Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance

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Plate 10: Benvenuto Cellini, saltcellar. Gold, silver, enamel, and ebony, 1540–43.
(Reproduced by permission from Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)
Milk

Visual Rhetorics

One of the most curious works of art brought to the French court from Italy is the figure of Nature by Niccolò Pericoli (known as Il Tribolo), the designer of the Boboli gardens (fig. 3.1). The sculpture was sent to Francis I around 1529 through the efforts of Battista della Palla, the king’s Florentine middleman who busied himself half-requesting, half-demanding precious gifts for Francis, whom he represented as a potential savior of the Florentine Republic.¹ Della Palla may have commissioned the Tribolo statue with the particular tastes of the French court in mind. He had a sense of what his French patron wanted, which translated into this figure of Nature, well suited to the gardens of a king’s rural retreat, and also Rosso’s Moses and the Daughters of Jethro, a “quadro . . . d’ignudi” (canvas of nudes).² Along with antiquities, the king’s desires included contemporary images that were difficult in their iconography and laced with erotic allusiveness.

From the perspective of Italy, the figure of Nature may have seemed particularly appropriate to France—a land thought to be both primitive and particularly rich in earthly abundance. The architect Sebastiano Serlio wrote in his Libro extraordinaire (or Livre extraordinaire) that in his sojourn at Fontainebleau he found himself more often in the company of wild beasts than of men. His rustic

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solitude, however, inspired in the architect a sense of freedom of production, both in quality and quantity, as he “felt [his] mind abounding in new fantasies” and produced images that blur the boundary between art and nature, with grass growing from cut stone and monstrous faces appearing in the blocks themselves (fig. 3.2). The visual rhetoric of Fontainebleau strongly emphasizes both femininity and natural abundance, identifying one with the other, as in Cellini’s image of the Nymph of Fontainebleau (fig. 3.3) and the Tribolo sculpture. Even more striking, as we have seen, are the omnipresent stuccoes of female nudes holding baskets and garlands of fruit, their bodies literally bearing the abundant products of nature.
The relationship between femaleness and nature is expressed in visual terms at Fontainebleau through the rhyming of breasts and fruit, the entangling of limbs with vegetation, the proximity of the feminine and the animal. Analogy between breasts and fruit, so common at Fontainebleau, is made very explicit, for instance, in a print by Jacques Androuet Duerceau, in which the garland of fruit held by a female caryatid in front of her body suggests breasts (fig. 3.4). This is not specific to France; the associations are at least as old as classical antiquity. But in the sixteenth century, a particular association of femininity, nature, and France appears both in visual forms and in the rhetoric that writers (both French and Italian) use in discussing French agricultural production. A cursory glance at the art of Fontainebleau, especially in comparison with that of the High Renaissance in Italy, is enough to suggest an emphasis on femininity and the female body. But understanding how such an emphasis signifies is more difficult given the overdetermination of the concept of femininity, and its compound and conflicting associations in male-centered discourse. In this chapter, I will follow one specific chain of associations the female body is made to bear in sixteenth-century French visual culture, and address the connection of nature and the earth (as both productive and promiscuous).

In the course of the sixteenth century, the figure of the goddess Cybele came to represent a goddess of France identified with the abundant productivity of the land. The productive female body, and specifically the productive breast, appeared in a wide variety of contexts, many of them specifically nationalist. With the Church split by doctrinal struggles, the nation might take on the Church's role of symbolic family, enabling France "herself" to serve as the object of universal fidelity. A brief word about nationalism is in order, because it has become customary to situate
the origins of modern nationalism in the nineteenth (or perhaps the eighteenth) century. Such views (for France, at any rate) may have been overly colored by the cult of personality of Louis XIV, whose personal, solar symbolism eclipsed the symbolic body of the nation in seventeenth-century France. But in the sixteenth century, the word “nation” was omnipresent in French political literature. This is not a modern nation, in the nineteenth-century sense; we might consider it a figure for the king’s mystical body (as opposed to his personal body). But France also represents a people coterminous with its land. “Nature” and “Nation” share a root, the Latin verb nasci, to be born; Nation was a matter of birth, and by extension race (though foreigners could be “naturalized”). As early as the fifteenth century, a female personification of France existed in both text and image: several beautifully illuminated fifteenth-century manuscripts of Alain Chartier’s Le quadriloge inventif present “France,” who exhorts the French to serve their nation, as a woman in a crown and royal robes. In Chartier’s poem, France asks men to devote themselves to their country of birth (“Nature has obliged you above all other things to work for the common good of the country of your birth”).

Chartier’s fifteenth-century version of France is not overtly endowed with productive breasts, which became the primary figure of abundance in the sixteenth century. The productive breast implies a form of generativity distinct from the sacrificial model of the preceding chapter, a national model for wealth as opposed to a religious one. Abundance of all natural things is miraculously produced, in infinite quantity, directly from the land, an ever-renewable resource that gives endlessly of itself. This “feminine” paradigm is distinct from the bloody, “masculine” one of the previous chapter. Yet they are intertwined in significant ways—not least by the fact that milk was understood to be made from blood by the body—and both do ideological work for the monarchy.

