



The All-Consuming Modern Woman

Cancer and Consumerism in Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca

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In this deeply innovative literary analysis, Rhiannon Quillin emphasizes the gendered metaphor of cancer in Daphne de Maurier's classic neo-Gothic novel *Rebecca*, arguing that the title character's terminal illness thematically signals her perversion of traditional femininity. This essay was written for *Critical Approaches to Literature* with Dr. Shelley Rees.

DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S novel *Rebecca* (1938) is well known for its eponymous woman whose specter haunts the inhabitants of the Manderley estate. The novel is also known for its disturbing representation of cancer, but critics fail to consider how the disease seems to define the character of Rebecca as monstrous from the very beginning. Instead, they offer limited interpretations of the disease: It is either treated as an explanation for why Rebecca would want to die by suicide or as an addition to her malformed uterus that is somehow meant to both reinforce and serve as punishment for her malevolency. Those who do in fact recognize the disease as more than just a plot device sometimes confidently claim that her cancer is uterine cancer without making it clear that the text never reveals this classification. And even historical readings do not

provide a sufficient account of how the disease was regarded at the time of *Rebecca*'s genesis, instead attending to its more politicized, interwar circumstances.

I provide a more "illness-aware" reading that I believe is virtually absent from scholarship on *Rebecca* by contextualizing the novel through cancer's metaphoric and supposed etiological connections to modern consumerism and consumption. These themes of modernity have been explored in other readings of the novel, but, again, only within the context of Britain's culture of decadence at the cusp of WWII. I take inspiration from Elizabeth Outka's book *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Period and Interwar Literature*, in which Outka tackles such interpretations dictated by the dominant framework of military conflict and draws attention to how "illness-aware" readings have largely been neglected in favor of war-based interpretations. "As an experiment to startle us out of more familiar narratives and patterns of reading," Outka challenges critics to alternatively position illness as the central metaphor to which war is related (245), thereby revitalizing overlooked role of pandemics, epidemics, and illness in general across literary scholarship and beyond. For a text like *Rebecca*, specifically, where a highly stigmatized disease like cancer is explicitly represented, fuller consideration of illness and how it serves to animate monstrous women is greatly needed.

In her influential 1978 work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag addresses the "metaphorical trappings" of both tuberculosis and cancer and specifies how cancer is commonly figured as a "modern disease," one of ambiguous modern origins. Sontag writes that "any important disease whose causality is murky . . . tends to be awash in significance[,] . . . and it is diseases thought to be multi-determined . . . that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong" (58-61). Around the time that *Rebecca* was authored, little was known about the etiology of cancer. Cancer's supposed mysteriousness and relative severity and pervasiveness made it overripe with symbolic potential, giving rise to metaphors

and metonyms that attach the disease to industrialization and the changing social status of women in the early decades of the twentieth century. Historian Agnes Arnold-Foster, for instance, notes that while many twentieth-century physicians were assuring the public of cancer's old and established history, they were also positioning it as an "unintended consequence of civilization and progress" (173). Industrialized countries like England and America were thought to be especially susceptible to the spread of the disease, and the most prevalent metaphors mystifying cancer in such countries were those linking it to modernization and consumerism in an effort to condemn an increasing moral corruption of mass society.

The figure that ultimately came to represent this corrupt consumer culture is that of the "consuming woman." She is often depicted in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature as a materialistic being whose hedonistic desire brings about her own demise. This hedonism is not only directed toward the latest fashions or cosmetics, literary critic Rita Felski argues, but it is also closely identified with uncontrollable or nonnormative sexual desire (65). Fornication, lesbianism, and even celibacy are all forbidden sexual territories through which the consuming woman passes, and she scarcely escapes these territories without falling victim to some sort of illness or disease. Cancer, a so-called "modern disease" known for its latent growth, is befitting of a modern woman who exhibits no proper sense of traditional gender boundaries and bodily borders. The labels "nymphomaniac" and "spinster" — "the over-sexed and the under-sexed" — were regularly assigned to these modern woman consumers. And, according to Susan Gubar, it was once thought that nymphomaniacs and spinsters were uniquely predisposed to gynecological cancers because of their failure to normally generate and regulate sexual consumption and heterosexual desire (36). Similar to Gubar, Sontag writes that characteristics such as unsatisfactory relationships, misplaced energy, and unhealthy consumption all designated potential cancer-ridden individuals or

those who were already afflicted (51). These traits obviously all imply the cultural anxieties attending gender and sexuality during this period. Illness and disease, of course, played a significant role, and cancer, too, became bound to the figure of the new, consuming woman.

