

ALONE TOGETHER: GENDER AND ALIENATION

in

THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM

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by

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Alone Together:

Gender and Alienation in the Novels of Barbara Pym

In Barbara Pym's distinctive fictional world, the designation of gender roles governs and regulates any and all activity. Closer examination suggests a less conventional interpretation, one that questions the patriarchal ordering inherent to the system. Though Pym may not accommodate the label of feminist novelist, her novels reveal the disparities attendant upon gender stereotyping.

Barbara Pym is an inheritor of the tradition exemplified in the novels of Jane Austen, most notably in the utilization of the "marriage plot". Implicit within this fictional device is the promise of marriage at the close, the heroine's hard-won reward for good behaviour. Though Pym's deceptively reticent heroines may harbour some hope of this resolution, few trust the mythology that informs the marriage plot. In consequence, the novels rest on a seeming paradox. They are defined by the rules that govern the conventional romance, but committed to exposing their patent absurdity. Although Pym uses the marriage plot and does not advocate a radical reordering of society, she recognizes that both sexes are victimized by expectations reflected in the marriage plot and maintained through rigid social gradations.

The early novels treat the subject of gender with Pym's distinctive blend of detached humour and irony. The later works, while maintaining this property, are tinged with a steadily darkening vision. In this context, the theme of community intrudes more insistently, to gain precedence in the final works. In them, Pym evokes a society increasingly estranged from itself and its past. In this alienated society, the "excellent women" become the repositories and custodians of the custom and ceremony that typify Pym's unique world, and serve as a mediating influence between past, present, and future. Pym envisages

a society more feminized than feminist, one that respects the challenge of difference as it is epitomized in gender, but recognizes that only community will ensure survival.

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Chapter 1

Gender and Community: "...only connect"

Barbara Pym is a comic novelist with a serious subject. Conversely, she is a serious novelist writing in a comic mode. Humour suffuses everything she wrote, her "very private eye" selecting and shaping the "self-contained world" that Hazel Holt describes.¹ This self-containment distinguishes Pym's novelistic landscape. Images of confinement abound, some explicit and some less so; all contribute to the sense of enclosure and privacy that typifies her world. Structured in patriarchy, its fundamental ordering principle is gender designation. In its name, assiduously devised and maintained rules of social conduct govern and direct human behaviour. By definition, of course, patriarchy privileges the masculine, and subordinates the feminine, a ranking that finds little favour with feminist critics. To them, gender perpetuates male dominance, since "... it is generally true that gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the interests of male supremacy".²

Because gender designation regulates every aspect of Pym's world, a specific definition of this principle is needed. Robert J. Stoller examines the concept, stressing its essentially social and cultural implications:

Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) [sic] sex. . . . *Gender role* is the overt behavior one [sic] displays in society, the role which he plays especially with other people, to establish his position with them insofar as his and their evaluation of his gender is concerned.³

The resulting hierarchy separates, when it does not isolate, men from women, age from youth, and race from race. Yet in this arrangement Pym glimpses an underlying fallacy. However the system favours "the interests of male supremacy", and she is in no doubt that it does, privilege exacts a price. Although the existing order may work to male advantage, its expectations and demands imprison and isolate men as well as women within its fetters. Barbara Pym's comic vision originates in this perception; the recurring motif of confinement becomes its dominant expression.

Pym's ironic humour neither denies nor diminishes her characters. However bemused she is at male gullibility and its seemingly limitless dimensions, she rarely descends to ridicule. In Pym's world, the feminine principle prevails; a keen appreciation of the patriarchal system's essential absurdity maintains this control. But beneath the laughter lurks the recognition that the structure's foundation has serious flaws, frailties that afflict everyone who shelters beneath its protection. Although Pym never advocates any reordering of the system, she does suggest that its artificially maintained barriers discourage human communication, and deny that, for men and women alike, human existence is ephemeral and solitary. As Piers Longridge, the aimless hero of *A Glass of Blessings*, says in self-justification, "... aren't we all colleagues, in a sense, in this grim business of getting through life as best we can?"⁴ Piers' homosexuality may exile him to a territory even more peripheral than the traditional preserve of the excellent woman, but his gloomy assessment originates in an exclusion rivalling that imposed upon women by a patriarchal order. Like Piers, the excellent woman maintains a separation from the dominant culture, although her isolation is neither so complete nor so despairing.

Although Pym's discerning protagonists understand that such divisions promote and sustain illusory patterns of social organization and behaviour, they honour them all the same. By this subterfuge, the excellent woman exercises a modicum of independence. Relegated to a marginal position, she scrutinizes the passing scene, takes note of its absurdities, and keeps her own counsel. Ironically, her somewhat invidious position allows her some flexibility in managing her life. In a limited way, in her limited world, the excellent woman retains a measure of autonomy, one she guards jealously.

Pym's characters operate within a confined and confining space, but this enclosure does not spare them the vicissitudes common to every life. Yet her heroines are rarely victims of their often unenviable circumstances. In *Less Than Angels*, Pym's fourth published novel, Catherine Oliphant speaks for her creator when she observes that, "[l]ife is comic and sad and indefinite — dull, sometimes, but seldom really tragic or deliriously happy, except when one's very young."⁵ As a writer of romance fiction, Catherine understands the appeal of illusion over reality. In this context, illusion can be defined as life as it should be, and reality life as it is. In Pym's world, illusion is romantic love, while the exigencies imposed by gender designation are its reality. To distinguish between the two demands honesty, courage, and perhaps most of all, humour. Pym's excellent woman has all three attributes. Together, these qualities sustain the heightened consciousness that identifies her. Viewed through her eyes, the familiar scene takes on a strange and hitherto unremarked structure. Its basic components remain, but their arrangement and relationship to one another have undergone some subtle transformation. As one critic has noted, "... there is nothing in the order of existence to mandate that the world or the two sexes be so. In the Pym world, bores and boors can be male and female, and men can out-spinster spinsters".⁶

This consciousness comprises a significant part of Pym's celebrated humour, especially as it illuminates the myths of male supremacy. Initially, critical response to her work celebrated her pleasantly domestic world, or attempted to match the events of her life to those of her novels. Both tendencies diverted critical attention from her idiosyncratic world view. In similar vein, literary antecedents are cited, Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope most prominently. Pym's style and subject owe something to each, although comparisons can be misleading. At worst, they encourage interpretations or expectations that detract from her originality and innovative technique. A debate is emerging between those who would place her in the first rank of late twentieth-century novelists, and those who believe that her work, though not without merit, belongs within a lower classification. Pym's limited scope is the most frequent target, as critics cite her reluctance to stray very far from the strict confines she established in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Francis King typifies this bias, saying "Barbara Pym was a *good* novelist . . . but she was not an outstanding one . . . she was a writer of an extremely narrow range. Not for her wuthering heights or lower depths, but merely the literary equivalent of the bland, cosy, comforting landscape of the Oxfordshire to which she retired".⁷ If these limitations preclude literary excellence, then King's verdict must stand. Still, Barbara Pym was not Emily Bronte, much less Dostoevsky, nor was she meant to be. The passionate grandeur of emotion and action that characterizes both novelists belongs to a tradition and a world more elevated and grandiose, and possibly more fanciful, than that inhabited by Pym's gentle (and genteel) heroines. Barbara Everett's assessment, that Pym's work is curiously resistant to current critical approaches, strikes a more convincing note :

[Critics] are perhaps reflecting some real uncertainty presented by their subject, some essential elusiveness and problematical quality [T]his may be an effect of a genuine attempt to come to terms with an underlying principle of Barbara Pym's work, the determined 'smallness' of her fictions; and the resulting problem of *status* is equalled by the problem of *kind* that meets the brisk unadmiring inquiry of the academic eager to categorize. Both suggest the possibility of a writer less lucidly simple than the best criticism can make her sound.⁸

This "determined smallness" encourages the assumption of simplicity, as does Pym's dependence on the marriage plot. In the first book-length study of Pym's work, Jane Nardin suggests that "... Pym is, in some ways, a displaced nineteenth- or even eighteenth-century writer".⁹ As Nardin points out, the lives of Pym's characters seem curiously anachronistic, more appropriate to an earlier period than to the mid-twentieth century. But these discrepancies work to Pym's advantage, as she controverts the conventions governing the romance genre. If the gender system perpetuates the patriarchy, the romance plot is its most eloquent advocate. As one feminist critic has charged, "... the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole".¹⁰ Its tenacious hold on the culture's collective imagination may account for the misinterpretations that have dogged Pym's novels. But Pym's subtlety contributed to these misreadings, "the essential elusiveness and problematic quality" noted by Barbara Everett. Barbara Bowman focuses on this difficulty in her analysis of Pym's adaptation of the romance convention. As she sees it, "Pym's heroines and narrators are not overtly feminist in the sense that they set out to overthrow male domination, but they do dramatize the heroine's perception of the discrepancy between her own and the dominant culture's assumption."¹¹ To appreciate Pym's subtle distortion of this convention, most

specifically in her delineation of the excellent woman , necessitates a brief review of the genre's informing principles.

The romance plot centres on a young woman's limited and finite quest; the successful negotiation of tests and pitfalls is rewarded in the blissful, if inevitable, resolution of marriage. The appeal of this narrative pattern has ensured its survival, conditioning perceptions of appropriate behaviour and expectation, that extend well beyond the convention. For Rachel Blau Du Plessis, this influence is integral to our world-view:

Romance plots of various kinds, the iconography of love, the postures of yearning, pleasing, choosing, slipping, falling, and failing are, evidently, some of the deep, shared structures of our culture.¹²

Worth noting in this account of the "iconography of love" are the implications of helplessness and loss of conscious control. For the heroine, marriage is the only acceptable resolution to her story; yet the attendant paraphernalia of romance preclude any conscious exercise of judgment or reason. Faced with the single crucial decision of her life, at least as it is presented within the convention, the heroine must relinquish her consciousness and her ability to discriminate, if she is to satisfy the dicta of romance. This idea is crucial to the romance plot, and to the genre's historic development. It is the dilemma that faces heroines from Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse through Jane Eyre and Catherine Linton to Maggie Tulliver and Gwendolyn Harleth. As any review of these heroines confirms, mistakes have devastating consequences. Somehow the heroine must accommodate to these conditions, and still make the correct, moral, decision. In her quest, she seeks more than a mate. As Rachel Brownstein sees it, the rewards of romance and marriage transcend any simple resolution. They

determine feminine aspiration and codify societal values, implicating both sexes in variant ways:

The marriage plot most novels depend on is about finding validation of one's uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man. The man's love is proof of the girl's value, and payment for it. Her search for perfect love through an incoherent, hostile wilderness of days is the plot that endows the aimless (life) with aim.¹³

Male approbation is the heroine's only hope, her sole means of acquiring any sense of meaning and direction to her life. In the courtship process, and its final triumphant progression to the altar, the heroine becomes the action's focal point. For one ephemeral moment, she stands at the pinnacle of her limited world, and of her life's experience. In this sense, her life is concentrated into this brief span. According to Rachel Brownstein, "... linking her life to a man's, the heroine defines her singularity. By reconciling opposites ... by marrying ... she makes herself all she is, complete".¹⁴ Brownstein's analysis focuses on the idea of marriage as the resolution of the heroine's plot. Indeed, this preordained conclusion is the genre's *raison d'être*. However romance mythology may obscure this truth, it is effectively an agreeable means to a necessary end. The anticipated reconciliation of opposites and resulting sense of completion spur the heroine's efforts, propelling her through this romantic prelude to the safe haven of marriage.

In Barbara Pym's novels, resolution of any kind is relatively rare. Her heroines do not live in the context of any answers, beyond those they have learned from their experience to date. Even those heroines who do marry, or are married, have no inflated expectations, either for institution or husband. For Pym's heroines, romance is the thing, an entity complete unto itself. Some find

the "slipping, falling, and failing" stage infinitely preferable to any potential resolution, and spend their lives seeking to recapture these delights. For them, the anticipation must always surpass the reality. Still others distrust the seductive power wielded by romantic illusion. But none deny its existence nor its primacy.

Barbara Pym uses the romance/marriage plot to her own idiosyncratic, even subversive purposes, adapting its conventions and playing against its expectations. To Barbara Everett, she can be likened to "the creator of *Don Quixote* Barbara Pym's novels are surely in the same way romantic anti-romances".¹⁵ Pym effects this seeming contradiction by replacing romance's traditional heroine with her "excellent woman". Through her detached and ironic gaze, the familiar scene is presented from a new and unfamiliar perspective. The original outlines remain, but they are overlaid by an altered configuration. Both are visible to Pym's protagonist, and each is separate and distinguishable from the other. Although the excellent woman never loses sight of romance and its appeal, she is careful to separate its pleasurable illusions from the reality of marriage. She knows, as conventionally romantic heroines cannot, that marriage makes no one complete who has not achieved that state already. Yet in Pym's emotional landscape, romantic illusion penalizes men as well as women, its demands defeating any possibility of authentic communion between the two. Several of Pym's excellent women make presumably happy marriages, but none of these unions promises any sublime resolution of the heroine's plot, nor of the excellent woman's life. By definition, opposites are irreconcilable. This sense of division pervades all of the novels, intensifying and deepening in the later work.

With this darkening vision goes a shift in emphasis. The need for community becomes Pym's dominant theme; the term implies a mutual

acknowledgment of human mortality and vulnerability, coupled with a recognition of shared obligation and responsibility. Paradoxically, Pym stresses the absolute necessity for community even as she never forgets the essential alienation of one human being from another. In this regard, the "wars of gender" becomes a major motif. Because the marriage plot governs Pym's novels, feminine is subordinate to masculine. But underlying the comedy, and intensifying with each succeeding novel, lurks the suggestion that such illusions work to the advantage of neither sex. Sustained by romantic ideals, a direct consequence of myths promulgated through the marriage plot, her male characters bask in the perceived approval of every woman they encounter. But Pym's men are not the sole perpetrators of these myths; to many of her female characters, romantic illusion becomes the motivating principle of their lives. The excellent woman is distinguished by her shrewd awareness of the absurdities that sustain and perpetuate its inequities. No discrepancy escapes her observation, nor her amusement.

Yet beneath the laughter, or mingled with it and inseparable from it, lies a note of regret. Undoubtedly, the "wars of gender" comprise a major component of Pym's humour, and of her novels. Equally, men are her major target, though she has an unerring eye for feminine self-delusion. However ruefully, she recognizes that men and women, caught within patriarchy's precepts, inflict needless unhappiness on one another. Men may offend more frequently since patriarchal values encourage, and even condone, male egotism and insensitivity. To bridge this seeming impasse, Pym seeks a rapprochement between the sexes, a redistribution of power and perceptions of power. Carolyn Heilbrun's *Toward A Recognition of Androgyny* has particular relevance to Pym's essential thesis. In her introduction to that work, Heilbrun argues that traditionally gender-determined behaviour must be relinquished in favor of "[a]ndrogyny [that]

seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate. . . [and] suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes".¹⁶ This "spirit of reconciliation" accords with Pym's general philosophy, although the dualities that characterize her work complicate and impede any hope of its attainment. At best, her ironic perception of a gender-determined society illuminates its absurdities as well as its frailties. To this end, Pym invokes a series of motifs that demonstrates the impact of these phenomena in determining and guiding perception. Of these, gender division is most evident, its themes and intricacies played out against a background that emerges with increasing clarity. Generally, the theme of gender designation predominates in the early work, superseded by community in the later. But underlying both themes runs her awareness of the immutable fact of human isolation, and of the impossibility of bridging the gap separating one human being from another. The highly individual, often idiosyncratic, perceptions that evoke each character so vividly accent this theme. The early novels exploit its comic possibilities, while the later work advances and deepens the ramifications for human isolation. As the novels advance into the bleak territory of old age, these divisions assume an altered configuration, realigning gender designations of superior and subordinate. In the world of the elderly, men find themselves with women on society's periphery; age becomes feminine to youth's masculine. Yet the learned behaviour patterns of a lifetime persist, and with them, a sense of duality.

As discussed earlier, the search for romantic love animates Pym's early work. An added dimension, not readily definable but always discernible, surfaces insistently, one that some of her readers find unsettling, at least. For C. A. R. Hills, discomfiture is a frequent, if unwarranted, response to Pym's work:

The suspicion grows that there is something potentially *embarrassing* about Barbara Pym, that what superficially seems innocuous is in fact original and thought-provoking, that behind the cheery vicarage-party jokes and pieces of white fish in string bags lies a power to disturb and annoy. ¹⁷

That "power to disturb and annoy" originates in her distinctive narrative voice. It is the voice of the excellent woman, a subtly disturbing blend of conventional wisdom and bemused irony. As Hills points out, the combination sounds a dissonant note in the dowdy world of vicarage-party jokes and pieces of white fish in string bags. Most disquieting is the source of these revelations, the near-invisible excellent woman, the undemanding and uncomplaining worker who epitomizes the strength and support of her community. As Mildred Lathbury, quintessential excellent woman and heroine of *Excellent Women*, describes herself, "I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life — birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fete spoilt by bad weather . . .".¹⁸ Mildred's catalogue, an ironic but accurate assessment of her life-experience, reflects her general milieu and point of orientation. In Mildred's world, birth, marriage, and death pale in significance to the great moments of garden fetes and jumble sales — as they do in most lives, Mildred (and Pym) imply.

The statement encapsulates Pym's comic vision, the slightly skewed observation that jolts and alters the customary perspective. But beyond that consideration, or integral to it, Mildred's list delineates the quality that John Bayley calls the "selfhood of her novels . . . [the] true sense of duality". He continues:

It is a quality she, and they, are quite unconscious of. And it is truer to life than the appearances of living laboriously assembled in other modern novels. . . . By 'truer to life' I mean that her novels

take entirely for granted the fact that we live in two worlds, one of extreme triviality typified by the work situation, social exchange, irritations, small comforts of eating and drinking, planning clothes, perceiving others. On the other hand we live in a world of romance, aspiration, love—longing, loneliness, despair. Nothing would be easier than for a novelist to systematise this contrast and purposefully point it up. It would then become an artificial structure on which our sense of the reality of the work depended, and about which we would be fully conscious of the author's probable satiric or didactic purpose. . . . In Barbara Pym's novels the two worlds completely coincide without losing their separate identity. Each is present, but neither can be demarcated or defined in relation to the other. ¹⁹

Bayley's insistence that Pym was unconscious of this duality is problematic, at least. That reservation aside, the insight captures Barbara Pym's informing thesis admirably. The duality of human existence, the insoluble paradox common to all experience, surfaces in a multitude of guises throughout her work, and nowhere more insistently than in the relationship between the sexes.

This duality achieves its quintessential expression in the narrative voice, or in its alter ego, the excellent woman. The "power to disturb and annoy" originates in this portrayal, in the uneasy and growing suspicion that this apparently harmless and innocuous female is neither so harmless nor so innocuous as she may seem. This transgression may elude specific definition; still it is there. Somehow, this unlikely heroine is flouting the rules, transgressing the female stereotype she appears to embody so perfectly. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make clear, "It is debilitating to be *any* woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters".²⁰ Ostensibly, this image of angel, an allusion to Coventry Patmore's paragon of Victorian female domesticity, supplies the model for Pym's gently unassuming heroines. A glimpse of the only alternative model, the monster surfaces from time to time. When Mildred Lathbury asks, "D[o] we really *need* a cup of tea?", the

shocked response tells her that "[the] question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind".²¹ Mildred's suggestion, apparently innocuous, stirs implications that threaten the foundations of her world, and she knows that they do. But the response owes as much to the public perception of Mildred as conventionally excellent woman as to her proposal. The incident contrasts Mildred with Miss Statham, the responder, who accepts a similar role readily and unconsciously. To Barbara Bowman, this difference distinguishes Pym's heroines from the stereotypical spinsters who people her novels. Miss Statham and women like her "... lack or ignore the consciousness of their subordinate state necessary to transform subordination into an acutely-felt sensibility".²² The consciousness identifies Pym's excellent women, who utilize apparent submission to gain tacit control. The illusion of subordination is, of course, crucial to the character's persona, and to the novels' thematic development.

The subordinate status accorded this woman reflects social gradations, regulated by the tenets of patriarchy, and memorialized in the marriage plot. Within this system, any unmarried woman past her first youth assumes a devalued status, and must accept this reduction readily, and even gratefully. The role of general helpmeet, willing and eager to perform generally thankless but necessary tasks, becomes her fate. In the Victorian novel, such women became governesses at best; in Pym's world, excellent womanhood suffices.

The heroine of romance as protagonist of the marriage plot has been discussed earlier. But one vital feature of Victorian society contributes to the idealized picture of marriage as it is promulgated through the romance plot. The economic status of Victorian women contributed significantly to the perpetuation of the patriarchal ordering. In a study of the connection between Victorian fiction and society, Jenni Calder cites the economic status of women as a major

determining factor. She points out that “[u]ntil almost three-quarters of the way through the nineteenth century a wife had no right of ownership. She and everything she possessed, money or property, belonged to her husband”. As Calder makes clear, “[t]he vulnerability of women, therefore, stems not just from feminine weakness, but from their lack of economic status”.²³ Calder's observation relates specifically to Pym's depiction of the excellent woman, and the relative economic independence each enjoys. The point is worth making, underscoring as it does Pym's consciousness of the romantic heroine and her origins. In virtually every instance, a measure of financial independence permits Pym's protagonist a corresponding detachment, strengthening in turn her narrative plausibility.

Like her heroines, Barbara Pym enjoyed some financial autonomy. Her years as Assistant Editor of *Africa*, the journal of the International African Institute, ensured her this relative independence, a distinct advantage during her fourteen years in the publishing wilderness. The numerous anthropologists who people her work reflect this phase of her life. The following review traces Pym's publishing history from her first novel in 1950, through the rejection of 1963, to her “rediscovery” and years of celebrity from 1977 until her death in January 1980. Though the following information has been documented *ad nauseam*, any critical consideration must include its salient points.

Some Tame Gazelle, completed in 1935, was not published until 1950, when Jonathan Cape accepted it. Over the next nine years, from 1952 through 1961, Cape published an additional five novels, all relatively successful. In 1963, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, was rejected summarily and returned. From then until 1977, Pym published nothing, although she continued to write and to submit her work to a series of publishing houses. But the prevailing disposition of the 1960's, one of “spurious radicalism” in one critic's felicitous phrase, had neither

time nor sympathy for Pym's retiring heroines or their minimal world.²⁴ In January 1977, *The Times Literary Supplement* invited several literary luminaries to name the most overrated and underrated authors of the period. In the latter category, Barbara Pym's was the only name cited twice. Almost overnight, her reputation recovered. Several publishers, Cape among them, rethought their earlier assessment and sought her out. Within the next three years, the last of her life, Pym published three novels. Of these, *Quartet in Autumn* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She died in January of 1980, a few weeks after completing *A Few Green Leaves*. In the ensuing years, her popularity has increased steadily. *An Unsuitable Attachment* was published in 1982, followed by *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters* in 1984. *Crampton Hodnet*, written in 1939 but not submitted for publication during Pym's lifetime, was edited by Hazel Holt and published in 1986. Pym began *An Academic Question*, in January of 1970. It represents her attempt to write a more contemporary novel, one which might appeal to a potential publisher. As she told Philip Larkin, "It was supposed to be a sort of Margaret Drabble effort but of course it hasn't turned out like that at all".²⁵ Finally published in 1986, the novel is compiled from two early drafts, and some surviving notes. The last of the posthumous works, *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, contains the remainder of the work, much of it unpublished at the time of her death. As well, this collection includes several short stories, and a radio talk, "Finding a Voice", broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on April 4, 1978.

At the time of her celebrated rediscovery, Pym's story attracted almost as much interest and attention as her novels. The vindication, the last-minute reprieve it proved to be, seemed a satisfying resolution to Pym's distressing and disturbing years of rejection. At the last possible moment, rescue arrives to save the heroine. This interpretation of her life, although not without validity, attests to literature's pervasive influence, both in shaping perceptions and determining

expectations. When imposed on Pym's novels, however, this romantic view encourages an interpretation as misguided as that which led to her earlier rejection.

Too often, the accolades stress her miniature world. While Barbara Pym commemorates life's quieter pleasures, her apparent subject may muffle her essential theme. This criticism need not deny Pym's comedy; rather it becomes a means to an end, "a way of mastering the world".²⁶ Humour remains her dominant mode, however the later novels stray from its customary domain. Increasingly, a sense of near-despair threatens. *No Fond Return of Love* marks the beginning of this phase, and *Quartet in Autumn* its culmination. In this bleaker world, comedy serves as a reassuring, and even life-affirming antidote to a world going seriously awry. With *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym's comic vision reaches apotheosis, proving itself equal to the ignominies of old age. In her riveting examination of human ageing and society's inept responses, Pym finds an unexpected, sometimes grotesque but always compassionate, humour. Documenting Marcia Ivory's disintegration in scrupulous and uncomfortable detail, Pym never loses sight of the comedic dimension. The fragile and ephemeral nature of human existence forms one part of this comedy, the extent of human vanity another. Even in her self-imposed isolation and escalating mania, Marcia is involved in mankind; her crazed logic may baffle her would-be saviours, but the reader understands it. It is one more example of Pym's ability to evoke individual consciousness, and to render it convincing and coherent. This technique weaves a common thread linking Pym's early, lighthearted comedies to her later and darker work. For Philip Larkin, "... the sparkle [the novels] had on first acquaintance has been succeeded by the deeper brilliance of established art; they are miniatures, perhaps, but will not diminish".²⁷ Barbara Everett finds "... an intensity equivalent to that of poetry".²⁸

But the confusion persists, the equivocation between "miniature" and "minor"; with it goes a tendency to interpret Pym's novels as somehow deficient. The absence of overt sexuality is cited as yet another symptom of this failing. Anne Wyatt-Brown believes that a pattern of denial in Pym's own life, a reluctance to acknowledge her own sexuality, hampered her artistic development. Citing an early love affair which seems to have ended in a series of misunderstandings and post-adolescent clumsiness, Wyatt-Brown contrives the following theory:

The whole question of Pym's sexual adventures is important precisely because of the insight that they can give us into her attempts to manage her feelings. By observing her response, we can better understand the forces that make her a writer, yet which at the same time inhibited her full development as an artist and as a woman. ²⁹

Again, Wyatt-Brown is imposing a literary model that Pym's work fails to accommodate. This tendency predates the above theorizing; indeed, Pym's career is littered with comparable interpretations. In 1963, Cape's rejection of *An Unsuitable Attachment* was only the phenomenon's most devastating and most famous example.

The earliest Pym criticism consists of reviews spanning the decade from 1950 through 1961, and confirms that her novels were well-received, within their perceived limitations. Then as now, attempts at generic classification worked to the disadvantage of both Pym and her critics. One example of this phenomenon can be seen in a study of contemporary English literature, first published in 1953. In a generally positive evaluation of Pym and several of her female contemporaries, G. S. Fraser makes the following assessment:

[T]he number of women novelists whom one would like to deal with in a longer survey, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Montague, Penelope Mortimer, among others, is remarkably high. There are novels by intelligent women which can bog one down in the detail of teaparties, babies' nappies, or shopping expeditions . . . and which can sometimes shade off into an Angela Thirkellish defence of threatened gentilities, but which nevertheless often convey the texture of daily living, the drama of the undramatic, in a way which most novels by men fail to do.³⁰

Critical approval is tempered with implicit condescension. Still, Fraser acknowledges the strengths of these feminine works, "the drama of the undramatic", a succinct definition for their general subject and concern. Indeed, this proclivity has proved the major obstacle to any satisfactory reading of Pym's work. In 1971, Robert Smith, Pym's friend from her student days at Oxford, published "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym", the first scholarly evaluation of her work.³¹ Smith singles out the novels' "miniature" aspect, calling them "exquisitely, nearly perfectly done" (p.67).

