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Eileen Williams-Wanquet

► **To cite this version:**

Eileen Williams-Wanquet. Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea: From the Meshes of the Sargasso to Subversive Countersignature. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2007, *Identities and Voices*, 28, pp.198-221. hal-02343082

HAL Id: hal-02343082

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02343082>

Submitted on 1 Nov 2019

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Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea: From the Meshes of the Sargasso to Subversive Countersignature

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is generally recognised as being a re-writing of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). As a white Creole from Dominica in the West Indies, Rhys declared that she was "vexed at her [Brontë's] portrait of the 'tiger paper' lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes" [...] (*Letters* 262) and that Brontë was only presenting "one side — the English side" (*Letters* 297). She clearly states her intention of reversing Brontë's text to tell the story from the mad wife's point of view:

The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure — repulsive, which does not matter, and not once alive, which does. She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, she howls and laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry — off stage. For me [...] she must be right on stage.

Jane Eyre, although without Jane — the central consciousness — is clearly signalled as being the hypotext for *Wide Sargasso Sea* by a number of intertextual references.¹³⁵ Rhys's protagonists are carbon copies of an earlier cast: Antoinette Cosway Mason is Bertha Mason, Brontë's madwoman in the attic; her unnamed husband is Mr Rochester;¹³⁶ Mr Mason, the Englishman who marries Antoinette's mother, is named after Bertha's brother; in both texts, the woman who is paid to look after the mad Bertha is named Grace Poole. The narrative events are similar. For example, the materialistic motives for the arranged marriages are identical — both Rochesters, whose elder brothers inherited the family estate, are thrust into an alien culture for financial reasons and both brides are married to an Englishman to restore the family to the identity and

¹³⁵ I am here following Gérard Genette, who uses the term « transtextuality » to refer to all types of relations and echoes between texts, keeping the term « intertextuality » to refer to the actual presence of a text in another (for example in the form of quotation or allusion). The hypertext is grafted onto the hypotext and could not exist without it (*Palimpsestes* 7-11). The hypertextuality at work is what Michaël Riffaterre would call "compulsory" — as opposed to "uncertain" — because the reader cannot fail to identify it (Piégay-Gros 16).

¹³⁶ He will here be referred to as "Rochester," within speech marks.

stability of the dominant social order —; both Antoinette and Bertha have a mother who goes mad and an idiot brother; the facts of the husbands' lives after their marriages are identical. In both novels the marriages are set in Spanish Town, Jamaica (45 and *JE* 348) and Part III of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in *Jane Eyre*'s Thornfield Hall. Rhys even takes up Brontë's imagery of fire and ice (or heat and cold) as well as her use of colour symbolism.

But, as Derrida has shown in his essay, "Signature événement contexte," all repetition is also alteration (1972 375). And in Rhys's "extended repetition with a critical distance" (Hutcheon 7), it is the differences that are significant. Adrienne Rich famously defined "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering the text from a new critical direction" (35). Rhys's revision of Brontë's novel aims at giving a voice to the silenced other, to a "jarring witness," whose discrepant narrative has been excluded, bracketed by the dominant patriarchal and imperialistic discourse (Holton, esp. 3-53 and 246-57). As G. Spivak points out, "Rhys makes Antoinette see her self as her Other, Brontë's Bertha" (250-51). As she "promotes the raving monster who shrieks, grovels and laughs horribly to the status of an articulate 'I' who speaks from the 'other side' of the colonial divide" (Maurel: 2002 108), it "may be more precise to say that [she] is not writing the other story, but writing the other into the story [...] she is validating the parenthesis" (Mezei 68). Jane's authoritative voice (see Oates 45 ff.) is not only replaced by that of Antoinette but by a "mosaic of narratives" (Maurel: 1998 129), as Rochester also is given a voice. Not content with shifting the perspective radically by giving a voice and a point of view to the "other side," Rhys also decontextualises Brontë's story and re-contextualises it both spatially and temporally. As all language is inherently citational, it can be "ex-cited" — as it breaks free from its original subject and context to be grafted onto another context, it can be made to re-signify (see Derrida 1972). Rhys's "restaging and resignifying of the offensive [text]" is a kind of "counter-speech, a kind of talking back" (Butler 14-15). When Holton writes, "Literature, particularly the novel, is one arena in which the cognitive and ethical limits that bound the *sensus communis* may be affirmed, transgressed or attacked" (46), he is expressing the same idea

as Jacques Rancière, for whom the role of literature — as opposed to fiction — is to introduce “dissent” (139).

As Andrew Gibson notes, “the period of the anti-novel or self-reflexive novel has been followed by a return to representationalism” (1999, 92), as writers seek once more to comment the world. But in an age when self and representation have become problematical terms, the contemporary novel’s epistemological turn is characterised by particular forms of self-awareness and tends to associate both textual and historical engagements, viewing texts as ideological constructions or sites of power struggles and tending to challenge dominant systems.¹³⁷ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a re-writing of *Jane Eyre* from the other side, is doubly rooted, both in a previous text and in historical reality to make a subversive comment on imperialist mentality, inseparable from patriarchy [a division into two sexes which culturally privileges the masculine].

This article purports to show how *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as the story of Bertha’s past, illustrates how the characters are trapped by discourse — by a previous text and more generally by its underlying ideology — but is also an attempt to break free from the straitjacket of a patriarchal narrative. After showing how Rhys’s novel, as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, is a tragic tale of pre-destination moving towards a pre-written ending, then how her characters are also the powerless victims of a patriarchal colonial mentality upheld by the social system, I shall argue that Rhys nevertheless attempts to break free by subversively suggesting a different mode of being.

