Chapter 1

Writing in the Margins:
Jean Rhys

One of the most striking aspects of the current Jean Rhys revival is the extent to which readers united in their determination to praise Rhys have divided on the issue of autobiography in her novels. The mainstream critics who undertook the rehabilitation of her reputation in the early 1970s seemed to find the autobiographical sources of her subject matter a distraction, if not an outright embarrassment. They were inclined instead to stress the formal finish and control of her prose style, to admire her ironic distance from the characters and incidents she describes, and to universalize her protagonists and the situations in which they find themselves, to the point where Rhys was represented as writing, as Elgin Mellown puts it, about “woman in one of her archetypal roles.” Diana Trilling goes further:

1Rhys published one collection of short stories and four novels between 1927 and 1939, after which she effectively disappeared from public notice until 1956, when the actress Selma Vaz Dias (who had actually been in contact with Rhys, with interruptions, since 1949) had the BBC place an advertisement in the New Statesman. “Rediscovered” by this maneuver, Rhys felt encouraged to write the novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) and to publish two more collections of stories and an “unfinished autobiography” before her death in 1979. The appearance of Wide Sargasso Sea resuscitated her reputation and led to the reissuing of the earlier novels. A. Alvarez’s review essay, “The Best Living English Novelist” (New York Times Book Review, 17 March 1974, 6–7) and Howard Moss’s “Going to Pieces” in the “Books” column of the New Yorker (50 [16 December 1974], 161–62) are two of the key critical pieces establishing Rhys as a major, indeed a canonical English writer. Judith Thurman’s article “The Mistress and the Mask: Jean Rhys’s Fiction” (MS 4 [January 1976], 51–52, 91) was one of the first major documents for feminist readings of Rhys’s work.
Rhys is not writing about "woman" at all and certainly not about "the plight of the sensitive woman." The novels "are far from being exercises in female literary narcissism; she deals with something more palpable, the hard terror of psychological isolation."  

On the other hand, and certainly in reaction to readings that eschewed "female literary narcissism" to the point of either turning Rhys's protagonists into sexless emblems or regarding them as the unsavory subjects of quasi-scientific study, the feminist critics who addressed Rhys's writings tended to emphasize that Rhys herself bears a strong resemblance to all her main characters and has undergone experiences similar to events chronicled in all her novels. As biographical material became more available, such critics increasingly treated the historical Jean Rhys as a gloss on her own characters. As a consequence, they regularly conflated creator and creation in the interests of discerning motives for both. Teresa O'Connor is representative: "Certainly boredom and domination figure in Rhys's work as themes but they are symptoms and results of a deeper malaise: the dislocation and alienation that comes from having neither a true home, metaphorically and literally, nor a loving mother, which for many may be the equivalent—and no way of fabricating either. It was Rhys's mother's indifference to her which forced Rhys to become indifferent in return. It is her heroines' statelessness, homelessness and lack of familial and deep ties that lead to their malaise."  


For example, Peter Wolfe cites as Rhys's "main contribution to modern literature a shrewd yet sympathetic look ... at a character type heretofore ignored, patronized, or used merely to flesh out a social category—the dispossessed urban spinster. No liberal-humanist heroine, the archetypal Rhys figure lacks ideas, job, and man" (Introduction Jean Rhys [Boston: Twayne/G. K. Hall, 1980], n.p.). In a letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys recalls a less ambiguous appraisal of one of her novels in the same terms—this a rejection of Good Morning, Midnight (dated 14 May 1964, Letters, p. 277): "This is not a novel but a case history' or something like that."  

inclusion as "symptoms" without explaining whose symptoms they are, so that the ensuing discussion of homelessness and motherlessness suggests that the "deeper malaise" may afflict society as a whole. But the discussion then shifts from the implicitly political to the explicitly personal and psychological—"It was Rhys's mother's indifference to her which forced Rhys to become indifferent in return"—and with no other connective than parallelism, shifts again, this time to the protagonists of Rhys's fiction—"It is her heroines' statelessness, homelessness and lack of familial and deep ties that lead to their malaise." Rhys's own "deeper malaise" is assumed to produce heroines suffering from the same malaise. And despite the meticulousness of O'Connor's study in other matters, notably the quotation and citation of manuscript material, it assumes without any discussion of the subject that Rhys was unaware of her own motivation for creating such women and consequently of the motivation that presumably provoked these women into acting the way she caused them to act.

Rhys herself complained about this sort of fuzzing of the distinction between author and character. In a letter to her daughter Maryvonne Moerman, 22 June 1960, she writes:

You know, I would like to send you a very short story and implore you to type it for me.

It is not (repeat not) autobiography, and not to be taken seriously.

But the people here are terribly narrow minded and they gossip like crazy.

Really—this is true! I found it out in Bude I assure you. For them "I" is "I" and not a literary device. Every word is autobiography!

Apparently her complaint applies to readers more sophisticated than her neighbors in rural Cornwall. If mainstream critics have insisted on her irony and control at the expense of the characters thus distanced and manipulated (as when Peter Wolfe applauds her for having performed "the rare feat of writing good books


Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys* (New York: Viking, 1985), unabashedly reads the novels and stories as if they were "confessions" of the author and attributes comments by characters to the Rhys who is the same age at a similar stage in her life.
about dull characters trapped in numbing routines”), many feminist critics have salvaged these characters by identifying them with the author, and in the process have turned Rhys’s writing into compulsive self-revelation, a by-product of therapy. Rhys does tell her own story, of course, and in this respect she resembles many other twentieth-century writers. But to make biography the principle that governs interpretation of her works is to make Rhys unable to control the form and the ideology of her own text. There can be little question of innovation or even of technique, and no question of a deliberate challenge to the value presuppositions of the dominant culture, when criticism tries to naturalize the unsettling questions raised within a body of fiction by making them the effects of a constricted point of view that the author herself was unable to transcend.

The unsettling questions raised within Rhys’s fiction have overwhelmingly to do with character, particularly with the status of female protagonists whose social situations are strikingly similar throughout five novels, despite differences in age, background, and historical context. The shorthand term “Rhys woman” often designates this whole species of protagonist, and the “Rhys woman” remains the factor within Rhys’s writing that has polarized the positive criticism, and the reason why other readers, many of them feminist, are hostile to Rhys’s fiction.


8In this respect, Marsha Z. Cummins’s accolade is representative of how even enthusiastic praise can damn. Cummins concludes her essay “Point of View in the Novels of Jean Rhys: The Effect of a Double Focus” (World Literature Written in English 24, [Autumn 1984]) with the observation, “Though Rhys could not imagine a new role for women beyond victimization, she could, at least, actively imagine the dead end of the old one” (371). Of this reflexive recourse to such “explanatory” principles as failure of imagination, Judith Kegan Gardiner comments, “When a writer like Joyce or Eliot writes about an alienated man estranged from himself, he is read as a portrait of the diminished possibilities of human existence in modern society. When Rhys writes about an alienated woman estranged from herself, critics applaud her perceptive but narrow depiction of female experience and tend to narrow her vision even further by labeling it both pathological and autobiographical” (“Good Morning, Midnight; Good Night, Modernism,” boundary two 11 [Fall/Winter 1982–83], 247).

9Diane McPherson reminds me that the term “Rhys woman” tends to erase important differences between these characters and so to reinforce the implication that the novels are “mere” autobiography. I take her warning to heart: Rhys in no way wrote five novels about the same woman; she did write about five women in analogous situations.
The defining characteristic of the Rhys woman is her financial dependency on a man or, if she is well on her way down the road to economic and social devastation that Rhys's writing persistently maps, on men. She is sometimes employed as mannequin, artist's model, or chorus girl, sometimes delicately "unemployed"; various degrees of euphemism term her adventuress, mistress, or prostitute; other characters call her tart, grue, petite femme, or girl. No one calls her wife, although she sometimes is one: her dependency is inherently unrespectable.

