JEAN RHYS

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Women Writers

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Editors' Preface

The study of women's writing has been long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic circles and beyond. As a result, many women writers have either been unfairly neglected or have been marginalised in some way, so that their true influence and importance has been ignored. Other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of women's work. The time has come for a serious reassessment of women's writing in the light of what we understand today.

This series is designed to help in that reassessment.

All the books are written by women because we believe that men's understanding of feminist critique is only, at best, partial. And besides, men have held the floor for quite long enough.

EVA FIGES
ADELE KING

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Abbreviations and References

ALM	Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971)
GMM	Jean Rhys, *Good Morning Midnight* (1939; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969)
Q	Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (1928; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973)
Sleep	Jean Rhys, *Sleep It Off Lady* (1976; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)
Tigers	Jean Rhys, *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972)
VD	Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969)
WSS	Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968)

All page numbers with these abbreviations refer to the Penguin editions of Jean Rhys's works.

Contents

1 Introduction

Had Jean Rhys's fiction been merely autobiographical, as so many critics have claimed, her plots would have strained the reader's credulity. Her life was indeed quite out of the ordinary. Jean Rhys was born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams on 24 August 1890 in Roseau, Dominica, to a Creole mother and a Welsh doctor. She spent her childhood there and left when she was seventeen to attend the Perse School in Cambridge. After a few terms, she decided that she wanted to be an actress and went to the Academy of Dramatic Art in 1909. When her father died suddenly, her family could no longer support her and Jean Rhys found a job in the chorus of a touring company. This is how, as Elgin W. Mellown puts it, 'a young girl from a respectable colonial family [...] lived a life that brought her into the demi-mondaine society of pre-War England'.[1]

The cold winters and her fear of the audience having somewhat damped her ardour, she left the tour before long and moved to London, where she had her first love affair with a well-to-do English gentleman twice her age, Lancelot Hugh Smith. The break-up with him was a severe blow to her, and she had an illegal abortion. It was after this traumatic experience that her career branched off. Driven by some uncontrollable impulse which she describes in her autobiography,[2] she wrote an account of the affair in a series of exercise-books which was to cause her to meet Ford Madox Ford and, some twenty years later, provided the basis for *Voyage in the Dark*. Before the First World War, Jean Rhys mostly lived on the allowance which Lancelot Hugh Smith continued to give her long after their affair had ended,

but also made a little money of her own, briefly going back to the stage, sitting for artists or getting one or two jobs as a film extra.

During the First World War, she met Jean Lenglet, a Dutchman, joined him in Holland in 1919 and married him. The couple moved to Paris where, in 1920, they had a son who died shortly after birth, then to Vienna, where Jean Lenglet worked as a secretary–interpreter for the Interallied Disarmament Commission. For a year or so, life was sweet and easy as Jean Lenglet was making a lot of money selling foreign currency on the black market, a very profitable business in post-war Austria. In 1921, the Commission moved to Budapest; so did the Lenglets, but soon Jean Lenglet lost the Commission's money and they had to run away to Paris in 1922.

After the luxury hotels of Vienna and Budapest, they were back to square one, finding themselves literally on the streets. In the same year, Jean Rhys gave birth to her second child, Maryvonne. Hunting for money, she tried to sell three of Jean Lenglet's articles which she had translated. As the *Daily Mail* was not interested, she thought of Mrs Adam, then a fairly prominent journalist in Paris, whom she had met before. Mrs Adam asked if Jean Rhys had written anything herself. She reluctantly showed her the exercise-books. Mrs Adam edited them and offered to send the typescript to Ford Madox Ford who, at the time, was publishing young, *avant-garde* writers such as Joyce, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson and Djuna Barnes. Becoming her patron and then her lover, he encouraged Jean Rhys to write short stories and published 'Vienne' in the last issue of *The Transatlantic Review* in December 1924. In 1923, Jean Lenglet was arrested by the French police, served his sentence and was extradited to Holland where he settled with their daughter. Jean Rhys's first collection of short stories, *The Left Bank*,[3] was published

in England with a preface by Ford in 1927, by which time both her marriage and her relationship with Ford were virtually over. She completed *Quartet* and went to England to find a publisher for it; it was initially published as *Postures* in 1928. Between 1928 and 1939, she wrote most of her life's work: *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* was published in 1931, *Voyage in the Dark* in 1934 and *Good Morning Midnight* in 1939. She married her literary agent, Leslie Tilden Smith, in 1934. Two years later, the couple visited Dominica, nearly thirty years after Jean Rhys had left it. It was the only time she was ever to return to her home island.

