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Gender and Generic Clashes in *The Years Between* (Compton Bennett, 1946)
Guerre des sexes et frictions de genres dans The Years Between (Compton Bennett, 1946)

Nicole Cloarec

Because of the enduring success of her novels and short stories, Daphne du Maurier's name and fame are certainly not immediately associated with the theatre, except through her father, the illustrious actor, theatre manager and producer Gerald du Maurier, to whom she dedicated her first original play *The Years Between*.¹ The play was first produced in November 1944 in Manchester, then in the West End as from January 1945, five months before VE Day.

Truly enough, drama does not appear best suited to accommodate what makes her work so compelling, such as the narrative intricacies of unreliable narrators or the powerful evocation of dramatic scenery. According to Margaret Forster, when du Maurier wrote her first play – her own stage adaptation of *Rebecca* – in 1939, “she was struck by how difficult it was to keep both atmosphere and suspense without having the heroine's interior monologues and without being able to describe the landscape.”² It seems all the more surprising that du Maurier went on writing two original plays, not only *The Years Between* but also *September Tide* (1949), even though she was quite inclined to venture into different genres.³ What is equally striking is that while so many of du Maurier's novels are historical fictions, *The Years Between*, which she wrote in between *Hungry Hill* (1943) and *The King's General* (1946),⁴ tackles an uncharacteristically topical issue. What is far less surprising, though, is that the play pursues the troubled examination of power relationships between the sexes which lies at the heart of so many of her other works.

From stage to screen

The play focuses on Diana Wentworth, an upper middle-class woman who has always been a devoted wife to her husband Michael, an MP before he joins the army. It opens in the winter of 1942, when Diana decides to stand for his seat in Parliament, a few months after she has learned about her husband's presumed death in action. Time elapses. In April 1945, Diana has become an accomplished MP, enjoying not only her work, but also her new-found independence and the feeling of being useful.⁵ She is about to remarry, with a farmer named Richard Llewellyn, who has proved a supportive neighbour for several years now, when all of a sudden the news is broken that her husband is not dead after all. Michael returns, only to

1 Du Maurier's first play was actually her own adaptation of *Rebecca*.

2 Margaret Forster, *Daphne Du Maurier*, London: Arrow Books, 2007, 144.

3 Du Maurier even ventured into writing a collection of inspirational, morale-boosting stories entitled *Come Wind, Come Weather* that were commissioned by the Moral Re-Armament group and published in 1940. See Ina Habermann, *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, Du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 192-196 and Xavier Lachazette, “A Desperate Attempt at Conflict Resolution: Daphne Du Maurier, Moral Re-Armament, and World War II”, *QUAINA*, June 2020. <<https://journals.openedition.org/orda/908>>, accessed on 1 July, 2020.

4 In 1943 according to Margaret Forster (*Daphne Du Maurier*, 178) but in the summer 1944 according to her daughter Flavia Leng. Flavia Leng, *Daphne Du Maurier: A Daughter's Memoir*, Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing, [1994] 2007, 91).

5 As Diana explains in the first act, “I suddenly realised my life doesn't belong to him anymore; it's mine; I can do what I like with it. And oh, Richard, that sudden sense of freedom – almost as though the years had rolled away and I was young again.” Daphne du Maurier, *The Years Between*, London: Gollancz, 1945, 17.

find that his wife has rebuilt her life. He soon realises that “the dead mustn’t return” and resents all the changes that the eponymous “years between” have brought—from the furniture⁶ to his wife’s new interests and self-fulfilment: “I’m not blaming you, or anyone. You believed me dead. Now I know the dead mustn’t return [...]. And we’re not happy now. Are we? Not your fault. Nor mine. The years between.”⁷ Notwithstanding, the couple are locked in mutual recriminations. Michael alternates wry sarcasms and hardly veiled reproaches that his family would have preferred him dead, while Diana proves unable to understand her returned husband, who has become “so different, so bitter and twisted.”⁸ They eventually come to realise that both had to go through acts of self-denial, Diana in forgoing her new love interest, Michael in deceiving his wife to serve his country. Still, as so often in du Maurier’s works, the play’s ending remains inconclusive: while closure is provided by the King’s radio announcement of VE Day the couple’s fate remains in a state of suspension. Both declare their resolution to salvage their marriage but this compromise is only achieved by Michael’s decision to accept a diplomatic post abroad, thus postponing any actual readjustments to a life in common. Such an ending was disparaged by some critics, among whom Beverley Baxter for the *Evening Standard* (13 January 1945), who reviewed the play under the headline “It Might Have Been So Good,” concluding, “When the curtain rose again we waited for the unfolding of a tragedy or the playing out of an ironic comedy. Unhappily, Miss du Maurier had shot her bolt. Having created an admirable situation, she could do nothing to resolve it. So she decided to end the war, which was accomplished by the use of the radio and, one has to record, to the titters of some people in the audience.”⁹

