War Against Human Selfishness:

The Relationships between War and Women in Daphne du Maurier's *The King's General*[*]

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Introduction

Written just after World War II, Daphne du Maurier's *The King's General* (1945) expresses the fear of war. Therefore, the whole story is surrounded by a dark atmosphere full of "the fear, the doubt, [and] the nagging insecurity" of war (*The King's General* 256). The story is set in seventeenth-century Cornwall and depicts the tumultuous life of heroine Honor Harris. When Honor is ten years old, her oldest brother Kit marries Gartred Grenvile. After only three years, however, Kit dies of smallpox, and Gartred soon leaves the house. Five years later, Honor meets Richard, Gartred's brother; they fall in love and decide to marry despite the objections of Honor's family. Unfortunately, Honor loses the use of her legs in a riding accident before their marriage. Consequently, she refuses to marry Richard and they go their separate ways. When the civil war breaks out, Honor again meets Richard, who leads the king's army as a general, at her brother-in-law's mansion, Menabilly. Richard asks Honor to take care of his frail son Dick during the war. Dick betrays his father and leaks a secret plan to the enemy, allowing the Parliamentarians to take Cornwall. After the revolt fails, an escape plan is made for Richard and Dick.

Although *The King's General* is set in the seventeenth century, it includes a mixture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century values, especially about war.[1] This paper will demonstrate how du Maurier expresses her thoughts about the two world wars, which she actually experienced, and the relationships between war and women in the work.

Independent Women in World War I

Nicole Ann Dombrowski insists that women's relationship to war is more complex than that of men (3), and indeed, women reacted in various ways to World War I. However, their responses to the war can be broadly divided into two categories. Some women regarded the war as their great opportunity to obtain their independence. Since about 6 million men were conscripted during the war[2], women started working at munitions factories. By working as welders, steel

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[1] Hornor and Zlosnik argue such mixture "offers a different kind of verisimilitude" (88) in du Maurier's works.

[2] Since the British Army of 1914 was far too small in comparison with French and German forces, a

workers, crane operators, aero-plane engineers and so on, women came to recognise that they had the ability to do the same jobs as men. This realisation helped women to obtain confidence that they could be socially and economically independent from men. Indeed, as Virginia Woolf stated, many women willingly worked in the munitions industry during the war. Woolf insisted that women “would undertake any task however menial [and] exercise any fascination however fatal,” since they unconsciously loathed “the education of the private house [which aimed to nurture an ideal obedient wife] with its cruelty, its poverty, its hypocrisy, its immorality, [and] its inanity” (*Three Guineas* 37). In other words, women “desired [their] splendid war” (*Three Guineas* 37) to escape from their limited lives controlled by men.

By contrast, some women considered the maintenance of peace to be their duty. Martin van Creveld noted:

> Quite a number of feminists have argued that war, and of course its culture, are typically wicked male products that (supposedly) do not appeal to the ‘real’ nature of women. Hence women who try to join in wars are traitors to their own sex; what they should do is stay away from them and resist them as much as they can. (397-98)

Not only some opponents of militarism but also women themselves thought that “women, as bearers of children, are especially endowed to oppose the kind of violence that destroys the very humanity their bodies reproduce” (Dombrowski 3). Maternal feminists, who believed women had superior moral sense than did men, especially engaged in peace movements during the world wars.

In *The King’s General*, du Maurier, who had a strongly independent spirit,[3] undoubtedly celebrates women’s independence of men bestowed by World War I. After the riding accident, Honor looks upon herself as a different being and considers her former self to be as dead and buried (*The King’s General* 53). Eventually, she breaks her engagement with Richard. Even though Honor relinquishes her life as a woman after she becomes “crippled,” she attains the

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massive recruit campaign began featuring a distinct poster of Lord Kitchener (1850-1916) Eventually, 5.7 million men were recruited from Great Britain. For more details, see Baker, C’s “Some British Army Statistics of the Great War.” *The Long, Long Trail: The British Army of 1914-1918*, www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/some-british-army-statistics-of-the-great-war/, Peter Simkins’s *Kitchener’s Army*. pp. xiii-xv, 39-40, 49-75.

