
INTRODUCTION: FASHIONING THE AUTHOR

The vampire Louis in Anne Rice's first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, experiences some adjustment issues in his transition from living to undead. His lingering humanity will not permit him to kill for his own sustenance. He is encumbered in his overpowering desire for human blood by a lingering sense of moral duty and by his addiction to humanity's ethical structures, even after he realizes that those constructs have no remaining application to his life. He struggles to maintain his humanity through his ostensible commitment to social contracts—restraint of passion and respect for life. Representative of the Freudian split consciousness, he is defined by the struggle between his desire to indulge his libidinal impulses and his compulsion to obey social strictures. Indeed, the novel itself could be characterized as a narrative of liberation in which Louis comes to a complete acceptance of his vampire nature or perhaps his animal/libidinal nature.

Anne Rice has been very insistent in her personal identification with Louis. She even suggested that the vampire be cast as a female in an early movie script in order to resolve the gender controversies that held up production of the film for almost twenty years. Louis' moral reticence in the face of a powerful desire is his defining characteristic, and we can see this same quality in Rice's public persona. Through both her novels and her interviews, Rice persistently pays homage to a polymorphous sexuality as well as a variety of marginalized subject positions, yet she also undermines the authenticity of these portrayals with the conventionality of her life and her narrative conclusions, consigning these subject positions to the realm of fiction and artifice.

Because the subject matter of her novels is frequently unconventional

and many of her characters are representative of the socially marginal, one might expect that the author shares a peculiar propensity for non-conformity. This, however, does not seem to be the case. While there is little or no moral condemnation of her characters, there is a refusal, both in her fiction and in the rhetoric of her public persona, to embrace a revolutionary posture toward social marginality. Upon a superficial consideration, Rice seems to be quite radical in her views toward sex and in her willingness to represent the sexual outsiders in her fiction. However, even here there is a narrative bias toward normative conclusions, such as marriage. Frequently in her work, erotic experimentation is valued exclusively for its impact upon monogamous relations. Even her most dedicated proponents of free love eventually discover that only marriage is truly satisfactory. The protagonists of *Exit to Eden* abandon their commitment to multiple partners and same-sex relations for traditional matrimony. At the conclusion of *The Erotic Adventures of Sleeping Beauty*, Beauty and Laurent exploit their countless sexual experiences, as well as the self-discipline that is an integral part of their S & M training, to the benefit of their conventional monogamous match. In the midst of their multifarious erotic adventures, the characters of Rice's *Beauty* series long for a meaningful relationship with a single individual. Even Rice's vampires desire a partner with whom they might endure eternity, and although these relations exist within a virtual orgy of erotic experiences, the vampires are nevertheless portrayed as partners who share many of the characteristics of conventional marriage.

In her public persona, Rice pays homage to alternative sexual identities. Yet her own relations and sexual propensities are ostensibly quite conventional. She praises sexual experimentation, but she has remained dedicated to the same partner her entire adult life and seems to be exceptionally family oriented. Rice writes extensively about the practices of S & M and even offers a defense of these experiences based upon their potentially therapeutic value, yet the author admits to her biographer that she balked at the offer to meet directly with S & M practitioners. Indeed, her reason for refusing the offer closely resembles disdain: "I just couldn't do it ... I didn't want to know them that well," she says, further distancing herself from S & M activities by suggesting that her brief encounters with "those people" actually resulted in the discontinuation of the *Beauty* series after the third book (Ramsland *Prism* 242-43). Clearly, Rice was willing to defend the practices of S & M in the abstract and to exploit the subject for its market value, but when confronted with the actuality of the practice, she experiences something akin to moral revulsion. Her husband defends her against the accusation that she is a dominatrix: "She's

no more sadomasochistic than she's a vampire" (Ramsland, *Prism* 243). This vindication constitutes a defense of the conventionality of the author's sex life, as though those marginal erotic practices that she so lovingly describes in her work are something to be shunned and repudiated.

