

**Spanking the Reader:**  
**Anne Rice's Poetics of Femdom**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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**BY**

**TOMMY C. VORST**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
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**Tommy C. Vorst                      1997 (c)**

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## Spanking the Reader: Anne Rice's Poetics of Femporn

by Tommy C. Vorst

### Abstract

The thesis is essentially a three-part critical study of Rice's Beauty trilogy and the development of woman-centered pornography as an industry which followed the trilogy's publication. From an anti-censorship feminist perspective, I first locate Rice's trilogy within the general context of fantasy literature and fairy tales. I go on to examine how dominant-submissive positions in sexual relationships parallel those of the author-reader relationship, as well as the implications of such a model for literary criticism. Finally, I look at the meteoric growth of the "femporn" industry. Included in this final discussion are examinations of the distinctions between erotica and pornography, the impact of censorship, and women as consumers, participants, and producers in the pornography business/movement.

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## Introduction

Bravery is relative. There are those who would say that for an established woman author to engage in writing hardcore sadomasochistic pornography, even in the 1980s, would be tantamount to professional self-immolation, if not construed as an act of outright gendercide. In deciding to publish her Sleeping Beauty trilogy, however, Anne Rice took as her model of courage a group whose risk was even greater; as Katherine Ramsland explains in her biography of Rice, these heroes were homosexual men, especially those who were "coming out" (105-06). Compared to that of a man laying his sexuality open to the scrutiny of family and friends, the gamble Rice was going to take with the Beauty trilogy was moderate at best, and particularly insofar as the novels were initially published under the pseudonym of "A. N. Roquelaure."

Undertaking such an endeavour, however, entailed a further problem which called for daring, a problem that feminist science-fiction writer, Joanna Russ, has called the denial of authorship (qtd. in Parker 93). In the case of pornography that is published pseudonymously, this denial first takes the form of the assumption that the author must be male, and when the female author "comes out" to claim the work as her own, the reaction is to denounce her as a gender traitor, as well as questioning the degree of artistry that the work evidences. One need only look at the controversy surrounding The Story of O. Despite its publication under the name of Pauline Réag , it was insisted that the author must be a man, since a woman would never have written a work of such sexual starkness or ferocity. Susan Brownmiller was particularly venomous in her refusal to accept that the pseudonym masked a woman, claiming she "nearly retched" upon reading it (qtd. in Brown and Faery 190). Years later, when Dominique Aury, a French book editor, revealed herself as the true author she was dismissed as being *merely* an editor—and therefore not possessing the artistic abilities of the famous authors to whom the work had been erroneously



attributed—by many of those who had argued so passionately and erroneously for her maleness (Brown and Faery 190). In effect, the quality of the work itself was questioned once it was revealed that the author was a woman.

By the time she wrote the Beauty trilogy, Anne Rice was already an established author. After her first novel, Interview With the Vampire (1976), met with commercial and critical success, she went on to write The Feast of All Saints (1979), a novel about the *gens de couleur libre* of 1840s Louisiana, and Cry to Heaven (1982), which told the story of eighteenth-century Venetian *castrati*. Lush and florid in their tone, the three novels were overwhelming to many readers and reviewers. Neither of the later works received the monetary or the artistic accolades of Interview, and it was their rejection by the literary community that pushed Anne to experiment with "another voice"—pornography (Ramsland 209).

That the Beauty books were published at all, given the public perception about who was and who was not supposed to be producing pornography in the early 1980s, is immediately striking. Indeed, it was probably their initial obscurity that saved them from significant public opposition and possible censorship. Alice Echols pointed out (right around the time of the publication of the trilogy) that the cultural feminists of the day still largely defined sexuality in the same narrow, gender-based manner as it was perceived over a century earlier: "Male sexuality is driven, irresponsible, genitally oriented and potentially lethal. Female sexuality is muted, diffuse, and interpersonally oriented" (449). In such an environment, censorship was a looming risk. Although Rice had experimented with writing pornography prior to the publication of Interview, in the early 80s she began to read porn by other authors, and hating the way that it generally conformed to the above stereotypes, she decided to create a different kind of pornography: a "literary sexual expression" (Ramsland 213). Switching publishers and adopting a pseudonym

which itself denoted concealment—a Roquelaure is an eighteenth-century cloak—Rice published The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty in 1983 and Beauty's Punishment in 1984. In 1985, after taking a break to write Exit to Eden under a second pen name, Rice returned to the Roquelaure name with Beauty's Release. After the publication of the final novel in the trilogy, public speculation increased about the real identity of the author, with one newspaper—*The Village Voice*—even suggesting that it was Joyce Carol Oates (Ramsland 242). Upon revealing that she was the author, Rice experienced no apparent detrimental effect, and today, reprintings of the trilogy feature the name Anne Rice more prominently than they do her pseudonym.

Although considerable scholarly attention has been given to Rice's vampire novels, her Sleeping Beauty trilogy has been virtually ignored, and commentary on these tales has tended to be restricted to promotional reviews or moralistic diatribes. In part this scholarly silence is understandable, for to approach the trilogy from a traditionalist literary perspective entails all manner of problems, not the least of which is that pornography is a tremendously contentious subject and is rarely considered material for "serious" literary treatment. Indeed, one of the few scholarly commentaries available suggests that Rice's pornography "fails to attain the 'literary'" status enjoyed by Story of Q (Ziv 74).

In addition, there is the need to address the complicated matter of Rice's use of the fairy-tale form itself, not only in the sense that her tales are hardly reading matter for the usual consumers of this genre--i.e., children--but also with respect to the question of what might have motivated her to use such an "innocent" mode as the vehicle for describing sadomasochistic acts. These deterrents to scholarly analysis of Rice's trilogy, however, do not mean that it "cannot" be done, and perhaps armed with some of Rice's own

bravery, I hope in this thesis to provide a three-part critical study of the Beauty trilogy that will also challenge those who might object that it "should not" be done.

In keeping with the dynamic that is part of the psychology of the fairy tale—that of easing the reader into the experience—I will begin rather conservatively, with a first chapter which locates Rice's trilogy within the general context of fantasy literature and wherein I will employ Bruno Bettelheim's pioneering work on the nature of fairy tales in order to show how Rice's work relates to its tradition. My specific focus here will be on what requirements are necessary for a narrative to be considered a fairy tale, and on how Rice honours and enlists the expectations of the genre at the same time that she subverts it by refashioning it for adults. In doing so, however, I also hope to illustrate that whatever subversive tactics are involved, they ironically serve to reinforce the educational and entertainment aspect that is associated with the genre in its unadulterated mode.

Becoming more daring, then, in my second chapter I will show how the educational aspects of Rice's trilogy involve teaching the reader about *how* these tales can best be read, understood, and enjoyed—a process that involves challenging many of the prevailing notions of reader-response. Here my focus will be on the way that the dominant-submissive positions in sexual relationships parallel those of the author-reader relationship, and on the way that the lessons learned by the characters in the tales about the connection between sexual stimulation and spiritual enlightenment are also designed as instructions for the reader.

In my third chapter, and becoming even braver, I will broaden my focus to consider how Rice's works fit into and contribute to what has been called the "femporn" industry. Here I will be tackling the much-debated issue of whether there is a distinction between erotica and pornography, and in arguing that there is no difference, I will discuss how such

distinctions conjoin with censorship in general in having an invidious effect on women's sexual self-definition, as well as being counterproductive for the cause of feminism as a whole. In doing so, I hope also to explode many of the misconceptions that continue to abound regarding women as consumers, participants, and producers in the pornography business/movement.

In arguing my thesis, I will generally be adhering to the traditional scholarly protocol of supporting my contentions with appropriate documentation. At the same time, however, it is my conviction that what has impeded the study of pornography has much to do with this very requirement, and that if any advance is to be made it must take the form of relying to large degree on a personalized and/or "gut" response. Significantly--but perhaps ironically--this emphasis on the personal seems indeed to be a major trend in current theorizing about what "honest" scholarship must entail. Where my approach hopefully retains its renegade and thus challenging character lies in its struggle to avoid what both the fairy tale and Rice's work identify as the cardinal (carnal?) sin of educational narrative: BOREDOM.

Whatever bravery I may exhibit, however, my efforts will clearly pale when juxtaposed with those of writers like Rice and Réagé, given the climate in which they wrote and published their works. Moreover, I remain very aware that critical works, much like subversive ones (as Ziv points out) will always rely on the existence of earlier works, and that without the Beauty trilogy, my attempt to rethink pornography would not be possible: that is a lesson I hope I'll not forget. Nevertheless, I hope that my efforts here will make their own contribution; and if my contentions prove thought-provoking, entertaining, educational, and perhaps a little surprising, then I will have succeeded. Even those ideas that I believe are quite provocative will no doubt be met with a fraction of the opposition that Rice and other pornographers have faced to their work.

## 1. Bedtime Stories: Rice's Fairy Tale for Grownups

Fairy tales, perhaps with the exception of myths, are the most universal literary form in existence. In these works, the characters and events are immediately recognisable, and draw upon what Carl Jung has called archetypal events and figures. Insofar as fairy tales are inexorably associated with childhood (and its innocence), they are frequently perceived as the most innocuous, and thus the most inviting and comforting form of narrative that literature has to offer. As Rice herself puts it, fairy tales provide "a fun and safe form of fiction" (Ramsland 215). There is, however, something paradoxical in the combination of "fun and safe," for in the case of children, if the fun element derives from "running away from home" and breaking the rules, as it were, the safe element resides in being able to return.

More specifically, children's powerfully influential sense of safety comes from two sources. One is the sense of familiarity that comes with the formulaic nature of the genre—the recurring stock types and the straightforward "black-and-white" depictions of the characters, the inevitable triumph of good over evil, and the happy ending. The second is the context in which the tales are typically read to children—the creation of a family environment around "bedtime storytime" serves to comfort the participants. For the adult readers of Rice's tales, it is the echoes of that "bedtime story" environment that generates the element of security, and which disposes those readers to feel comfortable with Rice's fiction even before reading begins. Given the sexually problematic nature of Rice's tales, the connection to childhood is a vital one, and its continued impact is a necessary condition, since without this sense of security it might be difficult (if not impossible) to maintain reader interest or tolerance in the face of the seemingly scary or opprobrious situations she depicts.

The way that the fun and safety element relates to "reader comfort" has much to do with the issue of normalcy. From a psycho-sociological perspective, normalcy is based largely upon a cultural consensus about what is "real." According to a materialist definition of "reality," of course, all literature (indeed all art) is "unreal," just as the conventional way of distinguishing literature from scientific discourse is its "imaginative" component. Yet to the extent that what is construed as "realistic" is a matter of convention, as semioticians like E. M. Gombrich and Nelson Goodman have argued, it equally becomes possible to establish boundaries between different kinds of literature on the basis of their adherence to a perceived "reality" component.

Plotted as a continuum, at one end of the spectrum is the novel of social criticism, which carries as its premise that the characters and events could really exist and do have their counterpart in the "real" world. Occupying a middle ground are science fiction and magic realism; the former operates by extrapolating from a "real" present to an imaginary—and usually evolutionary or devolutionary—other world and time; the latter weaves together presumably "real" situations and characters with exotic events and extravagant flights from actuality. Fantasy, finally, constitutes the pole most remote from the "reality," and its premise is that the events (past, present, or future) could never "really" happen in "real" life. Accordingly, it is the works in this "impossible" genre that call for a maximum amount of suspension of disbelief: to enjoy fantasy, the reader must be able to accept as possible—even if only temporarily—things, persons, and happenings which he/she would not consider credible outside the act of reading such a text.

