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Motherhood, Body and Science in Sylvia Plath's *Three Women*

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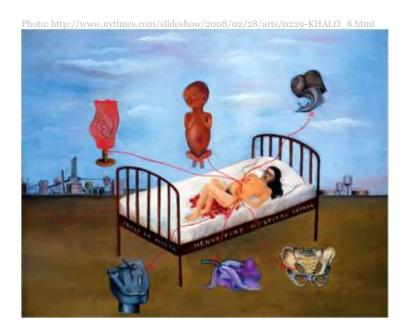
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—Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*

And here you come, with a cup of tea
Wreathed in steam.
The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.
You hand me two children, two roses.

—Sylvia Plath, "Kindness"

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RESUMO

O poema dramático *Três Mulheres*, escrito por Sylvia Plath em 1962, traz representadas as vozes de três mulheres grávidas, que passam por experiências diferentes em uma maternidade hospitalar. O objetivo deste trabalho é estudar as possíveis relações entre *Três Mulheres*, dualismo natureza/cultura e maternidade. Proponho que o poema apresenta um caráter (proto)ecofeminista, uma vez que conecta as mulheres a um imaginário natural, em oposição à ala hospitalar e ao conhecimento científico, tidos como masculinos. Também sugiro que a representação da maternidade no poema possibilita uma mediação entre natureza e cultura. Para isso, começo fazendo uma revisão crítica de pontos importantes já levantados sobre *Três Mulheres*, e, em seguida, uma revisão teórica do dualismo natureza/cultura, da apropriação de corpos femininos pelas tecnologias reprodutivas, e da maternidade, conforme discutida por algumas teóricas feministas. Por fim, apresento uma leitura aprofundada de *Três Mulheres*. Concluo que a oposição, presente no poema, entre as mulheres grávidas e a ala, tida como *locus* de poder masculino, pode reforçar, de alguma forma, os dualismos natureza/cultura, mente/corpo e sujeito/objeto, mas isso é feito com objetivos políticos, para criticar a ideologia do hospital. Quanto à representação maternal, minha conclusão é que *Três Mulheres* está além do dualismo natureza/cultura, pois a maternidade aparece como natural e social; como uma parte complexa tanto da natureza das mulheres quanto de suas vidas sociais.

Palavras-chave: Sylvia Plath—Crítica e interpretação. *Três Mulheres*. Maternidade. Corpo. Ciência.

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's dramatic poem *Three Women*, written in 1962, portrays the voices of three pregnant women, which undergo different experiences in a maternity ward. The aim of this work is to study the possible relations between *Three Women*, nature/culture dualism and motherhood. I propose that the poem has a (proto)ecofeminist disposition, since it connects women to natural imagery as opposed to the ward and to scientific knowledge, both portrayed as male. I also suggest that the poem's representation of motherhood projects the possibility of mediation between nature and culture. Therefore, I start with a critical revision of important points already brought up about *Three Women*, followed by a theoretical revision of nature/culture dualism, the appropriation of female bodies by reproductive technologies, and motherhood, as discussed by some feminist scholars. Finally, I present a close reading of *Three Women*. I conclude that the poem's opposition between the pregnant women and the ward, shown as a male locus of power, might somehow reinforce nature/culture, mind/body and subject/object dualisms, but this is done with political aims, in order to criticize the ideology of the hospital. Concerning its representation of motherhood, my conclusion is that *Three Women* is beyond nature/culture dualism, for maternity is displayed as both natural and social; as a complex part of women's nature, as well as of their social lives.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath—Criticism and interpretation. *Three Women*. Motherhood. Body. Science.

ABBREVIATIONS

BJ   Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

CP   Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

J   Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor, 2000).

LH   Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

Introduction

> We travel to our place in the world by the grace of others' words.
>
> —Kimberly Blaeser, "The Voices We Carry"

Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose have always intrigued me, even before I started the undergraduate course. She was unlike anything I had read before: a mixture of sharpness and deep feeling, of softness and abruptness. When I first thought about doing research at the university, there was no author more interesting to me. Time passed, and feminist scholars were among my favorite authors; most of them, I started reading while studying the bibliography on Plath's works. Three years have passed, and I am still interested in doing research on her poems. One that has always concerned me is the 1962 poem *Three Women: A Poem of Three Voices*, because of the way it makes reference to female experience and to female bodies. Now, with this work, I hope to contribute to the scholarship on Sylvia Plath, since the poem has not been as discussed as other of her writings. Moreover, I intend to bring out *Three Women* to discussion into the Brazilian context, where it has received very little attention.[1]

First of all, it is important to point out that motherhood is one of the most recurrent themes in both Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose. It is the center point of *Three Women*, and it is also treated in poems such as "Metaphors," "You're," "Morning Song," "Nick and the Candlestick," and "Child," among many others.[2] These poems do not present a single voice, a single vision of maternity; thus, critics generally say that Plath shows *ambivalence* towards motherhood.[3] In the 1963 *The*

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[1] One of the only critical texts on *Three Women* written in Brazil is Marina Della Valle's "Três Mulheres: Sylvia Plath e a Maternidade," published in 2007 as an introduction to Della Valle's Portuguese translation of Plath's dramatic poem, entitled *Três Mulheres: Um Poema Para Três Vozes*.

[2] These poems are dated 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1963, respectively. For the collection of her poetry, dated by Ted Hughes, see Plath, *The Collected Poems*.

[3] Leah Souffrant discusses maternal ambivalence by analyzing examples of what she calls "poetry of motherhood" (25-26). Among the poems that she discusses, is Plath's *Three Women*.

Bell Jar,[4] the only novel by Plath ever published, the theme is also explored, with a focus on childbirth. Esther Greenwood, the narrator-protagonist, and her then-boyfriend Buddy Willard, a medical student, go to a maternity ward to see a baby being born. During the process, Buddy assures Esther that the woman is under a drug that would make her forget the pain that she had, as if she were in a kind of sleep. About this, Esther comments: "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been" (*BJ* 66).[5] Esther then questions what she thought it would be like when her time to give birth came; she did not want to lose consciousness as happened to the mother that she had just observed: "For some reason the most important thing to me was actually seeing the baby come out of you yourself and making sure it was yours. I thought if you had to have all that pain anyway you might just as well stay awake" (*BJ* 67). Here we a have an evident critique of what it was to have a baby in a hospital in the United States in the 1950s. Doctors are not represented as easers of women's pains, but as putting them in a kind of numbness in which there is no consciousness; they end up being the protagonists of what should be a conscious and important—at least worth remembering—moment in a woman's life, in which she should have the main role.

If in *The Bell Jar* we have a glimpse of that criticism, clearly put forward in Plath's prose, in *Three Women* we have a more complex evaluation of a maternity ward. This work is developed in the form of a long dramatic poem for three voices, written for the radio. Differently from the novel's narrator, the I-speakers of the poem are not only observing other woman's birthing experience, they are the ones *experiencing* it. One of the poem's women eventually falls into a kind of numbness, but at least she is able to describe the darkness that takes her over:

> A power is growing on me, an old tenacity.
> I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,
> This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain.

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[4] Initially published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, *The Bell Jar* would only be published as written by Plath in England in 1966 and in the United States in 1971.

[5] According to Adrienne Rich, Esther's remarks were about nembutal, a form of anesthesia for labor of the early twentieth century: "Sodium amytal and nembutal were found to produce after-amnesia (while only partly blunting the pain)" (170).

> The air is thick. It is thick with this working.
>
> I am used. I am drummed into use.
>
> My eyes are squeezed by this blackness.
>
> I see nothing. (*CP* 180)[6]

Three Women is, over all, an *embodied* poem, in which body and emotion acquire a greater importance than in New Critical tradition in which Plath was writing.[7] Moreover, the dramatic form of intertwined monologues provides a larger spectrum in the play: each female persona experiences motherhood in a different way—even if they want to deny it completely. Several authors[8] have explored the possibilities of undergoing motherhood according to different factors. Thus, it requires a plurality of voices to explore this subject in depth, which is what Plath does in *Three Women* by presenting different views on childbirth, on maternity, on the self. One of the factors that conditions the way that motherhood is perceived is how each woman has gotten pregnant. In the poem, one of the women is pregnant as a consequence of rape, which gives to her experience a completely different view in comparison to the other two women in the ward. In this speaker's monologue, the experience of becoming a mother is portrayed as a *traumatic*.

Notwithstanding its complexity, *Three Women* is not among the most discussed of Sylvia Plath's poems. Her poetry has received great attention, with numerous books and essays published about it throughout the twentieth century and the first decade of the twentieth-first century. *Ariel*,[9] Plath's second book of poetry,

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[6] When quoting from *Three Women*, I refer to the page of the citation rather than its verses, since the poems' verses are not numbered in *The Collected Poems*.

