

Everyone Has a Mother

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At one point in *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet Forsythe, her husband Rodney, and his mother Sybil are discussing Wilf Bason and what to expect when Wilmet and Rodney have tea with him. When Wilmet comments, “He strikes one as the kind of person who would have a mother,” Sybil points out: “Well, everybody has or had a mother.” She goes on to add, “But I see just what you mean” (98). Just what Wilmet means becomes clear when one examines Barbara Pym’s treatment of mothers. For no matter what their personality or type, her fictional mothers play influential roles in their adult children’s lives. Though there are few young children, the novels are populated with grown-ups whose mothers still figure prominently – usually in a meddlesome way – in their everyday lives or, if no longer living, have left life-long impressions on their children. Whereas motherhood has often been idealized in both fiction and real life, particularly in the post-war period during which Pym’s first six novels were published, you will find little, if any, idealization of them anywhere in her works. While she portrays a few of the mothers in a sympathetic and indulgent light, the mothers in her novels by and large annoy, embarrass, or worry their children. Some of them may even be responsible for their children’s inability to have loving relationships with others, especially heterosexual relationships. Many of the mothers are fairly harmless nuisances, but some take over their children’s lives completely. No matter what they do, though, a large number of Pym’s mothers are problematic for their children.

Mothers who control their children so strongly that the children virtually give up their own lives appear from the first in Pym’s works. For instance, in the *Home Front Novel*, a very early work, unpublished in Pym’s lifetime, the narrator tells us that Beatrice Wyatt has “drifted into a sort of subjugation to her strong-minded mother,” who, incidentally, had taken to her bed after her husband’s death ten years before, despite being in good health (*Civil to Strangers* 222). Though Beatrice’s obligation to care for her mother very nearly prevents her marrying the local curate, their happy union is made possible by the sudden “cure” of Mrs. Wyatt. This “miracle” is brought about by Miss Stoat, a brisk, firm evacuee living with them. Miss Stoat had cared for her own bedridden mother for ten years and now seems fully prepared to read inspirational verse, bore Mrs. Wyatt with tedious monologues, and in general, take over for the duration in a way that Mrs. Wyatt find intolerable.

While Mrs. Wyatt is clearly a comic character whose pretense at being an invalid provides the conflict whose resolution brings a happy ending, her type takes on a darker tone in Pym’s subsequent novels. Often elderly women in the care of unmarried daughters or sons, these overly demanding mothers have a powerful influence on their children. In turn, their children find themselves in the middle of their own lives, still involved in a curious dependency relationship with their mothers. The daughters of this type are nondescript and weak, while their sons appear to be of questionable sexuality. Both sons and daughters appear powerless when confronted with their mothers’ wishes or demands.

A prime example is Mary Beamish’s dominating mother in *A Glass of Blessings*. Wilmet describes her this way: “I imagined old Mrs. Beamish crouching greedily over a great steak or taking up a chop bone in her fingers, all to give her strength to batten on her daughter with her tiresome demands” (20-21). This image seems fully justified when Sybil suggests, after Mary has rushed home to feed her mother, that Ella Beamish could afford to hire someone to look after her but prefers to run her daughter ragged. Mrs. Beamish’s domination takes many forms. Not only must Mary oversee her meals, but she must also have permission to go out. Further, Mary chooses her wardrobe in accordance with her mother’s tastes. We see this when, shopping for a new dress, she is reluctant to try one that Wilmet picks out for her because her mother does not approve of black. When Wilmet suggests that she would benefit from makeup, Mary resists, saying, “I don’t know what mother would say” (81). All of this would not be worthy of notice were

Mary a young teenager, but she is Wilmet's own age and well into adulthood. To her credit, Mary chooses the black dress, but it is clear that her mother controls her life. When it becomes evident that Mrs. Beamish is mortally ill, Sybil, Rodney, and Wilmet all try to imagine what Mary will do with her newfound freedom. Mary eventually chooses to enter a convent, a decision that is perhaps not surprising given her training in obedience and self-sacrifice.

