

Jane Rule's Sexual Politics

... truly, it felt like Year One, when all that was holy was in the process of being profaned and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings. . . . I can date to that time and to some of those debates and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968, my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of my "femininity" was created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing. —CARTER 70

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as a theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it did indeed imply the breakdown of the world as I had always known it, the end of safety. . . . But I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman. —RICH 182

With the advent of Women's Liberation, a very different set of problems has emerged, for, while at first the lesbian was considered a discrediting threat, gradually the independence of lesbians became a symbol of a new political identity for women. —RULE *Images* 10

Generations of 1968

Many women writers have attested to the importance of the Women's Liberation Movement, the second wave of feminism, for their lives and their writing. These three quotations indicate some of the variety of ways it affected the "generation of 1968," according to their age and experience. For some, like Angela Carter who was twenty-eight in 1968, the historical advent of this new wave of feminism was marked by a sense of a new world opening up in both their sexual-emotional lives and their political awareness. It coincided with their emergence out of youthful uncertainties into a process of maturation where they could feel centrally located in the debates of their time, "when one's very existence is instrumental in causing changes the results of which one can't begin to calculate" (Carter 76). This was an optimistic feminism, revolutionary in spirit, impatient to shed past "social fictions" like femininity itself.

For women of a slightly earlier generation born, like Adrienne Rich, around 1930, feminism came at a time when they were well embarked on

their life-paths, if not already established as writers. By 1968 Rich, married and the mother of two children, had been engaged for nearly twenty years in writing out of “the gap between poet and woman.” For her, feminism felt like coming into her own, like freedom from that “constant footwork of the imagination, a kind of perpetual translation, and an unconscious fragmentation of identity” that the gap between woman and poet had demanded (175). For her, as for many others whose political formation had begun well before the revival of the women’s movement, feminism was always seen as part of the broader effort to “build a political and cultural movement in the heart of capitalism,” dedicated to anti-racism and the elimination of poverty at home and imperialism abroad (183). What was new for this generation of women was the placing of women at the centre of their politics. What was also new, for Rich, was the discovery of her love for women, erotic as well as sisterly. This was indeed to experience “the end of safety” on several levels.

For novelist Jane Rule, born in 1931 and so Rich’s contemporary in age, the advent of the Women’s Liberation Movement meant other things again. She had long been aware that femininity was a social fiction which gave the lie to the most important aspects of her own life. As a lesbian she had never experienced the “safety” of sexual conformity, and she had left her native United States, looking for a place to live in peace beyond the long reach of McCarthyism, and settled in Vancouver with her partner Helen Sonthoff in 1956. She had already understood that “the personal is political,” that basic tenet of women’s liberation. Nor had there been such a separation between her writing life and her life as a woman: from her first published novel onwards, lesbian experience was a central, though not exclusive, concern of her fictional world. She was one of the first writers of serious realist fiction to address love between women directly, and sign her own name to it. Indeed, she might have welcomed some degree of separation, on the part of critics, between their attitudes to her subject matter and their judgement of her art: when her first novel, *Desert of the Heart*, was published in 1964, reviewers took it upon themselves to chide her for choosing a socially unacceptable subject, while colleagues at the University of British Columbia were only persuaded to reappoint her as a teacher by the argument that if writers of murder mysteries were not necessarily murderers, then writers of lesbian fiction were not necessarily lesbians (*Images* 1).

The seven novels, three volumes of stories and the study, *Lesbian Images*, which she published over the succeeding 25 years met with a variety of

responses, and her writing took some pronounced changes of direction. But the impact of the new women's movement was not, for her, so much a revelation (as it was for Carter and Rich) as an ambivalent confirmation. It nurtured a much larger audience for her fictions of human relationships than had previously existed, but it also continued to designate the lesbian as a special category of women, soon to be as often idealised as vilified, but nevertheless still singled out. Furthermore, her refusal to write fiction exclusively about or for lesbians attracted some fierce criticism. A certain wariness borne of this experience can be detected in her general comments about the significance of the women's movement for lesbians.

For many of Rule's contemporaries in Canada, the impact of the new feminism was less immediately, less intimately connected to both their lives and their writing. Margaret Laurence, for example, only five years Rule's senior, was already being recognised as a major writer by the time the movement arrived. She won the Governor-General's Award for *A Jest of God* in 1967, and was awarded the Order of Canada in 1972. After her return to live in Canada in 1974, she published no more fiction. She had already written about "the problem that has no name" among women. She saw the new feminism as confirming her own insights, but it did not prove to be enabling for her as a writer (Atwood 24). Younger contemporaries Margaret Atwood and Marie-Claire Blais (both born in 1939) had been publishing since their early twenties, were already established as a poet and a (Francophone) novelist respectively. Atwood vehemently denied that her work derived from the movement: "Some feminists insist that my work, things like *The Edible Woman* and *Power Politics*, stem from the women's movement. But they didn't . . . parallel lines do not usually start from the same point . . ." (Miner 163). Several of Rule's exact contemporaries who had married and had children published their first books in 1968 (Alice Munro and Marian Engel) and 1970 (Audrey Thomas). While they, like Laurence, had all developed their own sharp insights into male/female relations, and agreed that there was a constant tension in their lives between "woman" and "writer," they are unlikely at that time in their lives to have welcomed Women's' Liberation's fierce critiques of marriage and the nuclear family.¹

