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'Beautiful Creatures': The Ethics of Female Beauty in Daphne du Maurier's Fiction

'Yes', he said slowly, 'yes, I suppose she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life'

—Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* 1938

BEAUTIFUL heroines brood, swagger and suffer their way across the pages of Daphne du Maurier's novels, so dependably that it is perhaps tempting to take their presence for granted, or to draw swift conclusions about their conventional gothic or romantic function. But the fact that female beauty is at once so pervasive, so profoundly ambiguous and so insistently central in du Maurier's novels suggests that it might be productive to disentangle these representations of female beauty from familiar literary paradigms—the vamp, the femme fatale, the monster, the angel—and consider them in another light. In her book *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel* (1987), Lori Lefkovitz provocatively argues that 'we have actually been trained to ignore descriptions of beauty' (1984: 1), a claim as applicable to du Maurier's twentieth-century novels as to their nineteenth-century predecessors. But I would argue that we are not so much trained to *ignore* such passages—surely we revel in the vivid descriptions of Rebecca, of Rachel, of Dona St Columb—as to discount

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their significance. Despite Helena Michie's observation more than two decades ago that 'very little has been written on the problem of description in general, even less on character description, still less on the specific description of the female body', few critics have taken up the challenge to take seriously what she calls 'heroine description' (1987: 84, 85). We tend neither to examine nor interrogate the physical beauty attributed to female characters in fiction. Heroines are beautiful by default; to insist upon plainness—as Charlotte Brontë does with Jane Eyre, or du Maurier arguably does with *Rebecca*'s unnamed narrator—commands attention, demands analysis. Because plainness is anomalous, it seems fraught with significance.

My impulse to redirect critical attention to literary representations of female beauty coincides with a larger movement within the field of literary studies to reconsider 'beauty' as a meaningful category of analysis. As Gabrielle Starr puts it, '[h]and in hand in recent years with a turn to history . . . we find a turn to beauty, a mode of sensibility through which texts enter into and change the worlds of people who read them' (2002: 361). Clearly, Starr refers here to the aesthetic properties of texts themselves—and their effects upon the world—rather than the representation of beauty within those texts. For some critics, though, there is a certain slippage between the two. In the influential and controversial book *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Elaine Scarry draws key examples of encounters with beauty from her own life but also from such sources as Proust, Homer and Dante. In other words, she grants the same status to literary representations of encounters with beauty—usually as embodied by beautiful female characters—that she does to direct, visual encounters with physical beauty. Such a move is complicated by what most critics consider the difficulty—if not the impossibility—of capturing physical beauty in language. Lefkovitz, who is interested in the way in which descriptions of beauty encode certain cultural values, argues that 'physical descriptions of beautiful characters often will not visualize' (1987: 2); Michie acknowledges that 'by the end of the Victorian era descriptions had become almost obsessive in their cataloguing of features' (1987: 85), but contends that such passages simultaneously assert and erase the female body. Thus, while it is difficult to insist—as Scarry implicitly does—that we may take a literary account of the effect of a beautiful person or object upon the world of the text it inhabits as a direct reflection of the way beauty operates in the real world, I want to argue that such texts actually concern themselves directly with interrogating the function of beauty. That is, I want to look not at what beauty is but what it does—in other words, what work it performs in texts where it is prominent.

For Scarry, beauty's function is an ethical one: put simply, it promotes justice. Or, more precisely, as Starr articulates it, Scarry argues that 'beauty prepares us for justice, providing training in features of ethical life that are indispensable to being and pursuing the just' (Starr 2002: 365). Pamela Caughie explains it this way: 'Beauty produces justice because it creates in us a moral sensitivity to imbalance and injustice' (2000: 273). There is seldom much justice in du Maurier's novels: murderers remain at large, love is thwarted, noble causes are lost. But I want to suggest that du Maurier's enigmatic beauties consistently function as a locus of moral possibility; that beauty—whether it promotes justice or its opposite—both delineates and complicates the moral landscape each novel explores. In order to establish a pattern, I will explore three very different novels—*Rebecca* (1938), *The King's General* (1946) and *My Cousin Rachel* (1951)—all of which are fundamentally concerned with notions of justice and beauty, as becomes clear in their opening pages. Scarry's provocative book offers a suggestive lens through which to consider the way beauty operates in these texts, positing that beauty is a sort of compact between the beautiful being and the perceiver of that beauty, and that this compact—however fraught, as she argues, with the potential for error—promotes truth-seeking and justice. Projecting the compact onto relationships between characters, du Maurier places the perception, interpretation and response to female beauty at the heart of her morally ambiguous novels. Beauty exists neither as a force nor as a passive attribute, but rather as a tense and delicate relation—between Rebecca and her unnamed successor, between Philip Ashley and his mysterious cousin Rachel, between Honor Harris and her reckless general. Latent in that relation are the possibilities of equality, justice, and obedience to the truth-seeking impulse Scarry attributes to beauty. Nevertheless, du Maurier also anticipates Scarry's contention that beauty introduces ethical potential, but does not guarantee its fulfillment, and this conflict, to a considerable extent, structures her novels.

