

## BARBARA PYM: THE JANE AUSTEN OF OUR DAY

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The title of this study is borrowed from the affirmation made by the critic and scholar, A.L. Rowse, that Barbara Pym is “the Jane Austen de nos jours”. Rowse, however, is not the only critic to draw this kind of parallel: a *Hibernia* reviewer alleged that “Her brilliant sense of comedy is a direct inheritance from Jane Austen”, a *Harper's Queen* critic described her as “A twentieth century Jane Austen”, and another commentator, referring to her novel *No Fond Return of Love*, affirmed that it was “as haunting and subtle an autumnal comedy about love as Jane Austen's *Persuasion*”.<sup>1</sup> It is significant too that, as will be seen, one of the two critics that most contributed to Barbara Pym's belated popularity, Lord David Cecil, is, precisely, a specialist in the work of Jane Austen.

Any writer who comes before us bearing credentials such as these must perforce be of interest, and since Barbara Pym is as yet little known outside the English-speaking world,<sup>2</sup> and since six of her novels were published between 1977 and 1986, it may perhaps be of some interest to comment briefly on the work of this major modern English novelist, and, above all, to point out those features of her novels which most recall aspects of the distinguished nineteenth century novelist with whom she has been so frequently identified.

In the first place, a few words about the author herself may well be in order here, as her work does undoubtedly contain many autobiographical elements,<sup>3</sup> as also some references to the publishing history of her novels, which is not lacking in interest in any survey of “English fiction from the 70s to the 80s”. Barbara Pym was born in Shropshire in 1913 and died, aged sixty-seven, in 1980; she did an Honours Degree in English Literature at Oxford, and served with the Women's Royal Naval Service during the Second World War. She remained single, and was a practising member of the Anglican Church which, however, she presents in her novels in no idealised fashion. A woman of great literary culture, as might be deduced from her novels alone, she spent her working life at the International African Institute in London, and was, for a number of years,

Assistant Editor of their anthropological magazine, *Africa*. She was greatly attached to her sister Hilary, with whom she shared a cottage in Oxfordshire for the last years of her life, and, indeed, in at least two of her novels,<sup>4</sup> a sympathetic and amusing portrait emerges of a pair of sisters obviously closely modelled on Hilary and herself. Hilary it was, together with Barbara Pym's literary executor, Hazel Holt, who was responsible for the posthumous publication of four of her novels,<sup>5</sup> as also for the editing of her "Diaries, Letters and Notebooks" in 1985 under the title of *A Very Private Eye*.

Between 1950 and 1961, Barbara Pym published six novels: *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1959), and *No Fond Return of Love* (1961), and in 1963, she sent a seventh book, called *An Unsuitable Attachment*, to her regular publishers, Jonathan Cape. These first six novels "had been well received by reviewers, and she had gained a following among library borrowers".<sup>6</sup> *An Unsuitable Attachment* was, however, inexplicably rejected by Cape, who although not criticising the quality of the book, alleged that "they doubted whether they would sell enough copies to make a profit", whilst another publisher judged it "very well written" but "with an old-fashioned air to it".<sup>7</sup> Barbara Pym was very hurt by this rejection, for she knew that as an established author, it would be even more difficult to find a new publisher than if she had been trying her luck with a first novel. After two more rejections, she decided to put *An Unsuitable Attachment* by for a bit, revise it perhaps, and meanwhile wrote a new novel: *The Sweet Dove Died*. However, both this and a revised version of the earlier novel, when sent to another round of publishers, met with no better success! What was particularly ironical about the situation was that her earlier novels retained their popularity, were reprinted, and one, *No Fond Return of Love*, was serialised by the B.B.C. in 1965. In 1971, Robert Smith published the first independent appreciation of her work in an article called *How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym in Ariel*.

In 1967 Barbara Pym had written: "In ten years time perhaps someone will be kind enough to discover me",<sup>8</sup> and in the meanwhile, disappointed and disillusioned, as well as having had to undergo a major operation in 1971, she gave up novel-writing altogether. In fact, this is precisely what did happen: in 1977, *The Times Literary Supplement*, in an issue celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary, published a symposium called *Reputations Revisited*,<sup>9</sup> in which "a number of writers, scholars and artists (were asked) to nominate the most underrated and overrated books (or authors) of the past seventy-five years".<sup>10</sup> To Barbara Pym went honour of being the only living writer to be considered as underrated by two contributors, the distinguished scholar and critic, Lord David Cecil,

and the poet, Philip Larkin. Lord David Cecil's appreciation reads as follows:

Underrated: Barbara Pym, whose unpretentious, subtle, accomplished novels, especially *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*, are for me the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past seventy-five years.<sup>11</sup>

He mentioned no overrated author. Philip Larkin wrote:

Underrated: the six novels of Barbara Pym published between 1950 and 1961, which give an unrivalled picture of a small section of middle-class post-war England. She has a unique eye and ear for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

Larkin did have a candidate for the overrated too: D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. "This is not intended to mean", he wrote, "That I think Miss Pym a better novelist than Mr. Lawrence, but *Women in Love* has always seemed to me the least readable of his novels, boring, turgid, mechanical, ugly and dominated by the kind of deathly will-power that elsewhere Lawrence always attacked".<sup>13</sup>

These two tributes, coming from whence they came, did much to bring the name of Barbara Pym to the fore again, and after sixteen years of silence, a new novel, *Quartet in Autumn* was published in the late summer of that same year, 1977, this time by Macmillan; this was followed in 1978 by the publication of her second rejected novel, *The Sweet Dove Died*, and in 1977 too, the B.B.C. serialised *Excellent Women*. "Cape began to reissue her earlier books, Penguin and Granada planned a series of paperbacks. She was widely interviewed and appeared in a T.V. film called *Tea with Miss Pym*"<sup>14</sup>. "All this", Philip Larkin was to write, "she sustained with unassuming pleasure, but the irony of the situation was not lost upon her".<sup>15</sup> The year of her death, a new novel was published posthumously, *A Few Green Leaves*, and this was followed by the publication, in 1982, of the original rejected novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, with a Foreword by Philip Larkin. In 1985, her literary executor, Hazel Holt, and her sister, Hilary, had published by Macmillan a novel which Barbara Pym completed in 1940 (it is her first novel, therefore), but which she put aside, whilst dedicating herself to other activities during the war, and which, after the war, she considered to be "too dated to be publishable".<sup>16</sup> Hazel Holt did some editing work on this novel, with the help of notes found among Barbara Pym's papers, and it appeared under the title of *Crampton Hodnet*.<sup>17</sup> This novel may well be considered, given the date of its composition, as the first example of an

English post-war campus novel, situated as it is in Oxford, and the majority of its *dramatis personae* being academics or students. Finally, in 1986, Macmillan published what is undoubtedly Barbara Pym's most "trendy" novel, or rather "sharp" and "swinging" as she expressed it<sup>18</sup>, which, left untitled and in two draft versions, was edited by Hazel Holt and given the title of *An Academic Question*<sup>19</sup>. Barbara Pym had started to write the novel in 1970, and according to a letter she wrote to Philip Larkin in June 1971, "It was supposed to be a sort of Margaret Drabble effort but of course it hasn't turned out like that at all"<sup>20</sup>. In fact, two years before, when rewriting *The Sweet Dove Died*, she had exclaimed: "If only one could write about Margaret Drabble-like characters!"<sup>21</sup>. According to Hazel Holt, she had not really expected *An Academic Question* to be ever published, but like the young Jane Austen and her parodies, had hoped that "Perhaps my immediate circle of friends will like to read it"<sup>22</sup>.