In the years since her rediscovery, the renewed interest has progressed through a series of stages. Lotus Snow's early article "The Trivial Round, the Common Task: Barbara Pym's Novels" classifies the novels, and demonstrates the broad general trends of Pym's characterizations and plots. Snow's later work, *One Little Room An Everywhere: Barbara Pym's Novels*, extends this approach still further. Snow's interest centers on the prevalence of literary allusions, both directly and as they relate to her naming of characters. Isa Kapp and Edith Larson made pioneering and significant contributions to this early phase. Barbara Brothers's perceptive essay identifies Pym's recognition of "the idealised view of the romantic paradigm" in shaping expectation in both sexes, adding that "[Pym] attacks the myth because it has prevented both men and women from seeing and accepting themselves as they are".³²

Comparisons to Jane Austen were frequent and, in some cases, enlightening. Frederick M. Keener's perceptive study finds this influence throughout the work, noting that, "Both writers work permutations on recurrent character types . . . , [b]ut Austen stands more firmly in the tradition of novelistic romance. . .".³³ But others, Marilyn Butler and Hortense Calisher most prominently, reject the comparison indignantly.³⁴ In his critical study, *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*, Charles Burkhart addresses both sides of the argument, and concludes that "[t]he difference between Miss Austen and Miss Pym is that Jane Austen spoke out of an assured and moral culture, while Barbara Pym is afloat in an ebb tide". He continues, "Austen's novels are of the present, her present, while Pym's are nostalgic much of the time, of an order, a world, a past that impinges — comic and sad and indefinite — upon the grayness of the present".³⁵ Too often, feminist interpretation tends to miss Pym's subtlety. Though largely sympathetic, this approach treats Pym's heroines as helpless victims of the system. Harriet Rosenstein finds *Excellent Women* "... deeply unfunny . . . at heart . . .", its heroine Mildred Lathbury unable to resist "... uttering chipper ironies at her own expense. . .".³⁶ The comment suggests that, however Rosenstein may recognize the "subversive subtext", she misses Mildred's acuity of vision, and with it, Pym's essential theme.

An increasing number of book-length studies are expanding the field of scholarship. The first of these, Jane Nardin's *Barbara Pym*, (1985), identifies Pym's duality, and examines her unique treatment of gender conflict as it affects both sexes. Charles Burkhart's *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*, cited above, emphasizes the novels' comedy, calling it "... adult and impeccably intelligent."³⁷ To Diane Benet, Pym's principal theme is the human need for love.³⁸ *The Novels of Barbara Pym* (1989), a thematic study by Katherine Anne Ackley, identifies recurring motifs and traces their development within the novels; her original observations

and often surprising juxtapositions shed new light on several facets of Pym's work. Michael Cotsell's study, *Barbara Pym* (1989), examines Pym's "processes of composition", most notably Philip Larkin's considerable influence on the later novels.³⁹ Robert Liddell's *A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and Her Novels* (1989), is a selective critical study of the "work on which I feel sure her reputation must rest."⁴⁰ With this condition firmly in place, Liddell presents a brisk reading of the novels, dwelling upon their sunnier aspects. That said, his contribution provides much insight into both her work and her world. His affection for Pym is everywhere apparent, and his comments on the posthumous publications particularly astute.

Recent scholarship is broadening the scope of critical examination. Margaret Stetz counters the innumerable comparisons to Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, and sees a twentieth-century sensibility at work. Virginia Woolf's influence is cited, most specifically in Pym's manipulation of time as it figures in *Quartet in Autumn*:

In Pym's hands, time is malleable. A single moment may be made to last throughout a chapter. Quite often in *Quartet in Autumn*, we find that the successive scenes depicted are not occurring consecutively, but simultaneously. Chronology is suspended, so that we can be present as the same period of time is experienced in four different places and from four points of view. . . . The purpose of this sort of juggling with time is to turn the audience's attention away from storytelling and to focus it upon revelations of consciousness.⁴¹

Two recent collections of scholarly articles, *The World of Barbara Pym*, and *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym*, advance and deepen critical discussion. Penelope Lively believes that "the central,

driving theme of the books . . . is sexual conflict itself . . . it is a battle of gender rather than sex: board comes a long way before bed, children are seldom evident".⁴² Lively's insight is crucial to Pym's vision: when "board comes a long way before bed", sexuality becomes a minor consideration. Yet the appeal of romantic love endures, however illusory Pym and her heroines know it to be.

In Barbara Pym's work, romance becomes a synonym for illusion, to become, in turn, a synonym for hope. Paradox permeates her work; Pym is in no doubt that human existence is, regrettably but irrevocably, a solitary and lonely progress. But illusion, "romance", can soften and even relieve these harsh aspects. The cups of tea, and small dinner parties, and communal flower arrangements form a temporary connection or, at least, an attempt to bridge the gap between two irreconcilable disparities. In *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym's penultimate novel and possibly her masterpiece, this perception is central. Returning from Marcia Ivory's funeral, the lonely, ageing Letty Crowe accepts her landlady's offer of comfort, thinking that " . . . [t]here was something to be said for tea and comfortable chat about crematoria".⁴³ Both confer a momentary stay against an intensifying sense of alienation; the ritual of tea and measured sympathy is an affirmation of shared humanity. This moment, one of many, is Pym's minimalist evocation of E. M. Forster's dictum "only connect".

Pym's quiet subversion of the system she seems to celebrate extends beyond a critical appraisal of its defective structure. However she may recognize patriarchy's liabilities, she believes in the idea of community. This secondary theme asserts itself more forcibly in the late novels, but is discernible throughout her work. Finally, both themes intertwine to form one commonality. Here, Pym's publishing history has particular relevance to her work. The subtle shifts in emphasis, that mutate within the work from its initial to its final phase, are discernible as early as *Less Than Angels*, but achieves most comprehensive

expression in the three "late" novels. Yet despite this dominance, the theme of gender persists. Community furnishes an essential stability, but the "wars of gender" ensure the variety and even the conflict that Pym regards as essential to human existence.

This consciousness manifests itself in a variety of ways. When Mildred Lathbury, the protagonist/narrator of *Excellent Women*, says, "I forebore to remark that women like me really expected—very little—nothing almost" (p. 31), she speaks for most of Pym's heroines. But more, the guise of repressed spinster satisfies the feminine stereotype that looms so large in romance fiction. If convention is honoured, Mildred's modesty will be rewarded, and her self-confessed dowdiness transformed through the intervention of the inevitable hero. In accordance with the rules, Mildred is slated for completion. The early novels, those written from 1950 to 1963, play upon this interpretation. The excellent women and their fellow characters play out their designated roles in a quiet backwater of middle-class England. Isolation is not valued for itself, but when unavoidable, it is acknowledged and so mastered. The idea of community prevails, controlling and containing the action. In the progression from her first novel to her last, the thematic dominance is reversed, and community gains precedence over gender conflict.

This shifting emphasis reflects the changes that engulfed English society in the last two decades of Pym's life. These changes threaten to sever past from present, and to sweep away all sense of historic continuity. *A Few Green Leaves*, her final novel, is her prescription for continuity in an increasingly alien and hostile world. Her "imaginary village" incorporates past and present, young and old, men and women, to mutual benefit. Although her final work focuses most specifically on this concern, all three late novels address it in their disparate ways. As encroaching age and societal change isolate Pym's characters still

further, the excellent woman comes into her own. Life has taught acceptance of secondary status; her capacity to adapt to inhospitable circumstance proves ideally suited to this increasingly alien environment. In this final work, Pym's return to a village setting promotes the idea of community more forcibly ; the village becomes a microcosm of the cooperation and interdependence that encourages the order and continuity she urges.

Pym's multiple references to English literature become still another expression of this theme, as does her reliance on the "chronicle" device. The term "chronicle" refers to her practice of reintroducing earlier characters; this technique links the novels into one loosely connected unity. Collectively, these recurrences foster an illusion of shared history and continuity, enclosing Pym's reader within her fictional world. As well, these momentary reappearances reinforce the "comic and sad and indefinite" nature of human life, belying any definitive resolution for these characters from earlier novels.⁴⁴ For them, as for the present protagonists, as for Pym's readers, time passes and life goes on.

As the internal references enhance the novels individually, so the repeated allusions to English literature enrich Pym's entire canon. A kind of contract is struck between narrator and reader, binding them together in a network of shared knowledge. This bond unifies and orders, providing a reassuring pattern and definition in an often threatening and unpredictable world. Yet Pym never advocates any illusory escape to a gentler past. Rather, she celebrates the courage born of isolation, a bravery originating in a realistic perception and acceptance of individual circumstances. Throughout, Pym's "excellent woman" epitomizes this quality.

In the study that follows, I will divide Barbara Pym's novels into chronological groupings. The discussion of the posthumous works, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *Crampton Hodnet*, and *An Academic Question* is guided by

their relative significance to Pym's artistic progress. The ill-fated *An Unsuitable Attachment* is presented in its historic sequence, after *No Fond Return of Love*. Because Pym chose not to publish *Crampton Hodnet* (1985) or *An Academic Question* (1986), neither is treated as integral to her development. Of the two, the first has some historic interest, as a kind of companion piece to *Some Tame Gazelle*. The North Oxford setting and its inhabitants are marginally more realistic than the Bedes' enchanted village. Charles Burkhart compares the novel with its predecessor, *Some Tame Gazelle*, and finds it wanting. "It does not transcend her experiences," he says. "*Some Tame Gazelle* does; it was so much worked and reworked that it takes off into fairy tale".⁴⁵ *Crampton Hodnet's* greatest interest lies in its early articulation of her customary setting and characters, among them Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow. In the latter characterization Pym's darker vision intrudes, something totally absent from *Some Tame Gazelle*. *An Academic Question*, begun in 1970 and abandoned in 1972, is a recycling of familiar themes written to the dictates of an era unsympathetic to Pym's informing vision. At best, the novel is a caricature, and a sad one at that.

Some Tame Gazelle fixed Pym's idiosyncratic world view. The novel, a comic and affectionate tribute to her Oxford years, transplants her friends to some vaguely defined, middle-aged enclave in an imaginary English village. With the exception of this youthful and high-spirited excursion into the realms of near-fantasy, the novels evoke each specific historic period meticulously. Pym's delight in detail, her documentation of the mundane routine that defines most lives, provides an authentic picture of each succeeding cycle, as Britain moved through postwar austerity of the late 'forties to the relative affluence of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. To A. L. Rowse, she evokes "a society in deliquescence, only just emerging from the ruin and devastation of the war . . . an authentic portrait of the transition".⁴⁶ Tom Paulin's review of *Quartet in Autumn* sounds a more

ominous note, saying that "Barbara Pym's work [has] now deepened into a formal protest against the conditions both of life itself and of certain sad civilities that no longer make even the limited sense they once acknowledged".⁴⁷ The first of these reviews concerns Pym's early work, the second comments on her penultimate novel. If, as Paulin believes, the "certain sad civilities" are bereft of all meaning, Pym's excellent women honour them still. However futile their observance, custom and ceremony are emblematic of a happier time, a homage to and reminder of the deeper values they betoken.

In the first three novels, *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), and *Jane and Prudence* (1953), Pym defines the narrow boundaries of her fictional world, and identifies the character types who inhabit it. Most significant of these, the excellent woman becomes the mediating presence, the interpreter of the customs and conduct that govern this world. Barbara Bowman believes that "her heroines think and speak in ways characteristic of women when they adopt a subordinate role".⁴⁸ The often disconcerting yet always plausible observations impose a subtle distortion on the ostensibly familiar scene. The implicit comparisons provide additional examples of the duality Bayley describes; the narrative double vision filters the patriarchal norm through the narrator's unblinking gaze and finds pretension, usually masculine, everywhere. The second grouping, *Less Than Angels* (1955) and *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), advances beyond Pym's initial territory to encompass several interlocking and interdependent settings. With this expanded vision goes a shifting point of view, and a more varied milieu. Increasingly, the "chronicle" device weaves through the narrative, enriching its texture and complexity. *A Glass of Blessings* points a significant milestone in Pym's career, the culmination of her early style. *No Fond Return of Love*, its immediate successor, suffers by contrast, a slackening, curiously blurred vision. and rambling plot its most obvious failings.

Yet a new direction is signaled, if not realized. Her next novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, was rejected. Finally published in 1982, the novel supports the contention that Pym was contemplating a change in direction. *The Sweet Dove Died*, published in 1978 but written between 1963 and 1969, completes the transition period. To Michael Cotsell, it is "one of the harshest and least comic of Pym's novels, and its achieved artistry may be taken as the culmination of this period of Pym's work".⁴⁹

However personally disheartening, Pym's years in the wilderness served her well. When rescue arrived, she had two novels completed and ready for publication. Of these, *Quartet in Autumn* was published in 1977; *The Sweet Dove Died*, in 1978. As indicated earlier, both evince a darker vision; increasing shadows encroach upon the familiar scene. In this steadily darkening and disintegrating world, the excellent women, older now, survive and make brave attempts to adapt. Neither novel offers any comforting anodyne to soften or minimize the encroachments of time and change. In common with their predecessors, Pym's ageing women must accept reality as their best and only hope.

In some respects, *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym's final novel, mirrors *Some Tame Gazelle*. Written in the last year of her life and published posthumously in 1980, the novel falls somewhere between allegory and elegy. Pym returns to the village scenes of her earliest work, but in this instance, the setting reflects contemporary England, and not some idealized evocation of the past. Church attendance has fallen, as has respect for that institution. England is losing any sense of its historic past or traditions. In this setting, Pym frames her vision of the future, one which accepts the present and honours the past. In this last novel, Pym bows to convention and augurs a marriage as resolution. If this possibility

denotes a perpetuation of ecommunity, Pym's last novel can be said to affirm a guarded optimism.

Throughout her fiction, Pym invokes a series of images; these recur in a variety of guises. In several of the novels, stone figures and buildings, ranging from a headless garden dwarf in *Jane and Prudence*, and the furniture depository in *A Glass of Blessings*, to the de Tankerville family crypt in *A Few Green Leaves*. As the multiple literary associations evoke a sense of historic continuity, these images come to represent tangible effigies of time past. Although Pym never argues that these associations be discarded, she insists that any idealized reproduction, such as the artificially Victorian space that Leonora Eyre maintains so assiduously, can only isolate and estrange the present from the past and one human being from another. The point is worth emphasizing, given the tendency to equate Pym's novels with literature of an earlier period. This recurrent pattern of imagery may have other connotations. Allusions to the past remain, more specific to the individual character and plot. Anne M. Wyatt-Brown suggests this interpretation, citing the unpublished fragment, "Beatrice Wyatt or the Lumber Room":

The heroine, Beatrice Wyatt, says that the memory of a past love is like a storage room or attic, 'a kind of lumber room—full of old pictures'. After a long period of tiptoeing past the room, it is safe to open the door and inspect the shrouded object. The passage of time has converted the painful love into 'mild kindly looks and spectacles. Nothing to be afraid of anymore'. The explanation she gives for the change is that 'the lumber room like death was a great leveller' (MS PYM 6, f. 149).⁵⁰

This association of the lumber room and death, each "a great leveller", relates to the passage of time, and to the recognition that all human beings are

susceptible to its incursions. With time, "painful love" loses its terrible power over human emotion. The resulting detachment may shield from potential pain, but too much detachment can lead to a denial of life itself. Pym never advocates shrinking from life's experience, but she strives to maintain a discreet distance from its insistent demands. Sometimes that distance is temporal and sometimes merely physical. Either way, the resulting detachment ensures the objective view she favours.

In naming her characters, Barbara Pym incorporates her work into the English literary tradition.⁵¹ Some of these choices tend to the literary and some to the comic. For example, Wilmet Forsyth is named for one of Charlotte Mary Yonge's heroines, and Emma Howick for Jane Austen's Emma. Belinda and Harriet Bede, of *Some Tame Gazelle*, recall both the Venerable Bede and George Eliot's Adam Bede. Henry Hoccleve, beloved of Belinda, may be a descendant of the fifteenth-century poet, who is . . . "[t]raditionally regarded as a poor imitator of Chaucer. . ."⁵². Nicholas Cleveland, of *Jane and Prudence*, evokes comparably literary antecedents, as does Francis Cleveland, the distracted don of *Crampton Hodnet*. In the earlier novel, Pym cites the connection to Cavalier poet, John Cleveland, but the later work omits this association, possible evidence of Pym's growing confidence in her reader. Alaric and Gertrude Lydgate share two literary precedents, the first a contemporary of Hoccleve's, and the second a reference to one of the major characters in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Esther Clovis, one of Pym's most reliable comic creations, is the namesake of a great ruler. Edith Liversidge, Deirdre Swan and Digby Fox, Rupert Stonebird and Sisters Dew and Blatt, to cite only a few of Pym's inventive appellations, conjure up characters as specific as they are striking. In her mastery of this specific device, Pym summons associations with the nineteenth-century novel and melodrama, to Restoration comedy and still further to the medieval morality

play. Such associations enhance the novels' comic aspect, but perhaps more importantly, they link present and past into one continuum, strengthening the sense of historic succession, as each generation yields to the next. Throughout, the literary motif assumes a variety of guises, and blend with the "chronicle" to fashion a referential network that contains and connects all of the novels within one common web of allusion. In a modest sense, Pym incorporates her own novelistic world into England's literary heritage.

One final short story, "Across a Crowded Room," written late in her life and published in *The New Yorker*, incorporates both devices. In its economy of structure, the story synthesizes Pym's entire canon. My study will conclude with this work, emphasizing as it does both major themes. In this story, little more than a vignette, an elderly woman attends a college dinner at Oxford; Pym pays tribute to the traditions that she loved and honoured, but never loses sight of the absurdities that sustain them. Gender designation persists, as does male blindness to it. All of these elements join into one comprehensive scene, each captured and held in the gentle scrutiny of one last excellent woman.

This introductory chapter has outlined Barbara Pym's literary career, and the varying critical responses to it. As well, it has identified the novels' recurring and irreconcilable motifs, the carefully maintained divisions of gender and the necessity for human community. The romance / marriage plot serves as her narrative medium, but as Pym separates one component from the other, she emphasizes their mutual exclusivity. Further, she stresses the idea of romance as an end in itself, not as a means to the ultimate goal of marriage. In this revision, Pym's rendition deviates from the genre's tradition. The excellent woman never abandons her skepticism, never loses sight of the chasm that divides the illusions of romance from the pragmatism of marriage. To surrender to these fancies, to confuse them with reality, can only erode the measured autonomy that sustains

this detached posture. Yet for all of that, some faint faith in romance lingers, never quite relinquished if never displayed. To John Bayley, such dichotomies are the essence of all comedy, and “. . . could be expressed as body and soul”. “[F]or dualism,” he continues, “—the contrast between men and women, between Church and God, between how we live and how we feel—is the deepest source of human comedy”.⁵³ Consistent with these terms of reference, the metaphor of body and soul can be extended to encompass Pym’s depiction of the relative designation accorded men and women, “masculine and feminine”, within the patriarchy.

In terms of creature comforts, masculine existence far outstrips feminine, whether in Barbara Pym’s novelistic world or the society it reflects. But Pym never suggests that bodily considerations supersede the spiritual dimension. Fabian Driver, possibly the most cosseted man in the annals of literature, is a figure of fun, a captive of his own vanity and caprice. Similarly, Adam Prince, the petulant restaurant critic of *A Few Green Leaves*, has abandoned any semblance of religious observance to his obsession with food and wine. Neither man is rescued from his captivity. By and large, Pym’s pampered men are indulged and protected by the attentive women who surround them. This protection ensures that they need never address or confront life’s harsher realities, nor test themselves in ways that might threaten their complacency and self-esteem. For her heroines, Pym demands more. Even the most narcissistic of these is forced to an admission of her own mortality. When Wilmet Forsyth and Leonora Eyre are forced to admit to their self-serving delusions, and to acknowledge their humanity, they earn their places in Pym’s gallery of brave and excellent women. Pym never denies the considerable privilege that the patriarchy bestows upon men, but she does suggest that such advantage can prove hazardous to the health of the soul. The pleasures of the flesh are never

derogated; neither are they ennobled. They serve a clear purpose in human existence, as attested to by all those endless cups of tea. But, in the final analysis, their comfort must not deflect from the consciousness that something lies beyond the pleasure principle. As Bayley suggests, the ultimate division between body and soul lies at the heart of Barbara Pym 's comedy.

Finally, these divisions reflect Pym's essential thesis, her recognition that isolation is an immutable condition of human existence. In light of this insight, Pym may wonder why apparently artificial divisions are devised and maintained with such vehemence. With Carolyn Heilbrun, she may advocate a "spirit of reconciliation". Yet if human beings, men and women alike, guard these barriers so zealously, and they do, Pym can see the situation's comic possibilities. The system may be chiseled in stone, but Pym's "private eye" lights upon its structural flaws and exploits them for her pleasure and for ours.

Notes

¹"Preface", Barbara Pym, *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*, ed. Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), p. xiii.

²Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman", *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 3.

³Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: on the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), pp. 9-10.

⁴*A Glass of Blessings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980, rpt. 1983), p. 194. All references are to this edition.

⁵*Less Than Angels* (London: Granada, 1980, rpt. 1982), p. 86. All references are to this edition.

⁶Lynn Veach Sadler, "Spinsters, Non-Spinsters, and Men in the World of Barbara Pym", *Critique*, 26 (1984-1985), 153.

⁷"Fairly excellent woman", *Spectator*, 19 July 1980, p. 21.

⁸"The Pleasures of Poverty", *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym*, ed. Janice Rossen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 11.

⁹Jane Nardin, *Barbara Pym*, Twayne's English Authors Series, ed. Kinley Roby (Boston: Twayne, 1985), p. 9.

¹⁰Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹¹Barbara Bowman, "Pym's Subversive Subtext", *Independent Women*, ed. Janice Rossen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 85.

¹²DuPlessis, p. 2.

¹³"Introduction", *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. xv.

- ¹⁴ Brownstein, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Everett, *Independent Women.*, ed. Janice Rossen, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ "Introduction", *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p.x.
- ¹⁷ "The Bubble, Reputation: The Decline and Rise of Barbara Pym", *Encounter* (May, 1987), 33.
- ¹⁸ *Excellent Women* (New York: Perennial Library, 1980), p. 6. All references are to this edition.
- ¹⁹ *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym.*, ed. Dale Salwak (London: The Macmillan Press, 1987), pp. 52-53.
- ²⁰ *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 53
- ²¹ *Excellent Women*, p. 227.
- ²² *Independent Women*: ed. Janice Rossen, p. 91.
- ²³ Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), pp.16-17.
- ²⁴ Hills, p. 36.
- ²⁵ "To Philip Larkin, 22 June 1971," *A Very Private Eye*, p. 263.
- ²⁶ Hills, p. 33.
- ²⁷ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 March 1977, p.260.
- ²⁸ *Independent Women*, ed. Janice Rossen, p. 20.
- ²⁹ "Ellipsis, Eccentricity and Evasion in the Diaries of Barbara Pym", *Independent Women*, pp. 44-45.
- ³⁰ *The Modern Writer and His World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, rpt. 1972), pp. 169-170.

³¹*Ariel: A Review of International Literature*, II (1974), 63-68.

³²Women Victimized by Fiction: living and loving in the novels by Barbara Pym", *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*, ed. Thomas F. Staley (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp.62-63.

³³"Barbara Pym Herself and Jane Austen", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 31(1985), 91.

³⁴Marilyn Butler, "Keeping Up With Jane Austen", *London Review of Books*, 6-19 May 1982, pp. 16-17. In her review of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Butler describes Pym as a "functional" writer, citing anthropology as her major influence. Hortense Calisher classifies Pym with Angela Thirkell and E. F. Benson, and dismisses her from serious consideration. "Enclosures", *New Criterion*, September 1982, pp. 53-56.

³⁵Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987, p.

³⁶"Have You Discovered Barbara Pym Yet?", *Ms*, May 1979, p. 34.

³⁷Burkhart, p. x.

³⁸*Something To Love: Barbara Pym's Novels* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

³⁹*Barbara Pym*, Macmillan Modern Novelists, ed. Norman Page (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 8.

⁴⁰London: Peter Owen, 1989, p. 7. In a few instances, most notably the treatment of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Liddell's assessments coincide with my own. In all such cases, my discussion predates my reading of his study.

⁴¹"*Quartet in Autumn*: New Light on Barbara Pym as a Modernist", *Arizona Quarterly*, 41 (1985), 25.

⁴²*Life and Work*, ed. Dale Salwak (London: The Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 48.

⁴³*Quartet in Autumn* (London:Granada, 1980, rpt.1981), p.159.

⁴⁴*Less Than Angels*, p. 86.

⁴⁵Burkhart, p. 32.

⁴⁶"Austen Mini?", p. 733.

⁴⁷"Talkative Transparencies", *Encounter*, 50, No. 1 (1978), 72.

⁴⁸*Independent Women*, p. 82

⁴⁹Barbara Pym, p. 106.

⁵⁰*Independent Women*, p. 45.

⁵¹ For a careful documentation of this phenomenon, Lotus Snow's study *One Little Room An Everywhere . . .* provides an invaluable source.

⁵²"Hoccleve, or OCCLEVE, Thomas", *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, New Edition, ed. Margaret Drabble (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 465.

⁵³*Life and Work*, p. 53.

Chapter 2

Excellent Women in Their World

Some Tame Gazelle delineates Barbara Pym's comic universe. In some respects, the novel can be likened to an overture, an introduction that traces major themes and anticipates their development in the body of the work. At its best, the novel is vintage Pym: its ironic humour and penetrating observation are executed with a confidence and command that equal anything she would write subsequently. A. N. Wilson calls it "... a book full of the rich dottiness of English village life", and describes the Archdeacon as "wonderfully absurd".¹ Despite its strengths, the novel occupies a somewhat problematic position in its relationship to the Pym canon. Some elusive quality, embryonic and at times near-farcical, separates it from the later work; again, the judgment is coloured by hindsight. Yet for all its fantasy, "... the fictional ground is laid here".² The relationship between the sexes is defined, and the setting sketched. Most significantly, Pym's female protagonist, the "excellent woman", is presented in all her variation and permutations. More than any other factor, her presence determines Pym's highly original and characteristic narrative tone and point of view.

In Pym's novelistic world, there are excellent women and the excellent woman. The first is a generic designation, a title applied loosely to all of those vaguely unattached females, beyond their first youth, who stand ready, even eager, to undertake all the thankless but necessary tasks essential to any social organization. Excellent women make tea and organize church bazaars. Often they tidy up after the less responsible but more privileged members of their society—men, perhaps, or glamorous widows. For their pains, they are treated

with patronizing condescension; fortunately, most excellent women lack the discrimination to identify this response. Ostensibly, Pym's protagonist belongs to this company. But she deviates from its ranks in her finely-tuned consciousness. Taking stock of her subordinate position, the excellent woman fashions a unique sensibility. Taking the measure of her world, and of her place in it, she assumes the persona of the conventional excellent woman and shelters behind its protection. From this marginal vantage point, she gains a double advantage and protection; she becomes nearly invisible. In drawing these distinctions and separating the strands that divide excellent women from the "excellent woman", Barbara Bowman calls the latter "heroines", and outlines their unique function within the novels:

These heroines act like narrators in the way they keep their distance from the silliness of the other characters in the novels, and they are all observers more than actors, often drawn into the action somewhat against their wills. Their isolation, not their lack of intelligence or identity, relegates them to subordinate status but their private views are intriguingly brought forward by Pym. Though they may be subordinates in relation to a dominant culture's assumptions, the readers and the narrator join them in that isolation. That redefinition by the fictional universe, in turn, empowers their sensibility.³

As the mediator between Pym's world and the reader's, the excellent woman directs attention to the small absurdities and vanities that comprise every life. Of these, her principal target is masculine conceit. By and large, Pym's heroines view their gendered world more in sorrow than in anger, but always with humour. Their habitual response is rarely malice, only mild bemusement.

