‘Returning to Manderley’ – Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class

Alison Light

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.

Thus opens Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca, published in 1938. With thirty-nine impressions and translations into twenty languages in as many years, Rebecca was and still is an enormous bestseller. Hitchcock made a film of the novel in 1940, its latest TV serialization was only a couple of years ago and even more recently it has been the subject of an opera. Whilst one study of its initial success claims that ‘every good historian should read it in tandem with contemporary newspapers’ (Beauman, 1983: 178), its clear that Rebecca speaks as much to readers in the 1980s as it did to those in the 1940s. The story of the plain, genteel orphan girl — we never learn her name — who marries the aristocratic widower has got everything a romance needs and more: jealously, mystery, adultery and murder.

Jealousy and envy of her husband’s first wife — the beautiful, upper-class Rebecca — propels the nameless heroine down the dark corridors of Rebecca’s past. But in unlocking the secrets of Rebecca’s character, the girl gets more than she bargained for: her husband turns out to have murdered Rebecca himself. All is not lost, however, for the heroine’s bourgeois virtue triumphs and in the end she manages to save both her husband and her marriage. Rebecca is a rewrite of Jane Eyre amidst a nostalgia for the waning of the British Empire and the decline of its aristocracy. It’s a lingering farewell to the world of Monte Carlo and of paid companions, to splendid breakfasts and devoted servants, the ease and arrogance of life in a stately home like Manderley, the Cornish mansion of the suave gentleman-hero, Maximilian de Winter. Obviously, it is a ripping yarn. But apart from that how do feminists and socialists account for the continued popularity and appeal of a book like this?

In the aftermath of Charles and Di, a lot of critical attention has been turned toward romance and its fictions, from Mills and Boon to ‘bodice rippers’ and the latest high-gloss consumerist fantasies (see, for example, Batsleer, 1981; Margolies, 1982; Harper, 1982). At the centre of the discussion has been the question of the possible political effects of reading romances — what, in other words, do they do to you? Romances have on the whole, been condemned by critics on the Left (although Janet Batsleer’s piece is a notable exception). They are seen as coercive and stereotyping narratives which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who only finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male. What happens to women readers is then compared to certain Marxist descriptions of the positioning of all human subjects.
under capitalism. Romance thus emerges as a form of oppressive ideology, which works to keep women in their socially and sexually subordinate place.

I want to begin by registering the political dangers of this approach to romance fiction and then to suggest that we should come at the question of its effects rather differently. David Margolies, for example, (Margolies, 1982: 9) talks in highly dubious ways when he refers to women readers being 'encouraged to sink into feeling' and 'to feel without regard for the structure of the situation'. 'Romance', he continues, 'is an opportunity for exercising frustrated sensitivity . . . inward-looking and intensely subjective', it is 'retrogressive' as a form of 'habitual reading for entertainment'. Such an analysis slides into a puritanical Left-wing moralism which denigrates readers. It also treats women yet again as the victims of, and irrational slaves to, their sensibilities. Feminists must baulk at any such conclusion which implies that the vast audience of romance readers (with the exception of a few up-front intellectuals) are either masochistic or inherently stupid. Both text and reader are more complicated than that. It is conceivable, say, that reading Barbara Cartland could turn you into a feminist. Reading is never simply a linear con-job but a process of interaction, and not just between text and reader, but between reader and reader, text and text. It is a process which helps to query as well as endorse social meanings and one which therefore remains dynamic and open to change.

In other words, I think we need critical discussions that are not afraid of the fact that literature is a source of pleasure, passion and entertainment. This is not because pleasure can then explain away politics, as if it were a panacea existing outside of social and historical constraints. Rather it is precisely because pleasure is experienced by women and men within and despite those constraints. We need to balance an understanding of fictions as restatements (however mediated) of a social reality, with a closer examination of how literary texts might function in our lives as imaginative constructions and interpretations. It is this meshing of the questions of pleasure, fantasy and language which literary culture takes up so profoundly and which makes it so uniquely important to women. Subjectivity — the ways in which we come to express and define our concepts of our selves — then seems crucial to any analysis of
the activity of reading. Far from being 'inward-looking' in the dismissive sense of being somehow separate from the realities of the state or the marketplace, subjectivity can be recognized as the place where the operations of power and the possibilities of resistance are also played out.

A re-emphasis on the imaginative dimensions of literary discourse may then suggest ways in which romance, as much because of its contradictory effects as despite them, has something positive to offer its audience, as readers and as women readers. It must at the very least prevent our 'cultural politics' becoming a book-burning legislature, a politics which is doomed to fail since it refuses ultimately to see women of all classes as capable of determining or transforming their own lives.

Romance fiction deals above all with the doubts and delights of heterosexuality, an institution which feminism has seen as problematic from the start. In thinking about this 'problem' I myself have found the psychoanalytic framework most useful since it suggests that the acquisition of gendered subjectivity is a process, a movement towards a social 'self', fraught with conflicts and never fully achieved. Moreover, psychoanalysis takes the question of pleasure seriously, both in its relation to gender and in its understanding of fictions as fantasies, as the explorations and productions of desires which may be in excess of the socially possible or acceptable. It gives us ways into the discussion of popular culture which can avoid the traps of moralism or dictatorship.

What I want to do in this article is to focus some of these points by a close study of du Maurier's Rebecca, a text which seems to me to provide a classic model of romance fiction while at the same time exposing many of its terms. Crucially, because, Rebecca concentrates on femininity as it is regulated and expressed through class difference, it illustrates and also investigates the psychic, social and fictive conditions necessary for a successful bourgeois romance.