Yet as much as fantasy is based on what's conventionally impossible, paradoxically again, the "real" is very much a necessary component of its impact. In his classic study of fantasy, Tzvetan Todorov has explained this realistic component in terms of a reluctance or hesitancy on the part of the reader, whereby he argues that the mood generated by

fantasy is one of uneasiness and uncertainty. Based on this analysis, fairy tales must be regarded as a distinct kind of fantasy—as a genre which not only constitutes a pole at the remotest from the "realistic" one but wherein the reality principle in its pure form does not universally apply. The distinction lies in the difference between adults and children as readers of fairy tales.

In order to understand how this peculiar dynamic might operate, one should note that the ability of fairy tales to transcend the laws of realism depends greatly on their reading context, and specifically on the period of life in which they are read/heard. And here, in turn, one should note a major difference between adults and children in terms of the preconditioning or climate of acceptance that is involved. Whereas adults are aware that they will have to suspend their disbelief even before picking up a book they know as belonging to the category of magic realism, children do not react to fairy tales in the same way. Indeed, children have no disbelief to suspend. This is not attributable to naïveté but rather to the very real nature of the relationship between the child and parent. When an adult reads a story which begins "Once upon a time" or "A long time ago in a land far, far away," he/she immediately assumes that the tale is fantastic (i.e., untrue). By contrast, when a child hears these words from a trusted caregiver—and these are usually the kind of adults who read such stories to the young—the child is doubly reassured: both the source (or voice) and the way that factuality is evoked by the repetitious element, and the words themselves, convey the impression that what the child is hearing is true. For children, then, the story is "real," and with this condition comes the move to normalcy.

Once the truth condition is established, furthermore, anything that follows also quickly becomes accepted as normal as well. If one were to ask any child what knights do, one would likely find "slay dragons" among the answers. Ignoring temporarily the fact that this is not historically accurate, it also constitutes a decidedly foolish action on the part of

the knight: given even the most generous (to the knight) popular conceptions of knights and dragons, no one could presume this to be a fair fight. Nevertheless, it is popularly accepted as required, commonplace, knightly behaviour.

This shift from unreality and strangeness to normalcy adds to the comfort in reading fairy tales, and the adult reader is prepared for this transition the moment a text is seen to belong to the genre. In the case of adults, it is the recognition of the genre itself that operates as the reassuring parental voice, and what guarantees the same shift to a sense of normalcy and a comforting feeling has much to do with the extent to which the evocation of the childhood situation. This evocation, it should be emphasised, occurs at a subliminal level, and indeed it is crucial that the connection of fairy tales to childhood and the transition to normalcy is not recognised on a conscious level; were we conscious of the dynamic, we would have to question our response and the text, whereas because the association is subconscious, we are more comfortable accepting the tale's events as normal. It is in short the suspension of our adult sensibilities that permits us to accept the events as "real."

Aside from its "fun and safe" aspects—or perhaps because of them—the fairy tale has also been a predominant educational form for children. As valuable as the experience of these stories is *in* childhood, moreover, there are obviously also developmental benefits, and not just in their explicit lesson-teaching application. Bettelheim repeatedly points out that exposure to the fantasy world created in fairy tales promotes an active imagination in later years. The ability to recall comforting experiences and environments and to fantasize about one's experiences is vital to emotional safety. Childhood, however, also has an equally profound correlation to the theme of domination and submission that is such a significant part of adult sexual experience. The link is found in that both in childhood and such sexual relationships, pleasure is achieved in servitude. In this



(submissive) aspect of adult sexual relationships, the desire is for a lifestyle that is focused on a single, simple goal: pleasing and obtaining the love and recognition of a superior who will take responsibility for all aspects of one's existence. This kind of lifestyle clearly parallels the situation we experienced during our childhood, when parents look to every need, and validation is attained in pleasing them. This particular (parent-child) relationship model is a central component in Rice's fiction, and not only in terms of the relationship between the characters, but also with respect to the reader-author relationship.

Fairy tales themselves, moreover, frequently have a sexual orientation, and Rice's decision to use the tale of the Sleeping Beauty (in particular) for her framework is far from accidental. Not only is it her own favourite fairy tale (Ramsland 120) in its original incarnation, it is also one that most lucidly represents sexual themes and images. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is at its core a narrative about sexual coming-of-age. Beauty's sleep begins at an age (fifteen, in the Rice version) when she is first cognisant of her own sexuality. Traditionally, this onset of sexual readiness is grudgingly accepted by the parents in the story, who fear their daughter's sexual awareness, and for whom the awakening (both literal and sexual) is bittersweet. In some early versions of the tale, they even provide delay mechanisms in the hope of extending the sleep-stage for their daughters (Bettelheim 139-40). This sexual awakening is more pronounced for girls than for boys for several cultural and bio-anthropological reasons. The most striking difference is the onset of menstruation. As suggested by virtue of the age of the fairy-tale Sleeping Beauty and Rice's heroine, both are enchanted (put to sleep) shortly after this physio-sexual transition. Blood of any kind (including the menstrual blood that accompanies sexual maturity) has always symbolically indicated trauma or violence, especially in forms as dependent on popular notions and folklore as the fairy tale. The violence of change that is intrinsic to menstruation can only, of course, be found in a heroine. As

well, this subtext of violence provides a framework which makes the Beauty tale inherently suitable for Rice's recasting it as a story for adults.

Although Bettelheim does not draw any lines of distinction between male and female characters (226), for the purposes of understanding Rice's work, such differences are essential. Bettelheim is dealing with the ways in which a fairy-tale character can act upon the subconscious of the prepubescent child, and in this context, he may very well be correct in his reluctance to distinguish between the sexes. For Rice's adult readership, however, the issue of gender roles is an important consideration. Her choice of a female heroine is vital, especially because of the typical pattern in fairy-tales of featuring male heroes and casting them in the dominant role. As an author, Rice is herself accustomed to creating and dealing with overwhelmingly powerful male protagonists—i.e. Lestat, Lasher, and Ramses, (in the Vampire Chronicles, the Tales of the Mayfair Witches, and The Mummy, respectively) and admits to being naturally inclined toward such characters (Ramsland 240-42). It is therefore significant that for the purposes of her most erotic work, Rice turns to a tale featuring a strong heroine instead. Insofar as the trilogy has been labelled pornographic, the choice of the Sleeping Beauty story is—among other things—a conscious, preëemptive strike against potential feminist detractors who automatically equate pornography with weak female characters, and so might accuse Rice of being anti-woman or anti-feminist. In a discussion of Rice's compassion for sexual outcasts of all kinds, Katherine Ramsland suggests that Rice's pornography is a "bold statement" in response to "gender-based political and social situations" (64). I have already noted how Rice saves her greatest respect for people willing to make such bold statements. The choice of Beauty for the protagonist's role illustrates that Rice is willing to move out of her most comfortable fictive element to make the point that strong female characters are possible within such a sexual landscape.

Apart from its purely dramatic role of establishing the challenge for the potential suitors, for Beauty herself as heroine her one-hundred-year sleep functions in two ways. In his discussion of the Sleeping Beauty tale, Bettelheim calls the first of these a delaying mechanism, which offsets the risk that Beauty may rush into a sexual experience for which she is not yet ready. The second purpose he describes as the actual emotional and intellectual preparation Beauty needs prior to taking any action on her part (225-26). The sleep period is a lengthy time of introspection, self-recognition and self-actualisation. Without this preparation the character may not be strong enough, emotionally or spiritually, to face those adventures to come. The literal awakening comes only once Beauty is ready to awake to the events that will inevitably follow.

Quoting Tolkien, Bettelheim outlines four elements required to fulfill the essence of the true fairy tale, to which he adds a fifth element of his own (143-44). The five elements are: fantasy, recovery, threat, escape, and consolation. When we apply these components to Rice's work, however, something very interesting happens. As a result of dealing largely with the adult's consciousness (as opposed to Bettelheim's focus on the child's subconscious), each of the five aspects becomes a binary within the Rice version of the story. Each binary reveals multiple meanings and two separate aspects—most often the basic and the sexualised—of its own essence.

The first element—the fantastic aspect—is crucial to the fairy-tale structure. It allows readers to distance themselves from the world in which the events take place. In the tale of Sleeping Beauty, the fantastic is represented in the hundred-year sleep, during which no one in the palace actually ages, while the world around them continues on as if all was normal. This is the case in both the traditional version of the tale and in Rice's Beauty books. The childhood fascination with such a feat of cheating time, however, has probably been lost in the case of most adult readers, and consequently Rice's strategy is

to turn adult skepticism against itself at the beginning of the tale. Rather than relying on the power of the more traditional hundred-year sleep element to astonish and enthrall, Rice begins her erotic trilogy with a paragraph evoking the familiar tale and emphasising its fictiveness—only, however, to conclude by suggesting its veracity:

The Prince had all his young life known the story of Sleeping Beauty, cursed to sleep for a hundred years, with her parents, the King and Queen, and all of the court...*But he did not believe it until he was inside the castle....it was true, this old tale.* (Claiming 1-2, emphasis mine)

Rice recognises that not all of the traditional elements of the fairy tale can be presented in all the traditional ways, especially considering the radically different readership at which her version is aimed. As a result, she begins by introducing a character who at the outset, too, had doubted the truth of the story, but had found proof of its reality—and who himself becomes the living proof of it. The result is a suspension of disbelief similar to that experienced by children listening to (or reading) the traditional version of the tale, but here instead of being a matter of trust, in Rice's case it is a dictated, carefully constructed challenge. Where the traditional fairy tale acquires veracity because of the "once upon a time" formula, here it is the immediate present which guarantees its authenticity. Because even this opening may not be enough to maintain the challenge, throughout the trilogy Rice indulges in a little playing with the readers' expectations of what "fantasy" involves. Through playing with this concept, she also turns this first of the elements into a fascinating binary.

In its traditional association with fairy tales, fantasy has carried with it the connotations of youth and innocence. With respect to adult sexuality, however, the implications of fantasy are profoundly different. The term "fantasy" has taken on many additional

connotations in the post-Freudian world. One need only watch 10 minutes of late-night television, where invitations to call 1-900-FANTASY, or peruse the personals of any newspaper, looking for a "fantasy girl," to realise that the word has indeed become inextricably sexualised in our culture. Rice uses our now-predominantly sexual understanding of the word to inflate the range of its possible interpretations in the text. In switching to a sexual context, Rice is able to maintain the element of fantasy so crucial to a fairy tale, without losing an adult audience that might otherwise dismiss such a work as infantile. Yet the change also preserves the power of fantasy to draw a reader into a tale.

Receptivity to fantasy is often dismissed by adults out of a sense of bitterness and resignation; the childlike fascination is something we can no longer feel as powerfully as we once did. By converting to the fantasies of sexuality, Rice is reclaiming fantasy for an adult readership, emphasising that it is acceptable to indulge in fantasies. These sexual fantasies are those almost offhandedly referred to in the public forum, while remaining conspicuously taboo on a personal level. To illustrate, we might note that although it is considered perfectly normal for "people" in general to fantasize, there are still severe sociocultural constraints on admitting that "one" does, in fact, do so. While therapists hail the power of imagining elaborate sexual scenarios as not only harmless but beneficial, it would nevertheless be difficult to find anyone willing to admit publicly that they have erotic thoughts about Richard Gere, or Uma Thurman, or any of the other latest pop culture/Hollywood sex symbols while on the bus to work, let alone while making love with their own mates. In addition to its reëmpowerment of adult imagination, the reclamation of fantasy has an exclusionary aspect: by focusing on sexual content Rice is making fantasy the domain of adults alone, thus resolving at least some of the jealousy felt at having lost that aspect of literature.