The forms of personifications like Abundance, Nature, and Charity, and goddesses like Cybele and Artemis of Ephesus present a fusion of identifiable Italian-inspired classicizing iconography with harder-to-discern elements of local popular religion that associated female saints with long-submerged Gallo-Roman deities or the worship of nature. The line between patron saint and god, personified concept and muse, ancestor and ghost was difficult to maintain, as were distinctions between these figures and statues, icons, or idols. The single trope, prosopopoeia (personification), might be used to conjure any of them.

Prosopopoeia is a term that art historians would do well to revive. We tend to refer to personification “allegory”—a problematic term because it is based on a textual model (and specifically a model of textual, indeed Biblical, criticism). Personification in literature is not unrelated to allegory, but it is more closely related to animal fable and theater. James
Paxson writes that “prosopopoeia” seems to have indicated a means of mimetic character invention [i.e., drama] before it described a mode of rhetorical ornamentation.” He cites the third-century BCE treatise On Style by Demetrius of Phalerum, who wrote that “another figure of thought—the so-called ‘prosopopoeia’—may be employed to produce energy of style, as in the words: ‘Imagine that your ancestors, or Hellas, or your native land, assuming a woman’s form, should address such and such reproaches to you.’” The trope accumulated further associations with faculty psychology, imagination, and the interior life of the soul. In the Psychomachia tradition, which dates back to Prudentius’s fifth-century CE text of that name, personified virtues and vices battle for the human soul; in dream visions, the fiction dramatizes the interactions of personifications of emotions and psychological qualities.

Thus, I’ll refer to the conjuring of an image or figure that embodies a concept, whether in a visual medium or in a text, with the term “prosopopoeia”—or its close Latinate counterpart, “personification.” Both literally mean the making of a face or mask, a persona; so the figures themselves I will call “personae.” Personae are the masks of actors, but also the character performed by the actor’s body. This is especially important for the figures I will discuss in this chapter, whose breasts, or whose bodies, become the very source of meaning and value, sometimes in a very dramatic way. Figures like Abundance, Charity, and especially Nature and France tend to stand alone, not as part of a system of virtues, vice, or other qualities; in many ways the better visual analogy is to icons of the Virgin Mary. As we will see, they are endlessly productive of new meanings. It is partly for this reason that these figures in particular sit uneasily with traditional understandings of allegory. Romantic rhetorical theory would have more correctly identified such figures with the “symbol,” which claims a more profoundly embodied unity with its referent. But following the reemergence of allegory in postmodern theory, as in the work of Craig Owen and Paul de Man, we might see responses to these figures as allegorical, precisely because they refuse to restrict their referents to a single authoritative meaning. Rather, in their productive relation to desire, they generate new meanings and new “readings.”

This productivity is evident in the output of artists inspired by Fontainebleau who later worked outside the court. The underlying connotations of Nature and Art associated with the imagery chosen as personae of France had their own figural trajectory, quite apart from nationalistic propaganda. It is perhaps the excess of associations with the breast—both maternal and erotic—that enables its particular mobilization of affect toward the nation.

This excess produces surprising results in the work of certain artists, among them the Dijonnais sculptor Hugues Sambin and the team of Flemish designer Léonard Thiry and Angevin engraver René Boyvin.
(Sambin and Thiry both worked at Fontainebleau, where they learned the visual vocabulary they later put to other uses.) At court, humanist conversations surrounding artists like Cellini probably provided opportunities to explicate the abstruse significance and textual sources of objects like his celebrated golden saltercellar. But the imagery also replicated itself outside this context. Once mythological imagery used by such court artists as Cellini was translated into prints and book illustrations, precise iconographic referents might become obscure. The widespread availability of prints seems to have fostered confusion among these figures, making them more available to be used in different (and unorthodox) ways.

**Nature/France**

The idea that “mother” Earth should be strongly associated with a “mother” France resonates with the sixteenth century’s received ideas about the wealth of France and its sources. It is useful to scrutinize the ways in which this emphasis is expressed: natural wealth is represented through imagery of a productive, even superabundant, female body. This connection aligns femininity with animality, with constantly renewable and effortless production through the body. This idea also resonates in a religious context. When critiquing the cult of relics, Jean Calvin remarks that if the Virgin Mary had been a cow producing milk her whole life long, she would not have been able to render the quantities collectively claimed as relics by the churches of Christendom. The analogy between agricultural labor and male sexuality—ploughing a field—is part and parcel of these personifications. The focus on the woman’s body as limitless source both effaces her own labor and that of agricultural workers in general in the production of national wealth.

France was often described in the sixteenth century as an abundant mother to neighboring countries because of its natural wealth. Even during the difficult years of the fifteenth century in which Alain Chartier wrote *Le quadriloge invectif*, he still emphasized this characteristic. France’s mantle, covered in precious stones, fleurs-de-lys, and mysterious writings that represent knowledge, is founded upon the wealth produced by the fertility of the land: “At the bottom, which hung toward the earth, one could see interlaced depictions of animals, many plants, fruits and crops that grew upwards from the hem as if from a rich and fertile soil.”