[7] According to Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty, Plath's early poems are indebted to New Critical conceptions of poetry, while her later poems withdraw from it (112-119). The conception of the body presented in her poems also changes, which De Nervaux-Gavoty sees as related to different ways of (not) dealing with pain: "The strict forms of Plath's New Critical poems were used as a way of keeping loss and pain at a distance by enclosing them in the well-wrought urn of the poem. In 1962, however, Plath's poems become the scene of a confrontation with pain that is conveyed in an expressionist vocabulary of forms and colours" (119). *Three Women* is one of these 1962 poems, in which "Voice, body and colour are also closely interwoven" (De Nervaux-Gavoty 120). About the poem, Leah Souffrant comments that "Maternal ambivalence is *embodied* in triple-voiced verse" (29, emphasis added).

[8] Two examples of these authors and their discussions are Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (vol. II, part two, ch. 6) and Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (262).

[9] The first version of *Ariel*, edited by Ted Hughes, was published in 1965. It has been highly discussed for not being the one that Plath had let ready before her death. *Ariel: The Restore Edition*, edited by Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, was later published according to the

and the aforementioned *The Bell Jar* are the most carefully examined of her works, and debates are generally focused on them. Most studies on Plath's works consider her oeuvre as whole, with different approaches: right before her death, biographical readings reached their peak, followed by the study of her oeuvre in terms of a mythology.[10] For many years and still today, different feminist approaches have provided several readings of her works. More recent studies tend to bring them back to their contemporary debates and to the modernist tradition.[11] *Three Women* has been treated in these studies according to the scholars' different approaches. It has also been the subject of a few papers, but it has not been the main subject of any major study.

In this work, my intention is to examine carefully each one of these voices, focusing on what they have to say about motherhood, about their bodies, about science and about experiencing childbirth in a hospital. Drawing from what has been said about *Three Women*, I would like to propose that the dramatic poem has a (proto)ecofeminist[12] disposition, since it connects women to images of the natural world, as opposed to the ward and scientific knowledge—which are represented, in the poem, as exclusive male domains of the medical area. I also would like to add to *Three Women*'s discussion the notion that its representation of motherhood projects the possibility of mediation between nature and culture: the poem shows that, in pregnancy and labor, women are subjected to natural processes, but it also displays how mothering is social; how it is part of women's social lives.

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author's original manuscripts. Despite the differences between the books, *Ariel* was responsible for Sylvia Plath's recognition as an important poet of the 20th century. She was right to acknowledge, in a 1962 letter to her mother, that "I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (*LH* 468).

[10] Many are the researchers that deal with Plath's work as a whole. One of the first studies following this pattern was Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, in which the author studies Plath's poetry as "a unified body of work" (6). She focusses on different myths that she observes in Plath's poetry, discussing poems and prose in relation to them. The precursor of this mythic view on Plath's poetry was Ted Hughes, who was the main editor of Plath's works, though highly questioned in his craft. "The poems," Hughes says, "are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear—even if the origins of it and the dramatic personae, are bottom enigmatic" (qtd. in Kroll 6).

[11] This is the case of Christina Britzolakis's *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*.

[12] Britzolakis uses the term "protofeminist" rather than "feminist" while discussing *Three Women* (177). I believe that this prefix also applies to the case of proposing a "protoecofeminism" rather than just an "ecofeminism," for the fear of anachronism.

The first chapter, "Revisiting *Three Women*," is a critical revision of important points already brought up about *Three Women* which are necessary to situate my work in relation to the previous bibliography. "Nature/Culture Dualism and Motherhood: A Theoretical Revision," the second chapter, is, as the title suggests, a theoretical revision, starting with a contextualization of nature/culture dualism, followed by a discussion on the appropriation of female bodies by reproductive technologies, which comprehend from the origins of the connection between childbirth and hospitals until more recent discussions. This debate is grounded in Ruth Berman's "From Aristotle's Dualism to Materialist Dialectics: Feminist Transformation of Science and Society" and Rosi Braidotti's "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," among others. Then, still in the second chapter, I focus on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, discussing its demystification of motherhood and its view on nature, whose symbolic meaning led to a definition of women's reproductive role as innate and thus to female oppression. I then examine ecofeminism as presented by Ynestra King in "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and Nature/Culture Dualism," concentrating on this author's view on motherhood as a process located between nature and culture, a locus beyond the dualism. In the third chapter, entitled "Body, Science and Motherhood in *Three Women*," I present a close reading of the dramatic poem, focusing on images that I believe to be of extreme importance to develop my propositions.

1 Revisiting *Three Women*

Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: they like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge.

—Sylvia Plath, from her journals

Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices was written by Sylvia Plath in March 1962, according to Ted Hughes's edit of *The Collected Poems*. Plath wrote the long dramatic poem for the radio, as a result of an invitation, and it was produced on the BBC's Third Programme on August 19, 1962; it was later published in a limited edition in 1968 (Hughes 292). Afterwards, it was part of the 1971 collection of poetry *Winter Trees*. Finally, it was published in *The Collected Poems*, which earned Plath a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. When she was still alive, *Three Women* received considerable attention: it was translated to Norwegian by Oslo radio, as she mentions in a letter to her mother (*LH* 490). In a previous letter, Plath celebrates the acceptance of the play by the British radio, revealing its inspiration: "I've had a long poem (about 378 lines!) accepted by the BBC Third Programme (three women in a maternity ward, inspired by a Bergman film)" (*LH* 456). The film in question is Ingmar Bergman's 1958 *Brink of Life*,[13] based on a short story by Swedish writer Ulla Isaksson, who also co-wrote the script.[14] According to Geoffrey Macnab, the film "was preoccupied with the trauma of birth," and what the women depicted "have in common is that they suffer" (103). Both works—Bergman's and Plath's—present three women in maternity wards, but the conditions of each pregnancy—and their results— differ; though they have the same starting point, there is no doubt to the originality of

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[13] Originally, *Nära livet*, in Swedish; also translated as *So Close to Life* in the United Kingdom.

[14] The name of Isaksson's story is "Det vänliga, det värdiga" [Kindness, dignity], from her 1954 book *Dödens faster* [The aunt of death] (Steene 233).

each work. However, since it is not my objective to compare them,[15] I will focus on Plath's three voices. The first is called "First Voice," a woman who really wants to have her baby; the Second Voice is a working woman who suffers an abortion, and the Third Voice is a young student, whose rape leads to the conception of a baby-daughter, whom she gives away for adoption after giving birth. The women are not named, but they are commonly called "wife," "secretary" and "student" (Gill 71); in the BBC production script of June 9, 1968, the names were "Wife," "Secretary" and "Girl" (Kroll 226-227). This work follows the names as presented in *The Collected Poems*: First Voice, Second Voice and Third Voice—or, alternatively, first woman, second woman and third woman. Hereafter, I will try to summarize the contributions of studies on the dramatic radio play that are important to situate my work.

1.1 Mythology and Hospital Poetry

Judith Kroll, in *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, discusses Plath's poetry as a "mythic system," in which the moon is a center point (2; 21). Kroll relates the "Moon-muse" to Robert Graves's *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*—this book, according to Kroll, had a strong influence on Plath (21; 39-40). Kroll takes Graves's connection between the moon and a woman's menstrual period as a starting point, and regards the first as having different meanings in Plath's poetry: one of them is the moon's flatness as representative of barrenness (33-35). In *Three Women*, the "Moon's cold light" looks at the woman who has suffered a miscarriage (Kroll 35). Kroll also calls attention to the men's "flatness," the sterility, the impossibility of bearing children, as a "disease" that the Secretary might have caught from men or from the moon (252). In fact, according to the author, the themes of barrenness and fertility are what structure the play, for she calls it "plotless" (47). Furthermore, Kroll sees a connection between *Three Women* and the White Goddess myth, which was, according to Graves, a "moon-trinity" (qtd. in Kroll 57): "Each of these 'three women' represents one of the Triple Goddess' principal phases; and each of the women in Plath's radio play represents one of the same three phases" (Kroll 58). Moreover, Kroll relates each

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[15] For a good comparative study between film and dramatic poem, see Fraser, "Technologies of Reproduction: The Maternity Ward in Sylvia Plath's *Three Women* and Ingmar Bergman's *Brink of Life*."

woman—and her lines—to one of the three colors of the White Goddess, following Graves's "moon-trinity":

> White, the New Moon color of "birth and growth" [...], expresses the fate of the "Wife" who gives birth to a son. Red, the Full Moon color of "love and battle," expresses the fate of the unmarried "Girl" who gives up her newborn daughter. Black, the Old Moon color of "death and divination," expresses that of the "Secretary" who has miscarried. (Kroll 58)

However, though she relates each woman to a color, she also calls attention to the fact that all three colors[16] are present in all of the three women's monologues (58). In fact, the women seem to be ruled by the moon, which "appears as a glaring white death-goddess" (Kroll 72). Finally, the barrenness associated with the moon has other disguises in *Three Women*: as Kroll points out, the "bald nurse," also present in other poems, is representative of infertility in the play (104).

