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GREEN LEAVES

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THE NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE 2003

The fifth annual meeting of the Barbara Pym Society of North America took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the weekend of 29-30 March, 2003, on the campus of Harvard College. Some twenty-five of those attending gathered for the traditional Friday evening meal at Chang Sho restaurant, allowing us to get a jump-start on Pym topics before the conference's official opening. We were particularly delighted to find several members from England among us, including Yvonne Cocking. This was Yvonne's first trip to the US, and what a treat it was to have someone on hand who had worked at the African Institute when Barbara was there!

On Saturday morning, we arrived at Harvard Law School to find Ellen Miller and her helpers presiding over the registration table and tea table with good humour and efficiency. After greeting old friends and welcoming newcomers, we enjoyed one more cup and the conference started. Ellen began by noting the irony that in the midst of war, we had gathered together to talk about this quiet English writer and the world she created — a world in which the appearance of a caterpillar in one's cauliflower cheese was viewed with horror. She remarked that she hoped the balm of Barbara Pym would offer us respite amid so much fear and sadness.

At ease with ladies

The first speaker was **Kate Charles**, author of the well-known 'Book of Psalms' mystery series as well as three suspense novels. Charles is American, but lives in England, and is chair of the

Kate Charles

Barbara Pym Society. The title of her talk was inspired by lines in *NFRL* and *AFGL*, where Pym points out that Neville Forbes and Adam Prince, with their clerical backgrounds, are 'at ease with ladies' in situations such as parish functions. Charles considered Pym's clergy in relation to the women in their lives— including wives, sisters, and what Helen Napier refers to as 'holy fowl' — those parish women who take care of the clergy and even fall in love with them.

Charles began with curates, noting that they are almost always 'good looking', though inclined to be somewhat pompous and to take themselves too seriously. We have Mr Donne, whom Harriet cherishes and feeds, though he disappoints her by marrying. Then there is Mr Latimer, who proposes to and is very sensibly turned down by Miss Morrow, and the startlingly handsome Marius Ransome, who proposes to, and is accepted by, dim mousy Mary Beamish. Charles also mentioned Bishop Grote, who before he grew to resemble a sheep, was one of the most 'sought-after curates in the history of the Church of England'. Luckily for the bishop, he runs into Connie Aspinall while stocking up on supplies before his return to Africa. Charles noted, 'I can just imagine him ticking the items off his list: mosquito netting, water sterilizing tablets, wife...' And suddenly there is Miss Aspinall. And let's not forget one other curate, Basil Branche, who appears in *AUA*, at ease with the now elderly Bede sisters, as he escorts them around Italy and recovers from ill health.

While 'the typical Pym curate is good-looking and self-centred,' Charles noted that the typical Pym vicar is a celibate Anglo-Catholic. And whereas marriage seems to be on the minds of the curates, the celibacy of the clergy is a major theme for the vicars — even the married ones. For instance, Mark Ainger's reflections that it might possibly be 'better not to marry' are prompted by Sophia's devotion to their cat, Faustina, whose hairs he had found on the linen altar cloth at early Mass. Likewise, Nicholas Cleveland, noting that Jane has spoken out of turn at a parish meeting, reflects that she will 'never learn when not to speak', musing that there is 'something to be said for the celibacy of the clergy'. This topic is a major theme in *EW*, where Mrs Morris comments on Julian Malory's unmarried state as being not natural, while Helena Napier predicts that 'he will break out'. Mildred, tiring of the subject, eventually draws to the conclusion that 'it might be more suitable that there should be a biretta in the hall rather than a perambulator'.

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Despite the efforts of Allegra Grey, we know that this will continue to be the case for Julian: In *AGOB*, Wilmet, hearing him preach and naturally speculating on his marital status, recalls that Miss Prideau had said that he lives with his sister. Neville Forbes, the vicar in *NFRL*, also has problems with women. And it's little wonder, because 'Father Forbes is handsome enough to be a curate'. His trouble with a particular woman — Miss Spicer, who 'waylaid him after the benediction and declared her love' — sends him fleeing to North Devon and his mother's guesthouse.

At least four other vicars might be categorized as the type who are looking for help from the women in their congregation. In fact, in the case of David Lydell, his need for a good meal leads two women to compete for him with the lure of food and wine. Indeed, as Letty wonders, it seems that he did go 'all round the village sampling the cooking of the unattached women before deciding which one to settle with'. Charles noted that even Father Oswald Thames in *AGOB*, who is not exactly the sort to 'set feminine hearts a flutter', uses what leverage he has on the women of his congregation, searching for 'some good woman' to look after Father Bode and himself. When he mentions this to Wilmet Forsyth with an appealing look, she wonders 'how many men, perhaps the clergy especially, went about cajoling or bullying women into being the answer to prayer'.

Tom Dagnall, another vicar, uses the women in his parish to copy inscriptions from tombstones and pore over records. When his sister moves out, he throws himself on the mercy of the ladies in the parish, in the hope that they will invite him to an 'occasional meal'. Emma's mother views Tom as somewhat ineffectual. Though Pym implies that Emma and Tom wind up together, Charles isn't so sure that this is good ... at least for Emma.

Offstage another helpless vicar finds himself engaged. In *NFRL*, Aunt Hermione notes that after the vicar's sister died, she popped round one morning and found him 'trying to wash his surplices'. The rest is history.

The last category is that of Pym's married clergymen, who are usually on the sidelines, taking 'second place to their more interesting wives'. While Jane is 'scatty, disorganized, and imaginative', Nicholas is vague, kindly, mild-mannered, and 'given to childish delight in animal-shaped soaps'. Mark Ainger is remote, though also kind and courteous, 'seeming not to be particularly interested in human beings'. And of course there is Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve, who Charles believes is 'even odder and more remote'. He is difficult, and 'not at all accommodating or kindly'. His wife, Agatha, is formidable. However, the main woman in his life is Belinda Bede, who 'finds courage to pamper Henry a bit' when his wife goes off to a German spa. But 'we know as well as she does that nothing will ever come of it'.

Charles concluded by noting that BP 'treated the clergy as a sort of third gender — not women, but not exactly real men, either'. For instance, when Julian Malory is having trouble distempering, he says 'I suppose I am not to be considered as a normal man'. And in *AFGL*, we learn that 'Tom, being the rector of the parish, hardly seemed in [Emma's] eyes to count as an eligible man'. In *Jane and Prudence*, we find Nicholas wearing a flowered apron in the kitchen while drying his tobacco leaves. 'I feel I can almost count as another woman', he says when Miss Doggett arrives to confide her troubles to Jane.

Coming full circle, Charles ended her talk by reading from the final scene in *STG* where Harriet, that great connoisseur of young curates, introduces Belinda to Mr Donne's replacement. Noting that he will be coming to supper on his first Sunday evening in the village, Harriet announces that he is indeed fond of boiled chicken. And surely he will be, or learn to be, at ease with ladies .

Vibrations in the memory: Echoes of Philip Larkin in his favourite books and classical music

Father **Gabriel Myers**, a Benedictine monk of St Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, teaches Old Testament and Sacred Music/Devotional poetry to students of the Abbey School, and serves as the monastery organist. He has made several presentations in England at meetings of both the Barbara Pym Society and the Philip Larkin Society. His talk centred on the friendship between Larkin and Pym, and how Larkin's personality and poetry are reflected in some of his favourite music.

Father Gabriel Myers

Myers began by reminding us that Pym and Larkin wrote to each other and supported each other for fourteen years before they finally met, noting that 'the faint odour of courtly romance permeated the informality of their friendship'. Pym's admiration for Larkin is evident in the two cameo appearances he makes in her novels: in *QIA*, an unattributed Larkin line – 'unreachable inside a room' from his poem 'Ambulances' – is found in the scene describing Marcia's ride to hospital. Another tribute to the poet is in *AFGL*. Beatrix, musing on the fact that her daughter is not very well read in English literature, reflects that 'A few sad Hardy poems, a little Eliot, a line of Larkin seemed inadequate solace'.

Larkin, as a librarian, particularly admired Pym's gallery of 'rogue librarians'. To Myers, the material Pym gathered from Larkin about his work at the University Library of Hull may have helped her develop the 'tall, thin irritable-looking' Mervyn Cantrell. However, he believes that it is in Norman of *QIA* that 'traces of Larkin's character most brilliantly appear'. No wonder Larkin was to exclaim 'I liked Norman!'

In talking about the four classical pieces that Larkin chose for the BBC radio programme 'Desert Island Discs', Myers said 'there is some irony in the non-believer (not the churchgoer) naming three works which fit so easily into my high-school course in Sacred Music'. Larkin's first choice, the fifteenth-century Coventry Carol, is surprising, given his dislike of holidays. Yet Myers noted that the carol 'is closely related to [Larkin's] own favourite themes of grief and loss'. Also, the carol's focus on the suffering of women is similar to his sensitivity toward the female protagonists in his poems 'Faith Healing' and 'Love Songs in Age', both of which were favourites of Pym's.