Wide Sargasso Sea is literally haunted by *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, Rhys’s first idea for the title was “Le Revenant” — meaning one who comes back from the dead (*Letters* 213). The chosen title insists more on the sense of being trapped — the Sargasso Sea lies north east of the lesser West Indies and is named after the seaweed that accumulates in the becalmed waters and can trap a ship. As Sylvie Maurel puts it, “the sargassos may be seen as an apt figure for stagnation and deadly repetitive patterns” (128). She is justified in saying that *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) “creates the illusion that it precedes”

¹³⁷ See A. Gibson’s *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (1986 esp. 69-73) for a discussion about the return to representationalism. See also Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction” as the most characteristic form of postmodern literature in *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1988 (esp. 105-23) and what Holton calls “postmodernism of resistance” (249).

Jane Eyre (1847) as it writes the unwritten history of creatures invented by a previous author, filling in Bertha Mason's past, leading up to her madness and imprisonment in Thornfield Hall and ending on her setting fire to the house and jumping from the roof. As the end is already pre-written in another book, or in John Hearne's terms, as "[i]ts validity depends on a book from elsewhere, not on a basic, assumed life" (188), the characters are trapped and cannot escape their destiny, which has already been played out in an uncanny overturning of the tyranny of time. This sense of entrapment is conveyed in many ways.

The intertextual repetition of characters, events, setting and symbolism is accompanied by a certain number of verbal echoes between the two novels, mainly concerning the description of Antoinette's transformation into Brontë's Bertha Mason. The unnamed husband engenders the mad woman in the attic when he begins calling his wife "Bertha" (*WSS* 70). As Bertha was also Antoinette's mother's name, she doubly inherits madness. When he calls her Bertha, she is drunk and laughing, and his remark, "Don't laugh *like that* [my italics], Bertha." (*WSS* 86), refers to Bertha Mason's mad laugh, which is regularly heard by Jane. As Antoinette goes mad, she is described in terms which inevitably recall *Jane Eyre* — for example, "her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen" (*WSS* 94) eerily echoes "the long dishevelled hair, the swelled black face" (*JE* 323). When the end has moved inexorably to Thornfield Hall, thus into the previous book, such echoes become actual quotations. For example, when Antoinette quotes her husband's words to herself, she refers to him as, "that man" and the words closely echo those spoken previously by Brontë's Rochester in his self-exculpatory account to Jane of his relations with his first wife — "Bertha Mason, — the true daughter of an infamous mother, — [...] a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (*JE* 349) — as though she were engendering him, in her turn: "I took the red dress down and put it against myself. 'Does it make me look *intemperate and unchaste*?' I said. '*That man* told me so. [...] 'Infamous daughter of an infamous mother,' he said to me [my italics]" (*WSS* 120).

The external repetition of *Jane Eyre* is reinforced by internal repetition (see Maurel 1998, 130). Antoinette's destiny repeats that

of her mother: in addition to their striking physical resemblance, both marry an Englishman, both marriages fail partly because of cultural incompatibilities, both become alcoholic, both go mad... The same words are repeated to describe them. For example, Antoinette says of her mother, "A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep — it might have been cut with a knife" (*WSS* 5) and her husband later describes her in the same terms: "the frown between her thick eyebrows, deep as if it had been cut with a knife" (*WSS* 88). A same event is repeated several times by different narrators, giving different versions. Part One, which is told by Antoinette, tells the story of her childhood and adolescence. Part Two is narrated by the husband, but contains embedded narratives — Daniel's letter is partly a doubling of Antoinette's account of her childhood (*WSS* 57-60) and when Antoinette tries to justify herself to Rochester in a long dialogue, we have yet another echo of Part One (*WSS* 82-86). Moreover, as Sylvie Maurel points out, the text is full of "what Gérard Genette calls 'repeating prolepses,' anticipations referring 'in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place' (131). She gives as example the passage preceding the adulterous scene with Amélie:

I sat on the bed waiting, for I knew that Amélie would come and I knew what she would say: 'I am sorry for you'.
She came soundlessly on bare feet. [...] Then she said, 'I am sorry for you.' (89)

The fact that anticipatory hints are immediately followed by resolution does help establish the narrative as a prophetic one. Indeed, as *Wide Sargasso Sea* usurps precedence, the whole text becomes prophetic. Sylvie Maurel borrows Tzvetan Todorov's expression, a "plot of predestination," to show how "the whole of the plot seems to be proceeding from pre-existing discourse" (131). For example, when the unnamed husband, who is the reincarnation of Edward Fairfax Rochester, announces, "I played the part I was expected to play" (*WSS* 44), he is not only referring to his father's plans, but also to his previous *persona*. He later sketches a blueprint for the cell in which he will incarcerate his wife: "I drew a house surrounded by trees. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman [...] it was an English house (106). Antoinette, the "revenant" of Bertha, also has a sense of *déjà vu*: "I must know more

than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago” (*WSS* 69). Moreover, the text is shot through with the characters’ sense of obligation, as though they were mere puppets of a tragic fate, with no control over their lives. For example, when “Rochester” receives the defamatory letter from Daniel (Antoinette’s half-brother) that is to trigger off the final decline of their marriage, he reflects: “I felt no surprise. It was as if I’d expected it, been waiting for it” (*WSS* 60). When Antoinette is locked up in Thornfield Hall and Grace Poole lights a fire, she wonders: “What is it that I must do?” (*WSS* 115). At the end of the novel, after dreaming that she sets fire to Thornfield and jumps off the roof, she walks along the corridor holding her candle and remarks to herself: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I must do” (*WSS* 123).