This rich and fertile soil, along with a moderate climate conducive to growing all manner of medicinal plants, was lauded by Symphorien Champier in his *Hortus gallicus* (*The Gallic Garden*), first published in 1533 with the title-page remark “pro Gallis in Gallia scriptus” (written in Gaul for Gauls). Late in the sixteenth century, the prolific political writer Jean Bodin describes France, placed amidst the European powers,
as a mother to them, and to even more distant lands. “From the time that God placed France between Spain, Italy, England, and Germany,” he writes, “he also provided that she would be the nursing mother carrying at her breast the horn of plenty, which never was and never will be empty.” France is thus a nursing mother whose breasts are an ever-filled cornucopia. Bodin goes on to say that a certain King Agrippa declared that France “bathes almost the entire earth with her inexhaustible sources of all riches.”

This is a French nationalist viewpoint. But the reports of Italians in France provide insight into similar external perceptions of France in the sixteenth century. Machiavelli, who visited France several times in the early years of the sixteenth century, wrote in a report that “the crown and king of France are the strongest, richest and most powerful that they have ever been,” due to the consolidation of territories through marriage and primogeniture, and the loyalty of subjects that enabled the king to tax them as much as he desired. The Venetian ambassadors agreed in their high estimation of France’s natural wealth (often with a mind to finding ways for Venice to exploit it for profit). One of them, Michele Suriano, writes, “France was always reputed to be extremely rich and full of all commodities, and most abundant in all things necessary to human life.” This is a universal abundance, by which France is able to import gold: “By this universal abundance in all things that exists in the realm of France, it is estimated that in exchange for fruits of the earth, France imports, in any given year, fifteen million gold écus.” Giovanni Correro aligns the riches and accomplishments of Italy and France with Art and Nature respectively: “Because in Italy there are many more cities, more grand and more magnificent, it has more noble buildings, and in sum everything there is more beautiful that depends (more than on nature) on the industry and ingenuity of man. On the other hand, in France one discovers a land entirely beautiful and good (which cannot be said to the same extent of Italy), beautifully situated, with most fertile terrain, such that it not only produces easily the amount necessary for the use and comfort of the inhabitants, but it also supplies a great abundance to foreigners.”

Unlike Italy, where less fertile land drives people to the ingenuity of art and industry, the land of France is “tutto bello e tutto buono.” The theme of nourishing foreigners recurs throughout the Venetians’ reports as well as in French royal rhetoric of the mid-sixteenth century. Correro’s report emphasizes the profits foreign merchants can make in France, likening France’s natural resources to mines of gold: “Foreign merchants also make more than middling profits there, who come from near and far to buy grain, wine, wool, wheat, cloth, saffron, and other kinds of products. And these things, in my judgment, can be called the mines of France, because without penetrating mountains or digging up
ground, fine minted gold comes to them. Nor should it be feared that they lack currency in gold and silver, because the land, as I have said, easily produces everything.”

Better than gold mines, the natural wealth of France produces—seemingly effortlessly (“gli viene portato”)—not the raw metal but already-minted gold. Praising the wealth of France was a way of praising the king’s generosity to courtiers who included many foreign ambassadors. France also nourished foreigners in its armies: as Machiavelli pointed out in his report on France, the French king preferred to use mercenaries from Switzerland or Germany (the lansquenets, from the German Landesknacht) rather than French subjects in his armies. But France’s agricultural wealth did indeed feed foreigners; high-ranking emissaries did not disdain to broker grain shipments to Florence and Rome. The papal nuncio Ferrerio wrote in 1539 that a hoped-for grain shipment was likely, “considering the abundance that is in this realm, not so much in harvested grain as in the good hopes we have of the new harvest, seeing the fields everywhere covered [in grain] and abundant.” We may discern a certain sense of primitivism in this attitude toward French superabundance in agriculture (resembling colonial attitudes toward the New World, for instance). But there is little condescension in the Venetians’ attitude toward the king of France, who (as they report in one anecdote), “when asked by Charles V how much income he received from his lands in a year, said grandly, As much as I want.” That this is a story also told of earlier kings of France only adds to the association of wealth with the land of France itself.

CYBELE AND ARTEMIS

The degree of luxury suited to the king of such a fruitful land appears amply represented in Benvenuto Cellini’s golden saltcellar (color plate 10), the sculptor’s only surviving work in precious metal, which, after being held in Habsburg (and then Austrian national) collections for centuries, was stolen from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna on May 11, 2003.

