

THE RAPE OF MOTHER EARTH
IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY:
AN ECOFEMINIST INTERPRETATION

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Through ecocritical and ecofeminist theory, this paper describes how and why the earth and women are closely associated in many, if not all, cultures. The specific example of seventeenth century English poetry is used to demonstrate how women are associated with the land in a period of colonisation and imperial expansion. The poetry of John Donne and John Milton attempts to justify both the domination of women and of the land by men, whether it be done by lovers, colonists, or theologians. The poetry of Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish, on the other hand, reveals how women were aware of the way both they and the land were downgraded, and as a consequence they identify closely with the earth's sufferings.

KEY WORDS: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, English poetry, Behn, Cavendish, Donne, Milton.

O Earth, mother of all life!
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (1971: 23)

The rise of ecocriticism, or ecological criticism, has, in recent years, allowed literary texts to be studied and interpreted in important new ways. Together with postcolonial and feminist critical theories, ecocriticism reveals how representations of the land in a variety of genres and from all periods are heavily loaded with ideological assumptions. The close association of many feminist and ecological issues has led to ecofeminism, a term which embraces not only literary and cultural theory, but also political activism. Ecofeminism has shown how both women and the land are exploited by patriarchal societies and institutions, and the purpose of this paper is to reveal how this is manifested, specifically, in seventeenth century English poetry; and how men and women poets of the period differ quite distinctly in the way they represent the earth in their work.

The earth as mother is a universal metaphor. According to Ninian Smart, "there are powerful connections with the idea of the supreme Female, with the earth as being our Mother, with fertility, with motherly love, with falling in love. A devotee could see the Goddess under so many disguises, as provider of food, of great creatrix of the world." Smart is referring here to the "creative power or sakti of the Ultimate" (1989: 93), whose origins stretch back 5,000 years to the Indus Valley civilization. Even the Bible, which steadfastly represents the creator in masculine terms (in common with Ancient Near

East religions in general [Smart 1989: 195–213]) occasionally crosses gender, as the following passage from the Apocrypha demonstrates: “For ask the earth, and she shall tell thee, that it is she which ought to mourn for the fall of so many that grow upon her. For out of her came all at the first, and out of her shall all others come. . .” (2 Esdras 10: 9–10).

However, the earth as mother is part of a wider perception of nature as feminine. According to Kate Soper:

The association of femininity with naturalness 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 universal—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.” 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. (2000: 139)

Traditional perceptions of woman, then, are quite different from perceptions of man; as Vera Norwood succinctly puts it, “woman is to man as nature is to culture” (Norwood 324). Culture is generally valued more highly than nature, with the inevitable implication that men are valued more highly than women. Yet the premisses behind this are scarcely logical, relying as they do upon a circular argument whereby women are inferior to men because they are closer to nature, and nature is inferior to culture because it is feminine. As Kate Soper explains: “If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has been equally perpetuated through its representation as ‘female’” (2000: 141).

The circular arguments which jointly downgrade women and nature, and which served to justify the domination of both are common in seventeenth century English poetry. John Donne, in his well-known poem “Elegie XIX: To his Mistris Going to Bed,” which may have been written in the final years of the sixteenth century (“[p]robably most of the elegies and the five satires were written in the 1590s” [Guibbory 1999: 126]), makes the colonization of the woman’s body explicit:

Licence my roving hands, and let them goe
 Behind, before, above, between, below.
 Oh my America, my new found lande,
 My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man’d,
 My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,
 How blest am I in this discovering thee.
 To enter in these bonds is to be free,
 Then where my hand is set my seal shall be. (1971: 107; 25–32)

