



Special Collections

Constance Beresford-Howe

Biocritical Essay

by

Lorraine McMullen

©1996 Reproduced with permission

"I can't remember now whether it was before or after beginning a novel set in the London slums that I planned another about Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. By way of research, I read a column of fine print in a battered *Pears Encyclopedia*.... Only after several pages of scribbling did it occur to me that, just possibly, I wasn't quite ready yet to write an epic. Next year, perhaps...."⁽¹⁾ Constance Beresford-Howe's fascination with words dates from early childhood, and by thirteen she was already planning "to become a rich and famous author" and had "begun to scribble".⁽²⁾ Brought up in the Montreal suburb of Notre Dame de Grace in the Depression years, she escaped the stress of family financial problems and the tedium of long periods in bed with rheumatic fever through reading and writing. Her library consisted of classics her father had collected before emigrating to Canada and nineteenth-century novels her mother had purchased when working in a Toronto bookstore.⁽³⁾ Her youthful attempt at writing of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow recalls Margaret Laurence's young Vanessa MacLeod of *A Bird in the House* writing about an ancient Egyptian queen.⁽⁴⁾ And, like Laurence, Beresford-Howe was encouraged in her writing by high school teachers and first published in university papers, in her case the *McGill Daily* and the McGill student paper *Forge*.

When as an undergraduate Beresford-Howe wrote her first novel, she wisely set it in Notre Dame de Grace, the Montreal suburb in which she lived with her parents. The acceptance of this first novel the year of her graduation was a heady experience for the young writer. *The Unreasoning Heart* won the Dodd, Mead annual Intercollegiate Literary Fellowship of \$1,200 in a competition which was opened to Canadian as well as American students for the first time that year, 1945. Beresford-Howe learned of the award shortly before graduating with her honours B.A., and with the Shakespeare Medal for highest standing in English and the Peterson Prize for Creative Writing.⁽⁵⁾ As well as its acceptance by Dodd, Mead, *The Unreasoning Heart* was published in *Redbook* in 1946.⁽⁶⁾ An early and auspicious beginning to a writing career.

"Love's a funny thing; no logic to it. Who was it said 'The heart has its reasons?'"

In *The Unreasoning Heart*⁽⁷⁾ Beresford-Howe writes of an unusual family, consisting of five adults and one child: the family matriarch, the fiftyish Fran Archer; her two adult sons, Con and David; David's ambitious, social climbing wife, Fay; and Fran's brother Teddy with his eleven-year-old daughter Paule. Con, a successful businessman and the family's only obvious breadwinner, is also the family's ugly duckling, brusque and unemotional, bitter at his mother's obvious preference for his younger, charming, and handsome brother. David is a weak-willed man unable to break from his adoring and possessive mother. Teddy, equally weak-willed, is an alcoholic. Paule is a refreshingly normal eleven-year-old. As the domineering head of the family, Fran is observant, witty, and impossibly besotted with her one son while admitting her lack of affection for the other. Fran, trying to explain the difference in her feelings for her sons, says to David, "Funny there should be such a difference in my--in my sympathies--when you're both my own flesh and blood. From the first, Con was self-reliant--you were delicate and sensitive and seemed to need me. Oh, well--love's a funny thing; no logic to it. Who was it said 'The heart has its reasons?'" (31). Fran's differing attitude to her two sons provides the impetus for the novel, which concerns the interaction of family members over one year, the year following Fran's invitation into the family of orphaned sixteen-year-old Abbey, daughter of a childhood friend. Abbey is a believable adolescent who veers between giggling accomplice to eleven-year-old Paule and school-girl romantic in love with thirty-two-year-old Con.

The Unreasoning Heart has its share of melodrama: David's disappearance and later suicide, Fran's nervous breakdown and extended illness, Con's near marriage to the wrong woman. Con's decision to reject the predatory widow next door to wait for the adolescent orphan who adores him to grow up comprises the novel's supposedly satisfactory closure. But the reader cannot help wondering how satisfactory life will be for the youthful orphan who has found a home with this dysfunctional family. To make this decision more credible, Abbey is shown to change during the course of the year from a large, awkward sixteen-year-old to a graceful, responsible seventeen-year-old.

The novel is well crafted. Description of the changing seasons signals the passage of time. Limiting virtually all of the action to the Archer house creates a claustrophobic atmosphere which effectively mirrors the household's oppressive matriarchal control. With much of the text consisting of conversation, dialogue is realistic. The omniscient narrator observes the family primarily from the perspective of the new member of the family as she tries to locate herself in the unusual household. Anne Wilkinson is correct in viewing the handling of narrative voice as the novel's weakness: "When using a child or an adolescent as the mirror of events the author sets herself a double task; first she must give a reasonable facsimile of the emotions peculiar to youth, and second, convince the reader that these are not also the reactions of the author. Miss Beresford-Howe fails to persuade that there is an adult intelligence behind the scenes."⁽⁸⁾ The narrative mode which Beresford-Howe attempts is similar to that effectively used by Sinclair Ross in many of his stories written in the 1930s and 1940s, and later by Margaret Laurence in the stories of *The Bird in the House* (1963) and Alice Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). While Beresford-Howe herself later dismisses the novel as "a bad book",⁽⁹⁾ *The Unreasoning Heart* remains impressive as the first novel of a twenty-two-year-old.⁽¹⁰⁾ The characterization of Fran is the first of Beresford-Howe's unflattering portraits of mothers.

At McGill Beresford-Howe had met Professor Harold G. Files, from whom she took several courses, including in her fourth year Creative Writing. It was Professor Files who arranged for publication in *Forge* of

a story she had written for his course. She was even further encouraged when *Saturday Night* paid her fifty dollars for another story, "Martha and God and the Bright Blue Marble on a Dusty Road".⁽¹¹⁾ A summer working in an office had earlier convinced Beresford-Howe that office work was not to her liking and now, with the early success of her writing, her tentative consideration of a career in high school teaching faded, and she decided to continue her education at the graduate level with a view to an academic and writing career.⁽¹²⁾

After completing an M.A. at McGill in 1946 with a thesis on Virginia Woolf,⁽¹³⁾ Beresford-Howe began doctoral studies at Brown University, Rhode Island, assisted by a two-year provincial scholarship. She continued publishing short stories in *Forge* and the *McGill Daily* and in 1946 began publishing short fiction in the *Canadian Home Journal* and in 1947 in *Maclean's Magazine*. Her short fiction, as her early novels, conforms to the patriarchal ideology of the prefeminist 1940s and 1950s. In "The Boss Has a Baby",⁽¹⁴⁾ a young secretary in love with a seemingly aloof young boss wins his heart with her skill in caring for a baby he finds himself responsible for. In "The Pearl",⁽¹⁵⁾ a secretary is awakened from her infatuation with her employer, a successful but selfish and manipulative writer, through the efforts of a less personable but high-principled young man. "The Veil",⁽¹⁶⁾ is a sentimental religious story of the Easter season. In "One Plus One",⁽¹⁷⁾ a brusque, efficient woman scientist falls in love with her assistant when he becomes ill and she nurses him back to health; the story suggests that her emotional and social immaturity is due to her excessive zeal for her work. Beresford-Howe seemed equally zealous; in 1947, when she was in her second year of doctoral studies, her second novel was published.

