"I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it could be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death. Earned death? ... A reward? Yea." Jean Rhys quoted by Gabriele Annan, "Turned Away by the Tropics," Times Literary Supplement, 21 December 1979, 154.


Hazel Hawthorne, New Republic, 82 (10 April 1935), 260.


Times Literary Supplement, 1 November 1934, 752.


REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES

REVISIONARY (POST)MODERNIST PLASIBILITIES?
PAUL MONAGHAN'S STAGING OF OBEAH NIGHT AND THE FILM OF WIDE SARGASSO SEA:
A COMMENTARY

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Writers have seldom given names to the streams in and on which desires flow out toward unknown human futures. They are oceans, rivers, springs, surges, or simply waters, the endless movement of this matter without form. Less often do we read of the Pacific Ocean, the Nile, or the Congo. When these names are added, they are less descriptive of a site than of a history — desire enters historical territory, it becomes "political" ...

The Age interview with Paul Monaghan about Obeah Night, which opened the 1993 La Mama theater season in Melbourne, made me very anxious. The first paragraph mentioned Amélie cartwheeling "her way into a sinuous erotic dance, thrusting her crotch towards her master," and Monaghan told the story of his "fusion of text, opera and body movement" (Sullivan 16), which he also directed, from Rochester's point of view. There were I began to reassure myself resonances in Wide Sargasso Sea and in Rhys's letters about her writing of it which might offer some justification for a "re-vision" of Rochester in Adrienne Rich's sense: an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). Readings of Wide Sargasso Sea as Rhys's re-vision of Jane Eyre have after all occluded consideration of her reaching to Othello and Heathcliff to make her Rochester plausible, an act which situates Daniel as an
Iago figure and poses interesting questions about cross-racial and cross-class and/or cross-ethnic re-vision (depending on how one reads the otherness of Heathcliff’s origins). The performance of Obeah Night made me speechlessly angry at the Theatre, and occasioned furious jottings before I could go to sleep. Both Obeah Night and the film of Wide Sargasso Sea replot Rochester’s response to the gendered extravagance of Antoinette and his Caribbean experiences. They work to make that response plausible in relation to different sociolects of masculine sexuality, sociolects - grammars of “motives” (Miller, 26) - compressed in visual and kinetic images of fluidity. The fictive bodies of Daniel in Obeah Night, African-Jamaican dancers and musicians in the film of Wide Sargasso Sea, and Antoinette and Amélie in both, were made “an imaginary arena for fantasies of deterritorializations” (Theweleit 298): openings up for Rochester (and the implied audiences?) of problematically “new possibilities for desiring-production” (Theweleit 264).

Obeah Night opened with the incantation of Rhys’s 1964 dramatic monologue of that title, the writing of which she says made Wide Sargasso Sea “click into place” (262 Wyndham and Nelly). Signed “Edward Rochester or Raworth. Written in Spring 1842,” it is a retrospective meditation about the turning point of his relationship with Antoinette: his sadistically violent sexuality on the night on which Antoinette gave him Christophine’s potion. The La Mama Newsletter describes Obeah Night as an operatic exploration of a man’s longing for an experience of wholeness, yet his fearful and violent reaction when such an experience opens up before him. Through a blending of opera, the spoken word, music and the language of the body, “Obeah Night” evokes an experience of desire and violence, both confronting and elusive.

The opera, a revision of Part Two of Wide Sargasso Sea, used four characters - Rochester, Antoinette, Amélie and Daniel - all of them played by white performers. The device of having Amélie and Daniel visibly white could, to extend an Irigarayan formulation about women’s role-playing in a phallocratic economy, have been used to imply that they were playing the gendered others of the racial same. The performance did not seem to me to be so self-reflexive or to ironise Rochester’s point-of-view. Because Monaghan interpreted Antoinette herself and her operatic singing as the obeah magic, Christophine was written out. (This created narrative problems, the most monumental being Antoinette confessing have gone to Sandi rather than Christophine for consolation after Rochester’s brief sexual encounter with Amélie.) Rhys’s text was almost completely removed from its specific Caribbean context and history, even at the level of Stuart Greenbaum’s musical score and the speaking accents. Without the emotional and structural complexities of relationships with Christophine and Tia, and the conflicted detail of interactions with Annette and Pierre, Antoinette’s white Creole subjectivity was reduced to her being the object of Amélie’s and Daniel’s racial hatred and to her being from a formerly slave-owning family.

