

Communal Rites: Tea, Wine and Milton in Barbara Pym's Novels

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The mingling of sacred and profane love fascinated Barbara Pym as much as it did Milton to whom she often alludes. Snow regards Milton as less important to Pym than were Donne and Herbert, primarily because of the indirect nature of Pym's Miltonic allusions.

Analyzing the latter, I shall argue that Pym used Milton as a negative touchstone to define her feminist theology. Recently Wittreich (xi) and Gallagher (171) have defended Milton as an outstanding feminist of his time. On the other hand Corum follows Gilbert and Gubar (180) by stressing Milton's patriarchal orthodoxy which he perceives as atonement for the poet's sinful rebelliousness. The perception of Milton as misogynist was the prevailing view in Pym's lifetime.

Milton endeavored to distinguish sacred from profane love even in Eden. Raphael warns Adam:

...love refines
The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat
In Reason and is judicious, is the scale
By which to heav'nly Love thou may'st ascend,
Not sunk in carnal pleasure, for which cause
Among the beasts no Mate for thee was found. (*Paradise Lost*, VIII: 589-594)

The consequence of the fall in Milton and in the Hebraic/Christian tradition he represents is that Adam and Eve descend to bestial passion. Woman, associated with the body, draws man into the lower realm. As Eve tempts Adam and is the immediate cause of his fall, so Delilah tempts Samson and causes him to lose his physical prowess. In Milton's theology God the Father is superior to Christ the Mediator, who is in turn superior to the Holy Spirit. Man is superior to woman as the spirit is to the flesh.

Pym establishes an inverse ordering of the trinity and everywhere questions man's superiority to woman. She establishes serving the body, woman's traditional role, as a means of fostering the spirit. I shall demonstrate Pym's subversive use of Milton through an investigation of the nature of love in relation to the rituals of tea and wine consumption in Pym's novels. I believe Pym uses these rituals-feminine and masculine-to figure Caritas and Eros, the immanent and the transcendent, the real and the ideal. Ministering to the body, the rituals establish communal links between participants and, by providing solace for both body and spirit, imitate the transubstantiation of the Christian mass.

Rubenstein has written of Pym's "mingling the spiritual and mundane" (187) to suggest "that not only love but even the holy spirit calls us to and through the things of this world" (181). Yet Rubenstein juxtaposes "tea and biscuits" with "real spiritual sustenance" (173). Weld, on the contrary, argues that "food for Pym has always been a social cohesive, joining partakers in pleasurable community and providing spiritual as well as physical comfort" (189). Aligning myself with Weld, I would further argue that "tea and biscuits" provide the means to a development of Christian community. The continuity of the Church depends upon the survival of the body to which women minister.

With her Bakhtinian emphasis on the body, Pym fashioned her novels in the border region between satire and comedy. As Frye observes, old comedy ended with actors throwing "bits of food to the audience" (192) who literally shared an act of communion to celebrate the renewal of society. In Pym's novels this communion is reflected in the characters' sharing of tea and wine whether in the formality of the 30's or the casualness of the 70's. Rossen has pointed out that Pym never made her theology explicit (81). I believe that the outline of Pym's theology emerges from the conjunction of descriptions of tea, wine and Milton.

I should like to begin by way of a biographical episode establishing Pym's connection to Milton. Only those privy to this episode can fully appreciate both the significance and the humor of her glancing references to the English poet.

Pym, like her predecessors in the sacred parody tradition which evolved from the Song of Songs, through the medieval troubadours, through Petrarch's anguished sonnets to Laura, to the English poetic tradition of Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, *et al.*, openly delighted in the titillating conjunction of the revered and the reviled.⁷ Her affair with Henry Harvey culminated in a reading of *Samson Agonistes* in the nude -- a reading interrupted when Henry's roommate Robert (Jock) Liddell burst in upon the young lovers. From Pym's account of the episode it is apparent that she enjoyed this flagrant undercutting of the great English Puritan, an enjoyment increased by being discovered in so compromising a situation.

In *Some Tame Gazelle* Pym at the age of twenty-one transformed life into art by projecting herself and her Oxford circle into the aged residents of an English village. In the novel Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve nostalgically reads *Samson Agonistes* to the timid, repressed spinster Belinda Bede. This poignant evening repeats their youth when Hoccleve courted Belinda by reading Milton -- certainly not in the situation in which Henry Harvey actually read to Barbara Pym. It is all the recompense Belinda needs for her lifelong devotion to a man who not only chose to marry someone else but who daily reveals to Belinda and his other parishioners a vain, pompous, and lazy character. This recasting of the *Samson Agonistes* episode, chaste though it is, retains the conjunction of the sacred (love of the Deity, reason, and beauty) and the profane (the attraction Belinda and Henry feel for each other). The setting of the reading undermines Milton's patriarchal theology by suggesting that the lovers look for erotic rather than moral messages in the text. Milton is a poet Belinda wishes to share only with Hoccleve; she is horrified when Bishop Grote couches his patronizing and patriarchal marriage proposal in terms of *Paradise Lost*.