Furthermore, the text is full of forebodings and premonitions, as though the characters have a vague knowledge of what awaits them. Right from the start, the husband is plagued by misgivings and a vague sense of uneasiness, which is obviously due to more than the presence of the ex-slaves at Granbois and the unfamiliar landscape: “I woke next morning in the green-yellow light, feeling uneasy as though someone were watching me” (*WSS* 49). Colour symbolism reinforces the feeling of *malaise*, as the colour yellow crops up in moments of impending danger — for example, Daniel’s skin is yellow (*WSS* 79), Antoinette’s shawl is yellow the night she gives her husband the obeah love potion which misfires (*WSS* 82), the blanket onto which he vomits it up is yellow (*WSS* 88). Antoinette explains to her husband why she doesn’t wish to marry him: ““ I’m afraid of what might happen”” (*WSS* 45). Imagery is also used to prefigure the future, as the husband crushes underfoot the wreaths of frangipani — fragile flowers, representing Antoinette herself — that had been put on their bed (*WSS* 42) and as a large moth blunders into a candle (*WSS* 47) — attracted, like Antoinette, to deadly heat and love. Antoinette’s dream, which occurs three times, is premonitory, prefiguring her wedding to which she is led like a lamb to slaughter. The first dream occurs just after English strangers have arrived at Coulibri — Antoinette dreams she is walking in the forest” (*WSS* 10) and is followed by an unidentified stranger who hates her; however hard she

tries, she can do nothing. The second dream occurs when she is about to leave the security of the convent to be married. This time (*WSS* 34) she is following a man full of hatred “towards the forest” then into an “enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall” and up stone steps — obviously the third floor of Thornfield Hall. She is wearing a beautiful white dress, feels “sick with fear” and does not try to save herself, as she knows “this must happen.” Her dress, which hinders her movements, indeed does get dirtied, prefiguring the tragic marriage that finally deprives her of her identity. Many traditional Gothic trappings are present, here used, as in the nineteenth-century Gothic, to vehicle anxiety and dramatize the subjective inner anguish of the characters (see Luego and Maurel 154-55): the menacing forest and tall dark trees, the endangered innocent victim, the gloomy stone building with dark steps, the persecuted maiden in flight, etc. The third time Antoinette dreams, she has been transformed into Bertha and is now inside Brontë’s novel as the dream enacts the final inexorable convergence with *Jane Eyre*. As she becomes Bertha, prowling along the corridors of Thornfield Hall at night and laughing, she actually comes face to face with herself, with “that ghost of a woman whom they say haunts this place” (*WSS* 121), which is her own image in the mirror: “It was then that I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair [see *JE* 484]. She was surrounded with a gilt frame but I knew her” (*WSS* 122).

As Rhys puts Bertha back on stage by filling in her past until the inevitable pre-written end, she aims to explain “the why and wherefore” of Antoinette’s madness (*Letters* 164). But Rhys says she also wanted to explain Rochester’s cruelty towards Bertha: “I do not think it *justifies* him at all. I *do* think it *explains* him a bit” (*Letters* 270). Rhys’s characters are doubly trapped: their emancipation from *Jane Eyre*’s mid-nineteenth-century point of view into a vantage point situated at the ends of the 1960s, reveals how shackled they are by the historical, social and cultural forces which fashioned them, to what extent their individual psychic history is bound up with historical and political forces, how far “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected” (Woolf quoted in Carr 52). As Joyce Carol Oates writes, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is “a novel less of character than of destiny” (52). Indeed, Antoinette is in control neither of her dreamlike narrative nor of her life, but neither is her husband free to

act as he wishes. Both are trapped by historical circumstances, both are the victims of family, society, culture and more generally of ideologically saturated discourse,¹³⁸ which drive them inexorably to their tragic fates and make the novel “a complete study of tragic incompatibilities” (Thorpe 184). If *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read, as Coral Ann Howells argues, “as a post-colonial statement of resistance to an imperialist text” (21), it also “reads the precursory novel as a production of its cultural and social ethos” (Gregg 84). The ghosts are not only those of previous characters, they are also the ghosts of colonialism and its underlying psychic structures.¹³⁹

Several critics have read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a post-colonial novel (see Gregg, Oates, Howells, O’Connor, Spivak and Maurel 2002). Indeed, Rhys re-contextualises Brontë’s *story*, grounding it realistically in post-colonial time and space to make a comment on the scars left by colonisation. *Jane Eyre* was written in 1847, but the narrative events are set earlier, as “Jane Eyre, wife and mother in 1819,” recounts “the events of 1799-1809” (Oates 45).¹⁴⁰ Rhys shifts the dates to bring the story forward in time, opening her novel in the British West Indies (Jamaica and Dominica) around 1839¹⁴¹ and situating the events of her novel in the 1830s and 1840s, *i.e.* in the post-

¹³⁸ I refer to ideology as defined by Terry Eagleton in *Ideology* as “the whole complex of signifying practices in a particular society” (28). He explains: “But there is a third way between thinking of ideology as disembodied ideas on the one hand, and as nothing but a matter of certain behaviour patterns on the other. This is to regard ideology as a discursive or semiotic phenomenon. And this at once emphasises its materiality (since signs are material entities), and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with *meanings*” (194). “Ideology goes to work on the ‘real’ situation [...]” (209). Ideology is linked to power, as the dominant group inevitably produces the ideology which will uphold its power. Ideology functions through discourse. I use the term “discourse” here in the sense which Michel Foucault gives it. “Discursive formations” are ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context and which linguistically produce the vision we have of reality and of the subject. Discourse is linked to power and knowledge, as the dominant discourse is supported by institutions (see Mills on Foucault 16-22).

¹³⁹ As Sylvie Maurel points out, Rhys’s “rhetoric of haunting” is a characteristic feature of postcolonial writing according to David Punter, and acts as a comment on the “evil agency of colonial history” (2002 112).

¹⁴⁰ St John Rivers offers the newly published book *Marmion* to Jane towards the end of the novel (*JE* 427). If one knows that *Marmion* was published in 1808, it is possible to situate the story of Jane in historical time (see Gregg 83).

