

For the most part Angier paints a grim picture of her subject, leading A. Alvarez, a champion of Rhys's artistic standing, to the surprising conclusion that Angier's biography of Rhys argues against biography in general. "Jean Rhys was one of the finest writers of the century but the best way to read her work is to know nothing about the woman who wrote it" (*The New York Review of Books*, 10 October 1991, 10). Even though Angier blurs the boundary between the two, Rhys's life did inform her fiction. Her will to survive as well as create, however unconscious or fragile it might appear to the outsider, is equal in its way to the quality of her prose. Jean Rhys's life might have been at times poor, nasty, and brutish, but still it had its luminous moments. Francis Wyndham's summation of Rhys's special grace is worth remembering:

For me the ghost of Jean Rhys is not the hunted, lonely woman who figures in her novels, nor the restless spirit so often near despair ... but the slant-eyed siren with whom one could enjoy the full intensity of a treat as with no one else - those sacred moments of frivolity (an old tune, a new scent, a perfect cocktail, a wonderful joke) which for her nearly made life worth living. ("Introduction," *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-1966*, 12.)

Such intensity in Rhys, her passion in joy as well as in sorrow, is the heart of her life's story.

§ § §

BEHIND BARS: THE LITERARY RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN THE FICTIONS OF JEAN RHYSS & EDOUARD DE NEVE

Thorunn Lonsdale

Sue Roe suggests that Rhys's writing represents a particular kind of psychological quest which is dependent for its force on the motionlessness and demotivation of her heroines, that no external actions can alleviate the internal distress experienced by the heroines, and that there is no direct relationship between economic and moral forces. Furthermore, Roe de-emphasizes P.A. Packen's assertion that poverty seems to be the root cause of the hardships encountered by Rhys's heroines. She asserts that they have lost more than just money and that it is this larger area of deprivation which is paramount.¹

Although the psychological element is fundamental to the interpretation of Rhys's female portrayals, economic factors must also be acknowledged. The preoccupation with money in all of her work, and the characters' keen knowledge that money talks, must be seen as a key to their psychological make-ups. The demotivation and motionlessness of the characters can be understood as purposeful methods towards the attainment of economic security. From Anna Morgan's passive acceptance of a pair of stockings to Sasha's identification with a gigolo is the suggestion of a knowledge of how the stakes line up. Being a victim ready to be snared may be seen as a tactical manoeuvre to achieve a desired end, and Rhys's characters may be seen as deploying very sensible strategic moves given the social environment in which they operate. Their unhappiness can be read as a dissatisfaction with the methods they have to employ, but a cynical recognition that they are also the most effective. *Sous les verrous* helps in the unmasking of this element in *Quartet*, which, in turn, allows for the same connections to be made with Rhys's other work; it also helps to allay the frustration the reader feels, all too often, at the passivity of Rhys's female characters, since their behaviour can be read as actually motivated.

At a time when the new Europe is preoccupied with self determinism and economic security, Jean Rhys's *Quartet* and *Sous les verrous* by Edouard de Nève (the pseudonym of Jean Lenglet) have a particular relevance: for not only can they be read as representative of an age now past, and literary connections made in relation to that past, they can also be understood in terms of the dilemmas facing many of the newly developing European countries, where identity and economic security are fundamental to the individual's understanding of self and society. At first glance, the uniting factor between the fictions of Edouard de Nève and Jean Rhys appears to be one of a content steeped in the authors' mutual personal experiences; on closer examination, however, this aspect, although equally valid for consideration, is of lesser importance when identifying the dominant theme in either Jean Rhys's *Quartet* or Edouard de Nève's *Sous les verrous*.

The recurrent theme in both novels is alienation, an alienation which is the result of economic instability, and although it is possible to interpret this alienation through other lenses, the economic paradigm, simple as it may be, is less easily dismantled and underscores the motivations and actions of the principal characters in either work. At the end of *Quartet*, Marya (Stania in *Sous les verrous*) hurls her accusation at Stephan (Jan in *Sous les verrous*): "You left me all alone without any money"²; although she also states repeatedly that she loves Heidler, Marya can be understood as one for whom "poverty is the cause of many compromises."³ And although when Heidler

took her in his arms she thought: "How gentle he is. I was lost before I knew him. All my life before I knew him was like being lost on a cold, dark night,"⁴

she is simply changing her dependency allegiance which, although emotional, has its roots in "shadowy fear," which is most likely attributable to economic instability, or so any contextual evidence would suggest. Marya recognizes that Heidler offers greater security than Stephan can and had, the same sense of security that Stephan had once appeared to offer:

. . . she felt strangely peaceful when she was with him, as if life were not such an extraordinary muddle after all, as if he were telling her: "Now then, look here, I know all about you. I know you far better than you know yourself. I know why you aren't happy. I can make you happy."⁵

With the acceptance that economics are the determinant for Marya's actions must also be the recognition that this argument validates any feminist interpretation along these lines. In other words, underlying the motivations of Rhys's female characters is a reliance on a patriarchal system for economic security and therefore security in general. This however does not contradict the assertion that the main focus is on economics.

In the same way financial security is paramount to the protagonist of *Quartet* so is it for Jan Van Leeuwen in *Sous les verrous*. In prison and unable to support his wife, Jan knows that economics are and will be the basis for his life in prison, where money buys privilege, and thereafter: It is his lack of financial resources which will undermine his situation, prevent the securing of good legal representation - hence his freedom, and consequently precipitate the loss of his wife's allegiance and his own residency status - hence his identity. Stania will turn to Hübner (Heidler in *Quartet*) for security, and any residency rights which Jan, who is not a French citizen, may have had will be forfeited on the basis of his status as a convicted man.

Economic instability reduces the protagonists of both novels to passive characters resigned to their fates. In *Quartet*

becoming a chorus girl:

Gradually passivity replaced her early adventurousness.
 . . . She began to live her hard and monotonous life very
 mechanically and listlessly.⁶

Marya's "relatives, though respectable people, presentable people. . . were poverty-stricken"⁷ and it was from this environment that she had looked towards the stage, longing "to play a glittering part - she was nineteen then - against the sombre and wonderful background of London."⁸ So almost from the outset Marya is resigned and thus easily allured by Stephan, "so sure of himself."⁹ She is willing to escape to another life, albeit one that proves almost as financially precarious as that to which she was accustomed, but this is not something Marya would have known when she formed her determination to marry Stephan. Indeed, the evidence surrounding their courtship suggests that he assumed all financial responsibility, paying her clothing debts and calmly accepting her disclosure that she has no money (although he had already ascertained this through careful questioning), further evidence that any compacts were underwritten by financial considerations.

For Jan in *Sous les verrous*, although there are references to the financial hardships he and Stania had faced prior to his imprisonment, he does not become a man resigned to his fate until after his arrest:

I was very cold. I had not had an overcoat for a long time,
 and I had got used to it. But now, because I had lost hope,
 I felt cold.¹⁰

and he later thinks, "Il y a donc un terme à la sensibilité du prisonnier?" (There is then a time-limit to the sensitivity of a prisoner?).¹¹ The difference is that his despondency and resignation are not a direct result of personal deprivation, but rather the knowledge that he will lose his wife's love and support through an inability to provide for her. And herein lies the important connection between these two novels and, indeed, Rhys's translation of *Sous les verrous*. In both novels the major motivation is the attainment of financial security for the Stania/Marya character; in *Quartet* we see Marya's attempts to accomplish this end, and in *Sous les verrous* Jan's portrayal centers on his knowledge that its provision is how he will retain or lose his wife's affections. This then is the focus of both novels; in *Sous les verrous* it is clearly stated, in *Quartet* it is camouflaged by the portrayal of Marya as a victim, and in Rhys's translation of *Sous les verrous* entitled *Barred*, there is also an attempt to obscure the Stania/Marya character's motivations. The discrepancies in the portrayals of Stania in *Sous les verrous* and *Barred* are effectively demonstrated in Martien Kappers den Hollander's 1984 definitive discussion, "A Gloomy Child and Its Devoted Godmother: Jean Rhys, *Barred*, *Sous Les Verrous* and *In De Strik*."¹²

In *Quartet*, Marya, all too readily excused as society's victim, is a character frequently interpreted, in the words of Thomas Staley, as one whose passivity explains a great many of [her] attitudes and reactions and characterises her personality throughout the novel as she becomes entrapped in a number of situations which she has more or less drifted into rather than decisively chosen.¹³

If we are to accept that Marya has no will of her own, then it is difficult to understand how she had wanted to play some glittering part, and if it is a result of this life that her passivity and resignation developed, then why did she so clearly define her economic situation to Stephan and recollect China's

fate?¹⁴ Why did she not simply accept his marriage proposal passively? And how does such a victim manage to understand hypocrisy, exemplified through her understanding of Lois Heidler's image-making and game-playing, and is her acute cynicism consistent with the victim?

