An Exploration of Alternate Realities: Women's Contemporary Speculative Fiction

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by
Deborah L. Zanghi

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Introduction

When Mary Shelley accepted Lord Byron's playful challenge to write a ghost story, she unwittingly became the "mother" of speculative fiction. Transcending the gothic horror stories of the period, *Frankenstein* combined the supernatural with a scientific premise. Rather than relying solely upon the typical conventions of the gothic ghost story, she chose to blend them with scientific possibility, to find the horror in the potential future of medicine and technology. One possible interpretation of *Frankenstein* is that it can be viewed as being primarily about the revolt against oppression, perhaps growing out of Shelley's subconscious identification with what Ursula Le Guin terms the alien "other." Much like her contemporary counterparts, she used her writing as a forum in which to explore larger philosophical issues, many of them the same issues found today in women's speculative fiction. The monster was "created"—a product of the male domain of science, much as the feminine is "created" by patriarchal culture. More importantly, *Frankenstein*'s monster was, both literally and figuratively, a fragmented being incapable of functioning in the capacity he desired as a part of society, something with which many of Shelley's female contemporaries could readily identify. Like many of the characters found in contemporary women's speculative fiction, the "monster" did not commit the arbitrary acts of violence that many of the monstrous creatures found in traditional examples of the genre do, like Bram Stoker's Dracula. Instead, the creature found in Shelley's novel is driven to acts of violence as a result of its treatment by those in power. In other words, the creature is not the aggressor, but rather the victim who, fighting to survive, lashes out against its tormentors.

It is no coincidence that the creatures found in traditional speculative fiction differ so fundamentally in terms of acts of violence from those found
in female-authored examples of the genre because men and women differ fundamentally in their own motivations and capacity for violence.

Women may get angry, threaten and scream, lash out in fury or seek murder and revenge. Only men habitually prey on those weaker than themselves, stalk the night in search of the lonely victim, hunt one another in packs, devise initiation rituals, exquisite tortures, pogroms, and extermination camps, delight in Russian roulette, running the gauntlet, chicken... and all the world's never ending games of fear, pain, and death. “The insane cruelty man has inflicted..., the thousands of lives destroyed or ruined, passes belief,” observes historian A. L. Rowse. “Women have not behaved to each other like that.” (Miles 20)

Masculinity, and patriarchy, are predicated upon a power that is based in a systematic cultivation of fear through the use of oppression and violence which is clearly reflected in traditional fiction, and especially in traditional speculative fiction.

Considering the origin of the speculative genre it is interesting to note that it has been viewed as the American male's domain until very recently. This is especially thought provoking because the only genres which have been "open" to women are those deemed to be "popular" (like children's fiction, romances, and detective fiction) rather than "serious" fiction. While speculative fiction has never been viewed as anything other than a low-brow form of entertainment, it has been the one area in popular fiction in which women were curiously absent both as authors and subjects worthy of serious fictional treatment. This is not meant to indicate that there were absolutely no
women to be found, but rather that their presence was sporadic at best until the rise of the women's movement.

Preceding the female presence in speculative fiction the genre reflected the patriarchal values of its society and authors.

Previous to the intervention by feminist writers in the late sixties and early seventies science fiction reflected, in its content at least, what could be called masculine concerns, based around the central theme of space exploration and the development of technology: masculine concerns because access to those areas was effectively denied to women in the real world, and science fiction, like all writing, is written from within a particular ideology. (Lefanu 3)

As a result, women were peripheral at best and usually cast in highly stereotyped roles. Each of the stereotypes allowed to the female characters were an obvious extension of the patriarchal society's attempts to subjugate and oppress women. The four basic categories of the women's roles found in male-authored speculative fiction are what I term "The Woman in the Bullet Bra," "The Woman in the Diaphonous Gown," "The Frigid Female Mad Scientist," and, last but certainly not least, "The Cute and Perky but not-so bright Girl Next Door." Each of these stereotypes reaffirms the patriarchal perspective that deems women inferior to men. "The Woman in the Bullet Bra" symbolizes the "de-feminized" woman. Usually characterized as an Amazon (in its most pejorative sense) she represents the culmination of what patriarchy fears most-independent, strong, capable women. However, her depiction as a bloodthirsty beast driven by frenzied blood lust is diffused by the erotic manner in which she is often portrayed on the novel covers, thereby making her little more than a sex object; more importantly, a sexual object who is
ultimately defeated when pitted against a man, either through death or rape, rendering her a nuisance, but not one worthy of fearing. (This is also similar to the way female vampires are both depicted and ultimately defeated in traditional vampire fiction; their intense sexuality is in direct correlation to the male fear regarding it.) The Amazon's depiction in the cover-art also serves another purpose for it is through the act of "looking" that she is transformed from a powerful and independent woman into little more than a pornographic image whose only purpose is to titillate the male imagination. The "Woman in the Diaphanous Gown" is merely an extension of this. While the Amazon figure symbolizes female sexual aggression (and the male fear of it), the "Woman in the Diaphanous Gown" symbolizes the sexual victim (and the male desire for power and conquest). She is forever running, scantily clad, through the pages of traditional fiction, away from her pursuers only to twist her ankle and fall helplessly to the ground to be "devoured" in one manner or another. She is the quintessential victim found throughout traditional speculative fiction. Whether she is running from a three-headed monster on the planet Org, or fleeing from a group of Harley-riding vampires, she is the hysterically screaming caricature of a woman in a push-up bra and tight sweater. "The Frigid Female Mad Scientist" is similar to the Amazon stereotype in that she too is "de-feminized." However, her lack of femininity is more extreme. While "The Woman in the Bullet Bra" may at least be visually sexual in aspect, "The Frigid Female Mad Scientist" is usually presented as a woman whose beauty has been sucked away in direct correlation to her degree of intelligence and ambition. "The Cute and Perky but not-so-bright Girl Next Door" is patriarchy's example of the perfect woman. Attractive, young, and lacking threatening intelligence, she is willing to wait patiently and
contentedly at home while her man is off on a swashbuckling adventure in space.

Rather than depicting realistic female characters, masculinist speculative fiction offered mere caricatures—images of women as men perceive them instead of female characters that women could readily identify with. The female characters offered in traditional speculative fiction were merely variations of the madonna/whore characterizations found throughout traditional literature. Elaine Showalter writes:

If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. (qtd. in Moi 76)

Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics discusses this angel/monster phenomenon as well: "... the obverse of the male idealization of women is the male fear of femininity: The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (58).

The few female readers and authors who were attracted to the genre had to assume a male persona and perspective in order to participate successfully. Because they were the "alien," the "other" that was somehow inherently less than the males with whom they were in comparison, they had to relinquish their very identities. Joanna Russ lamented this in the mid-seventies:

[There] .... are tales for heroes, not heroines, and one of the things that handicaps women writers [and readers] in our—and every other —culture is that there are so very few stories in which women can figure as protagonists.
Culture is male . . . There is a female culture, but it is an underground, unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience. Both men and women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view—the male.

What myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist?

Very few. (qtd in Barr 4)

Fortunately, while Russ was sounding this battle cry there were female authors already accepting the challenge, and eager to explore the opportunities, that speculative fiction offered. This wave of feminist authors had to struggle not only with the male-oriented structure of the genre, but also with a patriarchal power structure upon which the genre's ideologies were based.

Given the significant barriers both female authors and readers had to overcome, what was it that drew them to a genre that, perhaps more than any other, excluded them? In order to answer this question the function of speculative fiction in general must first be explored. Since its genesis, speculative fiction has functioned as a mirror reflecting major societal trends. For example, it explored and detailed for its readers the impact of the mechanization of society in the 1940s and the importance of space travel in the 1950s. (Typically the fiction focused primarily on the technological aspects rather than on the philosophical. In other words, it was "hard" science fiction. This does not mean that there wasn't any "soft" science fiction being produced during this time period with Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* being two excellent examples.) As the genre matured there was a
growth in "soft" speculative fiction that focused on social and cultural aspects, reflecting the impact of the women's and civil right's movements. Through the social and cultural extrapolations the readers were allowed to perceive and experience new and different ways of thinking and structuring society. By exploring familiar cultural tendencies in an alien setting, or alien cultural practices in a familiar setting, the author allows the reader an "outside" vantage point from which he/she can isolate and evaluate in a more objective manner. Through this practice of defamiliarization the reader is able to explore, and even perhaps recognize for the first time, practices and tendencies which are so ingrained and commonplace as to never normally be questioned.

It is not surprising, however, that the early "soft" speculative fiction was obviously silent in the areas of sexual and racial equality. The treatment of the alien "other" in male authored fiction of the genre as something to be dominated and ultimately destroyed seemed to provide the explanation for this omission.

Joanna Russ has defined this as a failure of imagination, remarking on the extraordinary prevalence of what she calls "intergalactic suburbia" in worlds and times light years from our own. Kingsley Amis, perhaps surprisingly, pointed out as early as 1960 that there was a strange lack of experimentation around sex; that while all else may vary, male/female relationships stay the same. His explanation: "... 'Though it may go against the grain to admit it, science-fiction writers are evidently satisfied with the sexual status quo'. Even in the 1960's, with ... the interest in 'personal relationships', sexual roles were not in themselves challenged" (Lefanu 4).
This apparent lack in speculative fiction seemed to have begun to change approximately twenty years ago as women began to take a more active role in both reading and writing within the genre. Not only did speculative fiction provide a new way of writing, but it provided the female authors with the ready-made tools to explore themselves and their world both as readers and writers. The standard conventions of time travel, the exploration of alternate worlds, etc., could be utilized as powerful metaphorical tools in the discovery of what it means to be a woman (Lefanu 5). Through their use and manipulation of these typical genre conventions, these female authors are able to offer their readers alternative ways of interpreting the themes and beliefs that have long been a part of speculative fiction. In other words, the female author is able, through the use of these fictional "tools," to challenge the foundation of patriarchal beliefs upon which our culture is built. In her rejection of this patriarchal belief system, the female author of speculative fiction typically rejects the concept of a definite division between "good" and "evil." Instead, she will usually present "good" as something that can be twisted into "evil," and "evil" something that can be made into "good." As Anne Rice's Lestat says in *Interview With a Vampire*, "Evil is a point of view..." (89). This ambiguity harkens back to the pre-patriarchal Goddess mythology that centers around the light and dark aspects of the Goddess, a mythology which viewed good and evil, and life and death as necessary parts of a natural whole. Therefore, rather than separating women from nature and the natural world, contemporary women's speculative fiction stresses their unity within the realm of nature. Instead of concerning themselves with what they consider to be irrelevant questions dealing with good and evil, they
focus on communication, community, and a desire to preserve the environment. Needless to say, the realities offered by these authors are of obvious appeal to the female reader living in a culture concerned primarily with division and exclusion.

