

Handsome, clever and rich: Wilmet Forsyth and Emma Woodhouse

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Philip Larkin may have written to Barbara Pym, '*Some Tame Gazelle* is your *Pride and Prejudice*,' but my contention is that *A Glass of Blessings* is her *Emma*. I am not alone in noticing this, though to my knowledge no other scholar has investigated the similarities in any depth. In her essay in *No Soft Incense*, Triona Adams says of the heroine of *A Glass of Blessings*, 'we might almost call her Wilmet Woodhouse in homage to Austen's *Emma*, as it is a novel about perception'. Michael Cotsell, in his volume about Barbara Pym for the Macmillan Modern Novelist series, takes it slightly further when he says,

A Glass of Blessings as we have it is the most charming, accomplished and purely delightful of Pym's novels. It may be described as Barbara Pym's *Emma*, a superbly designed comedy of an attractive and lively heroine's misapprehension of her situation and the feelings of those around her.

Later in the same essay he draws a further comparison when he says of the close of Pym's novel,

One of the most attractive things about *A Glass of Blessings* is that Wilmet probably never realises the whole of what has transpired to bring about her felicity. As with Jane Austen's *Emma*, where the reader may only very much later realise who bought Jane Fairfax a piano and when, Pym leaves us to gather it all.

My present paper sets out to examine further echoes and parallels in theme, character, plot and tone between the two novels, written about one hundred and forty years apart. This is not to suggest that Pym was consciously moulding her story on Austen's, of course – that was not her way of working, and there is no suggestion in her notebooks, as she began to create a new novel, that *Emma* was particularly present in her consciousness. Austen's novels were, however, certainly part of Pym's well-stocked mind.

Pym, who favoured quotes from English poetry for her titles, is known to have changed the title of this novel from *The Lime Tree Bower* (Samuel Taylor Coleridge) to *A Glass of Blessings* (George Herbert). It may be a coincidence that her second thought echoes the opening sentence of Austen's novel, but it certainly announces a heroine in a similar situation, the woman who seems to have everything and who is a little too pleased with herself and her situation: 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her'. With the exception of her age, this description could apply equally to Wilmet Forsyth. But there is something beyond character in the prominence given by both authors to the word 'blessings' – it characterises the imaginative worlds in which the heroines have their beings, worlds replete with material ease and comfort in which if happiness eludes for a while it is never far away. Though both heroines have their moments of despondence, and have to encounter threats to their equilibrium which they hardly saw coming, these are, in tone, both happy narratives.

Both were written at the height of their respective authors' powers and at contented, fulfilled times of their lives. *Emma* was the fourth of Jane Austen's novels to be published in as many years, and the first by the prestigious publisher John Murray; it was the second, after *Mansfield Park*, to be wholly conceived and composed at her Chawton home. She was just forty when it was published. Barbara Pym was forty-four when she wrote *A Glass of*

Blessings, the fifth of her novels to be published in eight years of growing reputation and acclaim. Austen could have no idea that *Emma* would be the last novel to be published in her lifetime, just as Pym could not have imagined that after one more successful novel, her work would be rejected for a decade and a half. Death ambushed one writer, and literary fashion the other.

As well as the many parallels to be discovered in the texts of the two novels, as I hope to demonstrate, it is notable that there should even be an echo *outside* the respective texts, in the personal letters of the authors. 'I am going to take a heroine whom nobody but myself will much like,' wrote Austen to a niece clamouring for another novel. 'I may as well warn you that the heroine is not very nice,' wrote Pym to her publisher in submitting *A Glass of Blessings*. Generations of readers have proved both authors wrong about their own creations, however, for in their self-delusions and struggles to identify and live a good life, and their generous-spirited appreciation of the good qualities of others, we do in fact find both Emma and Wilmet very endearing indeed.

