

Women, Gender, and Religion

Edited by Susan Calef and Ronald A. Simkins

Persephone and Susanna in the Garden

Patriarchal Seductions of Nature and Virtue

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Introduction

[1] Persephone, a goddess of the Early Mycenaen period and the classical Greek Eleusinian mystery religion, and Susannah, of ancient Jewish and Christian religions, are both depicted in ancient and modern popular art and literature as virtuous young women who are associated with nature in agricultural settings. While their rape or attempted rape by lusty males resulted in a death sentence for these young women, both were set free and vindicated, not by their fathers or their husbands as one would expect in a patriarchal society, but by powers that represent a threat to patriarchal power. Demeter the Earth Mother releases Persephone from the male dominated Underworld, and Daniel the judge vindicates Susannah from injustices of a legal system that protected the interests of men, not women.

[2] Through the centuries, the images of Persephone and Susannah persisted in popular culture art and literature. As products of religious imagination, these images expressed the tensions inherent in the relationship between the eroticism of female fertility and nudity, on the one hand, and male lust and seductive force, on the other hand. It is in the garden that the tensions are dramatized because male seduction and domination of women and of nature are parallel themes in Western culture. While feminine nudity and nature were persistent

themes in European and American art, there was always a tension between the virtue that they represented and the social and cultural norms that promoted male lust and excess. The prevalence of these images in art and literature reveal, I suggest, the desire of artists to represent the plight of nature and female nudity for the popular imagination and their vindication of the virtues of women in relationship to nature in a quest for justice. These images are not about promoting lust and male desire, but something much more essential to the human condition that persists across time and place, namely, the renewal of the earth and of the human relationship to nature.

[3] Historical depictions of these two young women reveal the cultural norms pertaining to nature and gender at particular times and places. A brief historical review of the depictions of these images will serve to advance this basic argument, after which I then focus my cultural critique on two paintings from the 1930s by the American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton. Benton painted Persephone and Susannah as voluptuous and seductive young rural women seduced by nasty old farmers in verdant agricultural settings. While art critics argue that Benton drew on these images because he was preoccupied with nudity and obsessed with shocking religious sensibilities, I argue that he was also capable of working at a much deeper level. In my view, Benton understood the cultural, religious, and gendered crises in American agriculture in the 1930s much better than did the art critics, who reacted only to the sensationalism of nudity.

[4] I further argue that Benton did not just reveal the cultural norms of the American Midwest during the 1930s, he also challenged mainstream American cultural constructions of gender relations and gendered notions of fertility, sexuality, and the natural world. His works offered a regionalist cultural critique of American agriculture at a time of crisis. Understanding these gender relations and their cultural context is more important than examining the responses of elite art critiques of Benton's time that reacted to the shock value of two "pornographic" images, and in so doing missed the point. As a proponent of working people and their landscapes, Benton's work explored the religious, gender relations, and environmental issues that he found so compelling in the American rural Midwest.

[5] Benton's critical interpretations afford us a lens through which to refocus contemporary religious issues of gender, nature, virtue, and justice in a framework of integrative thinking. As they have been in the past, the interrelationship of these issues is open to renegotiation to serve as new cultural adaptations across time and place. The storied images of Persephone and Susanna are powerful tropes in the process of renegotiation of relationships among men, women, and nature.

Women in the Garden: Ancient Storied Images

[6] Persephone was worshipped in Greece as the power of fertility as early as 1500 BCE. In her myth, Persephone is torn from her mother, Demeter the Earth Mother, as grain is cut from the earth. She is abducted by Hades and forced to live with him in the underworld where he seduced her to eat pomegranate seeds. As a timeless trope, her rape signifies the horror of human death (Baring and Cashford: 369). As the myth of life, death, and spiritual renewal continues, Persephone returns to earth after Demeter destroys the earth and its fertility in her grief and subsequently negotiates her daughter's release. As a condition of her reunion with her mother Persephone must, however, return to her husband in the

underworld for one third of each year. The reunion of the mother and daughter goddess symbolizes the integration of birth and rebirth and transcends the duality of these oppositions for all of nature (Baring and Cashford: 384). The myth of Persephone seeks to express truths regarding suffering, death, cyclical time, and spiritual regeneration and rebirth. The earliest versions of the myth identified females with the primary creative power of life and death but their roles were slowly transformed to positions of secondary importance. Mara Lynn Keller asserts that the later patriarchal version of the Demeter/Persephone myths and rituals increasingly reduced Demeter's role to that of a lover and mother but not the source of sexuality and fertility. Persephone was also transformed to the role of virgin daughter and object of male sexual desire (47).

