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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Jean Rhys  
WIDE SARGASSO SEA



BACKGROUNDS  
CRITICISM

*Edited by*  
JUDITH L. RAISKIN

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



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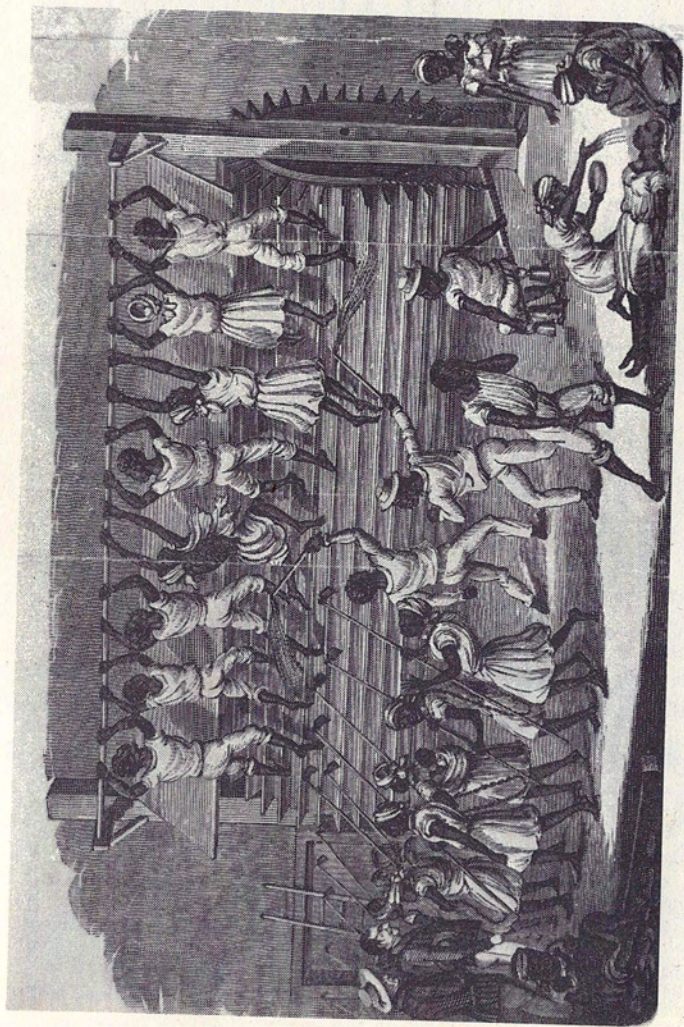
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"A Tread-Mill Scene in Jamaica," c. 1837.  
Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.

RACHEL L. CARSON

[The Sargasso Sea]†

\* \* \*

The mid-ocean regions, bounded by the currents that sweep around the ocean basins, are in general the deserts of the sea. There are few birds and few surface-feeding fishes, and indeed there is little surface plankton to attract them. The life of these regions is largely confined to deep water. The Sargasso Sea is an exception, not matched in the anticyclonic centers of other ocean basins. It is so different from any other place on earth that it may well be considered a definite geographic region. A line drawn from the mouth of Chesapeake Bay to Gibraltar would skirt its northern border; another from Haiti to Dakar would mark its southern boundary. It lies all about Bermuda and extends more than halfway across the Atlantic, its entire area being roughly as large as the United States. The Sargasso, with all its legendary terrors for sailing ships, is a creation of the great currents of the North Atlantic that encircle it and bring into it the millions of tons of floating sargassum weed from which the place derives its name, and all the weird assemblage of animals that live in the weed.

The Sargasso is a place forgotten by the winds, undisturbed by the strong flow of waters that girdle it as with a river. Under the seldom-clouded skies, its waters are warm and heavy with salt. Separated widely from coastal rivers and from polar ice, there is no inflow of fresh water to dilute its saltiness; the only influx is of saline water from the adjacent currents, especially from the Gulf Stream or North Atlantic Current as it crosses from America to Europe. And with the little, inflowing streams of surface water come the plants and animals that for months or years have drifted in the Gulf Stream.

The sargassum weeds are brown algae belonging to several species. Quantities of the weeds live attached to reefs or rocky outcroppings off the coasts of the West Indies and Florida. Many of the plants are torn away by storms, especially during the hurricane season. They are picked up by the Gulf Stream and are drifted northward. With the weeds go, as involuntary passengers, many small fishes, crabs, shrimps, and innumerable larvae of assorted species of marine creatures, whose home had been the coastal banks of sargassum weed.

Curious things happen to the animals that have ridden on the sar-

† From *The Sea Around Us* by Rachel L. Carson. Copyright © 1950, 1951, 1961 by Rachel Carson. Renewed 1979 by Roger Christie. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

gassum weed into a new home. Once they lived near the sea's edge, a few feet or a few fathoms below the surface, but never far above a firm bottom. They knew the rhythmic movements of waves and tides. They could leave the shelter of the weeds at will and creep or swim about over the bottom in search of food. Now, in the middle of the ocean, they are in a new world. The bottom lies two or three miles below them. Those who are poor swimmers must cling to the weed, which now represents a life raft, supporting them above the abyss. Over the ages since their ancestors came here, some species have developed special organs of attachment, either for themselves or for their eggs, so that they may not sink into the cold, dark water far below. The flying fish make nests of the weed to contain their eggs, which bear an amazing resemblance to the sargassum floats or 'berries.'

Indeed, many of the little marine beasts of the weedy jungle seem to be playing an elaborate game of disguise in which each is camouflaged to hide it from the others. The Sargasso sea slug—a snail without a shell—has a soft, shapeless brown body spotted with dark-edged circles and fringed with flaps and folds of skin, so that as it creeps over the weed in search of prey it can scarcely be distinguished from the vegetation. One of the fiercest carnivores of the place, the sargassum fish *Pterophryne*, has copied with utmost fidelity the branching fronds of the weed, its golden berries, its rich brown color, and even the white dots of encrusting worm tubes. All these elaborate bits of mimicry are indications of the fierce internecine wars of the Sargasso jungles, which go on without quarter and without mercy for the weak or the unwary.

In the science of the sea there has been a long-standing controversy about the origin of the drifting weeds of the Sargasso Sea. Some have held that the supply is maintained by weeds recently torn away from coastal beds; others say that the rather limited sargassum fields of the West Indies and Florida cannot possibly supply the immense area of the Sargasso. They believe that we find here a self-perpetuating community of plants that have become adapted to life in the open sea, needing no roots or holdfasts for attachment, and able to propagate vegetatively. Probably there is truth in both ideas. New plants do come in each year in small numbers, and now cover an immense area because of their very long life once they have reached this quiet central region of the Atlantic.

It takes about half a year for the plants torn from West Indian shores to reach the northern border of the Sargasso, perhaps several years for them to be carried into the inner parts of this area. Meanwhile, some have been swept onto the shores of North America by storms, others have been killed by cold during the passage from offshore New England across the Atlantic, where the Gulf Stream comes into contact with waters from the Arctic. For the plants that reach the calm of the Sargasso, there is virtual immortality. A. E. Parr of the American Museum

has recently suggested that the individual plants may live, some for decades, others for centuries, according to their species. It might well be that some of the very weeds you would see if you visited the place today were seen by Columbus and his men. Here, in the heart of the Atlantic, the weed drifts endlessly, growing, reproducing vegetatively by a process of fragmentation. Apparently almost the only plants that die are the ones that drift into unfavorable conditions around the edges of the Sargasso or are picked up by outward-moving currents.

Such losses are balanced, or possibly a little more than balanced, by the annual addition of weeds from distant coasts. It must have taken eons of time to accumulate the present enormous quantities of weed, which Parr estimates as about 10 million tons. But this, of course, is distributed over so large an area that most of the Sargasso is open water. The dense fields of weeds waiting to entrap a vessel never existed except in the imaginations of sailors, and the gloomy hulks of vessels doomed to endless drifting in the clinging weed are only the ghosts of things that never were.

## CHARLOTTE BRONTË

*From Jane Eyre*†

[*Jane Eyre and Bertha*]

\* \* \*

'I dreamt another dream, sir: that Thornfield Hall was a dreary ruin, the retreat of bats and owls. I thought that of all the stately front nothing remained but a shell-like wall, very high, and very fragile-looking. I wandered, on a moonlight night, through the grass-grown enclosure within: here I stumbled over a marble hearth, and there over a fallen fragment of cornice. Wrapped up in a shawl, I still carried the unknown little child: I might not lay it down anywhere, however tired were my arms—however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it. I heard the gallop of a horse at a distance on the road: I was sure it was you; and you were departing for many years, and for a distant country. I climbed the thin wall with frantic, perilous haste, eager to catch one glimpse of you from the top: the stones rolled from under my feet, the ivy branches I grasped gave way, the child clung round my neck in terror, and almost strangled me: at last I gained the summit. I saw you like a speck on a white track, lessening every moment. The blast blew so strong I could not stand. I sat down on the narrow ledge; I hushed the scared infant in my lap: you turned an angle of the road;

† From Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, A Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition, edited by Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

I bent forward to take a last look; the wall crumbled; I was shaken; the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke.'

'Now, Jane, that is all.'

'All the preface, sir; the tale is yet to come. On waking, a gleam dazzled my eyes: I thought—oh, it is daylight! But I was mistaken: it was only candlelight. Sophie, I supposed, had come in. There was a light on the dressing-table, and the door of the closet, where, before going to bed, I had hung my wedding-dress and veil, stood open: I heard a rustling there. I asked, "Sophie, what are you doing?" No one answered; but a form emerged from the closet: it took the light, held it aloft, and surveyed the garments pendent from the portmanteau. "Sophie! Sophie!" I again cried: and still it was silent. I had risen up in bed; I bent forward: first, surprise, then bewilderment, came over me; and then my blood crept cold through my veins. Mr. Rochester, this was not Sophie, it was not Leah, it was not Mrs. Fairfax: It was not—no, I was sure of it, and am still—it was not even that strange woman, Grace Poole.'

'It must have been one of them,' interrupted my master.

'No, sir, I solemnly assure you to the contrary. The shape standing before me had never crossed my eyes within the precincts of Thornfield Hall before; the height, the contour, were new to me.'

