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Charting the Empty Spaces of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Missy Dehn Kubitschek

> In the present feminist literary criticism we are . . . presented with a radical alteration of our vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint.[1]
>
> —Elaine Showalter

The idea of woman as alien in a patriarchal culture has now become widely accepted within the women's movement. In her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys addresses this alienation by representing patriarchy as women's Sargasso Sea: like the apparently navigable but in fact treacherous ocean, patriarchy's surface offers inviting opportunities, but its real substance chokes all progress. The women's movement at present charts two courses through this sea: one travels the mainstream of economic and social realities; the other maintains secret, marginal routes from which it subverts those realities via guerrilla attack. *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows both of these strategies, assimilating and remaining marginal, in action; it indicates that assimilating is not only disastrous as a personal strategy, but invalid or at least incomplete as a means of interpreting any experience, including that of reading a novel.

Wide Sargasso Sea revises Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* by presenting the life of Rochester's first wife, called Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and Antoinette in this work. Antoinette's narration, which constitutes a considerable portion of the novel, gives her own version of her courtship and marriage to Edward Fairfax Rochester, desirable Byronic hero in *Jane Eyre* and villain extraordinaire in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Thus, in Antoinette, Rhys chooses a previously peripheral character to narrate most of the novel. Antoinette's initial social and psychological position could hardly be more marginal: a West Indian Creole from a slave-owning family, she is a child when emancipation frees the slaves and for practical purposes abolishes plantation culture. Antoinette naturally belongs neither to the English fortune hunters who buy up the plantations nor to the "native" population of ex-slaves. Antoinette's mother, Annette, offers her no support, and the lonely child lives in fear of the ex-slave population, most of whom refer to her as a white cockroach. Antoinette receives emotional sustenance only from Christophine, originally a slave who was a wedding present to Annette and is now the only functioning adult in the household. Realizing Antoinette's needs, Christophine introduces her to Tia, a black child with whom she becomes friends. Even with these two emotional contacts, Antoinette's position remains precarious, marginal.

Although Annette marries the rich Englishman, Mason, Antoinette's situation does not improve—not understanding the cultural system with which he perforce deals, Mason unwittingly provokes already resentful laborers into burning his estate, Coulibri. In the ensuing chaos, when Antoinette sees Tia and approaches her for comfort, Tia literally and figuratively wounds her by throwing a sharp stone. Following the burning of Coulibri, and as a direct result of it, Annette goes mad, Antoinette's brother Pierre dies, and Antoinette is sent to a convent for schooling, isolated from nearly all her earlier contacts.

When Mason dies and his son arranges for Antoinette's marriage to a young, impoverished Englishman, Edward Rochester, Antoinette loses control over her inheritance, which under English law becomes Rochester's if not specially settled on her. Rochester fiercely resents his younger-son status, which has necessitated this financially profitable marriage, and he is intensely frightened of

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Antoinette's sexuality. For these reasons, he seizes on gossip about Antoinette to distance himself from her. Soon he decides to break up her identity—he rechristens her "Bertha," for example, and refuses to call her Antoinette; successful in the initial stages, he removes her to England for the final obliteration. There she becomes the character familiar from *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman who sets fire to Rochester's ancestral home, Thornfield. And yet, by this point, she cannot be quite that same character, for the reader is now familiar with her history, a context that revises the meaning of her actions.

Described in this way, Antoinette's story seems exactly that depressing, familiar archetype, woman-as-victim. But Rhys accents point of view—both Rochester and Grace Poole ("Bertha's" caretaker at Thornfield) narrate sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example. In this way Rhys draws attention to the selectivity of all of the characters' perceptions as they choose and define essential details according to their operative conceptual frameworks. And the definition of Antoinette as helpless victim belongs to a destructive framework that Barbara Hill Rigney alludes to in the last sections of *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*,[2] one that encourages both men and women to see women as passive, helpless beings. Because Rhys gives us sufficient material to revise this summary of a fated victim's life, the reader can see that Antoinette participates in her own destruction: her choices matter, and she chooses badly. Although it remains sympathetic to Antoinette, the novel does not offer merely another helpless victim of a patriarchal, imperialist system. Instead, *Wide Sargasso Sea* contrasts Antoinette's self-destructive attempts to assimilate with Christophine's successful preservation of her marginal status.