[7] The story of Susannah and the elders was most likely written in Hebrew between 102-75 BCE. It is probably a combination of folktales, myths, and older legends, but is itself not a myth because there is nothing supernatural or miraculous in the story (Casey: 21). In the story, a young married woman, the daughter of a farmer, went out to the garden to bathe. While there, several religious leaders of her community sought to seduce her into sexual union with them, threatening that if she did not submit, they would claim she had seduced them, which would result in her death for adultery. She resisted, they followed up on their threat, and she was sentenced to death. Young Daniel intervenes, exposing the lies of the elders by questioning them separately, and justice prevails. The elders are brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

[8] Jennifer Glancy suggests that the Susannah story is as much about gender relations as it is about femininity in that it reinforces the gender codes associated with societal ideals of femininity in ancient Judean society. From the patriarchal perspective, the wealth of Susannah's father and her husband are threatened because of her vulnerable beauty. They do not try to save her, but when she is vindicated, they are happy, not because she is not executed and her purity preserved, but because they were not dishonored (292). And while her resistance of the elders is courageous, the story is still about the concerns of men, not women (296). While the elders do not physically rape her, they exploit her fear, which is a form of sexual harassment and abuse (300). The story asserts that her deliverance is not achieved through the power of women, but by the power of a male god who intervenes through Daniel (301). The story is about how Daniel rises to power, not how Susannah is empowered to deliver herself. She lives in a culture that is male dominated, and she has no rights. Women are expected to be pious, innocent, and faithful, and are presumed to be guilty until proven innocent (Levine: 313). Glancy asserts that Susannah is objectified by male desire (293). Once the elders desire her, her innocence becomes her guilt. In effect, she is reduced to a guilty object by the males (294). As a naked woman, in particular, she is shameful and humiliated because she was seen by men (Levine: 315). The story does not present her in a positive social role, but in a marginalized position (Levine: 323).

Nudes in the Garden: Historical Images

[9] Images of Persephone and Susannah are powerful representations of gender relations and of interactions with nature that simultaneously reflect and promote the cultural norms of the time and place of their production. In early periods of Greek mythology, Persephone is depicted in frescoes with her mother goddess Demeter. Christianity subsumed some of the

agricultural images into its symbolism of life, death, and rebirth, but the role of the goddess is absent. It persisted, however, in European art that drew heavily on mythical and religious themes. Even in the Renaissance period, paintings of Persephone with Hades are favorite themes, but the role of the earth mother goddess Demeter is increasingly subordinated by male artists. Demeter's daughter Persephone becomes the central romanticized mythological female image now eroticized and moralized to represent popular depictions of femininity and nature in each historical period. Through the imaginations of male artists, the Persephone text enacts popular tensions in the relationships between femininity, nature, sexuality, and morality. Images reflect a tension between the innocence of youth and the seductiveness of femininity in the garden. For example, in 1877, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a Pre-Raphaelite painter, depicts Persephone alone as a young woman personifying spring. She is holding a partially eaten ripe pomegranate. In the early 1890s, Lord Frederick Leighton in "Return of Persephone" paints her coming up out of a cave from the underworld. The characters now illustrate Victorian gender motifs. Persephone, a fragile and willowy waif, is released into the arms of her sentimentalized mother by the god Hermes who accompanies her return, as if to protect her. Artists continued to reference mythological and Victorian themes. Gradually, images of Persephone reflect the transition in the popular culture away from independent female subjects who dominate life, death, and the creative cycles of renewal in nature. Persephone becomes the object of male desires to dominate the forces of nature and protect the innocence of their daughters.

[10] Persephone and her relationship to her mother and other males is the subject not only of paintings but also of prose. Writers are continuously drawn to the gender dramas of the myth. Josephine Donovan argues that the myth reveals a conflict between female and male control over the earth's fertility. Patriarchal seduction and captivity of the daughter challenges the matriarchal nurture and life force. Persephone betrays her mother when she eats the pomegranate seed, revealing the restlessness of daughters for alternative lives (3). Donovan argues that the lure of Persephone into the male world is an important motif in Victorian literature. In rejection of Victorian norms, feminist writers like Edith Wharton and Willa Cather revealed the destructive nature of male supremacy and envisioned a return to the feminocentric or matriarchal ideology where women guarded their daughters and cared for the garden (6). They expressed concern that young girls were leaving rural areas for the world of men where they were raped and exploited for their fertility and sexuality.

