

# *Crampton Hodnet* Through A Glass of Sherry: Barbara Pym's Brilliant Device to Portray Her Characters' Personality

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Barbara Pym liked a drink. We know this from her diaries and letters. In author Laura Shapiro's book *What She Ate* she refers to a lunch that Barbara enjoyed with her friend Julian where they imbibed Sherry, Niersteiner (wine) and Port.

Some of Barbara's characters enjoyed a drink too, and alcohol features in several novels. But with Barbara alcohol was not always just a libation with no significance. She often employed a clever device of communicating the personality and foibles of her characters by their attitude to alcohol. Think of William Caldicote in *Excellent Women* and the excruciating lunch-time scene in the restaurant with Mildred Lathbury as we learn what a pompous wind-bag he is by how he orders the wine – Nuits St Georges: 'A tolerable wine, Mildred. Unpretentious, but I think you will like it.' A few lines later we discover that he is also a patronising chump and inconsiderate too when lifts the bottle of wine, judges the amount and refills his own glass but not Mildred's.

*Excellent Women* was my first Barbara and her impressive economy of writing was apparent from the start. In a single line Barbara reveals how undomesticated and uncongenial Helen Napier is when she says to Everard Bone, 'You'll have to drink gin out of a mug. The glasses aren't unpacked.'

When I had the pleasure of reading *Crampton Hodnet* and realised that Barbara had given Sherry a starring role I was immensely pleased. Not just as a fan of the drink, but because I sensed that Barbara would gift us some fun in the Sherry scenes. I was not disappointed. Sherry is a silent character in the corner of the room, witness to the book's pivotal scene when Mr Latimer is caught out by Miss Morrow in his lie to Mrs Wardell. Sherry also appears in a number of other scenarios that the characters do not see as comic, but ones at which the reader cannot help but chuckle at the hapless protagonists.

Before I discuss more about *Crampton Hodnet* I want to describe what Sherry is, about its history with Britain and its place in British society. Today in Britain some people (including me) use the term 'going for a Sherry' as a euphemism for any sort of alcoholic drink. In Barbara's era Sherry was commonplace and every genteel house would have served it.

**What is Sherry?** Sherry is made from white grapes grown in the region around Jerez de la Frontera in Andalusia, Spain. After fermentation is complete, the wine is fortified with grape spirit to increase the alcohol content. It comes in a variety of styles from light and dry, such as Fino and Manzanilla to the darker and heavier Oloroso and Amontillado. The latter is a complex medium dry wine with nutty aromas, tobacco, oak and aromatic herbs and it is that type of Sherry in particular that Barbara would have been familiar with. All Sherry is made by blending older wines with newer ones and the oxidisation process some of them go through leads to flavours unlike any other wine.

The name Sherry is an anglicised pronunciation of the town of Jerez which was called Šeriš (pronounced Sherish) by Arab speaking Moors who occupied the region from 711 AD. Phoenician traders, renowned for viticulture, had founded the nearby port of Cádiz in the 10th century BC. Successive occupiers - the ancient Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans also had wine making expertise. Wine from this area was highly regarded and has been widely traded for millennia.

From the late 15th century several voyages started from Cádiz including expeditions by Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan to the New World. Both explorers carried ample supplies of Sherry aboard their fleets. On one of Magellan's voyages more money was spent on wine than on armaments. The Sherry of this era was not fortified, that only started in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the tastes of customers in England (the biggest export market) demanded sweeter and stronger wines.

England has always been the biggest export market for Sherry. It was especially popular in the Tudor era when Elizabeth I was Queen (1533–1603). But when England was at war with Spain – many times over the centuries! – and legal

trade was suspended, supplies of Sherry were secured through piracy and smuggling. Another way was to plunder it. The most spectacular instance of this happened in 1587 when English Admiral Francis Drake sailed with a fleet into the harbour of Cádiz in a surprise attack to destroy Spanish ships. The intention was to deter an invasion being planned by the King of Spain to overthrow the Protestant Queen Elizabeth and install himself, a Catholic, on the throne. The Spanish ships were laden with Sherry, and Drake's men spent three days transferring 2,900 butts – the equivalent of 1,740,000 bottles – for transportation back to England. Drake was said to have 'sing'd the beard of the King of Spain' and the looted Sherry was especially sought after.

