Shaping Insanity in a Patriarchal World

by Rachael Harbourne

How does the world define insanity? Is it by a look a person gives or the way someone walks? Maybe it's the tone of voice or the attitude they have. Maybe it is simply defined by an action or a spoken word. Or perhaps, insanity is defined by the the exact opposite of those things – silence. In both Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the subject of silence and patriarchal oppression are two of the most prevalent themes throughout the novels. A glimpse into the life of the "madwoman" before her insanity allows readers of Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* to explore the possible life of a woman struck down by patriarchy. Jean Rhys aims to define the meaning of insanity behind Brontë's "madwoman in the attic" in her re-creation of Bertha Mason, otherwise known as Antoinette Cosway, in her striking retelling of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Although Brontë's novel paints Bertha Mason as mentally unstable and wildly insane for seemingly no apparent reason, Rhys is able to create a strong background for a woman who was widely misinterpreted; she is able to show readers just how quickly the already thin grasp Antoinette had on her identity was stripped bare and her voice snuffed out.

It is clear that the "madwoman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre* is meant to be a terrifying character, shocking and unnatural to all that lay eyes upon her or hear her restless screams; but upon reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I've come to question the truth behind Antoinette's insanity. It is my belief that the madness described of Antoinette is not one that was passed down from lineage or that was sitting boiling in her blood, ready to explode at the smallest inconvenience; rather, it is the idea of a prolonged silence that forces a person into something deemed so cruelly as insanity. My goal throughout this paper is to examine Rhys' creation of Antoinette in conjunction with Brontë's own "madwoman" to identify the true meaning of this woman's madness. Along with the two novels, I will explore a few critical and analytical essays that

discuss the nature of Antoinette's insanity and just how much power patriarchal oppression has on the altering and silencing of a woman's credibility.

In a 1979 interview between Elizabeth Vreeland and Jean Rhys, Vreeland poses the question of where the inspiration to rewrite Brontë's "madwoman" came from. In response, Rhys discusses the first time she ever read *Jane Eyre*:

> When I read *Jane Eyre* as a child, I thought, why should [Brontë] think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life. (Rhys, Jean Rhys: The Art of Fiction LXIV).

Bertha is indeed a ghostly figure in Brontë's novel, both in the absence of her identity and the ghastly nature in which she is described. We see her come to life as Antoinette in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is written as a prequel of sorts to *Jane Eyre*, wherein readers have the opportunity to take a closer look at the infamous "madwoman in the attic" in a more innocent and natural light. Some of the descriptions that Brontë uses to describe Bertha in *Jane Eyre* could equate to that of nightmares. All we see of this woman is what is described to us from the eyes of Jane Eyre herself, a naïve, love-struck young woman who believes everything that Mr. Rochester tells her, especially regarding that of his estranged wife; even Jane Eyre is not immune to the power of patriarchy. The first glimpse we get of Bertha is truly terrifying:

> In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (Brontë 218).

Upon recognition of Mr. Rochester, Bertha is further described as a "clothed hyena [who] rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet …. The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors" (Brontë 218-219). The descriptions we get here are so entirely different from the young Antoinette introduced in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that it doesn't seem plausible that any amount of insanity could turn a woman into the likeness of a beast. Sezgi Öztop Haner makes the same connection regarding Bertha's dehuminzation: "Bertha is the only character in Brontë's novel who is not given a full characterization as a human being …. Brontë's [uses] animal imagery to overstate Bertha's racial and cultural difference" (Haner 173). It's important to note, here, how drastically the identity of this wild women translates in Rhys' telling, though both characters are meant to be the same woman, simply at different stages in their lives.

Antoinette Cosway has been faced with strife her entire life – born as a White Creole Jamaican woman, she was never meant to fit in anywhere. She is an outcast among the Jamaican people in her small town of Spanish Town, based off of the light color of her skin and her father's history of being a slave-owner; and yet she's also an outcast among the wealthy white people due to the loss of her family's wealth after the passing of her father. In retrospect, Antoinette never had a solid place in the world to stand. Each moment she thought she was finally grounded, her comfort was torn away from her and she was left bare and alone, sinking into the shadows, like she always had been. In Nushrat Azam's article, "Madwoman in the Post-Colonial Era," she describes the character of Antoinette in regards to Brontë's Bertha Mason as the "other." She is the "other" in the sense that she doesn't fit in with any particular group because of the complexity of her background: "The ambiguity that Antoinette suffers from is just a manifestation of a society that fails to comprehend the other" (Azam 236). The society that Antoinette has grown up in is terrified of this "otherness" that Antoinette is – she is both like

them and entirely different at the same time, which of course would allow her to never be fully accepted. Even her own mother silenced her when Antoinette attempted to find both comfort and give comfort (Haner 175). When she would see her mother upset and a frown form upon her face, she "touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed [her] away, roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that [Antoinette] was useless to her" (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea 18).