As with all Pym's work, the scale of vision is reduced and narrowed, trained upon a scene often obscured within a broader, more diffuse landscape.

Some Tame Gazelle conforms precisely to Bowman's model. The novel's protagonist, Belinda Bede, shapes the scene, redefining its dynamic principles through her own idiosyncratic vision. The village she describes is a benign enclave, inhabited by a collection of fanciful characters, all of them middle-aged projections of Pym's Oxford contemporaries. Presumably, Pym found this idiosyncratic device the ideal medium for her detached and distanced narrative position. In keeping with her hypothesis in the early incomplete draft of "Beatrice Wyatt or The Lumber Room", with "the passage of time" there is "[n]othing to be afraid of anymore".⁴ In this world, all passion spent, a reassuring order is restored; in some ways, the society suggests a return to childhood. Masculine indifference and callousness, always regrettable, are accepted as inevitable; they have lost their power to hurt. Shorn of their youthful mystique, men are revealed as child-like and transparent. Armed with this knowledge, women wield tacit control, some more obviously than others. The excellent woman, Belinda in this case, notes male frailties but rarely censures them. Comfort, emotional and physical, has displaced romantic torment in this middle-aged haven; in some ways, it has replaced it. Situated in the liminal territory that separates comedy from tragedy, myth from reality, and owing something to each, Pym's literary landscape is at once familiar and alien, hospitable and forbidding. It is a world where nothing is quite as it seems. The resulting disorientation may well explain Pym's "power to disturb and annoy", cited earlier.

Some Tame Gazelle sets the authentic Pym tone. Its village exists in a kind of limbo, "a village that never was".⁵ Subsequent settings are more conventionally realistic. For example, *Excellent Women* takes place in Pimlico,

Less Than Angels, in Barnes; both London districts were familiar to Barbara Pym. But whatever the specific location, the sensation of defined space lingers, an integral part of Pym's universe. As Charles Burkhart points out, "[i]f it seems a small world it is because it is an inner world where place is far less important than just what happens among people within it" (pp. 17-18). If such "determined smallness" reduces her characters and their lives to the inconsequential, Pym challenges this perception in the rich intensity of her portrayals. The emotions experienced, the peaks and nadirs, are no less intense for their ostensibly trivial origins. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Barbara Pym encompasses all of these concerns, providing her reader with a guide to her deceptively gentle, surprisingly unsentimental, and usually good-humored world.

Not all critical response is as sympathetic as those cited above. To Marilyn Butler, Pym fails because "in an age of feminist consciousness . . . her heroines so emphatically fall short of heroic stature . . .".⁶ But the concept of "heroic stature" betrays its patriarchal origins; its informing ethos is essentially warlike, a glorification of the masculine principle at the expense of the feminine. If Pym's novels have a political component, its expression has more in common with that of her great predecessor, Jane Austen. In this context, Karen Newman's defence of Jane Austen's reliance on the "marriage plot" can be extended to include Barbara Pym:

A novel's value, then, or indeed the value of any work of art for feminists, is determined not by its progressive picture of woman or by any exhortation to change a sexist society, but rather by its articulation of the conflict . . . posed by a sexist ideology, in the background but nevertheless dominant, in which female consciousness is foregrounded.⁷

Clearly, Barbara Pym articulates this conflict, however her presentation may confound conventional expectation. To Barbara Pym's shrewd heroines, heroic stature is one more rigidly enforced and faintly risible male myth. Further, the best of her characters understand that its demands imprison men within a pre-ordained stereotype. Although less restrictive than its feminine counterpart, its expectations do curtail and inhibit masculine behaviour. Each stereotype, too rigorously enforced, penalizes each sex, imposing mutually restrictive isolation. In large part, Pym's novels are committed to this proposition. Although she may lack Carolyn Heilbrun's sense of urgency, she shares her perception that "[w]hat is important now is that we free ourselves from the prison of gender and, before it is too late, deliver the world from the almost exclusive control of the masculine impulse".⁸ Within her novelistic limits, Pym's "excellent woman" is the focal point, the shrewd observer who honours the rules of the patriarchal game. Her marginal position, far from a handicap, works to her advantage. This narrative strategy, the view from the periphery, persists throughout Pym's work; her "excellent woman" is an infallible guide through its intricacies.

Some Tame Gazelle introduces this idiosyncratic protagonist; she recurs in a series of guises throughout Pym's canon. First written in 1935, though not published until 1950, the novel is a kind of "in-joke", Pym's mischievous projection of her Oxford student circle into some imaginary, middle-aged future. In a 1934 journal entry, she outlines her proposed scheme:

Sometime in July I began to write a story about Hilary and me as spinsters of fiftyish. Henry and Jock and all of us appeared in it. I sent it to them and they liked it very much. So I am going on with it and one day it may become a book.⁹

The novel verges upon literary *tour de force*; its highly original premise could be read as the earliest manifestation of the "chronicle" device, an external referent to contain and define her fictional world. The novel is composed of a series of set-pieces joined by a loose story line, each episode complete in itself. Its heroines, Belinda and Harriet Bede, are based on Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary. Spinsters in their vague fifties, they live in a country village and spend their time in a pleasant round of church services and fetes, small dinner parties, visits from the dressmaker, and the like.

The novel's action is divided into three segments. In the initial sequence, the cast is assembled. Henry Hoccleve and Agatha, his formidable wife are presented, as are other village inhabitants: Edith Liversidge, opinionated spinster and variant on the excellent woman model, her timid companion Connie Aspinall, Count Roberto Bianco, all three based on Pym's friends. The new curate, Mr. Donne, completes the roster. Each of these characters is shaded through Belinda's mild scrutiny, a strategy that establishes point of view and narrative voice simultaneously. The slight narrative premise is rooted in Belinda's unrequited but undying love for Henry. His wife Agatha is Belinda's nemesis; she is a paragon of confidence and efficiency, everything Belinda is not. Agatha's departure begins the second section. From an upstairs window, the Bedes observe her leave-taking:

Belinda had brought some brass with her to clean and in the intervals when she stopped her vigorous rubbing to look out of the window, was careful to display the duster in her hand. Harriet stared out quite unashamedly, with nothing in her hand to excuse her presence there. She even had a pair of binoculars, which she was now trying to focus.¹⁰

Passages like the above attest to Pym's youthful and fanciful perception. Belinda and Harriet are adolescents cloaked in the accoutrements of middle-age, as are all of their fellow characters. But however comic, Belinda's duster is a kind of mask, evidence of her reticence, while Harriet's shameless binoculars bespeak her no-nonsense approach. The episode helps to define Belinda as separate and distinct from Harriet. Most obviously, it shows Pym's readiness to laugh at herself.

Agatha's absence encourages a period of relative license. Several male visitors visit the Archdeacon, mildly raffish friends from student days whose presence inspires a round of decorous socializing. Agatha's return, with still another old friend in tow, restores order. The novel concludes with two weddings, neither of which conform to any known romantic mythology. Although Harriet loses one curate to marriage, his replacement is anticipated and augurs well: "... although his voice was rather weak . . . Belinda was overjoyed to hear that it had the authentic ring" (p. 253). The novel ends where it began: the lost paradise has been regained and life's comfortably familiar cycle will resume its course.

The novel's opening paragraph attests to Pym's narrative control, one that never wavers. Belinda Bede, the first of many "excellent women", evaluates the unsuspecting curate, as they wait together for Harriet, sister of Belinda and nurturer of curates:

The new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down. Belinda had noticed it when they had met him for the first time at the vicarage last week and had felt quite embarrassed. Perhaps Harriet could say something to him about it. Her blunt jolly manner could carry off these little awkwardnesses much better than Belinda's

timidity. Of course he might think it none of their business, as indeed it was not, but Belinda rather doubted whether he thought at all, if one were to judge by the quality of his first sermon. (p.5)

The passage contains a surprising amount of valuable information, establishing its setting, principal characters, and point of view. The last, which blends indiscernibly with narrative tone, fixes the unique Pym style, its multiple conditionals juxtaposed with a surprising asperity. As the novels succeed one another, this territory becomes increasingly familiar but its essential nature is captured in this account. The tone may be diffident, even hesitant, the opinions qualified as they are formed, but the keen observation misses nothing. The paragraph's concluding sentence is a good example of what Philip Larkin terms a "plangent" sentence, "the kind that give her books their special quality".¹¹ In another instance, this time at a dinner party, Belinda reflects that "perhaps it was a mistake to have any kind of serious conversation when eating, or even anywhere at all in mixed company" (p. 122). Both examples capture Pym's very distinctive mode. There is nothing hostile or angry or aggrieved in Belinda's musings: she is simply remarking upon a fact of life. The new curate's careless appearance, his inferior sermons, and the futility of serious conversation in mixed company are all one to her. However her diffidence may restrain her speech, it never clouds her vision.

This apparent contradiction, the rigour of Belinda's thoughts and the mildness of her demeanour, sets her apart from the other female characters. As Pym's first "excellent woman", she is the prototype for all of her fictional successors. As such, her portrayal is vital. Pym delineates her with clarity and sharpness, her individuality defined by her thoughts, as has been seen, and equally significant, by the quite specific contrasts that are drawn. In this regard, both Harriet Bede and Edith Liversidge point up Belinda's singularity. Belinda

and Harriet Bede are prototypical Pym heroines, each attesting to one pole of feminine possibility. A determined denial sustains Belinda's hopeless love for the egocentric Archdeacon, a posture that may falter from time to time, but never collapses. In contrast, Harriet transfers her affections from one curate to the next, each new object of desire as satisfactory to her purposes as was his predecessor. In their separate ways, both Belinda and Harriet travel hopefully, but never arrive, a course favored by a number of their successors in Pym's novels.

These three presage Pym's recurring female types. Harriet's lineage can be traced through Prudence Bates and Wilmet Forsyth. Edith Liversidge presents quite another facet of feminine possibility, denying the possibility of romantic illusion, any softening or shading of harsh reality. Her enthusiasm for her war work, ". . . of rather an unpleasant nature too, something to do with sanitation", captures Edith unerringly; characteristically, Belinda hopes that ". . . Harriet wouldn't mention it in front of Mr. Donne"(p.13). Apart from its humour, the information strengthens the characterization of all three women. Esther Clovis and Gertrude Lydgate are later delineations of Edith; none of the three evinces any true consciousness of her subordinate position in the patriarchal scheme of things. Belinda falls somewhere between these two. Although she sympathizes with both Harriet's enthusiasms and Edith's impatience, her innate practicality saves her from the first extreme and her reticence from the second. In consequence, she stands alone and to one side of the scene.

Pym draws these comparisons quite specifically, demonstrating Edith's impatience with male affectation, and her brusque, even dismissive attitude to it. Reminiscing with Count Bianco about a mutual friend, long-dead, each character affirms a separate and distinct vision. The exchange grows from the curate's

observation that "... the real knowledge comes from within and not from books":

"Ah, but it is true what Mr Donne says," said Ricardo thoughtfully. "My dear friend John Akenside used to say that he learned more about the political situation in central Europe in those quiet moments with a glass of wine at a cafe table than by all his talks with Pribitchevitch's brother."

"Oh, yes, I can believe that," said Edith Liversidge, "John liked his glass of wine." (p. 121)

Each speaks from conviction, recalling a close and loved friend. Only the interpretation differs, Ricardo's extravagance deflated by Edith's brusque commonsense. In a Barbara Pym novel, Ricardo's romantic excess suggests self-indulgence at best, a refusal to address and accept reality at worst. But still another device surfaces, one that illuminates the "duality" noted by John Bayley. In their self-revelation, these reminiscences reveal the distance that separates Ricardo from Edith. In Pym's later novels, these contrasts reflect unbridgeable human solitudes; in *Some Tame Gazelle*, humour dominates. For both Count Bianco and Miss Liversidge, John Akenside lives on in memory, his identity fixed by each respective sensibility. The novel's narrative voice, reinforced by Belinda's initial observations, favours Edith's memory over Ricardo's. (Presumably, for Pym's friends, the joke has an extra dimension).

Edith Liversidge represents one variant of the excellent woman. She is an authentic English "type", a prime example of A. N. Wilson's "dottiness". Her eccentricities are accepted, and even admired. Belinda wonders at this general response, "... why one always said that Edith was 'splendid' ". She concludes that "[i]t was probably because she hadn't very much money, was tough and wiry, dug vigorously in her garden and kept goats"(p. 13). Belinda may resist Edith's

brusque dismissal of masculine vagary and affectation in favor of her own confused romanticism, but she is in partial sympathy with it. In the following encounter, both have arrived at the church hall for a lecture by Archbishop Grote:

The problem of where to sit was settled by their meeting Miss Liversidge and Miss Aspinall at the door of the hall.

"Let's go somewhere at the back, where we can have a good laugh," said Edith.

Belinda agreed that she would also like to sit somewhere at the back, although she did not give any such crude reason for her preference. (p. 174)

Candour is not Belinda's customary mode, but she does sit at the back where, presumably, she has several good laughs.

Belinda's refusal to relinquish her idealized view of Henry introduces one of Pym's recurring themes. Essentially, Pym's heroines have two choices; they can cling to romantic illusion, or confront its falsity. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, both Belinda and Harriet belong in the first company and Edith Liversidge in the second. But Belinda's awareness that her love for Henry has settled into "something without glamour or romance" (p.158) suggests that it resembles an idealized variant on married love. In this limited way, Belinda achieves a kind of resolution, arguably the happiest possible ending to the romance plot. Harriet recycles her affections, each new beginning postponing the inevitable disillusionment of any resolution. As with the discrepancy between Count Bianco's memory of John Akenside, and Edith Liversidge's, this contrast is played for comedy. Simultaneously, it is one of the constrictions imposed by gender designation and one of the excellent woman's protective masks. In her protestations at Edith's perceived crudeness, Belinda anticipates characters in later novels whose camouflage is developed further.

Ostensibly, Pym's heroines are "excellent women". Certainly, that is how the world perceives them. The term's patriarchal connotations define all women by their place in a man's world. Pym's heroines utilize this assumption to their own advantage. That only they are conscious of this ploy may be the most subtle and all-pervading expression of Barbara Pym's ironic vision. To a significant degree, her heroines control their own lives, define their own space, and enjoy the resulting perquisites of their often solitary lives.

Because *Some Tame Gazelle* belongs to Barbara Pym's youth, her mastery of comic invention is startling. Certainly Archdeacon Hoccleve, object of Belinda's affections for several decades, irritable husband of Agatha, preacher of mind-numbing literary sermons, and general monster of male egocentricity, must stand as one of Pym's finest achievements. Subsequent male characters may approach his pomposity and insensitivity, but none surpass it. Henry Hoccleve originates in Henry Harvey, beloved of Barbara Pym loved in her Oxford youth, and perhaps for the rest of her life; this information may enhance the joke, but it deepens the pathos as well. Although Belinda recognizes Henry's faults all too clearly, she chooses to love him, and to defend his outrageous behaviour. Within this choice, Pym declares one of her central themes, the tenacious power that romance wields in shaping and determining women's lives.

This theme contrasts with its corollary, the reality of what must be termed "married" love, and the mutual exclusivity that separates it from romance. Reduced to its essence, this dichotomy becomes another expression of Pym's duality. In this instance, gender is the operative principle. The relationship between Belinda and the Archdeacon, if it can be so described, is the first delineation of this recurring motif, but it prefigures all of its successors. Although she displays more tolerance than most people to Henry's posturing and general testiness, certainly more than Agatha, even Belinda is moved to puncture his

inflated ego. Returning from shopping one spring morning, she finds him "sitting in his favorite seat under the yew trees", and feels "a faint irritation to see him sitting there in the middle of the morning when so many people, women mostly, were going about their household duties and shopping" (p.95). For once, Belinda chooses practicality over romance, reminding Henry that he might catch cold. In this action, Belinda is conscious that she is assuming the wifely role, and Henry concurs. In his response, Pym transfers the narrative point of view from Belinda to Henry, a strategy utilized increasingly in her later work:

He looked up irritably; Belinda had spoilt the romance of his environment. It was just the kind of remark that [his wife] would make and, now that he came to think of it, he supposed the seat *was* rather damp. He felt a distinct chill striking up through his bones and began to wonder if he were perhaps catching cold. He would never have noticed it if Belinda had not put the idea into his head. (pp. 95-96)

Encouraged by Agatha's absence, Belinda acknowledges Henry's failings, and sees him through Agatha's exasperated eyes. Pondering the possibility of Henry as widower, Belinda realizes the advantages of her position:

It would be like going back thirty years. Or wouldn't it? Belinda soon saw that it wouldn't. For she was now a contented spinster and her love was like a warm comfortable garment, bedsocks, perhaps, or even woollen combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance. All the same, it was rather nice to think that Henry *might* prefer her to Agatha, although she knew perfectly well that he didn't. It was one of the advantages of being the one he hadn't married that one could be in a position to imagine such things. (p.158)

The revelation signals the return to reality after a brief foray into illusion, and her momentary flight of fancy that "Henry *might* prefer her to Agatha". Her almost simultaneous rejection of that thought, is another example of Pym's dual vision. Paradoxically, Belinda's admission ensures the survival of her idealized perception of Henry, and her love for him.

In another variation on this theme, Belinda is given a fleeting glimpse of the village through the eyes of Miss Prior, the dressmaker. The episode typifies the "miniature" aspect of the novels, but the term does not connote inconsequence. In this characterization, Pym's compassion equals her humor. At the curate's wedding, Belinda and Miss Prior compare notes on the bride's dress and the intimidating Agatha's. Through Miss Prior's informed view, Belinda makes a significant and reassuring discovery about Agatha. In turn, she plays cultural emissary between her world and Miss Prior's:

Belinda moved over to where Miss Prior and her mother were standing.

"Very nice, isn't it?" she said inadequately, nodding and smiling in their direction.

"Oh, yes, it's quite nice," said Mrs. Prior. "It's nice to see everyone enjoying themselves. I like to see that."

"Mother was saying she wished there was a cup of tea," said Miss Prior in a low voice, "but we'll have one when we get home. You see, Miss Bede, we're not really used to drinking champagne. It's different for you of course."

"Well, I don't often have it," Belinda admitted, feeling that she must stand midway between Agatha and the Priors in this matter, "but of course we all want to drink the health of the bride and bridegroom in it."

"Yes, of course," Miss Prior agreed. "She looks very sweet, doesn't she? That *Vogue* pattern makes up well in velvet, it was in the December book. . . ."

"Mrs Hoccleve's dress is very smart, isn't it?" [Belinda] ventured, feeling that it was not at all the thing to discuss the guests' clothes with Miss Prior but being unable to resist the temptation. Perhaps, she thought, Miss Prior's profession will excuse me.

"Smart, yes, that's what I would call it too," said Miss Prior. "But red's not her colour. The material's good, I can see that, but you take a look at the seams inside—you won't find them finished off like mine are."

"No, I dare say not," said Belinda, realizing that she would certainly never have the opportunity of examining the dress so minutely, but feeling, none the less, that Agatha's splendour was considerably diminished. (pp. 249-250)

Passages like the above justify Philip Larkin's perception that "[Pym's] novels exhibit no 'development'; the first is as practised as the last, the observation, the social comedy, the interplay of themes equally expert".¹² Glimpsed through Miss Prior's eyes and in light of her privileged information, Agatha is reduced to a manageable, even vulnerable, entity. But, for all its comic overtones, the scene borders on pathos, etching the dreary dimensions of Miss Prior's world with painful clarity.

The pleasures of domesticity permeate *Some Tame Gazelle*: their celebration is another recurring motif. In the novel's concluding chapters, one exultant moment of epiphany derives from this theme, to become an apotheosis of "the trivial round, the common task". More remarkably, the passage ensures that Belinda and the reader share the revelation simultaneously. As the chapter begins, Belinda is attempting to make ravioli dough, which process becomes a meticulously executed metaphor: "... the recipe did not need complicated ingredients. The secret seemed to lie in the kneading or rolling, which was to be carried out for a full half-hour, or until the paste was ... 'of the consistency of the finest chamois leather'." But after ten minutes of kneading, "it was sticky, full of

little lumps and greyish looking—not at all like any kind of chamois leather” (p. 219). Through a series of distractions, one of them a proposal of marriage which Belinda declines politely, the kneading continues. Finally, her efforts are rewarded, the moment of victory interrupted by Harriet's entrance:

“Oh, Harriet, *look!*” Belinda held up the sheet of ravioli she had been rolling.

“But, Belinda, it's just like a piece of leather. I'm sure that can't be right,” protested Harriet.

“It is,” said Belinda joyfully, “it's even finer than the finest chamois leather.” (p.230)

The moment so evoked transcends the customary duality, unless we count the unlikely juxtaposition of imagery and subject. Best of all, the reader shares Belinda's moment of triumph, enhancing its affirmation. The entire sequence has almost mystic overtones, bordering upon an epiphenal moment. The mundane transcends its commonplace dimensions to achieve momentary exaltation, as real as it is evanescent. In the annals of literary epiphany, Belinda's ravioli dough belongs with Mrs. Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* or Mrs. Dalloway's party.

Finally, *Some Tame Gazelle* resolves into a series of permanences. For the Bedes, paradise is regained, affirming Belinda's idea that “Dr Johnson had been so right when he had said that all change is of itself an evil . . .” (pp. 252-253). Neither of the weddings that conclude the novel resembles any romantic stereotype nor seems motivated by its precepts, though one of the two stresses genuine affection and caring. Here, Pym draws a curious parallel between the younger married couple and the Bede sisters. Meeting the curate's fiancée for the first time, Belinda notes that it is “as if she were protecting Mr Donne in a sensible tweed coat or even woollen underwear. It was obvious that she would take care of him, not letting him cast a clout too soon” (p. 236). Pym echoes this

allusion to the homely Scots adage, "cast ne'er a clout / 'til May is oot", in a subsequent reference to the Bedes. As they dress for the wedding, "Belinda had great difficulty in restraining Harriet from casting off her woollen vest" (p. 243). Again, associations with *Beatrice Wyatt* surface, the idea that familiarity and custom neutralize the more disturbing aspects of love: there is "nothing to be afraid of anymore". For Barbara Pym then, ideally if not actually, love resides in just such loving attentions, a vision essentially unaltered from her first novel to her last.

Because *Some Tame Gazelle* is Pym's first published novel, *Excellent Women* is considered its immediate successor. But, chronologically, *Crampton Hodnet* intervenes. Written in 1939, the novel was not submitted for publication during Pym's lifetime. Yet its place in Pym's artistic development merits some attention. In several respects, the novel is an early draft of *Jane and Prudence*. Several of its characters are shared, most notably the formidable Miss Doggett, her acerbic companion Jessie Morrow, and Barbara Bird. In the early work, the bluff novelist with her "wheezy smoker's laugh" is a dreamily romantic student; her abortive affair with Francis Cleveland forms part of the novel's principal plot. Pym draws specific attention to the surname, affirming that Francis is, indeed, a descendant of John Cleveland, the Cavalier poet. As with her characters, certain common themes are discernible, though these are rendered with a greater degree of subtlety. The whole idea of the excellent woman is broached, and the distinction drawn between the persona's conventional version, and Pym's adaptation. Mrs. Cleveland's widowed sister provides the first example, and Jessie Morrow, the latter. Jessie's self-consciousness, her awareness of her subordinate state, confirms her status. In common with other excellent women Jessie is, for the most part, an observer of the scene rather than an active participant in it.¹³ As a woman who "... in spite of her misleading appearance, was a woman of definite

personality . . . able to look upon herself and her surroundings with detachment", Jessie satisfies all the criteria that characterizes Pym's excellent woman protagonist. Musing on the life of a vaguely unhappy widow, Jessie expresses her creator's essential credo:

Perhaps she had now given up hope of getting anything, if there was anything. But was there? And if there was anything, wasn't it often much less than people expected? Wasn't it moments, single hours and days, rather than months and years? (p. 119)

The novels of Pym's maturity remain true to her youthful assessment of human existence. Hazel Holt points out, "*Crampton Hodnet* is one of Barbara's earliest completed novels, and in it she was still feeling her way as a writer".¹⁴ Stylistically, Holt's judgment holds true, but the preceding quotation confirms that the authentic Pym perspective was fixed early.

Like *Some Tame Gazelle* the novel ends where it began. " 'I do not think you will find any change and decay in Leamington Lodge,' said Miss Doggett, smiling" (p. 216). In this assurance, she echoes Belinda Bede's invocation of "dear Doctor Johnson". More than any other aspect, this need to believe in the existence of some enchanted limbo, safe from any unwelcome or disruptive incursion, divides Pym's earliest, pre-war novels from her later work. From *Excellent Women* onward, her heroines understand that such detachment is neither possible nor desirable.

Excellent Women and *Jane and Prudence* unfold in a world more contemporary and therefore more readily recognizable, but Pym's fundamental vision colors and shades *Some Tame Gazelle*. With time and maturity, her focus of interest shifts, but her essential subject prevails. *A Few Green Leaves*, her final novel, is a mirror image of *Some Tame Gazelle*: Pym's familiar world seen

"through a glass darkly". Again the English village provides the setting, though time and change are engulfing its familiar institutions and practices. But, as with *Some Tame Gazelle*, the village exists in an enclosed dimension, one that resembles the real world, but modulates its informing vision to encompass the encroachments and change that Pym recognizes must be accommodated. This final village becomes a paradigm for everything Pym believes about the English sensibility that shaped her and her world; further, she pleads for its survival in an increasingly alienated England. The elderly spinster who knows that "a few green leaves can make such a difference" speaks for all the excellent women who people Pym's world, from Belinda Bede onward. The obvious difference lies in the informing vision of the ebullient young woman who created Belinda and Harriet, and the dying novelist who struggled to complete *A Few Green Leaves*. The life experience which separates these two darkened that vision, but its essential configuration endures.

Some Tame Gazelle and *Crampton Hodnet* adumbrate Barbara Pym's principal and recurring themes. Both unfold in a sequestered enclosure, a protected space where reality may threaten but never intrudes. In a sense, this world suggests a clever child's vision of the grown-ups' privileged domain. Against this singular background, the comic characters gather strength and authenticity to achieve realistic stature. In succeeding novels, Pym matches her equally memorable characters with a realistic milieu. In both *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence*, the "excellent woman" is developed and refined, her comic possibilities less exploited as her acerbic vision asserts itself more forcibly. But Belinda and Harriet Bede, flanked by Edith Liversidge and her goats, survive untouched in their demi-paradise, the patron saints of Pym's comic universe.

Notes

¹"Barbara Pym", *Penfriends From Porlock* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 113.

²Michael Cotsell, *Barbara Pym*, Macmillan Modern Novelists (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 20. Cotsell compares the published novel with its earlier drafts, and notes that "[w]hat is striking about even the first version . . . is that in it Pym immediately established her characteristic fictional world".

³*Independent Women*, ed. Dale Salwak, p. 91.

⁴Wyatt-Brown, *Independent Women*, p.45.

⁵Charles Burkhart, *The Pleasure of Miss Pym* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), p. 31.

⁶"Keeping up with Jane Austen", *London Review of Books*, 6-19 May 1982, p. 17.

⁷"Can This Marriage Be Saved?. . . ", *ELH* 50 (1983), 706.

⁸*Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, p. xiv.

⁹*A Very Private Eye*, p. 11

¹⁰*Some Tame Gazelle* (St. Albans: Granada, 1982), p. 68. All references are to this edition.

¹¹"Foreword", *An Unsuitable Attachment* (London:Macmillan, 1982), p. 10.

¹²"The World of Barbara Pym", *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 March 1977, p. 260.

¹³Jessie conforms to the definition given by Barbara Bowman. *Independent Women*, ed. Janice Rossen, p. 91.

¹⁴"Note", *Crampton Hodnet*.