Larkin's second choice was a prayer for mercy by the great Renaissance composer, Thomas Tallis. This 40-part motet was first performed in the home of Henry Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, whose ancestor's effigy clasps the hand of his wife in Larkin's poem 'An Arundel Tomb'. A recording was made of Larkin reading this poem, and Barbara Pym chose it as one of her Desert Island Discs (she wanted to have the voice of someone she knew). Myers finds the perfect response to 'An Arundel Tomb' in 'the heavenly sound of the Tallis motet'.

Larkin's third choice was Symphony No. 1 in A-flat Major by Edward Elgar. Myers believes that Elgar and Larkin shared some personal similarities. Elgar was very sensitive to criticism, provoking quarrels and rejection. He was curt, rude,

and bad tempered on formal occasions, but amusing and high-spirited with friends. Regarding his first symphony, Elgar said that there was no program, no explicit content for it, other than 'a wide experience of human life with great charity and massive hope in the future'. To Myers, the poignancy of that music is recalled in Larkin's poem 'Going, Going'. Though the poem refers satirically to crooks and tarts, Myers finds in it the wistful voice of authentic grief. Another poem, 'High Windows', shocks 'but gives way to a meditation on emptiness, which is a sort of heaven in Larkin's universe'.

Myers noted that Larkin's final choice, the oratorio *Solomon*, by Handel, was intended by the composer 'as a compliment to his adopted country in the Augustan Age, the century of both Samuel Johnson and Jane Austen'. The optimism of the music reminds Myers of Larkin's poetic tribute to the jazz trumpeter Sidney Bechet:

> On me your voice falls like they say love should,
> Like an enormous yes.

Myers believes that the word 'yes' deserves more attention in Larkin studies, which have tended to 'emphasize his personal failings at the expense of the humane greatness of his poetry'. In fact, Larkin himself said that he wrote poetry owing to 'a complex pressure of needs, [including the desire] to praise'.

Myers believes that this closing piece by Handel might be a suitable expression of the joy we experience when we read Pym. In closing, he reminded us that 2003 'marks the ninetieth anniversary of Barbara's birth, the fortieth of the beginning of her wilderness period, and the twenty-sixth of her rediscovery — for which all who love her must thank Philip Larkin'.

Unsuitable for attachment: Men in Barbara Pym's life

After lunch, Dr Nancy Talburt, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Professor of English at the University of Arkansas, spoke about the men in Barbara's life and how they may have influenced her writing. Talburt, who met Pym in 1979 for lunch in Oxford, reminded us that the theme at the 2002 Oxford meeting was 'Unexcellent Men', noting that the subtitle could possible be 'The Living Happily Ever After Myth'. Talburt has spent time in the Bodleian reading the letters of the different men who corresponded with Pym. She is interested in the men in Pym's life because Pym is such a great comic writer: one who wrote from experience, re-using what had happened to her in her novels. Clearly, romance was very important to Pym, and Rupert, the first man in her life, was suitably handsome, and courted her in style. When she fell in love with Henry Harvey, she became part of his world, even though he did not fall in love with her. Henry eventually married three times, and Pym became friends with his wives, thereby maintaining her friendship with him. Talburt noted that there is no evidence that Pym wanted children. Instead, she was 'interested in the grand passion' and not in ordinary relationships. Pym had a very wide life, including her time in Germany and her service as a Wren in Italy, but for the most part she didn't include those experiences in her novels. She dived in and savoured life; she didn't want the experience to end or to forget the men she had cared for. Yet she suffered also. Experiences were vital to her and, in turn, to her work as a novelist.

Group Discussion

Dr Anthony Kaufman, associate head of the English Department and director of undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, led an informal panel discussion on various topics. The question arose and was debated of whether Pym's diaries can be trusted, or whether she was sometimes fictionalising her own life in them. We were lucky enough to have Yvonne Cocking on hand to provide first-hand answers to questions about Pym during the period that they both worked at the African Institute. Also, Paul De Angelis, who worked for E. P. Dutton in the 1970s, provided insights into how that house came to publish both the first American editions of Pym's work, and the very first edition of *A very private eye.*

All This Reading: The Literary World of Barbara Pym

Following the panel discussion, Frauke Lenckos spoke briefly about the book of essays on Pym that she and Ellen Miller began working on four years ago and is now a reality. In 1999, they started by agreeing on the book's theme, recognizing that 'reading is the activity and the adventure that brings [us] close to the miracle that is Barbara Pym's genius'.

In her foreword to the book, Hilary Pym Walton notes that it might not be too fantastic to feel that each of the essays in it makes up for at least one of the years that Barbara was 'in the wilderness'. Speaking for Ellen and herself, Frauke read these lines from the introduction: 'We pay tribute to Barbara Pym herself. Her steady spirit has inspired and guided the making of our book, and she continues to enrich our lives immeasurably'.

After Frauke's speech, we enjoyed our champagne with much more joy and abandon than the guests at Mr Donne's wedding reception did! The hors d'oeuvre were delicious and we were in high spirits, as we congratulated Ellen and Frauke on their hard work, and asked them to sign copies of the books. We were also happy to have four of the essayists with us: Kathy Ackley, Paul De Angelis, Anthony Kaufman, and Janice Rossen. All This Reading not only is a fine tribute to Barbara Pym, but also represents a new avenue for widening Pym's audience in the 21st century among readers, both academic and common.

Following the champagne party, we had dinner together and then had a chance to enjoy watching the videos, 'Tea with Miss Pym' and 'Miss Pym's Day Out'.

Class differences in Barbara Pym's England

On Sunday morning, Tim Burnett covered a topic that was particularly interesting to Americans, as well as to his compatriots in the audience. Burnett is a consultant to Robert Holden, Ltd., Fine Art Agents in London, prior to which he was with the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum and British Library for more than 35 years.

Burnett began by reading the opening scene of *QIA*, where the hair of the four protagonists and the youthful librarian is described. The passage tells us 'almost all we need to know about the characters', but also reveals Pym's 'acute sensitivity to the nuances of social class'. Along with their hairstyles, the names she chooses for the four are telling. However, Pym avoids hammering home the contrast between the upper-middle class Edwin and Letty and the more 'down market' Norman and Marcia by giving the latter a rather grand name.

Numerous passages were cited that point to Pym's consciousness of class difference. For instance, in *NFRL*, Dulcie browses through an old copy of *The Field* while visiting Aunt Hermione and Uncle Bertram, and is baffled by a query from a correspondent who wants to know how to prevent a mat in his 'lounge' from curling. The word 'lounge' is inside quotation marks to emphasize its unacceptable usage. 'Drawing room' would be correct, just as 'mirror' should be avoided in favour of 'looking glass'. Burnett noted that 'Barbara Pym never puts a foot wrong in the jungle that is the distinction between "U" and "Non-U" usage, just as she is aware of and exploits all the subtleties of language in a stratified society'. As an example, recall that in *J&P*, Nicholas Cleveland remarks that 'A lady, or per-

haps a woman' is coming, amending his sentence after he sees that the person approaching the front door is wearing a straw hat with a bird on it and is carrying a bloodstained bundle.

Burnett noted that 'class is one of the principal motors of Pym's fictions and certainly one of the principal sources of her humour'. Returning to Aunt Hermione's drawing room (*not* her lounge), we find Pym using marriage across class lines as a plot device. To their astonishment, Dulcie tells her aunt and uncle that her friend Viola Dace is to marry Bill Sedge, the brother of their cook. Uncle Bertram's 'But how can they? Do they know each other?' is illogical, but does emphasize the surprise that such a marriage would have generated in a period when the world operated in 'well defined and defended circles'. And in *NFRL*, a major theme centres on Dulcie's interest in learning about Aylwin and Neville's background. This is the kind of exercise that Pym herself delighted in. The discovery that Mr Forbes had been the black sheep of a gentry family (as Burnett noted, just like Pym's own grandfather) who had married the local hotelkeeper's daughter was 'unexpected and glamorous'.

Recognizing that Americans have two barriers to surmount in understanding questions of class in Pym — both the time difference and the fact that England is a different country — Burnett talked in more general terms about class differences in Britain during the period when Pym was writing, 1935 through 1979. Noting the somewhat rigid differences among the lower-middle, middle-middle, and upper-middle classes, he remarked that 'People were conscious of their position, and often none too subtle about expressing it'. This era came to an end around 1970, so Pym 'was ideally placed to observe and record that society and its demise'.

