

Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture

By Carolyn Merchant

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Reviewed by Tara Roeder

Carolyn Merchant, professor of Environmental History, Philosophy and Ethics at the University of California, Berkeley, is one of the founders of the "radical ecology" movement and author of the now classic *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. In her most recent book, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, Merchant maintains that for centuries Western culture has been dominated by a "recovery narrative" in which men have seen themselves as "heroes" who, in one of two plots, either re-discover or re-establish the Garden of Eden on earth. Merchant compellingly argues that events such as the creation of medieval monasteries, the construction of the royal gardens at Versailles, the "discovery" and subsequent colonization of North America, the 19th century idea of "manifest destiny," and recent attempts to "re-create" Eden through suburbs, malls, and genetically altered food have all taken place within the framework of this particular narrative. She also discusses another, counter-narrative, embraced, she claims, by some feminists, environmentalists, and post-colonialists, in which the earth is seen as steadily declining, throughout history, from an original, pristine Eden to a degraded, phallogentric state. In the first narrative, woman, as Eve, is the cause of an abrupt fall from paradise, and scientific progress offers men a means by which to re-attain a paradisiacal garden state in which nature can be controlled. In the second, man is the cause of a much longer and more gradual fall from an Edenic, matriarchal culture in which nature and goddesses alike were revered. Merchant attempts to chronologically trace the development of these major ecological narratives while ultimately criticizing both, desiring to institute in their place a new narrative, one not based on the fall and recovery of Eden, in which a "partnership" ethic between humanity and "nature" plays a paramount role.

Merchant addresses huge periods of time spanning a number of cultures and delves into a variety of interdisciplinary concerns, referencing gender issues, the development of western science, and a number of ways in which the "recovery narrative" has been internally complicated at different points in history. Although impressive in scope, this broad focus causes parts of the text to appear overly simplified, and at times vague. The most interesting sections are Merchant's well-researched historical narratives; her discussion of the treatment of Native Americans by Euroamericans throughout American history is especially well-documented and strong. While some of her critiques of a Euroamerican desire to dominate and exploit nature seem kind of obvious, her critiques of some feminist and other "postmodern" counter-narratives are more incisive, and she happily avoids lapsing into essentialism or gendering the earth as "female," as do many imperialist explorers and eco-feminists alike. Her account of complexity theory, which stresses the element of chance in complex, adaptive, open systems, is coherent and logical. Her view of chaos theory, which she explicitly links to "postmodern" stories of randomness, as the final word about predictability, however, might be seen as partial by those (like string theorists) who actively seek to re-legitimate stories of order.

Although the ideas about partnership Merchant expresses in her concluding chapters are, surprisingly, not as "radical" as one might expect while scanning the reviews on the back cover, most of them come across as tremendously sensible and plausible. She provides examples of "partnerships" that have formed throughout America between large corporations, environmental groups, and public agencies, among others, to both foster human to human interaction and help "undo" some of the damage humans have inflicted on "nature." The language Merchant uses to describe such partnerships is surprising, however; although she is expressly critical of anthropocentrism, enlightenment thinking, and binary opposition throughout the text, Merchant's solution is repeatedly set up in terms of a "couple" in which there are two partners: "humanity" and "nature." This particular model seems oddly out of place in a project such as Merchant's, unintentionally reiterating the view of nature as "other" that Merchant criticizes in the recovery narratives by linguistically structuring it as "humanity's" dualistic and singular counterpart. It would be interesting to see what the effect would have been if, instead of using a "couple" narrative, Merchant had chosen one in which the focus was on billions of ecological "players."

Likewise, for someone who consistently comes across as pretty down on the enlightenment, the part of the text where Merchant *does* seem to acknowledge a diversity of "voices," (couched, on page 228, in terms of creating a place where "all the parties and their representatives must sit as partners at the same table"), sounds awfully like an extension of enlightenment thinking, a sort of Habermasian parliament in which terms like "consensus" still play a big role, although the subjects "consenting" in this case include "mountain lions" and "wetlands" (229).

Luckily, however, Merchant doesn't rely on abstract concepts and theories to prove her points; her illustrations of possibilities for a partnership ethic are clear and compelling. While occasionally vague (and peppered with words like "cooperation" and "equality") Merchant's language is refreshingly non-gendered, and her applied examples help support what might otherwise risk being semi-flaky (although occasionally pretty) prose. *Reinventing Eden*, while perhaps not as wildly provocative as one might expect given Merchant's reputation in the field of radical ecology, is definitely worth reading for its compelling historical narratives, its astute discussions of gender, and its ultimately practical suggestions for developing sustainable relationships with the rest of our planet.