From her home in Oswestry, Pym sent copies of her work, begun in July 1934, to Harvey and Liddell. The latter replied in December, 1934, with a poem in which he too recalls the *Samson Agonistes* episode but makes Milton himself the seducer of Cassandra:

Beholding her, the godlike Puritan
Forgot his godhead, and became a man
And prayed her as a second Eve to come
And share his Eden in Elysium.
Where he, John Milton, she, Cassandra Pym,
(He for God only, she for God in him),
Might live again the early days of Earth --
Unwieldy elephants should give them Mirth,
Only no serpent should be lurking there.
And wish her CALM OF MIND, ALL PASSION SPENT. (13-14)

Liddell has adapted most of these lines from Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: "he for God only, she for God in Him" (verse 299); "...th' unwieldy Elephant/To make them mirth us'd all his might, and wreath'd/His lithe Proboscis; close the Serpent sly" (verses 345-347). His last line echoes the last line of *Samson Agonistes* when Pym escapes to her ivory Tower "all passion spent." He depicts her in retirement where she devotes herself to domestic tasks and reads only the chastest poets. In fact, Liddell's poem accompanied a copy of the verses, not of John Milton, but of the notorious John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, the Restoration rake who slyly declared his scabrous poetry fit for the chaste ears of matrons. Both in this gesture and within his witty verses Liddell underscored Pym's standing of John Milton on his head.

Pym continued to allude playfully to Milton in her other novels but never so insistently as in *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Crampton Hodnet*, her first two novels written under Harvey's spell. The allusion may be as tangential as the name Allegra Grey in *Excellent Women*; Allegra's name recalls the promise of happy married life in Milton's "L' Allegro." In *An Unsuitable Attachment* (252) Basil Branehe foresees

the happiness of Ianthe Broom and John Challow: “‘Imparadised in one another’s arms, as Milton put it,’ Basil went on. ‘Or encasserolled, perhaps—the bay leaf resting on the *boeuf bourgignon*.’” In addition Snow notes that Jane (*JAP*) quotes from *Samson Agonistes* as does Leonora Eyre (*TSDD*) and “that Comus is alluded to in *STG* [*Some Tame Gazelle*] and *LTA* [*Less Than Angels*]; the sonnet ‘When I consider how my light is spent’ in *EW* [*Excellent Women*] and Milton’s metrical version of Psalm 136, ‘Let us with gladsome mind’ in *JAP* [*Jane and Prudence*]” (124). Ironic as these allusions may be in light of the *Samson Agonistes* episode, they still evoke Milton’s patriarchal theology and invite the reader to compare his views with those of Pym’s mid-twentieth-century characters.

Pym’s evocation of the “impure” blending of profane and sacred love serves as the background against which she contrasts her characters’ ideal visions of themselves and others with the reality of their lives. In her novels the chasm between the real and the ideal is bridged by the transforming power of desire and imagination. Through the impetus of Eros (passion) the lover seeks to unite with the perceived perfection of the Beloved. Once the lover discovers the Beloved’s flaws, Caritas (charity) enables him or her to continue nurturing the bonds of affection. Defects become endearing quirks which, by revealing the human weakness of their possessor, elicit the lover’s desire to protect the beloved. From its initiation in Eros, love within marriage pales into a habit of charitable forbearance. This scenario is played out in all of Pym’s novels during ceremonies of the imbibing of tea and, sometimes, wine.

Neither crises in the romantic lives of the characters, nor the exigencies of work, nor the obligations of religious devotion, disrupt the sanctity of the tea ritual. Indeed, catastrophe can sometimes be averted by the simple expedient of offering the victim a cup of tea. In the early novel *Excellent Women*, Mildred offers tea first to Rocky Napier, then to Julian Malory, when they are overpowered by their problems with women; in the last novel *A Few Green Leaves*, Emma likewise prepares tea and boiled eggs for Graham who has recently separated from his wife. Whenever a character feels unable to cope, a cup of tea restores his or her spirits and places things in proper perspective.

The ubiquity of the English tea in Pym’s novels prevents cataloging all its instances, but a just idea of her uses of the ritual can be gained through examination of *Crampton Hodnet*. There its customary observance reassures Jessie Morrow that the Clevelands’ marriage could not truly be endangered. *That it is* stems from Margaret Cleveland’s failure to properly attend to her husband’s tea and to her suggestion that he take one of his young students out for tea. Francis acts upon the suggestion and finds himself quoting poetry and falling in love with Barbara Bird over the teacups in Fuller’s, as he had once courted his wife with renditions of “To His Coy Mistress” over a cup of tea.