By the 19th century sherry was the most popular wine in Britain, where it accounted for 40% of wine consumption. It was drunk as an aperitif and with meals in the homes of the upper and middle classes and offered as a welcome drink to visiting guests.

Port was also a very popular drink in England, but until the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was consumed almost entirely by men. It was associated with drunken pugnacious masculinity. After formal dinners the women would retire to the drawing room and the men would remain at the dining table to smoke cigars and drink port. By contrast Sherry was more delicate and refined. Elite women started to drink Sherry which gave it the reputation of a domestic and respectable drink. This is important when we think about Miss Doggett in *Crampton Hodnet*, who saw herself as a paragon of respectability. Sherry was perfectly acceptable for her to have in the house to offer to guests, and occasionally to drink herself.

At Oxford University it is a long-standing tradition for students to be offered a glass of Sherry by the Professor during tutorials and when invited to the Dean's house for a celebration. A man I know who studied there in the 1940s (not long after Barbara started writing *Crampton Hodnet*) said:

Sherry was the standard refreshment. The meaner tutors palmed us off with South African imitations. It was usually modest priced medium sherry blends often mislabelled as 'Amontillado'. The wine was served at room temperature in those horrid little stemmed glasses. They did not hold much.

When Barbara writes in *Less Than Angels* of Professor Mainwaring serving his research grant students Amontillado, was it the good stuff or a mislabelled inferior South African imposter? I wonder what Barbara, studying English at St Hilda's College Oxford in 1931 thought of the quality of the Sherry she was served?

Back to *Crampton Hodnet*. The Sherry scenes happen in Leamington Lodge, home of Miss Maude Doggett a formidable gorgon who wears a skunk cape and is the type of person who always takes the tender lettuce leaves (Barbara's description). According to Barbara, Miss Doggett's chief work was imposing her personality on those weaker than herself. There seems to be little joy in her life. Miss Doggett was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and this is important in her attitude to alcohol. It was not there for enjoyment, more for medicinal purposes and to offer to guests. Miss Doggett conforms to what society dictates for a woman of her class. In her opinion having a drink needed to be justified: 'Mr Latimer is not feeling very well tonight. I persuaded him to take a glass of Sherry. I took a glass myself. It has considerable medicinal value.'

She tells Miss Morrow this to explain Mr Latimer's dramatic rendition of Keats. She has also partaken of a snifter and had used the excuse to Mr Latimer that 'elderly people need stimulants too sometimes you know'.

Compare Miss Doggett's attitude to alcohol to that of Catherine Oliphant's in *Less Than Angels*. Catherine is a young, modern, liberated woman living in 1950s post-war London. She is independent, has her own career, and eagerly drinks wine, gin, whisky, and Sherry at home, in restaurants and in the pub – both alone and in company. And then think of Miss Jessie Morrow in her mid-30s, trapped in a gloomy house in Oxford as the paid companion to an elderly battle-axe. Her attitude to alcohol as a drink for herself is one of 'what will people think' but for men she is a little more liberal. She says as much in the scene leading up to Mr Latimer's marriage proposal. He is nervous and looks at the Sherry and glasses on a little table.

‘There’s no need to look so furtive. It’s quite natural to want cheering up occasionally. I’m not sure Sherry after a meal is the correct thing though. Should it be Port? Still if you are only considering its medicinal value I shouldn’t think it matters when you drink it. I should have some now if you feel like it.’

‘How well you understand me,’ Latimer murmurs.

And then comes the least romantic marriage proposal. Mr Latimer does not even know the first name of the person he hopes to marry:

‘We’re neither of us young if it comes to that. But we aren’t old yet.’ His voice took on a more hopeful note. ‘Oh Miss Morrow – Janie’ he burst out suddenly.