According to Margaret Forster and Ina Habermann,¹⁰ du Maurier admitted the play was partly autobiographical as she felt estranged from her husband while he was working for the War Office. Nonetheless, however personal the inspiration for the play may have been and although du Maurier led a relatively sheltered life during the war, the depiction of the couple’s strained relationships echoed the massive wartime disruption of family life that affected all English households. As such, the play proves to be surprisingly contemporary, documenting the profound upheavals that World War II was bringing about in the nation as a whole. The fact that it stages the announcement of the end of the war some five months before VE Day must also have struck a thrilling chord. All this may explain why the play was a popular success, running in the West End for 618 performances.¹¹ This, in turn, may well account for its being turned into a film just one year later.

However, the film is very much a product of producer Sidney Box and his wife Muriel, who cowrote the script. According to Muriel Box, they wanted du Maurier to write the screenplay but she declined and “never got involved with the film at all, and refused to be consulted over the script.”¹² As was often the case, du Maurier was quite happy to sell the film rights but fairly reluctant to engage in any type of teamwork. According to Margaret Forster, du Maurier had found that attending the rehearsals of the play in Wyndham’s, which was formerly her father’s theatre, was “a disturbing experience”¹³ and one can also surmise the subject of the play may have been “too close to home.”

6 The very first words Michael pronounces are about the furniture: “Where’s the old cabinet?” [...] “It’s altered the room, somehow. Funny... And the table has been shifted too, hasn’t it?” *Ibid.*, 33.

7 *Ibid.*, 48.

8 *Ibid.*, 59.

9 Quoted from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Years_Between_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Years_Between_(play))>, accessed on 20 May 2019.

10 Margaret Forster, *op. cit.*, 178 and Habermann, *op. cit.*, 199.

11 John Peter Wearing, *The London Stage 1940-1949: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014 (2nd edition), 183.

12 Muriel Box quoted in Martyn Shallcross, *The Private World of Daphne Du Maurier*, London: Robson Books, 1991, 112-113.

13 Margaret Forster, *op. cit.*, 189.

The Boxes had just been working with filmmaker Herbert Compton Bennett on *The Seventh Veil* (1945), which scored an enormous commercial success and won them an Oscar for best original screenplay, although many were prompt to detect in that film reminiscences not only of George du Maurier's novel *Trilby*, but also of *Jane Eyre* and "all their imitations down to *Rebecca*."¹⁴ Sydney Box was his own producer at Riverside Studios at the time¹⁵ and still had to be appointed head of Gainsborough studios. While he had already adopted some of the fiercely commercial strategies which he would later apply at Gainsborough studios, which consisted in either adapting best-selling novels to a film's stars or tapping into topical issues,¹⁶ the Boxes were also determined to engage with significant social issues. In particular, they were eager to make a film with a strong feminist and socialist agenda. As Muriel Box recalls in her memoirs, *The Years Between* offered them the opportunity to give "a hint of the things we wanted to say politically."¹⁷

The film retains much of the storyline related to the balance of power in marriage and, more surprisingly, its bittersweet tone, which is precisely what singles it out among a national film production by and large committed to celebrating the war effort and the spirit of national unity. However, although some scenes inevitably feel stage-bound and dialogue-driven (this will be one of the common criticisms addressed to Muriel Box's own films and to many mainstream British productions before the New Wave), the film not only opens up the play, by echoing other generic traditions like the documentary, but it also raises the question of point of view, which was considered inadequate in the stage performance. Significantly, in the film, the eponymous phrase "the years between" is not pronounced by Michael but by Diana as she explains that he has to give her time to get used to his being back: "it isn't easy to put the clock back for years. [...] It isn't that I don't love you. It's all the years between." Michael only scoffs at the phrase: "The years between. They've got a lot to answer for, haven't they?" As we will see, this shift of ascribing the weighty line from husband to wife is quite emblematic of the film's angle in adapting the play, as it partly endeavours to redress the onstage balance, which was felt to be too much in favour of the husband. However, even more significantly, the film expands the domestic and personal quandary of du Maurier's drama to underscore its social ramifications. Thus, as it explores the emotional fallout of the war through the disruptive figure of a husband literally returning from the dead, the film dramatises the gender clashes through various subtle disruptions of viewers' expectations regarding generic conventions.

