ISSN 1360-9920

GREEN LEAVES

The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society Vol. 6, No. 1, May 2000

THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA 2000 CONFERENCE

The second annual conference of the Barbara Pym Society of North America, held at the Harvard Law School on 1st and 2nd April 2000, was a resounding success. Ellen Miller had organised a spectacular venue in Austin Hall, a marvellous building in the American architect H. H. Richardson's *rundbogenstil*, and splendid food. The infrastructure was superb, and the speakers lived up to it.

The first to speak was **Katherine Ackley**, Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, on 'All this Reading: The Importance of Literature in the Novels of Barbara Pym'. She pointed out that English Literature and the Anglican Church were the most important things in Pym's life. Her books are full of allusions to literature – her first novel had everybody in it from Algernon Charles Swinburne to Beverly Nichols. Her characters read widely if indiscriminately. Many of them bring out quotations both appropriate and inappropriate. For Pym, literature humanised a science-ridden world. It was also a source of comfort to those suffering unrequited love (Pym herself filled notebooks with quotations). Moreover, unrequited love helps us to appreciate literature (*Some Tame Gazelle*). Finding one's feelings expressed there can be painful, but it is at the same time a consolation.

Pym's characters relate to (and identify with) the characters in the books they read. Some of Pym's characters behave as if they were writers themselves, using their imaginations. They keep coming up with titles for novels and poems, as, for example, 'Birds, worms and Jesuits'.

Pym blurs reality and literature – fictions are more real than life. 'What odd people they were – like characters in a novel', says one of her characters of others. Dulcie finds literature preferable to reality. In her bathroom is a copy of *Some Tame Gazelle* – Pym writes herself into the novel. We are all actors, and the plot possibilities are endless. Pym comments that the deep mystery of life is like John Le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, 'which we all find so baffling'.

Literature can be cathartic. Pym's characters, like herself, are unmarried women. Before Pym, such people did not feature in literature. They sometimes, however, fall short of their own high ideals. Letty feels she should read works devoted to Social Studies, but settles guiltily for novels. Mildred, instead of reading up on the anthropological meeting, buys a new hat.

Literature is not science. It is subjective, but it deals with the higher things of life. Social scientists and novelists do the same thing, but novelists are creative. The writer of fiction has unlimited freedom – fiction is humanising in a way that science can not be. The novelist is interested in the emotions. Writing novels is more liberating than writing up anthropological notes. Literature, as in the case of Dulcie Mainwaring, makes us more sensitive and conscious of the meaning of trivial things.

The next speaker was the peerless **Father Gabriel Myers**, OSB, who spoke with great wit on the subject of Victorian Hymns in Barbara's novels, and the group sang several examples.

Father Gabriel Myers leads participants in singing 'All things bright and beautiful'

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Nancy Talburt, Associate Vice-Chancellor and Professor of English, University of Arkansas, then told the conference about how she came to meet Barbara Pym in 1979. She had written to Pym before leaving for London, asking her to lunch, tea or dinner. Somewhat to her surprise, Pym agreed to meet her at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford, warning her, however, that 'novelists are, on the whole, rather disappointing face to face' (Talburt could not help thinking 'What about readers?) Pym went on to say that she would carry a copy of one of her novels to assist recognition. When she appeared, she had a copy of *Some Tame Gazelle* in her string bag, inscribed as a present to Talburt. Pym then insisted on buying two gin and tonics for them in the bar – Nancy had rather thought that Pym would go for sherry. Pym had a warm, crooked smile, and was somebody that one would instantly like to know. Talburt lost her trepidation after about ten seconds. The subjects of their conversation were: Oxford, English Literature, Naples, the WRNS, anthropology, and Pym's sister's translation of Greek folk-songs. They lived near Oxford because they liked it so much – the Randolph was where she met friends. Pym met Philip Larkin there. 'He's very shy, and deaf, a difficult combination', she confided.

They then went into the dining room, where there was a large selection of *hors d'oeuvres* on a sort of ferris wheel. They ate a huge meal, including gooseberry tart with cream. During the meal Pym spoke about where she had lived in London, and said that she missed the city. They agreed that they both loved London, even despite all the changes. They then discussed where to eat in London; both favoured the 'White Tower' and 'Kettners'. Pym said that she and her sister enjoyed Chinese food, and the Indian restaurant 'Veeraswamy'. She had always wanted to get to the 'George and Vulture'.

Pym then said that she had been unable to resist Talburt's letter – the typing was so perfect. She agreed to meet at Finstock to talk about Talburt's reading group's views on her novels . She said that she had been unable to read after a severe illness. She wanted to do patch-work – Americans did a lot of it. To Talburt she looked very young and healthy.

They then talked about E. M. Forster. A reviewer had said that he was just watching from a deck-chair, and that it was a pity that he did not swim. Pym did not agree. She thought that if Forster had not had problems – had not been an outsider – he would not have been so good.

Since her rejection in 1963, Pym had always had a novel going round the publishers, and thought of herself as 'formerly a writer'. *Excellent Women* was the most successful of her novels. She felt that she had not been in step with the swinging sixties and the Carnaby Street scene. *Quartet in Autumn* was not as pessimistic as readers thought – but it was a big change from the last novel published before it, long before it. Death, not sex, was the big taboo.

On the subject of reviewers, Pym was appreciative of John Updike – he had understood what she intended. American reviewers were much kinder than British. She did not like Joyce Carroll Oates. Why choose Oates to review Barbara Pym? There was only the desire to produce heat rather than light.

When Pym was young she wrote a short story and sold it. She thought she could make a living writing, but this proved not to be so easy. Among American writers Pym liked Alison Lurie. Read Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, she said. She liked detective fiction. She went on to remark that new people she met often said 'I don't read novels much', to which her stock response was, 'Oh, I wouldn't have thought you did.'

Sunday morning began with Frauke Lenckos speaking on 'The Passionate Language of Geography: journeys in the novels of Barbara Pym'. Since the full text of her talk is to be printed in *Green Leaves*, I will not go into further detail here (see pages 4-7).

This was followed by **Helen C. Taylor**, Professor of English, Louisiana State University-Shreveport, on 'The Bodleian and Barbara Pym'. Pym's notebooks and diaries are preserved in the Bodleian Library, and reveal the author as a detached anthropologist. She analyses her own emotional and romantic life in her notebooks, and uses it in her novels. Only the men met while she was in the WRNS seem not to have made it into the novels, except perhaps in the case of Rocky.

In the early thirties Pym began a tumultuous romance with Henry Harvey in the Bodleian. That, and other libraries, became the background to excitement and despair. Romance struck while she (and for that matter her heroines) were meant to be working. Many of her visits to the Bodleian in 1933 and 1934 were made in the hope of seeing and observing Henry Harvey. She tried to get him to notice her, and this was transmuted into *Crampton Hodnet,* where Pym is Barbara Bird (among others). Henry Harvey never felt about Pym the way she felt about him, though he had no objection to sex after tea. The British Museum Manuscripts exhibition and the Reading Room also feature. They 'make people behave oddly'.

The Bodleian features also in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and even *Samson Agonistes* comes into it too (Pym and Harvey were once caught reading that work in the nude). The Bodleian achieves its full grandeur as a setting for romance. Pym fictionalises herself and Harvey, giving a wonderfully observed description of a love-stricken student and all her time-wasting activities in the library. The Bodleian is associated with love, but also with death: it can be a tomb. Romance flourishes after one leaves the library, not while one is within it.