More recently, a few authors have called attention to Plath's poems that focus on female patients in a hospital such as *Three Women*, "Tulips" and "Fever 103°," all written in 1962. *Three Women* has been regarded as a critique of the hospital for different reasons, which I will hereafter explain. Susan Bassnett places the long poem in Plath's "hospital poetry," a genre of poetry that she sees as more recurrent in women's writings than men's (211). According to her, this happens because childbirth often takes place in hospitals; furthermore, the relationship between doctor and patient is a very strong one in what she calls "female mythology," unveiling male power over women's bodies: "The woman in the hands of the male surgeon experiences a double powerlessness, that of the sexual as well as the medical" (Bassnett 211). Similarly, in accordance with Christina Britzolakis, *Three Women* is among a group of poems which "announce a poetic phenomenology of patienthood"

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[16] Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty studies Plath's choices of color in her writings and artwork. According to her, it is only in Plath's later poetry that she confronts both the violence of chromatic effects and pain (111). *Three Women* is described by De Nervaux-Gavoty as one of the poems in which the "reliance on colour's expressive power comes across most forcefully" (120). She sees in the play an interwovenness of voice, body and color. Still in accordance with her, though occasionally usual meanings such as red for blood and pain are resorted to, Plath's symbolism is not static; she often creates her own associations, unsettling fixed ones, which is the case of *Three Women* (Nervaux-Gavoty 120-121).

(92). Regarding Plath's depiction of the hospital in her poems, Britzolakis describes a gendered politics in terms of doctor-patient transference: "If the authority of the scientific male expert is linked with masculinity, the condition of patienthood or victimhood is assigned with femininity" (94). The author exemplifies this victimhood with examples from *Three Women*: the First Voice describes herself as "sacrificial" while still in the hospital, and the Third Voice walks out of there as a "wound" (94). Still according to Britzolakis, in *Three Women* there is a critique of the "metaphysical claims of patriarchy," which she relates to the Second Voice's monologue on men's progress and "flatness" (177). She calls this monologue "a protofeminist opposition between the nurturing values of the reproductive female body and the Enlightenment narrative of 'progress' as technological mastery over nature" (Britzolakis 177). In a broader sense, considering other poems, Britzolakis mentions the figure of the *mater dolorosa* present in Plath's Enlightenment critique, in which there is a "mourning mother" as the negative counterpoint of "civilization" (177).

Experiencing childbirth in a hospital has led to the commodification of pregnant women's bodies into the technologies of reproduction—especially during the Cold War period. Linda Lussy Fraser focuses on these technologies in both Ingmar Bergman's *Brink of Life* and Sylvia Plath's *Three Women*, discussing how the two works reproduce and criticize the maternity ward's domination over its pregnant women (548). She connects both works to their historical moment, to post-World War II "paranoia" and to "the fear of an omniscient eye which dissects and paralyzes through its gaze, the helplessness before technologies which consume in order to control, the commodification of the body into a site of (re)production" (Fraser 548). Frazer argues that Plath's poem is an attempt to overcome the ideology of the ward (548). In this context, according to her, the Second Voice's use of the term "flat" is subversive, for there is a reversion of the Oedipal narrative by the "flatness" (of the phallus) as it is presented; once the Second Voice knows she is part of the language of castration, she (re)writes herself to survive whole (552-553). Like Britzolakis, Fraser relates the First Voice to the *mater dolorosa*, underscoring the fact that this woman, though in this frame of representation, writes her hospital experience in her own terms, through her own imagery, and later "fight[s] the absorption of her son into the technology of the ward" (559-562). Still in accordance with her, the third woman uses Greco-Roman mythology to construct the memory of the conception by relating it to

two rapes by Zeus.[17] Therefore, Fraser points out, this voice broadens the scope of her rape, showing that it is not an isolated event, but present in the appropriation of the female body in western mythical "origin" narratives (567-568). To the Third Voice, the maternity ward appears as "a repetition of the act of rape, rape as both a violation and appropriation of a physical and political body" (Fraser 568). Away from the ward, this woman also shows signs of trauma, caused both by the memory of rape and of its consequences, but, at the end of her speech, she apparently has forgotten it, for she misrecognizes the violence of swan—and this misrecognition, according to Fraser, implies that the Third Voice feeds the technologies of reproduction (570-571).

1.2 The Poetry of Motherhood

Many are the possibilities of approaching motherhood, especially when it comes to female writing, to mothers writing about their experiences, or at least having experienced mothering before writing about the theme. In poetry it is not different, and there are several visions of motherhood in women's poetry. Leah Souffrant discusses what she calls the "poetry of motherhood," mentioning "maternal ambivalence," evoked by the multiplicity of voices on the theme (25-27). She says that "ambivalence" is a troubling term in this poetics: while a celebration of motherhood might fall into shallow sentimentality, a lack of love for the child might seem selfish and counterproductive, especially in a "progressive feminist vision of mothering" (27-28). The author thus concludes that ambivalence is part of it; that "A mother's love can—indeed must—coexist with representations of violence, indifference, ambivalence" (Souffrant 28). Regarding Sylvia Plath's poetry, Souffrant sees *Three Women*'s complex examination of maternity as a result of the poet's experimentation with the form of the lyric drama (28-29). Considering all of Plath's poems on the theme, Judith Kroll proposes a way to organize them: when maternity is male-dependent and part of an "entrapping domesticity," it is seen as negative; when it is focused on a self-sufficient mother-child universe, it appears as heroic (11). Still to Kroll, motherhood and fertility are celebrated in Plath's poetry, while barrenness is despised (11). Concerning works in which the speakers are daughters instead of mothers, Christina Britzolakis emphasizes the strong ambivalence in relation to the

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[17] Zeus rapes Leda, in the form of a swan, and Danae, in the form of "showers of gold" (Holbrook, Bundtzen qtd. in Fraser 567).

maternal body, present in Plath's poems such as "Medusa" (168-169; 215). Britzolakis seems to focus on such examples, for, according to her, Plath's "representation of motherhood cannot [...] be comfortably assimilated to a celebration of 'organic' or woman-centered forms of creativity" (173).

Maternity and the pregnant woman's body and self are strongly intertwined, a connection that is physical and mental. Different studies emphasize the relationship between motherhood, body, self and the language used to translate experience. Marilyn Charles explores psychologically the representations of self and body in Sylvia Plath's poetry. In *Three Women*, Charles sees an expression of the multiplicity and ambivalence of Plath herself regarding her "body-self," because she considers the poet speaking from primary, personal experience (340; 348). Focusing on the poem's First Voice, Charles says that this persona feels enlivened but also frightened by the experience, for the life she so far knew might end: "becoming mother is equated with loosing and finding self" (348). The author also affirms that the death of the Second Voice's child becomes her own death; after the miscarriage, this speaker wants to act as if it had not happened, but de-creating her child is de-creating her body-self, which leads to the confrontation of an empty image of self (349-350).[18] About the Third Voice, Charles mentions that, as she leaves her child, she becomes the emptiness inside her; this persona tries to continue her life by denying the child, but this is denying her own self, and thus she loses body and self (351). The Third Voice's loss finally changes her perception of the world because of it, and "Absence becomes the lens that patterns her universe" (Charles 351). As the women try to translate experience into knowledge towards self-understanding but somehow fail to do so, Charles concludes that "Plath's work speaks for what is lost in our failure to make our peace with the language of the body" (352; 361).

As I have discussed, maternity is a complex theme, which can lead to opposing emotions such as suffering and hope. Susan Bassnett discusses several of Plath's poems and how much of hope and love for life are present in them. Regarding *Three Women*, she emphasizes the fact that each of its voices changes her point of view during her monologue, which precludes the poem from being a cliché (214). According to her, the First Voice goes from calmness before labor to pain and terror during it, then to protectiveness right after birth and finally to hopefulness later, at home; the Third Voice associates birth to horror, is afraid right after leaving the ward

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[18] In a similar way, Raymond A. Anselment discusses the Second Voice's "loss of self."

and in the end her wound "starts to heal," when she is outside the hospital, though a part of her was left behind there (214-216). In different ways, both speakers seem to learn about suffering through their female experiences, during and after birth: "For neither woman does the future look whole and happy and the underlying significance of this emphasis on sorrow and motherhood is that woman's lot is seen to be a hard one" (Bassnett 216). Regarding the Second Voice, since she does not give birth, her suffering is of a different kind: Bassnett says that she is marked "within" (217). "Unquestionably this is a work that glorifies motherhood as a uniquely female experience": the three women are forever marked by it, without displaying any "ideal" way of experiencing it, as Bassnett points out (217). Still to the author, the final words of the play give us a message of hope and promise—its final word is "life"—, which are uttered by the Second Voice: we know that she might heal and later give birth (217). Likewise, other authors discuss the ending of the play as positive. Marilyn Charles highlights that, in the end, though the Second Voice tries to protect herself from it, life begins again: the grass grows through the cracks in the stones (350). Speaking of nature, Raymond A. Anselment underscores the presence of the earth in the second woman's monologue, in a rather negative way: "The alienation characteristic of miscarriage leads in its extremeness to a self-loathing and fearful isolation in which she identifies only with a consuming yet barren earth." However, still according to Anselment, the final images of the poem "begin, however tentatively, the healing of a life torn so radically in miscarriage"; the author sees the greenness of the grass in the conclusion as an expression of faith.

