

## BRONTË MEETS MAURIER: *REBECCA* AS *JANE EYRE* RETOLD

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### Abstract

My paper is an attempt to explore Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* in the light of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In terms of structure, nature, plot, and character study, Maurier's popular novel *Rebecca* is eerily similar, though not explicitly, to that of Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre*. There are certain glaring differences between the two novels but there seems to be a link or connection among those differences as well. That said it would hardly be prudent to pigeonhole *Rebecca* as just an imitation of *Jane Eyre*. It is also open to discussion whether Brontë's classic merely acted as a source text from which Maurier derived certain ideas to create a masterpiece of her own.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*, adaptation, appropriation, psychological thriller, feminism

My paper endeavours to explore how far Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* is similar to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in terms of structure, nature, plot, and character study. Maurier's 1938 popular novel *Rebecca* is eerily similar, though not explicitly, to that of Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre*. Can the former be called an echo of the latter or is it just similarity? And if so, was this a deliberate attempt on part of Daphne du Maurier? Or what could be her purpose? There are certain glaring differences between the two novels but there seems to be a link or connection among those differences as well.

The points of similarity between the heroines of the two novels are astounding. Both are orphans and their parents died when they were very young. In course of the novels, both refer to themselves as young and inexperienced, lonely and without a fixed home when they meet their future husbands for the first time. They are described as plain and simple. Their interests are also very similar, like reading or painting. The eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre*, in spite of having a family was thoroughly mistreated by them and was thrust into the Lowood Institution for girls, where she completed her education and later became a governess. The unnamed narrator in *Rebecca* became a travelling companion, which is similar in status to that of a Victorian governess, to an eccentric lady Mrs. Van Hopper. She hated her situation, was snubbed by anyone who sensed her inferior position and was embarrassed by Mrs. Van Hopper's manic obsession with other people's lives. But like Jane, she had no other option but to patiently wait

and learn as much as she could. It is their patience which adds to their strength of character and which will aid them in facing the difficult ordeals that fate will bring forth later in their lives.

Mr. Maxim de Winter in *Rebecca* is not very different from that of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Both are owners of country manor houses. While Mr. de Winter is the lord of Manderley, Mr. Rochester is the master of the Thornfield Hall. They are past their youth and approaching middle age. They both have had married before. Even their natures are not very different. They are brooding, reserved, unemotional and do not care much for company. They have an air of secrecy surrounding them from their very first introduction. They stayed away from their homes for long periods of time. Moreover, they both would take unusual interest in their future wives from their very first meeting.

If Thornfield Hall constitutes a vital part of *Jane Eyre*, a similar mansion at the heart of the gothic setting is Manderley. If Jane Eyre is awed by the magnificence of Thornfield Hall, the unnamed narrator of *Rebecca* is no less amazed. Both the houses serve as pillars of gothic romance. The fog and the eerie atmosphere play their part in adding to the gothic milieu. There are secrets, terrifying one at that, surrounding the houses and it is up to the protagonists to unravel them. If Jane hears cackling, inhuman laughter coming from the upper stairs of Thornfield Hall, in *Rebecca* the narrator is as good as made to believe that the place is haunted by Maxim's first wife, Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers, the sinister housekeeper of Manderley, plays no small part in scaring the protagonist and making her feel as unwelcome as possible. In both the novels, the same tropes of exploration are used, as the heroine rambles along the corridors and comes up against locked doors but more powerfully, locked is the access to Rochester's or Max de Winter's minds. In both cases, the country house becomes oppressive to their owners because of their association with the mad, bad wife. In spite of being haunted and oppressed by the houses, which contain evidence of their disastrous first marriages, both Rochester and Max De Winter try to establish their new, young wives in the same houses and under the same domestic rules (Bertrandias).

Another similarity that connects the two popular texts is the presence of 'the other woman'. There are although certain differences between the presentation, role and character of the other women in the two texts, a discerning reader would see through the distinction and find similarities even in differences. In *Rebecca*, the character of Maxim's first wife and the hold she still has over everyone even after her death is evident from the very moment the second Mrs. De Winter sets foot in Manderley. There are secrets surrounding the famous Rebecca, the first Mrs. De Winter, and the narrator is at her wit's end trying to decipher the mystery. Her constant attempts to fit in Manderley are repeatedly thwarted by the infernal housekeeper Mrs. Danvers who has been a faithful companion and loyal servant of Rebecca. Even though it's been a year that Rebecca's lifeless body was found near a distant shore, her presence still lingers in every part of Manderley and Mrs. Danvers makes sure to keep it that way, preserving Rebecca's room and possession as if she were still alive.