Rebecca: *Beauty and Replication*

At a glance, *Rebecca*, of all du Maurier's novels, might seem to resist such a reading: Rebecca's beauty, after all, *incites* crime; it is ultimately conflated with her selfishness, her cruelty, even depravity. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik classify Rebecca not only as a femme fatale whose 'rather morbid sexuality connects her beauty with barrenness, lack of production, and death', but as a 'vamp', a figure distinguishable from the femme fatale, they argue, by her 'conscious desire to destroy' (2000: 210, 211). Reading

Rebecca's beauty as monstrous or destructive ultimately permits the narrator (and potentially, by extension, the reader) to establish an equation between female beauty and vice, an equation that provides the basis for justifying Maxim's murder of his wife, as well as the second Mrs de Winter's eager complicity in that crime. Such an equation rests on the assumption that the narrator is *not* beautiful—a belief she both promotes and subtly undermines—and is therefore morally as well as aesthetically distinct from her predecessor. It also requires the narrator to reject the conclusions of her own obsessive investigation into the nature and significance of Rebecca's beauty. For Rebecca's beauty is, as so many critics have observed, a mystery; it is at once the only thing that can be known about her and an elusive, unrecorded, disembodied trait. For the narrator, unable to *see* Rebecca, her beauty is essentially an idea, an abstraction.

Initially, of course, the narrator assumes that Rebecca's beauty is anything but monstrous: it is, for her, an impossible ideal; it is what men like Maxim de Winter desire; it is, as Sally Beauman remarks, 'everything that she herself is not' (2007: 53). During one of her early excursions with Maxim, the narrator reveals the extent to which she measures herself against the standard of literary heroines: 'I thought of all those heroines of fiction who looked pretty when they cried, and what a contrast I must make with blotched and swollen face, and red rims to my eyes' (du Maurier 1971: 40). The narrator constructs Rebecca as just such a heroine long before she even arrives at Manderley, erecting an ideal Rebecca from the flimsy, second-hand strands of Mrs Van Hopper's gossip: 'I never saw her', the narrator's employer admits, 'but I believe she was very lovely. Exquisitely turned out, and brilliant in every way' (1971: 42). On the basis of such information, the narrator arrives at the conclusion that '[s]he had beauty that endured, and a smile that was not forgotten. Somewhere her voice still lingered, and the memory of her words' (1971: 43). Her dim knowledge of Rebecca's reported beauty leads her to extrapolate both a character and a plot, implicitly affirming Rachel Brownstein's observation in *Becoming a Heroine* (1982) that '[t]he beautiful appearance of a heroine . . . reveals her beautiful essence, and promises a happy congruence of outer and inner lives in fulfilling love' (1982: 158). Rebecca's beauty must have corresponded to a beautiful and admirable self, and Max must therefore have loved her: thus the narrator reasons. Rebecca, as a proper heroine, would have been at home not just at Manderley but in the romantic plot her beauty had generated; the narrator, by extension of that logic, perceives herself as out of place in both.

From the start, Rebecca's beauty has a self-effacing effect on the narrator. In pursuit of Rebecca's imagined perfection, she empties herself into her predecessor's vague outline: 'It was not I that answered, I was not

there at all, I was following a phantom in my mind, whose shadowy form had taken shape at last. Her features were blurred, her colouring indistinct, the setting of her eyes and the texture of her hair were still uncertain, still to be revealed' (1971: 42–3). Once at Manderley, moving uncertainly in Rebecca's footsteps, the narrator seeks to flesh out this 'shadowy' form. Becoming a sort of detective, she seeks clues that will concretise Rebecca's beauty, render it physically knowable. Sometimes, she remarks, 'I would glean little snatches of information to add to my secret store' (1971: 121). Wearing Rebecca's mackintosh, for instance, permits her to sketch Rebecca's physical dimensions—'tall, slim, broader than I about the shoulders'—and also to speculate on Rebecca's mode of wearing the garment ('she had thrown it over her shoulders like a cape . . . hands deep in the pockets', p. 118); in other words, she translates knowledge of Rebecca's *physical* being into assumptions about her character, her *way* of being. Her attempt to conjure up a knowable reflection of Rebecca's beauty is, then, profoundly caught up in her process of constructing a knowable *self*—of 'assimilating', as Horner and Zlosnik suggest, 'both psychological and corporeal aspects of Rebecca' (2000: 217). In that sense Rebecca's beauty becomes, with respect to the narrator, more of a *relation*—a concept central to Scarry's theory of beauty—than a simple, empirical fact. Furthermore, the evidence the narrator is able to glean from witnesses—those who actually knew Rebecca—might be characterised as *traces* of relations; inevitably, the narrator's sources report not only on Rebecca's physical appearance (the details, in fact, remain hazy) but on its *impact* on those it touched: Beatrice, for instance, testifies that Rebecca 'had an amazing gift . . . of being attractive to people; men, women, children, dogs' (1971: 187); while Frank Crawley's 'funny reserve' in speaking of Rebecca leads the narrator to wonder whether he might have been in love with her. Repeatedly, accounts of Rebecca emphasise not her own characteristics but the way people respond to her—and, specifically, to her beauty.

