

- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹"Jean Rhys: a tribute," op cit., p. 24.
- ³⁰Elaine Campbell, Introduction to *The Orchid House* by Phyllis Shand Allfrey, London: Virago 1982, p. ix.
- ³¹Interview, Allfrey, op. cit.
- ³²Lennox Honeychurch, *The Dominica Story*, Dominica: The Dominican Institute, 1975 and 1984, pp. 116-117.
- ³³*Smile Please*, p. 29.
- ³⁴Ibid., p. 25.
- ³⁵Ibid., p. 25.
- ³⁶Ibid., p. 21.
- ³⁷Ibid., pp. 21-25.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 21.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 34.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., p. 38.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 37.
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 36.

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JEAN RHYS BY CAROLE ANGIER: A REVIEW

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I still remember my initial reaction to Carole Angier's study of Jean Rhys, written for the Penguin series "Lives of Modern Women." I had come to it with the most positive expectations because I had been so favorably impressed by the insight and judiciousness of Angier's earlier review of Rhys's *Letters* in the *London Review of Books* ("All I can do," 71 June-4 July, 1984, p. 22). But my indignation was aroused at the very first paragraph and only mounted as I read on. This was a very different piece of work, fundamentally out of tune with the spirit of Rhys's achievement and so intellectually sloppy as to border on dishonesty. I can only speculate on the underlying causes of this astonishing reversal, but I have no difficulty in identifying its many and manifest forms: an impressionistic blurring of the distinctions between objective biographical information and material culled from Rhys's novels; a careless way with words that catches the text in numerous self-contradictions; a habit of making general assertions for which no evidence is offered; and even an occasional readiness to fill in the void in information by speculating about what might have taken place. (In fact, this last practice is less egregious than Angier's other indulgences in unsubstantiated claims because these speculations are at least labeled as such.)

The fuzziness of Angier's approach is already suggested in the Notes and

Acknowledgements which precede the text. Here she declares that "All the thoughts and feelings attributed to Jean Rhys in this book are quoted from or based on things she said or wrote, or things that have been said or written about her." This may well be true, but it requires no very high standard of scholarship to expect the text to do what it so frequently fails to do, namely, to specify whether the source is Rhys herself or some other observer, and whether the given sentiment derives from a work of fact or of fiction. Thus, in a typical example, Angier sums up Rhys's feelings shortly after her marriage to Jean Lenglet: "She didn't want to work, she didn't want to wear ugly clothes. She was weak, weak, weak - but she didn't want to change" (45). There is no attribution and no way of knowing whether the remark deserves credence. To be more precise, there is in Angier's text itself the grounds for challenging it - the account of the job Rhys held and enjoyed in the Richelot household. But Angier lets the discrepancy stand unacknowledged.

In fact, the sloppiness of Angier's language permits a host of discrepancies to pass unremarked. Thus, speaking of the end of Rhys's first love affair, she asserts hyperbolically that "she had only come to life when she was twenty and by the time she was twenty-two, her life was over" (36), a point reiterated when she writes of Rhys's second marriage: "She was not happy: that was no longer possible" (52). Yet she goes on to note instance after instance in which Rhys's spirits revived in what even she recognizes as a pattern of unquenchable hopefulness - from the early days of her marriage to Lenglet when she was "perfectly happy" (42-3) almost to the last years of her long life when, among friends, she was "the gay, laughing girl again" (114) - though she prefers to stress the almost inevitable disappointment of those hopes. Indeed, as the above example suggests, something more than sloppiness seems to be at work. The prevailing tone of Angier's presentation - strangely at odds with the occasional testimonials to Rhys's "genius" or "her courage, her honesty, her supreme artistry" (114) - is an unmistakable animus that prefers to emphasize Rhys's weaknesses - her alcoholism, her immaturity, above all her "dependency." Whenever an event or a personal trait can be seen from different aspects, Angier prefers a harsh, negative appraisal.

