Rebecca as Desdemona: "A Maid That Paragons Description and Wild Fame"

Author(s): Kathleen Butterly Nigro

Reviewed work(s):
Source: College Literature, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Fall, 2000), pp. 144-157
Published by: College Literature
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112541
Accessed: 08/05/2012 20:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of
content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms
of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Rebecca as Desdemona:
"a maid that paragons description and wild fame"

Kathleen Butterly Nigro

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? Rebecca’s cousin Favell remarks, during the final inquest, “All married men with lovely wives are jealous, aren’t they? And some of ’em just can’t help playing Othello” (1971, 326). Is it significant that Maxim refused to wear a costume for the ball, despite his disclaimer “I never dress up” (196)?
Perhaps the reader should consider that this refusal implies that he is already in costume, as Othello. There are parallels between Shakespeare's play and Rebecca that make this suggestion a plausible one. Is Rebecca really a Gothic novel, with the dead Mrs. de Winter, now silenced by her husband's jealousy, as an enclosed heroine? Maxim de Winter might be viewed as the cold manipulator rather than Rebecca, masking his true personality with his "double" as a gentrified landowner, unknown to his second wife, "with his own moods that I did not share, his secret troubles that I did not know" (196). As the novel opens, Maxim's face becomes a mask, "a sculptured thing, formal and cold," when he is reminded of something about the past with Rebecca. She is as confused about Maxim's nature as Desdemona is about Othello's: "My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him, / Were he in favour as in humour altered" (3.4.124–25). Othello is almost unrecognizable to others when he is seized with his consuming jealousy: "Is this the noble Moor . . . the nature / Whom passion could not shake?" Ludovico wonders (4.1.275–76).

Of course, since the tragedy of Othello precedes the popular fiction of Rebecca by more than 300 years, it is only through retrospect that those elements defined as "Gothic" can be applied to Shakespeare's play. Clearly, however, they are elements that du Maurier responded to, whether consciously or unconsciously, as revealed in her childhood memories of the "many prints from Shakespeare's plays scattered about the house, mostly up the green staircase." The performance possibilities were "endless" (1997, 30–31). Maggie Kilgour contends that one of the main and constant influences on the Gothic form is Elizabethan (and especially Shakespearean) tragedy (1997, 4). Perhaps du Maurier's youthful experiences with the play translate, in her novel, into elements that we identify as "Gothic."

The purpose of this study, however, is not merely to point out parallels between the two works but to reconsider the character of Rebecca. Reading Rebecca through the perspective of Othello enables us to see her as a woman whose worst crime, according to film critic Robin Wood, was "simply that she resisted male definition, asserting her right to define herself and her sexual desires" (1989, 232). Rebecca resisted the role of the modern Gothic female whom Joanna Russ sees as "women--as--victims," passive protagonists at the mercy of men's feelings and intentions (1983, 49). Furthermore, the novel Rebecca fits the model of the female Gothic which, according to Juliann Fleenor, "provokes various feelings of terror, anger, awe, and sometimes self-fear and self-disgust directed toward the female role, female sexuality, female physiology, and procreation" (1983, 15). Taking her opinions of Rebecca from Maxim (as she took all of her opinions, herself an enclosed
Gothic figure), the narrator comes to see the first Mrs. de Winter as terribly controlling, libidinous, intimidating, awesomely beautiful—and pregnant.

The second Mrs. de Winter is forced into masquerade (a doubling technique) by her fear of displeasing Maxim. After the dress ball at Manderley, she is aware that she has changed utterly ("This self who sat on the window seat was new, was different" [du Maurier 1971, 261]); she even displays behaviors which are reminiscent of the recalcitrant Rebecca's. "Don't let it happen again," she admonishes a servant who has left some flowers too long; "I am Mrs. de Winter now," she tells the fearsome Mrs. Danvers (289–90). However, she quickly submerges her new sense of individuality when Maxim confesses the murder to her. Rebecca is seen once more as "Damnably clever," a "devil," a "snake" (271–73). Maggie Kilgour distinguishes the male Gothic from the female in one very significant aspect—autonomy: "While the male moves through the standard Bildungsroman towards personhood and individualization, the female is never independent, and achieves her goal by entering into a new relation through marriage" (1997, 37). The narrator is the manifestation of the female Gothic heroine, the kind of woman both Maxim and Othello must exploit to achieve their own individuality. Male autonomy, although desirable, is a state that ultimately ends in "total isolation" (38).

