

# What Barbara Pym Read: Less-Known and Less-Regarded Works

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Critics and interviewers of Barbara Pym always cite her love of authors such as Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, writers who certainly loomed large in her reading and affection. Less well known are a number of other authors and works which were important to her formation as a writer. Some authors such as the Seventeenth Century's Anthony a Wood and the eighteenth's James Woodeforde must be termed "obscure" or even "quaint. Other writers which I shall discuss are well known but Pym preferred their less well known works to their more popular ones. Charlotte Bronte's novel *Shirley* is such a work and was a favorite of Barbara Pym's from her own girlhood. More puzzling is her attachment to Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, Elizabeth von Arnim's *The Pastor's Wife* and Vera Brittain's *An Honourable Estate*. These books and several others which I shall examine are clearly lesser works of literature and are fairly hard for modern readers to appreciate. What I hope to show is that great writers such as Pym (and perhaps all of us as readers) are influenced and shaped by reading inferior as well as superior books, and obscure as well as well-known sources.

The writings of seventeenth-century antiquarian Anthony a Wood were always on Pym's bookshelf, and she turned to these "quaint and curious volume[s] of forgotten lore" throughout her life. Wood's *Atheneae Oxonienses* and *History and Antiquities of Oxford*, both published in the late 1600's are depicted by Pym as the favorite books of the Rev. Thomas Dagnall in *A Few Green Leaves*; in fact Wood has become an obsession to Dagnall as has attempting to track down places Wood describes. Pym's relationship to Wood in her own reading and in her fiction is typical of the use she makes of other obscure English authors: while she enjoys Wood herself, she recognizes that a modern-day clergyman (or any one else for that matter) should not be wrapped up in Wood to the neglect of other duties. Wood's writing traces the fates of Oxford clergy and other notables from the time of Charles I to the accession of William and Mary, turbulent times indeed. In a 1977 interview, Pym talked about her method of using material she gleaned from observing people and reading odd bits of folk history like Anthony a Wood: "I boiled it up and reduced it, like making chutney" (Ms. Pym 98, fol. 24). Wood's place in the chutney of *A Few Green Leaves* is secure in the obsessions of the Rev. Thomas Dagnall concerning a deserted Medieval village described by Wood and in odd bits about regulations requiring people to be buried in wool. Throughout her fiction, Pym shows that when her characters are interested in Anthony a Wood, they are invariably people taken up with minutiae.

Closely allied to Anthony a Wood in its sweep of turbulent seventeenth-century English history if not its tone is the satirical anonymous poem "The Vicar of Bray" which first appeared in *The British Musical Miscellany* of 1734. The good vicar, who manages to keep his preferment by changing from high church to low church to crypto-Jesuit to Whig as the times alter, is certainly the progenitor of the denizens of Trollope's Barchester novels and was a delightful inspiration to Pym as well.

Always a great eighteenth-century favorite with Barbara Pym for casual reading in search of unconsciously amusing lore was James Woodeforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* which the worthy clergyman kept faithfully for forty-five years. Woodeford vouchsafes to his reader much about his eating habits, collecting tithes and dealing with his parishioners, and is at his best when unwittingly appearing pompous, righteous, or even kind. Using sources like Anthony a Wood and Thomas Woodeforde put Pym in the habit of looking for raw materials for novels in unlikely places such as *The Church Times* and *Crockford's Clerical Dictionary*.

Barbara Pym found inspiration for many of her clerical portraits in the works of nineteenth-century British authors. An appreciative reader of the three Bronte sisters all her life, Pym was especially taken with Charlotte Bronte. She told Philip Larkin in a 1969 letter, "I get comfort from a re-reading of Anthony

Powell and Charlotte Bronte (not *Jane Eyre*)” (*A Very Private Eye* 248). Janice Rossen has written on the differences between Pym’s heroines and *Jane Eyre*; according to Rossen, Pym sees *Eyre* as the quintessential Romantic heroine and her own heroines as examples of a sort of “negative capability” in that they can live with uncertainties and doubts in a congenial monotony (154-55).

