

# “A Plain-looking Woman No Longer Young”: Acceptance as Irony in *Crampton Hodnet*

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I came late to Barbara Pym—and, not long ago. It was last spring, right around now. A bit of backstory: I teach at my college alma-mater, Chatham. Before I was a student there, the English Department was run by Dr. John Cummins. He was a legend, a kindly chain-smoking archetype of an English professor. There’s a story that after Chatham banned smoking in classrooms (not as long ago as you might think), Dr. Cummins would stand *outside* Coolidge 130, and deliver his lectures through the big low window, into where his students sat. After Dr. Cummins retired he became the college archivist, and after he died, our department inherited his scholarly library. I came too late to Chatham to have ever had a class with Dr. Cummins, but I see now from his books that he was a Trollope man. Second to the number of Trollope volumes is Dickens, then Forster, Waugh, Hardy. Keep browsing and you will also discover many of the prolific Angela Thirkell and, around the corner, in pristine order, each of the Dutton editions of Barbara Pym.

I imagine on that day last spring I needed Barbara Pym. If one created a slideshow of the events that precipitate my seeking refuge in the Cummins library—really a narrow hallway and four teetering shelves—the slides would show Heather McNaugher at a faculty meeting, trying to keep from putting her head down on the table at the presentation of one more technological contrivance that requires one more username and password; Heather McNaugher tied to her office chair, being made to complete something called a Qualtrics assessment twenty minutes before summer break begins; Heather McNaugher, finished with her last class of the semester, standing in line at the bookstore (now called a campus store) as one of that class’s best students returns all the books they’d read together *within three minutes of the class ending!* I’m pretty sure it was this last little heartbreak that flung me into the dusty open arms of the Cummins library.

The Dutton Pym, of course, make a tidy set, and there’s a brightness to them, an alertness. In this way the Pym collection is set apart from her slumbering, mostly male neighbors in their heavy dark coats. There she sat, waiting her turn. I want to add adverbs like *patiently* and *primly*. There she sat, patiently, primly waiting her turn. But I’m wary of being presumptuous and, possibly, insulting. Additionally, it’s a sentence that endows objects—in this case, a row of books—with human features. But wait! These two things—a shrewd remark regarding a woman’s virtues, in this case primness and patience, and the personification of an object that one reveres—make the sentence quintessentially Pymian. Also, criticism is, by definition, presumptuous. So, just what is it about Barbara Pym that makes me—and many of her fans—want to protect her against slight?

It seems to me that a lot of the work surrounding Barbara Pym—scholarship, reviews, personal history—fixates on *just what is it* about Barbara Pym that so captivates us. I hope to now weigh in with my own ideas on this. But the fact that we can’t seem to put our finger on it, yet keep trying—this itself is part of her power. I wanted to write *charm* there, and yes, it’s that, too, but too many for too long dismissed Pym as merely charming. That she and her characters are so ostensibly dismissible gives Pym’s work an edge, the way no one suspects, say, sweet, slightly bewildered-seeming Miss Marple to be on the case. And here we land, for me, on one answer to the question *just what is it about Barbara Pym*: it’s that every perceived weakness is in fact a strength. Nowhere is this clearer than in her treatment of the prescriptively feminine domestic task. How sorry, for example, Mrs. Margaret Cleveland feels for her husband, Francis, that he has only his scholarly pursuits to occupy him, versus a household to run, as she does. Just listen: “Francis was like a restless, difficult child if he had nothing to occupy him” (15). And later:

It was an excellent thing for a husband to have something like research to occupy his time. After the first year or two of married life one no longer wanted to have him continually about the house. Mrs. Cleveland hardly noticed now whether her husband was there or not, and she was too busy doing other things ever to stop and ask herself whether she was not perhaps missing something.

The theme of keeping busy in order to save one from morbid rumination is, in Pym's world, the single most obvious advantage women have. I use the word *obvious* here with intention. For nearly a half-century, literary scholarship looked myopically for the wrongs men do women. While they are manifold, critics then go on the prowl for examples of female "agency." In such analysis, this agency is circumscribed by traditional ideas of masculinity and maleness: the female protagonist has agency because she dresses in men's clothes (Shakespeare), inherits and runs a farm (Thomas Hardy), or, last week, from the creator of the BBC drama, *Killing Eve*: "Seeing women being violent, the flipside of (seeing them "on slabs the whole time") is refreshing and oddly empowering" (*Guardian* 10 March 19).

