

From madwoman to
rebel: jean rhys's
reinvention of bertha
mason in wide
sargasso ...



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Jean Rhys' 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from a modern, postcolonial standpoint. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Brontë's "madwoman in the attic" from Bertha Mason's own point of view. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is "hidden away," both in terms of her physical place in the attic and also in terms of her own history and voice. Rhys, however, develops Bertha into a complex character: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette Cosway is a strong woman who rebels against and overcomes the colonial and patriarchal oppressions that face her as a result of her West Indian identity. Rhys' novel depicts Antoinette's ultimate vengeance on Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre* as a valid response to this oppression. By shifting points of view and rewriting certain events in Brontë's text, Rhys subverts the colonialist framework out of which *Jane Eyre* and Brontë herself came. In writing *Jane Eyre* and the character of Bertha Mason, Charlotte Brontë appears to have relied on several colonialist pretenses. Ellen Friedman writes that Jean Rhys "exposes the assumptions of...nineteenth-century English imperialism, Christianity, and patriarchy that served as the context for Charlotte Brontë's text" (1175). The first of these assumptions is that Bertha, as a Caribbean woman, is inherently different from English women like Jane. Rochester's initial portrayal of Bertha in his dialogue with Jane characterizes her as, in the words of Edward Said, "sensual...more or less stupid, and...willing" (145). Rochester initially meets Bertha at a party, and "she flattered [him], and lavishly displayed for [his] pleasure her charms and accomplishments" (Brontë 260); the diction of "displayed" and "pleasure" specifically calls to mind Bertha's sensuality and her role as an exotic other. Brontë also possibly alludes to syphilis when Rochester tells Jane, "[Bertha's] excesses had prematurely developed the germs of

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insanity,” again indicating Bertha’s supposed sexual excesses (261).

Similarly consistent with Said’s idea that the native woman is sensual and willing is that, in *Jane Eyre*, she has nearly all the agency in getting Rochester to marry her: Rochester states: “ Her family wished to secure me... and so did she,” and “ her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me” (260). In giving Bertha a great deal of sexual volition in Rochester’s initial impressions of her, Brontë characterizes her as an exotic “ other” without considering other aspects of her character. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, Rhys directly contrasts Brontë’s sexually motivated portrayal of Bertha in her portrayal of Rochester’s initial interactions with Antoinette. Unlike the Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, who blames his love for Bertha on her own “ allure,” Rhys’s Rochester relates the opposite: When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all...I must have given a faultless performance. (45) In Rhys’s novel, it is Rochester, rather than Antoinette, who has agency in their period of courting. The idea that “[Antoinette] never had anything to do with [Rochester] at all” completely subverts Brontë’s notions of the native woman as being sexually charged and, in Said’s words, overly “ willing” (145). Rhys continues to challenge Brontë’s characterization of Bertha as sexually motivated and willing in that Rhys’s Antoinette initially decides that “ she won’t marry [Rochester]” because “[he doesn’t] know anything about [her]” (46). Again, Rochester ultimately has to convince and coerce her into the marriage: “ I’ll trust you if you trust me. Is that a bargain?” (47). Antoinette’s decision to not marry Rochester on the grounds of their unfamiliarity reveals her as a character concerned with more than sexuality in her relationship

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with her husband, again undermining Brontë's initial characterizations of her. In addition to relying on colonialist assumptions in characterizing the early Bertha, Brontë also portrays the Bertha as an "other" after she goes mad and Rochester takes her to England. Rather than characterizing her as an exotic other, however, Brontë portrays her as a demonic other, who blurs the line between human and animal; Brontë's Rochester specifically refers to Bertha as "a demon" in comparing her to Jane, and to her abode, the attic of Thornfield Manor, as "the mouth of hell," "a wild beast's den" and "a goblin's cell" (251, 265). In Brontë's portrayals of her, Bertha is animalistic and inhuman: 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, seemingly, 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. (250) In characterizing Bertha, Brontë strips her of her humanity: she refers to her merely as "a figure" and as "it," and compares her to "some strange wild animal" with a "mane" (250). The notion that Brontë's Bertha never speaks, she merely "yells," also robs her of her humanity and paints her as a demonic other (262). In Jane Eyre, it does not take long for Bertha to make the shift from exotic to demonic other: Rochester states, "in the very first letter I wrote to apprise [his father and brothers] of the union—having already begun to experience extreme disgust of its consequences... I added an urgent charge to keep it secret" (263). In Wide Sargasso Sea, however, Rhys consistently describes Antoinette as beautiful and feminine.