Rule, like these other writers of her generation, had shared the experience of reaching womanhood in middle-class North America in the 1940s and 50s, and was vitally involved in the female-led renaissance of Canadian fic-

tion which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. She knew and corresponded with all these women writers, and they reviewed each others' work. Rule, for instance, wrote an essay on Atwood as a satirist ("Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Normalcy"), and reviewed titles by Munro, Engel and Thomas, while Laurence wrote several glowing endorsements and reviews of Rule's fiction. Indeed, at one point in the early 1960s they all, except Engel and Blais, were living in Vancouver and its environs. All of them were engaged in one way or another in expanding the resources of fiction to explore female experience, including sexual experience. All had urgent reasons to question the assumptions about female fulfilment that were dominant in their generation. For most of the writers, however, this questioning was done in their fiction rather than in more political forums.

Jane Rule participated in the new women's movement, not only as a writer to inspire it but also as a women's rights activist, women's studies teacher and member of consciousness-raising groups (Hancock). Unlike Rich, who participated in similar ways in the United States, she had been a part of such lesbian and homosexual communities as had pre-existed the new feminism, and which in the 1970s were being themselves transformed under the influence of women's and gay liberation.² Also unlike Rich and many lesbian feminists of the 1970s, she maintained contact with gay men's groups, and was for several crucial years in its beleaguered history a regular columnist for the Canadian journal *The Body Politic*.

Because of this, the significance of feminist, lesbian and gay cultural politics in Jane Rule's writing life—both for her own work, and for its reception—makes a complex and intriguing story. I use the term "sexual politics" in my title, not only as an umbrella term embracing feminist, lesbian and gay politics but also so as to invoke and honour Kate Millett. Her book, *Sexual Politics* (1969), important to so many who became feminists in the early seventies for its insistence on the cultural implications of sexual politics, played a key role for Jane Rule. As she testified in the essay, "Before and After Sexual Politics," "By the time I had finished reading that book, furious with the misogyny it revealed, I was not a different private person, but I had come out of the critical closet to know that if moral and political evaluations of literature were important to me as a person, they were important to everyone." So wedded had she been to the aesthetics-only, "form is content" school of literature in which she had been educated that she had "high-mindedly" omitted to tell her students "mere gossip" such as that Gertrude

Stein was a lesbian and Virginia Woolf had committed suicide. This discretion now appeared to her a closeted form of reading and teaching which allowed critical prejudices to remain hidden and untested (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 18).

It was only after making this discovery with *Sexual Politics* that she could have conceived of, and written, *Lesbian Images*, as a study not primarily of literary achievements but of how the writers “are influenced by religious and psychological concepts and by their own personal experience in presenting lesbian characters” (*Images* 3). Over twenty years later I would name what I am trying to do here somewhat differently, but it falls within the same tradition of broadly cultural rather than strictly literary studies: to examine how Rule’s writing, and the way readers responded to her work, is produced out of their interactions with a culture in the process of being transformed by feminist and gay liberation ideas and politics. I am not by any means seeking to find in her work a mirror of the women’s or gay movements, but to ask more open-ended questions about the ways in which writing and reading changed “before and after [the advent of] sexual politics.”

How much could the literary climate be said to have changed between the publication of Jane Rule’s first book in 1964 and 1975 when *Lesbian Images* brought her fame and fortune? And how much of the change can be attributed to the advent of the new liberation movements, especially feminism? Certainly, the fiction which she published after 1970 was received very differently, in a reviewing climate already agitated, if not polarised, by feminist ideas. It was received, too, by a larger and more vociferous female reading public who welcomed women’s books with enthusiasm, but who made new demands on them. I want to look first at the way her books were reviewed over the period 1964 to 1975, and then at her own responses to the women’s movement.³

The Reception of Rule’s Books, 1964 to 1975

Margaret Laurence wrote to Jane Rule she thought the heroine of her own novel *The Fire Dwellers*, Stacey (“white, anglo-saxon middle-aged mum”), a most “unlikely” literary figure, and one that many male critics had recoiled from (King 255). Elaborating on this response to another correspondent, Laurence wrote that she would have been better to have written instead about “a negro homosexual heroin-addicted dwarf” (King 264). Rule’s

commitment to presenting non-sensationalised homosexual and lesbian characters brought her similar problems with critics who appeared to resist the ordinariness of her fictional worlds, apparently preferring to see deviancy either demonised or idealised, if they had to see it at all.

Rule's publishing history from the mid sixties to the mid seventies was a series of frustrations. She published her first novel, *Desert of the Heart*, in 1964 with Secker & Warburg in London, three years after it was completed. Although MacMillan of Canada accepted it, on the condition (usual in those days) that she found an English or U.S. publisher to share the costs, it took twenty rejections by United States publishers, before she gave up and looked to England, where it was immediately accepted (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 11-12). Her next, *This Is Not For You*, was completed in 1965 but did not appear in print until 1970. After two years of submitting it unsuccessfully, she had given up writing and it was only when her New York agent told her in 1968 that he had finally placed it with a new company, McCalls, who wanted another to accompany it, that she returned to writing and completed *Against the Season* (1971). Different as they were, her second and third novels both displeased the majority of reviewers. Then, to add injury to insult, the publishing company failed, and it was another six years before she published a fourth novel, *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977). In the interim, she worked on the non-fiction work commissioned by Doubleday, Canada, *Lesbian Images* (1975) and a volume of short stories published by a small Vancouver press, Talonbooks (*Theme for Diverse Instruments*, 1975).