The Bodleian was used as a setting only in the early novels, but Pym continued to use libraries as settings for falling in love. The pursuit of the man in the library is exciting, but the reality much less so. Her women are exploited by men, and carry out academic drudgery for love. Nevertheless, libraries were an integral part of Pym's existence. She even foresaw that her letters might end up in the Bodleian. She might almost be called a 'library novelist'.

The conference had been enthralling, with a well-balanced choice of excellent speakers and original topics. Long may the Barbara Pym Society of North America continue to flourish!

Tim Burnett

Frauke Lenckos

"The passionate language of geography": journeys in Barbara Pym's novels

Frauke Lenckos

Most of us think of the excellent women of Barbara Pym's novels as natural-born stay-at-homes, their lives confined to a single, and quintessentially British, sphere. This is, of course, most frequently a nice house in the country or a comfortable apartment in a London parish. From these havens of safety, excellent women embark on a few, and not very adventurous excursions – to unfashionable seaside resorts, to friends' houses in the country, to the old school or to some other respectable destination that, as Mrs Doggett would surely request, offers the kind of accommodations recommended by the English Tourist Board, listed in Cook's Travel Agency, and perhaps frequented by four archdeacons at once. In Crampton Hodnet, Mrs. Doggett supplies the reason why the British – whether ladies or gentlemen – should confine themslves to their native turf:

> You ought to be very careful," said Miss Doggett. "Miss Morrow's cousin had a very unpleasant experience." She turned to Miss Morrow. "It was in Paris that your cousin Bertha had that experience, wasn't it?" (CH, page 151)

Similarly, Francis Cleveland's rather muddled-headed intent in the same novel to seduce Barbara Bird comes to nothing because he has missed the last boat to France. As it is, his vague plan to have the kind of diversion that a "weekend in Paris" offers is most certainly not realizable in the chaste atmosphere of a Victorian hotel in Dover. There, the room he has rented for the night reveals to him in no uncertain terms the squalid side of love:

> "Our weekend in Paris," he said, with an attempt at gaiety, but his voice had a hollow ring.
>
> Barbara felt she ought to make some sort of response, but somehow her voice would not come. She sat down on the enormous double bed with its hot crimson coverlet and looked about her.
>
> "What a funny room," she said at last.
>
> "Yes, it's very gloomy and Victorian, but we don't mind, do we?" he said rather uncertainly. (CH, p. 189)

As a consequence, it seems at first that apart from the holiday in Rome that Sophia and Mark Ainger undertake with his parish in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Barbara Pym's novels restrict themselves to the places that she called "home" – the social and personal world of London, Oxford, and the English countryside her *excellent women* inhabit more suitably than the more glamorous locales of foreign lands. Thus, a decorous stability seems to pervade the novels of Barbara Pym, in particular because the *excellent women* so frequently praise the virtue of steadfastness. And this leads us to assume that they are adverse to change, be it change of location, or change of lifestyle. As Dulcie Mainwaring says in *No Fond Return of Love*, "...change on the whole is a bad thing." (page 34)

However, is the world of Barbara Pym's *excellent women* truly as uneventful and as immobile as it seems to be? Do we not discover when looking closer at Pym's work that the majority of her heroines are not home-bound, that they are, instead, in transit? Take Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Women*, for example. When the novel opens, she has moved from her parents' home to the City of London. The very "inconvenience" of her apartment, which is

> not properly self-contained... "I have to share a bathroom," I had so often murmured, almost with shame, as if I personally had been found unworthy of a bathroom of my own, (EW, page 6)

allows her to escape from the stifling propriety of her own place. Delicately tackling the problems of the cleaning schedule, she is able to intrude upon the gypsy-like existences of Rockingham and Helena Napier. They, in turn, invade and upset Mildred's orderly world, so that she finds herself acting in conflict with her carefully arranged way of life.

Similarly, Ianthe Broome in *An Unsuitable Attachment* trades her mother's elegant Westminster flat for a house in a poorer, yet more sociable parish. What is more, we know that both Mildred and Ianthe are headed for even more drastic changes in their lives as their stories near their conclusion. The uncertainty of their destinies leaves us with an impression of possibility, of a journey in progress, a path about-to-be-taken.

Likewise, Dulcie in *No Fond Return of Love* travels far and wide. First to a conference, where she heals her broken heart by falling in love with the man who will in the end become her husband, Aylwin Forbes. Dulcie subsequently embarks on several quests in order to get to know him and to secure his affections; to the library, to the house of his mother-in-law in Deodar Grove, and, finally to the hotel of his own mother in Taviscombe. There, by the seaside, Dulcie and Aylwin have the conversation that later prompts him to remember her "fondly" when her young niece Laurel rejects his offer of marriage. Then, there is Prudence Bates of *Jane and Prudence*. A passionate traveller, she is also an itinerant lover, moving endlessly from man to man in her search for perfection. Barbara Pym's notebooks show that she had originally thought of ending this story with a scene that showed us "Prudence sitting in a railway carriage on her way to Spain..." (MS Pym 40-82, 1951, page 5) And indeed, this would have been an appropriate setting for a woman who thinks of herself in such far-fetched, romantic terms as Prudence does.

Like Prudence, Mildred, Ianthe, and Dulcie, so are Catherine Oliphant of *Less Than Angels*, Wilmet Forsyth of *A Glass of Blessings*, and Leonora Eyre of *The Sweet Dove Died*, veritable urban *flaneurs*. They regularly traverse the length and width of the City of London, as well as its suburbs. They cleverly use the means of transport at their disposal – taxis, friends' cars, coaches, and trains. They move with ease between their homes and the homes of friends, offices, churches, church halls, vicarages, department stores, boutiques, cafés, restaurants, art galleries, and the like. Also, they effect romantic encounters in public places. Wilmet has two rendezvous with Piers Longridge in more or less atmospheric eating establishments. Leonora is saved from a fainting spell by James Boyce and his uncle at an elegant auction house. Catherine gets better acquainted with Alaric Lydgate in the cafeteria of a "large store" with "old and respectable connections." (LTA, p. 154) Even the aging Letty in Barbara Pym's penultimate novel, *Quartet in Autumn*, relocates twice. At first, she resents her uprooted state. In the end, however, she finds that the seemingly chaotic conditions in which she is forced to exist help her to see her life as still holding "infinite possibilities for change." (QIA, p. 218)

Like Letty, many of the voyagers in Barbara Pym's stories are unlikely candidates for adventure. One thinks of timid Connie Aspinall, who in *Some Tame Gazelle* daringly follows Bishop Grote's call to Mbawawa-land, decorous Mary Beamish who in *A Glass of Blessings* plights her troth to handsome, feckless Father Marius Lovejoy Ransome and his motor scooter. Or there is dull, dejected Marjorie Forbes who in *No Fond Return of Love* goes off with a man she meets in the dining car of a train. (NFRL, p. 243) Although some of these women are minor characters, they follow the call of uncertainty readily. Some of them even seek it out. Marjorie, for example, not only anticipates, but even colludes in, the kind of courtship that takes off on the romance of a speeding train:

> Marjorie would have liked to travel first class. The possibilities of a romantic encounter were as great in a first class carriage as in the dining car – greater even. One never met anybody interesting travelling second class. (NFRL, p. 196)

What sets Marjorie apart from the *excellent women* is her keen appreciation of the opportunities, both romantic and social, available to a modern woman on the move.