The aspect of speculative fiction that, through the practices of defamiliarization and the like, allows the investigation of gender and of the unwritten societal edicts that govern feminine behavior presents enormous appeal to the female reader. Released from the constraints of realism, authors like Marion Zimmer Bradley and Anne Rice encourage the examination of the repercussions of individual oppression and its ramifications on a wider, societal level, while Octavia Butler investigates racial concerns in addition to gender-based issues. These authors give their readers the opportunity to experience living, vicariously, in a reality unlike their own, and to identify with females in roles which might normally be denied to them. Is this meant to infer that one of speculative fiction's greatest appeals to the female reader is the element of escapism? The answer is a resounding "yes": although speculative fiction is commonly denigrated for its supposed high level of "escapism"—apparently more so according to these critics than other, more intellectually acceptable, forms of fiction—escapism is precisely what these readers not only want, but need. Speculative fiction responds to a desire to experience that which doesn't or hasn't been permitted to exist, and to explore the existence of that which is denied because of its potential threat to the existing power structure (for example, positions of female authority or psychic ability, i.e. women's intuition). To do this effectively the author must move the reader away from the bleak confines of her existing reality into an
alien reality in which anything might be possible. By providing her female reader with a science fictional world in which freedom from a dominant and constricting order is a viable possibility, the author encourages the reader to participate in what Lucie Armitt terms an "imaginative leap."

However, there is a distinction to be made between this imaginative leap... and escapism.... Women are not located at the centre of contemporary culture and society, but are almost entirely defined from the aforementioned negative perspective of "otherness" or 'difference'. As such, the need to escape from a society with regard to which they already hold an ex-centric position is clearly an irrelevant one. More appropriate perhaps is the need to escape into --that is, to depict, an alternative reality within which centrality is possible. (Armitt 9)

The creation of a world in which female centrality is possible, a world in which women are allowed to create their own images of femaleness, becomes an act of validation in which the exploration of female concerns and fears is both permissible and encouraged. The fiction of Octavia Butler, Anne Rice, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, as well as that of many of their peers, deals with those concerns which are not normally addressed and which stem from women's experiences in their own reality. These authors deal not only with the investigation of the sense of "otherness," but also with the female fear of male violence in both the physical and mental forms, as well as a fear of the male-based power structure which holds the ability to diminish or even destroy its female "victims." All three of these authors also acknowledge, some more overtly than others, all of the aspects of the Goddess found in pre-patriarchal cultures. When the suppression of the Goddess occurred, women
became branded "alien" and "other." As Elinor Gadon states, "This transition was not just a gender change from Goddess to God but a paradigm shift with the imposition of a different reality of different categories of being, that deeply affected every human relationship" (xiv). As a result, they validate those aspects and characteristics with associated the feminine that have been demeaned in patriarchal literature. To more fully demonstrate this, it is necessary to briefly trace the death of the woman-centered Goddess religions in order to fully understand the importance of the monster/witch/vampire in both male and female speculative fiction. Why is this creature to be feared and despised when found in contemporary speculative fiction written by women?

The fall of matriarchal culture can be traced back to invasions, whether brutally quick or gradual, by the Indo-Europeans, "a war-like people who overran Old European civilization and imposed their male dominated hierarchy and worship of their sky gods on Goddess cultures wherever they settled" (Gadon 110).

The dominance of the patriarchal religion over our own culture has its roots in the ancient tribes of Israel who rallied around Yahweh, a war god who symbolized conquest and all its various trappings. From that time on the goddesses and women living in that culture were literally, as well as figuratively, condemned. Women became little more than possessions to be used in trading for more property or wealth by male "owners." Rather than holding the powerful and exalted positions they once had, they were forced to become, in many senses, slaves or prostitutes.

The witch burnings of the Middle Ages represented one of patriarchy's most brutal and devastating campaigns against matriarchal religions and women. During this time Christianity deemed women unworthy of
participation in the church or of study in the realms of science or medicine, the two great male bastions. As a result any knowledge a female healer or midwife acquired was attributed to Satan. It became a religious obligation to kill women, as well as a small number of men, labeled “witches.” During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries thousands of women were persecuted and murdered in the name of religion. “The control and the maintenance of the social order and the women’s place within it was one of the many complex and varied reasons for the witch trials . . . . Not only were the majority of accused persons women, the victims were primarily people in the lower social orders” (Merchant 138). In other words, these trials were done in an attempt to maintain control over the male domains of science and religion and to express, mainly in the “throw-away” portion of their social structure, a religiously legitimized hatred of women and the feminine creative force.

It is easy to determine what exactly they were attempting to destroy by considering the stereotypes of a witch. Uncontrollable and with different perceptions from those around them, disagreeing with what was generally accepted as the natural order or as beneficial to society, they were considered extremely dangerous. Another hallmark of the witch was that she was an extremely sexual being who would “drain” a man of his power in order to strengthen her own. These stereotypes harken back to the darker aspects associated with the Goddess. Her gender, sexuality, and her acceptance of death as part of the natural order represented all that was evil in Judeo-Christian beliefs. As Elinor Gadon states, “The irrational, the chaotic and destructive, which had been acknowledged when the Goddess reigned supreme, were split off from divinity and became feared. The power of the
feminine came to be seen as threatening to the established social order” (xiv). Women were the prime source of all that was evil.

The most important link between Butler, Bradley and Rice is that each presents a literary vision in stark contrast to what has been previously offered by traditional speculative fiction. For Butler, this revisioning includes a societal structure that is informed both by her gender and race, and both Bradley and Rice turn what traditional fiction had deemed vile and bloodthirsty creatures, Amazons and vampires respectively, into figures radically different from those previously presented. Through their revisioning that which has been previously perceived as weakness becomes strength, and what was once reviled gains validation and dignity. A closer examination of the work of Butler, Bradley and Rice will reveal the crucial function their literature performs as well as the resulting appeal that feminist speculative fiction holds for its readers.
Butler's Future Females

Octavia Butler's fiction is similar to most feminist speculative fiction in its portrayal of women in nontraditional roles. In the Patternmaster series the elite of Butler's new world includes a significant number of women while white males are equally represented in the lower class, not because of their race, but because males on this world are commonly not as gifted. A notable difference in Butler's work is that her major female characters are black. This difference is important, particularly in her Patternmaster series, because it allows her to explore the impact of race and gender in a future society not only through her characters, but also through the structure of the social hierarchy, in which white males maintain the majority of control. Another distinctive feature of her fiction is that Butler envisions a future influenced not only by science, but also by chance and nature. For example, the Clayark disease is a mysterious illness brought to Earth as a result of space exploration, but the very starships which helped to unleash this devastating disease upon the human population are also the means of possible salvation from the illness. The emphasis on nature is significant because it demonstrates the search for balance typically found in women's speculative fiction. Carolyn Merchant comments on the forces governing this trend in her book *The Death of Nature*:

The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change. The female earth was central to the organic cosmology that was undermined by the scientific revolution and the rise of the market-oriented culture.

Both the women's movement and the ecology movement are sharply critical of the costs of competition, aggression, and
Ecology has been a subversive science in its criticism of the consequences of uncontrolled growth associated with capitalism, technology, and progress. The vision of the ecology movement has been to restore the balance of nature disrupted by industrialization and overpopulation. It has emphasized the need to live within the cycles of nature, as opposed to the exploitative linear mentality of forward progress.

Butler's characters do not control nature, but they are able to develop knowledge of and influence over natural occurrences in both positive and negative ways; this is a hallmark of women's speculative fiction, and Butler's in particular, because it reinforces a philosophy of balance rather than a philosophy based on absolute good and evil and the need for power and control.

Butler's female protagonists, as well as Bradley's and Rice's, differ from speculative fiction's usual heroines in that their tough aggressiveness, their ability to engage in brutal acts of violence when necessary, is not depicted apologetically, but rather with an element of triumph. Confident, strong, intuitive and intelligent, these are not women to be trifled with. Butler's contributions to the changing face of speculative fiction can be shown in both the mythology and the heroines she creates in the Patternmaster series.

Although not the first novel in the series, the story actually begins in Clay's Ark when a starship by that name returns to earth and an astronaut, contaminated by an alien life form, evades the authorities in an attempt to spread disease. The virus, which will eventually kill one-half of the world's population and will cause genetic mutations in any children of the infected survivors, compels those afflicted to infect others, thereby ensuring its survival.
The Clayark virus becomes a foil against which the issue of racism and ethnocentrism can be explored. The novel opens somewhere in the not-so-distant future when a white doctor and his bi-racial daughters are kidnapped by what they think is a "car-family." One of their captors comments to the father on the girls' appearances and "Blake stiffened, felt Rane stiffen against him. His wife Jorah had been black, and he and Rane and Kiera had been through this routine before" (Butler, Ark 8). Significantly, it is Rane and Kiera, not their white father, who eventually are able to accept their infected captors. Rather than fear their differences, they eventually respect and admire them. This is particularly evident in their feelings concerning Jacob, one of the mutated children. Blake sees the child as nothing more than an animal while the girls view him as much more, "Jacob's beautiful, really.... The way he moves catlike, smooth, graceful, very fast" (65). The next sentence is extremely revealing, "The girls looked at each other again, shifted, uncomfortable, sharing some understanding that excluded him" (65). In this one brief exploration of prejudice, Butler seems to be questioning and testing its limits. Is there a scale that determines how different an individual must be in order to be accepted or reviled? Because of their gender and racial mixture, Rane and Kiera are quicker to recognize the hypocrisy of a belief system that embraces such values (a system which is very similar to the one found in our own reality). In fact, Butler is reacting to one of the primary themes found in feminist speculative fiction, a theme best explored by Ursula Le Guin concerning society's treatment of "The Other." This "other" can be different in a myriad of ways, "the sexual Alien, and the social Alien, and the cultural Alien, and finally the racial Alien" (Le Guin 97). Here Butler is dealing primarily with Le Guin's question: "What about the cultural and racial Other?"
That Le Guin and Butler share the same idea about the complex weave of humankind is obvious:

If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself—as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation—you may hate it or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality, and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself. (Le Guin 99)

Blake’s feeling of exclusion is in fact the result of his own alienation.

