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Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Troubled Feminism of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Resumen

Ancho mar de los Sargazos, novela escrita en 1966, es la respuesta de Rhys a *Jane Eyre*, la novela de Charlotte Brontë del siglo XIX. Más específicamente, el personaje de Antoinette es la respuesta al personaje de Bertha, la lunática invisible casada con Rochester. La obra de Rhys ha atraído tradicionalmente a la crítica feminista aunque, paradójicamente, las típicas heroínas de Rhys son mujeres pasivas ante los abusos y la opresión de la sociedad y el género masculino y no precisamente heroínas guerreras y luchadoras. Por otro lado, Bertha, personaje relegado a la oscuridad y al silencio, es representado como una bestia en *Jane Eyre*. Este trabajo sostiene la idea de que aunque Antoinette parece seguir el modelo típico de las heroínas de Rhys, pasivas e indefensas, y también la representación estereotipada de la mujer "loca y monstruosa" de Charlotte Brontë en lugar de ser una heroína feminista al uso, subyace sin embargo una lectura que subvierte la representación de Antoinette/Bertha tanto como heroína pasiva como meramente lunática.

El trabajo está dividido en dos partes siguiendo la estructura de la novela: la primera y segunda parte se enfocan en la traumática infancia de Antoinette y también en la experiencia opresiva de su matrimonio, siendo estos dos puntos las principales causas de su postrero estado mental; y la tercera parte se enfoca en la lectura de Antoinette/Bertha como una mujer "lunática" insurgente. De igual manera, la tercera parte está dividida en dos. La primera parte ofrece una lectura que rompe con la imagen estereotipada de la "mujer loca y monstruosa" con la que Rochester (la figura patriarcal) trata de encasillar a Antoinette; y la segunda parte, inspirada en la teoría de Cixous *écriture féminine*, desarrolla la idea de que Antoinette también rompe con la típica representación de Rhys de la heroína pasiva e indefensa usando, paradójicamente, la representación de la "mujer loca y monstruosa" como una imagen de sublevación, poder y autonomía, rompiendo al mismo tiempo con la caracterización estereotipada y superficial de la mujer lunática, según estándares victorianos. De esta manera, Rhys invita una lectura feminista que cuestiona a la mujer "lunática" de Brontë, Bertha Mason.

Abstract

Wide Sargasso Sea, published in 1966, is Rhys's response to the nineteen-century novel by Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847). More specifically, Antoinette is Rhys's response to Bertha, Rochester's invisible mad-wife. Rhys's work is usually analyzed from a feminist perspective although, paradoxically, Rhys's typical heroines are often passive victimized women, oppressed by society and men, and not exemplar fighter heroines. Similarly, Bertha is silenced, marginalized and portrayed as a beast in *Jane Eyre*. This dissertation argues that, although Antoinette seems not to stand as a clear feminist role model because she follows Rhys's typical heroine, the passive helpless girl, and Charlotte Brontë's stereotypical characterization of the 'monster-madwoman', nevertheless there is in *Wide Sargasso Sea* a feminist sub-reading that subverts Antoinette/Bertha's characterization both as a passive girl and as a plain 'madwoman'.

This dissertation is divided into two parts following the novel's structure: part I and II deal with Antoinette's traumatic childhood and oppressive marriage as the main sources

of her posterior mental state, and part III focuses on the reading of Antoinette/Bertha as a rebelling-fighter 'madwoman'. At the same time, part III is divided into two parts. The first part provides a reading that breaks with the 'monster-mad' image imposed by Rochester (the repressive patriarchal figure) on Antoinette; and the second part, which is inspired by Cixous's *écriture féminine*, explains that Antoinette also breaks with Rhys's typical characterization of the passive helpless heroine by paradoxically using the 'monster-madwoman' image as one of rebelliousness, power and freedom, simultaneously breaking with the Victorian characterization of a 'paper-tiger lunatic'. Thus, it is argued that Rhys invites a subversive feminist reading of Brontë's madwoman, Bertha Mason.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

On August 24, 1890, Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams —Jean Rhys— was born in Roseau, Dominica. Her parents were William Pott, a Welsh doctor, and Minna Lockhart, an English Creole woman. According to Angier, her biographer, Rhys would feel rejected and disapproved of by most people around her, especially by her mother. Approximately at the age of sixteen, she was sent to England to finish her education. Books had already entered Rhys's life and she discovered writing took away her fears and sadness.

After school, she got a job as a chorus girl in a touring company. During this time she learnt that "men were either protectors or exploiters" and "women were either winners or losers" (Angier 59). She also met the love of her life: Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith. When he broke up with her she thought she would die, and she even intended to kill herself in 1913. Lancelot was her ideal of a man, the perfect English gentleman. "He was like all men in all books she'd ever read about England" (Angier 62). But, after the failure of the affair, and after undergoing an illegal abortion, love became hatred. Nevertheless, she was willing to receive an allowance from him, and was dependent on it many years afterwards.