For the velocity of trains suspends not only the limitations of geography, but also the confines of society. As the outlines of the landscape blur behind the smudged windows of a rushing train, so do barriers of class and gender, too, lose definition, and persons who would otherwise never have met are allowed to mix and mingle, and even to fall in love.

More importantly, it is the fuzziness of social distinctions between fellow travellers who in truth might have little in common that provides the answer to Dulcie's question why Aylwin chose to marry Marjorie in the first place. For one can well imagine that a man who thinks of himself as a romantic hero, talks "in a Pseudo-Jamesian manner" and models his life after Jane Austen's novels, would be highly susceptible to the romance of an engagement effected on the British rails. Likewise, Marjorie has gleaned from popular culture, probably the kind of articles about romantic encounters between wild-game hunters and young girls, which Catherine Oliphant writes for women's magazines, that personal and social progress might well be within the reach of the woman who exchanges the safety of her mother's well-ordered parlour for the promising chaos of station waiting rooms and first class compartments. Marjorie is thus indicative of the dramatic change taking place in British conceptions of geographic and social mobility between the wars, and during and after the Second World War. Changes that enable persons of diverse social standing and ethnic origins "to invade" the British middle class.

However, one finds not only female fortune-hunters on the prowl in the novels of Barbara Pym. Men, too, "marry up." One of the most memorable male climbers is Bill Sedge, an Austrian refugee who courts Dulcie's friend Viola Dace with old-fashioned, continental manners. Unlike Count Bianco in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Senhor MacBride-Pereira in *No Fond Return of Love*, or Jean-Pierre le Rossignol in *Less Than Angels*, Bill Sedge is not content with observing British society from the margins. Instead, he, like his sister, works hard at becoming part of it, taking a job that enables him to acquire British middle-class respectability, and eventually a British, middle class-wife. Incidentally, he is a buyer travelling in knitwear; a happy combination indeed for Viola Dace who is in desperate need not only of being swept of her feet, but also of receiving some sound advice on what to do about her life and her clothes. Interestingly, Viola becomes intrigued with Bill when he recites to her a poem in German:

> "How strange," Viola murmured, looking at him rather intensely. "I was christened Violet."
>
> "Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand
> Gebückt in sich und unbekannt,"
> quoted Bill Sedge softly.
>
> Really, the ridiculousness of men! thought Dulcie... Aloud she said, "That must be a sort of German version of 'A violet by a mossy stone'."
>
> "Well, hardly," said Viola with a superior little smile. "And it does sound rather better in a foreign language, " she admitted. (NFRL, pp. 153-4)

This is one of the funniest scenes in *No Fond Return of Love*; for while Viola decidedly rejects Dulcie's obvious suggestion that Bill is merely quoting Wordsworth in his native tongue, he is, in fact, doing just that. However, Viola's point is that it does not really matter what he says, but that he speaks a different language, a language that holds the promise of the unknown, of adventure, and of romance abroad.

Viola's statement recalls an entry in Barbara Pym's notebook of 1954, where one finds the beautiful words that have become the title of this piece: "the passionate language of geography". This elegant turn of phrase serves not only as a subtitle to the novel that Barbara Pym was writing at the time, *Less Than Angels*, but also as a leitmotif in other stories – where, if one looks closely, one discovers that several protagonists, and they are almost exclusively men, speak this language and thereby entice women with the promise of the exotic. For example, Rocky of *Excellent Women*, who has recently arrived from Naples, evokes in Mildred yearnings for romance, Italian style. (EW, p.74) Then there is Tom Mallow in *Less Than Angels*, who breaks the hearts of women "because he has the glamour of darkest Africa" about him. (LTA, p. 149) Or Alaric in the same novel, whom Catherine finds good-looking because he has an "Easter Island" face (LTA, p. 92). Likewise, Piers in *A Glass of Blessings* carries the allure of Portugal with him. Aylwin, who has been branded a "libertine" by his wife's circle of friends, conforms to type by spending his holiday in Tuscany.

Thus, while it has been observerved that almost all of the men in Barbara Pym's novels are "handsome," what has not been noticed is the fact that many of the men are handsome because they have imbibed the charm of foreign locales. As the personal charisma of Barbara Pym's heroes is greatly enhanced by the thrill of "abroad," it seems that, in her stories, beauty appears synonymous both with romantic propensity and personal instability. This is even more true of the men who speak another kind of "language of geography" in the novels of Barbara Pym – that of social difference. One of their most notable representatives is John Challow of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, who is, in fact, strangely reticent – he says the wrong things, he uses platitudes, he simply refuses to communicate at times. However, this allows him instead to resort to body language. Rather than persuading Ianthe into marriage with words, as Rupert Stonebird and Merwyn Cantrell try to do, John pursues Ianthe actively, takes her in his arms, or later puts up shelves for her in her house, actions she obviously prizes above the fine art of conversation:

> Ianthe ... found herself wondering what John's comments would have been. Would it be possible to go round sightseeing with him and expect him to say the things appropriate to the occasion? But perhaps if they were to have any kind of life together, none of it – or very little – would be spent looking at churches and picture galleries, so it wouldn't matter. Plenty of people did without that sort of thing and were perfectly happy... Ianthe stopped short at the boldness of her thoughts... (AUA, page 158).

One could see as forerunners of John Challow, Keith and Wilf Bason in *A Glass of Blessings*. They speak yet another strange language – that of sexual diversity. Their peculiar ways of asserting confidentiality at once repel and enchant Wilmet, who is fascinated with

their semi-glamorous, nomadic lifestyles. When Wilmet meets Keith, he reveals to her that he has just recently removed to Piers' flat because he was asked to leave his last place of residence. In addition, Keith seems to have no surname, he holds no steady profession, he is a model who poses for knitting patterns, and he works part-time in a café. Also, he is friends with opinionated Wilf Bason, a full-blooded gourmet cook and a part-time kleptomaniac, whose obsession "with beautiful things" forces him to change occupations frequently.

Wilmet is noticeably unable to prevent herself from associating with these tentative, even tawdry existences although she at first seems to have little in common with them. However, she learns a lesson from their high velocity culture, realizing the contrast it makes to her own stagnation. Fortified by her glimpse of other people's mobility, Wilmet finally finds the strength to move from her mother-in-law's house to a more private apartment with her husband Rodney, and to start life over with him. This has become necessary because Wilmet has noticed a pronounced decline in Rodney's affection for her. For instead of spoiling her and whisking her off to wildly exotic Portugal, he transfers sums of money to her account and drags her to a "good, respectable hotel" in Cornwall. It is only when he takes on the guise of the libertine, confessing to his wife on their journey through the west country that he has been unfaithful to her, that Wilmet regains her interest in him, spurned on by her sudden discovery of his unpredictability.

