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## “Disembodied Spirits” Revisiting Manderley

### The Construction of Female Subjectivity in du Maurier’s *Rebecca*

#### I INTRODUCTION

Daphne du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca* (1938) presents an intricate network of interpretative discourses that centre around the figure of Rebecca. Although Rebecca does not play an active role in the novel’s plot, her function as a multi-layered textual construction is immense. There are several layers of interpretation to construe Rebecca as a system of reference: Rebecca as a referential construction to interpret gender; Rebecca as a semiotic construction created by means of objects; Rebecca as the narrator’s double; Rebecca as body; and Rebecca as writing and narrative. These layers do not appear separately in the text, as they all depend on one another in their methods and purpose of constructing Rebecca.

Du Maurier<sup>1</sup> uses the genre of the Gothic romance to arrange these layers into a unified text, in which she poses questions about the institution of marriage, the development of female subjectivity, sexuality, and homoerotic desire. As Janet Harbord points it out, both psychoanalysis and romance narratives draw upon

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1 Daphne du Maurier (1907–1989) was born in London into an artistic family. Her novels and short stories, which are mostly set in Cornwall, were widely read in her time, especially *Rebecca*, which was made into a film with the same title by Alfred Hitchcock in 1940. One of Hitchcock’s other great movies, *The Birds* (1963) was also adapted from a du Maurier text. Du Maurier is becoming more and more popular within the field of feminist literary scholarship, as a result of *Rebecca*’s various parallels with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

the concept of development in which "to move in time is to progress from a state of flux to a state of stability,"<sup>2</sup> where the "present is established as 'real' only in relation to a past that has been othered, reworked and reconfigured to give eminence to the present of identity."<sup>3</sup> Thus, in romance narratives, similarly to psychoanalysis, the past always serves as something to discard, to forget in order to live happily in the present, preferably in some institutionalised form, most importantly, marriage.

The process of forgetting and discarding, however, is never fully complete. As Harbord writes, "[t]he past returns to haunt, to ghost the present and disturb the familiarity of 'home.'"<sup>4</sup> This parallel makes it possible to interpret the textual construction of Rebecca in psychoanalytical terms, since du Maurier chooses repetition as the main narrative tool to create Rebecca. The novel can be read as a text of continuous repetition and repression, returning and discarding, which provides a method to express female subjectivity and desire.

The most important repetition in the novel is the "wife-doubling," since after Rebecca dies, the narrator comes to fill her position as Mrs. de Winter, when she becomes the second wife of Maxim de Winter, the owner of the Manderley estate. Besides Rebecca, the narrator, and Maxim, the fourth major character of the novel is Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper of Manderley.

Maxim de Winter and Mrs. Danvers represent opposing forces fighting for the right to construct and interpret Rebecca. In a metaphor, this process could be described as a game of tennis in which Rebecca functions as the ball. As Rebecca is bouncing from one racket to another, her meaning and significance changes, as if on a spectrum between two binaries. The game played by Max and Mrs. Danvers can be seen as the process of constructing Rebecca in the narrative, since it is these two characters who, in the larger part of the narrative, let the reader know what Rebecca was like, or rather, what their concept of Rebecca is like. Since the two "players" stand on the two halves of the tennis court, separated by the net, their images of Rebecca appear strikingly different. However, Rebecca finally refuses to take the trajectory allocated for her by either Max or Mrs. Danvers and decides to bounce off court, denouncing all interpretation along binary structures.

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2 Janet Harbord, "Between Identification and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*," *Feminist Review* 53 (1996) 95-107, p. 95.

