

**“The Shaping of a Writer”: Gollancz’s
epitextual construction of Daphne du
Maurier’s persona**

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Abstract

The following article stems from an academic visit at the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick (2021), aimed at collecting and studying evidence on the British reception of Daphne du Maurier’s works. In particular, the collection “Papers of Sir Victor Gollancz” was analysed, given the fruitful relationship between du Maurier and her first British publisher. During the analysis, the significance of Gollancz’s catalogues was observed, as they all presented an accurately crafted image of du Maurier. This operation was carried out by means of a few epitextual strategies, such as a focus on the author’s personal life and the place where she lived, an insistence on the popularity of Rebecca (the author’s most well-known novel), the usage of recurring terms, and others. This article, therefore, aims at exploring the editorial strategies employed by Gollancz to craft du Maurier’s public image as an author, which found a paratextual expression in the publisher’s catalogues. I argue that Gollancz created an actual myth of du Maurier’s life and persona, thus guiding the British public towards a pre-determined approach to her works which contributed to how the author came to be perceived.

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1. Introduction

The present study stems from an academic visit (2021) at the Modern Records Centre (MRC) of the University of Warwick, aimed at collecting and studying evidence on the British reception of Daphne du Maurier's works. Indeed, with its large collection "Papers of Sir Victor Gollancz (1893-1967)", the Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick seemed the most promising place to start from, at least for what concerned the works of Daphne du Maurier, one of Gollancz's pieces de resistance almost from the start of her career. As far as reception was concerned, my initial target were the press quotations about du Maurier's works collected by the editorial over the years; however, while these proved incredibly useful in formulating hypotheses on the author's British reception, I could not help but notice how Gollancz's catalogues were also important in terms of reception, as they all presented an accurately crafted image of du Maurier, undoubtedly contributing to a very specific reading of her work by the British public. My argument is that Gollancz helped shape du Maurier's authorial persona, ultimately influencing her reception in the UK, through a careful construction of the paratextual apparatus presenting her works to the reading audience. This article, therefore, aims at exploring one aspect of my research at the MRC, that is, the editorial strategies employed by Gollancz to craft du Maurier's public image as an author, which found a paratextual expression in the publisher's catalogues. I argue that Gollancz created an actual myth of du Maurier's life and persona, thus guiding the British public towards a pre-determined approach to her works which contributed to how the author came to be perceived.

2. Paratext

Paratext was first defined by Gérard Genette in his 1987 essay *Seuils*:

A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. [...] These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's *paratext* [...]. [T]he paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. (Genette 1997)

According to Genette, paratext can be understood as the combination of two different subsets, namely *peritext* and *epitext*, the latter being

defined as “[t]he distanced elements [...] that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others)” (Genette 1997).

2.1. Catalogues as epitext, and their target

The documents analysed in this paper can be said to pertain to the domain of the epitext, since they do not belong to the physical space of the book, but rather say something of the book from an external position. Nonetheless, they still provide a valuable tool of interpretation of the publisher’s strategy in presenting the author, thus revealing Gollancz’s own interpretation of du Maurier’s texts and the ideal target at which they were aimed. More specifically, catalogues constitute what Genette calls the publisher’s public epitext (Genette 1997). According to Cristina Demaria and Riccardo Fedriga, the primary function of the epitext is that of promoting a book for a specific public, which is delimited and, at times, *created* by the epitext itself. This is done also by crafting the author’s public image through a reinforcement of stereotypes linked to his or her writing process and creative work (Demaria and Fedriga 2003). Demaria and Fedriga thus highlight the creative role of the publisher’s epitext which, in conveying a precise idea of the author, contributes to determining the more or less restricted group of readers he or she will reach. As observed by Pierre Bourdieu, the publisher then holds the “power to [...] confer upon a text and its author a *public* existence”; he goes on by stating that “[c]reation’ of this sort [...] involves a *consecration*, a *transfer of symbolic capital* [...] bestowed by the publisher [...] upon its [...] repertoire of authors” (Bourdieu 2008). That is exactly Gollancz’s operation when it comes to the creation of du Maurier’s public image through catalogues. The importance of the catalogue as a tool of analysis is evident: on the one hand, if studied in a diachronic perspective, it is a valid tool of reconstruction of the cultural and commercial politics adopted by a publisher over the years; on the other hand, the yearly catalogue is living proof of the way in which a publisher chooses to promote its literary *capital* (to employ Bourdieu’s term) for potential readers (Demaria and Fedriga 2003). Such an approach draws from Hans Robert Jauss’ concept of “horizon of expectation”: according to Jauss, when a book is published in a specific editorial form, the public is pre-inclined towards a specific reception modality thanks to the promotional material surrounding the edition in question (Cadioli 1998). Jauss’ theory can be revised in André Lefevere’s notion of literary system, according to which literary works are usually “rewritten” for the target public, in order to be better received (Lefevere 1992). What is encompassed by the term “public” may vary according to the circumstances. As observed by Genette, “the public of a book” may “extend[...] potentially to all of humankind” (Genette 1997). That is why