This challenge to traditional interpretation of marginal experience demands a new understanding of both the theme and the structure of *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Antoinette Mason is not simply a pathetic victim, nor is she the heroine. The critical assumption that Antoinette is the heroine, the focus, never becomes explicit, of course; from the mainstream perspective that defines the book narrowly as a rebuttal of *Jane Eyre*, the premise is too obvious to require expression. As a direct result, Christophine, Antoinette's surrogate mother, becomes a minor character and her successful marginal strategy receives no recognition, while Antoinette's victimization receives substantial critical commentary.

Antoinette remains, of course, a major character; Rhys wished to combat what she considered Brontë's slander of West Indian Creoles. In an interview, Rhys recalled: "I was convinced that Charlotte Brontë must have had something against the West Indies, and I was angry about it. Otherwise, why did she take a West Indian for that horrible lunatic, that really dreadful creature? I hadn't really formulated the idea of vindicating the mad woman in a novel but when I was rediscovered I was encouraged to do so."[3] Clearly, Rhys felt the marginalist's resentment of the mainstream's power to characterize and define her.

This choice of the margin has not been the subject of critical commentary, which tends to focus on Antoinette as a creature "stripped of her name, her money, and her property . . . a prisoner in a small attic, denied the fresh air and sunlight enjoyed by other living creatures."[4] Then, perhaps because victims are in and of themselves often rather dull, criticism has examined the pressure of social and political conditions embodied in characters who influence her. These examinations generally seek to explain the origin of Antoinette's madness, by, for example, showing the failure of Antoinette's mother to nurture her[5] or by assessing the degree of Rochester's guilt.[6] These approaches, however diverse their focuses, concentrate on who does (or does not) do what to Antoinette.

Here and there the critical commentary suggests this perception without really developing it. Peter Wolfe notes of Antoinette, for instance, that "[h]er womanly tendency to reflect her male surroundings makes his [Rochester's] obsessiveness the iron bars of her cage."[7] The only interpretation of the novel that concentrates on the issue, Helen Nebeker's archetypal analysis, concludes that "Rhys reveals without hypocrisy or glossing, that woman is ultimately the victim, not of man, but of herself."[8] But while Nebeker accurately perceives Antoinette's responsibility, she locates the cause of her destruction in an overly romantic approach to love complicated by loss of financial independence. Antoinette's version of romantic love, I would argue, is a comfortably vague rationalization to disguise a more fundamental and even less attainable desire for safety through assimilation.

Antoinette very much wants peace and safety, certainly understandable goals. In order to achieve these goals, however, she abandons her own feelings and experiences, or more accurately, redefines them from a point of view not her own. Her shifting attitudes toward two other characters, Tia and Christophine, demonstrate this process. When Antoinette's mother is unwilling or unable to support her daughter, the ex-slave Christophine becomes a kind of surrogate mother.[9] Christophine attempts to find companionship for the friendless child and later advises the adult Antoinette. Antoinette cannot, of course, enter Rochester's society with a black mother and friend. The cultural mainstream defines both Tia and Christophine as inferior, and Antoinette half-consciously comes to accept these definitions, not realizing that the system will also define her as a subhuman.

Antoinette demonstrates this capacity to accept and act on destructive definitions very early. Tia's attack during the burning of Coulibri is motivated by the girls' childish quarrel over three pennies belonging to Antoinette, who calls Tia a "cheating nigger."[10] Clearly both the quarrel's subject and its outcome are a microcosm of the island's colonial problems. And by allying herself with the wealthy English and plantation owners against the natives, Antoinette relinquishes any claim to Tia's affection. Rhys's description of the girls after Tia has thrown the stone clarifies the reader's understanding of Antoinette's earlier choice: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (p. 45). In defining Tia as a "cheating nigger," Antoinette has denied a part of herself, has in effect thrown the first stone.