Scarry, arguing that a kind of 'continuity between beauty and its beholder exists', posits that '[b]eauty is . . . a compact, or contract between the beautiful being . . . and the perceiver. As the beautiful being confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life' (1999: 90). When the bishop's wife recalls that 'she was a very lovely creature. So full of life' (du Maurier 1971: 123), she hints at this function: those who beheld Rebecca's beauty might be said to have both derived the 'gift of life' from and conferred it upon Rebecca. To the extent that she seeks to inhabit Rebecca's idealised shadow, the narrator might be said not only to draw life from Rebecca (and to confer it upon her memory) but to illustrate another of Scarry's

central claims: that '[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being . . . It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication' (1999: 3). Some of the novel's most powerful and disturbing scenes chart the narrator's attempt to physically *enact* Rebecca, to embody the self-perpetuating essence of her beauty. Her obsession with Rebecca's beauty in a very real way keeps Rebecca alive, but it also increasingly animates the narrator herself, as in the scene in which Maxim both interrupts and describes her 'curious little performance'—when she is imagining herself, literally, as Rebecca, and allowing the knowledge of Rebecca she has gathered to enter her own limbs and features:

> 'What the devil are you thinking about?' said Maxim; 'first you listened, as though you heard the telephone, and then your lips moved, and you threw half a glance at me. And you shook your head, and smiled, and shrugged your shoulders. All in about a second' . . . I wondered what he would say if he really knew my thoughts, my heart, and my mind, and that for one second he had been the Maxim of another year, and I had been Rebecca (1971: 200–1).

Since at this point the narrator still believes that Rebecca was kind, amusing and generous, this is the Rebecca she imagines and unconsciously begins to embody. It is curious, then, that Max's interpretation of her 'performance' differs dramatically from her experience of it: 'You look like a little criminal', he says, adding, 'You looked older suddenly, deceitful' (1971: 201). For Scarry, the impulse to replicate beauty is at the heart of all forms of creation; it is fundamentally a good thing. But Maxim's reaction to the narrator's performance of Rebecca introduces a note of moral ambiguity—one that acquires resonance only later, when we realise that criminalising his new wife's reanimation of Rebecca is the logical outcome of Maxim's justification of his own literally criminal behaviour.

At this stage of the novel, though, to 'be' Rebecca still means—for the narrator—to inhabit more perfectly the heroine's plot; to earn from Maxim the kind of love a heroine commands. Her efforts to 'replicate' Rebecca culminate in her preparations for the fancy-dress ball, when she looks into the mirror and sees someone 'quite attractive, quite different altogether. Not me at all, someone much more interesting, more vivid and alive' (1971: 205). She also notes, disturbingly, that her 'own dull personality was submerged at last' (1971: 211). Of course, no sooner does she at last effect this transformation than the real Rebecca resurfaces, literally, from the sea, asserting claims of her own. Maxim's account of the 'real' Rebecca disrupts the narrator's assumptions about what Browning calls the 'happy congruence of outer and inner lives'