In this poem the narrator's voice unambiguously describes the *Mistris* as *lande* while the male lover is a *man*. Land, here, is seen in passive terms, while the man is active; indeed it is no coincidence that it is the male narrator who speaks, while the *mistris* remains silent. The metaphor of woman as land is taken further by Donne when he specifically refers to her as *America* and *new found lande*. The English had been colonising North America from the sixteenth century, and Newfoundland was formally taken into the possession of England in 1583 (Ashley 1962: 215; Woodcock 1988: 85), which, if it is true that the poem was written towards the end of the sixteenth century, may be why Donne refers so precisely to this colony in particular. The right to explore and exploit colonies was granted to trading companies (often a polite term for privateers) by the Crown in the form of "a system of licences" (Bindoff 1967: 286), which gave the holder a monopoly over such possessions. The request that the lover's *roving hands* be licenced in the poem is a reference to this practice, as well as a further confirmation of the *mistris*'s status as colonised land. The man, in this part of the poem is not just a lover, either. He is king, and she is his *kingdome* over which he has a monopoly, as the phrase *with one man man'd* makes clear. The purpose of colonies is also made quite clear: they are to be exploited, as the looting of New World mineral wealth by the Spanish Empire in this period amply demonstrates. The *mistris* then, is his *myne of precious stones*, and when this image is applied to the woman's body, with its implication of sexual exploitation, or even violation, the disturbing and misogynistic menace of Donne's conceit is revealed.

We see in "Elegie XIX: To his Mistris Going to Bed" what Deborah Slicer refers to as "the grip of the male gaze on the land and on the women's bodies" (Slicer 1998: 65). In another poem by Donne, "The Sun Rising," it is the sun ("a Renaissance emblem of sovereignty" Brown 1988: 27–28) which gazes upon both the mistress and the land—"th'Indias of spice and mine"—while the man remains human and, significantly, in control:

Look, and tomorrow late tell me,
Whether both th'Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftest them, or lie with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, all here in one bed lay.

She's all state, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us. (1971: 11; 16–23)

Not only do we return to the image of the woman as colonized land, but the reference to mining again emphasises her value as a commodity. She is both the East Indies of spice, and the West Indies of mineral wealth, while the man is *all princes*.

Earlier interpretations of "The Sun Rising" prefer to see the poem as a hymn of praise to the beauty of the beloved. "Its true subject is the lady," argue Dyson and Lovelock, "its true emotion love. Every insult to the sun is a compliment to the mistress, every assertion of the sun's weakness attests her power" (1973: 185). Such a view is hard to reconcile with a portrayal of the lady as a plot of colonised and exploited land, especially when seen alongside such misogynistic poems as "Elegie VIII: The Comparison" which uses similar imagery. Elegie VIII purports to compare the I-persona's mistress to another's, describing

the latter in some of the most unpleasantly misogynistic language ever written. We are told, for example, that her vagina is “like to that Aetna/Where round about the grasse is burnt away.” The poet’s final insult, revealing a predictable fear of female sexuality, compares her indecently enthusiastic love-making to the earth being torn up by the plough, observing: “Is not your last act harsh, and violent,/As when a Plough a stony ground doth rent?” (Donne 1971: 82; 47–48).

Milton, meanwhile, returns us, in *Paradise Lost*, to the image of mining. In book 1 the fallen angels excavate materials for the construction of their infernal palace:

. . . Or cast a rampart. Mammon led them on . . .
 . . . In vision beatific. By him first
 Men also, and by his suggestion taught,
 Ransack’d the centre, and with impious hands
 Rifl’d the bowels of their mother Earth
 For treasures better hid. Soon had his crew
 Op’n’d into the hill a spacious wound
 And digg’d out ribs of gold. (Milton 1952: 22–23; 1: 678–90)

Milton, here, seems to be unambiguously condemning the fallen angels for their violation of the earth. Firstly, the treasures uncovered for the construction of the palace would have been *better hid*, but not only because of the immediate purpose to which they will be put. There is a sense in these lines that a general point is being made; that the search for and accumulation of material possessions is sinful. Milton is, of course, attacking the pomp and splendour of the Catholic Church, and of Rome in particular, whose riches and architectural glories were anathema to Puritanism. Milton’s obsession with such ostentation can be seen again in another of his longer poetic works, *Samson Agonistes*, in which the protagonist brings down the “spacious Theatre” (Milton 1955: 105) upon the heads of the idolatrous Philistines, and in doing so kills himself along with his enemies. Both Samson’s and Adam’s downfall’s are, according to Milton, unquestionably the fault of women, yet in the passage quoted above it is “Men” whose “impious hands/Rifl’d the bowels of their mother Earth.” Such an assault, unmistakably Oedipal to modern ears, turns the creation story upside down. Eve, both Christianity’s and Milton’s ultimate culprit, was made from one of Adam’s ribs (Genesis 2: 22); as St Paul says, “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man” (1 Corinthians 11: 8). Yet here, in book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, it is precisely “ribs of gold” which are dug out of the earth, causing “a spacious wound.” The fallen angels’ creation, the infernal palace, is made out of the ribs of *mother Earth* in an inversion of the Genesis creation story.