After the chorus, she was unemployed and utterly penniless and for a short time she worked as a prostitute for Madame Hermine. Moreover, she resumed the habit of writing that she had neglected during the chorus' years. She bought three exercise books and made them her diary and drew on them to write most of her stories. She poured down all her sadness and misery, and anger. According to Angier, "the girl who could have become a woman, with a husband and children and an ordinary happiness, really had died. The Jean who made a new beginning was the writer" (Angier 80), although

she did not became a full time writer until years later when she met the editor of *The English Review*, Ford Madox Ford. She did marry three times though. In 1919, her first son, William Owen, died of pneumonia, and in 1922, her daughter Maryvonne was born.

In 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her rewriting of *Jane Eyre* and her most acclaimed novel, was published. It won the W.H. Smith Prize and Rhys was awarded the Order of the British Empire. All her novels were republished by Deutsch and by Penguin and translated into languages like French and German. In 1976, her collection of short stories *Sleep It Off Lady* was published and *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* was left unfinished when she died in 1979. Between 1928 and 1939 she had written most of her literary work: *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), and half of the short stories of *Tigers are Better Looking* (1968). Her stories are mostly based on her first years in England, the time in which she had to struggle with poverty while she had third-rate jobs, as a mannequin, an English teacher, an artist model, and as a chorus girl, and also of her terrible experience with men, especially with Lancelot. According to Angier, what we read is the first three decades and a half of her life (20).

Most critics have tended to approach Rhys's work through three main trends: they read Rhys as a Caribbean writer, as a modernist or as a feminist. She is not easy to classify. Moreover, she strongly denied she was a feminist (Angier 596-97). Nevertheless, *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores gender together with racial issues and has been analyzed from a feminist perspective, as have her previous modernist novels. Maurel explains that "most feminist critics have concerned themselves with the representation of women in Jean Rhys's fiction" and have resented "the heroines' collaborative attitude and debilitating passivity" (8).

Rhys's heroines seem not to stand as feminist role models of independence, of autonomy and power; on the contrary, they seem to be women that are dependent on men, insecure and hysterical types, victims of rejection and cruelty, mostly by men and society (García, passim). Indeed, Rhys focuses on portraying "cases of women oppression by patriarchal society" (Maurel 10). Antoinette, the main character of *Wide Sargasso Sea,* partly modeled upon *Jane Eyre'*s Bertha Mason, can be read as an extension of her previous heroines (Angier 525). By marrying, she becomes economically and emotionally dependent on her husband, an unnamed character the reader can recognize as Brontë's Rochester. The first and second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* depict Antoinette as following Rhys's typical heroines: passive, vulnerable, dependent. According to Helenius, Antoinette lets Rochester "control her and take her to England to live in captivity in his house. She lets him kill her emotionally, without a *visible* fight" (2; italics mine). For her, "Antoinette exemplifies the victim of male dominance and female subordination" (2).

Nonetheless, in the third part of the novel, there is a change: she apparently goes mad, turning into the 'madwoman' of *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, once in England, she dreams of setting the English house on fire (following *Jane Eyre*'s accounts of the burning of Thornfield Hall). According to Angier, in this she is different from the previous Rhys's heroines: "That she wakes up and *acts*" (531). And, although the revengeful act itself is in reality only performed in *Jane Eyre,* not in Rhys's novel (531), this shows a rebellious attitude against patriarchy and male dominance.

Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's Anglo-American Feminist criticism and on Cixous's French feminist literary theory, the following dissertation analyzes Antoinette as a character that does not stand as a traditional feminist role model but, nonetheless, one that rebels and rejects patriarchal imposition and domination. Her journey from

passivity towards madness is analyzed, for madness, it could be argued, becomes in her a sign of autonomy and independence from male control by paradoxically breaking and subverting negative stereotypes (such as the 'monster-mad woman') patriarchy has used to categorize and to repress women, and in this case, Antoinette. Gilbert and Gubar explain that women who devoted themselves to writing fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were sometimes deemed mad; their male contemporaries would draw on the excuse that this activity was atypical and anomalous for a woman's body, that exercising the mind 'too much' could make a woman mad (59-64).

Therefore, women had basically two options: either to apologize for their writing and devote themselves to a 'more congruous genre' such as letters, children's books and diaries, or to hide behind a man's pseudonym and to adapt themselves to patriarchal writing patterns (72). But, Gilbert and Gubar point out that, surprisingly, most great women writers did not do this. Instead, "women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works" that simultaneously conformed to and subverted patriarchal literary standards (73); that is, they created texts that apparently adapted to conventional female stereotypes but that had "submerged meanings" (72) that subverted these patriarchal standards of the feminine. As many previous great women writers, Rhys also made use of this type of strategy in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as is explained in my analysis.