When the Second World War broke out, Jean Rhys sank into oblivion and her books went out of print. If *Voyage in the Dark* had been reasonably successful and praised by the critics, *Good Morning Midnight* (1939) was deemed too depressing in the context of the oncoming war and received a cool welcome. She, however, never stopped writing, short stories in particular, but there is evidence that it was also about that time that she started working at the first draft of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Leslie Tilden Smith died from a heart attack shortly after demobilization in 1945. Jean Rhys married his cousin, Max Hamer, in 1947, and they moved to a house in Beckenham. There, it appears that Jean Rhys had a rather stormy relationship with her neighbours, which brought her to court a number of times and even to the hospital of Holloway Prison. Found guilty of assault, she was bound over for a year and then put on probation for two years. To cap it all, Max Hamer was also arrested in 1950 for financial fraud. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and sent to Maidstone Prison. When he was released, the couple eventually managed to leave Beckenham and moved to Bude, Cornwall.

In the middle of all these difficulties, on 5 November 1949, the *New Statesman* advertised for Jean Rhys: the

advertisement had been placed by an actress, Selma Vaz Dias, who had adapted *Good Morning Midnight* into a dramatic monologue to be broadcast by the BBC; she needed Jean Rhys's permission to perform it. In fact, Selma Vaz Dias gave a public performance of her adaptation, but the BBC turned it down. Jean Rhys was being rediscovered, but it was not until 1957 that the real 'discovery' occurred, when the BBC went ahead with the broadcast of *Good Morning Midnight*. Francis Wyndham, then an editor working with the publishing firm André Deutsch, came to hear of her. He had been a long-time admirer and had thought her dead, like so many others. They met and André Deutsch bought the option on her new novel. The completion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* took nine long years, hindered as Jean Rhys was by self-doubt, illness – she had a heart attack in 1964 – age and Max's deteriorating health. Still, elated by the renewed interest people seemed to take in her books and encouraged by Francis Wyndham, who helped her sell several of her wartime stories, she worked on. Her brother bought a bungalow in Cheriton Fitzpaine, Devon, where she and Max moved in 1960. Max Hamer died in 1966 and *Wide Sargasso Sea* was finally published in the same year. It brought Jean Rhys recognition, prizes and money. Her novels were all reissued, while some of her new stories were published in a collection entitled *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (1968), which included a selection from *The Left Bank*. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a CBE. Although she was already in her seventies when *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published, she continued to write: she produced a number of short stories collected in *Sleep It Off Lady*, published in 1976, and, four years before she died, she undertook to write her autobiography, *Smile Please*, which was left unfinished and was published posthumously. Jean Rhys died on 14 May 1979.

Jean Rhys is an elusive figure. A white West Indian who spent most of her wandering life in Great Britain and other European countries, she never really belonged anywhere, nor did she claim membership of any group of writers or artists, not even that of the Anglo-Saxon expatriates in Paris with whom she had rubbed shoulders in the 1920s. Although she wrote all her life, from the early 1920s to the late 1970s, she was never conspicuous on the literary scene and altogether remained out of the public eye for about twenty years, until the publication of her last novel and the much publicized circumstances of her 'discovery' hurled her into the foreground. The great variety of critical response to her work is but a reflection of her elusiveness and of the indefinable quality of her texts.

Apart from early approaches which considered her fiction as thinly disguised autobiography, academic criticism falls into three main trends. One reading of Jean Rhys is to consider her as a Caribbean writer. This is what Wally Look Lai does in the first academic study of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1968.[4] Such an identification, however, cannot go without qualification. In Kenneth Ramchand's book on Caribbean literature, Jean Rhys features in a *marginal* group of 'white West Indians' alongside Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Geoffrey Drayton and J. B. Emtage, all four writers voicing the 'terrified consciousness' of the dispossessed colonizer.[5] In 1986, Teresa O'Connor issued a full-length book, *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels*, in which, as the title suggests, only *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are discussed.[6] For such is the main difficulty of the Caribbean approach: it fails to take into account those of Jean Rhys's texts which do not refer to her home island – *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, *Good Morning Midnight* and a substantial number of short stories.

