

Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*

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Criticism of Daphne du Maurier's popular classic *Rebecca* (1938) can be divided into two mainstream interpretations. On the one hand, it was traditionally marketed as a gothic romance where the hero and the heroine conquered the evil women that separated them. On the other, certain feminist critics have recently provided a very different view of the story, aligning it with gothic narratives that deal with the dangers women suffer under the patriarchal control of their husbands. This would imply that du Maurier's novel should not be read as a traditional romance that promotes patriarchy, as the former interpretation suggested. In this article, I propose, through a Gothic Studies and a Gender Studies reading, that villainy in this novel is not exclusively linked to gender and, therefore, the victim and abuser statuses cannot be equated to femininity and masculinity, respectively. Instead, I argue that villainy in the novel is inextricably connected to being in a powerful position within patriarchy, and that it is the desire to maintain this position and perpetuate the patriarchal system that leads the main characters (men and women) to commit acts of villainy.

Keywords: Daphne du Maurier; gender; gothic; masculinity; patriarchy; *Rebecca*

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Fantasma del patriarcado: una relectura de la villanía y el género en *Rebecca*, de Daphne du Maurier

La crítica sobre el clásico popular *Rebecca* (1938), de Daphne du Maurier, puede dividirse en dos interpretaciones principales. Tradicionalmente, la novela se vendió como un romance gótico en el que el héroe y la heroína vencían a las mujeres malvadas que los separaban. En cambio, recientemente, algunas críticas feministas han dado una visión muy diferente de la historia, que ha pasado a verse como una novela gótica que relata los peligros que las mujeres sufren bajo el control patriarcal de sus maridos. Esto implicaría que la novela de du Maurier no podría leerse como un romance tradicional que fomenta el patriarcado, como sugería la anterior interpretación. En este artículo, propongo, a través de una lectura desde los estudios góticos y los estudios de género, que la villanía en esta novela no tiene que ver exclusivamente con el género de los personajes y, por lo tanto, los roles de víctima y villano no pueden equipararse a la feminidad y la masculinidad, respectivamente. En cambio, sugiero que la villanía en *Rebecca* está directamente ligada al hecho de estar en una posición de poder dentro del patriarcado, y que lo que lleva a los personajes (hombres y mujeres) a cometer actos de villanía es el deseo de perpetuar el sistema patriarcal y mantener su posición de poder.

Palabras clave: Daphne du Maurier; género; gótico; masculinidad; patriarcado; *Rebecca*

1. INTRODUCTION

English writer Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* —first published in 1938 and adapted many times for the theatre, the cinema and the television— is still today a classic of popular fiction. Described by the author herself as “a sinister tale about a woman who marries a widower . . . psychological and rather macabre” (Beauman 2003: vi), the main plot in *Rebecca* concerns a young woman (Mrs de Winter) who falls in love with an older man (Maxim de Winter) that is hiding a secret about his first wife (Rebecca). Criticism of *Rebecca* is divided into those who read it as a gothic love story, in which a virtuous woman triumphs over an evil one by winning the love of a gentleman, and those who identify the novel as a reworking of the Bluebeard tale, in which the gentleman actually turns out to be a villain who unjustifiably murdered his first wife. The novel was originally advertised and sold emphasizing the former interpretation. As Beauman puts it, “*Rebecca* was touted to booksellers as an ‘exquisite love story’ with a ‘brilliantly created atmosphere and suspense’. It was promoted and sold, in short, as a gothic romance” (2003: vii). This traditional reading of du Maurier's novel as a romance became even more popular thanks to Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 adaptation.¹ As Watson states, “Hitchcock . . . makes the novel more unambiguously romantic” (2005: 43). To achieve this effect, Hitchcock “ma[de] Maxim more important and more sympathetic” by “rewriting . . . Maxim's murder of Rebecca as an unfortunate and practically self-inflicted accident for which he feels irrationally guilty” (Watson 2005: 43). These changes in the film are significant insofar as they have influenced readers' and critics' reading of the story. Even recently, some critics, such as Yanal (2000), still project the film's more romantic vision on du Maurier's text, claiming that Mrs de Winter's decision to become Maxim's faithful wife improves her situation in the end, overlooking the fact that this means being married to a murderer.