Bertha Rochester's presence in *Jane Eyre* might not be as vocal as that of Rebecca's, but her nature and function is more similar to Rebecca's than it appears. Bertha is alive but she is so secretly locked up in the attic that she is thought to be non-existent. In fact, before the truth is unravelled, it would seem as if Thornfield Hall is haunted by a vampire-like creature. Rebecca similarly at times would also be presented as someone with long, dark, hair and pale skin.

Though Rebecca is everything that Bertha is not, they both are shunned by their husbands. If Bertha is considered to be a lunatic and locked-up in the attic, Rebecca's dominant, independent nature, her blatant disregard of conventions and her refusal to bow down or admit

defeat make her a mad woman. It is the husband again who locks her up in the boat-house and the only way Maxim could keep her that way was by killing her. But Rebecca is all the more conspicuous by her absence. Bertha and Rebecca, their being locked away doesn't stop them from wreaking havoc in their husband's lives. Moreover, if Rebecca represents a true avatar of the Fatal Woman, Bertha, by her dishevelled physical appearance and gory onslaughts inspire in Jane the same identification, the same mythic figure of the Fatal Woman.

Another similarity between Bertha and Rebecca is how different they are from the protagonists of the novels. Jane is sensible, passionate intelligent woman with not a hint of madness in her and therefore, apparently, a complete antithesis of Bertha. In spite of that, it has often been stated by critics that Bertha is nothing but an objective manifestation of Jane's own passionate nature. Similarly, the narrator in *Rebecca* is simple, plain, innocent and almost child-like, the direct antithesis of Rebecca. In fact the very reason Maxim de Winter chose such an ordinary, downtrodden meek girl to be his bride in Monte Carlo was because she was exactly the opposite of his beautiful but dominant and independent first wife Rebecca who could only be suppressed in death. But even in death Rebecca remains victorious. Not only did she force Maxim to shoot her to save herself from an even more painful death by cancer, she takes away the one thing that she knew would break Maxim down, his beloved home Manderley.

Though locked up, Mr. Rochester's first wife is alive whose existence drives a wedge between Mr. Rochester and Jane preventing them from being united in marriage. Similarly, Rebecca's spirit so thoroughly pervades Daphne du Maurier's text that it prevents the second Mrs. de Winter from becoming the true mistress of the house. If Bertha's presence prevents Jane and Mr. Rochester's marriage, in Maurier's text, the narrator, though married to Maxim, doesn't really feel like being his wife in the true sense of the term, nor does Maxim treat her as one until much later. It is also to be noted that in both the texts it is not so much the presence of the Other woman that creates a rift between the couples as the adamant insistence of the men to hold on to the secrets until it is too late.

The heroines of both the texts would agree to start new lives with the persons they barely knew, persons whose secrets would almost rend them apart. Mr. Rochester beguiles Jane to marry him, neither disclosing that he is already married nor the fact that his first wife is locked up in the attic of the very same house where he has been courting Jane these many days. He wished for Jane to "live a happy, and guarded, and most innocent life" (Brontë 383). In *Rebecca* Maxim treats his second wife as a child in need of guidance or protection from the truth and behaves with her more as a guardian or a father-figure. It is only when Rebecca's secret looms large and threatens to be unravelled that Maxim truly accepts her as his wife and confidante. In other words, both men in a striking parallel, construct their beloveds into a figure of innocence and purity in which they are determined to keep them enclosed (Bertrandias).

Manderley is the seat of gothic magnificence. From the very beginning it has been described as beautiful. When the second Mrs. Maxim de Winter arrives at Manderley she is awed by it: "A thing of grace and beauty, exquisite and faultless, lovelier even than I had ever dreamed..." (Maurier 65). But little does she know that she will neither be welcomed nor will she be able to start a new home with Maxim at the grand Manderley because Manderley still rings with the presence of the first Mrs. Maxim de Winter, who, though dead, is never forgotten. And it is only when Maxim's beloved Manderley is burnt to the ground that Rebecca's hold over their lives is released. As the narrator declares in the second chapter "... we have paid for freedom" (6), freedom from the clutch of the alluring but adamant Rebecca.