‘My name isn’t Janie.’

‘Well it’s something beginning with J,’ he said impatiently. It was annoying to be held up by such a triviality. What did it matter what her name was at that moment?

Miss Morrow is no fool, because even though marriage would be a way for a respectable woman like her to escape the drudgery of life with Miss Doggett in Leamington Lodge she realises that Mr Latimer does not love her and she does not love him. She spurns his offer. Miss Morrow may have been lonely and bored, but marriage to a self-regarding twit like Mr Latimer would have been no better. And how could she trust him when she had witnessed him lying so casually to Mrs Wardell about why he had not been at Evensong? That scene earlier in the book explains the meaning of the title *Crampton Hodnet* – the mythical parish in the Cotswolds area of England where Mr Latimer’s fictitious clergyman colleague was the Vicar. It also reveals Mr Latimer’s weak character, and once again Sherry plays a central role.

‘I really feel quite exhausted,’ Mr Latimer said after Mrs Wardell had left. ‘Is there by any chance any Sherry in the house?’

‘I don’t keep a secret bottle in my bedroom,’ said Miss Morrow, ‘but there is some in the sideboard. Miss Doggett only brings it out when we have company or when she feels she needs reviving.’

‘Well, we have just had company and we certainly need reviving,’ said Mr Latimer.

‘All right, I’ll get some. I too have undergone a shattering experience,’ said Miss Morrow, thinking that the first time one heard a clergyman telling deliberate lies could surely be called that.

‘Luckily the glasses are in the sideboard, but I shall have to hide them and wash them myself otherwise Maggie and Florence might think things. Florence is such an intelligent girl,’ she added. ‘You must let me propose a toast. I think we should drink to the health of your friend, the vicar of Crampton Hodnet.’

Mr Latimer looked at her uneasily. He was beginning to realise that he had put himself completely in her power.

With the line about Maggie and Florence, the house staff, Barbara communicates that Miss Morrow is suffering from the eternal fear that people of her class had of being judged by their servants. In a class-riven society the upper classes felt obliged to lead by example and show the lower classes how to live sober and proper lives. That patriarchal attitude believed the lower classes would degenerate without the guiding principles of the upper classes. Miss Morrow was also demonstrating the gender divide and hypocrisy of a society where respectable women who drank outside the strictures of entertaining guests, with a meal, or as medicine were considered to be shameless, loose of morals and out of control. Upper class men on the other hand could drink what they wanted and when they wanted with no sanction. It was expected of them.

When we read Barbara’s books now some of us (me included) may raise their eyebrows at the casual sexism women have to endure and the assumption by some of the male characters that women do not actually enjoy alcohol and certainly know little about it. Rocky Napier says to Mildred in *Excellent Women*, ‘Women don’t really appreciate wine. I suppose you would not dream of drinking a bottle of wine by yourself would you?’

And then we have the self-important William Caldicote at lunch with Mildred who says to her disapprovingly, ‘You seem unlike yourself today. I hope it was not the Nuits St Georges.’ Mildred replies ‘You know I am not used to wine, particularly in the middle of the day. But it’s rather pleasant to be unlike oneself occasionally.’

Like many of Barbara's male characters, Mr Latimer is rather ridiculous. He is self-regarding, needy, and demanding. That could also describe Francis Cleveland! Mr Latimer, as Barbara writes, usually has women gushing with delight. But these are middle aged, unmarried or widowed parishioners. Sitting and reading Tennyson to Miss Doggett as she knits and the marble clock relentlessly tick-tocks he realises how trapped he is in his dull existence. Miss Doggett sees his feeble countenance and says, 'I don't know if it is against your principles, but perhaps you would like a glass of Sherry?'

He leaps at the offer, gulps it down in one and starts to recite Keats.

*O for a beaker full of the warm South  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim.*

Keats (1795-1821) was an English poet in the Romantic movement. Typically poems in that tradition described how the poet was unhappy with reality, and so tried to escape into an ideal world. How appropriate then that Mr Latimer, imagining his future as a lodger in a dismal house where sunlight is not permitted through the windows in case it fades the carpets, should recite the words of a poet who also wanted to escape the mundane.

