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# ADMINISTRATION DE LA REVUE

**TABLE DES MATIERES / TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**LITTERATURE / LITERATURE**

**LIINGUISTIQUE / LINGUISTICS**

# WAR WITHOUT WEAPONS: POLEMOLOGY, SATIRE, AND POST-IMPERIAL IDENTITY IN DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S *RULE BRITANNIA* (1972)

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**Abstract**

Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rule Britannia* (1972) imagines Britain at war without weapons. The invasion comes quietly, through speeches, barricades, and habits of obedience, and what follows is a conflict fought in language, ritual, and memory rather than on the battlefield. The present paper reads du Maurier's novel as a polemology of the everyday, tracing how sovereignty disintegrates in kitchens and gardens, in the play of children and the idioms of command. Du Maurier's satire of the Anglo-American "alliance" turns post-imperial anxiety into farce, revealing dependence masked as consent. Read alongside Orwell, Golding, and Barker, the novel belongs to a tradition that locates the ruins of the Empire in ordinary life. Grounded in Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia and Malabou's destructive plasticity, it argues that irony itself becomes the sharpest weapon of resistance and survival.

**Keywords:** Destructive Plasticity**,** Polemology, Post-Imperial Identity, Postcolonial Melancholia, Satire, Sovereignty and Deformation.

**Résumé**

Dans *Rule Britannia* (1972), Daphne du Maurier imagine une Grande-Bretagne en guerre sans armes. L'invasion ne s'impose pas par la force, mais à travers les discours, les barricades et les habitudes d'obéissance. Le conflit se déplace ainsi du champ de bataille vers les espaces du language, du rituel et de la mémoire. Cette étude lit ce roman comme une polémologie du quotidien, où la souveraineté se désagrège dans les gestes domestiques, les conversations familières et les signes ordinaires du pouvoir. La satire que du Maurier adresse à « l'alliance » anglo-américaine transforme l'angoisse post-impériale en comédie politique, exposant une dépendance déguisée en consentement. Mise en parallèle avec les œuvres d'Orwell, Golding et Parker, *Rule Britannia* s'inscrit dans une tradition littéraire qui situe les ruines de l'empire au cœur de la vie ordinaire. S'appuyant sur la mélancolie postcoloniale de Paul Gilroy et la plasticité destructive de Cathérien Malabou, l'article montre que l'ironie devient, chez du Maurier, la plus fine des armes de résistance et de survie.

**Mots Clés :** Polémologie, Satire, Identité Post-impériale, Souveraineté et Déformation, Mélancolie postcoloniale, Plasticité destructive

## Introduction

*Rule Britannia* is the only major British novel to imagine the United States' occupation of the United Kingdom. Yet its critical afterlife has been shaped less by recognition of this extraordinary provocation than by dismissal, neglect, or reduction to local colour. The reception of the novel has been limited and uneven. Margaret Forster, in her biography *Daphne du Maurier: The Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller*, dismissed the book outright as du Maurier's "*poorest novel*" (Forster, 1993: 382), a judgment that long discouraged serious critical engagement. A decade later, Ella Westland's introduction to the Virago edition of *Rule Britannia* sought to recover the text (Westland, 2004, pp. vii-xxiv) sought to recover the text. It emphasises its oscillation between comic and bleak registers, and situates it within du Maurier's biography and Cornish setting. More recently, Westland's "Rule Britannia, Brexit and Cornish Identity" (2021) has extended this recovery by situating the novel within debates about Cornwall's regional identity and Britain's entry into the European Common Market, reading du Maurier's identification with Mad and the villagers as a reorientation of her relation to Cornwall from a picturesque backdrop to a locus of resistance. While these interventions have been crucial in reopening the text, they stop short of addressing the structural questions of sovereignty and war raised by its allegory of occupation.

Beyond these assessments, critics such as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik read du Maurier's later fiction through the twin lens of identity and the Gothic. They emphasise her sustained preoccupation with dissolving authority and loosening the boundaries of subjectivity (Horner and Zloski, 1998). In a related argument, Nina Auerbach contends that du Maurier's marginalisation reflects a broader critical unwillingness to engage with her formal and generic experimentation (Auerbach, 2000). These readings completely shift the ground by suggesting that *Rule Britannia* should be seen not as an aberration, but as part of du Maurier's ongoing interrogation of power and identity.