Desert of the Heart told the love story of two women finding each other in the unlikely but vividly-rendered setting of Reno in the late 1950s, where Evelyn Hall, an English professor, has gone to wait for her divorce, blaming herself for the failure of the marriage. There she meets Ann Childs, an uninhibited younger woman confident of her own sexuality, who works as a casino change-girl as well as at her cartoonist's art. In the desert these two, each of whom has been burnt by her experiences of life, find a renewal of the heart's desires and of faith in loving.

Reviews in 1964 of this novel habitually expressed distaste for its subject matter, as Rule herself reported, quoting such gems as these:

"extremely frank in its treatment of lesbianism. Perhaps a little too frank. The author almost makes it seem desirable." "I learned a lot more about Lesbians than I care to know." "There are facets of mental illness that are not particularly

pretty—is it necessary to bring them into print for display?” “But all the time you keep turning to the photograph of the author on the jacket and wondering how such a nice looking woman could ever have chosen so distasteful a subject.” “Miss Rule’s writing has a kind of perverted good taste about it.” (*Images* 1)

English reviews were less negative, including such praise as “subtle and courageous” (*Sunday Times*) and “an intelligent novel, not afraid of ideas and not committed to them over-diagrammatically” (*New Statesman*); but there was condescension as well: “like a basic phrase book in strange territory, it remains a useful and interesting read” (*Observer*). Reviewers everywhere, while hastening to note that the book was extremely well-written, were unable to ignore the subject matter (or “ideas”), but rarely knew how to take it: one even wanted to deny that “the problem of a lesbian relationship” was anything but a minor theme (Stephens).

Most interesting of all are the reviews in the United States gay press of the period, which placed the novel in an already-existing context of gay fiction. The homosexual *Mattachine Review* (August 1964) was enthusiastic about it as a “lyrical love story” that was “very reminiscent of the hot house stories of a less sophisticated day,” and disliked the symbolism of the desert and the gaming-tables (was there some nostalgia for the gay romances of the 50s operating here?). On the other hand, the long-established lesbian journal, *The Ladder* (June 1964) approved both the symbolism and the romance (“we seldom today have a romantic novel about Lesbians”) but objected to the “amateur psychiatry” which attributes to Evelyn both narcissism and thwarted motherhood, and to Ann “the greatest number of reasons for her Lesbianism yet awarded to a single character in a novel” (Rule box 33). The possibility of narrative irony—that pop-psychology’s currently favourite explanations for lesbianism are invoked only to be dismissed by the characters’ self-understanding—is not entertained here. In this context—the only two well-known homosexual publications in North America at the time—the kind of aesthetic and ideological sophistication Rule brought to her work was not altogether welcome.⁴

Thirteen years later, the 1977 Talonbooks reprint of *Desert of the Heart* elicited much more positive responses from the few reviewers who took it up for notice. Among these Elizabeth Brady, in *Canadian Book Review Annual*, wrote that, while her lesbianism “is by no means incidental to the kind of fiction she writes,” it was unfair that Rule’s reputation as a writer had been dependent on shifting public attitudes to her subject matter, from

the hostile reactions in 1964 to “the recent media celebration of her as a lesbian writer (as though there were some innate virtue in being gay)” (Rule box 33). As Brady indicates, this was no simple progression from rejection to acceptance, but a movement from silence to stereotyping (and thence, perhaps, to more complex understandings on the part of a more informed and differentiated audience). Broadly speaking, one can discern a change from relief (in the 1960s) that Rule is so “tasteful” to a later relief (in the mid seventies) that she “does not project a masculine image.” This relief is evident in feminist reviews by Sandler and Armatage of *Lesbian Images* (Rule box 36), expressing the common 1970s feminist preoccupation with whether lesbian writers were male- or female-identified. As well, there is evidence of the recurrent concern on the part of gay and lesbian activists about whether novels projected a positive image of homosexuality.

The fact that Rule’s work attracted multiple audiences was a further complication in her literary reception. It emerged as early as 1970, when *This Is Not For You* appeared. This technically and thematically ambitious second novel, again set in the 1950s, takes the form of an unsent letter from a lesbian woman, Kate, to her closest friend, Esther, who has gone into a convent. Kate confesses that she could more easily have died for Esther than lived with her: her character is such that she cannot risk overcoming the distance she keeps between herself and even those she loves. Esther’s character is such that she has no real idea of how the world might look through another’s eyes. It is a story of an impossible love—but not because it is love between women. In an unpublished “Autobiography,” Rule wrote that the establishment press mostly presented this novel as a morality tale of self-sacrifice and approved of it, while reviewers in the gay press made the same mistake and hated it. Almost no one realised the extent to which irony dominated the narrative, working against the confessional narrator, Kate, and the author resolved never again to risk such misunderstanding of her intentions (Rule box 37/5). The results of this decision can be seen in her later fiction in her choice of multiple narrative points of view, and indeed in a move away from one or two protagonists to whole groups of people in their interactions.