In fact, what to call this protagonist is part of the problem of her status within the value systems of Rhys's fictional universes. Certainly the available names have a powerful ideological charge: in a class of mine that was reading Voyage in the Dark, one young man remarked wonderingly that he wasn't sure why we were taking a floozy so seriously. Less obviously, these names tend to obscure the situation in which the Rhys woman finds herself, as Arnold Davidson inadvertently demonstrates in trying to address what he sees as "contradictions" within the character of Julia Martin in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie: "Is she a woman selling herself to a limited clientele and for no set price, or is she a woman too ready to fall in love with some man from whom she can then accept assistance because financial gifts are tokens of his love for her? Is she essentially a mercenary or essentially a romantic? The answer, of course, is that she must be both and neither."10 The "answer" proposed by Davidson renders a very common state of affairs paradoxical, largely because his presentation is conditioned by the assumption that a woman must be "essentially" either prostitute or beloved"—which is to say, either financially or emotionally dependent, but not both. The division here is the familiar one between stereotypically good and bad women, and Davidson's restatement of it is particularly helpful in revealing the contradictions inherent not in the situation of being

11Interestingly, the word that would evoke agency here, "lover," cannot be unambiguously applied to a woman in our society; we have no word to designate a woman emotionally involved with a man.
“both and neither” but in the division itself. A good woman is one who needs a man emotionally. Although she may also need his economic support to survive, this need must remain secondary, contingent, accidental; she is “essentially a romantic.” On the other hand, a bad woman is one who needs—and cold-bloodedly uses—a man financially. Any demonstration of emotional commitment to this man is necessarily a manifestation of bad faith, or as Davidson puts it later, a “sustained pretense”; she is “essentially a mercenary.” Of course, the historical condition of women has been to be “both and neither,” which is only to say that these mutually exclusive designations do not accurately describe an ordinary situation.

Yet many readers find it difficult to call the situation of any of Rhys’s protagonists ordinary, at least in part because the problems involved in naming these characters tend to invoke weirder problems about what to do with them, deposited as they are in the foreground of narratives that chronicle only their incapacity to control their own lives. The question of what to do with them arises because the Rhys woman doesn’t seem to do much for herself, or not anything that works, nothing that significantly improves her situation or even renders it tragic. She is often characterized as “passive” or “masochistic” because her actions do not substantially change her lot, as if she did not have the efficacy to be a protagonist. And readers like the student who resented paying attention to a “floozy” tend to feel that if she is going to be this sort of person she ought to get out of the way, out of the spotlight; she ought to fade back into the shadows at the periphery of the story where they won’t have to look at her all the time.

This last sort of reaction is valuable, precisely because it acknowledges how unsettling the Rhys woman is to dominant cultural presuppositions. Both mainstream and feminist critics who admire Rhys’s fiction in effect try to settle her, accommodating her to these presuppositions either by interpreting her as an alien and inferior sort of person who serves as an object of study (in the process sacrificing authorial empathy), or by interpreting her as Rhys’s own unexamined self-projection (in the process sacrificing authorial control). But such adjustments, made in order to justify the protagonist,
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take for granted that the protagonist requires justification. They begin from the presumption that she is the sort of character who, under normal circumstances would not be major, and then they redefine the circumstances without questioning the underlying premises: that there are intrinsically major and minor characters, regardless of narrative context, and that certain categories of socially marginal human beings are by virtue of this social marginality fitted only to be minor characters.

To articulate these premises is to allow Jean Rhys’s achievement to be restated in terms of radical innovation. Rhys continually places a marginal character at the center of her fiction and in doing so decenters an inherited narrative structure and undermines the values informing this structure. 3 In particular the novel, a form that emerged with the bourgeoisie and embodies the ethical priorities of this ascendant class, privileges agency—and, more insidiously, privileges the assumption that an agent who is motivated and tenacious enough will necessarily bring about the desired results. In his classic 1927 study Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster approvingly quotes the French critic Alain on the defining quality of the genre: “There is no fatality in the novel; there, everything is founded on human nature, and the dominating feeling is of an existence where everything is intentional, even passions and crimes, even misery.” Forster goes on to use this observation only insofar as it supports his contention that “people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed,” 4 but Alain’s point is more far-reaching, if less obvious. The absence of fatality in the novel is translated into a “feeling” that “everything is intentional” and thus becomes the unarticulated basis for a philosophy of extreme voluntarism. In effect, Alain has exposed the convention that major characters in novels bring things on themselves, whether for good or ill. Except in certain marked and delimited cases, they are presumed to be free to stand,

3Philip Brian Harper makes this point about such writers as Djuna Barnes, Anais Nin, Nathanael West, and Ralph Ellison in “The Re-Centered Subject: Marginality in the Development of the Postmodernist Novel” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1988).

free to fall, which is to say capable of thinking and acting independently of most external and all internal constraints.\(^\text{15}\)

In other words, major characters have free will, a power construed by the bourgeois ideology informing the novel as the ability to triumph over various kinds of obstacles—certainly over the intangible obstacles erected within the mind by upbringing and received opinion. Forster in effect recognizes this hyperbolic concept of autonomy when he makes unpredictability the distinguishing feature of the "round" characters who in his opinion are protagonists of all truly great novels: "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way."\(^\text{16}\) But clearly not all characters in a novel need to possess this sort of free will. Indeed, certain of them can best support and contrast with major characters by virtue of not having it, are convincing inasmuch as they are incapable of surprising. These are what Forster terms "flat" characters; they are what they are, he maintains, to the point where they can be summed up in a single sentence. Or even a single word. They can often be assigned their permanent place in the fictional universe simply by being assigned a name.

The concern to find a name for Rhys's protagonists is of course a concern to place them in this definitive manner. The Rhys woman is disorienting because names like "prostitute," "discarded mistress," and the anachronistic but heartfelt "floozy" do not suffice to dismiss her from further consideration. Completely constrained within a narrow social role, she yet possesses a centrality and subjectivity conventionally granted only to "round" characters, that is, to characters capable of transcending such roles entirely. Bemused by her own failure to be contained completely within her preordained niche, the significantly unnamed narrator of Rhys's short story "Outside the Machine" mutters, "A born nurse, as they say. Or you could be a born cook, or a born clown, or a born fool, a born

\(^{15}\)The marked and delimited cases generally involve or invoke the school of fiction called naturalism, which initially defined itself in terms of the protagonists' determination by the forces of heredity and environment. Interestingly, one of the key texts of naturalist fiction, Emile Zola's *Nana*, is the book that Anna Morgan is reading at the beginning of Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and perhaps serves as pre-text for the action of that novel.

\(^{16}\)Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 78.
this, a born that.” When a neighbor asks her what the joke is, she replies, “Oh, nothing. I was thinking how hard it is to believe in free will.” The Rhys woman lives in a world where powerful and privileged people treat other people as if they were minor characters, born into and summed up by the supporting parts they play in the main drama. She is well aware that free will is an asset granted to those people who play leading roles, and aware in addition—the knowledge prompting responses ranging from irony to desperation—that the consciousness preventing her from somehow existing as a minor character in her own life places her outside the machine of both narrative and social conventions.

For one of Rhys’s most powerful insights is that categories of literary and social determination interpenetrate. If major characters tend to be “round” and thus not wholly predictable, they also tend to have privileges derived from some combination of gender, class, and racial factors that give them the scope to be masters of their fates. If minor characters tend to be “flat” and thus wholly predictable, they behave according to type inasmuch as they tend to be typed—by some combination of gender, class, and racial factors that denies them the scope to make changes in their own lives. The institution of feminist criticism has to a great extent been built on just this insight, for its project, like the projects of Marxist and Afro-American criticism, began with the enterprise of reading differently stories about characters who are not economically and socially privileged. Yet many feminist readers are also wary of stories that are, like Rhys’s, “about victims,” and they tend to express impatience especially with characters who internalize the terms of their oppression, as if such characters had only to resolve to adopt a better attitude in order to surmount whatever obstacles stood in their paths. This sort of reaction suggests that the belief in individual efficacy is such an important component of the novel’s inherited value system that it can condition responses even of readers who

18I owe the phrase “minor character in her own life” to Alison Lurie’s novel Foreign Affairs (New York: Random House, 1984), which plays on the same notion of a conventionally minor character (here an aging and unpretty woman who is actually named Vinnie Minor) in a major role.
are thoroughly trained in political analysis. Perhaps more provocatively, such a reaction also indicates that the novel is particularly successful in articulating and enforcing the limits of social tolerance. To borrow Rhys's phrase once again, novels communicate very well the terror consequent on being “outside the machine” because they intimate that the machine encompasses not only social and literary conventions but also the whole range of what is recognized as intelligible discourse.