“[c]ertain paratextual elements are actually addressed to [...] the public in general”, while “[o]ther paratextual elements are addressed [...] only to readers of the text. [...] Still others [...] are addressed exclusively to critics; and others, to book-sellers” (Genette 1997). Arguably, the public of an editorial’s catalogues is composed both of what I already called “potential readers”, interested in what that specific publishing house has to offer, and of “devoted readers”, who are already acquainted with the editorial and choose it knowing, more or less, that its book proposals will be in tune with their taste.

3. Victor Gollancz Ltd

Victor Gollancz Ltd is still one of the most renowned names of twentieth-century British publishing. Founded in 1927 by Victor Gollancz, it specialized in the publication of highbrow and middlebrow literature and also in the promotion of genre fiction. Gollancz has the merit of having made known several masterpieces, destined to become bestsellers – one above all, du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) – to the point that “by the middle thirties almost everyone who was anyone in the literary world was clamouring to be on his list” (Hodges 1978). At the time of the establishment of the editorial, Victor stated what he would have liked the catalogue to look like:

Good novels; poetry of genuine distinction; “readable” history and biography; some very cheap series of serious volumes; a few finely printed limited editions; an occasional play of outstanding merit; detective stories for connoisseurs – these are some of the things which I hope to see on my list. (Hodges 1978)

The above statement shows Gollancz’s desire of putting together a comprehensive, varied and sophisticated catalogue – a distinctive feature of his firm, which would prompt him to include du Maurier among his publications and would also shape the promotional creation and presentation of her authorial persona to the public.

3.1. Gollancz’s paratextual and editorial strategy

Gollancz’s approach to publishing was groundbreaking under many respects, particularly regarding his revolutionizing the promotional and paratextual editorial strategies of his time. For instance, as stated by Sheila Hodges, one of his collaborators, Victor used to design the advertisements himself and took complete responsibility for them for thirty-five years. His marketing strategy revolved primarily around “boldness and extent” (Hodges 1978): “Gollancz splashed the literary pages of the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times* with enormous spreads which shouted to the roof-tops

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the merits of his wares, and must have made the public considerably more book-conscious" (Hodges 1978). His innovation was to be seen in dust jacket design, as well. Hating the so-called "picture jackets", he "evolved a form of typographical jacket design that became one of the most brilliant and successful innovations in publishing" (Hodges 1978). Soon, Gollancz's bright yellow covers became the editorial's visual trademark, starting to be immediately recognized by readers and booksellers alike. Another of Gollancz's remarkable traits was the usage of omnibus books, "compendious volumes" which had been extremely popular since the twenties (Hodges 1978). Victor believed he invented the word "omnibus" himself, "to convey that the volume was 'for everyone'" (Hodges 1978); again, a symptom of his will to compose a catalogue aimed at a vast, if educated, readership. Last but not least, it is significant for the scope of this paper how Gollancz's catalogues also managed to attract the attention: in July 1934, the *Sunday Times* wrote that "[o]f all the books Mr. Gollancz has issued during this spring publishing season, [...] perhaps one of the most interesting [...] is his own 100-page first Autumn List" (Hodges 1978).

