

Barbara Pym and the Comedy of Manners

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Consider, carefully, the following scene.

They would settle themselves in for one of Liz's long drinking sessions before there was anything to eat, Leonora knew from experience. The cats would be in and out of the room and Leonora would try to avoid getting one on her lap, kneading at her skirt with its claws. Liz's own clothes were of course so much plucked by cats that the pulled threads gave an almost bouclé effect to everything she wore. Eventually Liz would embark again on the subject of her unhappy marriage. 'All that love, wasted,' she would say. Leonora would feel inadequate, having no experience of her own to match it. She had never been badly treated or rejected by a man — perhaps she had never loved another person with enough intensity for such a thing to be possible — whatever the reason she would keep silent, only perhaps observing that love was never wasted, or so it was said. Liz for her part would be equally bored by Leonora and her reminiscences of her Continental girlhood and later attachments mysteriously hinted at but which never seemed to have come to anything. [TSSD]

Who but Barbara Pym could have written the above? It is all there: the quiet confidence of the narration, the ease and elegance of the prose itself, the eye for the tiniest and most telling of details — who among us can fail to see precisely what Pym means by “the bouclé effect?” — not to mention the delicate strokes of graveyard humor throughout.

And who among us, for that matter, has not passed such a dreary evening as the one between Liz and Leonora, in which two parties may find themselves “equally bored” by each other? None of us, I would think, if we are being honest, and one of the great things about Barbara Pym is how we always feel that she is being honest: how she does not inflate or mythologize the world she is describing but merely reports on it with a factual, and very nearly deadly, calm. That calm is a great source of her authority on the page: the sense we get that when we read Barbara Pym that we are in the hands of a master. One supposes that Jane Austen herself would find nothing to criticize in the scene I read from above.

It is the waspish rather than cozy Pym whom I, for one, particularly admire: not the younger, rather sillier Pym of *Some Tame Gazelle* but the utterly adult, utterly soignée Pym of *The Sweet Dove Died*; not for nothing does this sublimely assured novel feature her best-dressed heroine, whose most excellent, autumnal choice of an “amethyst-coloured dress” for a stroll in the park with a younger man I have never forgotten. But the book we are here to celebrate today is a novel from Pym's 1950s period: the sparkling comedy *Jane and Prudence*.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that the forerunners of Liz and Leonora just might be Jane and Prudence. Might not Prudence with her Regency furniture and her scandalous habit of entertaining gentlemen after hours in her red velvet dressing-gown have turned, someday, into Leonora, with her love of Victorian objects and sentimental habit of recalling past admirers? And might not Jane, reeling from a messy 1970s-style divorce from Nicholas, have turned into a version of poor, disheveled Liz?

A bleak turn of events, you say, but on the very first pages of *Jane and Prudence*, such intimations of bleakness are already there. The scene takes on a lovely, but appropriately melancholy, cast, with the two women strolling past “the grey towers” of Oxford and Jane stopping to remark, in what is the very first piece of dialogue

from the book: “Ah, those delphiniums. I always used to think Nicholas’s eyes were just that colour. But I suppose a middle aged man — and he is that now, poor darling — can’t have delphinium coloured eyes.”

Soon, Prudence is chiming in with the plaintive words, “Those white roses always remind me of Laurence,” and if *Jane and Prudence* were not, at its heart, such a good-humored book, ultimately so much less slashing in spirit than *The Sweet Dove Died*, we would be in the land of “boring reminiscences” between two women who do not actually like each other very much.

It is the comedy of social life which I want to speak about to you today, and in Pym’s comedy, as in Austen’s, this comedy often comes from the ways in we do, indeed, bore and exasperate each other. Boredom, contempt, the offhand, even occasionally brutal appraisal of one’s fellow human beings, as in “Liz’s own clothes were of course so much plucked by cats...”: the British have a grand tradition of this kind of thing. And by the way, it takes a fine ear to know to add the words “of course” to that sentence about Liz’s clothing; that’s what makes it so superb, that’s the source of both the cruelty and the comedy. And although I do enjoy the easygoing companionship we find in Pym’s first person novels — as narrated by the splendidly reliable Mildred Lathbury of *Excellent Women*, or the rather less reliable Wilmet Forsyth of *A Glass of Blessings*, who is to my mind the most complex and captivating Pym heroine of them all — I think that Pym’s comic gifts are most perfectly suited to the use of the third person. *Jane and Prudence* is a great example of this.

Throughout the book — and it is a book that abounds in social occasions: parish teas, luncheons, card parties — characters sum up and circle each other warily, often resulting in outrageous suspicions and observations about each other’s behavior. I can’t be the only person in this room for whom parts of *Jane and Prudence* are laugh-out-loud funny. The best moments are the ones in which Pym uses what we have come to think of as her “anthropological” technique. Here is a scene that we could only be privy to in a third person book:

‘Do you suppose Miss Bates has any love life?’ asked Marilyn idly one morning after Prudence had been staying with Jane. ‘She’s quite attractive still, really.’

‘I wonder how old she is,’ said Gloria. ‘About thirty, do you think?’