We are dealing, therefore, with an interesting literary case-history, with a novelist who had already achieved a certain reputation in the 50s, but whose subject matter, apparently, was felt by her own publisher, Cape, to be too old-fashioned to prove attractive to the "swinging" 60s, but who, having almost accidentally got her second wind in the 70s, has ended up by being a best seller in the 1980s! It must be remembered too, that Barbara Pym's best-sellers are not only the novels that she actually wrote in the 70s (*Quartet in Autumn*, *An Academic Question*, *A Few Green Leaves*), but also the earlier rejected novels (*The Sweet Dove Died*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*), the 1950s novels which were hastily reissued in paperback, and a novel like *Crampton Hodnet*, which she herself had more or less sentenced to oblivion. At the same time, she has herself become "an academic question": in July 1986, her old Oxford College, St. Hilda's, organised a Barbara Pym Conference attended by over fifty "Pymists"<sup>23</sup>, a *Barbara Pym Newsletter* has now come into being, and 1987 saw the appearance of a spate of academic publications concerning her life and work. Reviewing some of these books for the *Times Literary Supplement*<sup>24</sup>, Nicola Shulman suggests that the time is again ripe for Barbara Pym to find an appreciative audience; after labelling the years between 1965 and 1975 as "a decade of sexual licence", she adds:

But we are now entering greyer times, when restricted sexual freedom limits choice, when chastity and fidelity are again at large, when women again want to get married. Anyone who wants to know what relations between men and women are going to be like under these circumstances may do worse than to seek edification in the novels of Barbara Pym...<sup>25</sup>

It is, of course, a moot point whether she herself would, in fact, have

been happy to see her work thus “academicised”, in view of the delightfully satirical references she made to scholarly research as early as 1940 in *Crampton Hodnet* and as late as 1970 in *An Academic Question!* Indeed, it must likewise be admitted that it is difficult to judge how happy she would have been with any identification of her work with that of Jane Austen: according to her sister, Hilary, she regarded such identification “as mildly blasphemous”<sup>26</sup>, but there can be no doubt that she saw a possible mentor in her great nineteenth century predecessor: as early as 1952, we find her writing in her diary: “Read some of Jane Austen’s last chapters and find out how she manages all the loose ends”<sup>27</sup>, and we hear her exclaiming many years later when she went to visit Steventon: “I put my hand down on Jane’s desk and bring it up covered with dust. Oh that some of her genius might rub off on me!”<sup>28</sup>.

There is nothing experimental in the *nouveau roman* sense of the word about Barbara Pym’s narrative techniques; all her novels, with the exception of *Excellent Women*, *A Glass of Blessings* and *An Academic Question*, which have a female first-person narrator, are written in the third person, contain a good deal of dialogue, and not a little reported thought, both of these devices being exploited with great skill for humorous purposes. For, as will be seen later, one of the most obvious points of similarity between the novels of Barbara Pym and those of Jane Austen is that they are in both cases conceived of as vehicles for humour, irony and satire.

Jane Austen’s famous reference to her writing being restricted to “a small two inches of ivory”, and her no less famous dictum concerning suitable subject matter for the novel: “Three or four Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work upon”<sup>29</sup>, are both undoubtedly applicable to Barbara Pym’s novels. A *New York Times Book* reviewer, writing about *An Unsuitable Attachment* emphasized its “miniature exactness”, and Philip Larkin, too, qualified her novels as “miniatures” that “will not diminish”; in the *Times Literary Supplement* symposium, as has been mentioned, he likewise emphasized that, in her novels, Barbara Pym dealt with “a small section of middle-class post-war England” (our italics), as, indeed, she does. Like Jane Austen, she deliberately limits herself to the class she is best acquainted with, and to the social contexts she is most familiar with: true it is, she does not always, as Jane Austen suggests, restrict herself to reflecting village life in her novels as she does, for example, in *A Few Green Leaves*, but those of her books situated in Oxford or in London, and dealing, perhaps, not only with vicars, doctors and curates, but also with academics, anthropologists, librarians or office workers, are equally parochial in the strictest sense of the term. It is, in any case, an apposite word, since several of her novels do centre on vicarages and the activities characteristic of English parish life: religious

services, jumble-sales, flower-shows, bazaars and annual outings. With the exception of the odd daily woman, or volunteer church-worker of humbler origins, all the main characters peopling Barbara Pym's novels belong to the middle-class, and often to the so-called liberal professions (the men), and may be more or less cultivated as the case demands. Just as it is a commonplace of Jane Austen criticism to say that her novels did not trouble themselves with the larger political issues at stake —the Napoleonic wars, for example— at the time of their composing, so too it may be said of Barbara Pym's books that they deliberately ignore the great themes concerning war and peace in our time: there are few references to the Second World War, and none to the Cold War or the Bomb, for example; those politicians who do make brief appearances in her work, generally do so to little purpose. As Mildred Lathbury, in *Excellent Women* reflects realistically, after hearing the details of a trivial quarrel:

...but then I told myself that, after all, life was like that for most of us —the small unpleasantnesses rather than the great tragedies; the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic love affairs of history or fiction<sup>30</sup>.

A similar spirit informs Catherine Morland's meditations on the Gothic novel: "angels" and "fiends" might be found in the Alps and the Pyrenees, but "among the English... there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad", especially "in the midland counties of England" we are told in *Northanger Abbey*<sup>31</sup>.

But it is not only in the restricted choice of characters and environment that Barbara Pym so resembles Jane Austen, but also in the subject-matter of her novels, which is neither more nor less, to use the title of one of Jane Austen's minor works, than that of *Love and Friendship* (sic), the essential difference between the two authoresses being that Jane Austen, as tradition then demanded, generally presents relationships tending to courtship and marriage between young people, whereas Barbara Pym tends to favour, on the face of it, the affairs of the heart of more unlikely heroines —spinsters in their thirties who in their self disparaging way, no longer have many hopes in that direction, middle-aged or even elderly women.

As in Jane Austen's novels, the female protagonists constitute, as it were, the reflecting intelligences of Barbara Pym's books, the action of which is seen and judged through their observant and, generally, acute gaze, and it is with these characters that the reader tends to identify himself, just as one identifies oneself with Elizabeth Bennett or Anne Elliot. It should be added, perhaps, that many of Barbara Pym's heroines, though generally older than Jane Austen's, are endowed with similar

virtues; like Fanny Price, Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, they are sensible, intelligent, unassuming, altruistic, clear-sighted and ever willing to laugh at themselves.

A very brief summary of the plots of her two first novels and then those of the six books published most recently may perhaps help to give some idea of the themes and settings of the Pym world. Thus, *Some Tame Gazelle* is situated in a village, and is mainly concerned with the relationships established between two middle-aged sisters, both of them spinsters in their fifties, Harriet and Belinda Bede (that is, Hilary and Barbara, note the initials!)<sup>32</sup>, and a number of clergymen and curates, plus a librarian, some single, others married, and their wives and other female parishioners. The action revolves round the vicarage and its Archdeacon, and there are two marriages and two unaccepted proposals. The reflecting intelligence is reserved, self-deprecating Belinda. *Excellent Women*, a first-person novel, is narrated by Mildred Lathbury, a spinster of thirty, and one of the "excellent women", as they are patronisingly termed by the local vicar, who constitute the bulk of the parishioners at the local Anglican church, situated in "a shabby part of London". Mildred, characteristically, works in the office of an institution for the relief of impoverished gentlewomen, and in the course of the novel dispenses a large number of cups of tea and quiet sympathy to a series of Barbara Pym's typically selfish men. There is a separation and an ulterior reconciliation, a vicar is saved in the nick of time from marrying an unscrupulous woman, and his sister, therefore, from loneliness; Mildred becomes the object of attention of a rather self-centred anthropologist, in principle, because he wants her to help him with his proof-reading and card-indexing, for this is an open-ended novel, as several of Barbara Pym's books are. Those who read *An Unsuitable Attachment*, however, will learn incidentally that Mildred does, in fact, marry him. A characteristic of Barbara Pym's novels which owes nothing to Jane Austen is the fleeting inclusion in later novels of characters who have been perhaps the protagonists of earlier ones: thus, for example, the Bede sisters from *Some Tame Gazelle* make a brief appearance in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, where they turn up in Rome with a tame curate in tow, and come momentarily in contact with the group of parishioners, including the protagonists of the later book. Sister Dew who plays an important rôle in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, gives a cameo performance in *An Academic Question* as the matron of an old people's home.