(Brownstein 1982: 158), forcing her to entertain the possibility that Rebecca's beauty was a sign, not of a heroine's virtues, but of degradation. Moreover, in spite of her beauty, Maxim did not love her. It is not that the narrator has misattributed beauty to Rebecca—which Scarry describes as a common error, subject to correction, and an intrinsic danger of the perception of beauty (1999: 28)—but that she has misinterpreted the *meaning* of her beauty, and insisted upon viewing it as a necessary component of a romantic plot. To have been wrong about Rebecca's beauty frees her, she thinks, to be a heroine in her own right: 'I was free now to be with Maxim', she asserts, 'to touch him, and hold him, and love him' (Scarry 1938: 285). Until now, Rebecca's beauty has led the narrator on a quest for knowledge, and for a kind of truth—the truth, specifically, about her predecessor—in keeping with Scarry's assertion that beauty 'ignites the desire for truth', that it 'creates . . . the aspiration for enduring certitude' (Scarry 1999: 52, 53). Crucially, however, when she acknowledges her error and declares that she has willfully severed the relationship—the compact—between herself and the first Mrs De Winter, her position becomes ethically compromised. In order to dissociate herself from the shadow she has so ardently pursued, she must accept Maxim's assertion that Rebecca was 'evil and vicious and rotten' (1971: 285), tainting her previous assumptions about Rebecca's beauty and altering the image she has painstakingly constructed through her own investigations. Immediately, Maxim's guilt attaches to her: 'I too had killed Rebecca', she asserts after learning the truth about her death, at the same time proclaiming her new willingness to 'lie and perjure and swear', even 'blaspheme', in order to conceal the truth (1971: 285). Her relentless obsession with Rebecca's beauty, her mutually constitutive relationship with the first wife, has indeed led her to the truth—though not the one she sought—and placed her in a position where Maxim's fate is hers to decide. And while the novel itself invites us to identify with the narrator and share her desire to thwart what is presented as a misguided, too-technical justice (Rebecca goaded Max to shoot her, after all, and Rebecca deserved it), the novel's chilly opening scene, in which we see the narrator living not the life of a heroine, but one of monotonous exile, suggests that perhaps her choice was the wrong one. Her silence has not, after all, bought the kind of happiness—or the kind of plot—she imagined.

Complicating all of this is the possibility that the narrator does not, in fact, lack beauty, only the awareness of it. Du Maurier gives us plenty of reason to suspect this, although most critics have been willing to accept the narrator's assessment of herself uncritically. The reader, too, Janet Harboard notes, is 'invited to measure the girl's ineptitude, plainness, lack of sophistication against Rebecca's conventionally heroic beauty, brains

and breeding' (1996: 100)—to accept her, in Beauman's words, as a 'drab shadowy creature' (2007: 51). All evidence of the narrator's plainness, however, comes from thoughts and impressions she has projected onto other people: 'She's nothing to look at, you know', she imagines a guest remarking, with another responding, 'No, I've heard there's nothing much to her' (1971: 221). Of Maxim's sister Beatrice, similarly, the narrator reports, 'I caught her eye upon me now and again, puzzled, reflective, as though she was saying to herself, ''What on earth does Maxim see in her?''' (1971: 101) Even Maxim calls attention to this peculiar habit: '''Don't talk nonsense,'' he said. ''I've never said you dressed badly, or were gauche. It's your imagination''' (1971: 147). On the other hand, we have Beatrice's account of Max's initial report on his new bride—'very young, very pretty'—along with Frank's remark, when she complains of her lack of beauty, that she is 'modest' (1971: 98, 131); there is also Favell's unsavory but clearly flirtatious remark about the dangers of leaving a young bride all alone.

In fact, there are numerous hints that the distinction between the narrator and Rebecca lies not in their differing degree of beauty, but in an opposition between the natural and the artificial. In the scene in which Mrs Van Hopper relates how 'exquisitely turned out' Rebecca apparently was, she is all the while applying her rather garish makeup: 'I need the darker shade of powder with this brilliant red, my dear, fetch it will you' (1971: 42). Mrs Van Hopper's attempt to turn *herself* out exquisitely curiously aligns her with Rebecca, here, against the narrator's description of herself, 'with straight, bobbed hair and youthful, unpowdered face, dressed in an ill-fitting coat and a jumper of my own creation, trailing in the wake of Mrs Van Hopper like a shy, uneasy colt' (1971: 9). Beatrice hints at the same distinction: when she says that Maxim's new wife is not what she expected, the narrator assumes immediately that this is a reference to her plainness, when in fact Beatrice has explained that she anticipated 'a social butterfly, very modern and plastered with paint, the sort of girl you expect to meet in those sort of places' (1971: 98). Although the narrator ostensibly reports this conversation as evidence of her comparative lack of beauty, it works simultaneously to establish her as natural (as opposed to painted) and, arguably, preferable. Brownstein points out that '[t]he ''realistic'' novel insists that a true heroine is authentically, not artificially, beautiful. She is the girl who looks beautiful in any old thing she throws on' (1982: 166). While the narrator of *Rebecca* certainly does not make that claim for herself—nor does she seem aware of it as a literary convention—her representation of her lack of interest in fashion or makeup, along with the other characters' responses to her, leave the reader to recognise (and correctly interpret) that convention.