Pym does not suggest that children should not look after their aging parents (who are almost always widowed mothers). Rather, she exploits for comic effect the desire in too many of them to control and thus limit their children. As a result, the laudable devotion of grown children to their elderly mothers is undercut by the oppressive restrictiveness of the parents. We see other examples in the characters of Miss Jenner and Miss Prior of *Some Tame Gazelle*, who lead limited lives in large part because they live with their mothers. Though Belinda Bede finds Miss Jenner's behavior with traveling salesmen silly and embarrassing, she is quite sympathetic about her plight. She imagines that the dullness of Miss Jenner's life, exacerbated by living with her elderly mother, can be relieved only by her outrageous flirtations with the salesmen. Belinda's sewing woman, Miss Prior, described as a dried-up little woman of uncertain age, also lives with her mother, with whom she can be seen attending local village functions. Belinda is particularly kind to Miss Prior, not only because she is easily offended, but also because "one feels that perhaps Miss Prior's whole life is just a putting up with second best all the time" (46).

At least Miss Jenner and Miss Prior operate their own businesses and do not have the time to be constantly tending their mothers. The unfortunate Miss Spicer in *No Fond Return of Love* is not so lucky: she is burdened by an aged mother who keeps falling out of bed and cannot be left alone. While readers meet neither Miss Spicer nor her mother directly, we hear about them from Neville Forbes's housekeeper, who tells Dulcie about the embarrassing scene in which Miss Spicer declared her love to Neville. Miss Spicer's infatuation with Neville Forbes drives him from his church to the refuge of his own mother. By the end of the novel, Neville's problem is solved by the removal of both the Spicers, but one cannot help wondering about the fate of poor Miss Spicer.

It is not only women like Mary Beamish and the Misses Spicer, Jenner, and Prior but also single men who live with their aging, often controlling mothers. Edward Killigrew in *Crampton Hodnet*, Mervyn Cantrell in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Coco Jeffreys in *An Academic Question*, and Edward Lyall of *Jane and Prudence* all are grown men who live with their widowed mothers, and all are attached to them in interesting ways.

For instance, Edward Killigrew is always conscious of his mother, who is specifically described as "domineering" (*Crampton Hodnet* 121). He does nothing without wondering how she would react, what she would do, or what she will say. Edward himself is fussy, petulant, and spiteful, enjoying gossip about his colleagues with the same degree of pleasure as his mother. At the same time, they are antagonistic to one another, in much the same way as some of Pym's married couples who have been together for years and find so much to complain about each other. Although Mrs. Killigrew treats Edward as if he were still a child and he behaves accordingly, it is clear that she is at times too much for him. This is demonstrated in a scene in which Miss Doggett remarks on his mother's good health, and Edward replies that she is likely to see them all into their graves. "But behind his joviality," adds the narrator, "there lurked a fear that it might be true. Of course Mother was his whole life and he would be quite lost without her, but he occasionally wondered if it might not be rather pleasant to be quite lost" (*Crampton Hodnet* 121). This observation hints strongly that life with Mother is not as wonderful as Edward pretends to others but rather that it has fostered perhaps as much malice in him as it has fondness.

Even when the mother or mother-in-law is not particularly troublesome, as in *A Few Green Leaves*, the prospect of life without her has its appeal:

Martin was fulfilling his duty as a conscientious general practitioner and prescribing for his wife's mother just as he did for his older patients. But he did sometimes wonder whether he really wanted to

preserve his mother-in-law all that much.... If – not to mince matters or to put too fine a point on it – she were to drop down dead, the Shrubsoles would have enough money to buy a larger house. (52-53)

Martin does feel guilty about having such thoughts, which makes him treat her even more kindly. For her part, Magdalene Raven feels fortunate to be sharing their home and is only slightly uncomfortable at being essentially an “unpaid nanny and baby-sitter” (54).