3 Harbord, p. 95.

4 Harbord, p. 95.

The significance of this tennis game lies not so much in Max's or Mrs. Danvers's "enjoyment" but in the construction of the narrator as subject. As she always defines herself in relation to the various concepts of "Rebecca," her identification with, or opposition to, "Rebecca" is also shifting, at times moving in the same direction with the tennis ball and other times getting away from it. The tennis game of the narrative suggests that there is no stable subject position either for the narrator or for Rebecca; it keeps moving, and if it seems to get stabilised, it is always only on the surface. The instability of subject positions creates tension between the surface layer and the subtext of the novel, that is, between the story of the narrator's development into a heterosexual woman (where her status is seemingly stabilised by the sanctity of marriage) and her (unconscious) desire to denounce such an ultimate definition. The tension between the surface text and the subtext characterises the genre of romance, as it is "open to transgressive readings outside/against the strictly normative heterosexual matrix, even if the narrative works ultimately (and at times unconvincingly) to contain and close these possibilities."<sup>5</sup> In *Rebecca*, in spite of the fact that it is traditionally regarded as belonging to the group of romance narratives, we can find nothing that would convincingly re-establish the "normative heterosexual matrix" in the end. The text, as Harbord points it out, is informed by homoerotic desire and the neglect, or even subversion, of the Oedipal taboo, which says that "you cannot be what you desire; you cannot desire what you wish to be."<sup>6</sup> The novel, on the one hand, presents the norm (either in terms of heterosexuality or sanity), on the other hand, works for the disruption of the binary of "subject/object," "feminine/masculine," and "angel/witch" and questions the validity of patrilineage and the heterosexual power structure.

## II REBECCA AS THE UNCANNY OTHER TO INTERPRET GENDER

In his seminal study of "The 'Uncanny,'" Sigmund Freud describes this psychic phenomenon as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."<sup>7</sup> From the point of view of Gothic romance fiction, the uncanny gains enormous significance, as it relates to what Freud calls

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5 Harbord, p. 97.

6 Harbord, p. 104.

7 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 123-124.

"repetition-compulsion" in another essay entitled "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." The uncanny frightens us mainly because it is familiar but returns in an unexpected way, thus, it becomes striking.<sup>8</sup> When meeting with the uncanny, "the person seems to be experiencing something passively, without exerting any influence of his own, and yet always meets with the same fate over and over again."<sup>9</sup> In du Maurier's novel, Rebecca becomes the always-returning presence, whose meaning and significance shift according to the level on which she is interpreted.

The endless returns of the late Mrs. de Winter becomes textually interesting because her haunting course is not "initiated" by her (thus, there is no supernatural element in the novel) but by Max, Mrs. Danvers, and, after a while, the narrator herself. All the three characters conjure up Rebecca for some peculiar reason by means of traces she has left behind. Initially, what makes Rebecca's return possible is her going away, that is, her death. The dreadful secret Max hides is that he killed Rebecca and, having hidden her body in her boat, he sank her. The murder is a conscious effort on Max's part to silence, discard, and dissolve Rebecca, since she has become too "disobedient" as a living woman, with all her eccentricity, "inadequate" behaviour, and sexual drives. Max hopes that by killing Rebecca he can gain absolute control over her, as he is able to circumscribe Rebecca as a woman as well as a textual construction. If Rebecca is dead, Max can formulate her image in the popular imagination in the way he wishes, that is, he can keep Rebecca's character within the confines of the Manderley estate, where she is known to have fulfilled the role of the competent and faithful wife and social hostess.

Maxim's ambivalent love-hate attitude towards his wife becomes manifest not only in their shopwindow-marriage and his murdering her, but, most importantly, in his unconscious and unwilling desire to bring Rebecca back. He kills Rebecca, thus he relegates her into the realm of the past; however, he hides her body in a way that she can always return, that is, he sinks the boat not far away from the shore so that he himself may expect someone will sooner or later find it with the body lying at its bottom, as its name, *Je Reviens*, suggests. He identifies the body twice, almost deliberately duplicating his traumatic experience. Al-

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8 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" p. 149.

9 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" p. 150.

though he hates to admit that Manderley is “all Rebecca,”<sup>10</sup> he makes no changes whatsoever to restore the original, “pre-Rebeccan” state of things, so every time he returns to Manderley he has to face the traces Rebecca has left behind. Thus, Max himself seems to act out the repetition-compulsion almost literally: he feels obliged, as Freud describes the process, “to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed, instead of [...] *recollecting* it as a fragment of the past.”<sup>11</sup> By acting out the repetition-compulsion, Max unconsciously undermines his own effort to hermetically and hermeneutically close the past by murdering and burying Rebecca. Even the burial itself is a hoax: the corpse that lies in the family crypt is not Rebecca’s, as the real body is floating in the boat sunk by Max, ready to surface at any time.