"an improbable college and...an improbable staff"

In structure and narrative mode *Of This Day's Journey*⁽¹⁸⁾ is more innovative than the earlier novel. On one level narrating the activities of a single day, on another retrospectively encompassing the past year in the lives of Cam Brant, newly appointed lecturer in a small college English Department, and those she has affected during the course of that year. The novel is divided into three sections: "Morning", "Afternoon", and "Evening", with a different narrator for each section: Olive Pymson, with whom Cam shared an apartment narrates "Morning", Cam "Afternoon", and Andrew Cameron, college president, with whom Cam has a brief affair, "Evening". A gender-reversed parallel with Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is obvious: Olive, a middle-aged woman replaces Bloom, Cam, Stephen, and Andrew, Molly. The day of the action is the day in which Cam is leaving the college and the town.

Cam, a recent McGill and Radcliffe graduate taking up her first appointment, intrudes into the small college family much as Abbey, the orphan, intruded into the Archer family, and, like Abbey, affects everyone she meets. The English Department rake attempts to seduce her, the college's confirmed bachelor proposes marriage, the college president with a crippled wife falls in love with her, and the most brilliant but rebellious student is tamed by her. One wonders whether she is an idealized version of the author's dreams for her own future or perhaps of the youthful lecturer Gertrude Mason, whom Beresford-Howe so admired during her one-year tenure at McGill University.⁽¹⁹⁾

The lovers are portrayed as helpless in the toils of passion, the overwhelming nature of their sexual attraction allowing them to be viewed as victims. That Andrew, a handsome and attractive man -- although the same age as the spinster Olive -- can be the object of the passion of the lively youthful Cam, conforms to the male

values of contemporary society. While Cam is ready to give up all for love, her cautious lover is not. Fifteen years her senior, Andrew is not about to forego his sinecure at the college for love. Beresford-Howe offers a more positive relationship in that of the two women. Olive, a loner, is surprised by the depth of her friendship with the younger woman to whom she had impulsively offered a home. As Cam becomes increasingly troubled by her relationship with Andrew, she seeks emotional support from Olive, who takes on a maternal role. The depiction of Andrew's disabled wife reflects contemporary attitudes. The author as well as the characters apparently assume that being confined to a wheel-chair precludes all normal activities and relationships. Restricted to her home, deprived of all social intercourse except the occasional visitor for tea, small wonder she seems bitter. Her handicap, however, allows Andrew's fall from grace to be viewed sympathetically.

To a large extent the characters are stereotypical. Olive is the old maid with the acid tongue and ugly face, but heart of gold. The beautiful and intelligent Cam is too perfect and at times overwrought. As with the earlier novel, dialogue is realistic, but in this novel nature description is somewhat overwritten. Olive's acerbic wit adds a humour that had been lacking in *The Unreasoning Heart*. Scenes between women are better drawn than those between men or involving both men and women. The college milieu is not always credible; for example, it is improbable that at twenty-two Andrew would have been appointed to the academic staff of a college presumed to have very high standards. Nor to the presidency five years later. Despite her student experience of university, Beresford-Howe's sortie into academia does not ring completely true.

Of This Day's Journey received less attention from critics than the preceding novel despite its more innovative narrative mode. Writing in "Letters in Canada", Claude Bissell shares my view that Beresford-Howe "has created an improbable college and given it an improbable staff", and considers that the "unorthodox narrative technique" fails because of the similarity of tone of the three parts.⁽²⁰⁾ The novel did, however, win the attention of the influential book editor of the *Globe and Mail*, William Arthur Deacon, who not only praised it in a review⁽²¹⁾ but also wrote to the author to express his admiration for her work: "But when I was through with the luckless lovers, I had nothing but praise for you and utter confidence in your future. Any author who can write as you do--based on straight thinking first and verbal facility second--has no need of anybody's sympathy". In the same letter, Deacon advises Beresford-Howe not to publish so frequently:

Further, to talk to you parentally, you should not pump yourself out like this annually. It's no good for long-range policy. The tank has to be re-filled. Few writers who arrive in their twenties amount to much in their middle forties, when powers should be at their ripest. Certainly you are clever, probably intense, but do take care of the machinery. Your study plus creative work is a strain. Besides, there is this practical point that very few readers return every 12 months even to a favorite author. At this rate of production, your books will compete with each other.⁽²²⁾

Despite Deacon's warning, Beresford-Howe's production of fiction did not lessen; her third novel appeared two years later.

"I wonder if you've come to the invisible gate...."

I think of that gate as the symbol of a big moral issue".

The Invisible Gate⁽²³⁾ returns to Montreal's Notre Dame de Grâce for its setting. Beresford-Howe effectively captures the atmosphere of postwar Montreal as soldiers are returning from World War Two. Again she focuses on an unusual family; with both parents dead, twenty-eight-year-old Hannah Jackson has taken on the roles of both breadwinner and housekeeper--responsible for a younger sister, an adolescent brother, and a three-year-old niece.

As in her two previous novels, Beresford-Howe initiates action through the advent of an intruder. Will Ames, an army captain and longstanding friend of Hannah Jackson, returning home with the expectation of marrying her, brings with him Noel Carter, a decorated hero and his best friend. In this instance Noel, the intruder, precipitates several romantic triangles: Hannah falls in love with the charming, calculating, and ambitious war hero, and is torn between the opportunistic Noel and her longtime affection for Will; Noel, while responding to Hannah's love, also courts her younger sister Laurel, who refuses to believe that he seeks only her inheritance. And Noel's attentions divert Laurel from her romance with a reliable and wealthy young suitor.

The ideology Beresford-Howe expounds in this novel conforms to women's expectations in a patriarchal culture. Hannah is only mildly rebellious at her role. "I don't know why we women go on doing nine-tenths of the world's dirtiest and toughest jobs...and men are so free..." (42-43) she complains, only to agree when her older, and presumably wiser male companion replies, "Women are wiser, that's why....They know that real happiness is in serving other people, not in being free" (43). Her conception of an ideal future is limited and somewhat contradictory: "Free at last--a well-dressed, well-read, poised woman, happy because she was secure as only a woman can be in a man's bodily and spiritual love" (122). Despite such romantic notions about herself, Hannah veers to a more calculating view of marriage for her fragile and impractical younger sister: "I wish you'd be sensible....A good marriage is the best thing you can hope for, with your health. Your money won't last five years, the way you'll spend it. And then what? You can't afford to be so damned high-handed with a decent offer" (136).

In its conformity to traditional romance formula *The Invisible Gate* is closer to Beresford-Howe's magazine fiction than to her two earlier novels. None of the characters is as memorable as the matriarchal Fran Archer, and the novel lacks the humour that spinster Olive Pymson brought to *Of This Day's Journey*. "Letters in Canada" considered the novel better than *Of This Day's Journey*, however, admiring Beresford-Howe's "lively talent", and the "easy fluency" of her prose.⁽²⁴⁾

After two years residence at Brown University, Beresford-Howe began looking for a teaching position. She rejected an offer from Smith College in order to return to McGill when her mentor, Professor Files, now English Department Chair, offered her a position.⁽²⁵⁾ Happily her course load at McGill included a Creative Writing course and she numbered among her colleagues in the English Department writers Louis Dudek and Hugh MacLennan. The work involved in teaching during her early years at McGill, however, slowed Beresford-Howe's production of fiction. As well, her next novel, *My Lady Greensleeves*,⁽²⁶⁾ required considerable research. With her doctorate on Hamlet completed by 1950,⁽²⁷⁾ she delved into sixteenth-century England for the true story on which she based her fiction. The novel has its origin in an actual situation in which a nobleman divorced his wife for adultery, the children were taken from their mother, and

her husband refused to return her dowry. Eventually the woman was cleared of the charge of adultery, despite many witnesses against her. Her lover, increasingly involved in legal disputes concerning his property, eventually lost his estate entirely. In an Appendix to the novel explaining the facts on which her novel is based, Beresford-Howe says that she has reflected the personalities of the actual lovers in her protagonists, and that letters in her novel, "sometimes echo phrases from [the] actual correspondence".

