

# Not Quite a Trollope Wife: Jane Cleveland's Literary Expectations of Herself As a Clergy Wife

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Upon opening the pages of Barbara Pym's novel *Jane and Prudence*, the reader meets her two protagonists: Jane, the middle-aged wife of a clergyman, and Prudence, her former student who is now her good friend. As they walk in their college garden on a summer evening, Jane recalls her youthful aspirations to model herself on characters from the novels of Anthony Trollope, Charlotte M. Yonge, and other nineteenth-century writers. Pym's third-person narrator observes,

When she and Nicholas were engaged, Jane had taken great pleasure in imagining herself as a clergyman's wife, starting with Trollope and working through the Victorian novelists to the present-day gallant, cheerful wives, who ran large houses and families on far too little money and sometimes wrote articles about it in the *Church Times*. But she had been quickly disillusioned.

Nicholas's first curacy had been in a town where she had found very little in common with the elderly and middle-aged women who made up a greater part of the congregation. Jane's outspokenness and her fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated; other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire were apparently necessary. And then, as the years passed and she realized that Flora was to be her only child, she was again conscious of failure, for her picture of herself as a clergyman's wife had included a large Victorian family like those in the novels of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge. (J&P)

Like many of Pym's characters, and perhaps many of us, Jane has an interior dialogue running in her mind while going about her daily life. Critiques of the passing scene, quirky observations, bits of half-forgotten lines of poetry, hymns, and old popular songs, even large chunks of well-remembered poetry flash through her mind. Since she is seldom focused on the exact trend of the conversation at hand, she projects a bemused aura to those around her. Slangy expressions such as "flakey," "out to lunch," "spacey," and "space cadet" come to mind in describing Jane.

Jane has another gift: she seldom has an unexpressed thought, so she has a tendency to drop unintentional bombs into the conversation. When Father Lomax, a neighboring clergyman, calls for tea for the first time, Jane opines, "I suppose old atheists seem less wicked and dangerous than young ones, one feels there is something of the ancient Greeks in them." Poor Father Lomax, who thinks no such thing, must hastily scurry back to discussion of Sunday school teachers and parish church councils, while Jane dreamily muses on other things.

Jane does have one gift which might align her with one of Trollope's more traditional clergy wives: her maiden name, Bold. Barbara Pym teases the reader by giving Jane one of the same names as Eleanor Harding Bold of the first Barchester book, *The Warden*. But the resemblance of the characters ends with the name Bold. Eleanor has many conventional attributes of the Victorian gentlewoman, but she manages to outmaneuver her bossy brother-in-law, Archdeacon Grantly, in *The Warden*, and Mr. Slope in *Barchester Towers*, to marry two men of her own choosing. Not much happens to Eleanor after her second marriage to the Rev'd Francis Arabin, except that she has a daughter just as Jane has Flora; both

women settle into domesticity. It is the nature of that domesticity into which Jane settles which forms the major focus of *Jane and Prudence*.

Jane has a cook and her daughter Flora can cook, so her household duties are light. She serves tea to visitors, although she is happy to have Miss Doggett take over the pouring for her. The seasonal observations at the church such as the Harvest Festival and Pentecost have already been taken well in hand by the excellent women of the parish. In fact, one feels Jane would have a hard time wresting these responsibilities from such doughty ladies.

Jane invents reasons for going to London and getting out of meetings of the women's groups in the church. Buying confirmation gifts for the children at a religious book store provides the excuse for two Bunberrying trips to visit her friend Prudence. On the first trip she becomes distracted and forgets to purchase the children's books she has selected, necessitating the second trip. Her husband, Nicholas, seems to recognize her ruses but smiles at them indulgently. Even he is heard to sigh, "Yes, one does rather long for talk of intelligent people sometimes—people of one's own kind, I mean."

Jane laughs, "Oh that would be too much! Besides, we might not be equal to it now."

Jane and Nicholas met at Oxford and have memories of more elevated conversations and studies. Presumably, Nicholas has memories of discussions of fine points of theology, topics which don't come up often at jumble sales, or indeed in most parish work. Jane remembers her own "stillborn research," "the influence of something upon somebody," and has a hard time recalling whether her subject was John Donne or John Cleveland, an obscure seventeenth-century poet who was an ancestor of her husband's. She often threatens to get back to her research, but then her mind flutters off into another direction.

So which Trollope wives was Jane hoping to model herself on when she was a bride? Surely not Mrs. Quiverful, the impecunious mother of twelve and wife of the prodigious Mr. Quiverful, rector of Puddingdale, who appears in *Barchester Towers*. It is all very well to talk of gallant, cheerful wives living on little money, but the Quiverfuls really live hand-to-mouth until good fortune befalls them at the end of the novel. Manna may have fed the Israelites in the desert, but manna seems unavailable in the twentieth century, and Jane is not capable of living on nineteenth-century windfalls like the Quiverfuls.