More interesting than Pym’s non-attachment to *Jane Eyre* is her affection for *Shirley*. A novel that is little read in the twenty-first century, *Shirley* was a favorite with bright young girls early in the twentieth century, including Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain and Pym. Charlotte Bronte calls her attractive, independent heroine Shirley Keeldar “the first blue stocking”. Shirley is the complete mistress of her fate, refuses to marry “good catches”, and finally chooses her own husband, all the while managing her large fortune which she will continue to control after her marriage. One can easily see how Shirley would appeal to young ladies of slender means and limited opportunity, beginning with Charlotte Bronte herself.

Also important to the formation of Pym’s aesthetic consciousness were the clerical portraits she found in *Shirley*. Bronte turned all of her satiric wit on the Rev. Mr. Helstone, the rector of Briarfield and his three curates, Mr. Donne, Mr. Malone, and Mr. Sweeting. Bronte terms Helstone “a clerical Cossack . . . who show[ed] partiality in friendship and bitterness in enmity. . . who was equally attached to principles, and adherent to prejudices” (Bronte, *Shirley* 35). Helstone’s curates are certainly models for Pym’s curates, especially the Re. Donne who is the progenitor of the Rev. Edgar Donne in *Some Tame Gazelle* and the Rev. Stephen Latimer of *Crampton Hodnet*. Bronte says of her Donne:

He was troublesome, exasperating. He had a stock of small-talk on hand, at once the most trite and perverse that can be imagined: abuse of the people of Briarfield; the natives of Yorkshire generally; complaints of the want of high society; of the backward state of civilization in these districts; murmurings against the disrespectful conduct of the lower orders in the north toward their betters; silly ridicule of the manner of living of these parts,—the want of style, the absence of elegance, as if he, Donne, had been accustomed to very great doings indeed: an insinuation which his somewhat underbred manner and aspect failed to bear out (117).

In his dislike of local people, especially northerners, Donne is also very much like the Rev. David Lyell of Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn*. Donne’s peers, Malone (described as “besottedly arrogant”) and Sweeting (who is made over by ladies of a certain age), can also be seen from time to time in Pym’s clergy. Bronte’s clergymen spend most of their time visiting each other and discoursing “on minute point of ecclesiastical discipline, frivolities which seem as empty as bubbles to all save themselves” (5). On a conscious level Pym admired *Shirley* for the character of its heroine, but unconsciously perhaps she absorbed a great deal of the personalities of Bronte’s clerics, who seem more like Pym’s than either Austen’s or Trollope’s.

George Elliot’s early work *Scenes of Clerical Life* was a book that Barbara Pym turned to throughout her life. A very slight work, Eliot’s *Scenes* contains vignettes of divines such as Mr. Crewe, “who was allowed to enjoy his avarice in comfort”; the Rev. Mr. Horn, “who was given to tippling and quarrelling with his wife”; the Rev. Mr. Tryon, the curate at “the chapel-of-ease on Paddiford Common.” A more important clerical model for Pym can be seen in the Rev. Edward Casaubon of *Middlemarch*. Casaubon, the first husband of the heroine Dorothea Brooke, is engaged in a ludicrous life-long project, assembling the *Key to All Mythologies*. Casaubon whose name suggests casuistry as well as the Renaissance scholar, attempts to bend the will of Dorothea to his comforts and life work, much the same way some of Pym’s excellent women are forced into servitude by her clergy.

A minor Victorian who was a life-long influence on Pym was Charlotte Mary Yonge, author of *The Heir of Redclyffe* and *The Daisy Chain*, great favorites of Pym. We are indebted to our colleague Barbara Dunlap for her excellent article in “*All This Reading*”: *The literary World of Barbara Pym* which elucidates many instances of Barbara Pym’s allusions to and appreciation of Charlotte M. Yonge. Dunlap gives Yonge her due as a good storyteller by nineteenth-century lights, who helped to advance Tractarian ideas while collecting a popular audience.(180). I fear, however, I must join Janice Rossen in terming Yonge’s novels “patently sentimental”(181). I suggest we look at *The Daisy Chain* as an example of an inferior work which

perhaps had an impact on Pym's much better writing. In seven hundred tedious pages the excessively worthy May family of eleven children and their good country doctor father attempt to become better Christians by overcoming hardships and rooting out small flaws like flightiness and stubbornness (one flaw per child) from their personalities. The heroine Ethel and the other girls of the family are applauded for subordinating their personalities and talents to the advancement of their brothers. The modern reader is not charmed by the final portrait of spunky Ethel broken on the wheel of the Victorian family and coming "to understand that the unmarried woman must not seek undivided return of affection, and must not set her love with exclusive eagerness on aught below, but must be ready to cease in turn to be first with any." (Yonge 667) Anne Wyatt-Brown, who was not an admirer of Charlotte M. Yonge, concedes that the painful fate of Ethel in *The Daisy Chain* "taught [Pym] that women have no defense against social pressure, a lesson which helps explain why so many of Pym's later heroines seem passive by contemporary standards" (quoted in Dunlap 182).