The most obvious difference between their situations, apart from the fact that they live in different centuries, is that Wilmet is a married woman. I consider that this is one of Pym's strokes of genius. It would have been easy to make her one of her cast of spinsters, one more resembling a Leonora Eyre than a Mildred Lathbury, perhaps, and we do know that Wilmet was not a married woman in Pym's first conception, but perhaps a widow or divorcee, an Allegra Grey. But what is so brilliant about the novel as we have it is that Wilmet *has* her soulmate, who happens also to be a very good provider; she *has* her emotional stability (which through her own foolishness she risks throwing away), she *has* her source of happiness under her nose, but having become a little bored and blasé, it takes her a few adventures before she recognises this. In Austen's world, there could be no adventures for a married woman; her plots famously close with wedding bells. Her Emma Woodhouse also has her happiness under her nose, in the shape of her neighbour and mentor Mr Knightley, but she has not yet married him. Pym edges her plot into the twentieth century by making Wilmet a little more daring, a little more free, and by accepting that marriage is *not* the closure which eighteenth century literary convention dictated. Whether we would still have sympathy for Wilmet if she actually committed adultery is doubtful. Her adventures have to be in the imagination, no less than those of the respectable maiden Emma Woodhouse. Pym walks a finely judged line to suit the realities and mores of her age.

Each woman is beloved and indulged in her family circle, is financially free from care, and, living in a smooth-running household which makes few demands on her, enjoys a great deal of freedom as to how she spends her time. Priding herself on her elegance and social suavity, each imagines that an attractive man is in love with her, and toys with the idea of being in love with him. Such delightful imaginings, and flirtatious yet innocent encounters, bolster their respective egos and fill voids in lives and minds with very little to occupy them. For Emma Woodhouse Frank Churchill, and for Wilmet Forsyth Piers Longridge, represent the exciting 'other', a man of uncertain moral worth yet appealing personality, a man (as the reader sees) who is self-indulgent and allows himself to be amused by the heroine's lack of penetration.

The truths which are forced upon them are characteristic of their times. Emma finds that Frank Churchill is secretly engaged to another, and using her as cover. Wilmet finds that Piers Longridge is gay, and lives with Keith. Neither woman is heartbroken, but both are jolted out of their smugness. Not only must each accept that these men have never remotely been in love with them, but – and this is even worse for their self-esteem – their own readings of personal relationships, on which they had prided themselves, are shown to be seriously faulty. And, what is even more interesting from a literary point of view, is the question of whether the penny drops in the reader's mind before that of the heroine. Perhaps not, though we get more inkling in the case of Piers, I think, than

of Frank. But certainly, on second and subsequent readings, we see how all the clues are there, carefully laid by each author.

A significant difference in these two narratives is that Austen's is, like all her books, in the third person, and that of Pym, who varied her methods to suit the story she had to tell, in the first. In *Emma* we see almost everything through the heroine's eyes and inhabit her mind almost as if it *were* the first person, but there are two passages, both concerning Mr Knightley's view of Emma, when she is *not* present, and the novel would be the poorer without this alternative viewpoint. The tension is heightened, the reader begins to foresee trouble ahead, without being able to predict what it might be. This option is not open to the writer of a first-person narrative, but what Pym has to forego in this respect, she gains in the self-sufficiency of Wilmet's impressions.

Both *Emma* and *Wilmet* are snobs, but such is the skill of their respective authors, that we look on their snobbery indulgently. Wilmet early in the novel reveals hers, when she reflects that Father Bode, who has 'a slightly common voice,' might be the kind of person who prefers tinned salmon to smoked salmon, and then she is ashamed at the unworthy thought for she knows him to be a good person. Mr Coleman, Wilfred Bason and Keith – who also has 'a flat quiet voice, slightly common' – 'not quite our kind of voice' as Piers teases Wilmet – are also all perceived by her as belonging to a lower class than herself. This is perhaps no more than the perennial English habit of judging the fine distinctions of class from a person's accent and vocabulary within five minutes of meeting them, and is a frequent part of the comedy in the English novel. Wilmet learns to become quite fond of Keith, at least, despite his custard powder and Tide and the way he talks about her lovely home. Emma also begins by looking down on the young farmer Robert Martin – 'the sort of person with whom I can have nothing to do' – judging his voice, which she only hears at a distance, to be what she calls 'wholly unmodulated', and she persuades her friend Harriet to refuse his proposal of marriage saying that she could never visit her as a farmer's wife. Emma is also severe on Mrs Elton for certain verbal constructions, for example, referring to her own husband variously as 'my caro sposo,' 'my lord and master' and 'Mr E'.

The two plots are launched in similar ways. In the third chapter of her novel, Emma makes the deliberate decision to take up Harriet Smith as a friend to while away the emptiness of the coming winter, having foreseen 'many a long October and November evening' stretching ahead of her. Laying her plans, Emma intends to benefit Harriet: '*she* would notice her, she would improve her, she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners'. In the first chapter of *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet decides that what she calls 'my autumn plans' will include 'trying to befriend Piers Longridge' and in Chapter three, observing him at a party a little drunk, considers 'my friendship could be beneficial to him. It seemed an excellent winter programme'. They are, of course, very different types of friendship, but in both cases the heroine is partly motivated – or thinks she is – by doing good to the one befriended, thinking she knows best how to order their lives.