Before her marriage to Rochester, Antoinette shows at least a limited ability to judge from her own experience rather than conforming to cultural norms. Initially, Antoinette values Christophine's tenderness and under-

standing. When she hears from gossip that Christophine practices obeah—more commonly known as voodoo—Antoinette becomes afraid to enter Christophine's room. Upon actually seeing Christophine again, however, she regains her faith in her friend. Temporarily, Antoinette relies on her own experience and rejects the native cultural definition of Christophine as a threatening figure. In the same way, Antoinette rejects the imagery of traditional Catholic prayers when she sees that it does not apply to her individual needs. Praying for her mother, who "hated a strong light and loved the cool and the shade," Antoinette does not wish to implore God to "let perpetual light shine on them" (p. 57). Earlier, when Mason has promised to take her retarded brother Pierre to England for treatment, Antoinette wonders, "And how will you like that. . . . How will you like being made exactly like other people?" (pp. 36-37). Her question implies a recognition that imposed conformity to definitions of normality will obliterate the individual personality.

Not only social pressures but also her own emotional needs, however, predispose Antoinette to exchange her experiential standards for cultural norms. In at least one instance, she is able to maintain a marginal position long enough to feel its very mixed emotional consequences. Abandoning Catholicism's alien judgments of her experience, she feels "bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe" (p. 57). Although the tolerant convent does not insist on conformity, Antoinette ominously learns "to gabble without thinking as the others did" (p. 57).

With her marriage to Rochester, both the external pressure to conform and her desire for safety intensify. Antoinette actively wants to enter the dominant culture and is at least subconsciously willing to forfeit her own to secure the anticipated safety of belonging. Antoinette's exchange of her own values for those of the dominant culture centers on redefining Christophine. Rochester's culture, of course, sees Christophine's voodoo as ignorant superstition rather than fearsome power, and Antoinette adopts this viewpoint: "I stared at her thinking, 'but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman, who is not certain if there is such a place as England?' " (p. 112). Despite Christophine's extremely sensible advice—she says, for instance, that Antoinette can use potions to seduce Rochester but not to command his love—and her demonstrated ability to analyze people, Antoinette distances herself from her friend and protectress.

This redefinition of Christophine and Tia is part of Antoinette's growing conformity to a culture that will rename her "Bertha," will rob her of her inheritance, and will finally confine her to an attic prison. This culture denies Antoinette any settled identity even while it wars on her original identity. Rochester complains that Antoinette is maddeningly unsure of even basic facts—for example, whether the snakes on the island are poisonous. In fact, Antoinette's confusion generally amounts to an uncertainty over which culture she will accept as her defining conceptual system. For example, when she is ill after Tia's attack, her hair is cut off, and when she later sees the braid lying in a drawer, she thinks at first that it is a snake. This scene has vastly different resonances depending upon one's conceptual scheme. The Euro-American tradition, present in Antoinette's description of Coulibri as Eden-gone-wild, defines the snake as evil. The voodoo tradition, however, considers snakes not only sacred to Damballah, the mightiest of gods, but manifestations of him. Antoinette's discovery of the snake made by her shorn braid can therefore be seen either as the discovery of evil through the experience of Tia's attack or as the sign of a deep connection with a powerful spirit. Throughout the novel, because she adopts mainstream rather than marginal definitions, Antoinette interprets her own experience and her resultant identity as passive, subordinate, and finally untenable.

Antoinette thus participates in her own destruction, and though Rhys does not morally condemn her or judge her harshly, the novel contains in Christophine a corrective example, a woman as marginal as Antoinette who nevertheless survives intact. Antoinette's mother says to her, "[Christophine] was your father's wedding present to me. . . . He thought I would be pleased with a Martinique girl. I don't know how old she was when they brought her to Jamaica, quite young" (p. 21). A slave, isolated from all family and familiar terrain when probably still a child, Christophine has preserved the integrity that Antoinette surrenders.