The second element of the fairy tale according to Bettelheim is recovery. It involves a character's release from emotional burdens, which in fairy tales, are most often despondency or melancholy. It can also be a physiological state from which one recovers, such as Beauty's sleep. With respect to the notion of recovery, Bettelheim also notes that a "happily ever after" ending is contrasted not necessarily with damnation or similarly horrible ends, but with "sett[ing] down to a humdrum existence" (24). Nowhere is such an ending more feared than in Rice's rewriting of the Sleeping Beauty tale. Despite everything that the characters endure, the true horror, the fate that they collectively and intensely eschew, is *boredom*. There is no more pitiable end, and allowing Beauty to avoid that fate while having the trilogy retain the essence of a fairy tale's "happily ever after" marriage-oriented ending is one of the difficult challenges Rice seeks to answer.

Indeed, I would argue that if a list were compiled of elements which can under no circumstances appear in fairy tales—whether those for children or adults—boredom would be the major state to be avoided. For children, boredom represents an emotional empty space; even fear is preferable. For Beauty and the adult readers of Rice's tale, boredom represents those moments when no attention is being lavished on us. For either generation, boredom comes when there are no more mysteries and fantasies to spur us on. Boredom is, at its core, an absence of magic and of transcendence. Consequently, a fairy tale can never be dull, for a potent magic must permeate every aspect of it in order for it to be successful. By "magic" here I mean not literal conjuring, but a sense of some inexplicable natural or supernatural force, having as its literary objective a desire to astonish and fascinate. This magic is vital to the very perpetuation of a fairy tale. Having depended for centuries on oral transmission, any less-than-wondrous episode would have been rejected by listeners long ago, and accordingly forgotten.

Like the element of fantasy, in Rice's work the element of recovery is also undercut through the use of binaries. In order to appreciate how she does this, however, it is first necessary to look at the third element—threat. In the Beauty books, recovery and threat are irretrievably intertwined. Bettelheim sees threat as a particularly insidious challenge to the soul or body of a character. The more common of the two is of course the threat of physical violence. Fairy tales abound wherein the threat of a character being poisoned or eaten is constantly lurking. Rice, who is an unabashed aficionado of violence—"I love it. It's obvious, isn't it?"—relishes its infusion into her version of the fairy tale (Playboy 62). Rice's dedication to the potential artistic merit and beauty of violence, however, takes her beyond the use of simple threat. Her focus is on an omnipresent violence to which nearly all the major characters are subjected, and which they wholly enjoy. Herein lies the paradox of threat and recovery in her version of the tale: the recognition that boredom is the main enemy of the tale's characters and readers means that recovery can come in the form of violence.

Presenting boredom as the threat, as the one state to be avoided at all costs, gives Rice the task of making any other state attractive. In fact, in the trilogy, boredom is the only state of existence that is described, without exception, in negative terms. Slaves see their hours of confinement as being "broken down by more interminable boredom," and Beauty less-than-wistfully characterises her prior existence at her parents' court as "interminable banquets where....she had felt only boredom" (Claiming 181, 185). Since boredom represents the main threat, anything else is welcomed as a heightening of the self (out of that state). These circumstances immediately make pain and violence a potential vehicle for that state of heightened sensation and experience. As Prince Alexi discovers and tells Beauty: "The paddlings were the only things that broke the boredom" (Claiming 179). The sheer omnipresence of suffering makes it the main, and eventually preferred, deliverance from boredom. "As I became more and more desperately bored," Alexi goes

on, "I commenced to look upon [his beatings] as an interlude. I....began to actually look forward to the terrible spankings" (*Claiming* 180-81). As a result, the reader is faced with the dilemma of accepting that, at least in fairy tales from the imagination of Anne Rice, tranquility is the wretched existence from which pain can save you.

Escape constitutes the fourth element of Bettelheim's formula for fairy tales. He sees escape in very literal terms, as a physical movement away from danger, "out of the clutches" of some evildoer. In the Rice trilogy, several such literal escapes take place, but although their structural nature fits quite well with Bettelheim's conception, they do differ in one key respect: none of the literal escapes is planned or initiated by the characters who are escaping. Wholly conventional escapes—where the protagonists orchestrate the attempt themselves—by contrast, are extremely uncommon. They are also followed by severe punishments when discovered, unlike the rewards reaped in the traditional fairy-tale form.

In Rice's trilogy, there are four of these non-volitional "escapes" to another place: from the home of Beauty's parents to Queen Eleanor's castle, from the castle to the village, from the village to the sultanate, and from the sultanate back to the Queen's kingdom. Each of these significant shifts in location is organised by people other than the escapees. What additionally contrasts these moves from traditional escapes is their fallout. Contrary to traditional fairy tales, where escapes lead to greater freedom and happiness, here the opposite is true. Every escape is undercut by an immediate feeling of dejection or even dread. For example, even though she is excited at the possibility of escaping the Castle for the mysterious Village, when it becomes clear she will be sent there, Beauty is for "one moment" terrified (*Claiming* 252). It is sometime later after such escapes (usually through an additional twist in circumstances) that characters reap any benefits from the change, as when Beauty comes to realise how fortuitous was her initial claiming



by the Prince: that to have remained asleep would have been a worse fate (Claiming 66-68). Again boredom is the enemy. Beauty is equally distraught by her removal from the sultanate, where she has found (her most recent) love with Inanna, the Sultana. Upon her return to the Queen's kingdom, Beauty learns of her impending freedom, and is devastated. It is only when her freedom proves advantageous through Laurent's concurrent sovereignty that she welcomes the change in circumstances.

The most important of all the elements of the fairy tale (for Bettelheim) is the fifth: that of consolation. Without it, the fairy tale would condemn its readers to suffer a dismal outcome and outlook, which would in turn defeat its own purpose: bringing joy in the process of illustrating important facts about life and humanity. The traditional consolation consists most often of a reunion between male and female characters, followed by a "happily ever after" ending. For Rice, however, the consolation to be derived from reinstatement to her former life and marriage would seem to fall into the category of boredom so horrifically avoided throughout her tale. With extreme cunning, therefore, Rice has managed a traditional ending that is as piquant as the tale itself. In Rice's fairy tale, the same dynamics distinguish the ending as those which separate the rest of the trilogy from its prototype: the duality that results from adding the sexual component. Beauty's reunion with Laurent and the nature of the relationship that promises to follow are decidedly sexual, and equally unconventional in that sexuality. The ending is driven by the same gleeful wickedness of adult sexual knowledge that has grown stronger as (in particular) the third book progresses. It is this element in turn which ironically provides the readers' sense of consolation. We are very aware that in their marriage, Beauty will stand beside Laurent by day as Queen, but will also serve as his sexual submissive by night. In keeping with the way that Rice has provided a balance of roles throughout the trilogy, she ultimately provides a compromise that satisfies both our need to see the attainment of conventional personal freedom (i.e. Beauty is no longer

just another slave to the Queen or to the Sultan), and Beauty's need for the excitement of sexual submission.

As is the case in all genres, a contract is entered into by those who read fairy tales, and here the pact made is one of trust: the reader gives the tale *carte blanche* to go in any direction, to explore any danger, and/or to impose on the reader any horror, as long as the element of consolation is convincingly and effectively invoked via a happy ending. Part of the tale's (or author's, in this case) task is to make the dangers so powerful and dire that as readers we are unsure right up to the conclusion about whether consolation is indeed possible. This, of course, is the crux of Todorov's uncertainty theory, and is how the levels of tension in reading (or listening to) such a tale are created: how will the hero get to a happy end when he is facing such a perilous set of circumstances?

Assuming that Rice will treat the ending to her tale with the same subversive relish as she does the beginning, Rice's adult readers ask the same question, but differently. While children *wonder* about the outcome, adults ask from an intellectual perspective: how will Rice subvert the traditional ending, and will her subversion still permit an optimistic outlook? Our tension regarding the element of consolation stems from not really wanting an end to Beauty's adventures (which are simply an extension of our embarrassed enjoyment/titillation in reading the books), while at the same time needing, as all readers of this genre do, some conclusion to the tale. Our uncertainty comes from wondering if Rice will be able to reconcile these two perspectives. As adults, our awareness throughout Rice's trilogy that we are reading a fairy tale breeds the expectation (where children—on a differently conscious level—have the hope) that we will eventually find consolation. In Rice's case, it takes the form of a kind of therapeutic consciousness-raising: we find pleasure in admitting that perhaps we are reading the Beauty tales through to the end because deep down, we enjoy what we read, and are excited by it. Rice's

ability to force her readers to face their inner embarrassment (or even shame) at this desire, while all the while continuing to read and getting a literary rush from those very sensations is the key to the recreation of the childlike feelings and reactions that all fairy tales must evoke in order to succeed and survive.

## 2. Not Words alone pleas'd her: A New Model of Reader-Response

In Sex, Power and Pleasure, Mariana Valverde outlines her view of the sex dialectic:

In an erotic situation....we all want to be the lover, the one in control, the subject who initiates sex. But we also have an equally strong need to give up our human power, to surrender it to a stronger being who will "take" us and relieve us....of making choices. The need to assert our sexual power....is perpetually shifting, giving way to the deep longing to be engulfed....to be both overpowered and protected (38).

All humans are active/submissive binaries within themselves and, as a result, so too are all relationships between them, be they physical, spiritual, or intellectual. Fascinating, however, is the tenacity of the traditional view: that within the arena of sexual relationships, binary power dialectics exist only in sexually sadomasochistic relationships. In fact, Valverde's dialectic is universal. It applies to all sexual (and perhaps even many non-sexual) relationships. What sets the control/surrender sexual dynamic apart is its representation (in domsub) of the extreme form of this dialectic.

A word here about terms: I find the terms "sadomasochistic" and "S/M" too culturally loaded and problematic for the purposes of my discussion, particularly in that the connotations and the general understanding of the relationships to which they are connected are inaccurate. In fact, these terms are rarely used by participants in such relationships. Most often, their preferred name for such proclivities, and the one I choose to use here is "domsub," a current abbreviation for "erotic domination and submission."

Domsub might be the most misunderstood of all sexual relationships. First and foremost, domsub is not about the infliction or the reception of pain. From a purely sensory perspective, the goal of domsub is profoundly heightened physical sensation. In fact, one of the more cautious current euphemisms for domsub is "extreme touch," and what is frequently sought through the construction of temporary relationships of servitude is actually a more powerful feeling of union. Simone de Beauvoir points out that "such behavior is not....sadistic; it shows a desire to blend"; what its practitioners are seeking is "union" (445). Certainly, physical pain can be a by-product of such experiments; when attempting to reach such ultimates, people may indeed go beyond the limits of extreme pleasurable sensation into pain. (The leap is not a great one.) Pain however, is never a goal to be sought.

The belief that domsub seeks to sexualise pain is not the only misconception about such relationships. Prominent also is the idea that domsub gives men the opportunity to victimise and control women sexually. If this were to be true, however, such subjugation would not exist outside domsub relationships, which unfortunately it all too frequently does. Domsub, furthermore, may in fact be the only sexual dynamic that truly transcends gender. Since men and women participate equally in domsub relationships, most often exchanging roles from one encounter to the next, it cannot be described as anything but gender-neutral. "The slave of love is not always a woman, nor always a heterosexual," writes Jessica Benjamin (281). The mere existence of such domsub relationships among lesbigay couples shows that gender has nothing to do with defining who plays which role in domsub (Lesbigay is a current term identifying and encompassing all three of lesbians, bisexuals, and gays).

Yet the question of power within domsub remains an enticing topic for those seeking to perpetuate the misconceptions surrounding this kind of sexual expression. Once

arguments on the issue of gender are disproven, the recourse is to suggest that anytime one person is invited to control another, to dominate them, an unhealthy, unacceptable relationship exists. The error lies in the belief that the power lies solely in the hands of the person playing the dominant role (commonly known as the "top," and complemented by the "bottom"). As Valverde points out, however, this power is actually contrived, constructed, and make-believe; in fact, it is an ancillary kind of power, since it is based wholly on the genuine power of trust, which is conferred on the top by the bottom (172). In her study of women's fantasies, Nancy Friday points out that from the perspective of the bottom "there is no effort to disguise that even as 'victims' they are controlling everything that happens" (115). Rice understands the paradoxical power of the bottom in this relationship extremely well: "People....want to be in the focus of that intense devotion and attention and control. And, of course, they want to control all that" (Ramsland 213).

