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The Taming of the Creole

The (Little) Death of Otherness in Wide Sargasso Sea

[Antoinette:] 'He tells lies about us and he is sure that you will believe him and not listen to the other side.'

[Rochester:] 'Is there another side?' I said.

[Antoinette:] 'There is always the other side, always.'

Jean Rhys (WSS, 82)

When Jean Rhys undertook to write what is nowadays regarded as her masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), she felt urged to do so by the sensation that the story recounted in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was incomplete. "That's only one side – the English side" (*Letters* 297), whereas she – as a woman of English descent born and bred in the Caribbean – believed that Mr. Rochester's wife had the right to tell her own version of the story, that of the Creole girl who is forcibly brought to England and incarcerated in the attic of Thornfield Hall on charge of lunacy. Rhys intended to give voice to the *other* side: by doing so, she implicitly depicted the attic where Rochester's supposedly lunatic wife is imprisoned as the dark "other side" of the colonial British Empire, which viewed itself as the torchbearer of enlightenment and civilization.

Over the last four decades the implications of the story narrated in *Wide Sargasso Sea* have been analyzed from various perspectives, among which postcolonial and gender studies are major ones. In this contribution I intend to tackle the issue of Otherness in the novel from a slightly different standpoint, i.e. the way colonial and patriarchal values intrude on the private sphere of sexuality and transform it from an ideal place of communion (which implies equality) into one of oppression (thus entailing disparity in power). The encounter of the two worlds Antoinette and Rochester embody slowly but steadily degenerates into a cultural clash between the colonizer and the colonized, as well as a socio-economic conflict between the crumbling leadership of slave-owners and the increasing success of the new trading middle-class. Furthermore, this encounter progressively turns into a gender struggle in which the ideally complementary roles of man/husband and woman/wife within the economic system of the family are changed into a socio-economic hierarchy. Starting from Gayatri Spivak's

reading of the novel in terms of an “allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” (270), in this study I will delve more deeply into the dynamics of power that preside over the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette. In particular, I will focus on their physical intimacy as a key arena for the representation (and stigmatization) of Otherness in the gender, socio-economic and cultural struggles enacted in the novel. My goal is to call the reader’s attention on the way Rochester (that is, the colonizer)’s contempt for Otherness, his fear of it and his will to domesticate it permeates the public spheres of social behaviours and economic transactions *as well as* the private level of sexuality.

The notion of reification will prove essential for the investigation of the fear and the domestication of the sexual Other in my analysis, whose starting point is a dialogue between Antoinette (that is, *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha before being imposed on an English name by her husband) and Rochester (who is never called by any name in the novel):

[Antoinette:] “If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn’t have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don’t believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.”
[Rochester:] “Die then! Die!” I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. In the long afternoons when the house was empty [...]. Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was – more lost and drowned afterwards (WSS, 57).

The dialogue is spoken by the newlyweds toward the beginning of their honeymoon, that is, the climax (both literally and figuratively) of their marital relationship. At this point of the story, Rochester and Antoinette have recently married with some recalcitrance on both sides. Rochester was talked by his father into moving to Jamaica and marrying a well-off Creole girl with a view to making up for the prospective loss of his share of inheritance, which will be bestowed entirely upon his elder brother in order to avoid dividing the family estate. As for Antoinette, she was persuaded to marry this English gentleman by her stepbrother Richard Mason, presumably because he viewed Rochester as a useful connection for himself and his own business (although Mason’s motives are not at all clear in the novel). The reasons leading to this union are therefore of financial nature, and they coincide with the idea of interest in a contract, that of marriage, which is seen only in terms of an economic exchange.