The dominant critical perception of Antoinette as the heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has obscured Christophine's importance. This focus probably results from the unconscious assumption that as both a main character and a point-of-view character Antoinette must be, for better or worse, the heroine, the focus of theme as well as plot. Antoinette fits the conventional definition of a hero, one who participates in large actions or great intensities. Yet Rhys's choice of subject matter, her concentration on a minor character from *Jane Eyre*, indicates a marginal focus. In other words, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does something different from and something more important than merely substituting the heroine Antoinette for the anti-heroine Bertha. Instead, it demands that the reader interpret the plot from a marginalist perspective that nowhere directs the narration (not Antoinette's, Rochester's, or Grace Poole's account) but that nevertheless informs it.[11]

Most revisions of a myth retain the plot structure of the original but alter the motivations sufficiently to recreate the meaning of the action. Thus, *Jane Eyre* determines the fate of Antoinette Bertha Mason Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the reader knows from the beginning that she will die in a fire at Rochester's home. That event is in *Jane Eyre* presented through Rochester's account to Jane; in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader experiences it through Antoinette's dream vision preceding her waking actions, and the meaning thus changes radically. The relationships of Antoinette to Tia and Christophine, touchstones for the larger issue of assimilation versus marginality, displace *Jane Eyre*'s preoccupation with Rochester and Bertha's relationship. As Bertha/Antoinette recalls her third dream of a fire at Thornfield, she remembers that she "called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped" (p. 189); standing on Thornfield's battlements, she

> turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. . . . 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 called "Tia!" and jumped and woke (pp. 189-90).

Rochester's presence in the dream picture explains the parrot's lack of recognition: Antoinette has obliterated her original identity in attempting to conform to Rochester's and England's modes. But after her last cry to Tia, Antoinette awakens with a new certainty about herself and purpose:[12] "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (p. 190). After setting fire to Thornfield, Antoinette will jump to the dream pool and Tia, her vengeful suicide the only means of rediscovering and affirming her earlier self in England and English culture. This redefinition of the meaning of the plot cannot occur in a traditional context, which would deny the reality or the validity of the vision; it can exist only in a context that allows for the continuity of the present with what is physically dead or absent, a continuity central to the voodoo with which Christophine is associated.[13]

Christophine is never assimilated by Jamaican culture; instead she preserves her Martinican dress and practices as a voodoo priestess, a *mambo*. Her only friend Maillotte is not Jamaican, and the native Jamaicans are frightened of her. Christophine exploits her marginal status in order to secure the space she needs to live. Rhys never exaggerates the power of the marginal position vis-à-vis the imperialist, patriarchal system. When, for example, Rochester discovers that Christophine has been jailed once for her activities, and threatens to jail her again, she must leave Antoinette.

By that time, however, Antoinette's fate is really already sealed. Besides, Christophine succeeds in prying concessions from Rochester, as no one else does, by sheer affirmation of her definitions and rejection of his satirical attempts to make her doubt them. Taunted about her belief in spirits, Christophine "steadily" says, "In your Bible it say God is a spirit—it don't say no others" (p. 158). Rochester cannot shake her confidence, much less her identity. Christophine need not deny his truths; her own can subsume them. She compels even from this quintessential representative of English culture a grudging respect: "She was a fighter, I had to admit. Against my will I repeated, 'Do you wish to say good-bye to Antoinette?' " (p. 161). Just after this conversation, when Rochester stupidly or maliciously invites her to write to Antoinette, she says merely, "Read and write I don't know. Other things I know" (p. 161). Here Christophine acknowledges her ignorance in Rochester's system, an ignorance that she admits to without shame because her own values center on "other things," other kinds of knowledge and other definitions of what is valuable. Though Christophine cannot save Antoinette, she saves herself and offers Antoinette aid and comfort that might be sufficient if Antoinette were not deluded by the vision of joining the dominant culture.

The practice of obeah or voodoo offers Christophine direct spiritual experience and power that Rochester's culture would deny her, and it further serves both to express her marginality and to protect it. Voodoo represents an accommodation of African thought to the conditions of Caribbean slavery; it combines aspects of many different tribal religions and Roman Catholicism. Unlike most European and Asian religions, it allows women to be not only acolytes, but priestesses. (Incidentally, the critical response to obeah often either dismisses it as superstition or indignantly denies that Christophine practices it;[14] this mixture of condescension and fear can also be seen in Rochester.)

