

Violet Posies, Moleskin Coats, and Quince Jelly: Material Culture in the Lives of Barbara Pym's Female Characters in *An Unsuitable Attachment*

Cynthia Boyd

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As a folklorist specializing in material culture, I study, analyze, and interpret how humans create, use, and/or manipulate objects, whether handmade or mass-produced. Be they textiles, furnishings, pottery or jars of fruit preserves, objects' inherent patterns and layers of meaning allow folklorists and anthropologists to gain an understanding of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community, society or group (Boyd 2009). Women's material culture has often been represented by objects made and used by women and their families which stem from a need for warmth, shelter, nourishment and love (Boyd 2009). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the objects women created and manipulated recall their everyday interaction with both indoor and outdoor spaces surrounding the home. Whether grown in the garden or crafted in the kitchen, women's creations have had a lasting impact on the lives of the women themselves and on the people around them. Used for practical purposes on a daily basis or placed on display as mementos and collectables, women's material culture continues to represent current lives and recall past experiences. Historically, women's everyday lives were rarely documented through written texts and thus, the objects they made, used, or adapted were often the only surviving sources with which to understand the interrelationships of generations of women, their families, and the communities in which they lived and worked. Thus, material culture has long been an invaluable documentary form as well as an aesthetic one.

Though I, myself, have studied, examined, and interacted with creators and forms of material culture, especially designed and used by women, I have expanded my interest to those expressive forms of material culture that are depicted through the lives of female characters within English twentieth century novels, such as those written by Barbara Pym. There are multiple examples of material culture in each one of Miss Pym's novels, but this presentation focuses on what is described by female characters in *An Unsuitable Attachment* who live and work, love and gossip in the fictional North London parish of St. Basil's. Specifically, I will interpret and discuss how Ianthe Broome, Sophia Ainger, and Penelope Grandison use, create, alter and/or adapt forms of material culture, such as food and drink, everyday clothing and special dress, and flowers, floral arrangements, or garden spaces.

An Unsuitable Attachment was Barbara Pym's seventh novel, the "Lost" novel, having been rejected by Jonathan Cape in 1963, and by many other publishers besides. Notably an accomplished and popular novelist throughout the 1950s, Pym was so shaken by this initial rejection she thought she might never write again (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984). What followed was Pym's difficult 'wilderness years' in which she struggled to write and failed to publish. Her work for the International African Institute carried on, however, where her keen intellect and editor's eye focused on seminar papers and submissions for the Institute's journal, *Africa*. As scholars and readers know only too well, Pym eventually began writing again and her languishing career was finally rejuvenated when she was recognized by critics, Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil, in the 1977 *Times Literary Supplement's* listing of underrated writers. Pym's double commendation was particularly notable as she was the only author on the list who was still living which caused a flurry of interest in her and her writing.

Written and revised between 1960 and 1965, *An Unsuitable Attachment* was published posthumously in 1982 by MacMillan and E. P. Dutton respectively. Though Pym's novels have never been shy of romance, there are very few that refer to an actual wedding taking place in which some of the main characters tie the knot. In this novel, one of the female protagonists marries and seems uncharacteristically happy for doing so, despite naysayers all around her. Pym's great friend and literary executor, Hazel Holt wrote a short note at the beginning of the novel specifying that in her own conversations with Pym, she "spoke of ways in which she intended to 'improve'" the novel. Sadly, Pym never had the chance for she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer not long after her Booker Prize nomination for *Quartet in Autumn*; her death followed in 1980.

It is my belief that in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym provides what anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously referred to as “thick description” (1973). That Pym was influenced by fieldwork techniques indicative of anthropologists and folklorists is not surprising considering her years working among social scientists of the International African Institute from 1958 until her retirement in 1974. Even before she worked at the Institute, however, Pym had begun jotting down ideas in spiral notebooks that documented anything and everything she observed around her, all of which contributed to the thick description so evident in her writing. Within the pages of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym offers up a veritable feast of meaning and reflection through the material culture that her female characters use, create and manipulate as part of their daily lives in the parish of St. Basil’s.