‘Oh yes, must be. I hope I die before I’m thirty — it sounds so old.’

‘Forty must be worse,’ said Gloria sensibly. ‘I shouldn’t like to be forty. Miss Trapnell’s over forty, I should think, and Miss Clothier too.’

They brooded silently for a moment over this horror.

The narrator later concludes:

They discussed Miss Bates’ passion for Dr. Grampian for some moments, after which they came to the conclusion that any feeling one might have for such an elderly man — and in the office too — could hardly be counted as love life.

I’d like to point out two things about this. One, it is fashionable nowadays to steer writers away from the use of the adverb, as when Pym writes, “said Gloria sensibly.” And yet Pym has, once again, a very fine ear here. Her adverbs are stylish and inevitably somehow right, especially when remarking on the style of a character’s tone of voice, and here, “said Gloria sensibly,” is just the right touch. In this scene, as in so many of Pym’s, the right adverb enhances the comedy: adds to the wickedness of it all. I think, also, of the line ““Is he married?” asked Dulcie stoutly,” from *No Fond Return of Love*. You’d have to be tone-deaf to make the case that that line would be as funny without the word “stoutly.”

One more thing about the scene between Gloria and Marilyn. That tiny, and rather woeful, aside — “and in the office too” — is brilliant, consummate Barbara Pym.

The use of the third person also allows us to see poor, ill-groomed but well-meaning Jane through the pitiless gaze of her daughter Flora; young women in Pym are so pompous. One cannot wait to see them grown up and have a few hard knocks themselves. Think of Dulcie’s niece Laurel, dismissing Viola with the following description: “Life, apparently, had been a bit difficult. Well, it usually was, thought Laurel with the easy scorn of her eighteen years. Life might improve if Miss Dace — could one possibly call her Viola? — were to send that coat to the cleaner and get herself a new hair style.”

And here is Flora, despairing of what her mother is going to wear to tea: “Her dress, a patterned navy foulard with long sleeves, was really too light for October and was a little crushed, for, as Flora rightly guessed, it had been put away in the drawer since the last warm weather.”

One of Pym’s great gifts is her absence of sentimentality about motherhood. Later, when Flora’s beau, Paul, comes to dine at the Cleveland’s, Jane is given to opportunity to cast a cold eye on her daughter’s taste in men, observing to Prudence: “I have been trying to see how he could be described as ‘rather amusing,’ which was what Flora said about him in her letter.”

Then, too, consider the case of the love affair between Prudence and poor Fabian Driver: I say poor Fabian Driver because how swiftly Pym topples him off his mighty throne! No romantic hero, no Mr. Darcy or Captain Wentworth, is Prudence’s latest conquest in her long line of the “unsatisfactory love affairs” that she “had got into the way of preferring...to any others.”

The dispassionate Flora describes Fabian to Paul as being handsome in “a rather used-up, Byronic kind of way. But he’s rather middle-aged, really.” And to Paul, he is notable only as the man who came to dinner and appeared not to know what an anthropologist was.

For a different account of a so-called “romance,” consider Wilmet’s first person account of her infatuation with Piers, a man on whom, I confess, I have long nursed something of a hopeless crush myself. I can see the dissolute splendor of a figure like Piers through Wilmet’s eyes. I can see his “aquiline features and fair hair” and picture exactly how handsome he looks in his duffel-coat. I dream of slipping off to have illicit lunches with him, at which I might sport “a little turquoise velvet hat.” I can imagine how out walking with him on a beautiful May afternoon one might commit the faux pas, as Wilmet does, of getting carried away with inappropriate emotions and “plunging in among the lupins.”

No chance of me feeling anything so heady and sweet for Fabian — no chance at all. But suppose we were reading Prudence’s first person account of their affair. Surely Prudence, a woman given to sitting in restaurants alone and imagining that strangers see her as “that interesting-looking young woman, with the traces of tears on her cheeks, eating smoked salmon,” might embellish the details, much as we suspect Wilmet of doing: *and A Glass of Blessings* is a story, remember, of the predicaments of a heroine who gets things wrong, most disastrously in her choice of the homosexual Piers as her would-be paramour. We can imagine Prudence getting a number of things wrong about Fabian too. Would she be capable of telling the reader that he is “used-up, Byronic?” or would she prefer to leave it at just “Byronic?” Is not Flora’s “used-up, Byronic” the more striking description, however? Does it not have the ring of supreme truth?

I am compelled to go on and on about Fabian Driver, for on rereading the novel in preparation for this paper, I came to the conclusion that this rather hapless fellow is my favorite character in the whole book, the one on whom Pym casts an especially brutal eye. And I love, love, love the account of the following supposedly romantic dinner between him and Prudence, in which Pym tells us that “Prudence chose what she would have, perhaps more carefully than a woman truly in love would have done, and Fabian made his choice, which was equally deliberate and not quite the same as hers...The chicken will have that wonderful sauce with it, thought Prudence, looking into Fabian’s eyes.” And later on, when Prudence protests that all evenings must come to an end, Fabian’s first, uncensored thought is the hilarious: “They need not.”