The same sloppiness and the same animus can be detected in Angier's treatment of the novels. In the Introduction she maintains, "We not only can identify Jean with her heroines: we must," because "following the heroines through the novels and stories ... is following Jean's journey into self-knowledge - which is the point of all her life and work" (17). The second of these assertions defines an appropriate - and difficult - scholarly task; the first suggests its pitfalls. This issue of the relationship between Rhys's life and her fiction is an extremely complex one, demanding the utmost in finesse. But Angier's method is to blunder ahead, ignoring even the coarsest of distinctions, as her decision to "start with Anna," Rhys's youngest heroine, because, although Rhys did not publish this story first, "she did write it first." Aside from such obvious considerations as the fact that an entire childhood and adolescence precede the commencement of "Anna's" story, and that the latter is a fictional narrative whose components must be checked against verifiable fact, what we need to know to understand both the younger and the older Rhys is how the earlier, unpublished text differs from *Voyage in the Dark*, a work distinguished by a far more masterly control of narrative voice and structure than her first novel, *Quartet*. And Angier's biographical misappropriation of *Good Morning, Midnight* is even more flagrant. The Introduction observes that "from about 1927, ... when she returned to England and began to publish, we shall look at her life more and more separately from the lives of her heroines" (17). Yet, apparently lacking sufficient independent confirmation for her account of Rhys's emotional collapse during the thirties, Angier simply abstracts the most hysterical and vicious aspects of Rhys's complicated portrait of "Sasha" as "evidence" of Rhys's breakdown.

How are we to account for such an unbalanced representation? A partial answer lies with the terms of Angier's assignment. The aim of the "Lives of Modern Women" series was to provide "short biographical portraits ... of significant twentieth-century women whose lives, ideas, struggles and creative talents contributed something new to a world in transition." Responding to that aim, Angier feels obligated to stress her view that

was not a modern woman. Instead, she advances the simplistic notion that her subject's ideal self was the turn-of-the-century "Gaiety Girl," fragile and clinging (16). Angier acknowledges the modernity of Rhys's writing, and she even eventually gets around to quoting Rhys's own claim that writing was her justification for living: "If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure" (86), yet the burden of her treatment is the insinuation that Rhys was a woman obsessively and pathetically concerned with her physical attractiveness and unable to function without the help of a succession of masculine "protectors."

How does this image square with the facts? It is true that Rhys cared about her looks and that she had a gift for attracting men (Leslie Tilden-Smith and Max Hamer had to seek divorces before they could marry her). But it is at least arguable that her prototype in these relationships (particularly her marriage to Tilden-Smith) is not the "little woman," but the male achiever, whose achievement was traditionally ascribed to the unselfish ministrations of his "better half." The role reversal, to the extent that it actually worked, may well have been even more "modern" than Angier can imagine.

In any case, "modernity" is a term that buckles under Angier's fast and loose handling. Rhys is not "modern" because of her presumed lack of sturdy self-reliance, yet the fictional heroines who enact the circumstances of her life are "modern": "homeless and alone, in a shifting, uncertain, dangerous world." Moreover, the "voice" of Rhys's fiction is "modern: moody and disillusioned, honest and mocking" (15). We have several conundrums here. Can the woman who is able to speak with such a voice possibly be reconciled with Angier's image of wistful, childish helplessness? And if not, which is the real Jean Rhys? Is it a case of the writing being "wise" after the fact? But except for *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the exquisitely crafted novels were all completed by 1939, and forty more years of "helpless" practical incapacity stretched before her. What then does she offer in her fiction that merits our continued regard?