In the Pymian model, however, there is no need to map male demonstrations of power and autonomy onto women and call it agency. No. Women here are the lucky ones, precisely because we are women. This is quite obvious to Barbara Pym, and to her heroine, Miss Morrow. That Pym is often rightly praised for her subtlety, *not* said obviousness, is, in this case, due to our restrictive privileging of maleness. What I mean is, Pym's ironic flipping of domestic chores as empowering might be considered subtle only because we are so trained to favor masculine pursuits instead. Let's examine Pym's foil to this within the logistics of the proposal scene between Miss Morrow and Mr. Latimer.

"Well, well," said Mr. Latimer. "We shall have an evening to ourselves."

"Yes," said Miss Morrow. "I wonder if there's anything good on the wireless."

"Oh, don't let's have the wireless," said Mr. Latimer quickly. "We so seldom have a chance to be by ourselves. Let's make the most of it."

Miss Morrow sat down and assumed an attitude of patient expectation, as if ready to receive suggestions as to how this might be done.

"I think we always get on very well together," began Mr. Latimer.

Miss Morrow laughed. "A curate and an old lady's companion?" she said. "But what else would you expect?"

Mr. Latimer wished she hadn't put it like that, making them sound slightly ridiculous. It was a bad beginning, he felt. But he was not yet discouraged. "I meant that in some ways we seem to be very close to each other, very near," he went on.

Miss Morrow took her knitting out of its bag and began to count stitches.

Mr. Latimer looked round the room, as if expecting to receive inspiration from the objects in it.

Miss Morrow has her knitting, a task that occupies her hands and mind, and which bookends the comically excruciating proposal. Mr. Latimer has no such occupation. Here her knitting is a kind of prop. When, after being rejected, Mr. Latimer asks, "What about you?" Miss Morrow replies, "[M]e? Well, my life will go on just the same as usual' ... giving point to her words by picking up her knitting again." Other props in this scene are the wireless, on which Miss Morrow relies for company, and which Mr. Latimer rejects in order to propose, and Ovaltine, which Miss Morrow offers as consolation to the dejected Mr. Latimer: "I don't think you're quite yourself this evening. Perhaps you're overtired. I'll ask Florence to make you some Ovaltine, shall I?"

Miss Morrow fathoms the solace of such things—the wireless, her knitting, a cup of Ovaltine brought to one after a bit of a shock—in a way that Mr. Latimer does not, perhaps cannot. I have been known to follow such observations with, "Because he's never had to." This response is, again, wrapped up in limited, and limiting, prescriptive ideas of maleness. Because clearly, Mr. Latimer would be greatly helped in this instance by some knitting of his own, the comfort of hands busy with a tangible, domestic chore.

The thesis I proposed in my abstract had something to do with irony: that Miss Morrow's acceptance of her lot as a drably dressed spinster and companion to the meddling Miss Doggett offers an ironic foil to the many English novels in which the goal is marriage. But, like all Pymian fiction, it's more nuanced than that. In regards to her station, Miss Morrow swings from resignation to embrace and back again throughout the novel. Further complicating matters is Jessie Morrow's reappearance as a woman who *does* end up engaged in *Jane and Prudence*, written roughly ten years after *Crampton Hodnet*. My own argument will only consider Miss Morrow's role in the latter, mostly because her reversal in *Jane and Prudence* reverses my own premise, and because it's never been confirmed, to my knowledge, that Pym considered *Jane and Prudence* a sequel to *Crampton Hodnet*.