¹⁴¹ When Antoinette signs her name in the convent, she adds the date: 1839 (29). About “eighteen months later” (33) she is “over seventeen” (33) when she is taken away to be married. Also the literary references in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are anachronistic in terms of *Jane Eyre*. Tennyson’s painting of “The Miller’s Daughter,” which hangs in Coulibri (17, 23) was not well known until the 1840s. Moreover, most of Byron’s poetry and all of W. Scott’s novels, which “Rochester” notices on the shelves at Granbois (43), appeared after 1800.

slavery period.¹⁴² Right from the opening pages, personal tragedies are grounded in historical conditions, which are expressed through dramatisation, characterisation and imagery. The old order is passing and a new order emerging, as is symbolised by the garden at Coulibri: “Our garden was large and beautiful [...] But it had gone wild (*WSS* 10). As V. M. Gregg writes, “All the human relationships are marked by slavery and the plantation, society, and all are constructed, for the most part, within these parameters” (85-86). Economic concerns condition life. The Cosways’ neighbour, Mr Luttrell, commits suicide because the “compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed” has not arrived (*WSS* 3). Annette and Antoinette are excluded from the White British Jamaican community because they are poor, which explains why the ex-slaves jeer at them as “white nigger[s]” (*WSS* 8). “Mr Mason [Annette’s new husband, who also has properties in Antigua and Trinidad (*WSS* 14)] represents a new breed of English merchants and imperialists who still seek to dominate the life of the colonies” (Gregg 91), as does Rochester — Christophine comments: “New ones worse than old ones — more cunning that’s all” (*WSS* 10). As notes Frantz Fanon, “In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (quoted in Gregg 89).

The characters represent social and racial categories, which are a legacy of the colonial system and which condition their vision and determine their relations. Just as the Sargasso Sea stands between Europe and the West Indies, the characters stand for opposed categories: English and French, Whites and Blacks, English people from England and Creoles (white people born in the West Indies), rich and poor, colonisers and colonised, the half-castes being rejected by all the others. The hostility towards Annette is partly explained by the fact that she is from the French West-Indian island of Martinique and as Daniel writes to “Rochester,” “French and English like cat and dog in these islands since long time ago” (*WSS* 58). Antoinette and the black girl, Tia, *could* have been friends, indeed *should* have been as they get on particularly well as individuals, but they are not free of social prejudice formed in the past, which keeps coming between

¹⁴² As Kathy Mezei explains, the “Abolition Act of 1833 did not free slaves immediately except under the age of 6; only in 1838 were all slaves in the British West Indies set free” (62).

them — when Tia cheats her friend out of a few pennies, the stereotype of the Negro unconsciously dictates Antoinette’s insult as she calls Tia a “cheating nigger” to which Tia echoes, “white nigger” (*WSS* 7), as their possible friendship is undercut by the breakdown of the relationship between blacks and whites that has its roots in slavery. Similarly, Annette’s marriage to Mr Mason is doomed to failure: as a Creole she has an inside knowledge of things and feels the lurking danger from the rebel ex-slaves, whereas he is the product of an ideology of colonial cultural superiority and thinks he knows better and his lack of judgement culminates in the burning of Coulibri (*WSS* 14-15).

The marriage of Antoinette and “Rochester” is set in this post-colonial background and all these dichotomies symbolize the mutually destructive differences between them. To explain Antoinette’s madness and show how she is *driven* mad, Rhys reverses the identity-building process of *Jane Eyre*. Jane’s assured, masterful voice disappears to be replaced by a carnival of voices among which Antoinette’s is predominant, as Jane’s activity and control give way to Antoinette’s passive unjudging nature and increasing loss of control. Contrarily to Jane, who progressively acquires an individual identity, Antoinette follows the opposite curve — she moves from the tentative identity she embroiders in a medley of colours in the convent school (*WSS* 29) to the final loss of identity, to become “only a ghost” (*WSS* 111), a voiceless “doll” or “marionette” (*WSS* 112, 100), a zombie or dehumanised ghost, a “lunatic” (*WSS* 107) who has been deprived of liberty and autonomy, whose spirit has been broken and stolen. Antoinette’s madness is set in a context of the betrayal of history. As Teresa O’Connor puts it, “The levels of betrayal range from the cultural and historical implicit in the relationships between blacks and whites to the familial and filial levels” (198). Antoinette goes mad *because* she is betrayed by everyone — by her mother who rejects her; by her black friend Tia who throws a stone at her when the ex-slaves attack Coulibri (*WSS* 23); by the family servant Amélie who sleeps with her husband (*WSS* 61); by her jealous half-caste brother Daniel who writes a slanderous letter to her husband, (*WSS* 57-60); by Richard, Mr Mason’s son, who marries her off for money (*WSS* 68), thereby handing over all she possesses to her husband — “That is English law” Antoinette explains to

Christophine (*WSS* 68); by her aunt Cora who “turn[s] her face to the wall” (*WSS* 71); even by Christophine, who hates “Rochester” and influences her against him. Despite this, there are many moments when the reader has the impression that things *could* have worked out between Antoinette and her husband, but other characters keep interfering in their marriage and the whole society conspires to separate them. For example, even after Daniel’s libellous letter, “Rochester” is ready to love Antoinette — “I longed to bury my face in her hair as I used to do. I said, ‘we are letting ghosts trouble us. Why shouldn’t we be happy?’” (*WSS* 87) — but she makes him drink Christophine’s obeah love potion, which misfires and leads to his betraying her with Amélie. Even at the very end, as he takes her away, he is well disposed towards her — “She lifted her eyes. Blank lovely eyes. [...] I don’t know what I would have said or done. In the balance — everything” (*WSS* 111). But, once more, the alien background he cannot cope with intervenes in the form of what he takes to be a “half-savage boy” (*WSS* 112) and the moment is lost: “But at this moment the nameless boy leaned his head against the clove tree and sobbed” (*WSS* 111). Moreover, madness is literally written into her, as language, in a Foucauldian concept of power, is used as an instrument by the strong against the weak, reinforcing the heredity which binds her, as all the characters keep repeating to Rochester that she is “going the same way as her mother” (*WSS* 12, 26, 60, 79), until he also begins to see her as mad and to call her mad, finally actually engendering the mad woman in the attic as he renames her Bertha (*WSS* 70, 86, 87, 95) after her mother, leading Christophine to comment: “It is in your mind to pretend she is mad” (*WSS* 104).