1.1 Rhys's Typical Heroines and the Autobiographical Element

The stories of Rhys's heroines are basically records of Rhys's own experiences as a woman of the first part of the twentieth century. Usually the heroines of these stories are women who want to be loved but receive only cruelty and rejection (Angier 341). Rhys's characters are mostly divided between the poor and the weak, and the rich and the strong. It is basically her heroines who stand for the weak ones, whose fate seems to be always death. Moreover, poverty was a constant in Rhys's life and in her work. *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, for example, reflects the economic dependence on men that Rhys dragged on from her first relationship, "to which the author would be subjected for most of her life" (García 21; translation mine). She had three husbands but none of them could offer her the commodities and luxury she aspired to. Her novels and short stories before *Wide Sargasso Sea* gave her not enough to live on either. Economic dependence is evident in all her work.

Emotional dependence is also evident in her work. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, there can be found a perfect example of it:

> A man is standing with his back to me… I am wearing a black dress, very short, and heel-less slippers. My legs are bare. I am watching for the expression on the man's face when he turns around. Now he ill-treats me, now he betrays me. He often brings home other women and I have to wait on them, and I don't like that. But as long as he is alive and near me I am not unhappy. If he were to die I should kill myself. (Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* 176)

This is one of the reasons why her work attracted feminist readings, because her novels "explored the pain (and pleasures) of female dependency with great insight and honesty" (Angier 597). Nevertheless, she denied any relation between her, or her work, and Feminism. She wrote because she wanted to explore her own alienation and oppression (Angier 597); it was only about her and nobody else. Just that she was not

conscious she was also addressing the life of a lot of women of her time, as Angier explains: "anxious or unhappy women" (129). "And a lot of the dispossessed women felt she spoke for them. And she did, but without being too conscious of it" (130; translation mine). Indeed, her heroines are victims of poverty, mistreatment, extreme dependence, hatred and cruelty. Angier explains of Rhys's heroines:

> Susan is the essential Jean Rhys heroine: alone, abandoned by her protector; numb and paralyzed and unable to cope with life. In the extremity of her poverty and need she plans a violent act […]. But fate itself conspires against her, crushes and kills her…She is left with nothing…Everyone wins but her; everyone lives but her. This is what will happen literally or metaphorically to all the heroines… oppression, revenge, failure, death. (168)

Rhys's work actually contributes to the female literary tradition of the "twentieth century women writers" that "express feelings of powerlessness, of frustration and anger" (Spaull 88).

1.2 *Wide Sargasso Sea* As a Rewriting of *Jane Eyre*

Wide Sargasso Sea was written in 1966. It is a "twentieth century response to Brontë's novel" (Thum 147). In one of her letters, Rhys wrote: "The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure […]. She is necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry —*off stage*. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*" (qtd in Mezei 157). Indeed, Rhys's concern was focused on the feeble and stereotypical representation of *Jane Eyre*'s madwoman, Bertha Mason. Bertha Mason is a marginalized character in *Jane Eyre*. She is portrayed as a 'madwoman', "a composite of woman and beast" (Maurel 144). From Rochester's point of view, that of the English colonizer (149), she is portrayed as uncivilized, inferior, beast-like, mad, and therefore, as if an animal she is jailed in the attic of Thornfield Hall: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell […] it snatched and

growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 290). Moreover, she is never given a voice to tell her own story; rather her own story is told by Rochester and repeated by Jane Eyre. "Bertha Mason is seen only through Rochester's eyes as an Englishman. Bertha Mason's point of view is never given" (Thum 147). Therefore, Rochester's account of Bertha is completely biased by his ethnocentric and androcentric view (Thum 148), and Rhys wants to offer Bertha a chance to tell her own story (Maurel 128), because as Antoinette says: "there is always the other side, always" (Rhys 82).[1]

Rhys apparently wanted Bertha to be a more rounded character, for one of her complaints is that she "is no more than a 'paper tiger lunatic' in *Jane Eyre*" (Maurel 144). "In Charlotte Brontë's novel, the account of Bertha's life is quickly disposed of in one single chapter (Chapter 27), in which she essentially features as a by-product of Victorian ideology, her madness typically resulting from excess" (Maurel 144). The whole novel, therefore, is Rhys's attempt to "elaborate on and complicate" (Lewkowicz) the story presented in *Jane Eyre* about Bertha Mason and her marriage with Rochester, to explain the genesis of Bertha and to render a second opinion on her madness and actions as a 'madwoman' (Maurel 143).

[1] All quotations from *Wide Sargasso Sea* are taken from the 2000 edition. From now on, only the page number will be given between brackets.