Shifting perspectives

The first surprise comes with the play only actually starting more than forty minutes into the film. While the play opens in winter 1942 and quickly moves forward to 1945, the film opens in 1940 with a lengthy prologue as if to foreground its extensive rewriting. While the play unfolds in a single location ("the library of the Old Manor, the Wentworths' country house"), the film opens on a series of exterior long shots of a quiet British village, as if to counter its theatrical source text and assert the film's medium. These shots are as many vignettes that follow the tradition of the documentary and most particularly recall the propaganda films commissioned by the Ministry of Information and so popular during the war, films like *Britain at Bay* (1940) or *Listen to Britain* (1942)¹⁸ which compiled instantly resounding landscape images meant to extol the British nation and its resilience in the face of adversity.¹⁹ Likewise, it is fairly ironic that a film adapted from a play should start by eschewing all dialogue, using instead a series of inserts of written documents (a telegram, Diana's diary)

¹⁴ Richard Mallett in *Punch* quoted in Louise Heck-Rabi, *Women Filmmakers. A Critical Reception*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984, 142.

just like the titles of silent films. The use of close shots clearly foregrounds the possibilities offered by the filmic medium as opposed to the stage, as if the film had to state its departure from the source text, yet paradoxically reverting to the writing medium to do so. The first words actually spoken (after about four minutes)²⁰ are related to death and mourning as the priest starts celebrating a service in memory of the husband (Michael Redgrave). But his words soon fade out, triggering a long flashback sequence composed of a series of diary entries that sum up Diana's life, revolving entirely around her husband and his successful career. Already one can perceive some irony in the use of a dissolve that segues the memorial service into Diana's wedding ceremony, which no doubt contrasts them but also equates them. Soon the visuals contradict the official discourse of marital bliss: Diana (Valerie Hobson) is often filmed framed, thus highlighting her confinement and reducing her to a pretty picture. The film actually expands on a single line from the play, when Diana answers Richard, who is assuming she was happily married, with the words, "Happy? I don't know. I've never thought. There wasn't time. What I was feeling, what I was thinking never seemed to matter. It was just Michael, Michael. His needs, his comforts." (Act 1, scene 1). Although it paradoxically conveys Diana's perspective by silencing her voice, in retrospect, the quasi-silent prologue that relates Diana's life in the shadow of her husband stands in sharp contrast to the subsequent scenes where she takes the floor, addressing committees and the House of Parliament. Moreover, as the prologue clearly foregrounds Diana's point of view, it ironically reduces her husband to an abstract character, an already spectral figure that is constantly filmed with his back turned to the camera. While the device may convey Diana's grieving, it also creates a marked emotional distance for the viewer. Thus the long prologue that conveys Diana's nostalgic memories of her union paradoxically films the couple as if they were already apart.

Most significantly, since Diana's point of view is given prominence, the film seems to partly redress the balance that Daphne du Maurier deplored when, as she was involved in the West End stage production, the male character turned out to be much more attractive than his wife.²¹ du Maurier's Michael is by far the most complex and elusive character in the play—reactionary but also libertarian, a former idealist now disillusioned.²² The embittered, resentful

15 Andrew Spicer, *Sydney Box*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, 47.

16 Louise Heck-Rabi, *op. cit.*, 148.

17 "We were not under contract to Rank to make films with overt statements in social problems or those with strong propaganda themes. We were expected to produce a programme of films that would interest the general public and encourage people to go to the cinema more frequently and enjoy well-made dramas and amusing comedies. We were not engaged to indulge our own political or socialist views, however much we should have found satisfaction in doing so. *The Years Between* gave a hint of the things we wanted to say politically, but it was an exception." quoted in Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (eds), *Gainsborough Melodrama*, London: British Film Institute, 1983, 65, and Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49*, London & New York: Routledge, [1989], 1992, 89.