In *Patternmaster*, perhaps more explicitly than in her other novels, Butler explores the concept of power, not only in the life-and-death struggle between Teray and Coransee, but also in their interaction with Amber, a black healer. Butler’s manipulation of these three characters allows her to explore the different kinds of power available to men and women in that society while also hinting at the possibility of a society in which males and females could be considered true equals.

It is in the central character of Amber that Butler is able to explore more fully a woman who is powerful in her own right. In order to fully understand Amber’s significance a brief summary of *Patternmaster* and the structure of the patternist society will be necessary. The premise of the series is based on the idea that through the process of selective breeding a subculture of mentally superior individuals, linked telepathically in a hierarchical structure called “the pattern,” had been in existence prior to the spaceship crash that unleashed the Clay-Ark disease. This disaster caused them to take control of society in order to ensure human survival. Those
without psi-abilities, termed "mutes," serve those in power. They will not know until later that their thoughts and actions are no longer self-determined, but that they are programmed by the Patternists to show only docility and extreme loyalty. Fitting in at the bottom of the hierarchy that ranks Patternmaster, Housemaster, journeyman, apprentice, and lastly mutes, they are allowed to perform the mundane tasks of living—including raising the children of the Patternists. Occasionally the "mutes" will be "rewarded" for their service by the Patternists when the "mutes" are allowed to leave and establish new colonies on other planets (one such group, The Missionaries of Humanity, provides the basic focus in *Survivor*).

In this society, placement in the hierarchy is not determined by gender or race, but by psychic ability. As a result, this new ruling class divides the Earth into sections reminiscent of the medieval feudal system or the old southern plantation system. Each of the sections is ruled by a Housemaster, and all of the Housemasters, as well as other Patternists, are ruled by the Patternmaster. This emphasis on psychic ability also serves to strengthen and highlight those feminine aspects which patriarchy has tried to suppress, chiefly "women's intuition." Whereas under the reign of the Goddess this type of instinctive wisdom was not only validated but also highly prized, it became suspect under patriarchal rule. Eventually wise women, especially those gifted with the ability to heal, were labeled witches and therefore evil.

Amber, the black female healer in *Patternmaster*, fits in near the top of the Pattern hierarchy due to her special healing ability. However, she is an Independent, which means that she is able to move freely from House to House without ever permanently joining one. Amber chooses to prepare Teray to become the new Patternmaster rather than fight for the position herself and be forced to give up her freedom. It is only through Amber that Teray is
finally able to defeat his brother, Coransee. Butler's philosophy of balance is evident in their relationship because not only does Amber help Teray to develop his killing powers, she also senses and nurtures his healing abilities as well. When Teray and Amber form their alliance it is one of complementary forces and it is the combination of their abilities that gives them the power responsible for Coransee's destruction. Interestingly, the central conflict of *Patternmaster*, the use of power, and its ultimate resolution, is represented in the attitudes toward Amber by both Teray and Coransee with the former hoping that she will choose to work with him, and the latter wanting merely to possess her.

Butler makes it clear that when Amber allies herself with Teray, she is choosing to join her force with his. For Amber the matter of choice is of paramount importance. This is demonstrated when, after choosing to become Teray's lover, she secretly chooses to conceive. When Teray discovers that she is pregnant, he doubles his efforts at trying to convince her to marry him and she continues to refuse.

[Teray] 'Stay with me Amber. Be my wife—lead wife, once I have my House.'

She shook her head. 'No. I warned you. I love you . . . . But no . . . . Because I want the same thing you want. My House. Mine.'

[Teray] 'Ours . . . '

'No.' The word was a stone. 'I want what I want. I could have given my life for you back there if we had had to fight. But I could never give my life to you.'

'I'm not asking for your life,' he said angrily. 'As my lead wife you'd have authority, freedom . . . .'
Intelligent and independent, Amber is unwilling to subject her own desires to the domination of another person. Instead, she prefers a relationship in which neither is in a position to exercise their power at the expense of the other. Amber recognizes that by choosing a true partnership, in which no one is subordinated, their power is doubled.

The impact of socialization in a patriarchal culture is evident when Amber's male lover, Teray discovers that not only is Amber an extremely accomplished and competent woman, she is also bisexual. This ambiguity bothers Teray and he asks her, "Which do you prefer, Amber, really?"

'I'll tell you,' she said softly. 'But you won't like it . . . . When I meet a woman who attracts me, I prefer women . . . And when I meet a man who attracts me, I prefer men.'

'You mean you haven't made up your mind yet.'

'I mean exactly what I said . . . . Most people who asked want me definitely on one side or the other.'

'No, if that's the way you are, I don't mind.'

Although Butler's future society may not be as enlightened as we might hope, she offers the possibility of sexual tolerance when Teray chooses to accept Amber's bisexuality.

In her creation of secondary female characters whose race remains unspecified, Butler is able to explore more thoroughly the options available to women. By doing this the reader is then able to assume that these characters are not necessarily black and therefore are free to consider these women as representative of all women in Butler's future world.

Jansee, from *Patternmaster*, the lead wife of Rayal, a Patternmaster, is a good example of Butler's use of a minor female character to help define this
culture. In his struggle to gain control of the Pattern, Rayal killed all of his siblings except for Jansee. Although she was the strongest of his siblings, she had chosen not to compete with him, not through fear, but through a strong reverence for life (a trait shared by all of Butler's heroines). Instead, she chose to risk his anger by becoming his conscience, questioning his motives and forcing him to analyze his use of power. Rayal admits to Jansee that, while sometimes he might prefer her to worship him, he knows that he needs someone who isn't afraid of him. Through this relationship Butler demonstrates that adapting does not necessarily demand submitting. Their relationship also reflects the sense of balance found throughout Butler's work. While Rayal's use of power is overt, Jansee's use of power is subtle and, in the end, equal to, if not greater than Rayal's.

Another good example of a minor character who helps to define the possible roles assumed by females is Gehl in Survivor. Gehl is a huntress who forms a friendship with the protagonist, Alanna. Like many of Butler's female characters, she is ambitious but realistic. "I'm going to challenge the Third Hunter," she tells Alanna. "I can beat him. I know I can . . . . Natahk [the First Hunter] . . . says my ambition will kill me. He knows that if I beat the Third Hunter, I will take on the Second." But when Alanna asks her if she has plans to challenge Natahk, Gehl scoffs. "I only challenge where there is a chance for me to win" (17-18). Gehl is ambitious, but it is not an all-consuming ambition. She has no intention of needlessly sacrificing her life in the pursuit of power. Eventually Gehl does become Second Hunter and Natahk's mate and thereby gains the power she desired. Butler's depiction of Gehl offers a breath of fresh air for female readers used to seeing ambitious females typically characterized very negatively. Gehl provides another example of the way Butler strives for balance not only on a societal level, but on a personal
level as well. She is able to survive and succeed because she has fully integrated her "masculine" strength with her "feminine" wisdom and compassion. Unlike the driven women found in traditional examples of fiction she is neither irrational nor consumed by an "unhealthy" desire for power that would ultimately require some form of punishment, usually death, at the male author's hand.

Through these secondary characters Butler allows her reader to see a world in which women will eventually be allowed access to jobs and positions of power and authority. Many of her women of the future will also display an inordinate resistance to self-destructive power quests. She does seem to suggest that one way women of the future will compensate for their imposed limitations will be by forming liaisons with persons in power. Although these relationships may include sex, Butler clearly demonstrates that these women are powerful in their own right and do not need to rely upon erotic escapades to accomplish their goals.

While Amber represents one facet of balance, that between "good" and "evil," Alanna represents another crucial aspect of balance—social balance and racial tolerance. Butler explores the treatment of the cultural and racial Other in the missionaries' treatment of Alanna, the female protagonist in Survivor, and also in their treatment of and attitudes toward the planet's natural inhabitants, the Kohn. Saved by her foster parents after having been orphaned and having lived as a "wild child," Alanna was taken with them when they left to colonize a new planet. Set apart from the other missionaries by a childhood lived in the wild, and her Afro-Asian heritage, she is never truly accepted by the other missionaries and she never truly accepts them either.
Similar in form to humans, the Kohn have fur ranging from rare blue, to green, and then the most common, yellow. Because of their coloring, fur, and differing culture, the Missionaries consider them primitive and inferior. The Missionaries also assume that the Kohn will occupy a place of natural subservience. This belief in their own superiority allows them to become unwitting slaves of one of the Kohn tribes, the Garkohn, in a manner reminiscent of their enslavement by the Patternists, thereby demonstrating that their lack of psychic ability isn't entirely what jeopardizes their survival and the survival of the majority of the human race, but rather it is their limited concept of humanity that endangers them the most. Their self-alienation—their narrow criteria for judging acceptability—is repeatedly the primary cause of their difficulties.

Ultimately it is Alanna's difference that helps her to free the missionaries.

Perhaps there was a time when I could have become a missionary if [my father] had insisted, pushed me. But as it happened, it was best for him, for his people, and especially for me, that he did not insist. Best that when we left Earth and settled on our new world, I became something else entirely. (2)

Alanna's racial heritage plays an important part in Survivor. As an Afro-Asian, she is symbolic of balance. The product of an apparently loving and equal relationship between members of two differing races, Alanna lacks the ethnocentricity that dooms the other missionaries. When she is captured by Tehkohn raiders, she is the only one to survive captivity and endure. Unlike the missionaries who felt no need to try to understand anyone who wasn't one of them, Alanna not only learned both Garkohn and Tehkohn customs and language, she looked past their surface appearance to what lay beneath.
Alanna's tolerance allows her to perceive correctly the Tehkohn as ally and the Garkohn as foe. Her tolerance and character not only win her the respect of the Tehkohn, but also the interest of their leader, Duit, an enormous blue Kohn whose appearance is even less similar in form to humans than the other Kohn. She becomes a skilled hunter and fighter, once saving Duit's life. Eventually she is welcomed into the tribe as Duit's wife and bears him a daughter who is welcomed into the tribe as a future warrior.

Through Alanna, Butler gives her readers an independent woman possessing great moral strength and character. In addition to her impressive physical strength and skill, Alanna's moral character is demonstrated by her defiance of Missionary belief and custom, by her tolerance, and by her willingness to subject herself to the criticism of those who treated her as an outsider in order to save them from the Garkohn.