Since this economic exchange involves people being “traded,” it goes without saying that, at least in principle, it is quite similar to slavery. This consideration is significant in the light of the historical and geographical setting of the novel, i.e. the post-1833 West Indies. Prior to this date the Caribbean had been a huge plantation managed by French and English colonizers who had enforced the system of slavery in those islands. The issuing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 marked the end of the slavery regime in most of the British colonies, including the British-ruled Caribbean islands. As Antoinette is boarding at the convent in Spanish Town, she embroiders on an item of her trousseau “Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (WSS, 29). This detail locates the date of her wedding to Rochester as being subsequent to the Abolition Act, which, in this context, comes to represent a historical watershed making Antoinette into the representative of the declining class of the Creole plantocracy. At that time, they were being replaced by the new rising economic power of the tradesmen and businessmen emigrating from England, like Antoinette’s stepfather Mr. Mason and Rochester himself.

Slave-owners’ decline is represented in the novel by the ruin of Antoinette’s family, who – after her father’s death – becomes increasingly impoverished and vexed by their former slaves. Yet, although on the public level the system of slavery is collapsing, on the private level of personal relationships the master-slave dynamics of that system are described as still holding. This surreptitious adherence to the old values is conveyed throughout the novel by the references to Jesus’ betrayal at the hands of Judas, who is claimed to have sold Christ to the chief priests for thirty pieces of silver. The first reference to this scriptural episode is overt, and it is thought by Antoinette right after she has convinced her nurse Christophine to use *obeah* – that is, black magic – in order to entice Rochester in her bed one more time: “Nearby a cock crowed and I thought, ‘That is for betrayal, but who is the traitor?’ She [Christophine] did not want to do this. I forced her with my ugly money. And what does anyone know about traitors, or why Judas did what he did?” (WSS, 74-5). Here emphasis is put on the idea that money can buy people’s willpower – thus debasing them into means for reaching some goal. This amounts to degrading them to the rank of objects; put otherwise, it amounts to reifying them.

The same idea is implied in a covert reference to Judas’ betrayal spoken by Daniel (who introduces himself as an illegitimate brother of Antoinette’s) as he blackmails Rochester after dragging his wife’s name through the mire: “She start with

Sandi. [...] You believe me, but you want to do everything quiet like the English can. All right. But if I keep my mouth shut it seems to me you owe me something. What is five hundred pounds to you?” (WSS, 80). In this passage even respectability is presented in terms of a commodity that can be bargained; in this perspective, it’s not surprising for the reader to learn that, in Christophine’s opinion, the thing Rochester loves most about his wife is her money: “‘Your husband certainly love money,’ she said. ‘That is no lie. Money have pretty face for everybody, but for that man money pretty like pretty self, he can’t see nothing else’” (WSS, 72).

It is on the basis of these economic interests that Rochester and Antoinette find themselves together as husband and wife. Thus, a young man and a girl that barely know each other are rightfully allowed (and expected) to share the greatest possible intimacy in the isolation of a tropical island. They are suddenly free from the pressure of familiar authority that has forced them into marriage, and now their only duty is to consummate their union so as to validate it in the eyes of both civil and ecclesiastical laws. The luxuriant nature surrounding them is favourable to this task, for it provides the necessary privacy and, at the same time, stirs the senses even of a strait-laced English gentleman like Rochester: “Standing on the veranda I breathed the sweetness of the air. Cloves I could smell and cinnamon, roses and orange blossom. And an intoxicating freshness as if all this had never been breathed before” (WSS, 44). In this sultry atmosphere, husband and wife get to know each other through lovemaking, which enables them to transform their union from an economic exchange into a physical one.

At this point, their relationship becomes one of passion, that is, one based on a mutual exchange of physical pleasure through sexual intercourse. I intentionally speak of “passion” instead of “desire” in this case, for my contention is that the feeling Rochester and Antoinette have for each other is one of need – and, following in Jacques Lacan’s footsteps, I mean this word as antonymous with “desire”. Lacan defines desire in relation to a missing object seen as a *cause*, and he describes it in antithetical terms with need, which exists in relation to an object seen as a reachable *goal*¹. This distinction highlights the egoism underlying the two parts’ reasons for participating in this exchange. Each is more concerned with his/her own welfare than with the other’s, and this self-interest excludes that their relationship may be based on love. In effect, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is unequivocally made clear that Rochester only lusts after his