18 *Britain at Bay* (1940) (35 mm, black and white, 8 mins), directed by Harry Watt, produced by GPO Film Unit and sponsored by the Ministry of Information; *Listen to Britain* (1942) (35 mm, black and white, 19 mins), directed by Humphrey Jennings & Stewart McAllister, produced by the Crown Film Unit, sponsored by the Ministry of Information.

19 It is worth noting that both the Boxes and Herbert Compton Bennett worked on short propaganda films for the British Council and the Ministry of Information during the war. See Spicer, *Sydney Box*, *op. cit.*, 18-32 and Robert Murphy (ed.), *Directors in British and Irish Cinema, A Reference Companion*, London: British Film Institute, 2006, 43.

20 Dialogue proper actually starts after seven minutes.

21 Margaret Forster, *op. cit.*, 190.

22 This soured tone is typified by lines such as "Before I left this country I remember making a speech in the House of Commons about freedom. The right for every man to think for himself, to choose for himself, to do as he bloody well pleased. I understood that that was what we fellows were fighting for." Daphne du Maurier, *The*

husband keeps scoffing dismissively at his wife's new career and her aspirations for more social justice, and yet his sarcastic quips often sound more witty and salient than the emollient, mundane or morally heavy-footed discourses of the other characters. Unlike in the play, the addition of the long prologue that stresses Diana's mourning and faithful memory of her husband makes her renewed desire to live appear as a healthy and well-deserved change from her long doleful bereavement. Accordingly, in the film, Michael is unequivocally portrayed as an intruder who cannot find back his place or connect with his family. It is only three quarters of an hour into the film that his face is revealed at last, and then he is often seen moving off screen. The couple is repeatedly filmed in separate spaces, with their backs turned to each other, or moving in opposite directions. It is noteworthy that although the film proved a popular success,²³ many critics were offended by the portrayal of the returned soldier: one critic objected that "the presumed dead husband's intrusion into the plot at this juncture is more irritation than intrigue" (*Variety*, 10 April 1946) while another asserted that "his characterisation is quite revolting in its sullen conceit and self-pity" (*The Spectator*, 31 May 1946).²⁴

An outspoken feminist agenda

However, not only does the film foreground Diana's point of view but it also turns the play's proto-feminist theme into an outspoken feminist manifesto. In so doing, the film sets Diana's experience within a broader social context, paying tribute to women's part in the war effort and addressing some of the topical issues of the day, such as childcare facilities and equal pay.²⁵ If the play does mention Diana's work on a Housing Bill and a message to the General Teaching Council, the film adds a montage sequence of Diana addressing different women's rallies, for example campaigning for day nurseries (28:00).²⁶ Most significantly, it includes her maiden speech (32:40) whereby she defends a bill for equal pay and markedly departs from the speech that was prepared for her to toe the party line. Instead she speaks on behalf of "Mrs. Smith" who "isn't very interested in statistics because there are no statistics for human emotions or decency or ideals" but "is the person who is vitally concerned with this bill." Diana goes on describing Mrs. Smith's everyday life, her struggle and the hardships she has to go through during war time: a wife with two children, she lives alone after her husband was called up and her two children were evacuated to the countryside. She works a twelve-hour shift in an aircraft factory to contribute to the war effort and divides the rest of her time between homework, fire watching, standing in queues for groceries or a pair of shoes for the children, and writing to her husband every other day, to her children the alternate day. Then Diana expounds on her aspirations:

Now when Mrs. Smith has time to think, which isn't very often, she thinks of a happier, more pleasant world after the war. She wants quite a lot of things out of the post-war world, a decent home to live in [...], she wants the best education in the world for her children [...], she wants a little money saved against her husband's return and as long as she's doing a man's work, she doesn't see why she shouldn't have a man's payback at the end of the week. And that's not all. Mrs. Smith has earned the rights to all these things and a great deal more, she's going to have an equal say in the government of this country.

Years Between, *op. cit.*, 46.

23 "[T]he public's verdict was unequivocal: *The Years Between* performed well, indicating that once more the Boxes had understood the temper of the times." Andrew Spicer, *Sydney Box*, *op. cit.*, 63.

