Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Multiple Faces of The Madwoman in the Attic: An Analysis of Antoinette/Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Junio 2023

Resumen

El personaje de Bertha Mason creó gran expectación desde su primera aparición en la novela de Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* publicada en 1847. Sin embargo, no fue hasta la creación de la crítica feminista literaria de los 60 que empezó a suscitar tanto interés. De hecho, la autora caribeña Jean Rhys decidió en 1966 publicar una obra teniendo como protagonista la misteriosa 'loca del ático' de Brontë. En la obra de Rhys, *Ancho mar de los sargazos,* Bertha Mason se presenta con un nombre distinto, Antoinette, el que tendrá gran importancia para comprender las causas que la llevan a su trágico desenlace. En este ensayo se van a analizar las diferentes caras que se le han otorgado a Bertha Mason desde su aparición y como estas construyen un personaje complejo que buscará su propia identidad y libertad hasta su último aliento.

Abstract

The character of Bertha Mason attracted great attention since her first appearance in Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847. However, it was not until the creation of the feminist literary criticism of the 1960s that she began to arouse such a great interest. In fact, the Caribbean author Jean Rhys decided, in 1966, to publish a work with Brontë's mysterious 'madwoman in the attic' as its protagonist. In Rhys's work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha Mason is presented under a different name, Antoinette, which will be of great importance to understand the causes that lead her to her tragic end. This dissertation examines the different faces that have been given to Bertha Mason since her first appearance and how they build a complex character who will seek her own identity and freedom until her last breath.

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1. Introduction

In the mid of the 19th century, Charlotte Brontë published her masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*. In this novel, Brontë tells the struggles of a heroine to survive in a patriarchal society that restricts women's freedom and opportunities to fully develop their abilities. The novel illustrates the growth towards maturity that the main character, Jane Eyre, goes under. Being an orphan, she needs to educate herself at the same time she tries to fight against repression and the abuse of authority which other characters, mainly her aunt, exert upon her. After studying at Lowood School, Jane is hired as a governess in Thornfield Hall where she falls in love with her master, Mr. Rochester. However, Mr. Rochester is not the respectful person he appeared to be. In her own wedding, Jane discovers that her beloved Mr. Rochester is already married to a Caribbean woman, Bertha Mason. Thus, Jane "puts conscience before love, refusing to become Rochester's mistress" (Alexander 287). Jane's discovery of Bertha locked up in the attic marks a turning point in the novel. The presence of Bertha in the house triggers Jane's abandonment of the English Manor. However, after a mystic vision in which Jane hears the voice of Mr. Rochester, she returns to meet her beloved man just to discover that Thornfield has been burned to the ground and he is a widower.

Jane Eyre immediately became a success in the Victorian times and has remained Charlotte Brontë's most popular and sold novel up to the present. However, despite being Jane Eyre its main character, the character who has increasingly attracted scholars' attention has been Bertha Mason, named by Gilbert and Gubar as "The Madwoman in the Attic." In fact, the feminist movement and feminist literary theories that were developed during the second half of the 20th century generated the publication of new interpretations of Charlotte Brontë's novel. At the end of the 1960s, feminist literary critics embarked on the mission of establishing a tradition of women's writing. They called for the need to

reread the literary texts which conformed the literary canon as a strategy to challenge and question the texts' patriarchal ideas. This new feminist literary criticism also encouraged women to read each other's text. As they argued, the problem of female writings was not of a non-existent tradition, but one of "near-invisibility" (Martínez Alfaro 7). Therefore, to get recognition and to create a tradition as a base, women had to read and influence one another. In this way, they could build their own literary canon. To put it differently, works by women could be seen in the context of women's literature and experience disclosing a shared tradition apart from the male norms and canon.

Following this new literary criticism, in October 1966, Jean Rhys, an Anglo-Caribbean writer, decided to write a novel following this new feminist literary criticism, whose main character is Bertha Mason, 'the madwoman in the attic' of Charlotte Brontë's novel. Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, can be seen as a prequel of *Jane Eyre* because it narrates the life of Bertha Mason, whose real name—as the novel reveals—happens to be Antoinette Mason. The novel follows the character's life before being married to Mr. Rochester and examines how and why she was driven into madness.

