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Author(s): KAREN J. WARREN

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THE LEGACY OF CAROLYN MERCHANT'S *THE DEATH OF NATURE*

KAREN J. WARREN
Macalester College

Women and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history.” So begins Carolyn Merchant’s (1980) groundbreaking book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. It is a simple beginning for a book with a profound scholarly legacy for environmental history, philosophy, and feminism. In rigorous detail, Merchant shows how the controlling images and metaphors of nature as female have functioned historically to justify the domination of women and nature. Focusing primarily on the scientific revolution, Merchant explores the ethical implications of a worldview that reconceptualizes nature as a machine rather than a living organism. The uniqueness of *The Death of Nature* is its unprecedented scholarly attention to the ways in which the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women are linked historically to the justified dominations of women and the earth.

KEY THEMES AND THEIR IMPACT

There are three key themes in *The Death of Nature* that contribute to its historical significance and subsequent influence. The first is the role dominant images and metaphors play in shaping culturally accepted values and behaviors toward women and nature. The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother, a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an orderly, planned universe, linked the female earth to an organic cosmology, that according to Merchant, was undermined, transformed, and replaced as the prevailing metaphor of the scientific revolution. Merchant argues that by examining the transition from “the organism to the machine as the dominant metaphor,” one discerns how traditional cultural constraints on human actions toward the earth (e.g., constraints against mining) are transformed into cultural sanctions for the scientific, technological, and economic exploitation of nature (e.g., in favor of mining, draining, deforestation). The constraints grow out of and reflect a worldview that one may not slay a mother, mutilate her body, or “dig into her entrails for gold”; the sanctions grow out of and reflect a worldview in which nature is either a machine or disorderly female that needs to be mastered and controlled by the man of science.

Merchant is not claiming that there were no domination metaphors before the scientific revolution; there were (e.g., in Greek philosophy and Christian religion). Nor is she claiming that there were no nurturing metaphors during the renaissance; there were (e.g., in revived forms of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism). Merchant is clear that “The organic and mechanical philosophies of nature cannot,

therefore, be viewed as strict dichotomies, nor can most philosophers be placed solidly in one camp or another" (p. 103). Rather, Merchant is showing how, as a society's needs and wants change, cultural constraints can change into cultural sanctions through the demise of metaphors, worldviews, and their associated values (p. 41).

Merchant's main argument is that during the 16th and 17th centuries, the female imagery of the earth as nurturing mother was gradually transformed into an opposing image of female nature as disorderly, wild, and uncontrollable chaos, capable of rendering violence (e.g., storms, droughts) and needing to be subdued, controlled, and mastered by the man of science (p. 2). Merchant illustrates this by discussing mining. By reference to the early writings of Pliny (23-79 A.D.), Merchant illustrates the restraining force of the beneficent mother image. Pliny writes that although "upon her surface" the earth "has presented us with . . . substances . . . for our benefit," what is "concealed from our view, what is sunk far beneath her surface" is what the earth does not wish to be disturbed. Pliny argues that the earth's resources may not be exhausted by human avarice by imaging the earth as a kindly, nurturing mother (p. 30). However, during the scientific revolution, the image of nature as disorderly, chaotic, wild, untamed female, coupled with the new values of scientific progress, human control and power over nature, and the use-value of the earth's resources for improving human well-being ascended in importance. For example, in "On Metals" (1556), Agricola argues that the earth is given "to man that he might cultivate it and draw out of its caverns metals and mineral products," without which humans could not cultivate the earth, catch fish, shear sheep, slaughter animals, or cook fruit (p. 37). By claiming that "it is not the metals themselves which are to be blamed but the evil passions of men," Agricola attempts to separate the older normative constraints against mining from the image of the metals, so that new values about metals and mining could be introduced. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a celebrated "father of modern science," took the image further, reducing female nature to a resource for economic production (p. 165). Bacon portrays nature as a female whose "plots and secrets" must be discovered by "the man of science," she must be "bound into service," made a "slave," put "in constraint," and "molded" by the mechanical arts (p. 169). Merchant uses these illustrations to show that sanctioning mining amounted to sanctioning commercial exploration and (eventually) the exploitation of the earth's resources.

A second key theme of the book is so obvious that it easily could be overlooked for the significant achievement it was in 1980: In a scholarly way, *The Death of Nature* unearths, for the first time, the complex interconnections—historical, symbolic, literary and artistic, economic, conceptual, ethical, and philosophical—between the domination of women and the domination of nature in the Western intellectual tradition. As such, it is a classic in ecofeminist scholarship.

This is not to say that there were no previous scholars who addressed ecofeminist themes and positions. In France in 1974, Francois d'Eaubonne introduced the term *ecofeminisme* in *Le Feminisme ou la Morte* to describe the potential of women to bring about an ecological revolution. A year later, in 1975, Rosemary Radford Ruether argued in *New Women New Earth* that the demands of the women's and ecology movements must be united to bring about a radical reshaping of the socioeconomic relations and underlying values of modern industrial society. And in 1978, Susan Griffin published an unconventional book, *Woman and Nature*, in which she drew on a diversity of texts to explore "man's attitude that woman is both inferior to him and closer to nature." But, ecofeminism did not emerge at national and international levels as an area of scholarly research until the publication of *The Death of Nature*.

The last, and perhaps philosophically the most important, key theme is the book's challenge to the well-entrenched dichotomy between culture and nature in Western intellectual thought. For traditional Western philosophy, the distinction is crucial: The historically dominant view is that what is both most distinctive and most valuable about humans is the capacity to reason (or rationality, consciousness, the mind). It is as conscious, experiencing subjects-of-a-life that humans qua rational agents, moral selves, and knowers are distinguished from nonconscious, nonrational objects, bodies, and nature. Merchant has shown ways the culture-nature value dualism has functioned historically and hierarchically to assign higher status, value, or prestige to male-identified traits of culture and males, while assigning lower status, value, or prestige to female-identified traits of nature, females, and people of color. Merchant concludes, "If nature and women, Indians and blacks are to be liberated from the strictures of this ideology, a radical critique of the very categories nature and culture, as organizing concepts in all disciplines, must be undertaken" (p. 144).

Scholars in all disciplines have taken up Merchant's challenge. Whether it is philosophical explorations of the role of rationalism in a systematic inability to acknowledge humans as ecological selves, dependent on nature; literary critiques of concepts of nature and wilderness in "nature writing"; the development of visual arts, plays, and music with liberatory women-nature themes; or rethinking anthropology and development models that fail to take seriously women-nature connections, the ecofeminist critique of nature-culture dualisms has blossomed. *The Death of Nature* deserves credit for much of this flourishing scholarship.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is the influence of *The Death of Nature*? It is, simply, enormous! *The Death of Nature* provides the first distinctively ecofeminist, scholarly perspective on history ecology. It does so by critically examining the role of controlling images of nature in the subordination of women and exploitation of the earth; by ambitiously documenting how female imagery has been used historically to describe nature and enable the transformation from an organismic to a mechanistic worldview; by insightfully weaving together cultural, economic, and philosophical factors contributing to this transformation; and, by providing an impressive array of literary, artistic, scientific, and philosophical examples of the role of women-nature imagery in justifying the domination of women and nature.

Whether one agrees with the details, even the main argument, of *The Death of Nature* is not ultimately what determines the impact and influence of this book. What secures the place of this book as a classic citation is the questions it asks, the analyses that those questions invite, and the breadth of scholarly investigation that has arisen in an attempt to answer those questions.

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