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APOCALYPSE IN THE MAKING

Review by Christina Lake

Beresford, J. D. *A World of Women*. The MIT Press, 2022. Novel. 317 pp.

A World of Women (2022) is an apocalyptic novel about a deadly pandemic that mainly kills men. First published under the title of *Goslings* in 1913, MIT recently republished it as part of their Radium Age series, which focuses on forgotten proto-Science Fiction from 1900 to 1930. Its English author, John Davys Beresford, was a prolific writer of novels and short stories, many of which tackle Science Fiction themes such as the evolution of super-intelligence in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911) or utopian futures in *What Dreams May Come...* (1941). But Beresford, who wrote the first major critical work on H. G. Wells in 1915, was also a realist writer interested in early psychoanalysis, social satire, and metaphysical speculation. This amalgam of speculative realism and fantastical imagination makes *A World of Women* interesting as both a meticulous study of the breakdown of early twentieth-century civilisation and a horrifying depiction of the dark all-conquering return of nature. The new edition also contains a short introduction by writer, activist and filmmaker Astra Taylor who finds much to admire in Beresford's socialism, feminism, and ecological consciousness. Musing on the theme of catastrophe as a trigger for social change, Taylor takes a political rather than academic approach to *A World of Women*, reading it in the context of Covid-19 and US politics to find cautious hope in Beresford's vision of women building a new society from scratch.

For any reader who remembers the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is certainly a lot to relate to in the first of the three books that form *A World of Women*. "The New Plague" begins with the mundane life of the Goslings, a lower-middle-class family, and describes the arrival of an unknown virus which starts in Asia, spreads to Russia, and soon finds its way to the rest of Europe. The press run scare stories but is not interested in scientific facts. Food wholesalers try to corner the market in scarce commodities. Even when people are dying in Europe, no one expects the plague to come to Britain and schemes to close the borders to all trade and travel are described as "alarmist, far-fetched and utterly impracticable" (61). Meanwhile, the shortcomings and lack of leadership from a government only interested in party politics become abundantly clear. However, where Beresford's fiction diverges from recent experiences of Covid-19 is in the high mortality rates of the new plague, allowing an exploration of what societal breakdown might look like in London, the largest city of its day, where lack of food leads to rapid depopulation through emigration, starvation, and the plague. The breakdown is accelerated by the virus targeting mainly men in a social environment where they still carry out most key roles. After a few months, London is a dead city, vividly experienced by Blanche and Millie Gosling as they walk through silent streets of broken trams and overturned buses before ransacking a Knightsbridge clothes shop and trying on all the dresses they once coveted in what is clearly intended as a critique of the futility of the desires created by industrial capitalism.

The societal factors that have rendered suburban middle-class women unfit for any purpose other than marriage, consumerism and policing morality are a major theme of the book. Beresford's critique echoes some of the points made by early twentieth-century feminists such as Charlotte Perkin Gilman, who saw women's subjection to men's idealised version of womanhood as restricting their potential to contribute more fully to society. But Beresford, in line with contemporary theories of sexual behaviour, evolution, and Freudian psychoanalysis, is more concerned about how this moralistic version of femininity is damaging society by restricting men's libido and undermining the forces of natural selection. The second book, "The March of the Goslings," emphasises the problems with this brand of suburban femininity as it follows the fate of Mrs. Gosling and her two daughters trying to adjust to the new reality. Mrs. Gosling is described in evolutionary terms as "a specialized creature, admirably adapted to her place in the old scheme of civilisation" but unable to cope outside the ecological niche of her house in Kilburn (155). Her daughters are not much better, but their adaptation and survival skills develop as they set out on an odyssey to the countryside, pushing their mother in a trolley through nightmarish scenes of unburied bodies and women dying of starvation and dysentery.

The third book, "Womankind in the Making," focuses on a more successful adaptation to the new situation, a farming collective in Marlow. Its title, clearly borrowed from Wells' *Mankind in the Making*, a 1903 collection of essays on the future of humanity, suggests the emergence of a new type of woman, ready to throw aside middle-class standards for the sake of survival. In so doing, this new society arrives at the utopian socialist rule that "every woman had a right to her share in the bounty of Nature" provided that she "earned her right by labour" (227). However, some members of the collective have trouble adapting to the morality of the new world, where women are lured away to get pregnant by a male survivor in the next village and reject the idea of sharing men to ensure a future for humankind. Their refusal to abandon middle-class morality causes the community to fracture and reinforces Beresford's critique of the anti-evolutionary force of human moral laws.

In identifying the issues facing women both before and after the plague, Beresford demonstrates a proto-feminist awareness of the patriarchal forces ranged against women, but in failing to move beyond contemporary masculine concerns over repressed desire and restrictive moral standards, Beresford's depiction of a world of women falls far short of the type of explorations of matriarchal societies of powerful women undertaken by twenty-first-century writers such as Naomi Alderman and Christina Sweeney Baird. However, despite sharing many of the misogynistic assumptions of the age, Beresford does avoid some of the pitfalls of previous masculine imaginings of all-female societies, such as Walter Besant's satirical *The Revolt of Man* (1882). In this role reversal anti-utopia, women take over the government with disastrous consequences. The women of Marlow are shown as capable and efficient once they have thrown off their fashionable clothing. They learn how to farm with the help of a knowledgeable farmer's wife and deploy a man who has escaped the plague to train them to run the surviving agricultural machinery. Ultimately though, despite the initial success of the Marlow community, Beresford sees little hope for humankind as the machines built by "man's devilish and alien intelligence" break down (256). Beresford revels in images of nature overrunning civilisation and barren humanity in a futile fight against nature but sees little

prospect of humans, women included, living in balance with nature as, from Beresford's Darwinian viewpoint, the two are implacably opposed in the struggle for existence. The image of humans as "some horrible, unnatural fungus" disfiguring the Earth takes Beresford towards the anti-humanism of a radical environmentalist position (258).

Although the start is quite slow, the book builds up to an evocative depiction of a dying land with something of the atmosphere of George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* or Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885). While it does not live up to the promise of a feminist utopia, neither does it treat women as inferior to men and it ends with some utopian suggestions for how women's lives might be improved in a future where all men and women are equal. There are a few jarring notes. The attempts at a phonetic rendering of the Goslings accent are off-putting and the stereotyping of a Jewish character is shockingly antisemitic. In general, the characters are often hard to relate to and some are simply forgotten by the author partway through the narrative. Clearly, Beresford was more interested in a sociological study than fiction and uses the novel to examine his Wellsian-style fears for the future of the human species and where modern civilisation was taking it. Nevertheless, it is surprising that a book with so much to say about how humans behave in times of crisis is not better known, but the weight of an early twentieth-century social study on an otherwise inventive novel may have led to its neglect. While the book's evolutionary framework and class and gender politics will be predominantly of academic and historic interest, the warnings about consumerism, dysfunctional politicians, and lack of foresight are still relevant today as the Covid pandemic and the current climate crisis so clearly demonstrate.

BIONOTE

Christina Lake is an independent researcher based in Cornwall, UK. She has a PhD on Eugenics in Utopian Fiction from the University of Exeter and is currently working on various projects relating to genetics, early twentieth-century women's writing, and Science Fiction.