This object, made for Francis I in the 1530s, is perhaps the most famous artwork made in France in the sixteenth century. In the art history survey course—and perhaps in the minds of art thieves—it has become a fetish object of mannerism, a textbook example of the excessive luxury, the exquisite preciosity, of sixteenth-century courts. The phrase itself, “golden saltcellar,” seems to suggest a disjunction of form and function—specifically, of valuable material and quotidian function. Like the works sent to Francis by Della Palla, the saltcellar combines a diffuse eroticism with esoteric meaning, adding an appropriate subtext of abundance. In its own time, the saltcellar’s luxuriousness was very much in keeping with its purpose, as salt and pepper were
important substances for the sixteenth-century court. Salt was an important domestic product for France; the tax on it, called the gabelle, was the largest source of royal revenue after the major tax called the taille. Jean Bodin writes of France's salt that it is "a manna that God gives us as a special grace with little labor." Salt was required for the preservation of meat, whose (excessive) consumption was the very sign of aristocratic living. Pepper, on the other hand, was an exotic spice from the east, a sought-after commodity that served both for preservation and for flavoring. It was of equal necessity at the royal table and also represented the idea of the wealth of the Orient and, as an elementally hot food, suggested possible aphrodisiac qualities. At the aristocratic table, the saltcellar itself also marked status—one could be seated either "above the salt" or below it.

The figures on the upper part of the object serve as a prosopopoietic elaboration on the origins of these commodities: the anthropomorphic figure of the Earth (Berecynthia) represents the source of pepper, and the figure of the Sea (Neptune) represents the source of salt. They are also each surrounded by other forms of animal and plant life that derive from them, which together constitute the various types of food that salt and pepper might be called upon to complement. The saltcellar also
contains one of the more famous examples of what I call the “breast-press” (fig. 3.5) in which a female figure presses her own breast as sign of lactation. This is a common motif in sixteenth-century European visual culture. More abstractly, the gesture can suggest any sort of source—for instance, of wealth or wisdom, comfort or fortune. Little female figures appear, two under each pediment, in the framing stuccoes of the Loss of Eternal Youth fresco in the Galerie François Premier (fig. 3.6). In an ornamental frame by Antonio Fantuzzi, a female figure squeezes her breast as if to represent the wealth of the land that is depicted within the frame (fig. 3.7).

Frequently this iconography is associated with the idea of wealth, as in the persona of Abundance (fig. 3.8). Along with Abundance are images of Charity (both the cardinal virtue, also frequently depicted with many children, and the historical Roman Charity) and, most obviously, the Virgin Mary (whether in the typical Madonna-and-child position of nursing mother or Virgo lactans, or the rather more eccentric Lactation of St. Bernard, in which the saint is nourished by a stream of liquid propelled from the Virgin’s breast). In such images the breast is figured as inexhaustible source. Fountains, whether in city squares or elaborate mannerist gardens, frequently employed the female breast to gush water, along with spitting dogs and dolphins, upset vases, and peeing putti (fig. 3.9). Such imagery would also have been familiar to readers of the Hyperboreomachia Poliphili, published in Venice in 1499 and reprinted in France in 1546.

The figure of Nature represents not only abundance but also regeneration. One print by Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau (fig. 3.10), copied from an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi, insists on Nature’s miraculous gifts: “Nourishing all things,” the caption states, “I renew the fallen and restore those about to die.” She even seems capable of reanimating severed limbs—though the restoration implied may be a cyclical regeneration of little benefit to the limb’s original owners.
3.8 Hendrick Goltzius, design for a fountain decorated with a figure of Abundance. Ink and wash drawing, 1598. Louvre, Paris. (Photo J. G. Berizzi © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY)

3.9 Jacques Androuet Ducerceau, design for fountain. Engraving, c. 1550–75. (Reproduced by permission from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris)

The nourishing breast appears in somewhat less overt form atop Cellini’s saltcellar. The identity of the lithe female figure is not immediately obvious to the casual observer; even the fact that she is squeezing her breast may be lost in one’s contemplation of the luxuriously encrusted artifact. Because Cellini used an obscure name for the female figure in his textual descriptions of the saltcellar, and does not employ the traditional iconography of Cybele, she is rarely recognized as an avatar of the earth goddess. However, she is the same divinity seen in the left-hand panel of the Attis fresco in the Galerie François Premier. As Cellini writes,

It was a Golden Saltcellar of an oval shape two-thirds of an arm’s length, and the base was four fingers in height. The principal components of the invention of the Saltcellar were two Figures, one representing Neptune, god of the sea, and the other Bercynthia, goddess of the earth. Neptune surrounded by the waves of the sea, was seated triumphally on a shell drawn by four seahorses. In his left hand he held his trident, and with his right he leaned on a boat intended as a receptacle for the salt. Various fish played in the waves around the boat, on which I had incised battles of sea monsters....