Within Pym’s writing, there is a predilection for examining female characters’ lives minutely. I would argue, and I am not the first nor will I be the last to do so, that the experiences the characters have, whether mindful or sad, agreeable or misaligned, communicate what were, for many women, day to day realities that defined their lives in England during the mid-twentieth century in which Pym, herself, was living and working. The female sphere to which Pym pays the most tribute, from housework to cooking, gardening, sharing afternoon tea, dinner parties, church events, and many entangled conversations occurring in-between, was in fact, her world as well as that of her audience. From my folkloristic perspective, these are all examples of women’s material culture that constitute what is meaningful in the lives of Pym’s female characters and to some extent, that of their male counterparts. The excellent women found between the covers of *An Unsuitable Attachment* visit, talk, consult and argue amongst each other, but they also attempt to navigate through potential and/or current relationships with men at home and at work. As Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym’s editorial notes indicate within *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*, Pym was herself conscious of her single status, but she did engage in a number of love affairs, many of which left her an emotional wreck following their demise. Though Pym never married, her share of heartbreak in her personal life lends authenticity and depth to the stories she created. In connection, Pym depicts female characters in *An Unsuitable Attachment* who are neither complacent nor completely satisfied, for they, like Pym was herself, are inquisitive, questioning women, whose experiences encourage them to reflect upon their lives and that of others within their close-knit community. Pym wonderfully portrays women who experience a sense of fulfillment and purpose through shared pursuits and creative expression, and their lives appear to be far from desultory or unpleasant. When all else fails to surprise or stimulate, the female characters especially experience what Pym refers to as “small blameless comforts”: placing spring flowers in a vase, hemming a skirt, arranging a bowl of quinces, admiring the pattern on a china plate, or enjoying a quiet cup of tea. Through these simple, yet cherished daily events, readers recognize in Pym’s writing familiar activities and objects which play an inherent role in their own lives.

Early in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym introduces sisters Sophia Ainger and Penelope Grandison during a shopping expedition in which Sophia has purchased a few items for Penelope to bolster her spirits, for she is at a low point in her life due to a failed romance. The sisters are conversationally discussing men’s and women’s roles in relationships when Sophia remarks how “women are usually too good for men,” but then adds that her husband, Mark, “is much too good for me.” As further proof of the vicar’s goodness, she tells her sister that he even offered to fix supper that she might enjoy her day out, and that he “would get something.” In this scene, Pym provides a glimpse into the lives of the English middle classes and the division of labour within the household as early as the 1950s. Even if a day’s recreational shopping was planned, a woman was still expected to buy groceries and prepare the evening meal for her husband, all in prompt anticipation of his arrival home from work. In Pym’s world, it would have been a rare treat for a woman to have her husband (lover, boyfriend) organize the evening meal, and the writer is alluding to this point.

Foodways in *An Unsuitable Attachment*

In contrast to many of the female characters in this novel, Pym’s creation of the single, unhappy, but infinitely practical Penelope demonstrates her skill as a writer. Despite her competitive nature, especially with Ianthe Broome, Penelope is one of the more likeable characters in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. I believe that in Penelope lies a character who is the kind of woman we all know and love. Though Penelope’s conversation sometimes borders on the flippant – she even

surprises herself sometimes – in this woman, Pym has created a character familiar to us all: she speaks her mind, questions everyone and everything around her, and often feels moments of incredible frustration. It is through descriptions of food and clothing, however, that Pym depicts the true nature of Penelope’s character.

In being invited by archaeologist, Rupert Stonebird to his dinner party, Penelope realizes that she has likely been included to even out the number of guests. Since she is attracted to Rupert and sees him as a potential love interest, Penelope appreciates the invitation regardless. Upon her arrival, he compliments her on being available at short notice and Penelope admits: “I wasn’t doing anything this evening” and then, without a thought she blurts out abruptly, “[but] one’s always glad of a free meal.” Perhaps this comment reflects Pym’s thoughts on the state of affairs of single, working women in general or more likely, it represents a conversation Pym overheard in a tea shop (and recorded in a notebook) in which a few single women lamented their hand to mouth living, subsisting on meager earnings. In a passage near the end of the novel, Pym denotes how Penelope has a renewed interest in cooking for herself after she has returned from Rome. Whether Penelope’s disappointing experiences in Italy are to blame or because of Rupert calling her a “jolly little thing,” something has changed inside her. In another scene when her sister and brother-in-law have come for supper, she says, “at least I can provide you with a reasonable spaghetti.” Sophia pays little attention to Penelope’s musings for she is more interested that her sister followed *her* suggestion to put basil in the sauce, to which Penelope adds: “Yes, and I used a tin of tomatoes, and cooked it all very slowly for hours and hours.”

As a folklorist, I interpret food through the concept of foodways, a subgenre of material culture that includes not only the food dishes themselves, but the entire process of procuring ingredients, the tools and equipment needed, and the cooking or baking required to make food into a meal. Foodways also recognizes the presentation of the food, from the linens and dishes on which the food appears, to the interaction between the people who share in the eating of the food. In scenes where food plays even a minor role, Pym’s characters appear to pay attention to the process and presentation involved which likely indicates how significant food is, in the lives of the female characters, but obviously to Pym herself. As culinary historian Laura Shapiro remarks, in her impressive and entertaining publication *What She Ate: Six Remarkable Women & the Food that Tells Their Stories*, “Barbara Pym was not a food writer, but she saw the world as if she were – as if every piece of cake or even just the crumbs on the plate offered the most enticing clues imaginable to time, place, class and character” (2018, 176).