*Quartet in Autumn* is Barbara Pym's only novel dealing exclusively with old age<sup>33</sup>: the quartet in question are two men and two women of retiring age who have worked in the same office in London for many years; one of them is a widower, the others are all single. The story concerns the way in which the women employ themselves during the

forced leisure of retirement, and the evening and holiday occupations of the men; the clerical note is again present, as one of the men is a practising and active Anglican church-goer. In spite of what might seem a dreary subject, and death does, in fact, carry off one member of the quartet, the novel is full of wry humour and ends, as so many of Barbara Pym's novels do, on a hopeful note, in part because her undemanding heroines are willing to be satisfied with little and to find pleasure in simple things!

*The Sweet Dove Died* has, perhaps, a less sympathetic, but no less convincing female protagonist: a well-preserved, and relatively cultured woman of forty-nine (a rather Colette-like character), living in London, the object of attention of several middle-aged admirers, who enters, however, into an excessively possessive relationship with a much younger man with homosexual leanings, but loses him through this over-possessiveness. Even so, he tries to renew the relationship, but Leonora, ruthless and possessive as she undoubtedly is, is endowed too with the dignity of Barbara Pym's more sympathetic heroines, and smilingly refuses his tentative overtures; her decision and the graciousness with which she conforms to it, constitutes an understated triumph. The book echoes in a more intense way the theme lightheartedly evoked in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and in *Crampton Hodnet*, of certain spinsters' obsession with young "helpless" curates!

*A Few Green Leaves*, published posthumously, is again set in a country village, where a thirtyish anthropologist spends her summer holidays, and enters into contact with the local vicar and his parishioners, with the half playful intention of making a field study of the community. She is unsatisfactorily visited by a former lover; now married and separated, but is obviously (for again, this is an open-ended novel) intended to eventually marry the widowed vicar. The book abounds in delightful evocations of country and parish life.

*An Unsuitable Attachment*, the famous "rejected" novel, again centres on parish life, in this case in North London, and deals, on the one hand, with the match-making activities of the vicar's wife on behalf of her younger sister, and, on the other, with the interest aroused in a series of men by a lady-like spinster in her thirties, Ianthe Broome, who works in a library; she eventually marries a fellow-librarian, five years younger than herself, and socially inferior: the affair for this reason is considered by the rest of the parishioners as an "unsuitable attachment". There are many delightful parochial episodes, not the least being the parish excursion to Rome, and the perpetual search for cups of tea in the Eternal City!

*Crampton Hodnet*, the campus-novel written in 1940, is situated in Oxford, and counts among its *dramatis personae*; as was mentioned, academics and their wives, librarians, students, curates, vicars and their

faithful parishioners; there is a proposal (refused), a half-hearted attempt on the part of a don to run away to Paris with a student, and a great deal of fun is had at the expense of male academics of all ages!

Finally, *An Academic Question* has as its narrator the self-deprecating wife of an ambitious young anthropologist working at a provincial university. An old-fashioned non-working wife, Caroline suffers pangs of unjustified jealousy on account of an "able" colleague of her husband's, who is separated from hers, confides her troubles to a typical Pym woman, a forthright spinster more interested in hedgehogs than in men and their infidelities, and finally manages to pull off an academic *coup* for her husband, by reading to an elderly ex-missionary in an old people's home. Through her contacts with family and friends, we are offered a nodding acquaintance with a series of "contemporary" issues, such as student riots, abortion, contraception and one-parent families. The book is atypical in this sense, but not so in its parodic view of academic research!

As will be obvious from these summaries, Barbara Pym's novels, like Jane Austen's, are principally concerned with courtship and marriage, although as in Jane Austen's case, the characters engaged in the pursuit of love are surrounded by a variegated supporting cast of convincing and often amusing characters with personalities as memorable as those of Miss Bates, Mrs. Jennings or Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Although not all the novels, as has been seen, necessarily end in a happy marriage, as occurs in Jane Austen's books, the final pages of Barbara Pym's stories generally offer a promise if not exactly of romance, at least of some satisfying new vistas to be opened up. Thus, even *Quartet in Autumn*, which in view of the subject-matter, might be expected to have a pessimistic ending, closes thus:

Any new interest that might take Marjorie's mind off her disappointment was to be encouraged, Letty felt, though it was difficult to think of Edwin and Norman as objects of romantic speculation, and two less country-loving people could hardly be imagined. But at least it made one realise that life still held infinite possibilities for change<sup>34</sup>.

*Excellent Women* closes with Mildred thinking:

(Julian) might need to be protected from the women who were going to live in his house. So, what with my duty there and the work I am going to do for Everard, it seemed as if I might be going to have what Helena called "a full life" after all<sup>35</sup>.

*A Few Green Leaves* ends with Emma affirming:

... this was not going to happen, for Emma was going to stay in the village herself. *She* would write a novel and even, as she was beginning to realise, embark on a love-affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one<sup>36</sup>.

*An Academic Question*, finally, finishes with the following exchange between the narrator and her animal-loving friend, Dolly:

I thought how “ongoing” life was and was at that moment glad of it. Later I might change my mind.  
 “I suppose the hedgehogs are all gone now?” I said to Dolly.  
 “Yes, we don’t see them now, of course, they’re in hibernation. But in April —oh, that will be the time!”<sup>37</sup>.

For Barbara Pym is an optimistic writer, such optimism being convincing because, like Jane Austen again, she creates characters who are willing to come to terms with life, and, like Elinor Dashwood, for example, not to ask too much of it. One of the most attractive traits, of her novels, is the contentment often felt by spinsters with their single lot: their comfortable houses, their familiar relationship with the sister, brother, friend or employer with whom they live, their regular hours and little unchallenged habits, which contrasts endearingly with the popular attitude of “anything rather than be left on the shelf”, an attitude, incidentally, faithfully reflected by Jane Austen in the episode of Charlotte Lucas’s acceptance of the dreadful Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. Thus, the relief felt by the middle-aged spinsters, Harriet and Belinda, in *Some Tame Gazelle*, on refusing their respective suitors is amusingly evoked with Harriet finally thinking:

... who would change a comfortable life of spinsterhood in a country parish which always had its pale curate to be cherished, for the unknown trials of matrimony?<sup>38</sup>

whilst the much-tried Mrs. Cleveland, in *Crampton Hodnet*, reflects, on glimpsing the ringless hands of a sensible-looking woman in a tea-room, with a certain envy:

Then, presumably, she hadn’t got a husband. She was a comfortable spinster with nobody else but herself to consider. Living in a tidy house not far from London, making nice little supper dishes for one, a place for everything and everything in its place, no husband hanging resentfully round the sitting-room...<sup>39</sup>

a passage which might well have come straight out of *Cranford!*

Of course, underlying this popular notion that a woman should get married at all costs, is, or was, the idea that otherwise she would never know the fulfillment implicit in sexual experience, but, in fact, Barbara Pym's novels, like the English nineteenth century novel, are characterised by their sexual reticence: with the exception of a few brief references in the atypical *An Academic Question*, there are in the whole canon only two episodes involving sexual activity, both occurring in *The Sweet Dove Died*, in which Leonora's young protégé seduces a girl student and is, in his turn, seduced by a male American academic! Other references to sex are of a euphemistic nature and, generally, humorous: thus, Belinda Bede is amused when her sister, Harriet, enthuses about a new acquaintance, met in the village street, who "... had the most delightful manners... He didn't try to take advantage of me in any way"<sup>40</sup>, whilst in *Crampton Hodnet* there are several references to the "very unpleasant experience" which Miss Morrow's cousin, Bertha, had had in Paris:

"It was in Paris that your cousin Bertha had that experience, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, but I don't think Mr. Latimer need be afraid of anything like that happening", said Miss Morrow, thinking that, after all, Bertha had been a young girl of nineteen and Mr. Latimer was a clergyman of over thirty<sup>41</sup>.

