

*Discourse of Dispossession:  
Ex-centric Journeys of the Un-living in  
"Wide Sargasso Sea" and  
the Old English "The Wife's Lament"*

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COMPARISON BETWEEN SO unlikely a pair as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Old English *The Wife's Lament* throws a curious light on both works by defining their narrators as women dispossessed of life. Rhys's novel constitutes the first major Caribbean discourse of feminine dispossession, while the Old English *The Wife's Lament* is the first extant discourse of feminine dispossession in the English language. Generic similarities lie in complaint, which underlies Rhys's fictional recollections of a disturbed mind and sharpens the Old English elegy, and in such themes as betrayal and exile, and in the perspective of the rejected wife. Correspondences of structure result from the replay of memory through which each tale is delivered.

The most important common ground is the narrative stance of an alienated feminine speaker, who retrieves the events of her life from deep memory and reveals her present condition from a perspective which is off-centre. From this ex-centric locus each speaker replays the disordered past in a disembodied narrative voice, for both speakers are nameless or name-shifting, formless or form-shifting, and inhabit the borders of a reality which they have played no part in defining. Excluded from the companionship and protection of the living, each woman searches for definition in memories of a life repeatedly stressed as past. Thus, for each narrator the present is a tortured psychological quest from a locus beyond life. Each discourse is a haunting.

Perhaps the most obvious starting point for closer comparison between Antoinette and the Old English Wife is their dislocation from society. As both women journey physically and psycho-

logically into forced exile, crucial partings become final, a finality underscored by separating expanses of water. An added dimension to one narrator's dislocation is an excruciating mother/daughter relationship, which complicates Antoinette's abortive passage. This constitutes a major difference from *The Wife's Lament*.

In the Old English world view, exclusion from civilization is consignment to outer darkness, the ultimate dispossession possible. A substantial body of Old English heroic verse celebrates monumental achievement together with tragic loss, but there survives only a limited corpus of verse on the experience of ordinary humanity. Here too loss is a crucial theme, and in *The Wife's Lament* loss is momentous and all-consuming, for the lord with whom the Wife has exchanged oaths has driven her into solitude in the wilderness. As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the narrator's situation in *The Wife's Lament* admits no possibility of reinstatement. Her plight denies any avenue of consoling hope (Greenfield and Calder 294) and her attitude reflects no resilience beyond the stubborn survival of the anguished spirit itself. As an internal monologue of a tortured consciousness, *The Wife's Lament* resembles elegies like the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*. Unlike the narrators of these, however, the Wife integrates imprecation into complaint, and she contemplates suffering devoid of religious consolation. *The Wife's Lament* differs from other elegies in that it is infused with anger proportionate to irrevocable loss, an anger focussed not on the intervention of *wyrd* but on human (and specifically male) hostility and betrayal.

The perspective of the estranged wife carries this Old English complaint beyond elegy; she not only laments but resents her banishment to *wraecsipa*, "the paths of exile." This single view of woman's outlawry contrasts with other views of exile in Old English because of one factor which distinguishes the relationship between woman and lord/husband from that between retainer and lord. The Wife's passion rages on, unabated by events but distorted from sweetness to bitterness. In the finality of her husband's desertion, her love turns to hatred and her grief to fury. The outer landscape reflects the inner. Her dwelling place is among dim recesses overgrown with thorns. The poem itself

arises from a journey (*sip*) of the self and ends in contemplation of her husband's isolation, *waetre beflowen*.

Apart from its title, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes limited overt reference to the sea. Yet the presence of the sea is implied in the novel's themes of journey, exile, and maroonage and is essential to the tale of Antoinette's dispossession, which involves her actual transshipment to England. Rochester's Eurocentric vision of civilization redefines all that Antoinette would consider civilized as savage, yet he transports her to an attic that is neither civilization nor wilderness. The casting of Rochester as conqueror/colonizer implies his own voyage of adventure. Metaphorically too the confining sea is implicit in all suggestions of insularity that support the theme of Antoinette's increasing isolation and eventual imprisonment. Like the Old English world, Caribbean society itself is insular, waterlocked. The sea divides, and it defines borders of existence. To the Caribbean mind too the sea represents "paths of exile."