Pym may not specifically use the term “foodways” in her writing, but she understood the concept, and many scenes in *An Unsuitable Attachment* demonstrate how Pym saw, in the creating, preparing and eating of food, an expression of need, not of sustenance, but of nurturing and love. Pym’s discussion of Penelope’s preparation of the spaghetti sauce demonstrates the character’s domestic skills as well as her interest in cooking. It is the interaction, however, between the sisters during and after the meal that readers can gage the writer’s appreciation for how food brings the women together and recognizes their bond, which was only briefly alluded to at the beginning of the novel. Foodways is a conduit connecting people through the act of making, sharing, and consuming food. While the vicar is left out of the conversation because the ladies, by his own admission, wish to have “a sisterly talk,” it is apparent that the Italian flavour of the meal brings back memories of the trip, and because these were not all happy ones for Penelope, she confides in Sophia after the meal.

In scenes such as this, Pym’s appreciation for food and travel corresponds to her own experiences, especially as a member of the WRNS during the War and then later, when she travelled to Italy and Greece with her sister, Hilary afterward. She incorporates some of these experiences into her novels, re-generating them into the lives of her female characters. In the foreword to *À La Pym: The Barbara Pym Cookery Book*, Louise Ross indicates that Barbara and Hilary were particularly influenced by Mediterranean dishes in their own cooking (1995). Hilary, too, describes how her sister experimented in the kitchen, inventing recipes that featured tasty, flavourful foods that she enjoyed serving to friends and acquaintances (1995). Notably, Pym’s diaries and letters frequently refer to her peeling potatoes and chopping up vegetables to accompany roasts or soups; these diary entries point to the author’s on-going interest in the preparation of food which gave her a sense of fulfilment as she had played a role in its creation and later, its enjoyment (1984, 125, 134, 141).

Food and the serving of food in *An Unsuitable Attachment* appears in multiple scenes in which it is a catalyst for initiating a friendship or a potential romance between characters. On the eve of her trip to Rome, Ianthe Broome leaves the library accompanied by John Challow who asks her to join him for a drink. Since it is nearly time for supper, they decide to have a meal together at a café where Ianthe often has had a solitary lunch. “It would be the first time she had ever been with John to a place that was part of her own particular world.” Pym invites readers to consider the realm of possibility when a woman introduces someone to the more private elements of her life, and it is through food that Ianthe lets John into her world, her life, and her experiences.

Over poached eggs, tea and tiny cakes, John unabashedly confesses feelings that Ianthe tries to brush away, like detritus on the table. She skirts around the notion that she could be in love with this younger man and takes “refuge in the business of the drawing of cups and the teapot towards her.” Ianthe and John express themselves through food and foodways in a café indicative of tea shops and cafes of England of the 1950s and 60s. There are inevitable interruptions: the eaves-dropping waitress, Mrs. Harper, her arrival with the food, and then her huffy removal of the tiny cakes to another table. Despite these somewhat ill-timed and comical pauses in their meal together, John and Ianthe maintain an indelible connection, undoubtedly encouraged by John’s impatient queries and Ianthe’s romantic expectations. Recognizing that this is their first meal together, John hints hopefully that they will surely have “lots more,” but he truly pushes the envelope when, upon encouraging Ianthe to eat the cakes which she refuses on account of being full, he offers an alternate reason why she cannot eat the cakes: “You must be in love or something...that’s what loss of appetite usually means.”

Safely back in her own home, Ianthe cradles a glass of sherry, recalling the moments of the supper date and subsequent walk to the station. Though she focuses first on her sense of shock and excitement remembering John’s parting kiss, she is then struck when she recalls his earlier comment at the tea table, “You must be in love or something.” With a start she recounts that she *had*, in fact, eaten a serving of poached eggs *after all*, “and [she] was glad to have found a sensible reason for her lack of appetite.”

Truly, Pym has outdone herself in this comical passage in which the eating of eggs and taking of tea are balanced precariously on the edge of John and Ianthe’s “near” declarations of love. In considering the setting of a public café, with a nosey waitress, and fellow tea drinkers, I cannot help but think of Pym, pen poised over her notebook, as she sat in a café not unlike this one, listening, observing, then recording a similar conversation she overheard as she ate a quick supper after work. Through her characters’ awkward attraction, Pym uses the atmosphere of the café to allow them to express feelings they are unsure of admitting openly. Pym enables her characters to perform an everyday event – eating a meal together – and turns it into an extra-ordinary experience that neither character can forget. For Ianthe, this simple meal with John is transformative. She begins to wonder at feelings she once would have happily tidied away; she could not possibly be interested in a younger man, could she? Just as Penelope and Sophia bond over homecooked spaghetti, so too have John and Ianthe recognized their mutual attraction over a meal in a cafe. In real life, as in modern literature, foodways encourages connection through interaction.