In *Jane and Prudence*, in which Jessica Morrow and her employer, Miss Doggett, make a further appearance, the latter, on commenting on the infidelity of a friend's husband, adds (and it is worth noting the humorous authorial comment which follows it):

"They say, though, that men only want *one thing* —that's the truth of the matter". Miss Doggett again looked puzzled; it was as if she had heard that men only wanted one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was"<sup>42</sup>.

Both Miss Doggett and the vicar's wife comment on the propriety of the infidelity in question being committed in London:

"Yes, it seems suitable that things like that should go on in London. It is in better taste somehow that a man should be unfaithful to his wife away from home. Not all of them have the opportunity of course"<sup>43</sup>.

It will be remembered that in *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford's affair

with Maria Rushworth likewise takes place in London; in *An Academic Question*, the narrator's husband is briefly unfaithful to her with his publisher's secretary when he goes to London to inquire after his proofs, and in *Crampton Hodnet*, a chapter called *Love in the British Museum* is dedicated to a further stage in a middle-aged don's illicit but really rather innocent affair with one of his students from Oxford.

This tendency to, as it were, debunk, sex is particularly marked in *The Sweet Dove Died*, where the heroine, who is, after all, something of a *demi-mondaine*, looks back on her past:

But had there ever really been passion, or even emotion? One or two tearful scenes in bed—for she had enjoyed *that* kind of thing—and now it was such a relief that she didn't have to worry any more. Her men friends were mostly elderly cultured people, who admired her elegance and asked no more than the pleasure of her company<sup>44</sup>.

John Updike, the American novelist, who is himself anything but reticent about sexual matters in *his* novels, underlined this characteristic of Barbara Pym's novel in a penetrating review of *Excellent Women* published in *The New Yorker*:

*Excellent Women*, arriving on these shores in a heyday of sexual hype, is a startling reminder that solitude may be chosen, and that a lively, full novel can be constructed entirely within the precincts of that regressive virtue, feminine patience<sup>45</sup>.

In novels which are principally occupied, however, with the theme and variations of the pursuit of love, it is only to be expected that proposals of marriage be sometimes included in the text; since up to now, it has been the prerogative of the male of the species to make the running in this respect, such episodes may be inserted precisely to satirize and point out the vanity, selfishness and self-complacency of the proposer, as Jane Austen was to do, immortally, in the case of Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth Bennett, and George Eliot in that of Mr. Casaubon's declaration by letter to Dorothea Brooke. In a number of Barbara Pym's open-ended novels, this radical step is never taken, but in *Some Tame Gazelle*, *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *Crampton Hodnet*, she does include such episodes with the obvious purpose of casting a disparaging light on men who, be they clergymen or not, are essentially self-centred, self-indulgent and self-complacent, and what, perhaps, is worse, lacking in any authentic feeling for the ladies they are thus singling out for their attention. Thus, Mr. Latimer, the thirty-five year old curate in *Crampton Hodnet*, after having decided, as he unromantically puts it to himself, that he could do

worse than marry Miss Morrow (whose Christian name he has not even bothered to ascertain!) makes her what she describes to herself as “a very half-hearted proposal”:

“I respect and esteem you very much”, he went on in the same angry tone. “I think we might be very happy together”.

“But do you *love* me?” asked Miss Morrow quietly.

“Love you?” he said indignantly. “But of course I do. Haven’t I just told you so?”

“You have said that you respect and esteem me very much”, said Miss Morrow without elaboration.

.....  
 “You don’t seem to realise that one can learn to care”, said Mr. Latimer pompously.

“No, I don’t”, said Miss Morrow firmly. “Learning to care always seems to me to be one of the most difficult lessons that can be imagined. How does one set about it? Perhaps we might do it together, like Russian, in the long winter evenings?”

“Now, Jessica, you’re just being frivolous. I have asked you to marry me and you have refused. Is that it?”

“Yes”, said Miss Morrow in a low voice. “We don’t love each other, and I’m sure you could do better...”<sup>46</sup>.

Of a similarly prosaic nature is Mervyn Cantrell’s approach to Ianthe Broome in *An Unsuitable Attachment*: over dinner in a South Kensington restaurant he raises the question in the following terms:

“If *my* mother died, we should *both* be alone”, Mervyn declared.

“Yes, I suppose we would be”, said Ianthe in a puzzled tone...

“Supposing we were to join forces”, said Mervyn almost eagerly. “It would be silly keeping on two houses”.

“Do you mean we should live together?” she asked, thinking that she must have misunderstood him.

“Well, not in sin — I wasn’t suggesting that”. He giggled. “Get married— that’s what I meant, of course”.

.....  
 “But I couldn’t marry you”, she burst out.

“And why not might I ask?” he said petulantly, almost nastily.

“We don’t love each other”.

“Perhaps not, but there’s marriage and marriage, if you see what I mean”.

Ianthe thought she did see but there was no comment she could make.

“We get on well together”, Mervyn continued, “and we’ve

many interests in common, after all... And we both like nice furniture”.

“Whose house would we live in?” asked Ianthe.

“Oh, yours”, he answered without hesitation. “Ours isn’t at all nice and besides it’s only leasehold”<sup>47</sup>.

Barbara Pym’s comic view of such episodes was already to the fore in her first published novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, in the two scenes in which Harriet and Belinda are proposed to, respectively, by Mr. Mold the librarian and the missionary bishop, Theodore Grote, or Mbawawa, as he likes to call himself. Although as has been seen, Harriet has already decided in advance to reject such an offer, she cannot but note that when it does come, it is both “prosaic and casual”, and very different in this respect from the proposals she receives regularly from a charming and cultivated Italian Count. Belinda, on the contrary, is taken completely unawares by the Bishop, but has the dignity to firmly refuse a proposal which comes hedged in by phrases such as “... one hardly looks for beauty at our time of life”, “Perhaps you are not accustomed to receiving such offers?”, and “We need not speak of love—one would hardly expect that now”<sup>48</sup>.

However, not all men are to be rejected out of hand, marriage does play an important part in Barbara Pym’s novels, and in several of her books, Jane Austen’s famous axiom that “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”, and that he is to be considered “the rightful property of some one or other” of the daughters of the surrounding families<sup>49</sup>, is respected and exemplified in several of her stories. And, of course, just as Jane Austen has her matchmakers, her Mrs. Bennet and her Emma Woodhouse, so Barbara Pym has, for example, her Jane, her Sophia and her Mrs. Wardell, all of them vicar’s wives, in, respectively, *Jane and Prudence*, *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *Crampton Hodnet*.

Thus Jane laments that a bishop “should send them a curate already engaged”<sup>50</sup>, heartfree ones, of course, being far preferable, and the second paragraph of *An Unsuitable Attachment* is typical in this respect:

The situation had nothing particularly unusual about it —an unmarried man visiting the house he has just bought and wondering where he should put his furniture, and two women —sisters perhaps— betraying a very natural interest in the man or the house or both<sup>51</sup>.