Additionally, Rhys's portrayal of Antoinette often directly contrasts Brontë's point by point. In contrast to Brontë's description of Bertha's "dark, grizzled
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hair,” Rhys describes “[Antoinette’s] hair” as “ combed away from her face and [falling] smoothly far below her waist,” and as having “ red and gold lights in it,” a much more feminine description (47). Similarly, while Brontë states merely that Bertha wore nondescript “ clothing,” Rhys describes her as wearing a dress “ made in St. Pierre, Martinique,” and in the style “ à la Joséphine” (47). Since Josephine Bonaparte is associated with Europe through her role as empress of France, Rhys’s reference to her emphasizes Antoinette’s “ whiteness” in contrast to Brontë’s “ dark” and “ purple” madwoman (250). Even after Antoinette is carried to England, Rhys continues to dissociate her from Brontë’s Bertha: though the mad Antoinette ultimately has “ streaming” hair consistent with Brontë’s descriptions of her, Rhys never acknowledges that it is Antoinette. The woman fitting Brontë’s description is always referred to as “ that ghost of a woman,” and appears solely “ surrounded by a gilt frame”—a mirror; she is only implicitly linked to Antoinette (11, 112). In creating a separate identity for her, Rhys creates a character who “ is not Jane Eyre’s lunatic at all” (Rody 223). Though in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette never fulfills the role of demonic other, toward the end of the novel she grows into the role described by Said as “ sensual” and “ willing” as a result of her interactions with Rochester. Rhys subverts yet another of Brontë’s colonialist pretenses: while Brontë portrays Rochester as a victim of his “ infernal union” with Bertha, Rhys characterizes Antoinette as the oppressed party (259). Rhys suggests that Antoinette’s madness and development into Europe’s idea of a “ native woman” comes as a consequence of her marriage to Rochester. Indeed, Rochester changes and creates Antoinette’s identity in a number of ways. The most obvious way is that he changes her name from Antoinette to Bertha, “ a name [he’s]

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particularly fond of,” despite the fact that she insists that her “ name is not Bertha” (Rhys 81). He also forbids Antoinette from speaking patois with Christophine in order to further distance her from her Creole roots.

Rochester’s attempts to differentiate her from her mother by changing her name and make her more European actually ironically backfire, in that Antoinette grows to fit Said’s model of a native woman as a result of her estrangement from her husband (which grows out of the fact that “ he never calls [her] Antoinette now”) (68). Laura Ciolkowski notes, “[Rochester] is determined to resolve Antoinette’s ambivalence [about her heritage] first into the singular tones of English womanhood, and second, once his failure to cast Antoinette as the chaste mother of English sons is totally clear, into the equally singular tones of a savage otherness” (343). After their marriage begins to crumble, Antoinette becomes desperate for her husband to “ come to [her] one night,” indicating that her sexual drive begins to govern her actions (68). Furthermore, in order to satiate her desires, Antoinette wishes to employ obeah, an institution viewed by Europe as superstition; in this way, Antoinette becomes not only “ sensual” and “ willing,” but also “ stupid” and superstitious from the European viewpoint. Likewise, after she has been brought to England, Antoinette states, “ Does [my red dress] make me look intemperate and unchaste...That man told me so,” indicating that Rochester constructs Antoinette as a “ native woman” fitting with nineteenth-century European colonialist views (110). By detailing Rochester’s manipulations of Antoinette, Rhys undermines Brontë’s assumption that Bertha’s eventual revenge on Rochester is a result of her descent from “ idiots and maniacs” (Brontë 249); rather, Rhys shows

Antoinette’s final act of burning down Thornfield manor to be an important
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act of rebellion through which Antoinette, and Rhys herself, in the words of Aijaz Ahmad, “ modified, challenged, overthrew, [and] rewrote” “ Western representations” of the colonial (McLeod 48). At the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette describes her final act as “ why I was brought here and what I have to do” (112); Antoinette’s resolve and determination contrasts Brontë’s Bertha, whose setting fire to Thornfield was merely one of her many inexplicable acts of “ wild mischief” (364). Though Antoinette has been driven mad by the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she is still able to exact her revenge; Rhys expresses Antoinette’s ability to take vengeance despite her madness through the symbol of the candle at the end of the novel. Though “ the flame flickered and I thought it was out,” which expresses Antoinette’s discouragement (and perhaps the reader’s disbelief in her ability to rebel against her oppression), she “ shielded it with [her] hand and it burned up again to light [her] along the dark passage” (112); the steady candle flame thereby represents Antoinette’s resolve and determination, and turns her seemingly inexplicable act of arson at the end of *Jane Eyre* into her triumphant resistance against the oppression perpetrated upon her by Rochester and Western society. The fact that candles are an archetypal literary symbol for hope also supports this reading of the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Caroline Rody suggests that “ Antoinette/Bertha thus embodies in her defiant ending the triumphant revisionist act of Rhys the reader turned writer” (218). In rewriting *Jane Eyre* as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys redefines Bertha Mason’s final act of burning down Thornfield Manor as a rebellion against colonialist oppression rather than a random act of violence. Rhys shows Bertha’s eventual madness to have been a result of Rochester’s construction of her identity in accordance with nineteenth-

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century European notions of colonial women. Rhys challenges Brontë's characterizations of Bertha as both an exotic and a demonic other, portraying her as a victim of the patriarchal and colonialist society embodied in Edward Rochester. Despite her victimization, however, Antoinette rebels against Rochester, just as Rhys herself rebels against Brontë: while Antoinette destroys her literal prison, Thornfield Manor, by fire at the end of both novels, Rhys subverts the colonialist framework that held Bertha Mason's character captive by giving Bertha a voice, an identity, and a purpose.

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