Both Desdemona and Rebecca (and the "I" narrator of the novel) are confronted with the doubles of the men they thought they knew, creating the uncanny feeling of "the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange" (Smith 1992, 285) which Freud wrote of in his 1919 essay Das Unheimlich ("The Uncanny"). In her essay "Laughing at Leviticus," Jane Marcus writes that the female experience of the uncanny will differ from that of the male, primarily because "women had [traditionally] been the providers of heimlichkeit or domestic bliss" (1991, 240), and the fragmented marriage relationships in both works magnify the conflicts between the women and the men. Both Desdemona and the narrator of the novel (Rebecca's reaction cannot be known but will perhaps be implied through this study) suffer with the terror they feel towards their husbands, the "terror" which characterizes the uncanny. In addition, both works utilize the catalyst of a handkerchief as a common object that may become frightening in its symbolism, as Freud wrote in his essay. There are also images of locks and keys in both works, implying enclosure and restraint. Although there is no evidence that du Maurier used Othello as a direct model for her novel, it is obvious that the play affected her, perhaps suggesting some character models for her novel, while other Gothic elements do exist independently in Rebecca. A wilderness pervades the opening scenes (although the play does use the image of a garden to symbolize moral growth), and the entire narrative of the novel is framed with the remembrance of the narrator's night-
mares. Mirroring also plays a significant role in producing an uncanny effect in the novel, with the narrator as the child, Maxim as the father, and Mrs. Danvers as the surrogate mother (Smith 1992, 300). Rebecca parallels Desdemona, who, “being like one of Heaven,” is distrusted by her husband and therefore “double—damned” (4.2.36–38). Desdemona is, however, considered virtuous and beautiful by everyone else: “he hath achieved a maid / That paragons description and wild fame; / One that excels the quirks of blazing pens . . .” (2.1.61–63). Similarly, no one but Maxim, in fact, sees Rebecca as flawed: the Bishop’s wife extols her as “very gifted” and “very beautiful” (du Maurier 1971, 124), and Frank Crawley admits that Rebecca was “the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life” (134). Even the narrator is aware of Rebecca’s competence and feels reproached by the beautiful but proficiently organized writing—table in the morning—room (83–86). Robin Wood views Rebecca’s unkindness to Ben (“minor mental cruelty to a harmless lunatic”) as perhaps the only crime she can be actually accused of committing (1989, 232). The narrator, “haunted” by Rebecca’s pervasive presence at Manderley (Nollen 1994, 45) and her own sense of inadequacy, is easily led to accept Maxim’s account of the past. Regardless of whether a work is a Renaissance tragedy or a modern popular novel, the woman is still assumed to be the instigator of domestic unrest and social turmoil when seen through the perspective of the male characters. The accuracy of this vision should be interrogated in order to refocus and clarify basic assumptions about the roles of men and women.

Joanna Russ writes that another characteristic of the “passive protagonists” is that they “can be unknowingly involved in some family/criminal secret” (1983, 49). The notion of secrecy pervades both the novel and the play.5 In the narrator’s initial nightmare, Manderley is “secretive and silent”; Maxim never reveals his thoughts to her and keeps his “secret troubles” to himself. Allan Lloyd Smith writes of two aspects of the secrets in Rebecca: one is that the aristocracy, represented by Rebecca (who possessed “breeding, brains, and beauty”) was really corrupt underneath (1992, 305). “I put Manderley first, before anything else,” Maxim tells the narrator, explaining his motivation for murdering his first wife (du Maurier 1971, 273–74). She responds in support of him, exonerating his guilt about the secret and still offering her love, the appropriate reaction for the “fully socialized adult female,” according to Smith (1992, 305).