Chapter 3

The Real World

With *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence*, Barbara Pym consolidates the fictional structure she framed in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Through a series of carefully conceived narrative strategies, Barbara Pym's "self-contained world, within which her characters move freely", achieves discernible form and shape. Pym ratifies its boundaries, identifies its inhabitants, and confirms its customs. A series of narrative devices maintains the distinctive atmosphere; most prominent is the recurrence of characters and common references, linking each successive novel to its predecessors. A complex network of literary allusions is another example of this strategy. Together, these devices form one distinctive and defined enclosure that incorporates the reader within its boundaries.

The literary allusions encircling Pym's fictional universe acknowledge her literary predecessors, and fix her own place within the historic continuum. Pym's practice of recycling her characters forms a secondary chain of internal reference, reinforcing the sense of shared association and strengthening the bond between author and reader. This encounter and exchange takes place in the territory which separates the fictional world from the real. *Some Tame Gazelle* took its inspiration from Pym's student years in Oxford; these associations, admittedly obscure, provided an external referent of sorts. In both *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence*, she initiates her "chronicle" motif, the slow accumulation of past reference that becomes a specific entity in itself. Henry Hoccleve and his *Dies Irae* sermon initiate the practice. At a Lenten service, Mildred Lathbury finds an "Archdeacon Hoccleve, a name that was unknown to me . . .", and is taken aback by his "... most peculiar sermon, full of long

quotations from the more obscure English poets . . . [whose] manner of delivery occasioned dismay and bewilderment . . . "¹ The entire episode exemplifies Pym's stylistic economy, her ability to concentrate a significant amount of information into one incident. The comic aspect is most obvious, the sermon's esoteric references and its length sounding a familiar note to Pym's readers. Mildred's politely diffident response strengthens the characterization, and confirms her narrative reliability, while her encounter with Everard Bone advances the narrative. When he tells her that "I'm afraid I was so busy trying to keep myself from laughing that I was hardly able to take it in", Mildred finds herself "liking him better for admitting to a human failing" (p. 80).

Characteristically, Pym postpones the resolution to this part of Mildred's story until *Jane and Prudence*, and Miss Doggett casual disclosure to Jane that "that nice Miss Lathbury has got married".² As the novels progress these references multiply; in aggregate, they create a private world within a world. Each succeeding allusion intensifies the sense of privileged access to a protected enclosure.

The sense of enclosure and confinement pervades Pym's novelistic world. A multitude of literary allusions contributes to this sensation, as does the detachment and irony that characterizes the narrative voice. Through its inflections and nuances, Pym distances and isolates her fictional terrain and its inhabitants. By and large, her characters divide into two groups; degrees of consciousness determine these classifications. Those who recognize their confinement separate from those who do not. Through a carefully devised motif of imagery built around windows and mirrors, these distinctions are refined and clarified still further.

The symbols serve a variety of functions, all applicable to Pym's depiction of gender roles within the patriarchy. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra

Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the origins of both symbols, citing sources that range from fairy-tales through numerous nineteenth-century novels. Although both images imply confinement, the window suggests access to a world beyond the enclosure; the pane of glass becomes a transparent shield protecting and mediating between observer and observed. The mirror invokes a more complex metaphor. Gilbert and Gubar argue that "to be caught and trapped in a mirror rather than a window, however, is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self". They postulate further that the image is prototypically feminine, "... necessitated by a state in which all outward prospects have been removed".³ Their interpretation is consonant with Pym's usage of these symbols, though she extends their scope. In associating this specific pattern of imagery with Fabian Driver, Pym attributes to him a self-obsession more appropriately feminine, in the attribution of gender stereotyping. The inevitable connotations of containment and imprisonment reinforce this reading.

In this respect, the motif of confinement illuminates a more problematic aspect. Although Pym's female characters lead confined and detached lives, their chosen enclosure has its benefits. When adapted with ingenuity and imagination, a framing device can select and refract a specific view or image, and so distinguish the particular from the general. *Excellent Women* is punctuated with a series of these images, all identifying the disparity of individual vision, and each attesting to the fundamental isolation of one character from another. In *Jane and Prudence*, Pym alters her focus and intensifies her scrutiny. Neither in these early novels, nor later, does Pym present any potential conciliation between these individual differences. She prizes human variety, but regrets its inevitable alienating influence. Both aspects of her perceptions will be addressed later in this chapter, and throughout the remainder of my study. For Pym, as for Gilbert

and Gubar, a window denotes a consciousness of the world beyond its confined space, while the mirror connotes narcissism. But however they choose and whatever their sex, none of Pym's characters invite unmediated confrontation with their world.

Both *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence* continue the development initiated in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Pym's characters and her plotting attest to her maturing artistry, but the basic configuration of her world remains essentially unchanged. Mildred Lathbury, the narrator/protagonist of *Excellent Women*, inherits Belinda Bede's gift for incisive observation, and Prudence Bates has Harriet's boundless enthusiasm for romantic possibility. Jane Cleveland and Jessie Morrow owe something to Edith Liversidge. Applied too insistently, these parallels blur, but the resemblances remain tenable.

Excellent Women is set in a shabby, post-war district of London, ". . . so very much the 'wrong' side of Victoria station, so definitely *not* Belgravia . . ." (p. 7). Yet despite this urban milieu, a village sensibility lingers. Mildred Lathbury accounts for this similarity, saying, "I sometimes thought how strange it was that I should have managed to make a life for myself in London so very much like the life I had lived in a country rectory when my parents were alive" (p. 11). With its more realistic setting, the novel's historic period is defined; allusions to ration books and bombed-out churches, and to Rocky Napier's imminent return from Italy, establish its post-war ambience. When Mildred explains that ". . . I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person . . .", her statement satisfies several narrative conditions (p. 7). The most obvious is descriptive, to orient her listener (or reader), and to direct response. The allusion to Jane Eyre assumes some literary knowledge, most specifically of the romance genre. The device outlines Mildred's general frame of reference, places her within it, and

invites the reader's participation. As well, the statement has specific application to the novel. Mildred's negative comparison is self-revelatory, an expression of the careful diffidence that characterizes as it protects her. The repeated denials, the insistence that she is "not at all like Jane Eyre", attest to the pervasive influence of romantic illusion, as it is nurtured and sustained through the romance plot. Even Mildred's negative comparisons confirm this power. Mildred's doomed "hope" anticipates a dominant theme, one that sounds repeatedly throughout Pym's novels. For Mildred, the faint possibility exists that a Mr. Rochester does exist somewhere, to define and resolve her plain woman's story. In the course of *Excellent Women*, Pym examines the insidious influence of such mythology, evaluates its impact on the lives of both sexes, admits its appeal and even partial validity, and reaches a conditional compromise. *Jane and Prudence* is a kaleidoscopic reflection of its predecessor, the elements scattered and reassembled into similar, if murkier, patterns.

This darkening perspective focuses on an awakening awareness that human existence is irrevocably and irretrievably solitary. This gradually encroaching revelation does not deter Pym's characters from the pursuit of love, romantic or otherwise. As the novels progress, society and the company of one's fellows assume increasing importance, to become essential in maintaining any sense of proportion or even of self. Marcia Ivory, dying alone in self-imposed squalor in *Quartet in Autumn*, is Pym's most drastic expression of this need for human contact. In these early novels the all-consuming interest in romance and marriage has pride of place. Still, the paradox is presented, exemplified most strikingly in Rockingham Napier, romantic hero *par excellence*—at least in Barbara Pym's novelistic world and to Mildred Lathbury of *Excellent Women*.

In *Excellent Women*, Pym takes a significant step forward, advancing beyond the idyllic cloister she had created in *Some Tame Gazelle*. At its conclusion,

Belinda Bede can predict with confidence that "everything would be as it had been before those two disturbing characters . . . appeared in the village" (pp. 251-252). In her second novel, Pym's essential plot suggests a similar pattern, but the golden age has passed. Mildred Lathbury's story may seem to end where it began, but she has learned that change, however painful, is intrinsic to human existence. To Sister Blatt's assurance that "... everything will be as it was before", Mildred must acknowledge, "more to [her]self . . ." that "[n]othing can ever really be the same when time has passed . . . even if it appears to be from the outside" (p.234). In the course of the novel, Mildred risks moving beyond her narrow enclosure. Although her experience reaffirms her essential philosophy, it undergoes a sea-change, an adaptation to a world hitherto unknown and untried.

Despite Mildred's belief that the life she has created for herself in London differs little from her rectory girlhood, at least some of this similarity can be traced to her attitude. As she says, "... it is only a question of choosing one's parish and fitting into it" (p. 11). To this end, the role of excellent woman serves her purposes very well, perhaps too well. Winifred Mallory calls her "practical", while describing herself as "... silly and romantic" (p. 64). Helena Napier places Mildred "... among the rows of excellent women" (p. 27), and William Caldicote sees her as "... balanced and sensible, such an excellent woman" (p.69). Everard Bone, doubtless comparing her to Helena, speaks approvingly of "... a sensible person with no axe to grind". Mildred adds, "I accepted this description of myself without comment" (p. 151). For each, Mildred becomes a flattering reflection. Helena prides herself on her lack of any domestic skills, and Winifred on her self-styled romantic silliness. Mildred plays admiring audience to William Caldicote's knowledge of food and wine. As well, she is a stable and familiar presence in his life, unchanging and reliable. As she does with Everard Bone, Mildred accepts each of these roles without comment.

Two separate episodes show just how accommodating she can be. In the first of these, Mildred has accepted Helena's invitation to tea. Thick slices of bread and jam accompany the mugs of tea, both of which Mildred accepts "in the way one does" (p. 9). For Mildred, tea should be served in china cups and saucers, and bread thinly sliced. One critic interprets Mildred's acceptance as evidence that "she is not averse to others providing her with a generous tea".⁴ The reading seems misguided, given Mildred's supper with Julian and Winifred Mallory. This time she is offered "a pale macaroni dish and a dish of boiled potatoes", a meal that proves as unappetizing as its appearance. "Not enough salt, or perhaps *no* salt, I thought, as I ate the macaroni. And not really enough cheese" (p.14). Later, Winifred seeks Mildred's approbation for "coffee that look[s] like weak tea", and again, Mildred does not disappoint. "Delicious, thank you," I murmured" (p. 17). In both instances, Mildred is doing what she does best: she is conforming to others' expectations of her. She is fitting in.

This aptitude serves Mildred well. Her life is a satisfying round of good works, her firm grasp of reality a safeguard from any vain yearnings. Describing herself as "... an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties", she adds that if such a person "... is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her" (p. 5). Given Mildred's assessment of herself, and her acceptance of the one imposed on her, her response to Rocky Napier is hardly surprising. Rocky may be shallow, manipulative, and patronizing. Any one of the three would explain his reported success with the "dreary Wren officers in their ill-fitting white uniforms" (p. 9). That said, his self-absorption is no greater than that shown by most of Mildred's acquaintanceship. Certainly, he is more amusing. Mildred recognizes that he is "[n]ot nearly so worthwhile as Julian Mallory, or Mr. Mallett and Mr. Coneybeare our churchwardens" (p. 38); this lack may well explain his appeal. Rocky does not ask

her to be sensible, or balanced, or practical. Rather, he allows her to feel that she is amusing and even interesting. In his company, the quality or presentation of tea loses its importance. However unadmirable Rocky may be, he opens Mildred's eyes to something like fun, and she is grateful for the discovery:

We went out . . . to a cafe he knew, a place I had never discovered, where they had good cakes. But it hardly seemed to matter about the cakes. Perhaps it was because I had had a large and rather late luncheon, but I didn't feel very hungry. He was so gay and amusing and he made me feel that I was gay and amusing too and some of things I said were really quite witty. (p. 75)

Mildred continues to demonstrate her talent for "fitting in". But Rocky creates his own milieu, and she finds it surprisingly congenial. A specific correlation exists between the Wrens in their ill-fitting white uniforms and Mildred; for both, Rocky proves a reliable guide. His considerable charm, however suspect, earns him the designation of romantic hero. As such, he is a rare commodity in Pym's fictional universe.

Yet the romance genre furnishes her central theme; its familiar conventions and suppositions are the matrix of her comedy. To Pym, romance is at once dangerous illusion and life-affirming hope. Mildred Lathbury's allusion to *Jane Eyre* acknowledges both. Even the grimly realistic evocation of old age, *Quartet in Autumn*, ends on a note of guarded optimism, of life's "infinite possibilities for change".⁵ For the young, hope resides in romantic love, and for the elderly in the possibility of change. Pym never denies the necessity for hope, but she sees that romantic love is only one of its manifestations. Her novels are committed to this idea, to the recognition that the pursuit of romantic love to the exclusion of any other goal must always end in disappointment and

disillusionment. Integral to the romance plot is the assumption that marriage will fulfil the promise of courtship, and ensure eternal happiness. With this tacit certitude firmly in place, all female aspiration is subordinated to its authority. Pym's presentation refutes this myth, although it never attempts to "solve the contradiction between love and quest".⁶ Pym rejects any all-encompassing resolution to this inherent opposition, advocating instead a realignment of the existing order. To identify gender designation, and to expose its inequities and absurdities, marks the first step in a general restructuring of society. That both sexes lose by the present arrangement is Pym's fundamental contention; each of her novels articulates this argument.

The romance plot suits Pym's purposes admirably; its familiar conventions prove a serviceable foil to her mildly subversive thesis. Her perceptive protagonists detect the division which separates fantasy from reality, especially as it pertains to romantic illusion, but they delight in human variety. Much of Pym's humour, and theirs, springs from this appreciation. Her female characters divide almost equally between the disciples of romance, who delight in the promise of each new beginning, and the pragmatic "excellent women", who recognize but distrust romance's appeal. Harriet Bede and Prudence Bates, of *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Jane and Prudence* respectively, belong in the first category, Belinda Bede and Mildred Lathbury in the second. In neither case does the predominance of one bias preclude intimations of the other. These women are found in the early, light-hearted novels; each attests to Pym's comic sympathy. In her later, darker work, these character types mutate into chilling but identifiable exaggerations of these early heroines. Leonora Eyre, the ageing and self-deluding beauty of *The Sweet Dove Died* is a travesty of romantic narcissism, while the quietly self-reliant Letty Crowe, of *Quartet in Autumn*, exemplifies the ageing excellent woman. In each, the inherent tragedy is

elucidated. Mounting obsession with self supersedes and extinguishes all sensitivity to others in the first instance, while an increasing isolation and loneliness, born of lifelong independence, threatens to overwhelm in the second.

Although Pym focuses on women, her male characters prove equally vulnerable to the myths of romantic love. *Some Tame Gazelle* presents the prototypical male in the Archdeacon, that masterpiece of comic pomposity and chronically aggrieved sensibility. Although he inspires Belinda's uncritical and undying devotion, the novel's farcical dimension negates any authentic romantic interest. In subsequent novels, Pym remedies this omission and creates heroes who satisfy the generic convention. Rocky Napier, of *Excellent Women*, is one such example; Tom Mallow, of *Less Than Angels*, is another. Neither character displays any very admirable qualities, it is true. Rocky's casual dependence on Mildred, and his blatant and coercive charm, are not commendable, while Tom Mallow's flight from any and all responsibility, familial and emotional, attests to his inherent weakness. Still, both men qualify as romantic heroes, and accept the proffered feminine attentions as their due. Only the obligations discomfit them.

Ostensibly, romance is the heroine's story. Yet invariably, the hero embodies its fundamental principles. His assessment determines the heroine's fate, and his acceptance is crucial to her admission in the societal enclosure. If the romance plot epitomizes the sex-gender system, its hero, not its heroine, is its validating agent. From Jane Austen onward, the story is shaped by and through the heroine's progression to marriage. The journey becomes a feminine equivalent of the masculine quest, her choice of suitor crucial to its successful resolution. In this process, Jean Kennard sees a clearly identifiable pattern, one she terms the "convention of two suitors":

The growth of a woman in a Jane Austen novel is marked by her choice of the right suitor over the wrong suitor. The wrong suitor embodies the qualities she must reject; the right suitor those which, in Jane Austen's view, make for the good life. The heroine's personality and development are thus defined through comparison with two male characters.⁷

In this scheme of things, the "right" suitor becomes the repository and guardian of society's values, reaffirming and perpetuating its patriarchal structure. More than any other, this consideration sanctions the resolution of marriage. With this underlying principle firmly in place, the portrayal of that suitor must justify both the demands made of the heroine and her resultant subjugation. Consequently, the romantic hero becomes the critical factor in achieving a credible resolution that convinces the reader and satisfies the convention's demands.

In Barbara Pym's world, this hero bears only a superficial resemblance to its prototype. The normative hierarchy is reversed; in this reordering, the hero is dependent upon and defined by the women who surround him. This alteration to the customary mold weakens, if it does not remove, the main structural pillar of the marriage plot. These changes produce a comparable shift in the moral imperative, with women replacing men as custodians of societal values and traditions. Yet the patriarchy lingers, a tacit authority to contain and highlight the variations. Because of these shifts in emphasis, the romantic hero's function can be reassessed. Although Pym's novels abound in men who imagine themselves romantic heroes, few are romantic and none is heroic; the illusion is perpetrated through the admiration and encouragement of the women who surround them. As Jane Cleveland, the ingenuously shrewd clergyman's wife of *Jane and Prudence*, reflects, "... it was splendid the things women were doing for

men all the time . . . making them feel, perhaps sometimes by no more than a casual glance, that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things . . . "(p. 84).

Sentiments of this kind are rarely shared with anyone, men least of all. But from time to time, they are given expression, although the subtle delivery softens any potential sting. In *Excellent Women*, Mildred listens to an exchange between Everard Bone and William Caldicote, as each vies to outdo the other in declaring their distaste for a city summer. Each establishes his specific territory in the process, a strategy not lost on Mildred:

"Yes, August is not a pleasant month in London," said Everard stiffly. "So many libraries and museums seem to be closed."

"One's club is being cleaned," chanted William, "So inconvenient."

"But Lyons Corner House is always open," I reminded him, trying to remember which was William's club or even if he really had one. (p. 191)

In identifying these discrepancies, Mildred maintains a degree of spiritual autonomy within the patriarchy. Lyons Corner House is her territory, if not by choice then by necessity. *Jane and Prudence* makes a similar comparison. The contrast between Prudence Bates's lunch in a "small, rather grimy restaurant" and Arthur Grampian at his club measures the distance separating the masculine milieu from the feminine. "While Arthur Grampian was shaking the red pepper on to his smoked salmon," the narrator comments, "Prudence was having to choose between the shepherd's pie and stuffed marrow" (pp. 44-45). But such discrimination aside, Lyons Corner House, and "that line of patient people moving with their trays" (p. 240), is mundane reality, the light of common day unmediated by the artificial and shaded enclosure of a private club. Although Pym recognizes

the appeal of the latter, she never confuses its shelter with the bleaker stretches beyond the wall. After all, Mildred tells Everard Bone that the "great cafeteria" reminds us of "our own mortality" (p. 241). Her logic rivals Jane Cleveland's, it is true, and she is half-joking. But the sentiment accords with Pym's insistent reminder that mortality is the common condition, and no respecter of rank or sex. For Mildred, and in the novels generally, this often disconcerting honesty prevails, to override all other considerations.

Rocky's glamour may dazzle Mildred, and even cause her to fall in love with him. Yet she can never quite forget his less admirable side, and never quite submerge herself in the necessary illusion. She refuses to relinquish her own view of reality for his. Her healthy, if muted, self-respect and commonsense win out. In this regard, Mildred resembles Belinda Bede; each has a clearly perceived and carefully guarded sense of self. Because it demands a surrender of precious autonomy and of judgment, romance threatens this independence. In *Excellent Women*, Pym examines this dilemma, albeit with a comic eye, and concludes that, however appealing, romantic love cannot coexist with marriage.

Excellent Women ranks with Pym's most high-spirited work. In Rocky Napier, she creates one of her rare romantic heroes, a glamorous naval officer whose considerable charm enlivens any situation. Mildred may fall in love with Rocky, but marriage is never a possibility. In this sense, the novel harmonizes its dissonant strains, allowing its heroine a innoculating experience of romantic illusion while sparing her its sobering reality. The interpretation deviates from the conventions of the romance plot, Pym's thesis is vindicated. She celebrates romance as it enriches and enhances the "trivial round, the common task". Its glamour attracts as it repels, an ambivalence that characterizes Pym's treatment of it.

Excellent Women and *Jane and Prudence* examine both aspects of romance. Generally, the comic aspect dominates the first, while the second probes the darker implications. The increasingly stringent tone reflects this deepening vision. Mildred Lathbury, the heroine and protagonist of the first, may seem, indeed is, the quintessential "excellent woman", but the novel discourages any imposition of facile labels. That said, Mildred adopts this role as her public persona. Defining her terminology to Everard Bone, Mildred articulates Pym's world-view, the subversive intent suffusing its apparent propriety:

"You could consider marrying an excellent woman?" I asked in amazement. "But they are not for marrying."

"You're surely not suggesting that they are for the other things," he said, smiling.

That had certainly not occurred to me and I was annoyed to find myself embarrassed.

"They are for being unmarried," I said, "and by that I mean a positive rather than a negative state."
(pp. 189-190)

To define unmarried as "a positive state" refutes the fundamental principles of patriarchal control. Because the excellent woman occupies her own territory, unencumbered by the demands and curtailments of the married state, she can pursue her own course and repel any threat to her independence. Paradoxically, the enclosure she inhabits ensures her freedom. Mildred's acuity of perception, manifested in the above exchange, confirms her awareness. Superficially, Mildred may appear to belong with Sister Blatt and Esther Clovis, or Mrs. Crampton and Mrs. Mayhew. But, as Barbara Bowman has pointed out, "... these female characters lack or ignore the consciousness of their subordinate state necessary to transform subordination into an acutely-felt sensibility".⁸ This consciousness connotes a duality of vision, distinguishing the specific from

the general. When Helen Napier responds to Mildred by "putting [her] in [her] place among the rows of excellent women" (p. 27), Mildred experiences such a moment, recognizing both the identity so imposed and the traditional response. The implied stereotype becomes a protective coloring, preserving as it protects Mildred's autonomy. Of course, Mildred exemplifies the excellent woman to a very significant degree. But, unlike Helena Napier or Allegra Gray, she sees nothing pejorative in the designation.

This finely-tuned consciousness occurs more frequently, though not exclusively, in Pym's female characters. In either sex, its presence becomes a barometer of worthiness, attesting to an awareness of others. Her male characters bear her most meticulous scrutiny, her insistent focus trained on the illusions and self-delusions which shape their lives. These illusions originate in patriarchal convention as it is popularized within the romance plot, and most specifically, in the presentation of the "romantic hero". Of all her male creations, Rocky can be said to have grace, an ease and elegance of manner that enlivens and enhances the most mundane situations. A "Flags" officer newly returned from Italy, Rocky has spent the war "arranging the admiral's social life". The occupation, hardly daunting or heroic, seems ideally suited to his gifts. Mildred emphasizes the pleasure of Rocky's company, his ability to inject gaiety and charm into the most mundane situation. Undeniably, Rocky is manipulative, superficial, and unconsciously patronizing. Arriving at Mildred's flat unexpectedly, he presents her with a bouquet of flowers, and feels no compunction in telling her that "I snatched them when I was hurrying for the train" (p. 221). None of this is very laudable, nor does it suggest any true sensitivity to women. Yet Rocky remains an attractive character, however spurious the origins of his charm. His response to the mimosa which Mildred has bought so impulsively contrasts sharply with William Caldicote's. To

William, mimosa means "cafes in seaside towns, all dried-up and rattling with the bottles of sauce on the table," (p. 71). The enthusiasm of Rocky's response, however frivolous, captures the ephemeral pleasure of the early spring day:

"Mimosa!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that?"
"I couldn't resist," I said. "It makes one think . . .".
"Of Italy and the Riviera, of course."
"I've never been there," I reminded him; "it's just that it seemed such a lovely day and I felt I wanted it."
"Yes, that's a better reason." (p. 74)

Rocky's response attests to his charm, both in its spontaneity, and its ready accommodation to Mildred. Like her, Rocky knows how to fit in, how to adapt to others. With this aptitude goes a certain benevolence and willingness to share, both absent from William Caldicote's reaction. As well, Mildred's modesty is reaffirmed, her refusal to pretend to anything beyond her own narrow experience. Uncharacteristically, she forgets the mimosa in the Napiers' flat and is too shy to collect it later. All that she is left with is "a disturbed feeling that was most unlike me." (p. 75). Yet the episode represents more than a moral tale. The generosity that Rocky inspires leads to a giving, a reaching out to others, that carries its own risk, and demands its own price. None of this justifies Rocky's basically shallow nature. But Mildred has experienced a surfeit of worthy people. William and Dora Caldicote, Winifred and Julian Mallory, lead admirably conscientious lives, as do most of those Mildred encounters. Rocky brings a sense of frivolity, of fun for its own sake, into her life, and she is grateful for it.

Yet beneath Rocky's practised charm, Pym implies and Mildred senses a vague melancholy. Conscious of his appeal to women, he places little value on it. Although the facet is never explored, it is glimpsed in several of his exchanges

with Mildred. "Once you get into the habit of falling in love you will find that it happens quite often and means less and less", he tells her; a stanza from Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite" ends his pronouncement. Concluding with the line, "[w]e mortal millions live ALONE", he comments "[a]nyway, there it is". (p.136). Although Mildred falls in love with Rocky, she knows that romantic heroes, like excellent women, are not for marrying. In the following passage, Rocky demonstrates a measure of integrity and sensitivity to others, as he and Mildred acknowledge, however allusively, her feeling for him. The pretext of the discussion is Helena's disillusionment with Everard Bone. Mildred's response betrays her own emotion:

"You mean being disillusioned? . . . Perhaps you meet a person and he quotes Matthew Arnold or some favorite poet to you in a churchyard, but naturally life can't be all like that," I said rather wildly. "And he only did it because he felt it was expected of him. I mean, he really isn't like that at all."

"It would certainly be difficult to live up to that, to quoting Matthew Arnold in churchyards," said Rocky. "But perhaps he was kind to you at a moment when you needed kindness—surely that's worth something?". (p. 225)

In a limited sense, Rocky's justification authenticates him. In Barbara Pym's world, kindness is always worth something, however evanescent and arbitrary. Paradoxically, Rocky's allusive defense may diminish his romantic appeal, robbing him of the requisite mystery demanded of romantic heroes. In *Jane and Prudence*, Pym examines the alternative, creating in Fabian Driver a travesty of the romantic hero. If Rocky's behaviour has a benevolent intent, Fabian's is rooted in his need for a reassuring reflection in any surface. No motivation, beyond self-interest, informs his actions, and no curiosity or

originality enlivens his demeanor. Yet Fabian's obsession with self imprisons him within society's structures as effectively as it does the women he preys upon, a depiction consistent with Pym's thesis.

Meticulously conceived and executed patterns of imagery underscore this theme of confinement; the recurring motif of windows and mirrors is its most overt manifestation. As noted earlier, each is an image of enclosure, though a window provides access to a world beyond oneself, while a mirror reflects only personal reality. Mildred Lathbury's gradual advancement is charted through this metaphor, the window's frame and its transparency defining her modulating perspective. Her story is plotted through a succession of scenes, each presented from this vantage point. The first example, her view of the church and its surroundings, defines her general orientation:

I could just see the church spire through the trees in the square. Now, when they were leafless, it looked beautiful, springing up among the peeling stucco fronts of the houses, prickly, Victorian-gothic, hideous inside, I suppose, but very dear to me. (pp. 10-11)

Like the view from Belinda Bede's chair, Mildred's description fixes the novel's milieu, physically and emotionally. Later, as she is "staring absentmindedly at my favourite view of the church", she is startled and disconcerted to see "... Julian Mallory ... talking and laughing with a woman I had not seen before. ... It suddenly occurred to me that she must be Mrs. Gray ... I had a feeling that she was not quite what we had expected" (p. 56). Mildred watches both of Rocky's departures from her window. The second time, she remembers that "... I had done this before, and not so very long ago ... my thoughts on that occasion though more melancholy had somehow been more pleasant ... Now I felt flat and disappointed as if he had failed to come up to my

expectations" (p. 226). In the progression, Mildred's view has shifted and her focus darkened. Rocky has replaced the church and the reassuring Victorian-gothic houses. In another adaptation of this metaphoric pattern, Rocky alludes to a stained-glass window for the church. "... the Rockingham Napier window," he says. "I can see it—very red and blue" (p. 226). The image he invokes relates quite specifically to his romantic presence, and to the color and vivacity that romance and illusion can inject into life's prosaic course. The Victorian paperweights, collected by both Mildred and Rocky, are still another image of confinement, each miniature world contained and isolated within its glass dome. Even the snowstorm is held in check.

