

2004

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### Recommended Citation

Thomas, Sue, Jean Rhys's cardboard doll's houses, *Kunapipi*, 26(1), 2004.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss1/6>

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### Abstract

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) one of Jean Rhys's mordant figures for Rochester's need to assimilate white Creole Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester into a gendered middle-class Englishness is the 'marionette' (90, 92) or 'doll' (90, 93, 102, 103), the inert object of his desire and hatred. The others are the 'grey wrapper' rather than the red dress in which she is clothed at Thornfield Hall, and zombification (Rhys's West Indian interpretation of what Rochester sees as a doll-like condition). In Rhys's published and unpublished fiction of the 1930s – *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and the typescript 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' (1938 or 1939) – dolls of several kinds feature in narratives about assimilation, xenophobia and the racialisation of colonial difference.

SUE THOMAS

## Jean Rhys's Cardboard Doll's Houses

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) one of Jean Rhys's mordant figures for Rochester's need to assimilate white Creole Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester into a gendered middle-class Englishness is the 'marionette' (90, 92) or 'doll' (90, 93, 102, 103), the inert object of his desire and hatred. The others are the 'grey wrapper' rather than the red dress in which she is clothed at Thornfield Hall, and zombification (Rhys's West Indian interpretation of what Rochester sees as a doll-like condition). In Rhys's published and unpublished fiction of the 1930s — *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and the typescript 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' (1938 or 1939) — dolls of several kinds feature in narratives about assimilation, xenophobia and the racialisation of colonial difference. A later untitled extant version of 'The Cardboard Dolls' House', beginning 'MY GREAT-AUNT JEANNETTE LIVED IN her room' was apparently projected at one time as part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Material from these typescripts informs Rhys's representation of Aunt Cora and Antoinette's relationship with her in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The image of the doll's house is brilliantly distilled in the final section of the novel. For Antoinette, Thornfield Hall is a 'cardboard house', a 'cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it' (107). Tracing the genealogy of these figures in Rhys's earlier fiction reveals layers of Rhys's thinking about the place of women, a precise sense of historical context, and her considerations of artistry.

'I wrote this book before!' Rhys declared to Francis Wyndham in 1962, referring to the novel which would become *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She continues:

Different setting — same idea. (It was called 'Le revenant' then). The MSS was lost when I was moving from somewhere to somewhere else and I wonder whether I haven't been trying to get back to what I did.... I tried to rewrite 'Le Revenant' but could not — another title would have been found — however I discovered two chapters (in another suitcase) and have used them in this book. You will see perhaps.

(*Letters* 213)

These two chapters might well be the stories 'The Birthday'<sup>1</sup> and 'The Cardboard Dolls' House'. In 1938 Rhys remembered an experience of sexual trauma from her childhood, which began with an uninvited fondling of a breast by an English family friend Mr Howard. The autobiographical account, which is in her Black Exercise Book, contextualises the memory of trauma in a range of memories of growing up in Dominica. Rhys soon began to work on the possibility of using some of the memories as the basis for new stories. Incomplete fragments include 'Mr Howard's House. CREOLE' (dated 4 December 1938) and 'Fears' (dated 6

December 1938). 'The Birthday' is Rhys's first attempt to develop a story about sexual assault. Her published story about sexual assault is 'Goodbye Marcus, Goodbye Rose' (1976).

Both 'The Birthday' and 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' feature rites of passage of a white Creole character, Phoebe, and are set in the West Indies around the turn of the twentieth century. The maternal family's sugar plantation is called Canefield Estate, a generic sounding name, although there was a Canefield Estate on Dominica. It was renowned in anti-slavery circles in Britain for the 'fewness of the births as well as the fearful number of deaths' among slaves between 1817 and 1834 (Sturge and Harvey xvii). Rhys's Canefield Estate now produces cocoa and lime-juice, but its name is a marker of the historical formation of the white Creole family. Sugar, as Ileana Rodríguez observes, 'as regional representation, the product as island, is the seat of value of this social group; it is what makes white white ...; it is the object of exchange that sustains lineage, ethnic biography, blood' (121). In 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' Great-aunt Jane tells stories of the 'palmy times' of 'the slave days', 'when spice was sold for its weight in gold and a sugar estate was something really worth having' (1). If, as Rodríguez suggests, sugar represents the protected mercantilism of a slave labour economy (121), the switch to cocoa and limes is a sign of the adjustment to more *laissez-faire* conditions and economic modernisation. As narrator, Phoebe marks the newness of this and its masculine sphere with the word 'mysterious' (2). By the 1890s cocoa and limes had replaced sugarcane and coffee as the principal produce of Dominica (Honychurch 154).