The other “hidden” element is the “murderous response of a fully socialized adult male to the sexual freedom of his wife” (Smith 1992, 305).6 This incident reflects the response to a threat to the “patriarchal heritage” of Manderley. However, it is interesting that when Doctor Baker is finally located to reveal the medical condition of Rebecca, he reports that she had a mal-
formation of the uterus and could not have produced children anyway.\textsuperscript{7} Not only does this reinforce that aspect of female Gothics outlined by Juliann Fleenor concerning a negative feeling toward female reproduction, it also implies an unhealthiness in the social state: once the narrator believes that Rebecca was “evil and vicious and rotten” (du Maurier\textsuperscript{1971, 284}), her personal feelings of inadequacy are erased.

Desdemona’s father Brabantio calls upon his “brothers of the state” who must feel his betrayal by his daughter as he feels it; he is stung by her secret deception and warns Othello that since Desdemona deceived her father she might very well deceive her husband (1.2.96; 1.3.289–90). This intimation of Desdemona’s secrecy returns later in the play with Othello’s suspicions of her virtue, and the images of secrecy are again used: “This is a subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets,” Othello says of her. “I pray you turn the key, and keep our counsel” he tells Emilia in the same scene (4.2.21–22; 94). Like Maxim, Othello is infuriated at the notion of his wife’s lack of subservience to him and his inability to confine her. The references to secrecy reinforced by the lock and key imagery in Othello and in Rebecca’s now–unlocked cottage support Juliann Fleenor’s assertion that female Gothics explore attempts to enclose the heroine both literally and psychologically.

In addition to the locked room, according to Fleenor, the ruined castle is a typical Gothic setting in which the entrapment of the heroine takes place (1983, 15). Manderley is not ruined, of course, until the final scene of the novel, but the idea of its being enchanted frames the narrator’s memory. As a dreamer, she walks “enchanted” through the grounds of Manderley; the night of the ball Manderley is “an enchanted house . . . bewitched.” During the novel’s final days, the narrator feels as though it is invulnerable: “No one would ever hurt Manderley. It would lie always in its hollow like an enchanted thing, guarded by the woods, safe, secure . . . .” (du Maurier 1971, 357) As Freud writes in “The Uncanny,” dreams sometimes evoke feelings which can only be described as uncanny (1919, 143–44). In addition, magic and witchcraft are two of the “factors which turn something fearful into an uncanny thing” (150).

In \textit{Othello}, Brabantio says Desdemona must be “enchanted” by the “[D]amned” Othello, held “in chains of magic” (1.2.63, 65). Peter Stallybrass writes that Othello’s “witchcraft” is interrogated early in the play (1988, 266). He does captivate Desdemona with his stories of strange lands which feed her “greedy ear”: “This only is the witchcraft I have used” (1.3.148, 168). The handkerchief he gives Desdemona is charmed, with “magic in the web of it” (3.4.57, 69).\textsuperscript{8} Othello delineates its magical history for Desdemona: the sacred worms that bred the silk, its manufacture by the sibyl, the bestowing of the gift by the prophetic gypsy charmer. Still, its greatest power lay in the handkerchief’s ability to change and control the behavior of Othello’s moth-
er and father, keeping him loyal through submission and her "amiable." The loss of this gift would be inestimable. When Othello suspects that Desdemona has lost the gift, he is filled with terror and rage, for this object implies tremendous authority to him.

Rebecca's handkerchief has an uncanny effect on the narrator also; its very scent and feel evokes the presence of Maxim's first wife for her, and she is overwhelmed by it (du Maurier 1971, 118). Later she wonders whether she haunts Rebecca as Rebecca haunts her: "That mackintosh I wore, that handkerchief I used. They were hers. Perhaps she knew and had seen me take them" (234). Those objects which belonged to Rebecca and which still bear vestiges of her femininity—her lipstick and her distinctive scent—have the power to govern the behavior and the imagination of the narrator, affecting her in the same way that the handkerchief influenced Othello. She clearly believes in their magical powers to recall the dead Rebecca. The magic of Othello's handkerchief is woven into its fabric through its history. Desdemona accepts the power of the article as she has accepted the truth of all of Othello's enchanting stories. It does prove to exert a "mighty magic" over her, despite Othello's denial of any "drugs" or "charms" used to win her (1.2.91). Rebecca's handkerchief owes its potency to its history as well. Its perfume and characteristic monogram strengthen the psychic bond between the two women, and it becomes another element in the developing parallel dramas of the two de Winter marriages.