It is no coincidence that this moment of truth takes place in an ambience that, by sheer contrast, reminds Rodney and Wilmet of their year in Italy. When, on their visit to a Trust House Hotel in Cornwall, the couple discover a number of "delicate nineteenth-century watercolours of Neapolitan scenes", they embark on a nostalgic journey back to the past. In this way, they are finally able to recapture a sense of intimacy they have not known for a long time:

> "In the damp of the west country the traveller is reminded that there is sunshine somewhere," said Rodney. "And how very different this is from Posillipo!"
>
> "Yes. [I answered] Do you remember the funny guide book that we found – 'the Via de Posillipo recently ampliated'?"
>
> "Of course, and the name meaning 'pause of every sorrow.'"[said Rodney]
>
> "And the caves in the Via Chiatamone where some citizens went for pastimes that ended in scandal," I laughed.
>
> Rodney sighed. "Those were good days, weren't they?" he said. "Perhaps better than we shall ever know again."
>
> "Well, we were young then. But life is supposed to get better as one grows older – even married life," I added, not consciously cynical. (AGOB, page 248)

The theme of a holiday allowing a married couple to see one's partner in his or her true light and to be able to love each other again is one that Barbara Pym had tried out once before in an earlier novel and would do so again in a later one. The first is entitled *Civil to Strangers*, and tells the story of Cassandra, the much put-upon wife of the poet Adam Marsh-Gibbon who, tired of having Wordsworth quoted to her in moments of martial conflict, flees to Budapest, in order to test the strength of her marriage. As she hopes, her husband eventually follows her after he has tired of the "pleasure" of studying at the Bodleian Library. The two meet at her hotel and experience a second honeymoon, at the end of which Cassandra finally expects the child she has longed to have for so many years. The second and better known novel is of course *An Unsuitable Attachment*. This is the more complicated narrative of a holiday in Italy, which succeeds only in reuniting one couple and ends perhaps in more confusions and potential misalliances than those with which it had begun.

Both works, with their theme of women rediscovering love on a trip abroad, bear the stamp of a writer whom Barbara Pym had admired since she was a young girl and to whom she paid ample tribute late in life, but whose influence on her work still remains to be examined in depth. I am speaking here of Elizabeth von Arnim, author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, *The Pastor's Wife* and *The Enchanted April*. These were brilliantly successful novels which showed that travel, especially that of the international variety, was of great relevance to the study of women and their behavior in matters of the heart. Barbara Pym honoured Arnim in her now well known radio talk "Finding a Voice" in 1978, and praised Arnim's

> wit and delicate irony, and [her] dry, unsentimental treatment of the relationship between men and women which touched some echoing chord in me at the time.

It is important to follow up on this statement because, despite the fact that Barbara Pym was quite open about the debt she owed Arnim, to my knowledge few people – with the exception of Hazel Holt – have remarked upon her affinity with this writer.

To summarize *The Enchanted April*, the novel by Arnim that is mentioned by title in *An Unsuitable Attachment*: it is the delightful story of four women who are dissatisfied with their way of life in England after the Great War, but find friendship and renewed happiness during a holiday in Italy. Two of them, Mrs Lotty Wilkins and Mrs Rose Arbuthnot, are trapped in unhappy, childless marriages. The third, Lady Caroline Dester, has tired of her vacuous existence as a society beauty. The fourth, aging Mrs Fischer, is mourning the passing "of better times and better men." In order to escape from their dreary fates, they answer a discreet advertisement in *The Times* addressed to "Those who appreciate Wistaria and Sunshine." They rent a castle called San Salvatore on the Italian Riviera for the month of April. Under the spell of fragrant gardens and stunning vistas they rediscover their long-dormant ability to love and to enjoy life, and with it, a willingness to accept the drab existences they have always resented. Lotty writes quickly and ruefully to her husband Mellersh, urging him to come, while Rose hesitates for a while, but moved by Lotty's pleas, even she posts a letter with an invitation to her husband Frederick. What she doesn't know, however, is that he is already on his way to San Salvatore, not to meet her, but Lady Caroline, with whom he is mildly in love. In the meantime, the owner of the castle, Mr Briggs, has fallen in love with Rose but is forced to switch his attention to Lady Caroline when he discovers that Rose is married. After originally being very surprised to discover his wife in the very place where he had hoped to find Lady Caroline, Frederick recovers, delirious at his wife's renewed affection for him. The ending of *The Enchanted April* is aptly summarized by Sophia in *An Unsuitable Attachment*:

> Sophia had forgotten what happened in that book, but remembered enough to realise that there was a sort of bringing together of husbands and wives and that in the end everybody was satisfactorily and happily paired off (187)

The reference to this book reveals that Barbara Pym describes a similar crisis of female consciousness in *An Unsuitable Attachment* as does Arnim in *The Enchanted April*. The women in *An Unsuitable Attachment* are discontented, too: Sophia, who could be a modern Rose, feels that she is no use to her husband Mark in his determination to serve in a poor urban parish. Her sister Penelope, whose social unease recalls Lotty's funny ways, is out of touch with the sexual revolution going on around her and yearns desperately for a man to remove her from its playing fields. Ianthe, a lesser version of Lady Caroline, has lost her bearings after her mother has died and finds herself suddenly in love with a

younger and socially unsuitable man. Sister Dew, though as splendid as Mrs Fischer, seems to be a similarly lonely person who tries to involve herself a bit too eagerly into the lives of others. Their trip to Rome helps relieve for a while some of the monotony and sense of hopelessness that has come to dominate their existences. Sophia feels that Italy gives her and Mark a second honeymoon. Penelope is moved to cry deliciously romantic tears on the Spanish steps in the company of Rupert Stonebird — tears that cannot possibly remain without serious consequences for their future together. Ianthe, meanwhile, dares to admit to herself that like Lady Caroline, she is in love with a man who is her social inferior. Sister Dew has the most romantic experience of them all, when she "is carried shoulder-high by Italians".

Thus, *An Unsuitable Attachment* shows that Barbara Pym was intrigued by the idea that journeys could lastingly alter the destiny of a woman and perhaps even help her find a soul mate. However, the novel also indicates that she was critical of such a facile solution to human failure and found it short-lived; this is why rather than ending her novel, as Arnim does, with the happy vision of enamoured couples on a verdant Italian hillside, Barbara Pym continues the story of her women after they have been restored to their everyday surroundings back in England. And, of course they are *as they were*, with Sophia again making too much of her cat, Ianthe pursuing her disastrous relationship with John, temperamental Penelope misreading Rupert's timid attempts at a courtship, and Sister Drew again meddling where she should not. Accordingly, Barbara Pym subtly demonstrates that the human capacity to listen to "the passionate language of geography," to follow its call, and to transform oneself as result, is a limited one. Sooner or later, [she seems to say], however much we try to conserve the adventurous selves we have acquired on holiday, we relapse into our old, comfortable routines. Who could blame us?