Ultimately it is in the relationship between Alanna and Duit, a bi-racial woman with white foster parents and an enormous blue-furred Hao, and how her parents react to it, that Butler's views concerning racism and what must occur if our society is to survive are most readily viewed. Near the end of the novel Alanna goes to her foster parents hoping to gain their understanding concerning her marriage to Duit: "'I'm a wild human,' said Alanna quietly. 'That's what I've always been . . . I haven't lost myself. Not to anyone . . . In time, I'll also be a Tekhon judge. I want to be. And I'm Duit's wife and your daughter'" (168). While her foster mother is able to accept her, "you are what you are," her father rejects her. "Alanna had broken what was to him a very basic, very old taboo. A taboo that was part of the foundation of his life" (169). For her foster father, and to an extent her foster mother, racism is an ingrained part of who they are. As a result, their future is uncertain because they are unwilling to try anything that is not from their own history.
Alanna's ability to reconcile her past with her present ensures her survival. The Kohn naming ceremony of Alanna and Diut's daughter offers a significant contrast to the narrowness of the missionaries as well. To the Kohn Tien is "strangely shaded" and has wrong hands and feet. Yet they accept her in their ritual, saying, "We are an ancient people. The Kohn empire was the handiwork of our ancestors . . . . We are a new people . . . . In each child we welcome, we are reborn" (180). Like Alanna, the Kohn are ensured survival by their open and accepting philosophy.

In addition to exploring racism and ethnocentricism, Butler also examines issues of violence. Dorothy Allison, in her article "The Future of Female," discusses power and violence in relation to Butler's work:

In the early books, ordinary people, known as 'non-telepaths' or 'latents', are cast as the racial inferiors to the psychically gifted humans. The 'latents' are also known as 'mutes'; when Doro explains the term means 'ordinary people', his wife Emma tells him, 'I know what it means, Doro . . . . It means nigger!' Butler's use of the term nigger is as deliberate as her matter-of-fact handling of racism in the everyday lives of her characters. By portraying the 'ordinary' ones as lesser people who are treated with contempt, bred like animals (or slaves) for desirable genetic material, and murdered as if they were not fully human, Butler is commenting on the underlying structure of racism.

But those on the top are also on the bottom. The telepaths cannot function in normal human society; they are prone to violence, madness, and unreasoning hatred. Many are also black. In the early novels they are enslaved, victimized, assaulted, and killed. In the later, they enslave, victimize, assault, and kill normal humans. The
nigger, Butler suggests, is the one who's made slave/child/victim. It is the concept of nigger, the need for a victim, and the desire to profit by the abuse or misuse of others that corrupts and destroys.

(473-74)

Butler's exploration depicts the female fear of male power and its ability to oppress, violate and destroy its victims when Kiera and Rane are captured by an actual car-family and are brutally gang-raped repeatedly. The contempt and brutality they are shown by their captors becomes a social statement. Their sex and racial make-up combined render them, at least in their captors' eyes, insignificant, what Dorothy Allison would term a "nigger." However, Butler moves beyond the female fear of violence and delves into the female capacity for violence. In her hands, violence becomes a tool that her female characters can use only when absolutely needed for survival, whether physically or psychic, to help restore a sense of balance. In other words, when the situation, or society, is not "balanced," then the individual must rely on the self to maintain inner balance and thereby ensure survival. This is best illustrated near the end of the novel when the girls attempt to escape from the car-family. Kiera is able to get away with little problem, but Rane is forced to fight her way out. Her acts of violence are not indiscriminate. Her violence is in direct response to threats upon her safety and are not easy acts for her to commit.

'Open this door,' she said.

'I can't,' he lied. 'It needs a special key.' It could not have been more obvious to her that he was lying if he had worn a sign.

She fired a short burst, and he fell. Now the screaming inside her returned. She was shooting people, killing people. She was going to be a doctor someday. Doctors did not kill people; they helped people
heal. Her father had carried a gun for years and never shot anyone. He had escaped without shooting anyone.

But she could not.

The instant she showed indecision, weakness, mercy, these people would cut her to pieces: (177)

Butler's depiction of the enormous emotional struggle Rane goes through as her reverence for life is weighed against her will to survive is both human and realistic.

While she is not a ruthless killer, Amber is also involved in violence. Amber's acts of violence are usually done for the sake of self-preservation, as when she kills her Housemaster while a young woman. Although she lived in a society in which most women were little more than a commodity to be owned or traded, Amber's healing powers can't fully protect her from male abuse. Possessing significant healing powers at a young age, as well as being "a terrifyingly efficient killer" because, "A good healer could destroy the vital parts of a person's body quickly enough and thoroughly enough to kill a strong Patternist before he could repair himself" (58), she had still been sexually victimized by one of her male teachers. Her power could not prevent her from being viewed and treated as a sex object. Recognizing that her powers would soon be too much for him to handle, he set her up in a situation that forced her to kill the Housemaster and flee. Later in the book Teray and Amber are held captive by Teray's brother Coransee who orders Teray to send Amber to his bed. Although Amber is powerful in her own right she is unable to prevent her own rape. However, she is able to see Coransee's power play for what it is, "I'm sorry, Teray . . . . Sorry to be of use to him against you . . . . He doesn't give a damn about me now except to break me. He's doing this to
humiliate you" (146). Amber is able to see that sexual violence is really about power, in her time as well as our own.

It is clear when examining Butler's work that her own gender and race-related experiences are informing her work. The worlds she creates bear an uncomfortably striking resemblance to our own skewed reality. However, she is able to rewrite history, in a manner of speaking, by empowering her black female characters, by giving them the tools necessary to regain and maintain equality and balance in societies obviously pitted against them.
Bradley's Renunciates

While Butler's fiction focuses on aspects of racism and the need for balance, choice is the theme that echoes throughout Marion Zimmer Bradley's Renunciates Trilogy. Every major issue revolves around the question of choice, whether subtly or overtly. The Renunciates Trilogy focuses on a group of women called the Free Amazons, a group referred to without much detail in the Darkover series. Considering the place that Amazons have held in male-authored speculative fiction, Bradley's decision to explore her Amazon characters in depth is highly significant.

For many male writers of science fiction Amazons serve as symbol of all that is most feared and loathed as other, the castrating mother wreaking vengeance for her condition on her male offspring. She must be denied through death, or forced into submission to a male-dominated heterosexual practice which then becomes the norm.... Amazons must be punished, nominally perhaps for their presumption in assuming 'male' characteristics, such as strength, agency, power, but essentially for their declaration of Otherness. (Lefanu 33)

Instead of depicting the Free Amazons, or Renunciates, as cruel, bloodthirsty lesbians intent on butchering any man unlucky enough to cross their path, Bradley depicts them as average women, from all walks of life, who have, by choice, rejected the limited roles available to them on Darkover. Bradley's Free Amazons are both life-givers, if they so chose, as well as life-takers. In this respect they closely resemble depictions of the Goddess because the encompass both light and dark aspects. In other words, they are whole women.
Considering the negative depictions given to Amazons in previous literature, from what did Bradley's concept of a Free Amazon evolve? Anne Kaner believes that one must look at medieval history in order to find an answer,

Borrowing a bit from medieval convents, a bit from the Amazon warriors, and a lot from medieval women's societies, [specifically the Beguines], Bradley fashions an ideal composite figure or muse for her heroines to follow--that of both masculine and feminine elements combined into one concept of sisterhood, the sisterhood extends itself out to become a recognizable paradigm of duality of the human personality: the practical sisterhood of The Free Amazons or Renunciates for the masculine outward journey and The Dark Sisterhood for the feminine inward journey of the soul. (71)

In this secular semi-cloistered Beguinal society women were able to pool their economic resources and enjoy the benefits of a protected environment. It also provided an important sense of identity much as the Guild of the Renunciates did for its members. Most importantly, both provide women with a choice in societies in which options for women were drastically limited.

In *The Shattered Chain* the Amazons become symbolic of those individuals, both on Darkover and in reality, bound by old, limited choices, who refuse to remain locked into narrow roles and make the painful decision to break from tradition and culture to create new roles for themselves. In the oath that a woman must take to become a Free Amazon, she basically gives up all that she has ever known. She renounces the right to marry; to bear children, unless it is her own wish to do so; she agrees to accept sole responsibility for raising any female child she might have, while abdicating responsibility for any male child she might bear; and to be known by the
name of any man. But the Renunciate also gains a new family in the Guild of
Free Amazons; she becomes part of a sisterhood, something denied women in
patriarchal literature and societies.

The first Free Amazon Bradley introduces to her readers is Kindra, a
middle-aged woman with short gray hair, a woman whose appearance is an
obvious deviation from that found in male speculative fiction. Rather than
fulfilling the role of a sex object to be fantasized about, Kindra is a realistically
drawn woman, not a caricature of one. Neither is Kindra a bloodthirsty
swashbuckler, and she doesn't allow the Free Amazons under her command to
act in that manner either. When one of the women pulls a knife on a man who
only verbally insulted her, Kindra reacts furiously slapping the knife out of
her hand,

'Damn you, Gwennis . . . when I asked for volunteers on this trip, I
wanted women, not spoilt children! . . . your skills were given you to
protect you against real dangers, rape, or wounding, not to protect
your pride. It is only men who must play games of [pride], my
daughter; it is beneath the dignity of a Free Amazon.' (Shattered
Chain 15-16)

Unlike the female "killers" portrayed in traditional speculative fiction, these
women are not driven to kill by an all-consuming desire for power, nor are
they blood-thirsty man-hating maniacs bent on revenge. They fit into no one
neat category other than the fact that their acts of violence are not the result
of pure aggression. They are women who will kill, without apology, to protect
themselves or others. They are human beings, women from all walks of life,
who are as capable of nurturance as they are of violence.

It is through Jaelle that Bradley clarifies the pain of the oath. When
Jaelle, at sixteen, takes the oath she does so without tears, something very
uncommon for a woman in her position. Years later, after marrying Terran agent Petér Haldane she is able to see the stifling aspects of the society she had previously felt was far more free than that of The Renunciates. In Thendara House she is not Jaelle, but rather Mrs. Peter Haldane. When she betrays her oath by conceiving a child only to please her husband, she finds the constraints binding her tightened considerably by Peter's intensified attitude of ownership of her and their child. In an effort to escape, Jaelle believes she kills Peter, "I don't belong to him! And neither does my baby! . . . He wanted to own me, me and the baby, like things, like toys . . . . ". (387) It is after this that Jaelle is able to tell Magda that although she had taken the oath and lived as a Renunciate, she had never truly been one.