Although Nebecker examines development as journey, she does not pursue a link between transshipment and abortive birth. Antoinette epitomizes the unrealized Self, becalmed on the Sargasso. Her physical voyage completes her psychological passage of dispossession and finalizes her deprivation of mother, mother-land, and mother-tongue. Separate from society, and indeed never fully part of any civilization, Antoinette's quest is for existence and identity. The actual account of her physical passage across the Atlantic occupies less than a paragraph, but her psychological journey—a study of emotional darkness, isolation, and confinement in which Antoinette battles for existence—constitutes the entire novel.

Elsewhere in Caribbean literature the Middle Passage has figuratively associated the sea with childbirth. In comparing the trauma of transshipment to that of birth, the narrative may focus on the tortured consciousness of either mother or child. The link between passage in the great triangular route of the slave trade and passage in the birth canal occurs in John Hearne's *Sure Salvation*, where the frustrated womb of Eliza Hogarth reflects the becalmed slave ship. The passage of Eliza's nightmare labour brings death and madness. After the stillbirth she is *at sea* in

many senses, self-condemned to isolation in her sterile cabin. Close at hand the hold confines a cargo of slaves, until the whole enterprise is violently aborted. Rather similarly, Jennifer Rahim's "Still Birth" explicitly links the birth struggle and sea passage in ways that recall the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

the movement down  
the passageway  
taking deep breaths  
the pain sharper, faster  
Grenada,  
we are coming  
reaching for the door  
that will end one journey  
and begin another. (65)

By a combination of such metaphors Rhys explores the mind of a Caribbean woman adrift in a murky passage between her Caribbean beginnings and an attic in Britain. Antoinette tries to smash her way out of confinement in the cabin, but her captors drug her into deep sleep: "It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England. . . . This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England" (148). Torn from her motherland, Antoinette never arrives at the civilization she has imagined.

Rochester's preconceived vision of her aborts her independent existence. Rhys approaches the Passage as a psychological voyage of the white nigger/bartered woman in a study of the identity crisis through transportation from the Caribbean to England. It is an unnatural separation, abortive rather than maturing to independent identity; her passage is a miscarriage. Rhys has set out to fill a gap—to supply the Caribbean background to the mad wife of Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is thus a journey through recollection by the "madwoman" in the attic, a woman whose development of an identity separate from her mother has been stunted. Kloefer analyses the mother/daughter relationship in detail, but does not explore the methods by which Rhys fragments time, setting, and point of view to support the controlling theme of this tortured and disoriented psyche, stripped of its every support and suspended in a timeless void.

The Anglo-Saxon text does not express dispossession by reference to birth trauma or to a mother/daughter relationship (although the Wife refers to earlier sorrows). In other respects, however, the narrators' sufferings show much in common. In the exile imposed by her husband, the Wife shares with Antoinette/"Bertha" a history of irrevocable loss and a present of unremitting yearning. Both contemplate futurelessness.

Both narrators, dislocated in space, produce accounts which are superficially sequential but embedded in frames that are dechronologized. When the Old English Wife mentions her lord's departure overseas this may or may not be of his own volition, may or may not be desertion, may or may not precede emotional estrangement. Her anxiety for him is *uhtceare*, dawn-care, which may imply sudden discovery of his absence at day-break or the end of innumerable sleepless nights. In an age of limited communication, a wife may well lose track of the exact location of a husband travelling abroad, but in *The Wife's Lament* the narrator's reaction does not suggest routine uncertainty, for her husband's departure from his people renders her friendless and impels her to journey in search of support. The *dyrne gēþoht* of the kinsmen, introduced at this point, does not necessarily follow her departure into friendlessness chronologically; it may well explain it. All that is clear is that the kinsmen conspire to make the separation both complete and permanent.