Max’s unconscious urge to bring Rebecca back endangers not only his control over her, but his masculine identity as well. As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik suggest, Maxim needs woman in order to construct his masculinity in opposition to the Other.<sup>12</sup> Maxim’s efforts to create the Other, however, continuously fail, as for him woman has only “two faces: that of demon and that of angel.”<sup>13</sup> It entails that in the course of constructing the Other, Max has to rely on binaries like angel/devil, subject/object, and masculine/feminine, and when Rebecca puts the whole meaning of these binaries in danger by refusing to conform to them, Max kills her, hoping that as soon as Rebecca is dead, the traditional binary structures can be restored, and his masculine identity secured with another marriage.

Rebecca’s impact as a construction, however, proves to be stronger than her significance as a living wife and hostess, exactly because of Max’s repetition-compulsion. His return to Manderley with his new wife amplifies Rebecca’s uncanny presence: the second Mrs. de Winter starts to assimilate certain characteristics of Rebecca’s into her own subjectivity, even in spite of her own conscious effort to remain distinguishable from Rebecca. It is as if the very aspects of Rebecca that Max tries to suppress by murdering her were resurrecting in the new Mrs. de Winter, who has been chosen by Max directly because she is so much the opposite of what

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10 All parenthesised references are to this edition: Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Pan Books, 1976), p. 287.

11 Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), p. 149.

12 Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), p. 105.

13 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 105.

Rebecca represents. This blending of the narrator's and Rebecca's character, the mixing of the supposedly submissive "blondie" with the unruly "wicked woman" not only subverts the binaries of angel/witch and feminine/masculine, but, by Rebecca's continuous return as an uncanny presence for Max through his compulsive repetition, the boundary between life and death is also blurred. Moreover, as the narrator ceases to be distinct from Rebecca, she can no more fulfil her role as the necessary Other for Maxim to construct his own masculine identity.

### III REBECCA AS MRS. DANVERS'S SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION

Mrs. Danvers's fetishistic preoccupation with Rebecca largely contributes to Rebecca's powerful presence at Manderley. The first Mrs. de Winter's death becomes not only Maxim's but Mrs. Danvers's trauma, too. However, while Maxim brings about his own trauma, Mrs. Danvers believes that it was the sea that took Rebecca away, since no man would have been strong enough to conquer her. She also thinks that Max loved Rebecca, and his troubled state of mind derives from love: "He was jealous while she lived, and now he's jealous when she's dead" (256). Although a constructor herself, Mrs. Danvers is unable to see that the couple's marriage is a show, a construction itself. She creates the image of Rebecca as a natural goddess, whom she serves as priestess in the temple of Manderley, keeping Rebecca's fire alive (and, significantly, setting the temple on fire as if taking revenge on Rebecca for her turning out to be a woman, and mortal at that). Mrs. Danvers discards the fact that Manderley is not Rebecca's temple but serves as a place of confinement, securing the patrilineage of the de Winter family, thus representing the patriarchal system in which both Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers are trapped.

Mrs. Danvers successfully constructs the ghost of Rebecca by means of keeping her physical sphere of existence untouched, and by always recalling her from her memory. Rebecca's body is deprived of its clothes in her death (each time the body is "found," it is naked), while the clothes and other personal objects start to function as semiotic substitutes for Rebecca, as well as fetishistic articles to blur the line between life and death and make the absent lover present:

Here is the nightdress inside the case. You've been touching it, haven't you? This was the nightdress she was wearing for the last time, before she died. Would you like to touch it again? [...] Feel it, hold it [...], how soft and light it is, isn't it? I haven't washed it since she wore it for the last time. (176)