Meanwhile, Francis’ daughter Anthea is locked in an embrace with Simon Beddoes in the latter’s Oxford rooms, the tea which provided the ostensible occasion for the visit languishing on the fire. In the street below a Salvation Army Band provides a comfortable background of hymns and later “came the sound of the various bells calling people to evensong” (*CH* 38). Here Pym makes sacred love the soothing background for the profane love of two young people, who seek ecstasy if not salvation in each other. Instead of describing the lovemaking, Pym slyly suggests sexual excitation through the allusion to the rousing Salvation Army hymns, quiescence in the allusion to evensong bells.

Francis explains his absence to his wife with the elaborate fiction that he has been discussing *Paradise Lost* with Edwin Killigrew over tea. In another oblique allusion to Pym’s *Samson Agonistes* episode with Henry Harvey, Francis declares his love to Barbara Bird as they gaze at Milton’s signature in a Commonplace Book in the British Museum. Barbara returns to reality as she takes tea at Lyons’: “Milton couldn’t really have written in the book they had been looking at, just as Francis couldn’t really have said those words and she have agreed with them” (*CH* 100). Jessie Morrow muses over the gossip that Barbara and Francis have been seen in Lyons’ and remembers a large Baroque white and gold temple: “almost more suitable for sacred love than profane” (*CH* 124). Both the drama of Francis’ return home after his aborted elopement to Paris with Miss Bird and the contiguous drama of his daughter’s

receipt of a "Dear John" letter from Simon are assimilated and reduced to manageable proportion by their occurrence at teatime, the inexorable ritual they gratefully observe.

The minor characters of *Crampton Hodnet* are equally devoted to the tea ritual. Margaret Cleveland and Maude Doggett provide substantial teas for young Oxford students, occasions which allow them to make new friendships and to receive the unsolicited advice of the mother surrogate. Mrs. Killigrew invites her friends to tea to impart gossip about Francis' infidelity and to force him back into the mold of a socially-acceptable role: either a divorced man or a faithful husband. Enlarging their social concern, church members hold charity teas, preferably presided over by some titled personage like Lady Beddoes (Beddoes), to benefit the poor or the foreign pagan.

In her other novels no less than in *Crampton Hodnet*, Pym develops the tea as a symbol of societal order and stability. A maternal ritual, usually presided over by women, the English tea provides both physical and spiritual communion. The ceremony nurtures the emotional bonds that tie society's members together in the relationships of lovers, family members, friends, workers, and religious observants. Mildred immediately repents her suggestion to forego tea at a church committee meeting: "my question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind" (*EW* 227). The role of tea-pourer is jealously sought, for it corresponds to the sacramental role of high priest within the domestic sphere. Thus Fabian Driver (*JAP*) chooses to pour out tea himself rather than alienate either Jessie Morrow or Prudence by revealing his preference for one of them; Jessie subsequently expresses her resentment by spilling tea all over Prudence's elegant gown. She completes her revenge later when she and Miss Doggett lead Fabian captive-"like Samson" (*JAP* 215)-to their home. The vain, self-indulgent and philandering Fabian shares only a luxuriant head of hair with Samson and only his patriarchal sympathies with Milton. To relate Jesse to Delilah is to perceive that Pym counters Milton's treacherous spouse with a helpmeet morally superior to her husband.

In *An Unsuitable Attachment* Pym presents tea in an ecclesiastical setting. Rupert Stonebird recalls his mother's assumption of the sacramental role of tea-pourer, as she acted the counterpart of her husband the vicar who presided over the ritual of communion: "He had not been to any of the social functions advertised-it would have seemed like living his life backwards to enter voluntarily a church hall full of women and cups of tea -- he could see his mother at the urn and himself as a boy handing round those very cups" (*AUA* 35). In *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym underscores the sacramental nature of the tea ritual which is observed as part of the welcoming ceremonies for Father Ransome: "'I can see Mrs. Greenhill at the urn. Now we can get on to the main object of this gathering, eh, Ransome?' . . . Father Bode stood rubbing his hands as she approached, attended by a kind of acolyte bearing cups of tea on a tray" (60). Near the end of the novel Pym has Ransome articulate the association of the English tea with society's continuity: "Yes, life has to go on, and I suppose a cup of tea does make it seem to be doing that more than anything" (*AGOG* 210). Throughout Pym's novels tea restaurants are run by widows, often clergymen's widows, who function as modern versions of the ancient celibate female religious orders dedicated to the care of the temple.