Many of Pym's characters are in the upper-middle class, and have private incomes and secure lives. Like the middle-middle, this group consisted of bank managers, lawyers, real estate agents, and other professionals, but they were located in London or major cities and destined for the top of their organizations. The upper-middle class also went to the same schools and colleges as the upper class and were at ease with them, the only difference being that upper-class people owned, or had once owned, country estates. The upper-middle class tended to be inflexible in their attitudes, which they freely expressed, though often unthinkingly and without malice. Jews, Blacks, and gays were unacceptable, as well as Roman Catholics. The practices of the

Tim Burnett

latter were viewed as mysterious, even somewhat sinister, and 'not quite English'. In fact, many Roman Catholics were from Ireland or the Continent. Other religions were viewed with intolerance also. We see this in *J&P*. When Fabian takes a walk down the main street of the village, he reflects that one couldn't go to the Methodist chapel, unless 'out of a kind of amused curiosity'; he also notices the 'little tin hut' used by the Roman Catholics for worship, with its 'plaster images in execrable taste'.

Pym may have become intrigued with Anglo-Catholicism when she moved to a working class district of Pimlico where the 'colour and drama' of the Anglo-Catholic church might be more appreciated. By contrast, among the upper-middle class, 'spikey' Anglicanism with its smells and bells and communion every Sunday was out. Recall that Belinda 'cannot keep a note of horror out of her voice' when speaking of Father Plowman's Romish ways. And when Dulcie Mainwaring steps on the porch at St Ivel's, she reads 'with a shudder' that confessions take place on Saturday at 6.45, indicating that Aylwin Forbes's brother might be High Church. Burnett believes that the Anglo-Catholic church may have had more emphasis in the lives of Pym's middle-class characters than it did in real life at the time. 'Most people would have viewed taking Communion every Sunday with horror ... Mattins and a good sermon were what most churchgoers required'.

Burnett then turned to the class and financial status of the clergy. Archdeacon Hoccleve, with his large vicarage, spacious gardens, indoor servants, gardener, and wife who travels abroad, was much better off than his equivalent today. If he could have persuaded Lady Clara Bolding to join his congregation – with the possibility of her five- or ten-pound note in the collection basket – he would have benefited directly, as each parish supports its own incumbent. Today, most of the spacious rectories have been sold, and the Church of England pays clergymen a uniform stipend.

Noting that the purchasing power of the middle classes was much greater in Pym's day (in contrast to the upper class and the working class, who are much better off today than before), Burnett cited evidence of this in his own family. One of his great-uncles, the youngest son of a large family who viewed himself as rather poor, left behind chattels that today could only be bought by at least a millionaire, including a dinner jacket and shooting suit by one of Saville Row's best tailors, and a pair of Negretti & Zambra binoculars, the finest that money could buy. Likewise, Burnett's own parents moved in 1950 to a house in the country that they had inherited. They initially took seven servants with them, but at the end of their lives had only a cook and a part-time gardener, both of whom had worked for them for thirty years.

Burnett emphasised that 'the middle-class characters in Pym's novels enjoyed the last years when servants were affordable and available.' And indeed, most of the characters in the novels have a servant, such as the Bede sisters' Emily. The novels have a number of cooks (who were 'traditionally extremely fierce and territorial'), including Mrs Sedge of *NFRL* and Mrs Glaze of *J&P* as well as Julian and Winifred Mallory's Mrs Jubb. Mildred Lathbury, the daughter of a country clergyman, has an income of her own and the twice-weekly services of her 'woman', Mrs Morris. Though Mrs Morris addresses Mildred with respect as 'Miss', she has no qualms about expressing her feelings with familiarity. The scene in which Mrs Morris discusses Julian's unnatural celibate state and her fears that the Roman Catholics will cause everyone to 'be kissing the pope's toe before you [can] say knife', demonstrates Pym's brilliance in catching regional accents and working class turns of speech.

Pym also follows the tradition, going back to Molière, whereby 'servants are the people with resolution and initiative, and continually have to make up for the shortcomings of their somewhat feeble and ineffectual employers'. For instance, Mrs Glaze comes to the rescue of Jane Cleveland, who can't find her way to her own kitchen or vegetable garden. To Jane's relief, she arrives with liver for supper, carefully procured from her nephew, the butcher, and takes over.

Burnett concluded by noting that even though Barbara Pym's world has vanished, 'human nature never changes, and through her genius we know and care about the characters, both great and small, who populate her novels'. Nevertheless, human attitudes, assumptions, priorities,

and prejudices do change. With her sympathy for human motivation and ear for dialogue, Pym has given us an outstandingly accurate portrayal of the particular world that she knew and understood so well, and which gave her, and through her, us, so much entertainment.

Following Burnett's speech there were many questions from the Americans in the audience, which the British members were eager to help answer. What rich material we were able to gather, including the sartorial rules' "no brown in town" and no black in the countryside. Also, we went away eager to find a copy of John Betjeman's "How to Get On in Society", which Burnett had mentioned earlier in his talk as containing numerous examples of 'Non-U' usage.

Concluding activities

The conference closed with a dramatic reading of 'The Pilgrimage', a short story by Pym that Yvonne Cocking discovered in the Bodleian. She introduced the reading by talking about Pym's short stories and the history of their publication or non-publication. The reading was delightful, and was the perfect ending to another wonderful conference.

Ellen Miller gave us the benediction, and we all expressed our warmest gratitude to her for the excellent job she did in putting together 'Pym V'.

Conference report by Beverly Bell

John Betjeman's poem, "How to Get on in Society", to which Tim Burnett attributed so many examples of 'non-U' language, begins:

> 'Phone for the fish-knives, Norman,
> As Cook is a little unnerved.'

We forbear to quote more, with copyright law in mind; but invite readers to see how many solecisms they can identify in the poem, and send in lists (to the editor of *Green Leaves*), with explanations as to the nature of the offences. Tim Burnett has agreed to be the judge.

In The Garden of Pym

If Barbara Pym
was growing in my garden
she would be a sunflower,
tall, erect,
her no nonsense attitude
holding up the heads
of the smaller characters growing nearby,
each an offshoot of her imaginings.
The Misses Liversidge and Aspinall
would play the shrinking violets at her feet,
never knowing if they should
take in the slide show at the Parish Hall
or make a cauliflower cheese
to share before Evensong.
They would droop in the downpour,
humming Onward Christian Soldiers
as the rain soaks their little purple heads.
Fabian Driver, sopping wet,
would be the Delphinium at her side,
looking regal and alert,
dripping into his handkerchief.
Various Vicars, upright,
Divinely called to be Stocks,
would spend their perfume around them
to make the world a sweeter place,
their woollen socks,
knitted by the common species
who flourish and bloom everywhere,
Miss Trapnell, a pansy,
clothed in her maroon felt hat,
would shelter under the Monkey Puzzle
that drips overhead.
The pale petunias that failed to thrive,
would make their neighbour's lives their own,
and wait for the shoots of others to nourish their longings.
Business goes on as usual
in the Garden of Pym.

Judy Pollard Smith

Imaginary conversation no. III

Who are the speakers in the following synthesized conversation, and where do we find their remarks?

1) "How will you spend the rest of the holiday?"
(2) "...perhaps I will go to the Bodleian. It's a comfort to know that there is at least one place left in Oxford where scholars and elderly people can spend a peaceful afternoon."
(3) "You must go and see Keats's house in Hampstead."
(4) "Do you know what he has hidden away in his attic?"
(5) "... the most marvellous old flowered loo."
(6) "It's beautifully fine work."
(7) "One so seldom finds that nowadays. I don't mean that hideous stuff you call Art."
(8) "... you remember Maurice Clive at the exhibition, don't you ... those clever pictures ... Cat with Lemon ... and the abstract shapes."
(9) "... it must be the effect of the British Museum."

Solution:

(1) Priscilla in *Quartet in Autumn*, chapter 10
(2) Mr Cleveland in *Crampton Hodnet*, 'An afternoon in the Bodleian'
(3) Leonora in *The Sweet Dove Died*, chapter 18
(4) Miss Clovis in *Less Than Angels*, chapter 5
(5) Joan in *The Sweet Dove Died*, chapter 8
(6) Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*, chapter 9
(7) Miss Doggett in *Crampton Hodnet*, chapter 1
(8) Dulcie in *No Fond Return ...*, chapter 13
(9) Margaret in *Crampton Hodnet*, 'Love in the British Museum

N.K.M.

Marriage and spinsterhood in *Some Tame Gazelle*

Robin Joyce

Although Barbara Pym's troublesome women are more subtle in their approach than those of more modern writers such as Fay Weldon and Zoe Fairbairns, within the context of their time Jessie Morrow, Jane Cleveland, Catherine Oliphant, Mildred Lathbury and Ianthe Broome are as troublesome as the 'larger than life' heroines of those writers. The development of each woman's character and her story exposes the way in which the writers have their characters undermine accepted understandings of the seemingly simple themes of love, romance and marriage.

Romance and the desirability of marriage are topics we have been taught from childhood and that we do not want undermined. From the fairy stories when Cinderella or Snow White or Rapunzel meet their princes and live happily ever after to popular romance novels we are encouraged to see marriage as the ideal answer to all our dreams. We want to believe in romance and its corollary – or do we? The troublesome woman will say, no! Or at least she will enjoy novels that do not show love, romance and marriage as the only, or at least preferable role for a woman.

