



The Struggle between Masculinity and Femininity in Daphne du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek* and *The Loving Spirit*.

Striden mellan manligt och kvinnligt i Daphne du Maurier *Frenchman's Creek*
och *The Loving Spirit*.

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyse how genders are defined in Daphne du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek* and *The Loving Spirit* and determine whether they follow the traditional division between masculine/male and feminine/female. The essay starts with a general analysis of the female protagonist Dona St. Columb from *Frenchman's Creek* and Janet Coombe from *The Loving Spirit*, taking into consideration feminist criticism and traditional gender roles in order to see if the characters conform to them or not. Both characters are shown to struggle with their "masculine" characteristics in times when the roles of men and women are rigidly defined. The essay then shows how the characters seek temporary escape from their lives to find their true identity. The conclusion is that this struggle is somehow resolved through motherhood that, instead of being a prison that suffocates their true self, becomes an occasion for these characters to find a balance between their masculine and feminine tendencies.

Key words: Daphne du Maurier, gender, femininity, masculinity, male, female, sex, motherhood

Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna uppsats är att analysera hur kön är definierat i Daphne du Mauriers *Frenchman's Creek* och *The Loving Spirit* och hur de följer den traditionella uppdelningen mellan det manliga och det kvinnliga. Uppsatsen inleds med en generell analys av Dona St. Columb från *Frenchman's Creek* och Janet Coombe från *The Loving Spirit*: analysen tar hänsyn till feministisk kritik och traditionella könsroller i syfte att kunna se ifall romankaraktärerna anpassar sig till dessa könsbundna roller eller inte. Båda karaktärerna visar sig kämpa med sina maskulina drag i en tid då kvinnors och mäns roller antas vara strikt åskilda. Uppsatsen visar sedan hur de två karaktärerna strävar efter att frigöra sig från sina liv för att söka efter sina sanna identiteter. Detta sökandes lösning visar sig vara moderskap som, istället för att vara en fängelse som kväva deras riktiga identiteter, blir en anledning för dessa karaktärerna för att finna en balans mellan deras maskulina och feminina tendenser.

Nyckelord: Daphne du Maurier, kön, könsroller, femininitet, maskulinitet, man, kvinna, moderskap,

Daphne du Maurier, like many other women writers, is often dismissed as an author of thrill-inducing Gothic novels by critics who denigrate the genre. *Rebecca* (1938) is her most known novel and the general public often focuses solely on the horrific side of du Maurier's story, forgetting that Gothic novels – and novels in general – offer more than just the story they tell, and that a critical reading of the text can lead to the discovery of different layers and depths. Indeed, the novel as a genre had a difficult start and was deemed to be “not quite respectable” (Norton 25); the Gothic novel in particular soon became the critics' favourite target due to its unreal atmospheres and, especially at the beginning, what were considered stereotypical characters. What those critics failed to realise was that specially the women authors of Gothic novels were not just writing horror stories, they were writing history and writing themselves into ‘History’ (Wallace, 2-3), using this opportunity to be acknowledged and to shed some light on their “position within history” (Wallace, 5).

Du Maurier seems to fit well into this literary trend of women writing novels to rewrite history, as her stories are often set in the past and some of them are based on historical facts. Most of her stories are set in a time when women were very constricted and limited by society and supposed to stay home and raise children, but the struggles her characters face are not necessarily bound to the age they live in. Her women live in the past, but their thoughts, desires, struggles, and search for freedom are nonetheless relevant beyond the time of the novels' settings: any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written (Wallace 4). Du Maurier was also a very talented writer of women characters and, by dedicating much of her writing to the description of her women characters' feelings and thoughts, she allows the reader to enter their minds and explore their thoughts and desires. An analysis of these characters gives a very good opportunity to find out more about what du Maurier, and the society – both of her times and of the times in which the books are set – considered womanly and manly. Dona St. Columb from *Frenchman's Creek* (1941) and Janet Coombe from *The Loving Spirit* (1931) are two such central characters in du Maurier's writing and this essay will examine how feminine and masculine characteristics are combined in these two women, how they generate a struggle and how they are somehow reconciled by motherhood.

Du Maurier writes many of her novels in a time when women were almost forced into freedom because the outburst of the Second World War required them to take on some typically manly roles and activities, but at the same time the idea of what was

appropriate for women to do had not changed: women in uniform were thought to be sexually “easy” because they were wearing trousers and out on the streets doing work traditionally done by men (Nicholson). The public opinion was still fixed on old gender roles, but the needs of the time made women realise how their life could involve more than housework and children. As late as 1968, the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* launched its *Femail* section and its cover featured a model wearing trousers as a statement of female freedom (Kelsey), showing how long it took the general public to learn to accept that conceptions of gender in relation to appearance or activities can change over time. Du Maurier personally lived this struggle – being a very independent woman who loved the outdoors and had no desire to become “domestic” – and her novels can be seen as a way for her to channel her feelings, the pressure she felt and try to make sense of the struggle.