Material culture in the home – fruit as food and decoration; clothing and furs as mementos

In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the lives of Pym’s female characters are embellished by the forms of material culture that they create or manipulate, often in domestic spaces. Fruit and/or flowers are placed on display as decoration or given as gifts, and they also recollect memories of loved ones and past experiences. Clothing enhances the women’s image of themselves, balancing their wish to remain poised and proper with a desire to increase their sex appeal. Whether it is an arrangement of fruit, a hand-held floral posy, a casual dress, or an ostentatious outfit, material objects figure prominently in scenes in which Ianthe, Sophia and Penelope express a sense of belonging and identity to both their past and present lives.

Pym’s depiction of the interior of the vicarage focuses on Sophia’s description of the “sitting room” – which she indicates was “neither ‘lounge’ nor ‘drawing room’” – into which she and Mark retire. Considering that Pym, herself, attended church on a regular basis, and had a keen interest in church architecture, it is quite possible that the vicarage and

St. Basil's dated from the late 18th or early 19th century. Sophia attempts to compensate for the vicarage's "less gracious surroundings" by decorating it much like "her mother's house." In *Sophia*, Pym has portrayed a woman with an upper-class background who, despite marrying below her station, is dedicated in her role as vicar's wife. She does, however, feel the pangs of missed opportunity for herself, and to some extent for her husband. Through traditional furniture and various decorative objects, Pym's depiction of the vicarage "sitting room" becomes a space recognizable to women readers primarily because of Sophia's presence in that interior space. Even as we read Pym's writing today, it is not hard to appreciate how Sophia demonstrates her practical skills in housekeeping as well as her desire to express herself creatively through the objects she places on display. Beyond simple furnishings, Sophia has embellished this space with objects from her past that "recapture the atmosphere of her mother's house with bowls of quinces, the fragrance of well polished furniture, and the special Earl Grey tea, but she often realised how different it really was." Like most vicarages of the period, the residence Mark and Sophia live in represents a temporary home, but Sophia has filled certain rooms with objects that express her cultural background, more than her husband's, which enables her to make this home *her* home, no matter how temporary it may be.

According to folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in her article "Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review," how objects are used or placed on display often "influences their level of meaning" (1989, 332). Within *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym describes how Sophia enjoys having a bowl of quinces in her home for their simple beauty and warm, delicious fragrance, but these objects also remind her of her mother. Historians refer to quince as the fruit of lovers while other scholars believe that Eve gave in to temptation because of a quince not an apple. In my opinion, the quince's odd, nobly shape, soft buttery yellow exterior and lasting aroma point to home comforts rather than to sexual desire, and this is particularly true where the quince is concerned in Pym's novel. As Sophia describes how her mother has sent the quince up from the country, this fruit has become suffused within Sophia's past memory, while being part of her present life: she places them on display as her mother did before her, and she makes quince jelly to share with her husband or family and friends. Beyond their fragrance and culinary significance, the quinces that Sophia places in a bowl to decorate and scent her home represent for her what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has defined as a "memento," a cherished and valued object "that serve(s) as a reminder of an ephemeral experience or absent person" (1989, 333), even if in being perishable, the quince has to be replaced each year. For Sophia, the quince's seasonal presence in her home provides her with a sense of belonging and a sense of identity, connecting both her past *and* present lives.

As Pym divulges, however, Sophia is not completely satisfied with her lot in life, but she does not sit around complaining. Sophia creates and re-creates objects – cakes, bottled preserves, clothing, and flower arrangements – that provide pleasure, comfort, and nourishment in her and her family's life, and that of her church community. Within *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the quince plays multiple roles in this woman's life. Beyond providing beauty and comfort, this fruit engages Sophia to demonstrate not only her creativity but her domestic skill. Pym, too, may have displayed a wooden bowl of quinces in her sitting room. Though she mentions the beauty and delight of growing and harvesting blackberries and currants in the garden, I have not found that quince is featured in Pym's diaries, nor is the fruit featured in her cookbook. Perhaps someone shared quince jam or jelly and it left an impression on Pym, enough for her to mention the fruit so often in her novel.

The domestic skills of the female characters in this novel are evident not only of their practical competence but also of their intuitive and competitive natures in a close-knit church community. Though Sophia's bowl of quinces is aesthetically pleasing in her home, this fruit recognizes her culinary skills, for she comments that some of the fruit "will be saved to make jelly." Ever resourceful, English housewives from the Second World War onward harvested and/or purchased apples, pears, and quince in the autumn to make jams, jellies, and chutneys with which to stock their pantry shelves, if cookery books of the period have anything to say about it. Take for example, a quince jelly recipe from *The Constance Spry Cookery Book* of 1956, in which Spry, a famous floral designer and writer, along with co-author Rosemary Hume denote the necessity of adding windfall apples or crab apples to the quince so that the jelly will set properly, unless the quince is