'Describe it, Jane.'

'It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell.'

'Did you see her face?'

'Not at first. But presently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass.'

'And how were they?'

'Fearful and ghastly to me—oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments.'

'Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.'

'This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?'

'You may.'

'Of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre.'

'Ah?—What did it do?'

'Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them.'

'Afterwards?'

'It drew aside the window-curtain and looked out: perhaps it saw

dawn approaching, for, taking the candle, it retreated to the door. Just at my bedside the figure stopped: the fiery eye glared upon me—she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life—only the second time—I became insensible from terror.'

\* \* \*

[*The Ruined Wedding*]

\* \* \*

Our place was taken at the communion rails. Hearing a cautious step behind me, I glanced over my shoulder: one of the strangers—a gentleman, evidently—was advancing up the chancel. The service began. The explanation of the intent of matrimony was gone through; and then the clergyman came a step further forward, and, bending slightly towards Mr. Rochester, went on.

'I require and charge you both (as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed), that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not lawfully be joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it; for be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's word doth allow, are not joined together by God, neither is their matrimony lawful.'

He paused, as the custom is. When is the pause after that sentence ever broken by reply? Not, perhaps, once in a hundred years. And the clergyman, who had not lifted his eyes from his book, and had held his breath but for a moment, was proceeding: his hand was already stretched towards Mr. Rochester, as his lips unclosed to ask, 'Wilt thou have this woman for thy wedded wife?'—when a distinct and near voice said:—"The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment.'

The clergyman looked up at the speaker, and stood mute; the clerk did the same; Mr. Rochester moved slightly, as if an earthquake had rolled under his feet: taking a firmer footing, and not turning his head or eyes; he said, 'Proceed.'

Profound silence fell when he had uttered that word, with deep but low intonation. Presently Mr. Wood said:—"I cannot proceed without some investigation into what has been asserted, and evidence of its truth or falsehood.'

'The ceremony is quite broken off,' subjoined the voice behind us. 'I am in a condition to prove my allegation: an insuperable impediment to this marriage exists.'

Mr. Rochester heard, but heeded not: he stood stubborn and rigid: making no movement, but to possess himself of my hand. What a hot and strong grasp he had!—and how like quarried marble was his pale,

firm, massive front at this moment! How his eye shone, still, watchful, and yet wild beneath!

Mr. Wood seemed at a loss. 'What is the nature of the impediment?' he asked. 'Perhaps it may be got over—explained away?'

'Hardly,' was the answer: 'I have called it insuperable, and I speak advisedly.'

The speaker came forwards, and leaned on the rails. He continued, uttering each word distinctly, calmly, steadily, but not loudly.

'It simply consists in the existence of a previous marriage. Mr. Rochester has a wife now living.'

My nerves vibrated to those low-spoken words as they had never vibrated to thunder—my blood felt their subtle violence as it had never felt frost or fire: but I was collected, and in no danger of swooning. I looked at Mr. Rochester: I made him look at me. His whole face was colourless rock: his eye was both spark and flint. He disavowed nothing: he seemed as if he would defy all things. Without speaking, without smiling, without seeming to recognise in me a human being, he only twined my waist with his arm, and riveted me to his side.

'Who are you?' he asked of the intruder.

'My name is Briggs—a solicitor of — Street, London.'

'And you would thrust on me a wife?'

'I would remind you of your lady's existence, sir; which the law recognises, if you do not.'

'Favour me with an account of her—with her name, her parentage, her place of abode.'

'Certainly.' Mr. Briggs calmly took a paper from his pocket, and read out in a sort of official, nasal voice:—

"I affirm and can prove that on the 20th of October, A.D. — (a date of fifteen years back), Edward Fairfax Rochester, of Thornfield Hall, in the county of —, and of Ferndean Manor, in — shire, England, was married to my sister, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta his wife, a Creole—at — church, Spanish Town, Jamaica. The record of the marriage will be found in the register of that church—a copy of it is now in my possession. Signed, Richard Mason."

'That—if a genuine document—may prove I have been married, but it does not prove that the woman mentioned therein as my wife is still living.'

'She was living three months ago,' returned the lawyer.

'How do you know?'

'I have a witness to the fact, whose testimony even you, sir, will scarcely controvert.'

'Produce him—or go to hell.'

'I will produce him first—he is on the spot: Mr. Mason, have the goodness to step forward.'

Mr. Rochester, on hearing the name, set his teeth; he experienced, too, a sort of strong convulsive quiver; near to him as I was, I felt the spasmodic movement of fury or despair run through his frame. The second stranger, who had hitherto lingered in the background, now drew near; a pale face looked over the solicitor's shoulder—yes, it was Mason himself. Mr. Rochester turned and glared at him. His eye, as I have often said, was a black eye: it had now a tawny, nay a bloody light in its gloom; and his face flushed—olive cheek and hueless forehead received a glow, as from spreading, ascending heart-fire: and he stirred, lifted his strong arm—he could have struck Mason—dashed him on the church-floor—shocked by ruthless blow the breath from his body—but Mason shrank away, and cried faintly, 'Good God!' Contempt fell cool on Mr. Rochester—his passion died as if a blight had shrivelled it up: he only asked, 'What have you to say?'

An inaudible reply escaped Mason's white lips.

'The devil is in it if you cannot answer distinctly. I again demand, what have you to say?'

'Sir—sir'—interrupted the clergyman, 'do not forget you are in a sacred place.' Then, addressing Mason, he inquired gently, 'Are you aware, sir, whether or not this gentleman's wife is still living?'

'Courage,' urged the lawyer, — 'speak out.'

'She is now living at Thornfield Hall,' said Mason, in more articulate tones: 'I saw her there last April. I am her brother.'

'At Thornfield Hall?' ejaculated the clergyman. 'Impossible! I am an old resident in this neighbourhood, sir, and I never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at Thornfield Hall.'

I saw a grim smile contort Mr. Rochester's lip, and he muttered:—'No—by God! I took care that none should hear of it—or of her under that name.' He mused—for ten minutes he held counsel with himself: he formed his resolve, and announced it:—'Enough—all shall bolt out at once, like a bullet from the barrel.—Wood, close your book, and take off your surplice; John Green (to the clerk) leave the church: there will be no wedding to-day:' the man obeyed.

Mr. Rochester continued, hardily and recklessly: 'Bigamy is an ugly word!—I meant, however, to be a bigamist; but fate has outmanœvered me; or Providence has checked me,—perhaps the last. I am little better than a devil at this moment; and, as my pastor there would tell me, deserve no doubt the sternest judgments of God,—even to the quenchless fire and deathless worm. Gentlemen, my plan is broken up!—what this lawyer and his client say is true: I have been married; and the woman to whom I was married lives! You say you never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood: but I dare say you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast-off mistress; I now in-

form you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago,—Bertha Mason by name; sister of this resolute personage, who is now, with his quivering limbs and white cheeks, showing you what a stout heart men may bear. Cheer up, Dick!—never fear me!—I'd almost as soon strike a woman as you. Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family;—idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man.—I went through rich scenes! Oh! my experience has been heavenly, if you only knew it! But I owe you no further explanation. Briggs, Wood, Mason,—I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole's patient, and *my wife!* You shall see what sort of a being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human. This girl,' he continued, looking at me, 'knew no more than you, Wood, of the disgusting secret: she thought all was fair and legal; and never dreamt she was going to be entrapped into a feigned union with a defrauded wretch, already bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner! Come, all of you, follow.'

Still holding me fast, he left the church: the three gentlemen came after. At the front door of the hall we found the carriage.

'Take it back to the coach-house, John,' said Mr. Rochester, coolly; 'it will not be wanted to-day.'

At our entrance Mrs. Fairfax, Adèle, Sophie, Leah, advanced to meet and greet us.

'To the right about—every soul!' cried the master: 'away with your congratulations! Who wants them?—Not I!—they are fifteen years too late!'

He passed on and ascended the stairs, still holding my hand, and still beckoning the gentlemen to follow him; which they did. We mounted the first staircase, passed up the gallery, proceeded to the third storey: the low, black door, opened by Mr. Rochester's master key, admitted us to the tapestried room, with its great bed and its pictorial cabinet.

'You know this place, Mason,' said our guide; 'she bit and stabbed you here.'

He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window there burnt a fire, guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in a saucepan. In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seem-

ingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.

'Good-morrow, Mrs. Poole!' said Mr. Rochester. 'How are you? and how is your charge to-day?'

'We're tolerable, sir, I thank you,' replied Grace, lifting the boiling mess carefully on to the hob: 'rather snappish, but not 'rageous.'

A fierce cry seemed to give the lie to her favourable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet.

'Ah, sir, she sees you!' exclaimed Grace: 'you'd better not stay.'

'Only a few moments, Grace: you must allow me a few moments.'

'Take care then, sir!—for God's sake, take care!'

The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features. Mrs. Poole advanced.

'Keep out of the way,' said Mr. Rochester, thrusting her aside: 'she has no knife now, I suppose? and I'm on my guard.'

'One never knows what she has, sir: she is so cunning: it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft.'

'We had better leave her,' whispered Mason.

'Go to the devil!' was his brother-in-law's recommendation.

'Ware!' cried Grace. The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr. Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr. Rochester then turned to the spectators: he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.

'That is *my wife*,' said he: 'Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know—such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have' (laying his hand on my shoulder): 'this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk; then judge me, priest of the gospel and man of the law, and remember, with what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged! Off with you now. I must shut up my prize.'

\* \* \*

## [Rochester's Story]

\* \* \*

'I am a fool!' cried Mr. Rochester suddenly. 'I keep telling her I am not married, and do not explain to her why. I forget she knows nothing of the character of that woman, or of the circumstances attending my infernal union with her. Oh, I am certain Jane will agree with me in opinion when she knows all that I know! Just put your hand in mine, Janet, that I may have the evidence of touch as well as sight to prove you are near me—and I will in a few words show you the real state of the case. Can you listen to me?'

'Yes, sir; for hours if you will.'

'I ask only minutes. Jane, did you ever hear or know that I was not the eldest son of my house; that I had once a brother older than I?'

'I remember Mrs. Fairfax told me so once.'