Du Maurier grew up in a wealthy family in England in the first decades of the 1900s (Forster 3). Her parents were actors and she certainly did not grow up in a conservative environment, but her ideas of what characterises women and men are surprisingly old-fashioned for a twenty-first-century reader. A woman should be a wife and mother, a domestic creature, perfectly capable and happy to take care of the household, with no other aspirations in life than to please her husband and raise children: “I mean, really, women should not have careers. It’s people like me who have careers who really have bitched up the old relationship between men and women. Women ought to be soft and gentle and dependent. Disembodied spirits like myself are all wrong” (Forster 235). While du Maurier was more than happy to earn her own money and be independent, she nonetheless felt that it was not something most women would be comfortable with because the “biological role as a provider” (Tyson, 83) belonged to men.

Du Maurier is not the first writer creating women characters that represent this need some women have for more than a quiet family life; Charlotte Brontë, in her famous *Jane Eyre* (1847), explains this longing very clearly:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing

on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom had pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 141)

Du Maurier does not seem to agree with Brontë on the equality that exists between men and women. While Brontë's *Jane Eyre* does not doubt that women have all the right to want more from life than what society agrees should be enough, du Maurier appears to feel somehow that their claims are, if not completely wrong, at least odd and unusual and, more importantly, masculine. This persuasion, that freedom belongs to men, leads du Maurier's women to seek escape and happiness through some sort of a male alter-ego. Du Maurier herself had her own male alter-ego, her so-called boy in a box, that she created as a child and that she then tried to lock away (Forster 92). After the boy was put in the box du Maurier found other ways to escape and writing became one of them. While most critics avoid involving the authors' lives and thoughts in their analysis of their work, in du Maurier's case there is such a strong link between her characters and herself that it is sometimes relevant to mention her life in relation to her characters "for the characters she 'became' whilst writing can be construed as being facets of the Self" (Abi-Ezzi 227).

The novels *Frenchman's Creek* and *The Loving Spirit* show clearly that sex and gender do not necessarily mean the same thing and that not everybody fits in "the traditional masculine-male/feminine-female categories" (Tyson 110). The analysis of the protagonists of the two novels allows for a productive reading of two women characters who in different ways, represent non-stereotypical females. Both characters try to escape from the shackles of female stereotypes and their escape is worth examining, as what happens to them once they become mothers because motherhood brings balance between their masculine and the feminine sides for both Dona and Janet.

Dona and Janet

Dona St. Columb in *Frenchman's Creek* is a wealthy English Lady living during the reign of Charles II. She is married, has two children, a house in London, servants and a life of luxury and leisure, and yet she is unhappy. Dona's life is regular and predictable: theatres, parties, and dinners follow each other with no other purpose than that to fill the time, her children are taken care of by a nurse, and Dona's only task is

to look pretty at her husband's side. For many women this would be a life of contentment, with no worries about money, childcare, and security —especially in a time in history when these things were a privilege —but for Dona this kind of life is stifling.

It could be argued that Dona's unhappiness is the result of a sort of middle-age crisis: she is about to turn 30 years old and, with the life expectancy of the time, thirty could be considered middle age: Dona herself says that she “had reached a crisis in her particular span of time and existence” (15). On the other hand, middle-age crises are said to be often triggered by a lack of accomplishment: life is halfway over and one has not done all the things one wanted to do. Dona, however, has accomplished all the necessary things a woman needed to accomplish in those days: she has married a rich husband and she has given birth to two healthy children, one of which is a boy and an heir. Many women would just sit back contented as their role was supposed to be that of “housekeepers and full-time child care providers” (Ross 31), but Dona wants more: what society tells her is enough of an accomplishment, is not for her.

