Shipwrecks and marine phantoms in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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The journey across the Atlantic Ocean made by Mr. Rochester and his creole wife, Bertha, is barely mentioned in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. I argue, however, that Jane Eyre’s preoccupation with images of stormy seas suggests this particular voyage is more dramatic and much more crucial for understanding the novel than previously recognised. Through Jane’s imagination, the story of the ocean-crossing is subtly told, and it contains a critique of certain axioms of colonialism that the novel seemingly supports. In the article I argue that the implications of Jane’s fascination for the sea have previously been grasped by one reader: Jean Rhys. I make the case that her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read as an interpretation of Jane’s musings on marine images.

“When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. 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”. (*WSS* 107)

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the ocean is a place for openness and communication between people, between islands and between worlds. Rather than being desirable, however, over-sea communication comes through as violent and dangerous, suggested by the novels’ imagery of marine storms, shipwrecks and ghost sailors. When the two works are read together, the ocean crossings each of them features but hardly recounts emerge as striking allegories for an uneven relation between England and its former West Indian colonies. Because of this relation, Rhys’ heroine Antoinette would have been better off left in isolation on her island, protected by what she imagines to be “the barrier of the
sea” (WSS 16). But communication cannot be avoided, and due to this fact she is thrown into the search for a viable passage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Considering that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is named after a specific part of the Atlantic, the novel seems remarkably brief on the subject of the heroine’s important sea-voyage towards the end. At one point the reader leaves her on her disastrous honeymoon in one of the Windward Islands of the former West Indies. On the next page she reappears as a captive in a cold, dark room, trying to recollect where she is and how she got there. The story does not explicitly account for this abrupt shift of scenes, from the lush island to the prison “where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it” (WSS 107). In her confusing description of these new surroundings, the most striking clue is several allusions to the attic of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

In the attic of *Jane Eyre*’s mansion there is a secret room without any windows, where Mr Rochester keeps his mad West Indian wife, Bertha. This ghostly figure howls and snatches in *Jane Eyre*, pacing about on her hands and feet like an animal, attacking visitors. After setting the building on fire, she jumps from the top of the roof and lands “dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered” (Brontë 516). While avoiding to recycle certain names and exact elements from Brontë’s plot, Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* to give the white West Indian “a side and a point of view” (Letters 262).

As Antoinette is held captive in the dark room through the last eight pages of the novel, she refuses to believe she is in England. For her guard and nurse, the stout old woman named after Bertha’s warder in *Jane Eyre*, Grace Pool, the denial merely confirms the prisoner’s madness: “You fool, she said, ‘this is England’” (WSS 108). However, there are clues to suggest that Antoinette might be right. When she frequently escapes to rummage the mansion’s corridors at night, she discovers not England, but a world made out of cardboard. Gayatri C. Spivak points out that this refers to the novel

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1 I will refer to Bertha, Jane and Antoinette by their first names, and to Brontë’s Mr Rochester by his surname. This attests to the use of their names in the two novels, not to an uneven distribution of sympathy and respect on my behalf.
Jane Eyre rather than the English soil as such: “the England of Brontë’s novel ‘This cardboard house’ – a book between cardboard covers” (127). In other words, the West Indian heroine is confronted with the logic of Brontë’s novel, where she, according to Spivak, must act as the backdrop which allows Jane Eyre’s individuality to appear. In Spivak’s reading, the story of Jane Eyre functions as an allegory for the way Western feminism has conceived of the imperial project. “The colonial other” has, to a certain extent, relieved western women of their burden as the other of the western male. When Mr Rochester compares the English Jane to the Jamaican Bertha, it seems clear whom of the two is meant to be recognised by ethics and by law: “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk; then judge me, priest of the gospel and man of the law” (Brontë 354). As the emergence of the “feminist individualist heroine” is thus made possible by the colonial project, Western feminism reinforces an argument for colonialism, participating in the production of the colonial subject as an other, one whom the white man is burdened with having to save (Spivak 127).

But how did Rhys’ heroine get to the fictional England of Thornfield’s attic – what characterises the distance that is so abruptly marked in Wide Sargasso Sea, and what happened to her on the way? A number of scholars have investigated these questions, but curiously not by way of the child Jane’s musings on marine imagery on the first pages of Jane Eyre. As I will argue, this scene is crucial to understanding the transatlantic journeys of both Antoinette and Bertha. This will be my point of departure as I attempt to account for the missing sea voyages and suggested shipwrecks of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea.