Rocky may use his celebrated charm injudiciously, but kindness does motivate his actions from time to time. For Fabian Driver, however, his own reflection affords all the diversion he needs, an indulgence Pym exploits to comic advantage. In one example of several, Fabian is pleased to discover that "the distinguished-looking man sitting at that distant table was himself reflected in a mirror at the far end of the room" (p. 200). But the metaphor extends beyond nuances of narcissism to invoke those of imprisonment. These associations accord with the notion of entrapment posited by Gilbert and Gubar, and its implied search for "a viable self". But Fabian's fascination with his reflection supplies only one expression of this motif; its thematic implications reverberate repeatedly as the novel unfolds.

Fabian's comic, even pathetic, self-absorption is established early. Jane has seen Fabian's portrait displayed prominently on his wife's grave. Jessie Morrow's sardonic explanation of this bizarre gesture leaves no doubt of her assessment of Fabian. She tells Jane that "[Constance's] death came as a great shock to him—he had almost forgotten her existence" (p. 29). Fabian's chronic infidelity to the loving Constance may account for his portrayal of "inconsolable widower". But

despite the comic implications of his elaborate posturing, which neither miss, both Jane and Jessie see Fabian as an eminently marriageable male.

To Jane, Fabian presents an ideal match for Prudence, while Jessie schemes to marry him herself. For all her seeming advantage, Prudence loses Fabian to Jessie, whose shrewd deployment of her meagre resources demonstrates her firm grasp of the campaign's fundamental stakes. In Barbara Pym's gently comic world, Jessie is a disconcerting presence. Like the comparably plain and practical Charlotte Lucas in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Jessie knows that marriage, "however uncertain of giving happiness, must be [her] pleasantest preservative from want".⁹ It should be added that Jessie lacks Charlotte's financial advantage. There is no semblance of romance in Jessie's pursuit of Fabian. Prudence dines with him in fine London restaurants, while Jessie prefers fish suppers in cinema tearooms. She refuses to play the courtship game, beyond a mildly ludicrous but ultimately convincing opening salvo. Dressed in Constance's blue velvet dress and wearing unaccustomed make-up, she catches Fabian offguard. Yet the comparison to Charlotte Lucas does not equate Jessie's marriage to Fabian with Charlotte's to Mr. Collins. For whatever reason, Jessie loves Fabian. Her epiphany comes when she recognizes that his imprisonment equals and even surpasses her own, a revelation that transforms him in her eyes, and renders him attainable. The moment, presented through Fabian's eyes and recapitulated through Jessie's, determines the future for each of them.

She glimpses him as he gazes from an upstairs window into his garden. Fabian is remembering his marriage to Constance:

She had even invited his loves to the house for week-ends, and two women sitting together in deck—chairs under the walnut tree, having long talks about him, or

so he had always imagined, had been a familiar sight when he happened to be looking out of an upper window. (p. 63)

Ostensibly, the memory confirms Fabian's reprehensibly selfish treatment of Constance, filtered through the prism of his unfailing narcissism. But the scene has another dimension. In this version, Constance plays guardian crone to Fabian's Rapunzel, her devotion enclosing him within its strictures. The name "Constance", with its connotations of "woman's constancy", encourages this reading. Jessie's epiphany dates from this moment. "She had always loved him, but it had not occurred to her until that autumn day in the garden when she had seen him looking out of the window that anything could be done about it" (p. 158). Pym's repetition of the moment from opposing vantage points emphasizes the confinement metaphor, the image encompassing both Fabian and Jessie. With her revelation, Jessie understands that she must exchange the traditional passivity of the feminine role for a more aggressive posture. As the instigator of their furtive courtship, Jessie embodies the novel's dominant theme.

In Jessie Morrow, Pym brushes against a bleaker and more forbidding reality, a state that borders on despair, however comic its presentation in this instance. Jessie has had an earlier incarnation in Pym's early novel *Crampton Hodnet*. There, she is described as "a woman past her first youth, resigned to the fact that her life was probably never going to be more exciting than it was now".¹⁰ The subsequent version is softened and lightened, but these faintly ominous undertones persist. If Jessie values the protection of the enclosure, she does so in full consciousness of its restrictions. Her revelation, that Fabian shares her confinement if not her discernment, awakens her hope and gives her the courage to act. When, finally, Fabian is "led away captive by the women" (p. 244), Jane's observation only confirms his customary state, though Jessie's tenure

augurs a less indulgent regime. Contemplating his future with her, Fabian feels "as if a net had closed around him" (p. 226).

Jane Cleveland is a more problematic heroine than either Mildred, Prudence or Jessie. She can hardly be classified as one of the excellent women heroines, though she shares some of the generic attributes. Certainly, her detachment and irony qualify her. At lunch in the village tearoom, she wonders at Mrs. Crampton's insistence that "... a man needs eggs!", and takes note of Nicholas's response to this proposition. "Nicholas accepted his two eggs and bacon and the implication that his needs were more important than his wife's with a certain amount of complacency . . ." (p. 56). Of all Pym's heroines, Jane is the least conventional. Ultimately it is her view that prevails, and her acceptance of flawed human nature, her own included, that provides any comfort and coherence to a discouraged Nicholas. By novel's end, her crazy logic makes perfect sense. When she compares testing the seal on jars of preserves with going over to Rome, her association seems both delightfully apt and eminently sound. Comparably, her penetrating observations on Fabian's have the ring of ultimate truth.

Fabian Driver is the earliest, and possibly the most obvious manifestation of Pym's perception that the patriarchy penalizes men at least as much as it does women. These penalties are never material. Pym is in no doubt that monetarily, male privilege far outstrips female. Jessie Morrow's existence is only one example of this economic disparity. Ironically, Pym's technical skill has misled numerous critics into seeing the novels as mildly amusing romances and nothing more. In the following passage, Jane Nardin recognizes that, for its time, Pym's originality is still more striking:

Considering that many of Pym's novels were written in the late forties and fifties when such insights were severely out of fashion, she gives her tart reflections on the exploitative relationship of men to women surprising prominence. But even more surprising than the fact that Pym has these feminist insights is what she chooses to do with them. Instead of taking the common feminist position that women must seek equal opportunity to realize their own desires, Pym's novels suggest that it is in fact men, rather than women, who are the main victims of sex role differentiation.¹¹

In one of the novel's concluding scenes, Pym gathers these strands together, to fashion one definitive image of Fabian's captive existence. In a deserted conservatory, Fabian and Jane are discussing Prudence. The setting provides an appropriate background, a glass enclosure housing a decaying garden filled with dead and dying plants. Here, Fabian is enclosed in a wasteland, a miniature and artificial landscape of sterility and death; the headless dwarf, a corrupted Pan figure, is emblematic of his gratuitous presence:

He put one hand up to his brow with a characteristic gesture, while his other hand seemed to wander along the slatted wooden shelves of the conservatory, with the flower-pots full of old used earth and dried-up bulbs with withered leaves, until it came to rest on what felt like a piece of statuary. He looked down in surprise at feeling his hand touch stone, and started at seeing the headless body of a dwarf which had once stood in the rockery in the front garden (pp. 243-244).

The passage can be read as a paradigm of Fabian's existence, the conservatory setting enhancing the sense of compression and density. Fabian is a pathetic, even ludicrous figure. Yet he excites pity, if not terror, as he resorts to his familiar melodramatic charade. Like the headless dwarf, a broken and outmoded symbol of another time, he is an obsolete artifact. Admittedly, he will

continue to live in the relative affluence of Constance's inheritance. But his affectations will impress Jessie no more than they do with Jane. Deprived of his perennial diversion of casual liaisons, he is left with only his reflection for comfort.

The headless dwarf is an early example of a specific network of symbols, all variation on images of statuary. Generally, these connote past experience, images frozen in time. They are lifeless, disintegrating effigies, icons with the power to summon the past but no viable connection with the present. In *Excellent Women*, Pym embellishes these implications with specifically Gothic imagery. The scene parallels the decaying conservatory milieu, both in its artificially contrived setting and its intimations of time past. Visiting a provincial tearoom, Mildred Lathbury finds an enclosed and deserted garden:

On one wall there was a spotty engraving of a
Byronic-looking young man who reminded me of
Rocky. The room led out into a romantic little garden,
shut in with high walls covered with dripping ivy . . .
. I could see a little lawn and a stone cupid with ivy
growing on it and it seemed rather too melancholy
(pp. 201-202).

From the "Byronic-looking young man" to the "romantic little garden" with its "high walls covered with dripping ivy", each component intensifies the ambience of musty seclusion; the ivy-covered stone cupid epitomizes the adamant nature of the romantic myth. The overwhelming sensation is not of romance but of a sterility rivaling that of the abandoned conservatory.

Mildred's infatuation with Rocky has been contained always by her consciousness of his marriage. To that extent, he serves his purpose in her life, and vanishes. She will remember him, and her memory will be composed of pleasure and pain in equal part. Yet the novel's resolution endorses Mildred's

original strategy. Julian Mallory and Everard Bone beckon; whichever she chooses, she will "fit in". As she says, "... one shouldered [one's burden] bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all" (p. 255). Jane Cleveland lacks Mildred's readiness to shoulder unwelcome burdens. A willing but incompetent clergyman's wife, she admits her comparative failure with cheerful remorse. Although she knows that "kindly looks and spectacles . . . was what it all came to in the end" (p. 52), she clings to romantic dreams for Prudence, and for her daughter Flora. Interestingly, she can harbour these thoughts even as she acknowledges the inevitability of Jessie's and Fabian's match. "A beautiful wife would have been too much for Fabian," she thinks, "for one handsome person is enough in a marriage, if there is to be any beauty at all" (p. 219). Like Jessie, she speaks her mind; unlike Jessie, she is listened to from time to time. Presumably, Jane's position outranks Jessie's within the village hierarchy. If her candour causes difficulty, she is regretful but not really repentant. As she tells Nicholas on one such occasion, "But I always say what I think" (p. 155).

Of the four central characters in Pym's second and third novels, only Jessie Morrow's story ends conventionally in marriage. Her progress to that resolution confounds almost every tenet of the romance/marriage plot. Although she has never married, Jessie seems to know what Jane has learned: marriage and romance are irreconcilable dualities. For Mildred, Rocky remains in memory, as permanently etched on her consciousness as is the Dante quotation he inscribes on the window. The lines, "that bit about there being no greater sorrow than to remember happiness in a time of misery" (p. 237), are her suggestion. Early in the novel, Mildred wonders at Winifred Malory's predilection for the poetry of Christina Rossetti, reflecting that "she had not, as far as I knew, had the experience to make those much-quoted poems appropriate" (p. 40). Although

she may never use it, Mildred has gained that experience. Another comparison confirms this perception. The story of Mildred's infatuation with Rocky parallels Julian's fascination with Allegra Gray. At the novel's conclusion, Mildred has awakened to myriad possibilities for the future, even the chance of a "full life" after all. In contrast, Julian retreats into his familiar and unthreatening previous existence where, presumably, he will remain.

This anticipation of a "full life" owes more to Mildred's renewed awareness of life's possibilities than to one idealized potential husband. However the Napiers and Allegra Gray have disrupted her life, they have reaffirmed and expanded her original perception. On the other hand, Prudence will continue to evade the resolution of her story. She will begin at the beginning one more time, and resume her perennial cycle of expectations. That she is conscious of this pattern is significant. Comparing her own life with that of her Oxford contemporaries, she thinks "... what about Prudence? Prudence with her love affairs, that was what Jane used to say, and perhaps, after all, it was true" (p. 117). Judged rationally, her chosen course offers nothing but inevitable disappointment. Yet the near-lyricism of the novel's closing lines may justify her choice:

Let him go among the bishops to-night, she thought,
suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of her life.
We have many more evenings before us if we want
them (p. 252).

Prudence's imagination obliterates the gray reality of Arthur Grampian. The pleasure postpones the inevitable choice between "the comfortable spinster or the contented or bored wife" (p. 227), Jane's two poles of feminine possibility. Prudence's determined resistance to either commands a certain sympathy. As

the novel ends, Prudence controls the situation. That awareness, as much as the renewal of her expectations, may account for her temporary rapture.

Mildred Lathbury offers still another variation on the theme. Her experience has not produced a new, improved Mildred; rather it has vindicated the original. Her subsequent marriage to Everard Bone will not change her fundamentally. Miss Doggett's fearful disclosure that "... she even learned to type so that she could type his manuscripts for him" (p. 143) will not alter Mildred's essential core nor corrupt her inherent emotional autonomy. Mildred is the quintessence of excellent womanhood, a character crucial to Pym's work. In this paradoxical blend of the comic and the serious, each strand is entwined inextricably with the other, to become Pym's medium for communicating her distinctive and deceptively idiosyncratic vision. Mildred's catalogue of the qualities that distinguish an excellent woman, "for being unmarried . . . a positive rather than a negative state", overturns the prevailing world order, at least as defined within the marriage plot.

Comparably, Jane Cleveland's chaotic thought processes are vindicated in Nicholas's rueful acceptance of her intrusion into church squabbles:

"My poor Jane,"—he put his arm around her shoulders and they gazed down together at the remains of their supper — "what can any of us do with these people?"

"We can only go blundering along in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call us," said Jane (p. 241).

Finally, Jane and Nicholas experience a moment of spiritual union, with Nicholas acquiescing to Jane. The moment is a temporary fusion of the two minds, the "spirit of reconciliation" envisioned by Carolyn Heilbrun.¹²

In *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence*, Barbara Pym broadens and deepens the dimensions of her idiosyncratic and self-contained world. In the process, the excellent woman emerges fully realized as its pivotal and informing intelligence, her detached and ironic vision imposing form and coherence on a landscape simultaneously familiar and alien. The portrayal of Mildred Lathbury represents the quintessence of this unique formulation, while the women of *Jane and Prudence* explore and develop the implications of this basic model. Both Jane Cleveland and Jessie Morrow descend from Mildred. In *Jane*, the potential eccentricity is emphasized, while Jessie's tempered cynicism explores another facet. Both provide a contrast to Prudence Bates's determined romanticism. Together, these four serve as archetypes for all of Pym's subsequent female characters.

Less Than Angels (1955) and *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), the subject of my next chapter, find Barbara Pym in full control of her comic powers. The first work is a significant milestone in her development. She is gaining confidence and increasing mastery of her medium; both are apparent in *Less Than Angels*. Set in and around an anthropological institute, the novel sets anthropology and literature side by side, and examines both disciplines with Pym's customary ironic detachment. *A Glass of Blessings* is "the story of a useless woman".¹³ As it traces Wilmet Forsyth's progression from this state to something like excellent womanhood, the novel becomes the apotheosis of Pym's purely comic style. Yet the vision is darkening even as it realizes this affirmation. Comedy prevails in this account of Wilmet Forsyth's awakening. In the process, Wilmet must confront several unpalatable truths, most of them about herself. Relating these rites of passage, Pym's humour never falters. A deepening note of compassion tempers her customary irony, a tendency increasingly apparent with each succeeding work.

Notes

¹*Excellent Women* (New York: Perennial Library, 1980), pp. 78-79. All references are to this edition.

²*Jane and Prudence* (London: Grafton Books, 1981, rpt. 1988), p. 142. All references are to this edition.

³*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 37.

⁴ Barbara Bowman, *Independent Women*, p. 81

⁵*Quartet in Autumn* (London: Granada, 1980, rpt. 1981), p. 175. All references are to this edition.

⁶Rachel Blau DuPlessis, p. 4.

⁷*Victims of Convention* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1978), p. 11.

⁸"Barbara Pym's Subversive Subtext", *Independent Women*, p. 91.

⁹Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. James Kinsley and Frank W. Bradbrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 111.

¹⁰*Crampton Hodnet* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985), p. 3.

¹¹*Barbara Pym*, p. 4

¹²"Introduction", *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p. x.

¹³Charles Burkhart, p.40.

Chapter 4

Beyond the Enclosure

Less Than Angels and *A Glass of Blessings* mark the apotheosis of Barbara Pym's early comic phase; they reflect what has past and anticipate what is to come. Together, the novels advance her narrative field beyond its original boundaries into a more sophisticated and varied milieu. A bleaker vision is the most obvious manifestation of this change, but the comedic strain remains dominant. Increasingly, Pym's emphasis shifts from the purely personal to the more universal, to explore the mutual bonds linking the individual and the community. A heightened awareness accompanies this alteration. Although Pym always argues that society must respect the individual, she recognizes that too much emphasis on this aspect encourages alienation and isolation. Accordingly, she seeks a compromise, a balance that accommodates the individual and the society to mutual benefit.

The romance plot continues to serve her well, both schematically and thematically. As she adapts its assumptions and conventions to her altered perspective, her comedy sharpens. In her treatment of the romantic hero, Pym's darkening vision is most readily apparent. The all-pervading influence of romantic myth persists, but increasingly its destructive elements assume precedence; her characters reflect this altered perception. Catherine Oliphant, the protagonist of *Less Than Angels*, never confuses romance with reality; in the course of *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet Forsyth learns to distinguish one from the other. Each of these heroines reflects her predecessors. Catherine is an amalgam of Mildred Lathbury, Jane Cleveland, and Jessie Morrow. She has Mildred's practicality, Jessie's penetrating shrewdness, and Jane's ability to make

outlandish but plausible associations. Offering Tom Mallow's aunt a Bourbon biscuit, Catherine cannot resist speculating on the significance of the name.

"They always remind me of exiled European royalty," she says to her startled guest. "Do you suppose they sit around in their villas at Estoril eating Bourbon biscuits?"¹ Her logic is reminiscent of Jane's, and like Jane she likes to tease a little. Wilmet belongs with Prudence Bates and Harriet Bede. Like them, she loves clothes, displays a kind of benign vanity, and cherishes a faith in romance.

To some degree, Catherine exemplifies Pym's excellent woman. More worldly-wise than Mildred Lathbury and less embittered than Jessie Morrow, Catherine is, nevertheless, a descendant of both. Her healthy skepticism does not save her from inevitable pain and unhappiness. Romance remains the impetus of each plot, although its significance differs for each woman. In this respect, Catherine's story becomes an affirmation of her original values, ending more or less where it began, while Wilmet must learn to accept her own humanity, and to recognize that she is involved in mankind. Pym's heroines fare much better than her heroes. In their depiction, Pym administers the *coup de grace* to any faith in the fundamental ethos of the romance/marriage plot.

In the guise of romantic hero, neither Tom Mallow nor Piers Longridge satisfies any of the stereotype's demands. Equally reprehensible are their attempts to escape the entanglements of social obligation. Yet both continue to enjoy and to accept, in greater or lesser degree, the privilege that is bestowed upon them within the patriarchy. Both are handsome, intelligent, and well-educated, but neither is fulfilling his early promise, at least in the eyes of the world or their respective families. In their separate ways, each is acutely conscious of this perceived failure. To Tom's family, his interest in anthropology is mystifying at best, dismaying at worst. His aunt confides as much to Catherine, telling her that "[h]e has been a great disappointment and worry to his family . . . taking up such

a very *odd* career. . .”(p. 130). Similarly, the sobriquet of “poor Piers” springs to Wilmet’s mind, when she glimpses him at a noontime Lenten service. The designation originates with Rowena Talbot, Piers’s sister and Wilmet’s “great friend”. Thinking of this, Wilmet remembers that “. . . there was something vaguely unsatisfactory about him. At thirty-five he had had too many jobs and his early brilliance seemed to have come to nothing”.² Neither man is satisfying the patriarchy’s expectations of him; each declines to accommodate to any conventional mode of behaviour. Of course, Piers’s homosexuality is more profoundly unorthodox than Tom’s mildly disreputable interest in anthropology. The point is that both are caught within a system that has no place for them.

In this respect, their isolation surpasses that of the excellent woman. However thankless her role, it serves a purpose within the dominant culture and is accepted for that reason. For Tom and Piers, the situation is complicated still further by their seeming advantages; in their varying ways, both men are embodiments of romance’s ideal hero. Furthermore, each man understands the perquisites of his position, and invokes them from time to time. Here Tom transgresses more than Piers. But neither shows much compunction about exercising his charm to achieve his own ends, nor really examines the consequences of his behaviour.

Tom’s first meeting with Deirdre demonstrates this capacity, while his treatment of his family and Elaine and, to a lesser extent, Catherine, attests to his emotional irresponsibility. From time to time, a fleeting remorse brushes his consciousness, but its effects tend to confirm his self-absorption. During his brief visit home, he experiences a kind of nostalgia for his younger self, “. . . mourning the young man of those days . . .”, and “. . . wonders if the change was for the better”(p. 182). To a degree, Tom is a prisoner of the system. Admittedly, he makes valiant efforts to free himself, but he can never quite sever the final link.

His vacillations betray his essentially selfish, even childlike nature, and his treatment of women confirms it. Although he is ready to accept love when it is expedient, any intrusion of reality dampens his enthusiasm. He enjoys romance, particularly its early phases, but anything that threatens to become an encumbrance frightens him into retreat. From Belinda's comic devotion to the Archdeacon, through Mildred's infatuation with Rocky's gaiety and Prudence's injured pride, to the very real unhappiness caused by Tom Mallow's callousness, Pym's comic vision has darkened significantly.

In similar vein, Piers's mildly seductive flirtation with Wilmet raises troubling questions. In the novel's early chapters, Wilmet Forsyth is Pym's most blithely confident heroine. She accepts her cosseted existence as her due, if she thinks about it at all. Neither her naivete nor her self-satisfaction are particularly appropriate to her age, but neither causes harm, unless to Wilmet herself. Certainly, her general boredom with her useless existence encourages her to misinterpret Piers's attentions, and her ingenuous egotism embroiders upon them. But Piers is not guiltless; he sees Wilmet for what she is and must understand her readiness to misread his interest. His homosexuality explains his alienation, but it cannot quite excuse his behaviour. Pym's subtle depiction of Piers's unhappiness supports her argument of patriarchy's tyrannical hold, as does his bleak assessment of human existence. Certainly his statement plumbs depths that far exceed any other of Pym's characters. Questioned about his misrepresentation of Keith as "colleague", Piers counters Wilmet's veiled accusation by asking her, "... aren't we all colleagues, in a sense, in this grim business of getting through life as best we can?" (p. 194). Although his defense does not really justify his behaviour, it enunciates Pym's essential theme. It should be added that Piers's statement borders on an extravagance of expression relatively rare in Barbara Pym's work. Two possible explanations come to mind.

Like Pym's excellent women, Piers has assessed the society he inhabits and accepted his position on its periphery. His reliance on alcohol suggests that his acceptance is less than perfect. However, if excellent women qualify as heroines within this context, Piers deserves and wins our sympathy. More than Tom, he may disappoint any conventional expectations, but his admittedly oblique justifications suggest a measure of self-knowledge.

In structure and development, each novel resembles a series of linked circles. In *Less Than Angels*, Pym contrives an intricate network of characters and settings, all connected through an anthropological institute. *A Glass Of Blessings* encompasses a variety of social strata, from church to home to night class to suburbia and beyond, mediating all of these through Wilmet Forsyth, the protagonist and narrator. In both cases, Pym's narrative skill blends a variety of characters and milieux into one comprehensive unity. The church's influence is superseded by more secular, even worldly, considerations. Although *A Glass of Blessings* traces Wilmet Forsyth's spiritual evolution, the process is more implicit than overt, and effected through a kind of moral osmosis. Throughout most of the novel, Wilmet's attention is centered firmly on herself.

Her awakening consciousness of the world beyond her restricted precinct parallels her growing sense of commonality and community. As she moves from pride to humility, separation to inclusion, Wilmet retains some vestige of her appealingly frivolous nature, a reassuring affirmation of her individuality. Both novels examine the relationship between the individual and society, the rights and obligations of each to the other. Although the necessity for community and cooperation is urged, the irrevocable fact of human isolation cannot be vanquished. Gender designation becomes a major factor in perpetuating this isolation, with Piers's story its most eloquent expression. With this emphasis on human alienation, Pym edges toward the dominant theme of her late novels.

A crowded cafeteria sets the opening scene for *Less Than Angels*; one image, "a confused impression of English tourists shuffling around a church in Ravenna", is imposed upon another, "men and women from nearby offices, coming away from the counter with their trays . . ." (p. 5). As she has done in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym establishes the scene through the discerning and sympathetic eye of one character; in this instance Catherine Oliphant's vision dominates. *Less Than Angels* examines the connection between illusion and reality and stresses the necessity of each, but insists always that the exercise of consciousness must distinguish one from the other. The novel's initial paragraph offers a practical demonstration of this skill. As a writer of romance, Catherine must "draw her inspiration from everyday life", though its reality "must be made palatable by fancy" (p. 5). Catherine understands the fine line separating illusion from reality; she observes her world with a kind of double vision, always alert to its narrative potential but never confusing the reality she perceives with the romance she writes.

The opening scene has a cinematic quality, as Catherine's gaze ranges around the room to the window, where she sees "an unusual pair, like comics in a music-hall turn", as they walk against the "hurrying stream" of humanity (p. 6). Into this brief episode, Pym compresses a wealth of information, simultaneously orienting her reader and establishing her narrative posture. Catherine's identification of the comic pair as anthropologists relates to Tom Mallow and his imminent return from Africa. The action shifts from Catherine to the institute's library and the redoubtable Esther Clovis, who assumes momentary control. From this vantage point, the reader watches the entrance of the two anthropologists, "still talking loudly" (p.12). Through this narrative manipulation, Pym imparts a sense of privileged information to the reader; Esther Clovis's brusque geniality, and her rough and ready preparations for the

sherry party, evoke an instant familiarity within the institute's heretofore alien surroundings. Together, the cafeteria and the institute establish the novel's central conflict, the perceived opposition between public and private, between art and science, even between romance and reality. Since Catherine is a woman writing for women, and most of the anthropologists are men, one more classification could be added to this list. Defined in terms of gender designation, romance fiction could be termed feminine, and science masculine. In this context, the marriage plot is shaped by the dual vantage points of romance writer and anthropologist. Tom Mallow's flight from family or any other obligation, his detribalization, becomes a major focus, radiating implications that illuminate most of the novel's characters. The family becomes the agent of society and community. The patriarchal hierarchy is manifested quite explicitly in Tom's dilemma. By rejecting his family, he is denying his responsibility within the English class structure. Comparably, Deirdre Swan finds her suburban family stifling and repressive. But her predicament is a temporary adolescent phenomenon; Tom cannot advance beyond this phase. In their attitudes to family and home, Deirdre and Catherine express exact opposites. Deirdre's gestures of rebellion are made from the comfort and protection of her family. Catherine's complete absence of family ties makes her vulnerable to the cosiness she sees there, but she is sufficiently honest to admit that she would find its limitations intolerable.