The tea ceremony is no less integral to the work world than it is to family and church life. In *Jane and Prudence* and *Quartet in Autumn* the workers eagerly await their tea and are distressed by any variation in its observance. The unfortunate Esther Clovis in *Less Than Angels* was reputed to have lost her job as secretary of a learned society because of deficiencies in her tea-making. In *No Fond Return of Love*, the beverage and the smorgasbord method of presenting it at a charity function become symbolic of life itself. Aylwn Forbes' tea "tasted strong and bitter. Like Life? he wondered" (*NFROL* 15). When Dulcie is instructed that she must make a selection and then pay for what is on her plate, she observes that the procedure is "rather like life Except that there you can't always choose exactly what you want" (*NFROL* 75).

While the tea ritual celebrates reality and the continuity of daily life assured by an immanent deity, the consumption of wine in the Eucharist represents the human attempt to achieve union with an ideal,

transcendent divinity. A patriarchal ritual administered exclusively by male priests in Pym's novels, the Eucharist celebrates the extraordinary intervention of the divine in human affairs. The Anglican Church has avoided formally defining the sacrament. The Book of Common Prayer permits a wide range of interpretation from the belief in transubstantiation, upheld by the Roman Catholic Church and encouraged by the Oxford Movement, to the Calvinist doctrine of the spiritual, but not the material, transformation of the bread and wine. Most of Pym's protagonists are high Church -- Latimer, Mildred, Wilmet, Ransome, Viola Dace, Fabian Driver, Everard Bone, Edwin Braithwaite -- but they resist actual conversion to Rome. The reason may be esthetic, sociological or theological. Mildred and Fabian Driver express distaste for disappointing English examples of Catholic architecture. Although Roman Catholicism represents an exotic, sensuous faith abroad, in England it has 'lower-class' Irish connections. Ransome remains steadfast in the Anglican Church because he is appalled at the lower-class tea provided in the Roman Catholic Church he visits. Pym's repressed Anglicans cannot escape Milton's rationalization of Church Dogma nor their eighteenth-century Latitudinarian heritage. Mildred regrets the lack of opportunity for sentimental conversion to Rome in the hygienic abbey she visits: "for there was no warm rosy darkness to hide in, no comfortable confusion of doctrines and dogmas; all would be reasoned out and clearly explained, as indeed it should be" (*EW* 196).

Still, Pym's characters frequently yearn for Roman sacramentalism or for evangelical Protestantism, both associated with the masses who express religion in image and gesture with greater physical freedom than Pym's middle-class characters. Letty Crowe remains outside the noisily joyous religious celebrations of her African landlord: her faith was "a grey, formal, respectable thing of measured observances and mild general undemanding kindness to all" (*QIA* 66). Ianthe Broom (*AUA*) thinks "coloured people . . . are more naturally religious than we are. It is the white people who are the heathen" (*AUA* 92). Pym's interpreters have emphasized the formalistic character of worship in her novels (Burkhart 108) and its "devitalization" (Benet 513). Rossen lists numerous dangers to the Anglican Church: "paganism, atheism, aestheticism, 'Rome,' English literature, attrition and a corresponding reverence for the medical profession" (95). Throughout her novels Pym suggests that the inhibited English should allow greater physical expression of their faith. Resplendent Rome offers greater hope of a spiritual renaissance than Milton's grey Puritanism. Love in all its manifestations escapes Reason's careful gradations.

In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym contrasts Italian culture dominated by wine and Eros with English culture dominated by tea and Caritas. To Ianthe, the force of desire is both more intense and more earthy among the Italians; in Italy young lovers "gaze at each other more devouringly" and the Italian priest looks dirtier than his English counterpart (*AUA* 185). The Catholic priests on the plane to Italy prove to be a rowdy bunch who eagerly buy up the small bottles of alcohol. Much as Penelope Grandison desires to kiss St. Peter's toe for good luck, "when the moment came she couldn't do it. She became fiercely hygienic and Protestant and held back" (*AUA* 158). At the same time an Italian presses himself against her - "within the very walls of the Church!" she indignantly fumes. Yet in Italy, where the party stays at the Pensione Laura, evocative of Petrarch's impassioned sonnets of unrequited love, both Ianthe and Penelope recognize their love for John and Rupert. The young women find a personal spiritual message in the neon sign "Banco Di Santo Spirito" that glares out over the Roman landscape, as Londoners are strengthened by the sign "Take Courage," even though "Courage" is a beer and the bank is a commercial monetary establishment. The reader is reminded of the fairy tale association of golden coins with fertility. As Rubenstein points out, "the Banco di Santo Spirito is an illuminated and illuminating repository of spirituality that resists definition" (181).

Sophia, the vicar's wife who organized the trip to Italy, muses on Anglo- and Roman Catholicism and wonders "if the latter had need of nourishment from the former" (*AUA* 142). Actually the reverse is true, for Pym suggests throughout the novel that the Anglicans could use an injection of the more virile, earthy Roman faith. Imagination and desire are stronger in the Italians, who move so easily from the profane to the sacred, from Laura and Beatrice to the Virgin Mary. In their careful rationalizations the English do not so easily effect the transformations of love.