2 Nature/Culture Dualism and Motherhood: A Theoretical Revision

> [...] we *cannot* know with certainty whether we are opposing the power we oppose, or promoting it. But all this means is that we are fallible, our assessments provisional, our actions subject to revision. It should not be taken as cause for fatalism, or passivity. [...] To act responsibly and with hope it's not necessary that we know the final outcome of our actions.
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> —Susan Bordo, "Bringing Body to Theory"

2.1 Nature/Culture, Female Bodies and Reproductive Technologies

Speaking in the light of developments in biotechnology concerning reproduction in the 1980s and 1990s, a few feminist scholars—whom I will hereafter present—take the task of revisiting the roots of western scientific discourse, which is grounded in mind/body, nature/culture and subject/object dualisms. In these dualisms, women are usually placed as materiality, as physically located; grossly speaking, from ancient Greece until the twentieth century, science was generally a practice for those with minds, souls and culture, which were supposedly men— believed to be exempted of ideologies, to be "neutral." Focusing on the case of biology, Susan Bordo insists that "what constitutes our knowledge [...] is always mediated by the conceptual frameworks—cultural as well as scientific paradigms— that we bring into the laboratory" (89). Similarly, Ruth Berman argues that "the ruling segment of society" controls the uses of science and its ideology (230). This ideology reinforces dichotomies, since, in the mindset of scientists and in their philosophical assumptions, a dualist bias prevails (Berman 230). Regarding reproductive technologies, since the placement of childbirth in hospitals and its further medicalization, women have been seen as the objects of science, as the bodies appropriated by it. Berman mentions that the physical sciences and technologies have created tools to socially control women's bodies and their reproductive capacity (225). Having this in mind, I will examine the roots of the twentieth-century western

scientific discourse, focusing on its treatment of women, in order to understand the origins of nature/culture dualism before discussing it in relation to motherhood.

Ruth Berman reviews body/soul dualism as presented by Plato and Aristotle, discussing how it was still in vogue in the 1980s in the way society's rulers maintained the status quo by invoking a presumed "natural" hierarchy (234). For Plato, the soul, nonmaterial, was derived from the "first world" and fixed at birth, whereas the body, physical, was part of the material world; he also differentiated between superior and inferior souls, which he believed to be the case of women, since they had the recycled souls of inferior men (Berman 233). Several decades later, Aristotle maintained Plato's dualistic disjunction of body and soul; in accordance with him, nature created the barbarian, whether male or female, but he was only concerned with the latter as mothers: he believed female souls to be less rational than those of men (Berman 233). For Aristotle, women were only matter, in opposition to men, since "the principle of movement which is male in all living being is better and more divine" (qtd. in Beauvoir vol. I, part two, ch. 2). In *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle posits masculinity as the human norm, the female body being an anomaly (Braidotti 63). According to him, "The female is female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities" (Aristotle, qtd. in Beauvoir, vol. I, "Introduction"); he saw the female as "a mutilated male" (qtd. Berman 233). Aristotle also believed that the principle of life, of the soul, was carried by the sperm, while the female apparatus was only a receptacle, a passive material (Braidotti 64, Berman 233, Beauvoir, vol. I, part one, ch. 1). In the first century A.D., Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, lays the ideological bases for western women's subordination: he justifies how Eve is treated in Genesis by identifying her with a lack of moral discipline and intellect (Berman 234). As Berman summarizes, women are thus seen as carnal, as full of greed, as linked to the devil, whereas men were rational and spiritual, a notion later reinforced by the Judeo-Christian church (234). Its authority, she points out, was also responsible for the abandonment of the observation of nature, which would only return in the sixteenth century (234).

In the late sixteen and the early seventeenth centuries, when, according to Auguste Comte, "the human mind was astir under the *precepts* of Bacon, the *conceptions* of Descartes, and the *discoveries* of Galileo," the modern revolution in sciences takes place (qtd. in Berman 231). René Descartes, in his 1637 *A Discourse on the Method*, conceptualizes mind/body dualism by severing mind (soul) from body:

the first is seen as the one responsible for existence, not the latter (29). Descartes concludes that he is "a substance whose essence or nature resides only in thinking" and which does not depend on "any material thing" to exist; he further says "the Soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body" (29). Severed from the soul, matter is the substance of the body, which is conceived as a machine made by God; Descartes compares the functioning of the heart to "the movement of a clock" and to "wheels" (42), while the "body [is] as a machine which, having been made by the hand of God, is incomparably better ordered [...] than any that can be created by men" (46). Descartes also displayed the scientific exploitation of nature as important to guarantee human life by providing the means to medical advancements (59). He mentions that "[we could] make ourselves as it were the masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes 59), which is in consonance with Francis Bacon's writings (MacLean 78-79). Descartes also believed that, following his method, different people would get to the same results: "as long as one stops oneself taking anything to be true that is not true and sticks to the right order so as to deduce one thing from another, there can be nothing so remote that one cannot eventually reach it, nor so hidden that one cannot discover it" (18)—science is seen as *objective*. Berman shows how this objectivity, with its "division between the investigator and the phenomenon," reinforces the exercise of power by the scientists: "Superior qualities, justifying domination are ascribed to the objective, thinking minds, inferior, subservient ones, to the feeling receptive body" (237). It is not surprisingly that, while men have been seen as the subjects of science, as related to mind and soul, women have come to be associated with matter, with the body, and thus seen as the objects of science. Simone de Beauvoir questions a supposedly "objective" representation of women, which is actually male-biased; it places women as "flesh," since women do not have the power to do differently:

> Woman is sometimes designated as "sex"; it is she who is the flesh, its delights and its dangers. That for woman it is man who is sexed and carnal is a truth that has never been proclaimed because there is no one to proclaim it. The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth. (Beauvoir, vol. I, part three, ch. 1)

Regarding the appearance of the clinic and the hospital in the modern era, Rosi Braidotti mentions that this phenomenon is related to the medical practice of anatomy in the nineteenth century, which radically transformed "the epistemological status of the body," by focusing on "deciphering the body, transforming the organism into a text to be read and interpreted by a knowledgeable medical gaze" (Braidotti 72). Drew Leder discusses how modern medicine is based upon the dead body: after the Cartesian conception of the body as a machine, the lived body was modeled upon the dead body, as part of "*res extensa*," as a "lifeless machine" (117; 119). Descartes, who was engaged for years in the dissection of animals (Leder 118), is one of the precursors of the studies of anatomy and therefore of modern medicine. Contrary to the medical practice based on the dead body, Leder discusses the possibility of one grounded in the "lived body," which he defines as an "intending" entity, "bound up with, and directed toward, an experienced world," a concept designed to carry us beyond ontological dualism (123-124). Iris Young, in a 1990 essay, calls attention to the fact that humanistic writers suggest that a good medical practice happens when physician and patient share the lived-body experience (283). In the case of obstetrics, in Young's context, this condition was generally unachieved, because the majority of obstetricians were men, and, unless one is or has been pregnant, it is difficult to empathize with this body subjectivity (Young 283). Therefore, when obstetrics does not involve physician and patient that share the same lived body, it ends up working as the general medical practice—grounded in the dead body—and thus putting the female body as a text to be interpreted by the male medical gaze.

According to Braidotti, the fact that woman was seen as a sign of abnormality—of difference as inferiority—in western scientific discourse produced the "horror of the female body" (63-64). Concerning motherhood, because the female body can change its shape so drastically, she mentions that woman was seen as morphologically dubious, and thus she concludes that "Woman as a sign of difference is monstrous" (Braidotti 65-66). Young emphasizes the fact that, excluded through most of the history of medicine, when women's reproductive processes came within its domain, "they were defined as diseases," and thus treated in a way that can lead to the alienation of the pregnant woman (Young 281-282). Ynestra King calls attention to the medicalization of the childbirth in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century as making "heretofore natural processes mediated by women into

arenas controlled by men" (133). According to this logic, under the ministrations of experts, women internalized the notion that the experts knew better than them, accepting their power and also "the idea that the maximum intervention in and the domination of nature is an inherent good" (King 133). King emphasizes how the feminist health movement was responsible for changing this scenario in the 1960s by "reappropriating and demedicalizing childbirth": the movement did not reject completely these technologies, but rather questioned the motivations of their "widespread application" (133). Though in the 1990s, Young still called attention to the fact that the normal procedures of the United States' hospital birthing setting rendered women "considerably more passive" than needed to be during labor; among the practices that the author criticized was the "use of intravenous equipment, monitors, and pain-relieving drugs," since they inhibited the capacity to move during labor (282). Berman questioned other procedures that regulated women's reproduction in the 1980s such as excessive hysterectomies and caesarean deliveries (226).