With the idea of victim is associated that of the innocent, someone who does not play games or even understand them, but Marya does and as such puts herself into player rather than victim status. This is not to say she plays well; certainly she is no match for Lois, but she is better classified as loser than victim. The main difference is that she did choose to actively engage rather than simply be which is how her character is more frequently read.¹⁵ This becomes more apparent when *Quartet* is read alongside *Sous les verrous*. The choices Marya makes become more distinguishable and she consequently becomes less excusable. Marya is not the *faux naïf*, she does move in with the Heidlers, she does respond to Heidler, her very passivity is a response, she does show anger as she starts to lose Heidler, she does recriminate against her husband and she does have definite thoughts and views, but such actions are obscured by the more authoritative statements in the novel about Marya being "a victim. There's no endurance in your face. Victims are necessary so that the strong may exercise their will and become more strong."¹⁶

In *Sous les verrous* Stania is less sympathetic than her counterpart in *Quartet*; Jan is careful not to antagonize her during her visits to the prison for fear of losing her, and even recalls an earlier conversation (prior to imprisonment) where she had told him:

. . . froidement, cruellement, lorsque je voulais l'embrasser: "Puisque tu ne peux pas me donner de l'argent, tu n'as pas besoin de m'embrasser."¹⁷

(Coldly, cruelly, when I wanted to kiss her: "Since you can't give me any money, you have no business kissing me.")

The portrayal, in general, is one of a woman inclined to choose the most comfortable option offered and what constitutes the comfortable option appears to be security. In *Sous les verrous*, however, it is not masked and Stania makes it clear to Jan that Hübner has pride of place, a position he achieves through financial and emotional dominance (he even supports Jan after his release and upstages him at every turn, demonstrating his sense of ownership). This portrayal is consistent with that in *Quartet* except that Marya, at one level, is depicted as having been lured into the Heidler ménage à trois rather than having chosen it. At first she resists the offer to live with the Heidlers, but is reassured by Lois Heidler; once living with them, she asks Lois for help to leave when Heidler attempts seduction. The help she seeks is financial and when it is denied she succumbs to Heidler's advances and falls in love with him.

Ironically, once Marya has chosen her path (the Heidlers) she becomes as much a prisoner as her husband; she is dependent on Heidler financially and emotionally; all the identity she has is reflected through Heidler, except when she escapes her imprisonment and visits her husband in jail; she then seems to assume a greater sense of self, a fact that even Heidler recognizes:

"My dear, how much better you look!" Heidler would never fail to remark the next day. "Not half so peaky. My darling child. You pretty thing."¹⁸

A further irony in this situation is that both Marya and Jan's imprisoned states may be read as a direct result of their impecuniosity, Jan's inability to defend himself and Marya's inability to fend for herself. Identity or belonging, which may be seen as contingent on economics, is closely related to the theme of

alienation; furthermore, national identity is used, although differently, in both novels to confirm this.

In *Quartet* Marya is expected to play the game, to be and become part of the Heidlere's and the bourgeois artistic community's vision of themselves, and there is the impression that this community supports itself, and to some extent creates itself. Marya is contemptuous of this and Lois Heidler's approach to life:

"You talk and you talk and you don't understand. Not anything. It's all false, all second-hand. You say what you've read and what other people tell you."¹⁹

Throughout *Quartet* there is the depiction of the world of Montparnasse as an unreal, one to which Marya is an outsider, and this lack of identity or place is symptomatic of the character's financial insecurity and the author's understanding of this. Shari Benstock takes the issue up in her book *Women of the Left Bank*:

Rhys was not destined, then, to discover on the Paris Left Bank the "perfection" that Ford claimed existed there. Instead, she discovered its outer regions where streets smelled of poverty and hunger and lives were desperate and embittered.²⁰

Rhys confirms this point in a letter to Diana Athill in which she disingenuously quotes from her own translation of de Nève's *Sous les verrous*:

I struck a book yesterday written about the nineteen twenties in Montparnasse. Not an Englishman. Very good. Very. Especially as he stressed something that no one here realises at all. The "Paris" all these people write about, Henry Miller, even Hemingway etc was not "Paris" at all - it was "America in Paris" or "England in Paris." The real Paris had nothing to do with that lot - As soon as the tourists came the real Montparnos packed up and left. Here is an extract, "They're nice aren't they? These so called artists with dollars and pounds sterling at the back of them all the time! As immoral as they dare. . .and when they return to their own countries it's always on the back of Paris they put everything they have done. Considering that no Parisians will have anything to do with them. . . ."²¹

Paradoxically, of course, it is these very tourists who did become the important writers of the time and this only further confirms that what Rhys and de Nève were portraying in their works were not those belonging to this more fashionable set (who frequently, if not financially independent, had patrons) but those aware of them from the fringes, outcast because of their lack of status, economic or otherwise.

This representation of the Moderns in Paris highlights the issue of identity and, in particular, national identity. In both Rhys's and de Nève's work, although treated differently, nationality is important. In *Quartet* characters are repeatedly identified on the basis of their nationality, as if this somehow quantifies them, and in *Sous les verrous* the idea of the foreigner, and mistreatment on this basis alone, is fundamental. In *Quartet* the use of multiple nationalities creates the atmosphere and the idea that Paris is where the internationals congregate and that their very internationalism is part of their identity, an internationalism, according to de Nève, which exists by virtue of some financial backing. There is even the suggestion, when Marya first meets Stephan, that he should be regarded with caution because of his very foreignness:

Marya, who had painfully learnt a certain amount of caution, told herself that this stranger and alien was probably a bad lot.²²

Again and again what *Quartet* presents is a world in which nationality determines the person and this is consistent with an age when national frontiers were in a state of flux or becoming more formally created and there was a general sense of transience to life. A transience and insecurity which underscored the Modernist movement, the movement which eluded Marya who in type should have felt an affinity with it, but ironically remained removed from it, a depiction analogous to the author's own experience.

The issue of identity more obviously underscores *Sous les verrous*; the protagonist is not only victimized during imprisonment because of his foreignness - "Sale étranger, enfermez-le avec la vermine"²³ (Dirty foreigner, lock him in with the vermin) - but more importantly by his extradition from France, on the basis of his conviction. Ironically, his efforts in the Foreign Legion during the war not only deny him any former nationality rights he had, but are dismissed by the French authorities. He is left a refugee without refuge, colliding against national frontiers (and ironically ones redefined by the very war he fought in), accepted nowhere and unable to redress his situation by securing employment which is impossible without identity papers. Furthermore, his lack of funds will continue to make Stania unattainable.

Ultimately the only help he receives, in the form of a forged passport, is from the underclass he has become acquainted with during his prison term. It is this group, society's waste, whose commonality is based on the shared experience of imprisonment, who demonstrate greater humanity and have a keen understanding of loyalty. They understand the game and know that economic forces are the ultimate determinant, as evidenced by their repeated sharing of limited funds. And when Jan wants to avenge himself against Hübner, Marcel, recognizing Hübner's social status, counsels against it:

"I want to find the man who took my wife away, and I wanted to ask you to come with me."

Marcel lit a cigarette, put his hands in his pockets, and reflected for a moment. Then he asked: "Is he a bourgeois?"

"Yes."

"Does he know that you've got it in for him?"

"Yes. He knows."

"Is he a chap who's at all well known?"

"Fairly well."

He said: "Take my advice and leave it alone. Listen, petit. . . . When we others have something to settle up, we settle up among ourselves. We win or we lose, but we take the risk. Your man will never take any risk; he'll simply call in the police. And then what? As soon as you attack him, the 'tecs will jump out at you. It will be an armed attack and there's ten years' penal servitude for that. . . . And the other chap will simply laugh at you - he and your bitch of a wife."²⁴

Foreignness can therefore be understood as an issue of formal nationality, but also one of belonging, a sense of one's place within a society. In *Sous les verrous* any official status is denied to Jan and the only status that is available to him is that of "apache," which is bestowed upon him by his prison friends. This camaraderie is fundamental to the novel and is reminiscent of E.E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room*; it is also the more obvious because of the very lack of any such relationships in *Quartet*. Marya's world is not governed by loyalties

and it is in fact the absence of any sense of morality that renders the work so bleak.