Beresford-Howe's description of everyday life, of attitudes and relationships, rings true. Women are well aware of the restrictiveness of their lives. Through the protagonist Avys's closeness to her two married sisters and especially through her supportive relationship with her husband's widowed sister Elinor, the novel reveals the necessity for women of sisterly family connections. "Each marriage is like the next, I dare say....A prison, be it never so comfortably furnished" (10), opines the protagonist. Her twelve-year-old daughter, who would rather read her father's books than prepare to meet the man she is soon to marry, startles her mother by complaining, "Why cannot girls go to school at Oxford and be students there? I would love above all things to learn at Oxford" (41).

For the first time, Beresford-Howe turns from the trials and tribulations of courtship to write of a marriage and its difficulties. While the novel focuses on the situation of women in Elizabethan England, it is Avys's husband who is best drawn; he is a credible character, quick tempered, violent, unaccustomed to considering his own emotions or those of others, and now struggling to grasp his own feelings for his wife, daughters, and sister, torn between his pride and his love for his wife. The novel was a popular success, with a paperback edition planned for six months after its first publication, but drew little attention from critics.⁽²⁸⁾ It was Beresford-Howe's last fictional foray into Elizabethan England. In fact, it was her last novel for eighteen years, a surprisingly long hiatus.

Beresford-Howe kept busy, however. Her academic work continued to consume most of her time. As well as teaching at McGill, in 1957 she taught creative writing at the University of British Columbia. In the late 1950s and early 1960s she also wrote extensively for *The Montrealer* as a contributing editor. Her contributions included book reviews, informal essays, profiles of well-known Montrealers, including Dr. Hans Selye, Dr. David Murphy, surgeon-in-chief at Montreal Children's Hospital, and McGill colleague Frank Scott,⁽²⁹⁾ and for three years, 1963 to 1965, she wrote a monthly column reviewing classical and jazz recordings.

Marriage and motherhood also had their effect on Beresford-Howe's output. In 1960 she married high school teacher Christopher Pressnell, and in 1967 her son Jeremy was born. Political unrest in Montreal led to Beresford-Howe leaving McGill in 1969 and moving with her family to Toronto. In the hiatus between leaving McGill and accepting a position with Ryerson Polytechnical Institute two years later, Beresford-Howe at last found sufficient time to devote to writing and published in 1973 what remains her best known novel, *The Book of Eve*.⁽³⁰⁾

*"How annoying for God (not to mention Adam),
after all, if Eve had just walked out of Eden without
waiting to be evicted, and left behind her pangs of
guilt, as it were, with her leaf apron?" (7)*

The Book of Eve is the first of three novels in the trilogy Beresford-Howe termed "The Voices of Eve". Like Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* (1954), Beresford-Howe's novel begins where Ibsen's *Doll House* left off, as a woman walks out on her marriage. But while Ibsen's Nora and Wilson's Maggie Lloyd are able-bodied young women, Beresford-Howe's protagonist is overweight, hypertensive, and elderly, an unconventional heroine to choose an alternative story in which to reinvent herself.

This complex, multileveled novel was a major departure for Beresford-Howe. An ironic quest, it revisions the Biblical story of Eve, turning the myth of Adam and Eve upside down; a feminist novel, it defies readers' expectations, its elderly middle-class protagonist rejecting the restraints of her longtime role in a patriarchal marriage to live alone in a tenement basement and augment her limited income foraging in the parks for other people's cast-offs.

Abruptly walking out of her Eden, a comfortable home in Montreal's NDG, and finding her way to a small basement apartment in an east end tenement, Eva says, "Apartness was just what I craved" (11), and on awakening the first morning of her new life, "I opened my eyes into a perfect self-centered bliss without past or future, and rejoiced in everything I saw"(13). But the dingy subterranean apartment is not Elysium; it is a metaphorical underworld. Loneliness, physical illness, poverty, psychological illness, all tempt her to return to her former life, prison though it had been.

The narrative exists on two parallel lines. As Eva narrates her own story of these months, she also reflects on her past, with flashbacks to events in her childhood, young adulthood, and married life helping her explore her past and consider her future. A Hungarian Czech refugee twenty years her junior is the novel's intruder and Eva's catalyst for change. An intellectual blue-collar worker and gourmet cook, as unlikely to have entered her earlier middle-class world as the battered stray cat she adopts, and with whom he is compared, he teaches her to accept human relationships despite the risks involved. Her action that spring, with his help opening her basement door to the outside world, after being jammed shut for years, signifies her emergence from her underworld, her resurrection to a new, responsible life. Like Ethel Wilson's Maggie Lloyd, Eva learns that the "perfect, self-centred bliss" she rejoiced in when she first left her marriage is not the object. Only in accepting engagement with others, with her immigrant lover and the other members of her extended tenement family, can she redefine herself and turn her underworld into a new Eden. "Now I'm neither wife, maid, nor mother. But I'm myself for the first time nearly, since I was a teen-ager like you" (85), Eva explains to her granddaughter.

Written as feminism was on the rise in North America, Eva's story can be read as a female quest. In common with many such quests, Eva's is spiritual or internal, though it has its spatial counterpart in Eva's short trip from her comfortable suburban home to Montreal's east end. Setting out alone, as questors do, Eva overcomes psychological and physical obstacles as well as temptations to return to her marriage-prison and to reject connection with others. She is helped by her Czech-Hungarian Dionysian hero, and a female guide, her old friend Mae, now dead, but an important part of the past she reconsiders. Descending to the basement underworld, Eva is reborn in the spring. As with so many female questors, what Eva first wanted, "self-centred bliss, without past or future", is not what she achieves, an understanding of her past and acceptance of the future with her new extended family.

The novel was well received by critics and the general public. Russell Kent in *Fiddlehead* admired the

realism and complexity of the protagonist.⁽³¹⁾ Audrey Thomas termed the book "brave and comic", although finding the resolution "rather too pat".⁽³²⁾ Also, it won the Canadian Booksellers Association Award, and also won the praise of feminists in a period of increasing feminism and developing interest in women's studies. As a result, Beresford-Howe's name became well known in both Canadian literary circles and the feminist movement.

"A Victorian heroine absurdly placed in the twentieth century"

A thirty-year-old spinster provides Beresford-Howe's second voice of Eve. In *A Population of One*⁽³³⁾ Willy Doyle is only beginning to write her own story after her mother's death, as she leaves WASP Toronto for the more cosmopolitan Montreal and her first university appointment, five years after completing her Ph.D., and takes on "the Project"--"to marry somebody as promptly as possible--or at the very least to have an affair" (1). As in *The Book of Eve*, Willy tells her own story, but unlike *The Book of Eve*, she tells it in the present tense, lending an air of immediacy to her narration.

