My Cousin Rachel: Was she innocent or guilty—and what would it signify?

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Written and directed by Roger Michell, based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier.

My Cousin Rachel, directed by Roger Michell, is the second film version of Daphne du Maurier's 1951 novel. The first, directed by Henry Koster and released in 1952, featured Richard Burton (in his initial US film) and Olivia de Havilland (who will celebrate her 101st birthday on July 1!).

The novel and films are set in some undefined portion of the first half of the 19th century, on the coast of southwestern England.

In the new version, Michell dispenses rather quickly with certain plot details: Philip Ashley (Sam Claflin), an orphan, lives with his older cousin and guardian, Ambrose (also, briefly, played by Claflin), who, propelled by doctors' concerns for his health, decides to spend some time in a warmer climate, Italy.

Before too long, Ambrose, who has remained in Florence longer than expected, explains in a letter that he has met a certain "cousin Rachel," a half-English, half-Italian widow of an impoverished count. To Philip's astonishment and dismay, Ambrose later announces his plans to marry Rachel. Some months of honeymoon and happiness follow, but then Ambrose begins to complain about his health and his wife, finally appealing to Philip to "come quickly" to Italy.

When Philip arrives, he finds that his beloved cousin has died and his widow has already left Florence. Convinced that Rachel caused Ambrose's death, Philip swears revenge. The only extant will leaves all of Ambrose's property to Philip.

Rachel (Rachel Weisz) eventually turns up at the Ashley estate. Contrary to Philip's ignorant preconceptions, she is solicitous and generous, apparently not the slightest bit mercenary or "promiscuous."

To make a relatively long story short, Philip, who has almost no experience of women, falls head over heels in love with Rachel, and ends up signing over the entire estate to her, which, in any case, ought rightfully to have been hers. They spend a night together, and Philip assumes that this indicates her willingness to be "his" in marriage. He is soon disabused of that notion. When Philip falls ill, he and we wonder whether Rachel, who insists on his drinking her exotic herb concoctions, is determined to be rid of him by foul means. One way or another, tragedy ensues …

Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), the daughter of famed actor Gerald du Maurier, was a popular novelist best known for *Jamaica Inn* (1936), *Rebecca* (1938) and *My Cousin Rachel*, as well as the short novel *The Birds* (1952). Alfred Hitchcock directed works based on several of these. He was no doubt attracted to the unsettling, "gothic," even murderous element that du Maurier brought out, at odds with the apparently peaceful, bucolic English setting.

Du Maurier was a gifted and entertaining writer. *My Cousin Rachel* too holds one's attention throughout. But it is not the most profound stuff.

Novel writing in Britain had declined by the middle of the 20th century, along with the prospects of the ruling class. For 175 years or so, English novelists had looked objectively and searchingly at their society. That became far too dangerous and demanding in the last century. Almost any one of the Brontë sisters, George Eliot or Thomas Hardy would have made more of the goings-on in *My Cousin Rachel*, raising them to the level of "world-historical" events. The entire set of social relations, including those between landowners and farm laborers, would have entered the drama as a determining element.

Not here. Du Maurier becomes too caught up in the vaguely incestuous (the three central characters are "cousins"), Oedipal and sexual complications, which seem in part bound up with her own personal sexual complications and challenges. *My Cousin Rachel*, for all

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the interest it generates, remains largely a "private," psychological study of the upper layers. Absorbing, but not momentous.

Du Maurier did write an interesting work, published in 1949, entitled *The Parasites*, in which the husband of one of the three, intimately connected central characters bursts out, "Parasites, that's what you are. The three of you. You always have been and you always will be. Nothing can change you. You are doubly, triply parasitic; first, because you've traded since childhood on that seed of talent you had the luck to inherit from your fantastic forebears; secondly, because none of you have done a stroke of honest work in your lives but batten on us, the fool public; and thirdly, because you prey on each other, living in a world of fantasy which bears no relation to anything in heaven or on earth."

In the 1952 version of *My Cousin Rachel*, Richard Burton adds the quality of an "angry young [working class] man," which despite Henry Koster's rather nondescript direction, gives that film definite strength.

Rachel Weisz is the strongest acting personality in the new adaptation, and she is very good.

I don't mean to suggest that none of the ambiguities in Michell's *My Cousin Rachel* are intriguing. Some of them certainly are. The writer-director underscores, in a useful manner, Philip's backwardness and philistinism. Returning to the country estate after his schooling, Philip's first words are, "What had I learned? I didn't like books. I didn't like cities. I didn't like clever talk." Instantly, we take some measure of the man.

Philip and Ambrose lead an apparently inward-looking existence, anti-intellectual and misogynistic (in the novel, Ambrose initially describes himself as "a crusty cynical woman-hater if there ever was one"). And once Ambrose has left him, Philip seems to prefer the company of his dogs to that of anyone else, including the appealing and unfortunate Louise (Holliday Grainger), the daughter of the family lawyer, who cares for him.

Thoroughly unprepared, isolated, ignorant of passion and matters of the heart, Philip is soon reduced to emotional rubble by the elegant Rachel, who leads him around by the nose. In the novel, Philip describes the process: "Disliking our fellow men, we craved affection; but shyness kept impulse dormant until the heart was touched. When that happened the heavens opened."

As soon as Philip first travels south from the chilly, rainy, uncared for, all-male Ashley estate to sunny, cultured, slightly decadent, "feminine" Italy, the destruction of his old world seems imminent. With hints of "Latin-ness," "limitless appetite" and so forth, Rachel is a woman who will clearly chew Philip up and spit him out. Everyone recognizes that, of course, except him.

In the end, however, the ambiguities don't point to all that much outside themselves. Was Rachel's apparent acceptance of her impoverished condition, due to the fatally ill Ambrose's failure to sign a second will leaving her the estate, merely an elaborate ploy, aimed at gaining Philip's trust and affection? Is she simply twisting him around her finger from the beginning? In the first place, this is unanswerable, and, second, it's not clear that one should spend that much time scratching one's head about it.

One of the problems with *My Cousin Rachel*, and it reflects an overall lack of perspective, is the eclectic way it is shot. The film alternates between a rather grand, slightly awe-struck "Masterpiece Theatre" approach, on the one hand, and seemingly hand-held, fragmented sequences, on the other. The latter, filmed in close-up, documentary style, are meant to convey the emotional heating up of things between Philip and Rachel in particular. But it is precisely at those moments that the film most needs the "pathos of distance," a certain visual objectivity. The result is simply an unwarranted, confusing "closeness," without clarity.

In any event, the British still do these things relatively well, in their sleep, as it were. This is probably Michell's best film since *Persuasion* (1995). However, like a number of the film directors who have emerged from British theater in the past several decades, he has not yet demonstrated any strong views or commitments.

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