Tom's problem is more complex. He rejects his family responsibilities, but he cannot repress his guilt. Because Elaine is a part of this life, she is also a part of his guilt. Yet he is insensitive to the considerable pain he has caused her. Although Tom Mallow is a relatively sympathetic character, and a recognizably attractive man, his self-absorption militates against his appeal. Rocky Napier is prepared to give something of himself from time to time; Tom never endangers

his own interests. His relationships demonstrate this quality most clearly. Pym ranges several women around Tom, each representative of one phase in his life, and one facet of his character. His mother completes this circle, her presence invoked through another of Pym's statuary images. On a visit home, Tom finds her in the garden, "the massive grey-clad figure with its rather small head stood out like a great Henry Moore sculpture in a London park". The imagery is sustained as she "inclin[es] her stony cheek for him to kiss" (p. 175). Tom's sense of estrangement from his family and home is one obvious explication of the simile, his mother's undemonstrative nature another. Both might account for his inconstancy with all women. But more, she represents his unavoidable and eternal obligation to family and roots, and possibly to his country--of everything he seeks to escape. The statue becomes an icon of his tribal identity, an interpretation reinforced by his mother's reaction to his desertion: "... she worked in the garden and found comfort in the things of the earth" (p. 175). In contrast, his uncle spends his life in front of a television set, "... a kind of prisoner, or a sacrifice laid before the altar. . ." (p. 178). The male is imprisoned within the contemporary culture, while the woman, metaphorically at least, works for survival.

Each of the women who love Tom reflect an aspect of his life. Elaine emblemizes his youth and background; Deirdre is every adoring and unquestioning young woman he has known. Contrasted with Catherine, her appeal lies in her adoration and her near-anonymity. As Tom's mother comments, "... there are always young girls of nineteen" (p. 176). For Deirdre Swan, Tom is and will remain the ideal embodiment of romance. In an unobtrusive authorial interjection, their first meeting is caught and held in time, present and future, romance and reality, preserved within one crucial moment:

He was tall and dark, with thin aristocratic features and brilliant grey eyes--or this was how Deirdre always described him afterwards. Perhaps at the time she was conscious only of the shabby raincoat and the battered briefcase, and the fact that he stood over her rather disconcertingly, as if he expected a welcome. (pp. 46-47)

Romantic imagination transforms the commonplace into the sublime. Tom's shabby raincoat and battered briefcase, both identifiable as the anthropologist's protective colouring, give way to "thin aristocratic features and brilliant grey eyes". For Deirdre, Tom becomes the personification of romance, a vision that will be enhanced with each passing year. As "there are always young girls of nineteen," so there are always idealized romantic heroes. Pym's treatment of Elaine touches on more complicated emotions. In a curious mixture of compassion and impatience, Elaine is likened to Anne Elliot, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*; . Anne's quiet acceptance of her unhappiness is attributed to Elaine: "We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us". Elaine's projected response deflates the allusion: "But Elaine was not much of a reader; she would have said that she had no time, which was perhaps just as well, even if she missed the consolation and pain of coming upon her feelings expressed for her in such moving words" (p. 183). In her treatment of Elaine, Pym comments upon the limitations that reality imposes upon the human spirit. Because Deirdre's can cloak Tom's reality with illusion, she can assign him a place in her life, and go on. Elaine's brisk pragmatism denies her this comfort, although her quasi-widowhood may compensate for her unhappiness. Catherine's response has something of both. Resisting the temptations of romantic anodyne, she acknowledges the considerable pain that reality can inflict.

Tom's arrival from Africa instigates the novel's action, coalescing its disparate segments and animating its seeming stasis. Yet the expectations that he excites prove illusory. His departure and subsequent death cause temporary dislocation for the women who have loved him, but each life resumes its course. Elaine's will change very little, her subtly altered status aside; Deirdre will marry Digby Fox. Catherine's future is left unresolved. A possible match with Alaric Lydgate is hedged about with conditionals, as the novel's concluding sentence is at pains to emphasize. In death, Tom will satisfy the demands and expectations that he has declined and eluded in life. Like the statuary, he is frozen in memory and in time: he is transformed into an iconic figure, the quintessential romantic hero. For the other characters, paradise has been neither lost nor regained; life goes on. In this sense, *Less Than Angels* ends where it began.

This narrative technique contrasts sharply with *A Glass of Blessings*, which unfolds in linear fashion as it traces Wilmet Forsyth's emotional progress from her state of nearly suspended animation to relatively responsible adulthood. Like many of Pym's heroines, Wilmet inhabits society's margins, though this state is more real than apparent. Ostensibly, her life seems imbued with every possible advantage, in keeping with George Herbert's "glass of blessings". As the novel begins, something has drawn her to St. Luke's, the Anglo-Catholic church in her London neighborhood. Possibly Herbert's "repining restlessness" accounts for her action. In the course of the novel, a series of revelations, some comic and some less so, alter irrevocably her largely complacent view of herself and her life. While *Less Than Angels* narrows its focus to concentrate on the particular, *A Glass Of Blessings* expands Wilmet's constricted field of vision to encompass her community and so effect a heightened awareness of her own state of blessedness. But this transformation is relative; Wilmet retains a readily admitted measure of self-interest, as the novel's

concluding paragraphs confirm. Thinking of Mary's "description of life as being a glass of blessings," she adds "and that naturally led me to think about myself" (p. 252). Here, "naturally" is the operative word, epitomizing the paradoxically likeable and guileless Wilmet.

A Glass of Blessings begins with the phrase "I suppose", a desultory reflection that captures Wilmet Forsyth's generally aimless existence. The sound of a telephone ringing in the church has distracted her from the service, and the sight of Piers Longridge intrigues her still further. Neither suggests any particular gift for devotion, although Wilmet seems blissfully unaware of this lack. The novel begins on her thirty-third birthday. Her husband, Rodney, observes the occasion by telling her that "... I saw Griffin at lunchtime and arranged about your present". Wilmet accepts the news in the manner it is delivered, thinking "... I imagined the scene, dry and business-like: the transfer of a substantial sum of money to my account, nothing really spontaneous or romantic about it" (p. 12). Rodney's statement and Wilmet's response confirm the general tenor of their marriage. Not surprisingly, Wilmet feels vague dissatisfaction, and seeks diversion in new pastimes. Church attendance is one of these, and donating blood another. Her abortive liaison with Piers Longridge is still another. Her conventionally romantic expectations and her ingenuous naivete lead her to believe that some kind of romantic attachment is developing, and that Piers's improved spirits reflect her attentions. When she discovers that Keith, his "colleague" and flat-mate, is responsible for this transformation, her chagrin and humiliation force her to a confrontation with herself and her adolescent delusions. By the novel's conclusion, Wilmet's charming and childlike egotism is vanishing into a determined good cheer and good sense. Fortunately, she retains enough of her benign vanity to meliorate this sobering transformation. A measure of resignation may color her new-found maturity as

she reflects that dinner with Sybil and Arnold "seemed a happy and suitable ending to a good day"(p. 252).

Wilmet's search takes her into a world beyond the sequestered enclosure. In this quest, she bears some resemblance to Tom Mallow, but he lacks her honesty, and perhaps her courage. Though he flees enclosure in whatever guise it presents itself, he refuses to confront his own failings, preferring to exchange one milieu for another, most often one young woman for another, whenever reality intrudes. Overtly, this chameleon quality is manifested in his readiness to assume a change of role with a change of costume. Both novels rely heavily on this motif, as it defines and contrasts individual characters.

Catherine understands exactly the effect she projects. Her independence and strong sense of self allow her to adapt the convention to her own advantage. When she wears her old blue espadrilles to a party, for example, her action does not "disturb her unduly [because] she was too much aware of herself as a personality to make much effort to change"(p. 66). Although she misjudges their intention, the espadrilles comfort Deirdre. In the same vein, she finds a wearer of red shoes intimidating, even a threat for Tom's attention, believing them "to be one of those things that men were said to like" (p. 141). Deirdre's misreading of Catherine's action, and her response to the red shoes originate in her lack of confidence, and her reliance on articles like those that Catherine writes so irreverently. Elaine's acceptance of her surroundings and her place within them are mirrored in her clothes. A trained eye, Tom's in this case, can detect the telling nuances. "She was, he noticed, dressed just like everybody else . . . but her pearl necklace and small stud earrings were probably real" (p. 179). The observation is evidence of Tom's sensitivity to detail, and of his anthropological training. As he knows, clothes signal messages that cannot be verbalized.

In varying ways, each woman reveals herself, or at least some aspect of herself, in the clothes she chooses. Deirdre's youth and insecurity direct her choices, as Elaine's unquestioning acceptance of her place in the scheme of things dictates hers. Tom may vary his costumes, but his essential motivation is identical to both women's. With each new garment, he projects a new and different persona. At home, his dress clothes are appropriate for the local ball; at the Institute he wears a shabby raincoat and carries a battered briefcase. Even his death accedes to this pattern. When Catherine tells Rhoda Wellcome that "[h]e was probably wearing a native robe. . ." (p. 234), she cites another instance of protective coloration. His death assumes an air of inevitability, the culmination of his elusive life. Ironically, his last disguise proves fatally effective. Tom's flight is his answer to an insoluble problem. But his attempt at detribalization is only one facet of his dilemma. Dehumanization might be a more accurate term for his behaviour; he seeks to escape his emotional involvements as much as his familial responsibility.

For Tom, the demands of the patriarchy far outweigh its advantages. Almost invariably, he accepts the role imposed upon him. His decision to study anthropology is the one exception to this rule, but even there he cannot reconcile its demands with those of his family. Tom's passivity imprisons him as effectively as did Fabian Driver's vanity. Invariably, he accepts what comes his way, growing restive only when the inevitable demands intrude. His relationship with Catherine has grown from a chance meeting, and they have "become fond of each other, or perhaps used to each other" (p. 23). But her cheerful independence and pragmatism begin to pall, and he turns to Deirdre and her unquestioning devotion. In her company, he longs for "manly conversation, away from the cloying sweetness of love . . ." (p. 149). Even Elaine disappoints him. Conversing with her, "[h]e marvel[s]. . . at the sharpness of even the nicest

women”(p. 180). The possibility that he may inspire some of this sharpness never occurs to him. He refuses his familial obligations in much the same spirit as he retreats from the women who love him, and whom, after his fashion, he loves. As Catherine observes, it will be “soothing . . .to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe. . .” (p. 183). Though Tom's dilemma excites some sympathy, he belongs with all those characters who decamp hurriedly, leaving others to tidy up after them. Allegra Gray, the glamorous widow of *Excellent Women*, belongs to this company, as does Fabian Driver. In Barbara Pym's fiction, this failing condemns these characters to the negative side of the moral ledger, their desertion clear evidence of their unwillingness to accept the inescapable consequences of their actions. Tom's fear of entanglement counters Catherine's spontaneity. Although she may reject the ties and demands of family life, she welcomes the company of others, the public world. However he may deny its claims, Tom's upbringing has created a sense of exclusivity.

Catherine never shrinks from life's possibilities, although her enthusiasm causes her as much pain as pleasure. For her, life is “an old friend, or perhaps a tiresome elderly relative, pushing, knocking, clinging, but never leaving her alone” (p. 151). Distressed by Tom's departure, she seeks comfort in a book of devotion, where she reads that “we are strangers and pilgrims here and must endure the heart's banishment, and she felt that she knew that anyway” (p. 135). Of all Pym's heroines, Catherine lives her life most fearlessly and fully. She embodies the dilemma of the excellent woman: wanting to love and be loved, she cannot relinquish her clarity of vision. Suspicious of the language of romance, with its insidious power to blur and soften life's reality, she seeks an acceptable compromise. Her capacity to impose fantasy on fact, illustrated in the novel's opening scene, allows her to mix the two yet never mistake one for the other. She

maintains a delicate balance, a habit that gives her observations their special flavour. As has been noted, Tom's aunt finds the practice disconcerting in the extreme, and even Tom finds it irritating.

Wilmet Forsyth must learn the subtle distinctions that are second nature to Catherine. Forced to acknowledge Piers' homosexuality, she must confront the enormity of her humiliation, as she leaves the flat he shares with Keith: "[h]e stood on the doorstep and waved as Piers and I went out of the house. I was surprised that he should be so friendly towards me, but then it occurred to me that he had no reason to be otherwise" (p. 194). But even more devastating, she must accept that she is, in large part, the author of her own misfortune: "I was not a girl. I was a married woman, and if I felt wretched it was no more than I deserved. . .". The moment marks the first stirring of a genuinely communal emotion, as " . . . there came a sudden picture of Father Bode . . . talking about hiring a coach for the parish retreat. It was obscurely comforting to let my mind dwell on such things. . ." (p. 197). The source of Wilmet's consolation, obscure indeed, signals her growing awareness of a world beyond the shelter of her habitual purview. Her metamorphosis is gradual, almost indiscernible, its progress punctuated by flashes of revelation. Fragmentary glimpses into other lives illuminate her own privilege. One of these concerns Miss Limpsett, a middle-aged woman in Piers' office. Encountering her unexpectedly, Wilmet realizes that "she had obviously had a hard and tiring day. . . Her face was haggard, and it occurred to me that it was not only this day which had been hard and tiring, but all days and even life itself" (p. 150). Finally, Wilmet must acknowledge that her privilege does not and cannot shield her from life's difficulties and its disappointments.

Through a meticulously conceived and executed pattern of imagery, Pym traces Wilmet's progress from her self-imposed isolation through her awakening

consciousness of others to incorporation into the community. The Grinling Gibbons carvings that excite her attention during a riverside walk with Piers, initiate this elaborate motif. Her description of the riverbank conveys her extravagantly fanciful mood. In her elevated state, the river becomes "a great sheet of pink and silver", while "[t]he warehouses . . . looked like palaces, and the boats glided like gondolas". Her impressions culminate in a "great and splendid looking building . . . of rose brown brick, with minarets almost in the Turkish style. The facade was decorated with carved swags of fruit and flowers" (p. 70). Piers' company heightens Wilmet's reactions, encouraging all her romantic inclinations; his response is more obscure. Although he is the agent of her disillusionment, his motives are never clarified. Their shared aimlessness may unite them, but only Piers seems to recognize this bond. The following exchange adumbrates their future course, as Piers counters each of Wilmet's romantic fantasies with a deflating pragmatism:

"What is it?" I asked in wonder. "I never expected to see such a building here."

"It's a furniture depository," said Piers.

"But those minarets and Grinling Gibbons decorations--it's all too noble to be just *that*!"

"The birds have not respected it," said Piers, and I saw then that the rosy facade was white with their droppings.

"I wonder what it's like inside," I said. "Vast high-ceilinged rooms filled with huge shrouded bulky objects--great trunks of clothes, surely rather musty now, and books too."

"Or a kind of sprawling decay--the furniture rotting and riddled with woodworm, legs of tables breaking off in your hand, chair backs collapsing at a touch . . ." (p. 70)

The passage is crucial to the novel's development. The lavishly decorated and festooned effigies of fruit and flowers, nature caught and frozen in time,

symbolize Wilmet herself. Indulged and protected within her privileged enclosure, she is caught in a state of suspended animation. As her natural vitality wanes, her perfection verges upon the perfection of art. The obsession with appearance, expressed most obviously in the precise descriptions of her clothes, relates specifically to the building's exterior decoration. The birds' droppings become intrusive and implacable reality, while Piers's graphic description of woodworm and decay summons intimations of mortality. The Grinling Gibbons carvings inaugurate the metaphoric pattern, a motif specific to Wilmet that is sustained and resolved in the climactic garden scene. The peapods, her contribution to the compost heap, derive from Grinling Gibbons; her action signals her entry into the community.³ This motif of greenery and vegetation interweaves throughout the novel, its implications paralleling Wilmet's progress. On one of her excursions with Piers, Wilmet notices "a fig tree, now putting forth its new leaves among the old dark green fruits which had never properly ripened". Realizing that England's climate retards this process, she adds, "They would ripen in a conservatory, no doubt" (p. 159). Her comment recalls Jane's confrontation with Fabian, and its similar implications of denial and sterility. The presence of new leaves promises a revival and renewal, but the "old dark green fruits" attest to a season irretrievably lost. The garden scene, with its allusions to Biblical and classical literature and culminating in the bee-swarmling, completes Wilmet's epiphany. To Frederick Keener, this sequence recalls "... the fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics*, where bees provide an emblem of the well-regulated state, and where bruised leaves and flowers draw a swarm back to the hive".⁴ Released from her self-imposed prison of sterile narcissism, Wilmet is free to inhabit her newly-discovered world, one she shares with all those she has chosen to deny, "quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world" (p. 195). From her first

walk with Piers, and their sighting of the Grinling Gibbons furniture repository, she has traveled to the garden of the religious retreat. There, "in a kind of greenish twilight, stood a pile of grass cuttings and garden rubbish, and as I added my pods to it I imagined all this richness decaying in the earth and new life springing out of it" (p. 222). The novel culminates in this sentence, each metaphoric component coalescing into one triumphantly coherent apotheosis. Wilmet's peapods invoke the Grinling Gibbons motif with its attendant allusions to art, as the "grass cuttings and garden rubbish" symbolize the cyclical world of nature. Together, these become the origins of "new life", literally and metaphorically. The greenish twilight connotes a liminal moment of time, the period separating light from darkness, while the grass cuttings and garden rubbish become an assertion of worthwhile and necessary labour. The "richness", one of Barbara Pym's favorite words, affirms Wilmet's revelation of commonality and with it, her sense of a new life beginning. Pagan associations, "Keith's face . . . peering through the leaves" (p. 222), the Italian memories, " . . . a dish of tangerines with the leaves still on them" (p. 226), pay homage to the pleasures of the world, which find a place within newly-expanded boundaries. Finally, the associations with Marvell complete the pattern. Two lines from "To His Coy Mistress"-- "My vegetable love should grow/ Vaster than Empires and more slow"-- go "jingling through [her] head", as she makes a significant discovery:

The birds were tame and cheeky, and seemed larger than usual; they came bumping and swooping down, peering at me with their bright insolent eyes, their chirpings louder and more piercing than I had ever heard them. (p. 222)

Now the birds intrude into Wilmet's presence and her consciousness, the garden more their territory than hers. Their insistent proximity contrasts with their implied presence in the earlier scene, when droppings were their sole manifestation. The sound of the "... chirpings louder and more piercing than I had ever heard them", emphasizes her intensified response to the natural world. The garden's apple trees deepen the metaphoric implications, as does the bee-swarmer. Perhaps most significant is Wilmet's statement that "we all trooped down into the bottom of the garden to the part where the beehives stood" (p. 228). As they follow the bee-keeping priest, Wilmet is incorporated into the group, almost lost in the crowd. The chapter's conclusion merges its dissonant themes, pagan and Christian, nature and art, into a coherent harmony. Finally, Wilmet notices one priest making a note, and is pleased that "here in this pagan part of the garden he might have found an idea for a sermon" (p. 229).

In the opening paragraph of her next chapter, Pym invokes this garden imagery quite specifically, likening a trendy London coffee-bar to the garden of the retreat house. The "dim lighting and luxuriant greenery, reminded me of that part of the garden where the compost heap stood in the mysterious green twilight" (p. 230). The secular theme dominates; Sybil and Professor Root have been married in a "simple pagan ceremony", while Keith's "tangerine-colored shirt" has quite specific associations to her memories of Italy and to her visionary dream in the garden. Following so closely on the near-mysticism of the garden scene, the coffee-bar episode summons associations of "through the looking-glass". Its decor, Art imitating Nature, reverses the imagery that Pym has fashioned around the Grinling Gibbons motif. The meeting with Piers, and with Wilfred Bason pays homage to life's more frivolous pleasures; the world and the flesh need not invoke the devil.

The mood of near-exaltation that characterizes Wilmet's epiphany deflates throughout the succeeding pages; Wilmet's pragmatic exchange with Marius confirms her return to mundane reality. Anticipating his coming marriage to Mary, he agrees with Wilmet that Mary is a "splendid person", adding, "[s]he'll be able to do so much for me" (p. 238). Wilmet's subsequent reflection, that "the marriage of two people who had almost taken vows of celibacy . . . ought not to be a riotous affair" (p. 239), suggests that a sardonic eye compensates for any loss of romantic illusion.

From her first novel to her last, Barbara Pym celebrates life's variety. In very large part, this variety is a manifestation of the duality that John Bayley has described. Although this quality permeates all of her work, *A Glass of Blessings* may well be its quintessential expression. The juxtaposition of the garden and coffee-house scenes encourages this reading. Wilmet's conversion enhances and enriches both aspects of her life. Released from the false expectations that regulated and limited her life, she can enjoy both the religious and the secular worlds. In a minor sense, the truth has set her free.

The novel's concluding sequence affords one final glimpse of the redeemed Wilmet. In her unfamiliar persona of near-excellent woman, she retains a hint of her endearingly guileless vanity. With "two coachloads of friends and wellwishers . . . from St. Luke's" (p. 247), Wilmet is attending the induction of Marius Ransome, now the husband of Mary Beamish. Wilmet's description of Mary's appearance is more than a fashion report:

I noticed Mary sitting quite near us, looking already like a vicar's wife in her grey coat and rather too sensible hat. I had decided that the occasion called for something a little gay, and was wearing an emerald green feather cap with my black suit. (p. 248)

The "rather too sensible hat" corroborates Mary's readiness to lose herself in the role of vicar's wife, as earlier she has played the dutiful daughter. Wilmet's description of her own hat affirms her interest in clothes, but more important, it intimates that she guards a measure of her individuality. She may harbour a few regrets. Remembering her walks with Piers, and the furniture depository, she thinks of "... the dramatic decay, the baroque horror of it all. It would not be like that in reality, and perhaps it was just as well" (p. 249). The qualifying "perhaps" may hint at a mild regret at her loss of romantic illusion, a nuance strengthened by the conditional "it seemed" of the final sentence. Yet both occurrences are consistent with Pym's larger theme, the irreconcilable dualities that characterize and complicate human existence.

Less Than Angels and *A Glass of Blessings* mark the end of Barbara Pym's early, optimistic phase. Although both novels are formulated on the tenets of the romance genre, the cracks in the generic facade are widening, most notably in the portrayal of the romantic hero. Although strong, decisive men are a rare commodity in Pym's world, the earlier novels hold out some hope for a rapprochement between the sexes. Integral to such a settlement is the mutual recognition and acceptance of the thesis that common humanity should and must transcend evanescent and artificially imposed barriers, such as gender. Neither *Excellent Women* nor *Jane and Prudence* achieve this accommodation, although Nicholas's acquiescence to Jane holds out some hope for its realization. The concluding scene of *Less Than Angels* may imply a comparable conciliation between Catherine and Alaric Lydgate; certainly, he burns his notes at her prompting. But Alaric Lydgate is never proposed as a romantic hero. Tom Mallow is accorded that status, but finds its demands too onerous. Piers Longridge declines for other reasons. But whatever the circumstances and however they are resolved, each novel ends in a confirmation of its heroine as an

independent entity. Pym always stresses autonomy, but even this state has its hazards, not least the possibility of an isolation equal to any imposed by gender barriers.

This awareness assumes increasing importance in the ensuing novels. The next chapter will examine a group of three, each problematic in its own specific way. Together *No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and *The Sweet Dove Died* witness a transition from Pym's early comic vision to a mode that borders tragi-comedy. For various reasons, this grouping contains her least popular work. Though the judgment implies a diminution of Pym's powers, it may reflect, rather, a lack of reader discernment. Whatever else, these works effect a transition between her "early" and "late" phases. As such, they intensify the darkening vision that achieves its most eloquent expression in Pym's masterpiece, *Quartet In Autumn*.

Notes

¹*Less Than Angels* (London: Granada, 1980, rpt. 1982), p. 130. All references are to this edition.

² *A Glass of Blessings* (London: Penguin, 1980, rpt. 1983), p. 6. All references are to this edition.

³David Green, *Grinling Gibbons: His Work as Carver and Statuary, 1648-1721* (London: Country Life, 1964), p. 20. Although the subject of scholarly debate, the peapod is popularly accepted as Gibbons's signature.

⁴Frederick Keener, "Barbara Pym Herself and Jane Austen," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 31 (1985), 108.

Chapter 5

The Darkening Vision

This chapter will examine Barbara Pym's least successful novels, a group that includes *No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and *The Sweet Dove Died*. Together these novels span her years in the publishing wilderness. The classification reflects the order of composition, and not the publication date. *No Fond Return of Love*, the final novel of her so-called early period, appeared in 1961; *An Unsuitable Attachment* was submitted but rejected in 1963, and published posthumously in 1982. *The Sweet Dove Died*, written during the years from 1963 to 1969, was published until 1978, following the success of *Quartet in Autumn*.

As indicated earlier, the novels have generated considerable critical anxiety. Jane Nardin chose to omit *No Fond Return of Love* from her study of Pym's novels, describing it as "... the last and least interesting of her early books".¹ In similar vein, Michael Cotsell finds it "... the least satisfactory of the novels published in Pym's lifetime".² The summary rejection of *An Unsuitable Attachment* in 1963, coupled with the somewhat lukewarm reviews that greeted it in 1982, suggests that these perceived weaknesses continued to afflict Pym's work. Finally, *The Sweet Dove Died* is an idiosyncratic departure from Pym's customary style. Neither its central character nor its setting bears any clear resemblance to the comforting and familiar landscape that Pym's readers had learned to know and love. Yet each of these works advances her artistic development, leading her closer to the bleak terrain she depicted with such unerring accuracy in *Quartet in Autumn*.

Admittedly, two of the three novels present the critic with specific problems. Both *No Fond Return of Love* and *An Unsuitable Attachment* suffer from

muddled plotting and lack any clearly defined focus. In addition, the characters' motivations seem contrived and implausible from time to time. Both failings may reflect Pym's darkening and changing perception. Whatever the explanation, critics responded negatively to the shifting perspective.

Diana Benet detects this trend in *No Fond Return of Love*, and suggests that Dulcie is presented "in the same kaleidoscopic style that reveals Aylwin, conveying . . . the sense that no one sees or addresses the whole person".³ In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, this concept gains precedence. During this period, any last vestige of belief in romantic salvation gives way to an intensifying sense of isolation. Although romantic love, or some variation of it, continues to present the only viable solution to an insoluble dilemma, its promise grows increasingly ambiguous. Viewed from this vantage point, each of the three novels marks an advance from one phase to another. *No Fond Return of Love* relinquishes any hope of romantic fulfilment, while *An Unsuitable Attachment* focuses upon the myriad disparities that characterize individual human perception. The contrasts are played for comedy, but it is sad comedy; certainly its vision proved too starkly uncompromising for the determined optimism of the early 1960's. In C. A. R. Hills's succinct summation, "[s]he is an offence to the ethics of an expansive, hopeful, and selfish period".⁴ Following upon the heels of *A Glass of Blessings*, surely one of Pym's most accomplished novels, this sudden shift proved doubly disconcerting. Yet it is in these novels, and most specifically in the first two, that Pym's emphasis shifts from the romance plot and gender designation within that context, to a broader consciousness. In her late novels, community becomes her essential theme; the transition is achieved in the novels of this period.

As noted above, *No Fond Return of Love* catches Pym at the end of a particular phase in her career, when her familiar fictional terrain has been

exhausted of its potential. *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the famous or infamous seventh novel, shares many of its predecessor's weaknesses. A careful reading augurs a new and innovative direction, however tentative its presentation. With *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym adopted an alternate technique, one that resisted the peripheral temptations of auxiliary narrative or characterization. Undeniably, this revision sharpened her focus and honed her talent, although *The Sweet Dove Died* was greeted as a departure from her customary benevolence. But generally critical response was favorable, and largely in agreement with Mason Cooley's opinion that "[the novel] is the least lovable of Barbara Pym's books, but it is also her most perfect work of art".⁵ Leonora Eyre epitomizes superficial and stylized perfection, an impression that is enhanced by the polished prose by her story's narrative style. Although Pym's pleasure in human contrariety is diminished temporarily, *The Sweet Dove Died* channeled her gifts into a more concise and concentrated vision, one that persisted into her final novels.