A specialist in the nineteenth-century novel, the naive and inexperienced Willy seeks to construct herself as a sophisticated modern woman, but soon reads herself as a nineteenth-century heroine: "In fiction I would be that anomaly, a Victorian heroine absurdly planted in the twentieth century, a Lucy Snowe in modern Montreal" (38).

The main narrative strategy is intertextual. The analogy between Willy's experiences and those of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) is continued throughout the novel. In Brontë's novel, the lonely and isolated heroine travels to Brussels to teach at a girls' school, falls in love with a handsome and kindly young doctor who rejects her, and finally becomes engaged to the moody, brusque, older Monsieur Paul, a fellow teacher. Beresford-Howe's Willy, travelling to Montreal to teach at a university, falls in love with a handsome colleague, who proves to be an impotent, mother-fixated hypochondriac, then finds to her surprise that the real object of her affections is the sixty-year-old department head. Like Lucy's Monsieur Paul, he is neither young nor handsome. He is, however, intelligent and perceptive (and, in common with *The Book of Eve*'s lover, an excellent cook). After helping Lucy establish a small girls' school, Monsieur Paul sails for the West Indies promising to return in three years, only to be lost at sea on his return journey. Unfortunately, the conclusion to Willy's "Project" is parallel. Willy's fiancé dies of a heart attack on a trip to Jamaica. In living the novel, the self-aware Willy seems not to have expected the similar ending, but when it comes she decides like Lucy to accept her single status, and remains as isolated as Lucy Snowe.

A series of amusing set pieces dramatizes Willy's attempts to explore her autonomous possibilities and cope with academic politics and the advances of assorted males, from her lecherous apartment superintendent to a rebellious student. Willy's wry humour, reminiscent of Eva's, is appropriate for the novel's anti-romantic stance. Her scenes with the English Department's handsome young bachelor, with whom she hopes to fulfill "the Project", are neither romantic nor erotic. "All I feel is a mild surprise at how heavy it is" (138), she says when he stretches out on the sofa with his head in her lap. Her carefully planned motor trip with him develops into a series of comic incidents, in which not even her black baby-doll pyjamas can bring fulfillment of "the Project".

Willy's final monologue is reminiscent of that of Rachel in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* (1966):

I will always be alone. Single. Celibate. And I will make no more ridiculous efforts to be otherwise. I belong to no sisterhood, unless it is of aunts. I am a schoolteacher. A bachelor. A cat-owner. Soon I will be a solitary householder, surrounded by the furniture of my parents' lives. I will take up gardening. One day at a time is how I will live. Perhaps I'll become a bird-watcher or go to yoga classes. Doubtless I will lie awake at night, and sometimes ache and sometimes weep....

I shall look in no mirrors, except for laughs. If I feel like it, I will get fat, or adopt Christian Science, or rent a dog. (201)

Yet Beresford-Howe's conclusion lacks the hope and optimism of Laurence's Rachel. There is a bleakness about Willy's resignation: "Loneliness is just a condition, like arthritis or claustrophobia. Incurable. And far from enviable. But it's my condition, and I'm at last prepared to face it; even accept it. Eventually, in spite of my talent for being absurd, it may be possible to salvage a kind of dignity out of it. There is a modest satisfaction, even a sort of art, in island dwelling. Lucy Snowe found it, and so will I, in time" (201). The reference to "island dwelling" recalls another writer whom Beresford-Howe admired, Ethel Wilson, one of whose main tenets is that island dwelling is not recommended, as *Swamp Angel's* Nell Severance makes clear: "We are all in it together. 'No Man is an Island, I am involved in Mankind,' and we have no immunity and we may as well realize it".⁽³⁴⁾

Because of the success of *The Book of Eve*, this next novel was widely reviewed. Most reviews were positive and many compared the two novels. *Canadian Forum's* Raymond C. Shady, for example, finds the two protagonists, Eva and Willy, "equally engaging and entertaining".⁽³⁵⁾ Barbara Amiel in *Maclean's* terms Willie "an appealing and sympathetic heroine" and Beresford-Howe "that encouraging phenomenon, a writer who simply gets better and better".⁽³⁶⁾ *Saturday Night's*, I.M.Owen notes that, "Once again Constance Beresford-Howe has made a good novel by standing one of society's current assumptions on its head".⁽³⁷⁾ Less enthusiastic is Anthony Brennan, who complains that the characters other than Willie are "like the standard do-it-yourself kit of cardboard cut-outs from the lotus groves of academe", and the novel's ending is "pretentious and clumsily contrived".⁽³⁸⁾

"I was the prisoner loaded with chains, namely my two children, my current pregnancy, and my own temperament".

With *The Marriage Bed*,⁽³⁹⁾ Beresford-Howe completes her trilogy "The Voices of Eve". This is a novel about motherhood; at twenty-four, Anne Graham, more than eight months pregnant, with two children under three and separated from her husband, is an archetypal earth mother.

"Three days in the life of a Mom" would be a suitable title for this novel, which details Anne's moment to moment coping with her responsibilities as a single mother over the course of three days. Since Anne spends most of her time alone with her two small children, the primary narrative mode is interior monologue; extended flashbacks fill in the background as Anne relives crucial incidents from her childhood to the break-up with her husband five months earlier. Her two children are convincing portraits, charming, vulnerable, already developing distinctive personalities: Martha, almost three, precocious and rebellious; Hugh, sensitive,

gentle, more fragile.

Into this study of motherhood, Beresford-Howe introduces two additional mothers of an earlier generation, Anne's own mother, who never allowed Anne to call her "mother", and her boring, all too perfect mother-in-law, "the perfect guest, grandmother, mother-in-law; the Christian soldier marching as to war" (53). As well, on the margins of discourse are two neighbour-mothers, whose support and companionship are crucial in Anne's circumscribed life. They mind each other's children and commiserate with one another over coffee--one the seemingly perfect wife and mother, with two well behaved and cooperative teenage daughters, the other a narcissistic watcher of soap operas with a thumb sucking three-year-old, an unpleasant pasty-faced seven-year-old, and a dirty house.

During these three days of reconsidering her life Anne not only comes to a decision about her own situation and her future, but to a better understanding of her mother, discovering to her surprise that she had been devastated by her first husband's death when Anne was only five, and of her mother-in-law, whom she now realizes had been trapped for years in an unhappy marriage. Anne's perception of her stepfather also undergoes revision. Her realization that his motive for helping her over the years has been egoism rather than love, that she has been the victim of patriarchal manipulation, changes her relationship with him irrevocably. To his present advice--divorce, a full-time housekeeper while returning to graduate school and then a career--she responds, "I *like* being home with my children. I'm not a victim or a martyr. I'm a natural, normal woman. There is nothing being *wasted* here. Do you really think what happens in kitchens and bedrooms isn't important? I tell you, half of what goes on in labs and offices and classrooms is trivial by comparison. *This* is where it's all at, not out there" (206).

Anne chooses the domestic plot. Not all critics find this closure satisfactory, especially those with an essentialized feminist view. They question Anne's acceptance of her situation, as she brings the novel full circle with the words, "What was wrong with being in chains? I was dizzy with happiness" (231). As well, some feminists are unhappy with what they perceive as Beresford-Howe's stance on abortion, erroneously assuming that the fictional character's views are necessarily those of her creator. Flashbacks include the scenes in which the young unmarried couple informs the two mothers of the pregnancy. Anne defies their urging to have an abortion, a subject which comes up again with the two following pregnancies, and which each time she resists.