unripe, in which case, the addition of other fruit will no longer be necessary (1097). Pym does not discuss Sophia actually making the quince jelly, more's the shame, but the jelly appears in a later scene already made and in little jelly pots, along with a cake whose preparation and presentation *is* given some attention. In fact, both the cake and quince jelly play a prominent role in an unforgettably funny passage when Sophia welcomes Ianthe Broome's Aunt and Uncle Burdon into the vicarage. It is the quince jelly, however, that Pym depicts as the epitome of domestic achievement. Following the Burdons' entrance into her home, Sophia congratulates herself that she has had the foresight to make "a cake that morning" and, as an afterthought, she reflects how "it looked almost as good as one of Sister Dew's." Pym is all too aware of the competition between women in a small village or church parish where ladies in a close community can easily identify individuals famous for their blackberry pie or Victoria sponge. In an earlier passage of the novel, Sophia is making a sponge cake, beating together the eggs and sugar but knowing glumly that "her cake would not rise as high as Sister Dew's."

As any vicar's wife worth her salt would say when surprise guests appear at her door, "I was just going to make tea," Sophia does one better: she has cake, Earl Grey tea, thin brown bread with butter, and strawberry jam or quince jelly. It is while deliberating upon which fruit preserve to offer that it dawns on her how she should be more focused on what Randolph Burdon means when he says something about a "rather worrying business" concerning his niece. Once seated and beginning to enjoy the refreshments Sophia has laid out for them, Uncle Randolph abandons Ianthe's troubles as he becomes wholly fixated on the quince jelly: "Ah, is that *quince* jelly, I see? How delicious!" he says excitedly. Aunt Bertha bristles at her husband's distracted nature and begins to highlight the facts surrounding Ianthe's lapse in judgement, "a most unfortunate choice," and "a man...several years younger than she is and inferior to her socially."

Sophia agrees with the Burdons but is more worried that Ianthe and the young man in question "will, in her estimation, have nothing to speak about in the evenings." Harkening back to another era, Randolph replies with what he believes to be an obvious point: that "the man can go to his club while the woman does needlework or watches television ... so conversation in the evenings need not be a problem." He even goes so far as to suggest that Ianthe "could make quince jelly, of course" while offering a complement to Sophia on her jelly-making prowess and chastising his wife's ineptitude: "This is so delicious, Mrs. Ainger, that I am going to take the last spoonful. A pity my wife has not the strength to do these things." Bertha's retort of "quinces do not grow in Mayfair, anyway" discloses her profound irritation with her husband, but Sophia comes to the rescue by admitting that her mother sends up the quinces from the country and "I'll give you a pot to take away with you." Pym's comic yet thoughtful rendering of this scene reveals how she is ever mindful of the delicate balance between husband and wife, as well as that between women. Not all women are created equal in their domestic skill set, and while Bertha and Sophia are both vicar's wives, Sophia must diffuse a difficult situation.

This hilarious exchange over tea and jelly is one that might remind many of us of similar situations experienced in a close-knit community. I can appreciate Pym's delight in writing Sophia's somewhat exasperated thoughts upon seeing this couple finally depart: "At least he would be taking away a pot of his favourite jelly ... which was a great deal more than one usually got out of trying to interfere in other people's business." Where else but in a Barbara Pym novel could one envision a multi-tasking vicar's wife calming the waters with quince jelly so eloquently? And while cleverly contrived, this scene reveals Pym's ability to connect directly with women's daily experiences, foodways, and social conventions, all of which are interwoven on the pages of this novel, just as they would be in real life.

Ianthe's material culture

Sophia expresses her creativity and domestic skills through food, foodways, and decorative objects, while Ianthe, Penelope and other minor female characters are depicted using, displaying, or altering clothing, furnishings, china or flowers that often represent their current interests or recall their connection to earlier memories and experiences. In a small house at St. Basil's Terrace, Ianthe Broome is the only child of deceased parents; she has inherited elegant furnishings, china, and furs, and thus, the interior of her home again features what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines as mementos and material companions (1989, 333-335). These objects represent the indelible link between Ianthe and her mother and father who, she says, appear "to be a whole generation removed from those of her contemporaries." In passages throughout this novel, Pym

portrays how Ianthe is surrounded by objects she has grown to love, yet which are forms of material culture that do not define her life, but that of her parents. As a result of others' favourable reactions to her elegant furnishings, Ianthe deflects their complements, by stating: "It's really no credit to me ... All the furnishings came from my old home." Living and caring for her mother in the years prior to her death, Ianthe deigns to find "a ladylike occupation" working in a library, and yet she is used to a more entitled existence than most of the characters in the novel. After her mother's death, Ianthe has chosen to buy a house in a community to which she wants to belong, a place where she might forge a new beginning. From the onset of the novel to its near ending, Ianthe has to wade through others' expectations and false impressions of her in order to gain acceptance into the community.