Pym establishes Miss Morrow's status as spinster at once. "Jessie Morrow was a thin, used-up-looking woman in her middle-thirties"; and neither Pym nor her character apologize for Miss Morrow's relationship to that status: "Miss Morrow did not pretend to be anything more than a woman past her first youth . . . . It was degrading to think that she could not take a quiet pride in her resignation and leave it at that." The word *degrading*—let's linger here a moment. Pym wrote *Crampton Hodnet* between 1939 and 40. She then emended the book in the 1950s, and it was published in 1985. I don't know if *degrading* was there all along; I *do* suspect, however, that the word has undergone a significant cultural etymological transformation between 1939 and 1985, and then even more between 1985 and now. Without going too deeply into its history, I will say that *degrading* has since its earliest use been a synonym for humiliating, and it seems to have always had a sexual, or gendered, component. Certainly over my lifetime, *degrading* is commonly used to describe a kind of humiliation specific to women; and feminist readers like me are on alert for situations we consider degrading. All this to say that Pym's choice 80 years out, or 70, or just since 1985 is now, in this new century, even more meaningful and, ultimately, ironic. The irony is this: not that she's called a spinster, for so long an insult, but that for Miss Morrow the insult—the degradation—is in anyone thinking she can't or shouldn't *take a quiet pride in her resignation* of being one.

No other character more regularly insults Miss Morrow than the older woman to whom she's employed as companion, Miss Doggett. Miss Doggett's insults serve at least two narrative functions. One, to characterize Miss Doggett herself as the maddeningly cantankerous and nose-y old guard of pre-war North Oxford values. And two, her slighting behavior towards Miss Morrow enables Miss Morrow's own embrace of these slights:

"Ah, Miss Morrow, I didn't notice you," said Miss Doggett, "I see that you are here."

"She can hardly deny that," said the vicar, chortling with laughter, as he always did at his own jokes.

"I might," said Miss Morrow. "A companion is looked upon as a piece of furniture. She is hardly a person at all."

To contemporary, postmodernist critics, this is the kind of passage that we would home in on as, well, degrading. We would posit that due to her sex, class, and status as unmarried, Miss Morrow is represented here as an object, without agency or visibility—these being the rights most clamored for by my generation of humanities scholars. Yes, we fancy we've done women characters the world over a great service by restoring to them our understanding of agency and visibility. But to do so on behalf of Miss Morrow is a knee-jerk and frankly paternalistic reading. For one thing, she doesn't need us to. She doesn't, in this passage, particularly *want* to be read, or seen, at all. We can't only read the last two sentences, "A companion is looked upon as a piece of furniture. She is hardly a person at all." These two support the degraded object argument, a kind of criticism which—I've long struggled with this—only re-degrades by re-announcing, or announcing in the first place, a character's degrading conditions. No, we have to consider Miss Morrow's sly reply to the vicar and, implicitly, her employer, Miss Doggett, who states: *I see that you are here*. The chortling vicar: *She can hardly deny that*. Miss Morrow: *I might*.

If anyone is in charge here, if anyone is cagily suggesting that she has options regarding acknowledgment of her very existence, it is Miss Morrow, for whom *invisibility*, the peculiar quality of overlooked-ness is in fact where power—indeed, agency—lies. There is literary precedent for this. In his novella, *The Fox*, published just after the First World War, D. H. Lawrence writes of March: "Her desire to be invisible was so strong that it quite baffled the youth" (Penguin ed. p. 16). The youth in this case is the mesmerizing predator, Henry. Like Pym, Lawrence understands that invisibility has its advantages, especially under the more often than not predacious male gaze.

Again and again, Pym emphasizes Miss Morrow's inconspicuousness and, more importantly, her comfort there. "She had been acknowledged now and could sink back into her usual comfortable obscurity." Then, later, this exchange from the chapter "A Confrontation," which begins with Miss Morrow asking if it wouldn't be better if she didn't accompany Miss Doggett to the Clevelands. Miss Doggett replies, "Of course you must come . . . . Your being there will make no difference one way or the other." This is followed by a crucial two-sentence paragraph, "Miss Morrow walked meekly along by Miss Doggett's side, a comfortable neutral thing, without form or sex. There was something so restful in being somebody whose