It seems extraordinary that Milton, who sees so clearly that the violation of the earth was a violation of the Mother, can then place the blame for the Fall of Man squarely on Eve, the mother of humankind. In book 9 we learn that Adam “scrupl’d not to eat/Against his better knowledge, not deceav’d,/But fondly overcome with Femal charm” (Milton 1952: 207). In other words, Adam eats the apple out of nobility and love. But Eve does not. However, it is surely unfair to blame her when she is so clearly the victim of a vast patriarchal conspiracy involving the traditionally masculine figures of God, the Serpent/Devil, and of Adam himself: women may be weak, but it was God who made them so. With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to expect that Adam protect her from the superior masculine reasoning of the serpent, and this is, in fact, made clear in the poem. We are told

how Adam tries to persuade Eve of the dangers of wandering off (9: 251–375), and later, with the damage already done, Eve blames Adam for letting her do so (9: 1143–61). We are also told that the serpent is anxious not to meet Adam “[w]hose higher intellectual” (1952: 194) he would prefer to avoid. Milton’s depiction of Eve’s guilt and Adam’s nobility, which is firmly based on both a Christian tradition of misogyny, and Milton’s own underscoring of that tradition, seems to contradict his portrayal of mother Earth as victim of men’s *impious hands*. To return to the words of Kate Soper: “If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has been equally perpetuated through its representation as ‘female’” (2000: 141). By representing the earth as female, Milton downgrades nature: it is passive, helpless to hold back the wicked hands of men and fallen angels alike. Women such as Dalila and Eve, who are far less noble or spiritual than Samson and Adam, their male counterparts, are closer to nature, which makes them both more vulnerable, but also more wicked: they, like the land, need to be both protected and controlled.

Milton, we know, was interested in Platonism and neoplatonism, and his privileging of the spiritual world over the material world is to be expected. Sarah Hutton comments that: “[o]ne of the most significant ways in which the receiving culture of the Renaissance transformed the classical past was in the accommodation of pagan philosophy with the requirements of Christianity: the most striking example of reinvention of this kind is the transformation of Plato into a proto-Christian sage, the divine Plato, the seer of the soul most famously celebrated in Milton’s ‘Il Penseroso’” (2003: 45). Milton, then, was not only familiar with Platonism, but was actively transforming it for his own purposes, one of which seems to have been the perpetuation of the European/Christian tradition of misogyny. It is the fallen Adam, the neo-Platonist, who asks

How shall I behold the face
Henceforth of God or Angel, earst with joy
And rapture so oft beheld? Those heav’nly shapes
Will dazzle now this earthly, with their blaze
Insufferably bright. . . . (Milton 1952: 209; 9: 1080–84)

This contrasts sharply with Eve’s behaviour when eating the fruit and who, unlike Adam, revels in the sensuality of the act:

. . . for Eve
Intent now wholly on her taste, naught else
Regarded, such delight till then, as seemed,
In fruit she never tasted, whether true
Or fansied so, through expectation high
Of knowledg [sic], nor was God-head from her thought.
Greedily she ingorg’d without restraint. . . .
(Milton 1952: 202; 9: 785–91)

Eve wallows in her wicked sensuality, while Adam bewails the loss of a higher spirituality.

Milton’s downgrading of women is intimately linked to his downgrading of nature, and, despite his criticism of the fallen angels’ despoliation of mother Earth, with his support for the colonisation and exploitation of the land. The capture of Jamaica in 1654,

“the first overseas possession deliberately siezed by an English government” (Ashley 1965: 218), makes it clear that colonisation was by no means unacceptable to Cromwell and his government, of which Milton formed an influential part. Jamaica had previously been under the control of the Spanish, which seems to suggest that Milton’s objection to the violation of mother Earth is based largely on who is doing it. Indeed, Milton’s nephew, John Philips, published in 1656 an account of the Spaniards’ wickedness in the Caribbean entitled *The Tears of the Indians: Being an Historical and true Account of the Cruel Massacres and Slaughters of above twenty Millions of innocent People* (Hill 1975: 157). If the Spanish or the fallen angels (who are much the same thing from Milton’s point of view) are engaged in exploiting the land, then it is undoubtedly an act of wickedness; but if God’s chosen people decide to indulge in a little colonisation themselves, then that is quite different. The fallen angels were ransacking mother Earth to build themselves a palace in the likeness of Rome and ancient Egypt, just as the Spanish were using their ill-gotten wealth to build an empire dedicated to glory of the Anti-Christ. There is no contradiction in Milton’s apparent defence of mother Earth and his consistent downgrading of women. Both women and the land must be controlled not least for fear they fall into the wrong hands.