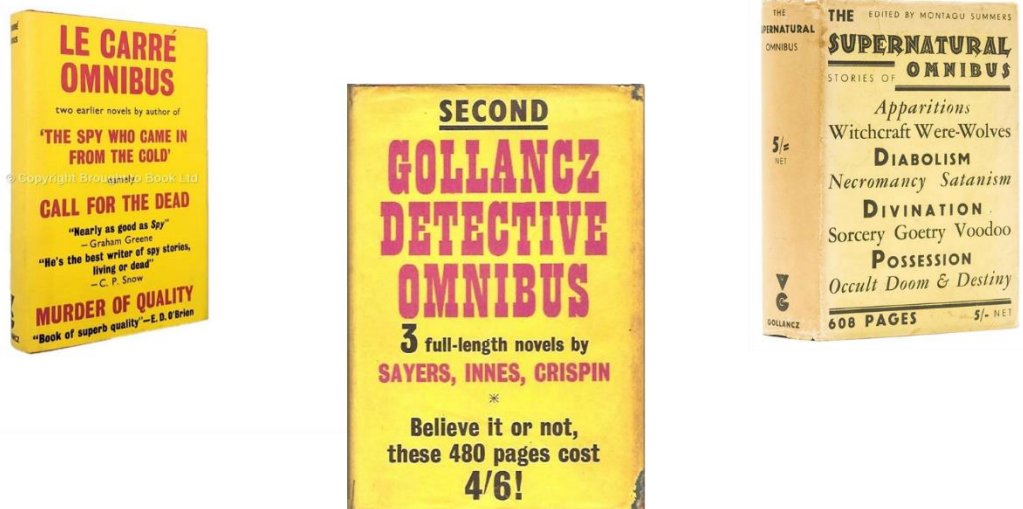


Figure 1. Gollancz's bright yellow book covers

3.2. Gollancz and Daphne du Maurier

Du Maurier and Gollancz's collaboration began in 1935 with the publication of *Gerald: A Portrait*. Her first three books had been initially published by Heinemann, enjoying moderate success and establishing her as a lowbrow, romantic writer: according to the American critic Frank N. Magill, "Miss du Maurier's initial success [...] was achieved with a series of historical cloak-and-dagger romances" (Magill 1958). At the death of du Maurier's father, Gerald, she wrote the honest memoir which scandalized

Heinemann for its straightforwardness; therefore, he refused to publish it. The manuscript was then offered to Gollancz, "who accepted it at once" (Hodges 1978). The following year, Gollancz also published du Maurier's novel *Jamaica Inn*; finally, in 1937, "came a letter with the first news of *Rebecca*" (Hodge 1978). According to Hodges, in 1978 the Gollancz edition alone of the book "has sold nearly a million copies" (Hodges 1978). Over the years, Victor and Daphne established a lifelong friendship, as their rich correspondence testifies. In a way, Gollancz's functional role as a publisher, with respect to du Maurier's works, was stimulated by their own mutual relationship; in Alberto Cadioli's words, Gollancz became du Maurier's *hyper-reader* ("iperlettore"): the term is used by Cadioli to define publishers who influence their readers and pre-determine their reception also through the strengthening of their own personal relationship with their authors (*Le diverse pagine* 2012). Hence, probably, the indulging, in Gollancz's catalogues, in intimate biographic details concerning du Maurier's life, such as the place where she lived and her writing habits, a strategy often supported by photographs portraying the author in various guises (Cadioli 2012). As hyper-readers, not only did Victor Gollancz (and his daughter Livia, after his death) choose which of du Maurier's works were suitable for publication, thus shaping readers' perception in the first place; they also crafted the very works they chose to promote from a personal, epitextual point of view.