[3] The reason why she started her career as a writer was that “the need to work at something was becoming more urgent” because “the idea of living at home, entirely dependent on her parents was particular anathema” to her (Dann 113). Even after she married, she did not change her mind. Oriel Malet recalls, du Maurier “was the chief breadwinner of a family with expensive taste” (*Letters form Menabilly* 117). She never depended on her husband and kept worrying about earning money until she died.

power to become independent. Honor thinks that she has to "school [herself] to a new way of living, and day after day immobility" and her mind "must atone for the body's helplessness" (*The King's General* 53). Thus, she begins to study hard, and learning becomes part of her existence. She eventually becomes "the guide and mediator" in her family's affairs and their problems are brought to her to solve (*The King's General* 53). Owing to her intelligence, she attains authority in her family and an influential position which ordinary young women could not attain.

Believing that "[her] own and succeeding generation must learn to adjust to the ever changing status of women in [the] modern civilization" (*The Rebecca Notebook* 114), du Maurier depicts her heroine as a completely independent woman of men just like many women during World War I.

Human Inequality in World War II

World War II was something far away for du Maurier herself, since she spent the war in safe areas. Therefore, as du Maurier considered herself as a "deaf musician, [. . .] singing a battle symphony, who has never heard the guns" (*The Rebecca Notebook* 169), she mostly got her image of war from what her husband, who was a senior officer of the British Army, told her. Du Maurier did not care whether her country won nor what the war brought to her, considering the war completely meaningless. The experience of World War II, however, made her rebuild her philosophy about human nature. While distressed by the limitation of freedom, she also noticed how war affected human nature: it "can make beasts of every one of us" (*The King's General* 193). Unlike du Maurier, her husband Tommy had a simpler faith, "believ[ing] in God and the triumph of Good over Evil, of Right over Wrong" (Forster 142). Du Maurier wished she could share his faith, but she could not; therefore, she struggled to "develop her own philosophy by taking a bit from Greeks, a bit from the Bible, and by mixing legend with superstition" (Forster 142). During her inner struggle, du Maurier started to believe that if each individual's internal makeup changed for the better, there would be no need to fight against one another and the war would be averted. She considered that the war was not the problem of the country or the society, but of the individual. Around the same time, du Maurier's old friend Bunny Austin invited her to join the Oxford Group,[4] which aimed at a worldwide moral

[4] The Oxford Group was a Christian organisation founded by Frank Buchman (1878-1961). It later became known as the Moral Rearmament Movement.

revolution by starting one in each person. Having a similar opinion about human nature, du Maurier gradually became interested in that movement.

The Oxford Group advocated the "Four Absolutes": absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. The founder of the group, Frank Buchman, especially emphasised the significance of unselfishness and divine guidance:

> Its [the Oxford Group's] aim is a new social order under the dictatorship of the Spirit of God, making for better human relationships, for unselfishness co-operation, for cleaner business, cleaner politics, for the elimination of political, industrial and racial antagonism. (Buchman 4)

Du Maurier sympathised with this idea. In the introduction of *Come Wind, Come Weather* (1940), which she was asked to write by the Oxford Group during World War II, she strongly criticised the human selfishness that had caused the disastrous war: "we believe that side by side with this war in Europe we are fighting another battle. The battle against human selfishness. When that battle has been won, we can look with confidence to the future and to a new world order" (*Come Wind, Come Weather* vi). Du Maurier believed that the war was an opportunity to "root out the germ of selfishness from human nature and to cultivate the seed of generosity instead" (*Come Wind, Come Weather* xiii).

Furthermore, the Oxford Group emphasised the equality of all humanity, as Buchman insisted that "a new illumination [could] come to everyone and bring men and women of every creed and social stratum back to the basic principle of the Christian faith, enhancing all their primary loyalties" (Buchman 4). Therefore, the group severely attacked Nazism, which strongly embraced racist and eugenic ideas, regarding it as a destroyer of Christianity. Du Maurier also advocated the equality of humans, repeating the phrase "the ordinary men, women and child" several times in *Come Wind, Come Weather*. In this work, she shared her opinion with people of all classes, all sexes and all ages. Four years later, du Maurier again dealt with the same theme of human equality in *The King's General*.