The period of the story is suggested, too, by historical markers related to the racialisation of whiteness in the tropics. Phoebe's immediate family lives in a coastal town rather than on the cooler plantation. Phoebe's Uncle James, who manages the 'estate-works', implies that the effect of this change in a plantocratic family is unhealthy, unnatural, and 'uncomfortable'. He finds Phoebe 'too pale and thin', that 'she moons about' (3). Her name is even a poetic commonplace for the moon. His characterisation of Phoebe draws on a moral mapping of the relation between the coast and the interior integral to the economic modernisation of Dominica under the New Imperialism of administrator Hesketh Bell. In the late 1880s James Anthony Froude would characterise the very small white population of Dominica as prone to a degenerative drift into the 'torpid content' which was the general mood (145). David Livingstone has demonstrated how 'regional climates have frequently been cast in moral idioms' (413), with tropical climates being linked with racial degeneracy among white populations. Froude adds political malaise to this picture. Comparing the Dominica of the previous century with its ruinous present-day condition, Froude declared: 'The English hand had struck the island with paralysis.... Dominica had then been regarded as the choicest jewel in the necklace of the Antilles. For the last half-century we have left it to desolation, as a child leaves a toy that it is tired of' (153). The New Imperialism, a policy articulated by British Colonial Secretary Joseph

Chamberlain, aimed to revitalise the economy of the island through the luring of investment and white settlers, and the consolidation of scientific agricultural and public hygiene initiatives. As Peter Hulme points out in his analysis of a letter Hesketh Bell wrote in 1899, Bell draws a distinction between the 'wan and pallid' white child growing up on the coast, and the 'rosy and fresh' white English child growing up on the cooler interior plateau.<sup>2</sup> This was an area to which he hoped to attract new investment and white planters from Britain. Englishness functions as a sign of racial purity. 'Since rosiness is the true ideological whiteness, it is therefore possible — Bell implies — to be dermatologically *too* white: wan and pallid like European children in the tropics', Hulme writes. In noting Phoebe's dreamy idleness, Uncle James places her through the 'georgic' aesthetic of 'work and productivity' which was, Hulme argues, to reproduce an English whiteness on the island under Bell's administration.

'The Cardboard Dolls' House' develops thematics around the place and socialisation of white Creole women through a first-person account of Phoebe's relationship with her Creole great-aunt Jane. ('The Birthday' is narrated in the third person from Phoebe's point of view.) Phoebe has been in the habit of visiting Great-aunt Jane, Grannie and Uncle James biannually. This pattern of invitation is disrupted by a long illness of Great-aunt Jane's when Phoebe is around twelve. Nearing fourteen, Phoebe visits her ailing aunt again when she is about to leave the island to continue her schooling in England — '[f]abulous England, where snow fell almost all the year round, and one learnt how to move quickly and to speak without a drawl' (4). Her aunt observes that she is 'too big to play with dolls now' (5). The mournfulness of the visit is short-lived for Phoebe is sustained by her emotional investment in an idea of 'wonderful England, and the incredible adventures she would certainly have there', and '[s]o, dreaming, she rode into a patch of sunlight and forgot Aunt Jane' (6). Judith Raiskin talks of this kind of 'myth of England' as 'cultural domination' by 'the imperial dream' (146–47). Rhys writes that for Phoebe 'growing-up' has been 'an absorbing business' during the hiatus in visits ('Cardboard' 3). Rhys implies through Phoebe's forgetting of Great-aunt Jane that she is like a loved toy discarded by the distracted adolescent. In 'The Birthday' the character of the 'absorbing business' is detailed. 'A wonderful creature, the English auntie' has visited her brother's family (2). Phoebe has been chaperoned on her walks by a servant, Tite Francine, after having been distressed by an elderly black man telling her stories of slavery, and a Mr Howard mortifyingly fondled her breasts on her thirteenth birthday. He is 'a very old friend of the family, an almost fabulous person' (5) with a 'Greek profile' that is 'clear cut, benevolent and relentless as that of some aged — and ageless — god' (8). In Rhys's oeuvre, childhood and adolescent colonial wonder at Englishness of the kind Phoebe exhibits characteristically give way to disenchantment.