This reading of *Rebecca* as a romance has been revised and rejected by certain feminist critics, who point out that du Maurier is using the unreliable narrator technique; therefore, “*Rebecca* is only ‘romance’ if the reader confines him —or herself— to the narrator's viewpoint” (Watson 2005: 39), the narrator being the second Mrs de Winter herself. Yet, if the reader questions the unreliable judgements of the narrator, the novel seems to be telling a very different story about the ill-treatment that women suffer at the hands of men. However, this standard feminist interpretation of du Maurier's text has consisted mainly of inverting the main characters' roles. If the traditional reading sustained that the dead wife —Rebecca— was the villainess that interfered with the harmony of the heterosexual couple, Watson claims the opposite: Rebecca is a gothic heroine and the husband, Maxim, a Bluebeard figure who not only murdered his first wife, but also oppresses and alienates the second Mrs de Winter. Similarly, Nigro proposes the following reading:

¹ Here, ‘romance’ is understood as “the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman” (Cawelti 1976: 41) which “seduce[s] [its] female readers into ‘good feelings’ about the dominion of men and the primacy of marriage” (Auerbach 2002: 102).

The common assumption about Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* figures the first Mrs. de Winter as a secretly conniving manipulator who had convinced the world that she was as morally flawless as she was beautiful. According to the second Mrs. de Winter, the narrator of the novel, Maxim murdered Rebecca justifiably: only he knew the true, corrupt Rebecca. What if, however, Maxim is the one who is lying, and Rebecca was as good as reputation held her, if his jealousy was the true motive for her murder? (2000: 1)

Thus, reading Maxim as a gothic villain seems to automatically imply that Rebecca is a feminist heroine, "a woman whose worst crime . . . was 'simply that she resisted male definition, asserting her right to define herself and her sexual desires'" (Wood in Nigro 2000: 1).²

I agree with the idea that *Rebecca* should be read either as a "failed romance" (Radway 1987: 157) or not as a romance at all,³ because "[it] signally fails to deliver happy heterosexual romance with its conventional promise of domesticity and procreation" (Watson 2005: 44). Nevertheless, when it comes to analysing villainy in the novel, the reversal of gender roles proposed by the feminist critics above is, from my point of view, as essentialist as the traditional reading: it does not break with the assumption that villainy stems from one sex to the detriment of the other. Furthermore, re-reading *Rebecca* as a heroine who dares to defy her husband is rather simplistic if we consider that Daphne du Maurier's presentation of this character is highly ambiguous. As I believe that du Maurier's text resists both the traditional and the standard feminist interpretations, my main question here is why criticism of this novel has not paid attention to the fact that *all* the main characters in the novel display signs of vice and dishonesty, regardless of their gender. I would argue that rather than any specific character, the ultimate gothic villain in Daphne du Maurier's novel is the haunting presence of an old-fashioned, strict patriarchal system, represented by Maxim's mansion, Manderley, and understood as a hierarchical system. The novel portrays the characters' inability to fulfil the highly demanding gender roles imposed by this system, which leads them towards hypocrisy, hysteria and crime.

I want to undertake this revision of the feminist reading of *Rebecca* for two main reasons, which are in fact interrelated. First, at a textual level, I believe previous readings provide a rather reductive view of gender roles and villainy, overlooking the ambiguous nature of Daphne du Maurier's novel. And second, at an extra-textual level, these readings do not challenge the assumption that abuses of power are gender-based, which encourages the female perception of man as the 'other' and the enemy, a posture which perpetuates inequality and naturalizes women as victims. According to Meyers: "by naturalizing heterosexuality as a Gothic gender system . . . [the] cultural feminist discourse potentially

² The original quotation can be found in: Robin Wood. *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.

³ Radway distinguishes between 'ideal romances', which end with a promise of patriarchy, and 'failed romances', which deal with the problems of patriarchy. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* could be said to belong to the latter.

leave[s] us suspended in a seemingly permanent state of victimization and paralyzing paranoia” (2001: 57).

The reasons why Rebecca cannot be considered the ultimate villainess of the novel have been pointed out by the critics already mentioned, who claim that she is actually a victim of her husband and that there is no possible justification for Maxim’s crime. As a consequence, my starting point here will be Maxim de Winter, the patriarch himself, the character that has emerged as the new villain in *Rebecca*, but has been very much left at the margins of criticism at the same time. To support my thesis, I intend to read the novel from a Gothic Studies perspective, focusing mainly on how villainy is articulated throughout relationships between the victimisers and the victimised, while taking into account a crucial question in the field of Gender Studies and, particularly, Masculinity Studies: the idea that being a man is not necessarily the same as being in a powerful position within patriarchy (Kimmel, Hearn and Connell 2004). With this, I intend to sustain the idea that du Maurier’s portrayal of villainy in *Rebecca* is not directly related to gender, but rather to the patriarchal abuses of power by those characters who find themselves in powerful positions, in terms not only of gender but also of class.