A similar kind of misunderstanding pertains to the belief that the submissive role adopted by the bottoms is an attempt to dissolve the self until a kind of sexual or emotional non-existence is achieved—a total absorption into the will of the top. In this case again, however, the motivation is in fact most often quite different. To be the bottom is, as Rice noted, to be the focus of the top's ministrations, to be the centre of their world. Rice calls this intense dynamic "the fantasy of attention" (Ramsland 213). In one of her definitions of masochism, Valverde defines such passive eroticism as a desire "to receive the powerful erotic force of a lover" (171). In other words, to be a bottom is to be a recipient, not a victim, of the top's force and undivided attention. To be a successful top, one must concentrate all of one's energy on the sexual needs of the bottom. This total attention, this dedication, is the mainstay of the satisfaction sought by the bottom. The attraction lies in having to do nothing but focus completely on one's own physical sensations; it is a state of complete, childlike self-absorption. Far from engendering a

dissolution of the self for the recipient, domsub involves a promotion of the self into a state of sexual and emotional narcissistic exclusivity: the bottom becomes the only person, the only reality in the top's world.

The last of the common misconceptions is the idea that within domsub a dangerous chaos reigns over the actions of the players involved. Once again, the actuality is not only different, but quite the opposite. Jessica Benjamin calls domsub a form of "rational violence mingl[ing] love with issues of control and submission....expressed in....carefully institutionalised, voluntary sexual practices" (281). Can it be said of any other expression of sexuality (with the possible exception of the tango) that it is "carefully institutionalised"? Domsub is the only sexual expression to be intensely concerned with structure and rules of conduct. It must by its very essence be so, based as it is on the power of the bottom's trust in the top. This trust is rooted in the promise to remain within the strict boundaries of the encounter. To introduce chaos, therefore, is to eliminate the dynamic which is domsub's driving—and containing—force.

In Rice's Beauty trilogy, the dialectic that characterises domsub in its most extreme form is exemplified in Laurent. He finds enlightenment, pleasure and value in both servitude and mastery. Though himself a slave by rank throughout, he initiates the secret dominant relationship with Lexius, whereby as he tells his "master": "You are my slave here and now, and damn the rest of them, damn the Sultan, the entire palace" (Release 86). He shares a curious respect with the Captain of the Guard, and eventually masters Beauty in the idyllic domsub relationship that concludes Rice's trilogy: "Offer, Princess, offer? I come with a command" (Release 235). Laurent's ability to move fluidly from one role to another within domsub illustrates the interdependence between the two parts. Beauty herself, however, also serves to articulate such ideas, and significantly, her understanding of the binary comes to her steadily, rather than by some epiphanous revelation. She is in

the Queen's castle only one day when she gets her first inkling of what is required of tops, if they are to be effective. Upon witnessing another slave playacting a little in her subservience to the Queen, Beauty "hoped she would be spanked again until her sobs were real...and she found herself vaguely delighted when the Queen ordered it" (Claiming 59). By the time that she and the others are abducted, Beauty not only enjoys watching other bottoms enslaved, but entertains "[m]ad thoughts....of tethering [Tristan] in the harnesses herself" (Punishment 209).

Beauty's understanding of mastery culminates in the episode with Inanna. In the harem environment, the rules with which she is familiar no longer apply—among them the rule that no harm will come to participants, that everything is educational, that trust is at the core of such relationships. Beauty's response to the enforced master/slave relationships that characterise the harem situation is to break the rules of the Sultanate, a process which involves initiating the Sultana to her understanding of love and domsub. Beauty does not understand why the Sultan's wives, with their social standing, are dressed "like slaves," and at first, her desire for Inanna is strange to her (Release 94). This foreignness is not because Inanna is a woman, but because she is not a top. Rice's strategy, in turn, is to use the language of domsub roles and temporarily to recast the now experienced Beauty into the role of top in contrast to Inanna's virginal bottom. Thus in the episode in which Beauty consummates her desire for Inanna, there is a shift from her position of being an always-receiving bottom to that of active top: "She *clasped* Inanna's head and *forced* her mouth onto Inanna's mouth and when the woman stiffened, Beauty *refused* to let her go....she *drew* the breath out of Inanna....she *pressed* her pubis against Inanna's pubis and *twisted* her hips" (Release 96-97; emphasis mine). Striking in this episode is that it is not until we see Beauty as a top that we truly understand how much love is involved in being one of the dominants. Though hate for the Sultan and his court certainly assists in driving



her adrenalin, it is love for Inanna, and an unwavering dedication to her pleasure that makes Beauty an effective top.

In the only other episode in which she acts as a top, Beauty is equally effective, though far less fulfilled. This episode appears near the conclusion of the trilogy, wherein her manipulations of one of the princes who comes to suit her are without question worthy of Queen Eleanor's court, and whereby she illustrates that clearly she has learned as much about being a good top as about being a good bottom. The suitor is so enthralled by her mastery that he will no doubt turn himself over to the same court where Beauty served. Beauty's realisation, in turn, is that she cannot be happy as a top: "I don't really want a slave," she tells him, "I want to be one" (Release 208).

Through both of these episodes, it becomes evident that Beauty, like Laurent, is one of the few individuals who are able to grasp both sides of the domsub binary and enact the roles effectively. It is equally apparent, however, that she can be truly happy in only one of the two roles, that of the bottom. By the end of her adventures Beauty clearly has no interest in assuming a double role: "She was too jealous of the suffering she inflicted, too eager for the subjugation" (Release 209). Because of her experiences, however, it is also clear that she understands both sides, whereby her decision to be a bottom is an unequivocal matter of choice.

Rice's use of domsub in the trilogy is a crafted, sociopolitically and sexually charged exercise. The characters take their roles and positions very seriously, perceiving the experience as something as vital not only to sexual concerns, but also to social structure and development as well. In these tales, just as good sexual bottoms make good tops, so too do those who have been cast in the role of slaves make good rulers in the social and political sphere. More than that, however, the two are conjoined: becoming a sexual

bottom is part of the training for becoming a successful political top. It is with a view to their future as leaders that Beauty and Laurent and all of the other princes and princesses subject themselves to sexual servitude. Their society's indentured servitude among nobles is a tool of preparation—one which has proven itself very effective in turning out capable rulers, as Beauty's parents prove. In this way, Rice's trilogy functions as a delightfully parodic but also very Machiavellian version of various Renaissance treatises about the education of courtiers and rulers, wherein she plays out their concern with issues of power in terms of the domsub dynamic. Her intent, in this respect, is as serious as theirs, and accordingly Rice is very careful to articulate the code of ethics which informs the morality of such a dynamic.

At the outset of the trilogy, the Prince who initially claims Beauty wastes no time before explaining the most attractive element of being a slave or bottom. The only goal, he says, is to submit as wholly as possible to the top: "How many....know such clarity, such simplicity?" (Claiming 23). Beauty's father, albeit somewhat reluctantly, concurs with the Prince. Speaking from the point of view of one who has experienced such subservience, he tells his daughter: "though you find your servitude surprising and difficult at times, be confident you will return, as [the Prince] says, greatly changed for the better" (Claiming 16). Rice further outlines the parameters of Beauty's "education" once she is brought into the Queen's palace. Lord Gregory begins his almost humourously pseudo-Taoist instruction of Beauty immediately, whispering to her that the best way is that of resignation: "You must accept," he instructs her quietly while she is prodded and pawed, on display for members of the court (Claiming 52). In turn, it is Beauty's groom Leon who articulates the rationale which underwrites and makes positive this kind of education: "nothing shall ever be done which truly harms you. You will never be....injured" (Claiming 89-90). It is this dedication to the education and

development of future social and political leaders that governs the entire domsub framework within the trilogy.

Beauty's domsub existence is designed to promote two branches of growth, the physical and the spiritual, and to illustrate the bridge that exists between them. As much as her education is marked by episodes of physical (and sometimes emotional) sensation, they are always accompanied by spiritual insights. Traveling through stages of growth, Beauty experiences a progression that begins with shock and moves on to resignation, curiosity, enticement, and eventually leads through pleasure to understanding. Initially, Beauty cannot comprehend at all what is happening to her. She simply rationalises her state, resigning herself to it in order to tolerate it: "This is my life, she told herself" (Claiming 29). No sooner does she do so, however, then she experiences an inkling of the power she has as a bottom. What comes with her realisation that the Prince's devotion to her makes her the only one by whom he can truly be sexually satisfied is an awareness that her sexuality gives her the power to alleviate emotional and physical pain—i.e. to heal. In this way, we can see that if Rice's stated goal in the Beauty books is an "elegant sadomasochism [set] in a safe environment, where punishment enhance[s] rather than restrict[s] sexual freedom" (Ramsland 213), the kind of elegance she has in mind includes a large component of "spiritual" refinement.

There is, of course, a long tradition of associating sexuality and spirituality, and when Benjamin asserts that "examined closely, sexual eroticism appears as the heir to religious eroticism" (281), she is calling upon an ages-old linking of eros and agape. Moreover, this sexual-spiritual connection has recently been explicitly emphasised in a trio of sex manuals aimed at Christian married couples. Borrowing at least in part the spirit of the Song of Songs, they ask their readers to commingle their sexual and spiritual feelings as follows:

"as you are with your partner and you begin to make love, offer a quiet inner prayer thanking God for those pleasant, exciting, satisfying feelings....pray together before or during pleasuring....Include God in your activity as you become more aroused"

"making love offers insight into Christ's relationship and modus operandi with His beloved followers"

(The Gift of Sex and A Celebration of Sex, qtd. in Cornog and Perper 9)

The very "vanilla" nature of these texts—lots of non-Christians mention God while in the throes of passion, though not, one suspects, in "quiet prayer"—puts them in a different category of sexual-spiritual manuals from that of Rice's works. The goal, however, is quite similar to that of *Beauty*, Laurent, and the other slaves: in both cases the objective is to seek greater spiritual understanding through sexual ecstasy. What separates the two is a matter of applicability and intensity: where these manuals offer guidance to straight, married couples, the slaves in the *Beauty* trilogy appear at least to be universally single, and are definitely not restricted to heterosexual encounters. Intensity is the other distinctive factor; it would be difficult to imagine any Christian organisation or sex manual recommending domsub to its readers as a way of getting closer to Christ. At the same time, there is indeed a definite historical precedent for just such a dynamic: in the case of many saints, one can find accounts of linking sexuality and spirituality in a sadomasochistic or domsub context. In Rice's case, this connection also seems to be rooted in personal experience. According to her biographer, at age eight, early feelings of sexuality were precipitated by attempts to empathise with Christ's agony: "Anne began to experience an erotic connection to the rituals.... The excitement [of spiritual

transcendence] mixed with thrills of fear to provoke a special physical tension" (Ramsland 30).

One way that this early link between spirituality and sexuality is forged and retained in the Beauty trilogy pertains to its ritualistic structure. In their most simple form, the pornographic aspects take the form of a series of episodic rituals within a larger ritualistic narrative. The enactment of these rituals is guided by protocol, revered by participants, and aimed at enlightenment.

Many episodes in the trilogy, furthermore, have a distinctly religious dimension, of which the most striking might be Laurent's punishment on the cross. Recalling the sentiment (though not the blandness) of the readers of Christian sex manuals, he seeks to know his "masters and mistresses better," and to "feel their power to the marrow of my bones" (Release 13). Laurent runs away from the Castle life he now finds boring. Once captured, his first impression conjures visions of a man before the gates of Heaven: "in the blazing moment of inescapable justice, everything was further clarified" (Release 14). Though it may appear sacrilegious or blasphemous at first glance, Laurent's anal impalement on the heavy crucifix is really (in symbolically Christian or even more generally spiritual terms) just one attempt at a kind of severe, ultimate empathy, as well as spiritual understanding through physical extremes. Laurent himself sees it as an elevation, an honour: "I was....the only one of us....who had earned the Punishment Cross" (Release 14).