The contrast between the aunts is starkly drawn. Great-aunt Jane 'with her soft kindness and her dear, lazy West Indian drawl belonged to the garden' at

Canefield Estate (3), a mix of English and tropical species, lovingly described and ‘lovely as a fairy-tale’ (1–2). As is typical in Rhys’s fiction, the mixed garden indicates the syncretism of white Creole culture, a blending of the tropical (tree-ferns, bamboo, hibiscus, crotons, oleanders, frangipanni) and the English (here roses and honeysuckle).<sup>3</sup> Phoebe thinks Great-aunt Jane in the garden ‘entirely satisfying’ (3). A Scots heritage and a possible political reason for the family’s displacement from Britain is suggested by great-aunt Jane’s singing of the Jacobite song ‘Charlie over the water’.<sup>4</sup> The unnamed English auntie’s cultural identity is grounded in xenophobia and a sense of superiority. Her disgust at Creole culture is made apparent in her disparagement of Phoebe’s wearing of a rose behind her ear on her birthday, a Creole custom. This implicitly highlights the absence of healthy rosininess in Phoebe’s cheeks. The auntie’s xenophobic language suggests that her brother’s marriage into a white Creole family with a Spanish heritage is a defilement of English blood. She is shown to derive much of her social confidence from a gendered performance of Englishness, seemingly secured by her sense of being favoured by divine providence. During Phoebe’s last visit great-aunt Jane declares that prayer is ‘no use ... for the Lord has quite forgotten me’ (‘Cardboard’ 5); the English auntie, by contrast, maintains a ‘proper reverent whisper’ during the Church of England litany (‘Birthday’ 2). She has a ‘clear decided voice’ (2). The whiteness of her hands alongside Great-aunt Jane’s freckled ones suggests she is a member of a leisured class cloistered from the effects of the sun.

Rhys was herself sensitive to issues raised by the normalising disciplining of comportment and speech in an English schooling.<sup>5</sup> Phoebe’s wonder at ‘[f]abulous England, where snow fell almost all the year round, and one learnt how to move quickly and to speak without a drawl’ is made ironic by the association of such discipline with coldness. Phoebe’s first-person English narrative accent in ‘The Cardboard Dolls’ House’ suggests a now Anglicised reminiscence about her childhood and about a comfortable syncretism in white Creole culture. Phoebe’s narrative voice differentiates her own standard English accent from the Anglophone West Indian accents of Great-aunt Jane and of Godfrey, the elderly black gardener. Great-aunt Jane’s ‘drawl’ is suggested in particular by her repeated use of the word ‘darlin’ (4–5), and Godfrey says to Phoebe, ‘Old massa — yo’ granddad — he had debbil of long ears’ (2). That Great-aunt Jane’s accent is a product of cultural contact with black people is indicated by Phoebe’s sense that ‘with ... her dear, lazy West Indian drawl’ she ‘belonged to the garden’ which Godfrey tends. Dominica was at one time a French colony, and a French patois was the language of the black majority population in the period in which the story is set. Great-aunt Jane’s Anglophone West Indian accent, then, suggests her and her family’s cultural isolation from the larger black community. Only the parrot speaks in French.

The title ‘The Cardboard Dolls’ House’ refers to Great-aunt Jane’s expression of love for Phoebe through the making of a cardboard doll’s house ‘furnished

with cardboard chairs and tables' and paper dolls with 'painted' faces and 'gaily-coloured frocks', the unworldly innocence and cultural isolation of Phoebe as a child playing with the dolls 'happily for hours' (1), and the cultural reproduction of a racialised domesticated femininity across generations of women through such craft and play.<sup>6</sup> More ironically, it alludes to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.<sup>7</sup> There Nora Helmer finally characterises her position in her father's and her husband's middle-class houses as that of a submissive doll, a plaything, whose exchange-value in the marriage market is maintained by an unworldly ignorance and intellectual and financial dependence. The characterisation signals her status 'as an object of exchange between her father and her husband', and the 'cash-nexus' of the exchange (Ledger 83).

Cardboard dolls are not only artificial miniatures of human beings; they want depth. Rhys implies that the garden and what it represents gives depth to Great-aunt Jane. In Jane's girlhood the domesticated femininity she is expected to perform is suggested by the fact that she is 'laced tightly into her stays' ('Cardboard' 1). The 'stays' become metonymic of the circumscription of her social and educational horizons, and of the dependence of such performance on black labour. In her song 'Over the Water to Charlie' there is a gendering of the sacrifices singers promise to make for Prince Charles Edward Stuart: men offer lives, women their sons' lives (South Riding Tune Book). Women's toil is bearing and bringing up children. The cross-generational transmission of aspects of Great-aunt Jane's femininity is negatively portrayed in 'The Birthday'. There Phoebe is described as having 'the weak creature's instinct to please and placate' (2). Great-aunt Jane's white ringlets and the white bandages that swathe her head during Phoebe's final visit suggest the outmodedness and morbidity of her white femininity.