Whether it is her clothing or furs, a Pembroke table or a set of Hepplewhite chairs, Ianthe's household and personal possessions engender a mix of feelings from friends and acquaintances, church members and co-workers. Fellow librarian Merwyn openly covets the objects in her home, and in later scenes, Ianthe wonders "was it only for her house and furniture that she was to be loved?" When Sophia tends to a very ill Ianthe in the role of helpful vicar's wife, she makes a meal for Ianthe in which she experiences a feeling of joy in the task, primarily because of Ianthe's "nice things":

Down in the neat little kitchen Sophia made an omelette, cut thin bread and butter and arranged the quarters of a peeled orange on a crown Derby plate. 'Nice things' Ianthe had and it was a pleasure to use them.

Feelings of envy and admiration are revealed in the musings of Penelope, Sophia, and minor female characters in regard to Ianthe and her mode of dress. Whether Ianthe's poised and polished physique is wrapped in grey squirrel or moleskin, wool or silk, Pym seems to be describing a dress standard to which the other women in the novel all want to aspire. After being embarrassed by her sister's dress of "tartan trews" at the church bizarre, Sophia realizes that her own attire is inadequate when compared to Miss Broome:

Sophia herself was wearing a green jersey suit and a small hat, but she felt that she did not look so absolutely right as Ianthe, whose plain blue woollen dress was set off by a feather-trimmed hat which had just the right touch of slightly dowdy elegance – if there could be such a thing.

The most interesting comments about Ianthe's style of clothing, however, are made through Penelope, her would-be rival. As Pym deftly describes it, Penelope's only recourse is to appear in direct contrast to her, such that from her mode of dress to her choice of alcohol, Penelope chooses what Ianthe does not. At Rupert's dinner party, Penelope places her coat on a chair, where she realizes with chagrin that Ianthe has arrived ahead of her; her moleskin jacket draped nearby.

So she's here already, thought Penelope, seeing that there was a fur jacket lying on the spare room bed. She fingered it. Moleskin! Did *anybody* have things made of moleskin nowadays? And Sophia said she had a grey squirrel coat too. Perhaps this one had belonged to her mother? It was an old lady's fur, somehow. And the silk scarf with it in a faded paisley design looked like something brought back by a missionary aunt from India about thirty years ago. But, of course, it was real silk, so tiresomely *good*, like all Ianthe's things.

Unlike other characters in the novel, Penelope is one of the few to realize that though Ianthe wears high quality clothing, she's inherited most of it from her mother, some items dating back to the Edwardian period. Ianthe's moleskin, for instance, was probably purchased and worn during the interwar years. According to Simon Ward, editor of the online blog, "[Truth about Fur](#)," moleskin was once favoured by British high society in the early twentieth century, who, upon hiring 'molecatchers' to rid properties and parishes of pesky European moles (*Talpia europaea*), began using the animals' fur in the making of trousers, jackets and wraps, and adding it to line the front of long waistcoats and winter gloves. It is the "nap" of mole fur which is so unique, soft and supple but whichever way you rub it, it stays the same. At the peak of moleskin's popularity from the 1900s through the 1940s, the United States was importing 4 million pelts a year from the UK. Other cotton-based fabrics also became known as moleskin, as did a pocket-sized journal made famous by writer, Ernest Hemingway, who routinely carried one around to record ideas and thoughts. By its very name moleskin, denotes quality, whether it is clothing or stationery, even today.

In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym's own interest in clothing – for everyday and special occasions – is discernable in the attention paid to it by female characters gracing the pages of the book. Pym was keenly aware of the cost and variety of fabric, for she, herself, was an avid seamstress who made her own skirts and dresses as evidenced in the entries and photographs from *A Very Private Eye*. Underneath a photograph of herself sitting on a window ledge dressed in a cheerful frock and sandals, Pym penned the following caption: "Orangey-pink and white checked gingham, 5³/₄d a yard" (Pym, Holt, and Pym 1984, Fig. 2d).

What the female characters wear distinguishes them in the eyes and minds of others in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, all because Pym is so clever in employing clothing in this novel. She recognizes how the making, buying, or altering of clothes would have been (and likely still is) of great interest to women readers as an everyday topic of conversation. Clothing figures prominently in women's lives as an expressive form of material culture, and whether it is ready-made or hand-sewn, everyday or evening wear, clothing can represent a wide range of feelings and emotions. Pym paints a fascinating picture of women's dress in this novel: Ianthe figures as cool and serene in wool dresses or fur coats and jackets; Penelope appears quite trendy in beatnik hats, beads and sandals; Sophia remains detached in wool jerseys and practical blouses; and Sister Dew and Daisy Pettigrew are perfectly type-cast in stout frocks and robust tweeds. Even through a garden party invitation, Pym pays attention to the importance of clothing and yet makes fun of it: "Dress optional" reads the last line in the invitation Rupert holds in his hand. *But clothing in this novel is anything but optional.*

Despite being a working woman, Ianthe can ill afford new items of clothing, so why shouldn't she wear and appreciate expensive relics of another period? Ianthe wears, in a sense, vintage fashion and she eats off Crown Derby china that her mother once cherished because, not unlike Sophia and the bowl of quinces, for Ianthe these objects recall loved ones remembered, her childhood, and other past experiences. They serve as "material companions" representing her cultural background, and thus the connection she has with the women of her family (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, 333).