Entering a different sea

Antoinette is anxious to remember the ocean-crossing when she lies in the dark room by the end of Wide Sargasso Sea. In her mind she keeps searching for the event she imagines made the ship change its course and navigate towards the strange cardboard world:
We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don’t remember, but we lost it. Was it that evening in the cabin when he found me talking to the young man who brought me my food? I put my arms round his neck and asked him to help me. He said, “I didn’t know what to do, sir”. I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. A woman came and then an older man who cleared up the broken things on the floor. He did not look at me while he was doing it. The third man said drink this and you will sleep. I drank it and I said, “It isn’t like it seems to be.” – “I know. It never is,” he said. And then I slept. When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England. (WSS 107)

If we read this as a story in the realistic tradition, it seems natural that the climate may simply have changed and the temperature dropped while the ship was crossing the Atlantic Ocean on the way from the Caribbean to England.² On account of Antoinette’s romantic ideas of “England, rosy pink in the geography book map”, she might fail to realise this (WSS 66). However, we shall see that realism is somewhat set aside in the final pages of Wide Sargasso Sea. Antoinette’s attempt to wreck the ship by smashing the porthole does not succeed, if read in a realistic way. But the unnamed man who gives Antoinette a mixture to make her sleep, just like her Obeah nurse used to do, reminds us that nothing of this is “like it seems to be”.³ The hints of violence and magic in the passage should make us consider the possibility that Antoinette actually wakes up crossing “a different sea”, rather than the Atlantic Ocean.

“The white ship whistled three times, once gaily, once calling, once to say good-bye” (WSS 110). The colour white is associated with death throughout Rhys’ novel, a connotation that brings to mind Charon’s ferry on the river Acheron in Greek mythology, carrying souls over to the world of the dead.

² At the age of seventeen, Jean Rhys left her home on the island Dominica in the Caribbean to attend school in England. In her unfinished autobiography she recalls the ocean crossing: “On the sea it was still warm at first and I loved it […] Then, quite suddenly it seemed, it began to grow cold. The sky was grey, not blue. The sea was sometimes rough” (Smile Please 97).

³ Obeah is the Jamaican term for what is known as vodou or voodoo in Haiti and the United States.
We can imagine the wrecked ghost ship with smashed portholes steaming along on this “different sea” towards the dead realms of Brontë’s attic. For this to make more sense, I must turn to *Jane Eyre* to see what happens to Bertha during her journey across the ocean.

Bertha’s journey from Jamaica to England is mentioned just once in *Jane Eyre*, as Mr Rochester justifies his decision to hide her away and attempt to remarry: “To England, then, I conveyed her; a fearful voyage I had with such a monster in the vessel. Glad was I when I at last got her to Thornfield, and saw her safely lodged in that third story room” (Brontë 373). When Rochester recounts the journey, Bertha has stayed in the attic cell for about ten years. This means her crossing took place around the time when the novel opens with Jane as a young orphan, left with her cruel relatives. The Rochesters might still be at sea as Jane sits on the window sill on the novel’s first page, reading a book on seabirds.

### The shipwreck in Jane’s reading of Bewick

In spite of her living on an island, Great Britain, Jane never goes near the sea throughout the story of *Jane Eyre*. Still, it appears in her dreams, sentiments, watercolour paintings and, initially, in one of her favorite books. When the reader first encounters her, she sits curled up on the window sill in her foster home, reading an illustrated book of natural history, *History of British*

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4 When the novel begins, Jane is ten or possibly nine years old. At the point when she advertises for work as a governess, she is “barely eighteen” (Brontë 105), which means she must be eighteen or nineteen when she meets Bertha and hears her story from Mr Rochester. The day of this encounter, Bertha’s brother attests to the fact that the Rochesters were married in Jamaica fifteen years ago (Brontë 350). According to Mr Rochester, he and his wife lived together in Jamaica for four years after the wedding, however it is not clear whether this includes the period when she was “shut up” in the house, “since the medical men had pronounced her mad” (Brontë 371). As he reports of being “thrust on to a wrong tack at the age of one and twenty” and making the decision to return to England at the age of twenty-six, he most likely spent one more year in Jamaica with Bertha, in addition to the four years he talks of to Jane (Brontë 164). Further on he states that for ten years his wife has lived in the attic of Thornfield “whose secret inner cabinet she has […] made a wild beast’s den” (Brontë 373). Consequently, the couple must have crossed the ocean around the time when Jane was nine years old.
Birds (1804) by Thomas Bewick. Apparently, this is the volume Water Birds, where Bewick’s artful vignettes go beyond the bounds of pure naturalistic descriptions. The child Jane is especially fascinated by the pictures of

the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; […] the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; […] the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.

I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of evertide.

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms. (Brontë 7)

Several critics have commented on how Jane’s interest in these particular vignettes expresses her feelings towards her own surroundings, in which she is friendless and at the mercy of her hostile aunt and cousins: “the pictures which she singles out for her attention are those which are analogous to her own state” (Linder 35). Jina Politi suggests that the bird-motive fuels Jane’s
desire for “Hights and freedom” (80), while E. B. Pinion briefly states that the vignettes seem “figuratively prophetic” (117) with reference to Mr Rochester’s destiny. What these critics do not notice is the way the passages come to inform the actual ocean voyage of Mr Rochester and his wife. In order to understand why this is so, one must pay attention not only to Jane’s choice of vignettes, but to their succession in her recount, amounting to a narrative that is key to reading Bertha’s story. Remembering that Jane’s construction of the narrative takes place simultaneously or just after Bertha and Mr Rochester crossed the Atlantic Ocean on their way to England, I will now summarise the story of Jane’s descriptions, which might be understood as Brontë’s ekphrasis of Bewick’s vignettes.