Another interpretation of Dona's discontentment could be that she is a rich and spoiled lady and that if she had to struggle daily to take care of her children maybe her life would not seem so empty and stifling: Janet's life in *The Loving Spirit* is more grounded by physical occupations such as cooking and cleaning, but neither Dona nor Janet find ultimate solace in being busy. Not even danger helps Dona appreciate what she has and quenches her thirst for more: she dresses herself as a highwayman and, together with some of her husband's friends, tries to rob a Countess in the streets of London, but the adventure leaves her ashamed and triggers her escape from London to Navron, from Lady St. Columb to Dona the cabin boy. “Thus, rather than simply being about a woman who escapes the strictures of her conventional husband and family life, preferring the exciting and dangerous world of a group of sociocultural others, *Frenchman's Creek* ... centers on a woman who seeks adventure and escape specifically in the guise of a male” (Bold and Greenhill 49). Dona needs more than just a bite of the forbidden fruit—of an illegal action—as her life already is a bit different from that of most women: her husband, Harry, allows her a great deal more freedom and she follows him in places “where no other husband took his wife” (11). Dona's need for freedom speaks of a struggle that has to do with her inner self, a search for her own real identity:

She had played too long a part unworthy of her. She had consented to be the Dona her world had demanded – a superficial, lovely creature, who walked and talked, and laughed, accepting praise and admiration with a shrug of her shoulder as natural homage to her beauty, careless, insolent, deliberately indifferent, and all the while another Dona, a strange, phantom Dona, peered at her from a dark mirror and was ashamed. (9)

There is more to Dona than a pretty face, despite what the rest of the world seems to think.

Dona's character is definitely ill-suited for a shallow and repetitive life, since she likes adventure, the outdoors, and to do what she wants when she wants to: none of these characteristics find approval in the high society of the Restoration Court and, while Harry does not seem to care very much, Dona knows very well how her behaviour is judged by the majority of society. This judgement, though, does not affect her all too negatively: in fact, it spurs her to defy society and to shock its most close-minded members. Lord Godolphin, her neighbour in Cornwall, for example, is met with a Dona who is ruffled and in disorder after having rolled in the grass with her children: while her disarray causes her a small embarrassment, she also does not bother to fix her appearance all that much, leaving a flower behind her ear because "obstinately, she did not care" (28). This obstinacy, together with her other characteristics, is a trait that most people do not care to see in a woman as women should be gentle creatures, "more nurturing, submissive and passive compared to men" (Ross 12).

If men and women are respectively "rational, strong, protective and decisive ... and emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson 81), the question is in which category Dona fits. She is indeed emotional, her decisions are often taken on the spur of the moment: she is often "obeying an impulse, ... a whisper, a suggestion, that sprang into being from nowhere and mocked her afterwards" (9). On the other hand, she is hardly submissive; her husband has no power over her and neither does her lover. Dona makes her own decisions, whether good or bad, with no help from male figures. She is also not weak. She follows the Frenchman, gets wet, tired, and wounded like any other member of his male crew; she also fends off and kills Rockingham when he tries to rape her, in a fight that is so filled with violence and horror that it might have justified her fainting. Her mind, albeit prone to making impulse decisions, can also be rational and decisive, which is demonstrated when she organises the Frenchman's escape from prison and, before that, when she plays the part of the lady

of the house who gets robbed in front of her husband by the “unknown” Frenchman.

If the reader keeps in mind that “biology determines our sex (male or female) and culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine)” (Tyson 88), it is easier to see that Dona is no less of a biological woman because of her masculine characteristics. The society of her time—and du Maurier’s society—did not yet employ this distinction between sex and gender and therefore masculine characteristics could make a woman feel less female and somehow wrong. Most of Dona’s problems stem from how society sees her and how society at the time decided what women could and could not do: even though women acquired more freedom during the Restoration period thanks to new scientific ideas that promoted a positive view of both sexes, they still “needed to be protected from the ugliness of the world, and their natural qualities would be better exploited indoors” (González and García 98). Going fishing or rolling in the grass with the children was deemed inappropriate for a lady, as is proven by both Dona’s defiant embarrassment and Godolphin’s shock during their first meeting, when Dona comes in from the garden in obvious disarray. When Dona returns Godolphin’s visit, the reader has the opportunity to see what society expects from ladies in the figures of Lady Godolphin – “lying on the sofa, backed with cushions, exchanging small civilities with her friends” (70) – and her guests: this is not Dona’s idea of what life should be. Outdoors activities are loved by Dona and, as soon as she is free from society, alone in Cornwall, she finally feels she can be herself because she can engage in masculine activities without anybody thinking that she is less of a woman for it.