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane never could become the mistress of Thornfield Hall when its original mistress was already alive and residing in the same house, although locked up in the attic. The parallel between the two novels concerns the woman's challenge to the patriarchal system embodied by the house and the heroine's future depending in both cases upon the destruction of the big house and purging their lives from the presence of the other woman. Therefore it is only logical that both Thornfield and Manderley should be destroyed by fire. If in Maurier's novel, it is Rebecca's loyal servant, or more precisely her alter ego, Mrs. Danvers who burns Manderley and frees Rebecca, in *Jane Eyre* it is Bertha herself who lights Thornfield Hall on fire and commits suicide. By doing so she not only frees herself but even Mr. Rochester.

The ordeals that the couples in both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* go through are great. But it is to be noted that while the heroines in both the novels emerge triumphant and transformed from their suffering, the same cannot be said of either Mr. Edward Rochester or Mr. Maximilian de Winter. They both endure ordeal by fire. While in *Jane Eyre*, the night Thornfield Hall is burnt, Mr. Rochester becomes "blind and a cripple" (Brontë 535), in *Rebecca*, Mr. de Winter after seeing his beloved Manderley burn, it is his spirit that is broken. Like Jane, the narrator now employs her time reading aloud to Maxim, although it is unclear why as there seems little possibility that he too might have been blinded in the fire. In both the novels, the roles that the couples played from the very beginning are interchanged. The hitherto young, inexperienced, awkward child-like heroines are transformed into mature, experienced, capable women, while the so far dominant, assertive, protective Mr. Rochester and Mr. de Winter are incapacitated, needing to be looked after and taken care of.

One marked difference between the two texts is the contrast between the Mrs. Danvers and Mrs. Fairfax, the first is the housekeeper of Manderley, the latter of Thornfield Hall. On one hand there is Mrs. Fairfax who is the faithful and obedient servant of the patriarchal law, one who never betrays her Master's secret and makes sure that the doors are kept locked (Bertrandias), on the other hand there is Mrs. Danvers. It seems that Daphne du Maurier radically subverts the character of Mrs. Fairfax and presents us with her direct antithesis—Mrs. Danvers. If Maxim de Winter closes the doors, she opens them. She adamantly holds on to the memory of Rebecca, refusing to let her go. In fact, it is through her that we come to know about the spirited and enigmatic side of Rebecca's character, one which is very different from the 'demon' that Maxim describes her to be. Mrs. Danvers not only brings Rebecca to life, constantly referring to the "real Mrs. de Winter", but, at the same time, never lets the narrator forget that she can never be anything like the magnificent Rebecca.

It is also to be noted that in spite of the similarities between the two heroines of *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, there are subtle differences in their natures as well. Jane is, though quiet, in no sense meek. She is courageous, witty and can even be called audacious. She has the strength to leave Thornfield Hall and the man she dearly loves to turn over a new leaf on her own when she was devastated by Mr. Rochester's secrets. The narrator of *Rebecca*, by contrast, doesn't appear to be as confident. She herself recalls "that self who drove to Manderley for the first time, hopeful and eager, handicapped by a rather desperate gaucherie and filled with an intense desire to please" (Maurier 9), laments that "poise, and grace, and assurance were not qualities inbred in me" (80), envies "someone who was never anxious, never tortured by doubt and indecision, someone who never stood as I did, hopeful, eager, frightened, tearing at bitten nails, uncertain which way to go, what star to follow" (98).

Although the similarities and the inter-textual link between the two texts, *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* are obvious, no reference, either implicit or explicit, has been found in the latter novel.

Moreover, Daphne Du Maurier, who admired Brontë's works, never made, as far as it is known, any mention of her intention to write a transformation of Charlotte Brontë's novel (*Bertrandias*). Moreover, it would be wrong to pigeonhole *Rebecca* as a reworking of *Jane Eyre*. *Rebecca* is not merely a story about a lovesick young woman's obsession with her husband's dead first wife, but it is also a book about the interweaving of past and present. It is a work of immense intelligence and wit, elegantly written, and suspenseful (Yardley). Though the parallels between the two texts are obvious, it is debatable whether *Rebecca* really is an imitation of *Jane Eyre* or whether Brontë's classic merely acted as a source text from which Maurier derived certain ideas to create a masterpiece of her own.

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