Jane and Prudence abounds in so many delicious scenes along these lines, but I’d love to show you some of my favorite scenes of social life from Pym’s other novels as well. Accepting invitations in Pym is a serious business, for every occasion may contain various disappointments and pitfalls. Dulcie, on accepting an invitation to dine at Viola’s, thinks: “One did not go out to see people for the sake of a meal, she told herself stoutly” — I urge you to notice that use of that wonderful word “stoutly” again! — “thinking of all the things she disliked most — tripe, liver, brains, figs and semolina.” Who among us has not felt such misgivings at the thought of dining at the home of a new acquaintance?

Invitations for long weekends in Pym are undertaken at one’s own peril. Think of the fastidious Leonora, being told by Joan, her hostess, that her bed is not yet made. Leonora thinks, and quite correctly, as things turn out: “It was ominous, the bed not yet being made...” She ends the weekend lying in said bed with a migraine. And Prudence’s “emerald green turban, a shade darker than her nightdress” was altogether the wrong thing to pack for a dreary weekend at the vicarage. “A little shocking,” is Jane’s estimation of it, coming in with the tea in the morning. Here, Jane can see about Prudence what Prudence would not be so keen to see about herself: that she is an unmarried women of twenty-nine given to over-dressing in the country, going so far as to appear in public, not just the boudoir, in “something black and filmy, chiffon perhaps.”

Which brings me to the question of what to wear when accepting invitations, fashion in Pym being a ceaseless source of amusement. Take the sad case of Penelope Grandison from *An Unsuitable Attachment*. I have always loved the character of Penelope, the “Pre-Raphaelite Beatnik,” and her playful sense of fashion, so much more of the scintillating 60s than the staid 50s. But perhaps she would have been advised to play it more safely when attending Rupert Stonebird’s dinner party in a too-tight dress of silver lame: we will recall that the dress eventually splits in the back. Rupert, helping her on with her coat at the end of the night, finds the split at the back “provocative and rather endearing,” which is a not inaccurate description of Penelope herself. There is also a subtle sexuality in Rupert’s reaction which is the kind of thing that Pym is so expert at: one thinks of the suggestive nature of Ned’s scent, “so much more powerful and exotic than the discreetly British ‘after-shave’ which was all that James had ever used,” in *The Sweet Dove Died*. It is in this fashion that we learn for certain that the two of them are indeed lovers.

And any writer of comic fiction ought to pay attention to the dinner party scene in *No Fond Return of Love*, in which Dulcie and Viola are captured in Pym’s perfect brush strokes: “Two women in black dresses were seen standing by the fire as if waiting for something to happen, as, indeed, they were.” Pym handles in this chapter a number of different points-of-view, lending an almost delirious cast to the proceedings. Aylwin does not fail to observe that Maurice likes his gin. Maurice is anxious to show off that he recognizes Aylwin’s Proust quotation. Aylwin thinks “what a pleasure it would be to initiate [Laurel] into the joys of drinking.” Viola is “embarrassed and disgusted by Aylwin’s behaviour toward Laurel.” Dulcie throughout all of this, in the manner of excellent

women everywhere, frets about Miss Lord and the appearance of the soup tureen. And it is Miss Lord, later on, who notices that the fringe of Viola's shawl "must've dipped in the soup."

Laurel, meanwhile, sums the whole situation up with the following priceless observation, applicable to so much of Barbara Pym: "There was something so depressing about the culture of middle-aged people."

Then just as the party is breaking up:

'My dear Dulcie,' Maurice murmured. 'So very sweet of you. A lovely evening...'

So her name was Dulcie. Aylwin registered this fact for the first time, and when he came to say goodbye he made a point of using it, not to be outdone by the younger man.

Afterwards, Dulcie is flattered and yearns for their next encounter:

She wondered when she might dare to call him 'Aylwin.'

On this bleak note — yes, bleak again, for it is the bleakness of Barbara Pym that I so love — the chapter ends. I urge you all to go and reread the entire scene; it is marvelous stuff.

I repeat: "Two women in black dresses were seen standing by the fire as if waiting for something to happen, as, indeed, they were." I have always loved this sentence, and in it I think that Pym gets at the heart of why we accept invitations in the first place — why we rouse ourselves from our beds and our endless round of "hot milky drinks" to go out into the world. Because we are waiting for something to happen. Because something might actually happen. Something, even if it seems at first glance like nothing. I'll conclude with a sly little scene that many of you will remember from *The Sweet Dove Died*, in which Senhor MacBride-Pereira gets swept up in the unfolding saga of Leonora Eyre's vanished *marron gâteau*. Pym writes: "Only a retired Brazilian diplomat, the type of man who could spare the time for afternoon tea, sitting at a table midway between the protagonists, noticed the little drama, if such it was. 'Now what have I seen?' he asked himself. 'Something or nothing?'"

This is the waspish Pym I spoke of earlier — Pym at her absolute best. Dark, knowing, bitter yet generous in her feel for humanity. The result in the end creates far from a "bouclé", but rather a beautifully tailored, a practically flawless effect.

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