Of course, the main agent in Antoinette’s descent into madness is her husband. He is not only influenced by the prejudices of post-colonial West-Indian society, which is itself the product of an imperialist ideology. In addition, he was engendered by a previous novel, which is also the product of the same Empire-founding ideology. “Rochester” is thus a pure product of an imperialist discursive formation, which relies “upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed upon codes of understanding” (Said quoted in Maurel 2002, 108). As such, he is as much of a puppet as is his wife. The dominant power is reinforced by the use of language, by the “Letter of the Law” upheld by social structures, as Christophine explains: “They

got magistrates. They got fine [*sic*]. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash people's feet" (*WSS* 10). Both Antoinette / Bertha and "Rochester" / Rochester are caught up in the straitjacket of a one-sided European frame narrative, which Rhys makes visible or de-doxifies — *i.e.* reveals that it is an ideological construct and not a natural state of affairs — as she writes back from the other side of the colonial divide. The characters are trapped in patriarchal social structures of mutual exploitation, as the destructive differences between Antoinette and "Rochester" are reflections of those between the island and England. In suggesting "the common workings of fascism, racism and bourgeois patriarchy, the persecutory power of the modern religion of intolerance" (Carr 62), Rhys echoes Virginia Woolf, who argued in *Three Guineas* that, "patriarchy, racism, pomposity, militarism, economic exploitation, autocracy and fascism are all part of the same process" (Carr 51). Sexual politics are interlinked in this wider system of power relationships and within that discourse gender is only one factor alongside class and money (O'Connor 12).

Jane Eyre is revealed as being itself the product of unquestioned imperialist ideology, as one of the classic texts of nineteenth-century British imperialism, both fashioned by and upholding the dominant system. Brontë's novel reinforces dichotomies that are the tools of power: self / other, Europe / colonies, civilisation / savagery, God / Devil, reason / passion, man / woman, sane / mad, sex and domination / love and reciprocity, etc. Bertha Mason, the mad Creole woman from the colonies, represents the inhuman inarticulate other ruled by monstrous passion, excess of which has driven her mad — she is repeatedly described in animal terms (dog, tigress, bird of prey, wild beast, she lives in a den and grovels on all fours); she is denied a voice (she only laughs, bellows, yells, snarls, gurgles, moans), an intelligence, a presence on the narrative stage, a past and an identity; she is repeatedly referred to as "it" or "the thing;" she is compared to the devil; she represents evil linked to passionate excess being defined by adjectives such as malignant, gross, impure, vicious, cruel, deprived, intemperate, unchaste, etc.; her horrifying physical aspect is qualified as savage and wild (see *JE*, esp. 347-59). Jane, who represents the "healthy heart of England" (*JE* 408), is "the antipodes of the Creole" (*JE* 354), a pure intelligent self-controlled

English girl of moral integrity. Rochester is the long-suffering victim manacled to a mad and monstrous wife. He is convinced that he is performing his duty, his social mission, by taking his mad wife back to England. In the name of social order Bertha has to be killed off and excessive passion controlled.

As Rhys fills in Bertha's absent past, she reveals another side, the "other" point of view that is absent from *Jane Eyre*. She not only reverses the picture by showing how it is Antoinette that is trapped — "like her island, she is 'colonized,' her independence an autonomy subsumed to British culture and to British law" (O'Connor 193) — but Rochester is also a victim of the same system, which comes between them. Even though they were forced into marriage by their families for reasons of finance and of social status — "I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks" (*WSS* 39) — it is made clear that they *could* have loved one another. But the depiction of their physical passion and of Antoinette's dawning happiness at Granbois is tainted from the start, as it contains the germs of the destructive ideology that contains them, as is signalled by ominous signs such as the moth blundering into the candle (*WSS* 47), the crushed flowers (*WSS* 42), the rats staring at them from the window sill (*WSS* 48) or the snakes and monster crabs lurking in the forest (*WSS* 52).

Rochester embodies the character of the coloniser, presenting many of the "imperializing desires deeply embedded in the education of privileged Englishmen — the narcissism, the will to domination, and the inevitable tragedy that it breeds" (Woolf, *Room*, qtd. in Gregg 106) or the characteristics described by the ethnologist Octave Mannoni under the label the "Prospero complex."¹⁴³ Right from the start he feels insecure, uneasy and unhappy in the island, which is too different and against which he is prejudiced by his upbringing — "Not only wild but menacing" (*WSS* 39). Antoinette is assimilated to her island, "not English or European either [...] a stranger" (*WSS* 37, 39). He feels that, "[e]verything is too much. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green" (*WSS* 39) — the medley of bright

¹⁴³ Mannoni is an ethnologist who worked in Madagascar. In his book entitled *Prospero et Caliban: psychologie de la colonisation* (1950), he defines the typical coloniser as suffering from the "Prospero complex" or "complex of inferiority." The need for domination stems from a deep feeling of insecurity, giving characters who are paternalistic, vain, impatient, dominating, arrogant and racist (9).

colours in nature being the same as the ones in which Antoinette writes her name (*WSS* 29). A victim of the superiority of his sex and birth, he mistrusts everyone. He feels superior to his wife and treats her as an object, referring to her as “this Creole girl” (*WSS* 45), “My wife” (*WSS* 36) or “the woman” (*WSS* 39). He is repeatedly shown as being hostile and unfeeling toward her — Christophine tells Antoinette that he is “hard as a board” (*WSS* 71). He replaces love and reciprocity by sex and domination: “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. [...] she was a stranger to me” (*WSS* 56), then is too proud to admit that he loves her — “‘Don’t you love me at all?’ [...] ‘No, I do not’ “ (*WSS* 95) — even though deep down he knows he did, but repressed his feelings — “*Love her as I did — oh yes I did*” (*WSS* 102). He is an aggressive warrior, who wants to break Antoinette up — as Christophine keeps repeating to him, “All you want is to break her up” (*WSS* 99) — and who captures wealth, property and people — he wants to possess his wife, even when she has become mad: “She’s mad but *mine, mine*” (*WSS* 108). He is endangered by the imperial tradition and his very identity is constituted by that history. As Gregg puts it:

The West Indian novel insists that the imperial tradition — out of which the husband emanates and into which he dissolves — depends for its existence on the reconstitution of Others as creatures of European will and a belief in Europe’s right of appropriation. Yet, at the same time, it anatomizes and displays the ravages of such a system on the person who appears to be privileged and dominant. (105-06)

To survive, “Rochester” has to assert his ego and assure his dominance — as he plans her transfer to England (*WSS* 106), “[h]is decision to act is written as an act that privileges his ego” as his interior monologue is punctuated by the word “I”, which appears fifteen times (Gregg 106). Thus Antoinette is broken up and driven mad by an encompassing ideological system through the agency of “Rochester”, who is guilty mainly because he conforms to the ideology that fashioned him and who is also himself a victim, as Grace Poole explains: “He was gentle, generous, brave. His stay in the West Indies has changed him out of all knowledge. He has grey in his hair and misery in his eyes” (*WSS* 114).

The romantic excess of forbidden desire is at the heart of the conflict and the struggle is finally between the predominance either of reason or of feeling. Sylvie Maurel describes *Jane Eyre* as a “wintry romance” (1998 145) and Donald Stone as a “Victorianised romance” or “realistic romance” or “an accommodation between self and society, passion and duty, romance and reality” (102), because the resolution of Jane’s journey to self-realisation depends on Bertha — as Jane’s dark double — being killed in order for reason and social order to triumph. The novel is the story of Jane’s struggle to moderate her passionate nature with reason, Brontë’s strategy being both to repress and undercut romantic excess and to balance one kind of temptation with its reverse — if Rochester, the man of fire, is all romantic passion, urging Jane to succumb to emotional excess, St John Rivers, the ice-man, is all Christian ambition, urging her to succumb to spiritual asceticism. The Rochester that Jane marries has to be damaged, as wish-fulfilment has to be paid by some sacrifice and cultural survival is at the cost of curtailment of desire, as Brontë engages with what David Lodge describes as the dilemma of “how to buy bliss without selling one’s soul” (Lodge 118). But Rhys reveals the dangers inherent in such a system, by showing that the shared tragedy of Antoinette and “Rochester” is that he “has never learnt to give, nor Antoinette to receive securely” (Thorpe 184) — they are *both* damaged by their incapacity for love as relationship. Indeed “Rochester was taught to weed out feelings — “How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier” (*WSS* 63) — by a patriarchal culture that disastrously represses emotion in the name of reason and perpetuates itself through binary strictures.

Although Rhys’s re-writing of *Jane Eyre* cannot actually alter the pre-written ending, she goes further than revealing the hidden workings of patriarchy by explaining how both Antoinette/Bertha and Rochester are trapped and conditioned by the dominant ideology. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also a subversive countersigning to Brontë’s novel and more deeply to the ideology in which it is embedded. Sylvie Maurel justly argues that Jean Rhys transforms *Jane Eyre* into a “tropical romance,” giving “free rein to everything that is suppressed” (1998 149,154). First of all, “excess is recommended where *Jane Eyre* advocates temperance and self-control” (Maurel 1998,

153). Indeed, as “Rochester” notes, “everything is too much” (*WSS* 39) for him — Antoinette’s eyes are “too large” (*WSS* 37), sexual passion is excessive (*WSS* 55), the noise made by crickets and frogs is “deafening” (*WSS* 47), the stars are “blazing” (*WSS* 53), the scent of the flowers is “overpoweringly strong” (*WSS* 49), etc. Secondly, Rhys revers[es] Charlotte Brontë’s ‘romance of reality’ into ‘a romantic novel’” (Maurel 1998, 150). The lush tropical setting is no longer the “overheated madness-inducing milieu” (Maurel 1998, 150) of *Jane Eyre*, but is presented as the idyllic world of Granbois, which romantically invokes “the past and socially remote” (Beer, quoted in Maurel 1998 150). The “powerful polarising tendency” opposing an “idyllic world” and a “demonic or night world,” which Northrop Frye names as one of the basic features of romance (Frye, quoted in Maurel 150), is typically present in a “magical, rather than in a purely ethical sense” (Jameson, quoted in Maurel 1998 151). Thirdly, the Gothic devices that are ironically undercut by comedy in *Jane Eyre* come to the fore, as Rhys “removes Gothic fantasy from the strictures of the subtext in which it is confined in *Jane Eyre*” (Maurel 1998 154-55). Anthony Luego argues that Rhys uses the Gothic to explore “the turbid depths of the human soul” (229) — as indeed does Brontë, but with an ironic distance that is absent for Rhys. Luego argues that Rhys makes “economic and effective use” of “the conventional machinery of the Gothic”, avoiding the “traditional claptrap” to concentrate on the use of the landscape, which replaces traditional Gothic ruins and castles to “convey [...] the subjective states of her characters” (231). Thus the dense tropical forest conveys the English husband’s sense of impending danger and the moon, linked to Antoinette, expresses her deteriorated mental state — her “blank hating moonstruck face” (*WSS* 108) — and his sense of her alienation — “Not night or darkness as I knew it but night with [...] an alien moon” (*WSS* 53). Other typically Gothic features include the presence of the ruins in the forest (*WSS* 64), the use of magic and superstition with the presence of obeah and of ghosts as mental phenomena (Luego 238).