The episode describing Beauty's arrival in the Sultanate is similarly designed to highlight the spiritual element. When she meets Lexius, the steward of the Sultan's slaves, his messianic personality impresses itself upon her so potently that her "memories of [previous masters] were suddenly threatened with complete dissolution" (Release 47). Such a feat clearly resembles that of prophets who challenge and eventually obliterate old

beliefs in their listeners. Lexius demands that the slaves give up their souls to him and the nobles, and at the conclusion of his speech, Beauty is "dazed with all he had said to her" (Release 50). For her, Lexius is the one who ultimately illustrates the most successful joining of spiritual control with physical desire: she envies the even fleeting attention her new master pays to another slave, and "would have done anything to have him touch her again" (Release 49).

This conjunction of the spiritual and the physical had, moreover, already been played out in the relationship of Tristan and his master, Nicholas, in the second book of the trilogy. Here it is also given clear enunciation in terms of Tristan's philosophy of slavery. His language is particularly religious in its tone and diction, just as his experiences provide one reason why Rice chose "Punishment" as the key word for the title of this volume. From his very arrival in the village when he asks Beauty "why struggle?" Tristan's is the path of the obedient servant, the ideal Christian submissive (Punishment 12). His journey in fact begins with a wink to the archetypal fall and expulsion from the garden of Eden. Tristan recalls the way that he had led the Queen's men "on a merry chase through the thick trees and shrubbery," and he quickly realises that "I had deliberately cast myself down" (Punishment 63). Once out of the garden and introduced to the ways of the village, Tristan expresses his understanding of the situation, in terms which re-emphasise the spiritual nature of his predicament:

I understood my lot....I understood it more clearly with every  
 excruciating trial and....I gave thanks from the depths of my  
 being that [my Master] had seen fit to break me so  
 thoroughly....I was bound, penitent, condemned to the village.  
 (Punishment 120-21)

In this way, and in true Christian fashion, Tristan sees his own punishment as a necessary step toward salvation, and thus as a blessing in disguise.

Appropriately, however, it is Laurent—the future leader and ultimate claimant to Beauty—who finally experiences and articulates this spiritual-physical relationship in its most undiluted form. His mantra could be phrased: "excitement is all," for he knows that erethism is the secret key to true knowledge. Looking upon the face of his master/slave Lexius, he notices first the expression on it, and then its significance: "His eyes were glittering with anger. Or with excitement. Hard to tell which. But what is the difference, really....It's the light that matters" (Release 82). For Laurent, as for all the characters, sexual energy is the means to enlightenment, and the sign of grace is the glitter in their masters' eyes.

Partly owing to her own early experiences, Rice therefore is able to make us see sexuality from a perspective in which it functions as a catalyst for spiritual arousal. Accordingly, she is also able to make us see how the "progressive taboo" against pornography (as Snitow puts it, 40) might be a way of prohibiting, rather than encouraging psychic growth. Rice sees the growth process as taking a complex sexual-psycho/spiritual developmental path, wherein participation in such taboo activities as domsub "promotes self-growth, self-knowledge, and....then creates psychological intensity that in turn yields the possibility for spiritual experience" (Ramsland 233). This is because the relationships found within domsub are ultimately reflections of those which operate in the religious model: the bottoms are to the tops as worshippers are to their gods; neither can hope to exist without the other, and they are both wholly defined by the other's existence and love.

Now that we can recognize and understand the complicated aspects of domsub relationships in the sexual-spiritual sphere, we should also be in a position to appreciate what may constitute Rice's unique contribution to the potential impact of pornography on many other areas of literary study: namely, the way that the domsub model applies to reader-author-text relationships as well. For as much as the Beauty trilogy takes the form of an educational manual, that same educational aspect applies to Rice's audience and the entire literary situation. Just as the characters within the tales function within a domsub relationship, so too do we and Rice when we read these works.

As we have seen, the domsub model entails a hierarchy, and while we need to bear in mind that the element of mutual dependency that exists actually operates to reverse what would be the expected conventional power alignments—that is, the top having power over the bottom—it may be helpful to begin by noting the way that, in reading the Beauty trilogy, we are clearly positioned as bottoms to Rice's position as top. Rice's major means of ensuring this position is, of course, the way she encourages us to align ourselves with Beauty, the central bottom in the tale. This identification is secured, however, not merely by the fact that she is the titular character, but also by the alternatives provided at the outset of the tale. In recasting the familiar opening of the fairy tale, Rice ignores the history of the sleep spell and the euphemistic releasing kiss. Instead, the episode which invites us into the tale, though enchantingly described and contextualised, remains at its basest a rape. In addition to the fact that Beauty represents the most familiar and comfortable character from the original fairy tale, no reader of fairy tales, even if given the option, will align themselves with a rapist—in this case the Prince—and thus through an initial sense of sympathy, we are inexorably tied to Beauty for the remainder of the trilogy.



With ourselves firmly connected to Beauty within the narrative frame, Rice initially speaks through the Prince who "claims" her. In the Prince, Rice has a springboard to a myriad of characters with which she represents herself to our Beauty. Rice is also able to allow Beauty to be mobile between different settings by not limiting her own presence in the trilogy to a single character tied to a single locale. As a result, we find Rice in the guises of—among other minor characters—the Prince, the Queen, Lord Gregory, Lady Juliana, Mistress Lockley, and Laurent. Throughout, Rice aligns herself with powerful figures, in order to maintain the pitch of the reader-author domsub relationship.

Rice makes carefully crafted use of these surrogates and their consistently personalised commands to Beauty. They give her the opportunity to speak directly to her readers whenever she feels it appropriate, simply by having one of the characters address Beauty. In the first book of the trilogy, Rice speaks through the Prince to explain the nature of the relationship she will exact upon her readers throughout the series: "punishment will come whenever I desire to give it. I will punish when it pleases me" (25-26). As Beauty contemplates the possibility of becoming more willful and more rebellious once arrived in the village, Mistress Lockley—Rice's most impressive female surrogate—explains that the punishments of the village have a very different motivation than those of court: "there won't be any rich Lords and Ladies....nor any soldiers or other gentlemen...just you and I" (Punishment 34). Clearly, there is a level of intimacy heretofore unseen, an intimacy to which Rice certainly expects her readers to adhere as well. The result of all of this is that the trilogy is speaking not to us as sexual bottoms, but as literary ones. The education of Beauty by a variety of trainers is in reality our education at the hands of Anne Rice. When Alexi says to Beauty, "Don't try to understand all that I say at once. Merely listen, and see if the story in the end does not soothe you," Rice is also providing her reader with an overt message: surrender is the key to knowledge (Claiming 174).

Getting the reader to agree to this surrender, however, is not necessarily an easy task. Within the domsub dynamic, we know that Rice can legitimately assume the power of the top only with our permission. What we should now consider is how Rice secures her position as top, not by coercion, but by creating a literary environment in which we *want* to be a bottom to her top. Here one of her simplest strategies is an appeal to our curiosity. Together with Beauty, we are enticed by mentions without explanations of the Bridal Path, the Village and the punishment of the Cross. Just like Beauty, we are eager for the unknown, for new experiences: "impatient to know the full extent of what [is] to happen" (Release 21). The secrecy surrounding the tale's suggested, impending episodes is both a force for intensifying our interest, and a factor in our willingness to continue as Rice's bottoms. What keeps us reading is, as in a traditional fairy tale, the constant piquing of our curiosity—the Scheherazade principle of appealing to the desire for novelty in our entertainments, of repeated shocking incidents, each more surprising than the last.

In the case of Rice's fiction, these shocking incidents also have an extremely visceral nature, creating through the reading experience a vicarious exposure to the acute sensations which characterise domsub in the sexual domain. The trilogy does so in a manner that actually evokes immediate (and sometimes shocking) parallel physical reactions—either empathetic or sympathetic, but always unforeseen—in the reader. More than that, each of the "spankings" becomes more shocking, thereby not merely increasing our tolerance, but also generating a craving for exposure to even greater punishments. The result of this tangible titillation and efforts to arouse a sensual response in us is to create a situation wherein to stop reading makes the reader feel—as much through the language as through those episodes described by it—as though an actual, tactile experience will be foregone. Thus Rice's tactics are those of immersion and deprivation, just as bottoms are always immersed in the attention of their tops. The

ways this dynamic operates is well suggested by an early description of Beauty's induction at Queen Eleanor's court:

They were paddled fiercely down the steps, Beauty shaken and red-faced and shivering with the passion that was kindled anew, and driven into the yard, there to be bathed in wooden tubs by the kitchen girls, who went to work with their rough brushes and towels.

(Punishment 163)

The passage represents a microcosm of almost everything we experience as readers of the trilogy. Like Beauty, we are first or at the forefront (among readers). Yet despite our position, we are only there because Rice is pushing, or in this case paddling, us from behind. Our status is tempered with pain and exposure, to ensure that we do not forget that we remain halves to the domsub dynamic's whole. The continued success of the relationship depends on our not forgetting.

The fierceness of the paddling—both Beauty's and ours, empathetically—though necessary, is tempered throughout. The humour that follows is the first device Rice uses: Beauty's face is made red by a paddle that clearly lands elsewhere. The fact that such fierceness arouses passion above all other sensations is a second. That the paddling is immediately followed by care at the hands of the girls is a third. Interestingly, Rice tempers kindness throughout as often as she does cruelty, frequently in the interest of intensifying the viscosity of the reader's experience: here, the anticipated comfort of a bath is tinged with the "terrible pleasure" of "rough brushes and towels." Just as Beauty experiences this ongoing series of interchanging dark clouds and silver linings, silver clouds and dark linings, so too do we as readers.

The crux of Rice's new reading model is rooted in her dedication to honesty in writing, an approach directly linked to her early successful works. Her first published novel (Interview With The Vampire) was written as an escape from alcoholism and as a self-constructed therapy. As a consequence of the cathartic nature of that first major writing experience, Rice seems—perhaps more than any current prolific author—to be more concerned with pure expression of feelings and ideas, and less with contrived notions of "artistry" or "commercialism." Her persistence through the objections and complications that erupted over the publication of the Beauty trilogy also supports the idea that it is the emotional nature of her work that drives her (Ramsland 221). In order for Rice to be able to show us such an inner corner of her sexual psyche, however, she demands that we do it on her terms. The reading experience here is more a product of invitation than of exhibitionism. It is made a privilege, and again we are made to feel special as readers. In writing in this open, personal manner, Rice establishes vulnerability as the central condition or even requirement of both author and reader, and trust becomes the driving force behind the relationship between them. In the end, such a relationship necessitates a new kind of reading in order to reward both author and reader for their efforts.

As a writer, Rice seeks readers of increasing intellectual and emotional stature, since it is readers that define her craft and her existence. This relationship is expressed in the final book of the trilogy by Lexius, who explains to Beauty that if the slaves in his charge are not seen as exemplary by the sayyids at court, it is he who suffers, his image that is tarnished. Like all tops, he is defined by his bottoms: "It is absolutely out of the question that you do not distinguish yourselves....that they do not compliment *me* upon your loveliness" (Release 49). Status notwithstanding (and in the literary world, status is certainly afforded based on one's readership), Rice is also asking people to read differently, because she is writing differently. By taking the risk of putting on paper her "genuine erotic fantasy," Rice felt "alive to her work." The necessary and resulting

exposure of herself was worth the sense of authenticity: "There's almost no literary dilution" (Ramsland 212, 218). Rice adds to this the admission that the Beauty books add a deeply personal exposure to the reader/author relationship itself—"When someone writes an authentic book....when elements of fantasy cohere to real feeling, you have a window into a psyche" (Ramsland 218).