Anticipating criticism, Beresford-Howe defended her novel even before it was completed. "It's about a much younger woman in the 'classic trap', suburban housewife with children, tied to dishes, her kitchen, and in her early 20s. My thesis is going to be that you must be sure you know what a trap is. Isn't the frontier right there in the kitchen?"⁽⁴⁰⁾ Later she again explains her stance in similar terms, disagreeing with what she sees as today's insistence that domesticity is "meaningless, wasteful, and stupid....It is not. I know a lot of young women who say, 'I *like* staying home with my children.' Yet they're made to feel as if they're stupid or wrong. When Anne says, 'It's in the kitchens and bathrooms (and not office towers) that real life takes place,' I have to agree".⁽⁴¹⁾

Beresford-Howe sees her three gynocentric "Voices of Eve" as united by the theme of "freedom and imprisonment and the different forms they take".⁽⁴²⁾ All three challenge current assumptions, each in a different way. "You see, I'm upside-downing ideas", she explains.⁽⁴³⁾

Andrea O'Reilly, however, argues:

In *The Marriage Bed* Beresford-Howe rejects the hierarchical dualisms of masculine and feminine, and in so doing, explores the specificity of woman's culture and values. Her agenda changed from "a demand for women to be 'let in' to the male-defined world to a challenge to that world itself and its definitions not only of femininity but also of humanity".⁽⁴⁴⁾

However, in feminizing feminism Beresford-Howe has resurrected the conservative values--anti-choice, anti-childcare, and so forth that are, by definition, anti-feminist. Because Anne's female specificity, like that of Eve and Willy, is not self-defined but conditioned by and expressed through patriarchal ideology, it does not engender female freedom.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Not all feminists agree with O'Reilly's conception of feminism. Ursula Robertshaw in reviewing the novel called it "in the best sense of the word a feminist book".⁽⁴⁶⁾ Other reviewers were generally positive, with many reviewers commenting on the humour, and several seeing it as "rather old-fashioned". *Books in Canada's* Victoria Branden termed the novel "a charmer, and her [Beresford-Howe's] best so far", and admired the humour and the "likeable" and "literate" protagonist.⁽⁴⁷⁾ *Maclean's* reviewer called the novel "a rather old fashioned kind of book one might affectionately call 'a good read'", adding "[w]ith wit, compassion and a nimble use of flashbacks, Beresford-Howe animates the everyday drudgery of a hundred mornings, noons, and nights".⁽⁴⁸⁾ Dennis Duffy considered that "comedy of manners seems Beresford-Howe's forte".⁽⁴⁹⁾ Anthony S. Brennan, however, less positively objected to the predictability of the ending and to "the smugness with which her [Anne's] cheerful tale is told".⁽⁵⁰⁾

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Beresford-Howe was continuing to write short fiction. There is a marked change, however; her stories are now much less conventional. "Jeanne", for example, tells of a lonely Toronto woman on the verge of suicide after being jilted by her lover; she rejects suicide to reinvent herself as wife of a hotelier in a small French village.⁽⁵¹⁾ "The China Shepherdess" deals with the difficulties of adjustment after divorce. After seventeen years of marriage, a devoted wife and protective mother of two teenagers finds herself a divorcée forced to enter the work force. Although her experience has been limited to a little part-time work in her husband's antique shop, she makes a success of a similar business. Her cool, sophisticated appearance a few years later reflects an inner change from gentle and caring to ruthless and opportunistic".⁽⁵²⁾ "The Right Age", satirizes contemporary life and its accoutrements--vegetarian diets, yoga, brown-rice casseroles, wine-making, etc. When she unexpectedly becomes pregnant and refuses to have an abortion, a young woman is left by her partner after a seven-year relationship. While she changes her life style completely, he continues his carefree lifestyle, seemingly frozen in time.⁽⁵³⁾

*The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n*

Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Beresford-Howe locates her next novel, *Night Studies*⁽⁵⁴⁾ in a community college, creating an enclosed universe much like Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* (1962). Such a structuring has endless possibilities, a lesson television has learned well, as the proliferation of programs set in hospitals, in police stations, and in schools has demonstrated. Beresford-Howe chose a night school populated with a cross-section of humanity by way of students, teachers, secretaries, librarians, administrators, security guards, parking-lot attendants, and loiterers, of varying ethnic backgrounds.

Later Beresford-Howe explained her construction of the college with parallels to Dante's *Inferno*:

It amused me greatly to become the architect of a black-glass tower of higher learning built with circular walls. Its twenty stories rose from space devoted to the minor sins (Gluttony and Incontinence, for instance, are represented on the ground floor by a cafeteria and nine washrooms.) The gravest of moral lapses, such as Treachery, are found of course on the highest floors where Administration offices are located. A swarm of details lent themselves readily to this concept. A quotation from Dante carved itself over the main entrance. All the features of a modern building, from the revolving doors to the sealed black-glass windows, helped to illustrate both the resources and the limitations of the human condition. Like most such structures, the building depended entirely on electricity, and when the power failed, its occupants found themselves paralyzed and bewildered, plunged into a darkness both actual and metaphorical.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Divided into three parts, one for each of the three evenings in the time span of the novel, the novel is intricately designed; each part consists of brief episodes ranging from six lines to five pages, and involves one or more of the eighteen or so characters who appear in the novel. As Beresford-Howe intimates, the various inhabitants of her *Inferno* exemplify different sins. While episodes and characters are juxtaposed for reasons of irony or revelation, the characters rarely interact, except on the most superficial level. Within this enclosed world, the reader becomes acquainted with them through their interior monologues and flashbacks more than through their dialogue or action. Each exists inside his own isolated world, making explicit the novel's epigraph from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n".

By the novel's conclusion two characters begin to break out of their isolation. For these two--Imogen, a wise-cracking extrovert and Tyler, a melancholy introvert--a power failure provides the catalyst for an evolving relationship. Stranded for hours in a darkened elevator, they find the courage to talk about their problems, provide solace for each other, and reach tentative beginnings of a friendship. The blackout is crucial for many others, too, including the corrupt Director of Night Studies, who reacts with fear and panic when forced to face his own emptiness alone in the blackness of his twentieth-floor office.

The nature of the novel precludes character development. This was a concern for some critics. Louise Longo, for one, while praising the novel, writes that the minor characters "hover dangerously close to cliché".⁽⁵⁶⁾ H. W. Connor, too, while recognizing the impossibility of developing so many characters, concludes that, "most remain little more than caricatures, their believability too plainly dependent on their predictability".⁽⁵⁷⁾ Yet *Night Studies* is not about individuals but about the human condition, and the characters act out the various

ways in which human beings struggle with problems and cope with difficulties, trying to "make a Heav'n of Hell". With its unusual structure and its Dantean atmosphere the novel succeeds in voicing these concepts.

*"Words. It's only words.
The charlatan's tatty little box of tricks".*

Beresford-Howe retired from Ryerson College the year that *Night Studies* was published and accepted an appointment as writer-in-residence at York Public Library. In the meantime, a confirmed anglophile, Beresford-Howe with her husband had been spending extended periods in England where they were considering retirement. Beresford-Howe's favourite areas of England were Suffolk and Kent, and in particular Canterbury, where the family had spent the seven summers preceding the publication of her next novel, *Prospero's Daughter* in 1988.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Not surprisingly, the setting for the new novel is a magnificent old English manor house in Canterbury, modelled on that of a friend.