The lonely rock standing erect among the billows illustrates Jane’s situation as a child, but read in a more literal way it constitutes a threat to ships and vessels approaching it. This interpretation is strengthened by the next sentence, in which a boat has been broken and lays stranded on a lonely foreign shore. The sinking ship of the following sentence could be the same boat, removed by the tide from the reef that broke it. Similar to Antoinette’s recollection of the ship changing its course, the wrecking in this scene takes place at night, when the “ghastly moon” is up. Jane W. Stedman points out that the next vignette, showing a sombre churchyard with its gate, trees and
broken wall, bears some resemblance to “Thornfield Hall as Jane imagines it in her dream and as she finds it after the fire” (38). It is thus significant that the very first hint of Thornfield Hall in Jane Eyre comes in the form of a churchyard where, in accordance with little Jane’s narrative, we could expect to find memorials for the people lost at sea – perhaps even their remains. Curiously, the solitary gravestone indicates only one dead from the shipwreck. Before I go on to discuss the two ghost ships in Jane’s narrative, I will turn to a passage in the novel that sheds light upon the identity of the deceased.

**The drowned woman in Jane’s paintings**

As already mentioned, scenes set at sea also appear in some of Jane’s paintings. The most detailed presentation of her work is given as Mr Rochester inspects three examples from her portfolio:

> The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet, set with gems [...] Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn. (Brontë 151-52)

Knowing approximately where in England she has spent her eighteen years up to this event, we can assume that Jane has never actually seen the ocean up close. The inspiration for this painting must have come from something else than experience with ocean voyages, and Cynthia Linder states that “[t]he first painting was probably derived from the recollection of a picture seen in Bewick’s ‘History of British Birds’” (40). In fact, the painting appears like a
detailed close-up of the shipwreck-scenes that fascinate Jane as a child. Noting the gold bracelet, we can assume that the drowned person is a woman, but as “a fair arm” is the only body part clearly visible, her identity remains a puzzle. Interpretations of this scene flourish, and the notion that the corpse constitutes an expressionistic self-portrait of some sort is widespread. With no reference to Bertha’s actual ocean-crossing, however, Lawrence E. Moser introduces the idea that “the work may foreshadow Bertha Mason Rochester, for it was only by her death that Jane would ultimately gain the response of love and kindness for which her soul craved” (279). Moser reads the dark, large cormorant as a symbol of Jane, although Jane is elsewhere in the novel compared to less stately birds like sparrows, doves and larks. Mr Rochester, on the other hand, with his dark and athletic appearance, is compared to the “royal eagle”, and the colour of his hair compared to the raven’s (Brontë 529). The picture of the cormorant that has torn the gold bracelet from the drowned woman’s arm could suggest the fact that Mr Rochester acquired a considerable dowry, thirty thousand pounds, when he married Bertha.

Should one hesitate to identify the drowned woman of the painting as Bertha Rochester, the next painting described features a woman of more obvious resemblance to the prisoner of Thornfield Hall, who will later appear covered in her “quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane” (Brontë 353). In this painting, “the [woman’s] eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy, like a beamless cloud torn by storm or by electric travail” (Brontë 152). This figure seems to foreshadow Bertha’s appearance over the battlements of Thornfield Hall during the fire, with her hair “streaming against the flames” (Bronte 516).

In the third and, perhaps, most enigmatic painting, Jane depicts:

the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon. Throwing these into distance, rose, in the foreground, a head, – a colossal head, inclined towards the iceberg, and resting against it. Two thin hands, joined under the forehead, and supporting it, drew up before the lower features a sable veil; a brow quite bloodless, white as bone, and an eye
hollow and fixed, blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair, alone were visible. (Brontë 152)

The pale and blank features of the woman’s face hold symbolic aspects, of which the most striking one concerns death (Linder 40). However, they also resemble the features of an actual corpse or perhaps ghost of a woman.

From Jamaica to the coast of Norway

An interesting aspect of Jane’s third painting is the possibility of identifying the location. The iceberg, “polar winter” and northern lights suggest the “death-white realms” of the Arctic Zone that Jane muses over in Bewick’s British Birds (Brontë 7). The Arctic imagery provides an abundance of symbols of death, but at the same time it locates the narrative of Jane’s pictures and ekphrasis within a certain geographical area. The child Jane reports that what “gave significance” to Bewick’s vignettes of the shipwreck, the church-yard and the marine phantoms were the words of the introductory pages, treating

the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindesness, or Naze, to the North Cape –
“Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls
Boils round the naked, melancholy isles
Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides”. (Brontë 6)

The Atlantic surge that pours in among the Hebrides towards the coast of Norway is the North Atlantic Current, a continuation of the Gulf Stream. Originating in the Atlantic North Equatorial Current that passes through the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf Stream turns north-east to cross the Atlantic Ocean. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the story of Jane Eyre takes place, it was well known that the Gulf Stream could help ships to
gain speed. It would take you from the Caribbean to the British islands, but almost at the destination, the North Atlantic Current would slightly change your course, and bring you further north along the coast of Norway. A wrecked ship or a drowned corpse could actually be transported by this current to regions where icebergs and northern lights are to be found.