Frequently, her representations of homosexuality involve a similar propensity for the conventional. In her erotic literature, same-sex eroticism is merely experimental, a propensity that may be morally neutral but which is something to be transcended. Both Lisa and Eliot, the protagonists of *Exit to Eden*, abandon their same-sex desires for a conventional monogamous bond with a member of the opposite sex. The protagonists of the *Beauty* series also forsake their homosexual practices for the normative heterosexual marriage. Other characters who engage in homosexual encounters are essentially bisexual. Christophe from *The Feast of All Saints* abandons his homosexual lover Michael to return to New Orleans, and once home, he immediately seeks sexual gratification from Dolly Rose, a loose woman of color. Rice's vampires form same-sex bonds, but they can never be fully identified as homosexual. Although there is a noticeable dearth of female characters in the *Vampire Chronicles*, there is nevertheless an implication that a member of either gender would constitute a sufficient partner with whom to endure eternity. Although one might argue that the mere suggestion that a same-sex bond is an acceptable choice constitutes a progressive position on gender issues, representations of those who have exclusively homosexual attractions are conspicuously absent from her early texts.

Rice's argument that the immersion in the flesh leads to spiritual transcendence also has a conservative subtext. Although she asserts that the indulgence of the flesh through sex and bondage constitutes a pathway to spiritual awakening, she nevertheless advocates a novel process with a conventional objective. The process merely exploits the body for the attainment of something that transcends body: the spiritual or the intellectual. This does not constitute a dramatic break from the Western philosophical tradition that one must forsake the flesh to experience enlightenment. It argues instead that the path to that forsaking is through the flesh itself and through the surrender of the body and the volition to the will of another. Thus, rather than truly embracing the flesh and subsequently the erotic, Rice's philosophical position merely represents yet another means of denying the flesh in favor of that which transcends it, this time paradoxically through meaningless carnal indulgence. Is this total satiation of the flesh not another means of repudiating the flesh, of representing it as negligible, as a means to a more meaningful indulgence?

At every level, Rice can be observed to negotiate between a radical

and a conventional point of view regarding sex and social taboo. In Michael Riley's *Conversations with Anne Rice*, Rice asserts that she finds the pictures of naked children in *Vogue* "very erotic." She then goes on to describe the "sensuous enjoyment" that she experiences when showering her children with kisses and hugs, initially a rather bold admission from a mother and a mainstream writer. However, in her subsequent explanation, she very rapidly distances herself from any impropriety, so much so that she completely eviscerates the concept of the erotic, implying that she means nothing more unconventional than maternal affection, an interest in watching her son grow "big and strong" (63–65). The backpedaling is very clear in the exchange. The author wants credit for the shocking suggestion, but she does not want to face the social stigma that would attend such an admission. It is easy to understand that she would not want to associate herself with a practice as ignominious as pedophilia, particularly when it carries the additional stigma of incest. However, the author wants to raise eyebrows and to perpetuate an outrageous public persona, and yet at the same time, she does not want to be taken seriously. In her fiction and in her initial assertions about children, she appears to be endorsing pedophilic desire. Yet she very plainly backs away from the idea as well, thus complying with conventional concepts of propriety. In her fiction, the instances of intergenerational eroticism are legion (e.g., Belinda, Beauty, Mona, Armand, etcetera). The author even offers a defense of such sexual desire in her biography *Prism of the Night*, where she suggests that some children are mature enough to negotiate a sexual relationship with an adult and that sometimes the child is even the aggressor (52). If Rice were to leave these ideas in the world of her fiction, there would be no issue. However, she clearly considers the idea a philosophical position about sexual repression in our society, and she even flirts with the concept in the public characterizations that she makes of her family. Yet as with other issues, the ideas are not ones that she is entirely capable of owning. She recoils from any public conviction on the subject. It becomes clear that she does not really accept the very ideas that she wants the public to believe that she is very comfortable with. Thus she is fashioning a fallacious public posture as the sexual outlaw. The argument that she is not obliged to be what she writes does not particularly apply because authors of erotica have often been defined by the stigma associated with their subject. Also, the effort to define her public image as an eccentric and a sexual dissident erases the dividing line between her fiction and her reality.

A similar duality in her public persona could be observed in a recent interview. When the author appeared on Brian Lamb's television program

Booknotes to promote her work *Servant of the Bones*, she wore the garments that one might expect her characters to wear, a dark velvet dress replete with lace fringe and other accessories reminiscent of eighteenth-century fashion. It was clear that her intention had been to dress in character, to reinforce public perceptions that she is more than a little eccentric, that she is subversive of middle-class values, particularly sexual prohibitions, and that she may even be a little dangerous. Yet despite her nonconformist persona, she insisted on talking to the interviewer about tax reform, a subject that one would expect from an accountant, not from the author of horror and erotic fiction. The interviewer's consternation was obvious even to Rice, yet he was unable to bring her back to the subject of her fiction. Plainly, the author only flirts with the revolutionary; her inclination is consistently toward the mundane.