Pym symbolically demonstrates the invigoration which the visit to Rome effects upon her characters in the episode in which the quintessentially Protestant Sister Dew breaks her leg and is carried by two strong Italian men to the hospital. The incident proves to be not a disaster but the highpoint of Sister Dew's trip. Since in Christian symbolism dew signifies grace, Pym here indicates the condition and the cure for the hobbled Anglican faith.

Pym associates Roman artistic achievement with the more primitive, "earthy," and "virile" culture's ability to draw upon the reserves of the irrational and the subconscious. Vicar Mark Ainger, overwhelmed by the grandeur of St. Peter's, realizes that the Anglicans have produced no comparable artistic marvel. He cannot conjure up an image of Canterbury Cathedral, the nearest equivalent, but instead recalls a vignette "of a tall thin English lady he and Sophia had once seen arranging long-stalked thornless red roses on the high altar one Saturday morning" (*AUA* 157). English roses do not draw blood, Pym suggests in an oblique reference to Christ's blood, transubstantiated in Communion wine.

Earlier in the novel Pym underscored the feminine nature of the Anglican Church by having Rupert describe it as having "fewer people and even more cups of tea" than in his youth, to which Penelope protests: "There should be more people and lots of wine" (*AUA* 84). Penelope perceives clergymen "as not quite manly" despite their priestly function of enforcing patriarchal beliefs. She suspects Rupert's virility because he is not only a vicar's son but looks like a vicar himself. Furthermore, his career in anthropology strikes her as perhaps effeminate. Rupert himself entertains doubts about his manly role. He worries that "he was showing himself to be not quite a man" in allowing the two vicars, Basil Branche and Mark Ainger, to select the wine for the party at the Italian restaurant. As de Paolo has pointed out, "the not unexpected association of men and wine or liquor is merely a reflection of larger issues of self-evaluation and power" (4).

The other novels also reveal an ideal pattern of female dominance in the tea ritual and male dominance in the wine ritual, whether on the secular or the religious level. Thus Tom Dagnell and Martin Shrubsole discuss wine knowledgeably and consume more of it over dinner than Avice and her mother: "An excellent thing in women, this abstemiousness in wine-drinking, though it hadn't been quite what Lear or Shakespeare meant when they coined the phrase," thinks Tom (*AFGL* 186). Wilmet (*AGOG*) observes that women are not supposed to admit to a liking for port, and Piers Longbridge's exotic appeal lies in his having been raised in Portugal where his father was engaged in the wine trade. But when he and Wilmet meet for their first tryst, he suggests that they stop for tea, an indication that Wilmet's romance will never materialize. Alwyn Forties, who lists his hobbies as wine and conversation, prefers women not to "be too knowledgeable about wine" (*NFRL* 123). Professor Felix Mainwaring (*LTA*), representative of the elite values of old English society, is pleased that the young voluptuous Vanessa defers to his choice of sherry, while the spinster Esther Clovis significantly reveals her distaste for the beverage.

Women defer to men's connoisseurship of wine, yet the ladies as often as the gentlemen provide the wine at those social gatherings marked by a strong undercurrent of sexual interest. Ianthe (*AUA*) offers sherry to her potential suitors; Jessie Morrow and Stephen Latimer (*CH*) flirt over stolen sherry; Wilmet plies sherry upon Ransome (*AGOB*); Catherine (*LTA*) guards an expensive bottle of wine against the day Tom will complete his thesis; Meg (*TSDD*) keeps a bottle of Yugoslav Riesling in the refrigerator to celebrate Colin's periodic returns to her after interludes with his male lovers. Catherine (*LTA*) -- in the process of buying a bottle of cheap red wine at the Greek restaurant she and Tom frequent -- discovers herself supplanted by Deirdre Swan. Subsequently she is drawn to Alaric by their mutual hobby of collecting wine lists.

Male characters also initiate their profane amorous relationships with wine. Thus Everard Bone (he invites Mildred to dinner, the wine bottle warming beside the fire); Aylwn Forbes (*NFRL*) presses sherry upon Laurel; Rupert Stonebird (*AUA*) entertains both potential marital candidates at a dinner replete with wine, then makes an overture to Ianthe over a glass of sherry. Tom Mallow (*LTA*) offers Deirdre Swan a glass of "cold, sour red wine" which, much to her chagrin, she finds almost undrinkable. Francis

Cleveland (*CH*) affords the most amusing example of male initiation of the wine-drinking ritual. Bent upon beginning a physical relationship with Barbara Bird, he imagines himself parading through the Oxford streets with a wine bottle protruding from beneath his coat, in a scene reminiscent of Aristophanic comedy. He carries the bottle more circumspectly, and, significantly, he forgets the corkscrew so that the bottle, like Barbara, remains a virgin.