However this ironic narrative was not always “approved as a morality tale of self-sacrifice,” but was just as often censured as if the protagonist’s faults of character—sententiousness, humourlessness—were the novel’s. Established lesbian novelist Isabel Miller conscientiously describes the novel in her review for *The Ladder*, but finally exclaims in exasperation: “Why does

[Kate] despise lesbianism? Damned if I know. . . . Does Jane Rule know? I think if she did she would have said." Keath Fraser's review in *Canadian Literature* 47 (1971) is one of the few to recognise the "cauterising" function of the irony, and to offer a more complex understanding of the characters than could be afforded by any conviction that "lesbianism" has a single clear-cut meaning (Rule box 36).

About *Against the Season* (1971), the first novel of her new style, Jane Rule wrote that she wanted to try creating a whole community, to get away from exclusive focus on one or two central characters, but that reviewers still tended to single out the one they wanted to be central anyway, so it was hard to believe they were all reviewing the same book ("Autobiography," Rule box 37/5). This novel about a group of friends and neighbours in an unnamed American city⁵ as they form new alliances and relationships elicited a more overtly angry response than her two earlier lesbian novels had done. Although it included male and female lovers, gay and straight, young and (very) old, the women were considered too strong, or just too prominent. Rule speculated that critics found it alarming precisely because heterosexuals and homosexuals mixed without problems and "the confrontations were gentle and playful" (Craig).

Kildare Dobbs, who had claimed to have recognised a good novelist immediately on reading the first draft of *Desert of the Heart* (Hofsess 6), now attacked the very sensibility of Rule's third book, condemning the "absence of erotic energy which expresses itself most aptly in the narcissism of lesbian love." He concludes that "a world in which only the women are real is at least sterile and airless. We are left with an image of death" (*Toronto Daily Star*). This sounds more like panic at female self-assertion than literary criticism. Another male reviewer (Lorne Parton in *The Province*), threatened more by the suggestion of male redundancy than by lesbian love, writes intemperately: "Look: the contrapuntal theme is the encroaching due date of a pregnant girl—and she is unmarried, the male having played his necessary bit part and gone." His review includes a useful insight into the direction of changed sexual attitudes at this time: "It is increasingly hazardous to criticise such 'modern' themes because you run the risk of being considered un-small-l-liberal. . . . (Refusal to play the game shows your own sexual hang-ups)" (Rule box 36).

Still other reviewers appear to have been struck by the novel's emphasis on romances. One called it a good "women's novel, if Kate Millett and her

ilk haven't banned the term" (perversely, this critic in the *Globe and Mail* says he would have preferred the novel without any male or heterosexual women in it). Some United States publications (*LA Times*, *Best Sellers*) preferred the more dismissive term, "soap opera" to "women's novel." All this outright rudeness suggests reviewers more aware of, and more threatened by, both feminist criticisms of men and high claims for women writers—a reading and reviewing audience more polarised around "feminism" and "gay liberation" than previously. Certainly most of them allude to the women's movement and/or gay liberation as a factor (however unwelcome) in the contemporary cultural scene (Rule box 36).

There was also a mixed response to *Against the Season* from lesbian readers.⁶ Two distinct generations are represented in the disappointment expressed by the long-established gay women's magazine, *The Ladder* ("one misses the intense romance of *Desert of the Heart* and the concentrated introspection of *This Is Not For You*"), and the enthusiastic endorsement in *The Lesbian Feminist* broadsheet in 1973, where the book was likened to a "spring thaw" compared to *This Is Not For You*, with its "iceberg" of hidden menace and its heroine who embodies "the Butch syndrome" (Rule box 33). The distance between these two views gives a good indication of the gap which had developed between two generations of lesbians, the "pre-Liberation" civil rights lesbians, and those who saw themselves as part of the new feminism, who rejected butch and femme roles and saw themselves as politically aligned with all women who called themselves feminist, rather than with other lesbians and gay men.

Surveying the book reviews for Rule's first three novels suggests that the emergence of the women's movement on the Canadian cultural scene in the early seventies served to muddy rather than clarify the critical climate in which her books were read. Both the lesbian novels sank from sight, and *Against the Season* seems to have pleased almost no one. It is perhaps not surprising that she did not publish another novel for six years. Certainly, she had not yet established what was to prove her distinctive series of multiple-focus novels, from *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977) to *After the Fire* (1989). Yet there was also a growing chorus of voices which recognised the quality of her explorations of love as her central theme, led by Margaret Laurence endorsing *This Is Not For You* as "a beautiful, ironic, civilised novel" (Hofsess 6). Welcoming the reprint of *Desert of the Heart* in 1977, Elizabeth Brady wrote: "Ultimately what is 'deviant' about Rule's fiction is

her somewhat unfashionable conviction that love is, or just might be, an attainable state of grace.” Many reviewers of *Lesbian Images* in 1975 also chose to read it as a study of some of love’s many forms: another prominent Canadian woman writer Marian Engel, for instance, hailed it in the *Globe and Mail* under the headline, “Brilliant and Touching: One Kind of Loving.” Engel is eloquent in her praise for a book which tells us so much about human sexuality and about loving, which is “surely the greatest human accomplishment” (Rule box 36).

