

more cutting observations indicate, Rhys also understood the latent viciousness waiting to be released when the underdog becomes top dog. Until we can be certain that empowered women will demonstrate their moral superiority over their former oppressors, Rhys remains in the select ranks of those of either sex haunted by a dream of emotional generosity as the foundation of relationships between men and women and plagued by the knowledge of its rarity in reality.

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THE THREE FACES OF RHYS

CORAL ANN HOWELLS: *JEAN RHYS*
NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1991, 171 PAGES, \$39.95

Elaine Savory

In her rather too brief, but focussed survey of Rhysian criticism to date, Coral Ann Howells makes the point that many readings of Rhys reflect the critic's preoccupations as much as they illuminate the text. This is not a surprising observation, given that the majority of criticism derives from subjective attachments to particular texts, writers or issues in writing, though Howells sees in Rhysian criticism a particularly intense case of this. She goes on to develop a reading of Rhys' fiction which brings together three facets of her life and concerns: Creole identity, modernist form and female consciousness. All of these aspects of Rhys have been explored before, of course, but Howells' point is that there has been too much in the way of criticism which reads Rhys from only one point of view. Perhaps the most important contribution which Howells makes about Rhys' fiction is to recognise there is a "field of multiple and contradictory voices" which construct the Rhysian protagonist, (whom Howells still calls heroine), and against which she continually struggles.

It is however still true of Howells' approach that a critical thesis is established and followed through without a conscious awareness of self-contradiction. This only becomes troubling at times when her sense of productive contradiction in Rhys' texts is suppressed by a definitive statement. An example of this is where Howells discusses Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) as "silenced subject," thereby reading the first person narrative as "a brilliant response" on Rhys' part "to the challenge of writing about a confused and increasingly speechless young woman," (73). What follows is an interesting discussion of the "multivoiced" narrative, but Howells does not examine the buried contradiction she has noticed here. It is important because it relates centrally to Rhys' technique for constructing the apparently powerless woman, i.e., a productive and subversive use of silence. This is a part of the political response of colonial peoples to a prevailing alien authority which scarcely hears them even if they do speak. When, at the end of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna drifts back in memory to her Creole childhood, she still records the other voices which populate her memories but she is herself a commentator ("I knew why the masks were laughing"). She is also, Howells points out, an outsider in this memory, a marginalised white Creole whose reading of the scenes of Carnival in the streets is not voiced either to her own people or to the black community she witnesses. There is much in Anna's perception of the world which is unsaid, and which therefore has a political meaning as withheld communication. Rhys' carefully edited, spare text must be read between the lines for Anna's full perception of her world to be comprehended - what she doesn't say is extremely important. The use of italics for Anna's infrequent private commentaries on her observations is indicative of the inner world which she scarcely ever shares through words.

There is in the discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* again a focussed reading which privileges modernism as well as reading the text as another example (the first being *Voyage in the Dark*) of a "female colonial sensibility offering its own critique of patriarchy and of imperialism" (123). The dream at the end of the novel is read here as a "modernist epiphany," endlessly postponed by the way in which the novel leads back into *Jane Eyre*. Though the reading of familiar aspects of the novel (such as the image of the mirror) is very interesting, there is a stress on familiar conventions of European criticism (Gothic, domestic Gothic, romance) which tends to muffle the powerful effect the novel has when read as a particularly vivid portrayal of Caribbean space and time. Despite Howells' acknowledgement of the novel's post-colonial subversion of the Brontë text, the power of this subversion does not come across very much in her account. For example, the parallel between the burning parrot falling from the house in *Coulibri* and the dream of Antoinette leaping from the battlements of Rochester's English house as it burns brings together past and present, dream and nightmare, and shows reality and action to be powerfully shaped and ordered by reconstitutions of the past through selective and heightened inner knowledge and memory. The spiritual dimension of *Wide Sargasso Sea* indeed anchors it in Caribbean culture, just as the difficulty of utilising the traditions of one history (obeah) for another (Antoinette's attempt to make her husband love her) illustrates the tensions and silences of a multiple cultural inheritance.