For Maxim, Rebecca's beauty is associated with a certain kind of knowledge—knowledge he is dismayed to detect in the narrator's own face when she is performing Rebecca, and which he tries to explain as the sort of knowledge one would glean from 'certain books one's father would keep under lock and key' (1971: 202)—knowledge presumably masculine, then, and probably sexual. The narrator herself, despite Maxim's clear disapproval, welcomes this possibility: 'I felt very curious, rather excited. ''What do you mean, Maxim? What isn't the right sort of knowledge?''' (1971: 201–2). By the end, what Maxim calls the narrator's 'funny, young, lost look' has been erased and replaced with knowledge, the 'something new' that has 'come upon' her (1971: 285). 'I killed that too', Max tells her, 'when I told you about Rebecca' (1971: 299). The narrator's successful enactment—or replication—of Rebecca's beauty and its accompanying knowledge coincide with her realisation that, in colluding with Max, '[she] too had killed Rebecca' (1971: 285). If Max has killed her former self, and she and Max have together killed Rebecca, what remains? In repudiating Rebecca and her beauty they elude justice, but they are also driven from the romantic plot the narrator had hoped, in replacing Rebecca, to inhabit at last. Their lives, as described in chapter two, are plotless, characterised by a stasis they choose to call peace. But the narrator still dreams of Manderley, and dwells on its beauty; the process of replication is thereby relegated to her unconscious mind, since she and Maxim do not speak of the past. They find comfort in the very lack of beauty in the hotel where they lodge—the 'hard glare', the 'stony vineyards' (1971: 9). In order to protect themselves from the past and its unbearable truths, and from the knowledge of their guilt, they must exile themselves not only from England but from beauty itself.

The King's General: *Beauty and Politics*

I have dwelt longest on *Rebecca* because it remains du Maurier's most read and most discussed novel, and also because it is in many ways a provocatively complex text. But du Maurier's interest in the relationship between female beauty and ethical concerns echoes throughout most of her work. In *The King's General*, a novel generally considered one of her minor works, du Maurier sets up another uneasy relationship between beauty and justice, raising the stakes, in a sense, by projecting these ideals onto an explicitly historical and political stage, rather than a claustrophobically domestic one. This Civil War novel offers two radically different embodiments of female beauty—Honor Harris, the wheelchair-bound narrator, and Gartred Denys, the destruction of whose beauty

Honor contemplates with some satisfaction in the opening pages. The novel's ethical crises are filtered through the lens of the influence these characters wield. Echoing the monstrous rhododendrons in the opening pages of *Rebecca*, however, this novel also presents an early warning about beauty: 'There was one flower, an orchid, that grew alone; it was the color of pale ivory, with one little vein of crimson running through the petals . . . It was the loveliest flower I had ever seen'. Honor's mother, prefiguring the conflicted role beauty will play in this fictional historical landscape, warns her not to touch it: 'The stem', she says ominously, 'is poisonous' (du Maurier 2004: 14–15). Beauty can be dangerous, then, even sinister: this is Max's position, essentially, and as such invites skepticism. For Scarry, to blame beauty itself for any undesirable effect it might have is a mistake: such an effect, she argues, is 'simply . . . an imperfect instance of an otherwise positive outcome' (1999: 7). Du Maurier's juxtaposition of Honor and Gartred may be seen as an exploration of the possible 'outcomes' of feminine beauty.

Honor Harris is the self-avowed 'beauty of [her] family', sharp-tongued and diminutive, fetching enough to secure the love of a ruthless general and notorious rake; she describes her features as 'more impudent than classical' (2004: 24)—thereby invoking the convention which dictates, according to Brownstein, that 'the heroine of fiction' possess a 'pretty little flaw' that 'saves' her from 'perfectly boring beauty' (1982: 206). Du Maurier swiftly removes Honor from the sexual realm by means of a riding accident that leaves her paralysed from the waist down and prevents her impending marriage to Richard Grenvile, the King's General. Her beauty itself, however, remains intact, even years later: 'You're fairer now as a woman than you ever were as a prinking blushing maid, and I'm not the only one that thinks it', her faithful maid attests, and Richard Grenvile, encountering her after a separation of many years, confirms this assessment: 'Has no one told you', he asks, 'that you are more lovely now than you were then?' (2004: 78, 100) The Prince of Wales himself looks her up and down 'in cool, appraising fashion, as though [she] were a maid' (2004: 276). Detached from a viable sexuality, though, Honor's beauty must acquire meaning in another register. The narrator's revelation that the marriage plot is over—that we 'will never see [her] wed to the man [she] love[s], nor become the mother of his children'—is swiftly followed by a challenge to redefine our expectations for a heroine: she proclaims, 'I took the leading part in the drama that unfolded, my very immobility sharpening my sense and quickening my perception, while chance itself forced me to my role of judge and witness' (2004: 51). Playing out at first on a domestic stage, where she becomes a 'guide and mediator' in family affairs, this role eventually extends to her

actions in the war (2004: 53). Nina Auerbach has commented that Daphne du Maurier's 'politics are, baldly, appalling' (2002: 17), and certainly the novel's unabashedly royalist sympathies sit somewhat uneasily today. But Honor's fierce loyalty to her family and to Cornwall does not preclude a critique of war itself: 'war can make beasts of every one of us' (2004: 193), she observes at one point, reminding us of her earlier remark about hunting: 'I rode for pleasure, not for slaughter, and hawking was never my favorite pastime' (2004: 49). She is critical of those who—like Gartred—exploit the war for personal gain. And her love for Richard Grenvile, never to be consecrated by marriage, does not prevent her from judging him 'without mercy'; instead, it translates into a desire to curb his cruelty, 'to give to him wholeheartedly and without any reservation all the small wisdom I had learnt, all the love, all the understanding that might yet bring him some measure of peace' (2004: 105)—thereby influencing him to conduct a less brutal campaign.