A thought similar to that of Martin Shrubsole’s must have occurred to Mervyn Cantrell, whose controlling mother Ianthe Broome pictures as a “disagreeable old” woman (*An Unsuitable Attachment* 27). When his mother goes away for a few days, he takes advantage of her absence by inviting Ianthe out for dinner, with a specific purpose in mind: If his mother dies, he wants to know, would she marry him? Far from feeling any romantic interest in Ianthe, Mervyn is motivated by pure selfishness: he covets Ianthe’s fine furniture, which would enhance his own collection handsomely. Ianthe wisely says no, but neither does Mervyn’s mother die. Indeed, she returns with renewed spirit and will probably live for years. The scene points to the tediousness of living with a querulous, demanding mother and highlights the fact that such a mother’s death may represent her child’s only chance to control his or her own life.

A minor but intriguing incident occurs in *An Unsuitable Attachment* while Ianthe and Mervyn are dining: a man comes to their table to tell Mervyn how sorry he is to hear that Mervyn’s mum has passed on, knowing as he does Mervyn’s devotion to her. It is not Mervyn’s mum who has died, of course, but Wilf Bason’s. This confusion serves to link Mervyn Cantrell with Wilf Bason and that sizable group of rather fussy, middle-aged, unmarried men of uncertain sexuality who live with or have very close relationships with their mothers. For Wilf Bason (whose mother is still alive in *A Glass of Blessings*), with his talent for housekeeping and cooking, in combination with the way he has furnished his room, conforms to certain aspects of the stereotyped image prevalent when Pym was writing her novels of “effeminate” or even homosexual men, that is, that they are skilled at traditionally female tasks and are closely tied to their mothers. When they have their tea with him, Rodney and Wilmet discover that Wilf Bason does indeed have a mother: her picture in a silver frame sits on the mantelpiece and she has made the chintz covers and lace tablecloth which contribute to the “charm” of his room. Implicit in the description of this room is its feminine quality, which Pym strongly implies is the result his mother’s powerful influence on him. Another male in *A Glass of Blessings* who has been influenced by his mother is Piers Longridge’s lover Keith. A funny and warm man whose fussiness about cleanliness is endearing and amusing, Keith, with his ready supply of helpful household hints, is accomplished in all things domestic.

Coco Jeffreys of *An Academic Question* is so close to his mother Kitty that they function socially as couple. At 42, Coco and his 62-year-old mother make “a handsome and interesting pair,” the narrator tells us on the opening page. Both are meticulous about dress and appearance, dislike any talk of aging and death, and need to rest before social occasions. Coco’s mannerisms and behavior are so very effeminate that Iris Hornblow asks Caroline frankly what his sexual leanings are. This notion of the strong attachment of homosexual males to their mothers is repeated in *The Sweet Dove Died*, when Meg goes to a play one evening with her young gay friend Colin, Colin’s lover Harold, and Harold’s mother. This is a peculiar sort of double date, with the two male lovers and their mother and mother-substitute.

James Boyce in *The Sweet Dove Died* also has had a very close relationship with his mother, who has recently died. As an only child whose father was killed in the war, James had spent much time with his mother and finds older women much easier to talk to than younger ones. James has turned out to be sexually ambivalent and confused about women. On first meeting Leonora, he is struck by her old-fashioned elegance, perhaps reminded of his mother as a young woman. Eventually, Leonora does become essentially a mother-substitute, an idea that is reinforced when, near the end of the novel, James is on his way to see Leonora and thinks of her as “some familiar landmark, like one’s mother, even” (205). Perhaps not entirely unconsciously, Leonora attempts to control James’s life by curtailing his freedom of choice, shaping his tastes, and even “confining” him to a flat at the top of her own home, a room which, ironically, had once been a nursery and which still has bars on its windows. Not surprisingly, James is startled to see the bars,

feeling quite rightly that he is being imprisoned, or at least being placed under supervision, as a child would be. James's lover Ned emphasizes Leonora's role as mother-substitute rather than lover by exclaiming how very much his own mother would like the way Leonora has decorated her room and by drawing attention to her fatiguing easily, just as his mother does. It is also interesting to note that Ned is so close to his mother that he writes to her twice a week and uses the excuse that she is ill in order to break off his English relationships and return to America.