In the centre of the tiny La Mama performance space was a stylised tree of life; Daniel was the serpent in human form, Amélie his familiar. The fluidities of sexual temptation and desire were the sinuous and acrobatic movements of Daniel and Amélie, and Antoinette’s long flowing hair, in which Rochester danced sensuously at one climactic point. Rochester’s resistance to contamination of the “temple” of his body was stylised in rigid (and very muscular) body language, especially when Daniel and Amélie were literally slithering all over him. In both Obeah Night and the film of Wide Sargasso Sea, the presumed sexual ardency of African-Caribbean women and men was assimilated to the “liberated” and climactic sexuality of white women and men through juxtaposition. The plausibility of this juxtaposition hinges on an audience uncritically referring it to manichean and primitivist racial stereotype. These revisions were indicative of the opera’s religiously based and racialised sexual primitivisms and the potential sexual, racial and cultural political conservatism of the
formally postmodern avant-garde. (La Mama is among Australia's premier avant-garde theaters.)

Monaghan's Rochester's sexuality was formed by Pauline angst concerning sexual desire. The spoken text of the one-hour production was rather minimal. A key formulation was based on St. Paul's injunction: "What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6.19). The visual/kinetic images of Daniel and Amélie slithering over Rochester's body and Rochester's movement through Antoinette's hair may well then have been authorised in part by 1 Corinthians 6.16: "What? Know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh." The homoerotic suggestiveness of Daniel's performances on Rochester's body was left undeveloped in the narrative. Perhaps homoathletic is a more apt description. All too often the projected eroticism impressed visually and kinetically as athletic feats. Teresa Blake, who played Amélie, has toured as a professional acrobat and aerialist with Circus Oz; Paul Monaghan himself has performed in productions of Renato Cuoculo's Institute of Research on the Art of the Actor, a company specialising in interpretations "based in the body" (Scott-Norman). (Monaghan also played Rochester in Whistling In the Theatre's 1987 production of Woman in the Attic, a turgid blending of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea.) Significantly the violence towards Antoinette which Rochester acknowledged verbally in "Obeah Night" was unperformed in the body-text of the opera. The religious dimension of Rochester's resistance to temptation was brought out, too, in a confused subplot concerning resurrection after three days. The subplot drew on highly recondite material on zombification practices in Wade Davis' Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie. It is small wonder that Mary-Anne Caleo complained the opera was "difficult to follow" without the aid of programme notes.

The opening underwater shots of the Sargasso Sea in the film adaptation of Wide Sargasso Sea gender the sea feminine (in the resemblance of the seaweed and female genitalia). The drowned sailor at Rochester's arrival in Jamaica, Rochester's fearful dreams of death by drowning, and the thunder without rain while he and Antoinette are at the bathing pool and at his and Antoinette's departure made explicit and anachronistic allusion to T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. The quintessentially male modernist and highbrow The Waste Land - in which the misogyny, Maud Ellman argues, takes the form of female stench (195) - provided in large part the register of Rochester's sexuality. The fear of death by drowning entanglement in a pungent seaweed of female genitalia was linked implicitly with Rochester's renaming of Antoinette Nettie. It is highly pertinent that the seaweed - which literally impeded the phallic rudder of colonial transatlantic traffic on Rochester's arrival in Jamaica - was racialised by its brownish colour and the occasion of Rochester's first nightmare of entanglement. He had his first nightmare of drowning in pungent seaweed after he read the letter from Daniel, an embodied testament to a colonial history of miscegenation who casts aspersions on Antoinette's racial "purity," and after witnessing Antoinette's transgression of racialised domestic and social boundaries by dancing in contest with Amélie. In a primitivist trope, African-Jamaican dancing and drumming were highly sexualised both here and when they were cross-cut with the consummation of Antoinette and Rochester's marriage. The principal male drummer's cry of finale even voiced Rochester's climactic sexual cry. "[R]efreshingly adult in its sexuality," runs the quotation from Siskel and Ebert's review on the cover of the Australian video release of the film. In Theweleit's terms (borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) the reterritorialisation of Rochester's desire - "the mobilization of dominant forces to prevent the new productive possibilities from becoming new human freedoms" (264) - is effected by a gendered erotised racism. To me the film seemed to be working, by the centrality of the seaweed image and by the racialised sexual primitivisms, to naturalise the gendered erotised racism. Rochester regained the surface equilibrium of mastery, in part through a sexual dealing with Amélie which reenacted a colonial master/slave relation, inverted racially in the sexual
abuse of Annette by her keeper. The film implied that Rochester's failure to give alms and compassion to Antoinette as requested by Christophine condemned him to return to the icy wastes of Thornfield Hall. The image of icy waste might be reframed in Irigarayan terms: Rochester turned Antoinette "to ice in which he mirrors himself, without coupling" (302 Irigaray). Daniel was constructed explicitly by Christophine as a debased Anancy figure. In Akan and Caribbean cultures, Anancy is a trickster figure capable of metamorphosing between human and spider forms. As Helen Tiffin notes, Anancy "is greedy, deceitful, cunning, a wily trickster who often outwits more powerful animals like Lion or Tiger. ... In spite of his mean and greedy nature he is also inventive, creative and wise" (18). Implicitly and mincingly, the film represented Daniel in relation to Rochester as the spider of the "What the Thunder Said" section of The Waste Land:

Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider (66-67 Eliot)

The deterriorialising of Rochester's and Antoinette's desires was represented through the heavily symbolic interactions between them at the bathing pool. The generativity of the pool is suggested by the presence of the crab and the "rebirth" of "naturally" sexualised subjectivities. As a ludic space, it is linked allusively in Antoinette's life with the play among the convent girls in the communal bath which disrupts Catholic repression of bodily expressivity, a repression figured in the bathing shifts. In the film, Rochester's play with Antoinette at the pool produced the feeling he was floating in an opium dream replete with the "deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy" (486 De Quincey) at the inversion of gendered colonial authority implied by Antoinette's cross-dressing in his clothes and the crab "king" of the pool. In Jamaican folklore, the crab is headless, and its status in the film suggests an inversion of the Cartesian dualism (a mind/body split, in which the body "improperly" rules the mind) "righted" by Rochester with his imprisonment of it, which presaged his imprisonment of Nettie as "madwoman."

Antoinette's cross-dressing in Rochester's clothes was a trace for viewers familiar with Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea of Tia's usurpation of Antoinette's "starched, ironed, clean" dress (21). Antoinette's interactions with Tia at the bathing pool in Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea were edited out of the film adaptation, erasing a highly significant aspect of Antoinette's white Creole subjectivity, its part in her firing of Thornfield Hall, and a key element of Rhys's Caribbean aesthetic. As Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin argue:

... Antoinette Cosway's passage from outsider in black West Indian society to potential sisterhood with Tia is facilitated by the "othering" of England. This is achieved through a series of moves which take Antoinette from the position of "massa" to that of "slave"; from ancestral victimiser to victim. ... it is the burning of Thornfield Hall, after the descent into a damp English hell, which allows her to jump to the still-mocking Tia in the hope of reclaiming the fire of the red dress, the colour of the flamboyant blossom into which the soul may be lifted. Conflagration, heat and the flames of hell are associated with the West Indies in Rochester's fervid recollection in Jane Eyre. In Rhys's text, the colour, fire, warmth and light of the Caribbean are opposed to the grey wet darkness of England. In replying to, and re-siting Bronte's [sic] text, Rhys then used similar formal strategies and metaphoric patterns, but reversed the trajectory and value both to destabilise an English centrality and to forge
difficult links between black and white Creole communities against a shared oppression. In forging these links, Wide Sargasso Sea invokes a Caribbean aesthetic and the strength of an/other (Creole) language and system of value evolving independently from the English one. (113)

The representation of Antoinette as slave is only made plausible by a bathetic women's emancipist troping which emerged historically during the European Enlightenment and was popularised during the nineteenth century. In the film the plausible cross-racial identifications available for Antoinette are the maternal protection and solace afforded by Christophine and the dancing constructed in sexually primitivist terms. Elaine Savory justly observes that the editing out of Tia and Sandi - and, I would add, the childhood dreams of sexual menace - suggests that "the film's production team missed the whole point of the long account in the novel of Antoinette's formative years" (14).

The revisions of Rhys's texts in Obeah Night and the film of Wide Sargasso Sea unreflexively reworked colonial tropes and assumptions, especially racial ones, and only confirm Rhys's sense that the complex and conflicted histories of white Creole people have been largely erased.

Notes

1Jean Rhys, letter to Diana Athill, 28 April [1964], Letters 269.

2Miller (26) quotes Gérard Genette:

What defines plausibility is the formal principle of respect for the norm, that is, the existence of a relation of implication between the particular conduct attributed to a given character, and a given, general, received and implicit maxim. ... To understand the behavior of a character (for example), is to be able to refer it back to an approved maxim, and this reference is perceived as a demonstration of cause and effect.

The sociolects I refer to are structured by received maxims.

3Rochester even turned up his nose when Daniel came closer to him just before their meeting was concluded.

4On the anancy figure in Caribbean literature see Tiffin.

5On this feminist orientalism see Zonana.

Works Cited


Martien Kappers

Elaine Savory writes, in her excellent review of Pierrette Frickey's Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys (Jean Rhys Review, vol. 7, nos. 1 & 2, p. 47) that "it is at least annoying to have no ascription for the letter by Jean Rhys placed at the beginning of the collection."