What about Mrs. Proudie, the redoubtable wife of the bishop, who befriends Mrs. Quiverful in order to strengthen her already iron-like grip on her own cowed husband? Alas, Jane is not of the self-same mettle as Mrs. Proudie, who could shake the present-day Church of England were she to step out of the pages of Trollope and stride the halls of Lambeth Palace. Jane is vague, while Mrs. Proudie is purposeful to a fault. No, Mrs. Proudie must remain Trollope's own private gargoyle, not a model for a twenty-one year old bride dreaming of her life as a clergy wife. (As an aside, I see Hyacinth Bucket as Mrs. Proudie's nearest fictional descendent.)

Barbara Pym stipulates that Jane is fanciful, and she certainly is a would-be matchmaker for her friend Prudence. What matron in the pages of Trollope better fits the matchmaker description than La Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni – Nata Stanhope? While her father, Dr. Stanhope, has abandoned his duties to a curate as the rector of a Barchester church in order to languish on the shores of Lake Como, La Signora, who has awarded herself a little gold coronet on her calling card, takes up with a Roman of doubtful origins and produces a daughter whom she styles, "the last of the Neros." Crippled in an unspecified manner, she is carried around by adoring minions; a beauty with charm, she delights in the malevolent teasing of frauds and the matchmaking which helps Eleanor Bold to secure her second husband. La

Signora skewers the scheming clergyman, Mr. Slope, by singing some lines of an old Scottish song, “It’s gude to be off with the auld love/Before ye be on with the new.” (Barchester, 247) . Jane echoes this refrain when she admonishes Fabian Driver to be honest with Prudence about his attachment to Jessie Morrow. Are Jane and La Signora fanciful? Yes. Are they would-be matchmakers? Yes. Are they alike in any other way? Not in a million years!

Jane’s flamboyant nature might have made her a fine helpmeet to the peculiar Rev. Mr. Josiah Crawley of Trollope’s *Last Chronicle of Barchester*; Crawley goes through dramatic public humiliation when he is falsely accused of stealing a check . He is succored by his long-suffering wife before his final vindication at the end of the novel. Nicholas Cleveland recognizes that Jane might have risen to such an occasion when he says, “How you would have stood by me if I had been accused of stealing a cheque. I can just imagine you!” But such dramatic opportunities for heroism are not the stuff of real life, certainly not in the life of Jane Cleveland. As Jane says, “I was going to be such a splendid clergyman’s wife when I married you, but somehow it hasn’t turned out like *The Daisy Chain* or *The Last Chronicle of Barchester*.”

No, Jane is not a Trollope wife, but might she be found in the pages of Charlotte M. Yonge’s novel, *The Daisy Chain*? Barbara Pym was a life-long fan of Yonge and *The Daisy Chain*, the seven hundred page story of the worthy May family of twelve children and their good country doctor father. Each of the children is attempting to become a better Christian by overcoming hardships and attempting to root out small flaws like flightiness and stubbornness (one flaw per child) from their personalities. The heroine Ethel and the other girls of the family are applauded by Yonge for subordinating their personalities and talents to the advancement of their brothers. The modern reader is not charmed by the final portrait of spunky Ethel broken on the wheel of the Victorian family and coming “to understand that the unmarried woman must not seek undivided return of affection, and must not set her love with exclusive eagerness on aught below, but must be ready to cease in turn to be first with any” (Yonge 667). *The Daisy Chain* is a didactic novel in the genre of Louisa May Alcott’s much superior *Little Women* and is a good example of the way Barbara Pym can take elements from other writers and rework them entirely to good effect in her own novels. Perhaps there is some of Ethel in her excellent women including Jane. Certainly the expectations for clergy wives and families were very high in the nineteenth century and are reflected in Yonge, but these expectations continued right into the twentieth century and are often reflected in Pym’s work. Unlike Yonge, however, Pym uses irony and humor to undercut these expectations. Jane knows she is not a clerical wife out of Trollope or Yonge, but she thinks she might have met current-day expectations better in their mythical worlds.

In a 1978 BBC interview , Pym addresses frequent comparisons to Anthony Trollope and to Jane Austen:

Critics discussing my work sometimes tentatively mention these great names, mainly, I think, because I tend to write about the same kind of people and society as they did, although, of course, the ones I write about live in the twentieth century. (CTS)

But we know Pym always had Austen in the back of her mind. In her literary journal for 1952-53, she admits to having a number of loose ends to be knit together at the close of *Jane and Prudence* and makes a note to herself to “read some of Miss Austen’s last chapters and find out how she manages all those loose ends” (Ms. Pym 43: IV,7). *Jane and Prudence* does not end in the tidy manner of an Austen novel with all the strands accounted for; the fate of Prudence is open-ended and yet the knitting together of Jane’s and her husband’s lives is distinctly Austenian.