In *Jane Eyre*, the climates of the West Indian island Jamaica and the islands of the Norwegian coast take on symbolic meaning, representing two different pitfalls in relation to the central theme of Jane’s *Bildung*. Jamaica serves as an illustration of the fierce, unstable, overtly sensual self. The threatening temptation of this position can be detected in “the breeze […] from the west: […] sweet with scents of heath and rush”, as opposed to the “wind fresh from Europe” (Brontë 482, 372). The Norwegian islands, on the other hand, symbolise the stiff and lonely self, detached from human feelings and aspirations. The British islands, to be found on the route between these coordinates, illustrate the successfully balanced self.

Jane’s paintings and her reading of Bewick suggest that Bertha does not make it to the symbolic territory of England, but drifts further north along the coast of Norway. This can be read as an allegoric portrayal of Bertha’s failure to gain a balanced, stable self in her continued oscillation between extremes. At the same time it opens Brontë’s novel to the possibility of an actual shipwreck or incident of some kind, disrupting the Rochesters’ voyage towards the British shores. In this case, the woman locked up in the third-storey room of Thornfield Hall, whose bolted doors do not stop her from rummaging the house at night, not only resembles a ghost, as Jane describes

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5 In the coastal areas of Norway, one can find an abundance of stories of foreign ships brought out of course by storms and the North Atlantic Current. Some of these ships came to be stranded in the far north. One example is the well documented trading expedition of Pietro Quirini, headed from Crete to Flanders, of which the surviving crew was rescued on a desolate reef outside the island of Røst in the north of Norway in 1432.

6 One example of how these geographic regions are put to use as symbols is to be found just after the wedding ceremony of Jane and Mr Rochester is interrupted by the revelation of the latter’s lawful wife, Bertha. Alone in her room, Jane sums up her feelings by way of an allegoric description of different landscapes: “[A]nd the woods, which twelve hours since waved leafy and fragrant as groves between the tropics, now spread, waste, wild, and white as pine-forests in wintry Norway. My hopes were all dead” (Brontë 356).
her, but can be read as an actual ghost. Through the paintings and the ekphrasis, *Jane Eyre* suggests that Bertha is not really contained within the plot – her ghost is present to play the part of the colonial other in the allegory of “the general epistemic violence of imperialism” described by Spivak (127), but her living or dead body might have been set adrift. If *Wide Sargasso Sea* is in some sense the story of Bertha’s childhood and youth in the West Indies, one can imagine the story of her old age in some village on the coast of Norway, where she has been rescued ashore from the wrecked ship.

**Marine phantoms in *Jane Eyre***

The possibility that the story Jane bases on Bewick’s vignettes is a summary of what, more or less simultaneously, happens to Bertha, is emphasised by the events following Jane’s reading of *History of British Birds*. With Bewick still on her knee, Jane is attacked by her bullying cousin, and when she fights back, she is shut up in “the red room” in the attic of her foster home. Following Gilbert and Gubar, many critics have observed the similarities between Jane’s conditions in her foster home and Bertha’s conditions at Thornfield Hall. I will only add the detail that Jane is locked up in the red-room at approximately the same time as Bertha, “the ghost”, is installed in the attic of Thornfield. During Jane’s evening of house arrest, she imagines a ghost or “a herald of some coming vision from another world” (Brontë 17). Jane suspects that the vision stems from her dead uncle’s spirit, but one could read it in the light of Bertha coming from another continent – “from another world” – and from a dimension of the novel’s plot made up of phantoms from the suggested shipwreck.

Jane has obviously never heard of Bertha, Mr Rochester and Thornfield Hall when she muses over Bewick and when she paints the pictures that will later be admired by Mr Rochester. She claims to have seen the subjects of the paintings “with the spiritual eye”, rather than with the physical one (Brontë 151). This could attest to Bertha merely being a manifestation of Jane’s own unconscious desire, “her own secret self,” as Gilbert and Gubar assert (348).
At the same time it hints at Jane's sensibility towards the supernatural, something that also reveals itself in her numerous dreams and presentiments. In the course of their second encounter, Mr Rochester even attributes to her the ability of witchcraft: “you have rather the look of another world […] When you came on me in the Hay-Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half in mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse: I am not sure yet” (Brontë 148). This side of Jane is accentuated in Wide Sargasso Sea, where the only character as determined, eloquent and independent as Brontë’s Jane, is the black Obeah woman.7