At the other end of the saltcellar, on the shore, a woman of the same dimensions, roundness and metal, represented the earth, who by design met Neptune’s legs with her own, of which one was stretched out and the other bent, as an allusion to mountains and plains. She held in her left hand a little temple of the Ionic order, splendidly decorated, which served to hold pepper, and in her right hand a Cornucopia filled with her richest productions. On the Earth or shore on which she rested, flowers and leaves sprung up, among which various little animals played and battled together. Thus, the earth and the sea were each surrounded by their own animals and ornaments that belong to them.²⁸

Bercynthia is another appellation for Cybele, a name deriving from her mountain of origin. Cellini does not use the traditional turreted headdress and lion-drawn chariot to make her identifiable; his figure, instead, expresses her identity with the earth through the form of her body. Her legs represent different topographies by their shape and position: she represents the earth, as opposed to being the ruler of it, as Neptune is of his domain. An earlier design of Cellini’s saltcellar, made for the Cardinal of Ferrara, contained most of the iconographic elements of the final version; Cellini describes it in his autobiography. The earth and sea appear as “two figures, considerably taller than a palm in height, which were seated with their legs interlaced, suggesting those lengthier branches of the sea which run up into the continents.” The intertwining of the legs of the two figures is far from accidental; Cellini wished “to suggest the interminglement of land and ocean.” (He later alludes to this formal analogy as a “metaphor”: “I had represented Sea and Earth, seated,
with their legs interlaced, as we observe in the case of firths and promontories; this attitude was therefore metaphorically appropriate."") In Renaissance iconography, the interlacing of limbs often alludes to sexual involvement—not only in the case of one limb "slung" over another, as in the two women at the center of the Jean Mignon engraving of women bathing (fig. 1.13), but also in the case of the reclining figures, with legs interlaced, above Rosso’s Attis fresco (fig. 3.11). If Cellini has positioned his figures in what appears to be an erotically allusive way, he may be at pains to justify his choice with an appeal to topography, just as the eroticism of the “breast press” might be explained as a reference to the productivity of the land. Cellini thus converts potentially problematic, erotically charged visual representation into a humanistically rationalized meaning.

The earth presides over a temple that holds pepper, she also holds in one hand a cornucopia ("overflowing with all the natural treasures I could think of"), and is surrounded by terrestrial animals of all kinds. (In the final version, an elephant figures prominently, alluding not only to the earth and the notion of the earth supported by an elephant, but also to India, source of most of Europe’s pepper.) The sea carries a ship to hold salt, and is surrounded by marine creatures. “What remained of the oval,” Cellini wrote in his memoirs, “I filled in with luxuriant ornamentation.”

The loquacious Cellini almost certainly explained the object’s symbolism, as he understood it, to his royal patron. As with the Galerie François Premier, the repetition of a verbal performance of meaning around the object must have constituted a significant part of the courtiers’ perception and understanding of it. But Cellini’s stay was brief, and by the time of the reigns of Francis’s grandsons, the identities imposed by the artist had been forgotten, as had his own authorship. A royal inventory of 1560 construes the female figure as Thetis, a sea nymph and consort of Neptune (it is not clear whether the saltcellar continued to be used at the royal table in the time between Cellini’s departure and the inventory of 1560). As a “triton,” the object was presented to Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol—the brother of the Holy Roman Emperor—as a gift in thanks for his assistance with the wedding of Charles IX (Francis I’s grandson, the second son of Henri II) and
Elizabeth of Austria in 1570. The new Habsburg owners were a further step removed from Cellini. It was not until 1788 that the saltcellar was finally identified as Cellini’s, by Johann Primisser; the attribution was reiterated more famously by Goethe, on a visit to the castle of Ambras ten years later. The misunderstood object was, ironically enough, given away at a time when visual representations of Cybele had gained prominence in royal iconography. In fact, in the entries of Charles IX and Elizabeth, she played an important role, as we will soon see.

Despite the lapses in transmission of specific knowledge about objects from generation to generation of owners, practical knowledge of iconography subsisted in the work of artists, among whom the work performed its meaning differently. In their hands, the iconography could take on new meanings. Though the specific iconographic complexity of Cellini’s description appears to have been lost, it is manifested visually in graphic works of the school of Fontainebleau, particularly in the design for twin salt and pepper holders drawn by Léonard Thiry and engraved by René Boyvin (fig. 3.12). In this design, the iconography of Earth for pepper and Sea for salt is reprised. Thiry and Boyvin’s collaborative style is distinctive, but there are enough stylistic and iconographic commonalities to safely assume that Cellini’s saltcellar was a source both in formal and in iconographic terms. Their Cybele is, however, quite different from Cellini’s. As in Cellini’s version, Cybele’s headdress includes

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3.12 René Boyvin after Léonard Thiry, salt and pepper cellars. Engraving, c. 1550. (Photo © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)
flowers, but it also includes the characteristic turrets of more orthodox representations of Cybele. She is also surrounded by a variety of species of animals, some of which nurse at her many breasts: she has acquired a profusion of breasts and of recipients of nourishment, an expression, perhaps, of the manifold nature of Cybele. Substituted for the individual “breast-press,” then, is a profusion of breasts and associated creatures.