Populated with an assortment of English characters, in the words of Janice Kulyk Keefer, "a sort of Agatha Christie without Miss Marple",⁽⁵⁹⁾ this novel is more dramatic than those preceding it. Structured largely of dramatized scenes, many of which are filled with the clever repartee of the sophisticated, the novel resembles a comedy of manners.

As the title suggests, *Prospero's Daughter* is a reconfiguration of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Like *The Tempest*, the novel's major themes are art and nature, reality and illusion. Montague Weston, a wealthy and famous Canadian novelist, is the Prospero figure. A master of illusion in his novels, Monty no longer discriminates between the real world and the imaginary. Charming, arrogant, opinionated, he manipulates those around him like characters in a play, or in one of his novels. Monty's daughter Paulina (Polly), with whom the story opens, is not the Miranda figure, but rather a corporeal Ariel who somewhat unwillingly facilitates her father's plans to arrange a marriage for her older stepsister Nan. Nan is Beresford-Howe's Miranda; despite her age, thirty-seven as the novel opens, she is childlike and innocent, and is considered retarded, though oddly enough a superb *cordon bleu* cook. While her father is associated with art, she is associated with nature. Inarticulate in a world where words are deceptive and manipulative, she gardens, walks in the countryside with her dogs, and deliberately keeps herself aloof from the social activities of her father and his sophisticated friends. Living in her private Eden, like Shakespeare's Miranda she is isolated from the corruption of worldly society.

Many allusions in the novel underline the reality-illusion dichotomy--the playing of charades, discussion of Tom Stoppard's play *Real Life*, allusions to Shakespeare. At various times Monty aligns himself with Prospero, with Shakespeare, and finally with God. "' high charms work...' said Pa, slowly drawing the curtains shut again. 'Ah, what an old necromancer God is'. 'It was Prospero who bragged like that, not God'. I said" (174). Monty alludes to Shakespeare's obsession with "the power of language to create illusion" (16). Appropriately, discussions of Shakespeare usually turn to *The Tempest* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, plays which involve deception and manipulation of others. Of course, Beresford-Howe herself is in this novel demonstrating the power of language to deceive and trick.

Unable to continue with his current novel because of writer's block, Monty is devoting his creative energies to finding a husband for Nan, and to entertaining his family, guests, and himself with elaborate masques,

munners' plays, parties, masquerades, and exotically gourmet meals. Celebrations include a Guy Fawkes bonfire, an elaborate Victorian Christmas, a Twelfth Night entertainment, a staging of *Comus*, an extravagant masquerade to celebrate Nan's engagement. All of these Beresford-Howe describes in detail, creating the most sensuous novel she has yet produced. On one level "Lives of the rich and famous" would be a suitable title for the work and its portrayal of the excesses of the wealthy.

Nan has little narrative space in the story devoted to finding her a husband; the focus is on the machinations of her father, as observed by Paulina, the novel's Jamesian observer-narrator. Nan barely escapes playing her part in the real-life drama Monty has designed, although her refusal to wear a mask at the masqued ball in honour of her engagement hints at her ultimate rejection of her role. "This isn't a game, Pa; it's somebody's life", warns Paulina (180). On discovering the extent of her father's plot, Nan steps out of his story and creates her own, eloping with the novel's Caliban figure, the rough-hewn gardener. To this point only a bit player, seen only fleetingly working in the garden, like Nan he is inarticulate and linked with the natural world; as well, he clearly has laurentian overtones:

In the kitchen-garden one sunny afternoon I came on Fisk the gardener, hoeing vegetables. Though it was very warm, he was evidently much too British to take off his shirt, but he had rolled his faded blue sleeves as high as they would go. Between his sun-browned neck and his collar a band of very white skin showed. Several butterflies of the same whiteness were fluttering in a dilatory way over the cabbages near by. It gave me a mild surprise to discover that Oldfisk was neither ugly nor old; in fact, with his muscular, gypsy arms and his eyes of the same milky blue as his shirt, he was as pleasant to look at as the garden's greenery and the butterflies swimming in the sunny air. (41-42)

In disappearing with Fisk, Nan is returning to the green world to which she belongs.

Monty's response to his daughter's disappearance on her wedding day is to burn his manuscripts. "Words. It's only words. The charlatan's tatty little box of tricks" (249) he says to Paulina, continuing: "It's only patter. Double-talk. The spiel of the con man tricking attention away from what's really going on. Just a lot of make-believe. What is it but a gimmick. Look, folks, there's nothing here--look there, here's something of value. Just a box of tricks. And in this case the trick doesn't even work" (249). "It was obvious", says Paulina, "that he saw himself as Prospero, breaking all his charms, drowning his book. No one could alter that vision of himself, and reluctantly I realized that no one should try" (250).

With a problematic insistence upon closure, Beresford-Howe wraps up all the loose ends in an Epilogue. Monty's hubris is justly rewarded with the loss of all his powers and a complete reversal of his situation. Incarcerated in a nursing home, "he spent his days in a wheelchair, his whole existence briskly and kindly manipulated by therapists, nurses, and orderlies. Poor Prospero, once so confident in his basic premise, 'There's no harm done'" (254).

Critics of *Prospero's Daughter* remark upon the novel's entertainments. Patricia Bradbury praises the assortment of splendid banquets and festivities and the description of "the sensuality of life", and admires the creation of Dickensian secondary characters.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Barbara Pell finds the novel "a competent and entertaining diversion" with "good dramatic set pieces at the seasonal fetes" but the major characters "unconvincing".⁽⁶¹⁾

Janice Kulyk Keefer is more critical, finding the novel "an indomitably conventional English novel", and concluding, "Beresford-Howe has mastered the craft of novel-writing, but the art of fiction is something else altogether".⁽⁶²⁾ To those who are disappointed that she writes in a conventional style, Beresford-Howe says, "Of course I *am* a devotee of the Victorian novel--and it *does* become apparent".⁽⁶³⁾

Earlier stories had suggested Beresford-Howe's engagement with the egotistical and manipulative artist. It was forty years earlier that "The Pearl" described the self-centred young writer. Closer to *The Tempest* in time and in its characterization of the artist, "The Second Mrs. Lindsay",⁽⁶⁴⁾ is a study of a famous, now elderly poet, a philanderer and a manipulator of women, who has destroyed his first wife, a talented novelist, and is in the process of destroying his second.

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you -- Nobody -- too?*

Emily Dickinson
(Epigraph, *A Serious Widow*)

As *A Serious Widow*⁽⁶⁵⁾ opens "Nobody" seems an appropriation designation for Rowena Hill, who, on her husband's sudden death, seems to have no identity. After thirty years of marriage, now no longer Mrs. Edwin Hill, who is she? This novel adds a fourth voice to Beresford-Howe's "Three Voices of Eve", that of a stereotypically helpless fiftyish widow. "Do widows have to pay income tax? How do you make out a cheque?" Rowena wonders as she listens to the clergyman at her husband's funeral. "He just dropped dead in his Adidas outside a dry cleaner's shop, with the Walkman plugs still in his ears. You've got to cry, Marion says sternly, it will do you good. Don't keep it all inside. And why not? If she only knew, inside is the best place for it. Shock, they murmur knowingly. Try surprise. Try relief" (2-3). The new widow is helped in coping with her situation by her sense of humour and her intense dislike of her late husband.