1.1. *Wide Sargasso Sea:* A Retelling of *Jane Eyre*

Rhys establishes the setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the West Indies where she was born and raised (she was born in Domenica). But what is more important in the novel is that she alters the perspectives, changing therefore how the reader sees the characters created by Charlotte Brontë. While in *Jane Eyre* Bertha Mason is completely silenced and presented as an "uncivilized, inferior, beast-like and a mad" figure (García Márquez 10), in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys grants Bertha with the opportunity to tell her own story. As Antoinette states in Rhys's novel: "there is always the other side, always" (99).

For Rhys, Bertha Mason is more than a lunatic that is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall. As Rhys's novel makes it clear, she had a life and a story to tell before and after meeting Mr. Rochester. Jean Rhys's novel questions the nature of Bertha Mason's madness. In contrast to the type of ending that characterized Victorian novels, "where domesticity and spouses come to be a comfort and source of joy" (Ripple), the portrayal of Antoinette and Mr. Rochester's married relationship in Jena Rhys's novel reveals that Mr. Rochester—Antoinette's husband—is "the source of pain rather than a source of comfort: the domestic sphere comes to destroy rather than enrich her" (Ripple). For this reason, Bertha has been described as a woman slipping into madness to escape masculine authority.

The present dissertation seeks to analyze and discuss the multiple faces that have been attached to the character of Bertha/Antoinette Mason from a feminist literary perspective. For this purpose, it examines this character under the theoretical framework of Gilbert and Gubar's Anglo-American feminist criticism and the French feminist theory of Helene Cixous. Unlike the pejorative view of Bertha in Jane Eyre, Rhys's novel makes us see that the causes that lead Bertha to set fire to the house are completely different from the ones that Charlotte Brontë offered. This paper will examine the journey Bertha/Antoinette Mason goes through since she knows Mr. Rochester, and how her personality and sense of identity change through their relationship and how these causes drive her to her tragic fate. In accordance with Ripple, "rather than having a clear sense of identity or purpose, as Jane has as she evolves into caretaker, wife and mother, Antoinette is demonized by her identity to create a sense of self." At the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Bertha uses this new sense of self to destroy her master's (Mr. Rochester's) authority by jumping from the roof of the manor. As this dissertation will demonstrate, through this action, Antoinette can be said to be seeking emancipation, just as women

authors, like Jean Rhys, do by writing their own texts and creating their own literary canon.

2. Angel vs. Monster: Jane Eyre and Antoinette as Two Faces of the Same Coin

In their classic study *The Madwomen in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that male authors have established two different prototypical images of what they think femininity is: these are the 'angel' and the 'monster'. These prototypical images have been characteristic of different stereotypes. The Victorian ideal of the 'angel in the house' has been associated, according to the male vision, with the qualities of sexual passivity, purity, delicacy or chastity among others (Gilbert and Gubar 23). On the other hand, the image of the 'monster' constitutes quite the opposite. The 'monster' is seen as a woman who is utterly mad, when in fact the 'monster' is a woman that does not abide by the cultural and social canon imposed by the patriarchal system. The monster-woman, then, embodies intransigent female autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar 28). In this sense, a monster is, to some extent, a polarized mirror image of an angel. However, according to Gilbert and Guber, the two prototypical images of women as 'angels' or 'monsters' are two faces of the same coin: "[…] the fact that the angel woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care reveals that she *can* manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot—stories as well as strategies" (26, emphasis in original).