The fat stem of the cup-shaped object is made up of a man and woman engaged in very explicit sexual intercourse, suggestive of I modi; the erotic prints designed by Giulio Romano. Sex here refers to the function of pepper as a purported aphrodisiac, but also to the process of generation that produces all the fruits of the earth. The woman’s body forms a triangle, with one arm and one raised leg supporting the upper part of the cup and her buttocks, the lower vertex of the triangle, firmly planted in the man’s lap. A scrap of fabric trailing down from her inner thigh serves as a strong visual allusion to the man’s inserted penis, as if viewed in cross-section. Erotic imagery that might appear excessive is legitimated by the imperatives of nature. If the decoration of the cover alludes to the earth’s nourishment of creatures in childhood, the center, then, refers to (hetero)sexual intercourse and the process of generation. On the base beneath, the same turreted and many-breasted figure who appears above presides over a ground littered with corpses of humans and animals that echo the living creatures of the cover. If the earth is a giver of life, she is also the material resting place of all creatures in death, creating a cycle of production and destruction. As Boccaccio notes (in the French translation of his Genealogia deorum): “through her great abundance and fertility like a good mother, she nourishes all mortal things and receives in her bosom all things that die.”

In the use of multiple breasts and surrounding animals and in the associated stages “life-generation-death,” suggesting the ever-transformational work of nature, this iconography extends beyond Cybele and alludes to the Goddess Natura. Natura was strongly associated with multiply breasted (or polystis) manifestations of the goddess Artemis of Ephesus, the Diana of the Ephesians against whose cult St. Paul had so vigorously inveighed. The polystis Artemis appears in antique sculptures and coins, from Rome as well as the eastern Mediterranean; numerous examples could be found in Italy in the sixteenth century. Artemis of Ephesus developed a life of her own within Italian humanism, and a well-established place in the visual culture of Italy. She made her way to Fontainebleau, as we have seen, in the Nature figure by Tribolo.

By the 1520s and 1530s, she was generally understood as the goddess of Nature (and not, in fact, as the pagan idol combated by Paul—though by the 1550s, at least, learned author Guillaume du Choul was aware of this connection). Though the figure’s protrusions may not originally have represented breasts, Renaissance versions, as Claudia Lazzaro points out, “are explicitly made breasts by the addition of nipples.” At
the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, where Primaticcio worked with Giulio Romano before going to France, several images of the polymast Artemis exist, one of them a rather bizarre scene in the Casino del Grotto, which may represent Nature as the “stepmother” of humans—as she is sometimes called—presiding over their birth.39

How should we interpret the relationship between Cybele and Natura, or Artemis, in French representations? The “meanings” of Cybele, while multiple, are nonetheless reasonably straightforward: she is the mother of the gods, but also represents the earth and its natural riches, provider of substance and raw matter. Earth has a place in the system of the four elements, but “she” tends to absorb the others and to serve as a universal raw material. The alchemical Traité du feu et du sel of Blaise de Vigenère (a royal secretary who wrote in the 1570s) describes the earth as a womb (matrice) in which all things are engendered. Elsewhere he writes of the earth as the final repository of all matter, and the “universal mother & nurse of all things.”40 This relates her to the figure on the Thiry/Bovin pepper cellar, ruling over life and generation, but also death (seen already in Ducerseau’s Nature) which may in turn imply regeneration; this is an association which can be traced back to Pliny’s Natural History.41

Renaissance notions of nature derived from a range of ancient philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, and Lucretius. To give a sense of the multiplicity of Renaissance notions of nature, I cite a list from Belgian natural philosopher Levinus Lemnius’s Oculata naturae miracula (Secret Miracles of Nature, originally published in Antwerp in 1559):

Nature is a quality infused in things from their beginning and birth.
Nature is the tempering and mixing of the four elements.
Nature is the instinct and inclination of a person’s mind.
Nature is she who gives form to each thing according to its special difference.
Nature is the virtue and efficient cause and conservator of all things:
  who is inserted into the whole world.
Nature (to designate the thing more properly) is the order and
  continuation of divine works: who obeys His power and His words and
  commands, and borrows her force from Him.
Of all these descriptions and of whatever eloquent people might invent,
  the principal cause and origin comes from this eternal spirit, as from
  a very abundant source.42

Lemnius considers Nature both as the individual nature of species, their telos, and as a more general (and divine) life-giving principle. For Aristotle, Nature signified the individual principles of generation and movement of species, and could be abstracted to a general principle of engendering, sexual reproduction, and teleology.43 Lemnius understands her also specifically as a source, a “very abundant” one, which might be
identified with a spring, source of water, or metaphorical liquid nourishment. This identifies her strongly with the imagery of female nymphs (who frequently hold overturned vessels with water flowing from them) and even more with the spouting breasts of fountain statues and the other related imagery we have seen.