Despite her long residence in San Francisco, even during the period of the psychedelic cultural awakening, Rice did not adopt a slavish adherence to radical leftist politics. She recognizes that the political spectrum is not linear but circular, with the extremity of the Left touching the extremity of the Right. Hippies and Berkeley intellectuals, she complains, were frequently indistinguishable from fascists in their sentiments toward the political opposition. She adds incredulously that the California intellectual's notion of liberalism is to torture and kill a conservative, and she refers to Berkeleyites as "merciless," "dangerous," and "vicious." She complains of a professor who talked of abducting and killing the wife of a prominent conservative politician to protest the Vietnam War. She also describes with disdain the hypocrisy of Californian Marxists, many of whom have never had to work, living off of trust funds while offering impassioned speeches on the plight of the migrant farmhands. The communist system itself does not escape her criticism. She boldly labels it "ruthless" and "guilty of mass murder" (Riley 149–55).

Rice's resentment toward leftist politics does not signify conservative leanings. She fashions herself as a liberal, adopting leftist positions on many social issues. A self-styled humanitarian, Rice suggests that to be an intellectual and to be liberal is to adopt a respect and appreciation for diverse, and even radically opposing, points of view. However, this does not necessarily mean that she is a traditional moderate, particularly on sexual issues, but that she has respect for the free exchange of ideas. She is most angry with liberals when they ally themselves, or adopt the practices commonly associated, with right-wing politics. Feminism, a movement that one would expect a successful woman such as Anne Rice to embrace wholeheartedly, has been a frequent target of her admonitions. In her opinion, the sexual politics of feminists such as Catherine

MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin are allied with right-wing patriarchal values. MacKinnon's and Dworkin's views on the exploitation of women through pornography reveal a subtle hatred of women's sexuality. These writers suggest that the women depicted in pornographic film are whores because they appear to enjoy anonymous sex or are exploited. No liberated woman would ever willingly participate in a pornographic production. Rice denounces this point of view for the same reason that she rejects sexism: because it limits women's choices, telling them "what they should feel" and condemning those who do not conform to prescribed philosophy (Ramsland *Prism* 218).

Rice's choice of subject matter reveals a negotiation between high and low culture, between the elite and the popular, between literature and commercial fiction. While many consider her career a surrender to the latter item in each of the above categories, such generalizations oversimplify the contents of her work, which is better characterized as a constant oscillation between high and low or as a recurring penetration of the boundaries between the oppositions. Rice's books are novels of ideas. They demonstrate an impressive understanding of art, literature, philosophy, psychology, and history. However, they are also generally an effort to appeal to the readers of the commercial marketplace. Rice was surprised and disappointed when she did not receive recognition as a serious writer after the publication and success of her first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*. The subjects of her next two novels reveal that literary respectability was not only her objective, but also her due. She was astonished that her first novel could be dismissed by critics and reviewers simply because she chose to exploit the genre of horror fiction, and her point is well taken. While the adoption of the vampire story is often correctly conceived as a signal of the author's desire to appeal to a mass audience, such considerations do not necessarily subvert the effort to make thoughtful observations about art, philosophy, and life. Within the context of a vampire story, *Interview* addresses a multiplicity of literary thematics, including the anxieties of immortality, the search for identity, the problems of domestic abuse, and the relationships between art, reality, mythology, and folklore. Moreover, these ideas are set against a rich eighteenth-century backdrop that reveals an appreciation for historical detail and an understanding of the spirit of the age.

Her subsequent novels are equally persistent in their appropriation of the high and the low. Rice's publisher tried to explain the initial commercial failure of her second novel *The Feast of All Saints* by theorizing that "it fell between the literary and the popular, and people just did not know what to do with it" (Ramsland *Prism* 192). *The Vampire Lestat* and

Queen of the Damned contain lengthy recreations of ancient fertility cults and mythologies. Yet the impressive anthropological detail of the historical sections is countered by the vulgar, even comic framing device of Lestat as a rock star, flaunting his vampirism to the outrage of his supernatural colleagues.

