

Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature

KATE SOPER*

WOMAN AS 'NATURE'

[THE] ASSOCIATION OF femininity with naturality represents a more specific instance of the mind-body dualism brought to conceptions of nature, since it goes together with the assumption that the female, in virtue of her role in reproduction, is a more corporeal being than the male. If we ask, that is, what accounts for this coding of nature as feminine – which is deeply entrenched in Western thought, but has also been said by anthropologists to be crosscultural and well-nigh universal¹ – then the answer, it would seem, lies in the double association of women with reproductive activities and of these in turn with nature. As feminists from de Beauvoir onwards have argued, it is woman's biology, or more precisely the dominance of it in her life as a consequence of her role in procreation, that has been responsible for her allocation to the side of nature, and hence for her being subject to the devaluation and de-historization of the natural relative to the cultural and its 'productivity'. The female, de Beauvoir tells us, is 'more enslaved to the species than the male, her animality is more manifest'.² Others have pointed out that in virtue of their role in the gratification of physiological needs, reproductive activities are viewed as directly linked with the human body, and hence as natural. As Olivia Harris puts it, 'since the human body is ideologically presented as a natural given, outside history, it is easy to slide into treating domestic labour as a natural activity, also outside the scope of historical analysis'.³ In the argument of Sherry Ortner, woman's

'natural' association with the domestic context (motivated by her natural lactation functions) tends to compound her potential for being viewed as closer to nature because of the animal-like nature of children, and because of the infra-social connotation of the domestic group as against the rest of society. Yet at the same time, her socializing and cooking functions within the domestic context show her to be a powerful agent of the

*From *What is Nature?*, London: Blackwell, 1995.

cultural process constantly transforming raw material resources into cultural products. Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connotations with nature, she is seen as situated between the two.⁴

In the view of Ormer, then, and other anthropologists, what is at issue here is not so much a simple conflation of woman with nature, as an alignment of the two that derives from the female role in child-birth and her consequent activities as initial mediator between the natural and the cultural.⁵ As those responsible for the nursing and early socialization of children, women are 'go betweens' who stay closer to nature because of their limited and merely preparatory functions as 'producers' of the cultural....

We might also note, in this connection, the extent to which the presumption that 'art' is a distinctively male preserve has influenced the reception of female cultural production. As Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker have pointed out, certain subject matters and art forms (the painting of flowers, for example) were typically viewed as appropriate to women in virtue of their similarity to their own nature, so that 'fused into the prevailing notion of femininity, the painting becomes solely an extension of womanliness, and the artist becomes a woman only fulfilling her nature.'⁶ At the same time, for needlework, quilt work and other forms of craft traditionally produced by women to be perceived as 'art', their origins as craft had to be overlooked. They cite (adding their own italics) the deliberate amnesia of the critic, Ralph Pomerooy:

I am going to forget, *in order really to see them*, that a group of Navajo blankets are only that. In order to consider them as I feel they ought to be considered as Art with a capital 'A' – I am going to look at them as paintings – created with dye instead of pigment, in unstretched fabric instead of canvas – *by several nameless masters of abstract art?*⁷

What is interesting about this remark, we may add, is not only its blindness to the chauvinism of its patronage of female 'art', but its failure to appreciate that the abstract pattern of a Navajo blanket could be viewed as 'art' only *after* (male) 'high art' had come to encompass and value abstraction. In this sense, female cultural production was actually in advance of 'masculine' aesthetic conceptions.

More generally, it must be said that the antithetical equivalence: woman = reproduction = nature versus man = production = culture offers a doubly-distorting picture: firstly, in that it invites us to suppose that 'production' proceeds without reliance on nature, when in fact any form of human creativity involves a utilization and transformation of natural resources; and secondly because it presents 'reproduction' as if it were unaffected by cultural mediation and innured against the impact of socio-economic conditions. Production, however, can no more be regarded as independent of biological and physical process than reproduction can be viewed as reducible to an unmediated matter of biology outside the cultural-symbolic order. This does not mean that there are no distinctions to be drawn

between the production of human beings and the production of armaments, or between the different kinds of work and activity involved when human beings transform natural materials. Feminists, for example, have pointed to the ways in which any economic theory (that of Marx, for example) that conceives of 'production' as essentially a matter of producing objects or commodities will tend to overlook the productivity of domestic labour and skew perceptions of its contribution accordingly. The adequacy of the 'object' model of production for thinking about agricultural production has also been justly questioned. Equally there is no denying that insofar as human reproduction is a biological process, the sexes are differently involved in it, and have tended to assume distinctive social roles as a result of that. The point is only that a simple mapping of the culture-nature opposition onto these various differences obscures rather than assists the discriminations necessary to thinking clearly about them.