Rhys's protagonists are victims who are fully aware of their victimization. Their awareness does not make them any less victimized; it serves only to make them self-conscious in their roles and thus alienated from the society that wants to identify them completely with these roles. Worst of all, because their situation as both marginalized and wholly conscious is impossible in the terms proposed by the dominant culture, the statements in which they express their awareness cannot have any acknowledged context. If they do not speak “in character,” which is to say, in the wholly predictable ways that their role obliges, their utterances are received as senseless. To be outside the machine is to be without a language, condemned to emit sounds that inside interlocutors will interpret as evidence of duplicity, infantilism, hypocrisy—or simply madness.

To women writers—indeed, to women generally in Western tradition—the imputation of madness is a continual and potent threat, for madness is the possibility that haunts their cultural identity as Other. Because the masculinist point of view is by definition the rational and intelligible one, anybody occupying the cultural position of “woman” is at risk, required simultaneously to be a spokesman for this masculinist viewpoint and to embody its inverse or outside, the possibility of being irrational, unintelligible. To express another point of view—to speak as “woman” in this culture—is to utter truths by convention so unimaginable that they are likely to be dismissed as gibberish, mere symptoms of hysteria. 19 Small wonder that female authors have been careful to mute or disguise their most subversive

insights and on occasion to attack women's writing that seems too flagrant in its violation of the accepted episteme.

The ultimate threat posed by imputations of madness is real madness, the prospect of a mind so riven by the pressure of condemnation and ridicule that it can no longer acknowledge what it knows. One of the central documents of current feminist criticism, Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, dramatizes the power of this threat in the narrative of Judith Shakespeare, William's hypothetical sister, who, with gifts equal to those of her brother, attempts to emulate his achievements. Woolf is initially detached in laying out the ways in which identical conditions aid William and thwart Judith, but at the climax of her exposition the cool, almost clinical tone gives way to an impassioned depiction of Judith's inevitable end:

Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.

Yet directly after this intensely moving passage, Woolf backs away from her own identification and outrage, asserting instead (and against the evidence of her own bravura prose) that such qualities can only damage writing: "Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination." The lesson is clearly that open rebellion continues to exact too great a price. Not only will it be interpreted as madness, but eventually, ineluctably, it will produce madness.

This acute understanding of how insanity works as a cultural prohibition seems to underlie the frequently harsh judgments Woolf visits on her literary foremothers. In particular, her famous attack in *A Room of One's Own* on the novel that Gayatri Spivak has called

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"a cult text of feminism," Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, seems informed by the awareness that one ought not to make one's meaning too evident. For in many respects the argument that Brontë advances through Jane's meditations is the same argument Woolf proposes through the example of Judith Shakespeare. The analogy is especially apparent when Woolf's persona, presenting herself as a reader of Brontë, quotes at length from the novel as a preliminary to commenting on it.

"Women are supposed to be very calm but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

"When thus alone I not infrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh...

That is an awkward break, I thought. It is upsetting to come upon Grace Poole all of a sudden. The continuity is disturbed."

Woolf suppresses here the revelation on which the plot of *Jane Eyre* will turn. The "continuity is disturbed" not by the servant Grace Poole but by the person whom Grace Poole was hired to guard, Mr. Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason. This "awkward break," which cuts off Jane's forthright demand that the (male) reader imaginatively empathize with women in their intolerable cultural role, is thus not Grace's but Bertha's laugh, the unintelligible utterance that serves to characterize a woman permanently outside the machine of accepted discourse. The threat of madness is so powerful in this passage that it prompts Woolf to read it back first into Charlotte Brontë's work and then, in an attribution more literary than historical, into Charlotte Brontë's life:


"Woolf, *Room*, p. 72."
The woman who wrote these pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted?²³

Brontë in fact died in the early stages of pregnancy, probably of untreated symptoms characterizing “morning sickness.”²⁴ There are no grounds for interpreting her early death (or her small, “cramped” body) as a consequence of her “indignation.” But the post hoc logic of Woolf’s narrative²⁵ combines with an aesthetic desire for balance to make Brontë’s end the equivalent of Judith Shakespeare’s. The strain of resisting societal injunctions about what women can and cannot do leads to mangled work (if in fact the literary voice is not silenced entirely), to insanity, and to death: both women die of their writing. In the case of Brontë, however, the tragedy is complicated by the kind of writing she insists on doing. And the muffled theme of madness makes itself heard as a voice intruding into a meditation on blame.

Woolf’s discussion of Jane Eyre begins, “I opened it at chapter twelve and my eye was caught by the phrase, ‘Anyone may blame me who likes.’ What were they blaming Charlotte Brontë for, I wondered?”²⁶ Technically, of course, this hypothesized blame, posited in order to be withdrawn, should attach to Jane, the narrator of the passage Woolf is quoting. Historically, as Woolf was well aware,

²³Ibid., pp. 72–73.

²⁴According to Philip Rhodes in “A Medical Appraisal of the Brontës” (Bronte Society Transactions, 16, no. 2 [1972], quoted in Helene Moglen, Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived [New York: Norton, 1976], p. 241 n. 20), “the evidence is quite clear that she died of hyperemesis gravidarum... an excess of the nausea and sickness which most women suffer in early pregnancy.”

²⁵And of narratives generally. As Roland Barthes notes, “Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula post hoc, ergo propter hoc—a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the ‘language.’” “Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in Image/Music/Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 94.

²⁶Woolf, Room, p. 71.
blame adhered to Charlotte Brontë, who in creating this protagonist gave voice to what contemporary critics called "an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit" and a "tone of mind and thought which has fostered Chartism and rebellion." Woolf accordingly wants to maintain that the question of blame here is out of place, that a speaker should not be held personally culpable if she dares assert that the situation of women is insufferable. Nor, by the same token, should her speech be broken off by an insane woman's laughter, the parodic echo of her own unsanctioned anger. Yet the issue of rebellion has always been one of blame, for Woolf and for women generally, and inasmuch as rebellion is first construed as and then brings about madness, madness itself has traditionally been regarded as blameworthy. Indeed, the issue of blameworthy madness propels the plot of Jane Eyre, although the exposition of this theme is largely either tacit or muted by being subordinated to more manifest concerns. It was Jean Rhys, writing thirty years after the publication of A Room of One's Own, who made the theme central by allying madness with rebellion and making it the effect, not the cause, of her female protagonist's outcast status.

II

Wide Sargasso Sea, published in 1966, is Rhys's reinscription of Jane Eyre. Its protagonist is the same woman whose laugh—"distinct, formal, mirthless," in one of Jane's peculiarly precise descriptions—disrupts Jane's meditations in order to enable the action of Brontë's novel, in the process motivating Virginia Woolf's complex ruminations on the subjects of madness, blame, and writing. By recentering the story on the character who is in many ways the most necessary accessory to the action—most necessary and most necessarily accessory—Rhys demonstrates how both social and narrative conventions mandate that certain categories of women

must be devalued if other categories of women are to assume importance. This convention emerges as a source of considerable tension in the narrative.