In fact, the elder married sister, Sophia, behaves in true Mrs. Bennett fashion, by constantly inventing strategies to throw the bachelor in question together with her younger unmarried sister —strategies which will

possibly, in this open-ended novel, be eventually crowned with success. The author is quite explicit about Sophia's intentions:

He could not know that Sophia was taking a keen interest in him and had even been considering him —provided he were not divorced or otherwise unsuitable— as a husband for her sister<sup>52</sup>.

“The truth universally acknowledged” is again emphasized at the end of the novel, when Sophia openly admits to the desirable bachelor in question that:

“A single man probably inspires wider and wilder speculation than a single woman... *His* unmarried state is in itself more interesting than a woman's unmarried state, if you see what I mean”<sup>53</sup>.

Similarly, in *Jane and Prudence*, where Jane is on the look-out for a suitable husband for her younger friend, we read:

... (she) found herself turning her attention to Mr. Driver, and wondering, though very faintly, if he might perhaps do for her friend Prudence<sup>54</sup>.

She has, in fact, a teen-age daughter of her own to protect, and the arrival on the scene of an eligible young M. P. sets her match-making instincts in motion again:

But was she failing in her duty as a mother, she wondered, by not entertaining hopes of Edward Lyall as a possible husband for Flora? He would be more suitable for Prudence, if anybody...<sup>55</sup>.

In fact, the rivalry that may possibly exist in *An Unsuitable Attachment* between Ianthe Broome and Penelope Grandison, both of them spinsters and neither in their first youth, for the favours of the local eligible bachelors is treated in the same humorous fashion as Jane Austen presents Mrs. Bennett's distrust of any friends with marriageable daughters or nieces!

Again, since Barbara Pym's novels, like Jane Austen's, are written by a woman, and since in both cases the action tends to be presented through the eyes of a female protagonist, it is hardly surprising that one should find many similarities as regards their treatment of the male characters in their books. The most noticeable difference here is that, though like Jane Austen, Barbara Pym tends to avoid all-men-together scenes (this is not, however, true of *Quartet in Autumn*<sup>56</sup>), she does characterise her men

more frequently through their own thoughts and, as in Jane Austen's novels —with the exception of the Grandisonian portraits of Mr. Knightley or Colonel Brandon, for example— no very rhapsodic view of mankind emerges: if Jane Austen had her Sir Walter Elliots, her Mr. Eltons, her John Dashwoods and her Mr. Collins's, Barbara Pym has her Francis Clevelands, her Alan Grimstones, her Graham Pettifers and her Fabian Drivers —none of them great heroes, and, really, no great “catches”! Indeed, Barbara Pym's irony and humour is at its most delicately mordant when dealing with such “unexcellent men”. In her novels there are few Grandisonian portraits: possibly the two married vicars, the husbands of Jane and Sophia come out a little better than most of the other male characters, although they too have their little pettinesses; it is, perhaps, significant that the only foreign male characters to figure in the canon are all sympathetically drawn: Count Ricardo Bianco, in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and in *No Fond Return of Love*, the Austrian Bill Sedge and a “Brazilian gentleman”, Mr. MacBride Pereira.

The vices which Barbara Pym most chastises by her mordant wit in the persons of her male characters, are similar to those emphasized by Jane Austen: selfishness, vanity, shallowness, self-complacency, self-pity, self-indulgence, snobbery, pedantry and negativism. Like Jane Austen, or, indeed, Jane Austen's great mentor, Henry Fielding, she holds up these petty, everyday vices to ridicule, that by laughing at them, and recognising them, we may learn a lesson from them. Perhaps one of her most effective portraits in this sense, is that of Archdeacon Hoccleve in her early novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, who seems to have most of these defects, yet who, in spite of all, is calmly idealised by Belinda Bede, and efficiently supported by his admirable and intellectually superior wife. Indeed, there is much, not only of Jane Austen, but also of Anthony Trollope, in the composition of Archdeacon Hoccleve, who was, in any case, foreshadowed by Francis Cleveland, the “unexcellent” Oxford don, in Barbara Pym's earliest work, *Crampton Hodnet*. A pedant, inordinately fond of his own voice, above all when quoting seventeenth century divines, the Archdeacon preaches unintelligible sermons, and is jealous of the success of other clergymen whose plain, understandable sermons he considers “very poor”. He is, in fact, even jealous of his wife's knowledge of Middle English literature: “Now, Agatha, Belinda does not wish to be forced to admire you... academic research is not everything”<sup>57</sup>. This, however, does not prevent *him* from “affectedly” reciting *Gray's Elegy* whenever he is obliged to visit the sick or the poor, people, adds the author, who “where much too frightened of their vicar to regard him as being of any possible comfort”<sup>58</sup>.

In fact, that vicars are no more perfect than the next man is driven home several times in Barbara Pym's novels, as it is, of course, in the

persons of Mr. Collins, Mr. Elton and Edward Ferrars, for example, in Jane Austen's. Father Gellibrand, in *Quartet in Autumn*, on hearing that Letty is a "retired person", seemed "to draw away".

He did not much care for the aged, the elderly, or just "old people" whatever you liked to call them<sup>59</sup>.

The penultimate chapter of this same novel opens with a Jane Austen-like affirmation:

Letty had an old-fashioned respect for the clergy which seemed outmoded in the seventies, when it was continually being brought home to her that in many ways they were just like other men, or even more so<sup>60</sup>.

Indeed, Mr. Latimer, the curate, in *Crampton Hodnet*, tries to get out of performing a disagreeable moral duty, by protesting "I'm no better than any other man"<sup>61</sup>. Certainly Barbara Pym's clergymen are no less selfish than other men: even the unworldly Nicholas, in *Jane and Prudence*, on seeing his teetotal wife pour herself a full glass of sherry, says anxiously "I shouldn't have it if you don't like it... It seems a pity to waste it". Indeed, alcohol brings out the worst in more than one Pym man: thus, William, in *Excellent Women*, inviting Mildred out to lunch, "... lifted the bottle, judged the amount left in it and refilled his own glass but not (hers)"<sup>62</sup>. Another relatively unworldly vicar, Tom, in *A Few Green Leaves*, whose long-suffering sister has eventually given up keeping house for him, reacts to a visit from her in the following way:

His first thought on her arrival was not so much pleasure at seeing his sister again as relief that she would be able to make the coffee which was usually provided on these occasions<sup>63</sup>.

Indeed, it is a characteristic of Barbara Pym's men that they should take their womenfolk totally for granted: thus, of Tom again, she writes:

As for Daphne, Tom had long ceased to regard his sister as a woman whose clothes might be worthy of notice, sometimes he hardly even thought of her as a human being<sup>64</sup>.

Although his new parishioner, Emma, does not attend Evensong, it occurs to Tom that she might be helpful in other ways: "She might be a good typist".

This taking of women for granted is especially distinguished, though, in the person of Fabian Driver, an eligible widower, in *Jane and*

*Prudence*, of whom we are told: “When his wife had been alive he had hardly noticed Jessie Morrow; indeed, if possible, he had noticed her even less than he noticed his wife”<sup>65</sup>, and his attitude to his wife’s death is of a piece with his general behaviour; she had been older than him, and:

had brought him a comfortable amount of money as well as a great deal of love. He had been unprepared for her death, and outraged by it, for it had happened suddenly without a long illness to prepare him, when he had been deeply involved in one of the little romantic affairs which he seemed to need, either to bolster up his self-respect or for some more obvious reason<sup>66</sup>.