Janet is the main character of the first part of the family saga *The Loving Spirit* and she is another strong woman who does not fit well with the typical role assigned to women in the past. Her story takes place in the late 1800s, once again in du Maurier’s beloved Cornwall, and it is a story all the more significant for this analysis of gender stereotypes versus reality, because Janet, unlike Dona, is not an entirely fictional character. According to Helen Doe’s *Jane Slade of Polruan: The Inspiration for Daphne du Maurier’s First Novel*, Jane Slade was the successful owner of a boat builder’s business, which she inherited from her husband, and she was also the first landlady of the Russell Inn in Polruan, which she received as a wedding gift from her father. Du Maurier studied the history of the Slade family and used it to write *The Loving Spirit*, so, while the story has many fictional elements, this novel is based on

historical facts and has helped to write another woman into history¹.

Janet shares many characteristics with Dona: she enjoys the outdoors (especially the sea), she is not afraid of speaking her own mind and she also deals with personality traits that were deemed at least unusual for a woman living at the end of the nineteenth century. Her longing for a physically active and adventurous life is similar to Dona's and, her temper is not of the submissive kind: she herself says "I'm awful wild at times" (*Spirit* 8). Janet, probably because she does not belong to the upper class, has been allowed a relatively free childhood, when, roaming with the village boys she would "lift her skirts and run about the rocks" (7), while Dona was left "watching her brothers ride off with her father, ... gazing after them with resentful eyes, a doll thrown aside on the floor in disgust" (*Frenchman* 118).

Despite their different upbringing and life situation, both Dona and Janet have come to the same conclusion: being a wife and mother is not enough, but everybody else seems to think it should be. When Janet gets married, however, she does seem to have grown calmer and immediately it is said that

'Tis having a man had changed her, and what more natural? She's a woman now, and wishful for nothing more than to do as her husband bids her. It's the only way with a girl like Janet, to rid her head of the sea and the hills, and all such nonsense. It's young Thomas has found the way to quieten her mind, an' waken the rightful instincts in her. (*Spirit* 13)

"To do as her husband bids her" is then considered a "rightful instinct," while anything else is "nonsense" and should be eliminated, if not during childhood then at least after marriage. The reader is immediately reassured, though, that this calm is only temporary, and it "had done nothing to alter the wandering spirit in her" (13).

Janet's situation in life makes her more grounded than Dona as she cannot afford a nurse to take care of her children, or servants to take care of the house and, consequently, she has less time to think about and long for a different life. This means that, unlike Dona, she does not dress like a man to try and rob a Countess or escape to the countryside and have an affair with a pirate. Instead, she has the chance to actually try and enjoy what at the time were considered female activities such as cooking, baking, cleaning, and raising children. The conventions of her time required from Dona

¹ . It is thanks to du Maurier's novel that Jane Slade is known and has become the namesake of a project that revolves around the construction of marine vessels in Fowey (Fowey.co.uk).

nothing more than to look pretty and bring children into the world: the rest was for women of lower status, leaving Dona somehow ignorant as to what most women actually do.

Nonetheless, even if Janet is generally more content with her life than Dona is, she still feels something that is “stronger than myself at times, ... like in olden days when a woman felt the call upon her from God, to forsake all, ...; the like of it comes to me, to wander forth from Plyn an’ you an’ our children, an’ to sail away in the heart of a ship, with only the wind an’ the sea and my dreams for company” (41). Janet and Dona feel this call, this need for freedom, and they both complain that if they had been born men they would not have experienced this struggle. When Janet is a child, she prays “Please God, make me a lad afore I’m grown” (5) and the night in which her son Joseph is conceived, she once again berates her sex: “‘Why wasn’t I born a man?’ she thinks. ‘To be up there now I’ the midst of it,’ and she felt the fact of her sex to be like a chain to her feet, as bad as the hampering petticoats around her ankles” (40). Dona also considers her sex as a hindrance at times and longs “to be a man ..., to handle ropes and blocks, to climb aloft to the tall raking spars and trim the sails” (*Frenchman* 103), while blaming her shortcomings on being a woman and asking herself “why must a woman be so useless at these things?” (82). Neither Dona nor Janet blame their society and the conventions of their times: they seem to genuinely think that their biological sex prevents them from fully enjoying life and they often feel “wrong” for desiring and doing things that do not conform to the norm.

The narrator also connects certain characteristics with being male when she describes Janet: “Like a lad she grew, tall and straight, with steady hands and fearless eyes, and a love of the sea in her blood” (*Spirit* 5). Being tall, strong, and fearless is not feminine and loving the sea is clearly a characteristic that signals a real man. In *The Loving Spirit* Joseph’s son, Christopher, hates the sea and his father feels “shame and humiliation” (151) because, despite being raised by a woman who loved the sea, his culture has taught him that this particular trait is necessary for a man’s identity. Biological sex is not enough, a man and a woman are also defined by characteristics that “are learned, not inborn” (Tyson 88) and it is exactly such an assumption—that everybody agrees which characteristics are feminine and which are masculine—that generates the struggle du Maurier’s characters go through.