[11] The story of Susannah has a similar staying power. Passed down in the book of Daniel, it was sanctioned by the Council of Trent in 1547 even though the Roman Catholic Church was unsure of its origin and authenticity. Because its origin was disputed, Luther removed it from the Old Testament in 1534 and placed it in the apocrypha, from where Protestant dramatists presented it in popular culture forms (Casey: 23-24). Nowhere was it more widely read than in Protestant farming communities in sixteenth century Germany because of its focus on the reward of virtue and the confrontation to church elders and their corrupt power. Because the judges of the Catholic Church attacked the Lutheran Church at the time, Lutherans found the story especially appealing (Casey: 100). Moreover, the use of Susannah in biblical dramas, advocated by Luther, was attractive to Lutherans, in part, because public dramas of the legend were banned by the Catholic Church, which only condoned devotional plays (Casey: 8, 25).

[12] The story of Susanna was dramatized for the masses in Holland, Switzerland, and Germany and persisted into the twentieth century, finding expression in vernacular languages as well as in Latin for elite scholarly audiences (Casey: 11). It even appears in an eighteenth century German opera and Handel performed it in London in 1749 in English. In his study of this theme, Paul Casey observes that there is never a period in German literature when the story of Susanna does not appear, always evolving in new adaptations (13). There was a rebirth of the theme in twentieth century Germany, but no evidence of its role is found in American German Lutheran communities. This is no doubt because Lutherans no longer experienced persecution by the Catholic Church and, therefore, had no need to be publicly rebellious.

[13] Susannah remains a popular image in sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century European art. During the Renaissance, woman's nakedness was an important motif. Her story reveals the tensions between sexual desire and female nudity within masculine systems of law and power, tensions that are also connected to religious themes. Painters sought to depict the female nude as an object of masculine desire, but needed theological justification for painting an erotic female figure (Miles). Artists did not see the tensions through the same eyes, however, nor were they really interested in theology. Rather, their works present a consciousness of the tensions inherent in sexual desire and female nudity for public consideration and raise questions regarding the accepted role of female nudity, virtue, and morality.

[14] In 1555/56, Jacopo Robusta Tintoretto painted Susannah sitting above the elders looking serene and showing no fear. She looks older, fuller bodied. Her voluptuous body tempts the elders who try to get a closer look. They are more sneaky than bold, looking old and small compared to Susannah. She is in control of her sexuality in this scene, and the patriarchy does not pass judgment on her virtue. Babette Bohn argues that around the turn of the seventeenth century Ludovico Carracci of Bologna revived the theme of Susannah's virtue, rejecting the eroticism of his contemporaries. He sought to depict the moral issues that were raised in the biblical text and not exploit the image for erotic themes. In 1610, Artemisia Gentileschi of Germany also addressed the virtue of Susannah. Rejecting the flirtatious theme, Artemisia, herself a young woman of seventeen, saw Susannah as vulnerable, frightened, and repulsed by the large, leering, and conspiratorial men. While her painting of a small and young Susanna shows her ability to work with psychological dynamics, it is also said to be painted prior to her rape by her instructor Tassi, and so probably reflects the sexual harassment by him and other artists. While the story of Susannah was told in medieval Europe to teach that salvation comes to those who put their trust in God, Artemisia understood that one could not trust men. She herself experienced the lustful and evil inclinations of men who seduced or raped women. In her case, she sued her teacher for rape and had to stand trial against him, even suffering torture to prove she was telling the truth. Artemisia experienced the Susannah story in her own life.

[15] Other male artists also addressed the seductive nature of female nudity and the power of males to exploit women's virtue. They struggle, seemingly, with understanding the nature of female sexual virtue and how females should protect and defend it. In 1610, Guido Reni paints Susannah looking young but voluptuous. She is gesturing with her right hand to the elders whom she attempts to hold back as they conspire to silence and seduce her. It is one

of his most famous paintings from the Baroque period. From the same period, Rubens, the Flemish painter, shows a “Rubenesque” Susannah crouching in fear in a more panoramic view of the garden, with the elders at a safe distance. Rubens painted her again, a few years later, looking fearful and vulnerable as the elders lean down over her. He paints the horror on her face and the pain in her eyes as well as the lustful leering in the elders’ eyes. In 1628, Jacques Blanchard of Paris painted Susanna large and voluptuous, but clearly distressed, surrounded by elders, pleading for her life. Paintings that show her body more voluptuous and larger, do not necessarily present her as more powerful; in fact, in such renderings she may be more vulnerable as a result of her obvious sexual nature.