The volume begins with Howells' apt observation that Rhys' "career may be read as a cautionary tale about the difficulties and dangers of a woman writing," (1), and later Howells explores Rhys' own self-contradictions on the subject of writing, and her negative and slight portrayals of the woman writer in her fiction. This is very important because of course writing is at least potentially a source of power and control and thus the fact that Rhys wrote sets her apart from her major characters, and gives her an ironic relation to others who seek to rule over others (men, the wealthy, white culture). Her reading of Rhys as a "riddling" writer whose texts refuse to sustain coherent and consoling resolutions of conflict is both useful and provocative, inevitably leading to comparisons between Rhysian technique and postmodern demolitions of linguistic attempts to resolve difficulty and confusion. Howells has insightful comments on the political meaning of Rhys' writing, often perceiving that one kind of persecution, e.g., that based on gender, parallels another, e.g., that based on race, class or nationality.

Howells' study provokes thoughtful response to Rhys' fiction and inspires another reading of it. It is careful, sensitive and responsible as well as well-informed, particularly in the area of theories of modernism and the relevance of the Rhys papers in Tulsa and London. The study begins with a presentation of the three faces of Rhys the writer: woman, colonial and modernist, and then reads her texts chronologically. Howells makes an interesting point about Rhys' relation to the prevailing masculinist style of Ford Madox Ford and his contemporaries. She points out the ways in which Ford's preface to Rhys' first collection of stories, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927) intends to displace Rhys' writing to second place, for there is no story entitled "The Left Bank" which is Ford's own piece ("Rive Gauche"). The ways in which her stories subvert Ford's embracing introduction of her to the literary public reflect a characteristic Rhysian strategy of female survival.

Where Howells perhaps falls somewhat short however is that whereas she knows a great deal about the European contexts of Rhys' life and work (presented her by feminist and modernist critical approaches) her understanding of the Creole identity of Rhys' work is more derivative. Edward Kamau Brathwaite's important work *Contradictory Omens* is ascribed to 1972 instead of 1974, and not placed historically within the development of post-colonial Caribbean critical trends, whereas in the case of feminist and modernist criticism of Rhys' work, Howells

provides a sense of the succeeding generations of response to which she herself contributes.

The very riddling and doubling techniques which Howells finds in Rhys' writing can easily be related to Caribbean awareness of the duplicity of language, an awareness much heightened by the complex interweaving of class, race and gender tensions in the context of colonial attempts to contain and define reality in Caribbean societies. A Eurocentric perspective on riddling, particularly in H.D. but also in Rhys, can be found in Deborah Kelly Kloepper's interesting study *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.* (1989), though Howells treatment of this theme is much more detailed and very insightful.

Also Howells remains in her discussion of Rhys within the by now conventional perception of colonial identity as manichean and postcolonial writing as centrally concerned with resistance. It is becoming clearer that collaboration, assimilation and resistance are complexly related in much postcolonial writing, just as in the case of Rhys' conception of female responses to male power, resistance is mingled with an exploitative willingness to assume a docile posture, as Howells rightly realizes.

This brings us back to our (and Howells') starting point: as Howells points out in relation to other critics, everybody tends to read a given text according to their own interests and insights, and we might add here that those are deeply reflective of an individual's cultural contexts. This does not mean that nobody but a critic whose experience involves the Caribbean and England can properly read Rhys (no more than we should anticipate a given text being refused to all but the reader who most clearly reflects the culture(s) it portrays). But it does mean that we should maintain a certain expectation that all criticism is limited and self-interested and only provides us with one or two facets of insight into the full complexity of a writer's skill and vision. Howells has written a very useful and readable text on Rhys' fiction, and I do not want to minimize this, only to remind us all that everything we say about Rhys is likely to have bias and to exclude. It is in the productive discussions which arise from response to limited points of view that we arrive at rereadings and reassessments, never singly encompassing the whole. Thus we can appreciate the contribution of a serious and careful critic like Howells whilst at the same time beginning the work of reviewing her vision of Rhys and thus reentering Rhys' world. I say this in the belief that the best criticism is that which brings us back to the text and the writer, creating a productive dialogue of interpretations. Howells has written a fine work which does just this.

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CAROLE ANGIER: *JEAN RHYSS: LIFE AND WORK*
BOSTON: LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY, 1990, 762 PAGES, \$35.00

Betsy Berry

It was the wish of Jean Rhys, formally stipulated in her will, that no account of her life be written unless authorized by her personally in her lifetime. But biography will out, and Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, published eleven years after Rhys's death, is an important contribution to the Rhys critical canon - even if Rhys and Angier had no such agreement and in fact never met.

Background material is particularly relevant in the case of Rhys, whose heroines so often suggest distillations of her own life.