The first Mrs. de Winter's body, a terrifyingly "floating" signifier of another Rebecca, by no means fits Mrs. Danvers's neatly constructed semiotic pattern. While she can keep the clothes and articles in order forever within the ancient walls of Manderley, thus, she can exercise control over the signifiers she uses to preserve Rebecca's image, the decomposing body refuses all identification and confinement. Most significantly, there are two bodies instead of one, suggesting that the body as a signifier is interchangeable, and Rebecca as a construction is constantly moving and changing. The body is a disturbing element both in Mrs. Danvers's and Maxim's construction: it disrupts their carefully built-up image of Rebecca, and its reappearance disturbs the surface, telling too much about "what lies beneath." While Maxim consciously tries to keep his construction of Rebecca as the wife and hostess at one end of the spectrum, fixing her meaning as woman, Mrs. Danvers wants to remake Rebecca by turning the past into present. Thus, both of them neglect Rebecca's allegorical instability, that her meaning cannot be tied down, preserved in her tomb or clothes but keeps reformulating and is always in flux.

Freud's definition of the instinct as a "*tendency innate in living organic matter impelling it towards the reinstatement of an earlier condition, one which it had to abandon under the influence of external disturbing forces*"<sup>14</sup> can be applied to construe the motivation behind either Max's or Mrs. Danvers's struggle to keep the image and meaning of Rebecca intact. Both of them want to preserve "an earlier condition," in which Rebecca plays either the socially acceptable and acknowledged role of the housewife, or the powerful role of an unconquerable witch-goddess. From both Maxim's and Mrs. Danvers's point of view, the *other* aspect of Rebecca functions as a "disturbing force" that intrudes and disrupts their construction. Maxim kills Rebecca because she endangers the image of the respectable hostess by her eccentric, "devilish" behaviour, while Mrs. Danvers's construction is shattered when she learns that Max killed Rebecca; moreover, she was severely ill, thus, in a way, conquered by her own female body – the very body to which Mrs. Danvers assigns an almost supernatural power. Both Max and Mrs. Danvers construct Rebecca in order to control her by keeping her familiar. However, when Rebecca as a construction reveals aspects of the uncanny, when she becomes *unheimlich*, "unhomely," and starts to function in a way that has not been intended by either Max or Mrs. Danvers, both husband and housekeeper lose the tennis players' power over their "ball," and Rebecca, choosing her own

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14 Sigmund Freud, "Pleasure Principle," p. 158.

trajectory of interpretation, bounces off court. This is the point where the narrator starts to understand the implications of Rebecca as her double and incorporate Rebecca's subversive aspects in the course of the development of her own female subjectivity.

*IV DUPLICATING IMAGES, FLOATING BODIES AND IDENTITIES:  
REBECCA AS THE NARRATOR'S DOUBLE*

In connection with instincts, Freud also remarks that if "all organic instincts are conservative, historically acquired, and are directed towards regression, towards reinstatement of something earlier, we are obliged to place all the results of organic development to the credit of external, disturbing and distracting influences."<sup>15</sup> Adapting this idea of development to female subjectivity, Rebecca can be seen as an "external, disturbing, and distracting" influence that triggers off the development of the narrator's subjectivity.

Horner and Zlosnik identify Rebecca as the narrator's "transgressive double," who is "a manifestation of an anxiety which drew [du Maurier] continually back to the Gothic mode of writing."<sup>16</sup> They argue that du Maurier uses "the grotesque and the sinister to explore shifting anxieties concerning the nature of identity."<sup>17</sup> In *Rebecca* the author creates the sinister and grotesque by means of repetition, return, and doubling or multiplication, which arouses anxiety in the narrator, concerning her identity as the second Mrs. de Winter, and implies, as well, that it is not only Rebecca who is the narrator's double, but the second Mrs. de Winter also functions as the double of the first one.

From the very beginning of her married life, the emphatically anonymous narrator, who lacks any name of her own, has to suffer others' constantly comparing her with Rebecca, thus, her identification as Mrs. de Winter is motivated by different images of Rebecca right from the start. Mrs. Danvers plays the key role in this process, as for her the new wife is also a disturbing element that intrudes into her stable construction of Rebecca as Mrs. de Winter. In this respect, Mrs. Danvers works against her own interest, since by continuously referring to Rebecca and even making the narrator pose like Rebecca at the fancy

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15 Freud, "Pleasure Principle," p. 159.