2. REVISITING BLUEBEARD’S CASTLE: DU MAURIER’S REWORKING OF THE FEMICIDAL VILLAIN

Rebecca, like ‘Bluebeard’, begins with the marriage of a rich aristocrat to a naive, inexperienced, young woman. From the very beginning, the hastiness, the coldness, and the condescension in the gentleman’s marriage proposal raise the question of whether it is a marriage for love —as the narrator would have us believe— or just a convenient arrangement for a widower who needs an ‘angel’ for his house. On the other hand, the fact that the narrator’s name is not revealed and that she is always referred to as ‘Mrs de Winter’ suggests that she is no one but Mr de Winter’s wife; a young woman who is “desperate for the validation provided by a man’s love —a woman seeking an authoritarian father surrogate”, a pursuit that “involves both self-effacement and abnegation” (Beauman 2003: xiii).

According to Tatar, “the Bluebeard thread in the fabric of Gothic narratives offers an exceptional opportunity for elaborating on the problematic issues arising as women leave childhood behind and move toward an alliance with adult males” (2004: 69). In *Rebecca*, one of the problematic issues that the narrator has to endure once married to Maxim is her own ambivalent attitude towards knowledge and maturity, for which she feels both attraction and disgust. On the one hand, the second Mrs de Winter feels that life in Manderley demands that she is mature and experienced enough to manage the big house. Yet, all her attempts to behave as a mature woman appear unnatural and are continuously frowned upon or mocked by her husband, who wants to keep her away from what he refers to as “not the right sort of knowledge” (du Maurier 2002: 226). Thus, the husband’s paternalistic attitude, treating her like a child and insisting that “it’s a pity you have to grow

up" (59), thwarts his young wife's passage from immaturity to maturity. As a consequence of her husband's authority, as well as her own inexperience and self-consciousness, Mrs de Winter is alienated, not only from the upper-class world that Manderley represents, but also from the world of adult femininity, of which she remains ignorant. It is this sense of alienation, together with her frustrated attempts to fit in, that make her both hate and identify with Maxim's dead wife, Rebecca, whose ghostly presence represents the beauty, the intelligence and the knowledge that Mrs de Winter would like to possess. And the more acute her obsession grows, the more invisible she becomes: "in that brief moment . . . I had so identified myself with Rebecca that my own dull self did not exist, had never come to Manderley. I had gone back in thought and in person to the days that were gone" (224-25). This pressure is increased by Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, who tortures Mrs de Winter by keeping the memory of Rebecca alive, telling Mrs de Winter that, unlike her, when Rebecca was a child she "had all the knowledge then of a grown person" (273). Mrs Danvers, as Lovell-Smith puts it, functions as the "older woman who plays the role of initiator offering the way to necessary knowledge" (2002: 203). This initiator, however, is presented as perverse by the narrator, who is both lured and disgusted by the knowledge offered by Mrs Danvers. This leads the second Mrs de Winter to become obsessed with the idea that she can never measure up to her predecessor, due to her own inexperience and her childish ways, and that she will never be good enough to live up to the highly demanding expectations of Manderley. This arouses her strong apprehension about her dead rival, while at the same time she cannot help admiring her and wanting to emulate her, seeking this "knowledge of a grown person" that Rebecca was said to possess.

The reading of Maxim as a Bluebeard figure is finally 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 murdered her. Interestingly, it is also at this point that the story moves away from its fairy tale precedent: Mrs de Winter is not going to be rescued from her murderous husband by another man, but, instead, will voluntarily, become Bluebeard's ally, helping him hide his secret and escape the law. Such a twist to the story already suggests that there is more to the novel's presentation of villainy than meets the eye. Whereas Maxim psychologically annihilates his second wife, with her own connivance, there is also his actual, physical murder of his first wife, which is what has induced some feminist critics to regard Maxim as an unquestionably villainous character. Choosing murder over divorce as a solution to his first wife's untameable nature, the patriarch attempts to maintain his reputation and ensure the continuity of his estate. When Rebecca's body is found in a boat, prophetically named *Je Reviens*, Maxim is aware that his secret will come out and confesses his crime to Mrs de Winter, telling her that "our marriage was a farce from the very first. [Rebecca] was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together" (304). For Maxim, Rebecca has all the qualities of 'the other': she was promiscuous, rebellious, adulterous, and possibly lesbian or bisexual (Berenstein 1995; Horner and Zlosnik 2000; Meyers 2001). She was—in Maxim's view—everything that is traditionally

undesirable in a wife, a threat against patriarchal rules. As he himself puts it, “she was not even normal” (du Maurier 2002: 304). At a symbolic level, Rebecca can be read as a supernatural force that threatens to feminize the estate and the patriarch, by challenging patriarchal order and heterosexuality.