2. *Wide Sargasso Sea* Parts I and II: Vulnerability and Dependence

Wide Sargasso Sea is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on Antoinette's traumatic childhood. It basically accounts for the disintegration and downfall of her family, also for her isolation and alienation from society. Antoinette is a creole heiress from the West Indies with Welsh and Creole ascendancy. She lives in a patriarchal, colonized, fragmented society composed of the white British and the black Jamaican community. From the very beginning she experiences rejection and hatred from both social groups (Angier 536). For example, "Antoinette's first trauma is an encounter with a little black girl who follows her singing (Angier 536): "Go away white cockroach, go away, go away" (3). This will leave her in a state of "immobility" as pointed out by Angier (536): "When I was safely home I sat close to the old wall at the end of the garden. It was covered with green moss soft as velvet and I never wanted to move again. Everything would be worse if I moved" (3). This might explain the genesis of Antoinette's passivity. Unable to form part of the black community that rejects her, Antoinette has no other choice but to integrate in the white community and yield to the English male dominance. The story moves from the traumatic heroine's childhood to her equally traumatic marriage which corresponds to part II of the novel.

2.1 Marriage, a Patriarchal System of Power Relations

The novel is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time when a woman had little autonomy (if any) over her life. When it comes the time to marry, Antoinette is virtually "sold" to the Englishman that has come to marry her (García 44). She is totally dispossessed of her dowry, leaving her legally and economically unprotected. García points out that money means power, and Rhys women are always in need of money, which leaves them defenseless, with the only possibility to depend on men. She explains: "power is unevenly distributed: the male characters have jobs, money, and a

high social-economic status, and as a consequence, the 'power' to 'use' or 'resist' the female characters" (García 33) (translation mine).

Power is settled through marriage in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. At the time, marriage, a system of power relationships, was a clear patriarchal institution. The man had total legal and economic control over the woman, who was left in a disadvantaged position. Therefore, part of the problem in Antoinette and Rochester's relationship is that power is all deposited in the male figure (García 44). Antoinette overhears Aunt Cora's complaint to Richard, Antoinette's British stepbrother: "When I passed her room, I heard her quarrelling with Richard and I knew it was about my marriage [….] You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger […] You are trusting him with her life, not yours,' she said" (72). Indeed, the heroine's destiny is all deposited in the hands of her future husband. Interpersonal relationships, García suggests, are subjected to the 'social-economic order' of a patriarchal society which favors the man (55). This social order is prefixed and leaves scarce possibilities of change for the female character (García 58). Consequently, she concludes that "before the impossibility of defending themselves before social aggression […], the passivity and resignation of the female characters is the characteristic feature of Rhys's fiction" (García 58; translation mine). Antoinette makes a feeble attempt to reject Rochester's proposition of marriage; nevertheless, she realizes she cannot step out of the arrangement. The only thing she can do is yield silently.

"She was sitting in a rocking chair with her head bent. Her hair was in two long plaits over her shoulders. From a little distance I spoke gently" (48). In this fragment, Antoinette is portrayed like a little child with her 'two long plaits' and 'her head bent', and is actually treated by Rochester as one: he talks to her 'from a little distance and gently'. She is inactive and passive. Although she has the chance to refuse, which she

mildly does, she ultimately accepts the proposition of marriage: "You don't wish to marry me?' 'No.' She spoke in a very low voice. […] 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" (48). She seems to be conscious of the patriarchal society and the social rules of the world she lives in which leaves no other possibility, or any other social role, to a woman but to marry. "Though Antoinette has a chance to refuse the marriage, the society is pressuring her into marrying" (Helenius 2). The world belongs to men and she has no other choice but to submit to her destiny if she wants a place in it. Antoinette says before the marriage: "if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen" (34). Her attitude of passivity and resignation is conspicuous. Gunenc states "patriarchal society forms oppositions as being active and passive. Antoinette takes place in the passive side" (211). Before being locked up in the room in Thornfield Hall, she is already trapped in a society that dispossesses women leaving them passive and inactive: "Antoinette and her mother are the victims of a system [the plantation system] the collapse of which has not only dispossessed them as a class but also deprived them as individuals of any means of independent survival" (Coral Howells qtd. in Maurel 133). Both Antoinette and her mother are victims of a patriarchal system implemented along with the colonization enterprise, an imperialistic business settled by the British white man.