The Ephesian Artemis was particularly popular among architects and landscape architects. In Pirro Ligorio’s Villa Pia in the Vatican Gardens, completed in 1561, the central figure of the exterior facade of the Casino (the main building of the villa) was adorned with a statue of Cybele, while in an exactly parallel position on the back wall of the interior was a statue of Artemis of Ephesus. Pirro had previously used a statue of Artemis (fig. 3.13) in the gardens of the Villa d’Este in Tivoli for the Cardinal Ippolito II d’Este. Ippolito had also spent years in France as ambassador of the Este family and member of Francis’s and Henri’s privy councils; his tastes may actually have been influenced by the French court’s. This Renaissance version was based on the one, then in Rome, which is now in Naples at the Museo Capodimonte. The relationship between Artemis and Cybele can be imagined, according to Pirro’s arrangement, as one of interior and exterior: Artemis, more mysterious and hermetic, is hidden inside a building whose exterior is presided over by Cybele. A close relationship between the two goddesses also appears later in the sixteenth century in a fresco by Giorgio Vasari: his Sala degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence contains a secondary scene of the mysteries of Artemis of Ephesus on the wall devoted to the element Earth. Nature is thus the more abstract, recondite concept founded upon the materiality of the Earth.
A strict distinction, however, is difficult to make. The first apparent "confusion" between the iconography of the two goddesses in France appeared in a fresco, now destroyed, that included a polymast figure. A study for the fresco, probably drawn by Primaticcio (fig. 3.14), identifies her as "Cibelle." Because this spelling could have been used in either French or Italian, it is impossible to tell who might have written it and whether or not the inscription postdates the drawing. The hand is sixteenth-century, and the inscription reflects an association made more widely between figures with multiple breasts and the goddess Cybele. One Fontainebleau artist, Antonio Fantuzzi, was known to have taken a specific interest in ancient statues of Artemis; Guillaume du Choul refers specifically to his drawing (of a statue found in Rome, possibly the one now in Naples) in his Discours de la religion des anciens romains of 1559. "The ancients also figured the image of this Cybele with a great number of Breasts," he writes, and with animals that "show that this was Diana."47

Analogies between the cults and images of Artemis of Ephesus and Cybele, in fact, date to the ancient world. Along with Artemis, Cybele was identified, at one time or another, with other goddesses who share some of their attributes, primarily maternal productivity: Ceres, Rhea, Berezynthia, Ops, the Magna Mater, Mater Idaea, the Bona Dea, the Dea Syria, Gaia, Terra or Tellus, sometimes Aphrodite. In The Goddess Obscured, Pamela Berger tracks mutations in the worship of the "grain protectress," her term for an earth goddess who appears under many names. Berger argues that this Cybele-like figure gave rise to stories of grain miracles performed by the Christian God on behalf of female saints. Berger documents the survival of traditions relating to the worship of a maternal earth figure into the nineteenth or even twentieth century, detailing ritual processions at harvest and sowing time and belief in fairies and other spirits, as well as the grain miracles of female saints that point to roots in pagan mythology. The Virgin Mary took
over some of the attributes of Cybele; the phrase “Mater Deorum” or, contracted, “Mater Deùm” (mother of the gods) became the “Mater Dei” (mother of God).

The veneration of Cybele—as a stone idol processed through the fields in a cart and destroyed through the intervention of the bishop Simplicius—also appears much earlier in the Liber in gloria confessorum of Gregory of Tours, who locates this practice in Autun. Gregory, aware of erudite “pagan” sources, uses the same name, Berecynthia, as did Cellini (much later). As Berger writes, “Even though . . . the Christian observers of the mother goddess ceremonies adopted a Romano-Oriental name for the mother goddess . . . that appellation was merely superimposed on a deeply rooted figure that had probably been venerated in some form for millennia.”

It is very difficult to know with any certainty just how deeply rooted in popular custom such a figure might have been; we should not accept the idea of transmission across such a vast span of time uncritically. But reverence for maternal bodies, and a corresponding emphasis on the breast’s productivity, certainly occurs in objects made by peoples distant in space and time (among them, Indian and Mesopotamian cultures). The abundance of names and associations itself expresses the goddess’s copious material gifts and expresses a kind of geographic promiscuity; Cybele’s turreted iconography was also, from Hellenistic times, the emblem of tutelary divinities of cities and countries. Cybele and her iconography were topographically mobile, expressing ambiguity between the land as universal Earth and the land as particular locale.

In the case of France, the national land is particularly strongly associated with Cybele for several different reasons. As we have seen, a well-known pseudoetymology linked the Galli, the priests of Cybele, with the Gauls. The cult of Attis and Cybele was, in fact, widely observed in Roman Gaul, particularly in Lyon, thus Lugdunum; the arms of the modern city itself bear Cybele’s influence (the city is represented by a turreted female figure with two lions, Lyon). Some combination of archaeological remains and oral history of the cult may have influenced ideas about Cybele in the sixteenth century. In the early modern period, people may well have been aware of small figures of mother goddesses and other female goddesses of Abundance made in Roman Gaul, which, “fashioned under the influence of Roman naturalism” that Berger contends represented Celtic goddesses “syncretized with Demeter, Tellus/Ceres, and the Great Mother Cybele.” Numerous objects of this kind, found in France, are present in the collection of the Musée des Antiquités Nationales at St-Germain-en-Laye outside of Paris. In 1559 Guillaume du Choul mentioned inscriptions related to the cult of Cybele and Attis found in France, especially in the southwestern town of Lectoure, as well as three medals of Cybele found in Reims during
the writing of his book. “From the inscriptions in our Gaul, and principally in Lectoure, where there are a great number of ancient epitaphs, which all speak of the Mother of the Gods... one can learn that the sacrifice made by ancient priests to the Mother of the Gods with great pomp was known as the ‘taurobolium’.\[53\]