As the feminist critics previously cited have noted, Maxim’s murder of Rebecca is predominantly motivated by Rebecca’s challenging of the patriarchal rules. What is more, as Maxim relates the facts to Mrs de Winter, he uses a manipulative discourse where he attempts to justify his crime under the pretext that, as Meyers (2001) puts it, women actually *create* their own gothic experiences: “It doesn’t make for sanity, does it, living with the devil”, he states (du Maurier 2002: 305). Thus, Maxim demonizes Rebecca and blames *her* for *his* crime. When he confesses what he did to Mrs de Winter, the confession acquires a melodramatic tone, as he starts positioning himself as the victim by stating that “Rebecca has won” (297). It is at this point that the tables turn. As Maxim becomes childish, Mrs de Winter becomes more like a mother figure — a protector— and the dependence that exists between them is reinforced. For the first time in the novel, it becomes apparent that these two characters need each other; it is not just the wife clinging to the husband. In this respect, du Maurier’s narrative differs significantly from its fairytale precedent, ‘Bluebeard’. As Russ explains, in gothic novels that follow the ‘Bluebeard’ narrative thread, “the Heroine . . . knows even more than the mere fact that danger exists; she knows that it *has all happened before*” (1995: 109). Even though Mrs de Winter knows what her husband has done, she does not take Rebecca’s murder 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 only, and repeated it to myself, over and over again. Maxim did not love Rebecca. He had never loved her, never, never” (du Maurier 2002: 306). As Meyers claims, “Maxim’s assertion that he hated and killed Rebecca makes him less of a villain and more of a hero in her eyes” (2001: 37). By contrast, from a feminist point of view, Maxim’s reputation as a gothic villain is finally confirmed, not only by his “overwhelming desire to control what [he] can and to destroy what [he] cannot” (Nigro 2000: 7), as well as by his revelation that “if I had to come all over again I should not do anything different. I’m glad I killed Rebecca. I shall never have any remorse for that, never, never” (du Maurier 2002: 336). And the reader is left wondering if he will, in fact, kill again in the future.

Last but not least, in his confession he also mentions that he would never go through a divorce, and preferred to murder Rebecca and lead a life of deceit instead. As Maxim explains:

[Rebecca] knew I would sacrifice pride, honour, personal feelings, every damned quality on earth, rather than stand before our little world after a week of marriage and have them know the things about her that she had told me. She knew I would never stand in a divorce court and give her away, have fingers pointing at us, mud flung at us in the newspapers, all the people who belong down here whispering when my name was mentioned. (306)

As this passage shows, Maxim's main preoccupation was to maintain his domestic sphere intact. Nigro, as well as other feminist critics, argues that Maxim's murder of Rebecca reveals "his anger toward Rebecca's demands to express her own sexuality" (2000: 5). While I agree that Maxim is repelled by Rebecca's sexuality, I believe that his main concern is not so much Rebecca's sexuality *per se*, but the effect that it might have on his estate and on his reputation. As he remarks, "what she did in London did not touch me —because it did not hurt Manderley" (du Maurier 2002: 308). This finally introduces a central issue: the fact that, unjustifiable as Maxim's act of villainy is, there is something else behind it, another source of villainy to which this patriarch is enslaved, just as the other characters are. And the key to this ultimate source of fear and anxiety in du Maurier's novel lies in Maxim's statement: "I accepted everything - *because of Manderley*" (308, emphasis added).