Of course the advancements in obstetrics were important, even to save women's lives, as Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*—she seemed to be an enthusiast of the technologies and medicalization of childbirth:

> Progress in obstetrics has considerably decreased the dangers of childbirth; childbirth pain is disappearing; at this time—March 1949—legislation has been passed in England requiring the use of certain anesthetic methods; they are already generally applied in the United States and are beginning to spread in France. (Beauvoir, vol. I, part two, ch. 5)

Beauvoir saw these new options as positive, and, of course, they were to a certain extent—I have no intention to deny it in this work. By decreasing the "dangers" of birthing, fewer are the women that die during childbirth. Anesthetic methods could ease pain during labor, but they could also inhibit women's movements and leave them in a kind of numbness while only partially blocking the pain, as presented in *The Bell Jar*.[19] Another evident progress is birth control, which Beauvoir relates to freedom since they created the possibility of refusing motherhood, an option that

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[19] See my "Introduction" (11).

women had in England and America but not yet in France in 1949 (vol. II, part two, ch. 14). For women, this was a way of dissociating sexual practices from motherhood.

2.2 Motherhood: Demystification and Ecofeminism

Simone de Beauvoir discredits the connection woman/nature as the only possibility for females: she was important for the *demystification* of maternity in the twentieth century. Yolanda Astarita Patterson uses the term in a famous essay in which she analyzes Beauvoir's fictional works: "Along with *The Second Sex* and the volumes of her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir's novels and short stories constitute a giant step toward the *demystification* of motherhood" (105, emphasis added). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir admits that motherhood is natural, but she denies biology as destiny. She develops several possibilities of mothering, and thus shows how complex the theme is, but she tends to display a rather negative view of maternity as a whole.

According to Beauvoir, "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her 'natural' vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species" (vol. II, part two, ch. 6). However, she highlights that "human society is never left to nature" and that the control of the reproductive function was changing from chance to "biological design" (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6). Though natural, the choice to have or not a child should not be left to nature: in 1949, it was already a question of choice. After analyzing different possibilities of motherhood—of pregnancy, labor and childrearing—Beauvoir concludes that "there is no such thing as maternal 'instinct'; the word does not in any case apply to the human species" (vol. II, part two, ch. 6). This affirmation breaks with the view according to which a woman's identity is based only on being a mother; with the allegation of an "instinct," biology was determined as the only possible path for women. Beauvoir emphasizes how other aspects of women's lives are important for them to find fulfilment: "that motherhood is enough in all cases to fulfill a woman: this is not at all true. Many are the mothers who are unhappy, bitter, and unsatisfied" (vol. II, part two, ch. 6). The ultimate goal for female lives ought not necessarily to be marriage and children; although it was the dominant discourse at the time of Beauvoir's writing, it was not at all true for her. Thus, to break with this vision that she believed to lead to female oppression, she called attention to how

unnatural—or to how social—mothering could be. She shows, for instance, how the first moments between mother and child are paradoxical: "The being would not exist without her, and yet he escapes her"; he is now "cut off from herself" (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6). There is no instant recognition as the mother might wish: there is a "disappointment," for the woman does not feel the baby to be "hers" and "familiar right away" as she would like to; "he is a newcomer, and she is stupefied by the indifference with which she receives him" (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6). About this initial indifference, Beauvoir mentions that nursing is a possibility for young mothers to "regain an intimate animal relationship with their children," but she recognizes it as even more stressful than pregnancy (vol. II, part two, ch. 6).

Furthermore, Beauvoir discusses how ambivalent the relation between women and pregnancy or women and mothering might be. In accordance with her, pregnancy and motherhood are experienced differently, according to the feelings that the mother shows in relation to it; its acceptance or refusal is also deeply connected to its conception and to the mother's personal relationships with her mother, her husband and herself (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6). Among the cases that Beauvoir analyzes, she discusses abortion as a solution for unwanted pregnancies, and, in the case of spontaneous abortion, she emphasizes its psychological implications, mentioning the fact that "Some women are haunted by the memory of this child who did not come to be" (vol. II, part two, ch. 6). Overall, Beauvoir tends to show a negative vision of motherhood, which might be justifiable by the examples in which she bases her argument—or even by personal relationships that she had with her mother and with a mother's friend, as Patterson suggests (91-92). In *The Second Sex*, she summarizes motherhood emphasizing its dramatic quality:

> But pregnancy is above all a drama playing itself out in the woman between her and herself. She experiences it both as an enrichment and a mutilation; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future, and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness annihilates her, she has the impression of not being anything else. […] she is a human being, consciousness and freedom, who has become a passive instrument of life. (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6)

Motherhood is "enrichment and mutilation"; the fetus is also a "parasite"; pregnancy is also a way of annihilating a woman, of becoming "a passive instrument of life"; here, no matter whether it was a choice or an imposition, to get pregnant is being an "instrument"—being "passive." Concerning gestation, it is seen as a "normal phenomenon that is not harmful to the mother if normal conditions of health and nutrition prevail"; however, it is also "tiring work that offers woman no benefit as an individual but that demands serious sacrifices" (Beauvoir, vol. I. part one, ch. 1). Among those sacrifices, are childbirth, which is painful and can be dangerous, and breastfeeding, which is an "exhausting servitude" (Beauvoir, vol. I. part one, ch. 1). Though a "normal phenomenon," motherhood is depicted as not bringing any individual benefit to the mother: the vocabulary chosen to discuss maternity relates it to slavery—one of her recurrent words for it is "servitude."[20] In a context in which women, mostly in marriage, had child after child and were exhausted because of many pregnancies, Beauvoir importantly displayed that this was not fair to women, that it was oppressive; that women had other ambitions in life—or they could have, if they were allowed to. And this might be the reason why Beauvoir displays motherhood as generally "a strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism" (vol. II, part two, ch. 6). She relates this scenario in part to how women were brought up to be; how they were educated to depend so much on their children and on their roles as wives. The way out was to cultivate one's personal life, one's place in the world: "it is the woman who has the richest personal life who will give the most to her child and who will ask for the least, she who acquires real human values through effort and struggle will be the most fit to bring up children" (Beauvoir, vol. II, part two, ch. 6). But even in this later case, even women with careers, feminists, were advised not to have children by Beauvoir. In an interview published by Betty Friedan, she advised feminists to avoid motherhood (Patterson 90).

Ynestra King makes a revision of different feminisms in her 1989 text "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and Nature/Culture Dualism." One of the currents

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[20] In a 1976 interview with Alice Schwarzer, Beauvoir explicitly relates maternity to slavery: "I think a woman should be on her guard against the trap of motherhood and marriage. Even if she would dearly like to have children, she ought to think seriously about the conditions under which she would have to bring them up, because being a mother these days is real slavery" (73).

that she mentions is radical feminism, which, in accordance with her, "root[s] the oppression of women in biological difference itself," because it relates the subordination of women in society to their association with nature (King 121). King places Simone de Beauvoir with "radical rationalist feminists," a kind of radical feminism that, she affirms, repudiates the woman/nature connection, and that believes the emancipation of women to be in their dissociation from nature (122). King says that they "celebrate the fact that we have finally begun to gain access to male bastions by using the political tools of liberalism and the rationalization of human life, mythically severing the woman/nature connection as the humanity/nature connection has been severed" (122). Regarding Simone de Beauvoir, this is partly true; she was concerned with woman being able "to make her history, her problems, her doubts, and her hopes those of humanity" (vol. II, part four, ch. 14). However, she does not completely sever woman from nature; in fact, she even sees the body as "the instrument of our hold on the world," and biological data as "the keys that enable us to understand woman" (Beauvoir, vol. I. part one, ch. 1).