The motivation to accept the role of bottom in a domsub relationship is an intrinsically selfish one. At its core is the desire to be elevated, and to become the sole focus of all of the top's attention and energies. In the relationship between Rice and her readers the same is true, though at different and at multiple levels. Initially the desire is simply a reflection of Beauty's desire. Just as she seeks total self-absorption into pleasure and servitude—"I wanted to be....lost among my punishments" (Punishment 207)—so too do we seek to surrender to our fantasies. Angela Carter points out that "the one-to-one relation of the reader with the book is never more apparent than in the reading of pornographic fiction," and that because the dilemma of those readers is non-participation, they seek out substitutes (14). Through this intense textual relationship to the character, we can also develop an extratextual bond to the author herself. We seek such a bond because we wish to feel special from the readers of other authors. Just as the submissive who craves status based on attention, so too do we in our relationship with Rice. To be invited into the author's fiction is one step on that status ladder. To be shown her private fantasies is a second. To be able to share in the viscerality, the sensations of those fantasies is a pleasingly surprising third. To learn from them is a fourth. And to feel that all of this is a privilege not extended to the readers of other authors is yet another elevation. All of these are steps which distinguish the reader of one author's works from those who read other authors, but eventually, we hope that our status will in fact extend beyond that of the other Rice-reading literary bottoms around us—that we will individually become the special reader. Our ultimate desire as readers is to surrender to

Rice completely in the hope that we will understand something as yet never grasped, or even perceived, by any reader. It is at such a point that the elevation of the literary self will be successful.

The tradeoff for this elevation is that we must continue to submit throughout; we must let Rice guide, control, and teach us. All the decisions—after that of participation—are hers. We must follow along trusting that we not be exposed to experiences our trust proscribes. In this way, the control and attention to structure found in real-life domsub is equally important to literary domsub relationships. If Rice permitted any opportunity for chaos to intrude on the dynamic, then there would be no way for her to ensure the happiness of, and continued attention from, her readership. Were we to abandon these rules, to raise questions and objections, or even interpret as we read, etc.—we would be rejecting the opportunity to be affected. Immediacy, surprise, and spontaneity are just some of the tools of the top in a domsub relationship. They are equally vital to the reading process. To resist these aspects through an uncoöperative reading method would be to nullify the author's attempts to affect us as readers. Such a breach of implicit contract would make the reading process no less futile than if attempting to read a mystery novel in reverse, or in a graphic novel refusing to read anything printed in balloons. Essentially, if we as readers were to abandon either the rules of submission or those governing how we read, we would be creating a situation in which Rice's tales lost their ability to entertain, titillate, and teach.

The significance of this new domsub model of the author-text-reader relationship should not be underestimated, for it clearly poses a serious challenge to the currently fashionable emphasis on the "active reader" or the entire "reader-response" school associated with critics like Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, and Stanley Fish. According to such approaches, primary consideration must be given to the experiences which the individual

reader brings to the text, and in effect the only text there is, is the one which the reader has reconstructed on the basis of his/her personal experience. Similarly, according to such reasoning, the reader's task is to resist the text as much as possible and persistently to engage in deconstructing it. It is not difficult to see why such an ego-inflating, pseudo-liberal-pluralist model has become so popular.

Unfortunately, some texts refuse to function as a sounding board for the reader's experiences, and rather seek to create new ones. Similarly, not all authors will allow themselves to function merely as the present-at-creation-and-ever-since-absent smith of that board. Reader-response criticism thus seems to have stalled itself at the very point where it ought to have come full circle: literature can be an environment in which the author and reader can connect emotionally, sexually, intellectually, spiritually, or in all of these ways, through the characters that represent them. Somewhere beyond the level at which the reader plays detective, trying to grasp the author's meaning, and somewhere beyond the level at which the reading act is wholly text-reader centered, there is a place where the text serves as a space—possibly a playground, or a dungeon, or a downs in Essex—in which the author and the reader interact in a fashion best suited to the nature of that space.

This is, moreover, a way in which reader-response criticism comes up short even *in terms of* reader-response when compared to domsub as a reading method. The domsub model in fact encourages a level of (reader-)response so immediate, so intensely physical that it achieves a purity, an involuntary immediacy heretofore unidentified. What seems to be the root of the misperception made by reader-response criticism is that it seems to have fallen victim to the common misunderstanding of the domsub relationship--the tendency to see it as an either/or situation rather than as a pact in which one side empowers the other. What reader-response theorising also seems to have overlooked, in turn, is that in

the domsub model there are two dimensions to this pact, or two levels of a reader's engagement with a text. The first level demands that as the bottom, the reader's most important choice is not a matter of *whether* to resist or surrender but rather a question of to which top they will submit, and which author is up to the job of literary top; and here the reader is totally in control. The second level is the actual reading, and here for the reader to resist submission to the author/text is tantamount to admitting a bad choice in the first place.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all about the "active-reader" theory as it pertains specifically to the challenge posed by Rice's alternative "submissive" model lies in the reasoning employed by Roland Barthes—in many ways the progenitor of the reader-response school of criticism. According to Barthes, one should recall, "the death of the author" is necessary for "the birth of the reader," and for Barthes the "pleasure" of the text is contingent upon overcoming the "boredom" that results from being a passive consumer: "to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, *set it going*" (163). Rice, as we have seen, is equally concerned with boredom, but for her preventing this situation is very much the task of the author, who must be very "alive" indeed, and when the author does evidence such a presence in the text, then the reader can very much take pleasure in submission. One could say, then, that reader-response theory seems to have been founded on a bad choice at the first level of author-reader relationship—the choice of which authors to read—and that had Barthes afforded himself the privilege of reading Rice's Beauty trilogy he would have found a passivity that goes far beyond any simple mode of consumption, just as he would have found a "pleasure of the text" that goes beyond any estheticized brand of "*jouissance*" (142-48, 155-64).



### 3. Ladies and Gents, Choose your Poison: Femporn—the New Feminism

Sex—and depictions thereof—does not equal sexism, which by definition is an oppressive force. Unfortunately, many critics, social commentators, and public figures—perhaps out of a general puritanical perspective which is well served by real sexism but not by real sex—fail to distinguish the two. Sara Diamond writes that "it *is* possible to create images of sexual experience that do not perpetuate the current imbalance between men and women" (41; emphasis mine). Marcelle Perks certainly agrees, and offers a suggestion as to the source of those new, remedial images:

I've learnt there are more choices than just being a slut or a whore. Women are already interested in pornography but many feel too embarrassed to become consumers and take an active role in shaping the demands of the marketplace. Pornography needs to be changed so that it doesn't project only to male desires. Instead of banning it, women need to participate and create pornography. (70)

In this light, pornography is not the problem, but rather the way the genre is used: in itself, pornography is no more inherently sexist than melodrama, or black comedy, or pulp fiction. Although it can certainly be sexist, pornography can just as easily be free from sexist messages, and moreover can be used to counter them. If this were not the case, then we would have to conclude that the quite literally hundreds (if by now not thousands) of creators of femporn around the world are all motivated in one of two ways: either they are deliberately attempting to hurt their gender specifically and society as a whole through their creations, or these same writers are too dumb to understand that they have been flummoxed into doing so by a startlingly organised misogynist cabal of publishers, editors, husbands, boyfriends, friends, acquaintances and readers. Safely

assuming neither to be the case, the questions remain: why femporn? And what is so different about it? My answer is that femporn's existence and recent explosion are responses to the kind of pornography that had been, until very recently, the only kind available: pornography that held limited appeal for a significant portion of its female audience. Femporn is intrinsically an improvement on porn that did not—by and large—employ female creativity, empower women through production, or engage a female viewer.

That is not to say that femporn is itself without its detractors. Most of those who oppose traditional mainstream pornography are equally rigid in their opposition to femporn. Central to the anti-porn lobby is the idea that pornography is inherently harmful to a society and its citizens, and that all porn leads to the undervaluation, degradation, and eventual desecration of women. Unfortunately for the lobby, ongoing research by scientists and committees in 3 countries and spanning almost 30 years—from and highlighted by the 1968 President's Commission, to the research of notable scientists such as Drs. Malamuth, Shore, Linz, and Donnerstein, to the 1985 Meese Commission—has consistently shown that there is no link between the consumption or even the *availability* of erotic material and anti-woman or criminal behaviour (Pally *passim*).

Other objections abound, however. Noting that one "anti-porn campaigner....constantly refers with disgust to what she calls 'splayed vaginas,'" Avedon Carol is quick to point out the unfounded basis for this opinion: that women's genitals are inherently unattractive ("Body Parts" 116). I would add that even if one were to believe that censorship could be justified, self-loathing cannot serve as a basis for that justification. Other objections include the idea that women are not interested in porn, that the actresses in pornographic films are actually being raped, and that porn is sexist. We know already from Diamond that porn is no more naturally sexist than any other form of expression, though it is

usually more sexual (41). Rape wherever it occurs is a heinous crime, and should be prosecuted vigorously in all instances. To suggest that pornography is rape, however, is tantamount to saying that "porn" rapists are producing, editing, and distributing admissible prosecutorial evidence of their crimes to millions of consumers. As for the argument that women as a gender are uninterested in porn, this is to ignore the facts. Books have been written in which women extol the wonders and thrills of pornography of all kinds. Women own and run companies producing, distributing, casting, and writing pornographic films, books, audio and multimedia materials. Most importantly, women are identified as the purchasers and consumers of between 40 and 47% of the (internationally) \$8 billion of porn produced annually (Assiter & Carol 15; Pally 67).

Despite all of this evidence, the opponents of porn continue to work towards the censorship of pornography in all its forms. What is striking is that if their genuine concern is the emotional well-being and stability of women, then their efforts may actually be doing more harm than good. Meera Dharan (who is one of many women who have to write pseudonymously as a result of attitudes surrounding porn) makes the valid point that her "culture has placed enough guilt on me without the double burden of radical feminists telling me that I should be feeling disempowered by porn, when clearly I am not" (13). The actions of pro-censorship and/or anti-porn feminists contribute to the fostering of feelings of guilt, ignorance, and sexual confusion in the women they hope to protect. And herein lies the problem: forcing women to live under *anyone's* protection—even that of other women—is to relegate them to the level of second-class people. In the end, the "only legitimate option is to let each woman explore as she pleases and define for herself" those depictions or descriptions of sexuality she wishes to see (Carol & Pollard 56).

Varda Burstyn is one of those women making such choices. She points out in her criticism that most traditional pornography is "entertainment....leeches of [its] emotive, poetic and social content" (162). Traditionally, pornography never contains, explores, or features gender neutrality, genuine same-sex relationships, and is not written by women. The preponderance of gender-specific role definition is reflected in the "formula" of virtually every traditional porn scene. The woman's orgasm, though often presented, is either dismissed, or is coterminous with that of the man's, and it is remarkably achieved at that moment without genital contact. Though the males of traditional porn require extended laborious manipulation to reach orgasm, the women need only see (or feel, in many cases) evidence of the man's climax to slip into melodramatically vocal paroxysms of pleasure themselves. Known as the "money" shot, such scenes convey "a convention of porn movies that male orgasm must be visible to the viewer" (Rubin 21). Femporn, in contrast to this tradition, is wide-ranging in its scope of sexual interests and expressions. Even before the widespread emergence of femporn as a counter to traditional pornography's perspectives, such roles and stories were something often sought by female porn consumers, as evidenced by women's disproportionate heterosexual interest in gay male porn (Mackenzie 29). Rice's inclusion of male-male episodes in her trilogy are a reflection of this cross-gender, cross-preference interest, and just one of the factors which firmly positions her work far beyond the unimaginative reaches of ordinary porn. Consider, for example, Laurent's response to the farewell between the Captain and Tristan: "I studied the two rough-shaven faces together, the mingling of the blond hair, the half-lidded eyes. Men kissing. Such a lovely sight" (Release 183). Even this, the tamest of passages by Rice's standards, would never find its way into traditional pornography.