3. FROM BLUEBEARD TO GENTLEMAN UNKNOWN: THE MASCULINITY CRISIS OF DU MAURIER'S VILLAIN

The first time Mrs de Winter sees Maxim she tells the reader that he reminded her of a portrait she had seen of a certain "gentleman unknown", which is ironic considering that Maxim was presumably well-known for being the owner of Manderley. Thus, right from the very beginning, there is a sense that the glamour of Maxim's character is constantly downplayed and mocked by the author. Although I agree with the reading of Maxim's character as a villain, there are some implications of this reading I would like to question. First, he is not a traditional gothic villain whose passion makes him both fearsome and attractive at the same time. And second, for most critics, interpreting Maxim as the femicidal villain of the novel automatically implies extolling Rebecca as a feminist heroine who defies the patriarchal system and dies in the attempt. As Nigro states, "[an] examination of Maxim as an Othello figure reveals Rebecca as a gothic heroine, who is dominated by her husband and the 'tyrant custom', whose only real crime was in insisting on her right to individuality" (2000: 7). I suggest that, although the reader may indeed be tempted to admire Rebecca, du Maurier's text complicates this reading. Instead, I would argue that *all* the characters in the novel—including both Mrs de Winters—are willing to commit acts of villainy regardless of their gender, as a means to maintain their powerful positions within patriarchy. Furthermore, in *Rebecca*, there is no such thing as a real threat to the patriarchal system, not even on Rebecca's part, but rather there is a constant preoccupation about *its perpetuation*. Thus, Maxim de Winter is a more complex kind of Bluebeard and his crime is not only the result of misogynistic anger towards a perverse woman. It also has roots in this other source of villainy, to which he and all the other characters, male and female, are subjected.

Maxim belongs to a literary tradition which presents the patriarch as an ambivalent figure, complicating the Bluebeard character, as is the case of his literary predecessor, Charlotte Brontë's Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847). The gothic villain and the gothic hero merge in the figure of Maxim de Winter: Maxim *is* a gothic villain when seen from

a feminist perspective, but in the eyes of Mrs de Winter, he is a hero, a protector, a father figure. In fact, Maxim is described by his peers as someone who “always gives a hand if he can” and would “give the coat off his back for any of his own people” (du Maurier 2002: 285). On the other hand, as Rey Chow explains, Maxim is also “the powerful man who perceives himself as a victim . . . even though the man is wealthy and often has dark moods, he is presented . . . as a kind of victim who has been wronged and oppressed” (1999/2000: 145). Unlike in Bluebeard’s tale, in *Rebecca* it is not the young, innocent woman that has to be rescued in the end, but Bluebeard himself. Maxim is a protector who has to be protected: he is the protector of the values and conventions of patriarchal masculinity, even of the ideal itself, which was increasingly under threat at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Maxim’s friend, Frank, states, “I wish there was more like him” (du Maurier 2002: 285), which suggests the masculine model that the people at Manderley celebrate—presumably embodied by Maxim—is the fast disappearing hegemonic model of masculinity. In order to determine what exactly is meant by ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as opposed to undesirable and, therefore, marginalized masculinity, Kane proposes the following “set of oppositions: good, light, unity, male, limit, mind, spirit, culture, high, ‘fit’” versus “bad, darkness, plurality, female, unlimited, body, matter, nature, low, ‘degenerate’” (1999: 11). The patriarch, in this case Maxim de Winter, was expected to fulfil the former set of requirements, as a means to emerge as the ‘fittest’ and distinguish himself from the ‘degenerate’. However, Rebecca’s ‘return’ complicates drastically the preservation of this ideal, as the plot becomes a struggle between those who desperately try to maintain Maxim’s ‘disguise’ as an ideal patriarch, and those who desperately try to expose him publicly. At this point, it is already clear that there is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, what Maxim pretends and is expected to be, and, on the other, what he really is. He has to play out the part of father figure, but he is a murderer and an incompetent patriarch. Yet, those characters who know or suspect that Maxim is guilty of murder still insist on covering up for him. In protecting Maxim, these characters are not just protecting a person but *an ideal*. The anxiety about the blurring of gender roles and the turn-of-the-century masculinity crisis are reflected in passages like this:

‘You don’t play golf, do you, Mrs de Winter?’ said Colonel Julian.

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t,’ I said.

‘You ought to take it up,’ he said. ‘My eldest girl is very keen, and she can’t find young people to play with her. I gave her a small car for her birthday, and she drives herself over to the north coast nearly every day. It gives her something to do.’

‘How nice,’ I said.

‘She ought to have been the boy,’ he said. ‘My lad is different altogether. No earthly use at games. Always writing poetry. I suppose he’ll grow out of it.’

‘Oh, rather,’ said Frank. ‘I used to write poetry myself when I was his age. Awful nonsense too. I never write any now.’

‘Good heavens, I should hope not,’ said Maxim (331).