Even though some scholars have viewed Rebecca as epitomizing this figure of modernity, it is rare that they ever closely associate her radical newness and modernness with her cancer. At the beginning, Rebecca is the beautiful and charming woman who had died tragically young; she becomes a source of envy for the narrator or second wife who cannot compete with what Poe deems “the most poetical topic in the world” (107). She is additionally known for her exquisite taste in clothing, her expert management over Manderley’s servants, and her planning and hosting of extravagant parties, typifying the aristocratic angel of the manor. But this homemaking is perverted as Rebecca posthumously “transforms” into a malignant woman by means of the continual “rewriting” and “triple-killing” of her character. It is soon revealed that Rebecca had a voracious sexual appetite and is known to have sexually consumed many men in the refuge of her beach cottage, a space where she could escape the confines of domesticity. She is only fully realized during the later investigation of her death, when it is discovered that she had a malformed uterus and an unspecified, fatal form of cancer. The former suggests a malformation of womanhood, since it is what the doctor locates as the source of her infecundity, while the latter is mystified in a silence of latency and encumbered by gender-specific implications of a corrupt modernity. What is perhaps the novel’s most pivotal moment is this revelation that Rebecca could never bear children, and that, furthermore, she had late-stage cancer, the diagnosis of which results in the retroactive establishment and affirmation of her capacity for abnormal growth and replication. Coupled with her excessive consumption of men and decorative objects, Rebecca, in stark contrast to the “unsexed,” nameless narrator, seems to represent the hypersexualized and materialistic modern woman. As such, her

body then becomes a space on which the ills of modernity — markedly the disease of cancer — make themselves manifest.

After Rebecca's diagnosis is revealed, her lover asks the following: "This cancer business . . . does anyone know if it's contagious?" (385). "No one answered him," is the response, or absence of response, to his question. While his question may seem ridiculous or comical to contemporary readers, it may have been intended to reinforce suspense by playing on an audience's anxieties about the so-called "cancer epidemic." Scholar Madeleine K. Davies points to this exchange as supporting the speculation that Rebecca's cancer is a type of gynecologic cancer due to her lover's fear of contamination (187). Though this fear concerning gynecologic cancers is likely exaggerated, it is also true that cancer was generally once feared to be contagious, which should not be undermined or neglected by critics. However, another more explicit gynecologic basis to her "case" is that the mystery of her doctor appointment revolves around the notion that she may have been pregnant at the time of her death. Even so, it is revealed that she is not pregnant in the literal sense but is metaphorically pregnant with cancer, a disease known for its own reproductive capacity at the cellular level. That is to say, a clearcut "trade-off" is made. Rebecca cannot produce offspring or heirs, but she can perversely reproduce herself at a rapid rate; she becomes a metastasizing presence in her failure to normally reproduce and fulfill traditional motherhood.