The historical moment sharpens the point. Published in 1972, on the eve of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community and still shadowed by the humiliation of Suez, *Rule Britannia* channels contemporary unease into satire. It converts the erosion of imperial prestige into an allegory of occupation. Political hesitation becomes drama. Sovereignty itself is undone. Against both the early dismissal and the regionalist containment of the novel, this article argues that *Rule Britannia* deserves to be read as a polemological experiment in sovereignty's deformation. War in *Rule Britannia* is not a spectacle. It seeps into homes, streets,

and minds. Gaston Bouthoul's conception of war as a *"phénomène social total"* (Bouthoul, 1951: 14) makes this extension legible, showing how militarization permeates the social, psychological, and symbolic fabric of the Cornish village.

The novel is haunted by the melancholia of the British Empire's decline. This is not nostalgia, but a persistent wound. Paul Gilroy's theorisation of postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy, 2005: 91) clarifies how imperial loss resurfaces in the intrusion of violence into the metropolitan core. Colonial resistance is never marginal, it flows back to the centre. Priyamvada Gopal demonstrates in *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* that such resistance decisively reshaped metropolitan Britain, exposing the former coloniser to inversion and vulnerability (Gopal, 2019: 112). This vulnerability is not provisional; it does not heal. Catherine Malabou's notion of destructive shows that sovereignty, once deformed, cannot be restored but is permanently reconfigured (Malabou, 2012: 37). By reframing sovereignty through the registers of occupation, dispossession, and vulnerability, *Rule Britannia* shifts the discourse of post-imperial decline from nostalgia to irreversible deformation and offers a critical meditation on the afterlife of the Empire and its enduring grip on Britain's cultural imagination.

The theoretical problem of sovereignty's deformation becomes legible from the very first pages of *Rule Britannia*, where the intrusion of foreign troops shatters the rhythms of provincial life. The novel opens not with diplomacy or battlefield spectacle but with the militarisation of everyday space. Like Orwell's *1984*, du Maurier transforms the familiar landscape into a site of occupation, where power infiltrates daily gestures and language itself becomes an instrument of control. However, while Orwell's telescreens enforce surveillance through technology, du Maurier's satirical work achieves the same exposure through the banality of bureaucracy and consent.

The analysis discloses three strands: first, the staging of war without weapons in Cornwall's insular setting; second, the novel's satirical unmasking of alliance rhetoric and imperial nostalgia; and third, the reconfiguration of sovereignty as a permanently deformed identity, marked by decline yet refusing restoration.

## I. War Without Weapons: Insularity and the American Invasion

One of the most disquieting dimensions of *Rule Britannia* is the way it transforms Cornwall, a peripheral and ostensibly sheltered region, into the epicentre of a new form of

warfare. Rather than a clash of armies, du Maurier imagines a sudden, almost bureaucratic occupation that militarises everyday life without ever declaring war. The shock of this reconfiguration is vividly conveyed when villagers return to report:

> There're soldiers everywhere. They've got a great barricade across the main road. I couldn't get within twenty yards of them – they waved me back. And all the time those choppers overhead creating a hell of a racket. It's terrific, just like the real thing. (du Marier, 1972: 18).

In this description, the familiar Cornish roads become indistinguishable from combat zones. The description is laced with satire: the word "terrific" is grotesquely misapplied, while the phrase "like the real thing" collapses theatrical simulation into lived terror. Occupation is experienced as a drill without end, an absurd parody of Britain's own militarised past. As Gaston Bouthoul argues in *Traité de polémologie: sociologie des guerres*, war is never confined to the battlefield (Bouthoul, 1951: 4). It spreads beyond combat to shape social life itself. It becomes a "*phénomène social total*" (14). It extends into psychological, cultural, and symbolic domains. Du Maurier stages precisely such an extension: war invades not armies but ordinary life. The violence of the occupation is not only territorial but symbolic. The narrator recounts the death of the dog Spry with a brutal and meaningful concision:

> Spry was no longer the guardian of his master's flock but something bleeding and torn, not even a dog. […] It isn't true, thought Emma, bewildered. It can't be true. Soldiers don't shoot animals, they have them as mascots, they love them (du Maurier, 1972: 23)

The image is very start. A docile creature of loyalty, continuity and rural guardianship is reduced to a miserable waste. The narrator's surprise and incredulity sharpens the satirical twist. Soldiers, traditionally perceived as protectors of mascots, become destroyers of what they are supposed to honour. The premeditated killing of Spry functions as an allegory of violated sovereignty. The novel is haunted by the melancholia of imperial decline. This is not nostalgia but a wound that does not close. As Paul Gilroy writes in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, the loss of empire resurfaces at the heart of the metropolis (Gilroy, 2005: 91). It reappears in cultural memory as a form of melancholia, shadowing national identity.