The anxiety reflected here is not so much about women becoming boyish, but about men becoming feminized. Similarly, Maxim's main problem with Rebecca is not so much the fact that she cut her hair short and enjoyed sailing, but that he felt feminised and 'otherised' by her. The apprehension he shows towards her feminizing force reveals his preoccupation with manhood, and suggests that he may not be so assured of his masculine identity. As Light notes, "the manliness of [Daphne du Maurier's] heroes is often as doubtful as the docility of her heroines" (1991: 165) and, in her novels, we find representations of "a modern masculinity no longer entirely at ease with itself" (169). As Light adds, in du Maurier's novels, "a psychologising of sexuality . . . makes the idea of an untrammelled, undivided individual, and with it the notion of the English male as gloriously unselfconscious and at ease with his masculinity, impossible to sustain" (170). Instead, du Maurier's male characters are "full of self-doubt, nervy ('neurasthenic' even), and tortured about their own desires, dependent upon their own fantasies of an older, stronger man" (170). This is applicable to Maxim, whose fear of the feminization of his estate reveals his own insecurity as patriarch and the fact that he is aware of his incompetence and his incapability of living up to this ideal of "an older, stronger man" (170).

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 'double' as a gentry landowner" (Nigro 2000: 1). In addition to this mask of respectability that du Maurier's character wears to hide his crime and fulfil the model of patriarchal masculinity imposed on him, Light proposes another dimension to du Maurier's male characters, which is certainly applicable to Maxim:

[Daphne du Maurier's] men are not latter-day knights, their masculinity is detached from the idea of nationhood or empire which made the historical settings of the stories so often the romantic place where manhood was to be proven. Rather history has become a kind of Never Never Land in which men are still boys who never grow up and where any skirmishing is on the frontiers of sexual relationships with women who question their mode of being. (1991: 171)

When Rebecca's body is found and Maxim's pretence starts to fall apart, emphasis is put on the fact that Maxim becomes childish, whereas Mrs de Winter suddenly becomes an older person: "He stared at me at first like a puzzled child, and then he held out his arms" (du Maurier 2002: 402). As Light puts it, du Maurier's heroines are "finally older and wiser than their men and come in the end to mother them" (1991: 171). Although Mrs de Winter's maturity and wisdom are questionable, she willingly becomes Maxim's protector in the end.

This final reversal of the characters' roles suggests that, underneath the surface, Maxim has been an immature and incompetent boy all along, forced to become a father figure to protect his estate and his people. The tensions created by his incapability, both of managing his estate and of fulfilling the patriarchal system's highly demanding model of masculinity,

have turned him into a villain who has to conceal both his crime and his immaturity under an external image of the 'ideal patriarch'. Such behaviour, when enacted in real life, can mean, as Kimmel, Hearn and Connell point out, that "by continuing to follow the dictates of separate spheres, we may be creating manly men, but we are also crippling men emotionally and creating husbands and fathers who are destined to be outsiders or despots in their own families" (2004: 233). In light of this, I would argue that du Maurier's novel offers a literary representation not only of how women suffer at the hands of men, but also of men's problem of having to live up to the extremely demanding expectations of patriarchy in order not to be marginalized from the system. According to Kimmel, Hearn and Connell (2004), men's violent responses against those who are considered weaker are not due to their powerful position inside patriarchy but rather to their frustration when they realize that masculinity *per se* does not endow them with innate power, as they had been led to believe. Thus, meeting someone's resistance triggers their use of violence to reassert their patriarchal rights and this, I suggest, is what du Maurier subtly succeeds in depicting in the plight of Maxim de Winter.

4. "LAST NIGHT I DREAMT I WENT TO MANDERLEY AGAIN": PATRIARCHY AS THE ULTIMATE HAUNTING PRESENCE IN *REBECCA*

Assuming that patriarchy oppresses not only the women in *Rebecca* but the men too complicates reading the male character as the other. In this last section, I intend to conclude my reading of villainy in *Rebecca* by analysing how patriarchy is the ultimate corruptive force which negatively affects all the characters in the novel. At this point I would like to go back to some of the characters' insistence on protecting patriarchal ideals, focusing particularly on the case of Mrs de Winter, who is probably the most misleading character.