Not surprisingly, cast-off clothing and dress play a role in this novel, for Sophia has been given clothing from a wealthy friend of her mother's. One dress in particular causes quite a stir when Penelope chooses to wear it to Rupert's dinner party. Before the party, Penelope leaves work and heads to Sophia's in order to change into more appropriate attire befitting this kind of event. Going through a number of items that Sophia offers including a green wool dress, Penelope steers away from such things, knowing only too well that Ianthe will undoubtedly wear a wool dress and wear it better than her. Penelope picks a cocktail dress knowing that it will certainly create contrast, but it also gets her into an awkward situation. She alters and manipulates the dress, making it reflect her own style and mode of fashion rather than wearing the dress as it was originally intended:

Half an hour later Penelope was encased – for it was a fraction too tight for her – in the lamé cocktail dress with the hem roughly tacked up, the sequin trimming torn away from the neck and a string of black beads hanging down below the waist.

Later, disaster ensues when Ianthe and Robina, another dinner guest, realize that Penelope's dress has split a seam at the back. Ianthe considers trying to sew it, while Robina suspects that the split is a lost cause, suggesting she cover it up with a shawl. Penelope is fed up with the whole thing and states exasperatedly that "the dress was rather tight to begin with and now I've eaten too much...Steak and kidney pudding, baked apples and cream, and Stilton cheese – what can you expect!"

The dress would have been difficult for any woman to pull off even if she was as thin as a rail. According to the editors of *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*, long, figure-hugging cocktail dresses designed in shiny, fluid fabrics became increasingly popular throughout the 1930s. Leaving little to the imagination, they clung to women's bodies such that "if dieting did not have the desired effect, women could purchase foundations with the new 'tu-way stretch' materials which would achieve the all-important smooth, unbroken line" (Hennessy et al., 2012, 274). Pym's description of the cocktail dress that Penelope bravely wore, is in keeping with historian's descriptions. Most were designed using silk,

satin or lamé fabrics in silver, gold, or white that made the wearer appear as if she had been sprayed in liquid metal. Sequins, fringes, or fine embroidery added to the overall, shimmering effect (2012, 274-275).

Unlike Ianthe's carefully controlled dress choices, which are inherently linked to her mother's generation, Penelope wears an extravagant dress that is too tight, but she is willing to take a gamble. She certainly catches Rupert's attention even though she is not even aware of the effect she is having on him. In interpreting how clothing is incorporated into Pym's writing, I recognize the attention paid to women's attire for it is another form of material culture that demonstrates how women express themselves creatively, and mirrors their desire to appear attractive or composed, practical or rebellious. For Penelope, dress becomes self-affirming and communicates, especially through this character, a woman's need for love and to express her natural sensuality, regardless of age or experience. In taking ownership of the dress, Penelope manipulates and alters the fabric, removes some of the accessories while adding others so that the dress represents her preferences, her style. Though an unlikely heroine, Penelope captures the attention of her would-be suitor, and while she does not achieve perfection in a cocktail dress or in a beatnik outfit, I believe that Penelope is an example of a new kind of "excellent woman" in whom most of us can relate and respect.

Lemons

Pym's female characters demonstrate their household skills through cooking, jelly making, or in the sharing of food, as well as expressing their creativity through the decoration, display, and/or alteration of objects significant to their everyday lives. Beyond the bowl of quince in Sophia's sitting room, there are numerous examples suggesting the significance of fruit and flowers to Pym's characters and to Pym, herself, in this novel. When she served as a Wren, Pym managed, in between assignments, to venture out, seeing villages and towns where she admired local architecture, visited cathedrals, wandered bookshops, or sauntered through cemeteries in church yards. On the whole, her appreciation of the English cultural landscape, village and countryside is remarkably documented in her letters and diary entries (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984, 144-145, 151, 155-156). When Pym is later stationed in Naples, she and fellow officers travel to surrounding areas where she was especially attracted to this entirely different cultural landscape. On November 3rd, 1944, Pym recorded the following comments on a visit to castle ruins as well as beautifully cultivated gardens near Ischia (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984, 173):

We walked a little round the island – everything is so beautifully green now. Oranges and orange blossom with shining green leaves, lemons, vines, bougainvillea, mild sunny air – I wore no stockings.