Christophine perceives the incompatibility of the dominant cultural systems and her own with a clarity that Antoinette never develops. To maintain the system that defends her integrity, Christophine refuses to participate in other systems.[15] She never marries, for instance, noting that "All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man" (pp. 109-10). Having escaped one kind of legal slavery, Christophine has no desire to enter into another. Antoinette, on the other hand, hopes for an impossible compromise that will allow her to assimilate without wholly giving up her personality. She thus takes as genuine Rochester's definite interest in and implied acceptance of important parts of her self, for example her sexuality. He reneges on what he implies, of course, rejecting her as coarse and even depraved. His attraction to Antoinette's "otherness" as expressed in her sexuality is an emblem of patriarchy's awareness of, fascination with, and finally revulsion from what Elaine Showalter and other feminist writers have called "the wild zone," that area of female experience that is not and cannot be inscribed in patriarchal language.[16] As he leaves for England, Rochester laments that "she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it" (p. 172). His plaint testifies to the truth of James Baldwin's assertion that racist oppressors as well as the oppressed bear huge psychic and emotional costs. The reader must not sentimentalize Rochester's response, however. The self-pitying tone, his absolute unwillingness to risk any part of his financial or emotional patrimony to quench his thirst, and his cruelty—all these reveal the shallowness of his desire and his essential solipsism.

Most critical commentary, by privileging Antoinette, ignores the novel's wider context: critics have interpreted *Wide Sargasso Sea* as though its form were the same as that of *Jane Eyre*, with their divergence consisting of a disagreement about judgment and emphasis rather than a difference in premise and perspective. In this framework Christophine remains a part of the island's lush foliage, undifferentiated from other secondary characters and places that make up the background for Antoinette's destruction. Foregrounding Christophine revises substantially the meaning of Antoinette's life and death; it juxtaposes the traditional narrative of tragedy or pathos

with a narrative of persistence. The center of value, Christophine, is thus not central at all but marginal to the traditional perception of the form of the novel. As the true heroine, Christophine performs no dramatic actions—except, that is, maintaining her personal integrity against the very forces that defeat Antoinette.

Rhys herself would undoubtedly be surprised at this interpretation. Because she is known to have drawn on her own life for her fiction, critics tend to view her heroines, built from parts of herself, as she viewed her own experience. And because she frequently saw herself as a helpless victim, they often perceive Antoinette as an innocent unable to cope with the breakdown of her family and of her wider society.

Self-dramatizing fatalism evidently typified Rhys's approach to her own experience. David Plante's memories of the elderly Rhys in *Difficult Women* reveal her self-pity, her suspicions that others were victimizing her, and her listless approach to both her present and her past life.[17] In her autobiography Rhys sounds almost entirely fatalistic. Speaking of herself in childhood, for instance, she says, "So as soon as I could I lost myself in the immense world of books and tried to blot out the real world which was so puzzling to me. Even then I had a vague, persistent feeling that I'd always be lost in it, defeated."[18] Or, when she is sixteen and her dog dies, she responds with, "After that I decided that the Devil was undoubtedly stronger than God, so what was the use?"[19]

And what, after all, is the use? What can a poor woman do? Poor Jean Rhys. Poor Antoinette. As Wolfe says, "Jean Rhys stresses betrayal in her religious symbolism. The crowing cock, the yellow-eyed Judas figure of Daniel, and the banished savior, Christophine, all limn in a world in which prayers are ignored and where obeah outpaces Christianity."[20] It is a tribute to the force of Jean Rhys's personality that critics have by and large defined the avenging angel of the ends of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a helpless victim.