In the second section of the book, Antoinette loses her voice, and the remnants of her identity entirely as Mr. Rochester takes over the narrative of both of their stories, which, unsurprisingly, happens to be the biggest section of the book by far. It only makes sense that Rochester narrates so much of the novel and Antoinette's life before her "insanity" is revealed – not only is he pushing patriarchal oppression down upon Antoinette, but the strength of his narration causes similar effects on Rhys' readers. They are forced to take a step back from Antoinette's story to hear the unreliability of Rochester's thoughts, in just the same way that readers are forced to learn about Brontë's Bertha when Rochester is ready to share it. It is in this section that silence begins to be pushed down onto Antoinette with each insight we get from Mr. Rochester. It seems as though this is the point in time when the question of her sanity really comes into play as it is also the point in time where the power of Rochester's patriarchal oppression takes over Antoinette's will. Rhys' appears to break the fourth wall, only in the sense that she strips the readers of the voice they came to hear and forces a fragment of Antoinette's oppression onto them. Readers desperately wish to hear Antoinette's voice once again, but don't have the power to change the tone of the narration as Rochester's booming power continues to take control. Azam further examines an interesting aspect of Rochester's role and identity in the second section. She states that "Jean Rhys makes use of ventriloquism when Antoinette chooses silence over voice, and gives her husband, Rochester, the narrative authority" (Azam 239).

While I don't believe that Antoinette *chose* silence over voice in this section, I do agree that Mr. Rochester was the puppeteer in her life throughout this section, calling the shots regarding her identity and the credibility of her past, along with her mother's deterioration into insanity.

In Phyllis Chesler's essay "Women and Madness" she discusses the correlation between madness and the role patriarchy plays in the creation of it: "In a patriarchal society, men assign features of madness to women when they do not act and behave according to one's sex-role stereotype" (Chesler 57). This is precisely what Mr. Rochester has done to Antoinette when he realizes that, not only does she have a strong personality quite unlike that of "any pretty English girl" (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea 64), but that the diverseness of her identity could eventually silence his own voice. The letter he receives from Daniel Cosway that explains the madness that absorbed Antoinette's mother, and which presumably runs in the family, makes Rochester question his beautiful young bride that he was once curiously enraptured by. The more Rochester learns of Antoinette's past, the more he slowly begins to mold her into that "pretty English girl" he so desires her to be. Whether he knows it or not, Rochester begins to mold her sanity as well until she has reached the point of no return and the full wildness that Rochester believes is held in her Creole background brings forth her insanity.

However, it was not what was in Antoinette's blood so much as it was the power that Rochester had as both an English aristocrat and a man. He wanted full control over all aspects of Antoinette's identity, and by breaking her down piece by piece, he got exactly that – maybe even more than he bargained for. When Rochester begins calling Antoinette "Bertha" – the only name the "madwoman in the attic" goes by in *Jane Eyre* – he begins stripping her of her identity. When she tells him, "My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?", Rochester doesn't have a clear-cut answer except that it is only "because it is a name [he is] particularly fond of." He then has the audacity to say, "I think of you as Bertha" (Rhys 122). Her name, Antoinette, is

one of the only pieces of her identity that she can truly hold on to; amid all of the discrimination and ridicule she has gotten over the years, her name was the only thing left untouched, because there was no reason for anything to be said of it. Antoinette continues to remember this in her state of madness towards the end of the novel as she "struggles to restore her own insanity" (Haner 176): "Names matter, like when [Mr. Rochester] wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes, and her looking glass" (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea 162).

When Mr. Rochester says that he thinks of her as Bertha, he has already completely discredited her identity – he wants her to be *his* entirely and none of herself. This brings us back to the point Azam made about the connection to ventriloquism: the more strings Rochester holds over Antoinette, the stiffer and less human she becomes. Similarities between Rhys' Antoinette and Brontë's Bertha begin to form well into the second section of the novel. After Rochester sleeps with Amélie, he comes in to find Antoinette in a state of self-destruction. She has been completely transformed from her original self and Rochester's attempted mold of that "pretty English girl" into a woman scorned. "Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring" (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea 132). Recalling the very first description given of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the two descriptions of the women are unnervingly alike. While Bertha is described as having "a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane" and "gazed wildly at her visitors," Antoinette is similarly described in the quote above. The glimpses of insanity readers receive from both women are aimed directly at Rochester and the idea that patriarchal oppression is forcing Antoinette to believe in her insanity comes into question.

In the third section of Rhys' novel, Antoinette's voice is finally returned to her – or rather, whatever remnants of it are left. Her tone in this section seems to be quite nonchalant – she is there, but at the same time, she doesn't really seem to be present. This section seems to be

written in a kind of haze, which translates again to the way that Antoinette is feeling and how the divide between her sanity and identity are portrayed at this moment in time. She seems to be aware of what is going on around her, but she no longer has any fight left in her – or perhaps she does. According to Abdulaziz Alabdullah, Jean Rhys' uses the method of revision and retelling of *Jane Eyre* as "an act of survival" to push through the power of the patriarchy present in Brontë's novel in order to give more power to the women (Alabdullah 317). Survival is another theme that comes out in the third section of Rhys' novel, woven into the silencing and insanity of Antoinette's character; perhaps her insanity is a mechanism created to survive Rochester's power and oppression that allows her to hold onto a fragment of the girl she once was.

If this is indeed the case, it can be assumed that Antoinette is playing a part in her own game against Mr. Rochester and the patriarchy as a whole. The mask of insanity she hides behind allows her to both mentally and physcially escape from Rochester. Though it isn't ideal, her attic prison gives her space from the patriarchy while her manic behavior keeps Rochester at arm's length – the terror she instills within him gives her more power than Rochester might realize. Her title as "madwoman in the attic" acts as a kind of barrier for further prosecution. For Antoinette, "madness is not a symptom of her constant feeling of a lack of voice and need to be heard; madness is a cure" (Azam 240). I don't believe that her insanity was something that was bound to happen. Rather, from what we have seen from Rochester's actions and attitude towards Antoinette, it is clear that she has been subdued under patriarchal oppression. But Antoinette is only just that: subdued; pondering; waiting, for the right moment to strike and send the world up in flames.

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