Whilst readers have been led to believe throughout the novel that Mrs de Winter is a good woman (in contrast to Rebecca), who is faithful to her husband and unconditionally in love with him, towards the end of the story she undergoes an important change which reveals that this might not be the case. I read Mrs de Winter as a selfish and hypocritical character who tries to restore patriarchy and protect the patriarch for her own benefits. She needs patriarchy because it is what secures her one and only identity. Being Mrs de Winter is what has worried her all along, as her obsessive repetition of the statement "I am going to be Mrs de Winter. I am going to live at Manderley" (du Maurier 2002: 61) suggests. In the same way, when Maxim confesses his crime, the only thing that matters to her is the fact that she feels that she has triumphed over Rebecca and this allows her to reassert her identity as mistress of Manderley. As Chow points out,

In the course of the second wife's progress, she gradually moves from being a powerless outsider, rejected by her society, to being an insider firmly rooted in the patriarchal order, its angel of the house. Her power as woman, notably, is achieved through the removal and exclusion of others,

especially other women, from her arena. Instead of her, it is these other women who must now remain forever on the outside. (1999/2000: 159)

Once her identity and her power have been reasserted through this ‘triumph’ over other women —Rebecca and Mrs Danvers— Mrs de Winter’s docile character fades away and she enjoys exercising her new power on those she now considers to be below her in terms of class. As she states, “I had not thought it would be so easy to be severe. I wondered why it had seemed hard for me before” (du Maurier 2002: 324-25). By the end of the book, Mrs de Winter is no longer the shy girl who treated servants as equals and who felt like a servant herself. However, in order for her to exercise this power, she needs a man and she needs to be in a powerful position within patriarchy. And this is why she has to become Bluebeard’s ally and protect him. As Allen and Ishii-Gonzalez claim, “in *Rebecca*, the ostensible narrative is that of one woman trying to prove the guilt of another in a manner that restores patriarchy” (2004: 9). And this restoration of patriarchy has to do with Mrs de Winter’s own selfish need for self-definition. This is, therefore, not so different from what Rebecca did, i.e., submitting to being the patriarch’s companion in order to benefit from certain privileges.

This interpretation of Mrs de Winter’s character again supports the idea that *Rebecca* cannot be read as a novel where women are feminist heroines. What turns Mrs de Winter into ‘someone’ is the fact that she is the mistress of an estate. As Light affirms,

It is not just that places, and especially houses, are for du Maurier the repositories of the past, where we can best find and read the accumulation of marks of change, but that they house ‘us’: who we are, and what we imagine ourselves to be. . . . ‘We’ are best discovered in some place to which we belong and our connection with others depends on this sense of identity, a private, individual place, somewhere deep inside, which is then the true subject of history. (1991: 188)

And as Light adds, this message “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 rehoused” (188). As a consequence, when Manderley is burnt down at the end of the novel 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 unknown gentleman that he really is.

Last but not least, the question of why I do not read *Rebecca* as a gothic heroine even though she threatened the villain and why her rebellion cannot really be considered a threat to the patriarchal system are still unanswered. As Maxim explains to Mrs de Winter when he confesses his murder, his marriage to Rebecca was a farce:

She made a bargain with me up there, on the side of the precipice. . . . ‘I’ll run your house for you,’ she told me, ‘I’ll look after your precious Manderley for you, make it the most famous show-place in all the country, if you like. And people will visit us, and envy us, and talk about

us; they'll say we are the luckiest, happiest, handsomest couple in all England. What a leg-pull, Max!' she said, 'what a God-damn triumph!' (305)

