

Missing Sideboards and Faded Slipcovers: Marriage in *Crampton Hodnet*

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In one of her earliest novels, *Crampton Hodnet*, Barbara Pym presents us with numerous images of marriage. First and foremost would be the Clevelands—Francis and Margaret—a 50ish academic couple. Margaret is motherly in her behavior towards Francis and he is comfortable and kept busy with a fairly boring, unfulfilling life. Margaret in her musings about an acceptable mate for her daughter tells us:

It was an excellent thing for a husband to have something like research to occupy his time. After the first year or two of married life one no longer wanted to have him continually about the house. Mrs. Cleveland hardly noticed now whether her husband was there or not, and she was too busy doing other things ever to stop and ask herself whether she was not perhaps missing something. The best she could say of Francis was that he gave her no trouble, and she thought that that was a great deal more than could be said of many husbands.

Francis's life is taken up with his lectures, mild dalliances with young students, meetings with friends, and when he had "some leisure time" work on a biography of a poet ancestor. When Francis muses on the sensibilities of one of his young students, Barbara Bird, he contrasts them with Margaret's:

She [Barbara] wouldn't spoil a beautiful evening—it happened to be a particularly raw December evening—by making conversation. She seemed to know one's feeling. If he went for such a walk with Margaret she would be chattering all the time about unimportant things, something they ought to get done in the house or some trivial bit of North Oxford gossip. One somehow couldn't imagine Barbara talking about things like that. He began to see himself as a sensitive misunderstood person, who had at last found a soul-mate.

Margaret finds Francis boring, yes, but life's other pleasures make up for this:

Margaret who had at one time helped and encouraged her husband with his work, had now left him to do it alone, because she feared that with her help it might quite easily be finished before one of them died, and then where would they be? Francis was like a restless, difficult child if he had nothing to occupy him. This book meant that he spent long hours in his study, presumably working on it. It would not be at all convenient for Margaret to have him hanging about the drawing room, wanting to be amused. After nearly thirty years of married life she had come to take very much for granted the handsome, distinguished husband whom she had once loved so passionately. Indeed, she even thought Francis rather a bore sometime. She was busy...with many interests although vastly different ones from those of her youth. For now she never thought of seventeenth century love lyrics but only of her house and daughter and the generations of undergraduates, who sometimes needed her help as a friend or even as a mother.

While Francis seems to have lost whatever passion he had had for his work and his wife, Margaret retains a comfortable, cozy passion for her present life but not necessarily for him. However, this does not mean that Francis is not an attractive man. Apparently, generation after generation of undergraduate women continue to delight in him and his lectures on seventeenth century poetry while Margaret sees none of his charms, but rather views him as another of her duties, and not a particularly rewarding one.

The Waddells, an elderly clerical couple, present an interesting portrait of a later stage marriage. Ben and Agnes Waddell seem more comfortable with themselves and each other but that may say more about

Agnes's personality than about their marriage. Agnes seems more intelligent, more self-aware than her husband.

When Francis teases Mrs. Waddell about wearing gardening shoes to tea, his aunt Miss Doggett comments that one's conscience might prevent one from doing so, Agnes replies:

“My conscience? My husband and his parishioners are far more likely to stop me than my conscience.”

“You are lucky, Mrs. Waddell, in having a husband who is something more than just a husband,” said Mr. Cleveland.

“I think it's really quite enough for a husband to be just that,” said Mrs. Waddell. “It's certainly a whole-time job, isn't it, Ben?”

One wonders whether either Francis or Margaret would agree.

After meeting the Waddells and the Clevelands, we are introduced to a couple (or at least one member of a couple) that is considering marriage—Mr. Latimer and Jessie Morrow. Mr. Latimer is the 30-ish curate who, new to the parish, is offered a home at Miss Doggett's Leamington Lodge. While we don't meet them in a married state, we learn a great deal about their views on the topic. Latimer “gets an idea.” He believes he'll never have peace until he marries and after a violent dream/nightmare he awakens literally and figuratively to the realization that Jessie is the woman for him, if only he could remember her name. He remembers the passion of an affair when he was nineteen “that enriched his life,” but he now wants a life less disturbed by what he calls love but wonders if it is not passion he is referring to. In many ways the Latimer-Morrow relationship is a very comfortable, companionable one based in part on a shared experience: the absurdity that is Miss Doggett but Jessie wants more than companionship; she wants passion, she wants love. When Mr. Latimer tells her that he respects her and holds her in high esteem, she rejects the proposal:

“Oh, no; it wouldn't do at all!” Even Miss Morrow's standards were higher than that, so high indeed, that she feared she would never marry now. For she wanted love, or whatever it was that made Simon and Anthea walk along the street not noticing other people simply because they had each other's eyes to look into. And of course, she knew perfectly well that she would never get anything like that.