Women poets, however, as is to be expected, are far less likely to downgrade nature. As I discuss in my article “When ploughs destroy’d the green” (Phillips 2002), Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn describe how the earth, which once gave freely of her bounty, now groans beneath the tyranny of husbandry and mining. The former, in “Earth’s Complaint” gives voice to mother nature’s grievances:

O Nature, Nature! Hearken to my Cry,
 I’m Wounded sore, but yet I cannot Dye;
 My Children which I from my Womb did bear,
 Do dig my Sides, and all my Bowels tear,
 They Plow deep Furrows in my very Face,
 From Torment I have neither time nor place;
 No other Element is so abus’d,
 Or by Mankind so Cruelly is us’d. (Cavendish 1994; 1–8)

In these extraordinarily heartfelt lines, so similar in some ways to Milton’s description of the fallen angels’ excavations, Cavendish implicitly identifies with the earth by allowing her to speak for herself. Milton’s lines, however, delivered by a narrator (arguably the poet himself, since it is far from unreasonable to identify him with the *I* of the poem’s invocation) serve to distance the reader from the sufferings of the earth. Notice that the earth is seen as distinct from nature. This is important to the poem, which continues:

Man cannot reach the Skys to Plow and Sow,
 Nor can they Set or make the Stars to grow,
 But they are still as Nature did them Plant,
 Neither Maturity nor Growth they want;
 They never Dye, nor do they yield their place
 To younger Stars, but still run their own Race:
 The Sun doth never Groan, young Suns to bear,
 For he himself is his own Son and Heir;

He in the Centre sits just like a King,
Round him the Planets are as in a Ring;
The largest Orbs over his Head turn slow,
And underneath the swiftest Planets go;
All several Planets several Measures take,
And with their Motions do sweet Musick make:
Thus all the Planets round about him move,
And he returns them Light for their kind Love.

(Cavendish 1994; 9–24)

Nature is the sum of all existing things; it is the universe, or at least the solar system. Fortunately for the planets, they cannot be reached by man, and are therefore invulnerable to attack from the farmer and his destructive implements. As a consequence the heavenly bodies live in harmony, they make music, and the love shown by the orbiting planets to the sun is returned in the form of light. In another poem, “A Discourse of Man’s Pride, or seeming Prerogative,” man’s ability to subdue nature is apparently celebrated:

He can Divide, and doth Asunder take
All Nature’s Works, what ever she doth make;
Can take the Breadth, Depth, Length, & Height of things,
And know the Virtue of each Plant that Springs;
Make Creatures all Submit unto his will,
And Live by Fame, though Death his Body Kill:
What else, but Man, can Nature imitate,
With th’Pen and Pencil can new Worlds create?
There’s none like Man; for like the Gods is he;
Then let the World his Slave and Vassall be.

(Cavendish 1994; 21–30)

This poem, published in 1664, neatly describes the colonial process. North America in particular, had been explored, measured and divided up by European cartographers, traders and settlers since the sixteenth century. Taking “the Breadth, Depth, Length, & Height of things” was precisely what they did, while man’s ability to create new worlds with pen and pencil as if he were one of the gods evokes other echoes of the Elizabethan age. Sidney, in “The Defence of Poesy” claimed that the poet “lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature . . . Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver golden” (Sidney 1991: 216). Yet Cavendish’s conclusion, unlike Sidney’s upbeat celebration of man’s powers, is baleful: “Then let the World his Slave and Vassall be,” she coldly decrees, though her words are, after all, little different from God’s injunction to Adam and Eve to “subdue [the earth]: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1: 28). The title of the poem, however, questions man’s prerogative over nature’s works. It is *seeming*, not real. It is his pride which leads him to believe in his ascendancy over creation and, shockingly for the seventeenth century, in his assumption of parity with the gods themselves. Sidney was careful to add

a rider to his apparent apotheosis of the poet: “Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man’s wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature” (Sidney 1991: 217) he reminds us. Cavendish makes no such justification, and we are left with an image of man, blasphemous in his self-esteem, reflecting not the Fall of Man through disobedience but something far worse, the fall of Lucifer through pride.