But, differently from Beauvoir, King is not only concerned with placing women as part of humanity: this step was not hers to take; a lot had changed since *The Second Sex*. King's goals are not only women's liberation, but mainly dealing with the exploitation of earth. She connects the ecological crisis to the hatred of nature and of the female and believes that feminism and ecology have similar goals, related to nature/culture dualism (115). According to her, western society is grounded in ambivalence about life and confusion about the human place in nature, to which she concludes: "Nature did not declare war on humanity; patriarchal humanity declared war on women and on living nature" (King 116). Thus, this is the point that connects women to nature more inwardly than men: men constituted the patriarchy that explored both the earth and women. King argues that the link between ecology and feminism creates the possibility of "a feminist epistemology based on a noninstrumental way of knowing," by which she means "a reformulation, not a repudiation, of reason and science"; she also mentions that new forms of politics are made possible by this "antidualistic, ecofeminist imperative" (118). Therefore, feminism and ecology, embodying "the revolt of nature against human domination," demand a rethinking of the relationship between humanity and (nonhuman and human) nature (King 132). Having this in mind while reading *The Second Sex*, one must admit that Beauvoir did value a culture that exploited both women and nature,

but it is also important to emphasize that, without been seen as part of humanity, women had no chance to speak for themselves, let alone for nonhuman nature. However, do women really have to speak for nature more than men? The link between women and nature, as presented by King, might lead to questions of whether it is an essentialism that reinforces women as nature. Catriona Sandilands recognizes a political affinity in the oppression of women and the domination of nature, but she finds it misguided to see this coalition "in a way that reduces both women and nature to a very particular point of connection," which "essentializes women and domesticates nature" (xix). However, she mentions that this problematic reliance on identity manifests "a much larger democratic desire that can be rechanneled rather than as an essential limitation" (Sandilands xix). Though the link between women and nature is valid at some points for a critique of patriarchal exploitation of both nature and women, it is important to see that it is a loose connection; to entirely accept a discourse centered on a woman-earth alliance would be retreating to the previous "biology as destiny" against which Beauvoir so insistently fought. So, I believe this point of liaison is valid, but we must have this restriction in mind.

In addition to discussing women's proximity to nature, King emphasizes the social dimension of their lives, especially when it comes to motherhood: "Part of the work of feminism has been asserting that the activities of women, believed to be more natural, are in fact absolutely social. [...] Giving birth is natural, although how it is done is very social, but mothering is an absolutely social activity" (129). Thereby, though highlighting women's connection to nature, King does not deny the movement that previous feminists—such as Beauvoir—had in displaying how social motherhood could be. In fact, King locates mothering as beyond nature/culture dualism: "The process of nurturing an unsocialized, undifferentiated human infant into an adult person—the socialization of the organic—is the bridge between nature and culture" (130). According to her, the interpretation of why women have been placed as this "bridge" between organic and social is a task for ecofeminism (131). Beauvoir had already discussed how social the act of mothering was, but King places women precisely *between* nature and culture. Similarly, Carol Bigwood sees motherhood as both natural and cultural, since a pregnant woman's "new mothering body," leads to "dramatic changes in her cultural, social, and personal life" (110). She also mentions breastfeeding, which she sees as relating the mother's body to the child's socialization: "Mother's body is the constant pleasurable flesh that helps

cushion and establish the new little being in a social and cultural environment" (Bigwood 111). Unlike Beauvoir, Bigwood discusses breastfeeding without displaying it as "servitude." In fact, the negative connotation of maternity and mothering seems to be the main difference between Beauvoir, King and Bigwood: all the three see motherhood as both natural and social, but the last two do not discuss it with negative implications. Forty years later, King and Bigwood seem to propose reconciliation with nature; they are able to conciliate a woman's motherhood experience to her social life without the fear of being limited to the first.

3 Motherhood, Body and Science in *Three Women*

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

—Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song"

3.1 Machine Imagery: Male Flatness and the Ward

In the three monologues of *Three Women*, the critiques of the ideology of the ward and of a male rationality—which will soon become clear—are present, sometimes intertwined. The ward is the locus in which the women are, but as outsiders: their logic is more complex than that of the hospital. All the voices take part in this critique, but the Second Voice is the one that emphasizes it. Before entering the ward, when she discovers her miscarriage, she is at work. She works in an office, full of men:

> When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
> I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
> There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught
> [it,
> That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
> Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
> Endlessly proceed—[…]. (*CP* 177)

Much has been discussed about men's "flatness," and the fact that they seem to infect this woman with it, leading to the miscarriage.[21] It is important to highlight that flatness is a metaphor linked to ideas, to machinery, to the production of shrieks: these are representatives of a patriarchy that destroys and creates pain—they seem to conceive the world as René Descartes conceived the body: as a machine. It is as if this

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[21] See my first chapter, "Revisiting *Three Women*" (16-18).

woman is locked inside a gear, a body in pain smashed by wheels, while men are represented as shallow, like "cardboard"; they seem incapable of seeing that she is suffering: "the man I work for laughed: 'Have you seen something awful? / You are so white, suddenly.' And I said nothing" (*CP* 177). He is too superficial to see what she is going through. Inwardly, she feels terrible; the idea of the child who would no longer come to be haunts her: "I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation. / I could not believe it. Is it so difficult / For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?" (*CP* 177). She might be asking here whether it was so difficult for her to keep the baby, let it form her or himself, or she can also be referring to the image of the child that she will no longer see. She realizes that she is not able to continue doing her work, typing, as if nothing had happened. The idea of the child is taken away from her as if from a train, a machine, another part of what was before represented as men's machinery:

> I am dying as I sit. I lose a dimension.
> Trains roar in my ears, departures, departures!
> The silver track of time empties into the distance,
> The white sky empties of its promise, like a cup.
> These are my feet, these mechanical echoes.
> Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs. I am found wanting. (*CP* 177)

The promise of the child is fading, and she notices that her feet are also turning mechanical: they are now part of the male office, since it has supposedly "infected" her and thus led to the loss of her baby. At the end, she is lacking, "wanting." She then goes home, describing her state: "This is a disease I carry home, this is a death" (*CP* 177); she now sees herself as a container of a "disease," of a "death." Further relations between the office's ideology and how this woman's loss is experienced might be found in the fact that, in English, death is portrayed as masculine.[22] Having this in mind, when she comes home, she is no longer a pregnant woman but a carrier of a death that she believes to be inflicted by patriarchal rationality, as represented by the office and the machine imagery through which she sees her workplace.

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[22] In Emily Dickinson's poem 712, dated 1863, death is clearly portrayed as a "he": "Because I could not stop for Death— / He kindly stopped for me— / The Carriage held but just Ourselves— / And Immortality" (350).

Regarding the First Voice, she feels uneasy when she gets to the hospital; its calmness precedes something that she fears: "I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful: / [...] It is so quiet here. / The sheets, the faces, are white and stopped, like clocks" (*CP* 179). The whiteness also bothers her; it is as if time is suspended. And voices talk in a coded language, which she does not understand: "Voices stand back and flatten. Their visible hieroglyphs / [...]" (*CP* 179). The voices "flatten," echoing the Second Voice's speech on men's flatness. In the hospital, "They paint secrets" in languages that the first woman does not understand (*CP* 179). The women are there as bodies/texts to be read by the experts, the medical minds. The two groups are severed in a way that they do not even speak the same language.

In a similar way, the Second Voice feels the impersonality of the ward's whiteness: "It is a world of snow now. I am not at home. / How white these sheets are. The faces have no features" (*CP* 178). In this place, all she can do is remember "the little emptiness I carry" (*CP* 178). She mentions that she has tried to keep the baby, that she has "walked carefully"; she has also tried to be "blind in love" and in bed, but, still, faces stared at her: "The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections, / The face of the dead one that could only be perfect / In its easy peace" (*CP* 178). But she is not only haunted by the face of her baby that could not live, there are other faces:

> [...] The faces of nations,
> Governments, parliaments, societies,
> The faceless faces of important men.
>
> It is these men I mind:
> They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
> That would have the whole world flat because they are.
> I see the Father conversing with the Son.
> Such flatness cannot but be holy.
> 'Let us make a heaven,' they say.
> 'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.' (*CP* 179)

The other faces that haunt her are those that govern nations, societies, and they are all faces of men; they are the ones who make the rules that she has to follow. These

men are "faceless" as the faces in that ward, which "have no features." They are represented as "jealous" of the complexity that they lack, so they want to "flatten" the whole world: they want to subordinate women and the other living creatures to their ideology. And this is a patriarchal practice: it passes from father to son. They want to create their own heaven, laundering the others' "grossness"—which brings to mind the Aristotelian conception of superior and inferior souls. These men are represented here as intending to simplify everything that does not fit their logic, which exists for their own sake, the creation of their own "heaven." The way flatness is associated to holiness also displays how an ideology can be justified for supposedly being sacred. This passage brings to mind not only the domestication of nature for human use—whose principle was set in Descartes—but also colonial missions in the name of fate: all representatives of a patriarchal, colonial and unsustainable ideology—as Ynestra King points out.