In contrast to Arnim, Barbara Pym realized that splendid moments of bliss cannot truly change the women who enjoy them. They also fail to replace, on a permanent basis, the need for human companionship. For women need "something to love" and something living at that. A more clement climate and a greater beauty of scenery just won't do in the end. So back they go, to the boarding-houses decorated with stuffed eagles and furnished with damp beds, looking for a fond return of love, and finding it, in all the romantically wrong places:

> Dulcie peeped into one of the rooms they were to have. It looked cheerless and unlived-in, although there was a basin with the possibility of hot and cold running water. But now a new anxiety came over her – one inherited from her mother: was it certain that the beds would be properly aired? ... Damp beds – rheumatic fever – death: this was the natural sequence of events, with all the horror of a Victorian novel. (NFRL, page 181)

No Fond Return of Love contains Barbara Pym's most memorable account of the kind of dreary holiday single women might spend at a British seaside resort which has long since gone out of fashion. Dulcie's and Viola's stay, first at *The Anchorage*, (NFRL, p. 171) then at the rather more Gothic *Eagle House*, is indeed so depressing that it drives even the decorous Dulcie temporarily to drink. Things pick up only when Marjorie Forbes, her mother, and finally Aylwin himself arrive, and a family drama worthy of a nineteenth-century novel enacts itself in the hotel, with Dulcie as a not altogether unwilling witness.

In addition, after this plot has played itself out, Barbara Pym gives her readers not the romantic depiction of a passionate embrace between the two principal protagonists, Aylwin and Dulcie, but instead a sublimely funny, almost farcical moment, when she, instead of telling him she loves him, pins her adored man's ears back:

> "Oh, why do you always want such unsuitable wives!" Dulcie burst out impatiently,".... "It's time you made a sensible marriage... You should choose a quite different kind of wife –somebody who can appreciate your work and help you with it – an older woman, perhaps...." (AFRL, p.223)

Subsequently she feels she has lost him forever as a result of her outspokenness, not knowing that this moment is one he will remember when he has come to his senses.

For another spell is at work, not the spell of the unknown, but the spell of the classic, British-made literary romance. A man and woman caught in a gale, arguing against the roar of the sea, the wind transforming the plain heroine into a creature of beauty –this is the stuff of Gothic tales, of British High Romance, of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. There are numerous references to Victorian literature in *No Fond Return of Love*, and it is this subtext that forms the exotic component of Barbara Pym's story. If there is romance in Barbara Pym, it is ultimately of the British variety. Like Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, her men might at first appear foreign and fascinating, but like him, they all end up as tame creatures – John puts up shelves, Rocky raises his children in the country, Aylwin enters into a suitable marriage, Rupert is made to apologize to Penelope, and Piers is forced to drink tea instead of whiskey by the "governessy" Keith.

Clothing her moral lessons in the finest gossamer fabric of irony, Barbara Pym thus intimates that from the woman's perspective, life is not about the self-involved pursuit of desire, but about the careful tending of men who need the help of women to survive in a civilized society. "Some tame gazelle," and so it happens indeed in the books of Barbara Pym, with women the tamers, and men the elusive gazelle who seek to avoid their grasp, but must yet yield to their embrace in order to retain shelter and sustenance. For while men speak one "passionate language of geography," tempting women with the titillating call to escapades, women answer in another idiom, encountering the challenge men pose with the reassuring promise of stability. This is not a promise that is easily made, and it is certainly not carried out lightly. For in Barbara Pym's novels, women play the central, the most important role of all in the society, that of the generous, the loving, the caregivers, the "calm, still centres at the core of humanity." To do so, they must sometimes venture outside the boundaries of polite, even of British society, but they do so willingly and bravely, on the way adopting the most desperate causes, loving the most impossible people, and enduring the most ludicrous situations in pursuit of the task apportioned to them — and all this without expecting a fond return of love. Thus, what Elizabeth Bowen said of Jane Austen also rings true for Barbara Pym. i.e. that "her view of life, ...if confined *to*, was not confined *by*, drawing rooms and lawns". So it is with Barbara Pym's perspective. Her novels might seem at first glance to limit themselves to the *pantouflards*, the stay-at-homes. But in truth, her women are, as we all are, on what Dolly Arborfield in *An Academic Question* calls our "Life's Journey", eager to go to personal and geographic extremes to give their all to the people they love.

I would like to thank Hilary Pym for her invaluable help in writing this article. When Ellen Miller introduced me to her at the 1999 Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society in Oxford and told her that I was working on a comparative study of the novels of Arnim and Pym, she very kindly invited me to her home. When I arrived there the next day, she greeted me sitting next to the Arnim novels that she and Barbara owned. These included the titles *Elizabeth and her German garden, Elizabeth in Rügen, Fräulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther*, and most importantly, *The Pastor's wife* and *The Enchanted April*. All were first editions in beautiful green-golden bindings by Macmillan.

Hymn trivia in Miss Pym

I composed the following trivia items to accompany my presentation at the North American Barbara Pymn Society conference, "Miss Pym & the Victorian Hymn", but now I wonder whether they were too esoteric, for no one at the Boston Meeting made any comment! Perhaps I should have made them in Quiz Question form: "Which BP character is thought to be a descendant of Bishop Heber?"* (See Hodnet item below.) "Which hymn brings giggles to chubby schoolgirls?"* However, Pym Society members seem not to be very competitive. I was one of three members to win the Trivia Contest prize—we were the only ones to hand in our papers!

*Answers: Ianthe Broome, or so wonders Sophia.

A line about frail children from "O Worship the King"—Mildred and Dora are the gigglers.

BODE: Harriet Bede's dowdy alter-ego, recipient of Gorringe's catalogue; the kind, toothy assistant priest at Wilmet's church.

John Ernest Bode, parish clergyman In Cambridgeshire, wrote '0 Jesus, I Have Promised' for the confirmation of his daughter and two sons in 1869.

HODURT: The Vicar of Crampton Hodnet was Mr Latimer's excuse for missing Evensong on the Sunday he spent with Miss Morrow.

Reginald Neber, author of "Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning" (quoted by Mildred, EW 55) & "Holy, Holy, Holy" was rector of Hodnet, Shropshire, before becoming Missionary Bishop of Calcutta. It is to be hoped that he was not like Theo Grote.

MISS LATHBURY: Mildred to her friends.

A Miss M. Lathbury, daughter of an English immigrant to New York state, was named Poet Laureate of Chautauqua in 1875, for, among other works, the hymns "Day is Dying in the West" and "Break Thou the Bread of Life."

ROCKINGHAM: breaker of WREN hearts and beloved of Mildred Lathbury. Name of the achingly beautiful 18th c. tune for "When I Survey the wondrous Cross."

SEEMLY SO TO DO: Digby uses this phrase in his eulogy to express the suitability of paying final respects to Esther Clovis.

Final phrase In third stanza of Old Hundredth ("All People That On Earth Do Dwell")—a 16th c. text.

TIME LIKE All EVER-ROLLING STREAM: Quoted by Dolly and Evan Cranton at her dinner party; misquoted by Mervyn about Miss Grimes.

From Isaac Watts's 18th-c. hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past."

MOST EXECRABLE HYMN QUOTED BY A PYM CHARACTER: Quoted by Rupert to Ianthe at the garden party: "Life isn't meant to be easy. 'Not for *ever* In green pastures,' as the hymn reminds us'."

Hymnologist Erik Routley says of "Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer," written by an American lady with the evocative name Love Maria Willis—"A travesty of the 23rd Psalm in its efforts to improve upon it. The worst hymn written on either Continent in the English language during the 19th century." In strength of opinion, Mr Routley reminds one a bit of the Archdeacon.

FATHER, hear the prayer we offer:
Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

Not for ever by still waters
Would we idly rest and stay;
But would smite the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.

Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.