Here lies the charm of writers such as Barbara Pym. She gives voice, but oh so gently, to our questioning of what tradition says we must admire, or at least accept.

Pym's approach to inequalities arising from gender and the seemingly simple themes of love, romance and marriage is subtle. However, she leads us to question notions of romance and its place in women's lives. She is particularly adept, for example, at turning the tables on the romantic picture of marriage. She often undermines the traditional respect given to marriage as women's preferred option, or necessarily a positive experience.

In marriage, the most content Pym women seem to be those who are stronger than their husbands and very much in command of their own happiness; those in more traditional marriages are often distrait characters whose close friendships with other women alleviate the emptiness of their married lives. Spinsters, rather than being women with whom the reader is expected to sympathise, are portrayed in Pym's novels as enjoying themselves. Picture, for example, Harriet's relishing her chicken, the bone in her fingers, and sauce on her chin!

Briefly I'd like to refer to some material I've researched in the Bodleian Library to suggest that Pym's support for spinsterhood was part of her repertoire over a long period. It is also interesting to compare the strength of her convictions as displayed in her short stories and the more subtle approach she takes in her re-worked and polished novels. However, it must be stated clearly that Pym was never bitter about men and marriage. Her delightful sense of humour was too great and sustained over the whole period of her writing, from the youthful stories and notes in her twenties to the sophisticated work written in the 1970s, to allow her fiction to become tedious tracts based on her convictions. Rather, Pym's troublesome women tease the reader with their joy in seeking love in odd places, enjoying delicious meals and finery and "selfish" concern with their own contentment in juxtaposition with their diligent indexing and church activities.

Turning to Belinda and Harriet Bede from *Some Tame Gazelle* we see Belinda's dragons of niceness outwitted at every turn. 'Dragons of Niceness' are what Naomi Wolfe claims infect women's abilities to make their demands heard and respected:[1]

> Though its struggles have gone mostly unilluminated, the developing female psyche ... follows a quest towards full womanhood. One passage involves learning how to steal one's own female power from under the gaze of the monsters of femininity. We call these, half-ironically, the Dragons of Niceness.
>
> Unlike the more direct, fire-breathing monsters of men's tales, these behemoths are soft-spoken and passive aggressive. As they manicure their sharp claws and groom their glistening scales, they breathe, *sotto voce*, an ongoing commentary at the woman who tries to journey past them to reach the treasure stores of her authority: 'Pushing hard, aren't we? Maybe a little too hard? Not nice,' they mutter. 'No one will like you.'

Wonderful, exuberant Harriet Bede appears to have left her dragons far, far behind. Pym's women could not brazenly flout society's expectations. However, she provided an excellent blueprint for the depiction of and education of troublesome women. Genteel it may have been, and at times that must be questioned, nonetheless the novels are wonderfully subversive.

The question of gentility is an excellent start to teasing out the troublesome nature of Belinda and Harriet. After all, are the curate's combinations, lavatories, corsets and pink knitted undergarments proper sources of surmise in a drawing room? Particularly when the thoughts or discussions are those of spinsters?

While Belinda ponders the curate's combinations and mentally criticises his ability to preach a sermon, then considers the archdeacon's 'lack of obvious virtues' and 'peevish and condescending tone' in a letter to the parish magazine, Harriet is portrayed in Celanese vest and knickers. Belinda's dragons of niceness determine her agitation at this appearance – the curtains are not drawn and anybody might see into the room. Ironically, they are, however, in abeyance at the shortcomings she has recognised in the clergy.

In addition Belinda is disappointed that the archdeacon's reported description of her as doing 'a lot of good work in the parish' makes her sound 'almost unpleasant'. Does Belinda reject the appellation, "excellent woman"? It certainly sounds as though she does. And if so, what would she rather be? Harriet's romantic version of her future with Henry is, it seems, unappealing. By the end of the novel Belinda realises that she would rather love Henry from afar, despite being more in love with him than is his wife, Agatha. However, before she reaches this conclusion we are treated to the vision of a spinster in her fifties who gives us some very troublesome moments. Not only do we see her loving a married man and taking steps to be with him, if only for tea: it is through her eyes that the problems of her archdeacon's marriage are exposed.

Belinda is not entirely compliant despite her love for the archdeacon. Through her visit to the vicarage we hear of his bath as late as eleven in the morning, and her quiet criticism; his peevish calling from the window upbraiding Agatha for the moths in his suit; and, later, Belinda's defence of Agatha's housekeeping. After all, Belinda suggests to the Archdeacon, if Agatha were to have kept the moths at bay with camphor he'd probably have disliked that.

The "pseudo-marriage" portrayed when Belinda and the Archdeacon have tea together and discuss domestic affairs

in no greater harmony than the angry exchanges between the Archdeacon and his wife shows marriage-like situations in as negative a light as the reality. Compared with this is the afternoon (later questioned as to its propriety by Belinda) that Belinda spends with Henry while Agatha is away. Belinda sees this as vaguely illicit as it reminds her of the university days in which Henry and she read poetry together. This picture has no qualities associated with marriage. However, Belinda, as pleased as she is by the romantic vision it fosters, recognizes that she needs no more. Rather than a romantic or melodramatic resolution to a story of thwarted young love, Pym turns the story on its head. Belinda prefers imagination to reality – one such evening every thirty years is enough.

Belinda returns happily to Harriet. At this stage her dragon of niceness raises its head – should she have spent the entire afternoon with Henry unchaperoned? Nicholas Parnell, academically titled and head librarian, is considered no match for a middle-aged woman in this capacity. However, lively joyous Harriet has no such qualms. She is pleased for her sister, immediately developing a romantic story and being annoyed that Belinda and Dr Parnell interrupted Henry's tryst. Harriet even laments Agatha's robust health, at least in matters that could leave Henry widowed, in her pursuit of Belinda's mythical romance. Although Pym allows romantic notions to be voiced, her mischievous approach is evident – a virtuous spinster is the conduit for these immoral musings rather than the writer.

Again, when it comes to the reality of marriage, Harriet too rejects it. The two proposals she receives are treated differently. However, the end result is the same: she remains a happy spinster. Nathaniel Mold's proposal is treated as farce from the start when we see Belinda crouching behind a large rhododendron bush at his approach, while Harriet is inside strengthening corsets. Mr Mold's point of view is then juxtaposed cleverly with Harriet's. He sees his drawcard as his large house on a corner with a larger garden than others; Harriet sees curates as her main interest – so where are their interests in common? And what fifty-year-old woman, other than one who does not fulfil society's expectations, claims young men as her interest? The 'many and ludicrous and exaggerated imitations' of the proposal, with the sisters laughing together reinforce Harriet's statement '... my sister and I are *very* confirmed spinsters'.

We are given the opportunity to examine Belinda's dedication to spinsterhood through the Bishop's proposal. Despite knowing that she cannot marry Henry, she refuses the Bishop – this is not a woman who wishes to follow the tradition of making marriage a priority. In addition, Connie Aspinall, the woman who eventually accepts the Bishop's proposal, is not a positive recommendation for marriage. It is clear that Connie's choice is predicated on the unappealing life she leads as Edith Liversidge's companion. That is, for Pym marriage is the lesser of the limited lifestyles her heroines might lead: the "stars" of the novel, Belinda and Harriet, choose to be spinsters despite the opportunities to change their state.

The Bishop's proposal to Belinda confirms her choice. A verbal slap at the clergy introduces the scene: Bishop Grote has '... an unctuous voice, a clergyman's voice, a Bishop's voice'. Despite this authority the Bishop is rejected. Belinda's strongest emotion is reserved for her success with the ravioli, not her success in receiving a proposal.

Although *Some Tame Gazelle* ends with marriages, the fairytale image that tradition expects is absent. Olivia Berrige and the curate will undoubtedly have a marriage like that of Agatha and the Archdeacon. Connie and Bishop Grote are most unromantic figures. The really happy ending is for the spinsters, Belinda and Harriet. Together they can continue the pattern of their lives. A new curate has arrived – and even more enthralling, he has suffered ill health and will need more ministrations than usual from Harriet (and Belinda quietly in her wake).

Harriet, whose dragons of niceness have been defeated from the beginning, is the most successful character in the novel, having happily achieved all she wants. Belinda, whose truth telling will out, despite her attempts to appease the dragons, is a very close second. Married Agatha and Olivia are clearly less troublesome in terms of fairytales but we know their rewards bear no comparison with the spinsters who people *Some Tame Gazelle* in such numbers and with such joy.