Aphra Behn, in common with Margaret Cavendish and Milton, also sees man’s delvings into mother earth as a violation, and affirms that in the golden age:

The stubborn plough had then,
Made no rude rapes upon the virgin Earth,
Who yielded of her own accord her plentious birth,
Without the aids of men;
As if within her teeming womb,
All nature, and all sexes lay,
Whence new creations every day
Into the happy world did come. . . .
(“The Golden Age” 32–38; Behn 1993: 2)

A wish for the return of a mythical golden age may seem naïve but it was a traditional means by which authors had, since classical times, criticised the government and society at large, particularly during times of change. Behn, a woman of “fierce royalist loyalties” (Hicks 1993: viii) was strongly opposed to “the mercantile ethos that reduced politics and sex to cash relations, making the crown an expensive ornament and the body a financial token” (Todd 1992: xxv). Although the return of Charles II in 1660 had revived Behn’s hopes, “the growing influence of the city and newly labelled commercial Whigs marked the end of the modified restored golden age of the Restoration” (Todd 1992: xxv). Such historicist interpretations of Behn’s work, valid though they are, do not take into account the poet’s identification of the earth as feminine. A closer examination of the poem will show us how, in the golden age, people lived in peace with feminine nature, and then why this peace came to an end:

Till then ambition was not known,
That poison to content, bane to repose;
Each swain was lord o’er his own will alone,
His innocence religion was, and laws.
Nor needed any troublesome defence
Against his neighbours insolence.
Flocks, herds, and every necessary good
Which bounteous nature had designed for food,
Whose kind increase o’er-spread the meads and plains,
Was then a common sacrifice to all th’agreeing swains.

Right and property were words since made,
When power taught mankind to invade:
When pride and avarice became a trade;
Carried on by discord, noise and wars,

For which they bartered wounds and scars;
And to enhance the merchandise, miscalled it, Fame,
And rapes, invasions, tyrannies,
Was gaining of a glorious name
(“The Golden Age” 56–72; Behn 1993: 2–3)

The problem lies in the ownership of land by men, and the consequences of this: war, rape and tyranny. It is only with the absence of the “male institutions of power, from kingship, religion and property to honour and shame” (Todd 2000: 205) that a true golden age can return. Yet it is not only in the ownership of land that oppression flourishes; of the 198 lines which comprise the poem, the final 118 are devoted to the question of female honour. In lines 117–18 the poet cries: “Oh cursed Honour! Thou who first didst damn,/A woman to the sin of shame” and then goes on to show how men, too, are injured by honour’s oppression since control of women’s sexual freedom must necessarily imply a restriction on their own. Female honour, as Aphra Behn was only too aware, is simply a means of control, usually patriarchal, over the female body. In the golden age men and women were free to love as they wished: “The nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain;/ Denied their joys, or gave the lover pain” (97–98), and Aphra Behn makes it clear that it is not just the nymph who was not denied her joys, but “the sighing burning swain” (102) too. But, just as ownership of the land leads to restrictions, commerce and greed, so honour binds and degrades what it claims to protect:

And all the charming’st part of beauty hid;
Soft looks, consenting wishes, all denied.
It gathers up the flowing hair,
That loosely played with wanton air.
The envious net, and stinted order hold,
The lovely curls of jet and shining gold;
No more neglected on the shoulders hurled:
Now dressed to tempt, not gratify the world:
Thou, miser Honour, hord’st the sacred store,
And starv’st thy self to keep the votaries poor.
(“The Golden Age” 128–37; Behn 1993: 5)

The woman’s body, like the land, has become a commodity. Aphra Behn is quite unambiguous: honour is simply a means of putting a price on a woman, and as such, has no place in the golden age where everything is free for the taking. Its place is in the market, or in the king’s palace, which is the same thing:

Be gone, and make thy famed resort
To princes palaces;
Go deal and chaffer in the trading court,
That busy market for fantastic things;
Of the illustrious and the great;
Go break the politicians sleep,
Disturb the gay ambitious fool,
That longs for sceptres, crowns and rule,
Which not his title, nor his wit can keep;