In *The King's General*, du Maurier effectively uses a hidden room in Menabilly to indicate the problem of eugenics. Honor, who discovers a hidden place beneath her next room, is told the secret history of the Rashleigh family by Jonathan Rashleigh. He explains to her that the hidden room was built to shut up his elder brother John, who was "mad [and] a hopeless idiot" (*The King's General* 73). Later, this hidden dungeon is used to conceal three male characters from the rebel army: Richard, his son Dick and Jonathan's son John. Of the novel's male

characters, Uncle John,[5] Dick and John have a notable common feature: all of them lack masculinity, which was considered an essential quality for men, especially during wartime. For instance, the "idiot" Uncle John did not possess mental stability, which was regarded as one of the features of masculinity. Moreover, unlike the other red-haired vibrant Granviles, Dick has "great dark eyes and tight black locks", and "a shrinking, timid way with him" (*The King's General* 125, 121). Furthermore, he has a great talent for painting; however, his father and even he himself consider that this practice is very "womanish" and will "degrade" him (*The King's General* 297). John, who suffers from "a malignant form of ague that [keeps] him shivering and helpless sometimes for days on end" (*The King's General* 66), also lacks enough physical strength to join the army. Therefore, the hidden room in Menabilly is a place to conceal or confine men who lack masculinity; that is, defective members of the human race.

Dick and John hide in the dungeon when the rebel army reaches Menabilly; however, they become enfeebled because of the terrible condition of the place. When Honor finds Dick coming back from the dungeon with his clothes dank, he weeps from exhaustion and fear. John's condition is far worse; the ague afflicts him, and he faints away in the hidden room. Moreover, Jonathan had previously told Honor that the room's lack of air rendered Uncle John unconscious and made it easy to handle him. These expressions remind us of the gas chambers of Nazi extermination camps. During World War II, the Nazis massacred more than 8 million "racially undesirable" people,[6] such as Jews, homosexuals and criminals (Evans 90). It especially regarded Jews as *Untermenschen*, which means subhumans. Such racial and eugenic discrimination against Jews had existed for a long time. For example, Benjamin Ward Richardson[7] argued Jews' physical inferiority:

> In no period in the history of this wonderful people [Jews] since their dispersion, do we discover the faintest approach to any system amongst them tending to the studied development of physical capacity. Since they were conquered they have never from choice borne arms nor sought distinction in military prowess [. . .] and the fact remains, that as a people they have never exhibited what is considered a high physical standard. To be plain, during their most severe persecutions nothing told so strongly against them as their apparent feebleness of body. (Richardson 98).

[5] To avoid confusion, this paper will call Jonathan's brother Uncle John and his son John.
[6] Lucy Dawidowicz *The War Against the Jews*. pp. 402-3.
[7] Benjamin Ward Richardson (1828-1896) was a British physician, physiologist and sanitarian.

Considering Jews to be an inferior race, the Nazis massacred almost 6 million of Jews[8] by gassing them in locked rooms. The hidden room in *The King's General* also functions as a place to confine and weaken the subhuman characters: Uncle John, Dick and John, who lack stability and masculinity, which are essential qualities for an ideal man. In other words, the room symbolises a place to conceal and lock up dysgenic Others. At the end of the story, however, the hidden room is destroyed by fire. This scene represents du Maurier's severe criticism of inhumane wartime treatments of Jews and other minorities, which completely retrogress from human equality.

Another inequality is subtly depicted in *The King's General* by using eugenic theory: the birth control movement. During wartime, women's relationship to eugenics was potent and ambivalent, since "as mothers of the family, nation, and future," they were "drawn to or targeted by eugenics" (Stern 176). Regarding this centrality as empowering, some of them found common cause between feminism and eugenics, and utilised it as a means to protect women from sexual exploitation and unwanted pregnancy. For example, American birth control activist Margaret Sanger believed that "women [were] enslaved by the world machine, by sex conventions, by motherhood and its present necessary child-rearing, by wage slavery, by middle class morality, by customs, laws, and superstitions" (Pease 56). Therefore, Sanger advocated the accessibility of birth control to improve women's health, which was critically damaged by frequent pregnancy, and free them from enforced motherhood. Sharing a similar cause with Sanger, many British feminists, including Mary Stopes, introduced a significant feminist dimension to the eugenics debate in England. Both Sanger and Stopes opened birth control clinics in working-class districts in the United States and England respectively.