Janet is also granted some typically feminine characteristics which are addressed as the reason why she has a “tenderness for animals and weak, helpless

things” and why she has “a care to her dress, and pin a flower to her bodice, and comb her black curls off her forehead” (*Spirit* 5), almost as if the narrator feels the need to assure the reader that Janet is indeed a woman and the aforementioned traits prove just that. Dona’s attire is also used as a way to mark her feminine side: as a cabin boy or as “escaping Dona” her hair is often in disarray, her clothes are either not hers or old and faded, but as Lady Dona St. Columb ruby earrings, “new long gloves...on her lap, and the hat with a sweeping feather that concealed her right cheek” (*Frenchman* 71) are in place.

Dona and Janet are not fully happy. Dona’s life is particularly void of meaning, while Janet’s is less empty because it is busier with childcare, taking care of the house and, especially, with her husband’s shipbuilding firm: Janet’s husband might be the official owner but “all men under him and the folk of Plyn knew that his wife was behind him” (*Spirit* 53). This emphasizes Janet’s unusual behaviour and her defiant character, yet even Janet longs for more and tries to escape from her life, just like Dona does.

Escape

Throughout *Frenchman’s Creek*, the escape theme is made very clear: Dona is escaping and the Frenchman also speaks of it, not only in relation to Dona, but concerning himself as well. Dona’s need for freedom is expressed by Dona herself who compares her life in London to that of a caged linnet she once set free: she feels “like the linnet before it flew” (15). However, it is William, her servant at Navron’s house, who uses the word escape to describe Dona’s situation: “you shall enjoy your solitude, and make good your escape” (32). William is actually comparing her with his master, the Frenchman, who is also escaping and will later reveal to Dona that their lives prior to the escape were fairly similar. Both come from upper-class families and both feel that they have to escape from themselves or, at least, the way their society expects them to be. Dona says that she “was tired of Lady St. Columb, and wanted to become somebody else” (63) and the Frenchman expands on the same theme with his own personal story: “Once there was a man called Jean-Benoit Aubéry, who had estates in Brittany, money, friends, responsibilities, and William was his servant. And William’s master became weary of Jean-Benoit Aubéry, and so he turned into a pirate, and built *La Mouette*” (63). Dona and Jean-Benoit are both “wanderers, both fugitives, cast in the same

mould” (102), searching for an identity to better fit what they feel are their true selves.

Dona’s escape is thus a search for her true self and it starts through a reconnection with nature and with childhood: Cornwall’s summer is the background of wholesome walks, late and leisurely dinners, frolicking with the children, and a general sense of freedom, laziness, and lack of formality. The connection with childhood is present throughout *Frenchman’s Creek*, with Dona often compared to a child in her enjoyment of summer walks: “She turned swiftly ... and strode back ... skirting the mud and jumping the ditches like a child” (*Frenchman* 34). Later her escapades with the Frenchman also have a childlike quality to them, not only the fishing trips and camping by the river, but even the piracy has a puerile touch in the wager Dona has with the Frenchman to steal Godolphin’s wig. While this return to childhood is certainly a starting point for Dona’s self-investigation, she realises, upon meeting the Frenchman, that it is not enough.

Dona’s escape seems to be complete only with the Frenchman: “She knew that it was this peace that she had wanted when she came away from London, and had come to Navron to find, but she knew also that she had found only part of it alone, through the woods, and the sky, and the river, it became full and complete when she was with him, as at the moment, or when he stole into her thoughts” (87). Yet, at the end of the story, she decides to leave him and she seems to be doing it with little regret, as though she always knew that their relationship would not last. Through the Frenchman the text offers the reader the explanation that it is, again, Dona’s gender that is the problem as “women are more primitive than men. For a time they will wander ... And then, like the birds, they must make their nest” (147). Men do not share the same need to build a nest, so the Frenchman will be forced to “sail alone again” (147) when Dona nests, thus putting an end to the relationship. However, the fact that Dona is already married or that she has children does not seem to be the cause of their break up: the problem is deeper than Dona’s personal circumstances, it is depicted as a problem common to all women that it is in their nature to settle and it is suggested that men do not have the same nature.