'Do you remember how you cried when you took the Oath? I never did. I--it was just confirming something I'd made my mind up to, a long time ago, and I was happy about it. I--I wasn't renouncing anything, I never knew till I met Peter that there was anything to renounce--I had forgotten so much, blinded myself to so much--. . . . I couldn't remember my mother's face, remember that her hands were chained, . . . . I thought it was enough to say no to all this, . . . All the women who had come to the Amazons, and fought and cried through the Training Sessions and left, free, having grown into freedom, but she had pretended she had nothing from which to be free. She had never had any idea of the anguished battles they fought. Now she knew why it took beatings, chainings, the threat of a fatal pregnancy, to drive a woman away from her husband.

'They don't chain us. We chain ourselves. Willingly. More than willingly. We crave chains . . . . (388-89)
It is Magda who reassures Jaelle that "craving chains" is not what it means to be a woman. Her year as a Free Amazon has brought her maturity and a new sense of self-awareness, "Of course not," she replies firmly. 'It means to be in control of your own life, your own actions" (389). However, it is only in an alternate society called The Forbidden Tower, part of "The Dark Sisterhood," that Magda and Jaelle are able to totally rid themselves of their patriarchal constraints. In this community individuality is prized and laran is found in both men and women and no one must sacrifice their ability when they lose their virginity. For this society, communication and a strong sense of support and community replace the need for aggression and domination that seem to go hand-in-hand with patriarchy and its constraints.

The old choices and limited options open to those on Darkover are symbolized by the chains mentioned in the title of the novel. For Rohana, a member of Darkover's ruling class, the chains are intellectual, for her niece, Jaelle, the chains are literal as well. It is in Jaelle that Bradley is most clearly able to depict the impact of socialization. Jaelle had lived in Dry-Town during her early childhood where, by custom, the women wore chains that bound their hands to signify their subjugation, and their status as an ornament. It is when Jaelle's mother finds her playing "grown-up" that Melora reaches out telepathically for help. She later tells Rohana that she would have killed Jaelle if escape had been impossible after seeing her playing at being an adult with ribbons tied around her hands--playing at being chained.

Bradley reinforces the influence of socialization with her depiction of Terran agent Magda Lorne. Magda had been raised on Darkover but trained as a Terran Intelligence Agent. When Magda posed as a Free Amazon her Darkovan upbringing paralyzed her. The codes and ethics she'd absorbed as a child were in direct conflict with her Terran training. Magda realizes that she
too is weighted with the invisible chains of her early socialization, and, that ultimately, her only chance lies in her choice to break away from her Terran and Darkovan sides to become a Renunciate.

Throughout the trilogy Bradley attempts to show how the openly sexist and limited culture of Darkover is made somewhat endurable only because an option exists for women who wish to escape from it. The existence of the Free Amazons gives those who wish it an honorable alternative to life as they had known it. Bradley expresses this best in Kindra's response to Rohana's indignation over the plight of the chained Dry-Town women:

'I feel no very great sympathy for them. Any single one of them could be free if she chose. If they wish to suffer chains rather than lose the attentions of their men, or be different from their mothers and sisters, I shall not waste my pity on them . . . . They endure their captivity as you of the Domains, Lady, endure yours; and truth to tell, I see no very great difference between you. They are, perhaps, more honest, for they admit to their chains and make no pretense of freedom; while yours are invisible—but they are as great a weight upon you. (Bradley, Chain 17)

The Lady Rohana, a member of the Comyn, the Darkover elite whose psychic abilities keep them in the position of rulers, contrasts with Kindra and the other Free Amazons. Early in her journey with the women, she begins to question the social constructs of Darkover. She wonders why, as one having inherited the gift of psychic ability, she was made to choose between laran and a "normal" life. To choose the laran would mean living a life in virginal isolation rather than being able to marry, bear children, and participate in the community, as much as women on Darkover were allowed. Looking back she wonders why she willingly sacrificed her power so easily.
... Why must women have to choose between the gift of laran and all the other things of a woman's life. ... Did Jalak really change [Melora's] life so much? Do any of us have choice, really? At our clan's demand, to share a stranger's bed and rule his house and bear his children ... or to live isolated from life, in loneliness and seclusion, controlling tremendous forces, but with no power to reach out our hand to another human being, alone, virgin, worshipped but pitied .... (58)

Rohana represents the majority of Darkover women. Conventional and timid, she blushes when a Dry-Town man insinuates that she and Kindra are lovers. For Rohana to break free from the narrow patterns governing the options available for a woman in her class, she had had to go against everything she'd been taught to believe in. Her choice to act against her family's wishes, to save her cousin and niece with the help of the Free Amazons, changes her life forever.

... it was not nearly so easy to give up the familiar support of known protections, known ways of thinking. Until she came on this journey, she had never quite realized how much all her decisions, even small personal ones, had been left to her father and brothers, or, since she married, to her husband. Even such small things as Shall I wear a blue gown or a green? ... had been dictated less by her own tastes and preferences than Gabriel's wishes ....

Now that I know how to make my own decisions, will I ever be content again to let Gabriel decide for me?

Or, if I do go back, is it only because it is so much easier to do exactly what is expected of a woman of my caste? (83)
When Rohana decides to go back to her husband and known way of life, it is a choice made freely. She returns not because she lacks courage or because she suffers from the conventional lack of imagination, but because her love for her husband and children outweighs the difficulties of the narrow confines she is allowed. "Rohana knew, now, that she was living life by choice; not because her mind was too narrowly bounded to imagine any other life,... (90). It is in her consciously made choice to stay with her husband that Rohana finds true freedom.

The chains don't only bind the women of Darkover. Bradley explores the enslaving, narrow attitudes of the males as well. When Jaelle becomes attracted to Magda's former husband, he expresses his concern to Magda that she is too "emotional" about Jaelle, implying that there is sexual interest involved. Magda responds to the narrowness of his thinking: "Do you really think no woman could be loyal to another woman out of common humanity and integrity? (Bradley, Chain 202). His socialization in the highly structured patriarchal Darkovan culture has made it impossible for him to believe that women could have a relationship based on anything other than rivalry or lesbianism.

Alternate sexual lifestyles are also explored by Bradley. It is treated as a fact that there are women who love women and it is as acceptable among the Renunciates as is heterosexuality. In Thendara House Magda becomes sexually involved with one of her oath sisters, and later in City of Sorcery she and Jaelle become freemates. Again, it is a matter of choice, and, more importantly, the freedom to choose and express that choice. The only instance in which any of the women react negatively is when they discuss what should be done to a pair of prostitutes dressing like Free Amazons and putting on a lesbian act. For the real Renunciates that sexual alternative is honest and
healthy if that is what the woman in question chooses, but to pretend and profit from such an exploitative exhibition, to indulge male fantasies, makes that choice seem "dirty." Bradley stresses that lesbianism is a facet of life for some of these women, but it is not the foundation of their comradeship.

In *Thendara House* the reader is shown that these attitudes hurt everyone in the society. Magda sees a group of men on Festival Night alone at a table. One of the men is very similar in appearance to a woman, and even his hair is pinned in such a way as to simulate a woman's coiffure.

She had seen [the men] holding hands. But they couldn't dance together. How strange, and how sad, that even on this most permissive of nights, men were still more trapped than women. She could wear, and as a Renunciate did wear breeches in public. If this man wore skirts, and he looked as if he would feel better in them, he would be lynched. How sad, and how foolish, people were! (312)

For the women of Darkover there was an option in the form of Free Amazons; for the men there was nothing.

Although Butler and Bradley focus on different themes, they are both concerned with offering their readers a different perspective on their own lives, a perspective that allows them to judge for themselves what it is to be a woman. They offer their female readers women with whom they can identify, women who challenge the patriarchal structure that circumscribes their lives.

For Bradley, society, both real and fictional, offers limited options to women. However, on Darkover she is able to recreate a version of an actual medieval society which provides the sisterhood of a nunnery without cloistering its members. They are able to move freely throughout society, supporting themselves and their families. Yet, Bradley makes it clear that the
Free Amazons are not for every woman. While some might choose a life free of dependence on men, Bradley does not denigrate those who actively choose to participate in traditional society. In Bradley's trilogy, freedom comes in many forms. It is not the way of life that a woman chooses that frees her of patriarchal constraints, but the very act of making an informed decision, of making a choice based not on what patriarchy has told her she wants, but on what she knows and feels to be best for her.
Rice’s Vampires and Visionaries

If women are the prime source of all that is evil in the majority of traditional literature, then two of the best biblical examples are Adam’s two wives, both of whom were strong and sensual women. Lilith and Eve both defied patriarchal society and rebelled when punished. Both are also associated with blood (another aspect of the Goddess and feminine creative power), and, as in the case of Lilith, child-eating (Keesey 8).

According to the Talmud, Lilith argued with Adam over his authority and left him. As punishment for her "sins," her children were destroyed. Lilith later returned—immortal, undead, and vengeful, according to the biblical stories—to kill Eve’s children. (Keesey 8)

This is significant not only in considering patriarchy’s long-standing hatred of women, but also because Lilith and Eve, both epitomes of the monster/witch, are now generally considered to be the source from which the vampire has evolved.

Although variations of the vampire myth are widespread, the basic premise is fairly consistent. The vampire is an evil creature which returns from the dead to "feed" on the living in order to perpetuate and preserve its own unnatural existence. The nature of the feeding depends largely upon the culture—in some cultures the vampire feeds on human blood, in others it consumes an individual’s psyche, or soul. One characteristic commonly shared, despite cultural variation, is the savage animalistic behavior of these creatures. Bram Stoker’s Dracula is an example of just such a beast. Highly violent and aggressive, the vampire uses his power to force his victims, usually female, to submit and thrives on their terror.

However, the vampire has recently undergone a transformation at the hands of female genre writers and their female readers have responded
enthusiastically. One of the most widely known of these authors is Anne Rice who created a humanized, even likable, vampire. Her vampire characters are not bestial beings driven by evil forces, but beings rather like ourselves with fears and insecurities, beings capable of intellectual reasoning and questioning. Just as Bram Stoker's traditional vampire tale, Dracula, appealed primarily to the male audience, this new breed of vampire has captured the imaginations and empathy of its female fans.