Outlawry and its attendant peacelessness recur as male conditions in Anglo-Saxon verse with such frequency that the Wulf in *Wulf and Eadwacer* has been assumed widely to be an outlaw simply on the basis of his name—an assumption questioned by Stanley (46). However, the epithet is also applied to feminine personae, like Grendel's mother (*brim-wylf*, *Beowulf*, l. 1599, ed. Wrenn). Exile in *The Wife's Lament* is framed in the imagery of outlawry and lordlessness, traditionally associated with male personae, and the poem invokes rather than subverts conventions of male dominance, for the Wife's ultimate dispossession is banishment by her *hlaford*, and her central complaint is not that he is a *hlaford* but that he has broken his oaths. Patriarchal values are not attacked any more than is tribal affiliation or mutual loyalty between lord and retainer. What unstructures the Wife's universe

is the betrayal of oaths, which, in the Old English world view, lock future behaviour to past promises.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* sequentiality is also apparent rather than real. The narrative begins with Antoinette's childhood and seems to move chronologically but, like *The Wife's Lament*, it is random memory. Each episode is part of the feverish dream-vision by which the novel moves towards the "dark passage," out of Antoinette's confinement. The action consists of remembered losses in series. First comes a neighbour's suicide; the only way out is by sea/through death. Antoinette is deprived, in turn, of her mother, her social circle, the friendship of her peers, her home (and incidentally her brother). All seemed protected from strangers by the barrier of the sea when she lay womb-safe in Coulibri, after her mother had covered her up in bed. Antoinette also loses the shelter of the convent and its religious support, her sympathetic aunt and mildly supportive stepfather, her inheritance and the limited love/lust of her husband. Her passage to England finally deprives her of her homeland, her region, her identity as Antoinette (for her husband insists on renaming her "Bertha"), and even of the certainty of her own sanity. The effect of a floating consciousness is achieved by suspension in time, by dislocation, in space, and by the cutting of communication (Lalla 10). The speaker is in this sense disconnected from context after context and left, ultimately, in a void.

In contrast to the time of events, which is muted, each physical setting is sharply defined. Coulibri is an island within an island, disintegrating internally. The voice of a hurt child recalls Coulibri, in a reliving of lost innocence. Every discomfort of the garden is "better than people." Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, also encloses and protects her; it is warm and a woman's world. The liturgical phrasing of Catholic instruction frames the voice of the growing girl and interlaces her experiences, "now and at the hour of our death" (48). From the seaside village of Massacre, the honeymoon couple follow a road climbing upward to the cottage at Granbois. Here is a landscape "wild and menacing" to Rochester, hills closing in, trees throwing up walls, the sea prowling stealthily. The cramped, dense, brilliant

intensity of the wilderness reflects Antoinette's passion and threatening otherness:

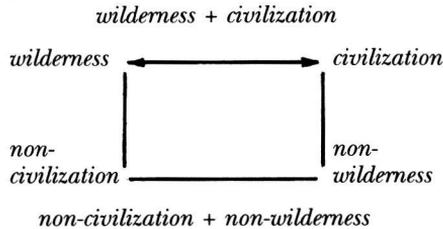
Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers are too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger.  
(59)

The final parting is with Sandi, the love that might have been, for the transoceanic voyage that completes Antoinette's alienation: "The white ship whistled three times, once gaily, once calling, once to say good-bye" (152). The narrator retrieves these remembered settings into her discourse whose actual context is the British attic, dark and cold until she rekindles Coulibri's last sunset. Each remembered setting, torn away, reveals one of greater confinement and isolation. Each is insular, reflecting the alienated world of the creole Self which is, after all, the ultimate setting of the entire discourse, for the speech act is internal. The alienation of Antoinette is multidimensional.