16 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 6.

17 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 21.

dress ball, she motivates the narrator to always feel Rebecca's presence: "sometimes I felt Rebecca was as real to me as she was to Mrs. Danvers" (144). Eventually, the narrator starts to identify herself with Rebecca: "in that brief moment, sixty seconds in time perhaps, I had so identified myself with Rebecca that my own dull self did not exist" (209).

Therefore, by keeping the narrator in constant awareness of Rebecca's presence, Mrs. Danvers achieves an effect different from what she originally intends: while she would like the narrator to disappear from Manderley by all means, even by committing suicide, she makes her start to assimilate certain aspects of Rebecca. This identification process signifies the development of female subjectivity in the narrator: "I had entered into a new phase of my life and nothing would be quite the same again. The girl who had dressed for the fancy dress ball the night before had been left behind [...] This self who sat on the window-seat was new, was different" (272).

The narrator's development, however, is as ambivalent as Rebecca's image. Through the course of the novel, she constantly struggles against Rebecca's influence but at the same time cannot escape it. The narrator finds it extremely hard to completely identify herself as Mrs. de Winter. For example, when the ship runs ashore at Manderley, and she meets some tourists, she fails to acknowledge she is Mrs. de Winter: "I wished I could lose my own identity and join them" (268). Not much later, returning to the house, she realises, "perhaps for the first time, with a funny feeling of bewilderment and pride," that Manderley is her home, she belongs there, and the estate belongs to her (271). Thus, she is constantly moving in and out of being defined by her marriage and by belonging to the Manderley establishment.

The formation of the narrator's subjectivity is thus a process of constant denouncing and returning to what is repressed and denied. The new wife wants to suppress Rebecca's image; meanwhile, she keeps visiting her room and dreaming about her. She craves for the knowledge Rebecca represents: the knowledge of female sexuality and desire. As Horner and Zlosnik write, the narrator's sexual curiosity is monitored by Maxim, who "invokes the father/daughter romance as a cultural endorsement of his over-protectiveness."<sup>18</sup> Maxim wants to prevent the narrator from entering Rebecca's sphere: he identifies Rebecca with a text contained in forbidden books that are "better kept under lock and key" (211), lest they should expose "a certain type of knowledge" (211) the narrator had better

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18 Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, p. 103.

not have. Maxim and Mrs. Danvers believe themselves to be keepers of the key to Rebecca's knowledge, and they both want to use their power to hold the narrator under surveillance and in threat. Paradoxically, both Mrs. Danvers and Maxim contribute to the narrator's gaining knowledge, however dreadful it may be. While Mrs. Danvers gradually lets the narrator know about Rebecca's sexuality, Maxim tells the secret about Rebecca's character and death when her body is found in the boat.

The moment of finding Rebecca's body becomes crucial in the narrator's development, as if the body was supposed to expose the possible truth about femininity. Rebecca's body serves as a metaphor for female subjectivity in that it is similarly floating, unstable, and constantly changing meaning. When the body is found, the narrator gains power and is not afraid of Mrs. Danvers or Maxim any more. Her husband becomes dependent on her, and this is what makes her "bold at last" (13).

The surfacing of Rebecca's body is foreshadowed by certain events in the novel that point to the same direction: towards the narrator's gaining knowledge and power. Maxim notices the first sign of the uncanny in the expression on his new wife's face right before the fancy dress ball: "I don't want you to look like you did just now. You had a twist to your mouth and a flash of knowledge in your eyes. Not the right sort of knowledge" (210). At the fancy dress ball the narrator unwillingly brings Rebecca back by dressing up as Caroline de Winter, one of Maxim's great-grandmothers, whose portrait in the Manderley estate once inspired Rebecca to dress up as Caroline de Winter at an earlier fancy dress ball. The narrator's posing as Rebecca posing as Caroline de Winter visually connects the three women, or rather, identifies them as one, which suggests a kind of alternative ancestral line within the confines of Manderley: that of women. It strengthens Rebecca's allegorical significance, which replays the fate of long-forgotten female ancestors, who were probably silenced and subdued just in the same way as Max tries to silence and subdue Rebecca and the narrator.