¹ See Sandrine Léopold: “‘The human being’s desire is the desire of the Other,’ Lacan writes in *Encore*. Desire, in the Lacanian sense of the word, differs from need inasmuch as it hasn’t got any object – or better, this object is lost for good” (6, my translation).

young wife², and that – although Antoinette speaks of love – she seems to be more addicted to the pleasure she draws from his body than to be genuinely in love with this man she barely knows. What ensues from this egoistic passion is a process of mutual reification in which the two parts see each other as a means for attaining a goal – that of sexual satisfaction.

Such a behaviour corresponds to the definition of “reification” Frederic Jameson gives in “Reification and Utopia,” in which he claims that reification occurs when “a thing no longer has any qualitative value in itself; the various forms of activity [...] become means to an end” (131). It is interesting that Kevin Floyd has recently analyzed the process of reification in connection with sexual desire, on which he has shed the light of profit mentality. In the chapter “Disciplined Bodies: Lukács, Foucault, and the Reification of Desire,” Floyd uses Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84) as springboard texts for his discussion of the schism between human beings and their skills and qualities brought about by Taylorism. Floyd views this separation as the beginning of a long-lasting process of reification of the individual: “Lukács insists that reification represents a moment in which the individual’s ‘qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things [...]’” (43).

The same holds true for the relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, in which they seem to see in each other only a cluster of features they want to own and use for their own advantage. Rochester identifies Antoinette with seductiveness – a quality he wants to be the only enjoyer of. This is the reason why he ultimately segregates her in the attic of his English mansion, thus depriving her of her own agency. By then she will be solely part of his belongings, a doll in his hands: “[Christophine:] She [Antoinette] tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette. Some word so.’ [Rochester:] ‘Yes, I remember, I did.’ (*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*)” (WSS, 99). Although criticism has mostly emphasized Rochester’s debasement of Antoinette into an object of sexual desire, my contention is that her behaviour is not much different from her husband’s. She, too, views him as a source of physical pleasure, and when he denies her his sexual favours, she tries to deprive him of his willpower through *obeah*. Accordingly, what distinguishes them is not their attitude towards each other, but the degree of power they are granted by social

² “[Rochester:] I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did” (WSS, 58).

norms and economic means. Herein lies the possibility to subdue and enslave the other's willpower, and thus possess him/her as an object.

The concept of inequality in power is crucial to my analysis of this novel in which neither on the socio-economic level nor on the physical one do the two parts involved in the exchange of marriage play an equivalent role. Far from being an interaction between equals in which what is gained makes up for what is lost on both sides, the exchange here turns out to be unfair. Rochester completely benefits from it, while Antoinette loses more than what she earns. In effect, the contract of marriage grants Rochester full mastery on his own life thanks to the wealth he lays hands on through marrying Antoinette. In addition, he also gains mastery over Antoinette, who – being deprived of those means her stepfather bequeathed on her upon his death – loses *de facto* any right to manage her own life. In the novel the exchange of marriage is thus characterized chiefly by inequality – an inequality for which the parts involved play the opposite roles of subject and object of the transaction. In consequence, marriage turns out to be less of an exchange *inter pares* than of a hierarchical structure where the husband is empowered by an active role while the wife is reduced to passivity to the point of turning into a mere commodity.

This hierarchy is not limited to the socio-economic exchange of marriage: the same agency inequality also characterizes the sphere of physical intimacy, in which Rochester ultimately holds a position of unarguable predominance. Although the narration makes clear that they both lust for each other – and therefore that the two of them are both subjects and objects of desire (in the non-Lacanian sense of the term) –, it is likewise clear that Rochester only has the right to take the initiative in this domain. The moment he refuses to have intercourse with his wife, she challenges his supremacy through the use of *obeah*, so as to seduce him once again. Yet, Antoinette's attempt at vindicating her own right to desire botches. On discovering her trick to sleep with him again, Rochester feels urged to re-establish his position of dominance through his betrayal with the black servant Amélie. Such a reaction seems ascribable to his fear that Antoinette's initiative may be the evidence of her abnormal sexual appetite – a suspicion that, if proved true, would threaten him with the impossibility to satisfy it and, in consequence, to master his wife's sexuality. So, Antoinette is rapidly debased into a mere object of desire and, more in general, a mere object that her husband wants to completely possess: "Hide yourself but in my arms. [...] My lunatic. My mad girl" (WSS, 107; my emphasis).