As reserved in their lovemaking as in their consumption of wine, Pym's characters seldom consummate a union; her novels are nearly devoid of erotic descriptions. In *The Sweet Dove Died*, her most sensuous novel, James and Phoebe's clumsy lovemaking is ironically surpassed by that of James and Ned. Leonora Eyre, troubled by distasteful memories of a few remorseful bedroom scenes, repels Humphrey's physical overtures. While Prudence Bates (*JAP*) has fond memories of her past lovers, she recalls nothing to distinguish between them. Only the very young -- an Anthea Cleveland (*CIA* or a Deirdre Swan (*LTA*), a Laurel (*NFRL*) or a Vanessa (*LTA*) -- actually seem to enjoy lovemaking. While Pym observes the comic convention to the extent of showing the reconciliation of male and female protagonists, she seldom supplies an account of the marriage. Thus the union of Mildred and Everard (*E41*) and that of Jessie and Fabian (*JAP*) occur in the hiatus between novels rather than in the text.

Pym's reticence in the description of Eros extends to her treatment of the Eucharist, the central sacrament of the Christian faith. Despite the assiduous detailing of ceremonies celebrating high holy days -- Christmas, Easter, Whit Sunday, etc. -- and numerous accounts of sermons, Pym does not explicitly describe communion. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet rejoices in a sung Eucharist that few attend. Her devotion survives even Mr. Coleman's kindling the New Fire on Holy Saturday with his cigarette lighter. Plain Mary Beamish acts as Wilmet's foil. A Christ-like figure in her chaste, humble, and selfless devotion to others, Mary delights in the Corpus Christi festival. In choosing to marry Ransome rather than to become a nun, she ironically relinquishes Eros, whose ultimate end is mystical union with God, for Caritas, unselfish love of others. She sacrifices single-minded pursuit of her own spiritual perfection for support of her Church's imperfect male priest. She, more than her fiancé Marius Lovejoy Ransome, promises to breathe new life into the parish both spiritually and materially, her money enabling the couple to repair the fungus-caused dry rot of the church. In the description of the Corpus Christi procession in which Wilmet and Mary participate, Wilmet in another of Pym's exchanges of the sacred and the profane is reminded both of Tosca and of Roman Catholic services. She perceives tea and wine as equally sacramental rituals, though the former marks the British character: "It should have been followed, I felt, by a reception in some magnificent palazzo, where we would drink splendid Italian wines with names like Asti Spumante, Lachryma Christi and Soave di Verona. That it seemed to go equally well with the tea and sandwiches and cakes in the church hall was perhaps a tribute to the true catholicity of the Church of England" (*AGOB* 297).

Pym alludes obliquely to sacred love in *The Sweet Dove Died*, whose title recalls the Holy Ghost, spirit of love. The characters in the novel have substituted art for religion. Living only for self, they fail to establish meaningful love relationships on the profane level as well. Leonora Eyre, a fiftyish "belle dame sans merci," feels disgust for the sexual basis of religion. When she sees a working class family clustered around a totem pole at Virginia Water, she comments to herself, "What a hideous phallic symbol . . . but of course one wouldn't mention it, only hurry by with head averted" (*TSDD* 37). Humbled by James' abandonment of her for Ned, she consoles herself with tea, "a drink she did not much like because of the comfort it was said to bring to those whom she normally despised" (*TSDD* 161). She drinks it frequently thereafter as she learns to admit her need of comfort and sustenance from other human beings.

In *Quartet in Autumn* Pym describes a communion which demonstrates her typical exchange between profane and sacred love as well as the exchange between secular and sacred ceremonies. After Marcia Ivory dies, her friends discover that this woman, who never allowed alcohol to pass her lips, had hidden away a bottle of Queen of Sheba sherry. They open and drink it in remembrance of her. Through her physical and mental torment, Marcia becomes a macabre Christ figure whose death brings grace to those still living, cementing the tenuous bonds that hold them together and giving new purpose to

Norman, the most socially unassimilated among them. In this novel, as in *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym reveals the importance of the Holy Spirit in establishing communion between people. It is obvious that for her the Spirit was of greater importance than God the Father and Christ the Mediator; her hierarchy reverses Milton's.