The alienation of the Old English Wife is less complex, though no less intense. Exile in *The Wife's Lament* thrusts the narrator from civilization to wilderness. The deprivation is both physical and psychological, though her physical location is ambiguous. She contrasts the present to her former life in civilized society, a life of warmth, comfortable dwelling places, companionship, and security founded on mutual oaths. Her outlawry places her in a landscape from which these defining features of civilization are absent. Her surroundings include valleys and an earth bank with a cave or shaft. There are surrounding briars and a nearby oak. Here she mourns that her spirit will never find smooth water. Regardless of the ambiguity in setting, her psychological condition is unequivocal because the contrast between what she has lost and what she has now is bipolar: civilization versus wilderness, where wilderness may be defined as [- civilization].

Antoinette's alienation is multidimensional, partly because her vision of civilization contrasts with that of her husband but also because her vision of wilderness is not necessarily a simple negative, [- civilization]. The wildness of setting for the honey-moon cottage is positive in her view and she resents her husband for negating it (121). Hemmereichs's structural analysis of *Wide*

*Sargasso Sea* shows the presence of complex and neutral terms that allow each semiotic square (along the lines of Greimas's fundamental grammar) to be extended to six terms:



The space of the attic to which Rochester relegates Antoinette is a place that is non-civilization and non-wilderness. The metaphor of the *Sargasso*, image of entrapment within the void, is thus subtly relevant to the entire novel. In this space Antoinette's isolation renders communication with others impossible (Lalla 3). The isolation of the Caribbean narrator is domestic, cultural, and linguistic as well as ethnic. Hers is a multiple colonization that denies her separate existence as centre of her own experience. Rochester's voice intersects with her story, redefining and reporting her. She protests her redesignation: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (121). Mad Bertha is a male invention by which Antoinette's husband transforms her to a figment of his imagination. Antoinette is not only socially and racially marooned, but is colonized by incomprehensible male and British culture, only to be marooned again in a space beyond all definition of civilization or of wilderness.

Although the intricacies of mother-daughter alignment are a background to Antoinette's sexual confrontation with Rochester, this mother-daughter alignment is significant and distinguishes Antoinette from the Old English Wife, who has no other identity but as Wife. Unlike that of the Old English Wife, Antoinette's dispossession precedes her abuse by the world of men. It is foregrounded in the fate of her mother, early established: "'Now we are marooned,' my mother said" (16). Not only gender, but class, ethnicity, and even language isolate the white creole

woman. This loneliness exacerbates Antoinette's separation from her mother: "She pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her" (17). Yet her loneliness also identifies her irretrievably with her mother. The daughter begins to mirror the mother's expressions and gestures.

Society begins to impose on Antoinette the expectation of madness. Much of her vulnerability lies in her (typically Afro-Caribbean) fatherlessness, and her tragedy is ensured by the domestic and social circumstances that at once sever her from her mother and doom her to become her mother. Preconceptions of her society and of Rochester in particular tie her fate to Annette's by locking their identities together. They are never allowed to separate effectively. Yet the rejection of daughter by mother drives Antoinette repeatedly to mother-substitutes like Aunt Cora and Christophine, and traps her in the endless trauma of successive separations. The loss of her real mother entangles her in memories of repeated yearning and rejection: "'I am here,' I said, and she said, 'No' . . . and flung me from her" (40). She describes leaving Christophine in terms which interrupt the "normal" chronological time frame, suspending her temporally: "I can remember every second of that morning . . . but now I see everything still, fixed forever . . ." (97-98). One traumatic recollection, fixed forever, is of her mother locked in the embrace of her keeper. It is a scene Antoinette later recalls herself reenacting on the voyage in which she "lost [her] way to England" (148).