In her descriptions of Bewick’s illustrations, Jane passes from the solitary churchyard to another vignette equally calm but dubious: “The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms” (Brontë 7). This scene appears after the ship has gone down and the deceased is brought to the churchyard in Jane’s narrative descriptions. It is the only vignette that shows two ships at once, a feature that complicates the idea that they could be the ghosts of the wreck seen in the previous vignettes. As the route of the North Atlantic Current is presented as stormy in Bewick, there is also the question of where “the torpid sea” is to be found. In order to suggest an answer, I will return to look at the geography of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Sargasso Sea

Encircled by the three ocean currents previously mentioned, the Sargasso Sea makes up the vast mid-region of the Atlantic Ocean. In the days of sailing ships, it was dreaded for its torpidity, as explained by Rachel L. Carson: “The Sargasso is a place forgotten by the winds, undisturbed by the strong flow of waters that girdle it as with a river” (26). Ships that entered this area found it hard to progress by sails alone, and the hardships related to this have earned it a reputation as a sea of lost ships. Unlike other mid-ocean basins around the world, the surface of the Sargasso Sea harbours a large amount of living organisms. Quantities of seaweed, torn by storms from the coast of

7 See footnote 3 on Obeah.
the Caribbean islands and Florida, cover vast parts of the area. As the weed is fed into the Sargasso by the Gulf Stream, other organisms follow:

Curious things happen to the animals that have ridden on the sargassum weed into a new home. Once they lived near the sea’s edge, a few feet or a few fathoms below the surface, but never far above a firm bottom [...] Now, in the middle of the ocean, they are in a new world. The bottom lies two or three miles below them. Those who are poor swimmers must cling to the weed, which now represents a life raft, supporting them above the abyss. Over the ages since their ancestors came here, some species have developed special organs of attachment, either for themselves or for their eggs, so that they may not sink into the cold, dark water far below. [...] One of the fiercest carnivores of the place, the sargassum fish Petrophryne, has copied with utmost fidelity the branching fronds of the weed, its golden berries, its rich brown colour. (Carson 26)

Carson goes on to elaborate on how different species have changed both habits and appearance in order to adapt to the environment of the Sargasso Sea. I want to keep this in mind while arguing that Rhys takes Brontë’s Bertha as her starting point, “changing” this figure by dividing her into two different women in Wide Sargasso Sea. Or rather, she derives two women from Brontë’s creation, and they have to be separated to appear as viable inhabitants of the environment in which Rhys locates them. This event is to a certain extent anticipated by Brontë’s image of the two marine phantoms appearing after the woman of the wrecked ship is dead and buried at the Thornfield-like churchyard. However, as the heroine of Wide Sargasso Sea crosses the Atlantic Ocean towards the end of the novel, Rhys merges her two women together, creating a Bertha-like hybrid. As an area where such evolutionary adapting is really apparent, the Sargasso Sea, solely mentioned in the title of Wide Sargasso Sea, lends itself as a metaphor for this novel’s relation to Jane Eyre.
Brontë’s blackened Bertha

To understand the implications of the difference between Rhys’ heroine(s) and Brontë’s Bertha, one must examine the latter’s appearances in *Jane Eyre*. According to Mr Rochester, Bertha was quite a beauty at the time when he first met her in Spanish Town: “Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman […] tall, dark and majestic” (Brontë 368). In the course of time, however, her exterior changed, and the Bertha described by Jane seems almost grotesquely degenerated. The first time Jane catches a glimpse of her is when the unknown woman r ummages through her chamber at night. Jane later describes the intruder to Mr Rochester:

“Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!”

“Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.”

“This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes.”

(Brontë 342)

We notice the emphasis on colour in the description. Bertha is perceived to be “discoloured”, “blackened”, “purple” and “dark”. As if to accentuate the darkness of the features, Mr Rochester points out that ghosts tend to be pale. Moreover, she has thick, “swelled” lips, “a quantity of dark […] hair, wild as a mane”, and blood-shot, rolling eyes, like in conventional stereotypes of black people (Brontë 353). The hints of racial dubiousness is remarkable, taking into account that Bertha’s status as Mrs Rochester is conditioned by her being a white West Indian “of pure descent”. For one thing, it is unlikely that a black or coloured West Indian woman would be able to produce a dowry of interest to the Rochester family. Moreover, it is out of the question

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8 The expression is used by Antoinette’s husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, while suspiciously examining his wife: “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but […]” (WSS 39).
for an English gentleman like Mr Rochester to marry a woman of colour. We must keep in mind that Brontë’s novel appeared barely fifteen years after the Emancipation Act of 1933 passed in the British Parliament, abolishing slavery in Britain and all its colonies.9 At the time when Mr Rochester made his journey to Jamaica, slavery was not yet outlawed.