NATURE AS 'WOMAN'

If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the 'downgrading' of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as 'female'. Looked at from this optic, too, the symbolization testifies to considerable confusion of thought, and its very complexity indicates some profound ambiguities about 'man's' place within and relations to the natural world.

Nature has been represented as a woman in two rather differing senses: 'she' is identified with the body of laws, principles and processes that is the object of scientific scrutiny and experimentation. But 'she' is also nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape – trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body). In both these conceptions, nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won, and if necessary forced to submit to intercourse. The Aristotelian philosophy, claimed Bacon, in arguing for an experimental science based on sensory observation, has 'left Nature herself untouched and inviolate'; those working under its influence had done no more than 'catch and grasp' at her, when the point was 'to seize and detain her';⁸ and the image of nature as the object of the eventually 'fully carnal' knowing of science is frequently encountered in Enlightenment thinking and famously pictured in Louis Ernest Barriass's statue of *La Nature dévotant devant la science*, a copy of which stood in the Paris Medical Faculty in the nineteenth century.

Nature as physical territory is also presented as a source of erotic delight, and sometimes of overwhelming provocation to her masculine voyeur-violator. Describing the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, Thomas Jefferson writes:

between the production of human beings and the production of armaments, or between the different kinds of work and activity involved when human beings transform natural materials. Feminists, for example, have pointed to the ways in which any economic theory (that of Marx, for example) that conceives of 'production' as essentially a matter of producing objects or commodities will tend to overlook the productivity of domestic labour and skew perceptions of its contribution accordingly. The adequacy of the 'object' model of production for thinking about agricultural production has also been justly questioned. Equally there is no denying that insofar as human reproduction is a biological process, the sexes are differently involved in it, and have tended to assume distinctive social roles as a result of that. The point is only that a simple mapping of the culture-nature opposition onto these various differences obscures rather than assists the discriminations necessary to thinking clearly about them.

NATURE AS 'WOMAN'

If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as 'female'. Looked at from this optic, too, the symbolization testifies to considerable confusion of thought, and its very complexity indicates some profound ambiguities about 'man's' place within and relations to the natural world.

Nature has been represented as a woman in two rather differing senses: 'she' is identified with the body of laws, principles and processes that is the object of scientific scrutiny and experimentation. But 'she' is also nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or earth which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (and with this we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape – trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body). In both these conceptions, nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. Nature is both the generative source, but also the potential spouse of science, to be wooed, won, and if necessary forced to submit to intercourse. The Aristotelian philosophy, claimed Bacon, in arguing for an experimental science based on sensory observation, has 'left Nature herself untouched and inviolate'; those working under its influence had done no more than 'catch and grasp' at her, when the point was 'to seize and detain her';⁸ and the image of nature as the object of the eventually 'fully carnal' knowing of science is frequently encountered in Enlightenment thinking and famously pictured in Louis Ernest Barrias's statue of *La Nature dévoilant devant la science*, a copy of which stood in the Paris Medical Faculty in the nineteenth century.

Nature as physical territory is also presented as a source of erotic delight, and sometimes of overwhelming provocation to her masculine voyeur-violator. Describing the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, Thomas Jefferson writes:

For the mountain being cloven asunder, she presents to your eye, through the cleft, a small catch of smooth blue horizon, at an infinite distance in the plain country, inviting you, as it were, from the riot and tumult roaring around, to pass through the breach and participate of the calm below.⁹

Wordsworth's poem, *Nutting*, offers one of the most powerfully voluptuous descriptions of the 'virgin scene' of nature, and one of the most disturbed accounts of the ravishment it provokes:

Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being; and, unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turned away
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.¹⁰

... But it is in the perception of the colonizer, for whom nature is both a nurturant force – a replenished bosom or womb of renewal – and a 'virgin' terrain ripe for penetration, that the metaphor of the land as female is most insistent; and also most equivocal – for it is one thing to cajole – or force – a virgin to surrender to her lover (rapist), another for the son to direct his sexual attentions towards his mother. Incestuous desires, or acts, (which constitute, indeed, a crime against nature) are of an altogether different order from those of a suitor overwhelmed by a natural interest in possessing the rightful object of his desire....