A manipulation of deixis conveys these shifts of memory, instances of disorientation and dislocation of consciousness, and these undermine for the reader the integrity of the speaker's psyche (Lalla 10). Rochester, who interrupts Antoinette's narrative to reinterpret her from a "sane" point of view, is himself disturbed by the unfamiliar Caribbean to the edge of neurosis, just as Antoinette is traumatized by the loss of every support. This undermining of the speaker's integrity destabilizes the discourse and spawns question after question: "What is it that I must do?" (146); "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (147); "We lost our way to England. When? Where?" (148); "What do you do when something happens to you like that?" (151); and "Someone

screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?*" (155). As the text conveys the increasing dislocation of the speaker from a normal orientation at the centre of her own narrative, at the centre of her own account of life experience, the narrator becomes a disembodied voice.

The insolubility of *The Wife's Lament* facilitates a multiplicity of meaning emerging from the play on lexical items of wide semantic range. For example, the demands of Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry for synonyms (often kennings) contribute to confused identity, as in the reference to *geong man*. Conditions may not be clearly defined by descriptives like *dreorig*, which means both dreary and blood-stained. Thus the exact circumstances of the separation between wife and husband remain obscure. The enigma is presented through a riddle beneath which, *sotto voce*, lies a curse. A lament for lost joy conceals a cryptic commentary on the fate of the Wife's betrayer. His fate mirrors her own. Understatement mutes the possible extremity of her situation and of his, while covert reference hedges the speaker with secrecy, deepening the mystery. The ambiguity has meaning only in the context of a world view in which death is the ultimate alienation and alienation a living death, the absence of *wyn*, "delight, that which brings pleasure to life." The Wife's is not the monumental insolence of the Old English hero who laughs in the face of disaster. For her, excluded from life, laughter is silenced. But she preserves the defiance to insist that the laughter of her husband, dearest enemy, must not survive hers. Structured insolubility tantalizes the reader with possibility after possibility about the Wife's fate, never confirmed, and the riddle wreaked is after all an internal *sip* ("journey") of tormented recollection and speculation on the obliteration of *wyn* for those who have sworn to be parted by death alone.

In comparison, Antoinette's end may seem unambiguous. However, through a series of tense shifts Rhys opens the novel's conclusion, which any reader of *Jane Eyre* would naturally suppose to be, from the outset, unalterably fixed. It is not illogical in a scenario that *must* end with the death of the speaker that tense should shift to the present just before the close of the novel. But why in such a delicately and deliberately manipulated mesh of

tense shifts should we be shifted back to the past in the last two sentences? In the end, the inevitability of the speaker's death, the certainty of the conclusion with which we began, remains part of an account in the past of the speaker. This undermines the presupposition based on the novel's intertextuality, its relationship to *Jane Eyre*. Just as Antoinette is never allowed to live fully in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her actual death, repeatedly foregrounded, is never realized.

The built-in ambiguity of a (doomed) first-person narrative contributes to this lack of closure, as do details of sentence structure. Passives are prominent, as are progressive or continuous rather than perfect verbs. Intransitive verbs are frequent in the setting rather than active, transitive verbs with Antoinette as subject. Frequent use of the copula produces states of being rather than actions, as in "It was sacred to the sun" (109) and "I am not a forgetting person" (110). Such grammatical features accumulate to create static pictures, and in the end, whatever we may be convinced that Antoinette is about to do, we do not see her final leap. Rhys foregrounds the fiery end of the creole wife only to rewrite the European construct of lunacy.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* exploits a different web of shared social meaning from that of the Old English poem. *The Wife's Lament* does not appear to attempt what Wilson Harris might describe as a new architecture of the world, through adjustment in point of view. It presents the theme of feminine dispossession in terms of banishment to the wilderness, common in Old English texts. However, it also conveys a psychological journey from powerless sorrow to articulate anger. Similarly, the Caribbean novel draws on archetypes of dream/vision/ hallucination, of exile and voyage, and it explores consequences of male domination. But it also conveys identity crises associated with colonialism through images of prenatal development, birth trauma, the mother/daughter relationship, and separation. Like more recent post-colonial works, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* deconstructs the reader's basic assumptions about power, civilization, reason, and femininity, and it compares the experiences of transshipment and bondage with those of feminine travail.