Katherine Mansfield wrote a story titled 'The Doll's House', which, like 'The Cardboard Dolls' House', is part of a set of stories about colonial family life and childhood. In both 'The Doll's House' and 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' the miniature house provides an ironic reflection on the status of girls and women within the colonial family. Mansfield's family, the Burnells, feature in 'Prelude', 'At the Bay' and 'The Doll's House'. Rhys was familiar with Mansfield's work, referring to her story 'The Fly' in a 1949 letter (*Letters* 68).<sup>8</sup> Mansfield's 'The Doll's House' highlights the gendered and racialised social demarcations integral to the formation of upper-middle-class colonial consciousness, and viciously enforced even by children in the school ground. The Burnell children are permitted to display their new doll's house to select school friends. The child Kezia admits the Kelveys, Lil and our Else, who as daughters of a washerwoman and a shadowy father rumoured to be in jail, are social outcasts at their school. The family name suggests possible Irish descent. The Kelvey children are rudely sent away by Aunt Beryl, who thinks of them as being of a different species: to be 'shooed ... out as if they were chickens', 'little rats'. They are placed beyond the

‘white gate’ that functions as a metonym for the racialised social demarcations that sustain the Burnell world (505).<sup>9</sup> That the gate is painted white highlights the artifice of the respectability and purity that it connotes. This racialisation is also apparent in ‘At the Bay’ in the family’s consciousness of the less securely middle-class Samuel Josephs and the servant Alice.<sup>10</sup> Mansfield’s authorial voice marks their speech through pronunciation and grammar, as she does that of the Kelvey children, as being lower class. The status of Aunt Beryl, the spinster sister of Kezia’s mother Linda, financially dependent on Linda’s husband Stanley, is subjected to sharp ironic treatment through slangier connotations of the word ‘doll’: very pretty woman; mistress. In ‘At the Bay’ Beryl’s unfulfilled romantic and sexual longings focus on marriage as salvation for a ‘lovely fascinating girl’, as she thinks of herself (468). In ‘The Doll’s House’ her enforcement of social demarcations by expelling the Kelveys helps her manage to extricate herself from the ‘ghastly pressure’ exerted by her apparent lover, Willie Brent, whom she would not welcome at the front door of the Burnell home (505). In ‘At the Bay’ her sister Linda does experience a passing sense that her marriage to Stanley has produced in her a passivity in the face of ‘Life’, but generally she has a more conventional doll’s status in Ibsen’s sense in the family home (453).

Playing the doll in Ibsen’s drama is a sign of being a good daughter and ‘good wife’ in the eyes of father and husband respectively (Ibsen 81). In her fiction of the 1930s Rhys uses the word doll, like Mansfield, in slangier senses.<sup>11</sup> In *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) white Creole Dominican expatriate Anna Morgan’s desire to be a doll (a very pretty woman) by wearing fashionable clothes well figures her relation to the commodity fetishism of European capitalist modernity before the First World War. By contrast, the cardboard doll’s house and dolls of Phoebe’s childhood are emblems of unworldliness and an older mode of cultural production. Dispossessed of her inheritance by her English stepmother Hester, she wants to turn herself into a marriageable object with classy sex appeal. Walter Benjamin would characterise this as “‘participation through fashion in the nature of commodities’”, submission to fashion “‘to maintain ... social status’”, the impersonation of “‘commodities in order to attract a distracted public of potential buyers’” (Buck-Morss 125). A record of the popular song *Puppchen* (dolly, you are the apple of my eye) is playing when Anna smashes the picture ‘Loyal Heart’ (137), which shows a ‘dog sitting up begging’ (127). Anna has by this time been spurned by Walter Jeffries, and is sharing a flat with Ethel, who has wanted to exploit trainee manicurist Anna’s sex appeal to promote her massage business. Anna has brought an anonymous man back to her room for sex. He has asked whether she owns a particular classical record, but she plays *Puppchen*. The smashing of the picture seems to be a rejection of the way she is hierarchically positioned in a transaction in which ‘sex has a machine-like character and attraction a commodity-like one’ (Buck-Morss 127). In the original version of the novel’s ending Anna’s current status as a doll was to have been juxtaposed



with a remembered image of herself as a child being photographed with a baby doll (*Voyage* IV 382). The baby doll is indicative of the more staid gender roles being inculcated within her family home in fin-de-siècle Dominica. The painted faces of the masks of black female masqueraders, remembered by Anna as a sign of their mockery of white femininity — ‘blue eyes’, ‘small straight nose’, ‘a little red heart-shaped mouth’, ‘under the mouth another slit so that they could put their tongues out at you [white onlookers]’ (*Voyage* 157) — prefigure the uncritically painted faces of Great-aunt Jane’s dolls.