Here again Angier is a poor guide. For one thing, she is a careless reader, for instance in her claim that Anna "doesn't drink, or make scenes" (57), when a drunken scene is at the emotional center of *Voyage in the Dark*. Furthermore, her claim that Rhys's "central recurrent theme" is that "there is no love, at least for the heroine: there is only 'nothing'- emptiness and the escape of death," scarcely does justice to the rich complexity of Rhys's texts. This is especially true of *Good Morning, Midnight* which, far from demonstrating the impossibility of love, is a marvelously transcendent statement of the possibility of fellowship - achieved in the teeth of the bitterest experience of exhausted emotional battering and wrested from the temptations of profound self-contempt. But Angier tends to have trouble with form in fiction. Her reading of the novels registers their situational *données*, but not their resolutions. Similarly, *Voyage in the Dark*, a work which is profoundly illuminating on the subject of the origins of its heroine's doom, is dismissed as merely "sad." Instead of acknowledging the novel's implicit social criticism, Angier, dredging up the dismissive label first used by Elgin Halloway, insists that Rhys is a "solipsist" (120), incapable of entering into the point of view of any character who is not some version of herself.

Indeed, this may well be the crux of Angier's animus. For whatever reason, she is fixated on Rhys's failure to appreciate the male's perspective - especially the English male's perspective. Again and again, she faults Rhys for her slowness to recognize that the "English gentleman" could also suffer and be vulnerable. She complains that in her fiction Rhys never acknowledged the substantial support she received from her second husband, Leslie Tilden-Smith (who typed, edited, and acted as her agent, as well as apparently taking an astonishing share of verbal and physical abuse). And her high praise for *Wide Sargasso Sea* derives from the view that in this novel Rhys has finally and for the first time been able to enter sympathetically into the mind of a male character and to see him as a fellow victim. Yet Rhys's portrait of Mr. Rochester is harsh as well as understanding." Although Angier is right that *Wide Sargasso Sea* transcends "solipsism," at least as good a critical case has been made for Mr. Rochester's vindictive abusiveness

as for Antoinette's "failure to love" (the emphasis that Angier characteristically prefers). Moreover, Angier fails to recognize that Rhys's effort to understand the male perspective can be observed as far back as *Quartet*, where, impressively enough, given the sense of personal betrayal initially motivating that novel's composition, Stephan's feelings are given as much play as Marya's, and no one is left off scot-free.

Even more offensive is Angier's perspective on Rhys's first love affair. Rhys was an extremely naïve young woman when she met Lancelot Smith and threw herself unreservedly into the grand passion of her life, an affair whose aftermath Angier sums up accurately: "For the rest of her life she felt as though some central spring of will and energy inside her had been broken" (36). Yet Angier faults her for not realizing that the affair was an "impossible dream" and credits *him*, a man twenty years older than she, with a "sense of honor" because he was willing to pay her off for some half-dozen years for her part in his cautious dalliance.

This is a matter that bears close attention, because the issue of male-female relationships is at the heart of Rhys's fiction. What are we to make of her involvement with the two lovers and the three husbands who played such a large role in the shaping of her life? To Angier, they demonstrate Rhys's fragility, her failure to achieve the sturdy self-reliance that characterizes the "modern" woman - or even to desire it. Repeatedly, characteristically, in Angier's version, she falls apart and she is "rescued" - preferably by the sort of "calm, blue-eyed English gentleman" that "she always instinctively trusted" (48). Yet, except in the case of the long-suffering Leslie Tilden-Smith, all of these "rescuers" failed her - the lovers by abandoning her, the other two husbands by the reckless financial dealings that landed them both in jail. With such "rescuers," it is not to be wondered at that Rhys fell apart. Yet she herself never abandoned her husbands in their troubles. One might call that "dependency" if loyalty is too archaic a notion. But what is one to make of the fact that she even consented to do the English translation of *Barred*, Lenglet's fictionalized treatment of her ill-fated affair with Ford Madox Ford, even though it portrayed her far more harshly than her own version in *Quartet*? What Angier makes of it is to ignore the generosity - so at odds with her "Gaiety Girl" construct - and to take it for granted that Lenglet's picture of "Stania's" helpless passivity is essentially correct.