By 1977, when *Desert of the Heart* was reprinted, reactions to the new feminism were less violent, and indeed many reviewers themselves espoused feminist views. In 1978, Jane Rule was awarded Canadian Authors Association Literary Awards for both *The Young in One Another’s Arms*, and “Joy,” a story published in *Chatelaine* magazine in August 1977. By this time Rule had published *Lesbian Images*, the book which may well have been the turn-around her career needed. It was widely reviewed and sold extremely well. She was interviewed and profiled in many newspapers and magazines. Ironies abound, however—that the novelist achieved such recognition for a non-fiction study, and that by then she had given up the teaching career which would have been radically changed, not only by her coming out so publicly in this book, but also by the way it broke the traditional rules of “aesthetics only” literary studies (as mentioned above). It also won her a large audience in the United States (a prophet in her own land?). And, as we have seen, within an expanded and more articulate audience of women came an expanded audience of lesbian and feminist readers to whom literary accounts of lesbian experience were of intense, and contentious, interest.

What were the effects of the vicissitudes of her literary reception over this decade of social and cultural change? Clearly, they did not determine everything that happened in her writing life. Rule wrote in her essay, “Free to Live,” that she had learned early that “The terrifying judgemental world out there isn’t all it’s cracked up to be” and that “it was my fear that crippled, nothing else.” This knowledge sustained her when “No one would publish my work for ten years, and I was nearly as frightened of my eventual success as I was of my failure. When my third novel was finally accepted by a publisher, I had no idea how much of my world I was risking” (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 75-6). Yet while force of character (and her grandmother’s example) sustained her faith in herself, she also made some significant changes of direction during the first decade of her public life as a writer—

most notably the shift in her novels to multiple centres of narrative consciousness, to the portrayal of voluntarily-formed, self-creating communities, as alternatives to conventional heterosexual families. It is not far-fetched to suggest that such a shift was profoundly influenced by her participation in the revolutionary surge, and the new forms of community, that began in the late sixties. Equally, this was not a one-way flow of influence, and Rule's impact on the feminist and gay literary scenes, in Canada and elsewhere, has also been vital. In the third and final section of this paper I want to look at her responses to some issues concerning literature and politics.

Sex, Politics and Literature

On the relationship between women writers and Women's Liberation, Jane Rule wrote:

The women's movement arrived in Canada at a time when most of the country's respected writers were women, on whom the movement belatedly tried to put its stamp. Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro bridled; Margaret Laurence tried to be polite; Dorothy Livesay, an old hand at politics, took it as one more arrow in her quiver. Gradually nearly everyone agreed that in one way or another the women's movement in Canada had helped women writers by being a newly honoring audience, by making men nervous enough to want to know what women were saying. (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 23)

Shelagh Wilkinson confirms: "If in general there was a new audience for Canadian literature in the 1960s, then in the 1970s the women novelists enjoyed a rapidly expanding readership," not only because of the spread of the women's movement beyond the universities, but also because of a broader cultural concern with women's issues and achievements, which had been growing throughout the 1960s, as evidenced by the setting up of the Royal Commission into the status of women (345).

However it was by no means agreed among women writers that this "newly honouring audience," nor indeed the "nervousness of men" were unmixed blessings. Several women writers who were already established in Canada by the early 1970s have commented on the way women's writing had anticipated many of the issues that would become politicised by the emerging women's movement. "We took the creative leap into issues of our age which others had not yet defined clearly as issues, and which they have begun to use our fiction to help them understand," wrote Adele Wiseman. Another, Miriam Waddington, claimed that the feminist movement "didn't spring up full-grown in 1970, but long before that, and this needs to be remembered.

Every woman who was an artist and who wrote out of herself, her life, and her values was a feminist whether she knew it or not" (Wilkinson 346). Margaret Atwood was more positive about what the new feminism offered to writers: "Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights" (Wilkinson 348). But she was wary of the development of "a one-dimensional Feminist Criticism" of women's writing that would "award points according to conformity or non-conformity to an ideological position" (*Second Words* 192).

The "nervousness of men" to which Rule refers also produced at times a highly polarised cultural climate which was not necessarily conducive to creativity. Marian Engel, in her novel *The Glassy Sea* (1978), gives a chilling account of her heroine's shock at discovering the extent of men's misogyny at this time: "there is a ghastly woman-hate in the air and [the men] are acting it out; and women are responding with either aggression or fear . . . war has broken out" (160). As we saw in the reviews of Rule's books from this period, there was often a strong whiff of gunshot in the literary pages. Even in a less embattled critical atmosphere, now that "women" had become a subject of public debate there was a danger, Margaret Atwood felt, of a new ghetto forming, where women's books were only reviewed by women, men's books by men (*Second Words* 106).

As for writers' anxiety that the women's movement would try to dictate what and how they should write, Jane Rule is characteristically forthright in her claim that "Canada still does not have writers either created or controlled by the movement," and so those who do write "have developed voices which do accurately describe for us the climate in which we live," and so "we have an opportunity to make more informed political judgements." Ultimately, she wrote, the issue is not whether particular writers are feminists but "whether the women's movement is confident enough to claim their power without reducing it to any sort of narrow political correctness." "Our collective voice must grow stronger for the singers in our midst," she declared, "learning both to deserve and to defend our gifts, our gifted" (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 24-25).