If we consider – as many critics do - that Dona’s character struggles to match her “gender identity (social, cultural, psychological) and sex identity (biological, physiological)” (Bold and Greenhill 48) it then becomes logical that she, a woman, should look for some sort of male counterpart that allows her to do all the things that her female status does not. While it could be argued that Dona chooses to dress as a

man to “suit her own purposes” (Bold and Greenhill 50), she first cross-dresses as a man in London, but that experience leaves her in “a wave of shame and degradation” (19) and it is only as a cabin boy on *La Mouette* and with the Frenchman that she finally feels complete. The illegality of the attempted robbery in London cannot be used as an explanation for Dona’s shame because piracy is even more illegal and considering that Dona sides with French pirates she is not only a pirate, but also a traitor to her country. The cabin boy disguise and the Frenchman could be seen as Dona’s way of dealing with and accepting her masculine side: the Frenchman then becomes a part of Dona, a part that she discovers hidden away in the creek and which she learns to love and accept.

All through the novel it is said how similar Dona and the Frenchman are: their relationship is close from the very start and they know and understand each other almost too well for two strangers who just met. When Dona invites the Frenchman to dinner he draws her a portrait where she is pictured with an expression “she has seen sometimes reflected in her mirror, when she was alone” (67). She then tells him she felt like she “had some blemish”. and he saw that, to which he replies that he has a “similar blemish” (69). This is a conversation Dona later reflects on: “there is a bond between us ... and she remembered ... about bearing the same blemish” (87). The two lovers are again similarly marked during their first act of piracy together: “The blood was running from a cut on her chin ... and he too had a cut on his chin” (135). The “Dona of to-morrow, the Dona of the future, of ten years away” will be a new, more complete Dona, who has faced that side of herself that the society of her time—and du Maurier’s time as well—considers masculine (149). This new Dona will not forget the “peace that [she and the Frenchman] have given to each other,” but this peace comes at the price of shutting away the cabin boy and the Frenchman (149).

Du Maurier puts much of herself in *Frenchman’s Creek*, like she does in most of her novels, and Dona giving up her lover and her cabin boy can easily be seen as a parallel to du Maurier herself who shut away that masculine part of herself that she deemed unsuitable for her life. Du Maurier actually had a name for this masculine part: it was her “boy in a box,” Eric Avon (Forster 14), the alter ego she created as a child and that she had to hide when the arrival of her first period marked her unequivocally as a girl. Du Maurier’s boy also has deep implications for her sexuality, as it was him “who fell in love with women while preserving the wife and mother” (Auerbach 74) and it gave her the peace of mind of knowing that she did not have “Venetian tendencies” (Forster 28), that is, that she was not a lesbian. Dona’s cabin boy, however, does not

have the same implications, as du Maurier's heroine is indubitably a woman who is attracted to men and there is a clear distinction between "sexual identity (the sense that one is or should manifest as male, female, both or neither) and sexuality (the sense that one is sexually attracted to people of the same sex, a different sex, both or neither)" (Bold and Greenhill 48). However, there are interesting correspondences because Du Maurier's boy in a box escapes from his seclusion from time to time and while Dona seems to be convinced that her cabin boy is a thing of the past she does nonetheless admit that "the cabin boy will vigil sometimes in the night, and tear his nails, and beat his pillows, and then he will fall asleep perhaps, and dream again" (251).

Dona escapes through piracy and a love affair while Janet instead does nothing openly illegal or immoral – albeit her relationship with her son is borderline incestuous. Janet's escape is nonetheless of a similar nature to Dona's. Janet also has the need for a male counterpart that can do the things that she wishes to do, but that her sex seems to forbid: Janet lives the life of the sailor vicariously through her son Joseph. Although Janet and Joseph's relationship should not be that of lovers, their behaviour, aside from having no sexual interaction, is in fact very similar to that of a couple. Similarly to Dona's Frenchman, Joseph completely understands Janet as she does him and their relationship has a spiritual quality about it that seems almost excessive, but it acquires more relevance and significance if the reader interprets Joseph as actually part of Janet—her masculine part.

Janet's double nature is often remarked upon in the novel, and what she calls "her ways" (*Spirit* 8) makes her feel a strange uneasiness despite her life being happy and full: "It was as if she had two selves; the one of a contented wife and mother ... and another self, remote, untrammelled, triumphant ... These things were not conscious definitions in Janet's mind ... All she understood was that the peace of God was unknown to her" (27). Very much like Dona, Janet feels restless and in need of more excitement, going sometimes into a sort of trance where she would "gaze out of the window towards the sea, with a queer unbelonging look in her eyes" (28). The sea also plays an important part in the novel as a safe space of discovery, just as it does Dona's case: the ever moving waters seem to allow these women to embrace their true nature in a sort of no man's land where anything can happen.