Embedded in the uncanny Gothic details are clues to the relationship between the narrator and her predecessor: they certainly share a common role as the wife of Maxim and are perhaps both oppressed by him. Tania Modleski writes that the Gothic genre is used by feminists "to explore [psychic] conflicts in relation to a society that systematically oppresses women. . . . It has been used to show how women are at least potentially 'pure victims'" (1982, 83). The narrator and Rebecca begin to merge, despite the apparent antipathy of the second Mrs. de Winter toward the first. In the narrator's final dream, she is gazing in a mirror at herself but sees Rebecca reflected. She is writing invitations in Rebecca's handwriting, that long, sloping, assertive hand so different from her own "small square" strokes (du Maurier 1971, 379). Although Rebecca's beautiful hair twists like a snake in the dream and the narrator tries to thrust it away with a denial, she cannot help but feel a sympathy for Rebecca, or perhaps a fear that her husband might not like her, either.9

Allan Lloyd Smith writes of the psychological "phantom" which has major implications for the study of the uncanny in literature: one facet of this "phantom" is the "unknowing awareness of another's secret" (1992, 291). The narrator seems to be drawn to identify with Rebecca although she is clearly antagonized by Rebecca's persistent presence. It is this inability to separate
herself “not from something external, alien, or unknown but—on the contrary—from something strangely familiar” which produced the terror in the uncanny for Freud, according to David Morris (1985, 307), and it is this same incapacity in the narrator which terrifies her. Her identification with Rebecca continues to increase, despite her resolute efforts to deny it.

Peter Stallybrass writes of the prevailing attitude during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries toward women’s bodies as dirty or contaminated, and of the notion of motherhood as a sinful (and possibly demonic) reflection of that attitude (1988, 259–61). Although Rebecca was not actually pregnant, it is the threat of that potential birth which enrages Maxim and drives him to kill her. This action reveals his anger toward Rebecca’s demands to express her own sexuality. “They made love to her,” and it was “like a game” to Rebecca, Mrs. Danvers tells the narrator (du Maurier 1971, 245). The narrator insists twice that she does not want to know this information, rejecting the image of Rebecca as a sexual predator. Maxim blamed the “shadow” of Rebecca as coming between them sexually, but he still calls the narrator “little love,” and until he confesses his guilt, the dominant female figure of Rebecca still prevails. According to Lloyd Smith, Mrs. Danvers, as surrogate, “stands between the ingenue and the scene of sexuality” (300). After he confesses to her, the narrator responds to Maxim’s kiss as more erotic and stimulating: “He had not kissed me like this before” (268). Her own emerging sexuality allies her more closely with Rebecca and perhaps makes her position even more threatened. The Renaissance notion of woman as “rampant sexual animal” as examined in Stallybrass (1985, 273) can also be applied here: such behavior in women is horrifying and aggressive and must be contained.

Implicit in such sexual behavior is the realization that a woman can become pregnant. It is this state which ties women together with their mothers (and later with their daughters, presumably), according to Claire Kahane (1985, 345). The reflection of Rebecca at the end of the novel that merges with the identity of the narrator reinforces this connection, now that they both share a female sexual response to the same man. The potential for childbirth in the sexual act can be seen as a female Gothic terror, “committing women to an imprisoning biological destiny that denies the autonomy of the self” (347). The medical fact that Rebecca has a malformation of the uterus and the point that the narrator never does bear children emphasize not only their struggle for autonomy but also the uncanny, ironic results of both unhealthy marriages. Desdemona is also portrayed by Iago as a rapaciously sexual creature. He assures Roderigo “When the blood is made dull with the act of sport,” her “appetite” may be again whetted by the qualities of beauty, youth, and sympathy—all of which Othello lacks (2.1.229–33). Othello calls her “strumpet” and “whore” and will not accept her virtue (4.2.81, 86). Peter
Stallybrass writes that honor, to Othello, "includes military prowess, virility, his 'name' or reputation. To Desdemona, the same term applies to her chastity (which Harvey calls the "keystone of Renaissance patriarchal culture") without which she has nothing (1988, 268). This same dichotomy of power applies to the novel, and the men react in a similar fashion, enraged that their reputations (and their wives' chastity) should be threatened.13