Taking into account the angel vs. monster dichotomy established by Gilbert and Gubar, Jane Eyre and Rochester's first wife, Bertha Mason, are seen as an angel and a monster respectively. The monster character shadows the angelic nature of the heroine. In this sense, Bertha Mason (Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea)* shadows the canonical personality of Jane Eyre, highlighting her role of 'angel in the house.' However, and according to Gilbert and Gubar, "Bertha is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret Jane has been trying to repress ever

since her days at Gateshead" (360). Every appearance of Bertha Mason, both in Jane's dreams and in reality, has been related to a response of Jane's repressed anger. Jane's desire to destroy Thornfield as a symbol of Rochester's manhood is fulfilled by Bertha, who burns the property to the ground. Nevertheless, according to Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha Mason's personality and actions provide Jane Eyre with an example of how not to behave, thereby assuming the angelic figure that Rochester desperately desires (361). In addition, "Rochester's description of Bertha as a 'monster' […] ironically echoes Jane's own fear of being a monster ("Am I a monster? … is it impossible that Mr. Rochester should have a since affection for me?" [chap. 24])" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). This theory, therefore, establishes that Bertha Mason is a simple facet of Jane Eyre's violent ego.

According to Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic,* the most symbolic scene in *Jane Eyre* to establish a relationship between Jane and Bertha/Antoinette Mason is the red room scene, where she is trapped and feels for the first time the need to escape. Jane encapsulates the heroine's greatest problem: the position of the orphan in a society in which she cannot find her place. The same thing happens to Antoinette, both as a child and as an adult. When she is a child, she experiences discrimination from the natives of the island. In some passages, such as the one quoted below, she describes how they laugh at her because she is a Creole woman living in the English colony of Jamaica. So, as a child, Antoinette learns that both English and Caribbean communities regard her as an outsider, whose place in the world is shamefully inferior to that of the two cultures that constitute it.

> […]. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach,

> go away, go away.' I walked fast, but she walked faster. 'White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away.' (8)

When Bertha/Antoinette Mason is an adult she feels the discrimination of her husband, Edward Rochester. Although at the beginning they seemed to have a happy marriage, some later scenes of the novel reveal quite the opposite. As Mr. Rochester confesses in the following quotation, he is only interested in Antoinette because he wants to have sexual intercourse with her.

> I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me […]. One afternoon the sight of a dress which she'd left flying on her bedroom floor made me a breathless and savage with desire. When I was exhausted I turned away from her and slept, still without a word or a caress. (69)

When Rochester discovers that Antoinette might inherit the mental condition of her mother everything changes. He thinks of the possibility that she is mad and a lunatic because she does not fit in the Victorian ideal of 'angel.' According to Carlisle, "by referring to her as a 'lunatic' and 'mad,' Rochester expresses a continued rejection of Antoinette. As an abject being that threatens his subjectivity" (6), Mr. Rochester shows his excessive contempt for Antoinette when he changes her name. "Renaming her is one way in which Rochester exerts his masculine power over his wife," Helenius contends (7). The following section will explore the implications that this change of name, together with other forms of male dominance, have in Antoinette's sense of identity.

3. Marriage and Male Dominance

In the Victorian Period, the roles that men and women occupied, both in the public and private spheres, were firmly established. In this society, women were kept at their homes taking care of their husbands and children. Being a good mother and wife was an obligation they had. All this meant that their role was relegated to the private sphere, while men took care of the financial side and thus the public sphere. Taking this division into account, it can be argued that women were imprisoned in their own houses. Moreover, according to the Victorian Law, after the wedding the husband is allowed to take all the possessions and the money his wife has (Mallet). Accordingly, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester marries Antoinette because of her inheritance and not because he loves her. In fact, he describes how Antoinette means nothing to him before even marrying her: "It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry. […] I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all" (55). Even in *Jane Eyre,* Rochester explains to Jane why he truly married Antoinette: "I had to be provided for a wealthy marriage. […] Mr. Mason had a son and daughter; and my father learned from Mr. Mason that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds" (256). This Victorian Law allows Rochester to control Antoinette as he wishes. According to Yurdakul "Rochester does not only possess her property, but also wants to own her and change her identity. Although he is not in love with Antoinette, nevertheless, as a representative of a patriarchal world, he wants to both possess and dominate her" (66).