It is self-deprecating, sensitive and sensible Jessica Morrow (translated from *Crampton Hodnet* to *Jane and Prudence*), who gets this particular “catch”, but then, the world of Barbara Pym’s novels is full of “unexcellent” men being supported by “excellent” women; as intuitive Jane puts it:

Oh, but it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time... Making them feel... that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things —enabling them to preen themselves and puff out their plumage like birds and bask in the sunshine of love, real or imagined, it didn’t matter which<sup>67</sup>.

It is this kind of vanity and self-complacency that informs the proposals already commented on, and the same kind of complacency characterises another eligible vicar, David Lyddell, in *Quartet in Autumn*, who is looking out for the highest bidder for his favours: clear-sighted Letty imagines him going “all round the village sampling the cooking of the unattended women before deciding which one to settle with”<sup>68</sup>. Vanity and self-complacency likewise predominate in the speech which another unattached vicar, Julian Malory, in *Excellent Women*, makes to Mildred Lathbury to inform her of his recent engagement:

“It’s so splendid of you to understand like this. I know it must have been a shock to you, though I dare say you weren’t entirely unprepared. Still, it must have been a shock, a blow almost, I might say”, he laboured on, heavy and humourless, not at all like his usual self... “I was never in love with you, if that’s what you mean”, I said, thinking it was time to be blunt<sup>69</sup>.

It is satisfying for men to feel themselves thus adored, though for ruthless

Ned, the American academic in *The Sweet Dove Died*, it can have its drawbacks:

There had been quite a number (of women) in his life, from his mother to older women and young girls who had been foolish enough to expect more than he was prepared to give. He had seen with distaste many a red face working and blotched with tears... Older women especially were most unwise to cry, it was ruination to their appearance<sup>70</sup>.

This passage, incidentally, offers a good example of the way Barbara Pym handles reported thought to the detriment of her male characters!

Because most of Barbara Pym's men are self-indulgent as well as self-centred, it is not surprising that many should believe that they are overworked: "Nobody can possibly know how much I have to do", complains Archdeacon Hoccleve, although his wife has to remind him that he was in his bath at eleven a.m.! In *An Academic Question* we read:

Some of Alan's colleagues were already eating, refuelling at the trough, to enable them the better to support what most of them regarded as a "crushing teaching load" which could amount to as much as eight or ten hours a week<sup>71</sup>.

Widower Fabian Drives talks pathetically to Jane, in *Jane and Prudence*, of "managing" as regards his food, making her see visions of him eternally eating bread and cheese, only to learn, a few minutes later, that he actually has a cook. In the same novel, there is a superb scene in which most of the protagonists are gathered for tea on Fabian's lawn, and the men vie with each other as regards their degrees of exhaustion: the local M. P. needs "to relax", Fabian is "exhausted" by "the bustle of City life" and the vicar finds "Life... certainly tiring these days!"<sup>72</sup>

A negative attitude to life may well be classified as a form of self-indulgence, since it generally consists in inflicting on others one's own attitude, and thus spoiling their pleasure or satisfaction. Negativism of this kind is superbly exemplified in the person of Mervyn Cantrell, the mother-ridden librarian in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and of Norman, in *Quartet in Autumn*, who both cast their wet-blanket opinions over any initiative. Thus, when Ianthe Broome talks of going to Rome with the parish excursion, Mervyn does all he can to disillusion her:

"Rome —you're welcome to it as far as I'm concerned" said Mervyn spitefully, the day before Ianthe was due to leave with the party from St. Basil's.

“But Rome in the spring, surely that will be lovely”, John protested.

“It’s not like Paris you know. I believe it can be uncomfortably hot. And I’m sure you won’t like the food. All that cannelloni —or all those cannelloni I should say— *very* much overrated”.....  
 “Grated cheese on *everything*”, Mervyn went on, “though it is Parmesan, I’ll grant you that. Mother would find it much too rich, I know”.

“Well, it’s a good thing she isn’t going then”, said John.

“They tell me you only get that very strong black espresso coffee —not even cappuccino— and the cups are only half full” Mervyn persisted...<sup>73</sup>.

Gloomy Norman makes the worst of any conversation held in the office: when Letty says: “after all, I haven’t retired yet”, Norman replies:

“But you soon will... and you won’t get much of a pension from here to add to what the state gives you”<sup>74</sup>.

When Letty moves into new lodgings with an elderly landlady, Norman is quick to point out the disadvantages:

“I only hope it won’t be a case of frying pan into fire... You must watch out that you don’t get landed with an elderly person and all *that* entails”.

“Oh, Mrs. Pope is very independent”, said Edwin quickly. “She’s a member of the parochial church council and a very active one”.

“That’s as may be”, said Norman, “but it doesn’t necessarily follow that she’s got perfect control over her legs —she might fall, you know”<sup>75</sup>.

As will have been observed from these satirical comments on mankind, Barbara Pym’s novels, like Jane Austen’s, are characterised by her profound sense of the comedy of everyday life. It is, perhaps, the aspect of her work which the critics have most insisted on, and it is interesting to note, in this context, that she herself described the first pages of her first novel, *Crompton Hodnet*, in her diary for 1939, as “rather funny”, and, as Hazel Holt points out in her Note to this novel, finally published in 1985, “so far, everyone who has read the manuscript has laughed out loud —even in the Bodleian Library”<sup>76</sup>.

It is difficult in a short study such as this to give a representative idea of the richness and variety of the high comedy to be observed in Barbara Pym’s novels. Like Jane Austen, she is a past master in the creation of comic episodes illustrating the dominant characteristics of a given

character: thus, in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, she produces a superb example of a latter-day Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the person of the self-confident, self-opinionated Lady Selvedge who makes a brief appearance in the novel in order to open the church bazaar. Mean as well as bossy, she obliges a friend to have lunch with her in a self-service restaurant for three and ninepence, where the following scene takes place after she has set hands on “a miniature steamed pudding” belonging, in fact, to a young man lunching at the same table:

“Excuse me, madam, but that’s *my* pudding you’re about to eat”.

“Oh, no, this is mine”, said Lady Selvedge firmly, making a shielding movement with her hands round the pudding in its little dish.

“I think the young man is right”, said Mrs. Grandison. “I don’t remember seeing you take a pudding. The dishes get rather confused when they’re all together on the table”, she added, trying to put things right.

“Oh well then I suppose it is not mine”, said Lady Selvedge grudgingly pushing the pudding back towards the young man, who then proceeded to eat it in a kind of defiant confusion.

“Those sort of people eat far too much *starch*”, said Lady Selvedge to Mrs. Grandison in an audible whisper. “Meat pie, chips, roll and butter, and now this stodgy pudding. A dish of *greens* would be much better for you”, she said, raising her voice and turning towards the young man”<sup>77</sup>.

Lady Selvedge is a minor character, but Barbara Pym is capable of presenting even a major character in a constantly ironic light, as she does, for example, in the case of Archdeacon Hoccleve or Miss Doggett who can, obviously, do no right in her eyes. She is likewise capable of creating a comic scene, almost gratuitously, without finding her inspiration for comedy in the quirks of any specific character: thus Ianthe Broome’s unexpected meeting with an old schoolmate, now a nun, in an Underground station, gives rise to the following scene:

Ianthe... found herself sitting down in a seat offered to her by a small boy.

“You looked as if you could do with a sit-down” said the boy’s mother. “I was watching that nun talking to you —it seems to have given you quite a turn”.

“I was surprised to see her”, Ianthe admitted.

The woman lowered her voice so that Ianthe could hardly hear it above the noise of the train. “I don’t think they ought to let them out, walking about like that in those black clothes. It gives me the

creeps and I know it frightened the kiddies. I mean it's *not very nice*, is it?"