"IT'S THE HYMNS THAT ARE THE GREAT STUMBLING BLOCK" to Christian faith and churchgoing, says Everard at Rupert's dinner party. "One must imagine the crowded churches in the East End [during the 19th-c. revival]—not just a few sophisticated Anglo-Catholic intellectuals pondering every word with critical detachment" (UA 128).

Fr Gabriel Myers, OSB

Obituary notice

Peggy Hawthorne

Peggy Hawthorne, who died on April 22nd, 2000, the day after her 80th birthday, was a founding member of the Barbara Pym Society, and a committee member until ill health prevented her from travelling to Oxford.

Peggy, from her early years, was fascinated by books. She read avidly both prose and poetry, and already in those teenage years of the 1930s was assembling a large collection of favourite authors, helping by seventeen in Wolverhampton Library. During the war she became a teacher at King Edward's Grammar School in Birmingham. However, the pull of the written word was strong, and she went to Manchester to work for the *Manchester Guardian*. In the late 1950s she joined Blacks, the publishers, in London. She was their excellent publicity manager and had to arrange the advertising of all new books. On leaving Blacks, Peggy, a qualified teacher, returned to the classroom and taught for 25 years at Bruce Grove Junior School in Tottenham, already becoming a centre of immigration from the West Indies. Peggy's patience with many difficult children brought out the best in them, and her deep, lifelong love of the theatre inspired her school productions of many plays and musicals. She also acted in productions of the Westminster Players where her talents both sides of the curtain were truly appreciated.

Peggy worked tirelessly for over forty years for the Conservative party in Hampstead in a variety of constituency and ward offices, but she hoped to live to see Britain free of the European Union, which she opposed passionately, and she had before the end transferred her allegiances to the UK Independence Party.

During the 1950s Peggy was received into the Roman Catholic Church, and remained a loyal supporter of the Dominican order, attending mass at the Dominican Priory at Haverstock Hill. As with most converts, the liturgical changes of the 1960s did not please her, but she remained faithful.

Peggy recovered from major surgery in the mid 1990s, and ironically it was crippling arthritis coupled with blindness that defeated her at the last. Once she could not read, she said, there seemed no point in continuing.

Her epitaph was written by our beloved Barbara Pym, for Peggy was indeed one of Barbara's Excellent Women.

Anthony Earl-Williams

Putting Pym on the Net

Claudia Di Giorgio

I began putting the Pym pages online during the summer of 1997, when I discovered that there were no Internet sites dedicated to my favourite modern British writer. Amazed by this deficiency, as the Net was brimming with information on writers, especially women writers, I wrote a page with Pym's biography, a list of her novels, and all the bibliographical references I could find. At the top I put the only photo of Barbara Pym that I had, scanned from the cover of the Abacus edition of Hazel Holt's *A Lot to Ask*. A second photo, from the same book, was put on a second page I added, entitled, "Different Pigeons", from one of her most extraordinary sentences. In that page I put more bits about Pym and her books, to give to any unknown passerby a flavour of how she was and how she wrote.

Both pages were in Italian: I'm Italian, born and living in Rome, and in no way engaged in literature or literary criticism (I'm a science journalist). The aim of the Pym pages was, and still is, non-academic. I just wanted to fill a gap, and it was also a good way to organise what I had collected. Still, the chief purpose of the Internet is communication, so I translated the pages into English to make them more generally available, asking a British friend to check my translation. It was, and still is, an amateurish job. Although I have more than ten years' experience of the Internet, as I went online some time before the Web explosion, in 1989, I'm not a professional programmer. My site was born as an experiment in online communication and is essentially driven by the fun I get doing it.

So I was flabbergasted when I began receiving emails from complete strangers who wrote to me about how much they loved Pym and were delighted to find her on the Internet. This is how the magic of Internet works: connecting people who share an interest or a passion, and helping to give this passion a concrete shape. I put more stuff online, a page with favourite quotations, and another that came to my mind after exchanging emails with an American screenwriter who was working on a screenplay of *No Fond Return of Love*. Which actors could best impersonate Pym's characters? The answers to this question are online, and I keep receiving new suggestions, along with new favourite quotations. Meanwhile, my correspondence with other Pym fans was growing, and I thought it was better to share feelings and comments. So I built a very rudimental online forum, where people began connecting and organising collective readings of her novels.

Everything happened fast: I went online with the site in June '97 and the forum opened in September, the "living" evidence that my pages had become a collective effort and a real meeting point for Pym's fans all over the world. The forum went on in a very lively way until, nearly a year later, the Digital Gods struck and, for technical reasons still unknown to me, the forum and most of its contents simply disappeared from the server. Luckily, in the meanwhile somebody had already opened a proper mailing list on

www.onelist.com

—a free mailing list server, so the discussions and the collective readings went on there, and still are there. Although I miss the forum, I believe the mailing list is a much better way to communicate, which also leaves me the time to follow better the Web pages. Where, thanks to the precious help of Ellen Miller, secretary of the North American Barbara Pym Society, there are now photos and speeches of the last meetings of the Society, that in January 1998 made the pages Barbara Pym Official Site, making me a very proud webmaster.

So, the site now is also an instrument for both the North American and the English Societies, and I hope to be able soon to put online also some extracts from *Green Leaves*, the BP Society newsletter.

At present the site has an average of 15-16,000 hits (meaning opened pages) each month—a figure that should be considered with caution, as should all Internet statistics. Also, it covers my entire site, which has other sections on my professional life and interests. But these are all in Italian, and as the Barbara Pym pages are the most frequently visited, I dare say their visitors represent the majority of the hits.

Most of the connections are from the USA, followed by Italy, UK, Canada and France. But there are also people connecting from the most unusual places: such as somebody who visits fairly regularly from Singapore and Malaysia, or other exotic places such as Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. Anyway, everybody is, of course, very welcome, as is any suggestion to make the Barbara Pym site a better one. I'm not always able to update the site regularly, but I try to do my best.

Sometimes, I wonder what Barbara Pym would have thought of all this: would her excellent women have used the Internet at all? How would their indexing work have changed with personal computers and the Web? Who are they; what do they do and feel, the high-tech excellent women of today? Because I'm pretty sure they do exist. Searching the Internet late at night to find stuff for the studies of their not-so-excellent men, maybe?

The Barbara Pym website number is

http://www.spore.it/pym

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Love, marriage and alienation

Bridget Guymer

I wrote my dissertation for a degree in English at Royal Holloway (London University) in 1998, on those three important and interwoven topics within Barbara Pym's work: love, marriage and alienation.

Pym was very unusual. She was not a writer of great passion or romantic fulfilment. Ironically, unrequited love became her creative *raison d'être*, the spinster her true heroine.

Mundane reality always undercuts romantic daydream. Thus, falling in love is 'giving in to flu' (*An Unsuitable Attachment*) or "a twinge of rheumatism in the winter" (*Crampton Hodnet*). Pym rejects the notion perpetuated by other writers that romantic love will always be transformed into marriage.

Often, the Cinderella scenario is subverted by having her princesses mature splendid and her princes prissy and egotistical.

