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Catherine M. Roach. *Mother / Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003. 221 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21562-8; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34178-5.

Reviewed by Marion W. Copeland (Center for Animals and Public Policy, Tufts School of Veterinary Science)
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The Power of Story

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In the by now classic novel *Ishmael*, Daniel Quinn's wise gorilla teacher tells his pupil that until he understands his culture's story, he will remain its captive.[1] Like Ishmael, Catherine Roach believes we cannot "celebrate connection" until we first "plumb the reality of our *dis*connections" (p. 138) and those realities are to be found embedded in our culture story. Quinn reexamines and reinterprets Biblical stories; Roach instead turns to the texts of our consumer culture, "television commercials, print advertising, public service announcements and slogans created by both business and environmental groups" (p. 10). Her examination of the conflicting images of nature (represented by the slash in her title) found in these source stories reveals three relevant stereotypes: Good Mother, Bad Mother, and Hurt Mother.

All three images, she finds, exploit our unresolved feelings about our human mothers which, at least according to Freudian theory, lie at the roots of our cultural as well as our personal neuroses and psychoses. Later analysts add to mother's guilt, blaming her also for our cultural and personal infantile self-absorption. Since each image reflects social and political as well as psychological attitudes, it is appropriate that Roach's interpretation uses the insights not only of her own field–which she describes as "theological anthropology"–but also of psychology and gender studies.

Roach's answer is *not* to decide between the benevolent mother and nature "red in tooth and claw," the two sides of the split, and thereby retain the dualism implicit in the choice. For instance, she explores the efforts of feminists to supplant Mother Nature with the Mother Goddess or Nature Goddess, and to rewrite the culture story in that light. While she credits the resulting narratives with "expand[ing] the imagination to new ways of thinking and living," helpful in the effort to disarm the patriarchy's war against Nature, she feels time has proven that these revised images serve only to reinforce another dualism, the gender split.

Much the same problem arises from the media's own effort to correct the Bad/Good disconnect with a third alternative, the Hurt Mother. That image, too, easily allows us to treat nature like an aged parent in need of our support and benevolence, reinforcing our sense of the centrality of self. Like the entire Western Culture story, all three images also retain the imaginative focus on the human (Are there other kinds of mother?) rather than encouraging us to widen ourselves into what Roach calls the "connective self–open to the world and realizing its relation to all other life" (p. 46). Quinn's *Ishmael* tries to lead its audience's imagination beyond this same myopia by making Ishmael a gorilla. Becoming Ishmael's student means, despite his grasp of human story and history, taking a nonhuman perspective on the human culture story.

In point of fact, although Roach's goals and assumptions are much like Quinn's, her particular target is dualism itself, our cultural predisposition for simplifying reality by painting it as either good or bad, black or white, friend or foe. Imagining Nature as either/or makes it impossible for us to accept, as other cultures may, that in fact nature is a Yin/Yang complex of forces. Simplifying those forces, much as Sarah Hrdy recently observed we have simplified the maternal, leads to the false expectations (imaginings) and assumptions that tend to metamorphose the Good Mother into the Bad.[2]

As early as 1936, psychoanalyst Melanie Klein theorized that our cultural and personal ambivalence about "mother" actually arose from the associations between mother (indeed, women) and nature that are so deeply embedded in our personal and cultural stories. Roach simply turns the equation around, showing that attitudes toward "mother" have had equally significant effects on our attitudes toward nature. Far better, she writes, "to ...

see earth as earth," freeing the planet from both the negative and positive lights shed by the association with the human "mother" and freeing us from the role of children capable only of childish thinking (dualism) and its equivalent behavior (selfishness, revenge, and dominance).

Perhaps Roach's most important contribution here is her recognition that new images of nature can neither be chosen nor imposed by our will. Nor can old images be banished at will as we once naively hoped to banish racist or sexist or speciesist language. Our culture story, like nature itself, is not, according to Roach, within our control. (Is it mere coincidence that Quinn refers to it as "Mother Culture"?). Such "images," she writes, seem to choose us–or even to possess us. They hold sway from deep recesses of personal and cultural fantasy. We are influenced unwittingly, even unwillingly, by these ingrained and compelling patterns. Even when we try to use the patterns deliberately for an end of environmental good, the outcome can surprise us. We may think we have adopted inspirational notions of nature as the Good or Hurt Mother, but suddenly the Bad Mother catches us unaware with the ferocity of her presence (p. 164).

What Roach suggests we can do consciously, however, is to recognize the power of the messages sent by our consumer culture and "subject [such messages] to continual scrutiny," hoping in time to "alter our imaginations and … the way we live." Once convinced of the power of story, Roach concludes, "We need to learn to read and critique and to responsibly use such imagery" and, as Quinn's Ishmael also counseled–too often to deaf ears–teach others to do the same (p. 172).

Notes

[1]. Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

[2]. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

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