Furthermore, just as Dona in *Frenchman's Creek* shares similarities with du Maurier, so too does Janet in *The Loving Spirit*, and not only because of her struggle with her masculine side: Janet lives her dreams through her double, Joseph, in a

similar way to how the author lived hers through her characters. In her writing du Maurier “explored the sensations involved in *becoming* her characters” (Abi-Ezzi 227), and not only in becoming Dona or Janet, but also in becoming the Frenchman or Joseph. From a very early age du Maurier learned that if she could not be what her family, or her society, wanted her to be she could act it just like her father did on stage: “I saw why D [Gerald] liked to dress up and pretend to be someone else; I began to do it myself, ... the very act of putting on fancy dress and becoming another person stopped the feeling of panic when visitors came” (du Maurier, “Growing Pains” 22). This act is then transferred into the characters she writes and even into the location of her stories with Cornwall as the landscape “dividing the lady she was forced to be in London and the ‘boy’ who found freedom in Cornwall, a split closely echoed in *Frenchman’s Creek*” (Abi-Ezzi 226). Janet’s double is Joseph, Dona’s is both the cabin boy and the Frenchman, and the author’s is all of her characters, which can be seen as “being facets of the Self” (Abi-Ezzi 227).

Another link between Janet and Dona is their love for risk-taking and illegal activities and, even if Janet does not engage in any of it, she is caught dreaming of it and boasting about how she would be suitable for a life as a smuggler of goods:

I reckon I would then [shake the smuggler’s hand], an’ follow him too. It’s often I’ve pictured the life myself. A pitch-dark night in Lannywhet Cove, an’ no sound but the waves breakin’ on the shore. Then a faint light glimmerin’ through the blackness, and oars creakin’ stealthy-like. ... That’s livin’, Thomas, and dyin’ all in one- no reckonin’ o’ time (*Spirit* 29).

Dona makes a similar boast when she writes to her husband about Godolphin’s failed attempts to capture the dreaded Frenchman and how she would be “setting forth myself, with a cutlass between my teeth, and when I entrapped the rogue, ... I will bind him with strong cords and send him to you as a present” (*Frenchman* 38).

Both women explore their masculine side by bringing it to an extreme: their male counterparts are essentially patriarchal stereotypes of men, physically powerful and emotionally stoic (Tyson 83). If du Maurier’s novels do challenge the typical patriarchal view of women and open up new perspectives on their characters and desires, they do not do much to challenge the view of men. Du Maurier’s women are struggling and are often not completely understood by the society in which they live, but they nonetheless manage to find their voice and, ultimately, they are offered the saving grace of motherhood. Men do not seem to be able to find the same balance, a

man “must either stay at home and be bored: or go away and be miserable. He is lost in either case. No, to be really free, a man must sail alone” (*Frenchman* 57). Women instead have their need to nest and their children and even if Dona’s cabin-boy might resurface at times, ultimately Dona will become “a placid, comfortable woman” (*Frenchman* 147). Women’s wanderings are temporary, dream-like, a “make-believe” (*Frenchman* 196), while for men wandering is life and there is no escape: when their feminine side leaves them they are wretched, like the Frenchman without Dona and, even more so, Joseph without Janet.

Motherhood

Becoming a mother is certainly an important and delicate part of a woman’s life with many physical and emotional implications: in literature motherhood is often present and in many of du Maurier’s novels it plays an important part. If the reader considers that “both theory and popular culture rely on a fundamental assumption that women, but not men, possess an inborn desire, in the form of a ‘maternal instinct’, to nurture and care for others” (Ross 12) it is easy to see that du Maurier’s characters do not entirely conform to this norm. Neither Dona nor Janet seems to be particularly filled with maternal instinct and they share a sort of detached attitude towards motherhood with their author, who was more than happy to delegate her children’s care to the live-in nanny Margaret. Even though it was fairly common practice for wealthy families to have a nanny taking care of the children, Margaret herself remarks upon du Maurier’s behaviour, especially with her first child, Tessa: “She did not cuddle or kiss her, she did not talk or sing to her, she did not in any way appear to dote on her or want to be with her. She seemed, in fact, to have difficulty with the whole idea of being a mother” (Margaret in Forster 108). Du Maurier was not the mother society expected, so it is hardly surprising that her characters mirror this aspect of her personality. However, du Maurier’s characters eventually accept motherhood as the reason why they cannot be free and see the impossibility to do as they please as part of their nature as women and mothers.