The roles within traditional pornography are as rigidly defined as the actions found therein. The players are universally interested in the reduction of all situations to sex, as

Snitow has noted (256). Within that reductive simplicity, men are allowed almost exclusively to act as voyeurs. In keeping with the—very gender-specific—taboo of looking evidenced in the Cupid and Psyche myth, rarely if ever does a woman watch another couple have sex in traditional pornography. Women are the recipients of the porn world: the attention is always on them. Though men are present and vital to the activity, men's faces and bodies are considerably less visible (or described) than those of the women. In addition, women generate porn's sexual energy, both in themselves and in the men. It is the presence of a woman in any given situation that creates sexual energy and potential sexual activity—the men of traditional porn are never erect until a woman arrives on the scene to make them so. Here again Rice and her fellow femporn pioneers turn the tables. Not only do Rice's male submissives not require women to be aroused, but they are expected to need no arousal stage, as they must stay erect at all times. One of Nicholas' servant girls places a weight around Tristan's penis, and tells him: "if that weight slips from your cock, there will only be one reason for it, that your cock has gone soft....your cock will be whipped for that" (Punishment 129-30). In the last twenty-five years—and more intensely in the last ten—it has become the responsibility of women to become the creative energy source not just *in* porn, but *for* porn, as well.

When writing the Beauty trilogy, Anne Rice may have been pioneering the new methods of producing and marketing pornography. Today, the industry's chief efforts are aimed at couples, rather than at individuals (or more specifically at men). This new wave of interest in pornography and the new kind of porn consumer might in fact be a result of Rice's appeal to a heterogeneous readership, even if initially her books were mainly popular within gay culture, and relative to other Rice books did not sell particularly well among a more widespread audience (Ramsland 238). In any case, over the last few years, the marketing of couple- and woman-centered pornography has rejuvenated the popularity of the trilogy, and in accordance with the way that pornographic fiction, and

especially femporn, has become more popular, the trilogy can now be found in almost every bookstore, elegantly boxed as a set. In today's bookstores, the Beauty trilogy can be found under the headings Gay Interest, Women's Studies, Fiction, and Adult Fiction, which together testify to the wide interest and readership the books attract.

A significant portion of criticism concerned with pornography over the last several years has been spent trying to form a definition of this treacherous literary form. Much has been made of these efforts by all concerned. Lawyers have disagreed with literary critics, who in turn argue with psychologists about what exactly pornography is. What is clear is that we inherit the word from a combination of the Greek words "*porne*" (meaning prostitute) and "*graphoi*" (meaning writing). Literally speaking, then, pornography is the chronicles of courtesans, presumably written by these same women, usually in diary form. A significant number of the earliest works so defined have in fact been ascribed to a woman called Philaenis of Samos, just as pornography also has a mythological protector/creator, who has also been identified as a woman—who may have been one of Helen's maids—named Astyanassa (Parker 91-94). At its most traditional, then, pornography is the domain of woman authors.

This ancient attribution, however, has been largely lost by both mainstream consumers and producers, who have come to know pornography—over the last 100 years—as almost exclusively male-oriented. Here one should note that though explicit sexual art is as old as art itself, the use of the word "pornography" in the context with which we are familiar is less than 150 years old. As Gayle Rubin points out, the word's current connotations represent the sensibilities of the Victorians, not the ancient Greeks (35). I have no intention of expending much more energy on the issue of definitions, nor do I wish to add fuel to an already considerable societal and academic blaze concerned with the pigeonholing of pornography. Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol point out that

pornography definitions have always been "circular, vague, arbitrary, and inconsistent" (25).

One matter that must be resolved, though, is the current fascination with the believed difference between pornography and its misconstrued-as-gentler cousin, erotica. This difference presupposes a definition of pornography rooted in several unworkable equations. The first is that women are naturally sexual victims, incapable of sexual self-determination and expression. The second is the belief that men are naturally sexually dominant to the point of violence. The third conflates these two, equating all man-woman sex with violence. The graphic representation of these relationships is supposed to be the essence of pornography. Unfortunately, to accept and adopt such a definition leaves little room in the literary arena for erotica of any kind.

In an early article entitled "Erotica vs. Pornography," Gloria Steinem attempted to distinguish between the two terms. In it, she tried to define the broadly interpreted mainstream definitions as follows: erotica features "mutual pleasure and touch and warmth....a shared sensuality"; pornography, by contrast, highlights "force, violence, or symbols of unequal power....whips and chains of bondage, even torture and murder presented as sexually titillating, the clear evidence of wounds and bruises" (Outrageous Acts 219).

Under the yoke of these definitions, Rice's work would have to be classified as both pornographic and erotic. On the one hand, Rice's books are filled with images of affection and caring, as when Tristan is overcome by emotions while walking with Nicholas: "I felt the smooth velvet of his tunic and the soft silk of his hair. This was almost ecstasy. And his lips brushed my cheek, and the mingling of distress and longing in me was so enormous I was almost in tears again" (Punishment 109). On the other hand, this

sensuality is presented within a context that includes force and bondage, such as an episode in which Lady Juliana administers discipline to Beauty: "desperately she thrust her hips forward to receive the angry punishment. She must please Lady Juliana. And the strap smacked her pubic lips again and again.... 'There, there, my girl, my virtuous, lovely girl.' And her lips pried open Beauty's lips....'Blessed Beauty, O, you do love me don't you, I love you dearly'" (*Claiming* 161-62). In turn, what would preclude locating Rice's trilogy with Steinem's parameters is that nowhere are torture and murder present, let alone condoned. Rice makes it clear throughout that physical terror is anathema to the tales, introducing the adventures to us with the reassurance that: "nothing shall ever be done which truly harms you. You will never be.... injured" (*Claiming* 89-90). The content of the Beauty trilogy thus proves the flawed nature of those conventional definitions of pornography and erotica, especially those which depend on untenable distinctions. Nor is Rice alone here: many sensual and titillating works by both men and women completely transcend and invalidate these definitions.

Britain's curiously named "Campaign against Pornography and Censorship" (CPC) takes a far simpler approach, distinguishing between pornography and erotica on a single criterion. Pornography is degrading, erotica is not. Even this simple definition is inherently problematic, however, because it offers no guidelines for what is degrading. Catherine MacKinnon and Annie Sprinkle are both well-known feminists, and there is no question that these prominent spokeswomen have vastly different ideas about what constitutes degradation. Sprinkle is a post-porn modernist and realist, and is by many considered to be the voice from the "middle ground" in the porn industry. To her, degradation would likely be any image during whose production a female actress/model *actually feels degraded*. MacKinnon, an American antiporn lawyer, is almost obsessive when it comes to the "content" of images. To her, degradation can include *any* image in which a woman—clothed or not—is kneeling, for example.



The reason for the fragility of distinctions between pornography and erotica is simple: there is no essential difference whatsoever in the content of the two. The use here of two different words for the same thing has mainly to do with issues of human sensibility, and more specifically, hypocrisy. Pornography as popularly defined is used by those who claim otherwise to be strongly opposed to censorship in order to justify censorship—to others and to themselves. The current definition of erotica is used to make the pornography one *does* like acceptable. To suggest that there is a content difference between them is akin to suggesting that there is an intrinsic difference between sleep and slumber, or a touch and a caress.

It is in an attempt to end the hypocrisy and in the interest of consistency that I refer to Rice's novels as pornography—by which I mean writings that are titillating, sensual, erotic, sexual, violent, tender, cruel, dangerous and exciting. No moral valuation on my part should be assumed, nor in my opinion, taken by others. Should the current moral trappings of the word pornography be so overwhelming as to still offend, the reader is free to substitute the (to them) less offensive term—for my primary concern is simply to establish a working definition so that I can now move on to the more important issue of the nature of pornography and its relation to women, both as readers and participants.

Femporn, or pornography produced by and for women, has grown exponentially since the late 1980s. In 1986, Gayle Rubin wrote: "the porn industry *is beginning* to recognize women as potential consumers and to design products to appeal to a female audience" (37, emphasis mine). The works of Anne Rice and Susie Bright in literary circles, of Lisa Palac in audio, and of Candida Royalle and Deborah Shames in film are just a few wildly successful examples of this emergence. Until this relatively recent explosion of femporn in literary and other media markets, women were offered only one mainstream alternative

to the pornography produced by and catering to men. Sara Diamond grudgingly called mass-market romances, epitomised by Harlequins, "the equivalent of women's pornography" (50). Although these books appear to provide women with a place where they can indulge their sexual fantasies, and although Janice Radway has argued that romance does contain an element of protest, what these works are is far from feminist, and in fact reinforce far too many of the cultural limitations traditionally imposed on women. In fact, mass-market romances are much closer in philosophical content to traditional male-centered, male-dominant model of pornography than they are to femporn.

I should point out here that this does not mean that there are no women who enjoy traditional pornography. Quite the contrary, millions of women do. Yet as long as there remain women who feel that much of the porn widely available is "dull, repetitive, mass-market rubbish"—i.e. does not speak to their tastes—there is a need for femporn (Green 43). The distinction between the traditional porn and femporn—and how they are received—is in many cases, however, a vital one: pornography (i.e., femporn) that is perceived as not contributing to the social and sexual *status quo*—in which women are second-class citizens—is suppressed, while that which upholds outdated ideas of male dominance/voyeurism and female heterosexual receptivity is widespread. In Britain, the female co-produced sex magazine *Libertine* was bankrupted—effectively destroyed—by the traditional pornography community through a distribution embargo, because they saw the inherent threat of "reality" having a voice in their industry (Melville 11).

Ann Snitow, among others, has provided us with much valuable material on the subject of pornography. She points out that pornography reflects a significant portion of genuine sexual expression because in it, "all things tend in one direction, a total immersion in one's own sense experience." She goes on to describe particular aspects of, and the repetition of certain themes within porn, including: "the joys of passivity....response without

responsibility, [an absence of] clearly delineated characters," and an environment wherein all social and personal conditions—indeed, where everything—can be "deliciously sacrificed, dissolved by sex" (256). Nevertheless, Snitow allows that some pornography may contain misogynistic images or messages. She is equally careful to point out, though, that "women are naturally overwhelmed by the woman-hating theme so that the more universal human expression sometimes contained by pornography tends to be obscured for them" (255).

I do not doubt that this is possible, but I also suggest that the term "naturally" is problematic and that Snitow does not go far enough in her analysis. All people (though I suspect women to a greater degree than men) today are socially conditioned—as opposed to Snitow's "naturally"—to impose and invoke woman-hating themes whenever and wherever sexuality is the subject in art, film, or literature. As a result, these invocations overwhelm and even obliterate the natural sexuality—what Snitow calls "the more universal human expression"—contained therein. It is only by making a conscious effort to recognise and confront this socialisation that we are able to see through it, and perceive the works themselves. As Lucy Williams correctly points out: "Contrary to any conditioning, pornography is for women as much as it is for men" (101). Since pornography is intrinsically no more than just another form of artistic expression, it follows that just as with any other medium, its appeal rests with the viewer.

Gloria Steinem says that women "[must] control [their] own sexuality" ("Erotica" 55). Occurring within the context of her definition of the difference between erotica and pornography, this statement implies that women's freedom to produce sexually explicit and arousing material can be achieved only in the form of what Steinem calls erotica, and the related implication is that all sexual/sensual writings or films or art produced by women is erotic as opposed to pornographic, and therefore acceptable. Insofar as the

content and nature of Rice's writings—by Steinem's definitions—would have to be labelled pornographic, they would also become unacceptable. Steinem asserts that "Sexuality is human, free, separate—and so are we" ("Erotica" 55), but her very definitions will not permit women the autonomy or the intelligence to express their sexuality in whatever form or representation they see fit.