Concerning the Third Voice, this woman is pregnant as a consequence of rape, which she describes through the image of a swan approaching her. According to Cathy Caruth, traumatic experience is spoken in a language that defies our understanding, in "a literary dimension that [...] stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" (5). The language that the Third Voice uses to express the violence of rape is different from the other voices' monologues up to this point of the poem:

> I remember a white, cold wing
>
> And the great swan, with its terrible look,
> Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.
> There is a snake in swans.
> He glided by; his eye had a black meaning.
> I saw the world in it—small, mean and black,
> Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act.
> A hot blue day had budded into something. (*CP* 178)

It is only possible for this woman to describe the memory of rape as related to Greek mythology; she does not say it clearly, but she refers to the rapes of Leda and Danae by Zeus. Without this reference, it is also possible to read the swan as a rapist, though

this connection is only set metaphorically, never literally. It would be impossible for this woman to describe this experience more realistically, as the Second Voice mentions the fact that she was in an office when she found out about her miscarriage instead of metaphorically transfiguring it into something else. The third woman can only recall the instant of conception as another story, by means of a landscape that does not correspond to the real scenario of rape. But we see the signs of rape in almost every word: the "white, cold wing" that approaches her—and that reminds us of the ward's whiteness—; the presence of the snake, which might be a phallic sign or might mean how treacherous the swan is: in spite of his beauty, he could bite like a snake. The moment the Third Voice looks into the swan's eye, she sees the world, "small, mean and black." According to Carol Bigwood, "'World' connotes a man's world and his public institutions, thereby tending to neglect the private realm, and, moreover, connotes a human world in opposition to the earth" (101). In the Third Voice's monologue, the world in the eye of the swan has a clear resemblance with the machine imagery used by the Second Voice to describe her office. The world is represented as male; it works according to a teleological logic that links word to word and act to act and neglects women and the earth. It is after this image that we clearly perceive the conception: "something" "budded," like a flower buds. The woman mentions that she wasn't ready, and, though she tries to deny it, she is haunted by the memory of her wound: "I thought I could deny the consequence— / But it was too late for that. It was too late, and the face / Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready" (*CP* 178). As Caruth points out, trauma is locatable "in the way that its very unassimilated nature [...] returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). This woman was not ready to confront this experience, but it kept coming back, "shaping itself," haunting her, as if she could stand it. The way this woman experiences motherhood is influenced by the constant reminder of rape: she makes clear Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the different possibilities for maternity. In the case of the Third Voice, it is marked by haunting and denial.

The Third Voice also criticizes male flatness. Inside the ward, she feels as a "mountain, among mountainy women" (*CP* 179); they are pregnant and big—which is as natural as being a mountain—, they are not flat, and this is something that the doctors do not comprehend:

The doctors move among us as if our bigness

> Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
> They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
> They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
> And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?
> They would go mad with it. (*CP* 179-180)

In the poem, there are male physicians and female patients, which do not share the same lived body: they cannot connect, identify with each other. It is as if the women's "bigness" frightens male minds: it is seen as "monstrous," to use Rosi Braidotti's term. Furthermore, the male doctors are placed as the Third Voice's male rapist: they are accomplices of what happened to her, to "blame" for it. And they believe their logic, flat, to be "healthy." However, they could not endure female experience; they would not know what to do if they were surprised with an unexpected pregnancy, they would "go mad." Experience leads to another kind of knowledge, which enables women to endure pains that the male physicians cannot fit into their rationality. Again, the whiteness of the place seems to hide awful tortures: "I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments. / It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy" (*CP* 180). Unnatural, the instruments are objects of dread for those in whom they will be used; they are also machines, part of a male imagery in *Three Women*. This places men as those that use machinery and women as the flesh in which it is used. During the final procedures of labor, the first woman comments on how she feels like mere materiality: "They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material" (*CP* 181). Those who stitch her are not concerned with what she thinks at this point: she is a body. But she is one of the voices that can later tell this experience in the poem and, by doing so, deny being placed in one side of mind/body dualism: by voicing experience, she shows that she is both. The First Voice also utters the excesses of medicalization during childbirth: she loses consciousness (*CP* 180).[23] She voices a critique of the "maximum intervention" during labor, to use Ynestra King's expression.

When the Second Voice is preparing to go out of the ward, she mentions that "The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity" (*CP* 183): she is no longer just another woman in the ward, she is starting to differentiate herself as a subject.

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[23] Quoted in my "Introduction" (11-12).

However, she is still a statistic somehow; her particular case, her wound, is also an object of study and research:

> It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.
> It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.
> I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.
> I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick. (*CP* 183)

In the ward of *Three Women*, women are statistics, while those collecting data are the minds studying them. And they inform the Second Voice that, statistically, miscarriages are common, but only a woman who experiences it knows how unusual it is to feel this lack. And thus this woman fights against counting as a number in a statistic—she takes her lipstick and starts her process of recapturing herself, her identity: "I draw on the old mouth. / The red mouth I put by with my identity" (*CP* 183). She refuses to be just another woman who has had a miscarriage: she voices her particular case.

3.2 Female Cycle(s): Pregnancy and Nursing; Death and Healing

In her journals, Sylvia Plath wrote frequently about her experiences and wishes concerning maternity. In one entry, she mentions: "I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense" (*J* 500). This idea is present in the images of her poetry: pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding are represented through natural imagery in *Three Women*. This imagery constitutes women as pregnant subjects, mostly through self-defining metaphors, especially in the case of the First Voice. In the following verses, for instance, she defines herself: "I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break" (*CP* 179). She is brown as the soil, a "seed": her fertility is portrayed as a natural given, as a growing plant. She compares the waiting to the sea, as a "cargo of agony" approaches her, and again she is part of the natural world: "And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach / Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element" (*CP* 179). She is a shell; she contains something, while the voices oppress her. Whilst nursing her newborn son, the First Voice recurs again to other images of

the natural world: "One cry. It is the hook I hang on. / And I am a river of milk. / I am a warm hill" (*CP* 183). She is waiting for the baby's call: she is a "river," a "hill." Breastfeeding is natural: her breasts are tumid like hills, and milk is flowing through her. However, it is a practice that depends on the mother's attention to the baby's call: she has to learn his different messages, and they are not easily readable at first. Hence, the praxis requires a socialization of both the infant and the mother—and thus the establishment of the newborn in a social environment starts, as Carol Bigwood comments on breastfeeding.

Therefore, mothering requires effort, dedication; it does not happen on its own. A few verses of *Three Women* emphasize this maternal effort, which is not simply "natural." Right after birth, the first woman looks for the first time at her son, with estrangement: "Who is he, this blue, furious boy, / Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?" (*CP* 181)—he does not feel hers right away, as in the example of a newborn that Beauvoir summarizes. The first woman observes that "The blue color pales. He is human after all" (*CP* 181); he is slowly becoming what she imagined him to be, and she is already starting to love him: "What did my fingers do before they held him? / What did my heart do, with its love?" (*CP* 181). But the love for her child also brings fear: this mother is afraid of not being able to protect her son from possible dangers—she wonders: "How long can I be a wall around my green property?" (*CP* 185). It is "terrible" to "be so open"; even the woman who has had her baby and wanted to keep him feels pain, for loving him too much: "it is as if my heart / Put on a face and walked into the world" (*CP* 185). Her heart is now exposed to the world, for she will not be able to nurse and protect her son forever.

The Third Voice's first verses after birth bring a similar, though particular, estrangement. After her daughter is born, the mother sees her "red, terrible girl" in her sleep; the screams awaken her, "like arrows," and she concludes that "My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide. / It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good" (*CP* 182). These passages are evidence of how ambivalent motherhood can be. The woman admits that the baby is her daughter, but fails to connect to the "terrible" child; the newborn is a burden: conceived unwillingly and now disturbing her mother's rest, "it cannot be good." The third woman chooses to leave her child: "She is a small island, asleep and peaceful, / And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye" (*CP* 184). Now, the baby is an "island," natural, while the woman leaving is a "ship"; she can choose where to go to, unlike the child who is stuck there in the

ward. This woman has chosen to leave; though this produces a wound, to keep the baby would be a reminder of a previous wound: she might have been an unhappy mother had she kept her child, because of the memory of conception. She denies her baby, an act that clearly demystifies motherhood by breaking with the vision of a "maternal instinct," which Beauvoir also opposes.

The three women's relationships to maternity and mothering change throughout the poem, but they have a point of liaison: there are negative moments in all three monologues. The Third Voice, for instance, does not feel ready for labor; before the procedure, she regrets having kept her baby: "I am not ready for anything to happen. / I should have murdered this, that murders me" (*CP* 180). She should have had an abortion, for the baby is killing her. She might refer to a psychological death, due to its conception, since her pregnancy is a reminder of rape. Or she can mean a physical murder: the baby is living out of her without her consent. Unlike the Second Voice, the Third gives birth, but she still feels a lack, for she leaves her baby daughter at the ward. While she struggles with her former identity as a pregnant woman—"There are the clothes of a fat woman I do not know"—, she does not feel wounded, she *is* a wound: "There is an emptiness. / I am so vulnerable suddenly. / I am a wound walking out of hospital" (*CP* 184). The act of leaving her daughter creates her second wound. But ambivalence is not only present in the third woman's monologue: though having a wanted baby and apparently not wounded, the first woman also experiences difficult moments. The excessive medicalization during birth—and its further loss of consciousness—is definitively one of them. Before entering the "blackness" of anesthesia, she summarizes her situation:

> I am the center of an atrocity.
> What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?
>
> Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.
> The trees wither in the street. The rain is corrosive. (*CP* 180)

What happens to her is an "atrocity": her innocent baby is "milking" her life; it is as if he is sucking her life out, like a parasite—which certainly brings to mind Beauvoir's description of the fetus. This is an example of how this woman's perception changes throughout the poem: a natural image for breastfeeding later in her monologue,

"milk" is here represented as a word for draining the mother's energy and nutrients. Other natural elements, "tree" and "rain," are now "withered" and "corrosive." Similarly, while in the ward, the Second Voice's monologue presents images of the natural world as corrosive. There, she is "accused": instead of having psychological support for her miscarriage, she is made to feel worse, and the landscape that she paints for herself is dark: "I am a garden of black and red agonies" (*CP* 180). Her loss is part of the natural cycle of a supportive though draining earth:

> I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.