This is not meant to imply that females weren't attracted to male vampire fiction; indeed, a strong connection can be made between it and romance fiction. The male version of vampire lore reinforces the female's role as the helpless victim with a child-like brain who must be protected from the evil beast, and, in patriarchy's judgement, from herself. The male vampire novel becomes another tool in patriarchy's war against woman when it takes advantage of romance novel characteristics. Is there more than coincidence at work when we note that the vampire and the male lead characters in romance fiction bear a strong resemblance to one another

... those aristocrats with ancient names and ruined mansions, with their awful demands, their hawk noses and piercing eyes, their stern and stepfatherly aspects...? (Stade vii)

Stoker describes Dracula through Jonathan Harker in the following manner:

His face was a strong--a very strong--aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking. (18)
Later, Mina's description of the count's face in her diary also bears a strong similarity to the heroes in popular romance: "... it was hard, and cruel, and sensual, and his big white teeth, that looked all the whiter because his lips were so red" (Stoker 180).

In romance fiction an innocent woman is drawn to a "dangerous" rogue and, ultimately, will only find happiness by sacrificing herself to him. As Tania Modleski states in her discussion of romance novels, "... the heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, sacrificing her aggressive instincts, her 'pride', and--nearly--her life" (435). Usually described as being extremely sensual, the woman's lover will pursue her with an almost obsessive passion, making her feel highly desirable.

... the reader is always able to interpret the hero's actions as the result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine. Knowing the hero will eventually imply or state that he has loved the heroine from the beginning. The reader can attribute the hero's expressions of hostility and derision to his inability to admit, perhaps even to himself, how much the sight of the woman 'sprawled at the side of the road looking like a collapsed puppet' inflames his passion and rouses his admiration. Male brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation, not of contempt, but of love. (Modleski 439)

The vampire, who needs the heroine's literal life in order to survive, is merely a logical extension, and her sacrifice is willing because, through death, she can prove her self-worth and power. This helps to explain why so many women have found the traditional vampire Dracula to be such an appealing figure.
Interviews with three of the men who have played Dracula on stage or screen corroborate this disturbing observation. Bela Lugosi stated,

... ninety-one percent of [my] admiring letters come from women

... Women are interested in terror for the sake of terror. For
generations they have been the subject sex. This seems to have bred
a masochistic interest--an enjoyment of, or at least a keen interest
in, suffering experienced vicariously on the screen. (qtd. in Stade vii)

Christopher Lee similarly explains Dracula's appeal:

Men are attracted to him because of the irresistible power he wields.
For women there is the complete abandonment to the power of a
man.... It's like being a sexual blood-donor. What greater evidence
of giving, than your blood flowing from your own blood-stream.
(qtd. in Stade vii)

Peter Wyngarde's statement is even more unsettling:

It's a totally sexual thing. All that blood sucking and the girl's
apparent orgasm when he kisses her--a form of the sex act.... He
has that sinister, almost violent look that men have who are
extremely sexually attractive to women. (qtd. in Stade vii)

The lines between male sexuality and male violence become blurred and the
female reader confuses the rapist mentality, with its intention to humiliate
and degrade, with sexual desire (Brownmiller 424). For the female, the hero's
brutal and violent behavior toward the heroine becomes not only acceptable
but highly desirable because of its interpretation "as a measure of [his] love or
[his] resistance to [her] extraordinary charms" (Modleski 441).

For the male, traditional vampire fiction reinforces the patriarchal
power structure which treats women as property to be fought over and
controlled while fueling the male appetite for sexual power and domination over women. In Stoker's Dracula this is demonstrated in the scene where the Count confronts and taunts the men pursuing him:

"My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine—my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed." (324)

Norine Dresser, in her book American Vampires: Fans, Victims, and Practitioners, reveals some of the responses she received to a questionnaire given to students relating to vampires. Twenty-two persons stated that the traditional vampire appealed to them because of its power. The three following excerpts are examples of their responses:

... perhaps women are attracted to the sexual side of a woman being enslaved by the vampire, coming to him whenever he needs her, submitting to him.

He can control any woman's soul and entire being and she could be totally his if he commanded it. It's a fantasy for me and I'm sure for many women all over.

For me the idea of a personalized powerful demonic force that yet cannot harm you unless you invite it into your life is an aspect which gives me the twin contradictory thrills of helplessness and power. (155)

By eroticizing this extreme form of male dominance, traditional vampire fiction has been at least partially successful in seeking to inoculate women against their resentment of their inferior position and their fear of male power and control while convincing men of the sanctity and righteousness of the patriarchal power structure.
Although many critics have cited the autobiographical aspects of Rice's vampire fiction, they seem to be ignoring the possibility that she is giving voice to the dreams and concerns of the contemporary woman. Rather than merely giving glimpses of her own mind, she is laying bare the hopes, fears, needs, and desires of modern woman which a patriarchal society forced her to bury—to lock away in a coffin—in the deep, dark recesses of her mind. The transformation of the traditional vampire horror story allows for the expression of that which was previously inexpressible. It is interesting to note at this point that the early, as well as contemporary, vampire fiction written by men does not express the vampire's point of view while the fiction written by women, specifically Anne Rice, is told exclusively from the vampire's point of view. Not only is this fact significant, it is also highly predictable. Those in power are the people who determine what fits within the category of being "acceptable" and what does not. Acceptability is predicated upon a similarity to those in power with the goal being to repress and dominate—ultimately to destroy either literally or figuratively—those different from themselves. In our own culture this means that those not fitting within the white, Protestant, heterosexual, male power structure are minimalized for who and what they are because their needs and desires do not match those of the controlling patriarchal structure. The vampire can then be interpreted as representing—"a transgression against the body, the last barrier protecting the self from the other" (DeLamotte 21). Because women have been viewed throughout our history as representing a dangerous threat to the status quo, they have been treated as the monstrous Other, a being to be shunned and oppressed for the safety of society. Just as this Alien or Other represents danger to the controlling power structure, the characteristics associated with it (not surprisingly also associated with the feminine), become
suspect and, in some cases, evil. In the case of the vampire, the psychic abilities, including other various supernatural powers, and the need for blood in order to survive (which can be related to menstruation) all serve in male vampire fiction to make the vampire a foul, unclean beast. Is it any wonder then that males have traditionally chosen the viewpoint of vampire hunter or victim and that the female genre writers like Rice have chosen the viewpoint of the vampire?

Why then, after what has been discussed thus far, would female writers like Anne Rice be attracted to a genre that has traditionally been used to manipulate and exploit women—the true 'separated one' at the heart of a social order whose peculiar disorder it is to make her the fearful Other (DeLamotte 28)? Writing in what has historically been considered a male genre, a female author can transform it from a negative, unhealthy force into a positive healthy force, and subvert the harmful inequities that have been previously cultivated. By reclaiming the mythical vampire and reshaping it, Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* challenges the existing patriarchal structure. The vampire image becomes, in *The Vampire Chronicles*, a metaphor for our own existence. Because she does not treat vampires as representations of ultimate evil, she is able to explore ideas and philosophies that transcend them—they offer a unique perspective and a distance from the problems that plague us as humans.

One of the most obvious challenges to the tradition of patriarchy is the manner in which the vampires are depicted. Unlike her male counterparts, Anne Rice gives the reader a far different impression of the vampire's powers and appearance. Instead of a beast with glowing red eyes motivated by a lustful evil force, Rice's vision is of a more humanized being. By focusing on similarities rather than on differences, Rice allows the female reader to
identify with the vampire character in a more positive manner. In Rice's world of vampires those things that had previously symbolized horror and evil have been given new meaning.

Traditionally, darkness, the realm of the vampire, has been associated with evil and death. The vampire's inability to survive in daylight is symbolic on two levels. Historically the sun has been associated with male power and the moon with female power. Light equals logic and truth and, in Greek mythology, was represented by Apollo, the sun-god, while darkness and the moon, the mystery of the unknown, were represented by the goddess Artemis. It is of little surprise then that the traditional vampire was powerless in the light of day. He was a symbol of the regressive, inferior, and dangerous qualities that patriarchy saw in women. By having "light" overpower "dark" it was symbolic of the male subduing and dominating the female. To the female audience this reinforced their inferior position as a result of their baser, more primitive, instincts.

Historically the cycles of the moon have also been associated with the female menstrual cycle.

The earliest rituals were connected to the women's monthly bleeding. The blood from the womb that nourished the unborn child was believed to have mana, magical power. Women's periodic bleeding was a cosmic event, like the cycles of the moon and the waxing and waning of the tides. (Gadon 2)

Male-created vampire lore connected these denizens of the dark and the flowing of blood with representations of the unnatural and the evil. The male fear of the female reproductive ability is dealt with by transforming it into something unclean and hideous. It is interesting to note how Stoker dealt with this fear of female sexuality in Dracula. Early in the novel Jonathan Harker,
pretending to sleep, is approached by three of the count's beautiful female vampires. He describes "in an agony of delightful anticipation" and "languorous ecstasy" how one of the women went down on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips, and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. Lower and lower went her head.... I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and could feel the hot breath on my neck. (Stoker 39)

In this scene female sexuality is depicted with horrified fascination--an "agony of delightful anticipation." Apparently female vampires, having been cast into the darkness and connected with the other female symbols of earth and moon, become doubly feminine and doubly powerful. The female vampire's sexuality becomes amplified, yet, in traditional genre fiction, she loses her maternal, or nurturing instincts. When the count comes upon the women ready to devour Harker, he throws a bag to them.

One of the women jumped forward and opened it. If my ears did not deceive me there was a gasp and a low wail, as of a half-smothered child. The women closed round... they disappeared, and with them the dreadful bag. (Stoker 40)

This inversion of the roles of the pure and chaste woman and nurturing mother is even more apparent in the following description of Lucy Westenra after her vampire conversion:

The sweetness was turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness...
With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone . . . .

'Come to me Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you.' (Stoker 222-23)

Losing her purity and nurturing abilities, the traditional female vampire in the genre becomes the epitome of what males fear most—a sexually aggressive woman. The destruction of the female vampire—with the phallic stake through the heart—becomes a lesson and a warning. The world of darkness is to be avoided and feared.