Multiplying the image of Caroline de Winter makes the meaning of the portrait unstable:<sup>19</sup> the great-grandmother's feminine position, together with that of Rebecca and the narrator, opens up to retrospective interpretation. The emphatic "dressing-up," which connects the three characters, suggests that women have been performing a masquerade of gender for centuries, which performance, as Horner and Zlosnik write, has long been functioning, within the limits of

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19 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 119.

patriarchy, as a “disembodied sign without a referent [...] and as the sight of uncanny ambivalence.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Mrs. Danvers’s endeavour to take revenge on both Maxim and the new wife eventually leads to the narrator’s experiencing, possibly for the first time with such intensity, “the masquerade of femininity, the flaunting of the theatricality of gender identity.”<sup>21</sup> This experience largely contributes to the narrator’s knowledge of Rebecca, and by means of this knowledge she finds herself exposed to the fact that gender is constructed of signifiers without a stable referent, which makes the binary of masculine/feminine an artificial construction.

*V FEMALE WRITING, DESIRE, AND THE PROCESS OF  
SUBJECTIVITY-FORMATION*

Similarly to the clothes Mrs. Danvers uses to construct Rebecca’s image, the texts Rebecca leaves behind also play a significant role in keeping her alive. Rebecca’s written traces interweave the whole novel from the beginning: the narrator encounters the sign of the “curious slanting hand” (37) as early as in Monte Carlo, where she first meets Maxim. Rebecca’s name stands out “black and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters” (37). Thus, as Horner and Zlosnik say, “Rebecca’s uncanny presence in the novel is due not just to other characters’ memories of her but to an indelibility which continually surfaces through her signature [...] and her handwriting.”<sup>22</sup> Rebecca’s writing exercises power over the narrator, so much so that she even burns the page on which she first sees Rebecca’s name written down, foreshadowing Mrs. Danvers’s setting the Manderley estate on fire towards the end of the novel. This is the narrator’s first attempt to suppress Rebecca in herself, quite unsuccessfully, since Rebecca’s writing keeps coming back at Manderley. The writing serves as another means of comparison (and, eventually, identification) between the old and the new Mrs. de Winter. After the narrator sees how powerful Rebecca’s handwriting looks, she comments on her writing as a sign of her inferiority and immaturity: “I noticed for the first time how cramped and unformed was my own hand-writing; without individuality, without style, uneducated even, the writing of an indifferent pupil taught in a second-rate school” (93).

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20 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 119.

21 Harbord, p. 101.

22 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 109.

Rebecca, however, also teaches the narrator how to write, both literally and figuratively. Besides serving as a powerful visual trace to conjure up Rebecca, her writing also signifies the power over text and narration. Writing is traditionally associated with masculinity, and the power of the written word has been encoded in western culture for centuries. As Horner and Zlosnik point it out, Rebecca's writing symbolises the power the narrator has to absorb in order to become powerful,<sup>23</sup> as well as to develop a level of subjectivity that enables her to write the text of *Rebecca*, which, as Horner and Zlosnik suggest, is another act of repetition, now in a complete narrative framework.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Rebecca keeps coming back in several forms: as a patriarchal construction made by Maxim, as a semiotic construction created by Mrs. Danvers, as a body, as writing, and as *Rebecca* the narrative.