This intriguing implication that one's sexuality can be affected by one's own mother is subtly underscored by the brief references to Leonora Eyre's mother. The first mention of her serves to emphasize Leonora's preoccupation with the past and appearance, when we are told that a photograph of her grandparents takes pride of place on Leonora's bedside table because she feels that it is much more distinguished looking than that of her mother and father, which she keeps in a drawer. Near the end of the novel, however, there is the curiously suggestive comment that Leonora's mother had had a "young Italian lover one had been thought too much of a child to know about" (186), implying a sexual relationship either outside marriage to her father or one that took place before her marriage. In either case, we have to wonder if Pym is hinting that her mother's sexual experiences have perhaps in some way contributed to Leonora's own obvious reluctance to have anything to do with sex.

Even when a mother is devoted to her son's best interests and appears to play a purely supportive role, she can drain his vitality. Such seems the case of Edward Lyall in *Jane and Prudence*, who goes everywhere with his mother. Described as "a slight, dark young man, with a pale interesting face" (87), his physical appearance suggests the effects not only of the demands of his position as Member of Parliament but also the rigors of being cared for by his mother. Mrs. Lyall's concern for her son's welfare presumably accounts for her own "rather long, melancholy face" (89). When first seen, she seems anxious, then worried, and finally sad, as she speaks with Jane of the demands placed on her son. Mrs. Lyall's energies are focused solely on Edward, who is the chief topic of her conversations. At one party, she regales his admirers with details of his eating habits, and at another she goes on about the exhausting nature of his work. Her influence on and place in her son's life is emphasized when, at a social gathering, Nicholas remarks, "'Ah, here is Mrs. Lyall and her son,'" and Jane replies, "'Strange how different it sounds said like that. . . . Usually one says Mr. Lyall and his mother'" (*Jane and Prudence* 169).

Parent-child relationships are not intrinsically bad; they can be immensely enriching for both parties. In Pym's novels, though, many of these relationships are troubled or less than satisfactory. Even when mothers do not dominate or make demands, they have ways of unsettling their children or embarrassing them with their idiosyncrasies. Such is the case not only with the single men who actually live with their mothers but also with the larger number of single men who maintain close relationships with them. Besides Wilf Bason, there are Everard Bone of *Excellent Women*, Simon Beddoes in *Crampton Hodnet*, Neville Forbes of *No Fond Return of Love*, and David Lydell of *Quartet in Autumn*. When Mildred Lathbury tells Helena Napier that she has met Everard Bone's peculiar mother (who carries on about Jesuits, wormwood, and the "Dominion of the Birds"), Helena may be speaking for many of Pym's characters when she replies: "Yes, she is odd, but then people's mothers usually are, don't you think?" (*Excellent Women* 181).

Less peculiar than Mrs. Bone, Mrs. Beddoes in *Crampton Hodnet* shares that woman's outspokenness. She is a garrulous, voluble, though rather vague woman whose talent at dressing smartly is her saving grace. Her son Simon's fears that she will not know what to do and say and that she will talk too much are confirmed, but her gracious and elegant appearance occupies people's attention so thoroughly that they scarcely notice her speech. Simon acts almost like her caretaker; at the very least, he seems embarrassed by her open and frank way of revealing her entire history to strangers: "Simon was always saying how unwise it was to let his mother travel alone," the narrator comments (*Crampton Hodnet* 112). Another slightly odd mother is Mrs. Forbes in *No Fond Return of Love*, whose sons Aylwin and Neville see her as rather a character. Far from resembling Dulcie's imagined picture of her as "a rather conventional kind of mother, elderly, of course, with white hair, and lace at her throat" (127), she is "a gaunt-looking woman with a large nose and piercing eyes" (158) who tends to live in the past and is so tight with her money that she serves inelegant

meals followed by coffee boiled with used grounds to the dwindling number of guests who come to her hotel.