For the central characters of both novels economic security is fundamental, but also the route to some form of identity. Identity itself is contingent on economic position and when this is threatened, so is identity, be it psychological, social, or national. In *Quartet* ironically, the search for economic security undermines the character's sense of identity because her method of achieving security requires that she compromise her own sense-of-self and adhere to someone else's idea of what her external image should be. This underlines the fact that since the economic security she achieves is not controlled by her, neither is her identity. In *Sous les verrous* the main character loses his formal identity and finds, as a direct result, that he cannot achieve even the less formal psychological or social sense-of-self (i.e., with no formal identity or papers there is no work, and therefore no personal sense-of-self); as a result he is denied Stania as well.

The plight of these characters then becomes more poignant when read in the current atmosphere of a New Europe with its economic challenges. The recent rise of nationalism across Europe can be understood in terms of identity. In many of the central European countries, as the formally state-funded and -controlled superstructures start to crumble or to be dismantled, and the individual is left increasingly to determine his own economic fate, economic insecurity looms large and personal identity is threatened. Some form of identification becomes necessary, hence the more formal national or ethnic one. Equally, and yet somewhat paradoxically, the same equation can be made for western Europe, where the very rapprochement of economic cooperation appears, in some quarters, to invoke the same response. Again this can be explained as the individual feeling threatened economically. The softening of national frontiers may suggest to some a direct threat to livelihood through greater competition and more choice, when in fact, if one is to accept economic theorizing from Smith to Keynes, it should suggest the opposite: more competition, more wealth. By and large economic success in western Europe has meant that the reaction to cooperation, etc. has been less negative, and there has thus been less overt nationalism, supporting the argument that identity and economics are linked. It can be seen therefore that alienation can result from economic insecurity and that the lack of this security brings into question the individual's, or even a group's, understanding of identity. Although not analogous, similar connections can be made in relation to the characters of *Quartet* and *Sous les verrous*, and their alienation more easily understood as a result. Finally, it is worth noting that the historical context for the Rhys and de Nève work considered here was one equally fraught with problems of recession, economic insecurity, and rising nationalism.

NOTES

¹Sue Roe, "The Shadow of Light: The Symbolic Underworld of Jean Rhys," in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, Sue Roe, editor, Brighton: Harvester, 1987.

²Jean Rhys, *Quartet*, 1928, reprint, London: Penguin, 1988, 143.

³*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴*Ibid.*, 66.

⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

⁷*Ibid.*

- ⁸Ibid., 14.
- ⁹Ibid., 16.
- ¹⁰Edouard de Nève, *Barred*, London: Harmondsworth, 1932, 15.
- ¹¹Edouard de Nève, *Sous les verrous*, Paris: Delamain et Boutelleau, 1933, 107. The English translations throughout are my own.
- ¹²Martien Kappers Den Hollander, "A Gloomy Child and Its Devoted Godmother: Jean Rhys, *Barred*, *Sous les verrous*, and *In de Strik*," in *Autobiographical and Biographical Writing in the Commonwealth*, Doireann MacDermott, editor, Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 1984; reprinted in the *Jean Rhys Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1987, 20-30.
- ¹³Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*, London: Macmillan, 1979, 38.
- ¹⁴China is another chorus girl who, instead of marrying the "fine looking young man with a large income," had secretly married the "swarthy violinist" and then spent her time pawning her watch in response to her husband's requests for money (see *Quartet*, p. 17).
- ¹⁵For further consideration of this point, see Paula De Gallez, who elaborates on the issue of narrative perspective in *Quartet* in her book *The Rhys Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) in particular in the chapter "Marya's Irony."
- ¹⁶*Quartet*, 58.
- ¹⁷*Sous les verrous*, 57-58.
- ¹⁸*Quartet*, 97.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 51.
- ²⁰Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, London: Virago Press, 1987, 449.
- ²¹*Jean Rhys: Letters, 1931-1966*, F. Wyndham and D. Melly, editors, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, 280; the quotation, while loyal to the sense of *Sous les verrous*, is not verbatim.
- ²²*Quartet*, 16.
- ²³*Sous les verrous*, 53.
- ²⁴*Barred*, 252.

This paper was first delivered at the European Society for the Study of English inaugural conference in September 1991.