Barbara Dunlap, who is more conversant with Charlotte M. Yonge's entire body of work than most critics, continues to admire Yonge. Those of us who are less admiring must concede that Pym reread *The Daisy Chain* and other Yonge books throughout her life, and perhaps there is some of Ethel in her excellent women, all of whom are content with their humdrum outer lives and rich inner lives; however, there is none of Pym's wit, irony or charm in Charlotte M. Yonge.

A late Victorian influence on Pym can perhaps be found in Canon Chasuble of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Chasuble flirts with the estimable Miss Prism by employing slightly risqué classical allusions, then denying their import; like Chasuble, Archdeacon Hoccleve of *Some Tame Gazelle* employs literary allusions which allow him to get away with saying things he could not voice in a more straight-forward manner. Hoccleve's allusions do not have sexual overtones, but are used to hector his congregation and its women. Wilde's delightful name for Canon Chasuble is also typical of Pym's interest in clergy names. She kept a list in her journal entitled "Gems from *Crockford's Clerical Dictionary*" which included "the Rev. de Blogue (formerly Blogg)" and the organist of Bristol Cathedral, "A. Surplice Esq" (Ms. Pym 44:v.1). The Wilde whimsy can be seen in clergy names like Father Thames, Father Gemini, and Father Gellibrand.

Some of Barbara Pym's Oxford-educated clerics doubtless took their inspiration from the dotty warden of Judas College depicted in Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, published in 1911. The warden, who is the grandfather of the femme fatale Zuleika, is so out of touch with reality that he does not miss the entire student population of his college who have drowned themselves for the love of Zuleika. A wildly improbable and delightful satire, *Zuleika Dobson* was a great favorite of Pym's.

Another hardy perennial with Pym was E.F. Benson, the author of the six-book Lucia series. Lucia is the queen bee of the tiny hamlet of Tilling and marshals all of its inhabitants to participate in her Elizabethan fetes, evening soirees, and other social doings. One of her minions is the Rev. Kenneth Bartlett who is a native of Birmingham but affects a thick archaic Scottish brogue. Bartlett and his "wee wifey" spend most of their time playing bridge, an activity which allows Bartlett to win considerable lucre from his parishioners. He claims to give his winnings to charity, which Benson suggests usually began at home with Bartlett. The machinations of Benson's Tillingites are more flamboyant than the activities in Pym's books but both authors render their small worlds with great wit and charm.

A life-long favorite of Pym's was the pseudonymous author "Elizabeth," now known as Elizabeth von Arnim, the some-time mistress of H.G. Wells. Her 1914 novel, *The Pastor's Wife*, is Hardy-esque in tone and contains several devastatingly bleak clerical portraits. The heroine Ingeborg Bullivant is the daughter of a bossy bishop and has the misfortune to marry a Prussian pastor, Robert Dremmel, who spends all of his time on agronomy experiments. When the good pastor forces his wife to have six children in seven years—only two of whom live—and insists on continued yearly pledges of affection, Ingeborg runs off with an artist to Venice but does not go through with the affair. When she returns home, her husband has

not even missed her, and her dreary life continues. Ingeborg's father and husband go well beyond the selfishness displayed in any Pym clergyman; that Barbara Pym owned *The Pastor's Wife* and reread it several times is a tribute to stamina not possessed by many modern readers.

