Jean Rhys's Nameless Englishman: The Imperial Quest for English Masculinity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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While *Wide Sargasso Sea* has received increasing critical attention as a feminist and postcolonialist revision of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the critical emphasis has mostly been given to Rhys's reimagining of Antoinette/Bertha, whether focusing on defining the literary and political relationship between Jane and Antoinette/Bertha or on an historicized and politically engaged reading of Antoinette's relationship to the black women, Tia and Christophine. The relationship between Jane and Antoinette has been read as either antagonistic or complementary. Whereas Elizabeth Baer underscores the similarity of Jane and Antoinette, reading them as feminist visionaries resisting the patriarchal structure, Gayatri Spivak argues that Antoinette's Creole identity, produced by "the axiomatics of imperialism," represents "the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (804). As for the relationship between Antoinette and Tia/Christophine, Mary Lou Emery contends that Rhys envisions their female friendship across
racial and class barriers as the ground of Antoinette’s resistance against the patriarchal and imperial structure. The readings oriented toward the female relationship within and across textual boundaries, while exploring the women’s voices variously positioned within the structure of colonialism and patriarchy, tend to disregard the role of Antoinette’s English husband in Rhys’s reimagining of the Rochester figure. The fact that more than two-thirds of Rhys’s rewriting of Antoinette/Bertha is narrated from the point of view of Antoinette’s husband implies the significance that Rhys places on the figure of Rochester. Noting the crucial position of Edward Rochester—the nameless English husband in Rhys’s text—in both Bronte’s and Rhys’s text, Robert Kendrick argues for further consideration of this Englishman who has usually been read as "the immediate manifestation and enforcer of the network of patriarchal codes" (235). Drawing on Kaja Silverman’s conceptualization of male subjectivity, Kendrick argues that within the patriarchal system that accommodates the male subject to phallic power, "Edward himself rearticulates and redefines his position as a masculine subject, as he reexamines the ethical implications of the masculine prerogatives that he has enjoyed and abused” (235).

There is no doubt that Rhys portrays Rochester as the enforcer of imperial and patriarchal Englishness. In narrativizing the interactions between Antoinette and her English husband, Rhys establishes the husband as the imperialist self enacting the objectification of and aggression toward the colonial woman. As Lee Erwin points out, the husband projects the "gaze of England" (155) which views the colonies as a fascinating yet dark labyrinth, depicting colonial landscapes as the primitive, untouched and menacing wilderness, and investing colonial women with an excess of alluring yet threatening sexuality. The depth and complexity of Rhys’s revision of the Rochester/Bertha relationship, however, resists any reading simplifying the Antoinette/Rochester relationship in