24 Both are quoted in Louise Heck-Rabi, *op. cit.*, 149-150.

25 See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1997] 2002, 222-254.

26 On the subject of day nurseries, Diana argues, "No woman worth her salt wants to be parted from her babies, but no woman with any sense wants to be saddled with them twenty-four hours a day. Now if we can afford to spend thousands on car parks and car park attendants, surely we can afford a few hundred for baby parks."

During the whole scene, other MPs, mostly males,²⁷ are filmed listening to her reverently, which, even considering the traditional indulgence that greets a maiden speech, looks highly overplayed, however sincere Diana's speech may sound.

Moreover, the social ramifications of Diana's situation are further probed through the creation of secondary female characters that echo her predicament. Effie, who has become a mechanic and a driver, experiences doubts and guilt while her fiancé is away at war, while Diana's secretary, Judy, who has a secret crush on Richard Llewellyn (James McKechnie), goes through a similar sentimental setback. Other characters provide further indirect comments of the disruptions that the war brought about in terms of gender roles: "a Sergeant Higgins to see [Mrs. Wentworth]" turns out to be her former cook; Nanny is seen reading the newspapers while Venning, Michael's soldier servant, is ironing, which leads them both to argue about what a man's job is—or should be.

A choral dimension

In this respect, the film's expanded examination of the gender issue goes hand in hand with a much more inclusive depiction of the British social classes than in the play. This gives the personal drama of an upper middle-class couple a choral dimension that is underscored at the end by the use of then recent archive footage, showing the whole nation celebrating VE Day. Just as the film blends various generic conventions, it also alleviates its melodramatic tone through the inclusion of comic relief. In particular, the film makes extensive use of running jokes, like the joke which turns the postman into a mouthpiece for wise folk sayings, seeing that he keeps warning his listeners, "You mark my words. Nothing will ever be the same again after this war and that's a fact."²⁸ Interestingly, those running gags encompass the whole social spectrum since Sir Ernest repeats on his own behalf the very words used by Richard to convince him that Diana should stand for Parliament, words like "her head is screwed the right way", which were Nanny's in the first place. Eventually, the film ends up with the lyrical portrait of a society facing the challenge of rebuilding itself.

This choral dimension is made manifest through the extensive rewriting of Nanny's role (interpreted by Flora Robson): while she remains a minor character in the play, in the film she literally acts like the film's screenwriter and director. She is the one who sets off the plot and induces Diana to start a new life. Significantly, after overhearing Diana talking alone, addressing the empty armchair which her husband used to occupy, Nanny sits down in the vacant seat, as if to fill in Michael's absence, and exclaims, "All the pretending in the world won't bring him back again. It's no good pretending; start a new life without him." Nanny is the one who devises the idea of having Diana elected to her husband's seat, submitting it first to Richard, who then talks Sir Ernest Foster into persuading Diana. Likewise, she is the one who brings the drama to its close, untangling the deadlock which the couple has reached by appealing to their reason and to the interest of the world at large. Recalling her own experience of mourning her fiancé who was killed during the First World War, she evokes the ordeal of "hundreds like me in this war as well as the last—women whose men won't come back to them." She soon adds:

27 Although we can see some women MPs in the long shots of the House, Diana is soon framed in medium shots as the only woman among her male counterparts. According to *UK Political Info, A resource for voters, students, journalists and politicians*, there were twenty-four women MPs in 1945, or nearly 3.8% of the total number of MPs (640) at the time. See <<http://www.ukpolitical.info/FemaleMPs.htm>>, accessed on 12 July 2019.

28 The line is an expanded interpretation of a brief indirect reference to the postman made by the Wentworths' son, Robin. (Daphne du Maurier, *The Years Between*, *op. cit.*, 14).

But there are thousands more like you. Women whose men *will* come back to them, men they didn't expect to see again. Men they didn't very much want to see again [...]. I know it is not one-sided; there'll be thousands of men coming back who won't make allowances for what their wives have been through while they've been away; men who will expect to find nothing changed even though they've changed themselves. That's not the point. It's this: somebody's got to start a little give-and-take. You heard what the Prime Minister said the other day on the wireless. He said nations have to collaborate and have faith in one another if there is ever going to be peace, but if people like you can't do it, how do you expect nations to? Have you got so big you can't be a wife to your husband anymore? And have you got so important you can't bear to see your wife doing something just as well as you did it? Do you mean you are both incapable of working together? [...] There's peace in the world again, it's starting today; but if you two are any sample of what's going to happen, then we might as well have the war again right away because we've lost the peace, lost it before it ever started.