When Antoinette goes to Christophine, her black nurse, for a love potion she informs her of Rochester's change of attitude. Christophine urges her to "pack up and go" (68). But Antoinette explains: "He will not come after me. And you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him." "What you tell me there?" Christophine says sharply. "That is English law", says Antoinette (69). When her marriage is teetering she has not the means to

escape or separate because of the lack of economic resources. Therefore, Antoinette seems to fall into the typical Rhys woman, economically dependent on the male figure. Moreover, Angier also notices Antoinette's attitude in contrast with Jane Eyre's: after knowing Rochester is already married, Jane is ultimately proposed by Rochester to be his mistress, and although she is lacking the money she still leaves him: Jane Eyre "is better at handling men. She knows what to do, as Antoinette does not, when Rochester misuses her: she knows she must, in Christophine's words 'pack up and go'—and she does" (530). For Angier, it is evident what Antoinette seems to lack in terms of character: she is not independent; she has not the strength, the boldness to leave him behind. This could be due to her emotional dependence. She is afraid he will not go after her if she does. Therefore, she resolves to give him a love potion which she hopes will make him love her again. Nevertheless, this 'love potion' never works. Rochester's relentless rejection and domination becomes a turning point for Antoinette: it triggers her madness, but also her rebelling attitude. Power in socio-economic terms forms part of this domination, but there are other forms of it. "Teresa O'Conner describes the characterization of Rochester in *both* novels as similar" (Thum 149). She states that he is depicted as "aggressive, controlling, urban, a warrior who captures wealth, property and people"; therefore "both Brontë and Rhys use him to represent the English colonizer", points out Thum (149).

Many critics point out Rochester's male desire for domination. Rochester starts hating Antoinette because he cannot understand her (Spaull 106). He cannot understand her explosive manners and he feels afraid of her sexuality, a sexuality that both attracts and repels him because it is not of the kind he is used to (Helenius 5): "Very soon she was as eager for what's called loving as I was —more lost and drowned afterwards" (57), and "She'll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She'll

not care who she's loving). She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would —or could" (106). So, when poisoned by Daniel's letters, he turns to the possibility that she is mad just because she does not fit his Victorian ideal of the 'Angel in the house', which according to 'virile reason' consists in sexual passivity, politeness, chastity, delicacy and so on (Gilbert and Gubar 23). He seems to represent the Victorian patriarchal society who used to think that women "if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (Gilbert and Gubar 53). He attempts, therefore, to impose his view of Antoinette onto her to exert control and repress her by means of renaming her Bertha. "Renaming her is one way in which Rochester exerts his masculine power over his wife" (Helenius 7).

3. *Wide Sargasso Sea* Part III: The Rebellion of Antoinette/Bertha

3.1 Antoinette/Bertha, 'the Madwoman in the Attic'

In their feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar develop a metaphor which expounds on the appropriation and authority men have historically had over the literary field, and consequently on women, namely, the 'metaphor of literary paternity'. Basically, "the poet, like 'God', the Father, is a paternalistic ruler of the fictive world he has created" (5). They explain this is an old belief deeply rooted in Western literary civilization: "the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world" (4). As a "father" of the text, the poet or writer can and has claimed authority over the subjects or characters he gives life. They explain that, for centuries in Western civilization, women have been imprisoned in literary texts: "because a writer 'fathers' his text, his literary creations […] are his possession, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page" (12).

This metaphor of literary paternity might serve to illustrate the kind of domination Rochester attempts to exert on Antoinette. Rochester is the first person narrator in the second part of the novel. It could be said he is characterized as 'the male writer'. Indeed, the very first thing he does in Antoinette's house is to write a letter to his father. Also, after arguing with Christophine and deciding to travel back to England he takes up the pen again:

> I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman —a child's scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house. (105-106)

He draws a house and a woman inside, which the reader imagines as Antoinette. Just as a 'Godly' writer, he metaphorically and literally 'traps' Antoinette inside the literary world, into Thornfield Hall, into the narrative of *Jane Eyre* to which the third part of the novel is entangled in space and time. Thus, Antoinette is completely dehumanized, objectified, reduced to a mere geometrical image. Gilbert and Gubar explain: "Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to *mere* properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts" (12).

Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar explain that male authors have created two prototypical images which encapsulate their ideas of the feminine: these are the 'angel' and the 'monster'. Rochester's significant act of drawing Antoinette goes in line with the act of renaming her. He "engenders the double of *Jane Eyre*'s mad wife" both by drawing and by "calling his wife Bertha" (Maurel 134). Therefore, his becomes an attempt to erase her identity (Spaull 100) and impose on her the 'monster/mad' image. Antoinette acknowledges this attempt at erasing her identity: locked in the room, she says "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass" (117). Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar point out: "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster'" are the "eternal types" men have "invented —to possess her [the woman] more thoroughly" (17). When Antoinette asks him "why do you call me Bertha?" he answers: "Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (86). This notwithstanding and contrary to the silenced Bertha of *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette can answer back: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (94). Twice she protests alleging 'Bertha' is not her name. Nevertheless, she is ignored by Rochester who keeps calling her that way: "'Not Bertha tonight,' she said. —'Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha.'" Finally, she

yields in submission: "'As you wish,' she said" (87). Rhys gives Antoinette/Bertha a voice to speak out; nevertheless, although Antoinette does protest her attitude seems to be one of submissiveness.