'And did you ever hear that my father was an avaricious grasping man?'

'I have understood something to that effect.'

'Well, Jane, being so, it was his resolution to keep the property together; he could not bear the idea of dividing his estate and leaving me a fair portion: all, he resolved, should go to my brother Rowland. Yet as little could he endure that a son of his should be a poor man. I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage. He sought me a partner betimes. Mr. Mason, a West India planter and merchant, was his old acquaintance. He was certain his possessions were real and vast: he made inquiries. Mr. Mason, he found, had a son and daughter; and he learned from him that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left college I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. My father said nothing about her money: but he told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic. Her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race; and so did she. They showed her to me in parties, splendidly dressed. I seldom saw her alone, and had very little private conversation with her. She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in her circle seemed to admire her and envy me. I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw, and inexperienced, I thought I loved her. There is no folly so besotted that the idiotic rivalries of society, the prurience, the rashness, the blindness of youth, will not hurry a man to its commission. Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act!—an agony of inward contempt masters me. I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even

know her. I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I had marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners—and, I married her:—gross, grovelling, mole-eyed blockhead that I was! With less sin I might have—but let me remember to whom I am speaking.

'My bride's mother I had never seen: I understood she was dead. The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too, a complete dumb idiot. The elder one, whom you have seen (and whom I cannot hate, whilst I abhor all his kindred, because he has some grains of affection in his feeble mind; shown in the continued interest he takes in his wretched sister, and also in a dog-like attachment he once bore me), will probably be in the same state one day. My father, and my brother Rowland, knew all this; but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds, and joined in the plot against me.

'These were vile discoveries; but, except for the treachery of concealment, I should have made them no subject of reproach to my wife: even when I found her nature wholly alien to mine; her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger—when I found that I could not pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day, with her in comfort: that kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started immediately received from her a turn at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile—when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders—even then I restrained myself: I eschewed upbraiding, I curtailed remonstrance; I tried to devour my repentance and disgust in secret; I repressed the deep antipathy I felt.

'Jane, I will not trouble you with abominable details: some strong words shall express what I have to say. I lived with that woman upstairs four years, and before that time she had tried me indeed: her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong, only cruelty could check them; and I would not use cruelty. What a pigmy intellect she had—and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me! Bertha Mason,—the true daughter of an infamous mother,—dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste.

'My brother in the interval was dead; and at the end of the four years my father died too. I was rich enough now—yet poor to hideous indigence: a nature the most gross, impure, depraved, I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society a part of me. And I could not rid myself of it by any legal proceedings: for the



doctors now discovered that *my wife* was mad—her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity \* \* \*

‘One night I had been awakened by her yells—(since the medical men had pronounced her mad she had of course been shut up)—it was a fiery West Indian night; one of the description that frequently precede the hurricanes of those climates; being unable to sleep in bed, I got up and opened the window. The air was like sulphur-steams—I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea, which I could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake—black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball—she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language!—no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she: though two rooms off, I heard every word—the thin partitions of the West India house opposing but slight obstruction to her wolfish cries.

“This life,” said I at last, “is hell! this is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! I have a right to deliver myself from it if I can. The sufferings of this mortal state will leave me with the heavy flesh that now cumbers my soul. Of the fanatic’s burning eternity I have no fear; there is not a future state worse than this present one—let me break away, and go home to God!”

I said this whilst I knelt down at and unlocked a trunk which contained a brace of loaded pistols: I meant to shoot myself. I only entertained the intention for a moment; for not being insane, the crisis of exquisite and unalloyed despair which had originated the wish and design of self-destruction was past in a second.

‘A wind fresh from Europe blew over the ocean and rushed through the open casement: the storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure. I then framed and fixed a resolution. While I walked under the dripping orange-trees of my wet garden, and amongst its drenched pomegranates and pine-apples, and while the refulgent dawn of the tropics kindled round me—I reasoned thus, Jane:—and now listen; for it was true Wisdom that consoled me in that hour, and showed me the right path to follow.

‘The sweet wind from Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty; my heart, dried up and scorched for a long time, swelled to the tone, and filled with living blood—my being longed for renewal—my soul thirsted for a pure draught. I saw Hope revive—and felt Regeneration possible. From a flowery arch at the bottom of my garden I gazed over the sea—bluer than the sky: the old world was beyond; clear prospects opened thus:—

“Go,” said Hope, “and live again in Europe: there it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you. You may take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield: then travel yourself to what clime you will, and form what new tie you like. That woman, who has so abused your long-suffering—so sullied your name; so outraged your honour; so blighted your youth—is not your wife; nor are you her husband. See that she is cared for as her condition demands, and you have done all that God and Humanity require of you. Let her identity, her connection with yourself, be buried in oblivion: you are bound to impart them to no living being. Place her in safety and comfort: shelter her degradation with secrecy, and leave her.”

I acted precisely on this suggestion. My father and brother had not made my marriage known to their acquaintance; because, in the very first letter I wrote to apprise them of the union—having already begun to experience extreme disgust of its consequences; and from the family character and constitution seeing a hideous future opening to me—I added an urgent charge to keep it secret; and very soon the infamous conduct of the wife my father had selected for me was such as to make him blush to own her as his daughter-in-law. Far from desiring to publish the connection, he became as anxious to conceal it as myself.

‘To England, then, I conveyed her; a fearful voyage I had with such a monster in the vessel. Glad was I when I at last got her to Thornfield, and saw her safely lodged in that third-storey room, of whose secret inner cabinet she has now for ten years made a wild beast’s den—a goblin’s cell. I had some trouble in finding an attendant for her: as it was necessary to select one on whose fidelity dependence could be placed; for her ravings would inevitably betray my secret: besides, she had lucid intervals of days—sometimes weeks—which she filled up with abuse of me. At last I hired Grace Poole, from the Grimsby Retreat. She and the surgeon, Carter (who dressed Mason’s wounds that night he was stabbed and worried), are the only two I have ever admitted to my confidence. Mrs. Fairfax may indeed have suspected something; but she could have gained no precise knowledge as to facts. Grace has, on the whole, proved a good keeper; though, owing partly to a fault of her own, of which it appears nothing can cure her, and which is incident to her harassing profession, her vigilance has been more than once lulled and baffled. The lunatic is both cunning and malignant; she has never failed to take advantage of her guardian’s temporary lapses; once to secrete the knife with which she stabbed her brother, and twice to possess herself of the key of her cell, and issue therefrom in the night-time. On the first of these occasions she perpetrated the attempt to burn me in my bed; on the second she paid that ghastly visit to you. I thank Providence, who watched over you, that she then spent her fury on your wedding apparel; which perhaps

brought back vague reminiscences of her own bridal days; but on what might have happened I cannot endure to reflect. \* \* \*

[*Fire at Thornfield Hall*]

\* \* \* The lawn, the grounds [of Thornfield Hall] were trodden and waste: the portal yawned void. The front was, as I had once seen it in a dream, but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile looking, perforated with paneless windows: no roof, no battlements, no chimneys—all had crashed in.

And there was the silence of death about it: the solitude of a lonesome wild. No wonder that letters addressed to people here had never received an answer: as well despatch epistles to a vault in a church aisle. The grim blackness of the stones told by what fate the Hall had fallen—by conflagration: but how kindled? What story belonged to this disaster? What loss, besides mortar and marble and wood-work, had followed upon it? Had life been wrecked, as well as property? If so, whose? Dreadful question: there was no one here to answer it—even dumb sign, mute token.

\* \* \*

'Is Mr. Rochester living at Thornfield Hall now?' I asked, knowing, of course, what the answer would be, but yet desirous of deferring the direct question as to where he really was.

'No, ma'am—oh, no! No one is living there. I suppose you are a stranger in these parts, or you would have heard what happened last autumn,—Thornfield Hall is quite a ruin: it was burnt down just about harvest time. A dreadful calamity! such an immense quantity of valuable property destroyed: hardly any of the furniture could be saved. The fire broke out at dead of night, and before the engines arrived from Millcote, the building was one mass of flame. It was a terrible spectacle: I witnessed it myself.'

'At dead of night!' I muttered. Yes, that was ever the hour of fatality at Thornfield. 'Was it known how it originated?' I demanded.

'They guessed, ma'am: they guessed. Indeed, I should say it was ascertained beyond a doubt. You are not perhaps aware,' he continued, edging his chair a little nearer the table, and speaking low, 'that there was a lady,—a—a lunatic, kept in the house?'

'I have heard something of it.'

'She was kept in very close confinement, ma'am; people even for some years was not absolutely certain of her existence. No one saw her: they only knew by rumour that such a person was at the Hall; and who or what she was it was difficult to conjecture. They said Mr. Edward had brought her from abroad; and some believed she had been his mistress. \* \* \*

'This lady, ma'am,' he answered, 'turned out to be Mr. Rochester's

wife! \* \* \* it's quite certain that it was her and nobody but her, that set it going. She had a woman to take care of her called Mrs. Poole—an able woman in her line, and very trustworthy, but for one fault—a fault common to a deal of them nurses and matrons—*she kept a private bottle of gin by her*, and now and then took a drop over much. It is excusable, for she had a hard life of it: but still it was dangerous; for when Mrs. Poole was fast asleep, after the gin-and-water, the mad lady, who was as cunning as a witch, would take the keys out of her pocket, let herself out of her chamber, and go roaming about the house, doing any wild mischief that came into her head. They say she had nearly burnt her husband in his bed once: but I don't know about that. However, on this night, she set fire first to the hangings of the room next her own; and then she got down to a lower story, and made her way to the chamber that had been the governess's—(she was like as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on, and had a spite at her)—and she kindled the bed there; but there was nobody sleeping in it fortunately. The governess had run away two months before; and for all Mr. Rochester sought her as if she had been the most precious thing he had in the world, he never could hear a word of her; and he grew savage—quite savage on his disappointment: he never was a wild man, but he got dangerous after he lost her. He would be alone, too. He sent Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, away to her friends at a distance; but he did it handsomely, for he settled an annuity on her for life: and she deserved it—she was a very good woman. Miss Adèle, a ward he had, was put to school. He broke off acquaintance with all the gentry, and shut himself up, like a hermit, at the Hall.'