Maxim's part of the deal was to allow Rebecca to do whatever she wanted and not reveal her promiscuity. This bargain shows that Rebecca never really broke away from patriarchy. On the contrary, she was glad to be part of the system and to live among the luxuries of Manderley, and being the mistress of Manderley made it particularly easy for her to hide the promiscuous life that she led in London. As Maxim said to her, "What you do in London does not concern me. You can live with Favell there, or with anyone you like. But not here. Not at Manderley.' She said nothing for a moment. She stared at me, and then she smiled. 'Suppose it suits me better to live here, what then?' she said" (311). And, of course, it did actually *suit* her to live at Manderley. If we accept that Mrs de Winter is an insecure woman who would like to be "one whose sexual autonomy would not bring about her social disgrace" (Light 1991: 178), so too is Rebecca's character. Rebecca's problem is also "how to find sexual pleasure without going beyond the pale —how to be like, and yet not like, those 'other women'" (Light 1991: 177). Thus, just as Maxim admits that "I accepted everything— because of Manderley" (du Maurier 2002: 308), all the other characters in *Rebecca* are just as concerned about the perpetuation of the patriarchal estate and they cling to it for protection: Mrs de Winter needs patriarchy to define who she is, and Rebecca needs it to protect and conceal her unaccepted sexual behaviour under the image of a perfect wife. The preservation of Manderley and everything it represents in terms of class and patriarchal power is, therefore, the biggest preoccupation in du Maurier's novel and, as such, it is also the most prominent source of evil and suffering. According to Brinks, "castles [and big houses] figure as material emblems of an enduring patriarchal line . . . such estates assume great symbolic weight in the transmission of cultural ideologies, felt as burdens placed upon their inhabitants" (2003: 13). Even if Manderley *is* a burden for the characters, they are nevertheless desperately concerned about its preservation, because otherwise they will have to face "the crucial question . . . of how to live after the end of patriarchy" (Kane 1999: 212). And this is actually what happens at the end of the novel when the house burns down. Thus, the destruction of Manderley is not a liberation and a new beginning as the burning of Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre* is for both Jane and Rochester. Instead, the ending of *Rebecca* "poses a . . . question of social reproduction and continuance" (Chow 1999/2000: 152), the ruined estate becoming the most prominent haunting presence in the minds of Maxim and Mrs de Winter in their exile.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As Alfred Hitchcock very well observed, "*Rebecca* is the story of two women, a man, and a house. Of the four . . . the house, Manderley, is the dominant presence" (qtd. in Beauman 2003: vii). As I have pointed out throughout this article, Manderley represents patriarchy and the rigidity of traditional patriarchal rules regarding the socially imposed

boundary between femininity and masculinity. The source of all the trouble is Manderley; not Rebecca —who, after all, is absent from the narrative— and not even Maxim, who is simply a puppet in the upper-class world he is trapped in. Imposing “the belief that hierarchy and authority were ‘fit’ and egalitarianism was degenerate” (Kane 1999: 12), the strictures of patriarchy corrupt all the characters in *Rebecca*, and make them act as villains, oppressing each other and abusing their power whenever they can. The desperate attempts to perpetuate this system originate from a strong sense of nostalgia which pervades du Maurier’s narrative right from the very first line —“Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” (1)— for the values of the past that are under threat. As Light argues, “In *Rebecca*, it is the desire to go back, to live earlier times again in the imagination, which forms the mainspring of the plot. ‘Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again’, that resonant opening line, gives us the novel in miniature, as Manderley is revisited by an older and sadder narrator, remembering, looking back” (1991: 183). As Light adds, “at the beginning of the girl’s story in *Rebecca* nostalgia for the past is the root of all evil: going back to Manderley with her new husband sets in motion an unstoppable train of memories, real and imagined, which poison their life together and make the loss of their home inevitable” (1991: 184). 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 why, when Manderley is destroyed, Mr and Mrs de Winter do not feel liberated, but dislocated; they cannot find a satisfying alternative once the big house is burnt down. The consequence of this is a great anxiety about the end of patriarchy, “the problem of the connection between aristocracy and immortality” (Punter, 1996: 17) or rather Mr and Mrs de Winter’s realization that this connection does not really exist. At one point in the novel, it is mentioned that “all these big estates will be chopped up in time and bungalows built” (287), a remark which, being uttered by an anonymous character, seems trivial and may pass unnoticed, but which I think gives an important piece of information: it signals that the story is set at a time when social changes are taking place. And change inevitably brings about anxiety about the future.

Rebecca is, in short, a story about a man’s struggle to preserve patriarchal order at all costs, even if this means committing murder. However, what makes du Maurier’s narrative intricate is that this does not automatically turn the patriarch into a villain because he is also represented as a manipulated subject, eventually ruined by the world he is trying to preserve. As the aforementioned feminist critics have pointed out, the one who seems to be the principal victim of Maxim’s manipulative strategies is Mrs de Winter, his inexperienced new wife. Nevertheless, she herself is just as guilty of trying to manipulate others as Maxim is. To start with, being an unreliable narrator, she attempts to trick the reader into believing that her story is an ideal romance which promises patriarchy, stability and continuity. Moreover, her compliance with patriarchal norms and her rapture when she finds out that Maxim murdered Rebecca reveal that, far from being a victim or a heroine, du Maurier’s female protagonist is in fact the villain’s accomplice. *Rebecca* is, therefore, not only about how far a man can go to comply with patriarchal norms, but also

about how much a woman is —or, rather, since this also applies to Rebecca, women are— ready to accept, overlook and sacrifice in exchange for patriarchal stability.

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