Although Mr Rochester hints to racial dubiousness in his wife, stating that her family was interested in the alliance “because I was of good race”, Bertha is presented as the daughter of an English merchant and a white West Indian woman (Brontë 368). On the one hand, Brontë seems to need a coloured woman in her plot as a contrast to Jane, through which the book can render “the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate, so that a good greater than the letter of the Law can be broached” (Spivak 121). The good greater than the law is in this case the proposal of Jane, representing Western women, as a subject that should have rights in relation to Mr Rochester, representing Western men. On the other hand, a white West Indian with certain dark features is the closest Brontë could get to a black woman, without undermining the credibility of the marriage between her and Mr Rochester. However, a black woman in Bertha’s place would not necessarily have suited the end better. As Spivak asserts, the point is to render the frontier indeterminate, in relation to the difference between animals and human beings, and, I will add, the difference between black people and white people. What makes Bertha sufficiently grotesque in this context is the fact that she is not a distinguishable black woman or white woman, she is a white woman in the process of blackening. As such, Bertha appears as a warning of what could also happen to Jane.

The implications of the warning is further emphasised later in the story, when Jane considers following her cousin to colonial India. Her reservation suggests the fear of becoming what Bertha is, as Jane anticipates to abandon

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9 In Wide Sargasso Sea, the most heroic and reliable character, the black nurse Christophine, questions the real value of the Emancipation Act for the black islanders: “No more slavery! She had to laugh! ’These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones – more cunning, that’s all” (WSS 15). Christophine’s remark suggests that the abolishment of slavery did not change the uneven power relations between black and white people in Jamaica.
herself partly, not completely, in the enterprise: “If I join St John, I abandon half myself: if I go to India, I go to premature death” (Brontë 487). The possibility of a white person going native, as the border between coloniser and colonised is not sufficiently fixed, appears more disturbing in the context of Jane Eyre than the mere existence of a black woman.

If Bertha, once “the boast of Spanish Town”, is not simply changing in accordance with her age and hardships in life, but rather to fit the requirements of Jane’s progress in the “cardboard house” of Jane Eyre, she can be compared to the sargassum fish in Carson’s explanation, changing its colour and behaviour to adjust to the new environment. Significantly, her new discoloured, blackened complexion, as well as the “bloated features”, also suggest a corpse of a person that has drowned and lain in the water for some time (Brontë 354).

Rhys’ Obeah woman

Two years before Rhys finished Wide Sargasso Sea, she underscored the difference between her heroine, Antoinette, and Brontë’s Bertha, in a letter to a friend:

I think there were several Antoinettes and Mr Rochesters. Indeed I am sure. Mine is not Miss Brontë’s, though much suggested by “Jane Eyre”. […] In the poem (if it’s that) [“Obeah Nights”, just written by Rhys] Mr Rochester (or Raworth) consoles himself or justifies himself by saying that his Antoinette runs away after the “Obeah nights” and that the creature who comes back is not the one who ran away. I wish this had been thought of before – for that too is part of Obeah. (Letters 263)

The Obeah woman Christophine, Antoinette’s nurse and friend, is an important character in Wide Sargasso Sea. According to rumour, Christophine disposes over Obeah remedies that “can make people love or hate. Or…or die” (WSS 67). This figure’s ability to express herself as a black woman in the
novel has generated quite a debate among scholars. Gayatri C. Spivak launches the idea that Rhys marks the novel’s inability to contain the black woman’s story by letting Christophine turn her back to the narrator halfway through the text:

Christophine is tangential to this narrative. Rhys’ text will not attempt to contain her in a novel that rewrites a canonical English book within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native\(^{10}\) […] She is quietly placed out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological justification: “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know’. She walked away without looking back” […] A proud message of textual – “read and write” – abdication. (Spivak 30-131)

While Spivak applauds Rhys’ non-appropriation of the black woman, Benita Parry criticises “Spivak’s deliberated deafness to the native voice, where it is to be heard” (23). Both critics, however, consider Christophine to be a draft for a realistic black West Indian, whose voice and muteness are representative of other black West Indian women. Here we must consider the curious fact that descriptions of Christophine actually emphasise the difference between her and the other black women of Jamaica:

Her songs were not like Jamaican songs, and she was not like the other women.