[16] In 1649, Artemisia Gentileschi again painted an image of Susannah after her vindication in court. This time she depicts Susanna in a more forceful resistance to the elders, pushing them away with her hands and looking away as if repulsed. The elders are not as close and as menacing as in the earlier painting. Whereas in the first painting, she dares not cry out, in the second she is pushing them away and calling attention to their outrageous act. Artemisia has been vindicated, but she is revealing that the male threat remains despite the fact that she is more emotionally prepared to confront it than she was in the first image.

[17] Rembrandt also painted Susannah small and young, crouching in fear, assuming a modest pose as if to protect her virtue. The elders are not shown in this image that romanticizes the vulnerability of very young girls. Most artists, however, were increasingly more interested in the personal agency of nude adult women in protecting their own virtue. Guido Cagnacci painted Susannah in a seated pose with a drape over her hips and the elders leaning toward her from the other side of the garden wall. She appears to be negotiating with them, looking voluptuous, older, and unafraid. In the early twentieth century, Albert Bierstadt of Amsterdam paints Susannah in a surreal garden. She is voluptuous and inaccessible in the water that separates her from the elders. The elders are mere voyeurs, posing no real threat as they crouch on the bank to observe her. She is more than vindicated; she is liberated! This transformation of Susannah images reflects a gradual public acceptance of the legitimacy of a virtuous nude female image.

Benton in the Garden: Shocking Nudes

[18] The preceding overview identifies the ways in which the literary and art images that were inspired by the Persephone myth and especially the Susanna story reflected artists’ interpretations of cultural conflicts in their times. With that in mind, I wish to argue that Thomas Hart Benton did not draw on them simply for religious justification to paint nudes in the 1930s. We must, therefore, ask: What was Benton saying about gender relations and human control over nature in his time and place, and does his cultural critique continue to speak in our time?

[19] Benton lived and died in Missouri. He was a Midwesterner with a midwestern sensibility. Working first as a cartoonist, then creating avant-garde art, he began to draw and paint people and landscapes of the rural American South and Midwest in the 1920s. Considered a founding leader of the Regionalist movement in American art in the 1930s, Benton argued that American art should not be French in its influence and style. He defined an original American art style by employing brilliant colors and stylized cartoon like figures. His work

reflected reality, ambiguity, socialist idealism, social engineering, and the recycling of biblical themes and religious ideals.

[20] Henry Adams observes that Benton's work was often regarded as unsophisticated and simple by the art establishment, but Benton did not care about that judgment. Although he had studied the work of Michelangelo, Tintoretto, El Greco, and Rubens to develop his own techniques, he did not develop an identity with any particular school or method. Rather, his representational style of painting the real world of rural people reflected his populist sentiments. Benton painted the American character in his celebrations of rural America, often in large-scale murals for mass consumption. His main contribution to American art is the result of his ability to work with contradictions and complexity in the lives of rural people.

[21] During the Depression, Benton painted many murals to represent rural America and its issues, frequently drawing on religious themes in his portrayals of rural people in the American Midwest and South. His work was sensuous, sexy, and daring in its incorporation of nudes into regional landscapes (Burns). Himself a product of rural life, Benton endeavored to maintain his rural identity and to reflect the American character through his life and work. In spite of the fact that he presented himself as a simple country person, Benton was actually quite sophisticated, having studied art in Chicago, New York, and Paris. He knew exactly what he was doing when he attacked the art establishment of the East with his raw and unrefined depictions of ordinary American life, many of them as huge murals that were visually exciting, full of energy and complex passion.

[22] That Benton enjoyed shocking people and delighted in antagonizing the art and religious establishments is clear. He horrified the clergy when he painted *Susannah with red fingernails* in 1938 (housed in the M. H. de Young Museum in San Francisco). Their visceral reactions apparently only encouraged him. A year later, his famous depiction of *Persephone*, another full length frontal nude, got him expelled from the Kansas City Art Institute. Interestingly, Margot Peet also painted *Persephone* as a full length nude at the Art Institute, but her image shows only a reclining nude in the garden. No men are included in the scene, and there are no gender tensions or hints of lust or rape in Peet's version. Later Peet was influential in helping the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City acquire Benton's painting of *Persephone*, which is now revered as American pornography at its finest.