In conclusion, although the term 'sisterhood' was coined during the 1970s, in recognition that women have a great deal to offer each other, I believe that *Some Tame Gazelle* demonstrates its relevance over time. The person Belinda really wants to be with is her sister, Harriet. Together they depict a range of characteristics with which women can happily identify. They are not constrained to one model of excellent woman. Pym gives her characters, and thus her readers, choices. Belinda cares about the other women in the novel, although her relationship (or lack of it) with the Archdeacon is a continuing theme. Perhaps her excuses for him are so predictable, in fact, they become the wallpaper on which her other concerns are played out. For example, when Agatha appears to step out of character (was it she who proposed?) Belinda is uncomfortable. I've already noted her defence of Agatha over the moths in the Archdeacon's suit. And, although Belinda mentally comments on Harriet's small foolishnesses, she enters the joking at Mold's expense with gusto. She encourages Harriet's liveliness – the hallmark of a woman unlike herself.

Although we don't know until reading *An Unsuitable Attachment* (published 1981) that the sisters remain spinsters with a curate in tow, the novels leaves me in little doubt that Belinda's true aim has been achieved – spinsterhood. That Belinda enjoys the possible image of herself as a 'romantically tragic figure' only adds to this conclusion – for this can be achieved only by renouncing the live Archdeacon and replacing him, at Bishop Grote's assumption, with a past love who died. To some readers this would be a truly troubling concept. However, as Judith Butler says, for women 'trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it'.[2]

References

1. Naomi Wolfe, *Fire With Fire*; Chatto & Windus, 1993
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity;* Routledge, 1990

An abbreviated version of the paper, "Troublesome women: our validation in the novels of Barbara Pym, Fay Weldon and Zoe Fairbairns" given to the Barbara Pym Society conference, Oxford, 2 September 2001.

Notice Board

The 2003 Spring Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society
will be held on Sunday 1st June
at St Alban's Centre, Holborn.
Buffet lunch 1.00 p.m.
At approximately 2.15 p.m.:
"Barbara Pym and the joys of quotation"
a talk by Katherine Duncan-Jones.

Beneath the civility of Pym's world and our world

Anne Marie Owens

What is it about Pym's world that manages to resonate still in a world where 12-step programs and tabloid TV have taken the place of church teas and social evenings? Pym's novels would seem to be the furthest thing from the Girl Power and Bridget Jones allure of modern female society, and yet her books and the people who populate them could be role models for the millennium, for a core of anarchy runs underneath the civility and constructed deference of their world. It is not mere romanticism for an imagined bucolic past that keeps Pym's readers coming back for more. Rather, it is this sense of the anarchical, of the quietly subversive, that unites all Pym readers. What we all relish in Pym is the cutting commentary, the insightful, though never spoken, remark that so captures a scene or a person.

This subversiveness is the key appeal of her characters, who render judgments and classify situations in ways that would not be shocking at all were they to come from the mouths of an Ally McBeal or Bridget Jones type, modern female characters who have little regard for maintaining the impression of doing the right thing. Pym's excellent women are so appealing precisely because they are actually subversions of the typical excellent woman: for dutiful, conscientious and church-going though these women may be, they are not so dull as to constantly think good thoughts about every situation or individual they encounter. And if Pym's characters are not the simplistic one-dimensional versions of excellent women, neither then are all her readers simply earnest church ladies, content with small talk, with nary a critical thought to be heard.

Reading is always a solitary pursuit, but reading Pym, because of her enduring anonymity, brings a particular isolation. Pym published six well-received novels in the 1950s; then, in the early 1960s, was rejected by publishers. She was reclaimed in the late 1970s after she was named one of the "most under-rated novelists of the century," by the critic Lord David Cecil and the poet Philip Larkin, writing in the London Times Literary Supplement. Rekindled interest in her work led to the publication of five more books.

Still, Pym is an author whose eleven published books remain widely unknown. No wonder then, that there was a sense of immediate collegiality, almost giddiness, among the group of nearly a hundred readers drawn together for the two-day celebration of Pym in the United States, at Harvard University in April 1999. For those predominantly women, it was pure delight to be in a room where the mention of Pym would not elicit puzzled stares and blank faces, but would rather inspire inside jokes and shared understanding.

Elizabeth Tamney, a Chicago researcher, broke the ice at the dinner table the first evening by asking if anyone else was reminded of No Fond Return of Love by being at the conference. (That book opens by chronicling a conference of indexers.) Tamney, who has read and reread Pym's books hundreds of times, says she often sees things "through a Pym glass." She thought that Pym herself would have found many moments at the conference "rather hilarious; she was at her best pointing out the silly behaviour of over-serious people." But for Tamney, that conference was an opportunity to realize just how much Pym's writing had informed her life.

Tamney was not alone. For many of the women at the conference, experiences in life are often defined as "Pym moments"; the people they encounter are often described as "Pymmish". They talk of Jane and Prudence, Everard Bone, and many other characters as if they were chatting about familiar friends. Pym's characters have been described as "uninteresting and worthy people, people whose behaviour is by a degree or two at a tangent to the rest of the world." Because they inhabit the same small world—confined largely to anthropological and church circles—it is not surprising that characters such as Everard Bone, Esther Clovis and Digby Fox keep popping up in different Pym novels.*

"I really enjoy her characters," said Emily Dunn, a pediatric nurse from Brighton, Mass., who attended the Harvard conference. She relishes in Pym "the everydayness" of the characters' lives and their small moral quandaries over such dilemmas as, 'Is it okay to knit something for the rector without his wife getting angry?' or, 'If I ask Norman to lunch will he think I'm pursuing him?'"

This is perhaps one of the more interesting subversions in Pym: the male characters may appear to be the main characters in terms of being the pinnacle of interest in consuming the thoughts of the female characters, yet they are so clearly inferior as characters to the women in the novels. As Dunn so simply puts it: men in Pym's books are not always portrayed in a good light, while the women are, quite often, Excellent Women, "and excellent women can lead rather boring lives". What saves these women, and what keeps modern-day readers such as Dunn rapt, is an inner dialogue that sparkles with insight, wit and irony and observations so true it seems as if there can be no clearer way of conveying them.

In *Excellent Women*, Mildred Lathbury's retreat to the kitchen is described in such a way that it seems a universal feminine escape:

> I began piling cups and saucer on to a tray. I suppose it was cowardly of me, but I felt that I wanted to be alone, and what better place to choose than the sink, where neither of the men would follow me?" (chapter 17)

Mildred's behaviour here is a classic Pym subversion: while her retreat to the realm of tidying up would appear to be the natural response of a good woman—because good women, of course, are always employed in the clearing up—Mildred is motivated more by a desire to escape and find a bit of peace. Pym is constantly subverting our sense of her characters in this way, and through them, our sense of good society. Women like Mildred are good women, surely, but they are not always motivated solely by goodness, and that is what makes them so interesting.

In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet Forsyth describes precisely what it feels like to be a victim of an interminable bore:

> He was one of those preachers who, on coming to the end of what they have to say, find it impossible to stop. Sentence after sentence seemed as if it must be the last, but still he went on. I felt as if I had been wrapped round and round in a cocoon of wordiness, like a great suffocating eiderdown. (chapter 12)

In *Less Than Angels*, Deirdre Swan just as precisely conveys the ennui of enduring the company of the wrong person:

> There are few experiences more boring and painful for a woman than an evening spent in the company of one man when

she is longing to be with another, and that evening Bernard's dullness seemed to have a positive quality about it so that it was almost a physical agony, like the dentist's drill pressing on a sensitive tooth. (chapter 4)

In both these cases, it is the subversiveness of the speaker that appeals. If these comments were to come from television's Ally McBeal or author Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones, the sentiments would elicit little surprise. That they are thought, though of course never uttered, by women like Wilmet Forsyth and Deirdre Swan, is what overthrows any simplistic sense that either of these women can be categorized as a certain type of woman. Readers of Pym are constantly forced to rethink their assumptions when it comes to her characters: the spinster so closely connected to the church may not be hankering after the rector after all, but seeking a life a bit more exotic; the young woman living with her anthropologist boyfriend in an unconventional situation may be someone desiring a very traditional married life.

This is part of the considerable subversion of romance in Pym, a theme which is explored in detail in Ellen Tsagaris' book, *The Subversion of Romance in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (1988). Tsagaris examines how Pym subverts the discourse of the romance novel through her use of food, clothes, heroine and hero characterizations, and argues that Pym rewrites and ultimately subverts the romantic paradigm. In *A Few Green Leaves*, the premise of the plot seems set on one course, with the spinster, Emma Howick, moving to a house near the vicarage, suddenly entangled with an old flame, Graham Pettifer, just split from his wife and fresh from a TV career. In Pym, of course, this "romance" is followed in scenes where the female character prepares thoroughly unappetizing food for the potential romantic mate. In the end, though, it turns out that romance is not at all to be found with this man, but lies somewhere off in the future, perhaps with the vicar. This is a classic Pym subversion, because it is a much happier conclusion to a romance than the traditional option would offer.