When one thinks of literary matchmakers, Jane Austen's Emma springs to mind, but Jane Cleveland is unlike Emma in most respects; she does not have Emma's money, sense of style, or determined purpose in her matchmaking. Her romance with her husband, Nicholas, which was spiced with fragments of poetry by Donne and Marvell in its early days, has now settled into "mild kindly looks and spectacles." If Nicholas was ever a Mr. Knightly to Jane's Emma, those days are long gone, and domestic tranquility and sameness reigns in the Cleveland household. Jane's friend Prudence Bates's last name echoes that of Miss Bates in the novel *Emma*, but Prudence abhors being called "Miss Bates" lest she be thought anything like Jane Austen's silly, chatty Miss Bates. But, unbeknownst to Prudence, Jane has cast her in a different Austen role from the novel, that of the ingénue, Harriet Smith. Jane happily sees herself as the matchmaking Emma Woodhouse, not realizing that Prudence, the object of her machinations, is not nearly as malleable as Miss Smith. In Jane's casting of herself as Emma and later as the character in a novel by Mrs. Henry Ward, the writer of popular Victorian melodramas, we see the continuous displacement of Jane's humdrum life into far more exciting fictional realms. Perhaps this is a disease which people who study English literature are particularly prone to, as even Jane recognizes, but Jane has an acute form of the malady, and tends to wander around in a fictional and poetic mental world displaced from everyday life. Of course there are advantages to Jane's preoccupation with literature: she can easily transport herself from a melodrama by Mrs. Henry Ward to a comic scene from Shakespeare and see the quibbling church council members as Dogberry and Verges, thus rendering the whole scene much ado about nothing.

Although Jane often identifies with fictional characters, her real literary love is poetry, especially seventeenth-century poetry, and most especially the poetry of obscure poets. Under her special care is the poet John Cleveland, a remote ancestor of her husband Nicholas. Barbara Pym herself deserves great credit for even being acquainted with Cleveland, because his work does not spring to mind to even a devotee of metaphysical poetry. Comparing John Donne and Andrew Marvell to John Cleveland puts one in mind of Mark Twain's comment about good and bad writing as being the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Metaphysical poetry at its best is ingenious and clever, but at its most extreme can be contorted and obscure. When Jane is musing that her marriage has lost its poetry and faded into "mild, kindly looks and spectacles," a favorite line of Cleveland's comes to her mind, "What doth my she-advowson fly incumbency," although she admits the line is not particularly apt. Apparently Cleveland's poetic love will not avail of herself of her "she-advowson," that is her right to the vacant incumbency of his love. This is the sort of poetry that Elizabeth Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice* would warn us might kill all but the stoutest love, but it has somehow caught Jane's fancy.

Throughout the novel Jane alludes to lines by John Donne and Andrew Marvell four times each, John Milton and John Keats twice each, as well as William Wordsworth, George Herbert, Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold, and John Betjeman, but she also has at her fingertips some poets who were surely not in the curriculum at her Oxford college. When she attends the meeting of "a vague literary society" to which she belongs, she suddenly recalls the words of nineteenth-century Irish poet, George Darley:

In bowers of love men take their rest,  
In loveless bowers we sigh alone;  
With bosom-friends are others blest,  
But we have none—but we have none.

She then mentally lurches into another line, “swans in snowy couples and the murmuring seal lying close to his sleek companion” and, in contemplating these ethereal creatures, almost misses her bus to Prudence’s flat.

When Fabian Driver finally gets around to putting a stone on his wife Connie’s grave, Jane seems to think the words of the seventeenth-century Bishop of Chichester, Henry King, writing on the death of his wife:

Stay for me there; I will not fail  
To meet thee in that hollow vale.  
And think not much of my delay;  
I am already on the way...

Clearly Jane does not think Fabian’s devotion to Connie matches that of the bishop to his wife, given Fabian’s lapses during marriage and his quick reattachments to Prudence and Jessie Morrow. Barbara Pym teases the reader by never revealing what Driver puts on his wife’s grave. One can only imagine.

When Jane is not reciting poetry and bits from Victorian novels in her head, she is recalling hymns and popular songs such as “Dona Clara” from the 1930’s. Mr. Mortlake, a member of the Parochial Church Council and the piano tuner, pounds out notes on the piano while Jane seizes his hat and pirouettes around the room singing, “O Donna Clara, I saw you dancing last night.” Not quite a typical clergy wife! But at least she restrained herself from greeting him with a low bow and “Buon giorno, Rigoletto!”