[23] Now, over seventy years after Benton's nudes confronted American religious and art elites, it is clear that his work made a valuable contribution to the Regionalist movement. The work of Thomas Hart Benton and other Midwestern regionalist painters of the 1930s captures the human dimension of agriculture. Their work was not just about ordinary people; it was for ordinary people. It celebrated their lives in the American public. It was also prophetic in revealing the contradictions and complexity in human and environmental relationships. I think Benton understood that these tensions are the result of cultural adaptations over the ages, beginning with the ancient mythological and religious traditions of agricultural peoples. Female nudity for Benton was not just about challenging Victorian notions of virtue. It was also about challenging gender relations in the garden in a time when the garden was in trouble. The familiar images and their enduring issues speak again through the eyes of an artist.

Trouble in the Garden: Whose Fault Is It?

[24] Regionalist art emerges during a crisis of national identity and character and its relationship to the agricultural environment. Many Midwestern writers and artists saw this identity and character as having male properties. Frederick Jackson Turner writes that the idealized American character is a heroic male with mythic significance in the assertion of masculinity into the virgin soil of the frontier (21). Mary Panicia Carden observes that this symbolism produced a “national erotics of male dominance” that was romanticized in scripts of American frontier history (276). Nation building was a project of male sexual conquest of nature, and nationalism was eroticized and romanticized to perpetuate gender differences (277).

[25] When Willa Cather published her novels in 1913 and 1918, the frontier was closed. According to Carden, Cather “confronts and challenges gender-specific narratives of the nation . . . at a time when tangible anxiety about the male supremacy that had served to explain the nation to itself was attended by slippage in traditional male/female relations” (278). Cather linked landscape to female creative imagination. Women’s bodies and the earth shaped her feminist consciousness. Cather placed women in space emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually, not just physically (279). Her female characters are strong, confident, and resolute (280).

[26] This was the gendered landscape that Benton painted. Establishment rebel that he was, Benton was no doubt influenced by Cather’s perspective in depicting a fertile earth as a feminine quality. And while his work was criticized as an attack on religion and feminine virtue, I submit that his images of Persephone and Susannah are as religious as they are profane. Religious art often places the subject in natural scenes near water because these are ritually clean settings. Women are placed in unaltered natural scenes to show their identification with it, and not with culture, while men are typically seen in cultivated landscapes. Following these tropes, Benton places Susanna and Persephone in nature near water. He places the males who pose minor threats to them at some distance or in the cultivated areas of the scene. The men and women in each scene are shown in relationship to the natural world and to each other in terms of power and defiance against power.

[27] There are no walls between Susanna and the elders in Benton’s scene. While there is a country church in the background, which clearly legitimates their power, Benton places Susanna on the edge of the stream, ready to immerse herself in a ritual of purification. The elders are too far away to threaten her, and they seem incapable of closing the gap. They cannot destroy her virtue. In Benton’s depiction of Persephone, the Devil is an impotent old man who only looks longingly upon a young and strong figure. She is at one with the grain harvest and the refreshing stream and clearly has all the power. While the grain has been cut, she is in no danger of being cut down. The strength of the woman in the foreground stands in marked contrast to the declining power of the patriarchy in the background.

[28] I argue that in these scenes Benton does not paint nudes for pornographic purposes, which serve to dominate female sexuality, but to reveal the strength of the vital life force that women represent on the midwestern landscape. Both Persephone and Susannah are the subjects, not the objects of these scenes. While they may be the objects of male desire, the males do not dominate them. It was that statement, and not their nudity, I suggest, that

shocked the religious and art establishment of the 1930s. Benton's images, like Cather's literature, examined the role of males in the woman-nature/male-culture equation (Cardin: 286) that dominated the rural landscape at a time when that domination brought famine to the land. In Benton's work, as in Cather's work, women are recast in the regionalist agricultural romance as powerful and self-reliant forces in the national identity. The narrative is still erotic, but the changes in gender-roles create alternatives and multiple interpretations (295-96).

