

## BOOK REVIEWS

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# ***The Plays of Margaret Drabble. A Critical Edition***

José Francisco Fernández (ed.)

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**T**he *Plays of Margaret Drabble, a Critical Edition* is the first study of the two plays written by this British novelist. In this volume, we are before the outstanding work of five scholars who open a new field before us: the plays of Margaret Drabble, the British novelist. Before focusing on the work edited by Fernández, we would like to dedicate a few lines to Margaret Drabble. The main references which we readers find in a fast search regarding Drabble are her novels. As Cronan claims, “Margaret Drabble is a novelist because she is a woman. Had she been a man, she would no doubt have been an actor, since she did more acting than writing as an undergraduate at Cambridge in the fifties” (Cronan, 1989:1). After studying at the University of Cambridge, she joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in plays like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *Cymbeline*, to move later from acting to writing, due to the fact that “women had never been shut off from the materials of fiction. A pencil and a piece of paper... all human life was there” (Cronan, 1989:1). Author of nine novels, two biographies, several screenplays, stories and literary books and editor of books on literary subjects so relevant as the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Hannay, 1987:129), “Drabble’s novels are studies of human nature with the emphasis on feminine nature” (Hardin, 1973:274), strong women who focus on their desires and fight for what they would like to achieve. It is her “mediating and often equivocal position between the traditional and the modern which makes her an important voice in contemporary fiction and links her to other writers

of her generation...It is this authenticity of voice which draws readers to her works” (Creighton, 2019:4). And it is in this world of narrative and feminine concerns, where we discover two short plays, *Laura* and *Birds of Paradise*, which embrace the same interests, women who are “notable for their resiliency and endurance” (Hardin, 1973:274) and, as a consistent theme, who try to achieve their self-definition (Beards, 1973).

Moving to Fernández’s book, it is divided in two different parts: first, the editor presents the readers with two short plays, which are followed by six articles which refer critically to them.

The first play, *Laura*, is a 55 minutes drama which was shown on Granada TV in 1964. It recounts a specific day in the life of a mother, Laura, who suffers from postnatal depression. Through her words and through the events presented to the reader / audience, we observe the struggle of a mother who reflects about maternity and the life of mothers from a new point of view. This is a modern voice, far away from those which praise maternity, as the author is able to transmit the solitude and sacrifices of a mother.

*Bird of Paradise*, the second play, was a production of the National Theatre in 1969. It is again a modern play in both staging and topic, as the author develops three different areas on stage to show how being a successful female entrepreneur affects the relationships between men and women. In this specific play, how it interferes

in the life of wife and husband, for it is, as one the characters points out, “a woman in a men’s world” (p. 68). Additionally, there is also a dialogue between the first feminist ideas and those of the current generation.

The second part of the book is composed of six articles on the author and her plays, written by five scholars, including the editor of the volume. The first article, entitled “The Presence of the Theater in the Life of the Novelist”, written by the editor of the book, draws the background of Drabble, starting with her parents, and presents the facts and ideas which later would influence her work: Methodism, equality, and the importance placed on personal effort or education. Besides, Fernández refers to the composition of her first plays at a very young age, her acting at university, her desire to be an actress and the beginnings of her acting career, which was definitely interrupted by her pregnancy, a fact which moved her to writing. According to Fernández, Drabble became “a sharp analyst of social mores and a keen observer of the changing ideological climate of Britain during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s” (p. 81). On the other hand, Fernández also explains the process of the composition of the plays, both commissioned and “first published in this volume” (p. 81).

Regarding the second article “*Laura*: Historical Context”, also written by the editor, Fernández gives voice to Drabble who explains that both Laura and her share the fact of being educated women who find themselves in a position which does not fulfil them. This situation was that of a whole generation of women who had attended university but “found themselves doing the same job of housework and child care as the girls who had left school” (p. 91), a way of life which clashes with their expectations. Along with this, Fernández explains in depth the meaning of the different characters which appear in the play, by linking them to the social circumstances of the British society of the times, and provides us with a hint of hope when he claims that Laura is able to assert herself.

The third article, “*Bird of Paradise*: Historical Context”, written by Betsabé Navarro, begins with a previously unpublished quote by Drabble, in which she shows her uneasiness about this play, and “sets out the complex picture behind Drabble’s only venture into the world of theater” (p. 100). Navarro deepens on the social and political situation of the times and the social advances in terms of feminism, women rights, the access of women to the market, homosexuality and fashion (as it is the world where the main character develops her business), which took place along the first six decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, another important topic which Navarro develops is the opposition between the first feminism and the one of the sixties. Based on all these aspects, the scholar explains the fight against the social constructs which working women must face and how these new times and circumstances are shown in the play.

The fourth article, written by Ángela Rivera Izquierdo and entitled “The Plays and Early Novels. Intersections”, reviews the first novels of Drabble, those of the 1960s,

together with the two plays gathered in this book, as all of them share the same concerns, topics and narrative strategy. This way, we are informed that although Drabble is considered a feminist novelist, a “cautious novelist” (p.117) or a “novelist of maternity” (p.122), according to different critics, Drabble claims that her work is nothing but a depiction of the daily life of many women in those days, and she considers herself a realist more than a feminist. From this point of view about the situation of women, Rivera explains the characterization and actions of the protagonists of these first novels, giving voice to Drabble herself sometimes.

With reference to the fifth article, “Margaret Drabble and British Drama of the Late 1950s and the 1960s”, by Germán Asensio Peral, the author places the plays of Drabble in their time. According to Asensio, the theatre in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a continuation of the previous literary tradition. Nevertheless, the new world and the new generation needed new forms of art, being these the motor of social change. The year 1954 was a turning point, for it was the year of the production of *Look Back in Ager*, by John Osborne, what gave rise to a new trend in playwriting launching the “most vital period since the Elizabethan Age” (p.135). Asensio, on the other hand, explains how a new type of drama develops: plays portraying real life, with people speaking colloquially who had everyday problems. It was against this backdrop that Drabble wrote her two plays, developing a new distinctive voice, since in her plays she was able to show the evolution of women in those ten years which had passed since Osbourne’s turning-point play.

“Margaret Drabble’s *Laura* and Television in Britain in the 1960s” by Verónica Membrive Pérez closes this part of the book, focusing on the expansion of television and its relationship with drama. As stated by the scholar, the radio had outshined the growth of TV, but in the 1950s, the latter developed due to the change in the lifestyle. From its creation, the BBC had broadcasted plays as “theatre was supposed to give a veneer of high culture to a medium which was populist by nature” (p. 149). Membrive depicts the type of theatre shown on TV and the constant need for plays for different programmes such as *The Armchair Theatre*, *The Wednesday Play* or *It’s a Woman’s World*, for which Drabble was asked to write *Laura*, as a second episode out of 4. Curiously, this series was intended for women, but the playwrights were all men but Drabble, what led to stereotypical women, being Laura the only “real character” (p.154) among them. To finish the article, the scholar studies *Laura*, its plot, features and symbols.

As a conclusion, we must say that this is a careful and sound edition, exemplarily full of quotes and ideas, which offers a deep insight on the two plays written by the novelist, accompanied by the depiction of the times in which they were written and the literary trends of the moment. We must underline the richness of this book, thanks to the insertion of some unpublished comments made by Drabble, which she sent to the editor, José Francisco Fernández.



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