In both works, the men respond to a catalyst that feeds their jealousy. In Othello, that catalyst is Iago. He goads Othello with the persistent mention of the handkerchief, and the image of Desdemona and Cassio in bed together, "naked with her friend in bed / An hour or more" (perhaps a jab at the "honor" of Othello's virility) drives Othello to distraction: "It is hypocrisy against the Devil" (4.1.3–6). In Rebecca, the destructive catalyst is Mrs. Danvers, who subtly induces the narrator to dress as Caroline de Winter in the same costume as Rebecca had worn at the last dress ball. She realizes that Mrs. Danvers had manipulated the entire scene: "I shall never forget the expression on her face, loathsome, triumphant. The face of an exulting devil" (du Maurier 1971, 214). The devil imagery that recurs in both works of course increases the atmosphere of mystery but, even more, it emphasizes the character doubling and the sense of terror that oppresses both the narrator and Desdemona.

In Othello, Desdemona feels that her husband is transformed with anger and it frightens her because he is no longer recognizable to her: "Upon my knees, what doth your speech import? / I understand a fury in your words, But not the words" (4.2.31–32). Peter Stallybrass discusses the "voice" which is inherent in the "passive terrain" of a woman's body on which the "inequalities of masculine power were fought out" (1988, 271–72).14 Desdemona places herself in a completely submissive position to Othello, just as the narrator does at the dress ball, after she has displeased Maxim with her costume. "His face was a mask, his smile was not his own," and he will not speak to her: "We were like two performers in a play, but we were divided, we were not acting with one another" (du Maurier 1971, 225). In both instances, a sense of terror motivates the women to humble themselves completely and drives any other thought from their minds.15

Edmund Burke's philosophical treatise on the sublime, a work whose appearance paralleled the rise of the early Gothic in the eighteenth century, makes a clear statement about the function of terror: "No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (1968, 57). Both women are absolutely overpowered by their fear of displeasing their husbands. Just as the image of submission (and perhaps worship of the male figure) characterizes Desdemona's speech, the narrator's choice of the acting image is a revealing one. Acting may mirror life, but it is not the same
thing, and clearly she feels a displacement from reality in the role she feels compelled to play as Maxim de Winter's wife. Favell tells her that part of the "damn good effort" she has made is that she has "put up with old Max and his moods" (du Maurier 1971, 323). Perhaps this comment refers to something he learned about Maxim from Rebecca; however, it casts doubt on the reputed untenable suffering of Mr. de Winter.

Burke writes that our feelings are more affected by nature when it is at its most wild: "the terrible and sublime blaze out together" (1968, 66). The wilderness that is overtaking Manderley in the initial dream of the novel is certainly terrifying, but Rebecca has an alliance with the wilderness as well. Maxim tells the narrator that Rebecca was responsible for the natural beauty at Manderley: "God, the place was a wilderness, lovely yes, wild and lonely with a beauty of its own, yes, but crying out for skill and care and the money that he [Maxim's father] would never give to it . . ." (du Maurier 1971, 274). Rebecca is associated throughout with the white azaleas of Happy Valley, the "blood–red and luscious" rhododendrons which stand outside the window of the morning room, and all the luxuriance of growth which characterizes the setting of Manderley. She has sympathy with the wilderness and is able to control and direct its energy. When, at sixteen, she is able to subdue the horse to "teach him," she is responding to that power which, to Burke, arises from the threat of danger and pain, increasing the sensation of the sublime. Although Mrs. Danvers believes that Rebecca was subdued herself by the sea, that turns out not to be true: she was revitalized and excited by her experiences with the wild nature that surrounded her, and only she had the sympathy to understand it. Others would enjoy its effects, but only Rebecca could appreciate and truly experience its wildness. It is a human tendency to cultivate, Iago says: "Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners" (1.3.317–18). Still, as the narrator's dream implies, the wilderness defies cultivation and "will come into her own again" (du Maurier 1971, 1). Othello reveals his awareness of this recuperative power when he calls Desdemona "thou weed, / Who art so lovely fair" (4.2.67–68). Like Maxim, he perhaps resents a force over which he has no control or with which he has no sympathy. Rebecca, however, did have this sympathy and it was manifested in the beauty of Manderley.