[29] Cather and Benton reveal the tensions in religious views of fertility and human relationships in American agriculture. They were not the first to recognize the conflicts between female and male value systems in the natural world. The work of Cather and other female novelists in the twentieth century asserted that despite male domination of women and nature, the earth is still the source of strength and renewal for women (Donovan: 63). Acknowledgment of this strength, however, was not part of the dominant national narrative. Rather, it becomes a critique of the male dominant national narrative that mythologized commercial and capitalist interests and also caused the plains of Kansas to dry up and die. Cather attributed this to Demeter's curse. Her female characters are earth goddesses, still seduced by males, but who struggle to define the virtue of their sexuality on their own terms in their resistance to male denigration of their sexuality. In so doing, they represent the triumph of feminine resurrection in the agricultural cycle of life and death (Donovan: 107). Still, Donovan asserts that Cather's work reflects a period of ambivalence and ambiguity in the lives of rural women (157). I argue that Benton also saw this tension as the result of gender relations in the garden and religious notions of feminine virtue that placed the blame for "the fall" on women. Perhaps Benton's work challenged the religious patriarchy to accept responsibility for their actions. Whatever his intentions and regardless of the ability or willingness of "the elders" to reflect at such a deep level on its meaning, he struck a nerve. They did not like it one bit.

[30] But does Benton's critique of gender roles and responsibility mean that women are more virtuous sexually and in their relationships with nature? It is one thing to examine these gender relationships in the arts, quite another to examine them anthropologically. Are women better caregivers of the earth? Do males dominate nature and females, and does such domination find religious legitimation? Are women by nature victims of men, or do men and women both need to be liberated from cultural norms that oppress them and nature? To consider these questions, we turn from examination of myths and religious traditions to comparative cultural studies and feminist theory.

[31] Ecofeminism asserts that ecological consciousness was a prehistoric cultural reality, as archeological evidence might suggest. It further asserts that women and their femininity were responsible for the reverence and respect ancient peoples had for the earth. Conversely, Riane Eisler argues that there is no archeological evidence that there ever was a full matriarchy or patriarchy, but rather partnerships between differences (28). While early agricultural societies saw power not as domination but as power to create, nurture, and transform, their notions of power were culturally gendered and culturally transformed. While spirituality, religion, and nature were all one cultural reality, those cultural realities were also fragmented and transformed.

[32] We also need to ask whether there is anthropological evidence to support claims that women were innately connected to nature because of their early connections to creative power through their nurturing roles as mothers and as gardeners. In comparative studies, Alaine Low and Soraya Tremayne test the link between women's spirituality and their sense of the sacredness of nature. Ethnographic material suggests that there is no innate link between women and nature, but rather these relationships were the result of cultural adaptations (2). We have seen that the images of Persephone and Susannah have been culturally constructed and reconstructed across time and place. While Western cultures construct nature and feminine virtue in terms of oppositions, anthropologists argue that many cultures construct them in terms of unity and wholeness if they reflect that culture's actual experience and serve that culture's adaptive success. Ecofeminism questions whether Western oppositions actually do provide some adaptive significance or if these dualism are mal-adaptive.

[33] Ecofeminism offers various theoretical positions from which to define the critical connections between human domination of nature and male domination of women (Low and Tremayne: 3). One of the questions ecofeminists explore is whether Western religious norms and beliefs can lead to respect for nature and whether Western dualism and its oppression of women and nature can be transformed to allow for greater gender equality (5). Cultures define the sacred significance of social and environmental relationships that organize social and economic practices. But these practices are also the result of cultural codes embedded in myths, legends, and stories that can be re-invented in specific concrete contexts. The Persephone myth and the Susannah story are examples of this reinvention. They allow us to examine the power of males to destroy nature through the subordination of women's sexuality and nature. They also allow us to examine the fear that men have that unregulated sexuality will redefine the natural order and destroy male dominated social order (Low and Tremayne: 12). The association of women with the fearsome forces of nature in opposition to men who seek to tame the environment through force and control over women is an ongoing theme in cross-cultural religious studies.