A Romantic Thriller

Rebecca is in fact a tale in two genres — crime and romance. Both of these have been dominated by women writers in this last century (interestingly, Agatha Christie — 'the Queen of Crime' — also wrote romance fiction under the name of Mary Westmacott). The girl's romance and whirlwind marriage, however, only occupy about one eighth of Rebecca. Although this is the chronological starting point of the girl's story — the plot — it is not the starting point of the novel, or narrative proper. The opening chapter and a half of Rebecca are chronologically the story's epilogue, an epilogue in which the girl narrator and her unnamed husband are in exile abroad, homeless and disinherited.3 The entire novel and clearly the romance take the form of a flashback. Rebecca takes the conventional romance story as its setting and as its own prologue; all the rest of the action takes place after marriage, after what traditionally constitutes the happy ending of romance fiction. Instead, the bulk of the text revolves around the girl's jealous pursuit of Rebecca's character and of her death. Once these enigmas have been solved they will explain the curious situation of the couple as expatriates which opens the story and will bring it full circle. I want to follow this structural movement of displacement and return, as it is narrated by the girl. I want to argue that through it Rebecca can investigate the terms and conditions of romance for women, both fictionally and socially. The novel becomes a thriller which goes behind the scenes of the romance drama.

'I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool.' This irresistible proposal (du Maurier, 1975: 36) is the climax of the romance between the 'red-elbowed and lanky haired' girl (20) and 'the man who owns Manderley', as Maxim is first designated in the dining-room of the Monte Carlo hotel where they meet. Their marriage —
which takes place against all odds, and much to everyone's amazement — would itself have furnished the standard plot of a contemporary Berta Ruck or Barbara Cartland romance (Anderson, 1974). Yet it is this category of romance that the girl immediately begins to question and that is as troubling as it is reassuring:

Romantic, that was the word . . . Yes, of course. Romantic. That was what people would say. It was all very sudden and romantic . . . (61).

From here she is led on to compare her 'raw ex-schoolgirl' dream to the adult love-story she imagines took place between Maxim and Rebecca. What makes the girl insecure about 'romance' is not simply her youth and lack of sexual experience, but crucially its expression in the class difference between her and Maxim, her and Rebecca. Much is made of her dowdy and inelegant clothes, of exactly how much she earns, of her down-at-heel middle-class niceness. Obviously their marriage is not one of social equals. Maxim makes this explicit in a comparison which demonstrates how class interprets and regulates sexual behaviour and expectations:

instead of being companion to Mrs Van Hopper you become mine, and your duties will be almost exactly the same(58).

Not surprisingly, the girl finds this both comforting and profoundly depressing. Thus her initial jealousy of Rebecca is one of her confident social and sexual place, since for women the one must secure and define the other. Where Rebecca was 'mistress of Manderley' the girl 'is no great lady' (79). And more importantly the girl begins to imagine that Rebecca's aristocratic lineage allowed her a passionate and equal sexuality which her own bourgeois model of femininity, with its stress on companion-ship and duty, does not. Rebecca's class difference makes her seem more mature, more adult, both socially and sexually. In the course of the novel the girl idealizes her as the expression of all the other possible versions of female sexuality which her own middle-classness excludes. Rebecca disrupts the girl's romantic model and leads her to search for a 'successful' marriage which will also legitimize female sexual desire. For the girl to find a secure social identity (a name) as Maxim's wife, Rebecca's difference must be reinterpreted. From being the girl's imaginary ideal, she has to become her nightmarish enemy. No longer the perfect wife, hostess and lover, she is to branded by the end of the novel as lesbian and whore.

So the key question of romance that the girl asks — does Maxim really love her? — comes to depend on the answer to an earlier question — did Maxim love Rebecca? If so, how can he love both, so different? This then raises the question of the nature of Rebecca's difference — what was Rebecca like? On returning to Manderley, the girl begins to pick up clues which lead to the discovery of Rebecca's mysterious death. It is no coincidence that the exploration of Rebecca's sexuality is imaginatively recast in the novel as a crime story. The text shifts between a fiction which idealizes and constructs harmonious models for human relations — romance — and one which starts from the violent disruption of the social — crime. This shifting marks out the distance which the girl and the reader have to travel in coming to understand Rebecca's significance as a seductive but ultimately tabooed expression of femininity. What is more Rebecca is a who-dunnit with a difference. Not only does the culprit get away with murder and ostensibly with the reader's approval too, but the innocent witness is called upon to become an accomplice. The girl agrees to keep secret the facts of Rebecca's murder in order to find true romance with the criminal, finally to get her man.

The problem is that in pursuing Rebecca the girl has identified with her as a positive alternative to herself. What then is dramatized is a scenario of extraordinary force and suspense. It is nothing less than an enactment of the power relations upon
which successful bourgeois marriage depends, and upon which the institution of its oppressed female heterosexuality turns. What the girl has to attempt, and what she must compulsively repeat in the telling of the tale, is a kind of self-murder. It is a violent denial of those other versions of female sexuality which Rebecca has come to represent.

Rebecca, then, is the focus of the novel's conflicting desires for and descriptions of the feminine. She is the character through whom the fiction of romance is undermined and whose murder will rescue and re-establish its norms. She jeopardizes the given social categories by existing outside them. And it is from this point of social and sexual disruption that the novel and its narrator must always draw back. From the outset, the novel acknowledges that the regulation of female sexuality finds its weapon in the expression of class difference. In so doing, it threatens to expose the social construction of all sexuality and the inherent instability of all those class and gender definitions. The narrative's circular structure thus tries to mop up and gloss over the disorder at its centre. It constantly disproves the girl's opening assertion — 'we can never go back' (8). Going back is precisely what Rebecca is all about: returning to Manderley, to the primal scene of the acquisition of femininity.

Becoming a good bourgeois woman is shown in Rebecca to be a perilous process, one which can never be either fictionally or socially completed. Rebecca begins with the dream of a return and so it anticipates its own narrative strategies. It gestures too toward the dream of all romance fiction: toward a resolution of all the tensions within fictionality itself. It gestures to an imaginary realm in which the conflicts of class and gender differences might be transcended by an unproblematic and full female subjectivity. But as the story of Rebecca comes full circle it is doomed to expose as a failure the myth, which is at the centre of all bourgeois ideology, and is its ultimate romance — that of a unified and coherent self.

Who is Rebecca?

