

'Not Named Amongst Christians': Debating 'Marginal' Homosexuals in *A Glass of Blessings* and 1950s England

Part 2: Nick Turner

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I'd like to follow Libby's paper with a look at homosexuality in *A Glass of Blessings* that is both more specific, and more general. This topic is clearly not an unusual one, given the content of the book. At the centenary conference I organised last summer, there were two proposed papers on the subject. 'Two Gay Lectures at UCLan Pym conference' proclaimed someone's blog: an amusing picture, and something Barbara Pym would, I suspect, have liked. Joseph Kennedy gave a highly original and very theoretical Queer Theory reading of Pym. He argued that

reading Pym queerly allows us to see how she plays with normativity, romance and desire as she constructs the gendered and temporal identities and development of her characters. The two novels in which Pym shows her lead female characters embarking on quasi-romantic relationships with men who have sex with men are read here in terms of this search for a definable queer (textual) phenomenology. In *The Sweet Dove Died* we see Pym subversively representing the (by turns selfish and unsure) motives and identifications of Leonora and James in order to show how a woman's desire for a man can be as queerly constructed as that of homosexually identified characters. By contrast, *A Glass of Blessings* plays with the domestic and interpersonal relationships of its characters to explore the ways in which normativity, queerness, and 'orientation' play against one another in all human interactions.¹

The paper will be published at the end of 2014 in a special issue by *WOMEN: A Cultural Review*. Robert Mack in turn proposed that

for many of today's readers, Pym's narratives possess the additional appeal of presenting a sustained (and comparatively rare and often extraordinarily candid) picture of male homo-social and homosexual behaviour in England extending from the 1930s through to the 1970s.²

He also suggested that he would

reconsider the received and largely uncontested consensus that Pym's work demonstrates an ambitiously progressive stance with regards to the sexual and social issues of her day ... the novelist's attitudes with reference to the subject of sexuality, generally, were often far less radical (or 'forward-looking') than has frequently been maintained.

He posited that although

...she would never have counted herself among the most purposefully or radically committed heralds of a new era ... A survey of the novelist's major works in fact suggests that, as a writer, Pym remained throughout her professional career far more aware than many of her contemporaries of the constraints exerted both by the real and the potential tyrannies of traditional gender boundaries and social roles ... Pym was much more alive and responsive than most of her fellow writers to the quietly shifting patterns of erotic orientation and expression throughout the period in which she was writing. Although she might not have been able entirely to break free of the cultural norms that connected gender stereotypes to conventional forms of representation in the mid-twentieth century, Pym at the very least recognized and *anticipated* in a remarkably prescient manner the very perception of sexuality and gender as transformative and transformable social roles or constructs.

I have quoted Mack at length here, as I think he gets right to the heart of what I want to develop further here. Equally significantly, Orna Raz's essay 'One of Those: Ambiguous Treatment of Male Homosexuality' in her book *Social Dimensions in the Novels of Barbara Pym* gives a thorough and original reading of the novel in terms of its historical period. Anyone interested in Pym's depiction of homosexuality should read this.

Reading Raz made me think that *A Glass of Blessings* is, in fact, Pym's most interesting novel in terms of homosexuality. I might flippantly say it's her 'gayest book'. While *A Sweet Dove Died* puts homo- or bisexual characters more at the forefront, *A Glass of Blessings* fascinates because of the *campness*, the relatively large number of apparently homosexual characters, and the way they are both central, and marginal.

Judging the importance and reception of the issue of homosexuality in this novel depends largely on the lense through which we look. Reviewers at the time made little of the 'issue'; a rare reviewer who did, as Yvonne Cocking notes (143), was Peter Green of the *Daily Telegraph* ('queer goings on of male housekeepers are described with catty accuracy'). *A Glass of Blessings* was not as favoured at the time as Pym's other novels. This was partly because of its promotion; was it also, perhaps, because of its subject matter?

Libby's paper has shown exactly what the period was like, and the now unimaginable restrictions it placed on life for homosexual men. With this in mind, it is not surprising that homosexuality was so marginally represented in literature: it was a marginal existence. If we look at other notable writers of the 1950s – Doris Lessing, William Golding, Kingsley Amis, Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Rosamund Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor – homosexuals are notable for their absence. In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, we cannot really say that Sebastian Flyte's homosexuality is more than a phase.

There are some notable exceptions, however. Pamela Hansford Johnson discusses the subject in her novel *The Last Resort*. In 1954, lesbian author Sylvia Townsend Warner published the excellent *The Flint Anchor*, a historical novel set in 19th century Norfolk, where homosexuality is an accepted, undramatic part of the lives of the fishermen. The same year, Mary Renault (who was also lesbian) brought out *The Charioteer*. Angus Wilson's 1952 *Hemlock and After* was a radical and brave piece of 'social realism' about a married writer who is homosexual; Wilson's career would continue to spotlight homosexuality. In 1956, a young Irishman named Patrick Martin brought out *Aubade*. And in 1958, Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* came out, a novel in which one of the main characters is 'gay'.