For Jane Rule, however, it could never be a question of "feminism" alone, but also of lesbianism. Of her own association with the new feminist movement, she wrote: "My reluctance to be identified with Women's Liberation

at first was my concern that it be protected from the label of 'lesbian', which my presence would encourage; but the issues mattered so much to me that I could not stay away." This modest statement barely touches on what must have been a frequent experience for lesbians like herself whose social conscience and political convictions drew them to the women's movement, but where they were never sure of their welcome in the early days before the emergence of strong lesbian feminist communities.⁷ She went on with this account, in the Introduction to *Lesbian Images*, to tell of the consciousness-raising group to which she belonged, and how the subject came up, and lesbians came out, and how several younger women came to her to discuss their fear of being labelled, and dismissed. She continued: "Those uncertain young women have now been replaced by militant lesbians who find me a political sell-out of the worst sort, living behind money and class protection, writing books which don't suggest that the lesbian way of life is the best way of life for everyone in all circumstances always, male-identified because I teach at the university and am published by 'the man'" (*Images* 10-11). The comic exaggeration belies hurt: willy-nilly, as an established writer she became a prominent figure, and as a prominent figure she was subjected to the kinds of attacks ("trashing") for which early feminist groups, including the radical lesbians, were notorious.

In her essay "Lesbian Leadership," acknowledging that she was often considered a leader because of her visibility as a lesbian and a feminist (and therefore to be trashed, according to one young lesbian who interviewed her), she asked herself "why writers particularly have been singled out as leaders by both the women's movement and the lesbian community." It seems, she wrote, that those who have created a voice for formerly silenced women, and new visibility for lesbians, are also expected to "lead the way into freedom," despite the fact that as writers they have never claimed any such leadership position. Her response is to debunk both this way of hero-worshipping writers, and the very need for any such "claptrap" about leadership among the lesbian community (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 109-12). She was only too well aware, also, that "within the gay community there are not only different but morally and politically conflicting tastes" (*Outlander* 203).

For her there was an additional tension between writer and "politically involved lesbian." It was a tension created by others, who insisted that either the two roles were mutually exclusive or that they were inextricably bound together. For her, both views are false. She has always insisted on her right

to be a political writer when she chose (as she wrote in introducing *Lesbian Images*, “I am so far from objective disinterest that my life, or at least the quality of my life, depends on what people think and feel about what it is to be a lesbian”), but also not to be limited, in writing or being read, by the label ‘lesbian.’” Then there were those for whom she was the lesbian as exotic Other, both denigrated and celebrated—even blamed, at times when homosexuality was in the news, for having evoked such celebration of qualities ostensibly unrelated to her art (as we saw above, in the reviews of her 1971 novel). She was only faintly bitter about those magazine editors who sought interviews with her principally “because I am a lesbian, a far more titillating title than novelist.” Yet her response is characteristically practical, if wry: she used such interviews as an opportunity to “make educational points about my sexuality” (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 42-43).

Yet while she was quite willing to use herself “for propaganda” in this way, she would not use her fiction for political purposes, as she explained in the essay “Lesbian and Writer.” She was as fiercely opposed to being told what or how to write as she was about being told how she should live. Yet as a politically-committed liberal (the “hot-eyed moderate”), she was caught in the crossfire, not just between two sexualities (as she implies here) but between two kinds of politics, between that liberal humanism which decried any difference as “bias,” and that revolutionary absolutism which demanded “political correctness”:⁸

Though one heterosexual critic [probably Adele Wiseman] did call *Lesbian Images* a piece of propaganda because in it I make my own bias quite clear, even that book does not satisfy the real propagandists who would not have me waste time on politically incorrect lesbian writers like Radcliffe Hall, May Sarton, Maureen Duffy . . . but concentrate only on my most radical contemporaries, who are writing experimental erotica and separatist utopias. (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 43)

Bertha Harris, the radical lesbian writer who made this latter criticism in her grudging review of the book in *Ms Magazine*, was expressing a view made more famous by the French feminist Hélène Cixous that women’s writing almost universally corrupted by having been produced in a patriarchal culture, and that only the most avant garde writing could properly be called feminist (Cixous 245-64). What Harris was calling for was a new lesbian political consciousness, something to be created out of a rejection of “the conciliatory survival patterns of the old lesbian worlds.” This would not be “propaganda” (a term which Rule had persisted in using, though approvingly, when discussing recent lesbian feminist texts) but revolutionary

art (Rule box 34/4). Both parties to the debate maintained the old opposition of art and propaganda intrinsic to liberal humanism, but while Harris tried to change the meaning of “art” to include the political, Rule insisted on there being circumstances where “propaganda” was needed.

Reading the feminist and/or lesbian reviews of *Lesbian Images*, it is fascinating to see the extent to which these reviewers saw this text through the lenses of their current preoccupations. In the early years of the new feminism, those lenses most often brought into focus an intense and horrified realisation of the magnitude of the problem of patriarchy. In retrospect it sometimes seems to have been *de rigueur* to scare ourselves with this problem: anything that seemed achievable in the near future, anything that brought pleasure in the attempt, was suspect. Despite what I see now as Rule’s emphasis on the variety of means by which her lesbian subjects (both authors and their characters) tried to survive in a hostile world, and her clear indication that she found some of these strategies unsympathetic, some of the most interesting feminist reviewers read her as doing quite the opposite. Harris’s review concludes that the book is only “a love affair with a ‘pretty’ past,” because it seems to her more sympathetic with the work of past lesbian writers than with “the zeal of the new lesbian-feminist writers” to create a new civilisation however “ugly” their art might have to be at first.

