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**CONSTRUCTIONS OF POWER:  
FEMINIST SUB-TEXTS IN THE  
NOVELS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË  
AND DAPHNE DU MAURIER**

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fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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### ABSTRACT

This exploration of the novels of Charlotte Brontë and Daphne du Maurier reveals a number of similarities in each author's investigations of feminist concerns. Centring upon a discussion of cultural values in the texts of both authors, this thesis suggests that nineteenth and twentieth century female writers use similar literary devices to incorporate feminist sub-texts beneath the surface of outwardly conventional romantic novels.

Certain significant themes and images appear in both Brontë's and du Maurier's works: the burned stately home, the Gothic atmosphere, the characterisation of an abused and abusive first-person male narrator, and marginalised female characters who are drawn towards a more empowered yet also culturally marginalised male protector/punisher-figure. In du Maurier's work in particular, these themes and images are recreated throughout successive novels in an apparently compulsive manner, suggesting a vital psychological working-through of material to which the author holds an attitude of ambivalence.

My discussion gives extra weight to du Maurier, not only because the volume and time-span of her work exceeds that of Brontë (twelve of her seventeen novels are here discussed in depth and the remaining five briefly placed in context) but also because limited academic interest has hitherto been shown in du Maurier's works (with the possible exception of *Rebecca*), as opposed to the existing wealth of Brontë scholarship. It is my belief that du Maurier's work as a whole is of interest to academic study for its inherent psychological realism, contemporary concern with gender-related topics, and strong sense of literary inheritance; this thesis initiates an exploration of these issues.

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Jacqui Beets

### DEDICATION

**This thesis is dedicated to the memory of the late M.L.E. Harper, whose artistic appreciation and generously-shared library of books and music fostered my early interest in the Humanities, and who would undoubtedly be delighted to know of the completion of this project.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Critics have observed that Charlotte Brontë's fiction exists on two levels, "the one conscious capitulation to convention, the other dissent concealed by overt orthodoxy" (Foster 79). This thesis suggests that a similar tension exists within the novels of Daphne du Maurier, and the following exploration of both authors' novels reveals their similarities in handling "dissenting" feminist material--material assigned a sub-textual position in an outwardly orthodox text.

Du Maurier was quick to acknowledge the debt she owed to early readings of the Brontës' novels, particularly *Jane Eyre* (Cook 132, 202). As has been observed,

many people have regarded Daphne's books as being rather "Brontëfied" in their construction, with their use of landscape alongside character descriptions. Certainly Daphne was fascinated throughout her career with this half-Irish, half-Cornish family. . . there is a parallel in that they, as she did, merged personal experiences and imagination, and became closely associated with a particular area. (Shallcross 42)

These personal experiences include the frustrations of living as a female in a patriarchally-dominated world. Both Brontë and du Maurier were overshadowed by possessive intellectual and artistic fathers who sheltered their daughters from prospective suitors and an independent life (a domineering role continued after Gerald du Maurier's death on the part of du Maurier's husband, Tommy Browning). Brontë and du Maurier escaped their restricted existences through the creation of early adolescent fantasy worlds and later adult fiction; both, however, suffered from ambivalent personal responses to the culturally-unsanctioned female resentment expressed in their work. Brontë's Angrian fantasy realm became an "infernal" paradise filled with "evil wandering thoughts", about which she expressed moral uncertainty (*The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* 66) and although du Maurier's private imaginary world may have been an "escape from the pressure of her luxurious and closely

watched everyday life" (Shallcross 26-7), the turmoil of creating a fantasy-life in which her so-called "No.2" or secret self had free reign drove her near to psychological collapse (Forster 416).

Cultural values and expectations continued to impinge upon both writers throughout their careers: prevented by Browning's health from working on her biography of Branwell Brontë, du Maurier identified closely with her literary predecessor Brontë's similar predicament at Haworth:

I have been in constant attendance on my husband. . . I feel rather like Charlotte Brontë when nursing the Rev. Brontë and finding it difficult to get on with *Villette*. (letter to J Alex Symington, quoted in Forster 308)

Much of du Maurier's soul-searching in later life centred upon the moral and social dilemma of women's ability to reconcile career and family in a cultural atmosphere which discouraged personal female fulfilment (Cook 243).

The two authors, although separated by almost a century in time and inhabiting diverse geographic locales (Brontë Yorkshire and Brussels, du Maurier Cornwall, London, Paris and Alexandria), respond to feminist concerns in a strikingly similar manner. They write in popular romance-novel and historical-novel genres, creating works which reveal, beneath an orthodox surface-text of a heroine's fulfilment through love and/or marriage, symbols, themes and images which create a sub-text subtly undermining their novels' "romantic" happy endings.

It is notable that du Maurier consciously deviates from the romance-novel or historical-novel genre in certain works, particularly her early novels *I'll Never Be Young Again* and *The Progress of Julius* and later works such as *Mary Anne* and *Rule Britannia*; these non-romantic, often *Bildungsroman*-like, fictions make interesting study as part of the canon of twentieth-century feminist works. Of her more conventionally-oriented novels, du Maurier denied that any but *Frenchman's Creek* were "romances"; *Rebecca*, she stated firmly, was intended as "a study in

jealousy and murder, not romantic at all" (Shallcross 83), although publicists, reviewers and the reading public have persistently argued otherwise. Recent critical studies have observed that the enduring success of novels like *Rebecca* may lie in their ability to be read in more ways than one; with an unnamed heroine able to be cast as either a conventional submissive wife or the subversive double of rebellious Rebecca, female readers are free to identify with either version of female behaviour (Rance 87, 97).

The following discussion outlines several areas in which feminist rage and resentment underpin the "orthodox" texts of du Maurier's and Brontë's fiction. Through the creation of a Gothic atmosphere and the symbol (in du Maurier's case, obsessively reproduced) of a burned stately home, bastion of patrimonial privilege and power; through the depiction of a male first-person narrator who embodies the oppressed status of the female author but who compulsively punishes his text's female, rather than male, characters; and through the creation of female characters who are drawn towards masculine rebel-figures symbolising a more powerful--and punishing--version of their own culturally-repressed individualism, Brontë and du Maurier reveal a legacy of feminine resentment which continues unbroken from the 1840s throughout the twentieth century.

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