Another critical response has been to situate Jean Rhys in the context of literary modernism. By 1939, the bulk of her fiction had been published and Thomas F. Staley, for instance, sees in modernism an apt way of categorizing Jean Rhys's works, including *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). That Jean Rhys's writing shares some of the characteristics of modernist prose cannot be denied, especially where the emphasis on subjectivity and the attention paid to form are concerned. As early as 1927, Ford Madox Ford had underlined Jean Rhys's 'singular instinct for form' in his preface to *The Left Bank*.[7] In turn, Thomas F. Staley refers to 'her sense of proportion and design'[8] and goes on to list the distinctly modernist features to be found in her work:

> central to modernist art is the concept, best exemplified in English by Joyce and Eliot, of the impersonality of the artist [...] which entailed a conscious artistry, a predilection for the formal properties and organic elements of art, a deep commitment to the allusive, the mythic, and a subordination of the traditional narrative concerns of the realistic novel such as plot, event, and resolution of the characters' circumstances.[9]

Again, Thomas F. Staley admits, qualifications have to be made: 'Rhys's art shares many of these characteristics and impulses of literary modernism, but she was unaware of or removed from many of its preoccupations.'[10] Although she started to write at a time when modernism was in full swing, under the patronage of Ford Madox Ford – who spared no pains to promote the movement – and in spite of the fact that she met a lot of the modernist expatriates through Ford, Jean Rhys remained a marginal modernist – in much the

same way as she is a marginal Caribbean writer – and outlived the movement by quite a few decades. As Helen Carr points out,

> [i]f one wants a label, 'modernist' is certainly the most satisfactory. Yet there are some elements in her work which can be better understood in terms of her affinity with the French nineteenth-century precursors of modernism, and others which might be better described as postmodernist, not least the metafictional structure of her most famous novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.[11]

According to Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Good Morning Midnight* itself encapsulates Jean Rhys's departure from the preoccupations of such women modernists as Colette or Virginia Woolf. Jean Rhys, she argues, found modernist irony too disengaged for the depressing realities of the times: '[s]he does not accuse them [Colette and Woolf] of being hypocritical escapists like the rich woman who hired Sasha, but she does imply that Colette's vision of ageless female sensuality and Woolf's of independent female authorship are blurred by privileges of class and national tradition'.[12] Like Judith Kegan Gardiner, many critics have seen Jean Rhys's fiction as an exploration of the disempowerment of women at the hands of male oppressors. The discovery of Jean Rhys's works by academia coincided with the development of women's studies, a chance encounter which, due to the thematic content of the texts, developed into a steady, if sometimes strained, relationship. Most feminist critics have concerned themselves with the representation of women in Jean Rhys's fiction. The first full-length study of it delineates 'the Rhys woman' through an archetypal framework based on female myths and Freudian and

Jungian models.[13] More frequently, Jean Rhys's works have been seen in terms of sexual power politics, which has led some feminists, those in search of consciousness-raising role-models, to resent the heroines' collaborative attitude and debilitating passivity. In the late 1980s, Rhysian critics started to pay increasing attention to the discursive implications of the issue of femininity. Nancy R. Harrison is a case in point. Trying to delineate the specificity of a woman's writing, she identifies the ways in which the feminine speaks back to the patriarchal order in a contrapuntal idiom, in a subtext which develops 'in the interstices of the "real" dialogue' and will in time be made to become the dominant text in Jean Rhys's practice.[14] Deborah Kelly Kloepfer also explores Jean Rhys's feminist poetics but from a different perspective: probing into the feminine economy of loss, she concentrates on the suppressed mother languages in Jean Rhys's texts.[15]

Critics have lately tended to blend all three approaches, gender, colonialism and modernism. The purpose of Coral Ann Howells, for instance, is to show that Jean Rhys constructs 'a feminine colonial sensibility becoming aware of itself in a modernist European context, where a sense of colonial dispossession and displacement is focused on and translated into gendered terms, so that all these conditions coalesce, transformed into her particular version of feminine pain'.[16] Weaving together three theoretical systems is probably the right thing to do, but it is also a very challenging task which might be carried out at the expense of close readings of the texts. Mine is a primarily textual bias. I shall be looking at the textual inscription of the feminine in each of Jean Rhys's novels as well as in some of her short fiction. Jean Rhys's poetics, it will be argued, seeks to subvert – and not just to invert – any ideological model. Her version of the feminine is a deconstructive force

which undermines any form of authority. Instead of examining her 'passion for stating the case of the underdog', as Ford Madox Ford once put it,[17] instead of looking for a mirror-image of women's subjection in the recurring motifs of oppression, I shall trace the manipulations of narrative and discursive forms which expose and destabilize the conventions of the symbolic order. Feminine dissent, in Jean Rhys's practice, takes the shape of resistance to narrative and semantic closure and makes the most of the subversive potential of irony, parodic mimicry and intertextuality in particular. Breaking finite limits or parodying mortiferous, authoritarian formulae, Jean Rhys seeks to coin a new idiom, a rhetoric of the feminine: '[s]ometimes I long for an entirely new way of writing. New words, new everything – sometimes I am almost there. But no – it slides away', she says in one of her letters.[18] This alternative signifying mode she achieves in her last novel, through her reworking of *Jane Eyre* and her revision of Gothic romance, which provide the ultimate dislocation of the dominant idiom.