Another typical subverted romantic scene appears in *Less Than Angels* between the newly-attracted Tom Mallow and young Deirdre Swan:

> They sat down. Tom took hold of Deirdre's hand. It lay there without moving, like a dead bird, he thought. (chapter 10)

The same novel features another interesting subversion of typical romantic plot, and of custom, when Catherine Oliphant, upon discovering the man she lives with sitting across the table with another woman, thinks:

> "I'm not one of those excellent women, who can just go home and eat a boiled egg and make a cup of tea and be very splendid, but how useful it would be if I were!" (Chapter 9)

This is an interesting subversion of the idea of the ideal woman. In this case, where Catherine discovers she is the woman scorned, she responds with cool detachment rather than jealous rage, and holds up the example of the capable, excellent woman, for who better to be in such situations? What appeals to Pym readers are these clever and often subtle subversions which are conveyed in a style of writing that deftly manages to combine cut-to-the-bone reality in its observations, in a setting that is as tightly contained and restrictive as a small English village. "There is an attraction about a world that is so self-contained, and to people whose lives are vaguely unsatisfactory," said Suzan Eltis, a schoolteacher from Ottawa in Canada, at the 1999 conference. "She does deal with a very small world. The big issues are not there. It's as if that world turns on its own axis." That finely-drawn and peculiarly English world can be a haven for readers such as Emily Dunn, who admits that her love of Pym is perhaps "a little bit of escapism." For women who work every day in jobs where they try to mend sick children, raise funds in a philanthropically-strained climate, or keep pace with rapidly changing technology, there is a refreshing indulgence to inhabiting a world where the niceties of inviting someone to tea or unravelling the vagaries of indexing are the most vexing dilemmas to be faced in a day.

Not all Pym fans relish such escapist pleasures, however. Elizabeth Tamney is impatient with what she calls the "unthinking American Anglophilia," that would simply embrace the "coziness" of Pym's world. "I love things cozy and English as much as the next person, but that doesn't translate into blind Pym worship," she said in a commentary written after the conference for a 'zine she publishes. "The narrow England-Is-So-Quaint,Don't-You-Just-Love-British-Writers view of all things English, without taking in transit strikes and small ovens and constant rain and Irish troubles and steep housing costs, drives me a little nuts."

Barbara Everett, a senior research fellow at Oxford who described the Harvard gathering as "a conference drawn together by the likeability of an author," courageously informed the very partisan crowd that she wanted "to sidestep a little that affectionate reaction that points out that there is a Pym world and our prime job is to live in it and relish it." Pym enthusiasts have not reached the peculiar cultishness of some Jane Austen gatherings, however, where participants attend wearing Regency-style dresses. There were jokes contrasting the Pym gathering with another one, just across the Harvard campus, in honour of the hundredth anniversary of Ernest Hemingway's birth. Where that event stressed bravado and machismo, this one opted for quiet kindness and civility. While Hemingway's food is fish and game, the people in Pym's books eat boiled eggs and toast, or prepare a cold fish mousse for dinner—anaemic, unappealing, but filling, fare.

Thankfully, there were no hunger lunches on that conference agenda. Yet there are Pym characters among the faithful, like the professional indexer in England (Hazel Bell) who compiled the exhaustive index of Pym references (which, among other items, chronicles the appearance of tea in the novels, detailed in 17 sub-categories such as, "in church hall," "cafeteria," and "weak") or the American monk who brought photos of his pilgrimage to Pym-significant sites (Father Gabriel Myers). But a major element of Pym's allure is her very obscurity. For a writer whose turn of phrase and gift for painting the details of the minutiae of small village life has often had her compared to Austen, she has not even a jot of the fame. There are no big-budget movies made from her novels, so there has been no push to re-release them with the actor's pictures on the cover to boost book sales. She is not taught widely in schools, save perhaps, for her presence in a few obscure graduate classes at university. There is a certain selectivity, therefore, to those of us who consider ourselves Pym fans, and with it, the cachet of belonging to an exclusive club.

"For years, I'd mention this author to friends and no one had heard of her, even my Austen friends," said Ann McCann, a fundraiser for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "No one ever knows who she is ... This conference has been like listening to someone talk about old friends." Emily Dunn said she looked around at the conference "and a saw a lot of women like myself: middle-aged women who are not scholars, but teachers and nurses." There were a few academics in the crowd, but this was really a gathering of the faithful. They came because they had been reading and re-reading Pym for years and had grown to love her. They are protective of her. There was palpable tension when someone seemed about to criticize, boredom when the talk turned to the kind of academic nit-picking that dissects stories and characters, and a

familiar ease when the talk turned to favourite characters or cherished Pym moments. "I'll go to work and I'll talk about this and it will all be blank stares," said Dunn. "This is my interior life. This is for me. And it has all been so wonderful!"

* Everard Bone is a major protagonist in Pym's story *Excellent Women*, and reappears in *Jane and Prudence, Less Than Angels*, and *An Unsuitable Attachment.* Esther Clovis appears in *Excellent Women, Less Than Angels*, and *An Unsuitable Attachment.* Digby Fox appears as a student in *Less Than Angels*, as a professor in *An Academic Question, An Unsuitable Attachment,* and *A Few Green Leaves*, and as a married man in *No Fond Return of Love.*

"The quintessential English gentleman": Some parallels between Siegfried Sassoon and Barbara Pym

Deborah Fisher

I have no idea whether Siegfried Sassoon, before his death in 1967, ever became acquainted with the novels of Barbara Pym; but I would be surprised if Barbara Pym never dipped into Sassoon, whose fictionalised autobiography, *Memoirs of a fox-hunting man*, was for many years a set text in the English Literature classes of British schools. On the surface, Sassoon and Pym have little in common. As a fan of both, I believe there are some similarities, and that the kind of person who has read and enjoyed one of these great humorous writers might well enjoy the other.

The very phrase, "quintessential English gentleman", which has been applied to Sassoon, puts me in mind of Barbara Pym – though, it has to be admitted, many of her male characters turn out not to be the gentlemen they appear. Perhaps the same was true of Siegfried Sassoon, whose personal life included many unsuccessful love affairs, a messy divorce, and bitter quarrels with some of his closest friends. Without delving into the background that made Sassoon what he was, I would defend him by saying that, if he was no true gentleman, you certainly wouldn't know it from his writing.

The worst I can find to say about him is that he had a misogynistic streak. I think Pym readers would agree that, though she may have represented men in a playfully satirical way (I can think of few admirable male characters in her novels), she certainly didn't hate the opposite sex. Sassoon, who was coddled by his mother up to the age of fourteen when he went away to an all-male school, subsequently returning to live a life of secluded leisure until catapulted into the Great War at the age of twenty-eight, had very little time for women. Although he did eventually marry, in middle age, a girl twenty years younger than himself, he seems to have had little understanding of

Deborah Fisher

his wife, and quickly discarded her when she proved reluctant to supply him with a second child.

Women, it must be said, seem to have found him devastatingly attractive. He was handsome, athletic, and artistic. Lady Ottoline Morrell, for one, was besotted with him. Yet in his work, both poetry and prose, we find mostly negative portraits of the few females who appear. Where, then, are the parallels with Pym?

Barbara Pym's first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, is semi-autobiographical. It portrays two middle-aged spinster sisters and their circle of friends, based on the real-life social group Pym gathered around her at Oxford. Siegfried Sassoon's "novel", *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man (MFHM)*, is basically a volume of autobiography with some of the names and events changed to prevent embarrassment. Sassoon's concern was that those familiar with his war poetry would not take him seriously as a prose writer, so he published anonymously, creating for himself the alter ego, "George Sherston". His book is not about fox hunting, but describes the kind of idyllic rural existence that Sassoon himself enjoyed before the outbreak of war. Many of the events he described would not be out of place in one of Barbara Pym's novels.

For example, one of the best-known episodes in *MFHM* is "The Flower Show Match", an account of a cricket match between neighbouring village teams held on the day of the annual flower show. Here we find dialogue worthy of Pym:

"Really, it's a bit thick, Aunt Evelyn; someone's taken my tin of Blanco," exclaims young Sherston/Sassoon as he prepares to whiten his pads before the match. "Probably the parlour-maid had bagged it; why on earth couldn't they leave things alone?"

Can't we imagine the archdeacon coming out with something similar?

The irony is that Sassoon expresses himself like a Pym character. He does so in a self-conscious, self-mocking style that endears him to the reader, constantly drawing attention to the callowness of his youth.

> If I ever thought of myself as a man of thirty-five it was a visualization of dreary decrepitude. The word maturity had no meaning for me. I did not anticipate that I should become different; I should only become older.

Worlds away from Barbara Pym, who, even in her early twenties, had the imagination to depict herself and her Oxford friends as middle-aged people.

It was war that turned Sassoon from a minor lyric poet into a great literary figure. Like Pym, he developed the capacity to see humour in the blackest situation. In *Memoirs of an infantry officer*, he describes his wartime experiences in a manner that is all the more effective for being ironic and understated:

> I still maintain that an ordinary human being has a right to be momentarily horrified by a mangled body seen on an afternoon walk, although people with sound common sense can always refute me by saying that life is full of gruesome sights and violent catastrophes.