Rebecca's failure to adhere to the hegemonic ideals of the mother and temperate housewife locates her outside of the sphere of civilization after death and instills her with an essence of contamination that takes root in the chaotic natural world. The descriptions of the foliage, the sea, and the miasmatic fog, all of which border and threaten to consume the Manderley estate, serve to evince her transgressive, oversexed body and its cancerous growth. The woods, "crowded, dark and uncontrolled to the borders of the house"; the beeches with their "white, naked limbs . . . intermingled in a strange embrace"; and the trees that had "thrown out low branches, making

an impediment to progress, while their gnarled roots looked like skeleton claws”; all arguably signify and foreshadow Rebecca who, as “an impediment to progress,” infects and possesses the future (7). “Rolling up from the sea” where her body resides, the fog that surrounds Manderley is also symptomatic of her diseased character, functioning similarly to a poison or toxin (225). The day after the narrator is tricked into simulating Rebecca at the annual costume ball, the queer, Rebecca-possessed spinster Mrs. Danvers attempts to coax the narrator into suicidally jumping from the balcony into the fog (236). As the narrator leans over the railing, she states that “the mist entered my nostrils and lay upon my lips rank and sour. It was stifling, like a blanket, like an anesthetic.” Growing and extending from Rebecca’s place of death, the anesthetic-like fog nearly drugs the narrator into attempting suicide — suicide being what the coroner conclusively rules as Rebecca’s official cause of death.

Rebecca’s specter infiltrates Manderley’s exterior borders, but Manderley’s interior place is also haunted by her presence as she continues to encroach on and pervert all that is meant to be safe and stable. Inside of Manderley, her polluting hedonism is represented by the decadent food, the extravagant parties, and the expensive décor, and the newlywed narrator expresses discomfort and mortification in seeing the estate still decorated in the first wife’s preferred fashion. Each decorative object that was picked out and purchased by Rebecca seems to contain some seed of her influence and contamination as the narrator reveals that even in her room, under her pillow, she “had a book that she (Rebecca) had taken in her hands” (32). The narrator continually expresses sentiments about the impossibility of escaping Rebecca within the house, since she is always surrounded by her objects. Her possessions propel one of the most memorable scenes of the novel, which occurs when Mrs. Danvers attempts to use them to infect and corrupt the narrator. She orders the narrator to touch, feel, and rub herself against all of Rebecca’s clothing and belongings in frenzied desperation, while confessing that she still feels the dead Rebecca “everywhere,” all throughout

Manderley (167). Mrs. Danvers appears to be stimulated, describing Rebecca's possessions as expensive and of the highest quality, disclosing the refined taste only a perverse, experienced consumer would have, a woman consumer who only uses and objectifies men for the sole purpose of accumulating more beautiful objects. This is why Rebecca is so monstrous and subversively terrifying; she threatens to usurp patriarchal authority and male subjectivity by turning the tide to treat men like sexual objects for her own consumer-driven desires. Even over women, her spectral, sinister influence only produces morbid effects, as the narrator reports feeling "deadly sick" after her encounter with Rebecca's cancerous excess through her maid Mrs. Danvers (164).

Rebecca seems to fulfill the myth of the modern woman consumer who, according to Felski, is depicted both as a victim and as a privileged agent of modernity: a consuming woman who "promotes the feminization of society through a burgeoning materialism and a hedonistic excess" (66). This dual-purpose, victim-agent status is confirmed by her cancer diagnosis, which makes her the victim of a contaminating disease and, in turn, allows her a far-reaching, corruptive influence. This influence is conveyed to the narrator through the distorted natural world surrounding Manderley and the lasting effects of her consumption of objects and men within Manderley and her beach cottage. She then infects all of those around her in fulfilling the role of a monstrous modern woman with a seemingly contagious modern disease.

Regardless of whether Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* is promoting a misogynistic demonization of the "modern woman" or encouraging resistance in response to these literary demonizations, critics should not exclusively view cancer as an unintended consequence or punishment for Rebecca's decadent behavior; nor should cancer's presence be overlooked or written off as incompatible with other readings about vampirism, lesbianism, or materialism. Rather, cancer, in its literary representation, should be viewed as an especially

dense site of meaning due to its numerous metaphoric and metonymic connections to modernity, pollution, consumerism, pregnancy, and other matters. Although I link its representation with gender and modern consumption, a wide range of meaningful potentialities can be gleaned even from the very beginning of the novel. And any contextual information on cancer can enrich understanding of the construction of Rebecca's character and enhance discussions, prompted by feminist critics, about the pathologization of women and their bodies. ▶▶

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