Placed in opposition to Honor is Gartred, originally a Grenvile, whose beauty is reminiscent of Rebecca's: the narrator notes at first her 'serpent's eyes beneath the red-gold hair, that hard, voluptuous mouth' (2004: 4), and marvels that anyone could be deceived by her. Even as a child, she recognises the destructive force of Gartred's beauty: 'I swear she cast a blight upon the place', she observes, perceiving that all men are 'mazed' by her beauty (2004: 15, 18). Gartred's destructiveness invites us to class her as a 'vamp', returning to Horner and Zlosnik's categories. But Honor's early observation offers another way to understand Gartred's influence: when she thinks herself unobserved as she tries to wrench open a concealed drawer, her beauty falls away, replaced by the 'hard' woman described above. In this moment Gartred is 'voluptuous' and serpent-like, terms that cast her allure as purely sexual, but not precisely aesthetic.[1] The beauty she displays in public, Honor perceives, is an act, and one motivated by her desire to preserve the privileges and trappings of aristocracy. Indirectly responsible for Honor's accident, Gartred is as brutal in her way as her brother the General, and more selfish; she is, according to Honor, without political allegiance or conviction: 'Neither for the Parliament, nor for the King, but for Gartred Denys' (163). While Honor's beauty is removed from the realm of sexuality and marriage, and reinscribed in the political realm, Gartred deploys her explicitly sexual appeal in the political realm of men—and of war—exclusively for material gain. Honor's judicious and principled influence, in contrast to Gartred's sexual power, is represented as a product of discipline: 'Day after day I drilled my feelings to obedience', she writes of her convalescence (2004: 57). Contrasting her own authority with his merciless military discipline, she says to Richard: 'Lying on my back

1 This distinction is fundamental to Edmund Burke's definition of beauty in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Beauty (whether of people or things), he argues, produces 'love', which is entirely different from 'desire or lust' (Burke 1958: 91).

has taught me some discipline . . . but not the kind you engender in your troops' (2004: 100). Horner and Zlosnik note that Honor's 'distorted body, rather than representing a loathed ''other'', becomes in a strange way empowered by its confinement and speaks for itself' (1998: 87). Part of the way her disabled body speaks, paradoxically, is through its improbable beauty, subjected to a rigid discipline that saves it from despotism and renders it both political and powerful.

In the end, after a botched attempt at reviving the royalist resistance to Cromwell effectively defeats the novel's political and romantic ideals, Honor invokes the language of justice to lash out at Gartred: 'Let her take the blame. Fix the crime on her' (2004: 333). But Gartred has at last been marked by war, by history, and has emerged from the events of the night with a deep gash across her face, from her eyebrow to her chin, and in a later moment when Gartred surveys her spoiled beauty in a mirror and catches Honor's eyes in her reflection, she suddenly confesses her role in the riding accident, adding that 'it has taken a long time to call it quits' (2004: 343). If she will not accept the blame for what the novel presents as the larger political crime (she has been playing both sides, to the detriment of her brother's cause), she at least admits her guilt in Honor's personal tragedy. The war is lost, Grenvile has fled the country, his son is dead and Honor's brother Robin is destroyed: but some measure of justice is enacted in this exchange between Honor and Gartred, explicitly mediated by their compromised beauty. Furthermore, Gartred's faithless beauty is hopelessly marred, her future uncertain, while Honor, whose beauty has proven impervious to physical injury, remains the guardian and recorder of history, patiently narrating the story. Amidst the ruins of the political and domestic worlds of the novel, Honor continues to embody the virtues she has sought to promote in both spheres: compassion, discipline, self-sacrifice—and honour, of course. In a sense, then, she collapses in her person the gap between the two realms, a gap that she has sometimes bridged in the course of the plot. Her immobilised beauty fuses the masculine and the feminine, the domestic and the political, and culminates in the production of the narrative itself.