The dynamics of reification that lie at the core of the novel are particularly evident in the dialogue between Rochester and Antoinette quoted at the beginning of this study. Here eroticism – and, in particular, female orgasm – is overtly associated with death, thus foreshadowing Antoinette’s fate in *Jane Eyre*: “Let her identity, her connection with yourself, be *buried* in oblivion” (305; my emphasis): with these words Rochester symbolically murders her in *Jane Eyre* exactly like Antoinette asks him to do in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Significantly, this passage presents coitus as the instrument of that violence that will result into Antoinette’s symbolical death in the prison-grave of the attic. Sex is thus depicted as a form of aggression in which man plays the active role of inflicting the “little death” of orgasm upon woman, who is expected to passively subside to this violence. This association between female climax and death complies with the 19th-century expression “little death,” which was commonly used for signifying both the fainting fit and the orgasm – that is, those moments in which a woman totally loses control over her rational faculties³. Yet, it is also a semantically connoted choice that directs the readers’ interpretation of the novel toward a brutal view of the sexual intercourse, which amounts to a struggle or an aggression⁴. In this aggression man plays the active role of the victimizer who resorts to physical violence so as to subjugate the woman and ultimately succeeds in reducing her to the most passive of all roles, that of the corpse.

The intrinsic connection between sex and violence was thoroughly explored by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), in which I find an belated explanation of the expression “little death” for signifying female orgasm in 19th-century language⁵:

³ “Little death” was probably translated from a Greek expression first used in modern times by the 16th-century French physician Ambroise Paré with reference to syncope: “Syncope est une soudaine & forte defaillance des facultez & vertus, & principalement de la vitale, & demeure le malade de sans aucun mouvement: & pour cette cause les anciens l’ont appelé petite mort [...]” (334). The expression later came to signify also the fainting fit and the sexual climax, which, like the syncope, entail a momentary loss of consciousness. The use of the verb “to die” with a sexual connotation is attested in English from the late 16th century. See, for instance, *Much Ado About Nothing* (ca. 1598), in which Benedick tells Beatrice: “I will live in thy heart, *die in thy lap*, and be buried in thy eyes [...]” (V.ii.86-87, my emphasis).

⁴ The connection between little death and male violence is discussed in Mark Breitenberg’s anatomy of male desire in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* with reference to Montaigne’s essay “Upon Some Verses of Virgill:” “In the sexual sense, satisfaction represents to the male imagination not just a ‘little death’ but also a moment of loss and vulnerability – it figures an end to the desiring subject that must be resurrected through another ‘conquest.’ Such masculine vulnerability finds its compensatory articulation in the creation of monstrous or unnatural female sexualities, [...] Men desire ‘maistery and absolute possession’ only to resent its negation of the process of desiring; the ‘conquest’ that results is threatening to women (‘infinitely to be feared’) because men project the source of their own inevitable dissatisfaction onto women, the result of which is anger, sometimes violence, against women” (432-33).

⁵ The representation of coitus as an aggression of the woman conveys the perception of the sexual act in the late 18th and the early 19th century, as David Punter claims: “The language of deceit [...] becomes inextricably bound to the language of the affections, and relationships become fixed into a calculable and quantifiable system whose basic terms nonetheless reject “difference.” A reading of almost any eighteenth-century novel gives us further evidence of this system. Its key metaphors are, significantly, military. Emotional encounters are recounted under the guise of warfare:

We are tempted to conclude that violence is impure because of its relation to sexuality. Yet only the reverse proposition can withstand close scrutiny. Sexuality is impure because it has to do with violence. [...]