Horner and Zlosnik, without going into details, associate the curious letter R in Rebecca's name with "a runic power which derives from its powerful visual impact and its refusal to be destroyed."<sup>25</sup> Taking a closer look at what a rune means may lead to transgressive territories, as a rune traditionally denotes a "character or mark having mysterious or magical powers attributed to it,"<sup>26</sup> as well as "an incantation or charm denoted by magical signs."<sup>27</sup> Although the mysterious or magical power attributed to Rebecca's writing perfectly fits the Gothic framework of the novel, the significance of this aspect exceeds the stylistic or generic shadings of the text, and extends the interpretation of Rebecca's character. It is not only her powerful writing, however, that associates Rebecca with mystery. Horner and Zlosnik point out that "Rebecca" in Hebrew means "knotted cord," which "indicates that – just as a knotted cord should hold firm – so should a woman with the name 'Rebecca' be a firm and faithful wife."<sup>28</sup> The image of the knotted cord also refers to the rope that may bring Maxim's death foreshadowed in the narrator's final dream.<sup>29</sup>

Although these interpretations sound logical and valid, they neglect the significance of the knotted cord and the runic character of Rebecca's writing as

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23 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 110.

24 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 110.

25 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 110.

26 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), Vol. II, p. 2606.

27 *OED*, Vol. II, p. 2606.

28 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 115.

29 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 115.

obvious references to Rebecca as a *riddle* Maxim wants to solve. In this respect, the reading of the “knotted cord” as a metaphor for the faithfulness expected from Rebecca becomes highly ironic. Maxim’s continuous attempts at making sense of Rebecca’s character and femininity prove to be abortive to an extent that his own masculine integrity falls in danger. Thus, he has to kill Rebecca, with which he hopes to provide one possible solution to the riddle. Rebecca’s mystery, however, seems to multiply with her death. Maxim’s next attempt to control Rebecca is when he gets married to the narrator, in order to counterbalance the mystery of the dark female with a blond, middle-class, and seemingly comprehensible girl. But as soon as the narrator finds herself under the roof of Manderley and under the spell of Rebecca, she also becomes engaged in the riddle.

The implications of the mystery reach much further than Maxim or even the second Mrs. de Winter would expect, because Rebecca’s riddle poses disturbing questions about class- and gender-based identification, and female subjectivity, sexuality, and desire. According to Harbord, Rebecca is characterised by “fluidity, the ability to shift between subject positions and across social and cultural spaces.”<sup>30</sup> For the narrator knowing Rebecca and having her as a double is fascinating and dreadful at the same time, since “the textual ‘other,’ as well as being an object of desire, can become a terrifying force who may well invade and destroy the ‘self.’”<sup>31</sup> The ambivalence of du Maurier’s Gothic romance lies in the fact that on the surface the binaries are acknowledged and fulfilled, and the horrifying aspects of subversion and transgression are suppressed, but the subtext gives away the artificiality of these binary structures, which are always motivated by power-relations.

In *Rebecca*, the narrator also tries to repress her desire to know Rebecca and everything that she entails. However, she expresses her doubt about the successful repression of Rebecca’s “threat” as early as on the fifth page of the novel: “We all of us have our particular devil who rides us and torments us, and we must give battle in the end. We have conquered ours, or so we believe” (9). As a contrast to this “hopeful” statement, the whole novel exposes the constant repetition of surfacing and repression. This psychic process is also signified by the dream-frame of the novel: it begins with a dream about returning to Manderley, and ends with a dream about Rebecca.

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<sup>30</sup> Harbord, p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Horner and Zlosnik, p. 26.

The final dream has a crucial function in the narrative, as it plays out the blurring of boundaries between self and other: the narrator sees herself in the mirror as Rebecca *writing*, while Maxim tries to strangle himself with the Rebecca-narrator's Rapunzel-rope. This dream makes the narrator's sentence "I too had killed Rebecca" (297) highly ambivalent: according to the surface layer of the romance, whatever Rebecca represents is killed, closed off; however, in the light of the last dream, the narrator's murdering Rebecca can be interpreted as her internalising whatever subversive and transgressive aspects she associates with Rebecca's character. The reader can follow the development of the narrator's subjectivity from ignorance to knowledge, from naïveté to female desire, and from submissiveness to power and confidence. Therefore, the narrator's belief to have conquered her "devil" sounds unconvincing, since "in assimilating aspects of Rebecca, the narrator implicitly rejects the social categorizations which separate the 'bad' from the 'good' woman,"<sup>32</sup> as well as embraces "the multiple possibilities inherent in female sexual identity."<sup>33</sup> In this light, the sentence "I too had killed Rebecca" could be rewritten as "We two had killed Maxim," together with the binaries he uses to establish and maintain a stable subject-position for himself.