4. Daphne du Maurier's authorial persona: the myth of the author

Victor Gollancz died in 1967. However, the editorial's interest in du Maurier did not seem to diminish; on the contrary, it appears over the years a more personal perspective was adopted when crafting the epitext concerning her works, with a more explicit focus on her private life – which was, as already mentioned, one of the strategies employed by the publisher to craft du Maurier's authorial persona. In his essay "Don DeLillo and the Myth of the Author: Recluse", Joe Moran defines this strategy as the "commodification of the 'private' self, created in pursuit of an exclusive image which will boost circulation and profits", thus highlighting the "marketing potential of celebrity, linked to the consolidation of literature as part of the culture" (Moran 2000). I hope this thesis will be supported by the following paragraphs, which will discuss a few examples taken from the papers examined at the MRC. To support my hypothesis, I will focus especially on the later catalogues, ranging from 1969 to 1992, which I believe are the ones showing this tendency most prominently. The exact identity of the catalogues' author(s) after Gollancz's death is not known; however, it might be safe to assume the texts were the result of a collaborative effort on the part of Gollancz's marketing team. Furthermore, given the repetitive nature of some of the epitexts presented below, it is

also possible that Gollancz's initial indications were followed automatically on the part of the editorial team, who might have carried out some sort of copy-paste process regarding the modalities of presentation of the author. Unfortunately, not enough data were collected to demonstrate this hypothesis; however, it is a potential factor to be aware of when approaching the following catalogues.

4.1. "Autumn Book 1969"

The 1969 catalogue of Gollancz's autumn reading list devotes an entire page to du Maurier's novel *The House on the Strand*, whereas many other authors only got a half page. The emphasis put on her persona is highlighted by her photographic portrait, which is not reserved to every author in the catalogue. Also, the 1969 synopsis starts by immediately drawing the reader's attention to the author's personal life:

Daphne du Maurier's most popular novels are those with a Cornish setting. So *The House on the Strand* will be the more welcome because it is set in the corner of the county where she has lived for twenty-five years.

This introduction, apart from referring to a personal detail of du Maurier's life, offers a portrayal of Cornwall as a mysterious and almost exotic place, thus arousing the public's curiosity about the novel through the tracing of a compelling authorial profile. The novel is featured in the general "Fiction" section, demonstrating Gollancz's refusal to confine the author to the realm of genre fiction as so many critics did. By doing so, the editorial probably aimed at elevating the novelist's literary status from what were still generally considered to be demeaning types of fiction, thus appealing to a broader, more cultured reading public.

4.2. "New Books Spring 1977"

In 1977, Gollancz published du Maurier's autobiography, *Growing Pains: The Shaping of a Writer*. The choice of publishing her autobiography speaks once more to the editorial's desire of constructing a well-crafted authorial myth of Daphne's persona and of romanticizing her life for her readers. Once again, the presentation spreads on an entire page and half of the page is occupied by a picture of a young Daphne staring intensely at the viewer. The synopsis shows the clear intention of building her up for the public:

"Why did you become a writer?" she is often asked, and in *Growing Pains* she seeks to give the answer – an answer all the more

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interesting because she is among the world’s most popular authors, with one book, *Rebecca*, a kind of legend.

The allusion to du Maurier’s bestseller *Rebecca* shows the publisher’s will to play on the novel’s popularity: the expression “a kind of legend” contributes to presenting the author as an established literary personality. Also, the synopsis encourages du Maurier fans to purchase the book as it “provides a remarkable insight into the mind of a woman who has become a famous writer but has nevertheless succeeded in remaining a person of great warmth, integrity and wisdom” – another personal description of du Maurier as an idealized version of herself, which also highlights her popularity thanks to the term “famous”.