Aborting the quest for self-hood in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the colonizer/husband presents an intervening perspective that reads subjects as objects and so strips them of meaning. Isolation from her own social set, separation from her mother and mother-substitutes without independent maturation, and confinement to silence all lock Antoinette into the role of an unreliable persona. The Old English Wife has no more option than Antoinette for regeneration or catharsis. The joy of life is lost irretrievably in her exile to the wilderness. For Antoinette too there is no return. The Caribbean that Rochester sees as wilderness is all the home that the white creole knows, but it has never been wholly hers. Her dislocation is intensified by the fact that (by virtue of ethnicity and gender) she has never fit completely into any of the settings she recalls.

Although the Old English Wife is located in non-civilization (which is wilderness) and in non-life (which is tantamount to death), Antoinette's situation is yet more ambiguous. As the victim of multiple colonization, she remains adrift in the void between non-wilderness and non-civilization, between non-life and non-death. Her ultimate locus remains unknown. As a Caribbean creole white, she always has been and never can be other than peripheral to every sphere of existence she has known. Ultimately, she exists in a nowhere, miscarried: "We lost our way to England." She recalls the physical voyage as she walks the cardboard passages of the mansion in which her husband has entombed her:

I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. . . . When I awoke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way . . . (148)

Indeed, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a matrix of relationships between the civilization<>wilderness dialectic described earlier and a life<>death dialectic. Antoinette's shadowy existence in the attic is broken by her occasional manifestation in Rochester's house as "the ghost" (149).

A somewhat comparable matrix of relationships occurs in *The Wife's Lament*. However, the Wife does not convey the same ideological stance on femininity, nor does she repudiate civilization,

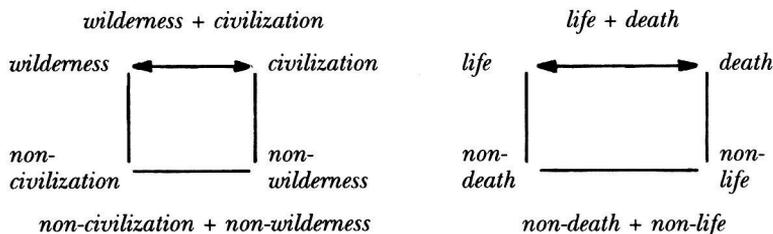
offer to redefine reality, or demand change in her contemporary society. *What* the poem does has been overlooked largely on the grounds of its "unintelligibility." Only in part is this because it is rendered in Anglo-Saxon, unfamiliar to many; primarily it is because the text is obscure as discourse. Obscurity in the Wife's message arises not only from ambiguities in pronoun reference and lexical semantics but from obscurities in spatial and temporal reference, points that normally clarify speaker orientation. Like Antoinette, the Wife is in many senses a disembodied voice.

The nature of the Wife's journey and the location of her exile have been much disputed, but Lench's interpretation of the alienation as that of physical death is convincing (3-23). The Wife's open-ended misery extends back to the past as she ponders the transformation of the husband who plotted evil and concealed the bitterness of his thoughts under superficial gaiety; and it extends indefinitely into the void of the non-past. Her torment is exile from the comradeship of life on earth, and if this is interpreted in its most absolute and literal sense then her husband may well have murdered her. But there is no explicit statement. Her situation is conveyed as no more, or less, than a separation from the living. Like Antoinette, she inhabits a grey area on the outskirts of life.

Hemmerechts defines meaning in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in structural terms:

WSS's semantic universe is encompassed by the tension between wilderness and civilization on the one hand and life and death on the other hand. These two sets of binary opposed sememes coordinate the semantic space of the text. (359).

