only in fragments – lips in one shot, eyes in another – as if to stress her power and attractiveness: she has to be fragmented in order to be held at bay' (Wheatley, 2002: 135). It can be argued, though, that this literal embodiment saps her of potency; in du Maurier's novel and in Hitchcock's film, it is the heroine's imaginative construction of her that is more dangerous than her reality. So, the director's introduction of an



actress to play Rebecca runs counter to du Maurier's original intent: the more 'real' a person Rebecca becomes, the less a hold she has on the narrator.

Interestingly, the period has been moved back into the glamorous and decadent 1920s, an era redolent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'bright young things'. The reference point of war differs from that in the stage production, though. During the 1940s, the audience was able to make an explicit connection between the need to protect and preserve England's ancestral past and the war raging literally outside the London theatre; at one point, even, the production had to be moved elsewhere after a bombing raid. In the 1990s television production, memory of the First World War and its aftermath seems to mirror contemporary interest with 'heritage' Britain, where the country has been 'packaged' for consumption by tourists: we see this in the selling abroad of British costume dramas like Brideshead Revisited or Miss Marple, or the way that the stately homes of England have been 'themed' in order to survive financially. Equally, though, there is an opportunity to see Rebecca's sexual and social transgressions as less to do with her as an individual, and more to do with the general sense of a generation attempting to free themselves from the memory of the First World War: this rereading may also remind us of early feminist critiques of Jane Eyre, which posit the idea that the madwoman in the attic is a riposte to Victorian curtailment of female sexuality (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979).

Like Hitchcock's film, the viewpoint is mainly that of the young woman, but once the location moves to Manderley, there are several camera shots that are not from her perspective, particularly those that involve Mrs. Danvers, played by Diana Rigg. Here Manderley looks like a National Trust property, not a foreboding, gloomy mansion, which dwarfs the central character. The only part of the house that is not presented as light and comfortable is the West Wing, where Rebecca's bedroom is situated. Jim O'Brien, the director, indicates this as a source of trouble, by copying Hitchcock's technique of looking down the dark corridors, as if from the viewpoint of the second Mrs. De Winter. In the open sexual climate of the 1990s, the lesbian relationship between Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers can be made more explicit. Diana Rigg longingly holds the dead woman's clothes against her body, and after setting fire to the building, lies down on the bed next to Rebecca's spread out nightdress. The ending provides yet another variation. Maxim enters the burning Manderley to try and save Mrs. Danvers, in a literary and cinematic echo of Rochester trying to save Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre. The last scene is of Maxim with a walking stick somewhere

abroad, being aided by his wife, the implication being that Maxim's 'resulting injuries accounted for the De Winter's childlessness' (Wheatley, 2002: 141). Yet this ending is far more optimistic than any version that had gone before, and it is significant that the couple's after life abroad is dramatized at the end of the series rather than at the beginning. Emilia Fox's voiceover makes clear that the memory of Manderley will sweeten their time away, rather than poison it, with the suggestion that this is not a permanent exile in a foreign country, but rather a temporary place of rest.

Interestingly, the scriptwriter Arthur Hopcraft seems to be following Daphne du Maurier's initial idea for an ending. Originally leaning heavily on Brontë's novel and conventions of Victorian fiction, du Maurier has her male character physically disabled in a car accident, and an Epilogue reveals how his second wife looks after him (du Maurier, 1981). The published account, of course, has far less focus on heroism and more on the stultifying existence that the two have to endure.

Critics have asserted that 'Historically, the novel succeeded the drama, but absorbed some of its qualities (character, dialogue) while adding possibilities of its own (interior monologue, point of view, reflection, comment, irony). Similarly, film initially followed the basic principles of narrative prose and copied stage drama' (Giddings, Selby, Wensley, 1990: ix). What we can see with Rebecca is 'a continuity between source text and resulting text' (Cardwell, 2002: 20), where alterations have been made due to change of medium, but also adapted it to 'fit the cultural moment' (Brosh, 2008: 4), as Liora Brosh has it. So, during the war years, the play focused on the notion of controlled threat. Manderley embodies the play's meaning at a time when there was a concern with Englishness, and where the country house represented, as Malcolm Kelsall says, 'a visible sign of "the ancient social order"' (Kelsall, 1993: 303). Alison Light has also described this as a period expressing 'nostalgia for the waning of the British Empire and the decline of its aristocracy' (Light, 1984: 7). The film, appearing at the same time as the stage version, and shortly after publication of the novel, shows a tension between Selznick's and Hitchcock's interest in the female: the former with what he saw as feminine traits, the latter with anxiety around the female figure, as filtered through the Gothic genre. The 1990s television series is also influenced by society's more tolerant approach to sexuality, with Maxim and his wife able to forge a union based on equality and desire. There is also here what Robert Giddings and Keith Selby label the 'Pride and Prejudice effect', where the links

between romance, consumerism and nation are tied into current socio-political concerns, and the British concern with repackaging their past is due to 'insecurity about the present [and] the undermining of national identity' (Gidding and Selby, 2001: 124) in the 1990s. Daphne du Maurier's 'reauthorship' of Jane Eyre, then, foreshadows every other adaptation of Rebecca, where questions of fidelity, origin and authorial ownership are imaginatively interwoven in a way that sheds light on the original, as well as providing fruitful connections between written word and visual image, and between text and context.

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