This conflict between conformity and revolution and between high and low culture can be observed throughout Rice's early fiction. The term "early" is used rather loosely in this study, referring to texts written between 1976, the publication of *Interview*, and 1993, the publication of *Lasher*. This study acknowledges that the quality of any author's work varies, but that with Rice the variation is perhaps more pronounced. Some of her novels possess intellectual and aesthetic qualities that achieve literary status, while others seem to be little more than escapist fiction. Moreover, the author seems to have lost her ability to distinguish between the high and the low as it is represented in her individual works. She will make disparaging remarks about the shortcomings of her most worthy novels (*The Feast of All Saints* and *Cry to Heaven*), while praising books that are virtually bankrupt of merit. She complains that the novel *Cry to Heaven*, a compelling historical work about the castrated singers in the Italian opera, took too long to get to the central action of the conservatory. Yet at the same time, she maintains that the novel *The Mummy*, a work that makes no pretense to the literary, was worthy of a sequel (*Ramsland Prism* 323). Plainly, the commercial and the meritorious have become coterminous in the author's mind, a progression that has become increasingly apparent as her career degenerates into a series of rapidly assembled codicils to her early successes. Having already related the heart of the vampire Armand's history in one of her early novels, she nevertheless deems the subject worthy of additional treatment, creating a book that narrates around the edges of the previously told tale. In her recent work *Pandora*, she creates an entire book around a story that does not have sufficient subject matter to warrant a digression in one of her previous novels. Yet even in her most commercial efforts, she frequently generates vividly conceived images of historical epochs or weaves into her narrative thoughtful philosophical meditations.

Each chapter of this study will observe the author's negotiation between the urge to conform to and the compulsion to subvert traditional bourgeois values about sexuality and gender. For example, the gay and lesbian community has been very quick to identify with Rice's vampires, reading the series as a lengthy allegory of sexual dissidence and social stigma. Chapter 1, "Interrogating the Vampire: Heterotextuality and Queer Reading," exposes the ways in which such a reading perpetuates

destructive, indefensible stereotypes about the gay community. All of the common insults are represented: promiscuity, predacious sexuality, pedophilia, melancholia, self-destructiveness, et cetera. Moreover, in a political environment laden with homophobic rhetoric that characterizes gays and lesbians as incompatible with family life, the representation of the vampire family as a collection of monsters who invert all of the traditional familial relations is particularly repugnant and even dangerous. The chapter demonstrates that such readings are noxious to the struggle for human rights.

Chapter 2, “Engendering Whiteness: The Politics of Race, Gender, and Class in *The Feast of All Saints*,” addresses the social construction of racial ideology. The novel focuses on a group of free people of color living in New Orleans before the Civil War. Borrowing from psychoanalytic and feminist traditions, this chapter observes the relationship between patriarchy and racial and gender discrimination. I argue that *The Feast of All Saints* dismantles the ideology of racial difference in American culture, erasing ethnic boundaries and exposing the vacuum at the center of patriarchal power. Like the Lacanian phallus, whiteness exists only as an ideal that is defined entirely by its opposition to other ethnic categories. It is the point at which the endless significations of racial difference begin. White is not a biological classification. It is an artificial category that social and economic factors have created, and one into which no character actually fits within the novel. Many of the social codes that are associated with whiteness are more prominent among the people of color than among the Caucasians. Moreover, the Caucasians invariably fall short of that ideal of power, privilege, and affluence that defines whiteness. The characters struggle to define themselves racially by embarking on a breeding program in which their progeny will be indistinguishable from the white population, but the irony of their efforts is that whiteness is only a mirage.

Chapter 3, “The Purloined Penis: Castration Anxiety in *Cry to Heaven*,” is an application of the theories of Jacques Lacan as articulated in his “Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*” where he suggests that meaning and identity are determined by the subject’s position within the signifying chain. In *Cry to Heaven*, four members of the same family compose four separate oedipal triangles. As the characters move from one position in the family romance to another, their perceptions of themselves as subjects alter as well. Tonio’s castration constitutes a displacement not only within the social, political, and economic sphere, but also within the system of signification. For Tonio, the movement through all of the positions of the family romance constitutes a realization of his latent

androgyny. However, Rice's incipient sexual conservatism undermines much of the revolutionary potential of such a discovery.