Yet in Rice's version the powers of darkness are not overcome by the sun's power. The female essence is not destroyed by the male. Lestat and his companions enjoy the power to heal very quickly, and when Lestat decides to destroy himself by flying into the desert sun, his vampire blood and its healing properties prevent him from turning to ashes. This represents a significant departure from the traditional genre fiction in which a single ray of light could destroy the vampire. Neither is darkness burdened with numerous connotations of evil in The Vampire Chronicles. Rather, it is seen as a place of beauty, opportunity and vitality—a place of worth. Rice presents darkness as something to be embraced, not feared. Although there may be death in the darkness, there may also be immortality, sensual delights, and powers beyond the imagination. The female reader responds to the transformation of darkness from a potentially destructive force into a creative force because it reinforces an appreciation of her own mystery and creativity.

The connotations relating to blood are also transformed in Rice's fiction. If vampire blood represents, in one of its aspects, menstrual blood, it is no longer the symbol of horror it was in the hands of men. Instead, Rice treats it
as a source of great power. Vampire blood becomes the source of the ability to create new life, which is significant when considering its menstrual aspect. Rather than a harmful pollutant, it is a source of fabulous gifts. The powers with which Rice imbues her vampires are not the stereotypical horrific abilities traditionally found in genre fiction. Telepathic abilities and heightened emotional sensitivity develop, becoming stronger as the vampire ages, thereby giving the female reader a scenario in which it is desirable to age because age translates into power. The telepathic and emotional abilities experienced by the vampires are presented in a positive light, thus affirming a woman's sense of intuition as something to be cherished and utilized rather than hidden out of shame. This is also true in relation to the vampire's heightened emotions and sensual abilities. Louis describes this awareness as "vampire eyes," indicating a sort of "mind's eye" or superhuman intuition which allows him to experience the world on a more intimate level: "I saw as a vampire . . . . It was as if I had only just been able to see colors and shapes for the first time" (Rice, Interview 20). Much as a girl will perceive the world differently after she has begun menstruating, the vampire too experiences changes in perception after his first "bleed". Throughout The Vampire Chronicles the beauty of the vampires' eyes are stressed—the change that occurred was not something horrible, but rather a thing of great beauty, allowing him to experience the world in a new way. Rice's vampires wear dark glasses when mingling with mortals because their eyes are so unusual and beautiful that they are intensely alluring.

Physically, the vampires also possess great strength and speed. Some of the older vampires acquire the power of flight like Akasha, the queen of the vampires, who later teaches this to Lestat. Rice seems to indicate that the ability to fly is metaphorical for the vampires attaining a higher level of
spirituality. However, for some of the vampires, it is a frightening experience that they seek to avoid.

It's more like floating, simply rising at will—propelling yourself in this direction or that by decision. It's a defiance of gravity quite unlike the flight of natural creatures. It's frightening. It's the most frightening of all our powers; and I think it hurts us more than any other power; it fills us with despair. . . . We fear perhaps we will one night leave the earth and never touch it again. (Rice, _Body Thief_ 232)

This sense of feeling disconnected from the earth, a symbol of the mother, explains why Lestat avoids using another of his abilities that allows him to accomplish astral projection.

Another aspect in which Rice departs from genre fiction concerns the way her vampires obtain their blood. The vampire's kiss, or "dark trick" as Rice's character Lestat terms it, is in most cases far different from the act of savagery as it is depicted in male vampire fiction. Typically, the vampire kiss is given only in heterosexual situations, usually from male vampire to female victim or female vampire to male victim. In traditional genre fiction this serves to reinforce the male reader's dominance and also play upon his fear that those he dominates might rise out of the grave to seek revenge. (This fear is diffused by the phallic destruction of the monster.) Rice breaks these gender barriers down: The first encounter described in _The Vampire Chronicles_ occurs in _Interview with the Vampire_ between Louis and Lestat. The language used to describe it is sensual and erotic.

... with the movement of a lover . . . . he put his right arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. Never had I been this close to
him before, and in the dim light I could see the magnificent radiance of his eyes . . . . he sank his teeth into my neck.

. . . light coalesced and began to shimmer, as though a golden presence hovered above me, suspended in the stairwell, softly entangled with the railings, curling and contracting like smoke.

'Listen, keep your eyes wide,' Lestat whispered to me, his lips moving against my neck. I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion . . . . (18)

The reader senses that Lestat is making love to Louis, that it is a pleasurable act for both of them and that it is a union of equals. This is in stark contrast to traditional genre fiction in which the vampire's feeding is more akin to rape. The act might still be one of dominance and submission, but in a non-gender-specific manner. Gender is unimportant in an act which does not focus on genital contact. Rice once stated in an interview that she meant for the reader to see the kill as sexual in nature, not in the traditional genitally focused manner, but in an asexual kind of experience (Ramsland 148).

Readers were invited to experience the blurred distinctions . . . . Female readers strongly identified with Louis, and later with Lestat, because Anne provided for them a means to experience male qualities that society prizes so highly without a loss of the female-oriented perspective. (Ramsland 148-49)

Through the blurring of gender distinctions, Rice's female readers are able to vicariously achieve a sort of gender-free perspective that is normally impossible for them.

The eroticism is accentuated in the Chronicles because the blood is usually sucked from the neck, wrist, or chest of the victim. By focusing on
non-genital erogenous zones, Rice creates a sexual and highly erotic act consisting only of foreplay thereby making it less "threatening" to her female readers.

And now he bent over my helpless head and, taking his right hand off me, bit his own wrist . . . . It seemed an eternity that he watched it . . . . He pressed his bleeding wrist to my mouth . . . . I drank, sucking the blood out of the holes, experiencing for the first time since infancy the special pleasure of sucking nourishment, the body focused with the mind upon one vital source. (Rice, Interview 19)

Describing his pleasure as that of a suckling infant, Louis' encounter resembles that of a maternal figure, Lestat, nurturing a child. This sort of intimate bonding is a drastic departure from the traditional genre fiction's description of a predatory act of savagery and dominance.

In Rice's fiction dominance is not one of the key factors involved in the vampire's bite. Between vampires, the bite is an act of intimacy shared by participants of equal status and done out of love. It is not a one-way act—both participants give and take. Although this is not as true with their mortal victims, it is still different from a "rape". Because the vampire must have blood in order to survive, it must feed on human victims. However, Rice's vampires, unlike their literary predecessors, learn to take the "little drink" from their victims rather than drain them. In this manner the victim still experiences the bite as very sensual and merely drifts off to sleep rather than death. Both vampire and victim end the encounter satisfied.

In novels like Dracula, the vampire hunter's tools are the crucifix and holy water. With these potent Christian symbols, the male vampire hunter is able to control and destroy the vampire, or Other. When these symbols fail to work, when they are impotent, the vampire is not only unharmed, but able to
lead its life virtually unthreatened and unimpeded. In Rice's fiction the various religious icons have no effect on her vampires. Christianity, a patriarchal religion, holds no power over the vampires unless they allow it to, and even then it is not real power, but only imagined in their own minds. Lestat realizes that religion has no meaning for him when he and his mother, Gabrielle, are pursued and they take shelter in a church beneath the altar. Although nothing happens to them when they enter or while they are hiding, Gabrielle becomes panicked when she awakens and hears the priest saying mass. "No, it's a Benediction," Gabrielle gasped. . . . We must get out. . . . Lestat, the Blessed Sacrament is on the altar." (Rice, *Vampire Lestat* 192) Gabrielle's Catholic teachings had become so ingrained that she was unable to see the truth—that it meant nothing because it was merely words. If the vampire is the Other feared by a patriarchal society, and that Other is also representative of woman, then Rice's refusal to give power to a patriarchally based religion is a matter of importance to her female readers. By having the vampires, the children of the darkness and earth, immune to a hierarchical religion, it opens the possibility that it may mean nothing but words for us as well. Many women unable to relate to the numerous religions that devalue women and give them a male deity to worship may be attracted to Rice because she questions traditional religion.

Rice explores another religious option in *Queen of the Damned*. Akasha, the vampire queen, awakens after having "slept" for thousands of years to implement her plan for world peace. Although her intentions are good, her plan is still evil. Reminiscent of the past atrocities committed against women in our own history, Akasha believes that males are the cause of all that is wrong with the world, and decides that all but a small handful of males should be killed. She plans on reviving worship of the Great Mother and
ruling over her newly created utopia as a goddess with Lestat at her side as her consort. Limiting her appearances to women living in primitive cultures and conditions she promises a world free of the miseries created by patriarchy.

... a new order was to begin, a new world in which the abused and injured would know peace and justice finally. The women and children were exhorted to rise, and to slay all males within this village. All males save one in a hundred should be killed, and all male babies save one in a hundred should be slaughtered immediately. Peace on earth would follow once this had been done far and wide; there would be no more war; there would be food and plenty. ... a world without war or deprivation in which women roamed free and unafraid, women who even under provocation would shrink from the common violence that lurks in the heart of every man. (302-03)

Once the women rid the world of ninety-nine percent of its men, they would teach the surviving boys to exist without violence. After this was done, the women would gradually increase the male population. Lestat tries to convince Akasha of the flaws in her plan, "What if there's something you don't understand .... Suppose the duality of masculine and feminine is indispensable to the human animal" (366). While Akasha is unable to recognize that she herself is committing those very crimes she accuses the males of perpetrating, the reader is able to recognize that Akasha is embracing the tactics she claims to despise. Rice wants us to realize that evil is not a gender-related trait. To believe so would switch the Other to representing male instead of female. Instead she wants us to understand the need for unity and wholeness. To divide is hierarchical, no matter the gender of the divider. While Akasha's plan is one that appeals to many women on one
level or another, the female reader is able to understand that a true utopia would have neither oppressors nor oppressed.

Claudia, Louis' and Lestat's vampire child, is what Rice gives to us as the result of domination and oppression. She is interesting because she is a blend of both female victim and monster. Trapped for eternity in the body of a six-year-old she is virtually helpless physically, shunned even by fellow vampires as an abomination that should never have been created. Not only is she symbolic of those women who, submitting to social pressure, are prevented from reaching their full potential, she is also representative of the tragic fruition of the Western ideal that women must remain young at all costs.

Naomi Wolf states in *The Beauty Myth*:

> Sacrificing ourselves for others, women respond to substances that acquire their aura from sacrifice. A substance into which death has entered must work miracles. At the Swiss spa La Prairie, freshly aborted sheep embryos are 'sacrificed' each week for their 'fresh and living cells' . . . . In Great Britain, France, and Canada, according to Gerald McKnight, human fetal tissue cells are sold to manufacturers of skin creams. He cites recorded cases of pregnant women in poor countries persuaded to abort their children as late as seven months, for about two hundred dollars, to a lucrative undercover trade in cosmetic fetal tissue. In seventeenth-century Romania, a countess slaughtered peasant virgins so that she could bathe in blood and stay youthful. The vampire never ages. (120)

Yet like Claudia, the woman/child who is kept young and child-like is denied the respect and power that come with age. To modify Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, she has been killed into an art object by Lestat and Louis. Even though they know her to be a mature, sensual and highly intelligent woman they
treat her as if she were a small child with little mind of her own, something pretty to groom and dress. She represents the modern woman who is valued for her appearance rather than her intelligence--she is, in many respects, a trophy.