Du Maurier dramatizes precisely this return: sovereignty is wounded not in distant colonies but in the mutilation of the ordinary. At the level of discourse, the invasion is legitimated through a rhetoric that collapses alliance into occupation. The narrator records Admiral Jollif's declaration:

> […] the country has been placed in a state of emergency. […] The American Sixth Fleet is in the English Channel. The troops you may have observed […] belong to the

> combined armed forces of the United States, and are here in the United Kingdom with our full knowledge and cooperation. (du Maurier, 1972: 28)

The phrase "with our full knowledge and cooperation" is a masterpiece of satirical distortion. Consent cloaks subordination. Sovereignty is hollowed out even as it is proclaimed. And the irony is cold: the rhetoric of alliance masks the occupation by a deployed military force. Colonial resistance never remains at the margins, it moves back into the centre, as demonstrated by Priyamvada Gopal in *Insurgent Empire* (Gopal, 2019: 112). Anticolonial struggles reshaped Britain itself, leaving the former coloniser vulnerable to inversion. Du Maurier pushes this logic further. The "special relationship" becomes a parody of empire itself, transforming Britain into the administered rather than the administrator.

The narrator continually returns to the Cornish setting. Cornwall is not London, with its monuments of imperial power; it is rather a peripheral, rural and bounded setting. The geography intensifies the satire. Insularity, long a boast of British defence, becomes the very condition of entrapment. What once guaranteed security now facilitates control. This vulnerability is not temporary; it does not pass with time. Catherine Malabou calls this "*destructive plasticity*" (Malabou, 2012: 9). Once sovereignty is deformed, it does not return to its earlier form. It is remade as something irreversibly altered. In *Rule Britannia*, Britain undergoes such deformation: from imperial subject to occupied object, from sovereign actor to terrain of survival. The narrator's account of Cornwall makes the irony clear. The island fortress becomes the island prison.

Definitely, *Rule Britannia* exposes a war without weapons, a conflict fought through encirclement, intimidation, and symbolic violence. Insularity, once Britain's safeguard, is reimagined as a cruel trap; alliance, once a marker of power, is revealed as dependence; and the domestic, once a refuge, becomes the battlefield. Through its Cornish dystopia, du Maurier exposes the fragility of sovereignty in the post-imperial moment, transforming everyday ordinary life into the theatre of a silent, satirical, yet devastating war.

The problem about the deformation of sovereignty is legible in the novel's opening scenes, where occupation turns provincial life into a playground of control. Yet, du Maurier's satire does not end with the militarisation of every space, including the most intimate ones. The following section explores the satirical unmasking of alliance rhetoric and imperial nostalgia, where the very discourse meant to safeguard sovereignty becomes complicit in its effacement.

## II. Family, Community, and Survival: the Domestic Sphere as Battlefield

The erection of barricades in Cornwall signals the visible apparatus of occupation. Its deeper satire, however, emerges inside the household and the village. In *Rule Britannia*, domestic space is not a sanctuary, but rather the site where sovereignty collapses in parody. Gardens, kitchens and parlours become arenas in which grandeur is dismantled, and authority mocked. Mad's confrontation with Colonel Cheeseman crystallises this transformation.

"What you mean is," said Mad, "you want to requisition it. As the owner, I have no choice in the matter, I take it?"

[…] "That's putting it rather baldly, ma'am," he replied. "There would be no inconvenience to yourself or to your household. It is a matter of communications. My intention is to set up a temporary post in the building, with Lieutenant Sherman here in charge." "I see." (du Maurier, 1972: 35)

On the surface, this conversational confrontation between Mad and Cheeseman is a minor skirmish of words. Yet, du Maurier turns it into an allegory of the collapse of law. Cheeseman dresses expropriation in the courtesy of bureaucratic euphemism, his "temporary post" framed as a harmless matter of "communications". Mad punctures this veneer by mirroring his language back at him: "*you want to requisition it.*" Her unfinished question – "*I take it ?*" – leaves the occupier's rhetoric suspended, and denies the closure of consent. What parades as legality is unmasked as coercion, revealed in the very syntax of the exchange. The satire lies not in open defiance but in the exposure of polite authority as hollow theatre. That this refusal is voiced not by a soldier or statesman, but by Mad, the matriarch, unsettles conventional imaginaries of authority. Sovereignty here speaks in a maternal register. It is articulated through irony rather than force, and this displacement further sharpens du Maurier's satire of power undone.