The emphasis on romance diminishes, as does any real faith in its efficacy; the figure of romantic hero continues to erode. Of the three men who figure in *No Fond Return of Love*, only Bill Sedge displays any civility or consideration, and his deportment borders on parody. To Dulcie Mainwaring, his manner makes her feel "almost as if I were a woman *manquée* . . .".⁶ Aylwin Forbes is a near-cipher, distinguished only by his vanity and petulance, while Maurice Clive, Dulcie's former fiancé, confirms his self-proclaimed unworthiness. *An Unsuitable Attachment* accelerates this descending spiral. Ianthe Broome's marriage to John Challow, the unsuitable attachment of the title, is mildly discomfiting, while Mark and Sophia Ainger lead lives of mutual isolation. Finally, Leonora Eyre's infatuation with James Boyce completes the cycle. James's passivity leaves him vulnerable to both Leonora and the predatory Ned. The ultimate confrontation is between these two, with James almost incidental to their competition. In Ned, Pym created her only

truly malicious character; his presence contributes significantly to the novel's peculiarly bitter flavour. Pym's final novels modify this downward progression, but its implications linger on memory.

No Fond Return of Love may not rank with Pym's finest work, but its pleasures are considerable. Dulcie Mainwaring is one of Pym's gentlest and most likeable heroines; according to Robert Smith, Pym "somewhat resembled" her creation.⁷ Structurally, the novel is flawed; a series of set-pieces linked by faulty plotting results in a marked discrepancy between the novel's protagonist and its action. Jane Nardin identifies this inherent weakness, saying "[it] requires the book's quiet, proper heroine to act in ways that seem . . . unconvincing and out of character".⁸ Yet it could be argued that Dulcie's often erratic behaviour reflects her mental state. Dulcie's unhappiness could explain, at least in part, her surreptitious pursuit of Aylwin Forbes, her visit to his estranged wife's house, and her investigation of his mother's rundown hotel. There, her description of a generally decrepit country hotel, and its front door in particular, ranks with the best of Jane Cleveland. To Dulcie, it is " . . . the sort of door that looks as though it's never been opened Or only when a Stuart king ascends the throne of England" (p. 199). The disparate comparison stops the reader in mid-paragraph, with its vivid and simultaneous evocation of both the hotel's dilapidation and Dulcie's fertile and erratic imagination. But of all Pym's heroines, Dulcie lacks the requisite detachment, the quality that would render her vulnerability tolerable and meliorate her very real distress.

Pym's heroines are no strangers to unhappiness, but their customary mode provides some degree of mastery over it. Dulcie Mainwaring is denied this comfort. The uncomfortable authenticity of her grief defeats any comic intention, and leaves the reader with the disquieting sensation that Dulcie cannot look after herself. The impression is misleading. Dulcie provides Aylwin with

the smelling salts after his "nasty turn", and demonstrates her practicality in countless other ways. Yet these incidents tend to sink from consciousness, whether by Pym's miscalculation or deliberate intent. Whatever the explanation, Dulcie's presence does not anchor and stabilize the novel as it should.

The novel's opening sentence, clearly reminiscent of Jane Austen, proclaims its general theme: "There are various ways of mending a broken heart, but perhaps going to a learned conference is one of the more unusual" (p. 5). Already the novel's problematic tone is sounded. Dulcie's broken heart is no joke; she has been deeply hurt by her broken engagement, although the depths of her pain are revealed only gradually. Meeting Maurice at the gallery, she reflects on her life, thinking that "... to have a not particularly congenial woman friend living in one's house was hardly to be compared with being married to the man of one's choice." (p. 99). The deceptively straightforward assessment and the virtual lack of inflection mask the emotion that invests the thought. The sentence has the plangent tone that Larkin commends in Pym's work. *No Fond Return of Love* covers a period of mourning in Dulcie Mainwaring's life; the novel's initial paragraph announces her re-entry into the world after "several months of quiet misery" while its conclusion anticipates another marriage proposal. To justify her resolution, Pym invokes Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, but the allusion is not persuasive; her "happy" ending does not compensate for the novel's pervasive melancholy.

Aylwin Forbes promises little improvement over Maurice; his vanity and easily bruised ego are only variations on Maurice's character. Anticipating his engagement to Dulcie, he cannot avoid the self-congratulatory thought that "it was all most delightfully incongruous. Just the sort of thing Aylwin Forbes would do" (p. 286). But despite its defects, the novel points to a change of direction, a willingness to surmount disappointed hopes and reduced expectations, and to

strike a compromise with reality. Bill Sedge's courtship of Viola Dace depicts this idea most forcibly, though again, its comedy and pathos blur together indistinguishably. This reduction of comic shading signals a definitive alteration in Pym's artistic direction. Hindsight confirms this directional shift, but contemporary readers and critics reacted negatively; Jane Nardin's evaluation is a subsequent expression of a generally negative response. Certainly, *No Fond Return of Love* fails to achieve the comic heights scaled with such apparent ease in Pym's earlier work. Dulcie Mainwaring's furtive pursuit of Aylwin Forbes cannot be sustained in any credible fashion. More serious is the reader's difficulty in rationalizing her obsession. Presumably, Pym intends Dulcie's pain as its justification, leading her to seek a vicarious existence of observing others rather than risk the potential pain of actual involvement.

The progress of Dulcie's gradual reintegration into society, traced through her interest in Aylwin Forbes and his family, hints at some vaguely constituted examination of a depression and recovery. Certainly, the conflict between detachment and involvement is part of the novel's thematic development, and recurs still more insistently in its successors, as Pym's emphasis shifts from the romantic and the individual to the more diffused notion of community. Dulcie's story seeks to make this change, and to demonstrate the affinity between Pym's old and new subjects. Reassured to discover that "she can still distinguish different degrees of hurt", Dulcie must find an acceptable accommodation between "... this sudden realization [and] her conviction that it was so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people" (p. 121). The novel traces her struggles to resolve this quandary, as she regains her customary emotional equilibrium.

Viola Dace should provide a foil to the shy and retiring Dulcie; but the total absence of grace, humour, or any other redeeming quality in Viola's

character prevents any effective contrast or the kindling of any comic sparks between the two women. Viola's posturings, her illusory affair with Aylwin Forbes, her equally illusory novel, and her general bad temper are meant to emphasize Dulcie's lack of pretension. But again, the transparency of Viola's affectations only serves to discredit any faith in her supposed relationship with Dulcie. Consequently, Viola becomes little more than a mechanistic device, one that grates increasingly as the novel progresses. Admittedly, Pym identifies this failing, and attempts a justification that approaches apology. Dulcie's musings acknowledge her dissatisfaction with Viola, and presumably her creator's. Equally significant are allusions to a notion that surfaces more insistently in both *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *The Sweet Dove Died*:

In a sense, Dulcie felt as if she had created her and that she had not come up to expectations, like a character in a book who had failed to come alive, and how many people in life, if one transferred them to fiction just as they were, would fail to do that! (p. 186)

Faulty characterization indicates only one symptom of a more generalized malaise. The novel's vagueness and lack of direction results, in part, from its episodic nature. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym seems to conclude that all human relationships are by their nature fragmentary and ephemeral, and possibly illusory. The difficulties in formulating and conveying this idea, to say nothing of its disquieting implications, may well explain that novel's unhappy history. When Dulcie abandons her customary shyness and confronts Aylwin, chiding him for his penchant for "unsuitable wives", she awakens his interest in her. But her outburst fails to ring true, marring the resolution. The problem may lie with the characterization of Aylwin Forbes, who is simply not worth the trouble, to Dulcie, or Laurel, or to his estranged wife, Marjorie. Since the two

younger and less perceptive women recognize his lack of worth all too clearly, why does Dulcie's obsession persist? No satisfactory answer is offered.

With the knowledge of Pym's subsequent novels, one can discern a change in emphasis and direction. In *No Fond Return of Love* her darkening vision encroaches irreversibly into her literary landscape, enveloping every aspect. Michael Cotsell believes that this change is traceable to "the literary climate of the 1960's", and that Pym was "uneasily experimenting with the self-conscious and self-referring fiction of the period".⁹ The reference to *Some Tame Gazelle*, which Viola finds in Dulcie's bathroom, and the author's intrusion into the narrative are two clear examples of this experimentation. Yet the manner of execution denotes an increasing tendency to self-effacement. That *Some Tame Gazelle* has been reduced to bathroom reading is one evidence of this tendency. More striking is Pym's introduction of herself into the narrative. She makes her appearance in the dining-room of Mrs. Forbes's decrepit country hotel, a "woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied", whose general lack of distinction ensures that "nobody took much notice of her". So, the narrative voice continues, "... [the diners] drank their thimble-sized cups of coffee, quite unconscious that they were being observed" (p. 196). The description reverberates with a kind of anguished detachment, a futile attempt to draw comfort from her virtually invisible state even as she longs for attention or even inclusion.

This clouded and ambivalent response exemplifies the novel's splayed focus and its ultimately confused perspective. Dulcie aside, none of its characters exist as fully-rounded Pym regulars. Something like despair breaks through the surface from time to time. With his outmoded affectations, Aylwin Forbes recalls the worst excesses of Fabian Driver. His ludicrous attempts to impress Laurel emphasize this tendency, as does his fixation on a stone squirrel that has

associations with his courtship. Cotsell believes that the novel's failings signal that "Pym's fiction was moving into a new and less certain phase in which there is an increasing strain, demand, and unbridgeable gulf in adult love relations" (p. 94).

Yet the novel exhibits many of Pym's customary strengths. The minor characters are drawn with her usual comic precision, from Miss Lord and her faith in television commercials, to Mrs. Beltane and her unpleasant dog, Felix. In Senor MacBride-Pereira and Mrs. Williton, Pym deepens and extends her exploration of this vein. Although richly comic, both reveal a darker side, one which edges closer to the tragic end of the spectrum. Of the two, Mrs. Williton evinces a less acute consciousness, but this lack detracts neither from her pain nor its authenticity. After her distressing visit to Aylwin Forbes, she goes to a teashop, "for that cup of strong reviving tea which Aylwin had not offered and which her pride would not have allowed her to demand". There she sees "other solitary people . . . [looking] as if they had problems worrying them". An authorial intrusion follows: "a novelist or a sociologist might have felt very near the heart of reality at that moment. But Mrs Williton was neither of these things" (pp. 155-156). The moment recalls the similarly sympathetic treatment of Elaine, in *Less Than Angels*. That neither woman is sufficiently perceptive to identify her suffering does not lessen its reality. Yet Pym resists the temptation to comedy, presenting Mrs. Williton's sad bewilderment and sense of helplessness with no shading of irony.

Senor MacBride-Pereira serves a more complex purpose. A stranger in a strange land, he lives his life at one remove from the present, his Brazilian heritage a protective shield. For all his protestations that "to be a foreigner is bad enough . . . but to be a *Latin-American*--that is really terrible!" (p. 33), he values his relative alienation and guards it assiduously. An indefatigable

observer of the passing scene, he spends his life at this pursuit, trying to decipher these isolated moments and actions. "Now what have I seen?" he wonders on more than one occasion. His musings suggest that he is an astute judge of human beings, but his cultural estrangement ensures that his curiosity remains unsatisfied. Though authentically comic, he sounds a warning note, directly related to Dulcie's predilection for the same pastime. When she rejects this mode, and berates Aylwin Forbes, she relinquishes the observer's detachment for the participant's involvement. Her action initiates a series of events, and culminates in Aylwin's proposal. The resolution is supremely unconvincing and unsatisfying, since Dulcie's projected marriage to Aylwin must demean her. In this respect, Charles Burkhart compares Dulcie with Mildred Lathbury, pointing out that "... each of them ends up with, or seems destined to end up with, an extremely egotistical man. . . ".¹⁰ Yet Mildred's independence and self-sufficiency will protect her to some degree. As well, Everard Bone has taken her measure and chosen well for his own purposes, at least. Aylwin Forbes's interest in Dulcie springs from her uncharacteristic outburst. In this sense, he has been attracted by a false impression. For all of these reasons, *No Fond Return of Love* marks Pym's definitive farewell to any faith in the possibility of serious romantic exchange between the sexes.

For all its failings, the novel shows the first stirrings of change. Though this interpretation hinges on critical hindsight, the metamorphosis continues in her subsequent work, as she struggles to diffuse her altering perceptions through a wider sphere. Perceived from this vantage point, the unlikely unions of Dulcie and Aylwin, Viola and Bill Sedge, anticipate all the unsuitable attachments that characterize her next novel, and exemplify Pym's familiar dualities in altered but identifiable guise.

In any study of Pym's novels, *An Unsuitable Attachment* presents specific difficulties, its status as the "rejected novel" only one of several. Read in its chronological order, its advancement over its predecessor is clear. Although a structural shapelessness mars the early chapters, this flaw is corrected as the novel develops. Pym's experimentation benefits both characterization and plotting. For Philip Larkin, "[t]he book's chief failing is that the 'unsuitable attachment' between Ianthe Brown . . . and the younger John Challow . . . is not sufficiently central to the story, and not fully 'done' . . .".¹¹ Charles Burkhardt sees the novel in a kindlier light, saying, " . . . if it has deficiencies, they are relative ones, flaws from our high expectations, not failures" (p. 47).

Robert Liddell believes that the novel belongs with the later work:

Its fate . . . ought to have been very different. Instead of standing at the end of the 'canon', with a heroine duller than Viola Dace or Deirdre, it ought (in a very thoroughly revised and altered form, and perhaps after two or three years of silence) to have appeared as the first novel of the Second Period, with Sophia as heroine. Ianthe, if she still were allowed a place, ought to be well in the background. John . . . ought to have been jettisoned, shoes and all. (p. 106)

Within the limitations of his argument, Liddell's prescription has much to recommend it. Clearly the novel suffers from major structural flaws, yet as it stands it attests to Pym's struggle to advance from one stage of her career to the next.

On balance, Larkin's assessment matches the prevalent response to the novel at the time of its publication in 1983. Critics commended Pym's familiar and ironic wit, and cat-lovers delighted in Faustina, but generally the novel was treated as a kind of postscript to Pym's career. By and large, its complexities of

theme and characterization went unnoticed, though a few perceptive critics probed beneath the deceptively mild and unruffled surface of church teas and "little dinners". Among these, A. N. Wilson celebrated "... [Pym's] total lack of malice", and went on to say that "[f]ew novelists' eyes have ever observed the lonely ludicrousness of human existence more acutely than she did".¹² But overall, the response was less than enthusiastic. Although Pym's literary rehabilitation was well underway, by 1983, the determined misreadings continued. Pym's increasing mastery of her genre was leading her beyond the sunny and generally optimistic milieu of her early work, to reveal that darker, more ominous forces lurked within the apparently protected enclosure. Perhaps ironically, the novel's dominant theme, articulated through a complex network of variations, rests on the human propensity to impose individual perceptions upon others, and to act on those perceptions. The procedure is complicated by the anomalous influences shaping these impressions.

A knowledge of the participants necessitates, in turn, a familiarity with individual biases, a carefully detailed account that leads, inevitably, to the inescapable fact of human isolation. Although muted, this awareness permeates the novel, its presence anticipating, in the words of Penelope Lively, "the bleaker vision of *Quartet in Autumn*".¹³ *An Unsuitable Attachment* examines this alienation from within and without. Each of its characters accepts the need for community, yet each clings to a private vision that defeats any hope of its attainment. Ianthe Broome's marriage to John Challow is the most obvious of several "unsuitable" attachments, but that distinction rests on presumptions rooted within the "marriage plot". The initial sequence indicates the multiple vantage points, moving from one character to another, enmeshing all into a common network. As the novel begins, the anthropologist Rupert Stonebird, a newcomer to the neighborhood, is watching Sophia Ainger and her sister,

Penelope Grandison, who are, in turn, watching him. His reaction to their scrutiny reflects his professional detachment, "for . . . he knew that men and women may observe each other as warily as wild animals hidden in long grass".¹⁴ Rupert's association recalls Jessie Morrow "padd[ing] through the long grass. . ." (*Jane and Prudence*, p. 28). In each, the suggestion of a predator is arresting, a jarring image within the existent context.

In the course of the novel, Rupert proves to be one of Pym's most introspective male characters, although his projected marriage to Penelope augurs one more "unsuitable attachment". From Rupert, the emphasis moves to the sisters, and from them to Mark Ainger, Sophia's remote clergyman husband, as he makes an agonizing choice of fish for supper. Here, Pym's fastidious eye for essential detail captures his character as he "turn[s] down the collar of his raincoat and arrange[s] it to expose his clerical collar--for he was not ashamed of his calling" (p. 15). This brief description fixes Mark's identity within the narrative, his benign self-deception as much as his sense of isolation; his awkward encounter with Sister Dew corroborates both. Only the cat Faustina enjoys any autonomy. Throughout this first chapter, each character's estrangement from the others is established. As well, the neighborhood's boundaries are set: the economic and social gradations of Mark's parish are defined, and the characters are ranked accordingly. Thus Pym demarcates her territory and its inhabitants. Ianthe Broome, the nominal heroine, is named, but her appearance is delayed until the second chapter. When she enters the narrative, it is through the eyes of Daisy Pettigrew, whose detachment, though not her consciousness, rivals Rupert Stonebird's. Through Daisy's skewed perspective, Pym's presents her central theme.

This motif relies on the notion of a mediating presence between subject and object, comparable to that employed in *Excellent Women* and *Jane and*

Prudence. While Nicholas Cleveland's spectacles provide a measure of protection from an intrusive world, Daisy's redefine its reality. The following passage anatomizes her idiosyncratic frame of reference, as it mediates between external and internal reality:

Daisy Pettigrew changed her reading for her long distance glasses, so that she could see the vicarage garden more clearly. Sitting in her window, she commanded a good view of the vicarage garden and of the 'object' whose identity had been puzzling her for some days now. It looked like--and surely it was--a statue of the Virgin Mary, and before long, no doubt, it would find its way into the church among all the other statues, though why it was now in the garden puzzled her a little. Grey stone and blue drapery, she thought, the whole thing rather shabby, not brightly painted like the other statues, but still a popish image. (p. 22)

Together, the "long distance" glasses and the window refine Daisy's vision. As these mechanical devices clarify the scene in the garden, the predetermined configuration within her mind distorts it, until outer reality satisfies inner perception. The leap from "it looked like" to "and surely it was" externalizes the workings of Daisy's mind, its scattered associations coalescing into the dread "popish image". Almost immediately, her fears prove ill-founded, as she sees Sophia remove the blue drapery to reveal that "what had seemed to be a popish image turned out to be merely a tree stump with a blue cloth spread over it to dry" (p. 23). Reluctant to relinquish her misgivings, Daisy continues to brood, seeing in the image "an indication of the way things might go" (p. 24). The entire episode establishes the novel's dominant theme. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym examines the fallacy of human objectivity, based as it is on the welter of prejudice and idiosyncrasy that shapes perception and determines

action. Yet these disjointed associations comprise the basis of human interaction. Within the novel, Daisy's distortion is only the first and most blatant example of the phenomenon.

As Pym's most obliquely allusive novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment* ventures beyond her customary boundaries. A curious Italian interlude provides the novel's defining imagery, its central episode a solitary incident set in the villa of Sophia Ainger's expatriate aunt. This setting narrows its scope from the general, Rome, where Sophia must maintain her role as Mark's wife, to an evanescent freedom from those demands. Temporarily, she becomes someone else, or at least an altered version of herself. For Ianthe, this mild transformation is deeply distressing. As this incident is fixed at the heart of the novel, or at least of Sophia's story, so the image mirrors this larger reality. Sophia Ainger must certainly rank as one of Pym's most complex creations, her alienation from her husband as disturbing as her near-obsession with the mysterious cat, Faustina. Yet in this singular moment, Pym invokes an ease and contentment that compensate, however ephemerally, for all that troubles Sophia in her life. Further, she may suggest that such moments embody the best of human existence and so the most that humans can or should expect:

And now here she was alone, unwrapping another little bundle of lemon leaves to reach the deliciously flavored raisins at the heart, and feeling that this trivial delight was almost enough to have brought away from a visit to Italy. (p. 195)

Clearly, the image embodies Pym's belief in the efficacy of "trivial pleasures", but its significance transcends this interpretation to symbolize the matrix of her fictional world. Sophia's fleeting moment of fulfilment entwines the figurative with the tangible, each enriching the other. Together they attain an

image as strikingly unique as that of Belinda's ravioli dough. The novel's action can be read as a progression to this moment, from the parish's outer limits, to the houses around the church square, to the vicarage, and finally to Sophia's kitchen. From there, the focus intensifies, until reduced to its essence in the mysterious episode in the Italian villa. There Sophia unwraps the raisins at the heart of the lemon leaves; for her, they symbolize some transcendent moment of happiness, separated from but intrinsic to her everyday existence. The imagery of the leaves is consonant with Pym's earlier usage, if somewhat more exotic.

This complex web of imagery enriches *An Unsuitable Attachment* in a series of highly significant ways, calling into question Philip Larkin's reference to its "undiminished high spirits" ("Foreword", p. 7). Increasingly, the "eternal note of sadness" creeps in, to affect the outlook of most, if not all, of its characters. Sensing this quality in Sophia, Rupert Stonebird attempts to explain his perception to Ianthe. Her incomprehension articulates again the novel's theme of alienation, most marked by her refusal to accept Sophia in any role other than that of clergyman's wife. Pym presents this theme in a series of variations, but all attest to the fundamental need to shape others to one's private vision, and to confirm that perception, however deviant from reality:

"I feel Sophia knows about life," Rupert went on.

"You mean living in this poor parish and being married to a clergyman--yes, I suppose she would know about life."

"Yes, that would be the conventional view ..., but I meant something a little different." Rupert frowned with the effort of trying to explain himself. "Something that the pessimistic Victorians had, not the women, the men . . ."

"Oh?" Ianthe looked puzzled and uncomprehending, but he did not see her face and

went on, "I think she sometimes feels that there is neither joy nor love nor light. . . ."

....
"I don't think one should feel like that about life," said Ianthe, a little shocked. "A clergyman's wife certainly shouldn't anyway."

Poor Sophia, Rupert thought . . . to be classified in this way. (pp. 214-215)

But even Sophia is guilty of this need to arrange and classify in keeping with her own perceptions and prejudices. Distressed by the thought of Ianthe's pending marriage to John Challow, she confesses to Rupert Stonebird that "I never thought of her as getting married-- it seems all wrong," and adds, "I wanted her to stay as she was, almost as if I'd created her" (p. 246). More than affirming a shared human foible, Sophia's statement attests to an honesty and awareness of the human capacity to surprise and even disappoint expectation. As well, she is articulating one extreme of Pym's literary spectrum, the instinctive resistance to change, the longing to catch and hold the moment, or at least to believe, with Belinda Bede, that "everything would be as it had been before . . .".¹⁵ Throughout Pym's novels, the theme surfaces repeatedly. Never dominant, its influence remains an integral component in defining character and regulating plot. In her final three works, the conflicting demands and obligations of stasis and movement become Pym's most compelling theme. *The Sweet Dove Died* initiates the process, and *Quartet in Autumn* expands it. Finally, *A Few Green Leaves* elevates an English village to archetypal dimensions, and pleads for its survival in an England grown increasingly alienated and estranged from its past. This setting and theme herald a return to the milieu of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, although community takes precedence over the emphasis on alienation.

The informing ideas of the earlier work survive. In Pym's world, all attachments are unsuitable in their way; their demands are a precarious but

necessary exchange for the benefits derived. Rupert Stonebird's bleak reflection does not glorify the single state for either sex. Returning home, he wonders why "people. . . make so much of returning to an empty house. As if life itself were not as empty as the house one was coming back to" (p. 43). Any discussion of the differences separating Pym's "early" and "later" phases cites this darkening vision. Equally striking, if less readily apparent, is the contrast between the looser, more rambling and episodic nature of the early work, and the concision and economy of the later. This leisurely pace is one of the great appeals of Pym's early work; both "transition" novels confirm her reluctance to relinquish it. For example, *An Unsuitable Attachment* features an amusingly perceptive episode, in which Sophia's mother and Lady Selvedge lunch together in "a very good tea shop" known to the latter (p. 56). But although the incident is vintage Pym, it intrudes into an already cluttered narrative line. Despite its various delights, the novel never achieves a cohesive unity but seems, rather, to founder in a web of unresolved, possibly irresolvable plots.

The richness of its contextual implications hints at a new direction for Barbara Pym, one doomed by the novel's rejection. The critical response to its posthumous publication, although generally favorable, may have misjudged this potential. The seemingly random composition masks a sophisticated complexity and control that escaped and perhaps continues to escape even her most admiring readers, while the novel's myriad thematic strands weave into a homogeneity of design that denies dominance to any one thread. Because Ianthe Broome's story conforms most clearly to literary dicta, as the most readily detectable figure in the carpet, the title's "unsuitable attachment" is presumed to describe her match with John Challow. But this neat formulation fades in light of the multiplicity of comparably unsuitable attachments. The Aingers' marriage is one example, Sophia's obsession with Faustina another. The perception of the term "unsuitable"

becomes a subjective evaluation. To Ianthe, everything about the Italian villa is disturbing, most specifically the relationship between Sophia's aunt and the Dottore. "[She] found herself remembering Sophia's aunt and the Dottore--surely Sophia could not really have meant that anything like *that* was going on between them" (p. 190). Because Ianthe's intensely conventional nature denies anything that appears less than "suitable", her love for John contradicts everything she has believed. Pym's refusal to exploit this irony is consistent with her determinedly minimalist style, but in this instance, the novel suffers from its lack of contrast and tensions. The rambling structure weakens the narrative line, which threatens to collapse into a random collection of loosely connected episodes and characters. Yet even with these flaws, *An Unsuitable Attachment* remains a work of considerable interest, crucial to Pym's artistic development.

In their portrayal of emotions that border on anguish, *No Fond Return of Love* and *An Unsuitable Attachment* stand apart. Gone is the coolly detached narrator whose observations distance the reader from the pathos of each heroine's circumstances. Both Dulcie Mainwaring and Sophia Ainger must resist near-despair, while Ianthe Broome's unhappiness and longing for John Challow, once she has admitted to her love for him, depicts an emotion relatively rare in Pym. Customarily, Pym steps back from such patent misery, drawing a discreet veil over its victim. But however she demonstrates her ability to portray authentic unhappiness, such reality strikes a discordant note when she reverts to her habitual detachment, and refuses any harmonious resolution. Read in the context of Pym's artistic development, *An Unsuitable Attachment* confirms her changing perspective. Sadly, her readers at Jonathan Cape saw only a confirmation of her continuing decline.

In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym has refined her comic skills to accommodate her altered technique. Nothing distracts from her essential theme, her

meticulously polished study of nearly terminal narcissism. Unsympathetic though she is, Leonora Eyre carries the novel's thematic burden, her pristine perfection reflecting and enhancing one facet of her creator's larger design. But for all its acknowledged technical excellence, the novel belongs with Pym's transitional phase. As Michael Cotsell argues, "with the book's successful completion, Pym arrived at a new stage in her writing" (pp. 84-85). Philip Larkin played a significant role in effecting this completion, not least in his advice that she reduce her initial cast of characters. Cotsell believes that Larkin's influence extended beyond such considerations, declaring that "... *The Sweet Dove Died* has some of the coldly formal qualities of Larkin's two novels . . . (which Pym had read)" (p. 106). Clearly, *An Unsuitable Attachment* suffered from its diffusion of characters and its indeterminate plot. Larkin's perceptive criticisms remedied both, and benefited *Quartet in Autumn* still more. Although *A Few Green Leaves* broadened the narrative range, the tension generated by the severely constricted perspective lingers.