“The lunatic is both cunning and malignant,” Mr. Rochester tells Jane after he has been exposed as the husband of the women he is describing (Jane Eyre, p. 337), and the syntactical yoking of noun and adjectives is representative of the way in which disease and immorality tend to be conjoined in judgments about Bertha. Inasmuch as she is a lunatic, she is deprived of reason; indeed, she is so unreasoning as to be nonhuman. “It seemed, sir, a woman,” Jane tells Rochester, describing Bertha’s appearance in her room the night before the wedding is to take place, and her description concludes, “It reminded me . . . of] the foul German spectre—the vampire” (p. 311). When she finally views the madwoman in broad daylight, she again seizes on the pronoun it: “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” (p. 321). And Rochester uses Bertha’s nonhuman status to defend his choice of Jane: “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk” (p. 322).

Yet while the actions of this woman must be so alien to rational human concerns that they require no motives, she must also be responsible for these actions, or Rochester can have no moral authority for his attempted bigamy or his desire to be rid of her. Bertha must be not only a “lunatic” but also “cunning and malignant,” a “demon” whose vampirish tendencies derive from her malevolence toward all humanity: “She said she’d drain my heart,” her shaken brother reports after she has bitten him (p. 242). She must simultaneously be an evil person, one who is morally culpable for what

Gayatri Spivak makes this point with political precision: “In this fictive England, [Bertha/Antoinette] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation” (p. 251).
she does, and subrational, subhuman. In particular, she must be without a human voice, because any reasons she might articulate could only suggest another side to the *Jane Eyre* story and undercut the premise that she is wholly dispensable.

In many respects, then, Bertha is the most marginal sort of character, for although she is absolutely necessary as a function, she must never be *heard*, in the sense of acknowledged to have made meaningful statements. She is outside the symbolic order by definition. Rhys commented perceptively that in *Jane Eyre* she is "a lay figure—repulsive, which does not matter, and not once alive, which does. She’s necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—off stage."\(^{30}\) Not coincidentally, this offstage lay figure is also socially marginal because she is not a native Englishwoman. Like Rhys, she is a colonial from the West Indies. And in Brontë’s novel the story of her origins colors Rochester’s account of her madness and badness, to the point where madness, badness and creole origins are all equal figures for an essential pollution that must be exorcized from the fictional landscape.

Rhys believed that Charlotte Brontë had a special animus against West Indians, and certainly the two Jamaicans of *Jane Eyre* fare badly in comparison with the English.\(^{31}\) In her initial impression of Bertha’s brother, Richard Mason, Jane remarks “something in his face that displeased; or rather, that failed to please” and pinpoints this failing as a peculiarly foreign variety of spiritual flaccidity: “His features were relaxed, but too relaxed: his eye was large and well cut, but the life looking out of it was a tame, vacant life.” Mason’s habituation to a tropical climate and his consequent discomfort in the chill and damp of British winters (a trait shared by Rhys and all her Caribbean-born characters) becomes confirming evidence of his inherent weakness: “He occupied an arm-chair drawn close to the fire, and kept shrinking still nearer, as if he were cold” (p. 219). Rochester un-


\(^{31}\)In a letter to Diana Athill in 1966, Rhys remarks in parentheses, “(I think too that Charlotte had a ‘thing’ about the West Indies being rather sinister places—because in another of her books ‘Villette’ she drowns the hero, Professor Somebody, on the voyage to Guadeloupe, another very alien place—according to her.)” (*Letters*, p. 297).
derscores all these implications later, after Mason has thwarted his marriage to Jane, when he cries, “Cheer up, Dick—never fear me!—I’d almost as soon strike a woman as you” (p. 320).

In the universe of *Jane Eyre*, then, a West Indian man is so effete as to be virtually a woman. A West Indian woman is an even more dubious phenomenon. Bertha’s inherited contamination is at once female and racial: if “she came out of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations,” the source of this impurity was “her mother, the Creole” (p. 320). As foreigner and colonial, she is both unfamiliar and debased: Rochester reports finding “her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (p. 333). And when in his narrative Bertha’s manifold deficiencies are finally established as blameworthy as well as genetic, testimony not only to a diseased lineage but also to a self-motivated moral degeneration, the language that describes her debasement reflects prevailing European preconceptions about the landscape and inhabitants of the near-mythical islands that produced her: “Her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank. . . . What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities!” (pp. 333–34).

The West Indies themselves appear intrinsically fallen within the jingoistic economy of *Jane Eyre*. The “Wisdom” and “Hope” that Rochester regains after his disastrous marriage to Bertha come in the wake of “a wind fresh from Europe” that brings purgation: “The storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure” (p. 335). Brontë was clearly concerned, however, that this nationalist version of original sin would not suffice to establish Bertha as morally dispensable, even when augmented by her madness. Colonial origins may be tainted, but they are hardly things that Bertha has brought upon herself; similarly, Rochester affirms that madness per se is not ground for moral disgust when he tells Jane, “Your mind is my treasure, and if it were broken it would be my treasure still: if you raved, my arms should confine you and not a strait waistcoat” (p. 329). The combination of the two circumstances moves Bertha further into the margins, but it does not make her reprehensible until the admission of a third factor, about which Rochester can only hint. “Jane, I will not trouble you with abomi-
nable details; some strong words shall express what I have to say," he begins, and eschewing the details that were inappropriate for the ears of Jane Eyre or the eyes of Brontë’s readers, concludes, “Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” (pp. 333–34).

“Unchaste” is of course the epithet that translates Bertha’s victimization by uncontrollable external forces—racial and family heredity and perhaps even physical disease (Joyce Carol Oates sees in Rochester’s story evidence that Bertha “is suffering from the tertiary stage of syphilis”)—into vice, still uncontrollable but now culpable. Moral reprehensibility, which at first is merely insinuated as something implicit in the marginalizing factors of nationality and family history, becomes Bertha’s defining feature only when it is associated with sensuality, which is treated as identical to promiscuity. Once Rochester has established his wife as “unchaste,” however, her lasciviousness becomes conflated with her madness and is even represented as having preceded and brought on this madness: “Her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity” (p. 334). In other words, the behavior for which Bertha is presumed to be responsible, her sexual infidelity, is thoroughly confused with the insanity that renders her repulsive to Rochester, with the consequence that she emerges as wholly responsible for her own repulsiveness. The narrative desire that motivates the plot requires this fuzzing of boundaries. What Oates calls Rochester’s “curious and ungentlemanly behavior regarding...the legitimate Mrs. Rochester” demands considerable vindication in a novel that is so overtly about the injustice of blaming women for aspects of their lives that are beyond their control. But by the same token, the charges under which Bertha is condemned and banished cannot withstand much in the way of direct scrutiny. For this reason, she remains offstage, in the margins, the narrative analogue of her situation within the story, locked away in the Thornfield attic.


Ibid.
When in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the first Mrs. Rochester becomes the protagonist, the effect is to direct a spotlight at the shadowy borders of the *Jane Eyre* narrative. The Bertha of Rochester’s story is exposed as a conceptual impossibility, with the consequence that she cannot be made to scuttle into corners to wait until her legal existence is no longer necessary to the plot. In particular, her taboo sensuality cannot be treated as something so grotesque and inappropriate as to cast her outside the pale of civilized interactions altogether. Under examination, the charge of “unchastity” tends to resonate uneasily with the eroticism of Jane’s passion for Rochester, which fuels and directs the central action of Brontë’s novel. Female sexual desire, the dirty secret that translates Bertha’s victimization into blame-worthiness, is also the source of Jane’s power and the reason that her final triumph seems so richly deserved. Blanche Ingram, offered as the most explicit contrast, is found wanting precisely because she is incapable of wanting Rochester. The carefully maintained distinction between heroine and scapegoat blurs when the one is allowed to occupy the same narrative space as the other.34

In presenting the other side of the *Jane Eyre* story, Rhys exposes the culpability of Rochester’s first wife as a function of narrative conventions: this woman behaves as she must in order to bring about a “euphoric” conclusion to a sequence of events wholly marginal to her own story. Moreover, as a central character she acquires motives, and these not only ground actions that already exist in the earlier book but exonerate her of blame in the process. For instance, a number of the causal relations implied in Rochester’s account are reversed. Most significant, madness becomes a consequence of the wife’s being cast out rather than a cause, and as a result the whole notion of insanity turns equivocal, meaning at once the way in which fury and frustration are construed by a masculinist audience and the way in which such fury and frustration prompt extremes of destructive (and necessarily self-destructive) behavior, as in the burning of Thornfield Hall. In the same way, the “unchastity” of Rhys’s protagonist is the consequence rather than the cause of her husband’s callousness and infidelity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the wife

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turns to her cousin (the insult is compounded, in the man’s eyes, by the fact that the cousin is mulatto) after her husband has copulated loudly with her own (black) maid in the adjoining room.