Apart from Rochester's possessive attitude, Antoinette seems to accept her destiny despite having the opportunity to refuse Rochester's marriage proposal. When Rochester asks her, "[…] 'You don't wish to marry me?,' she replies to him, 'No.' She spoke in a very low voice" (56). Through her words and tone, Antoinette suggests that the main

reason why she accepts Rochester's proposal is because she feels under pressure due to social expectations and Rochester's persistent attitude:

> 'I'll trust you if you'll trust me. Is that a bargain? You will make me very unhappy if you send me away without telling me what I have done to displease you. I will go with a sad heart' says Rochester. 'Your sad heart,' she said, and touched my face. I kissed her fervently, promising her peace, happiness, safety, but when I said, 'Can I tell poor Richard that it was a mistake? He is sad too,' she did not answer me. Only nodded. (57)

In this quote it can also be seen how Antionette accepts her destiny as a woman. She accepts the role imposed upon her of being a delicate and obedient woman. According to García Márquez, "the world belongs to men and she [Antoinette] has no other choice but *submit* to her destiny if she wants a place in it" (14, emphasis added). Thus, Antoinette decides to keep a low profile, being inactive and silent as it was expected from Victorian women.

Even though Rochester is the possessive person the patriarchal system designed him to be, he is still afraid of Antoinette's true identity because he views her as the threatening 'other.' "Otherness" according to David Barnhill is

> a term for the way people tend to view others (people or nature) that are dissimilar and separated. […] Conceiving of something else as an 'Other' involves objectification, failure to see one's similarity to them, a failure to recognize their distinctiveness, a failure to recognize their complexity and ability to change, an assumption that the Other is passive, a refusal to recognize their voice.

In keeping with Barnhill's ideas, Rochester rejects Antoinette in many ways because he always sees her as the "other" in terms of race and gender. According to Wedd "his

judgment of her 'alien' and 'debased' identity is the primary reason for the failure of their marriage." Furthermore, Rochester feels threatened because he does not perceive the West Indies as his comfort zone, he feels out of himself. In fact, Rochester manifests this feeling to Antoinette when he states, "I feel very much a stranger here, […] I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side" (100). To re-establish his dominance over his wife, Rochester deprives Antoinette from many features of her own personality. One of them, and the most important to the development of her madness, is the imposition of a new name upon her.

3.1.Antoinette/Bertha: The Problematic of Names

Rochester's fear towards the true personality of his wife is seen as a threat to him. He is afraid of Antoinette's explosive manners and her sexuality, which both attracts and repeals him as it is not what he is used to (Helenius 5). In addition to this, the letter he receives from Antoinette's stepbrother, Daniel, marks a point of no return in his relationship with her. It is at this moment when Rochester realizes that Antoinette might not fit in the angelic role she was expected to fulfill. As it was said above, Rochester shows his contempt towards Antoinette when he changes her name. Knowing that she might inherit her mother's disease as well as her Creole identity (not-fitting in the English canon of behavior) makes him reassure his power and dominance by renaming her. "Through renaming, he wants to exercise his masculine power over his wife" (Yurdakul 67). Rochester decides to rename his wife to distance her from her mother, thus preventing the latter's illness from entering Antoinette's life. He also does change her name to make her seem more "European and modest, and therefore less promiscuous, less insane and hostile" (Wedd). In other words, Rochester renames Antoinette as Bertha to construct her a new identity, an identity totally different from the problematic one she

grew up with. Rochester's rejection of Antoinette's Creole identity is evident from the very beginning: "the racial purity of her blood will always remain suspect in Rochester's eyes," Porter observes (546). But even as a child, Antoinette had a difficulty identifying herself with one of the two communities she belonged to. The fact that not even Antoinette is able to identify or realize her own Creole identity, makes it easier for Rochester to avoid talking about his wife's upbringing with her. He shows no desire to discover it himself either (Wedd). Instead of trying to get to know his wife, Rochester decides to believe Daniel's rumors about her.