Nonetheless, for all its wholeheartedness, Nanny's high-flown political discourse only highlights the contrived nature of the resolution. While she may seem to be voicing the "common decency" that George Orwell kept extolling,²⁹ and her intervention may echo the staple theme in so many American social comedies of the 1930s, of the upper middle class being redeemed by the common sense of common people, she still remains a supporting character whose primary function here is to allow for the intervention of a quite convenient *deus ex machina*. While the play's ending remains undecided, with the couple's marriage being salvaged only because Michael chooses to depart again, the film opts for a more conventional happy ending: after Diana has chosen to leave Michael to pursue her career and live with Richard, the echo of Nanny's words eventually makes her change her mind and come back to her husband. The scene of Diana's return actually mirrors one of the early shots that conveyed Diana's nostalgic memories of her husband. In both scenes, as Michael is nodding off in an armchair with an open book on his lap, Diana approaches from behind him, covers his eyes and gently teases him, as if he had not been sleeping: "You're ruining your eyes. Stop reading and come to bed." The second scene, however, is filmed as in a reverse shot, with Michael facing the camera. As the film thus comes full circle, the echo strongly suggests the restoration of the *status quo ante*. Then a very brief epilogue shows them both in Parliament, but sitting on opposite sides, thus suggesting that the battle of the sexes will go on. The idyllic picture of a reunited couple is therefore slightly qualified, and gently mocked, but by no means challenged, which explains why, though for different reasons, the film's ending was found just as unconvincing as the play's. The *Monthly Film Bulletin's* review of April 1946 encapsulates the general verdict: "the end is rather unsatisfying, for the break-up of the marriage is the only correct solution. Otherwise this is a courageous portrayal of the rehabilitation and resettlement problems with which thousands of families in Britain, America and other countries are now faced."³⁰

Conclusion

In her analysis of du Maurier's film adaptations, Nina Auerbach concludes that though male directors "may not deliberately falsify Daphne du Maurier", they misrepresent her work, transmuting her stark vision into sentimental plots and "turning her impersonal, almost

²⁹ The phrase appears in *Wigan Pier* (1937) to describe how the "ordinary working man" understands Socialism, as a synonym of "justice and common decency." Anthony Stewart also relates the notion to Orwell's analysis of Charles Dickens: "Orwell saw very clearly that the capacity for decency must be incumbent on the privileged if it is to have any real social consequence." For both quotations, see Anthony Stewart, *George Orwell, Doubtless, and the Value of Decency*, London and New York: Routledge 2003, 3-4.

³⁰ Quoted in Andrew Spicer, *Sydney Box, op. cit.*, 63.

inhuman tales into the romances her admirers wish she had written.”³¹ In a word, they “feminise” her. In the hands of the Boxes, du Maurier is not so much feminised as given a feminist agenda. The film’s rewriting from a definite feminist perspective in turn sheds light on du Maurier’s highly ambivalent feelings towards the issue of women’s condition, seeing that she would not endorse feminism while refusing the conventional roles associated with femininity. Besides, in the Boxes’ adaptation, du Maurier is not so much sentimentalised as socialised. Whereas the play foregrounds Diana’s personal predicament, the film sets it within the framework of the whole nation’s upheaval; and while the play delves into an anguished examination of power relations between the sexes, the film highlights how urgent it is to deal with the social disruptions brought on by the war. As noted previously, the postman is proved right when he keeps repeating, “You mark my words. Nothing will ever be the same again after this war and that’s a fact.”

The Years Between may thus appear uncharacteristic of du Maurier’s work, due to its foraying into the dramatic genre but also because of its dealing with an acutely topical issue when “pastness in all its forms, personal, familial, biographical and national”³² is so often the staple of her fictions. Diana returns to her husband just as Laura does in *Brief Encounter* (released in 1945) but unlike that other film, where the protagonist forgoes her romantic involvement with the noble-minded doctor, the dashing figure in *The Years Between* is embodied by the younger, pre-war version of the husband. The uncertain future which serves as the play’s inconclusive ending paradoxically looks to the past. And as with Stella at the end of *September Tide*, Diana “seems to settle for perpetuating the past rather than launching into a new future.”³³