Drawing on Rosemary Jackson’s theory of the fantastic, Sylvie Maurel further reads “the specificity of Rhysian Gothic” as “fantastic destabilization” (1998 155-66). Jackson interprets the fantastic as “exist[ing] as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the nov-

el's closed monological forms with open dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its opposite, its unrecognizable reflection" (Jackson, quoted in Maurel 1998 155), in other words as the anti-rational, the reverse of reason's orthodoxy. First, Rhys uses the fantastic alongside the plausible in order to "subvert the patriarchal categorization of the real" by giving "utterance to all that is unsayable within the dominant order" (155). Fantastic uncertainty is conveyed through many devices: descriptions in negative terms give a sense of the unnameable to the West Indies and its inhabitants — for example, "Annette is "so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either" (*WSS* 17); multi-voicedness and conflicting views replace an authoritative voice; Rochester gradually loses all sense of certainty when he gets lost in the forest (*WSS* 64), etc. Secondly, Rhys combines simile (which, according to Jackson, is incompatible with the fantastic) and metaphor to "give explicit utterance to things which cannot be articulated in the dominant idiom," as a "simile explicitly tells us what a metaphor merely nudges us into noting" (158). In the example quoted: "England is like a dream" (*WSS* 47), familiar categories are disfigured and the limit between fiction and reality become interchangeable. Thirdly, for Jackson, "the basic trope of fantasy is the oxymoron, [...] which holds together contradictions and sustains them in impossible unity" (Jackson 21, qtd. in Maurel 1998, 161). Maurel finally reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* on the whole as a "realized oxymoron," which "makes the bracketed subtext surface on a par with the masculine text" (165-166). Antoinette's oxymoronic nature as both mad and not mad, as a "lunatic who always knows the time" (*WSS* 107), is "an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility" and gives "utterance to the mysteries silenced by patriarchal sense and logic" (161). There is a final "victory of oxymoronic impossibility over the either/or of patriarchy" (164), as the dichotomy sanity/madness is abolished, even if "Rochester" finally re-establishes the patriarchal opposition between the two, by locking up his wife as mad.

In *L'écriture féminine en Angleterre*, Frédéric Regard suggests going further than Sylvie Maurel's interpretation of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as fantastic destabilization and as oxymoronic in structure (145-53), by developing the idea of the "dissolution of separate categories" and of the "reversibility and ambiguity" of Antoinette's

world that Maurel mentions (102, 160). Indeed, instead of simply holding opposite categories in unsolvable oxymoronic paradox, *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that everything is constantly and instantaneously reversible and ambiguous, the dichotomous either/or structure upholding patriarchy being replaced by a simultaneous both/and structure as limits are abolished, dissolving the oxymoronic structure. Everything is also at the same time its opposite. As Antoinette says, “There is always the other side, always” (*WSS* 81). This is a world where boundaries are overlapped and separate categories blurred: between life and death — “Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness [...] Not close. The same” (*WSS* 57) says “Rochester;” between sleep and wakefulness — “when she wake it’s as if she is still sleeping [*sic*]” says Christophine of Antoinette (*WSS* XXX); between good and bad — “The best — and sometimes the worst,” as Christophine tells “Rochester”, (*WSS* 101); between love and hate — “Again the giddy change [...] the sickening swing back to hate” remarks “Rochester” (*WSS* 111); truth and lies — “like all memories a legend. Or a lie” thinks “Rochester” about his mad wife (*WSS* 113); “Everything was brightness or dark. [...] That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, heaven and Hell” remarks Antoinette about life in the convent (*WSS* 32); Antoinette is afraid “[o]f nothing, of everything” (*WSS* 42). Time becomes reversible and uncertain in this dreamlike world, as past, present and future are conflated in a dizzying whirl of uncanny repetitions, as experiences are distorted in a mirror-like eddy of connections and separations, till the future of the text is finally swallowed up by another text situated in the past. Neither *Jane Eyre* nor *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes first, just as Antoinette and Annette, her mother, are reversible, one *being* also the other. The title is once more significant, as the characters are caught between two realities in a no man’s land situated between the old and the new worlds, in a sea full of asexual ungraspable slippery eels. Even geographical boundaries disappear, as Antoinette says : “They tell me I’m in England, but I don’t believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don’t remember but we lost it” (*WSS* 117). Regard interprets this haunted text as more than fantastic, preferring Freud’s term “*Unheimliche*” (152) or “*inquiétante étrangeté*” — the hidden secret, the plurality that infiltrates the known world, the coincidence of a thing with its opposite, that like

death (the signifier without a signified) eludes all understanding and is impossible to represent (see Cixous: 1974, quoted in Regard 149) — to define this instantaneous ungraspable substitutive doubling process, that Derrida refers to as a “*taking place*” and which is the “operation of the feminine” (Derrida: 2000 69 ff. and 116-17, quoted in Regard 148, 153).

I would like to add that Rhys further marks her text off from Brontë's by the symbolical echoing of the related words “secret,” “hidden,” “silence,” “truth,” “lies” and “nothing” linked to the theme of money, by her subversive use of colour symbolism, and by her ambiguous ending. As noted before, Antoinette follows the opposite curve to Jane: whereas Jane builds up her identity, Antoinette progressively loses hers. It has also been said that *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives free rein to the excessive passion repressed in *Jane Eyre*. More precisely and as Teresa O'Connor notes, whereas Jane “moves from expressed passion and rage to controlled passion, Antoinette moves from an apparently affectless behaviour to the ‘mad’ expression of passion and rage” (188). Madness is thus linked both to excessive passion and to loss of identity. O'Connor, like Carole Angier, notes “a dichotomy between sex and love” in the novel (O'Connor 89), as Antoinette's husband “turns love into sex” (Angier 544), then tries to destroy and possess that which he cannot understand or control. O'Connor associates the love/sex opposition to that between a feminine “interior” world of peace and a dangerous masculine “outside” world, as expressed in Antoinette's dreams (see O'Connor 183-86). Carole Angier also points out the opposition between Antoinette's interior world and the dominant patriarchal society: “[I]ike all Jean's heroines, Antoinette lives almost entirely in *feeling*, and relies on her feelings to get at the truth. [...] Inside her heroine all that matters is love, but outside her, in her lover, all that matters is money” (Angier 557) — the mad but lucid Antoinette indeed reflects: “Gold is the idol they worship” (*WSS* 122). Thus in the dominant patriarchal order, the expression of passion as love leads to loss of identity, because this is a world that secretly represses feeling, engendering madness as death of the soul or self (Angier 545-46). Thus Antoinette, deprived of her husband's love, becomes a “zombie” (*WSS* 27) or “soucriant” (*WSS* 73). The “secret” that eludes “Rochester” is linked to Antoinette, to the island of Granbois, to magic and dream.