Barbara Pym was lucky enough to be spared such sights; but I don't think it is

fanciful to suppose that her response to them might have been similar.

Even in this sequel to *MFHM*, we come across characters and situations worthy of Pym:

> At the end of twenty minutes' tension, the Colonel exclaimed abruptly, 'Good God, I wish I knew how they're doing!' ... And then, as if regretting his manifestation of feeling, 'No harm in having a bit of cake, anyhow'.

The respective social backgrounds of the two writers, though in many ways vastly different, have enough similarities to help account for their mastery of the ironical prose style. Both came from families that were comfortably off, able to afford domestic staff (Sassoon's Jewish father had been disinherited for marrying outside the faith). Both were brought up in the Church of England, but had leanings towards Catholicism. However, Sassoon's attitude towards religion seems to have been ambivalent in his youth – a fact to which he openly alludes – and was hardened by his war experiences. He developed, instead, the strength of character and courage to make a solitary stand against the authorities, which could easily have resulted in his being court-martialled and shot. Barbara Pym had her own brand of inner strength, which kept her going through years of adversity and comforted her when public recognition was lacking.

In summary, I don't want to make too much of the similarities between my literary hero, Siegfried Sassoon, and my literary heroine, Barbara Pym, but I do reiterate that any Pym fan who has been put off reading Sassoon's prose by the wrongful supposition that it is mainly concerned with blood sports should give him a try. You may come to feel, as I did, that you have been missing out.

Reviews

"All This Reading": The Literary World of Barbara Pym, edited by Frauke Elisabeth Lenckos and Ellen J. Miller. Associated University Presses, 2003. 247 pp; 24 cm. Index. $46.50 / £35.00 ($46.50 / £28.00 to members of BPS). Ordering information at http://www.barbara-pym.org/book.html. ISBN 0-8386-3956-9

In 1980, when Jane Nardin first came across the novels of Barbara Pym, as she remarks, 'almost no literary criticism had yet been written' of Pym's work, while Dale Salwak, in his epilogue to *All This Reading*, records the 'appearance since 1985 of twenty full-length book studies or anthologies, with more soon to arrive'. An extraordinary growth of interest, which is now further reflected in the publication of this stimulating collection of nineteen new essays. Part I examines the significance of reading in the novels; Part II is devoted to literary encounters and collaborations in Pym's life and works. Hazel Bell's index successfully draws together the threads running through the contributions by various hands, allowing the reader to trace, for example, references to spinsterhood in the essays of Frauke Elisabeth Lenckos, Katherine Anne Ackley, Barbara Everett, Helen Clare Taylor, Anthony Kaufman, Anne Pilgrim and Barbara Dunlap.

In attempts to pin down Pym's special quality as a novelist, she has been compared to, and with, a quite disparate list of writers, from Jane Austen to Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth von Arnim, E. M. Delafield and a whole host of other names, many listed by Lenckos in her introduction. Kaufman compares the rivalry of Belinda and Agatha in *Some Tame Gazelle* to the humour of E. F. Benson's Mapp and Lucia, and Everett commends Pym's 'high originality' which sets her fiction 'far above the intransigently reactionary ... Angela Thirkell'. Dunlap, tracing the influence on Pym of Charlotte M. Yonge, asserts that 'Pym's fiction is steeped in the work of Yonge' (even the unusual name of the heroine of *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet, is borrowed from a very different heroine of Yonge's).

To what extent are Pym's novels autobiographical, and her well-read heroines reflections of herself? Orphia Jane Allen, writing on 'Reading Pym Autobiographically', comments that 'Pym was aware that she could permit herself to become like Leonora' (in *The Sweet Dove Died*), but Leonora represents only 'one of the directions an aging, unmarried woman's life could take'. The most obvious incarnation of Pym's own personality is Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, with her near-obsessive love of literary quotation. Pilgrim notes that, while Archdeacon Hoccleve and Bishop Grote quote aloud, sometimes not very felicitously, and Harriet 'tends to be oblivious to literary references', Belinda 'hardly ever quotes aloud, but silently recollects and meditates upon scores of passages, many of them quite obscure', and Nardin also finds significance in the fact that Belinda keeps her literary references to herself, 'restrained by a sense of personal modesty and strict propriety at once pathological and deeply lovable'. In being made privy to Belinda's interior monologue, the reader is at the same time granted access to the author's own stream of consciousness.

As Ackley points out, Pym 'often blurs the distinction between literature and life', suggesting in various ways that some of her characters have lives outside her fictional world. Dulcie in *No Fond Return of Love*, who cannot resist prying into people's lives, finds it 'so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of others'. Pym's characters, says Ackley, 'view the world as if they, too, were writers', and Nardin writes that 'in Pym's novels, there is a tension between the impulse to read and the impulse to contextualize or interpret'.

The inner monologues of Pym's heroines reveal her own uncertainties and need for reassurance. Pilgrim comments on Belinda's habitual alternation between self-doubt, 'expressed in her diffidence, timidity and constant anxiety', and self-confidence. Everett remarks on the unpretentiousness of Pym's early novels, and adds that the modesty of her approach 'possibly worked to Pym's disadvantage during the period when her manuscripts were being rejected' and 'makes her too easy to dismiss now'. Surveying the six earlier novels, she considers these thoroughly enjoyable but 'probably minor art', while *Quartet in Autumn* is to her mind a major work. She finds *Excellent Women* the 'most accomplished, ... the most admirably competent', and has a kind word for *An Unsuitable Attachment* – it 'has a first-rate cat and a wholly believable public library'.

These are only some examples of the many rich insights provided by *All This Reading*. Further pleasures are provided in the second part of the volume, such as the reproduction in the essay by Paul De Angelis of Pym's letters to him of 1978-9,

almost up to the time of her death in January 1980, and of *A Year in West Oxfordshire*, Pym's contribution to Ronald Blythe's anthology *Places* of 1981.

Janice Rossen's essay, 'Philip Larkin: Barbara Pym's Ideal Reader', discusses the crucial role played by 'virtually the only fellow writer with whom she discussed her work in progress'. Larkin's influence and advice were clearly of great importance to her: not only was he able to give her very specific and practical advice, but he was a writer of established reputation who treated her as an equal and gave her 'constant reassurances that her work was of extraordinary value'.

And not least, there is an account of thirty years of friendship and collaboration by Hazel Holt, Pym's literary executor, who tells us that she no longer reads Barbara Pym. I don't need to. ... once you've read the novels, she is with you forever.'

Christine Shuttleworth

The Philip Larkin I knew by Maeve Brennan. Manchester University Press, 2002. xii, 240 pp. 23 cm. Illus., index. £14.99 ISBN 0-7190-6275-6 h/b; 0-7190-6276-4 p/b

Traditionally, interest in a writer seems to slacken in the years following his death. This does not appear to have happened in the case of Philip Larkin, who died in 1985. There is a thriving Philip Larkin Society, an impressive list of biographical works, much poetry still in print and of course the often sophomoric but entertaining correspondence with his friend Kingsley Amis. The popular impression of Larkin is of a sensitive writer of poetry but a grouchy individual whose character combined anxieties, irritation and impatience with wit, humour and occasionally charm.

Larkin's youthful stammer and lifelong shyness did not prevent a rather impressive list of sexual adventures as well as platonic affairs. One of his colleagues at the library of the University of Hull was Maeve Brennan, a convent-educated girl from a local Catholic family of unquestionable respectability. This book sets out to describe her relationship with Philip Larkin in a style so restrained it could be read by a Victorian maiden without causing a blush. In her book and in the jacket blurb the word "affair" does appear. However, it is interesting to see that a programme note for the current West End play about Larkin, written and performed by Tom Courtenay, "Pretending to be Me", refers to "Maeve Brennan, with whom he gradually builds a longlasting but sexually unfulfilled relationship".

Anyone familiar with Barbara Pym's heroines will perhaps recognise parallels here, with Maeve emerging as the well brought up, well behaved young woman, attractive but not flashy, working in some worthwhile employment and gently yearning for involvement with an interesting but perhaps difficult male colleague. Sadly for Brennan the relationship never led to marriage or indeed a shared home although, with some upsets, she managed to remain in touch with Larkin and his last partner up to his death, since when Maeve Brennan has been generous in sharing her correspondence and her memories in admirably non-sensational manner.

For the Pym reader, there is much more in *A Very Private Eye* about Barbara's own correspondence with Larkin and their famous lunch in Oxford, but this occasion is mentioned in one of his letters to Maeve Brennan. Although *The Philip Larkin I Knew* does not greatly expand the Pym records, it is good to know that Larkin enjoyed meeting Barbara, whom he thought "a bit like Joyce Grenfell, but very pleasant and accommodating". In another letter to Brennan he comments in passing on the characters and plot of *A Glass of Blessings*, but of course we are most grateful to Larkin that he (like David Cecil) selected Barbara Pym in the famous piece highlighting neglected writers which brought her back to public attention and indeed back into print. For this reason one thinks of Philip Larkin as a person of some importance to Pym readers, many of whom may want to explore Maeve Brennan's rather poignant memoir.