presence made no difference one way or the other.” The technique Pym uses here is called Free Indirect Discourse, sometimes referred to as the “Uncle Charles Principle,” after James Joyce, who, along with other modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, popularized it as a powerful literary tool. Free Indirect Discourse, many of you already know, is when the author, using the third-person, dumps us into the thoughts and vernacular of the character. Pym does this almost exclusively throughout *Crampton Hodnet*. From paragraph to paragraph, she swoops in and out of the perceptions of each member of her ensemble. But in this example, Pym artfully moves from Miss Doggett’s point-of-view about Miss Morrow: *Miss Morrow walked meekly along by Miss Doggett’s side, a comfortable neutral thing, without form or sex* to Miss Morrow’s about herself: *There was something so restful in being somebody whose presence made no difference one way or the other. Not in being with somebody whose presence made no difference. No: in being somebody whose presence made no difference.* Free Indirect Discourse within the same paragraph, a two-sentence paragraph no less, is not to be trifled with. It is not just any writer who can master this level of subtlety and, indeed, irony. We expect that at some point Miss Morrow would tire of Miss Doggett’s constant insults, that she might even lash out, or that at the very least her own interior life would reflect a hit to her self-esteem. But no, she accepts, even absorbs, the slights as, in fact, her preferred state of being.

It isn’t that she never has moments where she wonders wistfully about love and a life without it. Immediately following Mr. Latimer’s proposal, for instance, we are privy to a long reflective passage, in which Miss Morrow concedes to herself that:

It had been such a very half-hearted proposal ... poor Mr. Latimer! She smiled as she remembered it. ‘I respect and esteem you very much ... I think we might be very happy together ...’ *Might*. Even Miss Morrow’s standards were higher than that, so high, indeed, that she feared she would never marry now. For she wanted love, or whatever it was that made Simon and Anthea walk along the street not noticing other people simply because they had each other’s eyes to look into. And of course she knew perfectly well that she would never get anything like that.

To ignore a passage like this is to deny an important feature of the novel and its heroine’s personality: namely, that despair for Miss Morrow is indeed an abyss against which she must shore herself. More important for the purpose of my argument, however, are the choices Pym makes in the concluding half of this same paragraph:

It was only sometimes, when a spring day came in the middle of winter, that one had a sudden feeling that nothing was really impossible. And then, how much more sensible it was to satisfy one’s springlike impulses by buying a new dress in an unaccustomed and thoroughly unsuitable color than by embarking on a marriage without love. For, after all, respect and esteem were cold, lifeless things—dry bones picked clean of flesh. There was nothing springlike about dry bones, nothing warm and romantic about respect and esteem.

I’ve learned a lot about myself and my education unpacking this half-paragraph. In graduate school I had a professor, Dr. Gisela Brinker-Gabler, and she would refer to knowledge-procurement as a series of bus-stops. In her Austrian accent she would thoughtfully encourage: “It’s good, Heather, this bus-stop. But keep going to the next one and the next one!” At one such bus stop, say about 20 years ago as a master’s student, I might have taken Miss Pym to task for her setting in opposition *warm and romantic* with *respect and esteem*, the latter which, after all, are still being fought for. They mean the opposite of *degrading*, and have equally gendered associations. And then, over the last decade until quite recently, I stood at another bus-stop, on the other side of the road, where I would gang up on feminist expectations by reveling in Pym’s ironic undoing of them. I would do this to be contrarian. To be what you might not expect from looking at me. But irony is not contrarianism, and when I indulge the latter, I don’t like myself very much. My writing becomes angry and snarky. And believe me, angry and snarky are a destination, and I have hung out there in the rain, waiting for the next bus, then not getting on. It’s where, sadly, so much literary criticism has built its flimsy shelter; there’s a reason, after all, we call it *criticism*.

Barbara Pym, in my estimation, has neither the patience nor the stomach for mean-spiritedness; neither did she concern herself overly with what scholars, feminist or otherwise, might do with her work. And it’s this very indifference to certain cultural expectations that frees her to have Miss Morrow turn her consideration of respect versus romance, and seize her springlike impulses on, of all things, a new dress! Perhaps more intriguing is Pym’s linking of romance with spring, as

she does in the sentence, *It was only sometimes, when a spring day came in the middle of winter, that one had a sudden feeling that nothing was really impossible*. For Miss Morrow's romantic sensibility is more often and more believably linked to her experience of the natural world, the monkey-puzzle tree, than to Mr. Latimer.

Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow walked slowly home. The sun shone into the drawing-room, bright gleams of it twisting through the dark, spiky branches of the monkey-puzzle...

Miss Morrow always enjoyed these summer evenings. The effect of light and sunshine on the heavy furniture, the dark covers, the silver-table, the Bavarian engravings, even the photograph of Canon Tottle, gave her the idea that there might be a life beyond this, where even the contents of Miss Doggett's drawing-room might be bathed in a heavenly radiance.

I am going to change gears now, and begin to wrap up. As I've thought about how to do so, I imagine a plane beginning its gradual, occasionally bumpy descent. You've been very patient so far, and I thank you. Now, several pages ago I explored the word *degrading* and concluded that Pym's use of it is ironic. Before coming to this conclusion, I briefly outlined the fits-and-starts of *Crampton Hodnet's* creation and publication history, and suggested that the term *degrading* is today even more loaded, and thus more ironic, than it was 80, 70, and 34 years ago. Meanings change over time. This declaration is over-obvious, but worth stating in the context of Miss Pym's—no, of the publishing world's peculiarly hot and cold relationship with Miss Pym's work. If I've read correctly, Pym enjoyed a steady publication of her novels throughout the 1950s, conformist years, a decade when it would be understandable for the West, perhaps especially England, to want nothing more than to cozy up by a fire with tea or Ovaltine, a picturesque respite from London rebounding from bombed-out ruins; what Robert Smith refers to as "books for a bad day." Then, the 60s—and almost at once, her work is rejected just as steadily for the next 15 years. When at last we are reintroduced to Pym's work in 1977, so starved are we for Barbara Pym's aura that she is shortlisted for a Booker. In all this back-and-forth, history and culture are having their way with the reader, thus informing what critics and publishers determine the reader wants. Meanwhile, the England of *Crampton Hodnet* does not change. It ends one year out, exactly where it began, at a tea party. Some of the guests names have changed, but "Everything went on just the same in Oxford from year to year .... The pattern never varied."

Just as our relationship with irony changes over time, so does our nostalgia depend on when we were born and into what circumstances. I, for instance, was born in 1973. One thing my divorced parents have in common is, they surround themselves with books, which is an aesthetic as well as a value-system (or, aesthetics inform values and vice-versa; Barbara Pym understood this). I grew up in a part of Pittsburgh, where I still live, that is full of old London plane trees, slate roofs, dark brick. In 2019, there is less of all this than there was. That's to say that as each ancient tree comes down, either from age or to build a house for somebody's car, I grow increasingly forlorn. But long, long before the pace of development accelerated, I was utterly overcome with nostalgia for all things British. Presumably there was a time before I and five million of us sat riveted for 11 Mondays to *Great Performances'* broadcast of *Brideshead Revisited*, after which I, for one, was changed: I became an unabashed Anglophile. I had just turned nine.

You'll recall that I began this paper in the Cummins library, searching for some book to relieve me of the despair I feel all too often in our tech-driven society so increasingly hostile to stillness and reading. That I and so many of us in this room have sought refuge and found it in the work of Barbara Pym—well, it isn't a proper thesis in the same way "Acceptance as Irony" is; it's more of a personal thesis, an exploration, but I do believe my own nostalgia and Miss Morrow's mostly positive relationship with her spinsterhood are connected. One connection is, Miss Morrow does not apologize for being a spinster and I don't apologize for being nostalgic, even though both categories have a hard time of it. (In academia, my nostalgia indicts me as imperialist.) But the more interesting connection has to do to with the aforementioned *heavenly radiance* that Pym shines on North Oxford. Even in the pouring rain, as in the book's opening:

It was a wet Sunday afternoon in North Oxford at the beginning of October. The laurel bushes which bordered the path leading to Leamington Lodge, Banbury Road, were dripping with rain. A few sodden chrysanthemums, dahlias and zinnias drooped in the flower-beds on the lawn. The house had been built in the sixties of the last century, of yellowish brick, with a gabled roof and narrow Gothic windows set in frames of ornamental stonework. A long red and blue stained-glass window looked onto a landing halfway up the pitch-

pine staircase, and there were panels of the same glass let into the front door, giving an ecclesiastical effect, so that, except for a glimpse of unlikely lace curtains, the house might have been a theological college.