The "multiple possibilities" of female sexual identity are strongly connected to female desire, which is motivated in the narrative by repetition and return. As Harbord writes, "despite the narrator's profession to the contrary, 'we' are continually going back, returning, because the appeal of what is prohibited is often stronger than the appeal of the 'present' limits of conformity."<sup>34</sup> Harbord also summarises Freud's setup of the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal phases: whereas in the former there is "no distinction between being and having, identification and desire,"<sup>35</sup> the Oedipal taboo "forces a recognition of identity through separation."<sup>36</sup> While Maxim tries to construct female sexuality according to the Oedipal complex, on the basis of its separation from its male counterpart, the way Rebecca relates to men and sex (and the way the narrator relates to Rebecca) interrogates the validity of the Oedipal taboo in the definition of female sexuality and desire. The narrator's relationship with Rebecca is formulated by two forces: her identification with, and desire for, her. Both are motivated by "a semiotic

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32 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 126.

33 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 125.

34 Harbord, pp. 95–96.

35 Harbord, p. 104.

36 Harbord, p. 104.

network of signifiers detached from 'needs,' which are endlessly displaced and substituted."<sup>37</sup> Thus, what constructs Rebecca, and consequently, the narrator's identification with her, is what constructs her as an object of the narrator's desire, a beautiful imaginary signifier without a referent. While Maxim's idea of sexuality and desire is based on binaries, thus, separation plays a key role in its formulation, the narrator's identification with Rebecca, the suppressed object of her desire, denounces division and oppositional identification.

This pre-Oedipalisation seriously jeopardises Maxim's masculine identity, since he has to depend in his self-identification on the feminine "other," which, however, he himself creates. If Maxim's "other" cannot be constructed, moreover, the images of the angel (the new wife) and the witch (the old wife) start to overlap and finally collapse into one subjectivity, Max's masculinity as opposed to femininity makes no sense any more.

#### VI CONCLUSION

As Judith Butler writes,

[i]f prohibition creates the 'fundamental divide' of sexuality, and if this 'divide' is shown to be duplicitous precisely because of the artificiality of its division, then there must be a division that *resists* division, a psychic doubleness or inherent bisexuality that comes to undermine every effort of severing.<sup>38</sup>

Constructed as the textual double for the narrator and for du Maurier herself, Rebecca functions as the object of desire, and thus the novel becomes the story of the ego constantly departing from but always collapsing back into its love-object. If female subjectivity and identification are formulated in relation to a constantly shifting, floating, deconstructed and reconstructed love-object, the story of *Rebecca* "in effect explores subjectivity as a spectrum, rather than a position, thus presenting female identity as complex and multifaceted."<sup>39</sup>

Rebecca, a trope for female subjectivity, is the "absent center of desire, the imaginary lack."<sup>40</sup> She is absent in more than one sense: she is dead and is

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37 Harbord, p. 104.

38 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 55.

39 Horner and Zlosnik, p. 100.

40 Harbord, p. 100.

constructed only from other characters' memories and from traces (clothes, articles, scents, notes) she has left behind. Her body is missing almost throughout the whole novel, and when it is eventually found, it is already decomposed. She functions as a referential structure without a referent, a representative of contrasting discourses but herself the product of the same discourses. Hence her ambivalence: she is a ghost, "intangible yet desirable, present yet invisible,"<sup>41</sup> something to be repressed yet coming back, something to loathe and worship at the same time. Because of her ambivalence and multiple discursive functions, Rebecca eventually becomes what her name refers to: a knotted cord that holds untied, in the same way as the riddle of female subjectivity remains unsolved. The woman, once so familiar and domestic, starts to behave in the same way as the word *heimlich* itself: she "develops towards an ambivalence, until [she] finally coincides with [her] opposite, *unheimlich*,"<sup>42</sup> and keeps coming "home" to disturb the boring but "dear tranquillity" (S), even though her haunting place has long perished in fire.

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41 Harbord, p. 100.

42 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" p. 135.