Whether they live with their mothers or not, single men who remain in close communion with their mothers have troubled relationships with other women. Some clearly want nothing to do with women in a sexual or romantic way. Wilf Bason, Edward Lyall, Mervyn Cantrell, and Coco Jeffry, for instance, have no such interests. Others, like James Boyce, Simon Beddoes, Everard Bone, Neville Forbes, and David Lydell, expect far more from women than they themselves are prepared to give back and have awkward or uneasy relationships with them. With women, they are befuddled and weak. Their one great strength – if you can call it that – is a highly developed sense of their own self-importance. Pym plays these characteristics primarily for comic effect, but she also seems to imply that mothers, especially when fathers are gone, can have potentially damaging effects on their sons' ability to enjoy and participate in mutually loving and rewarding relationships with women.

Pym's mothers are not always demanding, embarrassing, or domineering. They also serve as guides who set standards of right and wrong and guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Their lessons remain with their children far beyond childhood, persisting even after their own lives have ended. No matter how old nor how mature, many of Pym's characters are reminded of their mothers when they contemplate doing things that they think their mothers would not approve. The single exception occurs in the very early work "So Very Secret," published posthumously in *Civil to Strangers*, in which the central character heroine, Cassandra Swan, still thinks of what her father would have said, even though he has been dead for five years. After this, characters are almost always conscious of what their mothers, not their fathers, would have thought. For instance, in *Excellent Women*, Mildred Lathbury, well over thirty years old, thinks of her mother's pursed lips pronouncing that brandy is to be used only for medicinal purposes, as she contemplates opening her own "emergency" bottle. Dulcie Mainwaring of *No Fond Return of Love*, skeptically regarding her cheerless hotel room at Tavistock, is seized with an anxiety "inherited from her mother; was it certain that the beds would be properly aired? A damp bed . . . she could hear again the horrified tone in which these words were pronounced" (184). Ianthe Broome in *An Unsuitable Attachment* is not surprised that the image of her mother rises up before her after John Challow has kissed her in public.

The influence of mothers is also demonstrated in the way that characters do not like to disappoint them. For instance, Emma Howick of *A Few Green Leaves* is conscious of having let her mother down when she attends an old students' reunion at her college: "[She] always had the feeling at these college gatherings that her mother would have been happier if she could have presented her in a more favourable light, a daughter to be proud of – married, and the mother of fine children, or even not married, but still the mother of fine children" (126). Similarly, in *Jane and Prudence*, Prudence Bates is reluctant to visit her mother after learning of Fabian Driver's engagement to Jessie Morrow because her mother's unasked questions would be too much to face: "Why didn't she come and see her mother more often? . . . Why wasn't she married yet?" (202). In *Less Than Angels*, when Digby Fox and Mark Penfold drop by Catherine Oliphant's flat and catch a glimpse of her with a mop in her hand, Digby remarks, with a disapproving tone: "I don't know what my mother would say" (28). What one's mother would say has varying degrees of importance to people, but many of Pym's characters are keenly conscious of their mothers' views.

While many characters have ongoing problematic or troubled relationships with their mothers, Pym's central character heroines have paid their filial dues, which involved sacrificing or suppressing their own desires until their parents died. They now live independently and enjoy their autonomy. Mildred Lathbury of *Excellent Women*, for instance, had looked after her parents until they died, as did Ianthe Broome. Dulcie Mainwaring lives on in the family home in which she had cared for her parents. The deaths of their parents liberated these women to make their own choices about things that matter to them. After Mildred's parents died, she began going to a High Church, though not without misgivings: "I could imagine my mother," she says, "her lips pursed, shaking her head and breathing in a frightened whisper, 'Incense?'" (11). Dulcie Mainwaring had begun doing her indexing jobs at home while her mother needed attention during the day, but "now [that] she [is] free," she actually prefers doing her work there (*No Fond Return of Love* 22). In *An*

Unsuitable Attachment, Ianthe Broome had lived with her mother, a canon's widow who actually chose Ianthe's profession for her so that she would meet the right kind of person. Now that her mother is gone, Ianthe feels "free to choose" the church she would like, fix the meals she prefers, and read the sort of thing her mother would have disapproved of (31).