Few subjects inspire as much intransigence and hysteria as the sexual initiation of children. Yet Rice frequently embraces the topic and offers some quite heretical views. Chapter 4, "Violation and Sex Education: Beauty's Erotic Odyssey," examines the sexual politics of this incendiary subject as it is addressed in Rice's erotic and sadomasochistic rewriting of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. The author seeks to demonstrate that childhood is fraught with sexuality and that parents ignore the obvious saturation of childhood with carnal desire to maintain the fiction that children are pure, empty of sexual cravings. Rice even takes the radical step of suggesting that the sexual initiation of children may be beneficial, instructing them in discipline and self-control. However, as with all of her boldest affirmations, she shies away from any unrepentantly revolutionary stands about sex. She examines the initiation of children in the knowledge of the flesh as an introduction to a normative bourgeois lifestyle that is replete with traditional marriage and gender inequity.

Chapter 5, "*Exit to Eden: The Body, the Spectacle, and the Transgressive Space*," is a Bakhtinian analysis of sexual transgression and the carnivalesque. It examines the containment of subversive energies within the same apparatus that threatens to undermine civil authority, and it focuses on attributes of the carnival such as the flouting of authority, the spectacle of the grotesque body, and the celebration of fertility. The chapter deconstructs the oppositions generated by sadomasochistic practice. The values of pleasure/pain and liberty/constraint are inverted, and the border between antithetical concepts dissolves. In *Exit to Eden*, Rice is carnivalizing the carnival, reversing the priorities of the historical celebration by employing the subversive traditions to their own destruction. Such a praxis is conservative if it undercuts an exercise that is reverent and seditious. It begins with what seems to be a radical, revolutionary agenda for sexual liberation and concludes with a conventional marital union.

Chapter 6, "Prurient Painters and Pedophiles: Negotiating Consent in *Belinda*," reveals Rice's effort to navigate between two ill-defined forms of intergenerational sex: pedophilia and child molestation. Rice's confidence that an adolescent has the ability to consent to sexual relations with an adult is the crux upon which she distinguishes between nurturing and destructive intergenerational bonds. The example of the precocious and resourceful Belinda is intended to invalidate the assumption that all pedophilic relations are exploitative of, and harmful toward, the child. While the author makes an effort to diminish the transgressive potential

of the subject by excluding explicit descriptions of sex and by constructing a relationship that will end in a permanent monogamous bond between the participants, she nevertheless confronts a virtually insurmountable cultural bias against her thesis, one that promises to silence and invalidate any such narratives. At another level, the novel is a thinly veiled allegory of the risks that Rice took in publishing her erotica, particularly the erotica that depicts relations between adults and children. Thus, the novel becomes a defense of the writer's aesthetic judgment in the selection of subject matter, even that material that may be socially taboo.

Chapter 7, "Rape Fantasies: Constructing a Masculine Prototype Among the Mayfair Witches" is an application of the theories of contemporary men's studies. Traditionally, our culture has defined manhood very narrowly, allowing only a quite limited group of characteristics to be coded as truly masculine. Inspired by feminism, men's studies seeks to identify and legitimize a plurality of masculine types. In *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, Rice attempts to deconstruct the reductive notions of masculinity that have characterized traditional gender coding. Rice's two principal male characters are an effort to broaden the scope of acceptable masculine practice. Michael is represented as genteel brute; he has an uncommon sensitivity and a coarser side that makes him sexually exciting. In appearance, Lasher is more androgynous than Michael is, and yet Lasher retains the sexual aggressiveness and self-centeredness that is historically associated with hegemonic masculinity. Rice's rehabilitation of masculinity, however, does not disempower or emasculate the male characters as much as it advocates the strengthening of the female characters. Rowan is representative of the woman who can compete with men at every level: intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

It is clear in her choice of subjects that the author desires to challenge the boundaries of sexual tolerance. Yet she is consistently unwilling to step boldly over the line, and it is just this trepidation that the current study seeks to observe. The publication of some of the novels was in and of itself an act of subversion. The fact that the author occasionally chose a pseudonym reveals her initial reticence, her unwillingness to defy convention openly. She can write shamelessly of Prince Alexi and the stone phallus, but only after the portrayal gains some level of public acceptance is she willing to reveal her authorship. Like Louis, she hides her perversity and pays homage to convention and society's moral constructs.