This scene in the book is interrupted by Miss Morrow who walks into the room as he waves his empty glass. She is wearing her new tender leaf green dress which of course Miss Doggett looks at with her eyebrows raised disapprovingly (does she have any other way?) and mutters something that sounds suspiciously like 'popinjay'. Mr Latimer is rather taken by the new ensemble and offers his arm to escort Miss Morrow into dinner while trying to persuade her to have a glass of Sherry. She refuses curtly saying, 'I don't want any thank you. I am perfectly well.' Yet again Miss Morrow is treating alcohol as medicine and something not to be enjoyed for its own sake – at least not in front of the fearsome Miss Doggett. Maybe a glass of Sherry would have perked her up and made what was a rather strained meal more enjoyable. Although on second thoughts, any occasion where Miss Doggett was present was could never be anything but uncomfortable.

Miss Morrow had been feeling excited as she eagerly pulled her new green dress from her wardrobe of uniformly drab clothes. She knew she looked lovely in it and Mr Latimer said as much. But as she pondered over a dinner of boiled mutton and caper sauce (yuck!) she came to the depressing realisation that this was no state of mind for the companion of an elderly lady. She thought that the dress should have been kept for a special occasion that she knew in her heart would never come.

Before World War II liberated them, genteel, unmarried women with limited means like Miss Morrow were restricted in their domestic and employment choices. Being a paid companion to a gentlewoman like Miss Doggett was a respectable position, albeit as a glorified servant, but it did mean that youngish women were often condemned to a life of boredom and missed opportunities.

That was Miss Morrow's fate, but then she decided to wear the green dress on the very evening that Mr Latimer had pityingly acknowledged to himself that he was imprisoned in a life of church fetes and jumble sales surrounded by geriatric female parishioners. The green dress combined with Keats and Sherry was the catalyst for Mr Latimer to concoct his escape plan. He would ask Miss Morrow to marry him. After all, as Barbara describes it, he could do worse than marry her. Typically for a narcissist he did not care about what Miss Morrow thought, he just assumed she would be pleased to be asked. How could she not – after all, women always gushed with delight in his presence. If he was not so self-absorbed he would have realised that Miss Morrow was not a gusher. With Sherry to steady his nerves, he made his clumsy and, ultimately, spurned proposal as I outlined earlier.

What type of Sherry would Miss Doggett have kept in the house? It would either have been Amontillado, a medium dry copper coloured wine, or Cream Sherry, a sweeter style that was very popular (and still is) in the UK and is the Sherry for people who do not really like alcohol. It is unchallenging and easy to drink. It reminds me of how as a child I imagined red wine to taste – fruity, syrupy and sweet. It was a complete shock when as a teenager I finally had a taste of Bordeaux wine and it was dry and tannic. Miss Doggett would have purchased her Sherry from one of Oxford's many independent

wine merchants. In households that drank a lot of alcohol, the Sherry would be delivered in small wooden casks and then decanted, but as we know Miss Doggett was not a drinker and was certainly not generous so her Sherry would have been bought and served from bottles, the levels of which she could keep a beady eye on.

Despite Sherry playing a major role in *Crampton Hodnet*, compared to other Barbara novels such as *Excellent Women* and *Less Than Angels*, there are few mentions of alcohol. As an Oxford don, Francis Cleveland would have been expected to offer his students a glass of Sherry during tutorials. Barbara saves the passing mention of alcohol and Francis to his ham-fisted seduction of Miss Bird when he takes a bottle of Niersteiner (a light floral white German wine) to the river. He is thwarted when they both fall in the river, although his romantic gesture with the wine would have been fruitless because he forgot the corkscrew. In that scene Barbara Pym shows us what a silly man Francis is. An amateur lothario going through a mid-life crisis and someone with no common sense. After all, the first thing one thinks of with a bottle of wine is ‘how am I going to open it!’