Birth control activists were especially concerned about the fact that many working-class women lacked the knowledge of birth prevention, and "pregnancy was a chronic condition" for them (Sanger 92). As Craig suggests, however, the birth control movement had a double-edged nature. While showing sympathy for lower-class women suffering from physical and financial instability caused by undesirable pregnancy, birth control texts often used such disdainful words as "degraded," "ignorant" and "primitive" to illustrate them (11). Furthermore, feminist eugenicists feared that "feebleminded" women labelled as "developmentally and mentally disabled, as well as poor and uneducated" (Stern 177) and often prolific would become the greatest threat to the nation's biological worth, since such women were considered to reproduce dysgenic offspring. Margaret Sanger warned:

[8] Lucy Dawidowicz *The War Against the Jews*. pp. 402-3.

> Everywhere we see poverty and larger families going hand in hand. Those least fit to carry on the race are increasing most rapidly. [. . .] Many of the children thus begotten are diseased and feeble-minded; many become criminals. The burden of supporting these unwanted types has to be borne by the healthy elements of the nation. Funds that should be used to raise the standard of our civilization are diverted to the maintenance of those who should never have been born. (Engelman 130)

Many other birth control advocates, like Sanger, believing the amplification of the "feebleminded" race contributed to numerous social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and increasing crime, supported not only the use of contraception but also sterilisation of the "unfit." For them, while the "fit" deserved their reproductive autonomy, the "unfit" were complete "others," lacking the right to reproductive self-control. As Stopes declared her birth-control books would "help to improve [their] race," (Stopes viii) the movement inextricably bonded with racism and eugenics.

As a feminist writer who repeatedly dealt with the theme of motherhood in her works, du Maurier implicitly criticises such eugenics-based motherhood in *The King's General*. Richard has two sons with different women. One is Dick, whose mother, Richard's wife Mary Howard, is from a respectable upper-class family. The other is Joseph, whose mother is a dairy maid at Killigarth who is submissive and has an "obliging soul" (*The King's General* 201). Dick, as discussed, is dissimilar from the other members of the Grenvile family and very effeminate; however, Joseph is "so broad-shouldered, big and auburn-haired" (*The King's General* 198) and has the great strength and courage to join the royalist army. Thus, Joseph gains Richard's favour while Dick is abused by his father. Du Maurier apparently resists the eugenic theory exploited by birth control advocates to characterise Richard's two sons: superior descendants can be born of uneducated poor lower-class women, and inferior ones of well-born women. Moreover, at the end of the story Richard and his army are brought to a crisis by Dick, who betrays his father by leaking a secret to the enemy. Even though many feminist eugenicists claimed that the offspring of lower-class women would bring a crisis to British society, Dick in *The King's General*, who is supposed to be "fit" in eugenic theory, becomes a great threat causing a disastrous effect on the whole royalist army. Defying the eugenic reproductive theory advocated by birth control activists, du Maurier severely attacks the racial and eugenic discrimination behind the wartime birth control movement, which promoted human inequality.

Conclusion

As this paper demonstrates, in *The King's General* du Maurier reflects her thoughts about the two world wars in different ways. Emphasising the importance of women's independence, du Maurier depicts Honor as a woman who obtains enough power and intelligence to live without relying on men after a riding accident, just as women during World War I realised their ability to become independent of men. Furthermore, du Maurier, sharing her ideal of humanity with the Oxford group, attributed World War II to the selfishness of human nature. She insists on the necessity of eradicating selfishness from each person to restore peace by advocating the equality of all humanity in her two works: *Come Wind, Come Weather* and *The King's General*. In the latter work especially, du Maurier criticises eugenics, which was founded on human inequality and consequently caused the catastrophe, using a metaphor for the gas chambers of Nazi extermination camps. She also condemns the racist dimension of the birth control movement that exploited eugenic theory to justify its cause. Du Maurier, who deeply lamented the corruption of human nature, successfully integrated her warning against selfishness with her historical romance, *The King's General*.

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