Dona’s situation is similar to du Maurier’s as they both are wealthy and can afford a nanny for their children: their attitude towards their children is also similar as they both do not particularly care for their daughters, but are very fond of their sons. Du Maurier made no mystery of her longing for a son, but “she gave birth not to the

son she longed for and confidently expected, but to a daughter. ... Her disappointment was intense, nor did it disappear quickly, and she made no attempt to hide it” (Forster 105). When she finally gave birth to a son “the baby was treated quite differently... Far from not wanting to do much for him, she wanted to do everything” (Forster 157). Dona is not quite as active in her son’s life as he is also mostly entrusted to the care of the nanny, but she is more attentive and tender towards him than towards her daughter. It is James she imagines as a companion on a boat trip where “they would both dip their hands and faces in the water and become soaked with the spray” (*Frenchman* 18). It is James that receives a furtive goodnight kiss from Dona and, while Dona herself realises that it is “so primitive, so despicable, to be moved to folly, simply because he was male” (23), she cannot help it. It is James that somehow gives Dona the strength to kill Rockingham when the latter attacks her, which she realises when the Frenchman asks her: “What made you angry? ... It was James who woke and cried” (250). Dona’s anger allows her to kill her attacker, but it also makes her realise that she is not free to join the Frenchman: she is a mother and, therefore, has to stay with her children and protect them.

Janet is more involved in her children’s care, but her reaction to the birth of her first child is far from that of a woman who just got “the most important and satisfying job in the world” (Ross 18) and she hopes she “would remember to call it ‘him’, and not ‘it’” (*Spirit* 21). Janet’s relationship with her child is more one of duty and loving detachment as neither her child nor her husband can be fully part of her soul:

Janet’s feeling for Samuel ran parallel to her feeling for Thomas. ... Samuel depended on her for care and for comfort until he should grow old enough to look after himself. She ... gave him all the tenderness and the affection her demanded from her. ... But the spirit of Janet was free and unfettered, waiting to rise from its self-enforced seclusion to mingle with intangible things, like the wind, the sea, and the skies, hand in hand with the one she waited. (26)

Janet feels equally for almost all of her children, regardless of their sex — Samuel is not more special than Rose, for example — but it seems hardly a coincidence that the only one who can fully understand her, the one she waited for, is Joseph, a boy. Like James for Dona and Kit for du Maurier, a son is what makes motherhood significant, as though engaging in traditionally masculine activities is what makes life worth living.

Although du Maurier creates unusual women and in doing so helps people

realise that even if women “can be seen as unfeminine ... that doesn’t make them unfemale” (West and Zimmerman 134), she still seems to be bound to the patriarchal idea that “women are innately inferior to men” (Tyson 81) since her female protagonists need a male alter ego that fulfils their dreams. Motherhood too seems suffused with patriarchal values and something women cannot escape from, but it does nonetheless help du Maurier’s women characters to come to terms with their lives.

While du Maurier’s view of motherhood might appear to be in line with a patriarchal ideology that sees women as destined only to be wives and mothers, it is to be noted that both Dona and Janet go through a process of development and that motherhood signals their coming to terms with their lives. Neither Dona nor Janet will completely relinquish their masculine side, but they seem to have accepted it and tamed it just enough to find some peace of mind. Motherhood, far from being a shackle, then becomes, in the characters of Dona and Janet, the point of conjunction between masculine and feminine features. Dona gives up the Frenchman and Janet transfers her desire for adventure to her son: both the Frenchman and Joseph become solitary and unbalanced figures without their female counterparts, but, like du Maurier’s boy, they better rest in their box.

Conclusion

As shown by their struggle to accept some of their characteristics because they deem them masculine Dona and Janet and are still partially dependent on certain patriarchal values but they undoubtedly present examples of how the difference between genders is not clear-cut and how society can cause women to question their own identities by trying to force them to fit into a closed category. Du Maurier’s novels often deal with this struggle to fit in and the defiance that comes from realising that it is impossible to fit in unless one lets go of certain liberties and passions. The solution for many of Du Maurier’s women protagonists to the conflict between traits that are categorised as feminine and masculine in dichotomous ways seems to be a sort of acceptance: women can try to find a temporary escape—through some sort of male disguise—but ultimately it is better for them to embrace their feminine side in order to find a balance, especially after motherhood. For conflicted men, however, the solution does not seem to be acceptance as du Maurier’s most masculine characters (like Joseph in *The Loving Spirit*) do not achieve happiness or peace of mind through fatherhood. The readers of

her novels, though, are most of all reminded of how certain characteristics do not necessarily have to be coded as only masculine or only feminine: they belong to the human race, independently of a person's sex and that the most important thing is to explore one's own self in order to find balance.

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