An endless train of dressmakers and shoemakers and tailors came to our flat to outfit Claudia in the best of children's fashions, so that she was always a vision, not just of child beauty, with her curling lashes and her glorious yellow hair, but of the taste of finely trimmed bonnets and tiny laced gloves . . . . Lestat played with her as if she were a magnificent doll, and I played with her as if she were a magnificent doll . . . (Rice, Interview 100)

But Claudia's mind matures even as her form does not:

And then strange things began to happen, for though she said little and she was the chubby, round-fingered child still, I'd find her tucked in the arm of my chair reading the work of Aristotle or Boethius or a new novel just come over the Atlantic. Or pecking out the music of Mozart we'd only heard the night before with an infallible ear and a concentration that made her seem ghostly . . .

(Rice, Interview 101)

Like many women in our society she was valued primarily for her outward appearance thereby negating her of intellect. The reason in both situations is the same; it is far easier for men to disarm a woman, to see her as beautiful but lacking substance, than it is for them to admit that a beautiful, sensual woman might also be threateningly intelligent.

Up until this point Claudia's method of killing was fairly quick for her victims. In addition to her growing mental maturity, her resentment over the constraints her child's body imposes on her grows as well and is reflected in
her killing, in manner as well as victim, "... she learned to play with them, to lead them to the doll shop or the cafe where they gave her steaming cups of chocolate or tea to ruddy her pale cheeks, cups she pushed away, waiting, waiting, as if feasting silently on their terrible kindness (Rice, Interview 101). She begins to focus on families as her victims; specifically mothers and daughters as if she were seeking to recreate the mother/daughter bond she felt she had been deprived of by her "fathers:" Her resentment and rage are readily seen in the tableau she stages. "There they lay on the bricks, mother and daughter together, the arm of the mother fastened around the waist of the daughter, the daughter's head bent against the mother's breast, both foul with feces and swarming with insects" (Rice, Interview 107). Eventually Claudia fulfills her need for mother/daughter bonding in Madeline, a woman whose young daughter had just died, who Claudia makes into her own vampire caretaker by Madeline's own choice. This is significant for two reasons. First, Claudia gives Madeline the choice that she was deprived of by Louis and Lestat. Secondly, because Louis and Lestat forced Claudia into a life of enormous constraint, she is unable to connect with them on a deeper, more nurturing level. Although they possess androgynous qualities they are still far from perfect and their initial act of dominance over Claudia is what ultimately forces a wedge between them and is one of the reasons she is driven to seek out Madeline. To understand Claudia's need for Madeline and all she represents more fully it is helpful to explore, albeit briefly, the Freudian analysis of male/female development. The father figure is, at least in Freud's earlier theories, the primary force in both a boy's and girl's development. Later Freud was forced to concede the importance of the mother in female development, but he stipulated that this left women in a less developed psychological state of being. The importance of the mother figure is obvious
in Claudia's case. Her sense of isolation, her apparent lack of conscience or morals could be traced to the lack of a feminine force in her life. It is now generally agreed, as Marianne Hirsch explains in her essay "Mothers and Daughters," that female mothering provides women with a way to remain bonded with their first love objects as well as giving them the ability to extend this sense of connectedness to the world around them. In other words, while a boy must separate, psychologically speaking, from his mother in order to meet the societal expectation of complete male identification and autonomy, girls assume their identity as women by more closely aligning themselves with their mothers in a process of positive identification. Lestat's actions rob Claudia of this opportunity for optimal female development. Although she does, to a certain extent, identify with her "fathers," she still needs a mother. Her need to provide herself with a mother (Madeline), when coupled with her desire to kill Lestat, proves that she is not completely seduced by him, either intellectually or emotionally. Instead, she is both the victim of her fathers'/lovers' incestuous love, and the quintessential "child-bride" doomed by societal constructs in a patriarchal society to be infantized. It is the rage that she feels as a result of this powerlessness that causes her to attempt to murder Lestat—an attempt that ultimately leads to her own death. Claudia's rage against Lestat is analogous to that of the female reader against the unfortunately all too common, unhealthy male/female relationships prevalent in our society. Rice is making the connection between Lestat, in this instance, and the seductive lover or husband who actually ends up controlling and emotionally and mentally, if not physically, "draining" his female lover of her power. The female reader is then able to question, perhaps for the first time, whether she too on some level, will come to hate and want to destroy the man in her life in rebellion against his domination. Claudia was not made by Lestat
in a manner that was nurturing or of equals, but in an act of domination, even though it was motivated out of Lestat's love for Louis, that leads, ultimately, to tragedy.

Just as was alluded to in the introduction to this thesis, Victor Frankenstein was consumed by his lust to "create" a new life, and so too was Lestat in his desire to bind Louis to him by "birthing" a vampire child common between them. Neither Shelley's "monster" nor Rice's Claudia were equipped to function in society because their "fathers" were too intent on the birthing process to consider the ramifications their actions might have upon their "children." The result is, in both cases, a being without a voice--a creature shunned and powerless who becomes so consumed with rage that they are compelled to destroy their creators. Claudia is Shelley's monster's contemporary counterpart representing the tragic results of those who must exist in a society which perceives them as monstrously "other," as creatures who, as a result of their very being, are powerless. Creatures like Claudia highlight the inequities of social structures founded in a hierarchal attitude that allows abuses of power based on class, gender and race, and that also condones unequal access to resources.

The male and female duality necessary for human beings is a hallmark of Rice's vampire fiction. Androgyny is a breakdown of gender distinctions, a blending of male and female which, in The Vampire Chronicles, represents an ideal. Rather than destroying the concepts of masculinity and femininity, the concept of androgyny unifies the two, thereby ending gender separation and tyranny. It is no accident then that the majority of Rice's vampire characters are androgynous figures embodying both male and female characteristics. Throughout The Vampire Chronicles Lestat frequently weeps out of sadness or sheer joy. The male vampires are able to bond with one another easily because
they do not belong to the traditional hierarchy, but are of equal status with no need to prove dominance. Extending and accentuating the androgynous aspects of Rice's vampire characters is their predilection for cross-dressing. Clothing themselves without regard for the socially constructed definition of gender appropriate fashion, as demonstrated in Lestat's fondness for velvet and Louis' preference for billowy sleeves, enhances the vampire's erotic appeal. In moving beyond traditional categories they acquire a power and flexibility that is extremely attractive to the female reader. A male wearing female attire or a female wearing male clothing becomes sexually stimulating precisely because the gender lines are blurred.

More importantly, the sense of sexual ambiguity that occurs in cross-dressing can be viewed as a challenge to the patriarchal power structure. Androgynous beings do not fit into the patriarchally defined social order. Because they cannot be categorized into belonging to a specific gender, they are allowed a freedom and power that those who are easily categorized do not possess. The sexual ambiguity diffuses gender-based anxieties and allows for a freedom of self-expression. Gabrielle, Lestat's mother, best expresses the idea of an androgynous being. Her first choice of a victim after Lestat makes her a vampire is a young man. She chooses him solely because of his size and clothing.

It became clear in an instant why she'd done it. She tore off the pink velvet girdle and skirts right there and put on the boy's clothes. She'd chosen him for the fit of the clothes.

And to describe it more truly, as she put on the garments, she became the boy. (Rice, Vampire Lestat 171)

Knowing that she no longer belonged to the traditional social order she realized that she didn't have to stay dressed within her traditional role. She
chooses to rid herself of all her female trappings and her relationship with Lestat is permanently altered because she no longer needs him to express her male aspect. Completely androgynous, she, more than any of the other vampires, is completely free from gender and society. Androgyny allows the vampires to move freely between roles and in relationships. In Interview with the Vampire these qualities are highlighted by Louis and Lestat's relationship with Claudia. Because both male and female vampires have the ability to create, or "bring forth" new life, to make other vampires through the sharing of blood, roles become blurred. Both Louis and Lestat shift between mother, father, and lover with Claudia, their six year old vampire child. Rice shatters the boundaries traditionally outlining the definition of a family. Redefining social structure allows her to transform what are normally considered deviations and taboos into acceptable options. Inclusion, rather than exclusion of that which is outside the patriarchially defined norm, works to accomplish a feminist re-vision of society. Otherness, or difference, becomes naturalized and unobjectionable.

In The Vampire Chronicles Anne Rice transforms the bestial monster into a thinking, moral being. Rather than representing difference, her vampires represent a strong sense of self-determination and expression. They live outside traditional codes and norms, defining for themselves what is right and what is wrong. In the hands of Anne Rice, the vampire has become visionary.
Conclusion

The role of women's speculative fiction is a powerful one. While they do seek to entertain, Butler, Bradley and Rice, through their writing are attempting to return to their female readers that which has been stripped from them—their sense of self, their dignity, their pride in their femaleness. The revisioning of culture and history found in the works of these three authors provides women with a vehicle from which they are able to re-think, and perhaps, re-learn, what patriarchy has been teaching them to believe. When reading these authors, female readers needn't fear looking into the mirror only to see a victim or "monster." Indeed, they learn to revel in their differences, to appreciate the forces locked within themselves, forces that society has tried to teach them to fear.

The work of Octavia Butler, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Anne Rice serves to highlight the distortions concerning "the other" so prevalent in male-authored fiction. Should this then mean that, once recognizing the hidden agendas found in traditional speculative fiction, women should avoid reading it? No, as Mary Gordon states

... we can think of this reading as a process of unveiling. Before, we were afraid of what we would see, expecting that we would encounter the august patriarch, bearded and implacable, fixing us with his authoritative eye. We girded ourselves like Antigone before Creon. Now we have learned that the face beneath the veil is not the bearded father's but the pimply boy's. Absorbing in his power to tell a tale. Nevertheless a boy. (23)

While entertaining us, Bradley, Butler and Rice have contributed to "unmasking" traditional speculative fiction and its attempts, motivated by a fear of the feminine, to keep us in cultural chains.
Works Cited


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