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Mary Daley, Gyn/Ecology
by Helena Reckitt

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[text accepted for publication]

There are books that sit unread on your shelves for years. They seem to belong to another time in your life, to reflect different interests, even a different you. Their presence is almost embarrassing. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* of 1978 is such a book for me. I read the Women's Press edition when I was an undergraduate studying English.¹ The male-dominated nature of the College, the curriculum, and the faculty left me searching for female allies and mentors. I didn't yet participate in the feminist movement, which, in any case, reached its peak when I was a child. But a largely all-girls education and a maternal-dominated household had given me a strong sense of female identity and agency. Encountering *Gyn/Ecology* was an unforgettable experience. It emboldened me; it opened my eyes; and it made me feel less alone.

Gyn/Ecology exposes the myths that have constrained women and the atrocities that have oppressed them throughout history, from witch-burning to female genital mutilation, foot-binding to suttee, Nazi eugenics to western gynacaecology (a term played on in the title). Moving beyond critique, it posits a new feminist culture grounded in female relationships and values. This in itself, Daly argues, is a return to an earlier matriarchal period, whose rediscovery enables women to unleash the Goddess within, or "female divinity, that is, our Selves."²

¹ The Women's Press edition appeared a year after US publication, in 1979. Although I first read the book in that edition the copy that I own, and that I refer to here, is the 1991 edition which included a new introduction.

² Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, London, Women's Press, 1991, p.111

Daly's righteous anger, accumulated scholarship, and visionary scope enthralled me. "Rage is not a stage," she wrote in her *New Intergalactic Introduction* to the 1991 edition. "It is transformative focusing Force that awakens transcendent E-motion. It is my broom, my Fire-breathing, winged mare. It is my spiraling staircase, leading me where I can find my own Kind, unbind my mind."³ Her book me allowed me to voice my previously inchoate frustration with gender roles and expectations, and my alienation from the subtly oppressive 'refinement' of an Oxford University education.

Defying mainstream feminist politics, Daly rejected sexual equality, arguing that women should govern men. Her unapologetic misandry was intoxicating. "An act of Dis-possession," she pronounced her book "absolutely Anti-androcrat, Amazingly Anti-male, Furiously and Finally Female."⁴ In a later interview she claimed that the earth required "decontamination," prophesying, approvingly, the drastic reduction of the male population.⁵

Beyond its polemical message, *Gyn/Ecology's* creative and irreverent style captivated me. Here was a new language for a new kind of woman, one that I might not live up to myself but which offered me an aspirational ego ideal. To expose language's sexist underpinnings Daly denatured words, slashed them in two, and returned them to their Latin roots. She coined terms to devise new concepts and to imagine new worlds.

Derision and erudition were in equal evidence. A sentence considering female submission to male spirituality contains the audacious passage: "forever pumping our own blood into the Heavenly Head, giving head to the Holy Host, losing our

³ Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology*, *ibid*, p.xxxiii

⁴ Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology*, *ibid*, p.29

⁵ Bridle, Susan, 'No Man's Land: An interview with Mary Daly,' *EnlightenNext Magazine*, Fall-Winter 1999, Accessed at www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j16/daly.asp?page=1, 15th April 2015

heads.”⁶ That Daly taught in a conservative Jesuit-run university, Boston College, is hard to believe.⁷

I found *Gyn/Ecology's* separatism its most liberating aspect. Trained to develop the conventional female traits of niceness, popularity and amenability, the prospect of turning against my cultural education was exhilarating. Daly once said, “I don't think about men. I really don't care about them.”⁸ By subjecting men to the rejections and denials they had historically meted out to women, she advocated a radical form of reverse discrimination. In the process she aimed to release suppressed female subjectivities and power.

There are lots of problems with Daly's book, which seem clear to me now, from its ahistoricism to its white ethnocentrism (the latter critiqued by Audre Lorde in an Open Letter written shortly after publication). Its transphobia and anti-gay male bias today feel horribly narrow and prescriptive. Daly's language games now strike me as annoyingly contrived, and her goddess imagery makes me wince.

But *Gyn/Ecology's* impact cannot be denied. Daly saw her work as a springboard, and that's how it affected me. It prompted me to pool my energy with other women in feminist activism around the miner's strike (“tampons for miner's wives”) and in the women's theatre company Medusa (one look from men and we turned them turned to stone). Above all Daly gave me a glimpse of what's possible when women don't seek male approval or validation: when sisters do it for themselves.

END

⁶ Daly, Mary, *Gyn/Ecology*, *ibid*, p.67

⁷ Daly's contentious tenure at Boston College, during which she was denied tenure (a decision that was subsequently overturned), began in 1967. In 1999 she was forced to resign after she refused to allow two male students to attend her women-only seminars, offering them one-on-one tuition instead.

⁸ Bridle, Susan, 'No Man's Land,' *ibid*