It is saying something, though, that the fiction of a heterosexual woman writer in some ways gives the most positive representation of homosexuality, more so than in the examples quoted above. Wilson's work, particularly *Hemlock and After*, is brave and original but, given the temper of the time perhaps, has an aura of pessimism. There is anger here, as there should be, but the emphasis does mean his work has dated in a way Pym's does not seem to have done. Renault foregrounds homosexual males in almost a startling way, and the representation is positive; but strictly speaking, this is a middlebrow novel (different questions are raised here, in a different field). Warner is notable for the unself-conscious way she depicts homosexuality and lesbianism; but her works are fantasy, historical fiction, allegory, and never realism. And although *The Bell* might be seen to be a more important novel for homosexuality in that it gives centrality to a 'gay' character, there are problems with this. As *The Bell* appeared the same year as *A Glass of Blessings*, I think it is worth comparing them for a moment.

In Murdoch's novel, Michael Meade is one of the two main characters. The narrative gives us access to his thoughts, his consciousness, in depth. We know his history; we know his doubts and his joys. Clearly, Murdoch has the edge on Pym here. However, it's curious that Murdoch has Michael as someone that had an 'affair'

in the past with a schoolboy. It's not sexual, and is presented as a consensual affair; Meade is very much the victim of young Toby's caprices. Michael loses his job as a teacher, not surprisingly. Although we are strongly encouraged to feel sympathy for him, and see Murdoch's argument that love knows no rules, and that one may fall in love with anyone regardless of age or gender, and in terms of the religious community at Imber Michael's homosexuality is not viewed as criminal, Murdoch's connection of homosexuality with 'criminality' sends out mixed messages. As readers of this extraordinary novel will now, Michael and Nick meet again at Imber, and it does not end well: *The Bell* is a tragedy in part, as well as showing Michael falling in love again – with a teenager. I think it's also significant that the setting for the action, Imber Court, is by its very nature a withdrawal from the world: this is why Meade is there. The symbolism and gothic of the novel accompany this distance from recognisable reality.

Iris Murdoch and Barbara Pym are very different writers, of course, but Pym's depiction of homosexuality can be argued to be more positive and valuable. One of the reasons for this would be the tone. Unlike the other writers above, *A Glass of Blessings* is an unashamedly comic novel (with subtle depths, of course). Pym does not seem to feel anger, and does not protest; she comes from the Austen school which may appear almost apolitical. While Wilson's protests were brave and necessary, it has dated his work; Pym just seems to see homosexual characters as part of the world, and depicts them as they are, with no fuss. As Raz shows, any stereotypes are treated carefully. If there is an ideology and agenda it is part of a very un self-conscious registering of the world – a kind of unconscious art – another thing shared with Austen. This effect is hard to analyse, but the result is a very even view of homosexuality.

Pym's novels are works of art, giving the *appearance* of lightness and effortlessness. But at the same time they are, as Joyce Carol Oates observed (43), very personal, unlike perhaps the work of Elizabeth Taylor, with whom she is perhaps over-compared. We are seeing 'Barbara's' view of the world, her humour, her sadness and irony. And, as has been proved, Pym became fascinated in the 1950s with a gay couple who she, in effect, stalked; we know of her later love for Richard Roberts. Pym was, as a person, at ease in the company of homosexual men, perhaps because they seemed less of a threat than heterosexual ones; she was also fascinated by them. This interest and ease, removed of any insistent politics, quite naturally shines through *A Glass of Blessings*. The ease and interest reflect the attitudes of someone who was, in fact, very unusual. It is often said that Pym's voice in the fiction is highly distinctive; like many artists, she must have felt she was different, outside the social discourse. Lying outside it, too was the gay culture of the 1950s. It's not surprising that she had a subtle sympathy with it. Discussing an artist's 'personality' and what they felt at home with can be spurious, but I think it can explain the homosexual interest. Let's remember of course, that, for reasons that are both obvious and mysterious, Pym remains popular with gay readers. Perhaps they find in her work a 'voice' and outlook they recognize; the entry by Marc O'Day in the *Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing* (515-6) describes her as 'camp', noting the *Cookbook*.

Let's turn to some specifics in *A Glass of Blessings*. To remind us: it is the story of woman who has been married for some time and has little to occupy her, and becomes fascinated by/falls in love with a homosexual man. A modern reader is likely to spot Piers's homosexuality much quicker than one in the 1950s would have done. Piers exercises caution and discretion about Keith, fitting the social climate; he allows Wilmet to come to the wrong conclusions (rather than actively deceiving her). We can assume that the depiction of Piers's life and this 'cover' represents how things were: Pym must have been into the homes of homosexual couples. Given the privilege of entering Piers and Keith's home, we see Keith's proud housekeeping and his own, very bare room.

Wilmet is intrigued by this: 'His room was painfully neat and un-lived in, as if everything had been arranged for effect.' Modern readers will assume that, based on the period, the room is a cover, a fake room for Keith. Although Piers and Keith seem to have taken Wilmet to their hearts, the conscious presentation of a 'fake' living arrangement (the undertone nevertheless being that Wilmet understands what really goes on, and that the men know she does) shows that the friendship requires participation in a game, mask and charade.