The semantic sets outlined by Hemmerechts parallel each other:



Antoinette's final setting, from which she narrates the entire account, is not only a state of non-civilization and non-wilderness but one of non-death and non-life. References throughout the novel to the grey area between life and death and to the presences that inhabit them culminate in Antoinette's recognition of her own face in the mirror as "the ghost" (154). The final section of the novel establishes the speaker as a non-living/non-dead consciousness, dreaming her own existence and hallucinating her escape from the room/womb/tomb of the attic. Here the alienation foregrounded in Annette's early fear of maroonage is complete.

In neither the Caribbean nor the Old English text does the disembodied voice of the speaker produce closure in meaning. Nor is there disclosure in any conventional sense, since the narrators' suffering is the result of irrational hostility, and since their ends are not shown. Obscurity does not appear to be a flaw of structure or expression but a part of the message. In the Old English poem, the narrator's husband, perhaps contaminated by the *dyrne gepohte* of plotting kinsmen, presents a *blibe* exterior while plotting *morþor*. The characters of the poem are not what they seem. Questions, stated or implied, proliferate as the narrative progresses. Multiplicity of meaning and the resulting ambiguity characterize the message of the disembodied narrator.

*The Wife's Lament* is particularly ambiguous in the speaker's conflicting reactions to her husband. But this ambiguity, and indeed its insolubility, are crucial in conveying the woman's dilemma. The *wif*, in Old English at once "wife" and "woman," wanders on the periphery of existence, haunted by conflicting emotions. She recalls joy even as injustice and deprivation infuriate her. The frustration of undeserved suffering whips her to a desire for vengeance. While the unique personal outcry of the Old English feminine narrator implies characterization, this characterization remains shadowy and presents the situation of the rejected wife as a riddle. The speaker remains disoriented in relation to spatial and temporal perspectives because the message does not disclose where she is or in what sequence her experiences have occurred. If ambiguity is taken as both a generic feature (that is, as intrinsic to Riddle) and a perspectival

one, the poem gains depth and interest. *The Wife's Lament* can then be read as balancing concealment and revelation. It acknowledges universal suffering through formulaic, gnomic wisdom (*A scyle . . .*) but it also presents the dilemma of the rejected woman in a specific society in which outlawry is tantamount to death. As a riddle, the poem presents a discourse in which gaps and contradictions are intentionally foregrounded.

There is every justification for interpreting ambiguity as generic and perspectival. In the first place, the speaker's lament is framed as riddle interlocked with curse, "ic þis giedd wrece. . . ." The opening, literally rendered, says,

I	wreak	this	riddle	concerning	me	full	sorrowing,
	speak		poem			very	wretched
	avenger		song				
of	my	self	(a)	journey			
	(the)		passage				

*The Wife's Lament* is not explicit narrative, but internal, implicit. It works privately, through understatement, and it ponders the cloaked intent beneath overt statement. The oaths "pæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana owiht elles" ("that only death and nothing else would separate us") are cancelled—or are they grimly fulfilled? At any rate, it is as if their friendship had never existed. The breaking of oaths inverts values. Instead of the past conferring meaning and security on the non-past, the present renders the past meaningless. Expulsion by her husband establishes the *fæhðu* of her best-beloved. For all practical purposes, in the Anglo-Saxon world view, this is death, whether or not the *eorðscræf* is physically a grave. The old earth-hall, dim valleys between high hills, bitter dwellings overgrown by thorns, radically oppose images associated with *wyn*, the joy of life. The contrast to simple comforts enjoyed by living friends, who sleep in the protection of their beds, drives her beyond the earth-shaft. In this area *geond*, she weeps away days long as summer days or weeps away summer itself; the torment of her mind allows no rest.

Here, as in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a sense of injustice kindles anger. In Charlotte Brontë's novel, the hatred that ignited the fire to destroy Rochester's mansion was part of Bertha's madness. Rhys rewrites this hatred, dis-closes its lunacy, introduces doubt about

its irrationality. Like Antoinette, who wields a knife by the end of her story, the Wife who is *wynna leas* ("bereft of joy") is seized with *wraþe* over the desertion of her husband.