As the girl finds out about Rebecca in the first part of the novel, she herself begins to fade. Her fragile security as married woman, and indeed as woman, crumbles until she is brought to the point of collapse and almost of self-destruction. This is the first movement of the plot and it charts Rebecca's ascendancy. Slowly the girl collects the signs of Rebecca's difference: the raincoat (Rebecca's height and slenderness), the handwritten cards and accounts (Rebecca's elegance and efficiency as wife), the cambric handkerchiefs, silk lingerie and perfume which suggest her sensual and delicate nature, as well as her expensive tastes. Maxim's grandmother testifies to Rebecca's amiability and Frank Crawley testifies to her beauty. Rebecca was fearless and energetic, rode difficult horses and sailed boats single-handed, even in rough weather. The girl, who doesn't hunt, shoot or sail, likes sewing and doing the odd sketch. Gradually the text sets up a binary opposition between the two kinds of femininity which the girl and Rebecca represent. Virginal Lily and sensuous dark-haired Rose; the girl occupies the East wing overlooking the domesticated flower garden whilst the West wing, Rebecca's, is dominated by the sight and sound of the sea, restless and disturbing. Rebecca emerges as an aristocratic mix of independent and 'essential' femininity, a strong physical presence, a confident and alluring sexuality. The girl emerges as literally a girl, immature by Rebecca's standards.

But these conventional oppositions are recast in an important way. For it is crucial that Rebecca is wholly a figment of the girl's imagination, invented from a sense of her own social and sexual limitations. 'Rebecca' is a projection of her own desires which both help to produce and to ratify the girl's feelings of inadequacy. Rebecca is in fact
only the most complete moment and expression of the girl's longing for a secure place, socially and sexually. The narrative is made up of a series of fantasies which the girl projects, all of which function as an imaginary commentary on her lack of a fixed identity. She constantly slides away from her real location in time and space to invent scenarios, for example, between Maxim and the servants, which points up her failure to become a proper grown woman and wife, to be a Mrs de Winter.

But whilst the reader is invited to share this process of disintegration which the young romantic undergoes, she is also offered something else. There is another twist. The girl herself is only a remembered and invented persona — relayed back to us by the older-woman narrator with whom we started the novel. The narrator is already projecting back into the feelings and thoughts of an imaginary younger self. The reader knows then from the beginning that the girl makes it, becomes that adult woman, 'older, more mature' (49). But this twist means also that we can be given clues about Rebecca which the girl misses and which come from the hindsight of the older woman. Thus 'Rebecca' the novel and 'Rebecca' the woman, are being simultaneously written and revised. The 'editorial' position of the older self and the insecure persona of the young girl are both available for the reader.

Our very first intimations of an alternative Rebecca come from the opening pages of the novel, from that dream-return to Manderley which finds it overgrown and wild. 'Nature', we are told,

had come into her own again . . . things of culture and grace . . . had gone native now, rearing to monster height without a bloom, black and ugly . . . The rhododendrons . . . had entered into an alien marriage with a host of nameless shrubs, poor, bastard things . . . conscious of their spurious origin (5–6).

The English garden has been overrun by natives in a kind of horticultural anarchy in which the proper order of class, family and Empire has been flouted. The passage neatly expresses social and racial disruption in terms of sexual — 'natural' — excess. This symbolism is given more force when the heroine is startled by the same rampant rhododendrons on arrival at Manderley. This time her homily on the politics of gardening is clearly linked to definitions of femininity. The shrubs are

slaughtorous red, luscious and fantastic . . . something bewildering, even shocking . . . To me a rhododendron was a homely, domestic thing, strictly conventional . . . these were monsters . . . too beautiful I thought, too powerful; they were not plants at all (70).

It turns out that these had been planted by Rebecca, her pride and joy. The lesson of an 'over-natural' and therefore deviant female sexuality is being mapped out.

Two processes are at work then in the narrative. As the appeal of Rebecca mounts, the girl begins to be dissatisfied with the romance between her and Maxim — bourgeois companionship now seems mere paternalism on his part, doglike devotion on hers. Rebecca becomes the figure which reveals the girl's unfulfilled desires. She is what is missing from the marriage; she is body to the girl's endless cerebration, the absent centre around which the narrative and its definitions of femininity turn. But even as the girl finds herself lacking, the older-woman narrator begins to hint darkly at Rebecca's 'real nature' and to signal to the reader that the distance between Rebecca and the girl is in fact proof-positive of the girl's superior femininity and true worth. Rebecca thus offers the reader the chance to have her cake and eat it, to slide like the girl between possible sexual identities, but unlike the girl to be in the know all along. The reader can have the pleasure of finding Rebecca desirable and of condemning her in advance. I want to argue this position is an androcentric one and fraught with difficulty for the woman reader. It is difficult because it offers a control of the
discourses that define femininity, which women, since they themselves remain subject to those discourses, can never wholly enjoy. The reader, like the girl, wants to be like Rebecca, but dare not. And yet once that process of identification with Rebecca has been set in motion its effects can never be fully contained nor its disruptive potential fully retrieved. This narrative of wishful projection and identification, displacement and repulsion is then the story of all women, of what we go through in the constructing and maintaining of our femininity.

In fact the hints at Rebecca's deviancy become so obvious that the girl's social and sexual purity is only just about believable. When Ben, the local 'idiot', says, for example, 'You're not like the other one... She gave you the feeling of a snake' (162). One wonders how the girl is still able to ignore the negative connotations of Rebecca's phallic sexuality. The point of this 'innocence' is, however, that it is almost wilful. The girl's inability to see Rebecca as deviant slowly becomes a refusal to do so, so caught up is she in the development of her own fantasy of a powerfully sexual and autonomous female subjectivity.

Of course it is Mrs Danvers, Rebecca's devoted housekeeper, who acts as catalyst and midwife here. She actively feeds the girl's sense of herself as 'a second-rate person' (80) until the fantasy of that other self takes over and actually begins to direct the girl's behaviour. In an extraordinary scene in the West wing Mrs Danvers acts out Rebecca's seduction of the girl, inviting her to touch Rebecca's lingerie, put her hands inside her slippers, to imagine her waiting in bed. Importantly, though, the girl has already performed these actions, if timidly: Mrs Danvers merely ratifies her desires. Shortly afterwards the girl day-dreams an incident between Maxim and Rebecca, with herself cast as Rebecca. Maxim who has watched her silent reverie comments that she looked 'older suddenly, deceitful' (210).

