

## THE PLAYS OF MARGARET DRABBLE: A CRITICAL EDITION

José Francisco Fernández, ed.  
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José Francisco Fernández's edited volume is a critical edition of Margaret Drabble's two plays: *Laura* (1964) and *Bird of Paradise* (1969). The book is divided into two parts: the first presents the full, unabridged plays, while the second comprises six critical essays offering a broad historical and cultural contextualisation of Drabble's plays, as well as a discussion of the main thematic and ideological connections between the plays and her early novels. The importance of this project lies in its exploration of how Drabble presents her views on the socio-economic situation of middle-class British women in the 1960s in two creative media that were completely new for her: television and the stage. Moreover, the essays stress the relevance of these two plays in that they might offer insights into the intellectual and social concerns of British post-war theatre and television.

The critical commentary opens with a biographical essay, "The Presence of Theater in the Life of the Novelist", by José Francisco Fernández, editor of the volume. Fernández stresses the importance of theatre in both Drabble's personal life and the contribution it made to her writing from a very early age. At university, she did some acting, and after she graduated, she joined her husband in the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon to pursue an acting career. However, after she got pregnant, she abandoned her theatrical aspirations and focused on writing novels, as she felt that a career as a writer was easier to combine with being a mother and a wife. Fernández further argues that, when she was asked

to write the two plays, Drabble was already a successful novelist, and her theatrical incursions were only a temporary deviation. However, her plays received neither critical nor popular acclaim, and Drabble felt that they had not been understood by the audience. Fernández concludes this chapter by stating that the significance of Drabble's plays resides in her critical analysis of the situation of British women in the 1960s, as well as her demands for social advancement.

The next two chapters, "*Laura*: Historical Context", also written by Fernández, and "*Bird of Paradise*: Historical Context", by Betsabé Navarro, concentrate on the historical context in which both plays were written and performed as well as on the ideological debates they created. In the case of the former, Fernández asserts that *Laura*—a play made for television—reflected the anxieties of middle-class, educated women in the 1960s. The play criticises the situation of married women as second-class citizens, dependent on their husbands and considered to be caregivers and housekeepers. The protagonist, Laura, becomes the voice of rebellion, as she does not conform to the stereotypical role of women as happy housewives. Furthermore, Fernández argues that Drabble denounces the state of the nation and the country's economic situation in terms of class barriers, challenging pre-conceived views on the newly implemented Welfare State.

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Complementarily, Navarro states in her chapter that Drabble tackled various social concerns of the 1960s in a very straightforward manner. Navarro further argues that Drabble chose an internationally reputed female designer as the protagonist in order to place a successful woman at the forefront as the symbol of modernity and professional achievement, but also as an individual facing gender oppression both in the public and private spheres. Moreover, the contradictory depiction of the female protagonist in Drabble's play—as a beautiful and professional entrepreneur, but also a victim of gender violence—seems to point to Drabble's acknowledgement that women had a long way to go until they could actually reach gender equality. Navarro closes this chapter by pointing to the protagonist's ambiguous sexuality in her ambivalent relationship with her homosexual assistant. Navarro considers that, by introducing this sub-plot, Drabble was contributing to the normalisation of homosexual practices.

Chapter 4, "The Plays and Early Novels: Intersections", written by Ángela Rivera Izquierdo, establishes a link between Drabble's plays and her early novels. Rivera Izquierdo claims that Drabble's early fictions aimed to portray the daily life of women of her generation, and that they had the same thematic concerns as her two plays. They revolved around the life of complex, contradictory middle-class women caught up in between conflicting expectations: having a family and succeeding in the professional world. Rivera Izquierdo stresses the fact that Drabble has been labelled "the novelist of maternity" (122), due to her frequent—albeit contradictory—

depiction of motherhood. On the one hand, maternity is a positive aspect of female sexuality, and, on the other, a patriarchal imposition that holds intellectual women back. Drabble's plays also coincide with her early novels in their narrative strategies. They all are reality-centred, have simple plots and share linear chronologies. Moreover, Rivera Izquierdo states that they all explore women's experiences, contributing to the generation of "Angry Young Women" (125), represented by Shelagh Delaney and Ann Jellicoe. Rivera Izquierdo concludes by emphasising Drabble's experimental capacity in the representation of silenced women.

Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the connection between Drabble's plays and post-war theatre, and the emergence of television in the 1960s, respectively. "Margaret Drabble and British Drama of the Late 1950s and the 1960s", written by Germán Asensio Peral, explores the theatrical context of post-war England and its influence on Drabble's play for the stage, *Bird of Paradise*. Asensio Peral asserts that the late 1950s and the 1960s were a fruitful period for contemporary British drama, as the atmosphere of depression and desolation after the war triggered a profound change in the theatrical audiences and themes. This revolutionary theatre was aimed at a working-class audience and was conceived as a vehicle for social change. Asensio Peral argues that *Bird of Paradise* follows in the footsteps of this innovative line, whose aim was to break away from static, conventional drama. Moreover, he claims that Drabble was influenced by authors such as Shelagh Delaney and Arnold Wesker in portraying the reality of women and queer themes, although what differentiates her from these 1950s social realist playwrights is that she portrays middle-class women, rather than working-class families.

Chapter 6, "Margaret Drabble's *Laura* and Television in Britain in the 1960s", by Verónica Membrive Pérez explores how the social transformations brought about by the Welfare State shaped the development of British television in the 1960s, a period marked by modernity. At first, television was regarded as a second-rate cultural product, but its innovative character attracted young playwrights who wanted to explore the lives of working-class people, as in the case of Margaret Drabble. Even though Drabble's *Laura* was not well received, Membrive Pérez states that the play was highly underrated on the grounds that it portrayed the reality of intellectual, middle-class women who had to reconcile their professional aspirations with a life as wives and mothers. She further suggests that the great significance of this play lies in Drabble's ability to voice her opinion as an intellectual female writer, expressing her concerns regarding the State's intrusion in women's private lives, as well as denouncing the banality of the media and the social contradictions that women were subject to.

*The Plays of Margaret Drabble* is a thought-provoking, edifying volume, rich in historical and literary sources. Academic research on Drabble's oeuvre has mainly

concentrated on her novels and short fiction, whereas her plays have received little critical attention. Some of this academic research includes *Margaret Drabble: A Reader's Guide* (1991) by Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: This Freudian Family Nexus* (1998) by Nicole Suzanne Bokar or *Margaret Drabble* (1985) by Joanne V. Creighton, among many others. Fernández's appears to be the first academic volume that centres on Drabble's theatrical production, bringing to the fore its literary quality, as well as its role as a vehicle for social change in its criticism of the oppressive situation of middle-class women in the 1960s. The contributors offer a historical and cultural background that allows readers to understand the socio-economic motivations that drove Drabble to write her plays. Interestingly, this volume compares Drabble's plays with her earlier novels and demonstrates that they share the same literary quality and social concerns. Furthermore, it proves that Drabble's plays have been highly underrated by both critics and the audience, and demands that they receive the attention they deserve. Therefore, the relevance of this book resides in its capacity to give Drabble's plays the visibility they did not have at their time, as well as in offering new approaches for the interpretation of her prose.

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Nonetheless, since the volume's aim is to stress the importance of the plays in the historical context of the 1960s, and to establish thematic connections with Drabble's earlier novels, the critical commentaries are, at times, too theoretical and repetitive. Perhaps it would have been beneficial to include a more thorough analysis of the plays, or an essay comparing the two, exploring the contradictory portrayals of the female protagonists from a feminist approach. Despite these minor details, the essays included in this collection are a valuable and original contribution to the field of theatre studies, as well as to the study of Margaret Drabble's production.

## Works Cited

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