\* \* \*

'Then Mr. Rochester was at home when the fire broke out?'

'Yes, indeed was he; and he went up to the attics when all was burning above and below, and got the servants out of their beds and helped them down himself—and went back to get his mad wife out of her cell. And then they called out to him that she was on the roof; where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off; I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed Mr. Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof: we heard him call "Bertha!" We saw him approach her; and then, ma'am, she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement.'

'Dead?'

'Dead? Ay, dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered.'

'Good God!'

'You may well say so, ma'am: it was frightful!'

He shuddered.

'And afterwards?' I urged.

'Well, ma'am, afterwards the house was burnt to the ground: there are only some bits of walls standing now.'

'Were any other lives lost?'

'No—perhaps it would have been better if there had.'

'What do you mean?'

'Poor Mr. Edward!' he ejaculated, 'I little thought ever to have seen it! Some say it was a just judgment on him for keeping his first marriage secret, and wanting to take another wife while he had one living: but I pity him, for my part.'

'You said he was alive?' I exclaimed.

'Yes, yes: he is alive; but many think he had better be dead.'

\* \* \*

'He is stone-blind,' he said at last. 'Yes—he is stone-blind—is Mr. Edward.'

I had dreaded worse. I had dreaded he was mad. I summoned strength to ask what had caused this calamity.

'It was all his own courage, and a body may say, his kindness, in a way, ma'am: he wouldn't leave the house till every one else was out before him. As he came down the great staircase at last, after Mrs. Rochester had flung herself from the battlements, there was a great crash—all fell. He was taken out from under the ruins, alive, but sadly hurt: a beam had fallen in such a way as to protect him partly; but one eye was knocked out, and one hand so crushed that Mr. Carter, the surgeon, had to amputate it directly. The other eye inflamed: he lost the sight of that also. He is now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple.'

\* \* \*

## JEAN RHYS

### Selected Letters†

TO PEGGY KIRKALDY

October 4th [1949]  
Beckenham

\* \* \*

I know Peggy that you don't care for Americans but they have one great virtue, they don't stifle criticism. You can write about the Chain Gang or a canned meat factory or a loony bin and what have you and there's a chance of an audience. But not here! The English clamp

† From *The Letters of Jean Rhys*, selected and edited by Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (New York: Viking, 1984). Reprinted by permission of Sheil Land Associates Ltd.

down on unpleasant facts and some of the facts they clamp down on are very unpleasant indeed, believe me.

My dear I hope I may write again some day. I have a novel half done and the rest safely in my head. It's about the West Indies about 1780 something.

But this horrible creeping *indifference* stops me—I can't find anything worth while.

\* \* \*

TO MARYVONNE MOERMAN

November 9th [1949]  
Beckenham

\* \* \*

I have had some news which may cheer you up. The enclosed advertisement was in the *New Statesman* on Friday. I answered it at once—very puzzled.

It turned out to be from a BBC actress called Selma Vaz Dias who wants to broadcast my work. She says she has been looking for me for "years" as the BBC like my stuff.

The preliminary reading is tomorrow.

I am very astonished that the BBC like my work (especially *Good Morning*) but it seems they thought I was dead—which of course would make a great difference. In fact they were going to follow it up with a broadcast "*Quest for Jean Rhys*" and I feel rather tactless being still alive!

However I'm cheered up too for if they can make a fuss of me dead surely they can make a *little fuss* though I'm not.

\* \* \*

TO PEGGY KIRKALDY

December 6th [1949]  
Beckenham

\* \* \*

Now I'm really hanging on to my belief in fate—I never wanted to write. I wished to be happy and peaceful and obscure. I was *dragged* into writing by a series of coincidences—Mrs Adam, Ford, Paris<sup>1</sup>—need for money.

1. Mrs George Adam was the wife of *The Times* correspondent in Paris during the early 1920s. Jean, who had met her briefly in London during the war, approached her for help in placing three articles by Jean Lenglet which she had translated from the French. Instead Mrs Adam asked to see work of her own, and Jean showed her a diary she had kept between 1910 and 1919. Mrs Adam rewrote parts of it in the form of a novel called *Susie Tells* and sent the typescript to Ford Madox Ford. He changed the book's title to *Triple Sec* and the author's name (then Ella Lenglet) to Jean Rhys. The book was not published, but Ford encouraged

felt a bit uneasy in the early happy days and asked her to tell him what's wrong, promised to believe her, and stand by her, and she's always answered "Nothing is wrong." For, poor child, she is *afraid* to tell him, and cries if he insists.

So he strides into her bedroom, not himself, but angry love and that is what the poem is about.

Even when the love has gone the anger is still there and remains. (No obeah needed for that!) And remains.

Well this is now a long letter. Have you got so far? Continuez—

Mr Rochester tries hard not to be a tyrant. Back in Spanish Town he gives her a certain freedom, *tries* to be kindly if distant.

But now she is angry too. Like a hurricane. Like a Creole. For his second revenge—his affair with her maid (and next door) has hurt more than the first.

*She* uses her freedom to rush off and have an affair too—first with her pal Sandi—then with others. All coloured or black, which was, in those days, a *terrible* thing for a white girl to do. Not to be forgiven. The men did as they liked. The women—*never*.

So imagine Mr R's delight when he can haul her to England, lock her up in a cold dark room, deprive her of all she's used to—watch her growing mad. And so on—I think the governess and the house party rash. But I suppose he thought her fini by that time. Well, she wasn't—

I think there were several Antoinettes and Mr Rochesters. Indeed I am sure. Mine is *not* Miss Brontë's, though much suggested by "Jane Eyre". She is, to start with, young not old. She is still a girl when she fires the house and jumps to her death. And hates last. Mr R's name ought to be changed. Raworth? A Yorkshire name isn't it? The sound is right. In the poem (if it's that) Mr Rochester (or Raworth) consoles himself or justifies himself by saying that *his* Antoinette runs away after the "Obeah nights" and that the creature who comes back is not the one who ran away. I wish this had been thought of before—for that too is part of Obeah.

A Zombie is a dead person raised up by the Obeah woman, it's usually a woman I think, and a zombie can take the appearance of anyone. Or anything.

But I did not write it that way and I'm glad, for it would have been a bit creepy! And probably, certainly I think, beyond me.

Still, it's a thought—for anyone who writes those sort of stories.

No. Antoinette herself comes back but so changed that perhaps she was "lost Antoinette". I insist that she must be lovely, and certainly she was lost. "All in the romantic tradition".

\* \* \*

Yes I need a holiday, *short*, but I feel that perhaps I'd better get it straight here. I have solitude and privacy—both not so easy to get and

there's rather a good tree to look at. I'm sure the neighbours think I'm potty but after all—they can hardly haul me off to the bin for scribble scribble scribble. Quite noiselessly. I really believe that if I had a typewriter they would, for I work late now. (They don't like books much.)

\* \* \*

### Obeah Night

A night I seldom remember  
 (If it can be helped)  
 The night I saw Love's dark face  
 Was Love's dark face  
 "And cruel as he is"? I've never known that  
 I tried my best you may be certain (whoever asks)  
 My human best

If the next morning as I looked at what I'd done  
 (He was watching us mockingly, used to these games)  
 If I'd stared back at him  
 If I'd said  
 "I was a god myself last night  
 I've tamed and changed a wild girl"  
 Or taken my hurt darling in my arms  
 (Conquered at last. And silent. Mine)

Perhaps Love would have smiled then  
 Shown us the way  
 Across that sea. They say it's strewn with wrecks  
 And weed-infested  
 Few dare it, fewer still escape  
 But *we*, led by smiling Love  
 We could have sailed  
 Reached a safe harbour  
 Found a sweet, brief heaven  
 Lived our short lives

But I was both sick and sad  
 (Night always ends)  
 She was a stranger  
 Wearing the mask of pain  
 Bearing the marks of pain—  
 I turned away—Traitor  
 Too sane to face my madness (or despair)  
 Far, far too cold and sane

Then Love, relenting  
 Sent clouds and soft rain  
 Sent sun, light and shadow  
 To show me again  
 Her young face waiting  
 Waiting for comfort and a gentler lover?  
 (You'll not find him)  
 A kinder loving? *Love is not kind*  
 I would not look at her  
 (Once is enough)  
 Over my dead love  
 Over a sleeping girl  
 I drew a sheet  
 Cover the stains of tears  
 Cover the marks of blood  
 (You can say nothing  
 That I have not said a thousand times and one  
 Excepting this — That night was Something Else  
 I was Angry Love Himself  
 Blind fierce avenging Love — no other that night)

"It's too strong for Béké"  
 The black woman said  
 Love, hate or jealousy  
 Which had she seen?  
 She knew well — the *Devil!*  
 — What it could mean

How can I forget you Antoinette  
 When the spring is here?  
 Where did you hide yourself

After that shameless, shameful night?  
 And why come back? Hating and hated?  
 Was it Love, Fear, Hoping?  
 Or (as always) Pain?  
 (Did you come back I wonder  
 Did I ever see you again?)

No. I'll lock that door  
 Forget it. —  
 The motto was "Locked Hearts I open  
 I have the heavy key"  
 Written in black letters  
 Under a Royal Palm Tree  
 On a slave owner's gravestone

"Look! And look again, hypocrite" he says  
 "Before you judge me"

I'm no damn slave owner  
 I have no slave  
 Didn't she (forgiven) betray me  
 Once more — and then again  
 Unrepentant — laughing?  
 I can soon show her  
 Who hates the best  
 Always she answers me  
*I will hate last*

Lost, lovely Antoinette  
 How can I forget you  
 When the spring comes?  
 (Spring is cold and furtive here  
 There's a different rain)  
 Where did you hide yourself  
 After the obeh nights?  
 (What did you send instead?  
 Hating and hated?)  
 Where did you go?  
 I'll never see you now  
 I'll never know  
 For you left me — my truest Love  
 Long ago

*Edward Rochester or Raworth*  
*Written in Spring 1842*

TO FRANCIS WYNDHAM

*Thursday [1964]*  
 Cheriton Fitz Paine

\* \* \*

I realise what I lose by cutting loose from Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester — Only too well. (Indeed *can I?*) Names? Dates?