Because I found Angier's portrait of Rhys so unsatisfactory, I made a point when I was in England of trying to contact people who might supply an alternative point of view. I was especially eager to track down the Reverend Woodard and Mr. Greenslade, two men who had been kindly disposed toward her during her years of poverty, obscurity, and failing health after the death of Max Hamer. Instead, as luck would have it, the only acquaintance I was able to find was a woman who had made a point of befriending Rhys after *Wide Sargasso Sea* had conferred belated prestige and funds on its seventy-seven year old author. When I asked her whether Rhys had ever become reconciled to England, she did not answer directly. But the dismissive evasion, "She was a very discontented woman," told me more than a direct reply would have done. In our further conversation, I heard about Rhys's vanity about her appearance, her ingratitude, her intellectual limitations. I was not surprised then when I reviewed Angier's acknowledgements and found the woman listed. And this seems to me a telling illustration of how Angier's study goes wrong. Essentially, this is an English perspective on Rhys. Making do with the most accessible material, Angier settles for English sources. Worse still, she herself is most comfortable with "respectable" English assumptions - despite the clear-cut evidence in Rhys's books that such assumptions represent an outlook wholly alien to Rhys's own sensibility. The rebellious, romantic, hedonistic side of Rhys's temperament - the part that responded to the bohemian life of Paris - has no appeal for her.

The limitations of Angier's perspective are even more evident in her stinting, belated treatment of material of the utmost importance - the formative influences of Rhys's childhood in Dominica, a colonial backwater rife with racial tensions just barely overlaid with a veneer of English gentility. It is not just that Angier does not attempt

any independent investigation of this important source material, for this is admittedly a difficult thing to do, given Dominica's remoteness and the unlikelihood that many traces of her early life can be found. Rather, it is the myopia of taking up Rhys's story from the time of her arrival in England and claiming that "Edwardian England" was the "source of Jean's deepest and most lasting attitudes" (15). It trivializes her reading of *Voyage in the Dark* and it trivializes her understanding of Rhys's works as a whole. Admittedly, at the end of her study, Angier draws upon *Smile Please*, Rhys's autobiographical fragment, as a kind of coda, but again, typically, her account is laced with strained and even nonsensical conclusions: her rejecting "English" mother (English in her values, that is) represented for Jean the "safety" she needed (how? why?) and was the prototype for her attraction to apparently "safe" lovers, while her tolerant but "irresponsible" father anticipated the appeal of Lenglet and Hamer; "and certainly her end was in her beginning, in her parents' strange, incompatible marriage" (108). Such coarse and sweeping generalizations cry out for closer examination.

Angier's work is not without merit. For example, it does provide some interesting new material that appears to reflect her own research, such as information about Rhys's activities as a student at the Perse School. She also offers a lengthy discussion of the later years of Lancelot Smith (the model for Walter in *Voyage in the Dark*) which enables her to account for a notable difference between the fictional portrait and the real man. Smith, she maintains, was originally a more attractive and sensitive person than Walter, but Rhys, writing years later, was portraying the man he had become. Distinguishing between Rhys's aesthetic creations and their real-life sources is an important scholarly task - more important than it would be in the case of writers whose imagination took freer flight - so Angier's efforts here are as welcome as they are atypical. But they are not convincing - partly because of the book's lack of scholarly apparatus (formal documentation, of course, is not required in a volume of this kind - but Angier's sources for this material could have been identified in the text), but also because Angier's account of Rhys's later encounters with her former lover constitute the most flagrant example of Angier's penchant for speculative constructs: "It is all too likely that Jean did go back to him again in the late 1920s, and that Lancelot said to her things very like those that Mackenzie and Neil James say to Julia" (56).

The relationship between Rhys's life and her writing is an extremely complex one and, unfortunately, as time passes we have less and less access to those who can give the first-hand testimony needed to help decipher it. As her list of acknowledgments indicates, Angier has made a start in this direction, but it is woefully one-sided. Perhaps the full-length biography she is working on will do her subject more justice, but this early, slapdash, blinkered, overly "English" version of Rhys's life and significance will not do.

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