Mad's confrontation with Colonel Cheeseman also illustrates Bouthoul's conception of war as a "*phénomène social total*". War does not remain confined to trenches or fleets but saturates ordinary interactions. The requisition of a family home becomes a site of struggle where sovereignty is negotiated through syntax, its grandeur dissolved into the rhythm of a sentence. The exchange also enacts what Malabou calls "*destructive plasticity*". Once the legal speech act of "requisition" is turned into parody, it cannot return to its former authority. As Malabou writes:

> Acknowledgement of the role of destructive plasticity allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew. This recognition reveals that a power of annihilation hides within the very constitution of identity, […] (Malabou, 2012: 37).

This "*power of annihilation*", she continues, hides within the constitution of identity itself, a "*farewell that is not death, a farewell that occurs within life*" (Malabou, 2012: 37-38). Law, in this light, is not merely bent by occupation but abandoned by its own internal fragility; its power to command dissolved in parody. Mad's defiance shows that sovereignty is no longer anchored in grand declarations, but in ironic refusals at the margins. The family home becomes the battlefield where law and satire collide, and the occupier's rhetoric is exposed as hollow theatre. Proportionally, the collapse of legal authority in Cornwall echoes the wider post-imperial condition. Gilroy has argued that imperial loss generates melancholic repetitions of vanished grandeur, while Gopal has shown how resistance reshaped the very identity of the metropole. Du Maurier's satire fuses these insights: sovereignty does not simply fade, it is mocked into deformation, leaving Britain not nostalgic but parodied, its authority hollow even in its own domestic spaces.

The blunt exchange among Children underlines the collapse of moral language under occupation:

> "What I want to know is this […] "Are the American soldiers baddies or goodies?" (du Maurier, 1972: 29)
>
> "I know one thing for sure […]. "They're the baddies and we're the goodies, and it's going to stay that way, so we may as well make up our minds to it. (du Maurier, 1972: 85)

The exchange appears laughably naïve. The binaries of "baddies" and "goodies" belong to playground morality, not to the language of diplomacy. Yet this is precisely du Maurier's satirical point. Where the Prime Minister inflates the language of unity, liberty, and destiny, the children reduce it to its crudest categories. Their words expose the hollowness of alliance rhetoric. The so-called liberators, are here named as enemies. The satire is devastating because it comes from innocence. As adults hesitate, bound by the conventions of moral and diplomacy, children say plainly what occupation has made obvious: sovereignty is lost, and Britain is ruled by "baddies". This domestic irony finds a revealing counterpoint in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where isolation and scarcity unravel community into savagery. Du Maurier reverses that trajectory. Her villagers, hemmed in by occupation, transform want into the legendary solidarity. What in Golding ends in the loss of moral order becomes here a satire of endurance, an assertion that sovereignty, even in fragments, survives through humour, routine, and shared substance.

The struggle over sovereignty in kitchens and gardens is not only about survival. It reverberates outward, unsettling Britain's larger memory of itself as an imperial power. The analysis has shown the way the domestic sphere appears to be the frontline of parody and resistance. The third and last section now focuses on how du Maurier stretches this satire into a meditation on post-imperial identity, where memory of past grandeur collides with the humiliation of present dependency.

### III. Memory, Identity, and the Satire of Post-Imperial Britain

Du Maurier transforms a dystopian scenario into a satire of post-imperial Britain. In *Rule Britannia,* the American "alliance" does not merely displace sovereignty; it also unsettles the memory of empire, exposing the fragility of British identity in the aftermath of imperial decline. The rhetoric of Admiral Jollif's emergency broadcast is emblematic: "*The country has been placed in a state of emergency… The American Sixth Fleet is in the English Channel… with our full knowledge and cooperation*" (du Maurier, 1972: 27). The discursive pairing of crisis and consent illustrates the contradiction of post-imperial melancholia: Britain clings to the language of power even as it acknowledges dependency. As Paul Gilroy has argued, this melancholia arises from an inability to mourn empire's loss, producing fantasies of continuity even in conditions of subordination (Gilroy, 2004: 98). Du Maurier's satire lays bare this pathology, showing how a great power is reduced to declaring its occupation voluntary.