"Oh, I didn't mind", said Ianthe. "She's somebody I know".

"How dreadful for you, somebody you know being like that"<sup>78</sup>.

But it is not only in the presentation of such vignettes that Barbara Pym's comic spirit excels, but also, and above all, it makes itself constantly felt in the little understatedly ironic, acid or purely humorous throw-away asides, as it were, embedded here and there in her narratives, the games of wit that constantly surprise and delight. Her unassuming heroines' gift for mocking their own ordinariness or dullness is, for example, an unfailing source of humour: when Belinda Bede's dressmaker observes: "Oh, well, Miss Bede, you never wear very *fitting* dresses, do you, if you see what I mean? A few inches here or there doesn't make much difference", Belinda is forced to agree, depressed, however, "by this picture of herself in shapeless, unfashionable garments"<sup>79</sup>. Clothes often inspire such self-deprecatory judgements: as Mildred does her washing, in *Excellent Women*, she thinks:

It was depressing the way the same old things turned up every week. Just the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear, I thought dejectedly, so there is no need to describe them<sup>80</sup>.

I might be pointed out in this context, that in 1952, in this novel, long before the term "kitchen sink drama", for example, had become current, Barbara Pym has Mildred reflecting: "... it occurred to me that if ever I wrote a novel it would be of the "stream of consciousness" type and deal with an hour in the life of a woman at the sink"<sup>81</sup>.

Such realities as the kitchen sink form part of women's daily experience, and Barbara Pym is not above reflecting with humour some of the more *terre à terre* aspects of everyday life: thus, in *Some Tame Gazelle*, the Miss Bedes' genteel sewing-woman perceives a lack in the amenities of the household:

"Oh, and there was no paper in the downstairs lavatory", chortled Harriet. "She came to me now, *so confidential*, I couldn't think what she was going to say".

"Oh, dear", sighed Belinda, "I meant to get some more toilet rolls yesterday".

"I just gave her an old Church Times", said Harriet airily.

"Oh, Harriet, I wish you hadn't done that. I feel Miss Prior is the kind of person who wouldn't like to use the Church Times"<sup>82</sup>.

Barbara Pym was very alive to verbal nuances, and often explores them for humorous purposes: thus when Mildred Lathbury is patronisingly called “a dear”, she replies “ungraciously”: “No, I’m not”, for “nobody really likes to be called a dear. There is something so very faint and dull about it”<sup>83</sup>. Later, when she is asked to act “nobly” as a reconciler of a separated couple, she “... agreed that it did certainly sound noble, but like so many noble occupations there was something a little chilly about it”<sup>84</sup>. On hearing that an anthropologist is considered to be “petty and mean”, Mildred facetiously asks herself whether it was his work among the pygmies which had made him “small-minded”<sup>85</sup>.

As will have been noted, Barbara Pym is quite capable of irreverent humour: thus, in *A Few Green Leaves*, she compares the relative popularity of the church, half-empty on Sunday, with that of the village surgery, full on Monday, the surgery being a place of “advice and consolation”:

You might *talk* to the rector... but he couldn’t give you a prescription. There was nothing in churchgoing to equal that triumphant moment when you came out of the surgery clutching the ritual scrap of paper”<sup>86</sup>.

Note the cunning use of “advice”, “consolation” and “ritual” here! Similarly, in *Quartet in Autumn*, we hear of the “High” vicar’s leanings towards Catholic ceremonies:

“But the Kiss of Peace —turning to the person next to you with a friendly gesture, rather a... ” Father G. had been going to say “beautiful idea”, but, perhaps, given his particular congregation, it wasn’t quite the word”<sup>87</sup>

and his friend prefers not to point out that with only half a dozen worshippers scattered among the pews, it would be difficult for “anybody to make any kind of gesture”. In *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie Mainwaring is struck by the difference between seeing the servers in their altar vestments and out of them:

“... one of the servers began to remove his cassock and put on a very secular-looking leather jacket. One should not perhaps ever witness the change from the sacred to the profane, and how very profane it seemed when she noticed that another server was wearing jeans”<sup>88</sup>.

Sister Dew, one of Barbara Pym’s most memorable comic characters,

appearing both in *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *An Academic Question*, has clear ideas on the last rites:

“Cremation, dear, so much cleaner and tidier, don’t you think? I always try to get them cremated if I can. Of course, it’s sometimes difficult with Catholics —they don’t like it. I was told it’s forbidden, bones and relics and that kind of thing. Naturally there would be no difficulty of that sort with the Reverend Stillingfleet. He was *very* low church”<sup>89</sup>.

But Sister Dew has, in fact, *her* secular superstitions: in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, she goes on the parish excursion to Rome, and when throwing the ritual coin into the Fontana di Trevi, and secretly wishing that one of her numbers would come up on “Ernie”, she adds, “Premium Bonds, that is”, “in case the spirit of the fountain didn’t know what she meant”!<sup>90</sup>

Love too, of course, is taken *cum grano salis* in Barbara Pym’s books, as indeed it is in Jane Austen’s: not only is the whole subject dealt with in a comic light in many of her novels (in *Crampton Hodnet*, for example), but there are, again, many minor humorous references to it: the following conversation, for example, from *Excellent Women*, where Sister Blatt says of widows:

“Oh, they have the knack of catching a man. Having done it once I suppose they can do it again. I suppose there’s nothing in it when you know how”.

“Like mending fuses”, I suggested, though I had not previously taken this simple view of seeking and finding a life partner<sup>91</sup>.

However, even supposing that a life partner *is* found, according to Barbara Pym, life will not necessarily become a bed of roses. Jane, in *Jane and Prudence*, meditates:

Indeed, it was obvious that at times she found him (*her husband*) both boring and irritating. But wasn’t that what so many marriages were —finding a person boring and irritating and yet loving him? Who could imagine a man who was *never* boring or irritating?<sup>92</sup>

Added to that, she reflects later on in the novel, “... most men, when one came to think of it, were undistinguished to look at, if not positively ugly”<sup>93</sup>. As A. L. Rowse has pointed out, Barbara Pym probably remained unmarried because she “noticed too much —it makes life difficult, puts men off!”<sup>94</sup> If we are to believe Miss Mitford’s anonymous friend, Jane

Austen's case was very similar: "no more regarded in society than a poker or a firescreen", she was transformed by the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* into "a poker of whom everybody is afraid... A wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed!"<sup>95</sup>.

Barbara Pym paid tribute to this awe-inspiring genius in several of her works; there are quite a few literary allusions in her novels, since many of her characters are well-read, cultivated people, as is to be expected in academic, clerical or anthropological circles, and some of these refer directly or indirectly to Jane Austen. Thus, in *A Few Green Leaves*, we are informed that the main character, Emma Howick, was given her Christian name by her mother, a lecturer in English Literature, "perhaps with the hope that some of the qualities possessed by the heroine of the novel might be perpetuated"<sup>96</sup>. Further on in the book, when Emma is preparing supper for a possible suitor, the thought of lightly-boiled eggs reminds her that Mr. Woodhouse "in the novel about her namesake had claimed that (they were) not unwholesome"<sup>97</sup>, and at the end of the book, an agnostic's desire to play on a fine instrument reminds Emma of Jane Austen's Jane Fairfax "and her gift of a pianoforte"<sup>98</sup>.