4.3. “New Books Autumn 1980”

This reading list devotes once again an entire page to du Maurier, advertising the collection *The Rendezvous and Other Stories*. Again, half of the page is occupied by her picture, which seemingly portrays her as a typical classy British lady. The synopsis delves into a detailed description of her narrative genre and style, stating how the collected stories “all possess the particular haunting quality which distinguishes Daphne du Maurier’s work”, thus introducing the noir aspect of du Maurier’s writing, which, up until that moment, had been engulfed by her more romantic narrative qualities. It is possible Gollancz attempted a re-evaluation of her writing towards a more genre-oriented perspective, as the stigma associated with genre literature was gradually lifting and “[s]cience fiction grew increasingly [...] literary” (Dirda 2022). Nonetheless, du Maurier’s works are still featured in the “Fiction” section, and not in the “Fantasy and Macabre”, “Thrillers”, or “Science Fiction” ones. The synopsis also features a quite lengthy quotation by du Maurier herself, explaining her writing method:

Nothing definite, nothing solid or factual, but an impression, an association of persons, places and ideas, so that weeks, possibly months later, the germ of a short story suddenly became clear in my mind, and I knew that I must write it down.

By describing her creative process, this particular epitext serves the purpose of making the public empathize with du Maurier’s struggles, enhancing her image as a mysterious *artiste maudite*.

4.4. “Spring Books 1981”

In 1981, Gollancz presented *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories*, the non-fiction story of the creation of *Rebecca*. The work in

itself is another idealization of du Maurier's creative experiences and her life as a writer. Furthermore, it emphasizes once more the ongoing success of the novel, to the point that Gollancz deemed it convenient to issue a non-fiction work about it. The synopsis opens with an observation about its reception, describing it as "one of the great bestsellers". The text then focuses again on du Maurier's personal life, particularly in the passage describing her romanticized discovery of Menabilly: "the secret house, hidden away in Cornish woodland, that was to become *Rebecca's* romantic setting: a house that stood derelict, and which she lovingly restored to make it her own home". The synopsis then proceeds to explain:

Next comes a selection of the author's memories: pieces about her family, her career, her beliefs, her homes. We meet her astonishing grandfather, George du Maurier, and her greatly loved father, Gerald du Maurier. She gives us her views on romantic love, on religion, and on death (not least, the death of her own deeply mourned husband). A collection that reveals something of every aspect of Daphne du Maurier's great talent, it will delight – and sometimes surprise – her army of admirers.

These few lines clearly address the ideal reader of this publication – that is, "her army of admirers". According to Cadioli, the choice of publishing previously unknown material derives from the desire of enhancing the public image of the author disseminated by the media. These editions are usually also directed to a very specific public, that is, readers already acquainted with the author and who are fans of his or her work (Cadioli 2012); however, the creation of a fandom could not be possible without the publisher's presentation of the author as a mythic figure, worthy of being read. In short, Gollancz managed to create a character out of du Maurier's life, transforming her into a literary figure to the benefit of her readers: indeed, her family and childhood are also frequently mentioned, as an important part of who she is as an author and a person.

4.5. "New Books, Autumn 1982"

This catalogue presents du Maurier's omnibus *Three Famous Du Maurier Novels*. As the word "famous" in the title, the brief synopsis also highlights her fame, by immediately stating that this omnibus follows "the great success of *Four Great Cornish Novels*". The description goes on by informing readers that *Three Famous Du Maurier Novels* collects "three of Daphne du Maurier's most popular novels, each showing different aspects of this great story-teller's art". Du Maurier was often defined as a "story-teller" by the Gollancz epitext, thus appealing to readers looking for excitement and entertainment without dismissing her as a mere bestseller writer. Two out of three novels in the omnibus are set "in her beloved

Cornwall". The previous omnibus, *Four Great Cornish Novels*, is featured in the spring 1978 catalogue. This time, both the title and the synopsis are completely centred on Cornwall:

Daphne du Maurier's novels set in Cornwall have always been her most popular, perhaps because she herself has made her home in and around Fowey and seems to have absorbed so much of the atmosphere of that land of mystery and dark deeds.

As one can easily notice, Gollancz repeatedly employs a handful of keywords when composing the epitext concerning du Maurier, such as "story-teller", "Cornwall", "mystery". Moreover, the aforementioned reference to the "dark deeds" remarks the author's connection to the Gothic/horror genre.