Noting how interested she was in the beauty of this Italian landscape, it is not surprising that she returned, visiting areas of Southern Italy in 1961, and in Ravello, she recorded these observations (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984, 202):

Acres of lemon groves all covered with matting...It is for the lemon groves that one loves Italy...and the little bundles of dried lemon leaves which you unwrap to reveal a few delicious lemon-flavoured raisins in the middle.

Remarkably similar observations reappear in *An Unsuitable Attachment* in several scenes, but particularly when Sophia and Ianthe take an excursion to Ravello, following their time in Rome. At Villa Faustina, Sophia hopes Ianthe will be just as enamoured as she is herself with the panorama before her, especially of the lemon groves situated on the property. In her room, Ianthe steps out onto the balcony to admire the view but in doing so, she realizes with a pang that she is longing for home:

The trees were covered with matting so that the fruit was almost hidden, but Ianthe could feel that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lemons hanging there among the leaves. ... Beyond the lemon groves she could see the sea which she found more reassuring because beyond it lay England, her little house, the library, and John.

Later, Sophia begins to think how members of St. Basil's each experienced something of consequence while on the trip to Rome. In considering others' experiences, she is untying bundles of lemon leaves, and through the removal of leaf after leaf until "the fragrant raisins" are revealed at the center, she contemplates what she, herself, accomplished in going to Italy. It is not a rekindling of love between her and Mark, as others might suspect. For Sophia, it is the Villa Faustina that

physically and emotionally represents to her an idyllic and romantic place to which she can return in her heart and mind. Though the bundle of lemon leaves and premature fruit will wither and dry over time, they signify a memento, recalling past experiences, where Sophia has tucked away a part of herself. In feeling and smelling the lemon leaves in her hands, she remarks: “this trivial delight was almost enough to have brought away from a visit to Italy.” In passages like these, is it any wonder that Pym considered *Wrapped in Lemon Leaves* as the alternative title to this novel? (Holt 1990, 199).

Just as the female characters in this novel are particularly fond of flowers, fruit, and garden spaces, so too was Pym, who indulged in her own botanical interests, many of which she recounts in diary entries: she describes her energetic weeding, and her growing, harvesting and cooking of fruit and vegetables, and how much she enjoys the ephemeral beauty of spring flowers especially daffodils, primroses, and violets (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984, 15, 23). Within *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Ianthe is seen arranging a bouquet of tulips in one scene and in another, she finds pleasure in a gift of fragrant violets from John: “[she] hurried down the library steps holding the flowers to her face. The violets’ cold fresh scent and passionate yet mourning purple roused in her a feeling she could not explain.” During both the Victorian and Edwardian eras, violets, specifically “parma violets,” were sold by flower sellers in small bunches to women who carried them in hand-held posies as they walked on busy London streets, for the violet’s sweet fragrance allowed other, less pleasant odours, to be masked. The violet growing industry in the Hudson River area of New York from the 1870s through the First World War encouraged a lucrative importation of these violets to English flower markets as late as 1928, according to an article in *Country Life* magazine.

Today, violet fanciers and heirloom plant and seed companies continue to sell varieties such as “Duchesse de Parme” because there is still a demand for this very fragrant violet. Canyon Creek Nursery in Oroville, California still grows and sells these plants commercially, for proprietor John Whittlesey indicates that the demand for parma violets is strongly associated with memory: “People still buy parmas because of family history, their relatives either grew or loved the plants...” (Ginsberg 2009). Within *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Ianthe describes how these violets, give her a “feeling she cannot explain.” In all likelihood, the violets are like living mementos to Ianthe because she feels a sense of attachment to absent loved ones and a sense of identity, to past experiences (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, 332-333).

Like Sophia’s bowl of quinces or bundle of lemon leaves, the violets are fixed in the mind, evoking layers of meaning and personal memory. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym presents a fascinating array of material culture – food, flowers, fruit, clothing and decorative embellishments – within the lives of her female characters. In scenes in which these forms of material culture appear, Pym’s own interests and life events are often mirrored, which increases readers’ appreciation for the authenticity and validity of the women’s experiences depicted in the novel. Through their daily activities and more extraordinary experiences, women in *An Unsuitable Attachment* represent what is significant and relevant to readers who find in Pym’s conversational writing style all the appearance of a kind and intelligent friend. The attention paid by these female characters to small blameless comforts implies what is most meaningful and relevant to women beyond those described on the pages of this novel, for as Pym once said: “It adds to the pleasure of life to notice things” (Pym, Holt and Pym 1984, 158).

Cynthia Boyd has a PhD in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland where she is a part-time lecturer and researcher in the Department of Folklore, specializing in material culture, occupational folklore, and the decorative arts. She has published and presented papers on these and other topics in North America and the United Kingdom. In addition, she is a copy editor and writer for the Newfoundland Quarterly magazine in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada.

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