But I believe and firmly too that there was more than one Antoinette. The West Indies was (were?) rich in those days *for those days* and there was no "married woman's property Act". The girls (very tiresome no doubt) would soon once in kind England be *Address Unknown*. So gossip. So a legend. If Charlotte Brontë took her horrible Bertha from this legend I have the right to take lost Antoinette. And, how to reconcile the two and fix dates I do not know — yet. But, I will. Another thing is this: —

DEREK WALCOTT

Jean Rhys†

In their faint photographs  
mottled with chemicals,  
like the left hand of some spinster aunt,  
they have drifted to the edge  
of verandahs in Whistlerian  
white, their jungle turned tea-brown —  
even its spiked palms —  
their features pale,  
to be pencilled in:  
bone-collared gentlemen  
with spiked moustaches  
and their wives embayed in the wickerwork  
armchairs, all looking coloured  
from the distance of a century  
beginning to groan sideways from the axe stroke!

Their bay horses blacken  
like spaniels, the front lawn a beige  
carpet, brown moonlight and a moon  
so sallow, so pharmaceutical  
that her face is a feverish child's,  
some malarial angel  
whose grave still cowers  
under a fury of bush,  
a mania of wild yams  
wrangling to hide her from ancestral churchyards.

And the sigh of that child  
is white as an orchid  
on a crusted log  
in the bush of Dominica,  
a V of Chinese white  
meant for the beat of a seagull  
over a sepia souvenir of Cornwall,  
as the white hush between two sentences.

† From *Collected Poems 1948-1984* by Derek Walcott. Copyright © 1986 by Derek Walcott.  
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Sundays! Their furnace  
of boredom after church.  
A maiden aunt canoes through lilies of clouds  
in a Carib hammock, to a hymn's metronome,  
and the child on the varnished, lion-footed couch  
sees the hills dip and straighten with each lurch.  
The green-leaved uproar of the century  
turns dim as the Atlantic, a rumourous haze  
behind the lime trees, breakers  
advancing in decorous, pleated lace;  
the cement grindstone of the afternoon  
turns slowly, sharpening her senses,  
the bay below is green as calalu, stewing Sargasso.

In that fierce hush  
between Dominican mountains  
the child expects a sound  
from a butterfly clipping itself to a bush  
like a gold earring to a black maid's ear—  
one who goes down to the village, visiting,  
whose pink dress wilts like a flower between the limes.

There are logs  
wrinkled like the hand of an old woman  
who wrote with a fine courtesy to that world  
when grace was common as malaria,  
when the gas lanterns' hiss on the verandah  
drew the aunts out like moths  
doomed to be pressed in a book, to fall  
into the brown oblivion of an album,  
embroiderers of silence  
for whom the arches of the Thames,  
Parliament's needles,  
and the petit-point reflections of London Bridge  
fade on the hammock cushions from the sun,  
where one night  
a child stares at the windless candle flame  
from the corner of a lion-footed couch  
at the erect white light,  
her right hand married to *Jane Eyre*,  
foreseeing that her own white wedding dress  
will be white paper.

1981

## MARY LOU EMERY

## Modernist Crosscurrents†

\* \* \*

To view Jean Rhys as a woman writer only or to discuss her as a West Indian author or a European modernist exclusively limits our understanding of her work. For in each context, her writing remains outside the main current by virtue of its participation in the other two. I see her novels as textual sites both in between and intersecting these three important currents of twentieth-century cultural history and literature. My interest in the events of her life, therefore, does not lie in building a psychological portrait or even in constructing a unified narrative that ties the events together. Rather, I am interested in her plural and often conflicting outsider identities as West Indian writer, European modernist, and woman writer at the closing of the era of empire, and the ways in which she occupied the spaces in between such identities.

\* \* \*

The pressures of language and literary tradition from three emerging canons—the female, European modernist, and the West Indian—re-shape the biographical facts as literary truths in Rhys's novels. The larger social context of these literary movements gives meaning to both the distorting mirror of the text and the truths we may see in it, and a sociocritical perspective can give us the wide focus we need to see the multiple contexts of Rhys's writing. We can distinguish then between an approach that views her characters as psychological types or reflections of Jean Rhys and one that sees connections among the social forces shaping the author and the novels. The first approach draws upon and develops European literary and psychological notions of "character" and "self" and so misses the implications of the Caribbean context of Rhys's writing and her identity as a West Indian writer critical of the colonizing countries' concepts and values even if governed by them. The second approach views the events of Rhys's life as indicators of the conflicting values, ideologies, and social circumstances in which she wrote. It allows us to perceive in the same mirror competing cultural visions and to understand them within a larger gendered colonial system as it declines.

Primary materials are available to tell us about Rhys's life, including her incomplete autobiography *Smile Please* (1979), *The Letters of Jean Rhys* (1984), and the unpublished notebooks that Teresa O'Connor has

† From Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) 7–20. Copyright © 1990. Reprinted by permission of the University of Texas Press.

## WILSON HARRIS

Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*†

Myth, as I use it in this context, implies a force in the universe that is untamed and untamable, but which subsists on paradox. Myth teaches us that sovereign gods and sovereign institutions are partial, partial in the sense that they are biased, but when they begin to penetrate their biases, they also begin to transform their fear of the other, of others, of other parts, in a larger complex of wholeness. In this medium of transformation, the unconscious psyche is in dialogue — in rich marvellous dialogue — with the conscious mind. And out of this arises the living ongoing momentum of the imaginative arts.

Now, the basic thrust of what I have to say has to do with myths that have secreted themselves in certain works of the imagination — I shall confine myself on this occasion to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* — and of which the writers themselves are or were unaware. But before moving into that territory I think I should make a distinction. It is this: the imaginative artist who makes *deliberate* use of myth may in no way be inferior to the writer or painter or sculptor or composer in whose work one may find an *intuitive* body (or intuitive bodies) of myth.

Writers as varied as James Joyce, St John Perse, Miguel Asturias, David Jones, T. S. Eliot, Camara Laye, Ralph Ellison, Djuna Barnes, D. H. Lawrence, Pablo Neruda, Kathleen Raine — to give outstanding examples — have employed myth with deliberation, but in order to ask new questions, so to speak, of untamable reality. Yet even here — however self-conscious the equilibrium between artist and myth — unconscious variables secrete themselves in the live tapestry of word and image whose enigmatic manifestation lies in the future.

I find myself in agreement with critics and historians of the arts — such as Anton Ehrenzweig, Herbert Read, William James — who point to variables of unconscious motivation in the arts of which generations become differently aware, consciously and partially aware, with the passage of time. Compositions of music, painting, fiction of a certain kind, sculpture, poetry, will address us differently with the passage of time because of unconscious variables of myth that leave apparent gaps, angularities, turbulences, opacities, in the live tapestry in which they function. Those gaps come to be curiously filled, opacities dazzle or lighten, angularities and turbulences become rich and intriguing, as if the life of works of art mutates in depth with changed perceptions and responses of later decades and generations.

† From *Kunapipi* 2.2 (1980): 142–50. Reprinted by permission. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition are given in brackets after Harris's original citations.

Thus even the self-conscious usage of myth by individual imaginations involves a descent into unconscious variables whose manifestation affects the future. \* \* \*

What is intriguing about *intuitive* usage of myth is that the artist may not perceive in his or her own work an activity or concentration which is other than daylight consciousness and which runs into the apparently unconscious past.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* varies the rainbow arc between cultures in profoundly intuitive spirit. To appreciate that variation we need to recall the bridge between sky and earth that is implicit in the rainbow arc from Central to South America in Quetzalcoatl (snake and bird) and Yurokon (Quetzalcoatl's Carib cousin). Then we need to revise that arc or bridge into a rather different compression of features. The food-bearing tree of the world, in Arawak and Macusi legends, reaches to heaven across forgotten ages, but suddenly we become aware of it as creation myth rooted in catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> The tree is fired by the Caribs at a time of war when the Arawaks seek refuge in its branches. The fire rages and drives the Arawaks up into space until they are themselves burnt and converted into sparks which continue to rise into the sky to become the Pleiades.

Let us note, firstly, the fire-motif in the creation myth, secondly, the ground of war and catastrophe in which the foodbearing tree is rooted, thirdly, the constellation of the Arawaks in 'the sky of fiction' (if I may so put it). All these features are *intuitively* woven into the tapestry of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is the persistent fire-motif that runs through the entire fabric of the novel. There are the legacies of slavery and catastrophe in the soil of the Caribbean which leave such deep scars on Antoinette and her relations. There is the re-dress of mad Bertha into the new burning constellation of Antoinette in the sky of fiction. Antoinette turns round and sees 'the sky — the tree of life in flames'. 'It was red and all my life was in it' (p. 155)<sup>2</sup> [112].

Mad Bertha of *Jane Eyre* is symbolically, if not literally, widowed by a husband to all intents and purposes dead and vanished. His presence is the presence of ornament and Jean Rhys straitjackets his 'death' into 'stone' (p. 94) [65] in Antoinette's confession to her black Haitian<sup>3</sup> nurse Christophine, as events begin to move towards their separation — Christophine is soon to be banished from Rochester's West Indian household as an evil witch or obeah woman — Antoinette is soon to live the 'lie'

1. Quetzalcoatl is The Feathered Serpent, one of the major deities of the ancient Mexican pantheon. In Toltec mythology Quetzalcoatl symbolized the evening and morning stars and came in Aztec times to symbolize death and resurrection. One body of myths describes him immolating himself on a pyre, emerging as the planet Venus. The Macusi were aboriginal people of the Guianas, South America [Editor].

2. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, first published 1966. All page references are to the Penguin edition and given in the text.

3. Christophine is from Martinique [Editor].



of a voyage from the West Indies and the setting up of home in England where she is deemed mad by Rochester and locked away in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette tells Christophine—as she pleads with her to mix a love potion to bring Rochester back to her bed—‘I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says, “Goodnight, Bertha.” He never calls me Antoinette now. And I dream . . . *Then I beat my fist on a stone . . .* Going away to Martinique or England or anywhere else, that is the lie’ (pp. 93–4 [65], italics mine).