And in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is the wife, not the husband, who is most evidently victimized by the institution of marriage. Brontë’s Mr. Rochester proclaims of the woman he has just wrestled to the floor, “That is my wife. . . . Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know—such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours” (p. 322). But the madwoman of *Jane Eyre* was also an heiress; indeed, her wealth was the reason for the marriage in the first place. Rochester may be constrained from remarrying by the legal tie that binds, but this same tie allows him both the money and the authority to keep his wife prisoner in his attic. She has no resources or rights of her own, in fact no independent existence at all—a condition that Rhys points up when she has her most acute outsider, the black obeah woman Christophine, advise, “A man don’t treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out,” only to discover that the “rich white girl” she counsels has been stripped of all her possessions under the terms of nineteenth-century English law.35 Rochester’s figurative entrapment corresponds to his wife’s literal imprisonment, but the irony inherent in the contrast is suppressed in *Jane Eyre*, where the only woman endangered by Rochester’s previous life must be Jane herself.

In these ways *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides, as Teresa O’Connor puts it, “an opposition to many of the givens of Brontë’s novel.”36 But Rhys’s revised version goes much further, not only countering the priorities that structure the value system of *Jane Eyre* but also revealing how narrative conventions that confine and finally eradicate Bertha are at the same time ways of bringing a rebellious female

35Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in *Jean Rhys: The Complete Novels* (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 524, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Rhys was very clear about the historical conditions circumscribing Brontë’s convenient madwoman and hypothesized that Brontë may well have known of such a woman in real life. “I believe and firmly too that there was more than one Antoinette,” she wrote Francis Wydham in 1964. “The West Indies was (were?) rich in those days for those days and there was no ‘married woman’s property Act’. The girls (very tiresome no doubt) would soon once in kind England be *Address Unknown*. So gossip. So a legend.” *Letters*, p. 271.
protagonist back into the patriarchal fold. In order for *Jane Eyre* to reach its sanctioned "euphoric" conclusion, Jane's story must be incorporated into Rochester's story—and Jane must be incorporated into Rochester. Rochester's version of his own life and motives involves an attempt at bigamy that amounts to a betrayal of Jane, and thus his account must be regulated and corrected: he must admit and repent his transgressions. The process of emending his story is analogous to an act of contrition, in particular to cutting off the right hand that offends, and Rochester of course loses his right hand in the refining fire that prepares him to be united with Jane. But the union itself betrays Jane inasmuch as she has associated herself with the larger case of "women," and in particular it betrays her crucial meditation on the blame that society wrongly attaches to women for desiring freedom. Bertha's incarceration allows Jane to fall in love with Rochester; Bertha's escape terminates Jane's engagement; Bertha's death enables the marriage that constitutes the happy ending. But if Jane triumphs at the expense of Bertha, her triumph in turn shuts her up in the Rochester enclosure, for the "euphoric" ending is by definition one that terminates the story by locking away the female protagonist in the paternal house. "Reader, I married him," Jane reports, but for the reader her exultation may remain contaminated by the unease with which she had earlier contemplated the prospect of renouncing her name to assume the patronymic required to legitimate future children, the name of the father. "Soon to be Jane Rochester," Rochester had assured her, and she had felt "something stronger than was consistent with joy—something that smote and stunned; it was, I think, almost fear" (p. 287). Names both identify and constitute identity. The act of giving up the name under which one has known and been known is in many respects an act of consenting to become someone else. Charlotte Brontë clearly recognized this circumstance—for instance when she titled her novel not *Jane Rochester* but *Jane Eyre.*

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37Charlotte Brontë seems to have been alert to ways in which the prescribed "euphoric" conclusion of the heterosexual romance plot curtails identity and may not have been altogether easy about the ending of *Jane Eyre.* Certainly her next novel, *Villette,* goes to considerable lengths to avoid coming to a conclusion at all, leaving the options bifurcated between the "euphoric" termination involving marriage and a renunciation of the very palatable career as head of a school and a termination in
Jean Rhys also recognized the importance of names for women. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha Antoinette Mason begins as Antoinette Cosway, daughter of Annette. (Ronnie Scharfman notes in the encoded matrilineage “a combination of Annette and ‘toî’: a hidden, built-in bond between mother and daughter.”) She acquires “Mason” through the superimposition of a stepfather and “Bertha” through her husband’s Adam-like penchant for imposing his will by imposing his own colonizing language. “My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?” she asks the man, and he responds, “Because it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha,” a palpable lie in the context of his first-person meditations, where he always refers to his bride as Antoinette (p. 540).

Furthermore, Rhys’s novel suppresses the name of the father. The character in Rochester’s position, prominent though he is in the plot and as a first-person narrator in the middle section of the book, remains carefully unnamed.) His peculiar anonymity seems emblematic of the inverted hierarchies characterizing Rhys’s revision of the *Jane Eyre* story, in which imperialist white male Europeans are irredeemably other, on the margins of a culture and even a nature that they are powerless to understand. If the West Indies were for Brontë a convenient fiction, they are too vivid, too present to Rhys’s Rochester figure, who must insist finally on their unreality in order to sustain his own frantic assertion of European hegemony: “If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste’s face, or Antoinette’s eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal” (p. 519). At one point, however, he tells Antoinette, “This place is my enemy and on your
side" (p. 537), and the notion of an other side that menaces the secure vantage of the sanctioned white male point of view is what provokes so much of his rage against the islands and against his wife. For Antoinette it is England that is unreal, “a cold, dark dream” (p. 505), and even when she has arrived and has become the uneasy phantom of the attic, she maintains, “This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England” (p. 568). Indeed, for this woman England is necessarily a fiction—Brontë’s fiction—and the “cardboard house” that contains her so completely is the already written account of her destiny, the novel between whose cardboard covers she is imprisoned.40 In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Rochester character appropriates her for this house by appropriating her subjectivity, insisting first that she is his “marionette,” who can serve as the repulsive “lay figure” of Rhys’s description, and finally, at the conclusion of his first-person narrative, reducing her to the bare structural elements that the *Jane Eyre* plot requires: “I drank some more rum and, drinking, 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” (p. 599). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the English house, like English law, has only a paper existence. But paper in the hands of the oppressor is a formidable weapon in a world where paper entities have the power to confine people and to condition the universe that they inhabit. After her husband has concluded his account of her, Antoinette Cosway, rendered as a stick figure, enters an alien country to take her place as a prisoner of literary precedent.

III

If Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has proved by far the most attractive and sympathetic of Rhys’s protagonists, the attraction and sympathy are in many respects due to the historical documentation of the novel, to the fact that Antoinette is “emblematic of an entire way of life,” as Oates observes: “If she is passive and easily victim-

40See also Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts,” pp. 50–51.
ized, this has been true of other members of the decayed Creole ‘aristocracy’ . . . ; if she suffers from a kind of sporadic amnesia, this too is typical of her people.”41 Her sufferings have clear external causes that correspond to a situation in the text known as history; most important, this situation is located far in the past, in the early nineteenth century, when a whole “people” can be explained without raising uncomfortable implications for present behavior. But she is also and concomitantly marginalized by another literary text, in ways suggesting that certain narrative conventions are inherently aligned with an ideology of marginality: of whom readers should and should not look at, of whose story is worth the telling, of what sorts of people ought to prove dispensable, means to an end. For this reason, her situation reflects on the situations of—and reader responses to—characters in earlier Rhys novels and implies that all Rhys’s protagonists are to some degree prisoners of literary tradition.