A Few Green Leaves is a dense mosaic of themes treated in the earlier novels. The title refers to the aging female parishioners' insertion of new greenery around the fading roses on the Church's altar. Benet interprets this to mean that "the revitalization of the Church (which is traditionally the Rose of Sharon) depends upon the infusion of a fresh faith in its beauty and capacity to serve" (512). Tom Dagnell, a vicar whose name summons up the sounding of evening bells, threatens to let his ministry sink into historical oblivion as he cultivates his interest in DMV's (deserted medieval villages). The woods of San Greal harbor a mean housing development and an abandoned, stinking poultry house, formerly managed by Jason Dyer. These names evoke the failure both of the myth of the Holy Grail and that of Jason and the Golden Fleece. The name of Martin Shrubsole indicates the spiritual suicide of the scientific elite who are appropriating the vicar's former authority. The agnostic doctor has the soul of one of Dante's speaking shrubs. Another male character, Adam Prince, has declined irreparably from his Biblical and Miltonic antecedents by abandoning his position as an Anglican vicar to become food critic for a journal. He seems to feel more the loss of the gustatory pleasure of consuming Communion wine than the gain of any spiritual good in his conversion to Roman Catholicism. When he donates a bottle of wine to the Anglican Church's "bring and buy sale," its elderly female recipient exchanges it for a barbola mirror. Her action figures the narcissism and lack of vitality of the older women who make up most of the congregation. Pym signals the transfer of power to the emerging village elite when the bottle is carried off by the young energetic doctor's wife. The latter's fidelity to the church countermands to some degree her position as appendage to the scientific community.

Pym's reaffirmation of her theology of love is most clearly seen in three significant choices her heroine Emma makes. First, she decides to abandon her career as anthropologist, scientific observer of humanity, for that of novelist, humanistic observer. Second, she decides to concentrate her romantic aspirations on vicar Dagnell rather than on the media personality Graham. Third, she remains faithful to the Church, the only institution to provide consolation in death. Emma is relieved that Tom dissuaded Miss Lickerish's surviving relatives from using a funeral hymn with a suggestion of wormlike submission to God, a quality so little displayed by the stalwart, independent woman. Emma perceives "the Almighty, a nebulous figure, and seated on his right her headmistress, eyes gleaming but kindly behind rimless glasses which in an earlier age would have been pince-nez" (AFGL 88). This image of a woman, rather like Miss Lickerish, suggests that God's real power, his right hand, his Miltonic propagandist, is a woman who conveniently creates the myth of male omnipotence to conceal her own manipulation of the shuttle in weaving life's tapestry. Women are responsible for defining the moral code which, internalized, becomes God. Emma's image recalls Mrs. Lord (*NFROL*), a cleaning woman, and Mrs. Pope (*QIA*), an aging landlady, both of whom represent the English moral code formalized in the Anglican church.

Near the end of *A Few Green Leaves*, Emma attends a midnight Christmas Eve service at which Geoffrey Poor, the nonbelieving organist, plays *The Messiah* magnificently, perhaps the effect of the apricot brandy Tom has given him. In this anomalous situation, Pym incarnates the relationship of Eros and Caritas: the believer Tom shows his love of his neighbor (Caritas) with the gift of brandy, which, with "the opportunity of playing on a fine instrument" (AFGL 238), inspires "poor" Geoffrey to the perfection of his art (Eros). The reader perceives the beauty the Church has contributed to society, a beauty that still draws a large congregation on high holy days.

At this service, in another example of Pym's exchange between sacred and profane love, Emma realizes that she wants a male companion. She has as much difficulty envisioning him as she did God: "some nebulous, comfortable -- even handsome -- figure suggested itself, which made her realize that even the most cynical and sophisticated woman is not, at times, altogether out of sympathy with the ideas of the romantic novelist" (AFGL 239). The reader recognizes that this figure is Tom Dagnell, who has

awakened Emma's affection both by his beauty (Eros) and by his pathos (Caritas). For Emma profane and sacred love are mixed. Her perception of the Deity mirrors her perception of a husband. Furthermore, the feminine has become inextricably mixed with the perception of the male divinity and proves the more effectual in life's daily affairs.

Patriarchal religion and society are on the wane, but Pym's characters continue to cultivate the old ideal. "Man and woman created he them," Tom ruefully comments at the beginning of the novel when he caught sight of Robbie and Tamsin Barraclough, the former dictating to the latter who was seated at the typewriter. In her last novel, Pym returned to the Biblical scene recreated by John Milton. The reader perceives not only Adam and Eve but also the blind Milton dictating *Paradise Lost* to his daughters.

Throughout her novels Pym developed the rituals of tea and wine as metonymic of the feminine and the masculine, Caritas and Eros, the immanent and the transcendent. Caritas dominates but it must be awakened by Eros; the many cups of tea sometimes enlivened by a glass of wine. Strauss-Noll has pointed out that Pym's female characters sometimes balk at taking up the wife's role. Her male characters likewise experience difficulty supplying the erotic spark in a feminized society which has exposed the secrets of male privilege.