This desire of the girl to be like Rebecca reaches its full expression when, misled by Mrs Danvers, she unknowingly copies a fancy dress costume identical to one worn by Rebecca. This is the moment of her most complete social and sexual confidence as mistress of Manderley and as Mrs de Winter:
Everybody looked at me and smiled. I felt pleased and flushed and rather happy. People were being nice . . . It was suddenly fun, the thought of the dance, and that I was to be the hostess (218).

'Being Rebecca' leads of course to her social and sexual disgrace, to the novel's crisis when it seems that the girl's marriage is all but destroyed. The girl wrongly interprets Maxim's horror at her appearance as evidence of her inadequacy, believing that her difference is her tragedy. Significantly alone in bed (Maxim fails to join her after the ball incident) she submits to Rebecca's triumph:

There was nothing quite so shaming, so degrading as a marriage that had failed. . . . Rebecca was still mistress of Manderley. Rebecca was still Mrs de Winter. . . . I should never be rid of Rebecca. Perhaps I haunted her as she haunted me (242-244).

The boundaries which shored up the girl's identity have now been dissolved. The projection of her desire which the imaginary Rebecca represents now threatens to undermine not just the basis of her marriage but also to jeopardize the girl's only known route into acceptable middle-class womanhood and into being a person, a self.

This is when the girl decides to return to the West wing and when she hears the truth about Rebecca from Mrs Danvers. Tellingly du Maurier's description of Rebecca's childhood cruelty and ostensible heartlessness is shot through with envy and admiration. It is unmistakably appealing:

She was never one to stand mute and still and be wronged. 'I'll see them in hell, Danny,' she'd say. . . . She had all the courage and spirit of a boy. . . . She ought to have been a boy. . . . She did what she liked, she lived as she liked. She had the strength of a little lion. . . . She cared for nothing and for no one (253-5).

The key moment in Mrs Danvers's account of Rebecca's unnaturalness, of her refusal to be a good girl and a proper wife, comes when she describes Rebecca's relation to sexual pleasure — 'It was like a game to her. Like a game.' This is the giveaway, the telltale sign of Rebecca's criminality for which she was punished with death. The girl, however, is so immersed in her fantasies of Rebecca as a positive alternative to her own imagined failure as wife and woman that she refuses to listen. Her need to endorse other approved versions of sexuality leads her to contemplate suicide. Either she or Rebecca must survive — the two sexualities cannot co-exist.

This is the book's crisis. Now every attempt must be made to separate Rebecca out from the girl's and the reader's identification with her. Rebecca must be externalized, taken out of the realm of imaginary projections of subjectivity and put back into the world. This means that in terms of the text, she must be forcibly reinscribed within that range of social discourses which will condemn her difference and so legitimate the girl's. At this climax the girl is saved from suicide by the ships' hooters sounding a shipwreck. They also signal the return of Rebecca in person, as it were. Her body is about to be found in her sabotaged boat — 'Je Reviens' — and her coming back leads to Maxim's confession of murder. From now on the text runs all downhill in its rewriting of who Rebecca was. Maxim's final testimony needs only to be compared with that of Mrs Danvers, quoted above, to gauge the disproportionate force with which the text reasserts its allegiance to a bourgeois morality, whereby women's pursuit of sexual pleasure outside of marriage must be brutally tabooed.

She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal (283).
But this diatribe is a measure too of Rebecca's disruptive force: of what is at stake, fictionally and socially, that she needs to be so profoundly denigrated. This devaluation suggests too that for the girl and the reader once to have fallen for Rebecca is never to be free of the possibilities she offers. Perhaps after all Rebecca will have the last word.

**Rebecca's Murder**

What then is the significance of Rebecca's murder? To know this we have to know her crime. Rebecca refused to obey the law whereby women exchange their bodies for social place. Moreover, by treating sex as a game, she exposed the ways in which femininity is powerfully over-determined — definitions of female sexuality are not just saturated with class meanings, but produce them and ensure their continuation. Rebecca's sins have therefore been against the whole fabric of the social order — against family (her lover, Jack Favell, was her cousin), against class (she even made overtures to the workmen), against property (turning Manderley into a 'filthy den' (287)), and most importantly against her husband. Rebecca's most heinous crime, which drove Maxim to shoot her, was, of course, to taunt him with a future heir of Manderley who might not be his. What is at stake in her murder is the continuance of male authority and of masculinity itself, as it is defined through ownership and the power of hierarchy. The sexual and the social underpin each other.

Maxim's only attempt to mitigate or excuse his actions is via an appeal to a kind of aristocratic patriotism which offers itself as a moral discourse transcending the considerations of gender and class, even though the language of his sentiments is obviously steeped in them:

I thought about Manderley too much. . . . Christ said nothing about stones, and bricks, and walls, the love that a man can bear for his plot of earth, his soil, his little kingdom (286).
Manderley here is Little England as well as Little Eden. Both are lost through the love of a woman. It is a measure of the social support du Maurier must have felt she could rely on that this crime of Maxim's can not only be forgiven but actually celebrated. Emphatically, the confession chapter ends:

If it had to come all over again I should not do anything different. I'm glad I killed Rebecca. I shall never have any remorse for that, never, never (313).

Importantly, Maxim's revelations are recorded by the girl not in a mood of sober consideration (for after all, what kind of man remarries six months after murdering his first, and as he believed, pregnant wife?) but of heady joy. For a vital sleight of hand is taking place which will shift our attention from the crime back to the questions of romance, and in so doing establish the girl once and for all as model wife and woman.