Lench recognizes the narrator's lament for the absence of her husband from the *eorðscræfas* as grim irony. However, the Wife goes beyond lament to describe an identical fate to her own for *geong mon*—possibly a third party, perhaps one of the hostile kinsmen, but more likely her husband. She contemplates as inevitable (*scyle, sceal*) the most grievous inner torment and calls down on him eternal deprivation of all sources of worldly joy outside himself. Bolton suggests the *sy . . . sy* phrases (ll. 45-46) as correlative, but they make sense as two-part wish, following the *scyle . . . sceal* phrases. Denial of peace and companionship intensifies to proscription. He is to be marked in some way, possibly with guilt, though *fah* is sometimes associated with *blod* to denote "blood-stained."

An important ambiguity in the poem is the nature of the distant land to which the husband is/must be banished. This too is desolation. Although outlawed existence in a seaside cave is possible, one perspective suggests the sad, chill, submerged hall of the northern Hel. Cumulatively, *sited*, *stanhliþe*, and *dreorsele* offer still another and related possibility. *Sittan*, primarily "sit," is also glossed by Bosworth and Toller as "stay, dwell, abide, remain." *Stanhliþe*, often a rocky slope, may also be simply a rock; and *hliþe* is a slope or hill. *Dreor-sele*, normally glossed as "dreary, desolate-looking hall" gains ambiguity from *dreor*, "blood." *Dreor-rig* means "bloody" as well as "sorrowful." Moreover, the stance of the speaker has changed from prediction (*sceal*) and wish/curse (*sy*) to description. From one perspective, the husband can be visualized as lying under a rocky mound in a blood-stained/dismal dwelling, too often remembering a more joyful place of abode. The final sentence observes that sorrow follows the waiting of those too long parted. In the context of the *dreor-sele* as wilderness of the most concentrated and permanent sort, this conclusion of *The Wife's Lament*, framed as impersonal maxim (*Wa bið þam . . .*), echoes a dire threat.

Perspectives on the rejected wife in these texts from widely different cultures converge to a view of feminine and colonial

dispossession as potentially lethal to all concerned. Antoinette's painful rejection by her mother and her destructive alignment with her mother only underscore this denial of separate identity. Together, the texts suggest that the woman in a patriarchal colonial society is as deprived as the outcast in Old English tribal culture and suffers more complex alienation. Indeed the social framework that makes possible the multiple colonization of the creole woman resembles tribalism. Antoinette is isolated by her incomplete inclusion in the racial sets and social cliques that compose her civilization, and she acquiesces in Rochester's lordship by surrendering to him the power to define her existence: "Say die and I will die" (140). On the other hand, the conflicting yearning and resentment of the Old English Wife has much in common with the temperament of the colonized. Persistent, irrational deprivation and confinement reduce both women to shadows enlivened only by anger. They become extraordinarily dangerous. Rochester intentionally reduces Antoinette to "only a ghost" (140), but cannot put a stop to her because "*she hasn't lost her spirit*" (146). Nor does he succeed in silencing her, however "meaningless" she seems to him. Both narrators remain articulate despite the rupture of communication lines.

Both the Old English and the Caribbean wife, pressed beyond the boundaries of existence and outside of linear time frame, produce narratives that are hauntings. As speaker, Antoinette retains past-tense usage through the conclusion of her story, even as she has injected her endless present into memories of the past. The feminine narrator's ultimate "place" in space and time is an insoluble mystery from early in the novel:

There are more ways than one of being happy, better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected, as I feel now, peaceful for years and long years, and afterwards I may be saved whatever Myra says. (31)

Both women speak from beyond their tragedies, dechronologized, disembodied, death dis-closed. Comparison of these narrators forces on the reader troublesome questions. Can one persona, rejected by another that defines the boundaries of existence, truly live? And what if, roused to anger, she refuses to die? For who lives at the end of *The Wife's Lament*? And, if the

narrator speaks from *beyond* the attic even at the beginning of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then, in the end, how dead is Antoinette?

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