My Cousin Rachel: *Beauty and Error*

My Cousin Rachel, in which conflict returns to the domestic sphere, establishes an even more explicit connection between justice and beauty, though both categories are fundamentally unstable in this novel. Philip Ashley's lingering doubt about his cousin—'Was [Rachel] innocent or guilty?' (du Maurier 1952: 12)—corresponds to a similarly framed

question that preoccupies him earlier in the novel: is Rachel beautiful or ordinary? From the start, she is essentially unknowable; before her arrival—her invasion, as he sees it—Philip imagines a multitude of possible Rachels, baldly exposing his misogyny:

> I had pictured to myself a woman resembling Mrs. Pascoe ... Large-featured and angular, with a hawk's eye for dust ... far too loud a laugh when there was company for dinner ... Now she took on new proportions. One moment monstrous ... and the next pale and drawn, shawl-covered in a chair, with an invalidish petulance about her ... One moment middle-aged and forceful, the next simpering and younger than Louise, my cousin Rachel had a dozen personalities or more, and each one more hateful than the last (1952: 31).

Importantly, he envisions not only the imaginary Rachels' characteristics as individuals, but their effect on his cousin Ambrose, who has unexpectedly married her while on a trip to Italy for his health: various versions of Rachel lead him to picture Ambrose 'having lost all dignity', or smiling 'the bland smile of an idiot' (1952: 31). Even before he has considered the possibility of beauty, he understands femininity in relation to his uncle as a force, and explicitly a destructive one.[2]

Far from fulfilling his vivid if mutable expectations, the actual Rachel, who appears after Ambrose's sudden and mysterious death abroad, catches him off guard and immediately disarms him:

> If only she had borne some resemblance to the image I had created I should know better what to do ... Somewhere there was a bitter creature, crabbed and old ... somewhere a larger Mrs Pascoe, loud-voiced, arrogant; somewhere a petulant spoilt doll with corkscrew curls; somewhere a viper, sinuous and silent. But none of them was with me in this room. Anger seemed futile now, and hatred too, and as for fear—how could I fear anyone who did not measure up to my shoulder and had nothing remarkable about her save a sense of humour and small hands? (1952: 94)

She wins his approval precisely because he sees her as unremarkable—and unthreatening. Even when he recognises her effect on other men—'I thought how swiftly men, especially menservants, became fools in the presence of a woman'—he is pleased to find himself unaffected (1952: 97). Curiously, his attempts to describe her repeatedly seem to resist a direct account of her appearance, and he resorts to artistic representations: her face reminds him of 'a Roman coin' (1952: 100), her hands remind him of an unfinished portrait by an old master—but still he does not associate these deferred images with beauty.

2 Philip's association of female beauty with destructiveness flies in the face of prevailing nineteenth-century aesthetic theories. For Kant and Burke, the kind of power Philip attributes to beauty is aligned solely with the sublime—Scarry's 'aesthetic of power'—while beauty is 'diminutive' and 'powerless' (Scarry 1999: 85). Further, the beautiful is feminine while the sublime is essentially masculine. Philip attributes the power of the sublime to his imaginary Rachels—but also to the real Rachel, once he has recognised her beauty and begins to fear her. For Scarry, these aesthetic distinctions posit oppositions where there was once continuity, and demote beauty in the process. Philip's association of beauty with power suggests a similar blurring of the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime.

Tellingly, he believes she is unremarkable because she seems to have no effect on him at all, other than perhaps to make him even more fully himself. When his friend Louise first remarks that Rachel is 'very beautiful', Philip vehemently denies it—not on the grounds of her actual physical person, but rather his experience of her company. He insists to Louise that Rachel is 'the most ordinary person I have ever met. Why, I can say what I like to her, I can talk of anything, I don't have to put on any sort of special manner of behavior in front of her' (1952: 124). By implication, a beautiful woman, Philip believes, would force him to change, would alter him in some way. For Philip, a beautiful woman is almost by definition a femme fatale or a vamp. Understanding beauty to be a kind of relation—not the sort of affirmative contract that Scarry describes, but rather a destructive force—Philip logically insists that Rachel cannot possibly be beautiful. Believing her to be ordinary, he also believes her to be innocent, marveling: 'Was it for this that one man had fought a duel, and another, dying, had written to me and said, ''She's done for me at last, Rachel my torment?''' (1952: 94). As readers, we are alerted by Louise's comment—'she seems to have made a great impression on you'—that Philip's judgement here, both of Rachel's beauty and his own imperviousness, is not to be trusted (1952: 125).

Unrecognised, however, Rachel's beauty propels the decidedly misanthropic Philip to astonishing and, it seems, uncharacteristic gestures of both kindness and generosity. In this sense, beauty may be said to have the 'life-giving' effect Scarry describes, and also to illustrate the effect of beauty she calls the 'pressure toward distribution', which she associates with justice: '[B]eautiful things', Scarry argues, 'give rise to the notion of distribution, to a lifesaving reciprocity, to fairness . . . in the sense of ''a symmetry of everyone's relation to one another''' (1999: 95). Though Philip's actions are not entirely selfless, they certainly represent a clumsy attempt to undo the apparent injustice enacted by Ambrose's will, in which Rachel is deprived of her inheritance as his wife. '[M]y conscience tells me I have been enjoying something that is not mine by right', he declares to his reluctant godfather (1952: 253). In fact, Philip eventually goes well beyond symmetry, using an unsigned will of dubious legitimacy to relinquish his own claim to Ambrose's property in Rachel's favour.