Sex and violence frequently come to grips in such direct forms as abduction, rape, defloration, and various sadistic practices, as well as in indirect actions of indefinite consequences. Sex is at the origin of various illnesses, real or imaginary; it culminates in the bloody labors of childbirth, which may entail the death of mother, child, or both together. Even within the ritualistic framework of marriage, when all the matrimonial vows and other interdictions have been conscientiously observed, sexuality is accompanied by violence; and as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of matrimony to engage in illicit relationships – incest, adultery, and the like – the violence and the impurity resulting from this violence, grows more potent and extreme. Sexuality leads to quarrels, jealous rages, mortal combats (35-6).

Accordingly, the little death inflicted on the woman through sexual intercourse is a physical violence that dispossesses her of her rational and conscious willpower through orgasm. As such, it may be used as an instrument of reification, a means of enslavement through which a man can become the only master of a woman's body and mind. This idea seems to be confirmed by Mr. Rochester's allegations against Bertha/Antoinette, spoken in *Jane Eyre* on recalling the moment when he decided to shut his wife away from society: she was "at once untemperate and *unchaste*" (302; my emphasis). These words reveal his will to be the one and only lord of his wife's desires – in short, to be her possessor, to own her as if she were a thing or a slave. A "jealous rage" (to put it in Girard's words) is the reason why Rochester makes up his mind to sentence his wife to the little death of oblivion in the isolation of the attic.

A major impetus behind Rochester's symbolic murder of Antoinette is the Othellian jealousy he has been inoculated with by gossip about his wife's amour with her illegitimate cousin Sandi. The parallel between the couples Desdemona-Othello and Antoinette-Rochester apparently finds a confirmation in the echo from *Othello* in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* passage about death and orgasm: "If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear / My soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate" (II.i.181-85). These words are spoken by Othello in a circumstance that is somewhat analogous to that of Rochester and Antoinette: Othello has just reached the shores of Cyprus with Desdemona, whom he married the previous night. He has been charged by the Venetian senate of defending this outpost from the impending attack of the Turkish fleet, but – since the rival army

attack, defense, and force become the central terms of description, and thus *a concept of violence – or perhaps, more literally, violation – is implanted at the heart of the feelings.*" (477; my emphasis).

was dispersed by a storm on the night of their voyage to Cyprus – in the end he is left free to enjoy a prospective honeymoon with Desdemona on an island that, as Greek mythology has it, is the birthplace of Aphrodite, and therefore the island of love. The story will have an ill turn which is darkly foreshadowed by these lines overflowing with Sophoclean irony: instead of enjoying his honeymoon, Othello will be driven mad by his ensign Iago, who will slander Desdemona to the point of persuading Othello of her unfaithfulness. Both Desdemona and Antoinette are viewed by the men around them as carnal women, and their unwilling role of objects of desire is the cause of their (physical or symbolical) death. This is inflicted upon them by their respective husbands, who endeavour to master their sexuality through the exercise of coercion, leading to violence and, ultimately, to murder as the most extreme form of control over it.

The endings of both Shakespeare's tragedy and Rhys' novel are examples of the tragic consequences of the violence inherent in sex. On the one hand, Othello retaliates against Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness through a berserk version of sexual intercourse: he kills her upon their nuptial bed through the physical contact of strangulation. Thus, he transforms the little death of female orgasm into the real death of a crime of passion. On the other hand, Rochester kills Antoinette symbolically – that is, he inflicts on her another form of little death – because of his possessiveness towards her. In both cases, jealousy plays a key role in the perpetration of the murders. As paradoxical as it may sound, I see behind Othello's and Rochester's decision to kill (literally or symbolically) their wives a hidden motivation that is closely related to the construction of their identity as rational men who comply with the standards of civilization imposed on them by the society they belong to.