In the attic, "When Richard Mason pays a visit to Antoinette, he does not recognize her. Nor does Antoinette recognize herself […] There is no looking-glass, so that she does not know what she looks like or who she is" (Maurel 165). According to Gilbert and Gubar, mirrors, like 'texts', duplicate the conventional "eternal types" man have created for women: "What she [the woman] sees in the mirror is usually a male construct" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Maurel claims that this lack of a mirror in the room in which Antoinette is imprisoned might be seen as "an inscription of Antoinette's breaking free from the strictures of the masculine identifications of women that have been passed down through the centuries" (Maurel 165). Paradoxically (taking into account her imprisonment and supposed mental instability), this lack of a mirror might be read as a symbolic detachment from the patriarchal, stereotypical image of the 'monster-mad' woman.

Antoinette is not simply the monster image of a 'madwoman' as depicted in *Jane Eyre*, the plain 'murderer' that impedes Rochester and Jane's 'happy ending', as any reader might first think when reading *Jane Eyre*. On the contrary, Rhys "redeems her monster" (7) because in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette/Bertha is portrayed as an individual who suffers unrequited love, betrayal and patriarchal oppression. Helenius states that "Rhys subverts the female roles by turning the 'monster' —the 'madwoman'— into a sympathetic character" (7). This follows Gilbert and Gubar's vision of "feminine writing and submissive female characters as a mask, a way of subverting the roles that men and patriarchal conventions have imposed on them" (Helenius 1). Besides, Helenius also states: "Perhaps the part of a victim is only a

disguise —perhaps Antoinette seems to submit to male dominance, but really she is waiting for a chance to liberate herself" (7). So, it could also be argued that Antoinette, in contrast to previous Rhys's female heroines, eventually breaks with the stereotype of female tragic victim. And she might break it precisely due to the 'monster-woman' or 'madwoman' image that Rhys seems to appropriate for Antoinette. "That magical creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel" (Gilbert and Gubar 28) and who "embodies intransigent female *autonomy*" (28; italics mine).

Indeed, the 'monster woman', in Classical Mythology for example, is a character that embodies "Female Will" (Gilbert and Gubar 28) and a life of "significant action" (36), opposing female submissiveness and passivity. The 'madwoman', therefore, is a plotter, a schemer, a temptress, and according to Gilbert and Gubar is also associated with "female creativity" (29). Female creativity and will and female sexuality, encompassed in that image of the 'monster-woman', an originally patriarchal negative image of the feminine, as pointed out by Gilbert and Gubar, becomes a positive image in the light of Cixous's theory, *écriture féminine*, because it is by those means that the female character ultimately fights patriarchal oppression, as will be explained.

3.2 Cixous's *Écriture féminine*: Nature, Female Sexuality and Language

The third and last part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* overlaps with *Jane Eyre* in space and time. It is now the female narrator's voice, Antoinette's, who takes over the narration. Rochester has no voice (Maurel 162), and it is in the dark of the secret room, it is in the timeless consciousness of Antoinette that reality and dream merge and she takes action. Her poetical narrative surmounts the objective, linear narrative of the male narrator of part two. It has been said that Antoinette's madness takes over the text and it becomes a

perfect example of Cixous's *écriture féminine*: "Antoinette's madness is a rebellion against the patriarchal repression and the male form of writing" (Helenius 9).

Écriture féminine, a theory proposed by Cixous, one of the maximum representatives of the French Feminist Literary Movement, refers to an act of writing that "becomes the means of escape and consequently dis/erupt established grouping and arrangement of [patriarchal] signifiers" (Crawford 44). A disruptive form of language that is very close to the female body, to "the woman's libidinal organization", which is "disruptive, eruptive, volcanic" (44), and which is very close to "the unconscious stream of language that derives from the female body" (Helenius 3), which is universal, indefinite, unlimited, heterogeneous. In other words, Cixous advocates for a distinctive women's writing, a language that writes and comes from the female body and from female sexuality, and that is in essence transgressive to patriarchal linguistic structures. Cixous explains: "It is necessary that the woman writes her body, that she conceives the impregnable language that breaks walls of division, class and rhetoric, rules and norms" (61). They "go, flee, enjoy scattering the order of space, confounding it, changing the furniture of place, things, principles, breaking, emptying structures" (64) (translation mine).

