Moving on from Manderley: Daphne du Maurier's short fiction

Setara Pracha

Department of English and Media, University of Buckingham, UK
Correspondence: setara.pracha@buckingham.ac.uk

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Abstract

This reflective article comprises a doctoral research journey for which the archives at MRC were pivotal and produced groundbreaking work, thus enabling the repositioning of a key literary figure from the twentieth century, Daphne du Maurier. The correspondence between the author and Victor Gollancz her publisher led to breakthrough moments connecting contemporary events to the genesis of the short fiction, and this showed du Maurier as an insightful critique of power dynamics in her times.

Keywords: Daphne du Maurier; Victor Gollancz; body gothic; The Alibi; Rebecca; pathology of desire

When I first came to Warwick University's Modern Records Centre (MRC), I was a fresh-faced researcher with little idea of what an archive was, let alone how to use one. I now know that without these institutions and their 'pixie' helpers, students and academics would never get their work completed, submitted and published. Although these hidden heroes of scholarship are traditionally thanked in thesis dedications, it feels good to explain how my research was enriched by their archival expertise and support. It was while studying at the MRC that I first realised my doctoral hypothesis held true and where I became certain about the success of my thesis. The excitement of finding a hidden gem in an archive cannot be expressed exactly when it happens – it is a library, and one must maintain an earnest silence – but that gleeful inner yelp from myself as a doctoral student still resonates, despite years since then spent lecturing.

Daphne du Maurier was not my first choice of research topic. In a Victorian-heavy English Department it made sense to examine periodicals from the nineteenth century, but the materials I found at the Bodleian Library did not enthuse and my literary passion led me elsewhere. On being asked to teach a module called Women Writers I delighted in finding new authors to showcase, ones that were unknown to my students, and merited more attention than the academy had awarded them. Du Maurier was one of those I reappraised for teaching, and I discovered that her reputation languished under the label of 'middle' or 'mezzo brow', with critics dismissing the quality of her writing, scorning her as a popular novelist capable of composing a ripping yarn and little else. As she composed the first gothic novel of the twentieth century – *Rebecca* can be read as a rewriting of both *Jane Eyre* and *Bluebeard* – I was baffled and determined to investigate what I felt was a misconception. So began my exploration of all things du Maurier, including her close relationship with Victor Gollancz, her publisher, mentor, friend and correspondent for many years. It was a desire for a greater depth of field knowledge that first took me to the MRC.

Some of the frequent letters between du Maurier and Gollancz are held at Warwick, and after a few pleasant phone calls with archivists keen to assist with my research quest, I ventured to see them for myself. My aim was to explore the influence Gollancz had on du Maurier's writing, as I knew their relationship extended beyond the professional and into friendship and that she also had a trusted editor in Sheila Hodges. As du Maurier's shorter fiction was commonly less regarded but of significant quality, it became the central focus of my research, and the materials I studied indicated how seriously du Maurier took her publisher's views.

I found the letters with many other useful items, and these were together with editions of the characteristically bright yellow books detailing

Gollancz publications. Gollancz and du Maurier's correspondence is couched in warm and expressive prose with many a du Maurier dash between ideas – as if her pen cannot contain the speed of her thoughts. They even led to her altering the gender of a character when Gollancz took issue with the plot of a short story entitled 'Monte Verità'. In an early draft, du Maurier went so far as to turn Anna's character into a man, but this was vetoed by Gollancz who had doubts concerning the sexual aspects of the story: 'I don't understand the slight implication that there is something wrong with sex', he wrote. Thus, Anna remains female but single-mindedly pursues her dream over the dreams of other, male characters, including her husband, Victor. (It may be a discreet compliment to her publisher that a major character has his name.) Gollancz's comment is quoted in Margaret Forster's biography of du Maurier, and I used it in my work, but it was sourced from letters in the British Library where there was an embargo on du Maurier's correspondence until 2023 (**Forster, 1993: 257**). Though disappointed over this research 'full stop', I knew I was going to graduate and be published long before the embargo ended and, thanks to my findings from the MRC archives, I was.

The missives between author and publisher form a dialogue framing an exchange of opinions on cultural, spiritual and political matters, highlighting both correspondents as enthusiastically engaged in issues of their day, with a keen emphasis on morality, religion and economics. Corporal punishment and Apartheid are two examples of the weighty issues covered in depth and the former is showcased at the denouement of 'The Alibi', a short story from du Maurier's 1959 collection *The Breaking Point*. To illustrate the point, it is useful to see exactly how the issue is woven into a tale of hubris, casual cruelty and a satisfying come-uppance for the main character.

'The Alibi's' plot concerns James Fenton, a would-be murderer who does not ultimately act out his violent plans and yet is eventually arrested for the crime of triple murder and sent to the gallows (the penalty for murder at this time). His chosen, but random, victim is Anna who lives a life of despair and loneliness as a dispossessed itinerant refugee, one of the many drifters through the wasteland of 1950s post-war Europe. The narrative is set during a decade framed by the murders committed by John Christie and others, of those lost and unmissed people disposed of within a domestic setting until their bodies came to light. Christie murdered eight women but was not caught and tried until another man, Timothy Evans, had been hung for the homicides. Du Maurier was fascinated by the issues surrounding these events and communicated her views to Gollancz, opinions subsequently immortalised in her ironically titled short story. The peripatetic Anna's final action is to (according to Fenton), complete suicide killing herself, her unborn child and her infant son, thus leaving him to face

the police, his wife, and finally the gallows. Gollancz and du Maurier debate the best punishment for such crimes in their letters, and while considering the possibility of Christ's views on the subject, du Maurier makes darker references to more appropriate punishments in a missive from 1955:

> *That wretched little man near Paddington who put all those women's bodies in cupboards a few years ago, I forget his name, wait a minute – Christie – must surely have been insane. (I think after being buried in the 1914 war. Psychiatric treatment might have cured him, I don't know, but he was hanged).* (**MSS.157/3/1/DM/1-43**)[i]

Gollancz sent his Cornwall-based author a regular series of newly published texts for review including his own books, among which was John Barlow Martin's Break Down the Walls, an account of the 1952 riots in the State Prison of Southern Michigan at Jackson. Du Maurier confesses her conflicted response with some candour, 'when I say enjoyed, I mean I was very interested, always am in anything to do with prisons' (**21.2.55, MSS.157/3/1/DM/1-43**). This macabre fascination with the darker aspects of human nature also comes across in her comments on high-profile murder cases, as in her mention of Haigh dissolving an old woman in a bath of acid, or a Mrs Roberts using rat poison on her 72-year-old employer to obtain money in a will. The details are processed and emerge as the genesis of plots, psychological analysis resulting in Old Testament punishment. To du Maurier, as judge and jury, there is:

> *an unnatural sort of greed [...] made them become murderers, or a menace to society. They chose their weapon to destroy, therefore it seems to me just that the same weapon should be used by them to create.* (**MSS.157/3/1/DM/12**)

Du Maurier also made requests of Gollancz for books on particular themes, 'I have a passionate interest always in medical or psychological matters, so if you have anything in that way, send it to me.' (**14.11.55, MSS.157/3/1/DM/1-43**). Gollancz's response was to send more books on morals and medicine to his author, delivered with 'immense love' (**MSS.157/3/1/DM/1-43**).

The topics under discussion range from the particular to the general. In one letter from du Maurier to Gollancz she dismisses the concept of the 'free world' as chittering cant citing the U.S.A. as obsessed with money and plumbing, and Russia as caught up in party doctrine. Her observation on the times is that 'the chaps at the top [are] dictating even now and the herd following'; sixty years later one wonders if much has changed. And yet there is a hopeful note, too. In outlining potential global disasters such as meteors and H-bombs she asks, 'What then is the ultimate answer to

fear? Love, of course, but how does one show it to greatest effect?' In this sober letter her general point is that against a general threat we, the 'inhabitants of the world', might get together and 'all unite to do what we can' (**MSS.157/3/1/DM/12**). In our post-pandemic world, these words seem oddly prescient.

In that period as an early year's researcher, it was gripping to 'eavesdrop' on the insights offered by two great minds of their generation on international politics and morality. The details I found in the correspondence provided the necessary impetus for my ambition to reposition du Maurier as an author of the highest quality, whose fiction offers a clear and topical commentary. Although this element of her fiction is subtextual, the dialogue in the letters reveals du Maurier's strength of opinion on what she regarded as important matters, and it was a short step from this to re-examining her short stories through a political and cultural lens. I knew this approach would both professionalise my research and hopefully reposition my author as someone to take seriously within the literary canon. There is an excitement about researching known only to those lucky enough to feel the definite sense of being on to something, and this inspiring moment came when I read du Maurier's letters containing her views on cultural values and morality and realised they saturated her texts. The confidence I drew from this enabled me to forge ahead with my critique of the scholarly field and inspired me to address the research gap with my own project.

After Victor Gollancz's death du Maurier continued to correspond with his daughter Livia, and these letters reveal that du Maurier was deeply affected by scholarly marginalisation. In fact, it haunted her own sense of authorial success, as her son Kits Browning described in an interview for the *Radio Times* in 2014 (**Browning & Dowell, 2014**). This was despite being awarded the title of Dame of the British Empire for her contribution to literature, and a loyal readership that devoured each new publication. In a letter to Gollancz's daughter, she mentions with some humility how, '[c]ertainly no author can present future scholarly appraisal of his or her work - though in my case I hardly warrant such attention' (**5.8.72, MSS.318/3/LIV/3**). In the respondent letter Livia adds a significant postscript: '[d]o not be so sure that your own work will not receive the accolade of scholarly attention one day' (**9.8.72, MSS.318/3/LIV/3**). I recall sitting in the MRC reading this PS with a smile, certain that my research project would meet with my subject's approval and finally admit her to the halls of academe as a respected writer of social commentary. My research subsequently enriched my teaching practice by adding a depth of context with the result that du Maurier's fiction became a regular favourite with undergraduate students. The first international conference on her work was held in Le Mans in 2019 and, having first encountered her texts as

undergraduates, postgraduate students now choose du Maurier as a research topic.

The archival materials provided an excellent source of intellectual seasoning to my chapters, grounding my observations in real world facts and authorial statements, without which much of my analysis might have read as opinion and not the high-level critical commentary which merits a PhD. It is testimony to my detailed study of secondary materials that during my viva my examiners commented on the strength of my research as its solid grounding in archival sources. My book, entitled *A Pathology of Desire in Daphne du Maurier's Short Stories* was recently published, and du Maurier's 1938 novel, *Rebecca,* is on the GCSE syllabus. This is an instance of authorial repositioning within the canon, something made possible by research supported by the archivists and the archives at the MRC.

Dr Setara Pracha is a Senior Research Fellow and Post-graduate Supervisor at the University of Buckingham. She was the first Ondaatje Scholar to Massey College, Toronto. Her research interests include Gender Studies, Identity and Otherness, and Diasporic Writing in twentieth-century fiction. She is currently working on Robert Browning's influence on Daphne du Maurier's work, and researching 'passing' as a literary trope for a forthcoming book. The research undertaken at MRC was published in book form as *The Pathology of Desire: Daphne du Maurier's Short Stories by* Lexington Books in 2023.

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Endnotes

[i] References in this format are to materials in the MRC's collections – see References for details of the relevant collection area.