Of course, the irony of this passage is that Simon has already spurned Anthea and has gone on to another passionate affair. One wonders if Jessie has made a mistake in turning down Latimer since their relationship has a strong friendship at its core (if he can only get her name straight) and while it lacks passion, this passion in most of the novel's marriages appears to disappear inevitably with time anyway.

Barbara Bird, a student and contemporary of Anthea's, is briefly paired with Francis Cleveland to show another variation on this question of passion. Bird feels no passion for Cleveland and there appears to be little friendship there. Cleveland is passionate, yes, but he also has a very strong desire for comfort, something his marriage to Margaret affords him bountifully. His image of marriage to Bird is one of suppressed horror—a small flat, Bird ineptly and begrudgingly performing domestic chores, a truly diminished life from Francis's perspective, but one he feels he must aspire to if his manhood is to be realized. To his astonishment, the romantic Bird is sorely lacking in passion. Francis, rather ungallantly says to her, “You look so amorous and really you are just a cold fish.”

Other insights into marriage come from the 70-ish spinster Miss Doggett, especially in her criticism of Margaret as a “bad wife”:

“I've never liked Margaret, thought Miss Doggett, suddenly and surprisingly. There she was, quite happy and contented, making no effort to keep her husband interested in her. Wearing the same old jumper suit and comfortable shoes, the same musquash coat with its old-fashioned roll collar, bicycling into town to do the shopping, sitting by the fire smoking

cigarettes, taking no interest at all in her house and family. Look at those faded slipcovers, thought Miss Doggett unreasonably... Yes, Margaret was a bad wife and mother. It was no wonder Francis was looking elsewhere.

Another snapshot of marriage is given to us by Simon's mother, Lady Beddoes, who comments on her late husband, an ambassador to Warsaw. They were married for 20 years, and she says of his death that it was somewhat like having a piece of furniture removed and then being left to stare at a blank wall. She vaguely remembers that after all one does really only love once in a lifetime, and it appears the ambassador was not that one; rather he was more the missing sideboard.

Finally, we meet very briefly the Fremantles (Olive and Herbert), an academic couple who both offer marital advice to the Clevelands: he advises adultery and she, the averting of one's eyes. The Clevelands do a little of each. The Fremantle marriage is unusual for Pym in that the husband dominates and belittles his wife. Olive tells Margaret Cleveland that Fremantle had had "lapses," but she overlooked them, and advises her to do the same although she does characterize herself as "an old woman and not very clever." Her husband agrees. "You mustn't listen to Olive," he says. "She always gets the wrong end of the stick."

Later Margaret is in London and observes a number of women walking by. She wonders how many of them have had to deal with "lapses." She even considers the possibility that these women might have had "lapses" themselves. Just then she notices one with a sensible hat and dress—"an excellent woman" indeed. She decides to approach her and ask her advice on straying husbands but sees the woman's ringless finger and realizes she is unmarried:

Presumably, she hasn't a husband. She was a comfortable spinster with nobody but herself to consider. Living in a tidy house not far from London, making nice little supper dishes for one, a place for everything, and everything in its place, no husband hanging resentfully around the sitting room, one moment topping and tailing gooseberries, and the next declaring that he had fallen in love with a young woman. Mrs. Cleveland sighed a sigh of envy. No husband.

Pym's characters, here as in her other novels, are flawed, amusing, and richly developed. There are some prevailing themes: excellent women (Margaret Cleveland, Jessie Morrow), child-like, self-absorbed clergy and academics (Francis Cleveland, Mr. Latimer) and obtuse, cantankerous older women (Miss Doggett). These figures are prominent in many of her books but one never gets the sense that Pym's characters are stereotypes. The same holds true for her portraits of marriage. Are not these relationships but reflections of these rich characters? But we do sense a strong pattern. In Pym's marriages, passion usually ebbs with time, women care for their husbands in many small domestic ways and husbands often are childish, self-absorbed, and querulous. Often there is a commentator who is unmarried but has very strong opinions how married lives should be lived. In *Crampton Hodnet* there are two such characters: Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow. But one comes away from the novel with the realization that for Pym's characters, a shared, comfortable, cozy life is what is most important and marriage can sometimes help achieve this goal