The "tyrant, custom" that drives Othello (1.3.230) also drives Maxim de Winter, who put Manderley above all else. The daily menu protocol and the "solemn ritual" of tea emphasize the rigidity of life at Manderley, a life which would not allow a spirit like Rebecca's to threaten its tradition. When she would not submit to Maxim, he killed her. "O, it comes o'er my memory / As doth the raven o'er the infected house." Othello cries when he is reminded of the handkerchief by Iago, although he would much rather have for-
gotten it (4.1.20–21). Maxim, too, is haunted by the uncanny presence of Rebecca, her “damned shadow” like a raven, omnipresent and threatening to his peace. He mocks the “breeding, brains, and beauty” which his grandmother admired in Rebecca (du Maurier 1971, 272), just as Roderigo condemns the “gross revolt” by which Desdemona has tied “her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes” to Othello (1.1.136).

Still, the question of Rebecca’s (and Desdemona’s) guilt deserves the reader’s attention. Marvin Rosenberg argues that since the nineteenth century, Desdemona has been criticized on moral and social grounds, but that it is this very “human frailty” which contributes to the complexity of her temperament (1971, 206; 209). A similar observation about the censure and complexity of her nature could be made about Rebecca. In addition, the characters of their husbands are also in doubt, for each reveals an overwhelming desire to control what they can and to destroy what they cannot. The Gothic elements of terror, wildness, and the uncanny do increase the suspense in Rebecca, but they also reveal an alternative to the usual interpretation of the work: 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.17

Notes

1 The double is discussed extensively in Freud’s essay “The Uncanny.” The double’s reflective quality of “doubling, dividing, and interchanging the self” creates an uncanny, unsettling effect. “The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the ‘double’ being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt, in which it wore a more friendly aspect. The ‘double’ has become a vision of terror, just as after the fall of their religion the gods took on demonic shapes” (1919, 140–43). Although there is doubling of other characters, I am mainly concerned here with that feature as it characterizes Maxim and Othello, as it functions to conceal the true nature of their marriage relationships.

2 Another strong dramatic influence was her father’s professional life in the theater (1977, 30–31).

3 Wood goes on to say, “The logic of the film would have Rebecca its heroine, a project made impossible by Selznick’s faithful rendering of du Maurier’s novel, but realized magnificently a few years later by him an Hitchcock as The Paradine Case” (1989, 232). It is interesting to consider the hesitation of the producer to see Rebecca as the guiltless figure; perhaps her amoral behavior would have been sufficient for both the censors and the viewing audience to condemn her. In addition, since Rebecca does not actually appear in the first film version of the novel, it can be seen as an attempt to erase her completely.

4 In Myself When Young, the author writes that she actually identified with Othello rather than Desdemona: “I was Othello smothering Desdemona” in pretend childhood dramas (1977, 30). The author was curiously aware of the killing of
women through submission and perhaps felt that men instinctively desired complete authority: there could be no equality between the sexes.

5 According to Elizabeth Harvey, Renaissance texts paralleled the inability to keep a secret with being pregnant with that secret, or as an analogy to the “involuntary urge to give birth” (1992, 96).

6 Tania Modleski writes that in female Goths such as Northanger Abbey the heroine often responds in a submissive manner to her distrust of the male: “She tries to convince herself that her suspicions are unfounded, that, since she loves him, he must be trustworthy and that she will have failed as a woman if she does not implicitly believe in him” (1982, 59).

7 In the poetry of John Donne, Elizabeth Harvey sees a reflection of a contemporary assumption that the uterus (believed to have a life of its own) was the source of a woman’s insatiable sexual drive and garrulity, and the combination of moist and cold humors added to her inventiveness and changeability, as well as her powers of memory (1992, 106).