The reader is led to think of Flora as the practical member of the Cleveland household, but even she has her poetic flights of fancy. When she is admiring Mr. Oliver in church, she is reminded of some lines of poetry by William Roscoe Caldwell from the poem, “Spiritual Love”: she muses, “something about ‘my devotion more secure, woos thy spirit high and pure....’” She is so taken with these lofty sentiments, she vows to copy them into her diary. Later she sees Fabian Driver as Samson Agonistes being led away captive by the women in the persons of Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow. Will three years at Oxford and more time with her mother engender in Flora even more poetic flights of fancy?

Jane’s protégée Prudence also has affection for poetry which has passed into obscurity. We see her eating lunch in a restaurant and musing over a poem entitled “The Unknown Eros” by the Victorian poet, Coventry Patmore. Patmore’s memory in the real world has been kept alive by Virginia Woolf’s observation that she had to strangle his “Angel in the House” to realize her writing ambitions. A quick glimpse at “The Angel in the House” reveals an ideal courtship and marriage according to the lights of Patmore, one in which the woman subordinates her entire personality to that of her husband. Prudence, however, is reading section XI of “The Unknown Eros” which is entitled “Tired Memory.” The poem as a whole yearns for an unknown lover, while the “Tired Memory” section is enough to make the reader languish into a permanent state of prostration. That Prudence can read Patmore with pleasure tells us that she is just as capable as Jane of lapsing into unreal realms and romantic speculations. She is realistic enough to recognize that it is amazing that Geoffrey Manifold can quote lines from such an obscure poem and wonders what his quotation might portend. By the end of the novel, however, Prudence is on steadier ground with Geoffrey and can agree with Jane that their love is, in the words of Marvell, “the Conjunction of the Mind, and the Opposition of the Stars.” One hopes such high sentiments will be enough when there is washing up to be shared.

Even Fabian Driver has knowledge of at least one Marvell poem, for he has inscribed the same line from Marvell's "Definition of Love" in both a book he gave his late wife Connie and one he gave Prudence. Perhaps he is the sort of man who is more loyal to a poet than to the women in his life.

Those who have read the early manuscript of *Some Tame Gazelle* which Barbara Pym wrote before World War II, and which is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, will remember that it was full of long quotations from those Barbara called "our greater and lesser English poets." Among the changes in the final post-war version of the novel is a severe curtailment of quotations from poems and novels. To be sure, the *Some Tame Gazelle* we know contains many allusions to literature, but they are worked in more skillfully than in the earlier version and do not impede the narrative as they sometimes do in the early manuscript. Comparing the two versions of *Some Tame Gazelle*, we can see that Barbara Pym is learning her craft as a novelist. Pym's use of allusions to the works of other writers in *Jane and Prudence* takes her even further in fully integrating this material into her own work and making it a harmonious ornament to her own writing. Harriet and Belinda Bede and Archdeacon Hoccleve of *Some Tame Gazelle* are lovers of poetry which enriches their lives, but the fictitious world of poetry and novels constitutes the very soul of Jane Cleveland.

As suggested previously, John Donne and Andrew Marvell are Jane's true loves despite her many forays into the work of more obscure poets. Jane correctly predicts that Flora's boyfriend Paul will quote Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed" to her with the line "O My America! My new-found land..." despite the fact that he is a geographer and not a student of English literature. When Jessie Morrow manages to snare Fabian Driver and Jane realizes that her matchmaking efforts to pair Fabian and Prudence have gone for naught, she muses that a beautiful wife would have been too much for Fabian and that there was no beauty at all in many marriages. A not quite appropriate quotation comes to her from Donne's "The Relic," "Differences of sex no more we knew, than our guardian angels do..." It makes her smile to realize that a poetic quotation is sure to come to her on every occasion even if it is not a very apt quotation. Jane's self-observation is quite astute: she is always at home with herself and in good company because she has so much poetry and other literature tumbling around in her head.

As outside observers of Jane, we might ask, but to what end? Does she have the soul of a Donne or a Marvell or of even a John Cleveland? Has she developed the traits of a Trollope wife or a Yonge heroine? Well, no. After all, Trollope was a satirist, albeit a gentle one, and we could not wish Mrs. Proudie or Senora Neroni, nata Stanhope, out of the pages of the books in which they appear. Perhaps Jane is a bit like Eleanor Bold Arabin in that both women are assertive in procuring the men they want but fairly acquiescent in the conduct of the rest of their lives. Jane is certainly not like any of the women in Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, a didactic novel which hopes to instruct well-bred young women in their duties. When Nicholas Cleveland wonders aloud what either of them can do about squabbling parish members, Jane says to her husband, "we can only go blundering along in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call us." She regrets not having been a heroic figure from the pages of a novel, but is realistic enough to see herself as a well-intentioned woman muddling along with a jumble sale's worth of poetry tumbling around in her head. Fortunately, Jane and Nicholas seem to appreciate each other just as they are. And so do Jane and Prudence's many readers, who might say with Jane, something as poetic as, "fear not that we shall cease to love you, for we love you well."

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