Maxim's confession has a revealing sequence. It is not enough for him to admit to murder, he must also stress that he never loved Rebecca, that the crime was one of hatred not of passionate jealousy. Thus the girl's relief at Maxim's emotional 'freedom' can replace the problem of his guilt. Maxim's crime becomes a statement of his love for the girl and can then be recast as a test of her love for him. Now it seems she has the chance to be happily married after all, if she will agree to be complicit in the murder:

I had listened to his story, and part of me went with him like a shadow in his tracks. I too had killed Rebecca, I too had sunk the boat there in the bay. . . . All this I had suffered with him . . . but the rest of me sat there on the carpet . . . caring for one thing only, repeating a phrase over and over again, 'He did not love Rebecca. . . .'

Now at the ringing of the telephone, these two selves merged and became one again. I was the self that I had always been. I was not changed. But something new had come upon me that had not been before (297).

The girl, in becoming narrator of the crime, transfers her identification from Rebecca to Maxim, and invites the reader to do the same. Her own identity solidifies and secures itself around this endorsement of murder. She is no longer torn in loyalties between Maxim and Rebecca, between different femininities. The murdering of Rebecca is the price the girl must pay to guarantee the success of her marriage and to take on the status of good middle-class woman. She is rewarded with the identity of Mrs de Winter, the security of belonging to the male, but only at the cost of underwriting his definitions of what femininity should be. In order to become a social subject — to think of herself as a self — she learns to accept the regulation of female heterosexuality through class differences which themselves necessitate sexual competition between women.

Yet for the girl to learn about Rebecca is in some measure to repeat Rebecca's fall, to lose her own sexual innocence. Maxim's cry of no regrets is immediately followed by his mourning of the girl's entry into womanhood. She no longer has that 'young, lost look'; she has finally got hold of that 'knowledge', which Maxim warned her earlier, must 'be kept under lock and key' (211) by fathers and husbands. If Rebecca's crime was to be too 'natural', too much of a woman, how then can the girl be both sexual and different from her? The text's confusion at this point is worth noting. Up until now Maxim's and the girl's sexual relations have either been played down or literally written out of the text — their honeymoon takes place between chapters. Now that the girl has lost her symbolic virginity they are able to become real lovers: 'He had not kissed me like this before' (279). At the same time, their new happiness must not be misconstrued as simply sexual — 'there was', we are assured 'nothing feverish or urgent about this'. Nevertheless du Maurier must still add that their lovemaking 'was not like stroking Jasper, Maxim's dog, anymore!' This coy ambivalence points to the fact that, having discovered the joys of sex, the second Mrs de Winter must take pains
to see that she does not end up murdered too. If Maxim found his first wife dispensable because of her sexuality, what is to stop him from finding his second equally flawed? Hence the remorseless logic of a Bluebeard. Women are all the potential victims of a femininity which is not just endlessly defining us in terms of sexual status — we are wives, mothers, virgins, whores — but which marks us as representing 'the sexual' itself. Where women's sexual desirability is competitively organized around male approval and social reward, there will always be a Rebecca who is both an idealized alternative to our elusive subjectivity and a radical undermining of it.

What saves the girl is her middle-classness. This is also what commits her to a cycle of repression and denial. Those other possibilities for female sexuality which exist outside the perimeters of middle-class femininity, and which had, in the figure of Rebecca, all but seduced her, she must now firmly repress:

something . . . that I wanted to bury for ever more deep in the shadows of my mind with old forgotten terrors of childhood . . . (263).

And yet it is clear that Rebecca can never be forgotten since she is the condition for the girl knowing 'who she is'. As the girl's femininity is defined against Rebecca's, Rebecca becomes more, not less, important. It is their difference from each other that gives each meaning. The girl and Rebecca need each other in order to mean at all. In imagining the drama of romance as a murder, the novel shows successful heterosexuality to be a construct, not a natural given. Correct femininity has to be learnt, and whilst Rebecca's murder recalls all the discourses which condemn her, it cannot do so without revealing their social and therefore arbitrary order. Within such a system of differences the girl is equally a deviant Rebecca and this for the reader could be a potentially revolutionary reversal.

For the girl in Rebecca the impulse from which the story-telling originates is the desire, not to forget, but to remember. Her act of repression can be seen as one of definition and expression — the unconscious literally making sense of the conscious in a dynamic, not a static relation. As older-woman narrator she looks back and relives the trauma of her marriage, within a narrative whose structure is circular. For she must constantly refabricate the illusion of her coherent social and sexual identity. As the
ambiguity of the opening sentence suggests, she has dreamt of a return to Manderley and this dream keeps on coming back:

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. She becomes a kind of Ancient Mariner of her story of middle-class femininity, as much the victim as the producer of its fictionality. The more she tries to control her own life, tell her own story, the more she is brought back to Rebecca who has disrupted and defined both. It is Rebecca who is the named subject of the novel, she who dictates its movement, pushes epilogue to prologue, and structures the impossibility of its ending.

It was Rebecca, of course, who originally drew me to write. It seemed to me that there was a whole alternative narrative to be written from her point of view. Bold, independent, cooped up with her stuffed shirt of a middle-aged playboy husband, in the middle of nowhere, in a house surrounded by grasslands and sea, Rebecca is the wife who refuses to go mad. The force for my identification came though from du Maurier’s own, from the image of a confidently sexual woman which she herself could not resist,

Rebecca seizing life with her two hands; Rebecca, triumphant, leaning down from the minstrel’s gallery with a smile on her lips (284).

Rebecca’s fictional come-uppance underlines all the more her dangerous appeal. She has to be more than murdered. Not only does Maxim escape freely and get a new adoring wife into the bargain, he is finally vindicated. The denouement reveals that far from growing a baby inside her, Rebecca was growing a cancer. She would have died of her sins anyway, so there was no harm in making sure. And then the final, brutally gratuitous touch: the doctor’s X-rays, we are told, indicated a malformed uterus:

which meant she could never have had a child; but that was quite apart, it had nothing to do with the disease (383).

Don’t the forces of social and fictional retribution seem just a might excessive? Even with all this overkill Rebecca refuses to stay dead. There is to be no going back, but not in the sense intended by the new Mrs de Winter. There can be no undoing of the crime
she commits against herself in order to find a name. Her middle-class femininity is to be her punishment as well as her salvation.