The most thoroughly unsettling of the Rhys women is probably Julia Martin in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie (1930), who compounds the discomfort of dependency by being at a point in her life when she is aging out of successful objecthood. The title of the novel suggests the narrative impropriety of Julia’s situation, an impropriety reinforced by the opening sentence: “After she had parted from Mr Mackenzie, Julia Martin went to live in a cheap hotel on the Quai des Grands Augustins.”42 The action in effect begins after the romance plot has concluded, concluded “dysphorically” inasmuch as the parting was initiated by Mr Mackenzie, who has withdrawn from his role as protector. Julia is hiding in the hotel, supported by a sort of pension doled out weekly by Mr Mackenzie’s lawyer, “until the sore and cringing feeling, which was the legacy of Mr Mackenzie, had departed” (p. 238).

The burden of the plot is that Julia does not lose the sore and cringing feeling although she believes she ought to, indeed that she must. Her progress is steadily downward as she tries the remedies that have worked before, a change of man and then of location. She seems continually to sabotage her own efforts, for example lapsing

4Oates, “Romance and Anti-Romance,” p. 54.
into indifference when she knows it is crucial to seduce Mr Horsfield, who has emerged as a possible protector, or exploding into resentment at the complacency of her Uncle Griffiths, whom she has attempted to approach for a loan. And the self-sabotage reflects an attitude presented early in the story, in an exchange with Mr MacKenzie after he has withdrawn his weekly stipend: “She said that she had fallen ill, and then she hadn’t cared about anything except to lie in peace and be ill. And then she had written to the lawyer and asked for the allowance to be sent to her. And after that something had gone kaput in her, and she would never be any good any more—never, any more” (p. 251).

Mr MacKenzie’s own point of view dominates the context of this explanation, and the passage is framed by his implicit diagnoses of hysteria, self-indulgence, and thoroughgoing bad taste. Earlier in the scene, the narrator formulated his general philosophy in such situations: “The secret of life was never to go too far or too deep. And so you let these people alone. They would be pretty certain to tell you lies, anyhow. And they had their own ways of getting along, don’t you worry” (p. 248). Julia’s apocalyptic claim that “she would never be any good any more—never, any more” emerges in this setting as clearly overdone, excessive, evidence of her lack of control, which is in turn evidence of her general unworthiness. Yet much later in the action, Julia accosts Mr MacKenzie again, and he confirms her claim that “something had gone kaput in her,” although this time the judgment deals with her appearance: “She looked untidy. There were black specks in the corners of her eyes. Women go phut quite suddenly, he thought. A feeling of melancholy crept over him” (p. 343). MacKenzie thus articulates two basic positions about women and blame. On the one hand, he maintains that there can be no such thing as irremediable psychological damage to a woman who allows herself to be kept, and certainly not damage for which another person could in any way be held responsible. On the other hand, he maintains that aging inevitably produces in women sudden and irremediable physical damage, which removes them from any further consideration as objects of affection and thus of financial support. The two positions remain separate in his mind, and so he can treat Julia first with contempt and later with something like pity.

These judgments are, of course, equally dismissive; the action that
informs the novel, although it never seems quite completed enough to warrant the "after," is leaving Mr Mackenzie. But just as Mr Mackenzie cannot nudge Julia entirely out of his field of vision, the reader is continually faced with a protagonist who seems as though she ought to be dismissed, either on the grounds that she has "gone phut" or on the grounds that she believes she has "gone phut" and therefore displays a bad attitude. No other Rhys woman has proved so discomfiting, or so susceptible to negative criticism—so much so that in the introduction to her edition of Rhys's complete novels, Diana Athill attempts to validate this criticism by assigning it to the author:

Julia remembers catching butterflies when she was a child: how desperately she longed for their beauty, and how it was unfair of the grown-ups to scold her for damaging them when all she had intended was to keep them safe and happy in her jar. Julia remembers no more than her longing and her sense of injustice, but the reader is free to see that the butterflies died because the child's desire was blindly selfish. This passage of symbolism seems to me a flaw; but it does suggest that the reader who judges Julia severely is not doing so against the will of Jean Rhys.

Julia is thereby convicted of "blindly selfish" desire that presumably continues from this inauspicious incident in her childhood and now informs her adult existence. Her conviction on this count implies authorial sanction for "the reader who judges Julia severely." But what does a severe judgment of Julia entail? What is Julia presumed to deserve?

What is at stake for Julia in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie is survival, her physical continuance as a living human being. That she survives is part of the extreme discomfort the novel produces in its readers, a discomfort accentuated by a passage that flirts with a "dysphoric" conclusion but evades it. Late in the action, Julia looks out at a patch of the Seine "where shadows danced and beckoned" until a gendarme accosts her, at which point she offers him the shopper's excuse, especially pertinent coming from a woman whose life as a commodity may be nearly over: "I was just looking" (pp. 338-39). She does not kill herself, although the whole context is such that

"Diana Athill, Introduction to Jean Rhys: The Complete Novels, pp. xi-xii."
her death would be a relief. In this narrative about female aging, continuity can only make matters worse, and Julia seems almost perverse in her desire to go on, “to intrude her sordid wish somehow to keep alive” into situations where she is profoundly unnecessary (p. 297). Yet she persists, despite the insistence of virtually all the other characters that she is not the sort of person who ought to survive any longer.

Athill’s assertion that Rhys wants the reader to “judge Julia severely” appears an attempt to maintain that Julia is somehow to be regarded as having brought her situation on herself. Such a judgment would allow the reader to maintain a morally conditioned distance from the character, to withhold sympathy on the ground that the character has not earned it. But even granting the reader a detachment that Rhys’s technique incessantly undermines, it seems difficult to hold to the notion that Julia should be so severely punished for her crime of selfishness, that she should be left to the humiliations of abject dependency foreshadowed in the figure of the old woman who lives upstairs in her hotel: “The woman had a humble, cringing manner. Of course, she had discovered that, having neither money nor virtue, she had better be humble if she knew what was good for her. But her eyes were malevolent—the horribly malevolent eyes of an old, forsaken woman. She was a shadow, kept alive by a flame of hatred for somebody who had long ago forgotten all about her” (p. 241). It may be significant that Athill makes this judgment when she is comparing Julia to her sister Norah. Equally trapped, equally resentful and terrified, Norah can lay claim to some altruism because she has devoted much of her adult life to taking care of their invalid mother. But the universe of Mr Mackenzie is not distinguished by altruism, and certainly the selfishness, or, more properly, the self-centeredness that Julia displays in the “symbolic” passage with the butterflies is a defining quality of all the male characters, even as all of them pass judgment on Julia.

Indeed, the charge of self-centeredness is most memorably leveled by Mr Mackenzie himself, during the confrontation scene Julia stages at the beginning of the story: “He listened, half-smiling. Surely even she must see that she was trying to make a tragedy out of a situation that was fundamentally comical. The discarded mistress—the faithful lawyer defending the honour of the client.... A situation con-
The Other Side of the Story

secreated as comical by ten thousand farces and a thousand comedies” (pp. 250–51). This reflection effectively conditions the tone of the subsequent encounter, tainting Julia’s claim—“after that something had gone kaput in her, and she would never be any good any more—never, any more”—with the suspicion of self-dramatization and self-pity. But Mackenzie’s bluff and worldly assessment of Julia’s account—especially the imputation that her reading of her own situation involves a fundamental category mistake—relies on the “consecration” granted to their respective roles by literary precedent. The substance of Mr McKenzie’s charge is not only that Julia has mistaken her genre but also that she has mistaken the nature and importance of her part: not only has she read her own story as a tragedy, whereas it is really a comedy or farce, but she has cast herself as the protagonist, whereas she really figures only as a peripheral, indeed, a stock character. These corrections to the context allow Mackenzie to reinscribe Julia’s explanation in the register of banality, so that her protestations become the expected, if embarrassing, effusions of “these people.” In a parallel scene later in the story, the younger and more sympathetic Mr Horsfield finds himself reflexively translating another of Julia’s attempts to explain herself into the language of a comic music hall “turn”:

She began: “After all . . .” and then stopped. She had the look in her eyes of someone who is longing to explain herself, to say: “This is how I am. This is how I feel.”