With its “big, cold drawing-room” and “air of mustiness,” Leamington Lodge is only ever described in the gloomiest terms. In fact, *Crampton Hodnet* begins with both house and inhabitant, Miss Morrow, described as “dark” and “feeling a little depressed,” respectively. Just as Jessie Morrow is up against a constant barrage of slights from Miss Doggett, the matron of Leamington Lodge, she is submerged in the gloom of the house itself, Miss Doggett being convinced that sunlight will mar her heavy Victorian furniture. And yet ... and yet I, for one, want in! Is it, I wonder, the wireless? Just listen here to its power:

[T]urning back to the wireless, she advanced the volume control so that the music filled the dark North Oxford dining-room and seemed to bring to it some of the warmth and sinful brightness of a continental Sunday.... And then suddenly it went scratchy, and she remembered that it was not really a gay continental Sunday she was listening to but a tired, bored young man sitting in a studio somewhere between Belgium and Germany, putting on innumerable gramophone records....

Earlier I called the wireless a prop. One that not only lightens Miss Morrow’s mood, but also serves as a bookend when the novel lands full-circle exactly where we began. (Remember, “The pattern never varied.”)

A simple movement could fill the room with rich, unsuitable music from Radio Luxembourg. [Miss Morrow] switched on the wireless, and the sound of it poured out into the room. Except for the slight scratchiness of the records it might have been the very same music that she had listened to this time a year ago .....

The wireless fills Leamington Lodge with aural heavenly radiance (initially referred to, you’ll recall, as *sinful brightness*—some clever irony there!). Even its reality check, rendered sardonically in the beginning quote, is revised as “slight scratchiness” in the final appraisal. And such scratchiness is, to my ears, what I yearn to hear-via-reading when I seek the solace of Dr. Cummins’ library. Every month or so I comb Jerry’s Records in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh for the very records with which Miss Morrow is initially annoyed. Just as Miss Morrow uses the wireless to imagine another kind of life, brighter and more cultured and romantic, I read Pym’s use of the wireless to inhabit the very world her heroine wants sometimes to escape. Such is the deeply personal, time-sensitive nature of nostalgia. Could the Misses Morrow and Pym ever imagine what the word, wireless, would come to mean today?

But nothing is more endowed with heavenly radiance than Pym’s monkey-puzzle trees. More accurately, the monkey-puzzle with its many criss-crossing arms of bright dense needles is the conductor of heavenly radiance.

It was a lovely morning, when even the monkey-puzzle was bathed in sunshine. She clasped a branch in her hand and stood feeling its prickliness and looking up into the dark tower of the branches. It was like being in church. And yet on a day like this, one realized that it was a living thing too and had beauty, as most living things have in some form or another. Dear monkey-puzzle, thought Miss Morrow, impulsively clasping her arms round the trunk.

*It was like being in church.* When Miss Doggett rebukes her “nature worship or whatever it is,” Miss Morrow rejoins, “Only God can make a tree.” Like for *Brideshead*’s Julia Flyte and Charles Ryder, themselves on the brink of World War II, God is the only way forward. It’s worth noting, too, that these passages where North Oxford is in bloom, rain or shine, be it light or shadow leaking in through the leaded glass, are some of Pym’s most lyrical and loving. This particular scene is significant for another reason. In a way, it’s Miss Morrow’s conclusion, for Mr. Latimer has left at last—“Miss Morrow knew it was the beginning of the end”; when Miss Doggett catches her hugging the monkey-puzzle, *we* understand that she, Miss Morrow, has made her choice and made peace with it. It’s no coincidence that just opposite this scene, on the next page (and where I will conclude):

Miss Morrow went in to the house thinking about the trivial round, the common task. A companion asked really nothing, indeed, she had no right to, and Miss Morrow considered herself lucky to be able to occupy herself with those things that would furnish her with all she needed to ask.

“Room to deny ourselves; a road to bring us, daily, nearer God,” she thought, as she tugged the sheets off the bed.

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