Characters rely on 'other kinds of love' as replacements for love, be they for curates, love of animals, pigeons or beautiful ornaments, perhaps as a talisman against rejection and their fear of communicating with people. Communication is vitally important. Pym's characters must decide whether they are going to observe or participate in some form of emotional life. To use a phrase currently over-used, Pym advocates a 'get real' attitude to both romance and life. Prudence Bates in *Jane and Prudence* fails the 'get real' challenge, preferring to live in a narcissistic fantasy world of doomed relationships.

Marriage, to Pym, does not provide the answer to the stigma of female singleness. For women, love becomes an all-encompassing process of emotional bartering set against surmounting male indifference. Food in Pym's work is a major symbol of this emotional bartering, for men need cooked breakfast, they need eggs and meat but never tinned salmon! So often men are portrayed as weak animals who only need food and exercise to be happy.

As for alienation, feelings of isolation may envelop Pym's heroines but there is seldom self-pity. They show stoicism and extract what cosiness they can from their lives. They almost seem to enjoy the sense of self-denial and limitation of scope in their lives; it is part and parcel of being an 'excellent' woman. What is significant is the element of choice. Characters are faced with the choice of becoming an observer or a participant in life; between integration or alienation. A good example of this might be Alaric Lydgate's wearing of both a literal and metaphysical mask to conceal his insecurity (*Less Than Angels*).

This concept of avoidance of human contact is developed in the later novels. By the end of *The Sweet Dove Died*, Leonora Eyre has renounced any communal integration for singleness and isolation. But Marcia Ivory in *Quartet in Autumn* is the most serious victim of a lack of human communication. She is starved physically, mentally and emotionally. Yet Marcia's death is the catalyst to an improved sense of community amongst the three remaining protagonists. At the last, Letty, a perfect example of Pym's excellent women, believes that "life still held infinite possibilities for change". Love, in the wider sense of the word, all depends upon whether we recognise and act upon such possibilities for change.

NFRL on the air

Beginning appropriately on Valentine's Day, 14 February, Radio 4 broadcast a dramatization (by Elizabeth Proud—who else?) of *No Fond Return of Love*, in four half-hour instalments. The advance notice in *The Times* curiously featured only the Neville Forbes subplot, claiming, 'it centres on gossip in a small community concerning an affair between the vicar and a woman parishioner. The vicar has to leave amid speculation that he will have to marry the woman. The core of the story ... is the speculation about it'.

However, the dramatization itself was wholly true to the full novel, though Sara Coward (Caroline Bone from 'The Archers') as Viola seemed far too nice and sensible for the role, and Mrs Forbes (Tina Gray) was perhaps too much of a caricature, wickedly cackling. Elizabeth Proud played Mrs Williton. Wilmet Forsyth from *A Glass of Blessings*, making her guest appearance on the visit to Taviscombe castle, was anonymously replaced by a gossiping woman with strong local accent. Perhaps it would have been too complicated to introduce her properly.

Incidental music was of the period, featuring Perry Como, Peggy Lee, Acker Bilk and Nat King Cole. 'The story of my life', 'When I fall in love', 'Memories are Made of This', 'Pretend you're happy when you're blue' and 'Why do fools fall in love?' all seemed appropriate; Peggy Lee's 'Fever', less so.

Certainly, though, the broadcasts added to life's small pleasures.

Hazel Bell

ANNUAL MEETING AND CONFERENCE:

LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN PYM

Saturday—Sunday, 2–3 September

St Hilda's College, Oxford

Barbara Pym and ordinary Oxford

Alison Shell

All Oxford graduates are annoyed by the Oxford myth, and most have their own versions of it. For the purposes of the media its components are simple: ball-gowns on punts, leather-bound books in bicycle baskets and attractive young people wearing spectacles as a signifier of scholarship. The medium of the Oxford novel lends itself more to rumination. The spectacles gather dust and assume a rose-coloured tint, and elegiac themes appear: evanescent friendships and unrequited love, the passing of youth and the enemies of promise, all set against the Arcadian backdrop of grey immemorial walls, evensong and plovers' eggs. Looking back so langorously is in itself a tacit confession of failure, betokening a need to reassure oneself that for three years one was special; but through the narcotic power of collegiate luxuries this is often forgotten. Transfer the elegiac elements to a college too poor and too young for the usual trappings, add a consolatory dash of irony to the realization that in inter-war Oxford the greatest enemy of promise was being a woman, and the stage is set for Barbara Pym's Oxford: the Oxford of ordinariness.

Barbara Pym's first novel, the posthumously published *Crampton Hodnet,* was set entirely in Oxford; another, *Jane and Prudence,* is partially based in a college recognisably St Hilda's; and her further fiction echoes preoccupations learnt at university. Further, her Oxford diaries, now published as part of the volume *A Very Private Eye,* frequently became source-material for her novels. 'Oxford really is intoxicating', she wrote at the beginning of her second Hilary Term at St Hilda's: and, as the diaries witness, her time was intoxicatingly and variously spent, falling in love and being fallen in love with, collecting a wide circle of friends, and, *inter alia,* doing enough work in English Literature to guarantee her a Second at a time when these were by no means automatic.

But her research in the Bodleian often tended to become prentice-work for the life of the novelist rather than that of the scholar: or, to put it another way, she carried to novelistic extremes the inquisitiveness about one's neighbours that a library engenders. It helped if these were young men: and, to travesty the Miltonic Adam and Eve who would have figured on every English undergraduate's reading list, Barbara Pym often plays with the idea of he for research only, she for research into him. A number of her heroines are handmaids to scholarship, typing up manuscripts, indexing, preparing bibliographies and administering learned organizations, and the brilliance with which they deploy these ancillary skins for research into men contrasts with the objects of their study, often holding distinguished posts, but intellectually lacklustre to a man.

The most important of Barbara Pym's male muses was the enigmatic, elusive and handsome Henry Harvey, nicknamed Lorenzo. Her campaign of surveillance directed at him in the Bodleian shows up research as the ultimate irrelevance to life:

> I went to the Dictionary and looked up a word (an entirely fatuous word) becoz he was there—i.e. Pentatremite—an echinoderin of the genus "Pentatremites belonging to the extinct class Blastoidea, allied to the Crinoids"—Is that a definition of me—Lorenzo—or both of us?

Hazel Holt suggests in her biography that Barbara Pym consciously preferred her loves to be unrequited because it was a better stimulus to novelistic creativity. The undergraduate Barbara Bird in *Crampton Hodnet* is dismayed to find her love for her tutor returned, since the reality proves to be so much more prosaic than her dreams; while the tutor in question — no rampant Malcolm Bradbury academic — ends up preferring comfortable scholastic torpor to the promises held by Barbara's dark, passionate eyes.

This tutor, an imaginary descendant of the Metaphysical poet Francis Cleveland, is doing unenthusiastic research into his ancestor. But it is Barbara Pym's own livelier interest in Cleveland and his poetic contemporaries that make her — with Eliot and P. G. Wodehouse — one of the most creative, and wickedest, quoters in twentieth-century English literature. The Metaphysical poets John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and the rest were a fashionable and compelling area of study in inter-war Oxford English. To a generation reacting from Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and tinctured by modernism, they offered a combination of mental intensity, metrical experiment and daring subject-matter —even models for a sort of intellectual equality between the sexes—which seemed startlingly contemporary. But for every undergraduate fired to intellectual adventure by the poets' combination of body, mind and spirit, there must have been twenty who, like Barbara Pym's young men in fact and fiction, memorised 'To His Coy Mistress' as a useful opening gambit for seduction. Another couplet of Marvell's:

> My love is of a birth as fair
> As 'tis for object strange and high

grows stale before the reader's eyes in *Jane and Prudence,* through being recycled endlessly by the Lothario Fabian Driver: ordinary people make cliché out of newly minted poesy.