In fact, Wilmet has another friend, a woman, Mary Beamish, to whom she also intends to do good, even if only in such trivial ways as helping her to choose better clothes. The parallels are not straightforward but multifaceted. Mary Beamish – spinsterish, full of goodwill towards everyone – is a version of *Emma*'s Miss Bates, even down to the living with her old mother. But the feelings of Wilmet when she compares herself to Mary – 'the kind of person who always made me feel particularly useless – she was so very much immersed in good works, so splendid' – are similar to those that arise in *Emma* when she contemplates the simple-hearted sweet nature of Harriet Smith, 'really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two'. And

there is another woman with whom Emma compares herself unfavourably, Jane Fairfax, who is the accomplished and elegant creature she would like to be thought of herself.

The time-frame of both novels is notably similar. *Emma* begins on 28th September – the wedding-day of her former governess, which leaves her without companionship and in need of some change – and *A Glass of Blessings* begins on 18th October, St Luke's day and Wilmet's birthday, a good time for reviewing life. Both novels take about a year to play out and come to fruition at harvest time. Christmas plays a significant role in the development of both stories. It is on Christmas Eve that Emma's plans for Harriet are so brutally overthrown by Mr Elton's proposal of marriage to herself, and her realisation that she cannot manipulate people as easily as she thought. In *A Glass of Blessings*, much happens at Christmas. Old Mrs Beamish dies, the Forsyths visit Mr Bason at the clergy house, and Wilmet receives a gift whose donor she mistakes.

This episode in fact echoes two such mistakes by Emma Woodhouse. The charade presented by Mr Elton as part of his pursuit of Emma herself is taken by her as proof of his admiration for Harriet; and the other mistake, occurring in February, concerns Frank Churchill's gift of a piano to his unacknowledged fiancée Jane Fairfax. Of course, such a gift has to be kept secret from the whole community, and Emma is not the only person in ignorance of the true donor. But only she weaves fantasies around the gift, and while other neighbours are content to suppose the piano comes from Jane's benefactors the Campbells, Emma decides that it is a token of the illicit love of her friend's husband, Mr Dixon – a theory that she imparts to Frank Churchill himself, much to his private amusement. The illicit love of a friend's husband – how reminiscent of *A Glass of Blessings'* Harry Talbot, the person who has actually made the gift of a Victorian box to Wilmet. Again, creatively multi-faceted reflections of the earlier novel, but whether by chance or literary indebtedness, it would be presumptuous to decide.

In both novels, winter and spring proceed by measured steps – almost all the months are named in passing – and the weather warms up. Emma notices that the elder is out, and Wilmet, as befits her name, mentions the forsythia. As the months succeed one another the strands of the plot thicken and intertwine, until high summer is reached. In *Emma*, we are made to feel the intense heat of midsummer during the strawberry-picking visit to Donwell Abbey and the picnic on Box Hill. In *A Glass of Blessings*, outdoor heat is experienced during Wilmet's visit to Mary Beamish at the retreat where she works, and where the bees swarm.

Donwell Abbey is famous not only for its strawberry beds but for its apple trees, and at the retreat, 'The only task Mary could find for me was to pick and shell some peas for lunch, and to put the pods on the compost heap under the apple trees at the bottom of the garden. Here, in a kind of greenish twilight, stood a pile of grass cuttings and garden rubbish, and as I added my pods to it I imagined all this richness decaying in the earth and new life springing out of it.'

Wilmet tells us that she married Rodney partly because as a young officer he embodied 'those peculiarly English qualities which had seemed so lovable when we had first met in Italy during the war and I had been homesick for damp green English churchyards'. The repetition of the word English, the stress on the greenness of England are anticipated in *Emma*. Visiting Donwell Abbey, the home of Mr Knightley, Emma looks around to refresh her memory and reflects, 'It was a sweet view – sweet to the eye and to the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.' Both Mr Knightley and Rodney Forsyth are models of the English gentleman, reserved, honourable, socially assured, even commanding when required. Having to converse with both Keith and Wilfred Bason in the coffee bar, an alien haunt for the Forsyths, the unruffled Rodney speaks 'smoothly' and 'evenly'. Later he speaks 'calmly' when encountering Bason again

in the Devon tea shop. Neither Emma nor Wilmet ever has to blush for the man she marries. She can always depend on him to do and say the right thing.