He suddenly remembered: “Pa was a colonel. I was seduced by a clergyman at a garden-party. Pa shot him. Heavens, how the blighter bled!” He wanted to laugh. [pp. 261–62]

In the course of the narrative, Mr Horsfield displays a certain amount of fellow feeling for Julia; later on he voices a central theme: “It’s always so damned easy to despise hard-up people when in one way and another you’re as safe as houses . . .” (p. 284). But on this occasion the lines of banal dialogue seem to burst unbidden into his mind, asserting the existence of an already-written document within which Julia can be definitively placed and asserting his own identity as spokesman for the “safe as houses” cultural mainstream that has produced this document and ordained that it “consecrates” as comic
or farcical certain predicaments involving certain categories of "hard-up people."

All of Rhys's novels, and many of her short stories, contain at least one character who performs this function of assuring the protagonist that literary tradition relegates her to the sidelines. Such assurances amount to a process of translation: the social forces that place people on the social margins are reconstrued as literary structures that reduce these same people to minor and indeed "flat" characters. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the preexisting system of patriarchy is conflated with the already-written text of *Jane Eyre* to reduce Antoinette to a gendered stick figure within a symbolic enclosure. In *Mr Mackenzie*, the financial dependency of the aging, uneducated, professionless, inheritanceless, middle-class woman is interpreted as the matter of farce and secured with the title of "discarded mistress." In the novel published after *Mr Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), the nineteen-year-old Anna Morgan reports during the course of her first, devastating love affair, "Everybody says the man's bound to get tired and you read it in all books. But I never read now, so they can't get at me like that, anyway." But the network of respectable businessmen that has already incorporated Anna into the sexual underclass serving as its harem insists that she must accept its reading of her situation. As her lover's cousin writes in the letter ending the affair, the issue has not been one of love at all, "especially that sort of love—and the more people, especially girls, put it right out of their heads and do without it the better" (p. 58). If Anna has been used, her option is to "get on" in the prostitution business, counsel that bewilders her because she has never felt she chose that particular profession and sees no reason to want to "get on" in it. But the sanction for the official version of her predicament comes, once again, from literature. The letter continues, "Do you remember when we talked about books? I was sorry when you told me that you never read because, believe me, a good book like that book I was talking about can make a lot of difference to your point of view. It makes you see what is real and what is just imaginary" (p. 58). At the opening of the novel, Anna's

fellow chorus girl, Maudie, remarked of the book that Anna was reading (Zola's *Nana*, the title an anagram of Anna's own name), "I know; it's about a tart. I think it's disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides, all books are like that—just somebody stuffing you up" (pp. 4–5). This view of literary tradition as a means by which privileged men systematically lie to and about the women they exploit permeates *Voyage in the Dark*, to the point where the relation of "unrespectable" women to written language becomes intensely problematic. After her rejection, Anna sits in bed compulsively writing and tearing up letters to her former lover, finally lapsing into a sort of stream-of-consciousness style ("writing very quickly, like you do when you write") to insist on the reality of her own emotions: "My dear Walter I've read books about this and I know quite well what you're thinking but you're quite wrong because don't you remember you used to joke because every time you put your hand on my heart it used to jump well you can't pretend that can you you can pretend everything else but not that it's the only thing you can't pretend" (p. 64). But obviously her mustering of the physical evidence supporting her claim to be in love with Walter cannot convince, indeed will be read as largely irrelevant, within a sexual economy where her acceptance of financial support makes her (to borrow once again the mutually exclusive categories in which Elgin Mellown has couched a dichotomy "consecrated" by literary precedent) "essentially a mercenary."

The "translators" who reinscribe the protagonists' situations into terms hallowed by the writing of the dominant culture are so pervasive and so powerful in Rhys's novels that they guarantee the protagonists cannot make their stories heard within their own fictional universes. To be heard—to be acknowledged as having uttered meaningful statements—these protagonists would have to be recognized as possessing subjectivity, even an independent existence, within a regulative structure that grants them neither. For this reason, their own testimony to the contrary must continually be referred back to the already written. Thus Julia and Anna, conventionally "women with a past," are not allowed to have their own histories. Their personal backgrounds are inadmissible because personal, uniquely their own. The people most concerned to use them as supporting characters need to render them generic, to turn them
not only into "flat" characters but into potentially interchangeable versions of a single type.

The process begins immediately in *Voyage in the Dark* when Anna and Maudie are approached on the street by a Mr Jones and a Mr Jeffries. Mr Jeffries, later the "Walter" of Anna's torn-up letters, asks Anna's age and discovers that she is eighteen. At this point, Mr Jones provides a gloss palpably intended to counter any suggestion that Anna is innocent or ingenuous and thus to counter the effect this woman is producing on his friend. "He knew you'd be either eighteen or twenty-two. You girls only have two ages. You're eighteen and so of course your friend's twenty-two. Of course" (pp. 6-7). The phrases "you girls" and "of course" reduce Anna's real age to a lie, attributed to the calculated production of a self-stereotype. More disturbing, they tend to suggest that *any* age claimed by either of these women will likewise be a lie, that the number of years between such a woman's birth and the present moment can exist only as an attribute that she puts on, like makeup or clothing, to make herself desirable to a prospective buyer. Inasmuch as these women are viewed primarily as commodities, their defining features are presumed to be responses to the market: supply created solely in order to satisfy demand.

The process of "translation" is most devastating in contributing to the alienation of Anna from her West Indian past. Traumatically orphaned, removed from her homeland and taken to England by her repressively respectable stepmother—the opening sentence of the novel, "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known" (p. 3), places narrative emphasis on the catastrophic break in her sense of personal continuity—Anna finally becomes so detached from identification with her childhood, family, or indeed any sort of belonging that her past can only enter into her present consciousness through the violent disruptions of involuntary memory. (Rhys highlights the estrangement by putting associatively remembered incidents, like the passages of writing from letters, in italics.) Her interactions with the men who use her for sexual entertainment serve to intensify the split. For example, despite some evidence of personal concern (based largely on her virginity when he met her, "the only thing that matters," as he assures her before the defloration [p. 22]), Walter is completely uninterested in her
Caribbean background and tends either to mechanically "reflect" back her statements about her heritage or to treat them with gentle ridicule. Her subsequent lovers go from dismissing to overtly revising her account of origins, as when an American named Joe claims to "know" about her country and her family:

He sat on the bed. "I know, I know. Trinidad, Cuba, Jamaica—why, I've spent years there." He winked at Laurie.

"No," I said, "a little one."

"But I know the little ones too," Joe said. "The little ones, the big ones, the whole lot."

"Oh, do you?" I said, sitting up.

"Yes, of course I do," Joe said. He winked at Laurie again. "Why, I knew your father—a great pal of mine. Old Taffy Morgan. He was a fine old boy, and didn't he lift the elbow too."

"You're a liar," I said. "You didn't know my father. Because my real name isn't Morgan and I'll never tell you my real name and I was born in Manchester and I'll never tell you anything real about myself. Everything that I tell about myself is a lie, so now then."

He said, "Well, wasn't his name Taffy? Was it Patrick, perhaps?"