In early draft material for the story, ‘Tigers Are Better-Looking’, in the Black Exercise Book the term doll is used in its modern sense of mistress. ‘[P]robably thinks she’s a person & not a doll. What cheek you’ll soon learn better’, thinks the character Mr Smith. The story is set in mid-1930s London.<sup>12</sup> Doll here is for Mr Smith a sign of prostitution. The irony is that writer Mr Smith is disconcerted by having to compromise (prostitute) his scepticism about the smug nationalism occasioned by George V’s Silver Jubilee in covering a procession.

In a letter to Francis Wyndham on 14 April 1964 about the writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys toyed with the idea of changing Rochester’s name: ‘Mr R’s name ought to be changed. Raworth? A Yorkshire name isn’t it? The sound is right’ (*Letters* 263). The poem ‘Obeah Night’ that accompanied the letter and which Rhys regarded as a breakthrough in her writing of the novel, is styled as being in the voice of ‘Edward Rochester or Raworth’ and ‘Written in Spring 1842’ (266). (Rochester’s patronym is withheld in the novel; implicitly he identifies himself as Charlotte Brontë’s character in *Jane Eyre* when he names Antoinette Bertha.) In the story fragment beginning ‘MY GREAT-AUNT JEANNETTE LIVED IN her room’ the unnamed first-person narrator visits her now senile aunt just before she is about to marry an Englishman, Mr Raworth. The fragment is set in the wake of slave emancipation. Her aunt warns her against the English:

In England ... women with no money are as cheap as dirt, and they treat them like dirt too. So whatever you do keep hold of your money. That’s what my father always said. He always said he’d rather cut his daughter’s throat than see her married to an Englishman. And I think it broke his heart, the day his daughter married one. He didn’t like them, you see, on account of some old story I’ve forgotten now — something to do with passing his punch over the water bottle. And all his friends dead and gone, and betrayed too, he said, and to a German too. (3)

Her father has been displaced from Scotland in the wake of the failure of the Jacobite rebellion in 1746. His Jacobite sympathies (apparent in stock gestures like passing his glass over the water) ground his and Great-aunt Jeannette’s anti-Englishness. In her case it becomes a shadowy sign of romanticised and insular ethnic heritage sustained by the singing of songs like ‘Charlie is my darling’ and patriarchal curses. She does keep vases of roses by her bed, although their names, La France and Marshal (Maréchal) Niel, suggest they are French

cultivars. The great-niece, it seems, will be fated to live out the curse of pennilessness in marriage to an Englishman.

Great-aunt Jeannette is a Lady of Shalott figure living immured in ‘her room as she would have in a castle’. The narrator remembers that she ‘could do anything with her hands’: she ‘stitched always at a patchwork’ of ‘dazzling ... colours’, ‘every mingling of colour’, and the cardboard doll’s house she made ‘was an enchantment’ (1). The ‘bright and vivid’ colours of the tropical landscape feature in her patchwork. That she imagined that the maid given to her as a sixteenth birthday present by her father reciprocated her sisterly feeling for her is symptomatic of her unworldliness. Great-aunt Jeannette asks the narrator to read to her from Chapter 21 of Revelation. This is the chapter that St John Rivers reads to his sisters Mary and Diana and to Jane Eyre in an implicit effort to sermonise Jane about her recalcitrance in accepting his proposal of marriage and a shared missionary vocation. The narrator of Rhys’s fragment reads a bit selectively instead from Matthew 5.4, ‘Blessed are they that mourn, they shall be comforted’ (2).