Justice in the Garden: Co-Creators Naked Together

[34] How can cultural critiques like those presented by artists such as Thomas Hart Benton provide fresh images of nudity in the garden that reflect new gender relations in nature? How can the public re-invent images of an integrated wholeness, and why is this necessary in American agriculture? There is a critical difference between those who would master nature for the purpose of ongoing sustainable relationships and those who would dominate nature in order to dominate others. Mythical symbols like those depicted in Benton's paintings can provide images for holistic gender and nature relationships. While the mystical solidarity with cultivated plants was linked to the mysteries of female fertility and the soil was symbolized as woman, the discovery of the plow and its use was symbolic of the sexual act as it opened the soil for planting of seeds. Males till the earth and plant the seeds in the soil and in women. That does not necessarily have to translate into hierarchy. The roles can be seen, alternatively, as mutually interdependent. Sheaves of grain are symbols of dying grain that are consumed to give new life. The cycle of grain and the cycle of death and rebirth are timeless themes. Christianity reinforces these symbolic roles in the sacrament of Communion. But

Christianity is also a patriarchal religion that sustains male domination over nature and women through hierarchies of spiritual as well as social power.

[35] Does it have to be this way? Anthropologists assert that the societies that gave women high positions due to their spiritual connections to nature and its creative forces were based on a partnership model, not a dichotomous model between masculine and feminine spirituality and nature (Eisler: 31). In these societies, neither nature nor women were devalued or exploited. Riane Eisler asserts that it is not science or technology, or even masculinity, that is the problem, but how cultures define nature, culture, masculinity, femininity, science, technology, and spirituality in terms of either domination or partnership (33). According to Eisler, the roots of ecological problems lie not with the shift away from a religious to a scientific or technological worldview, or away from a feminine model of creative power to a masculine model, but from a dissolution of the link between nature and spirituality (31). We have moved away from seeing the world in terms of wholeness and partnerships. While ecofeminism affirms the sacred bonds of nature and the feminine, Eisler argues that we have to be able to see these powers within the realm of masculinity as well (34). Anthropology reminds us that these powers are not just the essence of femininity. Low and Tremayne argue that the task of creating wholeness is more likely to be accomplished if we do not subscribe to the idea of a special women's relationship to the earth, but instead promote equal responsibility for men and women in sustainable development processes (16).

[36] Western cultures defined and developed dualisms between soul and body, spirit and nature, male and female, and what is sacred and what is profane. Anthropology reminds us that these are cultural constructions. Through the transformation of ideas about creative power and nature, humans gradually withdrew from participating with nature to opposition against nature (Baring and Cashford: 661). Humanity becomes more and more independent of nature as it gains power to shape and order the natural world, reinforcing oppositions between spirit and nature, life and death, male and female, good and evil (662). These powerful cultural codes make it difficult to comprehend the world as a whole and humanity as living in mutual interdependence with all other life forms (662-63). Thinking in terms of dualisms and assuming that evil is an intrinsic force in the universe (667-68) allows us to blame males or females for what goes wrong with the environment (667-688). We cannot think about unity unless we expand our consciousness and experience to make it possible (665). Baring and Cashford assert that both feminine and masculine modes of consciousness are available to both men and women (284). Certainly there are examples of gender complementarity in most religions.

[37] But opposing principles and polarized opposites are also often present in even modern Christian religious imaginations. Cultural anthropology and comparative literature studies help us look within our own culture to see what writers and artists have said about our cultural constructions and reconstructions of gendered oppositions and oppositions between nature and culture. Willa Cather's work is instructive as she advocated for gendered wholeness and oneness with nature (Donovan: 97). Her work asserts that neither is complete without the other. The project of creating holism is complex, requiring not just the imagination of artists and critical cultural theory, but also the practical participation of integration. According to Baring and Cashford, integrated wholes must incorporate ambiguity and ambivalence (675). The ability to think about complexity and to describe it

requires a flexible, inclusive, and imaginative consciousness of participation at the level of lived lives (676). In other words, there is no one template for all times and all places. We have to work at it within our personal circumstances.

[38] If we will begin the task, the work of poets, writers, artists, and scholars can help us examine our mythological, religious, and cultural inheritance and help us disengage ourselves from our fragmented consciousness. Their work invites us to engage our imaginations toward constructing conceptual systems that develop partnerships between males and females as well as with culture and nature. While Low and Tremayne argue that ideological barriers in spiritual traditions restrict the discovery and nurturing of an environmental ethic and gendered justice, I hold out more hope. The resources are present in most religious traditions, including Christianity. They are also present in ancient myths. Baring and Cashford suggest that new visions of harmony and unity will necessarily draw on old images (663). Perhaps re-examining Persephone and Susannah in the garden in the twenty-first century is a good start.

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