[p. 78]

Joe's winks, directed at Anna's more cynical friend Laurie, serve the same function as Mr Jones's earlier phrases "you girls" and "of course." They acknowledge what is presumed to be a mutual awareness of Anna's evident self-fabrication. Here the question is even less one of hiding the truth about Anna, of veiling her real story in more glamorous trappings: Joe's dubiety about Anna's "little" island does not imply a parallel certainty about her origins in a prosaic place like Manchester. In fact, Joe seems to appropriate Anna's account of her antecedents and make it deliberately generic ("Taffy" is a stock nickname for Welshmen just as "Patrick" is a stock name for Irishmen, a similarly debased minority in England) on the assumption that his version is just as good as hers, if not better because he has the power in this relationship. The assumption forces Anna into a posture of total denial. She responds with a variation on the Cretan paradox ("Everything that I tell you about myself is a lie, so there now"), which is intended to protect her endangered sense of identity from further damage but which in effect confirms her own words to be as meaningless as Joe takes them to be.

In a very similar manner, Julia in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie ap-
pears to have lost control over her own past, and thus to have lost her sense of individual identity, through lack of an audience willing to hear and believe her own story. Very early in the delineation of a highly circumscribed fictional universe, whose reputable inhabitants are clearly tagged and shelved (for instance, her sister Norah is "labelled for all to see... 'Middle class, no money' " [p. 275]), the narrator introduces Julia as someone who is significantly unlabeled: "Her career of ups and downs had rubbed most of the hall-marks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged" (p. 240). The implication that Julia has somehow become generic as the consequence of a "career of ups and downs" acquires substance in an important passage that has storytelling as its subject. Julia describes to Mr Horsfield a period in her life when she worked as a mannequin for a female sculptor, and this story in turn becomes the frame for the story of how she lost faith in her own stories:

And so one day, when we were sitting smoking, and having tea, I started to tell her about myself. I was just going to tell her why I left England... One or two things had happened, and I wanted to go away. Because I was fed up, fed up, fed up.

I wanted to go away with just the same feeling a boy has when he wants to run away to sea—at least, that I imagine a boy has. Only, in my adventure, men were mixed up, because of course they had to be. You understand, don't you? Do you understand that a girl might have that feeling?...

And when I had finished I looked at her. She said: "You seem to have had a hectic time." But I knew when she spoke that she didn't believe a word. [pp. 263–64]

It is particularly important that a female interlocuter refuses to acknowledge the reality of Julia's story, for within Rhys's fictional parameters only women have the capacity to understand that there might be such a thing as female desire or experience. Throughout Mr Mackenzie, Julia seeks out women who appear sympathetic, manifestly searching for the kind of acceptance she associates with the mother who long ago was "the warm centre of the world" for her (p. 294). But women prove to be spokesmen for the masculinist viewpoint in this novel, and as spokesmen they uphold a societal edict to the effect that male and female experiences cannot be com-
pared, not merely because the realms of masculine and feminine endeavor are far apart but because female experience as such is unimaginable. When Julia aligns her adolescent desire to get away from England with a boy’s desire to run away to sea, her analogy acts as a socially conditioned cue that triggers an attitude of blank incomprehension. Later in the narrative, she tries to tell a former lover about her “career of ups and downs” and is met with a show of jolly acceptance. “I’ve got a lot of mad friends now,” Mr James assures her. “I call them my mad friends.” But when Julia presses him, “People who haven’t got on? . . . Men?” he recoils from any understanding of Julia’s situation that further empathy might entail: “Oh, no, some women too. Though mind you, women are a different thing altogether. Because it’s all nonsense; the life of a man and the life of a woman can’t be compared. They’re up against entirely different things the whole time. What’s the use of talking nonsense about it? Look at cocks and hens; it’s the same sort of thing,” said Mr James” (p. 299). The point is driven home firmly a few pages further, when Julia escapes for a time into a movie theater. “After the comedy she saw young men running races and some of them collapsing exhausted. And then—strange anti-climax—young women ran races and also collapsed exhausted, at which the audience rocked with laughter” (p. 301). In Rhys’s world, gender cues genre. The activity that signals heroic aspiration in men is the stuff of farce when women attempt it. The spectacle of defeat is coded as ludicrous when it involves characters so marginal to the great central movements of the drama that nothing they do could be read as triumph.

Because other inhabitants of her universe refuse to hear her, Julia loses her own sense of having come from anywhere, of having a continuous identity that extends back into the past and can extend forward toward anything resembling a goal. Without validation from the outside world, even tangible evidence cannot assure her that the story of her life is not simply another fabricated, detachable aspect of her existence as a commodity:

Then we went out to dinner. When I got home I pulled out all the photographs I had, and letters and things. And my marriage-book and my passport. And the papers about my baby who died and was buried in Hamburg.
Writing in the Margins

But it had all gone, as if it had never been. And I was there, like a ghost. [p. 265]

Mutilated by the process of being reduced to a "flat" character, Julia is alternately affectless and desperate, resigned to a preordained destiny and furious at the "respectable" people who take credit for their own effortless lives. In living by her appearance she has been condemned to the impossible existence of being appearance. Like the woman in a Modigliani print hanging in the sculptor's studio, her role is to be nothing but body, and as she stares at the picture she feels as if it were saying, "I am more real than you. But at the same time I am you. I am all that matters of you" (p. 224).

All the Rhys women get this message in one form or another, despite significant differences in the way protagonists and supporting characters are presented. In the course of writing her five novels, Rhys developed three distinct narrative strategies. In Quartet (1928) and Mr Mackenzie, she uses a third-person narrator and a multiple point of view that can shift, often disconcertingly, from the mind of the protagonist to the minds of the people with whom she is immediately involved. In Voyage in the Dark and Good Morning, Midnight (1939), she uses a first-person narrative voice limited to the protagonist herself, with other voices emerging only through the protagonist's conversations and recollections. In Wide Sargasso Sea, she uses two first-person narrators, with Antoinette speaking in the first and third chapters and her husband delivering the central chapter. Yet despite the disparities in method, all the novels manage the difficult feat of presenting characters who are obviously powerful enough to ensure the protagonist's marginality in her own world, while remaining minor from the point of view of the reader.

It is important to note the difficulty of this achievement precisely because a number of critics have faulted Rhys for her "unsympathetic" supporting characters, especially the male ones. Except for the Rochester figure, none of the men is explained, justified, or given anything much in the way of motivation; each simply exploits or judges the protagonist with the confidence of someone engaging in a habitual or customary activity. Of course, Rhys's novels are eminently about exploitation and judgment and in particular about how the two are often identical. And as the preceding discussion may
begin to indicate, exploitation and judgment are encoded in the already-written texts of the dominant culture, so that when representatives of that culture banish one of Rhys's protagonists to its margins, they are merely restoring an order so pervasive that they cannot question its prescriptions. In this context, habit and custom emerge as the most credible—and the most terrifying—motives.

Moreover, the privileged male characters appropriate and express positions that readers might otherwise feel free to take. In using their social and political power to assign a name to the protagonist and control the meaning of her speech and actions, such characters make visible the mechanisms that render her marginal. As a consequence, it becomes impossible for readers to assume that judgments blaming this protagonist for her own situation and/or dismissing her entirely from serious consideration are politically neutral, separable from the power structure that governs her. One judges the Rhys woman "severely," in Diana Athill's words, at the risk of colluding with the system that enforces her marginality.

The disorienting, uncomfortable quality of Rhys's writing derives finally from Rhys's exposure of the easy and ready-to-hand interpretation as an ideological construct. This interpretation is always represented in her novels, either through the coercive speech of one or more of the privileged characters or—in the case of Wide Sargasso Sea—through allusions to a particular canonized literary text, which by already existing makes the protagonist's victimization and sacrifice inevitable. By making it an untenable interpretation, Rhys closes off the possibilities for dismissing the marginal woman who exists so disconcertingly at the center of her narratives, and opens up the possibility that someone may yet hear the other side of an old, familiar story.