August Gering has argued that Rhys, who had Celtic (Scottish and Welsh) forbears, envisions in *Wide Sargasso Sea* ‘a nineteenth-century Franco-Celtic Creole-black Creole alliance against English colonialism’ (55). He reads Annette as Franco-Irish on the strength of her Martinican birthplace and her ownership of ‘a locket with a shamrock inside’ (*Sargasso* 16), the shamrock ‘being a national symbol of Ireland — and metonym for Ireland’s Gaelic, Catholic alienness to Anglo-Saxon, protestant England’ (Gering 43).<sup>13</sup> He suggests, too, that Antoinette’s paternal grandfather, Cora’s father is Scottish. Rhys does not, however, indicate whether Cora is a maternal or paternal aunt. In Gering’s reading, the Celtic is synonymous with anti-colonialism. ‘The Cardboard Dolls’ House’ and the fragment beginning ‘MY GREAT-AUNT JEANNETTE LIVED IN her room’ suggest that Rhys had far more ambivalent feelings about a Scottish Creole heritage than Gering suggests, especially in the way that heritage impacts on and shapes the lives of women.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys reworks aspects of her treatments of Great-aunt Jane and Great-aunt Jeanette into the figure of Aunt Cora, although Aunt Cora’s character is far feistier and worldlier. In an effort to secure safe passage, she confronts one of the leaders of the black people who mill around the burning estate house at Coulibri. She berates Richard Mason for his failure to secure his stepsister Antoinette a marriage settlement to protect her financially, and offers Antoinette a parting gift of two rings that she might be able to trade for money. Her shows of strength, though, are based on her confidence that divine providence is on her side, a trait she shares with the unnamed English auntie in ‘The Birthday’. When Richard ignores her pleas she turns ‘her face to the wall. “The Lord has forsaken us,” she said, and shut her eyes’ (69). Her comment reflects her sense of the fate of the white Creole plantocracy, and especially its women.

Aunt Cora's reservations about the English are based on her personal experience of marriage to an Englishman who hated the West Indies; of living in England with him; and a family history of Jacobite sympathies intimated by Antoinette in a confrontation with Rochester. Great-aunt Jeannette recalls the sister who had married an Englishman saying, 'If I had known what he was like I wouldn't have married him if his bottom had been stuck with diamonds' (3). Rochester remembers Antoinette recalling Aunt Cora having told her not to marry him, 'Not if he were stuffed with diamonds' (*Sargasso* 89). In Antoinette's final dream, which Rhys implies will inspire her to set fire to Thornfield Hall, Antoinette remembers, among other mundane details of her life in the West Indies, 'Aunt-Cora's patchwork, all colours' and her own 'doll's house', but they are not identified as anyone's handiwork (112). Rhys has Rochester articulate the view that white Creoles are 'not English or European either' (39), an attitude which seeds an increasing xenophobia.

In relation to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, quilting and making cardboard doll's houses become for Rhys figures for her own and Charlotte Brontë's art respectively. In a 1959 letter to Selma vaz Dias, Rhys described her artistry in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as 'a lot of cutting, joining up — all that patchwork' (*Letters* 159). What she writes of Great-aunt Jeannette's patchwork is apposite:

it was dazzling to see the colours — not only the pure colours, but every mingling of colour. The patchwork was made very elaborately, stitched on to tissue paper at the back. Only when the tissue paper was taken away did you see the beautiful work as it was meant to be. She liked bright and vivid colours best — red, purple, deep blue, sea blue, yellow, black — but she did not disdain the weaker ones — tender green, pale blue, grey and black and white. (1)

The analogy positions Rhys's technique in a lineage of female art reaching back within her own family to her beloved great-aunt Jane Woodcock. Rhys mentions the 'lovely colours' of Jane Woodcock's patchwork and her absorption in the craft of patchwork in her autobiography (*Smile Please* 35). In England Antoinette has a subjective sense that Thornfield Hall, the world of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and art into which she is transported, is a 'cardboard house'. The 'cardboard house' is a sign of Antoinette's disenchantment with her childhood myth of middle-class English domesticity and of her alienation and dispossession in 'their world'. For her 'everything' there 'is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it' (*Sargasso* 107). Rhys writes of her own 'brood[ing]' disenchantment with *Jane Eyre* produced by rereadings of the novel. Brontë's 'touch of genius' had initially 'swept' her 'along regardless' (*Letters* 262). Grace Poole, by contrast with Antoinette, is comforted 'above all' by a subjective sense of Thornfield Hall as 'the thick walls, keeping away all the things that you have fought till you can fight no more'. The solid walls are for her, as she ponders the reasons why she, Mrs Eff and Leah 'all stay', 'a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman' (*Sargasso* 106).

Rhys described herself in 1964 as having been ‘vexed’ at Brontë’s ‘portrait’ of the Creole Bertha Mason as a “‘paper tiger’ lunatic’ (*Letters* 262). Rhys’s description of Brontë’s Bertha is doubly suggestive. A ‘paper tiger’ is someone who ‘has the appearance of strength, power, or aggressiveness, but is in fact weak and ineffectual’ (*Macquarie Dictionary* 1253). Paper tiger, too, suggests a stylised cut-out figure, like the dolls in the cardboard doll’s houses in other pieces of Rhys’s fiction. It is an apt description of Brontë’s representation of Bertha as exotic animal in relation to the English humanity of Rochester and Jane.