The stone-masked Rochester is an ambiguous yet shrewd alteration by Jean Rhys of the stature—the almost Gothic stature—of Charlotte Brontë’s creation. Carnival stone or death-in-life mask expressly mourns a hunger for the dance of life endangered in hunter and hunted, seen and perceived with such intensity by Antoinette *alone in all the world*, so to speak, that she begins to redeem the solitary plague of madness in herself which—in Jean Rhys’s ambiguous novel—is nothing but the magic of faith in the subsistence of fiery love to redeem the terrors of the dance when the dance is conscripted into feud and war. The fire-of-the-war-dance-motif in the foodbearing tree casts its shadow of anguish and pain into Antoinette’s plea to Christophine for a desperate love-potion to bring the enemy (yet lover) in Rochester to heel.

Rochester’s stone-mask appears to remain pitiless but it is now *psychically* affected by the creature he hunts into madness, the creature to whom he ‘dies’ after the honeymoon rape she endures. His symbolic conquest of her, yet ‘death’, his Anglo-Saxon stoicism, is now all at once altered by her uncompromising madness and perception of *his* needs in *hers*. Nothing—neither duty nor respectability nor the observance of codes of behaviour so formidably constructed into moral imperative in *Jane Eyre*—possess quite the tone of necessity—that runs deeper than appearance and logic—with which Jean Rhys imbues Antoinette, and in so doing makes her madness essentially human, and Rochester’s hardhearted sanity a psychical debt to her inimitable passion that borders on precarious divinity. Hard-hearted sanity it is in him because it remains unconscious of the debt he owes to her that is infinitely greater than the rich dowry, in money terms, she brings to him.

\* \* \*

I have spoken of Rochester’s indebtedness to Antoinette but she too is indebted to shadowy, almost nameless, myths within the inarticulate heterogeneity of the Caribbean. May I pause for a moment to explain, in some degree, what I mean by ‘inarticulate’. There is no short-cut into the evolution of new or original novel-form susceptible to, immersed in, the heterogeneity of the modern world. If we genuinely accept the view of variables of unconsciousness a handful of eminent thinkers has advanced, it will assist us, I think, to realize that the evo-

lution of complex imagery secretes such variables of or from necessity, and that that secretion may sustain a wealth of beauty when it is perceived in its ‘true’ light by different eyes in other places or by other generations. That is the price of originality. Mere academic lip-service to creativity is useless whatever its militancy or piety or apparent clarity. Jean Rhys’s significance, in ‘inarticulate’ Caribbean complex, lies in the immaterial, subtly visible, pressure to alter the rock-fast nineteenth-century convention Rochester symbolizes. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written in nineteenth-century realist convention and as a consequence the subtle, ambiguous, poignant, disruptions of homogeneous cultural model may be misunderstood or misconceived as the logic of pathos, as a psychology of pathos, whereas their significance, as dialogue with untamable creation myth, is much more profound in their potential bearing on the evolution or original Caribbean or South American novel form.

We have already looked at the Arawak/Macusi foodbearing tree in which is secreted both physical need or hunger and a hunger for creation or renewed visions of creation. We need also to remember Jean Rhys’s Anglo-Saxon yet Caribbean antecedents (she was born of a Welsh father and a white *creole* mother in the West Indies). Her imaginative insights are ‘white’ and ‘black’ in tone in their appeal to the catholicity of West Indians in whom are combined primitive religions—such as Haitian vodun myth (or obeah)—and fertile Christianity. Obeah is a pejorative term but it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter ‘lost’ origins, ‘lost’ heavens, ‘lost’ divinity.

It is Christophine, in particular, Antoinette’s Haitian nurse, who symbolizes the forbidden obeah strain in Jean Rhys’s imagination. It is she (Christophine) who mixes the love-potion for Rochester which Antoinette cries for, when Rochester finds himself torn by rumours of madness in her family and steels himself (or relapses into his ingrained Protestant rationality and fear of heretical ecstasy) to ‘widow’ or abandon her like a dead man, however formally alive, as he paces the verandah.

In strict Catholic context (in contradistinction to alchemy and catholicity of origins) we need to glance at the convent in which Antoinette spent an impressionable period after her home was set on fire by angry ex-slaves, a fire that precipitated a massive nervous breakdown in her mother Annette (also known as Bertha) and occasioned the death of Pierre, the youngest member of the family. It is here, in the convent, that we begin to perceive the depth of subversion or ecstatic hunger which begins to envelop Antoinette, to prepare her, so to speak, to become the bride of a spiritual obeah bull. (It may be intuitive design but no accident, I believe, that during the physical and doomed hon-

eymoon between rock-fast Rochester and subversive Antoinette, before he abandons her and widows her on the marriage-bed, he is given a cup of 'bull's blood' by Christophine (p. 71) [50] as a token of his conversion yet retreat into 'stone' or 'relic' of ecstasy. Thus one of the portents of *psychical* alteration or stone-mask or death-mask is the obeah bull Rochester unconsciously wears or consumes. All this is so subtly woven into the tapestry of the fiction, it is never explicit, never stated, but lurks, so to speak, between the images in the alchemy of the word.)

It is in the convent that Antoinette is drawn into contemplation of the elusive life of precarious divinity in 'relics' (p. 45) [32] as if in anticipation of the 'relic' of 'stone' Rochester wears after his symbolic death, a relic that undergoes *immaterial* re-animation in the 'sky of fiction' above 'the tree of life in flames' (p. 155) [112].

The 'tree of life' appears in the convent and bears 'a rose from the garden of my Spouse' (p. 45) [32]. It is a rose saturated with indebtedness to the black soil of dreams in which Antoinette seeks 'to hold up (her) dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress' (p. 50) [36]. The dream continues:

We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden—I stumble over my dress and cannot get up. I touch a tree and my arms hold on to it. 'Here, here.' But I think I will not go any further. The tree sways and jerks as if it is trying to throw me off. Still I cling and the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years. 'Here, in here', a strange voice said, and the tree stopped swaying and jerking. (p. 50) [36]

Antoinette's indebtedness to 'rose of my Spouse' and to 'soil of dreams' is a preparation for a dialogue with the 'other' in the garden, the strange dark terrifying voice she never forgets within her and without her. It is a voice that celebrates and mourns her coming betrothal and marriage. For it is less Rochester and more symbolically herself who drinks 'the cup of bull's blood' which Christophine gives to her insensible bridegroom. It is a voice that pushes her beyond the walls of convent or school in which she shelters. In the darkness of that voice the nuns in the school have 'cheerful faces' she resents (p. 50) [00]. They do not understand her magical 'spouse'. They do not perceive a richer catholicity beneath the formal Catholic education they dispense. Their religion—however evocative in its relics—has become respectable ritual, undemanding ornament, as undemanding or frozen in posture as the Greek or Roman goddess of the milky way from whose breasts the white fluid spurts across the sky into the calloused mouth of a consumer age.

Whereas the 'bull's blood' of art and religion is imagistic confession of cross-cultural labyrinth in which the transformation of apparently incorrigible bias in all mankind tests and challenges the imagination

beyond ideal formula. It is the stigma of complex earthiness and exile from convention. It is raised with anguish into the stars. The incompatibility of consumer callouses and bull's blood holds out madness (if one is enmeshed in a religion of sensuality and mindless academic spirituality) or alternatively it holds out a genuine spiritual sensation that one needs to lose one's ritual soul to find life, and that this means prayer of such depth it is directed to god, however masked by innumerable or magical relics; Antoinette's madness is no less than a hidden surrender of life, a loss of soul to find soul, disrupted ritual callous, disrupted voice of convention in order to find (or begin to find) the voice in the foodbearing tree from the 'spouse' of otherness.

These considerations are never explicitly stated in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Their authenticity lies, I find, in a measure of confused force and anguish that drives her to say to one of the nuns before she leaves the convent: 'I dreamed I was in Hell.' The nun replies: 'That dream is evil. Put it from your mind—never think of it again' (p. 51) [36].

But she was to dream and think of it again and again. And the nun's incomprehension is woven into Bertha's shroud and damnation. It was Jean Rhys's passion to illumine by fire Antoinette's essential humanity and precarious divinity.

\* \* \*

## SANDRA DRAKE

### Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*†

"A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombi can also be the spirit of a place. . . ." (WSS, 107)<sup>1</sup> [64].

" . . . I have noticed that negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe. Voodoo as it is called in Haiti—obeah in some of the islands, another name in South America." (WSS, 107) [64].

"Is there a ghost, a zombi there?" I persisted.

"Don't know nothing about all that foolishness."

—Rochester queries the Black servant Baptiste, WSS, 106 [63].

† From "All That Foolishness / That All Foolishness: Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Critica* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 97–112. Reprinted by permission. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition are given in brackets after Drake's original citations.

1. All quotations are from the edition published in 1966 by W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York.

- Nebeker, Helen. *Jean Rhys, Woman in Passage: A Critical Study*. Montreal: Eden, 1981.
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## GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

### [*Wide Sargasso Sea* and a Critique of Imperialism]†

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious "facts" continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms.

If these "facts" were remembered, not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism, we would produce a narrative, in literary history, of the "worlding" of what is now called "the Third World." To consider the Third World as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation fosters the emergence of "the Third World" as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding," even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline.<sup>1</sup>

It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm. It is supported and operated by an information-retrieval approach to "Third World" literature which often employs a deliberately "nontheoretical" methodology with self-conscious rectitude.

† From "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 243-61. Copyright © 1985 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Reprinted by permission of the author. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition are given in brackets after Spivak's original citations.

1. My notion of the "worlding of a world" upon what must be assumed to be unscripted earth is a vulgarization of Martin Heidegger's idea; see "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1977), pp. 17-87.