Furthermore, the region around Paris was connected in legend to another goddess frequently associated with Cybele, the Egyptian goddess Isis. This connection, according to Gilles Corrozet, was current in sixteenth-century France; Paris was even given the dubious etymology Para-Isis, “near [the temple of] Isis,” corresponding with the fabled Celtic city of Dis (d’Is[is]) and with the notion that an Isis cult existed in what is now the neighborhood of St-Germain-des-Prés.\[54\] Corrozet writes, “Some say that near this city in the place called St-Germain-des-Prés was a temple dedicated to an Idol of the goddess Isis who, according to Jean Lemaire [des Belges] was the queen of Egypt, and wife of the great Osiris called Jupiter the just, and that the statue was seen at the place called St-Germain-des-Prés, which is true, because many of our own time have seen it.”\[55\]

Along with the local connection is a recurring notion of the mother goddess’s foreign origin, whether Cybele or Artemis in Rome, Isis or Berecynthia in France. The goddess might replace local traditions—a civilizing substitute similar to the substitutions of sacrifice. The folk procession of the goddess’s chariot calls up associations (at least in the minds of Christian writers) with the ceremony commemorating the arrival of Cybele by boat to Rome, heralding victory in the Second Punic War.

Some images of Cybele, Artemis, or Isis are given black faces and hands, which might allude, in Europe, to the idea of a foreign origin, whether Eastern Mediterranean or African. On the other hand, when black stone was used in images of the goddess(es), it might have resonated with the volcanic stone of the idol of Cybele (an incarnation of the goddess that is depicted in Mantegna’s Arrival of Cybele in Rome in the National Gallery, London). France’s Auvergne, the volcanic region of the Massif Central, appears to have been the center of the cult of the Black Virgin in France in the sixteenth century. A survey of black images of the Virgin made around 1550 shows a high concentration there, possibly related to the presence of obsidian. (Some Black Virgins may also have been the result of years of accreted smoke from nearby candles.) The survey was taken during a time of Protestant iconoclasm, when these images were being destroyed as idolatrous, possibly because of pagan associations. In European imaginations, blackness may have seemed to refer to Cybele’s earthy or mountainous (as well as foreign) origins.\[56\] These figures and other images of the Virgin were processed in times of crisis for purposes of agricultural production, just as images of
Cybele had reportedly been carried through the fields. It seems ironic that Cybele or Artemis, as goddesses of the earth and nature, should be marked as foreign, either by skin color or by stories of foreign origin. But their iconography was perpetually transferable to local goddesses. The stories of Cybele's arrival and the practice of procession enacted repeated appropriations, as if the earth must perpetually be reclaimed; in an agrarian society this was true for the very basic fact of seasonal change. It also resonated with marriage processions (and, at the highest level of society, with the arrival of a foreign queen, a not uncommon occurrence dictated by royal exogamy). As we have seen, artists and patrons transformed and adapted the iconography for their own purposes; a specifically French idiom for the iconography of multiple breasts appeared in royal entry ceremonies, where it served to glorify France and French royalty.

**Fertile Gaul's Fat Breasts**

In preceding sections, I have dwelt upon the transformations and multiple significations of Cybele and Artemis in their French manifestations. By midcentury in France, the iconography of multiple breasts had come to be commonly used to represent the Earth and/or Nature. The breast—whether in this explicitly multiple manifestation, or, more metaphorically, as a miraculously productive organ—became a significant element of national personification in sixteenth-century French constructions of national identity. Cybele's iconography is, as I have mentioned, echoed in that of the tutelary divinities of cities and locales (as in the arms of the city of Lyon). In the sixteenth century she came to figure as a representation of France. Perhaps more strikingly, the specific iconography of multiple breasts was used to represent Gaul; and further, the image of Cybele became strongly attached to an individual woman, Catherine de' Medici, in an extension of the classical mythology of royalty developed by Francis I.

The transferability of the goddess—to which I pointed in the preceding section—has resonances in the ceremonial use of Cybele iconography by French monarchs. The idea of arrival as conquest was replayed in the entries in which French kings (and queens) took symbolic possession of their own cities. Entries—celebratory events organized by cities with varying degrees of control by the monarch—had taken place in the Middle Ages, but a significant change occurred in the sixteenth century. Medieval entries involved a variety of festivities, mystery plays, mummary, bergeries (pastoral scenes), tableaux vivants, and the presentation of gifts that traditionally included ypocras, or spiced wine. Tapestries were hung from the houses that frontal the major streets, and citydwellers donned their finest clothes to appear both as audience and participants. These