Rhys's earlier works accentuate the critical inclination, of course. Looking for discontinuities has only recently become fashionable; until fairly lately, academic critics have tended to view a writer's works as a continuous, flowing whole. In regard to Rhys's oeuvre, Thomas Staley states this propensity directly: "*Wide Sargasso Sea*, even with its exotic setting, its links with *Jane Eyre*, its more explicit qualities of narration, is not all that far distant from Rhys's novels of the 1930s. If not a fulfillment, it is certainly an extension of her most basic themes, and the same quality of feeling pervades *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the earlier novels."[21] One need not share deconstructionist premises to question this assumption, which, even when unexpressed, underlies a good deal of criticism on this novel. The assumption works best when a writer produces many works in a short period or produces almost continuously over a long period; either way, the gaps from work to work are likely to be small. Rhys's oeuvre, however, does not fit either paradigm.

The publication in 1966 of *Wide Sargasso Sea* broke an almost total silence of twenty-seven years: only a few short stories intervene between *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Between 1934 and 1966 Jean Rhys's world experienced the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the advent of the nuclear age; between 1934 and 1966 Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams ("Jean Rhys" is a pen name) experienced the death of a lover, marriage to Max Hammer, Hammer's imprisonment for misappropriating funds, Hammer's death, and the utter eclipse of her literary reputation. It would not be remarkable if these events had affected Rhys's subsequent work. Of those intervening short stories written during and immediately after the war,[22] "Till September Petronella" (1960) does have a feckless, victimized heroine, but two others indicate Rhys's consideration of other possibilities that became central to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The narrator of "Let Them Call It Jazz" (1962) may be confused and victimized, but she can accept the dominant culture's misperception and mislabeling of a song that she heard in prison without losing her essential feeling for the song. "The Day They Burned the Books" (1960) takes its title from the action of a woman who, after the death of her abusive and racist husband, burns the library that she associates with his oppression of her. Her young son Eddie questions the narrator's equation of "home" with "England" and challenges the racism that attacks his mother. These sketches of marginal characters' self-definition and resistance to oppression suggest crucial, if perhaps unconscious, changes in Rhys's world view.

Both the action of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Rhys's action in writing the novel speak for remaining marginal rather than attempting to assimilate. Rhys utilizes her empowering heritage as successor to powerful women writers, Charlotte Brontë among them, to create her novel; simultaneously she rejects the part of Brontë that supports mainstream literary tradition. Thus, Rhys revises the canon of "accepted literature" by making visible and audible a minority element previously ignored. Remaining marginal in her choice of subject (a minor character from another woman's novel) and her theme (the necessity of avoiding assimilation), she nonetheless re-routes mainstream traffic.

The implications of *Wide Sargasso Sea* extend far beyond changes in the scholarly conception of a novelistic tradition and into the actual lives of individuals. Though the genesis of the novel makes an elaborate apologia for a political reading unnecessary, any *application* of a political reading within a scholarly context still requires such a defense, the influence of women's studies notwithstanding. Women's studies demands, I believe, that its practitioners strive to be aware of their political premises and that they clearly communicate these premises and examine some of their possible consequences. Mainstream literary academia still insists that it is apolitical, dedicated to timeless truths that are opposed to the necessarily topical nature of politics; to a distressing degree, it has ignored demonstration after demonstration by feminist critics that "truths" (such as the contents of the "canon of masterworks") represent a very political consensus of white males. Elaine Showalter's epigraph at the beginning of this essay describes the process of feminist revision of literary history: when the orthodox plot of *Jane Eyre* recedes, the revisionist plot of *Wide Sargasso Sea* emerges; when the orthodox critical plot of Antoinette's victimization recedes, the marginal survivor Christophine emerges. Further, *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows both the folly of attempting to con-

form to structures designed to preserve others' power and the wisdom of preserving marginality. Its message to the women's movement, and particularly to women in academia, is clear. The separation of personal and professional concerns in mainstream academia dominates so effectively that direct comment on contemporary situations generally meets with absolute rejection. But to accept the mainstream definition of permissible discourse is to accept the irrelevance of our profession, to adopt it as an agreeable escape. Jean Rhys's novel speaks in particular to the contemporary women's movement, which must heed the work or destroy itself.