Whether Antoinette becomes mad because of her genetic inheritance or due to the way Rochester treats her is not explicitly explained in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. What is truly certain is that Rochester triggers her madness. According to Gilbert and Gubar "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' are the "eternal types" men have invented to possess her [the woman] more thoroughly" (17). In fact, when Antoinette asks Rochester "why do you call me Bertha?" he answers, "because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (105). This excerpt of the novel particularly shows something previously established: Rochester is afraid of Antoinette as the "other" and he tries to create a new identity for her that resembles the image of the English woman or "angel in the house" to which he is familiar more closely. Furthermore, it is at this moment when the reader gets glimpses of Antoinette's rebellious attitude towards her new name, Bertha. She rejects her new name because she realizes Rochester's true intentions, and so she tells her husband: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (115). Even in the same conversation, she expresses all her feelings to Rochester

> […] Do you know what you've done to me? […] I loved this place and you made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went

> out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It's just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I *hate* it now like I hate *you* and before I *die* I will show you how much I hate you. (115, emphasis added)

Although she reiteratively expresses how she feels and what the name of Bertha makes her suffer, Rochester completely ignores her. He keeps calling her Bertha "of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha" (106) and in spite of the fact that she does not identify herself with that name, she yields in submission: "As you wish" (106). In other words, Rhys grants Antoinette/Bertha a voice through which she could have spoken out, but her attitude remains passive and submissive towards her husband.

4. Antoinette/Bertha Mason's Rebellious Attitude

4.1. Bertha Mason: The Madwoman in the Attic

Bertha Mason, as it has been shown, becomes one of the most analyzed literary characters of all times thanks to Charlotte Brontë's vague description of the character in her masterpiece novel *Jane Eyre.* In this novel, Bertha is dehumanized in different ways. She is described as if she were an 'animal,' a 'beast' or some 'demonic presence' which is haunting Thornfield Hall, even before Jane Eyre, and readers by extension, get to know about her existence. Indeed, Jane Eyre herself describes Bertha's laughter as "a demonic laugh" and an "unnatural sound" (126). Bertha has been caged like an animal on the third floor of the Thornfield Manor, being watched by a carer, named Grace Pool. Moreover, Charlotte Brontë does not even give Bertha a voice of her own. All that is known in the novel about Bertha Mason is due to Rochester's descriptions, this once again shows the act of power that he exercises over his imprisoned wife. Besides, when the reader gets to know who that demonic figure is, Bertha is described by using the pronoun 'it':

> 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 […]. (Brontë 247, emphasis added)

This dehumanization of the character of Bertha allows Jane Eyre to discover and develop her own identity as a governess, rejecting the Victorian canon she was supposed to follow. Through Rochester's eyes, Jane is perfect in every sense of the word. In fact, he also appreciates and loves her outspokenness and her passionate spirit—something he completely despises from his first wife, Bertha. Reading Rochester's devotion towards Jane's passionate spirit, one might think that Bertha is mad because of her mother genes

and not because of the enforcement of her husband's power over her. According to Bhawar, "the only possible explanation of Bertha's act of insanity would be the effect that years of confinement and isolation would have had over her" (33).

Considering this description of Bertha Mason as an imprisoned beast, some scholars have considered that she is a fair representation of the unknown and misunderstood 'other' figure. Her psychological instability is what seems troubling for Rochester in Brontë's novel. Rochester thinks that she is the only culprit for her situation. Indeed, he tells Jane that Bertha "came from a mad family; idiots and maniacs," and he also blames Bertha's mother for Bertha's condition. As he states to Jane, Bertha's mother "was both a madwoman and a drunkard!" (246). However, many critics have established that it is her Creole background what might be problematic. Bertha Mason is regarded as a dehumanized being; she is associated with uncivilized and uneducated people. These statements resemble the way in which colonizers saw the natives of the colonized territories. Rochester establishes that Bertha's family are both liars and wild creatures: "You shall see what sort of 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" (246). Furthermore, the fact that she is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall also represents her status as the 'colonial other.' According to Carpenter, "Bertha is a symbol for many cultures exploited and repressed by the British Empire." She, in a certain way, represents the colonizers' fear towards the possible mixture of English and native cultures. Finally, Brontë's confinement of Bertha may be interpreted as a strategy to control and prevent the further assimilation of Creole and native people into English culture (Carpenter).