The film, on the other hand, reflects the Boxes’ commitment to tackling urgent topical issues, offering a personal message of hope for a fairer nation. It is also fairly emblematic of Muriel Box’s future production. Most of her films foreground women’s experiences and their struggle to gain recognition and independence. Muriel Box herself was a victim of discrimination in an industry rife with gender prejudice. In her memoirs, she explains how she started directing documentaries thanks to the scarcity of male directors in wartime. She also recalls that she soon met difficulties because of gender prejudice. For instance, after writing the script for a third commissioned documentary called *Road Safety for Children*, she was barred from directing it because it was not considered “the type of picture suitable for a woman to direct.”³⁴ She then bitterly remarks: “This was the first time I had been discriminated against in my work on the grounds of sex. I regret to say it was by no means the last.”³⁵ Interestingly, her works have often been dismissed as filmic equivalents of novelettes, the term Hitchcock used to qualify du Maurier’s fiction.³⁶ Critic Richard Winnington, in *The*

31 Nina Auerbach, *Daphne Du Maurier, Haunted Heiress*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, 157.

32 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, London & New York: Routledge, [1991] 2001, 156.

33 Michelene Wandor, “Drama in Daphne Du Maurier: Spirit and Letter,” in Helen Taylor (ed.), *The Daphne Du Maurier Companion*, London: Virago Press, 2007, 341-47, 342.

34 Muriel Box, *Odd Woman Out. An Autobiography by Muriel Box*, London: Leslie Frewin Publishers, 1974, 163.

35 *Ibid.* As Spicer recounts, Muriel Box had to face Michael Balcon’s scepticism about her ability to direct a feature film, was forced to pretend that her husband was co-directing her first feature *The Happy Family* (1952), and lost one of the main financial backers’ funding when he learned she was directing on her own. Eventually she was not credited as director when the film was first released. Andrew Spicer, “Box, Muriel,” in *Directors in British and Irish Cinema*, <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/479374/index.html>>, accessed on 12 July 2019.

36 See the moment in the Truffaut/Hitchcock interview when Truffaut asks Hitchcock whether he is satisfied with *Rebecca*. Hitchcock answers, “Well it’s not a Hitchcock picture. It’s a novelette, really.” (at 4:50), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDs3GvhJZq0>>, accessed on 20 March 2019.

News Chronicle of 25 May 1946, thus described *The Years Between* as the “novelettish distortion” of a contemporary problem.³⁷ But Robert Shail’s assessment of Box’s work also recalls du Maurier’s disillusioned outlook on human relationships, which is made explicit by Michael in the play when he asserts: “It’s always a mistake, my dear fellow, to find out too much about anybody’s life. And the closer you are to someone, the less you ought to know.”³⁸ According to Shail, this disenchanted and caustic view is what makes Muriel Box’s films worth considering despite all their shortcomings: “Although sometimes lacking in obvious visual flair and often reliant on adaptations of stage work, the content of her films was often striking, with a tendency towards foregrounding relationships and viewing the battle between the sexes with an unsentimental, acerbic eye.”³⁹

The Years Between thus documents how traditional gender roles were radically changed by the Second World War. In both play and film, the spouses come to realise that the ideal image of their pre-war marriage is a bygone chimera: Diana is no longer the silent, supportive housewife that Michael cared for, while Michael is no longer the dashing and idealistic politician whom Diana found so seductive. Marriage may be preserved at the end, but the couple have yet to build up a new relationship and accommodate each other’s diverging needs and desires. While in the play nostalgia prevails, the film suggests that the couple’s future common life lies in the collective rebuilding of the nation. In this respect, the film not only offers an insight into women’s hearts but it also asserts their aspirations at playing a part in society on par with men.

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37 Quoted from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Years_Between_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Years_Between_(play))>, accessed on 20 March 2019.

38 Daphne du Maurier, *The Years Between*, *op. cit.*, 72.

39 Robert Shail, *British Film Directors. A Critical Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 33. Shail adds, “Whatever aesthetic limitations may be apparent in the films she directed, she directed a distinctive body of work and provided a model of achievement for future generations of women directors like Sally Potter and Lynne Ramsay.” In 2018 two major retrospectives paid tribute to her career and provided the opportunity to re-examine her work. As Phil Hoad pointed out in his review of these retrospectives, with 15 feature films to her name, Muriel Box remains to this day Britain’s most prolific female director.

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