Similarly, Judith Barbour’s review in the Australian magazine, *Nation Review*, accuses Rule of idealising lesbian experience as a “serene singleness of being” through detaching it, not from artistic struggles (as Harris accused), but from “personal conflict and the more wasting emotions,” and relegating evil to the male world “out there.” Here “singleness” connotes an undivided consciousness rather than a unified community. Its achievement is placed by the implicit contrast with Sylvia Plath’s tragically divided self, one of the subjects of the other book which Barbour was reviewing, Joyce Carol Oates’ *New Heaven, New Earth*. It is probably no accident that such an apocalyptic theme seemed more attuned to the mid-seventies climate of radical feminism than Rule’s compassionate acceptance of deviance among the deviant. (Rule Papers Box 34/4)

Could it be women’s own misogyny, lesbians’ own homophobia, that was surfacing here? Rule proposes exactly that, in her laconic response to one of Harris’s more famous raves:

I understand why Bertha Harris wants to insist that lesbians, the only true lesbians, are monsters. She is trying to take our homophobia into her arms and

transform herself/us into lovers 'bad enough to be true', incestuous, self-centred, addicted, mad. Begin to love there. I lack the romantic flair, live in too small a community (by choice), have been too long in a central relationship (twenty-three years, by choice). I need more ordinary solutions. Or hopes. (*Outlander* 184)

Yet Jane Rule's "lack [of] the romantic flair," her desire for "more ordinary solutions" is by no means repressive. Some of the most intelligent and helpful points about the broad issues of sexual representations, and the sub-question of censorship, are included in her brief essays and reviews from the 1970s, reproduced in *Outlander* (1982). The essay from which I have just quoted, "Homophobia and Romantic Love," concludes:

Sex is not so much an identity as a language which we have for so long been forbidden to speak that most of us learn only the crudest of its vocabulary and grammar. If we are to get past the pattern of dominance and submission, of possessive greed, we must outgrow love as fever, as 'the tragic necessity of human life' [Willa Cather], and speak in tongues that set us free to be loving equals. (185)

It was for this reason that she valued Adrienne Rich's "attempt to describe and live in terms of a relationship between two equals." But she also wrote of how, as a novelist trying to represent a range of sexual experience, she could learn a great deal from writers like Monique Wittig and Kate Millett, writing of "relationships in which there is a struggle for power not only between the lovers but in each to be at the same time slavish worshipper and devourer" (150).

This brief discussion of the many uses and purposes of erotic literary language, "Sexuality and Literature," is a persuasive—and representative—example of the creation of community which is Rule's frequent concern in her non-fiction, much of it, as we have seen, written for the gay magazine, *The Body Politic*. When that magazine was prosecuted in 1977 for publishing an alleged obscenity, an article on paedophilia, she had offered, as a gesture of solidarity, to contribute a regular column, called "So's Your Grandmother," while the court case continued. As it turned out this became a longer-term commitment than she had anticipated, as each time the magazine was acquitted, another charge would be brought, in a five-year campaign aimed at ruining it financially (Cavell 163).

Canadian writers of all persuasions became experienced in dealing with censorship during the 1970s, and some came to the support of the beleaguered *Body Politic*. In the mid seventies books by women like Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro were being set in high-school syllabuses. Yet it was a paradox of their success that in engaging so directly with mainstream

Canadian life, they both endeared themselves to a wide range of readers, and aroused the ire of those members of the dominant classes (male, Christian) who were not accustomed to having their judgement questioned. There were calls for the work of these women to be withdrawn from schools, because of their frank treatment of female sexuality. Laurence was hurt and angered by these reactions, although fellow writer Alice Munro, whose *Lives of Girls and Women* had been similarly attacked, wrote that she thought it was “hilarious” to be thought a scarlet woman: “it gave me a new lease on life” (King 441).

Yet the form of censorship Rule experienced was that “nobody ever suggested that my books should be read in schools in the first place” (*Outlander* 199). In her case there was also, of course, de facto censorship from publishers, as mentioned earlier, and then—a final irony towards the end of her writing life—her novel, *The Young in One Another’s Arms* was detained by Canada Customs during Freedom to Read Week in 1990—fully thirteen years after it was first published in 1977. Absurd as this incident was, given the seriousness, even sobriety, of her writing, she nevertheless took on the broader issues of censorship and appeared in court in the defence of the Vancouver radical bookshop, Little Sisters, which had been charged with selling obscene material. She defended the publication of pornography, arguing that “censorship is the cheap solution to violence against women—governments will introduce censorship but not fund women’s shelters.”⁹

In an essay entitled “Why I write for the *Body Politic*,” she addressed those members of the gay community who object to its openness to controversial sexual practices, writing that although she has reservations about s/m sex and man-boy love, she supports this magazine which airs such issues freely because

Until our right to consenting sexual acts is established, limited only by the rights of others, no homosexual behaviour will be protected because anything any of us does is offensive to the majority. Policing ourselves to be less offensive to that majority is to be part of our own oppression. Tokenism has never been anything else. (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 64)