Another analysis of Bertha Mason in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is the one carried out by Gilbert and Gubar in their famous *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and*

the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. In this study both scholars explore what they established as the metaphor of 'literary paternity;' they discussed how male authored texts have imprisoned women in their literary texts. According to them, the only way for female characters to survive and be accepted by society and literary community was to conform to a passive attitude. Thus, women writers had to face "the coercive power not only of cultural constraints but of the literary texts which incarnate them" (Gilbert and Gubar 11). Following this argument, Bertha Mason's confinement in the attic could be metaphorically associated with the literary restrictions Charlotte Brontë had to face due to her gender. Both women are presented with the challenge to break free from confinement that has been imposed by men. Charlotte Brontë was imprisoned by male literary authority, so she decided to escape from this paternity by writing her own piece of fiction: *Jane Eyre.* This novel allowed her to achieve artistic autonomy. In the case of Bertha Mason, she is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield because she does not fit in the ideal angel role imposed on women. According to Rebecca Pohl,

> In a patriarchal society, men write women as they would have them (passive, derivative), and then women have only these male-authored representation available as models of their own existence and, crucially, writing practice. (32)

Therefore, so the argument goes, if women authors want to avoid this 'literary paternity,' they must 'escape' male-authored texts. In this way, they could get free from the patriarchal literary imagery of women and develop their artistic autonomy. In the same manner, Bertha Mason needs to escape from the imprisonment her husband, Mr. Rochester, has put her into. To free herself, Bertha decides to set fire to Thornfield and jump from the top of the building. Through her death, she manages to escape from her husband's tyranny. Furthermore, Bertha's death allows Rochester and Jane to have a

beautiful and lovely Victorian ending. This is why, for Bhawar, "it is important to note that while Jane gains freedom from a relationship and mutual dependence, Bertha finds emancipation only through death" (35). The fact that Jane Eyre and Rochester's apparently happy union is based on Bertha's tragic ending may be said to bring to the fore the system of oppression that underlay the Victorian society and thus contribute to downplaying the idyllic nature of the novel's domestic ending.

4.2. Cixous's *Écriture Féminine:* Bertha's Nature and Sexuality

In the third and concluding part of *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Antoinette/Bertha undergoes a gradual change of behavior. Significantly, this final part of the novel overlaps with Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in space and time. Antoinette/Bertha's progressive change of behavior can be seen in this last part because she recovers her voice, and now it is Rochester the one who is completely silenced. Antoinette's madness (now Bertha for Rochester) becomes a tool for rebellion in her unconscious mind. In the attic of Thornfield Hall, Antoinette's dream and reality become one. According to Helenius, "Antoinette's madness is a rebellion against the patriarchal repression and the male form of writing" (9). In this respect, Antoinette's madness follows the path of Cixous's *écriture féminine.*

Helene Cixous's *Écriture féminine* is a feminine act of writing which can be accessed through a rediscovery of the lived female body, of feminine desire, and that can lead to new ways of thinking and living (Martínez Alfaro 9). Cixous advocates for the production of a kind of writing that comes from the female body and female sexuality, and which is in nature a violation of patriarchal linguistic structures. Following her theory, "to pursue feminine discourse, one must escape mastery, and the act of writing becomes the means of escape" (Crawford 44). Apart from the female body, Cixous also recalls a female voice, a voice whose loss has caused women to learn how to speak in a

borrowed language. As Cixous herself explains in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: "it is necessary that the woman learns how to write her body, that she reasonably assumes to break free from norms." In this way, so the argument goes, "she will [be able] to return to that body that was robbed from her" (61, my translation). Even laughter—an action typically related to Bertha Mason—is considered as a reaction to male dominance. Cixous explains female negative reaction to any kind of endeavor to constrain women by emphasizing female laughter (Kamalova 50).