But let the humble honest swain go on,
 In the blest paths of the first rate of man.
 (“The Golden Age” 152–63; Behn 1993: 5)

Both Behn and Cavendish are well known for their defence of women: “Aphra Behn was a feminist,” (2000: 7) claims her biographer Janet Todd, leaving little room for argument, while Cavendish believed, according to her biographer Katie Whitaker, that “women shared men’s rational souls, and were inferior only by nurture, not nature” (2003: 192). The two poets, then, were consciously aware of, and spoke out against, the downgrading and exploitation of both the land and of women, recognising that their domination by male institutions was connected.

Ecofeminism provides a theoretical framework for explaining why women viewed the exploitation of the land so differently from men. Carolyn Merchant, in *Earthcare*, argues that renewed interest in Platonism during the Renaissance led to the possibility of reversing the Biblical Fall of Man and the subsequent loss of Eden. “Platonism,” she suggests, “provided paradigmatic ideals (such as that of the Garden of Eden) through which to interpret the earthly signs and signatures leading to recovery” (Merchant 1995: 31). This possibility of recovering Eden depended on several factors associated with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. Firstly the “Baconian–Cartesian–Newtonian project is premised on the power of technology to subdue and dominate nature” (Merchant 1995: 31), a power which increased enormously as scientific, technological and industrial developments accelerated over the following centuries. She goes on to argue that “capitalism is a movement from desert back to garden through the transformation of undeveloped nature into a state of civility and order” (1995: 32). If we add to this mixture the allied doctrine of salvation—recovery, in other words—through hard work, as preached by Calvinism in particular, and the sudden availability of vast tracts of apparently undeveloped nature, particularly in the Americas, then all the ingredients are there for an easily justifiable colonisation and exploitation of the “New World.” In the first tract he ever published, “Of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England and the Causes that hitherto have hindered it,” in 1641, Milton wrote that “the savage deserts of America” would provide a refuge for those “faithful and freeborn Englishmen, and good Christians, [who] have been constrained to forsake their fair home, their friends and kindred” (Parker 1991: 197). One wonders how Milton expected these English refugees to farm, to build and to make tools if not through some kind of rifling and ransacking of mother Earth.

Women, meanwhile, are unable to contribute to the recovery project, indeed, ought not to interfere, since it was Eve which brought about the Fall in the first place. Having been told by God that “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3: 19) “[f]allen Adam becomes the inventor of the tools and technologies that will restore the garden” (Merchant 1995: 32) while Eve “becomes the nature that must be tamed into submission” (Merchant 1995: 32). The consequences of this recovery project have become increasingly evident. As ecofeminists such as Ynestra King, quoted by Gaard and Murphy, argue: “[the] building of Western industrial civilisation in opposition to nature interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subjugation of women, because women are believed to be closer to nature” (Gaard and Murphy 1983: 3). The world is now deeply divided between rich and poor, largely as a result of European colonialism, while gender discrimination remains a global phenomenon. But, comment Gaard and Murphy, “ecofeminism is based not only

on the recognition of connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies. It is also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Gaard and Murphy 1998: 3).

It is extraordinary how women such as Aphra Behn, the author, let us not forget, of *Oroonoko*, the first anti-slave narrative in the English language, and Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, recognised and repudiated the "interconnections of forms of oppression" (Gaard and Murphy 1998: 3) so early on in the process, while men such as Donne and Milton actively connived in it. In Aphra Behn's "The Golden Age"

the snakes securely dwelt,
Not doing harm, nor harm from others felt;
With whom the nymphs did innocently play,
No spiteful venom in the wantons lay;
But to the touch were soft, and to the sight were gay.
(*"The Golden Age"* 44–48; Behn 1993: 2)

As Malcolm Hicks comments: "Her Golden Age is not just prelapsarian, but opposed to the prospect of the loss of Paradise specifically and severely established in patriarchal, Puritanical Old Testament teaching. The legacy of Eve's disobedience has been the debasement of womankind. By contrast, Behn's first women are conspicuously and blissfully unimplicated in the severities of Puritan Old Testament reprimand" (Hicks 1993: XIII). How different Behn's Eden is from Milton's, a place of prohibition, and dangerous serpents. And how different too, these women's perceptions of the recovery project.

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