Tellingly, Philip's doubts about Rachel's innocence arise soon after he revises his earlier impression and decides that 'Louise and the Pascoes had been right after all. Rachel was beautiful' (1952: 196). According to Scarry, a kind of propensity for what she calls 'error' is intrinsic to beauty. She argues that 'the experience of ''being in error'' so inevitably accompanies the perception of beauty that it begins to seem one of its abiding structural features', while 'the act of perceiving that seemingly

self-evident beauty has a built-in liability to self-adjustment and self-correction, so much so that it appears to be a key element in whatever beauty is' (1999: 28–9). Philip's failure to recognise Rachel's beauty falls into one of Scarry's two categories of error—the sudden recognition of beauty in an object already 'confidently repudiated as an object of beauty'. Philip's recognition of his error accompanies an infatuation amounting to a kind of madness, and initiates a never-ending process of 'self-adjustment' that, as the opening passages suggest, becomes his dominant mode of being. When he commences his narrative, looking back at the events he is about to describe, he is haunted by his own guilt, and the question of his culpability hinges eternally on the unanswerable question of Rachel's guilt. Burdened with the knowledge that he is responsible for Rachel's death, still tormented by uncertainty as to her guilt, Philip announces that he 'shall become a justice of the peace . . . and also be returned one day to Parliament'—ironising his failure to promote justice in the personal realm by legitimising himself as a protector of justice in the public sphere. The lingering memory of Rachel's beauty, meanwhile, has become 'almost like poison', and his desire to 'plant trees and shrubs'—'to leave some legacy of beauty when [he goes]' (1952: 12)—makes a mockery of Scarry's contention that 'beauty brings copies of itself into being' (1999: 3): having destroyed Rachel's beauty, Philip's effort to beautify his estate seems a profoundly inadequate form of reparation.

Beauty and Betrayal

In all three novels, it seems clear that if we understand beauty as a potentially life-giving and justice-promoting *relation* between perceiver and perceived, then the nature of that relation represents a key site of ethical possibility, a turning point—and also, I would suggest, a site from which narrative itself is generated. Each of these novels seeks, in its opening pages, to establish two central ambiguities, one involving beauty and how it is to be read, and one involving justice and the extent to which it has prevailed. The fact that these two fundamental questions become increasingly intertwined in the course of each narrative—to the point where I think it is nearly impossible to consider one without the other—suggests the extent to which they are linked. In explorations of the vexed relationship between beauty and justice, du Maurier is ultimately less optimistic than Scarry. Nevertheless, she shares some of her key assumptions: that beauty 'incites deliberation', that it may be 'the starting point for education', and that 'the beautiful person or thing incites in us

the longing for truth' (Scarry 1999: 28, 31). By situating beauty at the centre of ethical crises, du Maurier also reveals an implicit concurrence with Scarry's argument that, contrary to the current position on beauty in the humanities, beauty is—or may be—political; that rather than distracting us from 'wrong social arrangements' and rendering us 'indifferent . . . to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just' (Scarry 1999: 58), beauty plunges us into the thick of injustice and demands that we act. But while Scarry acknowledges that beauty *may* produce 'an imperfect instance of an otherwise perfect outcome'; in other words, beauty might *prepare* us for justice, as Caughie puts it, but offers no guarantees—du Maurier, more gloomily, dwells on those imperfect instances. *Rebecca*'s nameless narrator seeks to understand and to replicate Rebecca's beauty but ultimately exchanges justice for love, only to learn that her appeal to Maxim was precisely the *lack* of the kind of knowledge she has now, through Rebecca, acquired. Honor Harris retains her judicial function until the end, when her family has crumbled around her, but announces in the opening pages that the history she is writing—the truth she has to convey 'will go with me to the grave, and by rotting there with me, unread, will serve its purpose' (du Maurier 2004: 8). And in *My Cousin Rachel*, the truth is frustratingly inaccessible, and the very notion of justice is fraught with irony. For du Maurier, justice is stubbornly elusive, and the truth is often terrible. Her beautiful heroines provoke visions of justice; they precipitate moral dilemmas that present ethical possibilities. In general, though, du Maurier's reckless characters fail to rise to the occasion; their search for knowledge ultimately turns inward and becomes self-judgment. Beauty may be a contract, but like any pact forged by imperfect entities, it is subject to betrayal.

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