In addition to what Snitow regards as porn's reductive simplicity (in that it reduces all social interaction to a sexual level), Lisa Duggan et al. importantly add that porn brings with it a variety of messages, though admittedly all centering on sex. Their mocking and hilarious (in both scope and length) list of these messages includes the advocating of "sexual adventure, sex outside of marriage, sex for no reason other than pleasure, casual sex, anonymous sex, group sex, voyeuristic sex, illegal sex, public sex" (145). All of these ideas, these critics stress, can help liberate women who until now have felt that they have been alone in their sexual feelings and fantasies, and therefore somehow morally wrong in feeling them. A significant portion of Nancy Friday's work has been predicated on ending the isolating effect of women's individual sexual fantasies. Friday encourages women to share their fantasies with one another, both through her books and in person, thus creating an entirely new—or perhaps recreating a very old—tradition of writing (and other modes of transmission) pornography. She recognises that women who were sexual mavericks long ago were "alone in their desires, sociological dead ends," and feels that those who are vocal about their sexuality today are helping others "know that their search for what it means to be a woman is shared by others" (63-64).

Many of femporn's pioneers—and according to Annie Sprinkle "Women *are* porn's pioneers"—see themselves as much more than simply artists or entertainers (85, emphasis mine). Although I suppose an argument can be made for the educational (or "edutainment," in more modern parlance) value of all forms of pornography, it is only the

femporn school whose members very often have education and enlightenment *in mind* as they produce their work. As I have argued, Rice has indeed made this a major theme of her Beauty trilogy; as Tristan comes to understand, obedience to the Queen's whims will leave him "well enhanced in wisdom" (Punishment 87).

The educational aspect of femporn is limitless, touching on all parts of women's growth, from that of the individual, to the gender socialisation of all women. It is also not only the producers and proponents of femporn who are making that claim. As noted recently on the Femme Productions homepage, fempornographer and film producer Candida Royalle is "the first adult film-maker to have been invited into membership by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists because of the 'positive sexual role-modeling' in her films." Echoing Friday's focus on individual women, Cherie Matrix begins her preface to Tales from the Clit: A Female Experience of Pornography with the following challenge: "Imagine spending your whole life being told what you like and what you feel—and *knowing* that it isn't true" (v). Matrix is well aware that this strange dictation of tastes and emotions is not the experience of many people (certainly homosexuals and atheists come to mind), but stresses that this was, until very recently, the reality for *all* women—over 50% of the population in most places—when it came to issues of sexuality in general and pornography in particular.

Much of this educational view of pornography began shortly before femporn, when women began to discover that sexual information, like all knowledge, is empowering. Matrix notes that simple exposure to porn can be profoundly beneficial, in that it can "clear away the mysteries surrounding female sexuality;" for her, pornography represents the path out of Freud's forest of misconceptions (vii). As a result of such flawed theories about what women should and should not (or do and do not) like, many women have ended up confused by feelings of guilt, fear and ignorance. Early exposure to porn—or

more realistic "pop sexology" like Friday's sharing of women's fantasies—offers an opportunity to understand that others share these interests and desires, and can lead to what Frances Scally calls "the bliss of guilt-free sex," though that may also be a somewhat utopian view of the complex matter of human sexuality (75). Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol make the more modest—and yet much more far-reaching—assertion that the emergence of porn has given women the "tools of discourse": an arena within which the unabashed, uncensored exploration of female sexuality can occur (3).

Surprised to find herself interested in porn, Lucy Williams makes a provocative observation about her new discovery: the variety of women's bodies that can be found in the world of hard-core porn (101-02). To the same effect, Avedon Carol and Nettie Pollard have pointed out that in contrast to other media, "hard core shows a wider variety of female physical types....fat....small breasts....older, shorter, taller" women (55). Striking about this truth is that in terms of body imaging, sexism and many of the other ideological and social ills that women have had to deal with in the twentieth century, hard-core pornography may very well be a less damaging medium than soft-core porn, the fashion industry, Hollywood, and advertising in general, all of which are still ruled by the airbrush, the ex-lax diets, and the generic "plastic tits" mentality that demands surgical enhancements from many of the women working in those fields.

One of the educational aspects of porn comes with a bit of a twist. Jen Durbin suggests that the freedom to watch porn has not only allowed her and other women to seek out sexual images and ideas they enjoy, but also to reject those they do not: "the ability to say no" is not something that women have always enjoyed, and to be able to do so is a genuinely powerful idea in itself (59). It is in this ability for women to decide for themselves what they like and do not like that the earliest origins of femporn are found. Before discovering femporn (or other porn that suits their tastes), many women feel that

they have no "acceptable" outlet of their own for their sexual fantasies, particularly if they find what *has* been offered—i.e.: bodice-ripping mass-market romance novels—unsatisfying. Marcelle Perks similarly notes how clandestine interaction with "other people's porn" can lead to feelings of guilt for many women, whereas the free embrace (or rejection) of porn of one's own choosing and purchase becomes the only healthy, just alternative for both men and women (68).

One of the earliest producers of what was—but was not yet called—femporn in the 1970s, Arabella Melville thought of herself not just as an artist, but as someone performing a valuable public service for women. As the publisher of the UK magazine *Libertine*, her goal was to eliminate the repression and guilt surrounding female sexuality, which in truth made her a kind of *de facto* social worker. "I was a missionary," she proudly proclaims (5); and what better place for a missionary of sexual truth than Britain in the 1970s? From a series of such short-lived and random attempts to bring women's sexuality into the public eye to the full-blown industry femporn that has now become, a number of ideas have taken root.

Not the least of these is that whereas simple discourse and information was an initial goal of the femporn pioneers, many believe now what Avedon Carol and Nettie Pollard insist is the case: that femporn is an inextricable part of the strategy of equality for all women:

"We cannot establish sexual balance between men and women unless we break through the myth that male sexual interest is stronger than female interest. We must make plain that the negative feelings many women have towards sex are by no means proof that women can't enjoy sex, but rather result from the continued presentation of sex as something women must provide *for others* rather than as something we can do out of our own natural desires and for our own pleasures. And we are not going to be able to do that until we are free to create art, entertainment, and documentary

materials that deal specifically with this focus on sexuality. In the current climate, make no mistake, such material *will* be called pornography." (53-54)

Though perhaps inadvertently, this last phrase shows just how far femporn has come. It was clearly initially meant as a warning and a rallying cry to the women involved in the early days of femporn; it was a warning that anything written in the interest of exploring and discussing women's sexuality would be perceived as and labelled "pornography" by the establishment; and it was a rallying cry to do all that was possible to not let this happen. Despite the urgent and somewhat pessimistic prediction, the reality that has unfolded is one in which not only are these writings being called porn—or femporn, in many cases—but *it's OK* that they be so labelled, and OK that they be sold to men *and* women in mainstream bookstores everywhere as such.

One of the initial impulses of many anti-censorship feminists to porn was to champion it simply as a reaction to those who were in favour of limiting access to sexually explicit materials. Their embrace of porn as legitimate expression was often an act of rebellion against a sector of feminism that they felt was no longer in touch with modern women's interests. Frances Scally articulates the subsequent dissatisfaction she found with both those impulses and the embrace of porn that resulted, and advocates a new approach: "I now consciously reject being defiant about pornography as a reaction to the would-be total imposition of censorship, because I prefer to just get on with my own sex life" (74). The wry humour of the end of her statement testifies to the outright silly preconceptions that have persisted for so long about women's sexuality. What must follow now is a period during which members of both sexes and all sexual preferences are free and unencumbered to explore whether or not they wish to read The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty, or watch Behind the Green Door, or do neither. It is also time for the producers



of porn to recognise that economically and artistically, it is time "to bring the sexes together" (Sharrock 122-23).

## Conclusion

In The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim states as his primary contention: "Fairy tales reveal important truths about life" (227). For my own part, I have attempted to show that Anne Rice's pornography serves a similar function, and that in her Beauty trilogy, these key truths are three in number. First, what the adult can learn from childhood fairy tales is that a similar rule applies in pornography: the only condition to be universally eschewed is boredom. The second key truth is that adopting a reading strategy based on the rules of domsub can not only be illuminating to the work in question but also with respect to the current state of literary criticism. Finally, the third important truth is that women are as entitled to their own pornography as are men, and that in fact, it is women who are the creative force behind the radical improvement and proliferation of pornography over the last twenty years.

That boredom would be perceived by an author as the main enemy of a fulfilling life should come as no surprise. It is the strategies Rice's characters use to avoid that boredom that raise the eyebrows and danders of those who do not approve of, or simply do not understand, domsub. Rice once pointed out the simple truism that "If you think S&M is sexy, it needs no explanation. And if you don't, you wouldn't have the faintest idea why anyone else does" (Ramsland 218). The people who fall into her second category are the same people who, in terms of Fairy Tales, do not understand why Disney's versions cannot provide their children with the developmental experiences provided by those of the Brothers Grimm. Rice's use of the fairy-tale form to bring "elegant" tabooed sexuality to her readers is her way of conveying the same message: as long as you're not bored, the writer/artist/filmmaker/top is doing his or her job: they are making you think and feel; they are helping you grow.

Domsb, as a sexual practise is feared, misunderstood, and even reviled. Most of the misunderstanding comes from the belief that it is about pain and domination. It is not. As we have seen, domsub is about trust. The trust at the heart of domsub is so deeply rooted that it allows the participants to explore the absolute limits of their sexuality and tolerance, without ever permitting the terror that those limits might be transgressed. Employing domsub as a strategy for reading the Beauty trilogy is a simple extension of the tales within the text. The challenge lies in the willingness to cast off the paranoia that leads to the deconstructionist view of the text-reader relationship and instead to take "reader-response" to its truly personalised potential: how does the reading experience affect me? How have I changed as a result of the reading process?

For many authors of femporn, listening to the tales told by their bodies is essential, and accordingly they are concerned with what they are and are not culturally permitted—as women—to write, read, and unabashedly enjoy. History has taught that simply in order to control their own bodies, women must be able to discuss freely all aspects of sexuality. Femporn has a greater agenda: that women not only discuss, but create and revel in pornographic art based on that sexuality. In the Beauty books, Anne Rice has created a playground for adult sexual fantasies, both from a literary and a social perspective. Her statement is one of freedom to explore, as well as express that exploration, and perhaps most importantly, that other *women* exercise that freedom. The very real predicament that faces those women who choose to follow Rice's lead is that the most vocal protest against the publication of pornography will almost invariably come from other women.

In the introduction to her 1984 anthology Pleasures: Women Write Erotica, Lonnie Barbach summed up her hopes for the burgeoning femporn movement of the time: that it has "helped to engender a cultural understanding that adventure and enjoyment in sex are positive aspects of female sexuality to be celebrated with pleasure and joy, not shrouded

in guilt and discomfort" (xviii). There is some evidence that this is indeed the case. Certainly the way that femporn has expanded its beginnings as a small niche and become a mainstream, multibillion-dollar part of the pornography industry suggests that women's sexuality has become less than obscene to North American consumers. What may not be as assured, however, is the future of the form. Trends in censorship have always been cyclical, with the 1960s breaking many of the taboos of the 1950s, but conversely with the conservative 1980s lashing back against the experimental and *laissez-faire* 1970s. What is necessary to ensure that femporn continues its progressive crusade for sexual freedom is that it does not limit its mass appeal to only half the population. Thus as Lesley Ann Sharrock notes, while one must "wildly applaud all the new erotica for women....the next step has to be to bring the sexes together" (122). In that respect, as in others, Anne Rice appears to have served as an avatar of the pornography of the future. The classification which serves as the frontispiece in the first of Rice's Beauty books certainly announces this as her objective: "an erotic novel of tenderness and cruelty for the enjoyment of *men and women*" (emphasis mine).

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