Following Cixous's *Écriture feminine,* "Rhys language seems to derive from the unconscious, emotional and subjective" (Helenius 10). Antoinette figures out that words are useless when she tries to talk about herself and her family to Rochester. "Words are no use, I know that now," she says to her husband (105). In regard to this aspect, Cixous explains: "Muffled throughout their history, they [the silenced women] have lived in dreams, in bodies (through muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (quoted in Helenius 3). Imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall, silenced and depreciated, Antoinette unleashes her revenge of destroying the Manor, and this revenge manifests itself through symbolic dream imagery.

Cixous also connects her theory of *Écriture feminine* with nature. According to her, the concept of nature is a "lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed" (quoted in Helenius 3). In this sense, Antoinette can be associated with the Jamaican landscape where she belongs to. In *Wide Sargasso Sea,* references to the sunny and warm weather of the tropic country abound. She is also associated with the color red, which is generally "linked to female sexuality." As Helenius goes on to argue, "the color red is one of the metaphors in the novel—the color of sexuality, passion, dreams, emotions [and] violence" (5). In keeping with the metaphorical meaning of this color, it could be argued that Antoinette's red dress

epitomizes the character's rebellious attitude. As Antoinette has always felt as a person without a defined and clear identity, she seems to feel attached and identified with her red dress since "the dress carries all the intense sensuous qualities of Jamaica: the colors, the smells, the spiritual and emotional experiences" (Spaull 108). In fact, Antoinette says: "If I had been wearing my red dress Richard would have known me" (149), as if the dress was herself, the only thing that represents her. Some scholars have also associated the red dress with an extramarital sexual encounter. She was supposed to have a sexual intercourse with her cousin Sandi, so the red dress resembles Antoinette's sexuality. Antoinette actually says that she "was wearing a dress of that color when Sandi came to her for the last time" (148).

However, for Rochester the red dress is a symbol of Antoinette's condition as a 'monster-woman.' He feels more attracted to Antoinette when she is wearing a white dress. Contrary to the color red, white is related to purity, obedience, and conformity. To put it in Helenius's words,

> Rochester is sexually aroused when he sees Antoinette in her white dress, because white traditionally symbolizes virginity and purity because white women should, traditionally, be modest and chaste. His passion and desire is aroused by the thought of an innocent, virginal woman—a woman Antoinette in reality is not. (6)

Another important image with which the red dress is associated is that of fire, which is maybe one of the most important symbols in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Antoinette herself links her red dress with fire. It is the red dress what triggers her the action to destroy the English Manor (García Márquez 23). It is when Bertha takes off her red dress that she knows what she needs to do to escape from her confinement:

> I let the dress fall on the floor, and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire. […] But I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as If the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do (149).

Right after this passage, Antoinette dreams of burning Thornfield Hall. In accordance with Adjarian, "when Antoinette takes a candle from her room while her guardian sleeps, it not only suggests what she will do to Rochester, but also that she will regain the power of which he has robbed her, signified in this case by the flame" (208).

Nevertheless, Antoinette rebellious attitude does not begin with this episode. One of the first glances of her madness and violent attitude happens when her brother, Richard, visits her at Thornfield Manor. Previously to his visit, Antoinette manages to get a knife. She attacks her brother in one of her maniac episodes, but when she has a moment of lucidity, she remembers nothing of what she has done. Grace Pool (Bertha's guardian in *Jane Eyre*) tells Antoinette: "You rushed at him [Mr. Mason] with a knife and when he got the knife away you bit his arm" (146). However, it is thanks to the fire that Antoinette can successfully fulfill her revenge. Driven by her desire for vengeance, Antoinette gets up and gets the keys of the attic to leave the room. Antoinette dreams that she can move freely through the different rooms of the Manor and sets the English house on fire.

> Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colors, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in the flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when

> he saw a stranger, Qui est là? Qui est là? And the man who hated me was calling to, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out loke wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I though, Why did I scream? I called 'Tia!' and jumped and woke (151-152)

This final scene of the novel and Antoinette's dream is an example of what was said before about Cixous's theory due to the imagery and emotional language that Antoinette uses. According to García Márquez, "burning and jumping out from the English house might not be a self-destructive, suicidal act […], but in Antoinette's world it is an act of emancipation and destruction of the patriarchal world" (25). What is truly Antoinette's main aim is achieving her freedom and burning the house is a collateral damage to get it. However, Antoinette/Bertha only dies in Brontë's novel. Antoinette survives until the very last page of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She wakes up from her dream more active than ever and with a perfect plan for revenge.

5. Conclusion

Both authors, Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys, established a difficult and convoluted path for their heroines, providing them with different closures. Jean Rhys provided her character Antoinette with the voice that she had not been granted in *Jane Eyre.* Antoinette/Bertha Mason has been considered one of the most enigmatic characters for the feminist literary criticism, being therefore one of the most studied, especially since the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. She is a complex character that has been given many faces to describe her. It has been argued that her condition as a passive and vulnerable woman comes from the patriarchal society and marriage life she lives in. Her husband's, Mr. Rochester, attempts to control her are satisfied when he decides to rename Antoinette as Bertha in an attempt to leave behind her manic condition, as well as to bring her closer to the role of the ideal English woman: 'the angel in the house.'

On the other hand, Bertha Mason has also been associated with the figure of the 'monster.' As Gilbert and Gubar argued in their seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* the monster is a prototypical image which is given to those women who do not abide by the canon established by patriarchal society. Nevertheless, as the two critics also contended, both prototypical images, angel or monster, are two faces of the same coin. Bertha is considered a monster, a prototypical image given to women that did not abide by the canon established by the patriarchal society. They established that Bertha is "the truest dark double of Jane Eyre." The appearances of Bertha Mason in Brontë's novel are related to moments of repressed anger that Jane herself suffers. Furthermore, it has been discussed that Jane is very scared of becoming a 'monster' and that Bertha's personality grants Jane with an example of how not to behave. As Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of

Bertha Mason conclude and has also been demonstrated in this dissertation, Bertha Mason may be considered to be a simple and monstrous facet of Jane Eyre's violent ego.

The characterization of Antoinette/Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also contributes to highlight the passive and vulnerable nature of Charlotte Brontë's silenced character. This is an idea that becomes especially evident when she is married to Mr. Rochester. Mr. Rochester, as an English man who belongs to a patriarchal world, has the desire and the need to possess and dominate Antoinette in all senses. Rochester's most effective way to possess Antoinette is renaming her to separate her maniac condition from her persona. Another aspect Rochester rejects by renaming Antoinette is her Creole background. He does not accept having married a woman who is not fully English, so by renaming her he creates a new personality for her that is much more like that of 'the angel of the house.' Although Antoinette explicitly refuses to accept this new name when her husband gives it to her, she cannot change her husband's decision and her attitude remains submissive.

Towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea,* the new renamed Antoinette decides to become a more active character. In terms of Helene Cixous's *Écriture feminine*, Bertha decides to escape from her confinement by challenging the authority of her master. Rhys's use of symbolic imagery, such as the red dress and the fire, grants Antoinette an opportunity of freedom because thanks to the dress, she is able to comprehend her world. Antoinette's voice dominates the narration, and it can be seen as a way of rebelling against the patriarchal system represented by Mr. Rochester.

In conclusion, Jean Rhys subverts all the stereotypes associated to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* by giving her a new name. At first sight, Antoinette seems to follow the same path of submission and passivity that she follows in Brontë's novel. However, considering Gilbert and Gubar's and Helene Cixous's feminist theories, this paper has

proved that Antoinette/Bertha is a much more complex character than she appears to be. The many faces and roles given to Brontë's 'madwoman' and Rhys's protagonist makes her a round and, at the end, an active character that at the end fights for her desire of freedom even if it is trough death.

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