As Janette Dillon maintains, at the beginning of *Othello* “‘bombast,’ or inflated diction (literally, ‘stuffing’) is introduced to the audience as the essence of Othello’s speech” (87). This key feature of Othello’s discourse demonstrates his rational command over both his words and actions – a characteristic on which his full integration into the “civilized” society of Venice depends, since he was born a Moor and, therefore, a barbarian by the standards of the European society of that time. His rhetoric does not fail him until the poison of Iago’s slanders finally has effect upon him. This occurs upon hearing Iago’s lie about Cassio’s confession to be Desdemona’s lover: at this point, Othello falls in a trance after delivering the first of his incoherent speeches in the play: “Lie with her? Lie on her? [...] Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief! [...] Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is’t possible? – Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!” (IV.i

, 36-41). Falling into a trance means losing one's own rationality, and thus giving in to the non-rational – which is what happens also during the little death of orgasm.

As for Rochester, he tries to “civilize” his Creole wife by holding the control of her actions and words. He seems the very embodiment of rationality and self-control as opposed to Antoinette's emotionality and impulsiveness – but this only until Antoinette has him drink the *obeah* love filter that gets him back to her bed one last time. Then, Rochester lies with her in a state of unconsciousness from which he recovers only after lovemaking. So, the filter reverses the roles Rochester and Antoinette have played thus far: she becomes the “rational” one (in the sense that she is conscious and aware of what she's doing), while he goes through the little death of orgasm in a state of numbness. Once recovered from the spell, Rochester flees from the house; when he comes back in the evening, he betrays his wife with the servant Amélie and lets Antoinette hear his betrayal from the adjacent bedroom. The episode of the *obeah* sorcery represents the only moment when Rochester's rational control of the situation is seriously put at stake. Through the use of the “barbarous” means of black magic, Antoinette's passion, emotionality and sexuality – that is, everything Rochester views as irrational and uncivilized – deprive him of his own consciousness, thus reducing him to an object of desire. He sleeps with Amélie with a view to regaining his position of master; yet, this is not enough, for the worm of jealousy is still gnawing him.

As I mentioned above, jealousy is a major motivation leading Rochester to the decision of inflicting on Antoinette the symbolical death of life-long reclusion. At this point, it is important to highlight that the hard kernel of jealousy is the jealous individual's fear that his/her identity may be undermined by the Other (the partner, a parent, a friend, a competitor, a colleague, etc.)'s interest in another person, as W. Gerrod Parrott explains:

One might say, then, that at the heart of jealousy there's a *need to be needed*. This need exists because relationships with other persons create and confirm certain aspects of our selves. [...] We think of ourselves as being fun to be with, sexually attractive, humorous, or worthy opponents. These concepts are meaningless when applied to a person who does not interact with others: there is no “fun to be with” without others to be fun with, no “sexually attractive” without someone to be attracted, no “humorous” without a laughing audience, no “worthy opponent” without another opponent. We need others not only to confirm these aspects of ourselves, but, in a real, sense, to *create* these aspects of ourselves. [...] The threat of the loss of such a relationship is therefore the threat of a loss of self, not the loss of “property,” as someone have mistakenly claimed (16-7).

In the case of Othello, there's no civilization without inclusion in the Venetian society, and the clearest proof of his inclusion is Desdemona's love. Once Othello believes to have lost it, he surrenders to barbarity – first relinquishing his distinctive logic and rhetoric, then abandoning rationality to the extent of killing his wife on the grounds of mere suspicion. By contrast, in Rochester's case there is no civilization and rationality without the yardstick offered by Antoinette and the world of the colonies she belongs to. Antoinette is the very embodiment of the Other, the non-English that, in his view, is uncivilized and therefore needs to be tamed. Contrary to the 19th-century English values of self-restraint, Antoinette is an emotional and passionate girl who – instead of hiding her feelings – openly cries, desires, gets angry and enjoys bodily pleasures. Her most instinctive behaviour occurs when she finds out that her attempt at seducing Rochester has failed and that he has even slept with Amélie right after making love to her:

Then to my astonishment she stopped crying and said, 'Is she so much prettier than I am? Don't you love me at all?'
 'No, I do not,' I said (at the same time remembering Amélie saying, 'Do you like my hair? Isn't it prettier than hers?'). 'Not at this moment,' I said.
 She laughed at that. A crazy laugh.
 'You see. That's how you are. A stone. [...]
 And lifted the bottle to drink again.
 I said, and *my voice was not very calm*, 'No.'
 I managed to hold her wrist with one hand and the rum with the other, but when I felt her teeth in my arm I dropped the bottle. The smell filled the room. But *I was angry* now and she saw it. She smashed another bottle against the wall and stood with the broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes. [...]
 Then she cursed me comprehensively, my eyes, my mouth, every member of my body, and it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the candles flickering and this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me (WSS, 95; my emphasis).

This is the climactic moment of their relationship, for at this point Rochester confronts three risks. The first is that he may be unable to fulfil his duties as a civilizer – and, worse still, he might himself be transformed into a savage by Antoinette. She has succeeded in subjugating his will through *obeah*, by means of which he has himself experienced the little death of irrationality.⁶ In addition, she has “contaminated” him with her lust to the point that he has slept with her black alter ego Amélie, a girl whom he views as both socially and racially inferior to him. Finally, Antoinette has succeeded in having him lose his temper and self-control. Accordingly, his major fear is that,

⁶ As far as the connection between little death and the irrational/uncivilized is concerned, see Thomas Cooley: “In the psychology of the Nineteenth century, then, the swoon is a ‘little death,’ like orgasm, of the knowing and reflecting faculties, a temporary giving-in to the ‘savage’ instinct and unbridled passion that the age associated with the physical body and the more ‘primitive’ impulses, or ‘propensities,’ of the mind” (84).

instead of “civilizing” Antoinette, she might be able of depriving him of his own “civilization.” But even in the hypothesis that he clung to the values of English culture, another risk involved in staying in the West Indies with her is that he might not be able to civilize and tame her. This would mean sending to smithereens his own identity, which hinges on Englishness as the only culture that, in his view, might “rescue” him from the wilderness of the Caribbean. In addition, a further menace threatens him: that Daniel’s allegations may prove true, and that Antoinette might have (or have had) an affair with her cousin. Unfaithfulness on her part would mean being unable to control and master her wildest side, that of eroticism. If we consider the words Freud used in *The Questions of Lay Analysis* (1926) for speaking about female sexuality, Rochester’s implicit parallel between colonizing/civilizing and controlling the female libido becomes clearer: “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, *the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology*” (32-3; my emphasis)⁷.

Prior to Daniel’s accusations and the *obeah* episode, Rochester’s identity as a colonizer and a civilizer rested upon the comparison with his non-English wife over whom he believed to have absolute control. Thus, he constructed his identity through reifying her, that is, through reducing her to a series of characteristics which proved functional to highlighting his role of rational and active subject. To him, Antoinette represented the Other without whom he could not exist as a trader, a master and a colonizer bringing civilization to the macrocosm of the Caribbean island/estate where he lived and the microcosm of his wife’s ‘dark continent’ of desire. When he sees his power jeopardized, his identity, too, is put at stake, because the Other embodied by Antoinette has changed from a passive object on which he exerted his civilizing power into a potentially active object that threatens to dispossess him of his rationality and agency. Immediately after the post-betrayal crisis, Rochester is offered a loophole by Christophine: he can leave Antoinette in her care, live his own life and let her live her own: “She marry with someone else. She forget about you and live happy” (WSS, 102). But these words spark an uncontrollable reaction of “rage and jealousy” (WSS, 102): he will not let her go, for – as Christophine has rightly guessed – he needs to “break her up” (WSS, 98). That is, he needs to deprive her of her self-possession and agency so as

⁷ See Mary Ann Doane about the link between female sexuality and racial Otherness in Freud’s passage: “A metonymic chain is constructed which links infantile sexuality, female sexuality and racial otherness. For the adjective ‘dark’ in dark continent signifies not only unknowability but blackness in its racial connotations. Africa is ‘dark’ because its inhabitants are ‘dark’” (210).

to see his identity as a master and a colonizer strengthened. Gerrod Parrot claims that jealousy is not about the fear of losing one's own property, but I would contend that – at least in this case – in the end the result is the same: jealousy reifies the Other and turns him/her into a need, or a means for attaining an egoistic goal.