In demanding that Antoinette becomes a doll/marionette (a diminutive of Mary) or Bertha, Rochester invokes a virgin/whore dichotomy,<sup>14</sup> but the figure of the doll or marionette has a wider resonance. The puppet, as Tim Armstrong notes, is a compelling figure for modernist dramatists: ‘the puppet represents an actor freed from mediation and interiority, better able to represent the human by virtue of abstraction from the human’ (172).<sup>15</sup> Rhys is determined to rescue Bertha’s humanity in telling Antoinette’s story and to criticise Rochester’s desire for a controllable and inert marionette, locating its origins in his inability to deal with his own experience of sexual pleasure with her (Thomas 1999 176–77). In his memories of farewelling Dominica his sense of loss and anger are apparent as he notices the doll-like changes in the traumatised Antoinette, which are represented as a kind of zombidom:

I scarcely recognized her voice. No warmth, no sweetness. The doll had a doll’s voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice.... And looking at her stiff white face my fury grew.... No, the doll’s smile came back — nailed to her face. Even if she had wept like Magdalene it would have made no difference. I was exhausted. All the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left me wearied and empty. Sane.... Very soon she’ll join all the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot. Or try and fail because they do not know enough. They can be recognized. White faces, dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter. (103)

To invoke Rhys’s patchwork metaphor for her artistry in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys implicitly joins up Rochester’s desire for a doll wife in Antoinette with his attitude towards the betrothed Jane. At one point in *Jane Eyre* Jane feels that Rochester is treating her like a doll. He has taken Jane shopping for dresses in a silk warehouse in Millcote, wanting to outfit her according to his taste and as an object reflecting his social status and wealth (partly derived, of course, from Bertha Mason’s dowry). Jane refuses his positioning of her as desirably submissive and passive. Realising the importance of an inheritance in guaranteeing her ‘ever so small an independency’, she resolves to write to her Uncle John in Madeira, whom she now knows wants ‘to adopt’ her and ‘make’ her ‘his legatee’ (281). It is this letter about her marriage and her uncle’s connection to Richard Mason that will alert Richard to Rochester’s bigamous intent and lead to the disruption of Rochester and Jane’s wedding ceremony. In rejecting the role of

doll Jane reaches out to a male relative for a measure of financial independence and Antoinette in her final dream calls out 'help me Christophine help me' and is 'helped' with a 'wall of fire' (*Sargasso* 112). Christophine, reputed Obeah woman, slave and emancipated servant in the Cosway family, a surrogate mother figure for Antoinette, has offered Antoinette a model of female empowerment: using 'spunks' to stand up for herself (69). In readings of Antoinette's condition at Thornfield Hall as that of a zombi (Emery 35–62, Drake 193–206, and Raiskin 129–43), 'Antoinette's red dress and the red flames in her last premonitory dream of firing Thornfield Hall, mark an awakening from zombification'. Rhys suggests that Antoinette's redemptive independence is to be her dying dream of a horizon of spiritual release which conjoins Obeah, Amerindian, African Caribbean and Christian cosmology (Thomas 2002 95–96). As with Great-aunt Jane in 'The Cardboard Dolls' House', it is the syncretism of West Indian culture which offers an animating and satisfying depth of character.

Here in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as in 'The Cardboard Dolls' House', and the fragment 'MY GREAT-AUNT JEANNETTE LIVED IN her room', Rhys's cardboard doll's house is metonymic of female artistry. In more ironic registers, Rhys uses them to comment on the gendered circumscriptions of the lives of white Creole girls and women in West Indian culture and in relation to the English and Englishness at specific historical moments. 'The Cardboard Dolls' House', too, suggests the influence of Henrik Ibsen and Katherine Mansfield on Rhys's earliest crystallisation of the image.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Manuscript material by Jean Rhys has been quoted with the permission of Jean Rhys Ltd. and the Department of Special Collections at the University of Tulsa.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I discuss 'The Birthday' in detail in Chapter 2 of my book, *The Worlding of Jean Rhys*.
- <sup>2</sup> I want to thank Peter Hulme for kindly inviting me to read his essay 'Undeveloped Estates' in draft form and for permission to quote from forthcoming material.
- <sup>3</sup> For a broader discussion of Rhys's use of horticultural tropes see Thomas, *Worlding* pp. 19–22.
- <sup>4</sup> The song, which features Scottish dialect, was officially banned during the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–46, the aim of which was to restore Prince Charles Edward Stuart to the British throne. This information is drawn from a piece by Frank Kidson in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* which is reproduced on the South Riding Tune Book website. The battle of Culloden on 17 April 1846 was to herald the rout of the Jacobite rebellion. It was followed by the 'butchery ... of many hundreds of stragglers and onlookers', 'the cold-blooded slaughter of wounded men', maltreatment and humiliation of prisoners, pillaging of Scottish farms, treason trials, executions, banishments and transportations to the colonies (Hook and Ross 115–23).
- <sup>5</sup> Rhys (Gwen Rees Williams) had earned praise in the Dominican press for her