The creation of community is Rule’s recurring preoccupation in both her fiction and her essays. What is clear in this passage is that her sense of “the gay community” is always of a varied, morally and politically divided group which nevertheless must, for its sanity and survival, work out a bottom-line agreement on the rights yet to be won and protected. Equally, she insists on

that community's complex location within straight society, and rejects separatism as anything more than a political tactic. For instance: "I object to lesbian separatism because it, like all forms of bigotry, judges people by gender and class rather than as individuals . . ." and in particular, "where lesbians refuse to cooperate with gay men simply because they are men is self-defeating." She concludes this essay, "Integration," with an apt but surprisingly biblical image: "Instead of passing the buck endlessly between the sexes we might come to understand that we lost our innocence together because we wanted to know, and only together have we a chance to use that knowledge with integrity, some as lovers, all as friends and equals" (*Hot-Eyed Moderate* 96-98). For her, the freedom of homosexuals, of women, and of writers as well, is connected with a secular notion of the necessity of community, and of love, both relationships continually under construction.

Within Jane Rule's sexual politics, elements of civil rights discourse combine powerfully with those of seventies women's and gay liberation, a combination by no means incompatible with more recent queer politics and sexual radicalism. Her emphasis on the importance of creating communities, while at first it seems diametrically opposed to the postmodern destabilisations of identity favoured by queer theorists, can be reconsidered in the light of that reconceptualising of community occurring in 1990s feminist as well as queer political thought.¹⁰

For Jane Rule the advent of the women's movement did not seem to bring a sense of living in "Year One," as it did for Angela Carter. She had already experienced that questioning of reality "when all that was holy was up for grabs," but in the terms current in her own postwar youth, and in ways made necessary by her different erotic choices. Yet she had already, in her first novels, begun to "take women's existence seriously as a theme and source for art," as Rich, her contemporary, had found so difficult to do as a poet. The new women's movement emerging in the late sixties brought to her lifework as a writer expanded possibilities of subject and language, as well as new expectations on the part of feminist and lesbian readers. The critical climate she had to weather, along with other women writers, was marked by a polarising of views under pressure from a bold and vehement movement of women for sexual freedoms as well as social changes. But that critical climate was also significantly changed by the presence of feminist and lesbian readers, with their new and fiercely-articulated political expectations. As a pioneering lesbian and feminist writer, at the time when it was

becoming possible to be both, Rule demonstrates in her fiction and essays the intelligence, courage and compassion needed to engage in such sexual politics. "I try not to make a principle of being politically incorrect," she wrote in "Integration," "for rebelling against a code can be as limiting as serving it. I depart, valuing the journey" (96).

* * *

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I thank the Special Collections librarians at UBC Library for access to Jane Rule's papers. All otherwise undocumented reviews have been consulted in this collection. Further references to the collection are given in the text as "Rule" with box and folder number.

NOTES

- 1 See interviews with Graeme Gibson by all these writers, most particularly Munro, in which they talk about the conflict between their lives as writers and as women.
- 2 By "communities" I mean such activities as publishing in *The Ladder*, the magazine for lesbians and voice of the lesbian civil rights organisation, Daughters of Bilitis.
- 3 Since I did not have access to the private correspondence held with Jane Rule's papers, this study cannot take into account the responses of readers and students, but Marilyn Schuster mentions this dimension of Rule's popularity in her 1998 article.
- 4 See Marilyn Schuster's insightful point about the growth of the protagonists' self-awareness in "Strategies for Survival."
- 5 Based on Eureka, California (Jane Rule, correspondence 7/7/1998).
- 6 Though I have confined my enquiries to the period 1964-1977, there is evidence that these divided responses continued with later publications: Jane Rule indicates as much in several interviews, and Marilyn Schuster reported in 1981 that "the publication of *Contract with the World* last fall caused immediate furor in feminist and gay circles," where the characters were deemed "not only politically incorrect but distasteful as well" ("Strategies for Survival" 445).
- 7 It was not until the early 1980s that significant connections began to be made between Québécois and Anglophone lesbian feminist writers, according to Coral Ann Howells (1987), who cites Nicole Brossard's edited collection, *Les Stratégies du réel / The Story so far* (1980) and the special issue of *Tessera* VIII (4) 1984. A comparative study of the reception of the work of some of these writers, such as Marie-Claire Blais, and Rule would be of great interest.

- 8 It is important to note crucial changes in the uses of this term since late 1970s, when it was used within radical political movements to resist pressures to conform, as Rule uses it in such essays as "For the critic of what isn't there" and "Intregation," in *A Hot-Eyed Moderate*. In the 1990s it is a term used principally by reactionaries objecting to the presence and voice of formerly marginalised groups in public debate.
- 9 The excellent 1994 NFB film about Jane Rule by Lynne Fernie and Aerlyn Weissman, *Fiction and Other Truths*, recounts these incidents and Rule elaborates her views on Dante and literary sado-masochism, among other things.
- 10 Marilyn Schuster, in "Inscribing a Lesbian Reader, Projecting a Lesbian Subject," usefully places Rule's work in the context of Teresa de Lauretis's proposal that feminist theory should use the trope of "home" deconstructively (de Lauretis 136).

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