There's a similar obfuscation in the presentation of La Cenerentola. I was initially reluctant to read it as a 'gay coffee bar'; there again, why are Bason, Piers and Keith there, and no women mentioned? Its name translates as Cinderella, which of course suggests disguise and transformation. It would not have been labelled as a 'gay coffee bar' at the time; Wilmet's understanding of it would have been limited. The lack of identity of this place, its shadowiness, reflects the marginal lives of the homosexuals who inhabit it, hiding behind leaves, as Keith does there, in a sense, and as Wilmet feels he could in the retreat. I wonder if Wilmet's linking of Keith with 'retreat' implies that he is someone likely to need refuge, in the same way that Michael does in *The Bell*? Perhaps Wilmet is wiser and more attuned to the world than seems apparent, though, for the scene at La Cenerentola has been immediately preceded by the swarming of the bees at the retreat, closing with reference to a queen. Narrator Wilmet remarks within a page, curiously, 'I was not prepared to go further with the analogy, or even quite as far as this comparison would suggest.'

Critics have not always made much of the Keith-Piers relationship: it has more been seen as something significant as a kind of test case for Wilmet's understanding and education, rather than mattering of itself. Thus, it is marginal to critics. Janice Rossen has an unusual take on the matter, arguing that all Pym's male characters are 'indifferent to women, and homosexuals represent only the most decisive men in this regard.' (65). Although this is interesting, I think there are more positive things to be said.

The real originality of Pym's depiction of homosexuality in this novel only becomes clear with repeated readings, as is often the case in the greatest works of art. I'd like to go back to Orna Raz's work here. I was initially surprised to read the argument that Father Thames can be viewed as homosexual. I've read the book four times at least. Had I missed something obvious? On further looking, his annoyance at Marius Ransome's upcoming marriage (and admiration of the handsome priest) and his secreting of the rather pagan statue of the boy in his room – something unsuitable for the church – confirms the matter. What about the first glimpse of Father Thames, where he is distracted from talking to Wilmet by a young man? Possibly something that is simply a social detail, a record of how people interact. People are diverted all the time. But why is it there? Pym is too careful an artist to waste time with uninteresting trivia.

In fact, the whole matter is so subtle that it is not some trivial, tacky 'is he or isn't he one' question. Just like life, there are tiny meaningless or important details around us all the time, and people remain a mystery. Sexuality is just one of the mysteries of life, and by keeping it at a distance, Pym's realism is enhanced. Father Thames's sexuality is not, then, important. He is not defined by it: more interesting is his social role, his position in the church. In the same way, Bill Coleman (of the Husky) is not clearly bachelor, homosexual, effete: there are no labels.

As has been argued before, Pym's novels are about love, human relations, and connection, or, by contrast, lack of it and loneliness. This essential human need overrides gender. Pym stands out from the writers quoted above in that she is the only one who actually presents a happy, homosexual relationship and even takes the step of arguing the Church should accept this, as Wilmet subtly reflects at the end.

Homosexuals in the 1950s were marginalised, and the literature of the time sometimes to mirror this marginalisation. Novels of protest existed because of this; they made the subject an issue. Pym stands aside from this, and although some might argue that her view was a limited one, the privileged view of a middle-class woman, the ‘humane liberalism’, allies her with tolerant upper class. Raz argues that Pym represented homosexuality ‘sensitively and sympathetically’ and that this attitude was ‘paradoxically ... considerably ahead of its time’ (166).

Is homosexuality marginal in *A Glass of Blessings*, a book that is so much a novel of the 1950s? No. Wilf Bason (who is read as homosexual because of stereotypical behaviour, but with cleverly no even implicit references of questions) is worth visiting on holiday, and has made a happy change of circumstances; Father Thames is about to enjoy a happy retirement in Italy at La Cenerentola – the place that shares the name of the ‘gay coffee bar’ in which Keith works. ‘Poor Piers’ has found a steady anchor in his life, and Keith a purpose. The positive nature of all this will be confirmed when, in the next novel, *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie meets Wilmet, Piers, Keith and Rodney, Wilmet loved and cherished by her three men.

I’ve suggested that, in *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym is both very personal, and an artist. What I think she does achieve – and, like the greatest art, this may well not have been an intention – is a picture by the end of Wilmet as a symbol of the English establishment on a wider scale. She is inward-looking, self-obsessed, frivolous and has lost her sense of place; confronted with novelty, with new ways to live and love, she fails to acknowledge and see them. But, by the end, she has embraced them. This is the message for the society of her time, a society on the cusp of change, where the works of the more explicit Orton and Radcliffe will soon come. Like the rest of Pym’s fiction, *A Glass of Blessings* is a book about eccentrics and outsiders, with whom Pym was fascinated. In a climate of fear, Pym has with hindsight given a message, to them and for us, of tolerant hope.

Bibliography

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Notes

¹This is an unpublished abstract for the paper delivered.

²This and the extracts below are, again, part of an unpublished abstract, from the conference material.