Francis Cleveland is a Professor of English Literature, so he would know that alcohol was a trope in many literary plots. Several high-profile writers were also addicted to it and their characters were too. In America, Ernest Hemingway was devoted to whisky and rum, Tennessee Williams to brandy, and both were alcoholics. Welsh poet Dylan Thomas drank himself to death, and in Scotland national poet Robert Burns not only worked for a time as an excise officer collecting tax on Scotch whisky but was more than partial to a wee dram himself. He inspired the global annual Burns Night celebration where people drink Scotch, eat haggis, and listen to his poems and songs being performed.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote a short story called ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ with a character who lures his victim to his death by promising him some fine Sherry. In England a number of the literary greats were fueled by Sherry. William Shakespeare (writing in the Tudor era when Sherry was a very popular drink) mentioned it 44 times in eight of his plays compared to a mere single reference to Claret (Bordeaux wine). One of his characters, Sir John Falstaff, avaricious erstwhile companion to Prince Hal in the play *Henry IV Part 2* was a big fan and rhapsodised about Sherry (known in that era as ‘sack’): ‘If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them should be, to forswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack.’ The ‘thin potation’ he refers to is Bordeaux wine, aka Claret.

Charles Dickens placed a glass of Sherry in the hands of characters in a number of his novels including *Great Expectations*, *Little Dorrit*, and *David Copperfield* and in his personal life he extolled the virtues of a fine Amontillado: ‘We are away on the wing of the wind to the region of your nutty, full flavoured, unbranded Amontillado, the golden juice I have so often held up to the light with ridiculous affectation of knowingness.’

Even today in Britain Sherry features in the literary life of the nation. One of the perks of being the British Poet Laureate is the ‘butt of sack’ that comes with the job. A butt of sack is the equivalent of 720 bottles of Sherry. The Poet Laureate is invited to Jerez to choose personally which Shery they want. The outgoing Poet Laureate is Carol Ann Duffy and she is partial to Fino and Manzanilla styles. She wrote this poem in honour of Sherry and it is printed on the labels of her Laureate’s Choice Sherry bottles.

### **At Jerez**

*Who wouldn't feel favoured,  
at the end of a week's labour,  
to receive as part-wages  
a pale wine  
that puts the mouth in mind of the sea...*

*and not gladly be kissed  
by gentle William Shakespeare's lips,  
the dark, raisiny taste of his song:  
bequeathed to his thousand daughters and sons,  
the stolen wines of the Spanish sun...*

*or walk the cool bodegas' aisles –  
where flor and oxygen  
grow talented in fragrances and flavours  
to sniff, sip, spit, swallow, savour...*

But it is not just in high literature where Sherry has a starring role; it appears in popular culture too. Frasier in the eponymous TV show regularly reached for the Sherry bottle to drink with his brother Niles. Agatha Christie's amateur sleuth Miss Marple was also partial to a drop. Just as Barbara Pym's writing has been accused of being 'cosy' Miss Marple may appear on first sight to be a harmless elderly spinster musing over a glass of Cream Sherry, but she is a steel magnolia like many of Barbara's female characters.

As a person who makes a living out of talking, educating, and writing about alcohol, *Less Than Angels* set in urban London, with its freedom and liberated enjoyment of a drink should be my favourite Barbara novel but it's not. *Crampton Hodnet* with its buttoned up, restricted, prim, provincial, and conformist attitude to alcohol is.

Final word to Miss Maude Doggett who, even in the midst of a shock, displays her customary imperious manner. Upon hearing the news from Edward Killigrew that Francis Cleveland had declared love for Miss Bird in the manuscripts department of the British Museum, Miss Doggett murmured, 'What a terrible thing. I feel quite shaken.'

Edward offers her a brandy but she responds sharply 'No thank you. I don't need a stimulant, but I should like more tea. Miss Morrow, pass my cup to Mrs Killigrew.'

'Go on have the brandy' readers might have urged, but Barbara ensured that Miss Doggett remained in character - bossy, dismissive and contemptuous towards Miss Morrow. All that communicated in three short lines. What genius writing.

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