She was much blacker – blue-black, with a thin face and straight features. She wore a black dress, heavy gold ear-rings and a yellow handkerchief – carefully tied with the two high points in front. No other negro

\(^{10}\) Spivak and Benita Parry (in the following quote) refer to Christophine as a native, as opposed to the white islanders. However, descending from African slaves brought across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, Christophine is hardly more native to Jamaica than the white Antoinette. As Christophine is born in Martinique, one can actually argue that she is less native to Jamaica than her white friend. Spivak and Parry attest to the way the notion “native” is commonly confused with dark skin. It is in this respect that Bertha’s going native to a certain extent is synonymous with her blackening.
woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion. She had a quiet voice and a quiet laugh (when she did laugh), and though she could speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois, she took care to talk as they talked. But they would have nothing to do with her [...]. (WSS 12)

With her blue-black complexion, Christophe resembles the purple Bertha of Jane Eyre. Her quiet laughter brings to mind Bertha’s disturbing “haha”, frequently heard from the attic of Thornfield Hall. Like Bertha, Christophe hardly laughs out of joy – her laughter tends to be an expression of anger or sarcasm: “No more slavery! She had to laugh!”; “She threw back her head and laughed loudly (But she never laughs loudly, and why is she laughing at all?)”; “I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place.’ She laughed” (WSS 12, 67, 96). Like Bertha, Christophe has experienced imprisonment, as she has been charged by the police for practicing Obeah. Moreover, Christophe’s “heavy gold ear-rings” allude to the gold bracelet which is torn of the drowned woman’s arm in the first painting of Jane’s portfolio.

Unlike Bertha, Christophe is indeed an articulate and eloquent woman. Spivak points out that she is the first named speaker of the novel, and as Lucy Wilson argues, she engages in conversations and makes remarks that “reveal the full scope of Rhys’s social vision” (67). While Bertha’s mad ravings contribute to affirm Jane Eyre as a rational being in Jane Eyre; Christophe’s well-informed comments seem to shed light on Antoinette’s ignorance.

If Brontë’s Bertha is partly a black woman, it seems appropriate that the novel that attempts to “write her a life” also touches upon the life of the black West Indian woman (Rhys in Vreeland 235). As Spivak asserts, Rhys does this carefully, leaving Christophe as a tangent in Antoinette’s story. Rhys refrains from reducing her to the other of the white heroine, and at the same time she resists the temptation to give Christophe an easy victory. When she argues with Antoinette’s husband about the latter’s future, and he threatens to fetch the police, Christophe acknowledges her defeat and “walked
away without looking back” (WSS 97). But does she really leave the novel, as Spivak and Parry assume?

The ghost in the attic

In the last part of Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette lies in the dark room and wonders: “What am I doing in this place and who am I?” (WSS 107). This question seems to be directed to herself, but at the same time it constitutes a riddle for the reader to solve. At this point Antoinette does not even know what she looks like: “There is no looking-glass here and I don’t know what I am like now” (WSS 107). The question of her physical appearance is further emphasised when her stepbrother, Richard Mason, comes to visit her. Mr Mason does not seem to recognise his stepsister: “I remember now that he did not recognize me. I saw him look at me and his eyes went first to one corner and then to another, not finding what they expected” (WSS 109).

Mr Mason’s visit corresponds to a sombre scene in Jane Eyre, in which a person of the same name is almost killed by his mad sister Bertha in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Spivak points out that the attack seems more understandable in Rhys’ rewriting, on account of Grace Pool’s explanation: “I didn’t hear all he said except ‘I cannot interfere legally between yourself and your husband.’ It was when he said ‘legally’ that you flew at him” (WSS 109). Spivak reads Grace’s explanation as a justification of the attack: “it is the duplicity in Richard that Bertha picks out in the word ‘legally’ – not a mere bestiality in herself – that prompts her violent reaction” (Spivak 125).

In the rest of the novel, however, Antoinette strikes us as quite ignorant on subjects of the abuse of power in connection to the law. The only character who gives voice to analyses of this kind is Christophine. At one occasion she even claims to know that Richard Mason is capable of exploiting the law for his own advantage: “Law! The Mason boy fix it, that boy worse than Satan and he burn in Hell one of these fine nights” (WSS 66). The day after Mr Mason is stabbed, Antoinette has forgotten that he came to see her. Grace Pool tries to refresh her memory, and gradually Antoinette recalls the visit,
but not the attack. All she can remember is that “[h]e looked at me and spoke to me as though I were a stranger” (WSS 109).

Antoinette has apparently heard talk of a ghost haunting the “cardboard house”, but she does not identify with it or suspect that the talk could refer to herself: “Sometimes I looked to the right or to the left but I never looked behind me for I did not want to see the ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place” (WSS 111). At one point, however, she is confronted with a face surrounded by what Spivak and several other critics assume to be the frame of a mirror: “It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (WSS 112). Spivak explains this passage as the point when Antoinette “recognizes herself as the so-called ghost in Thornfield Hall” (126). But it is not clear whether Antoinette actually recognizes herself or if she recognizes someone else in the mirror. The next second, she calls for Christophine, as if she were calling out to the woman in the mirror: “I called Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me” (WSS 112).