In *Less Than Angels*, as often occurs in Pym's novels, a seemingly unrelated, isolated incident reinforces a larger thematic interest. Two women at the table next to Catherine's in a restaurant ask, because she is wearing a black dress, if she is in mourning. One of these women has just lost her mother, they tell Catherine, and now she is free to go to the church of her choice. This is not a young woman, either, for Catherine wonders how one who looks as old as she could possibly have had a mother recently living. This brief scene underscores the reality that, no matter how old they are, children are often called upon to forsake their own preferences in deference to those of their mothers.

To be fair, mothers almost always want only what is best for their children. The problem lies in the nature of what they perceive as "best." They are particularly interested in who their children date and marry – though they typically disapprove of their children's choices – and often express a wish that their children might have the happiness and success that they find missing in their own lives. Thus, Margaret Cleveland in *Crampton Hodnet* wishes Anthea would not see so much of Simon Beddoes, who she is sure will hurt her daughter, but more of the safe and dull young men destined to be Oxford dons, like her own husband. Margaret's observation about the value of a mother's viewpoint when her child is in love is absolutely timeless and has probably been thought countless times by mothers throughout history: "Of course it would never do to say anything; mothers nowadays knew nothing, absolutely nothing."

Another mother looking out for her daughter's best interests is Mrs. Williton in *No Fond Return of Love*, who confirms her suspicion that her son-in-law Aylwin Forbes is "a man of loose moral character" when she calls on him as he is entertaining Laurel, proof, she thinks, "of his degeneracy" (136). Sophia Ainger's mother in *An Unsuitable Attachment* believes that Sophia has married beneath her; Caroline Grimstone's mother in *An Academic Question* wishes that Carolyn had married the politician with a promising future instead of her university professor husband. Emma Howick's mother in *A Few Green Leaves*, on the other hand, simply wishes that Emma would marry – anyone will do; and even Jane Cleveland in *Jane and Prudence*, probably the least interfering mother of all, wonders if she is failing her duty by not having higher aspirations for her daughter.

In her notes for *Quartet in Autumn*, Barbara Pym wrote in 1973: "Mothers – Each character once had a mother. Four people in their sixties faced with the approach of old age" (MS Pym 72). Pym uses this observation in the first chapter of the novel when, as Mother's Day approaches, the four discuss the increase in the price of flowers: "Yet it could hardly affect people too old to have a mother still alive," notes the narrator. "Indeed, it was sometimes strange to reflect that each of them had once had a mother" (7). Then follows a brief history of the fates of each mother and the age at which she died. Norman had not known his mother, Letty's had died after the war, Edwin's had died at seventy-five, and Marcia's had died just a few years before, at age eighty-nine. When we take into account Pym's portrayal of mothers throughout her novels, we understand what she means by the comment on the four aging people's once having had mothers. Consider Dulcie Mainwaring's thoughts in *No Fond Return of Love* when she contemplates Christmas as a time when people "seemed to lose their status as individuals in their own right and became, as it were, diminished in stature, mere units in families, when for the rest of the year they were bold and original and often the kind of people it is impossible to imagine having such ordinary everyday things as parents" (106). This passage implies one reason why parents, particularly mothers, are troublesome, no matter how old their children grow: parents represent that earlier, dependent stage of life, before maturity and being able to function on one's own, "bold and original."

The fact that Pym even mentions the mothers of the four aging people in *Quartet in Autumn* strongly suggests the importance she places on the role of mothers in their children's lives. Could it be, for instance, that Norman's never having known his mother might in some small way account for his general state of

anger? It is certainly not unreasonable to deduce that Marcia's mental instability is influenced in no small measure by the loss of her mother, with whom she lived as she grew into adulthood and then into her own old age. The least stable of the four characters, Marcia clings to memories of her mother and the cat they both loved as she grows increasingly isolated from the other three with whom she worked and, indeed, from reality itself. The importance of her mother is evident when we are told that Marcia was "one of those women, encouraged by her mother, who had sworn that she would never let the surgeon's knife touch her body, a woman's body being such a private thing" (18). Indeed, after her mother's death, Marcia stopped cleaning her house because she wanted to preserve everything as it always had been when her mother was alive. There is still an old fur ball from her cat Snowy on her mother's bed.