Confessions bring the happy conclusions to both books. Frank Churchill confesses his secret engagement, which brings Mr Knightley and Emma to a mutual acknowledgement of their love. 'It darted through her with the speed of an arrow, that Mr Knightley must marry nobody but herself!' The confession in *A Glass of Blessings* is Rodney's. Finding that he has had a flirtation seems to make him more interesting in Wilmet's eyes – she has been thinking of him as somewhat aged and boring, incapable of any little romantic adventure such as hers with Piers or Harry – but more than that, it makes her realise the value of what she was in danger of throwing away, the congeniality of their marriage. They are calm and happy and courteous together, and find the same things amusing; what more can be expected of life? Together with the gifts of health and beauty and prosperity, a glass of blessings indeed. Or, as Jane Austen winds up her story with the conventional happy ending of a marriage, 'the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union'. *Emma* ends with three weddings: between Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, and Emma and Mr Knightley. *A Glass of Blessings* ends with two marriages – Sybil and Arnold Root, Mary Beamish and Marius Ransome – and almost a fresh start in the marriage of Wilmet and Rodney, as they move to a house of their own. In *Emma*, the weddings are specified as being in September, October and November; in *A Glass of Blessings*, in August and September. These are marriages formed in the most fruitful part of the year.

Both heroines have experienced the full rotation of the year, in which they have been humbled and have learned much about themselves and others, principally that others are quite capable of directing their own lives without help. Not only do both Frank Churchill and Piers Longridge find their own partners, but even Sybil and Arnold become engaged under Wilmet's nose, without her noticing their growing attachment. As Wilmet says to Mary Beamish: 'Sometimes you discover that you aren't as nice as you thought you were – that you're in fact rather a horrid person, and that's humiliating somehow.' She has been stung by Piers' word 'unlovable'. This equates with Emma's reflections, "It is tenderness of heart which makes my dear father so generally beloved ... which gives Isabella all her popularity. I have it not," and resolve that 'the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future'.

But lessons learnt, and new leaves turned over, both novels end on a note of laughter. 'You are trying not to smile ... I can hardly imagine that anything that pleases or amuses you should not please and amuse me too,' says Emma to Mr Knightley who is about to tell her of Harriet Smith's engagement to Robert Martin; while in *A Glass of Blessings*, as Rodney confesses to his flirtation, something about mentioning Prudence Bates's Regency sofa makes his mouth begin to twitch, and instead of being hurt or offended, the fundamentally nice-natured Wilmet dissolves with him into helpless laughter.

It goes without saying that there is much in both of these novels that is *not* reflected in the other; it would be absurd to think otherwise or to try to force comparisons when each has its own integrity as a fully imagined world. The wonderful sub-plot of Sybil and Arnold Root in *A Glass of Blessings* has no precedent in *Emma*, except in so far as Emma's mother-substitute Miss Taylor does marry and leave her to her own devices – but at the beginning of the book, not the end; and when married, Mr Knightley and Emma live in her father's house, just as Wilmet and Rodney have lived in Sybil's, though for different reasons. When Arnold marries and moves in with Sybil, the unconventionality of his so doing is described by this learned man drily as 'matrilocal or uxorilo-

cal residence ... where the husband goes to the wife's village in certain tribes,' while in *Emma*, Mrs Elton describes it as 'a shocking plan ... It would never do.'

Nor shall I stretch the point by remarking that food plays a large part in both novels, or knitting, or hair-styles. *Emma* is unusual among Austen's works in having far more of this kind of everyday minutiae, but these are common components of domestic novels, and it would be quite wrong to suggest that Barbara Pym is following Austen's practice here.

I get the impression when I read about Barbara Pym that continual comparisons with Jane Austen were inclined to make her testy, and who can blame her. It was as if she were being put in a box, the Jane Austen *de nos jours*. That is not what I have tried to do today, rather to celebrate the creative spirit as it suffused both writers with sheer joy in their respective creations. *A Glass of Blessings* is, in my opinion, Pym's most accomplished and revisitable novel, and to read it alongside *Emma* is by no means to find it suffer in the comparison, rather to appreciate the wholeness and complexity of its design.

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