performance at a 'dramatic and musical entertainment' at the local convent in 1905 (*Dominican* 31 Aug. 1905). She began study at The Academy of Dramatic Art in London in 1909. After two terms she withdrew. The Academy's Administrator George Bancroft had advised her father that his 'daughter is slow to improve with her accent which in my frank opinion would seriously affect her chances of success in Drama. I fear it would take her a considerable time to overcome this accent which in my judgement would only fit her for certain parts and those perhaps few and far between' (qtd. in Angier 49). Rhys would always associate the Academy with snobbery; Angier notes that from her thirties onwards she would characteristically speak in a soft voice that was almost a whisper (50).

- <sup>6</sup> In 1859 Alice Landells provided detailed instructions for making cardboard doll's houses and doll's house furniture in *Girl's Own Toymaker and Book of Recreation*, co-authored with her father E. Landells. In the Introduction the role of such craft in the reproduction of femininity is suggested:

The child who is instructed to make its own doll's clothes, toy furniture, bedding etc. will soon take a pride in making them properly and will thus be acquiring knowledge of the most useful and practical character. Girls, a little older, will find much to entertain and amuse themselves. Nothing is more becoming than to see a home neatly and tastefully embellished by the handwork of its inmates: while the formation of habits of industry and usefulness are not only satisfactory in enabling young ladies to decorate their own homes by employing their leisure hours profitably, but also in furnishing the means of making suitable presents for their friends. (qtd. in King 280–81)

In her history of doll's houses, Constance Eileen King she also describes and has a photograph of a doll's house within Ann Sharp's eighteenth-century Baby House, the term for a model house then. Ann Sharp was goddaughter of Princess Anne, later to become Queen (1702–1714). The doll's house within a doll's house is made of playing cards and currently 'stands in the "attic" room' (185). This resonates with white Creole Bertha Mason's position as madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*.

- <sup>7</sup> Rhys's biographer, Carole Angier, by contrast, reads 'The Cardboard Dolls' House' as a thinly veiled celebratory autobiographical account of Rhys's great-aunt Jane Woodcock and of the Lockhart family estate Geneva.
- <sup>8</sup> 'The Fly', like 'The Doll's House', was published in Mansfield's posthumous collection *The Dove's Nest and Other Stories* (1923).
- <sup>9</sup> Angela Smith notes that 'the gate is a demarcation line' separating 'the well-regulated inside world' of the Burnell home from 'outsiders', but does not analyse the whiteness of the gate as a racialised sign (41).
- <sup>10</sup> The children of the Samuel Josephs are described in 'At the Bay' as 'leaping like savages on their lawn' (448), and Beryl's disgust at the servant Alice's best clothes sense makes her think that 'she had never seen such a guy. If Alice had only blacked her face with a cork before she started out, the picture would have been perfect' (457).
- <sup>11</sup> In the autobiographical narrative in the Black Exercise Book Rhys also uses the word doll to describe the white Creole character Margaret Fernandez in Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929). She becomes the sexual plaything of sailors in the novel.
- <sup>12</sup> In quoting from this draft material I have inserted apostrophes in appropriate places.
- <sup>13</sup> The shamrock is the symbol of St Patrick, who is reputed to have converted the Druids of Ireland to Catholicism through 'explaining the doctrine of the Trinity by

reference to a shamrock' (Jones 189). One might also read it, then, as a sign of religious imperialism.

<sup>14</sup> See Deborah Kelly Kloepfer pp. 144–45 and Thomas, *Worlding* pp. 176–77.

<sup>15</sup> Here one might also think of the disturbing ball-jointed dolls manipulated and photographed by surrealist Hans Bellmer. On Bellmer's dolls see Hal Foster 101–22.

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