Rowena's startling discovery at her husband's funeral that she had been married to a bigamist means that in the absence of a will his first wife inherits his property, including the house in which Rowena lives. Her comment as she rummages desperately through the house, "In a Victorian novel a will would drop out of a book after a delay of only a few hundred pages....I have little hope anything of the kind will happen in the real world" (56) adds an intertextual and metafictional flavour to proceedings.

With no one in whom to confide, Rowena holds conversations with Canadian novelist Ethel Wilson, a narrative strategy reminiscent of Morag Gunn's conversations with Catharine Parr Traill in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1973). Beresford-Howe's admiration for her interlocutor is apparent in these conversations, and in the allusions throughout the novel to Wilson's *Swamp Angel* and her less known novels *The Innocent Traveller* (1949) and *Love and Salt Water* (1956). Rowena further displays her literary bent with allusions to Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) and its lost will, to Sir Walter Scott's novels, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and T.S.Eliot's *Wasteland* (1922). From time to time she also converses with Prince Charles. Talking to Charles or Ethel Wilson she finds more satisfactory than talking to her daughter Marion, an austere, spinsterish Girl Guide Commissioner, with whom Rowena appears to have nothing in common. Once again, Beresford-Howe rejects the traditional maternal role for her mother figure:

Often I wonder wistfully whether somewhere outside the pages of books there are mothers and daughters who embrace each other--laugh together or even confide in each other. Years ago I used to speculate whether something I ate or didn't eat during my pregnancy could account for the bloodless distance between us two. Whatever the reason, she is always crisper and more efficient with me than with anyone else, while with her I become even more than usually neutral. In Marion's company, my normally colourless speech sinks to a level of platitudes and clichés that dismays even me as I utter them. (30)

Unexpectedly, Rowena's suppressed life opens up in many directions on widowhood. She accepts an offer of friendship from her somewhat eccentric but charming English neighbours, whom she and Edwin had carefully kept at arm's length. Through them she meets crotchety but entertaining Sebastian Long, a retired philosophy professor. She is consoled and advised by two friends of her late husband, her lawyer and her clergyman. With both men consolation and advice develop into affairs, and, since she never enjoyed sex with her husband, she is surprised by her eagerness to pursue both. On a practical level, one lover lends her money; the other finds possible employment for her among his parishioners as part-time housekeeper--the only money-making job for which she seems fitted. Rejecting the proffered housekeeping position, however, she accepts a five-dollar an hour job cutting up chickens.

Freed of her repressive wifely role Rowena matures quickly. Within six months of her widowhood she has resolved her situation satisfactorily: she has found a more satisfying part-time job in a craft shop where she can also sell her own handiwork, rescued the likeable Sebastian from an abusive housekeeper to share her house, and found a holograph will bequeathing the house to her, a will which, she had commented earlier, in a Victorian novel would obligingly drop out of a book after a few hundred pages, and does just that in this novel. As well, she comes to some appreciation of her responsibility for denying her own subjectivity throughout her marriage and being an accomplice in her own repression, "No doubt I have not been entirely fair to Edwin. Perhaps it would do me no harm, in fact, to ask somebody's forgiveness for sins of my own" (250), and admits that her loveless relationship with her daughter may be salvageable: "I feel that I'm just beginning to know Marion" (223). To which admission Ethel Wilson observes: "Maybe till now you haven't been equipped for it" (233). Widowhood has brought Rowena the opportunity for growth.

It is Beresford-Howe's wit that most reviewers of this novel find attractive. Michael Flynn finds that "the narration is refreshingly honest, highly readable, and often genuinely funny".⁽⁶⁶⁾ Pat Barclay in *Books in Canada* praises her creation of "entertaining characters, and remarks that "[i]t is a tribute to Beresford-Howe's skill as a novelist that Rowena and her banal problems remain so consistently interesting".⁽⁶⁷⁾ A *Serious Widow* is reminiscent of *The Book of Eve* in its exploration of the older woman's quest for a self after years of being "Nobody". Rowena's voice is a worthy addition to those of Eva, Willy, and Anne -- Beresford-Howe's "Voices of Eve".

*"And the way up is the way down,
the way forward is the way back".*

T.S.Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," *Four Quartets*, III,6

Carefully crafted although at times overwritten, noteworthy for their realistic dialogue, Beresford-Howe's early novels and stories are reflective of the values of the dominant culture and woman's place in that culture. For the most part they lack the wit and humour integral to her later writings. Beresford-Howe's comments about these early works are accurate: "I used to be ever so romantic...and idealistic--and also addicted to purple prose, lots of lush adjectives and stuff".⁽⁶⁸⁾ Today Beresford-Howe prefers to disregard these novels of the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, her entry in *International Authors and Writers Who's Who* omits them entirely. Beresford-Howe's later fiction is dramatically different, more complex, intellectually, philosophically, and structurally, and often challenging current assumptions; they often exploit literary allusions and intertextual strategies which assume a degree of literary competence in the reader.

One respect in which later novels do resemble earlier is in the failure of mothers to love their children, from *The Unreasoning Heart's* Fran Archer, who adores one son and actively dislikes another, to *A Serious Widow's* Rowena, who can say: "Often I wonder wistfully whether somewhere outside the pages of books there are mothers and daughters who embrace each other--laugh together or even confide in each other" (30). Other women often become surrogate mothers, demonstrating the nurturing, caring love associated with motherhood: Hannah with her sister and brother (*The Invisible Gate*), Olive with Cam (*One Day's Journey*), Willy with her young nephew (*A Population of One*), Nan with Pauline (*Prospero's Daughter*). Along with Beresford-Howe's generally negative portrayal of natural mothers is an often pessimistic view of marriage. From *My Lady Greensleeves* to *A Serious Widow*, Beresford-Howe's women for the most part consider marriage as imprisonment. With Beresford-Howe, however, there are always exceptions, such as Willy (*A Population of One*), whose greatest ambition is to marry, and Anne Graham (*The Marriage Bed*), who rejoices in the chains of domesticity and maternity.

Beresford-Howe sometimes perplexes critics by combining her penchant for Victorian novels and the values they represent with a contemporary feminist stance interrogating the values of the dominant patriarchal culture, and especially challenging women's place within that culture. Her view of herself appears similarly conflicted, seeing herself as both traditionalist and rebel. Writing, "It was a family joke that as a toddler I'd been too timid to step off the pavement onto the grass, and I hadn't changed much",⁽⁶⁹⁾ and, like her protagonist Willy Doyle, valorizing traditions associated with the Victorian novel: "I'm a 19th-century person. Austen, Trollope, the Brontes, Thackeray, Dickens, I love them all. There's something so firm about their sense of values. Some of their ideas may be quaint today. But they were so sure about what was right and what was wrong".⁽⁷⁰⁾ Yet she apparently contradicts this self-appraisal of timidity and traditionalism when she says of an early story "I suppose that is me, the little girl in Sunday School clothes, thinking rebellious thoughts...".⁽⁷¹⁾ She is similarly ambivalent about feminism: "I hope the feminists won't be outraged unduly, [referring to *Prospero's Daughter*]....I've had such a botherization with them. I don't fit into their mould. They get agitated and a little shrill. Of course I *am* a feminist", Beresford-Howe says in 1988,⁽⁷²⁾ though a few years earlier she "refuses to be numbered" among the feminists.⁽⁷³⁾ This ambivalence may be at the root of what Andrea O'Reilly sees as ambiguities in Beresford-Howe's expression of a feminist ideology in "Voices of Eve".⁽⁷⁴⁾

The key to Beresford-Howe's varied textual strategies--her frequent reconstitution of canonic texts and reformulation of social codes, her undercutting of feminist or traditionalist ideology--is her rejection of essentialism and her resolve to interrogate both traditional and contemporary assumptions. She elucidates her creative strategies, "You see, I'm upside-downing ideas".⁽⁷⁵⁾ Thus her elderly middle-class woman walks out

on her marriage of forty years (*The Book of Eve*) and her lively, intelligent twenty-four year-old happily accepts the "chains" of domesticity (*The Marriage Bed*); she creates an upside-down Inferno (*Night Studies*) and an underworld/paradise (*The Book of Eve*), and deconstructs Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (*Prospero's Daughter*). "All my books are very subversive", Beresford-Howe says.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Not all critics appreciate this fact.