For middle-class readers in the 1930s Rebecca's murder appears to offer an ideal fictive solution to those all too seductive deviant femininities. It is less than simple, however. Rebecca is no longer 'out there', the wife in the attic of the Gothic text, but *inside* the female subject, the condition of its existence. The process of identification which the novel depends upon is, in more ways than one, fatal. For Rebecca does, after all, get what she wants. She lures Maxim into killing her and thereby alters forever the balance of his authority and power. Ultimately, she robs him of his place. For we know from the very first page that something goes wrong with Maximilian de Winter's *second* marriage. That initial and final mystery has still to be solved — the mystery of Maxim and his child-bride finding themselves homeless, countryless, and childless.

**Happy Ever After?**

I want to stress that it is the ways in which class intersects with gender priorities that determine the dénouement and leave it finally unresolved. The 'psychic' cannot therefore be seen as somehow existing outside history or the 'social' but is in fact its material. Class and gender differences do not simply speak to each other, they cannot speak *without* each other. What is at stake in *Rebecca* is for the girl to become both wife of Maxim and mistress of Manderley, and it is the latter which she must forego. For if Manderley cannot be ruled or even haunted by Rebecca then it is inconceivable, within the imaginative model of social relations in the text, for the girl to take Rebecca's place. The problem of their sexual identification has to be dealt with equally forcibly in the arena of class differences. Notably, the girl's first action as a newly confident Mrs de Winter is to bully the housemaid and dismiss Mrs Danvers's stale menu. Both acts make her the mistress. Her new-found sexual status and her superior class position differentiate and strengthen each other.

The problem is of course that the girl's actions are here too Rebecca-like for comfort. On arrival at Manderley she had in fact deplored the wastefulness of its aristocratic kitchens — though typically the text dwells lingeringly on the breakfast spread before condemning it. Now she is throwing bourgeois thrift to the winds. The girl cannot stay within this ambiguous class position and yet it is equally impossible to imagine a happy ending for the de Winters within that original bourgeois romanticization of marriage. One cannot see Maximilian de Winter settling down to a cosy, middle-class existence, the model for which is provided by the cameo sketch of Dr Baker near the end of the novel and whose domesticity is felt to be both appealing and trite. The proto-type for Maximilian was in fact called 'Henry' (du Maurier, 1981); like Brontë's Rochester, he ended up physically crippled and maimed. Daphne du Maurier decided after all not to call her hero 'Henry' and in so doing made it impossible for him to find true happiness pottering about the herbaceous borders with a wife busy sewing on the boys' nametapes — a fate suitable for many of the adorably dull husbands in the novels of the war-years to come.

Thus Maxim's loss of place, of Manderley itself, is a social, psychic and fictional necessity within the terms set up by the girl's assumption of Rebecca's position. It is interesting to see just how over-determined their self-imposed exile is. For it is certainly not 'realistically' necessary. After all, once Rebecca's cancer has been discovered and the verdict of her suicide accredited, what is to stop the couple, if not re-building Manderley, then finding another mansion house in the West country, or at least in the parklands of Surrey? Why do they have to leave England altogether? The
point of asking these questions, which are of the 'how-many-children-had-Lady-Macbeth?' variety, is to see how certain possibilities are not imaginable within the text. Maxim and the girl must be left without a place. All kinds of necessities are met by their exile. Firstly, the text can invoke a compensatory moral discourse which equates Maxim's economic loss with a psychological crippling, and can therefore atone for his crime. Losing your stately home is a fair cop for murdering your wife. Secondly, the couple can be placed literally outside of the English class system and the problem of whose class position is to be endorsed, is neatly avoided. And this can then be the price that the new Mrs de Winter has to pay. Reading Country Life and listening to the World Service can thus be shown to be both a far sadder and a greater thing than to be mistress of Manderley. Notably, Mrs de Winter lacks those sons who would so obviously need a Home (see pp 74-75 for details), so again the problem of class inheritance and of competing notions of the family are sidestepped. The couple's exile is also used to appeal to a 'universal' Englishness and their position made poignant by relying on a mildly jingoistic patriotism with its dislike of 'abroad' and of foreigners, which had all the more force in 1938, with the Empire on the wane. The logic of Maxim's crime is, of course blurred and it seems that Rebecca is responsible for his loss of home, authority and even for the sunset of the Empire. Through her fall, the couple are exiled from their little Eden, leaving the garden of England to become overgrown by social and racial anarchy.

This epilogue is placed, though, as I have said, at the beginning of the novel. By the end of Rebecca the reader may well have forgotten these details and their relation to the plot. The text actually closes with the burning of Manderley, apparently instigated by Mrs Danvers (though we do not know this for sure; the conflagration is also a kind of spontaneous combustion). This is a far more ambivalent ending since it is impossible to mourn the loss of Manderley without mourning too the loss of Rebecca who made it what it was — 'the beauty of Manderley... it's all due to her, to Rebecca' (287). The death of Manderley is in a way brought home as the real tragedy, as a place untouched by the demands of capital, a site of feudal freedom, which like Rebecca herself could at least operate outside of an encroaching bourgeois hegemony of social and sexual values.

Manderley has to burn to keep the whole range of readers happy, to leave Maxim and his new wife finally unplaced, free-floating outside of the allegiances of class and family. This is both the end and the beginning of the girl's story — where in fact we came in. Interestingly, unlike Jane Eyre, the girl does not find family and social place at the end of her story. She ends as she began, abroad, a paid companion. But the last page of the novel also ends with a dream, a dream of discovery which again has murderous consequences:

Back again into the moving unquiet depths. I was writing letters in the morning-room... But when I looked down to see what I had written it was not my... handwriting... I got up and went to the looking-glass. A face stared back at me that was not my own... The face in the glass stared back at me and laughed. And then I saw that she was sitting on a chair... and Maxim was brushing her hair... It twisted like a snake, and he took hold of it with both hands and smiled at Rebecca and put it round his neck (396).