If Helen Gardner, a near-contemporary of Barbara Pym's, distilled the essence of the Metaphysicals in the alembic of her scholarship, Pym diluted it with weak tea. The poets' preoccupations—sex, religion and intellectual quest—are thinned down by her into three years of higher education, unrequited love and churchiness.

Though from her diaries churchgoing seems to have played no major role in Barbara Pym's undergraduate life, the Anglo-Catholic revival of the 1920s and 1930s—as prominent in the home of the original Oxford Movement as anywhere, —must have had its influence on the ambience of her novels. *Crampton Hodnet* introduces a recurrent comic theme, the single curate surrounded by women all well aware that while Anglo-Catholicism encourages celibacy in priests, it does not enjoin it. Very ordinary priests are transmuted through being objects of rapt speculation, fascinating because nearly unattainable.

Crampton Hodnet opens with an unforgettable description of the archetypal North Oxford house, debased Ruskinian yellow brick with narrow Gothic windows and stained-glass panels; like an amalgam of the Pym spinster and the Pym curate, it

> might have been a theological college ... except for a glimpse of unlikely lace curtains.

The novel then enters the drawing-room for a narrative of a grim tea-party; tea is the Oxford liquid throughout Pym, rather than port or champagne, and within the confines of *Crampton Hodnet* it can be by turns a damper to passion, a blameless stimulant at Anglican gatherings or even—more unexpectedly—an aphrodisiac. Barbara Bird and Francis Cleveland

meet furtively at Fuller's tea shop—like the Moorish tea shop, a beloved feature of Oxford eating out—and the following description of crepuscular Sunday Oxford explains how, in the days when college curfews were stricter, young women and walnut cake were both enjoyed at tea-time:

> From different parts of Oxford came the sound of various bells calling people to Evensong. After a time ... rough young voices were heard down below and on the stairs, and a bell began to ring, a loud bell that disturbed the young men and the young women who had come to tea with them. Lights were turned on to reveal the happy lovers blinked like ruffled owls, the honey toast lying cold and greasy on a place in the fireplace, the tomato sandwiches curled up at the edges, and the Fuller's walnut cake a crumbly mess because it had been roughly cut by inexpert hands.

This illustrates something of the unprecedented social freedom that undergraduates, particularly female undergraduates, enjoyed in inter-war Oxford: a freedom made possibly by single rooms, which manifested itself also in areas such as taste. Barbara Pym recorded in her third year:

> I'm terribly enamoured of my new room, and think it most artistic and aesthetic. Chaste green cover for my bed—check cushions—beautiful pictures —books and bookends—bronze golden chrysanthemums on the table in the window alcove.

But Virginia Woolf's room of one's own can metamorphose into the one-room living that bespeaks failure, the distaff equivalent to Mr Blaney's room in the poem by Philip Larkin. Pym later analyses the fierce territorialism of bedsits with an insight surely first learnt from college life, and sharpened—for her heroines at least—by there being no prospect of anything better.

For women, empowered only up to a point by university education, failure is shown as inevitable: either the failure to find a husband, or, having found one, the failure to achieve in other directions. It is instructive to compare Barbara Pym's approach to the problem of the alumna with that of Dorothy L. Sayers in her Oxford novel *Gaudy Night.* Sayers' heroine, Harriet Vane, is afraid to return to a Gaudy at her old college because her career since has been too notorious and, in a sense, too successful: 'It was all so long ago: so closely encompassed and complete; so cut off as if by swords from the bitter years that lay between.' These are traditional elegiac reasons, utterly different in tone from the first page of *Jane and Prudence,* where Barbara Pym comments:

> They walked on [in the college garden] without speaking, their silence paying a brief tribute to their lost youth. Prudence Bates was twenty-nine, an age that is often rather desperate for a woman that is not yet married.

The brutality of a college reunion, necessitating summary of success or failure to slight acquaintances in two sentences, is brought out in both *Jane and Prudence* and *Gaudy Night.* But whereas Dorothy L. Sayers is sad at the premature seed-time of early promise, Pym is more realistic in her acknowledgement that most female undergraduates were doomed to marriage and obscurity:

> 'So you have all married clergymen,' said Miss Birkenshaw in a clear voice from her end of the table. 'You, Maisie, and Jane and Elspeth and Prudence...'
>
> 'No, Miss Birkenshaw', said Prudence hastily. 'I haven't married at all.' 'Of course, I remember now—you and Eleanor Hitchens and Mollie Holmes are the only three in your year that didn't marry ... I like to think that some of my pupils are engaged in academic work', said Miss Birkinshaw a little regretfully, for so few of them did ...
>
> 'Here we are all gathered round you,' said Jane, 'and none of us has really fulfilled her early promise'.

Jane's vision of a female academy of failure cruelly poses the dilemma — whether to fail in achieving distinction or as a woman — imposed upon female undergraduates.

Earlier,when Jane and Prudence are talking in St Hilda's garden, the former says 'Oh, those days of wines and roses! They are *not* long', and the latter responds 'And to think that we didn't really appreciate wine.' These two insights, the elegiac combined with the recognition that most human beings are incapable of sustained strong feeling, render the Oxford myth in Barbara Pym's hands completely collapsible. In *Crampton Hodnet,* a secret punting-trip taken by Francis Cleveland and Barbara Bird ends in failure. Francis precipitates Barbara into the Cherwell, both end up soaked to the skin and the bottle of Niersteiner brought by Francis is forgotten: in a mischievous *double-entendre* Francis remembers later that he had anyhow forgotten to bring a corkscrew. But it is another episode in their stillborn romance that is emblematic of the way in which Barbara Pym rewrote her memories of Oxford, transmuting them from modest success into comic impotence. One day in the Botanical Gardens, an admirer of hers plucked for her—gallantly if illegally—a spray of orchids from one of the greenhouses; but in *Crampton Hodnet,* Francis Cleveland is too prudent to act on a similar impulse and pluck Barbara Bird a bunch of red lilies, having to buy them later from a florist. The instinct to understand, befriend and even act out infirmity of purpose can be seen in Barbara Pym's life, and inspired her work. Miss Birkinshaw in *Jane and Prudence* has a tripartite diversion of St Hilda's womanhood into those who married clergymen, those who married into other professions and 'those who had "fulfilled" themselves in less obvious ways, with novels or social work or a brilliant career in the Civil Service'. Barbara Pym spurned the first two destinies to fulfil herself in a way that now seems to us the more obvious: by becoming one of the great English comic writers of the century.

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Green Leaves: the Journal of the Barbara Pym Society
Volumes 1-5, 1994-1999
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Vol. 1 No. 1 July 1994; Vol. 2 No. 1 March 1995; Vol. 2 No. 2 February 1996
Vol. 3 No. 1 March 1997; Vol. 4 No. 1 March 1998; Vol. 4 No. 2 November 1998
Vol. 5 No.s 1 July 1999; Vol. 5 No. 2 November 1999

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