The “secret” is love as reciprocal sharing. The secret is the “truth.” But in the dominant patriarchal order, which is upheld by the power of the word, of the letter, of the law and which is represented by the husband, love is hidden, silenced, reduced to “lies,” becoming “nothing.” As he leaves Granbois, “Rochester” has a sudden intuition:

So I shall never understand why, suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that all I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true — all the rest’s a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here.

(But it is lost, that secret, and those who know it cannot tell it.)

Not lost. I had found it in a hidden place and I’d keep it, hold it fast. As I’d hold her. (*WSS* 109)

But he chooses the reason of the dominant order: “All the mad conflicting emotions had left me wearied and empty. Sane” (*WSS* 112). And Antoinette is “only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie” (*WSS* 113). Part II, which marks the disappearance of “Rochester” from the narrative scene, ends with the words, “Who would have thought that any boy would cry like that. For nothing. Nothing. ...” (*WSS* 113), “nothing” being Rhys’s “final name for love” (*Angier* 559). Thus the genesis and nature of madness is unmasked as repression of all that is “other”.

But Rhys is not content with making visible the secret lie of patriarchy. The unnamed husband is himself reduced to nothingness, as “his life and text [...] decompose at the end of his narrative into a ‘Nothing’ [...] annulled, reabsorbed into the Eurocentric discourses of narrative and history” (Gregg 101-02) and Antoinette is given the last word, her voice taking over the final section of the novel. Moreover, in this Part Three, the feminine subtext symbolically explodes to the surface in a blaze that destroys this dominant discourse. Red, which metaphorically signifies reprehensible passion in *Jane Eyre*, is also associated with passion, with Antoinette and with her red-soiled island throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As such, it is repeatedly repressed by her husband, as he symbolically blows out the candles at Granbois (*WSS* 93), prefers her white (for innocence) dress (*WSS* 80) and rejects the flame-red dress she identifies herself with as “intemperate and unchaste” (*WSS* 120). This tendency to suppress the colour red is reversed in the third part of the novel. As Antoinette

takes her red dress “that has a meaning” (WSS119) from the cupboard in the red-curtained room in which she has asked Grace Poole to light a fire and is reminded of the “colour of fire and sunset” and of “flamboyant flowers” (WSS 119), the colour red literally suffuses the text, as everything associated with red is repeated again and again, echoing through the pages. The red of flames invades the final pages as Antoinette dreams she sets fire to “their world [...] made of cardboard” (WSS 116), thus symbolically destroying the dominant patriarchal order that is upheld by discourse and opening the way to a different vision of reality. Instead of really setting fire to Thornfield as Bertha does, Antoinette metaphorically sets fire to the discourse which perpetuates the repressive patriarchal order and to the book which engendered her.

Moreover, Antoinette does not actually die or set fire to Thornfield at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She only dreams her act of revenge and her death. But the dream ending is different from that of *Jane Eyre*. In her dream Antoinette does not die like Bertha, smashed up on the pavement of Thornfield. She does not fall onto the “hard stones” (WSS 123) of her stone-walled prison (WSS 34), where the man who is cold and dead like a “stone” (WSS 95) has imprisoned her. Instead, she jumps to freedom as her “hair stream[s] out like wings” and she hears Coco, the parrot, which in obeah is associated with the soul (Angier 561-2), and sees the flame tree, “which lifts up the buried soul when it flowers” (Angier 563). She does not jump to her future in a past text. Instead, she lands in the past with Tia in the pool at Coulibri (WSS 123) as Eurocentricism is reversed, the past cancels out the present and dream triumphs over reality — “Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it” (WSS 123). Only then does she walk along the passage with her candle to accomplish the ending in *another* book, transferring the revenge to *another* text: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (WSS 123). She does not cross the gap from dream to reality in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She remains in her natural element, dream, leaving Bertha and Brontë to inhabit reality (see Howells 122 and esp. Angier 529-33). But as it is a reality “made of cardboard” it can be destroyed by the flames.

Rhys's re-writing of *Jane Eyre* goes much further than an explanatory prequel as it creates a counter discourse, which suggests

the possibility of a fundamental change of mentality. As Hélène Cixous writes, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: “Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (quoted in Carr 81). In Judith Butler’s words, “if the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression” (Butler 28), repetition with a difference can break free from the binary structures of established power and suggest the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read as a “post-feminist” work, as part of what Drucilla Cornell, in *Beyond Accommodation*, names “ethical feminism.” This is different from a feminism that acts on the real world in the aim of achieving equality by either reversing the hierarchy between men and women or by entering male spheres of power — she explains that such a “politics of revenge” would “only reverse the gender hierarchy, not displace it. Such a reversal would not be liberation, but only perpetuation, even if women were to finally be on top” (11). This starts with a disruption of “the tyranny of established reality” and a re-metaphorization of reality, a re-writing of the fictions “through which we portray ourselves” (Cornell 2-3).¹⁴⁴ Rhys’s countersignature is what Derrida would call “subjunctification,” a marking-off, which is also a re-marking suggesting new possibilities for the future, a “*might of the may*” (Derrida: 2000 95).

Eileen Williams-Wanquet¹⁴⁵

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¹⁴⁴ As food for thought, it can be pointed out that postmodern ethics’ insistence on openness to the other is not totally foreign to both Hinduism’s and Christianity’s stress on the killing of the ego and the harmonious reunion of the masculine and feminine — as though it were a sort of religion without god.

¹⁴⁵ Université de La Réunion (France).

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