The dream points exactly to the act of writing as the moment of danger. For the girl in Rebecca, the narrating is both a making safe and opening up of subjectivity, a volatile disclosure which puts her 'self' at risk. Rebecca acts out in this dream what the girl also desires. Perhaps, then, the de Winters do need to go abroad to save Maxim's skin — not from the scaffold, but from his wife. Perhaps the whole of the narrative should be seen as a kind of displaced revenge, a revenge which the ordinary middle-class girl dare not acknowledge as her own, and which only feminism would allow her to speak.
Rebecca’s Story — to be continued

The ending of Rebecca resists a simple resolution in favour of the middle-class reader. If the ordinary girl triumphs, that triumph involves a deep sense of loss. Du Maurier, herself a displaced aristocrat, was perhaps drawn to query that shifting of values which historically was taking place. The texts of the 1930s are full of these dying houses. Rebecca is unique, however, in using its aristocratic class mythology to interrogate bourgeois definitions of femininity. There is no straight-forward model for social mobility in the novel because what is central to it is the question of female sexual pleasure. However much Rebecca is finally condemned as a deviant woman, the text still does foreground the problem for women of desiring an autonomous sexuality. No doubt the novel is a snobbish farewell to Manderley but looking into the 1940s it also registers, I think, a collective gritting of the teeth by those women who suspected that to be a ‘Mrs Miniver’ would be a lesser thing than to be a Rebecca de Winter.5 In the war years that followed, romance began to move into a more conservative terrain, one which tabooed the erotic and minimized the conflict between the demands of middle-class marriage and femininity, and the desire for sexual excitement and pleasure (Harper, 1982; Anderson, 1974).

Rebecca marks an outpost in the late 1930s, a transitional moment historically and fictionally, when the demands of middle-class femininity could be discussed and even dismantled within a public and popular form like romance. It demarcates a feminine subjectivity which is hopelessly split within bourgeois gendered relations. The girl’s autobiography of gendered experience dramatizes the contradictory pressures which middle-class sexual ideologies were to place upon women, pressures which were in some measure to be responsible for their politicization some thirty years later.

Much of the popular fiction of the 1940s and ’50s can therefore be seen as a space where women as writers and readers seek to resolve and secure a gendered and desirous subjectivity by celebrating a staunch British middle-classness, with differing degrees of inevitable failure. Like Freud’s hysterics ‘suffering from reminiscences’ their writing continually makes visible the tensions within the social construction of femininity whose definitions are never sufficient and are always reminders of what is missing, what could be.

The continuation of Rebecca’s disruptive story can be glimpsed and sometimes openly followed in the novels which in the 1950s began to centre on the pressures and contradictory demands of middle-class femininity. The bleak and abrupt closures of the early novels of Elizabeth Taylor, the comic refusal of Barbara Pym to write novels about ‘a full life’, describing instead the lives of elderly or single women, the silences and madnesses of writers like Antonia White, Jean Rhys and Pym herself, have to be understood also as responses to the decade’s regulation of acceptable femininity through its public discourses on marriage, motherhood and home (Weeks, 1981; Wilson, 1977 and 1980; Birmingham Feminist History Group, 1979). It is not until the 1960s, with its renewed emphasis on sexual pleasure and with the happy housewives themselves breaking into print, that personal and marital collapse become openly the subject of many literary narratives. The shift from the Gothic ‘Other’ of female sexuality to its resisting within the individualized trauma of the gendered subject can no longer be contained. Jean Rhys rewrites both Jane Eyre and Rebecca in her own dramatic comeback, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966). This time the revenant mad wife tries to tell her own story and finishes it by coming down from the attic to set fire to the house. It would be wrong, however, to characterize this moment as one of social rebellion pure and simple. For within literary discourse, ‘the return of the repressed’ (Wilson 1980) is imagined by white, middle-class writers as actually maddening. Anna, in Doris Lessing’s Golden Notebook (1962), finds a personal artistic freedom which is
also a private hell, as much a place of individualized confinement as of sexual protest. Perhaps then it is not too fanciful to suggest that it is only from inside the collectivity of a feminist politics that Rebecca's story could ever be imagined without fear of social, psychic or fictive retribution.

Postscript: The Fiction of Romance

How then does Rebecca say anything at all about the formulaic fiction in which frail flower meets bronzed god? I would like to see Rebecca as the absent subtext of much romance fiction, the crime behind the scenes of Mills and Boon. For it seems to me that perhaps what romance tries to offer us is a 'triumph' over the unconscious, over the 'resistance to identity which lies at the very heart of psychic life' (Rose, 1983:9). Rebecca acts out the process of repression which these other texts avoid by assuming a fully-achievable, uncomplicated gendered subject whose sexual desire is not in question, not produced in struggle, but given. Above all, romance fiction makes heterosexuality easy, by suspending history in its formulae (whether costume, hospital or Carribbean drama) and by offering women readers a resolution in which submission and repression are not just managed without pain or humiliation but managed at all.

Thus although women are undoubtedly represented as sexual objects, there might be a sense in which women are also offered unique opportunities for reader-power, for an imaginary control of the uncontrollable in the fiction of romance. Within that scenario of extreme heterosexism can be derived the pleasure of reconstructing any heterosexuality which is not 'difficult'. Romance offers us relations impossibly harmonized; it uses unequal heterosexuality as a dream of equality and gives women uncomplicated access to a subjectivity which is unified and coherent and still operating within the field of pleasure.

Perhaps then the enormous readership of romance fiction, the fact that so many women find it deeply pleasurable, can be registered in terms other than those of moralizing shock. Romance is read by over fifty per cent of all women, but it is no coincidence that the two largest audiences are those of young women in their teens and 'middle-aged housewives'. (See Anderson, 1974, for discussion of readership patterns and responses and Euromonitor for more recent data.) I would suggest that these are both moments when the impossibility of being successfully feminine is felt, whether as a 'failure' ever to be feminine enough — like the girl's in Rebecca — or whether in terms of the gap between fulfilling social expectations (as wife and mother) and what those roles mean in reality. That women read romance fiction is, I think, as much a measure of their deep dissatisfaction with heterosexual options as of any desire to be fully identified with the submissive versions of femininity the texts endorse. Romance imagines peace, security and ease precisely because there is dissension, insecurity and difficulty. In the context of women's lives, romance reading might appear less a reactionary reflex or an indication of their victimization by the capitalist market, and more a sign of discontent and a technique for survival. All the more so because inside a boring or alienating marriage, or at the age of fifteen, romance may be the only popular discourse which speaks to the question of women's sexual pleasure. Women's magazines, for example, do at least prioritize women and their lives in a culture where they are usually absent or given second place.