There is, however, an interesting parallel to *The Pastor's Wife* in *Crampton Hodnet*, in which an attractive, lazy middle-aged don, Francis Cleveland, has a brief flirtation with a young student, Barbara Byrd, but is such a poor candidate for adultery that even his own wife does not think him capable of it. As she says, "Francis simply hadn't got it in him to fall in love with someone else and break up a comfortable home" (*Crampton Hodnet* 146). Cleveland is offended that his wife Margaret does not think the possibility of his adultery much of a threat. He thinks to himself, "She probably thought it impossible that he should have a love affair . . . feeling suddenly aggrieved." (*Crampton Hodnet* 163). The unconsummated love affair in *The Pastor's Wife*, which is unnoticed by Ingeborg's dreary husband and bespeaks her dreary life, becomes a comic turn in *Crampton Hodnet* wherein Francis Cleveland is shown to be a bumbling, inept lothario.

A more probable influence on Pym is von Arnim's *The Enchanted April*, published in 1923, which relates the story of four women who rent a house together in Italy for a month. The women, two of whom are very much like Pym's excellent women, do not know each other before the trip but come to interact in unexpected ways. The four-character structure of *The Enchanted April* is much like Pym's *Quartet in Autumn*, although the former book is lighter and more optimistic than the latter. The voice of the narrator in *The Enchanted April* is also similar to Pym's in its humor and ironic detachment. In a 1978 B.B.C. radio interview Pym mentions her debt to Elizabeth von Arnim:

Such novels as *The Enchanted April* and *The Pastor's Wife* were a revelation in their wit and delicate irony, and the dry, unsentimental treatment of the relationship between men and women which touched some echoing chord in me at that time. (*Civil to Strangers* 383)

Pym retained a lifelong affection for the work of her fellow Oxonian Vera Brittain, who is best known for her autobiographical account of World War I, *Testament of Youth*. More important to Pym may have been Brittain's best novel, *An Honourable Estate*, which contains both the feminist and pacifist themes for which she was famous. One character, Janet Rutherston, is crushed by her insensitive clergyman husband who expects her to have a baby every year against her wishes; in this affliction she is much like Ingeborg of *The Pastor's Wife*, even though Janet is unique in her desire to be an activist for women's rights. Although nothing good ever happens to Janet, her son learns her feminist principles and finally marries Ruth Alleyndene, an Oxford-educated woman who seems much like Brittain and Pym. Pym did not share Brittain's interest in politics, but her taste was likely shaped by Brittain's writing.

In the B.B.C. interview cited above, Pym also mentions her debt to Ivy Compton-Burnett: "Another author I came across at this time was Ivy Compton-Burnett . . . Of course I couldn't help being influenced by her dialogue, that precise, formal conversation which seemed so stilted when I first read it—though when I got used to it, a friend and I took to writing each other entirely in that style" (*Civil to Strangers* 383). Pym had all of Compton-Burnett's novels in her personal library and may have been influenced not only by her clipped dialogue but by the pompous and insensitive clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Chaucer of *Daughters and Sons*; Chaucer makes much of his doctorate which he barely managed to secure, and proposes to no fewer than three women before securing a helpmeet in bossy Hetty Ponsonby. In Chaucer we see a bit of Pym's Stephen Latimer of *Crampton Hodnet* and Father Thames of *A Glass of Blessings*.

Aside from Pym's own acknowledgement of the aforementioned guardian spirits, she also had in her library many odd books. One peculiar little book she loved to joke about was *The Ritual Reason Why* by Charles Walker, published in 1950, which offers reasons for various Anglican customs and answers to questions of religious punctilio surely not asked by very many of the faithful. Another literary curio is Margaret Watts's *History of the Parson's Wife*, published in 1943. While Watts does survey portraits of clerical wives in English literature, she also betrays many quaint prejudices including the thought that the challenge of securing good servants is the hardest problem besetting modern clergy wives (93). She also

castigates Samuel Butler for his unflattering view of the clergy and suggests that “a Celtic strain in Butler’s ancestry” accounted for his lack of charity towards the clergy (126). As was mentioned earlier, Pym was an avid reader of *Crockford’s Clerical Dictionary*, which contains much unintentionally humorous clerical minutiae. Pym delighted in peculiar religious books and turned them all to good account in her own novels.

I hope the foregoing ramble through some of the less-known books and authors Barbara Pym read and enjoyed has reminded us that she did not confine her reading to Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and “our greater and lesser English poets,” as she termed them. Pym was a voracious and eclectic reader, and we can be thankful that her taste was so varied and that she possessed a magpie’s eye for the perfect bits of tinsel to weave into her own stories, stories which continue to instruct and delight us today.

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