4.6. "Autumn Books 1987"

In 1987, Gollancz published a new anthology of du Maurier's stories, significantly titled *Classics of the Macabre*. Once again, the title of the collection is a piece of paratextual information in its own right, indicating Gollancz's definitive presenting of du Maurier both as a classic author and a genre author. However, the work is still featured in the "Fiction" section, presented on a double-page spread. The showy typographic characters match those of the book itself, with particular emphasis on du Maurier's name and the title in terms of character size. A personal focus on the author and on her idealization is present as usual, as demonstrated by specific biographic details such as the subtitle "In celebration of her eightieth birthday", and by the same picture used in other epitexts. The reference to her being a "storyteller" is also present. Furthermore, the allusion to 250 special-edition copies personally signed by the author, plus to the edition being a "gift book", shows the extent of canonization (and, in part, of sacralization) of her figure on the part of the publisher.

4.7. "Spring Books 1992"

The 1992 catalogue advertises four reissues of du Maurier's works, namely *Jamaica Inn*, *Rebecca*, *My Cousin Rachel*, and *Frenchman's Creek*. The author's name is clearly stated at the top of the page in bold letters, while a subtitle reads: "Simultaneous reissues of Daphne du Maurier's most famous *classic* novels" [emphasis added]. As happened for *Classics of the Macabre*, the adjective "classic" is not used randomly. According to Cadioli, this strategy is part of the canonization process carried out by publishers, who often get to define what pertains to the domain of the classics by means of catalogues with a precise identity (Cadioli 2012). Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that, in 1992, du Maurier had been dead for only

three years. In this regard, Cadioli observes how the choice of defining a writer who has been dead for a few years as a "classic" is a merely editorial and promotional decision, which strongly influences the shaping of a society's literary panorama and readers' reception (Cadioli 2012). This assumption confirms Franco Brioschi's concept of literariness as convention, since literariness is clearly not an intrinsic quality of a text, but merely the result of a conscious choice (Cadioli 2012). By 1992, then, Gollancz's had eventually succeeded in presenting du Maurier as a "classic" author – the term "classic" encompassing here a range of subtle meanings, from the canonical one to that of a clearly recognizable public figure in the literary field, which readers almost instinctively associate to a precise set of allusions and references.

5. Concluding remarks

I hope this study contributed to the academic discussion on publishers' epitext, a still under-researched area of paratext and literary studies. I believe, in fact, that the previous examples showed how Gollancz's catalogues shaped Daphne du Maurier's public image over the years, ultimately canonizing her for the British public. This operation was carried out by means of a few epitextual strategies, such as: a decisive focus on her personal life, achieved through specific, idealized biographic details and photos, which make her stand out with respect to other authors in the catalogues; a focus on Cornwall as intimately linked with the author's creative process; an insistence on the popularity of *Rebecca*, which came to be (and still is) the author's most-known novel; the physical space taken up by the presentations of her work, usually larger than what happens for other authors; and the usage of very specific keywords like "story-teller", "mystery", "atmosphere", and "classic" (in the later catalogues examined). Whether these tactics were actually received by the public and how is yet another question. However, I argue the renovated interest in du Maurier's work over the last few years, both from an academic and cultural point of view, might not be a mere coincidence. In fact, this type of epitext might have helped make du Maurier visible to a public which, otherwise, could have as well ignored her. Even more precisely, it might have created that very public. Gollancz's strategies were, indeed, the main inspiration for various highbrow publications, issued within the first decades of the twenty-first century, which emphasized du Maurier's literary value for the contemporary public. An example is the 2003 Virago edition, which features a full-page picture of the author and includes the book in the "Modern Classics" series, among other distinctive characteristics. In a way, then, not only did Victor Gollancz Ltd make Daphne du Maurier known to the reading public; to draw from Bourdieu's observations, it is possible that it also created her as we know her today.

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