In this essay, I will attempt to examine the operation of the "worlding" of what is today "the Third World" by what has become a cult text of feminism: *Jane Eyre*.<sup>2</sup> I plot the novel's reach and grasp, and locate its structural motors. I read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as *Jane Eyre*'s reinscription \* \* \*

Sympathetic U.S. feminists have remarked that I do not do justice to *Jane Eyre*'s subjectivity. A word of explanation is perhaps in order. The broad strokes of my presuppositions are that what is at stake, for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and "interpellation" of the subject not only as individual but as "individualist."<sup>3</sup> This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as "companionate love"; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission. As the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the "native female" as such (*within* discourse, as a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm.<sup>4</sup> If we read this account from an isolationist perspective in a "metropolitan" context, we see nothing there but the psychobiography of the militant female subject. In a reading such as mine, in contrast, the effort is to wrench oneself away from the mesmerizing focus of the "subject-constitution" of the female individualist.

\* \* \*

When Jean Rhys, born on the Caribbean island of Dominica, read *Jane Eyre* as a child, she was moved by Bertha Mason: "I thought I'd try to write her a life."<sup>5</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the slim novel published in 1965, at the end of Rhys' long career, is that "life."

I have suggested that Bertha's function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law.

2. See Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York, 1960); all further references to this work, abbreviated *JE*, will be included in the text.

3. As always, I take my formula from Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1971), pp. 127-86. For an acute differentiation between the individual and individualism, see V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, *Studies in Language*, vol. 1 (New York, 1973), pp. 93-94 and 152-53. For a "straight" analysis of the roots and ramifications of English "individualism," see C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962). I am grateful to Jonathan Rée for bringing this book to my attention and for giving a careful reading of all but the very end of the present essay.

4. I am constructing an analogy with Homi Bhabha's powerful notion of "not-quite/not-white" in his "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambiguity of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 132. I should also add that I use the word "native" here in reaction to the term "Third World Woman." It cannot, of course, apply with equal historical justice to both the West Indian and the Indian contexts nor to contexts of imperialism by transportation.

5. Jean Rhys, in an interview with Elizabeth Vreeland, quoted in Nancy R. Harrison, *Jean Rhys and The Novel as Women's Text* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988). This is an excellent, detailed study of Rhys.

When Rhys rewrites the scene in *Jane Eyre* where Jane hears “a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling” and then encounters a bleeding Richard Mason (*JE*, p. 210), she keeps Bertha’s humanity, indeed her sanity as critic of imperialism, intact. Grace Poole, another character originally in *Jane Eyre*, describes the incident to Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “So you don’t remember that you attacked this gentleman with a knife? . . . I didn’t hear all he said except ‘I cannot interfere legally between yourself and your husband’. It was when he said ‘legally’ that you flew at him” (WSS, p. 150 [109]). In Rhys’ retelling, it is the dissimulation that Bertha discerns in the word “legally”—not an innate bestiality—that prompts her violent reaction.

In the figure of Antoinette, whom in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester violently renames Bertha, Rhys suggests that so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism. Antoinette, as a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica, is caught between the English imperialist and the black native. In recounting Antoinette’s development, Rhys reinscribes some thematics of Narcissus.

There are, noticeably, many images of mirroring in the text. I will quote one from the first section. In this passage, Tia is the little black servant girl who is Antoinette’s close companion: “We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. . . . When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. . . . We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass” (WSS, p. 38 [27]).

A progressive sequence of dreams reinforces this mirror imagery. In its second occurrence, the dream is partially set in a *hortus conclusus*, or “enclosed garden”—Rhys uses the phrase (WSS, p. 50 [36])—a Romance rewriting of the Narcissus topos as the place of encounter with Love.<sup>6</sup> In the enclosed garden, Antoinette encounters not Love but a strange threatening voice that says merely “in here,” inviting her into a prison which masquerades as the legalization of love (WSS, p. 50 [36]).

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus’ madness is disclosed when he recognizes his Other as his self: “Iste ego sum.” Rhys makes Antoinette see her self as her Other, Brontë’s Bertha. In the last section of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette acts out *Jane Eyre*’s conclusion and recognizes herself as the so-called ghost in Thornfield Hall: “I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt

6. See Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature Up to the Early Nineteenth Century*, trans. Robert Dewsnap et al. (Lund, 1967), chap. 5.

7. For a detailed study of this text, see John Brenkman, “Narcissus in the Text,” *Georgia Review* 30 (Summer 1976): 293–327. [*Iste ego sum*: That I am (Editor).]

frame but I knew her” (WSS, p. 154 [111–12]). The gilt frame encloses a mirror: as Narcissus’ pool reflects the selfed Other, so this “pool” reflects the Othered self. Here the dream sequence ends, with an invocation of none other than Tia, the Other that could not be selfed, because the fracture of imperialism rather than the Ovidian pool intervened. (I will return to this difficult point.) “That was the third time I had my dream, and it ended. . . . I called ‘Tia’ and jumped and woke” (WSS, p. 155 [112]). It is now, at the very end of the book, that Antoinette/Bertha can say: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (WSS, pp. 155–56 [112]). We can read this as her having been brought into the England of Brontë’s novel: “This cardboard house”—a book between cardboard covers—“where I walk at night is not England” (WSS, p. 148 [107]). In this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her “self” into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that *Jane Eyre* can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation.

Critics have remarked that *Wide Sargasso Sea* treats the Rochester character with understanding and sympathy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he narrates the entire middle section of the book. Rhys makes it clear that he is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment rather than of a father’s natural preference for the firstborn: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester’s situation is clearly that of a younger son dispatched to the colonies to buy an heiress. If in the case of Antoinette and her identity, Rhys utilizes the thematics of Narcissus, in the case of Rochester and his patrimony, she touches on the thematics of Oedipus.<sup>9</sup> (In this she has her finger on our “historical moment.” If, in the nineteenth century, subject-constitution is represented as childbearing and soul making, in the twentieth century psychoanalysis allows the West to plot the itinerary of the subject from Narcissus [the “imaginary”] to Oedipus [the “symbolic”]. This subject, however, is the normative male subject. In Rhys’ reinscription of these themes, divided between the female and the male protagonist, feminism and a critique of imperialism become complicit.)

In place of the “wind from Europe” scene, Rhys substitutes the sce-

8. See, e.g., Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (Austin, Tex. 1979), pp. 108–16; it is interesting to note Staley’s masculinist discomfort with this and his consequent dissatisfaction with Rhys’ novel.

9. Narcissus and Oedipus are figures from Greek mythology. Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water; unable to touch the object of his desire, he dies of unfulfilled longing. Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother. Sigmund Freud used the Oedipus myth to describe a son’s feelings of love toward his mother and jealousy and hatred toward his father [Editor].

nario of a suppressed letter to a father, a letter which would be the "correct" explanation of the tragedy of the book.<sup>1</sup> "I thought about the letter which should have been written to England a week ago. Dear Father . . ." (WSS, p. 57 [39]). This is the first instance: the letter not written. Shortly afterward:

Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to). . . . I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet . . . (WSS, p. 59) [41]

This is the second instance: the letter not sent. The formal letter is uninteresting; I will quote only a part of it:

Dear Father, we have arrived from Jamaica after an uncomfortable few days. This little estate in the Windward Islands is part of the family property and Antoinette is much attached to it. . . . All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes. I dealt of course with Richard Mason. . . . He seemed to become attached to me and trusted me completely. This place is very beautiful but my illness has left me too exhausted to appreciate it fully. I will write again in a few days' time. (WSS, p. 63) [44-45]

And so on.

Rhys' version of the Oedipal exchange is ironic, not a closed circle. We cannot know if the letter actually reaches its destination. "I wondered how they got their letters posted," the Rochester figure muses. "I folded mine and put it into a drawer of the desk. . . . There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up" (WSS, p. 64 [45]). It is as if the text presses us to note the analogy between letter and mind.

Rhys denies to Brontë's Rochester the one thing that is supposed to be secured in the Oedipal relay: the Name of the Father, or the patronymic. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character corresponding to Rochester has no name. His writing of the final version of the letter to his father is supervised, in fact, by an image of the *loss* of the patronymic: "There was a crude bookshelf made of three shingles strung together over the desk and I looked at the books, Byron's poems, novels by Sir Walter Scott, *Confessions of an Opium Eater* . . . and on the last shelf, *Life and Letters of* . . . The rest was eaten away" (WSS, p. 63 [44]).

*Wide Sargasso Sea* marks with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse in Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse. We may perhaps

1. I have tried to relate castration and suppressed letters in my "The Letter As Cutting Edge," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis; The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (New Haven, Conn., 1981), pp. 208-26.

surmise the distance between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by remarking that Christophine's unfinished story is the tangent to the latter narrative, as St. John Rivers' story is to the former. Christophine is not a native of Jamaica; she is from Martinique. Taxonomically, she belongs to the category of the good servant rather than that of the pure native. But within these borders, Rhys creates a powerfully suggestive figure.

Christophine is the first interpreter and named speaking subject in the text. "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self' Christophine said," we read in the book's opening paragraph (WSS, p. 15 [9]). I have taught this book five times, once in France, once to students who had worked on the book with the well-known Caribbean novelist Wilson Harris, and once at a prestigious institute where the majority of the students were faculty from other universities. It is part of the political argument I am making that all these students blithely stepped over this paragraph without asking or knowing what Christophine's patois, so-called incorrect English, might mean.

Christophine is, of course, a commodified person. "'She was your father's wedding present to me'" explains Antoinette's mother, "'one of his presents'" (WSS, p. 18 [12]). Yet Rhys assigns her some crucial functions in the text. It is Christophine who judges that black ritual practices are culture-specific and cannot be used by whites as cheap remedies for social evils, such as Rochester's lack of love for Antoinette. Most important, it is Christophine alone whom Rhys allows to offer a hard analysis of Rochester's actions, to challenge him in a face-to-face encounter. The entire extended passage is worthy of comment. I quote a brief extract:

"She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her. Tell the truth now. She don't come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it's you come all the long way to her house—it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she give you all she have. Now you say you don't love her and you break her up. What you do with her money, eh?" [And then Rochester, the white man, comments silently to himself] Her voice was still quiet but with a hiss in it when she said "money." (WSS, p. 130) [95]

Her analysis is powerful enough for the white man to be afraid: "I no longer felt dazed, tired, half hypnotized, but alert and wary, ready to defend myself" (WSS, p. 130 [95]).