Accordingly, Rochester doesn't desert Antoinette, but deprives her of agency through branding her as mad. By doing so, he gains full control over her and, at the same time, reduces her to a cluster of negative qualities (anger, lust, irrationality) that, by comparison, makes him into an ideal model of self-control and enlightenment. Through the enslavement of his "savage" Creole wife, he succeeds in constructing his own identity as a master and a "civilizer." This enslavement debases her into an object in the same way as it had happened to her mother, Annette, about whose vicissitudes Christophine maintains:

When she lose her son she lose herself for a while and they shut her away. They tell her she is mad, they act like she is mad. [...] In the end – mad I don't know – she give up, she care for nothing. That man who is in charge of her he take her whenever he want and his woman talk. That man, and others. Then they have her" (WSS, 101).

Antoinette's mother was labelled as a lunatic before being shut away from society: this was her "first" death Antoinette refers to when questioned by Rochester's about her mother's alleged insanity. Also, this is the "little" death of the reification she went through at the hands of her English husband, Mr. Mason, as well as of her keeper. Both inflicted violence on her: in one case, her husband deprived her of her freedom; in the other, the violence of rape transformed her into object of sexual exploitation. Annette was actually driven crazy by the brutalization she was the victim of; thus, she ended up losing that rationality (which the English colonizer had already declared as lost) and falling into the little death of madness – which, significantly, coincided with the little deaths imposed on her by her keeper/torturer's sexual violence.

Antoinette's fate is somewhat different from her mother; yet, the result turns out to be the same. Rochester takes her to England, where he locks her up in the attic of Thornfield Hall and puts her in the care of a woman, Grace Pool. This choice is probably intended to prevent any sexual violence, for Rochester's main concern when he decides to segregate Antoinette is precisely to avoid the risk that she might betray him: "She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. [...] Made for loving? Yes, but she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other.

[...] She's mad but *mine, mine*" (WSS, 107; author's emphasis). These words make it clear that, although she is not an object of sexual exploitation, she is nonetheless an object and, more precisely, an erotic object or plaything in the hands of her husband. Instead of imposing on her forced sexual intercourses, in this case the violence resides in refusing her any form of physical contact with him, whom she desires and, maybe, even loves. Thus, she slowly slides into the little death of lunacy because of the violence inflicted on her by Rochester, who kills her rationality through depriving her of agency and free will – both staples of that sexual life she used to have when she would actively seduce and willingly give herself to him. Rochester has now become his wife's lord not just in accordance with the English laws – for which a woman's property automatically passed to her husband through the contract of marriage – but also in the colonial sense of the word: he's her master, the only owner and ruler of her willpower and, above all, her "dark continent" of desire.

Antoinette is neither a free person nor a slave any more: she has become an object. She is Rochester's doll, his puppet – his *Marionetta*: "The doll had a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice" (WSS, 110). Her silence in the last scenes of the novel is proof that, like Othello, she has no more any command over her speech and, therefore, her rationality. The little death to which Rochester has sentenced her has deprived her of lucidity and reduced her to silence. Apparently, Rochester's tasks as colonizer/civilizer have been fully achieved: the savage has been tamed, the "dark continent" of female desire has been conquered and subjugated, and the hierarchic system of "civilization" has been safeguarded. Once left voiceless, Antoinette will never be able to tell the *other* (and the *Other's*) side of the story: her reification as a wife, a woman and a Creole is now completely achieved.

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