> She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
> Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
> I know her. I know her intimately—
> Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
> Men have used her meanly. She will eat them. (*CP* 181)

Earth is a provider, but it is also "barren": the situation that this woman is passing through changes her perception of it. Earth is also a "vampire": it will decompose the residues of the fetus, of her baby that did not come to be. And the second woman knows "her intimately": she is close to earth, while men are the responsible for its misuse. Again, these points of connection between women and earth as opposed to men bear resemblance to the reliance on identity that is the basis of ecofeminism. Furthermore, in these verses, men will be "eaten": it is as if the earth will avenge the exploitation—but this woman seems to forget that women will also be decomposed by it. Moreover, unearthly elements are also of great importance in the Second Voice's monologue. Through a hospital window, she observes the earth's satellite, the moon, and relates it to menstruation—the "blood-black sea"—and to "voices of failure" (*CP* 182). This woman is tired and she feels somehow responsible for the miscarriage: "I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create corpses" (*CP* 182). Her body has the possibility of creating but also of killing, as represented in the latter verse. Her infertility, her inability to keep a child, makes her fantasize that she is sexless: "I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman, / Neither a woman, happy to be like a man, nor a man / Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack" (*CP* 182). But she

cannot be a woman like a man or just a man, because she feels a lack; she is not flat; therefore, according to her logic, she is female.

The negativity presented in the monologues can be transfigured into more positive images—except for the Third Voice, who denies her wound and apparently finds no healing.[24] The other two women are able to find comfort, though in different ways. The First Voice is "reassured" among the flowers and birds that surround her house (*CP* 185). She is happy with her son's "normality": he is healthy; she has prepared everything to receive him, and wishes what she believes to be the best for his future (*CP* 186). Regarding the Second Voice, while leaving the hospital, she speaks as if she were a "deformity," lacking "an eye, a leg, a tongue" (*CP* 183). Nevertheless, she starts her healing process:

> The body is resourceful.
> The body of a starfish can grow back its arms
> And newts are prodigal in legs. And may I be
> As prodigal in what lacks me. (*CP* 184)

Her body, like other animals' bodies, is intelligent; she will physically heal like "starfishes" and "newts." It is as if she lost a member that can grow again: she can get pregnant again. Back home, this woman feels like herself again, without "loose ends," it is as if she has put the past aside: "I am bled white as wax, I have no attachments. / I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened, / Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again" (*CP* 184). But, though she can begin again, what she has passed through cannot be erased; she describes herself as another woman, in third person, before revealing her identity: "She is deferring to reality. / It is I. It is I— / Tasting the bitterness between my teeth" (*CP* 184). She recognizes that she is denying her recent bitterness, her recent traumatic experience. Differently from the Third Voice, the Second Voice's recognition that she was denying her pain makes it possible for her to heal. Later, back to her routine with her husband, the second woman acknowledges that she has been "healing": she "recover[s] / From the long fall" (*CP* 187). She identifies as herself again:

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[24] This woman seems to enact trauma; at one point, she tries to deny it: "It is so beautiful to have no attachments! / I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss? / Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?" (*CP* 186). Even the grass, a symbol of life in the second woman's monologue, represents solitude to the third.

I find myself again. I am no shadow
Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife.
The city waits and aches. The little grasses
Crack through stone, and they are green with life. (*CP* 187)

She is no longer a shadow, feeling guilty for the miscarriage, but her body produces a shadow: though she was not a "mountain," round and pregnant like the others, she definitively is not flat; she is not superficial. She also identifies herself as a wife: it is near her husband that she starts to feel better—he is the only man in the poem to be treated positively, which is evidence that there are exceptions to the poem's earlier representation of men. And the final image of *Three Women* is certainly one of reconciliation: the "little grasses" find a way of growing amidst the pavement. Life starts anew, even in the harshest environments; and so the second woman, though her womb has passed through curettage, can nurture a new life. Life is a cycle: one day it is death, in the other it might be life. Earth can kill but it can bring life again as well: just like a woman's monthly reproductive cycle brings the possibility of barrenness but also of new lives.

Conclusion

Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; [...]

—Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines"

Sylvia Plath wrote *Three Women: A Poem of Three Voices* in the light of medication of childbirth, which usually took place in hospital wards—especially in the contexts that she knew: she lived in the United States in the 1950s and was living in England in the 1960s.[25] Throughout the dramatic poem, the ward is negatively represented by the three voices: it is the locus of male gaze over female bodies—doctors are seen as "flat," while pregnant women are round, "mountains." There are several images in which they identify themselves with natural elements such as seeds, through metaphors that highlight women's and earth's fertility. Thus, *Three Women* connects women to earth—especially in the Second Voice's monologue—in opposition to how it represents male rationality. This is precisely the point of connection between women and ecology, as presented by ecofeminist Ynestra King, and the reason why I believe the poem has a (proto)ecofeminist disposition. Furthermore, the Cartesian conception of mastering and possessing nature is reinvented and criticized in *Three Women*, as well as the Cartesian view of the body as a machine: the poem's machine imagery represents a teleological logic that is superficial, flat, and therefore only makes sense to the men in the office, the doctors in the ward or in the "eye" of the rapist represented as a swan. This depiction of men is somehow simplistic, but *Three Women* provides one exception: the second woman finds comfort in the company of her husband—her "sweet one" (*CP* 178)—during her process of healing. Thus, though the poem's representation of male rationality is somehow dualistic (men and women are portrayed as opposed poles), it does not essentialize men as flat—or at least it provides an exception.

Concerning motherhood, *Three Women* shows that, though getting pregnant and giving birth are natural processes, mothering is a social activity—this is clear in

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[25] Plath was raised in the United States, but, after her marriage to Ted Hughes, they lived both in the United States and in England. It was in the latter that she delivered both of her children, and from which she had no intention to come back: among her reasons, was the English free medical care, since she could not afford healthcare in the U.S. (*LH* 472; 498).

the first time that the First Voice sees her baby; there is no instant, "natural," recognition. Thus, the poem shows women's connection to nature, but it also displays how these women are social subjects and therefore not (only) determined by nature—King's view of mothering as a bridge between nature and culture finds an echo in Plath's dramatic poem. By depicting a voice which denied her child and another which wanted her baby while still having to adapt to him, *Three Women* breaks with the view of a maternal instinct: it demystifies motherhood through images that can be associated with Simone de Beauvoir's discussions on the theme. Besides, the poem shows maternal ambivalence, depicting moments that carry a negative connotation of maternity such as when the Third Voice faces an unwanted pregnancy, when the First Voice is sedated for childbirth and loses consciousness, or when the Second Voice believes that she has responsibility for "creating a corpse." These moments—represented by images of parasites, vampires, dark gardens—are connected to negative experiences such as rape, birthing in the ward and suffering the miscarriage of a wanted baby. However, with the exception of the Third Voice, which is the most traumatized, these negative experiences are left behind once the women leave the ward, and more positive images are represented, mostly through natural metaphors. The final view of the poem is that earth is cyclical: it feeds on corpses as well as it creates new lives. Similarly, the Second Voice—the last speaker—has had an abortion but might be a mother in the future. Motherhood is displayed as part of a cycle: although maternity is demystified, women's reproductive cycle cannot be denied—and it is also part of a larger one: the earth's.

Therefore, I believe that, though the opposition between the pregnant women and the male hospital might somehow reinforce nature/culture, mind/body and subject/object dualisms—by placing females as nature, as the bodies in the ward, while the hospital is displayed as the locus of masculine rationality, of science—, this simplification is done with political aims, in order to criticize the ideology that identified women as bodies and nature instead of minds and culture. Furthermore, the "minds" of the doctors and men in general are part of the poem's criticism: opposed to women's pregnant complexity, men are superficial, flat. Thus, the dramatic poem might seem to present a dualistic frame in its representation of men/ward as opposed to women/nature, which could be justified in the name of a larger goal: that of denouncing science's dualistic bias. However, in its representation of motherhood, *Three Women* is beyond nature/culture dualism: for maternity is

displayed as both natural and social; as part of women's "natural vocation" (to use Beauvoir's term) as well as part of their choices, their social lives. In fact, depicting women's complexity seems to be one of the major objectives of *Three Women*: by its plurality of voices and experiences, its constant denial of flattening women, it represents them, through the "bigness" of their pregnant bodies, as images for complexity itself.

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