Of course, *A Few Green Leaves* was written between 1978-80, when Barbara Pym was aware of the frequency with which her work was compared to that of Jane Austen, so these specific references may have been included deliberately as tongue-in-cheek tributes to her benevolent critics. Such allusions do, however, appear already in her earlier works: thus, in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, she writes of the elegant, understated Ianthe Broome in the following terms: "She saw herself perhaps as an Elizabeth Bowen heroine —for one did not openly identify oneself with Jane Austen's heroines"<sup>99</sup>, and in a wryly humorous passage of *Jane and Prudence*, Jane sees herself as a Pandarus in her efforts to bring Fabian and Prudence together, but then decides that "as it was to be a courtship and marriage according to the most decorous conventions... she was really much more like Emma Woodhouse"<sup>100</sup>. Again, at the end of *No Fond Return of Love*, when Aylwin Forbes suddenly changes his mind, and prefers to court Dulcie Mainwaring instead of her niece, he justifies his rather surprising *volte-face* in the following way:

As for his apparent change of heart, he had suddenly remembered the end of *Mansfield Park* and how Edmund fell out of love with Mary Crawley and came to care for Fanny. Dulcie must surely know the novel well, and would understand how such things happen<sup>101</sup>

and in *Jane and Prudence*, we learn that Prudence's surname is Bates, and

that she “disliked being called Miss Bates; if she resembled any character in fiction it was certainly not poor silly Miss Bates”<sup>102</sup>.

In the closing pages of *An Academic Question* Jane Austen’s novels are equated with “good” books, and in the opening pages of *Quartet in Autumn* which refer to the library frequented by the four protagonists, we learn that Letty has stopped reading “romantic” novels, and has gone on to biographies:

And because these were “true” they were really better than fiction. Not perhaps better than Jane Austen or Tolstoy, which she had not read anyway, but certainly more “worthwhile” than the works of any modern novelist<sup>103</sup>

a sly dig, this, perhaps, at herself, or other contemporary novelists. If, however, there is any “modern novelist”, “not perhaps better than Jane Austen”, but certainly as “worthwhile”, it is, surely, Barbara Pym!

## Notes:

1. Tributes reproduced on the back of the Granada editions of *No Fond Return of Love* and *Less than Angels*, and the Perennial Library edition of *Excellent Women*.
2. The *Barbara Pym Conference*, organised by St. Hilda's College, Oxford, July 4th and 5th, 1986, was attended by "about fifty Pymists from Great Britain and the United States, and also present... were scholars from Sweden and Germany" (Letter from the Conference Organiser, Mrs. Jean Harker, to the author of this study).
3. "Biographical elements do figure in the books —her enchantment with Oxford; her work with the International African Institute", Nicola Shulman, reviewing various books on Barbara Pym for the *Times Literary Supplement*, December 25-31, 1987, p. 1420.
4. *Some Tame Gazelle* and *An Unsuitable Attachment*.
5. *A Few Green Leaves*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *Crampton Hodnet* and *An Academic Question*.
6. Philip Larkin: Foreword to *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Granada, 1983, p. 5.
7. Philip Larkin, *ibid*; Nicola Shulman, *ibid*.
8. Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*, an *Autobiography in Letters and Diaries*, Grafton Books, 1985, p. 341.
9. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 75th Anniversary Number, 21st January, 1977, pp. 66-68.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
14. Philip Larkin, Foreword to *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
16. Hazel Holt: *Note* prefacing *Crampton Hodnet*, Macmillan, 1985.
17. This possibly infelicitous title refers to an imaginary village in the Cotswolds, invented on the spur of the moment by an embarrassed curate to explain his absence from Evensong. Crampton was her father's middle name and her own third Christian name.
18. Expressions quoted by Hazel Holt in her *Note* prefacing *An Academic Question*, Macmillan, 1986.
19. The idiomatic expression is used by the narrator: "What would Mr. Stillingfleet have really wished? Well, it was an academic question now", p. 162.
20. Quoted by Hazel Holt, *Note* to *An Academic Question*.
21. Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*, p. 349.
22. Hazel Holt: *Note* to *An Academic Question*.
23. See Note 2.
24. Nicola Shulman, *Times Literary Supplement*, Dec. 25-31, 1987, p. 1420.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Hazel Holt: Preface to *A Very Private Eye*, p. xvi.
27. Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*, p. 264.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
29. Jane Austen: *Selected Letters*, Edited by R.W. Chapman, with an Introduction by Marilyn Butler, Oxford, 1985, p. 189 and 170 respectively.
30. *Excellent Women*, Perennial Library, New York, 1980, p. 101.
31. Chapter 25.

32. "Indeed, sometimes it was her life that followed her fiction. The imagined village existence of her first book, *Some Tame Gazelle*, in which she projected herself into a spinsterish middle age, is not very different from the world of *A Few Green Leaves*, a late novel which she drew from Finstock, where she ultimately did come to live with her sister, Hilary". Nicola Shulman, *T.L.S.*, Dec. 25-31, 1987, p. 1420.
33. See Patricia Shaw: "The View in Winter: The Theme of Old Age in Contemporary English Fiction", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, Nº 5, November, 1982, for a specific study of this theme in *Quartet in Autumn*.
34. *Quartet in Autumn*, Macmillan, 1977, p. 218.
35. *Excellent Women*, p. 256.
36. *A Few Green Leaves*, Perennial Library, New York, 1980, p. 250.
37. *An Academic Question*, Macmillan, 1986, p. 182.
38. *Some Tame Gazelle*, Jonathan Cape, 1950, p. 136.
39. *Crampton Hodnet*, Macmillan, 1985, pp. 171-2.
40. *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 101.
41. *Crampton Hodnet*, pp. 151-152.
42. *Jane and Prudence*, Granada, 1983, p. 79.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *The Sweet Dove Died*, Macmillan, 1978, pp. 16-17.
45. Quoted on the back-cover of *Excellent Women*.
46. *Crampton Hodnet*, pp. 92-93.
47. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Granada, 1983, pp. 201-202.
48. *Some Tame Gazelle*, pp. 223-224.
49. *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter I.
50. *Jane and Prudence*, pp. 19-20.
51. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 13.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
54. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 37.
55. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 77.
56. Barbara Pym wrote to Bob Smith, February 8th., 1977: "(Didn't they say that Jane Austen never has two men talking alone together in her novels? I'm afraid I have been bolder than that)", *A Very Private Eye*, p. 410.
57. *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 68.
58. *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 54.
59. *Quartet in Autumn*, pp. 192-193.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
61. *Crampton Hodnet*, p. 153.
62. *Excellent Women*, p. 70.
63. *A Few Green Leaves*, p. 241.
64. *Ibid.* p. 91.
65. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 61.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
68. *Quartet in Autumn*, p. 151.
69. *Excellent Women*, p. 133.
70. *The Sweet Dove Died*, p. 199.
71. *An Academic Question*, p. 28.
72. *Jane and Prudence*, pp. 194-195.
73. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 131.
74. *Quartet in Autumn*, p. 70.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
76. Hazel Holt: Note prefacing *Crampton Hodnet*.
77. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 58.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
79. *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 48.
80. *Excellent Women*, p. 85.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
82. *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 49.
83. *Excellent Women*, p. 128.
84. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
86. *A Few Green Leaves*, p. 13.
87. *Quartet in Autumn*, p. 15.
88. *No Fond Return of Love*, Granada, 1982, p. 163.
89. *An Academic Question*, pp. 50-51.
90. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 162.
91. *Excellent Women*, p. 120.
92. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 219.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
94. Quoted by Nicola Shulman, *T.L.S.*, Dec. 25-31, 1987, p. 2140.
95. Quoted by Virginia Woolf in "Jane Austen", *The Common Reader, First Series*, Hogarth Press, 1968, pp. 168-169.
96. *A Few Green Leaves*, p. 8.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
99. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, p. 26.
100. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 108.
101. *No Fond Return of Love*, p. 286.
102. *Jane and Prudence*, p. 39.
103. *Quartet in Autumn*, pp. 3-4.