Many have remarked on the analogies between the domination of nature and the oppression of women. Fewer have noted the equivocation in the mother-virgin-lover imagery, which is surely expressive of the conflicting feelings that 'real' nature has induced in 'men'. If Nature is, after all, both mother and maid, this surely reflects a genuine tension between the impulse to dominate and the impulse to be nurtured. The urge to feminize nature contains within it, that is, something of the contrariness of attitude that is inspired by the interaction with it; or, as Annette Kolodny has put it in her study of the 'pastoral impulse' in American art and letters, it combines both a 'phallic' and a 'foetal' aspect, the conflict between them testifying to deep-seated ambiguities about the use of nature. For the American colonizer, suggests Kolodny, who was 'beginning again', nature was a site of rebirth, 'but only on condition of its settlement and taming – a 'violating' intervention by the phallic pioneer upon the nurturing womb, which was bound to prove a source of guilt. The mother's body as the first ambience experienced by the infant becomes a kind of 'archetypal primary landscape' to which subsequent perceptual configurations of space are related. As such, moreover, it is expressive of a nostalgia

for a mother-child unity, this unity itself being a figure of a desired harmony and 'at oneness' of man and nature.¹¹

To pursue this idea further is to suggest that there is a parallel mapping of the regrettable but inevitable mother-child separation onto the relation to nature as inevitable object of 'phallic' intervention. The Oedipal drama, whereby the child acquires masculine subjectivity in 'giving up' incestuous desires for the mother in exchange for eventual possession of another female, is here inscribed in the 'body' of nature itself as both protective mother to be shielded from ravishment, and (as Thomas Morron described New England) the 'faire virgin, longing to be sped / And meete her lover in a Nuptiall bed'.¹² If viewed in this light, nature's retentions on those who would force her to yield her secrets or submit to 'husbandry' can readily appear to be maternal punishments; or the desire to be overwhelmed by nature indicate a remorse felt for her violation.

Feminized nature is not therefore emblematic simply of mastered nature, but also of regrets and guilts over the mastering itself; of nostalgias felt for what is lost or defiled in the very act of possession; and of the emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction.

NOTES

- 1 Its universality is stressed by Sherry B. Ortner in 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds) *Woman, Culture, Society*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974, pp. 67–87.
- 2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H. B. Parshley), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, p. 239.
- 3 Olivia Harris, 'Households as Natural Units', in Veronica Beechey and James Donald (eds) *Subjectivity and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985, p. 129.
- 4 Ortner, 'Is Female to Male?', p. 80.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 85–6.
- 6 Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 58.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 8 Francis Bacon, *Thoughts and Conclusions*, in B. Farrington, *The Philosophy of Frances Bacon: An Essay on its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964, sec. 13, p. 83; and *Novum Organum* I, aphorism CXXI, in *The Physical and Metaphysical Works of Lord Bacon* (ed. J. Devey), London: George Bell, 1901, p. 441.
- 9 Cit. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 28.
- 10 William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, *The Lyrical Ballads* (ed. Derek Roper), London: Collins, 1968, pp. 206–7.
- 11 Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*, pp. 127–8, 148–60.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

for a mother-child unity, this unity itself being a figure of a desired harmony and 'at oneness' of man and nature.¹¹

To pursue this idea further is to suggest that there is a parallel mapping of the regrettable but inevitable mother-child separation onto the relation to nature as inevitable object of 'phallic' intervention. The Oedipal drama, whereby the child acquires masculine subjectivity in 'giving up' incestuous desires for the mother in exchange for eventual possession of another female, is here inscribed in the 'body' of nature itself as both protective mother to be shielded from ravishment, and (as Thomas Morton described New England) the 'faire virgin, longing to be sped / And meete her lover in a Nuptiall bed.'¹² If viewed in this light, nature's retributions on those who would force her to yield her secrets or submit to 'husbandry' can readily appear to be maternal punishments; or the desire to be overwhelmed by nature indicate a remorse felt for her violation.

Feminized nature is not therefore emblematic simply of mastered nature, but also of regrets and guilts over the mastering itself; of nostalgias felt for what is lost or defiled in the very act of possession; and of the emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction.

NOTES

- 1 Its universality is stressed by Sherry B. Ortner in 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds) *Woman, Culture, Society*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974, pp. 67-87.
- 2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H. B. Parshley), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, p. 239.
- 3 Olivia Harris, 'Households as Natural Units', in Veronica Beechey and James Donald (eds) *Subjectivity and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985, p. 129.
- 4 Ortner, 'Is Female to Male?', p. 80.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-6.
- 6 Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 58.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 8 Francis Bacon, *Thoughts and Conclusions*, in B. Farrington, *The Philosophy of Frances Bacon: An Essay on its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964, sec. 13, p. 83; and *Novum Organum* I, aphorism CXXI, in *The Physical and Metaphysical Works of Lord Bacon* (ed. J. Devey), London: George Bell, 1901, p. 441.
- 9 Cit. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 28.
- 10 William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, *The Lyrical Ballads* (ed. Derek Roper), London: Collins, 1968, pp. 206-7.
- 11 Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*, pp. 127-8, 148-60.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 12.