8 See especially Murry for a discussion of the significance of the “wonder” inherent in Othello’s gift to his wife (1936, 313–16). The wonder imparted by the true love-token embodies the entire drama between Othello and Desdemona: “The simple, naïve, older man, who cannot see himself for the noble and splendid thing he is, cannot quite believe that the divine Desdemona feels for him as he for her. And, by the magic of the handkerchief, the very proof that she does becomes her ruin” (316).

9 Du Maurier had a fascination with mirrors as a child and was frightened by the recognition of doubling in her playmates: “If I could turn into Kay, and M could become the Snow Queen, then who was I really, where did I belong?” (1977, 11).

10 See Stallybrass for a discussion of the political problems during Elizabeth I’s rule created by virtue of the simple fact that she was a woman ruling under a patriarchal system (1988, 260–63). Elizabeth Harvey discusses the very public concerns of begetting heirs during the Tudor monarchy, not the least of which was the chaos which would predominate after Elizabeth I’s childless reign (1992, 89–90).

11 The women who experienced World War II were caught in a schizophrenic split between image and reality. Although they felt a new spirit of independence and rejected traditional morality, they were ostracized and condemned for the same liberal sexual activity which was encouraged in men. In fact, women who contracted venereal disease were sometimes marked with a purple dye which did serve as a therapeutic but perhaps also as a warning to potential partners (Schneider 1997, 22–23). Both Desdemona and Rebecca felt the same sexual freedom as their male partners, but both were equally condemned for their honest expression of sexual desire.

12 “Economically [and in all other senses as well], she is the fenced-in enclosure of the landlord, her father, or husband”: the Renaissance precursor to the Gothic enclosed heroine. The ideal Renaissance woman is contained, silent, and locked up (Stallybrass 1988, 256). According to Marilyn French, Desdemona does not fit the traditional Renaissance model of modesty because she is not ashamed of her sexual desires and is without sexual guilt (1981, 216). It is just this revelation of her sexuality, Edward Snow argues, which Othello detests (1988, 218–19).
13 According to the theory of Joan Riviere, a female might “exhibit excessive displays of femininity in order to disguise her threat to heterosexual manliness” (Sullivan 1997, 41). The narrator chooses a very feminine costume for the fancy dress ball, one that submerges her true self. The wig completes the “transformation”: “I looked quite attractive, quite different altogether. Not me at all. Someone much more interesting, more vivid and alive” (du Maurier 1971, 205). In her costume, the narrator self-effacement is complete and her sense of inadequacy is gone. It is only when she is not herself that she feels a sense of liberty.

14 Stallybrass explores how Desdemona’s voice has been “constructed” rather than merely recognizing it, since it exists in a fictional work by a male author. Elizabeth Harvey contends that female speech—associated strongly with the tongue—had very negative connotations. Indeed, the woman was seen as having two mouths, one containing the gossiping tongue and the other represented by the insatiable womb (1992, 65). Because of the vulnerability of these organs, it was easy for a woman to become the instrument of the devil, or a vehicle for another’s speech; therefore, the woman is dependent on the man to express her feelings in language (66).

15 Masks have been significant in the formation of world-wide cultural behaviors for at least 30,000 years, according to Mircea Eliade (1990, 65). They perform a variety of functions (which parallel their use in the novel), including personal transformation (or alienation of personality), the assertion of dominance by a power figure, and as a token of the transcendence of time. According to Mary Russo, making a spectacle of oneself is seen as a “specifically feminine danger,” implying “a loss of boundaries” (1997, 318–19). The woman’s body (in carnival theory) becomes a grotesque object, “unruly when set loose in the public sphere” (320).

16 Burke writes, “There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas about the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds” (1968, 57). See Kilgour for a discussion of Burke as an “enemy” of Mary Wollstonecraft. She viewed Burke as a partisan of a political and aesthetic system that claimed to protect women while actually repressing them (1997, 78).

17 The author would like to thank Kathy Gentile of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, for her perceptive reading and editing of this article.

Works Cited