The mirroring takes place in Antoinette’s dream, but it could indicate that Antoinette and Christophine have merged together in this part of the novel, an interpretation that explains why Mr Mason could not recognize his stepsister. The unity of the black and the white West Indian is strongly suggested by Brontë’s blackening Bertha. Moreover, the mirror scene corresponds to the passage in Jane Eyre where Jane is locked up in the red-room in the attic of her foster home, and catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror: “All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me […] I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp” (Brontë 14). Noticing the correspondence between Jane’s split reflection and Antoinette/Christophine’s ghostly mirror scene, one could ask which of the two West Indians that represents the fairy and which represents the imp. However, Christophine mimics them both, with her yellow handkerchief like a halo around her head, tied “with the two high points in front” like the horns of an imp.
The missions of Christophine and Antoinette

Immediately after Antoinette calls out for Christophine to help her, she turns and asserts that she has been helped. But “the wall of fire protecting me” can hardly rescue Antoinette any more than “the barrier of the sea”, behind which she used to imagine that “I am safe” (*WSS* 112, 16). In the dream, Antoinette climbs up on the roof where several images of the West Indies appear in the red sky. She gets ready to jump towards the images, but is interrupted as “[s]omeone screamed and I thought, Why did I scream? I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke. Grace Poole was sitting at the table but she had heard the scream too, for she said, “What was that?” (*WSS* 112).

To shed light upon this passage, I will turn to *Jane Eyre* and another image composed of two halves sharing a sad fortune – that of the old chestnut tree of Thornfield Hall, that has been split in two by lightning:

![Image of a split tree with a red moon](image)

The cloven halves were not broken from each other, for the firm base and strong roots kept them unsundered below [...] next winter’s tempest would be sure to fell one or both to earth [...] the time of pleasure and love is over with you; but you are not desolate: each of you has a comrade to sympathize with him in his decay.” As I looked up at them the moon appeared momentarily in that part of the sky which filled their fissure; her disk was blood-red and half overcast. (Brontë 333)

Both the split tree and the half (over)cast red moon of this scene suggest the half cast figure Bertha composed by both the white and the black West Indian. Moreover, it brings to mind the two trees of “the solitary churchyard” of Bewick’s vignettes, where only one gravestone is visible. With this in mind, we must consider Jane’s prediction about the tempest making either one or both of the branches fall. Christophine, whose name alludes to Christ, who chose to sacrifice himself in order to save the rest of humankind, is not a realistic inhabitant of the attic of Thornfield Hall. Mr Rochester’s bride had to be white, and Bertha’s dark features are merely present as an element of horror in *Jane Eyre*. It seems natural that Christophine should leap back into
the images of the West Indies, after having comforted her protégée Antoinette by showing her in the mirror that she “has a comrade to sympathize with [her]”.

Whether Christophine screams to wake up Antoinette and save her from the fall, or Antoinette screams as Christophine breaks free amounts to the same: Antoinette wakes up in the attic, waits for Grace to fall asleep, and wanders off with her candle. The novel ends with the following words:

Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (WSS 112)

At this point, Coral Ann Howells claims that Antoinette “wakes up and is about to set fire to Thornfield as she walks along the ‘dark passage’” (Howells 122). But what could Antoinette possibly gain by committing suicide? The dream of the fire and the leap from the roof has already secured the connection between Bertha’s story in *Jane Eyre* and Antoinette’s story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Manifold readings like Howells’ attest to this by taking the suicide for granted. When the connection is established, the story of *Wide Sargasso Sea* leaks into readings of Brontë’s novel, slightly changing the possible interpretations of the latter. In this respect, one can envision Antoinette with her candle to light her along the passages of the cardboard houses, or rather the sentences of the two novels between cardboard covers. She has to do what Christophine refrains from in the novel, and what Spivak asserts that Christophine cannot do in this context: to read and write her story.

Helen Nebeker, Coral Ann Howells, Caroline Rody and several others have pointed out the double meaning of the word *passage* in Antoinette’s final reflection on what she has to do, referring to both the corridors of Thornfield Hall and the sentences of *Jane Eyre* and indeed of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I will add that reading the two novels together can light the reader along the “dark passages” across the Atlantic Ocean, where shipwrecks and dramatic changes of the ship’s course tend to occur in the dark of night. The significance of the ocean voyages is indicated by the fact that they mark the
alteration of Brontë’s Bertha from being “the boast of Spanish Town” to the
ghost of Thornfield Hall, and, accordingly, of Rhys’ Antoinette from being
the lost and lovely white girl in the West Indies into being a peculiar half-
caste in the attic of her cardboard England. In both novels, violent and
haunting marine imagery suggests how and why these changes take place. In
this respect the novels point beyond themselves, to historical and political re-
lations.

In their afterlife, after they are read, one can envision these novels as the
two phantom ships in Jane’s description of Bewick, becalmed on the torpid
Sargasso Sea in between the West Indies, where the majority of the story in
Wide Sargasso Sea is set, and the England of Jane Eyre. Each novel continues
to haunt the reading of the other, and adapts to the environment the other
novel provide – much like organisms brought into the Sargasso Sea adapt in
order to stay afloat. This means a counter-story like the Wide Sargasso Sea was
always anticipated by the marine imagery of Jane Eyre, and prefigured in
Jane’s vision of the two marine phantoms.
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