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 **“Because she’s a woman”:** Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields’s *Unless*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“Because she’s a woman”:
Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields’s *Unless*

Nora Foster Stovel (bio)

In *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988), Linda Hutcheon observes the inherent conflicts between postmodernism and feminism. But Carol Shields succeeds brilliantly in combining her feminism and postmodernism in *Unless* (2002). Her last novel, *Unless* is her most explicitly feminist *and* her most intensely postmodernist text. She remarked, “I think I was the last feminist to wake up in the world.”¹ She was braver about expressing her feminist beliefs in *Unless* because she did not think she would be alive to read the reviews. The narrator of *Unless* echoes these sentiments: “I am willing to blurt it all out, if only to myself. Blurting is a form of bravery. I’m just catching on to that fact. Arriving late, as always.”² As Wendy Roy writes, “*Unless* is Shields’ most explicitly feminist novel” (125).³ Shields’s **[End Page 51]** feminism embraces egalitarian liberalism, however, not radical, militant feminism. For example, Shields and her *Unless* heroine both practise “bean-counting”—noting the exclusion of women from lists of the modern world’s greatest thinkers and writers.⁴ In her “Playwright’s Note” to her play *Thirteen Hands* (1993), Shields asserts her commitment to the “redemption of women artists and activists” and her desire to reclaim these women, “to valorize those lives.” Shields’s daughter, writer Anne Gardini, confirms her mother’s mission to address the “erasure” of these “invisible” women, “lost heroines,” because this “obliteration is a tragedy” (12). Shields employs myth and metafiction to convey her feminism in *Unless*: she revises myth in a manner employed by feminist writers from H. D. to Atwood, and she employs metafictionality, fiction about the art of fiction, to critique women’s place in a “withholding universe” (220). All Shields’s novels are metafictional—beginning with her first novel, *Small Ceremonies* (1976), in which Judith Gill is writing a novel, through *Swann*, in which critics cannibalize the poet Mary Swann, to *The Stone Diaries*, in which Daisy Goodwill Flett, who writes under the pen name Mrs Green Thumb, narrates her own autobiography—but *Unless* is her most explicitly metafictional novel, for her narrator uses fiction to reflect and resolve her real-life dilemma. While all Shields’s heroines are writers, the heroine of *Unless* writes novels, like Shields herself: in contemplating her heroine’s destiny, she revises her conception of the

“happy ending” of marriage for women.

Shields employs myth to present the problem in *Unless* and metafictionality to seek a solution. In “Literature and Myth,” Northrop Frye defines literature as a “developed mythology” (35). To convey this, her most feminist fiction, Shields draws on that most female of myths, the ancient Greek tale of the fertility goddess Demeter’s search for her missing daughter Persephone.⁵ [End Page 52]

Shields frames this quest as a mystery in *Unless*. Reta Winters appears at age forty-three (the oldest point at which a woman could still exert sexual allure, as Shields then thought)⁶ to have it all: three engaging teenage daughters named Norah, Natalie, and Christine; a twenty-six-year-old loving partnership with their physician father, Tom; a sprawling one-hundred-year-old farmhouse in Orangetown just one hour north of Toronto; *and* a successful career as translator and novelist.

But suddenly her eldest daughter, Norah, the most thoughtful and literary of the three sisters, drops out—out of university, out of her Annex apartment with her boyfriend, Ben Abbott, out of her family, and out of life—to sit in silence on a street corner with its own “textual archaeology” (11), beneath the lamppost where a Muslim woman recently immolated herself—with a begging bowl and a sign around her neck reading “GOODNESS” (11–12).⁷

The question is Why? *Unless* is a novel of interpretation—how to interpret Norah’s defection from life. Theories abound. Each member of Reta’s *kaffee klatsch*—a parody of the ancient Greek chorus—has a theory: “A phase, Annette believes. A breakdown, thinks Sally. Lynn is sure the cause is physiological, glandular, hormonal” (120). A psychiatrist calls it “a behavioural interlude in which she is either escaping something...

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1 Shields made this comment in a conversation with Nora Foster Stovel in Victoria, 8 May 2003. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Carol Shields’s remarks will be to this interview. This essay was composed as a work of mourning following Shields’s death on 16 July 2003.

2 *Unless*, 270. *Unless* was short-listed for the Mann Booker Prize, the Orange Prize, and the Governor General’s Award.

3 Wendy Roy calls *Unless* “a brave, strikingly feminist examination of goodness, loss, fam-

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