Occasionally there are "motherless" children – grown-ups who lost their parents early in life. If they are men, they are doted upon by women who feel great sympathy for them. Prudence Bates, for instance, thinks more kindly of Geoffrey Manifold after she learns that his parents died when he was eighteen. For Catherine Oliphant of *Less Than Angels*, having been without a family for much of her life has produced in her an almost compulsive desire to "mother." Thus Digby and Mark know they can call on her whenever they lack food or funds to feed themselves, and Tom relies on her in the way a child might his mother. Indeed, Catherine views most men as children, recognizing Tom's weakness as that of a child and feeling responsible for Alaric Lydgate, whose rough exterior hides what Catherine believes is a cowering "small boy, uncertain of himself" in need of a woman stronger than he (242). This view is testified to by Alaric's sister Gertrude, who tells Esther Clovis that "Mother always used to say that he was weak" (227). In some of the novels, it is sisters who act as mother-substitutes and share homes with their brothers to look after them better. Thus we have Winifred and Julian Malory in *Excellent Women*, Tom and Daphne Dagnall in *A Few Green Leaves*, and Dulcie Mainwaring's Aunt Hermione and Uncle Bertram in *No Fond Return of Love*.

Pym's mothers and mother-substitutes are all the more noticeable because of her striking lack of fathers. Time and again there are references to fathers having died many years before. James Boyce's, Emma Howick's, and Alan Grimstone's fathers had all been killed in the war. Many fathers seem to have died in their prime, a circumstance that takes on greater significance in light of Pym's unbalanced world where mothers survive long into old age. One wonders if perhaps for some of the men, their wives had simply been too much for them. Such seems the implication at least with the domineering Mrs. Killigrew in *Crampton Hodnet*, who tells Margaret Cleveland that she has seen two husbands go to their graves.

There are wonderful exceptions to the often negative or unflattering portrayal of mothers in Barbara Pym's novels. Mabel Swan in *Less Than Angels* is a jolly, comforting mother whose two children are fairly independent even though they still live at home. In *No Fond Return of Love*, Mrs. Beltane also has two children who live at home, but her fussy doting is focused on her dogs, not her children. The fact that her son is a nice young man, quite lovable, who works in a flower shop while her daughter teaches botany at London University probably suggested to readers in the 1950s that Mrs. Beltane's guidance as a mother was not all that it should have been. On the other hand, to readers today, it might suggest that her children have had more freedom than others to express themselves as they wish. Another mother who might come under scrutiny for laxity is Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence*, for it is almost as if she has reversed roles with her daughter Flora. Flora is much more conscientious about the appearance of their house, the preparation of meals, and the necessity for proper behavior than is her mother. Still, Jane is a delightful, loving woman who gives Flora all the freedom she needs. One cannot imagine her turning into a Mrs. Beamish.

Perhaps the best example of good mothering is Sybil Forsythe in *A Glass of Blessings*. Just the opposite of Mrs. Beamish, Sybil is not intrusive, domineering, nor dependent. She is a social worker with a strong commitment to her causes. She is a good friend to both her son Rodney and her daughter-in-law Wilmet, with whom she shares her home. Wilmet especially values Sybil's friendship, but she has come to rely on Sybil so much that Sybil's engagement to Professor Root comes as a real shock: "I can hardly describe how I felt on hearing this news. My first feeling was that I must have heard wrongly, my second that it was some

outrageous joke. Sybil to be Professor Root's wife! But she was Rodney's mother and my mother-in-law – how could she ever be anything else?" (221)

It is to Sybil's credit that she marries Professor Root without feeling guilty about turning Rodney and Wilmet out nor excluding them from their planned trip to Greece. Sybil's independence and her refusal either to control or be controlled are refreshing: far too many mothers lack her wisdom. In the event, Sybil's marriage is one of the best things to happen to Wilmet and Rodney, for they are forced to finally, truly grow up. Wilmet discovers that she actually enjoys making choices for their new home and acting on her own, and Rodney apparently does as well. In the process, their marriage is strengthened, for Wilmet is no longer almost like a sister to Rodney. They begin to behave like husband and wife. With Sybil and Professor Root as models, they can hardly go wrong.

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