As Cixous's, "Rhys language seems to derive from the unconscious, emotional and subjective" (Helenius 10). It has been argued: "The main modes of understanding the world and her fate [Antoinette's] to which she resorts are subconscious ones: dream, emotion and image […] in *Wide Sargasso Sea* everything we know comes not through the rational use of words but through these elements" (Angier 557). When Antoinette's intention of explaining about herself and her family to Rochester fails, she admits "words are no use, I know that now" (86). "Truth is hidden beneath the surface, and particularly beneath the surface of words" (Angier 556). Cixous explains: "Muffled

throughout their history, they [the silenced women] have lived in dreams, bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts" (Cixous qtd. in Helenius 3). Therefore, it is then, locked in the attic, silenced and marginalized, that Antoinette's revengeful plan of destroying the English house is manifested and takes place by means of dream and symbolic imagery.

Furthermore, Cixous "sees femininity as something close to nature; *écriture féminine* is to her 'a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed'" (Cixous qtd. in Helenius 3). The 'real' poetical language of the novel is, therefore, the sensorial imagery of the Jamaican landscape by means of which "the anarchic, the irrational, the unconscious stream of language that derives from the female body— controls the novel" (Helenius 3). Rhys makes use of the natural world to express Antoinette's feelings and meanings (Angier 561). Indeed, "Antoinette is a part of nature which seems to corroborate Cixous's theory of […] the feminine consciousness as in touch and one with nature" (Helenius 4). Antoinette is intrinsically associated with colors, with nature and her lifetime in Jamaica. Similarly, colors and nature "seem to be linked to female sexuality. The colour red is one of the strongest metaphors in the novel —the colour of sexuality, passion, dreams, emotions, violence" (Helenius 5). Antoinette's red dress is the paradigm of this connection.

Antoinette is strongly identified with her red dress because "the dress carries all the intense sensuous qualities of Jamaica: the colours, the smells, the spiritual and emotional experiences" (Spaull 108). "As soon as I turned the key I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers." (120). The red dress is associated with fire and flowers. Antoinette adds: "If I had been wearing my red dress Richard would have known me" (121), as if the dress were her own identity token. Joannou indicates: the "dress is used as a marker of Caribbean identity" (124).

Moreover, the red dress evokes the memory of an extramarital sexual encounter with her cousin Sandi (Joannou 140). Therefore, it could also be associated to Antoinette's sexuality. She "was wearing a dress of that color when Sandi came to see [her] for the last time" (120).

For Rochester, echoing *Jane Eyre*, the dress makes Antoinette look "intemperate and unchaste" (121). He associates the negative connotations of the 'monster-woman' to the dress. But the red dress is actually positive because it is connected to two sources of female power: nature and female sexuality. Far from negative, the red dress might be a symbol of autonomy and subversion since it helps to plan the destruction of the English house. Indeed, it is the red dress that ultimately triggers the action: "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" (121-122). Almost immediately she dreams of setting the English house on fire: "That was the third time I had my dream" (122). Joannou explains: "the anger is symbolised in the red dress which reminds the exiled Antoinette of her origins in the Caribbean" (128). She also points out that "associated textually with passion, fire and anger, the dress comes to symbolize the tone of subaltern defiance with which the novel ends: the red dress is 'beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do'" (142).

Furthermore, although ignored and locked by her husband, Antoinette becomes quite an active character. Paradoxically, it is her 'madness' that gives her the freedom to move around without been seen, without been stopped because the inhabitants of the house are afraid of her, believing she is the 'ghost' of the house (in Rochester's words). Antoinette is also able to get a knife which she manages to introduce into the house, thus she arms herself with a 'man's weapon'; clearly a symbolic image of the phallus,

possibly representing male power. This could point out to a change in Antoinette's character: more aggressive and active. Indeed, she moves around inside the house and attacks Mr. Mason. All these motions could be interpreted as an attempt at taking control of her life.

Grace Pool (Bertha's custodian in *Jane Eyre*) says to Antoinette: "You rushed at him [Mr. Mason] with a knife and when he got the knife away you bit his arm" (119). Nevertheless, this weapon is rather ineffective in fulfilling Antoinette's desires of vengeance and freedom. It is by her own means, by fire, that she will accomplish it: "then I got up, took the keys and let myself out with a candle in my hand" (122). The fire of the candle also evokes the destructive powerful qualities of nature and of the color red associated to Antoinette's identity. Spaulls points out that "fire is important for its destructive qualities, but also for the vivid colors which link it with the lush Jamaican landscape" (102). Moved by her will of destruction and freedom, she gets up, takes the keys and leaves the room. Moving freely from room to room she will eventually set the house on fire, albeit in a dream.