Deirdre Bryan-Brown

The Resurrection of Miss Pym; BBC Radio 4, 11 February 2003

Sue Arnold, in *The Guardian,* praised this broadcast as one of those very occasional radio programmes 'that leaves you feeling that if you never heard another it wouldn't matter ... briefly, gently, yet perfectly summing up everything that's good about radio'.

Though billed as the 'Afternoon Play', this was not a dramatized version of Pym's life, but a selection from her letters and journals, telling 'the true story of her disappearance from the literary scene of the Swinging Sixties and her subsequent triumphant rediscovery'. Jennifer Howarth was given due credit on air for her sensitive adaptation of the material, though unfortunately her name did not appear in the *Radio Times* listing, and she was renamed 'Jane' in the *Guardian* review.

Penelope Wilton was ideally cast as the voice of Barbara Pym, composed and ironic, remarking self-deprecatingly of her writing, 'I am really better at making marmalade and doing patchwork' (could she actually have believed that?), and noticing 'How full of fictional situations life is'. This theme ran throughout the programme. After a disturbing visit to hospital, she wonders 'if I could write a hospital novel', and the African Institute's move to new offices suggests a book based on office life, which became *Quartet in Autumn.*

At a literary gathering in London, 'I had a word with Iris Murdoch' – but tantalizingly we are not told what was said. On the same occasion she encounters the Duke of Edinburgh, 'but I don't think he reads my books'.

She records, 'The letter I wrote to *The Author* about not getting published was never published, which seems to me to be the final accolade of failure.' Yet, 'Novel writing is a kind of private pleasure, even if nothing comes of it in worldly terms'.

The cast also included Clive Merrison as Philip Larkin, with whom she exchanged letters for nearly twenty years. She clearly drew great strength from Larkin's encouragement – he called her books 'rare and valuable' and did not think she could write a novel he would not enjoy. Cape's rejection of *An Unsuitable Attachment* was a 'mystery' to Larkin, and further lack of appreciation of her work by a succession of publishers he found 'absolutely scandalous'. Later, he wrote joyously, in a haze of champagne, 'I'm so delighted to think of you having a new publisher, and proofs and everything. My most luxuriant felicitations!'

He seems to have valued the correspondence as much as she did. 'Life in Hull is not agreeable at present,' he noted, and Barbara's letters brightened his days

– even at her funeral he found himself looking forward to her next letter. On one occasion he sent her a photograph of the new library extension at Hull. 'Was ever a stranger photo sent by a man to a woman?' she comments. 'In a novel, she might be disappointed.'

'Her letters aren't bitter,' commented Sue Arnold. 'They are wry and witty like her novels, and listening to Penelope Wilton reading them made this cynical old reviewer want to weep. ... Barbara Pym was a member of that dying breed – a perfect English lady.'

Christine Shuttleworth

Pym gleanings

In books –

** Mary Madden, reviewing *Indexers and Indexes in Fact and Fiction* by Hazel Bell in *Update*, 1 (8) November 2002, commented:

> One of the sections of most interest to indexers is 'Indexers in Fiction'. Many appreciate Barbara Pym's description of the beginning of the business relationship (if it can be dignified by that name) between Mildred Lathbury and Everard Bone in *Excellent Women* and will be glad to find it included.

** In *Bachelor Brothers' Bed and Breakfast* by Bill Richardson (St Martin's Press, 1997), eccentric twin bachelors in their fifties own and operate a B & B where 'the gentle and bookish and ever so slightly confused' can feel at home.

One of their Top Ten Authors is Barbara Pym – the other nine being Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, Marcel Proust, Leo Tolstoy, Anthony Trollope, Anne Tyler, and Virgina Woolf.

** *The Faber Book of Diaries,* edited by Simon Brett, was published by Faber & Faber in 1987. It consists of extracts from the diaries of 108 people, alphabetically from J. R. Ackerley to Walter Yonge, chronologically from Henry Machyn (1498-1563) to Jimmy Boyle (1944-). Barbara Pym is quoted often, with entries taken from *A Very Private Eye* for:

1932	June 5, 13 and 23, Sept. 21, Oct. 15
1933	April 29, July 31, Nov. 1
1934	Jan. 8
1939	June 6
1940	April 3 and 7, May 10
1943	April 24, May 10, June 17, Oct. 14
1955	Sept. 8
1964	Nov. 27
1969	July 31

** Not a direct reference to Pym's work, this quote, but a resemblance. "Pym Gleanings" often suggests other writers whose works are found Pymlike. Graham Greene has never featured in these lists. But his novel, *A Gun for sale* (Heinemann, 1936) includes a distinctly Pymmian passage in its third chapter. The woman who is to open a jumble sale is late, a long queue of impatient women is waiting to get at the bargains, and the vicar is worried about not opening the sale on time:

> 'A dry perky woman with a cameo brooch put her head in at the door. "Henry", she said, "the committee are rifling the stalls again. Can't you do something about it? There'll be nothing left when the sale starts."
>
> ... "You can't really do anything about it", the vicar said. "It happens every year. These good women give their time voluntarily. ... They *expect* to have first choice of everything that's sent in. Of course the trouble is: *they* fix the prices."
>
> "Henry", the perky woman said, appearing again in the doorway, "you *must* interfere. Mrs Penny has priced that very good hat that Lady Cundifer sent at 18 pence and bought it herself.'

– Quoted by permission of David Higham Associates.

In the press

** From *The Oldie*, issue 169, April 2003 - Reviews, Wireless, by Valerie Grove:

> A positive rash of literate, classy afternoon drama on Radio 4. *The Resurrection of Miss Pym* was an admirable example of how a literary story from the recent past can be successfully exhumed. This was of course the tale, told via their letters, of how Philip Larkin and David Cecil rescued the good Miss Pym (played by Penelope Wilton) when she found her novels out of fashion and rejected by her publishers, Cape. She was resurrected and given a new lease of life, just in time for the terminal illness.

** *The Chicago Newsletter* of the Jane Austen Society of North America, November 2002, includes 'Gentlewomen and excellent women: Jane Austen and Barbara Pym', a comparison of the two writers and their literary societies, by Frauke Lenckos.

On the web

Hazel Holt now has her own website:
www.hazelholt.co.uk
This (of course!) includes references to Barbara Pym, as follows:

> Hazel Holt worked for 27 years in the Editorial Department of the International African Institute in London with her friend the novelist Barbara Pym whose Literary Executor she later became. Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* was the inspiration (much later) for Sheila Malory.
>
> After writing a biography of Barbara Pym (*A Lot to Ask*) she wrote her first work of fiction at the age of 60 and has written one a year ever since.

and –

> What books do you enjoy reading?
>
> HH: Nothing sad or miserable any more. Favourite authors (apart from Tom [Tom Holt, her son]) are 1930s women writers (E.M. Delafield etc), Barbara Pym, and Arthur Marshall and Alan Coren.

** The *Guardian* lists authors' favourite books on its website. Jilly Cooper's top-ten list cites at no. 8, *Excellent Women* by Barbara Pym, described as:

> A wonderfully funny novel, about the goings-on in a London parish. A handsome naval officer and his feckless, unprincipled wife cause havoc among the flower-arranging ladies and the local vicar.

It is always interesting to know the other favourites of Pym *aficionados*. Jilly Cooper's other nine choices are, in order of preference: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen; *Middlemarch* by George Eliot; *A Dog Day* by Walter Emmanuel; *The Pursuit of Love* by Nancy Mitford; *The Tortoise and the Hare* by Elizabeth Jenkins; *Barchester Towers* by Anthony Trollope; *The Tale of Mr. Tod* by Beatrix Potter; *A Question of Upbringing* by Anthony Powell; and *The Judge's Story* by Charles Morgan.

See also, of course –

www.spore.it/pym/home_english.htm
and
www.barbara-pym.org

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Editor Hazel K. Bell

Committee
Phil Bacon; Bridget Guymer; Gabrielle Page; Maggie Parsons; Chris Ward; Maureen Woolley
co-opted: Deirdre Bryan-Brown
US Organizer Ellen Miller
email: ellen@ellenmiller.net

Society correspondence and queries to:
The Barbara Pym Society
The Development & Alumnae Office
St Hilda's College, Oxford OX4 1DY
tel. 01865 276867; fax 01865 276820
email: eileen.roberts@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

Editorial correspondence to:
Hazel K. Bell, 139 The Ryde
Hatfield, Herts AL9 5DP
tel. 01707 265201; fax 01707 273601
email hkbell@dialpipex.com

Pym **website address:**
www.spore.it/pym/home_english.htm

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