Rhys does not, however, romanticize individual heroics on the part of the oppressed. When the Man refers to the forces of Law and Order, Christophine recognizes their power. This exposure of civil inequality

is emphasized by the fact that, just before the Man's successful threat, Christophine had invoked the emancipation of slaves in Jamaica by proclaiming: "No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman" (WSS, p. 131 [96]).

As I mentioned above, Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native. No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self.<sup>2</sup> \* \* \*

Of course, we cannot know Jean Rhys' feelings in the matter. We can, however, look at the scene of Christophine's inscription in the text. Immediately after the exchange between her and the Man, well before the conclusion, she is simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation or justice. "Read and write I don't know. Other things I know." She walked away without looking back" (WSS, p. 133 [97]).

Indeed, if Rhys rewrites the mad woman's attack on the Man by underlining of the misuse of "legality," she cannot deal with the passage that corresponds to St. John Rivers' own justification of his martyrdom, for it has been displaced into the current idiom of modernization and development. Attempts to construct the "Third World Woman" as a signifier remind us that the hegemonic definition of literature is itself caught within the history of imperialism. A full literary reinscription cannot easily flourish in the imperialist fracture or discontinuity, covered over by an alien legal system masquerading as Law as such, an alien ideology established as only Truth, and a set of human sciences busy establishing the "native" as self-consolidating Other.

\* \* \*

I must myself close with an idea that I cannot establish within the limits of this essay. Earlier I contended that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is necessarily bound by the reach of the European novel. I suggested that, in contradistinction, to reopen the epistemic fracture of imperialism without succumbing to a nostalgia for lost origins, the critic must turn to the archives of imperialist governance. I have not turned to those archives in these pages. In my current work, by way of a modest and inexpert "reading" of "archives," I try to extend, outside of the reach of the European novelistic tradition, the most powerful suggestion in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: that *Jane Eyre* can be read as the orchestration and staging of the self-immolation of Bertha Mason as "good wife." The power of that suggestion remains unclear if we remain insufficiently

2. This is the main argument of my "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

knowledgeable about the history of the legal manipulation of widow-sacrifice in the entitlement of the British government in India. I would hope that an informed critique of imperialism, granted some attention from readers in the First World, will at least expand the frontiers of the politics of reading.

## BENITA PARRY

### [Two Native Voices in *Wide Sargasso Sea*]†

\* \* \*

[Gayatri Chakravorty] Spivak argues that because the construction of an English cultural identity was inseparable from othering the native as its object, the articulation of the female subject within the emerging norm of feminist individualism during the age of imperialism, necessarily excluded the native female, who was positioned on the boundary between human and animal as the object of imperialism's social-mission or soul-making.<sup>1</sup> In applying this interactive process to her reading of WSS,<sup>2</sup> Spivak assigns to Antoinette/Bertha, daughter of slave-owners and heiress to a post-emancipation fortune, the role of the native female sacrificed in the cause of the subject-constitution of the European female individualist. Although Spivak does acknowledge that WSS is 'a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native' (TWT, 253), and situates Antoinette/Bertha as caught between the English imperialist and the black Jamaican, her discussion does not pursue the text's representations of a Creole culture that is dependent on both yet singular, or its enunciation of a specific settler discourse, distinct from the texts of imperialism. The dislocations of the Creole position are repeatedly spoken by Antoinette, the 'Rochester' figure and Christophine; the nexus of intimacy and hatred between white settler and black servant is written into the text in the mirror imagery of Antoinette and Tia, a trope which for Spivak functions to invoke the other that could not be served:

We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. . . . When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. . . . I looked at her and I saw her

† From "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *The Oxford Literary Review* 9.1-2 (1987): 27-58. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Page references to this Norton Critical Edition are given in brackets after Parry's original citations.

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry* 12:1, abbreviated as TWT.

2. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), abbreviated as WSS.

She blinked and answered quickly, "I don't say I don't believe, I say I don't know, I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it. . . . Besides I ask myself is this place like they tell us? Some say one thing, some different, I hear it cold to freeze your bones and they thief your money, clever like the devil. You have money in your pocket, you look again and bam! No money. Why you want to go to this cold thief place? If there is this place at all, I never see it, that is one thing sure." [67]<sup>2</sup>

When Antoinette changes Christophine's more metaphorical "place"-England to the political "country"-England, Christophine recognizes the power of this vocabulary ("She blinked and quickly answered . . ."). As an Obeah woman whose knowledge exceeds the categories of English ontology, Christophine has been forced, at least in appearance, to acquiesce to the new "belief" system of legal incantations by which the new English order can imprison her as a practitioner of a competing code of power. When Christophine distances herself as a black Caribbean from the spiritual "place"-England, Antoinette switches the terminology to one of politics and fealty. Recognizing the threat implicit in the political terminology, Christophine retreats behind the double negative ("I didn't say I don't believe"), while countering the white creole myth of England with the black version of it as a "cold thief place." The magical word "country," Christophine discovers, only carries power in Prospero's mouth. She tries to use it as self-protection against Rochester's threats: "'No police here,' she said. 'No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman'" [96]. But apparently the political use of "country" is effective only for the white "children" of the "mother" country. For the black ex-slave, England is not a "mother" but a "thief," not a protector but an exploiter.

At the center of Rhys's writing is her extremely powerful deconstruction of this "family"—the mother country, England, and her children, the colonies. \* \* \* Rhys's Caribbean characters returning to the mother country do not find themselves nurtured in the "home" they have been so persuasively educated to expect, but rather find themselves once again in exile, this time not on the frontier, but in the heart of the metropolis.

\* \* \*

2. Benita Parry reads this difference between "belief" and "knowledge" as Christophine's challenge to Rochester and Western empiricism: "'Read and write I don't know. Other things I know.' She walked away without looking back" (WSS, p. 97). See Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9, nos. 1-2 (1987), p. 39; and in this volume, pp. 248-49.

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## Jean Rhys: A Chronology

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- 1890 Born in Roseau, Dominica, to Welsh father (Dr. William Rees Williams) and Creole mother (granddaughter of a Scottish-born plantation owner and a West Indian, possibly Cuban, woman). Named Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams.
- 1907 Leaves Dominica for England to attend Perse School for Girls in Cambridge.
- 1908-09 Leaves Perse School and enrolls in the Academy of Dramatic Art; stays two terms and is withdrawn on the basis of an unfavorable report on her progress. Refuses to return to Dominica and joins a touring musical comedy company as a chorus girl. Her father dies. Has a love affair with a wealthy older man who leaves her after 18 months, providing her with a long-standing pension.
- 1914 Writes manuscript in exercise books of what will be published twenty years later as *Voyage in the Dark*.
- 1919 Leaves England for Holland to marry Jean Lenglet, a Dutch journalist and poet (pen name Edward de Nève). They move to Paris.
- 1920 Their son, William, is born and dies after three weeks. Moves with Lenglet to Vienna, then Budapest.
- 1922 Returns to Paris and gives birth to daughter, Maryvonne, in Brussels.
- 1923-24 Meets Ford Madox Ford, who encourages her writing. Lenglet is imprisoned for breaking currency regulations in Vienna and entering Paris illegally and is extradited to Holland. She lives with Ford and Stella Bowen in Paris and becomes Ford's lover. Uses this experience for her novel *Quartet*. "Vienne" published under the name of Jean Rhys in the *transatlantic review*, edited by Ford.
- 1927 *The Left Bank and Other Stories*, with a preface by Ford, published by Jonathan Cape.
- 1928 *Postures* published by Chatto & Windus. (Published as *Quartet* in the United States).
- 1929 Lives in London with Leslie Tilden-Smith, her literary agent, while writing *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*.
- 1930 *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* published by Jonathan Cape.

- 1932 Translates *Barred* by Edward de Nève (Lenglet) and helps get it published.
- 1933 Divorces Jean Lenglet.
- 1934 *Voyage in the Dark* published by Constable. Marries Leslie Tilden-Smith.
- 1936 Visits the Caribbean (Martinique, St. Lucia, Dominica) and New York with Tilden-Smith.
- 1939 *Good Morning, Midnight* published by Constable. Outbreak of WWII.
- 1939-45 Rhys spends the war years in several small English villages and in London. Her daughter and Lenglet live in occupied Holland and participate in anti-Nazi resistance activities. Lenglet is arrested, imprisoned, and sent to a German concentration camp.
- 1945 Tilden-Smith dies. Rhys begins work on *Wide Sargasso Sea*.
- 1947 Marries Max Hamer, Tilden-Smith's cousin, and lives in London.
- 1948 Rhys arrested for assaulting neighbors and police. Sent to Holloway Prison Hospital for psychiatric evaluation; released after a week and placed on probation. Uses this experience later in short story "Let Them Call It Jazz." Answers actress Selma Vaz Dias's advertisement in the *New Statesman* seeking information about her whereabouts.
- 1950-52 Max Hamer imprisoned for misappropriating funds from his firm. Rhys lives alone in temporary rooms in Maidstone.
- 1955 Moves with Hamer to Cornwall.
- 1956 Selma Vaz Dias finds Rhys again with another advertisement in order to adapt *Good Morning, Midnight* for a radio play, which is broadcast on BBC in 1957. Rhys signs contract with André Deutsch for *Wide Sargasso Sea* and begins professional friendship with Diana Athill, Francis Wyndham, and Diana Melly, who help and encourage her writing for the remainder of her life.
- 1960 Moves with Hamer to Devonshire.
- 1961 Jean Lenglet dies.
- 1964 Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* published in *Art and Literature* without final revisions. Rhys has a heart attack.
- 1966 Max Hamer dies. Rhys has another heart attack. *Wide Sargasso Sea* published by André Deutsch; it wins the W. H. Smith Award for Writers and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature.
- 1968 *Tigers Are Better Looking*, a collection of short stories, published by André Deutsch.
- 1975 *My Day*, a collection of three autobiographical pieces, published in *Vogue* and in New York by Frank Hallman.

- 1976 *Sleep It Off, Lady*, a collection of short stories, published by André Deutsch.
- 1978 Receives the Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her literary work.
- 1979 Dies on May 14 in Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* published posthumously by André Deutsch.
- 1981 *Quartet* adapted to film by James Ivory and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala.
- 1993 *Wide Sargasso Sea* adapted to film by Jan Sharpe, Carole Angier, and John Duigan.