The novel's Cornish setting sharpens this satire through its emphasis on insularity and marginality. Cornwall, often imagined as Britain's rural periphery, here becomes the site where the empire's collapse is most starkly visible. When Mad observes that "*the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes flew side by side*" (du Maurier, 1972: 40), the symbolism is unmistakable: the British flag is no longer sovereign but twinned, diluted by another. Priyamvada Gopal's analysis of colonial resistance as a constitutive force in British identity helps to illuminate this moment (Gopal, 2019: 112). The twinned flags signify that Britain's identity is now shaped not by commanding others, but by submitting to alliance, echoing the very reversals once produced by colonial dissent.

Du Maurier extends this satire through caricature and irony. The villagers' stoicism, their grumbling acceptance of "*'tatties, onions and beetroot*" (46), and the children's moral binaries of "*baddies and goodies*" (29) underscore the gap between imperial self-imagining and the realities of survival. These satirical moments are not merely comic; they dramatise "*destructive*

*plasticity*", a rupture that irreversibly reshapes identity (Malabou, 2012: 9). Britain, once an imperial hegemon, is here plastically reformed into a satellite state, its cultural memory fractured, its future identity uncertain. The satirical register thus allows du Maurier to advance a polemological critique. Rather than staging a conventional war novel, she crafts a parody of sovereignty itself, revealing the absurdity of a nation that once commanded half the globe now merely reduced to subsisting on vegetables and contesting household requisitions. Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) would later translate this same paradox into psychological terms, showing how the memory of war survives not in combat but in conversation, therapy, and trauma. Du Maurier anticipates this internalisation: Cornwall becomes a kind of sanatorium of the British Empire's decline, where satire replaces catharsis and memory itself becomes a wound.

Irony positions *Rule Britannia* within a broader tradition of British satire — from Orwell's bleak totalitarian allegories to Evelyn Waugh's farces of decline — while speaking directly to the anxieties of the 1970s. As with Orwell and Barker, memory and trauma define the narrative; but in du Maurier's fiction, memory is not heroic or tragic but rather grotesque, exposing the brittleness of imperial identity when subjected to reversal. In this way, *Rule Britannia* emerges not as an eccentric satire but as a profound meditation on Britain's post-imperial predicament. Memory of empire collides with the humiliation of dependency; identity is reconfigured through destructive plasticity; and satire becomes the literary mode capable of holding together tragedy and farce. Du Maurier's Cornwall, besieged yet defiant, embodies the paradox of a nation that has ceased to rule but cannot cease to remember.

The satire of *Rule Britannia* therefore operates on multiple registers: the barricaded village, the contested household, and the fractured memory of empire. Du Maurier's Cornwall becomes a microcosm in which the fate of Britain is parodied and laid bare, a nation that has ceased to rule yet cannot cease to remember. What remains is to ask what this novel contributes to the broader literary and theoretical understanding of sovereignty's deformation in the cultural landscape of late cold war.

**Conclusion**

Du Maurier's *Rule Britannia* stages a paradoxical conflict in which no weapons are fired. The full machinery of war is felt instead in discourse, space, and memory. Invasion becomes theatre. Resistance is staged in kitchens and gardens. Alliance is revealed as façade.

The battlefield is displaced onto everyday life, where sovereignty appears not as mastery but as fragile performance, constantly unravelled by satire.

Read in parallel with the post-imperial arc from Orwell's *1984* to Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Barker's *Regeneration* (1991), du Maurier's Cornwall joins a lineage of British disillusionment. Orwell exposes control; Golding disintegration; Barker, trauma. Du Maurier gathers these fragments and turns them to irony. Her satire transforms the ruins of empire into a quiet drama of endurance.

The polemological force and taste of the novel lies in this transposition. War is never resolved by violence; it merely mutates into symbolic occupations, into the policing of movement, in the manipulation of memory. Cornwall becomes the microcosm of a post-imperial Britain, its identity reshaped not by empire's ruins alone but by the absurd spectacle of its dependencies. What Paul Gilroy terms postcolonial melancholia lingers here: the nation clings to symbols of grandeur while speaking its own submission. Catherine Malabou's notion of destructive plasticity clarifies the irreversibility of this transformation: once sovereignty has been mocked into parody, it cannot be restored.

To read *Rule Britannia* in this perspective is to define satire as a weapon of polemology. The novel shows that post-imperial identity is not an inheritance but an arena of struggle, fought over in language, ritual, and memory. Literature itself becomes the theatre of this struggle. In the silence of actual guns, irony delivers the sharpest detonation. It is this satirical charge that secures du Maurier's novel a place in the canon of British war writing, not as a tale of armies, but as a masterclass in the art of waging war without weapons.

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