Notes

1. Constance Beresford-Howe, "Stages in An Education", in *A Fair Shake: Autobiographical Essays by McGill Women*, eds. Margaret Gillett and Kay Sibald (Montreal: Eden Press, 1984): 32.
2. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 31.
3. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 31-32.
4. "The Mask of the Bear", *A Bird in the House* (1963; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974): 64-65.
5. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 34.
6. *Redbook* 86.5 (March 1946): 149-80.
7. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1946; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan Laurentian Library, 1978. All quotations are from the Laurentian Library edition. The title of the novel is from a Pascal quotation which forms the novel's epigraph: "Le coeur a ses raisons que las raison ne connait pas".
8. *Canadian Forum* 26 (June 1946): 69.
9. Michael Ryval, "Constance Beresford-Howe's subversion and sensibility", *Quill & Quire* 47.7 (1981): 62.
10. In 1978 Macmillan republished *The Unreasoning Heart* in its Laurentian Library series of Canadian novels, after *The Book of Eve* and *A Population of One* had brought Beresford-Howe's name into prominence with the reading public.
11. *Saturday Night* (17 January 1945).
12. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 33.
13. "The Heroines of Virginia Woolf".
14. *Canadian Home Journal* 43.4 (November 1947): 5-7, 18, 20-22.
15. *Canadian Home Journal* 43.4 (November 1947): 5-7, 18, 20, 22-25.
16. *Canadian Home Journal* 43.12 (April 1947): 10, 94, 96-97.
17. *Maclean's* 60.23 (November 1947): 10-11, 35-36, 41.
18. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1947.
19. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 34.
20. Claude Bissell, "Letters in Canada", *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17.3 (April 1948): 273.
21. "Canadian Girl's Love Story New Note in Native Fiction", *Globe and Mail* (10 May 1947).
22. Deacon, "To Constance Beresford-Howe", 6 May 1947, in *Dear Bill: The Correspondence of William Arthur Deacon* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988): 246.
23. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1949. All quotations are from this edition.
24. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 19.5 (April 1950): 272.
25. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 35.
26. New York: Ballantine Books, 1955. All quotations are from this edition.
27. Beresford-Howe's doctoral dissertation, "The French translations of *Hamlet*", compares successive translations of *Hamlet* into French.
28. Beresford-Howe, "To William Arthur Deacon", 30 May 1955, *Dear Bill: The Correspondence of William Arthur Deacon*, 306.

29. On Selye, *The Montrealer* 31.9 (November 1957): 62-65; on Murphy, 32.9 (September 1958): and on Scott, 32.4 (April 1958): 65-70.
30. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973; rpt. New York: Avon, 1973. All quotations are from the Macmillan edition.
31. "Novels and Heroes", *Fiddlehead* 101 (1974): 82-88.
32. *Canadian Literature* 61 (1974): 79-81.
33. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. All quotations are from this edition.
34. Ethel Wilson, *The Swamp Angel* (1954; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), 150-51.
35. "The Second Voice of Eve", *Canadian Forum* 57 (February 1978): 38-9.
36. *Maclean's* 90 (19 September 1977): 80, 82.
37. *Saturday Night* (September 1977): 69.
38. *Fiddlehead* 117 (1978): 129-32.
39. Toronto: Macmillan, 1981. All quotations are from this edition.
40. Karen Mulhallen, "A funny thing happened to Constance Beresford-Howe on her way to freedom", *Books in Canada* 7.1 (January 1978): 31.
41. Ryval, 62.
42. Fergus Cronin, "Showing the Hands: A Profile of Constance-Beresford Howe", *Canadian Forum* 65 (October 1985): 34-36.
43. Ryval, 62.
44. "Ideological Hegemony in Political Discourse: Women's Specificity and Equality", in *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, eds. Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982): 216.
45. Andrea O'Reilly, "Feminizing Feminism: Constance Beresford-Howe and the Quest for Female Freedom", *Canadian Woman Studies* 8.3 (1987): 72.
46. *Books and Bookmen* 329 (February 1983): 32.
47. "Glory be to the mother", *Books in Canada* 10.8 (November 1981): 18-19.
48. Cathleen Hoskins, "The blessing of ordinary people", *Maclean's* 94 (14 September 1981): 76-77.
49. *Queen's Quarterly* 90.1 (1983): 241-43.
50. *Fiddlehead* 133 (1982): 82-85.
51. *Chatelaine* 53.4 (April 1980): 50, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80.
52. *Chatelaine* 54.2 (February 1981): 55, 66-68, 72, 76.
53. *Chatelaine* 54.1 (January 1981): 41, 108, 110, 113-14, 116.
54. Toronto: Macmillan, 1985. All quotations are from this edition.
55. Beresford-Howe, "Wavelength: Territories in Time", *Waves* 15.1-2 (1986): 57.
56. *Books in Canada* 14.7 (1985): 24.
57. *Canadian Literature* 112 (1987): 119.
58. Toronto: Macmillan, 1988. All quotations are from this edition. See also Patricia Bradbury, "Beresford-Howe's Shakespeare in a vibrant Victorian mode", *Quill & Quire* 54.3 (March 1988): 77.
59. "Tempest in Kent", *Books in Canada* 17.3 (April 1988): 25.
60. Bradbury, "Beresford-Howe's Shakespeare", 77.
61. *Canadian Literature* 127 (1990): 77.
62. "Tempest in Kent", 25.
63. Bradbury, "Beresford-Howe's Shakespeare", 77.
64. *Chatelaine* 52.11 (November 1979): 65, 93, 96, 98, 101, 105, 106, 108.
65. Toronto: Macmillan, 1991. All quotations are from this edition.
66. *Canadian Literature* 136 (1993): 155.

67. *Books in Canada* 20.7 (October 1991): 35-36.
68. Cronin, "Showing the Hands", 43.
69. Beresford-Howe, "Stages", 34.
70. Ryval, 62.
71. A reference to "Martha and God and the Bright Blue Marble on a Dusty Road" in Mulhallen, "A funny thing happened", 32.
72. Bradbury, "Beresford-Howe's Shakespeare", 77.
73. Cronin, "Showing the Hands", 35.
74. O'Reilly, "Feminizing Feminism", 69-72.
75. Ryval, 62.
76. Ryval, 62.

The Constance Beresford-Howe papers: an inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Library.
Compiler: Marlys Chevretil. Editor: Apollonia Steele. Biocritical essay: Lorraine McMullen. [Calgary]:
University of Calgary Press, 1996.