> 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 colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in 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 too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like 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 thought, Why did I scream? I called 'Tia!' and jumped and woke. (123)

This climactic scene in Antoinette's dream becomes a perfect example of Cixous's *écriture féminine* because of the symbolic imagery, emotional and poetic, seemingly unsystematic and subjective use of language. The associative narration of Antoinette eventually surmounts the rational order of patriarchal conventional discourse, that is, of Rochester's logical order of narration of the novel's second part (Mezei 206). As Maurel points out, it is an "illogical accumulation" of "natural and cultural elements […] conflat[ing] different times and places", disrupting chronological and logical sense (164). As Rhys uses her own 'female language' to explain Antoinette's actions it is plausible to think that Rhys provides new meaning to Antoinette's jumping. Burning and jumping out from the English house might not be a self-destructive, suicidal act, as some critics have suggested, (or as any reader might interpret when reading *Jane Eyre*) but in Antoinette's world it is an act of emancipation and destruction of the patriarchal world, of its signifiers and strictures, its labels and oppressive images. In the same way as "Cixous writes a new self, free of patriarchal signification" (Crawford 47), Rhys writes a new end free of patriarchal signification. Antoinette does not jump to the "hard stones" but to "the pool at Coulibri". Freedom is part of her plan. And also, as Gunenc indicates, "in patriarchal society, the burning of the house can be seen as the final point in madness but it is [actually] the reflection of vengeance" (212). Moreover, according to Maurel:

> Jean Rhys substitutes a more positive image of flight: unlike Bertha, Antoinette does not leap to her death; she jumps and returns to wakefulness before the crash. This ending is in keeping with the wish Jean Rhys expresses in her letters: '[h]er end —I want it in a way triumphant!' And so it is, in the sense (…) that Antoinette dies neither in her dream nor in the 'reality' of the diegesis. (141-142)

Indeed, Antoinette/Bertha only dies in *Jane Eyre*. "Antoinette is still alive on the last page of *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (Angier 531). Antoinette wakes up determined; far from passive, she wakes up to act out her emancipating and revengeful plan.

4. Conclusion

Rhys drew on her own life, her experiences as a woman of the twentieth century to write her stories. Rhys's heroines' salient feature is that they suffer oppression and mistreatment by men and society. This is evident in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It has been argued that part of Antoinette's passivity and vulnerability comes first of all from her marginal position in society. She is trapped in a patriarchal society, one that gives no other option to women but to marry and, therefore, to economically depend on men. It is the rejection of society and, especially, Rochester's attempt at controlling Antoinette that triggers her madness, but also her rebelliousness and hatred. Rochester's desire of possession and control stifles Antoinette's identity. By renaming her 'Bertha', he conjures up the stereotypical image of the 'monster-madwoman' of *Jane Eyre*.

In line with Helenius, it has been argued that Rhys gives Antoinette a background story which makes the reader sympathetic towards her and critical towards Rochester, breaking in this way the image of the stereotypical, flat character of the *Jane Eyre*'s 'madwoman'. Thus, the 'monster-madwoman Bertha', as portrayed in *Jane Eyre*, is a stereotype to be broken in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Furthermore, this dissertation has proved that in the light of Cixous's *écriture féminine*, the 'monster-mad' image of Antoinette/Bertha becomes positive. Rhys appropriates this image to give Antoinette a new identity more related to power and autonomy, and, consequently, breaking with the pattern of Rhys's heroines as helpless, tragic victims. Indeed, Antoinette/Bertha is definitely not a flat character but one that evolves from passivity and submissiveness towards rebelliousness. Therefore, it is paradoxically in the attic of Thornfield Hall that Antoinette becomes more aggressive and active. Rhys's achievement is that Antoinette as a 'madwoman' can rebel. 'Madness' leads her to take action, to plan a destruction of Rochester's mansion that stands as a representative of British male oppression.

Moreover, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been analyzed as a paradigm of *écriture féminine* and it has been proven that it is by these means that the heroine ultimately escapes and subverts linguistic and symbolic patriarchal domination. Female writing is intrinsically related to the female body and to female sexuality and it inscribes female independence and power in the novel by means of: dream, imagery and metaphor. The use of symbolic imagery, dreams and metaphors becomes the means by which Antoinette expresses and understands her world, a way which crashes with the objective and 'sane' narration of Rochester. The female voice takes over the narration, and its poetic and subjective use of language is seen also as a way of rebelling patriarchal domination.

In conclusion, Antoinette's 'feminism' might seem problematic, ambiguous. Her characterization seems to follow Rhys's typical heroine's passiveness, vulnerability and dependence, and eventually death, since for some critics *Jane Eyre* still weighs heavily on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bertha Mason dies after all in Brontë's novel as a lunatic and Antoinette *seems* to inevitably follow this path in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Nonetheless, drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's Anglo-American and Cixous's French Feminist Literary Theories, it has been proven that there is a subtext reading that breaks and subverts the interpretation of the 'madwoman' and, consequently, of the intertextual ending of the novel.

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