Nevertheless, Pym was not yet willing to pronounce the patriarchal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition a male-created fiction to justify male dominance. The patriarchal god still exists, if only nebulously, but his existence is now affirmed and upheld by women to strengthen their imposition of the school mistress' moral code of fairness, tolerance and equanimity. Fortified by many cups of tea and a little wine, Pym exchanged Milton, propagandist of the School Master God, for a Head Mistress. For Pym, God had not yet become a woman, but Milton had emerged as the Lady of Christ Church.

Two writers more unlike than Milton and Pym could scarcely be found. John Milton, primary propagandist for the Puritan rebellion and defender of regicide, everywhere asserts male privilege. The tentative Miss Pym, though a traditionalist in politics and religion, everywhere questions the premises underlying that privilege. Pym humorously depicted women's heroic efforts to shore up the form of male privilege, even as they despaired that its content was evaporating. In her treatment Milton himself becomes somewhat absurd. Jane, after praising Milton's hymn "Let us with a gladsome heart," mildly recalls: "In many ways one dislikes Milton, of course; his treatment of women was not all that it should have been" (*JAP* 30). The knowledgeable reader is aware of the wink behind Pym's failure to specify the object of Milton's imperative.

Subjecting love to reason, woman to man, Milton separated physical attraction from the higher accord of spiritual and intellectual affinity. Pym perceived love as a continuum, its profane manifestations shading into or frequently exchanged with the sacred. The impetus towards caritas might sometimes manifest itself as a desire to bed the girl, as in Rupert's reaction to Penelope in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. While Milton in his male--dominant society feared the incorrect ordering of desire, Pym in her feminized society feared the failure of desire. To be worthy of the office of high epic/tragic poet the young Milton believed he must renounce all traffic with the female sex in the maintenance of a perfect chastity. For Pym, becoming a novelist meant embracing amorous experience and recording its impact on the mind and heart. As Henry Harvey complained, Barbara was no simple ingenue but a woman whose reason constantly scrutinized her passion (*ALTA* 49). For all his abstinence, Milton nonetheless married thrice and fathered children. Pym remained single, never experienced motherhood, and deliberately chose a relatively undemanding editorial position to remain free of distraction in her vocation as novelist. Milton inveighed against trivial modern subjects in epic and tragedy. He sought to keep these genres pure of the comic interlude or free from the mixture of the trivial and the commonplace with the heroic. Pym devoted her writing to the depiction of "the common task, the trivial round" in which average people sometimes display heroism. As she chose her underwear "with a view to it being seen" (*AVPE* 33), she kept a meticulous journal which supplied the material for her novels and then assured the journal being made available to future scholars by willing her papers to the Bodleian Library. These differences between

Milton and Pym do not surprise, given the different moments in history occupied by the male and female subjects.

Pym and her characters revealed their devotion in the small “trivial” acts of cleaning and decorating the church, helping a sick neighbor, visiting an old person, knitting caps for seamen. They sought transcendence through high church ritual (wine and Eros), but they practiced a religion implying an immanent deity (tea and Caritas). Milton’s personification of God the Father had retreated into the mists, while Pym’s personification of the strict schoolmarm enforced the Christian code of morality. Pym’s devoted readers will agree that she elucidated the spiritual malaise of English society in the last half of the twentieth century as she chronicled the aging, unsung heroines into whose custodianship the Church has passed.

Notes

- 1) Pym excels in the description of unrequited love. As Nardin points out, Pym showed that “the frustration of desire can be pleasurable” (18). Ackley observes that Pym enjoyed copying out verses about unrequited love and perceived her writing as a kind of therapy (178). Wyatt-Brown perceives the courtly quest as the basis of Pym’s relationship with H. Harvey; Pym shows that unrequited love may be better than dull marriage, “and much of what Pym’s artist-heroines describe ... is effect of unrequited love” (149). Cotswell notes that “Pym registers the comic and touching flow of desire through this dull, respectable church world” (21).
- 2) See *A Very Private Eye*, eds. Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym, p. 40, also Hazel Holt, *A Lot to Ask*. Subsequent references will appear in the text as *AVPE* and *ALTA*. Pym’s novels will be referred to as follows: *Some Tame Gazelle*, *STG*; *Crampton Hodnet*, *CH*; *Excellent Women*, *EW*; *Jane and Prudence*, *JAP*; *Less Than Angels*, *LTA*; *A Glass of Blessings*, *AGOB*; *No Fond Return of Love*, *NFROL*; *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *AUA*; *The Sweet Dove Died*, *TSDD*; *Quartet in Autumn*, *QIA*; *A Few Green Leaves*, *AFGL*.
- 3) The quotation is from Genesis 1:27 in the King James version. Milton, VII, 29-30 says: “Male he created thee, but thy consort/Female for race; then bless’d Mankind”

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