Patterns of romance reading are also revealing. Readers often collect hundreds, which are shared and recycled amongst friends. Reading romance fiction means participating in a kind of subculture, one which underlines a collective identity as women around the issue of women's pleasure and which can be found outside a
political movement. As Janet Batsleer has pointed out, romances are not valued because like 'Great Art' they purport to be unrepeatable stories of unique characters, they are valued precisely as ritual and as repetition. It is difficult then to assume that these narratives are read in terms of a linear identification — it is not real and rounded individuals who are being presented and the endings are known by readers to be a foregone conclusion. Romance offers instead of closure a postponement of fulfillment. They are addictive because the control they gesture toward is always illusory, always modified and contained by the heterosexuality which they seek to harmonize. In a sense the activity of reading repeats the compulsion of desire and testifies to the limiting regulation of female sexuality. Romances may pretend that the path to marriage is effortless (obstacles are there to be removed) but they have to cry off when the action really starts — after marriage. The reader is left in a permanent state of foreplay, but I would guess that for many women this is the best heterosexual sex they ever get.

I want to suggest then that we develop ways of analysing romances and their reception as 'symptomatic' rather than simply reflective. Romance reading then becomes less a political sin or moral betrayal than a kind of 'literary anorexia' which functions as a protest against, as well as a restatement of, oppression. Their compulsive reading makes visible an insistent search on the part of readers for more than what is on offer. This is not, of course, any kind of argument for romance fictions being somehow progressive. Within the realities of women's lives, however, they may well be transgressive. Consumerist, yes; a hopeless rebellion, yes; but still, in our society, a forbidden pleasure — like cream cakes. Romance does write heterosexuality in capital letters but in so doing it is an embarrassment to the literary establishment since its writers are always asking to be taken seriously. Their activity highlights of course the heterosexism of much orthodox and important Literature. For, leaving aside the representation of femininity, what other models are available anywhere for alternative constructs of masculinity? Romance is not being willfully different in its descriptions of virility as constituted around positions of authority, hierarchy and aggression. Male, left-wing critics might do well to address themselves to projects which set out to deconstruct 'normal' male heterosexuality — a phenomenon which does after all exist outside war-stories and cowboy books.

To say, as I have, that subjectivity is at stake in the practices of reading and writing is not to retreat into 'subjectivism'. It is to recognize that any feminist literary critical enterprise is asking questions about social and historical formations, not just as they operate 'out there', but as they inform and structure the material 'in there' — the identities through which we live, and which may allow us to become the agents of political change. Fiction is pleasurable at least in part because it plays with, displaces and resizes these other fictions, and we need a language as critics of 'popular culture' which can politicize without abandoning the categories of entertainment. To say that everyone's art is somebody's escapism is not to underestimate the effects of a literary discourse, but to try to situate these effects across the vast spectrum of the production of meaning, of which literary texts are part. It would suggest too that it is not so much the abolition of certain literary forms which feminism necessitates as the changing of the conditions which produce them. I for one think that there will still be romance after the revolution.

If I have a soft spot for romance fiction then it is because nothing else speaks to me in the same way. It is up to us as feminists to develop a rigorous and compassionate understanding of how these fictions work in women's lives, keeping open the spaces for cultural and psychic pleasure whilst rechanneling the dissatisfactions upon which they depend. That then would seem to me to be the point of returning to Manderley.
Notes

Alison Light is a research student at Sussex University working on a study of post-1945 British women's fiction. She also teaches on literature and Women's Studies courses in adult education.

Alison Light would like to thank Cora Kaplan for helping to clarify many of her thoughts and sentences.

1 I am referring here very briefly to the enormous body of theoretical arguments which have emerged largely from the work of the French Marxist Louis Althusser. For extended discussion of this work, and the different directions it has taken since the late 1960s see, for example, Coward and Ellis (1977), Barrett (1980). For an analysis of the historical and political relations between Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis, see Rose 1983.

2 Barrett (1982) takes up some of these points but see also Coward (1982) and Rose (1983) for the importance of psychoanalysis as offering ways into the questions of subjectivity, representation and sexual politics.

3 In her original notebook for the novel, du Maurier puts a lengthy epilogue in its proper place (du Maurier, 1981). All references to Rebecca are to the Pan 1975 edition.

4 Rebecca might also be seen — like all romances — as being about adolescence and as such a re-enactment of the choices and traumas of Oedipalization: Maxim replaces the girl's lost father (who gave her such a 'very lovely and unusual name' (27)), but is only able to become her lover once the girl has moved from identification with Rebecca's clitoral (phallic) sexuality. Mrs Danvers is important here as Rebecca's lover in an almost lesbian relationship. The girl moves to a passive 'vaginal' femininity, organized and defined by Maxim. I would argue that Rebecca also recognizes that moment of becoming a gendered subject as always involving a psychic division within the subject which continually resists the assumption of a coherent social and sexual identity.

5 Mrs Minter, by Jan Anstruther, began as a series for The Times based on her own 'typically middleclass' family life. Published as a novel in 1939, it was a huge bestseller; the wartime film of the book is supposed to have helped bring the Americans into the war.

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EUROMONITOR Readership Surveys


WRRC has changed its name to Feminist Library and Information Centre. The library includes a wide range of feminist publications — novels, poetry and plays as well as non-fiction — journals, newsletters, conference papers. We keep an index of work/projects/research in progress and information on women’s studies courses and Adult Education classes. Free library use to all; income-related membership fee for borrowing and for receiving our bi-monthly newsletter. Opening hours: Tues — Sat 11.00 — 5.30, late night Thursday to 7.30. Feminist Library and Information Centre, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC2N 6PA. Tel: 01-930 0715.