Women cannot leave the Sargasso Sea of the current social milieu, but we can avoid accepting mainstream definitions of ourselves and our work. In practical, personal terms this means letting exactly none of our self-respect rest on definitions of women or of educators that our experience does not affirm; it means determining for ourselves where we will invest our emotional, financial, and spiritual resources. In practical, professional terms this means, if we publish at all, publishing in journals that are likeliest to reach a wide audience rather than those with the most prestige; it means supporting women's presses and publications; it means restoring the primacy of teaching over research in universities; it means taking seriously Adrienne Rich's suggestions about the reform of our universities;[23] it may often mean doing without tenure.

To the extent that the feminist movement merely attempts to chart the Sargasso Sea by opening mainstream, middle-class male options to women, then it deserves the scorn of the adventurous navigators of the margin like Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood. Instead, we must choose Christophine's—and Rhys's—strategy of revising the old maps of literature and tradition by remaining true to our own ancient lights, by preserving celestial navigation.

NOTES

1. Elaine Showalter, "Literary Criticism," Review Essay, *Signs*, 2 (1976), 435.

2. Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

3. Interview with Hannah Carter, *Guardian*, August 8, 1968, quoted in Helen Nebeker, *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage* (Montreal: Eden Press Women's Publications, 1981), p. 126.

4. Peter Wolfe, *Jean Rhys* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 160.

5. Ronnie Scharfman, "Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Telumée Miracle* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 88-106.

6. Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 115.

7. Wolfe, p. 153.

8. Nebeker, p. 155.

9. Scharfman, p. 101.

10. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966; rpt. New York: Norton, 1982), p. 44. All further page references will come from this edition and will appear in the text.

11. Christophine's viewpoint and example play roles in *Wide Sargasso Sea* analogous to Babo's in Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Babo's silent but deducible viewpoint redefines the whole of the plot told from another viewpoint. See Allen Guttman, "The Enduring Innocence of Captain Amasa Delano," *Boston University Studies in English*, 5 (1961), 35-45.

12. Nebeker also highlights a return to self in this incident, but the self in her argument is defined in psychological rather than socio-psychological and political terms.

13. For drawing my attention to the importance of voodoo in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I am indebted to Sharon Hakel Taylor.

14. For example, Nebeker, pp. 154, 156, denies that Christophine practices obeah; Wolfe, p. 152, associates obeah with evil and betrayal. An exception, Staley treats obeah in a morally neutral manner, though he posits its ineffectiveness in dealing with colonial law (pp. 111-12).

15. Christophine's choice of name signifies her choice of status. Rochester's informant refers to her as "Josephine or Christophine Dubois" (p. 143), indicating that she has deliberately changed her name. The name that she has renounced is that of the most famous female native of Martinique, Josephine de Beauharnais, whose liaison with, marriage to, and divorce from Napoleon Bonaparte exemplify not only the marginality of women and colonials but the precariousness of power-by-proxy relationships. Her chosen name may suggest the spiritual power of Christ, but Nancy Mann of the FRONTIERS Editorial Board suggests a likelier possibility that affirms Christophine's non-Western orientation: Christophine's name recalls the political power of Henri Christophe, the ex-slave who as a lieutenant of Toussaint l'Ouverture fought Napoleon's troops to liberate Haiti from French rule and later established a black kingdom on the island. Ironically, Josephine and Christophe were almost exact contemporaries. In contrast to Christophine's choice to affirm her own culture through her name, Antoinette wears a dress *à la mode Josephine* in her attempt to become the Miller's Daughter of the picture in her stepfather's parlor—that is, to become a part of European culture by playing Josephine triumphant. Antoinette attempts assimilation and shatters her identity; Christophine maintains her marginality and survives.

16. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 9-35.

17. David Plante, *Difficult Women* (New York: Atheneum, 1983).

18. Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co., 1983), p. 50.

19. Rhys, *Smile*, p. 70.

20. Wolfe, p. 152.

21. Staley, p. 116.

22. Four are collected in Jean Rhys, *Tigers Are Better Looking* (1968; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

23. Adrienne Rich, "Toward a Woman-Centered University," in her *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-78* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 125-55.