But Larkin's contribution, significant though it was, served only to redirect Pym's essential vision. Her cool detachment never wavers, although its focus is refined and sharpened. *The Sweet Dove Died* takes its theme from an idea articulated by Sophia Ainger. Speaking of her distress at Ianthe Broome's engagement to the less worthy John Challow, Sophia says, "I wanted her to stay as she was, almost as if I'd created her" (p. 246). Leonora's affection for James owes something to this sentiment, as she confesses in one of the few forays we are allowed into her mind: "Sometimes it seemed almost as if she had created him herself--the beautiful young man with whom people were always falling in love and who yet remained inexplicably and deeply devoted to her. . . ." ¹⁶ Both revelations attest to the same notion, the human need to surround oneself with reassuring affirmations of one's existence and perhaps, one's power over others.

Sophia acknowledges this tendency, and with it, her own failing. Leonora's narcissism precludes any comparable honesty, and continues to nurture her flawed perceptions of herself and of others.

Two specific themes emerge from Leonora's narcissism. Both rely upon this obsession with self, although each addresses a separate facet. The novel's title signals the first, with its implications of confinement and death. Clearly, Leonora imprisons James within her web of self-delusion, taking comfort and pleasure from the self-affirming reflection. A cluster of images surround Leonora, each calculated to enhance this association. Of these, the Victorian mirror with its fruitwood frame provides the most graphically conceived delineation of the motif. A present from James, the mirror becomes a surrogate for his presence. Looking into it, Leonora finds an idealized image of herself, one that denies the encroachments of time and reality:

The glass had some slight flaw in it, and if she placed it in a certain light she saw looking back at her the face of a woman from another century, fascinating and ageless. It might be a good idea to use it when she made up her face, to spare herself some of the painful discoveries she had lately been making—those lines where none had been before (p. 79)

The metaphor becomes increasingly complex, as it accumulates symbolic gradations. Leonora's fascination with James is reflected and its vitalizing principle revealed; invariably, it springs from a fascination with herself. But more significantly, perhaps, the image that Leonora so enjoys symbolizes her own hermetic existence, caught and imprisoned as she is in her romanticized delusions of a past and a self that never were. Without the "slight flaw", something she abhors in most of her possessions, the idealized reflection could not exist. This image becomes a quintessential Pym metaphor, a rich and

complex depiction of the life-denying nature of illusion. Both aspects illuminate Leonora with telling economy, while they reiterate one of her creator's most insistent motifs. Its occurrence can be detected in the space separating Leonora's illusory reflection from its reality. This repressed admission of time's inexorable progress is evinced in her almost indiscernible transition from illusion to reality, from the realm of fantasy to that of practicality. But more, the passage confirms that Leonora is a survivor. Further, she understands, however hazily, that her illusions are her means of survival. If the Victorian mirror advances this cause, she will use it to that end. In the interests of this enterprise, she observes herself as a kind of *objet d'art*, distancing herself from reality, and isolating her subjective and objective selves from one another. At its most successful, the exercise promises protection from life's bleakest realities, as when Leonora resorts to the use of "one". The more intrusive these threats, the more pronounced this obliquity of expression.

Vague musings about the possible advantages of regular employment prompt the first incidence of the phenomenon, the revelatory idea that "it gave one less time to brood". From such reflections, Leonora advances to unwelcome thoughts of death's inevitability, "[which] came into one's mind occasionally but one tried to be sensible about it". Such atypical gloom is broken by the comforting reminder that "... there was no reason why one's death should not, in its own way, be as elegant as one's life, and one would do everything possible to make it so" (p. 17). However potentially comic, these grapplings with mortality establish Leonora's awareness of advancing age, with its attendant depredations and indignities. The complacency that punctuates her thoughts confirms her belief in her ability to control and guide the events of her life; this faith denies any external or unforeseen force that lies beyond her power. Nothing has shaken Leonora's belief in her narcissistic precepts, nor even challenged

them. In the course of the novel, Leonora is tested and vindicated, to some extent. In the process, she learns a modicum of humility, takes her own measure, and reasserts her perennial, if mildly ridiculous, image. The novel concludes with a flagrant display of Leonora's narcissism, as she is preparing to attend that celebration of ephemeral artifice, the Chelsea flower show:

It was the kind of thing one liked to go to, and the sight of such large and faultless blooms, so exquisite in colour, so absolutely correct in all their finer points, was a comfort and satisfaction to one who loved perfection as she did. Yet, when one came to think of it, the only flowers that were really perfect were those, like the peonies that went so well with one's charming room, that possessed the added grace of having been presented to oneself. (p. 188)

It is Pym's considerable achievement that Leonora emerges relatively unscathed, her pretensions transmuted into a ludicrous display of something close to gallantry. Her rejection of James confirms her newly discovered independence.

The novel traces the progression that forces this unlikely heroine to confront and acknowledge the reality of her lonely existence. At her emotional nadir, Leonora confronts this truth, and admits that "I am utterly alone" (p. 167). Until this point, she has viewed her solitude as an advantage, a protection against inconvenient intrusion. Her revelation is rooted in an alteration of perception, not circumstance. Forced to her devastating admission, Leonora realizes that she is a potential object of pity, another lonely, ageing spinster. Her response vindicates but does not transform her. As one reviewer has it, "she is not ennobled by suffering: Pym is too strenuous a realist for that".¹⁷

Arguably, *The Sweet Dove Died* represents Pym's strongest statement on gender as society's regulating principle. In the competition with Ned, Leonora is

virtually powerless. The illusions that have sustained her and enveloped James disintegrate under Ned's confident appraisal. She stands revealed for the ageing woman that she is. To a degree she has never before encountered, Ned understands all the rules of the game, both masculine and feminine; his invasion of her territory forces her to revise her assessment of herself and of her comfortably complacent existence. That Ned is both homosexual and American is not without significance, since both enhance his power over Leonora and her precarious illusions. Because he has no place in her carefully ordered world, and can have none, he is the quintessential outsider, whose presence exposes and destroys all of her exquisitely contrived artifice. Through Ned's eyes, and the strength of his malevolent presence, Leonora is forced to see her world and herself in a new light, as unpleasant as it is unfamiliar:

Yet when he came into the room he immediately took the center of the stage, the glitter of his personality making Leonora seem no more than an ageing overdressed woman, Liz a shrewish little nonentity, and James and Humphrey a callow young man with his pompous uncle. (p.137)

If Ned's intrusion illuminates the fallacy of gender designation, such devastating exposure confirms its tyranny, one that imprisons both sexes within its constraints. The multiplicity of confinement symbols embedded within the novel encourage this interpretation: the novel's title is only one of many similar allusions. Leonora's elegantly and painstakingly maintained surroundings are another; her efforts are committed to a denial of reality, of the inexorable passage of time. Her relationship with James is only the most obvious example of this impulse. But, as Pym indicates, these efforts imprison her within an increasingly limited and artificial world. Even nature must be experienced within an

enclosure. For James, the park where they walk together is "... depressing ... with its formal flowerbeds and evil-faced little statue--a sort of debased Peter Pan --at one end and the dusty grass and trees at the other" (p. 42). Clearly, the setting contrasts nature with art, and youth with age. After all, "Leonora had had romantic experiences in practically all the famous gardens of Europe, beginning with the Grosser Garten in Dresden ..." (p. 44), where presumably, in memory at least, the grass was not dusty nor the statues debased. As well, their dinner in the pristine perfection of Leonora's flat contrasts to James's earlier interlude with the ingenuous Phoebe.

Yet here Pym is making clear that James's passivity has been a kind of encouragement. Both women make demands, it is true, but his ready acquiescence to each and his willingness to accept the role each imposes on him, raise questions about his motivations. With Ned, he is similarly compliant. Whatever the setting, and whoever his companion, James inhabits a world fraught with potential demands and restrictions, all posing nearly insurmountable risk. Accompanying Leonora to a pet show, his response to a caged animal borders on envy, as he thinks, "How much wiser to contract out altogether" (p. 62). Leonora's extravagant attentions outweigh the minor demands they exact. Finally, his tentative attempts at reconciliation after Ned's decampment consign him to the company of all those who deny responsibility for their actions, the Allegra Grays and Tom Mallows of Pym's world. Because she rejects this course, Leonora achieves a kind of victory, an homage to her hard-won integrity. The experience summons a moral strength whose intensity surprises her. The recognition crystallizes in her response to Meg's intended comfort, that James will return. "No'..." Leonora was surprised at her own vehemence. "It could never be the same again'" (p.182). The moment marks Leonora's true epiphany, denoting a dual awakening. Although Meg's sympathy is the ultimate humiliation, Leonora

appreciates that "final touch of irony" (p. 182), a momentary detachment that saves her and restores a vital shred of self-respect. Her meeting with James becomes a confirmation of the moment, its necessary denouement and nothing more. The decision is Leonora's to make. Her action ratifies her newly acquired strength.

The novel's cool detachment redefines the bleak moral courage that characterizes Pym's world, and those inhabitants who merit her approbation. In one of the novel's most affecting moments, Leonora acknowledges that, for her, spring's traditional promise of "romantic love" has vanished. Her perception that "one did not expect anything like that, or indeed anything at all. . ." (p. 175) is sadly familiar. But more, the direct contrast with Mildred's self-sufficiency and sturdy independence illuminates the scope of Leonora's former self-delusion, and intensifies her present mortification. By novel's end, Leonora has not altered in any truly significant way, but she has confronted and accepted her own humanity and her near-pathetic absurdity. As the concluding paragraph confirms, the narcissism flourishes, but it is attenuated to a kind of sublime affectation. Leonora's last thoughts provoke only affectionate laughter. Her vanity has saved her, and her survival merits respect, however she has achieved it.

Together, *No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and *The Sweet Dove Died* connote a crucial phase of Barbara Pym's artistic development. Through each, a sequential development can be traced. The first crosses an unmarked border, moving from a territory where romantic comedy and its corollary romantic love dominate, into a murkier and more forbidding environment where a growing consciousness of community and communal obligation displaces exclusively individual concerns. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, this shift emerges still more forcibly, but demonstrates the concept's

essential paradox. However the community contains the novel's action, its central theme rests on the irrefutable reality of human isolation. The attachments that inspire the novel's title encompass both this awareness and the remnants of the earlier romance theme. *The Sweet Dove Died* is a devastating study of self-absorption unmediated by any vestige of communal consciousness. In its way, the novel's delineation of pure unreconstructed narcissism pleads for community.

As the novels progress thematically, Pym's style undergoes comparable alteration. The diffuse, almost inchoate, plotting and characters of the first two novels, transmute into a starker, more minimal presentation. Here, Philip Larkin's influence figures significantly; *The Sweet Dove Died* witnesses to his effect. Although its colder and more forbidding aspect may repel some readers, the novel signals a specific advance for Pym. One hesitates to impose any neatly formulated interpretation upon this progression. Yet the temptation is strong to find a reassuring moral in the story of Barbara Pym's tribulations. It seems fair to suggest that the lessons learned in these years served her well. At least, one can say that her chillingly funny account of four pensioners benefited from her own experience, if only because it provided her with the courage to write it.

In *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym advances her examination of ageing, as she takes her characters beyond the cosmetic encroachments and petty indignities that so disturb Leonora Eyre, into the infinitely greater distress of true old age. The benefits of Larkin's advice are manifest in the novel's admirable concision, an attribute particularly apposite to the increasingly marginal world her characters inhabit. Yet that territory proves surprisingly familiar, peopled with excellent women and obtuse men growing older. In Pym's world, the same principles apply, whatever the age. Indeed, the excellent woman's credo, "to expect very little, nothing almost", proves ideally suited to this stage of life.

Notes

- ¹*Barbara Pym*, pp. 4-5.
- ²*Barbara Pym*, p. 84.
- ³*Someone to Love*, p. 94.
- ⁴"The Bubble, Reputation . . .", *Encounter*, 68 (1987), p. 36.
- ⁵ Mason Cooley, "The Sweet Dove Died: The Sexual Politics of Narcissism", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32, No. 1 (1986), p.48.
- ⁶*No Fond Return of Love* (London: Granada, 1981, rpt. 1984), p. 172. All references are to this edition.
- ⁷"Remembering Barbara Pym", *Independent Women*, p. 162.
- ⁸Preface, *Barbara Pym*, no pag.
- ⁹Cotsell, p. 85.
- ¹⁰Burkhart, p. 7.
- ¹¹Philip Larkin, "Foreword", *An Unsuitable Attachment*, by Barbara Pym (London: Granada, 1983), p. 8.
- ¹²St Barbara-in-the-Precinct", review of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *Spectator*, 20 February 1982, p. 22.
- ¹³"Books and Writers", *Encounter* 58 (1982), p. 78
- ¹⁴ *An Unsuitable Attachment* (London: Granada, 1983), p. 13. All references are to this edition.
- ¹⁵*Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 251.
- ¹⁶*The Sweet Dove Died* (London: Granada, 1980, rpt. 1985), p. 47. All references are to this edition.
- ¹⁷ Harriet Rosenstein, "Have You Discovered Barbara Pym Yet?", *Ms Magazine*, May 1979, p. 35.

Chapter 6

Seasoned Timber

Quartet in Autumn is Pym's masterpiece. Its spare precision of structure and scope combines with a meticulous depiction of character and setting to achieve the quintessential Pym style. A degree of technical experimentation distinguishes the work still further, refuting those critics who see in Pym a contemporary attenuation of Jane Austen. As has been noted earlier, such comparisons label Pym's work as a recapitulation of an outmoded genre. But Margaret Diane Stetz contends that "her narrative devices owe more to Virginia Woolf than to Jane Austen".¹ In support of her claim, Stetz examines Pym's treatment of the time factor:

To a conventional novelist following in the tradition of Austen, time means merely chronological progression—one action succeeding another; to a modernist, time is something that can be reversed, sped up, or stretched infinitely. (p.25)

Stetz's perception is crucial to *Quartet in Autumn*, concerned as it is with time's infinite guises. Through myriad manifestations, time controls and reflects a series of emotional and physical states, so closely intertwined that they become indistinguishable one from the other.

The novel's title signals the most obvious and universal aspect, that of old age and its obdurate transgressions on men and women alike. Directly related to this theme is Pym's increasing concern with community. The wars of gender take on a new face, their forces redefined and realigned. With age and encroaching infirmity, reliable and timeworn tactics must be revised or even

discarded. The excellent woman comes into her own, recognizing the marginal world of the elderly as the familiar territory she has inhabited throughout her life. But even with this advantage, retirement presents difficulties exceeding the territorial. Time is life's immutable condition, but perceptions of time vary from one individual to another, and from one situation to another. *Quartet in Autumn* becomes a study of the disparities that separate objective and subjective time. The order imposed by years of regular work governs daily life, organizing each day and each week into familiar and manageable patterns. With retirement, a new pattern must be devised, and a new rhythm learned. The period of adjustment, the "liminal" period that Pym has addressed in earlier novels, becomes a crucial test for each individual.

Quartet in Autumn hinges on this period, and specifically on the lives of two single women, Letty Crowe and Marcia Ivory. Time becomes Pym's organizing principle, an all-pervasive presence interweaving throughout the narrative in innumerable modes and manifestations. The onset of retirement provides the defining structure, the device Pym utilizes to test and measure her characters. In the absence of their customary routine, time assumes new and unfamiliar dimensions for each woman; these aberrations and anomalies mirror each individual's inner state. Through these reflections, Marcia's deterioration is charted, as is Letty's quiet fortitude. The narrative follows a generally chronological progression, but within this larger context, incidents overlap, move backward or forward in time, and leapfrog one another to culminate in climactic episodes. These sequences can be likened to a kaleidoscope, each scattered fragment fusing to form a discernible design, while retaining its individual dimensions. Comparably, each character exists both as a separate and distinct entity and as an integral component of the larger group.

The narrowing spectrum of old age proves ideally suited to Pym's sparse settings, the characters' contracting world a reflection of their inner landscape. This choice of subject drew a mixed critical response. Philip Larkin commended her courage, saying, "I admire you enormously for tackling it . . .".² Larkin's reaction identifies the novel's unique power, its depiction of old age as the final reckoning, the ultimate human confrontation of self with self, men and women alike. Evaluated within the context of Pym's entire oeuvre, the novel's subject evolves as a logical progression of its predecessors. As she had examined the marginal life of the excellent woman, who "expected very little, nothing, almost", Pym now turns her attention to the comparably peripheral world of the elderly, who are denied even that faintly hopeful "almost". Yet each character retains a measure of individuality, as striking as it is disturbing. Ranging from Marcia Ivory's stubborn reclusiveness to Letty Crowe's acceptance of old age and its mortifications, Pym renders each understandable and even admirable. In a society that shrinks from acknowledging age and reduces the elderly to one amorphous mass, Pym's revelations challenge the bureaucratic mentality that is responsible for policies affecting this group. Despite their advancing years, or more likely because of them, these pensioners are as fiercely and individually human as they have been at any other stage of their lives. Pym addresses this attitude most specifically through the futile efforts of Janice Brabner, a well-meaning social worker, as she attempts to save Marcia from accelerating physical and mental decline. Yet, although Pym never shrinks from the grim realities that attend her subject, her final statement reaffirms the individual human spirit, and equally significant, the community's role in ensuring its survival.

The quartet of the title is composed of four ageing office workers, two women and two men. All are single; three never married and one, Edwin Braithwaite, a widower. Although each of these characters emerges as a fully

rounded and viable creation, the men's role is subordinate. The novel centers on the women, and, within that context, on Marcia Ivory, whose death becomes the catalyst that releases a latent awareness within the survivors, a renewed appreciation of community and of each other. Because they are a little older than their male counterparts, Letty Crowe and Marcia Ivory must confront the indignities and exigencies of retirement first. As their names indicate, the women serve as foils for one another. Each approaches the strange new world of retirement in disparate fashion, a practice consistent with her earlier life. Norman and Edwin are a complementary presence, their lives comparably bleak and narrow, however blunted their consciousness of this truth. Letty Crowe lives the life of a distressed gentlewoman, a Pym stereotype. Though less aggressively self-sufficient than Marcia, she displays an impressive degree of independence and even courage. Most important, she rarely reflects on past or future, "holding neatly and firmly on to life, coping as best she could with whatever it had to offer, little though that might be".³ But even this formula breaks down from time to time. When this happens, Letty's bleak contemplation owes as much to the changed face of her native England as to her advancing age. "How had it come about that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1914 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians?" (p. 56). Letty's dilemma anticipates the major theme of Pym's last novel. *A Few Green Leaves*, returns to an English village, seeking some common ground between the vanishing England that produced Letty's generation and the contemporary disintegration. Forced from her familiar routine, Letty discovers within herself an independence and resourcefulness, hitherto unsuspected. The novel ends on a note of guarded optimism, with the awakened awareness "that life still held infinite possibilities for change" (p. 176).

Letty's literary lineage can be traced through Mildred Lathbury and Belinda Bede, while Marcia is a descendant of Jane Cleveland and Harriet, and of Leonora Eyre. The adulation of Mr. Strong and the rosy memories of her hospital stay affirm her romantic bias. Much more than Letty, who has survived by "fitting in", Marcia has fashioned her own world. Any intrusion of reality has been ejected, and with it, any true consciousness of her fellow humans. Advancing age and retirement have exacerbated this tendency. When she leaves the office, her withdrawal from any significant human contact coincides with her escalating mania. In the absence of any moderating social influence, she loses her bearings. As John Updike interprets it, "... to be sane is, to a great extent, to be sociable."⁴ Letty's refusal to reflect on the past, or its possible bearing on the present, contrasts sharply with Marcia Ivory's obsession with the austerity that marked the war years and those immediately following it. The fanaticism that compels her to catalogue plastic bags and canned goods and to accumulate milk bottles originates in this era. Marcia has long since forgotten the purpose of these exercises, although some faint memory stirs as she contemplates the rows of milk bottles, and thinks that "... she mustn't let the hoard get too low because if there was a national emergency ... or even another war ... we might find ourselves back in the situation of 'No bottle, no milk'..." (pp. 54-55). The shift to the collective "we" signals the curious dichotomy that governs Marcia's behaviour. The pronoun recalls the war years and their enhanced sense of community, but Marcia's life, and her death, are committed to a self-sufficiency that escalates into a crazed rejection of any possible help. During her last working year, she gathers information on retirement benefits, but shares none of it. In the novel's opening chapters, a prophetic conversation intimates Marcia's encroaching madness. Speculating on the pitfalls and dangers of old age, Norman mentions "the chance

of being found dead of hypothermia". Marcia's response foreshadows the obsessive privacy that will overwhelm her:

Marcia smiled and fingered a leaflet in her handbag, one she had picked up at the library that morning—something about extra heating allowances for the elderly—but she kept the information to herself. (p. 9)

In some respects, Marcia resembles Pym's other great comic creation, the Archdeacon. Like him, her vanity separates and isolates her, but she lacks a protective retinue of loyal women to save her from her follies. Nor would she accept such protection, as her decisive deflections of all well-intended if impersonal overtures confirm. Pym's ability to evoke, simultaneously, Marcia's skewed logic, and the pathos so engendered, induces a response somewhat akin to pity and terror. The sympathy applies equally to Marcia and to her frustrated would-be saviours. The mutual failure to bridge the chasm which separates them ensures the inevitable tragedy.

If time's inexorable progress is Pym's essential theme, the motifs of community and of gender in age are its medium. Marcia's vanity, as it hurtles toward mania, carries the thematic burden. Her refusal to participate in any joint activity, or to contribute anything to her fellows, is mentioned in the novel's early chapters, but treated as a mildly idiosyncratic foible, even a source of humor. After all, each of the quartet shows behavioural quirks, presumably one more evidence of advancing age. Norman's barely suppressed and chronic anger seems more pathological than does Marcia's reserve, while Edwin's myriad church activities supersede all other aspects of his life, family and friends alike. Of the four, only Letty seems "normal", a designation that accords with her "excellent woman" persona. With retirement, and the removal of any modulating influence, each woman must draw upon her inner resources. The

nature of their work is never defined, not even at their retirement party. The director's tribute is a classic Pym irony, his empty rhetoric a marvel of its genre: "The point about Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory . . . is that nobody knows exactly, or has ever known exactly, what it is that they do', he declared boldly" (p. 84). Yet even these faceless and nameless tasks have served the purpose of imposing an order and coherence upon lives that acquire a drastically altered shape when they disappear. As each woman copes with this bleak truth, Pym explores the dual theme of community and individual consciousness, and examines the relationship between the two.

Lacking Marcia's seeming advantage of a permanent home, Letty must fend for herself. As a single ageing woman, she has no defined position within the society she inhabits. Even the comforts of literature are gone, since "she had come to realize that the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction" (p. 7). In a determined effort to recreate and reorder her life, she decides to do some "serious" reading, only to find that she has "lost the knack". Her first day of retirement is long and, "in a curious way, tiring". In contrast, Marcia's passes in a flurry of activity:

Marcia spent a long time in the room, tidying and rearranging its contents. All the plastic bags needed to be taken out of the drawer and sorted into their different shapes and sizes, classified as it were. It was something she had been meaning to do for such a long time but somehow she had never seemed to have a moment. Now, the first day of her retirement, she had eternity stretching before her. (pp. 91-92)

As she strives to organize the accumulated detritus of her life, Marcia's mental deterioration is clear. But more ominous are the intimations of rationality that justify the task, evinced in the language describing her work. She spends a

"long time" in the room, "until what would in the office have been lunchtime". As the phrase "long time" recurs, Pym introduces the opposing concepts of "subjective" and "objective" time. With retirement, Marcia slips from any awareness of each into an abyss of anonymity and confusion. Unlike Letty's, "Marcia's day seemed to have gone in a flash . . . She had no sense of time passing . . . [and] no memory of having experienced the first day of her retirement" (p. 96). Although she invokes its tenets to organize and justify her welter of activities, Marcia has lost all sense of objective time. Letty's firm grasp of reality intensifies her unhappiness. Marcia's withdrawal into dementia may spare her Letty's desolating "sensation of nothingness", but ultimately it destroys her.

Yet Pym's portrayal of the demented Marcia, particularly in her final guise of bag-lady, exudes a vitality and energy that enliven the entire novel. Her frenetic and useless activity originates in motivations at once crazed and comprehensible. Because she need not accommodate or adjust to any society but her own, Marcia loses all sense of any modifying reality, anything beyond her own increasingly crazed perception. In this respect, Marcia recalls Leonora Eyre, each creating and inhabiting her own meticulously maintained territory. These efforts lead to seeking her dead cat's grave, agonizing over the disposal of an odd milk bottle, and repelling any offers of help. Pathetically, Marcia resorts to the reliable if timeworn phrases that have vindicated her behaviour to herself, if not to others, throughout her life. A probable anorexic, she prides herself on never having been a "big eater". Riding on a bus, she "hold[s] herself aloof from the chattering women" (p. 127). Her mysterious surgery, a mastectomy, has become the major event of her life, and Mr. Strong, her surgeon, its focus.

In retirement, her world contracts to her obsession with him and his hospital, and to the safety and sanctity of her house. Her determined isolation

attests to her fear of the world beyond these boundaries, a fear manifested in a suspicion verging on paranoia. Pym traces Marcia's increasing deterioration through the elaboration and extension of one recurring pattern of imagery. To date, spectacles and panes of glass have denoted protective shields, mediating between the vulnerable character and intrusive reality. As we have seen, Nicholas Cleveland's spectacles serve just this purpose, as do the innumerable windows through which Pym's heroines and heroes contemplate the passing scene. Marcia's glasses mask her eyes, discouraging and repelling any contact. To Letty, the "dark eyes [are] alarmingly magnified behind her glasses, like the eyes of some nocturnal tree-climbing animal" (p. 12). Even when she tries to reach out, "the marmoset eyes behind the thick glasses" (p. 19) inhibit conversation. To the social worker who attempts to help her, she has "funny staring eyes" (p. 30). The physical description evokes Marcia with a vividness and clarity relatively rare in Barbara Pym's work. Metaphorically, this progression from transparent shield to thickly distorting lenses denotes an intensifying emotional detachment, possibly the inevitable consequence of unmediated individuality.

Still more changes are rung in Pym's recurring patterns of imagery. Leaves and vegetation, usually harbingers of spiritual resurrection, become another reminder of time and life passing. Angry little Norman shortens his annual holiday, and returns to the office a few days early. However he justifies his action, he knows that he will probably never use the extra time. Rather, "he felt that those extra days . . . would accumulate like a pile of dead leaves drifting on to the pavement in autumn" (p. 45). The image strikes a definitive note, evoking Norman's sense of the end of things. During a country walk with Marjorie, the friend of her youth, Letty fights the temptation to hopelessness. As

with Norman, her depression finds expression in the imagery of the natural world:

Letty . . . looked around the wood, remembering its autumn carpet of beech leaves and wondering if it could be the kind of place to lie down in and prepare for death when life became too much to be endured. Had an old person—a pensioner, of course—ever been found in such a situation? . . . It was not the kind of fancy she could indulge with Marjorie or even dwell on too much herself. Danger lay in that direction. (p. 123)

As Marcia's deranged behaviour assumes a measure of coherence when presented from her vantage point, so Letty's controlled desperation permeates the above quotation. In *A Few Green Leaves*, this fleeting fantasy becomes a pivotal episode in the novel's thematic development. Consistent with the cyclical motif permeating both novels, the intimations of death transmute into an affirmation of life and regeneration. Similar associations surface in *Quartet in Autumn* in less rarified form. Following this scene, and despite her involuntary lapse into despair, Letty refuses Marjorie's suggestion that she move to a home for the elderly. But Marjorie's plan crystallizes Letty's resolve. The implicit contrast between Marjorie's anticipated marriage and Letty's quiet withdrawal sparks her resentment. But her decision is founded on a much worthier incentive, a revelation that resolves Letty's dilemma and her depression. During a visit to the proposed home, Letty sees three old ladies walking in the garden, and recognizes that "there was nothing particularly remarkable about them except their remoteness from any kind of life" (p. 124).

Letty's revelation bears directly on Pym's theme of community. Isolation and segregation of the old encourages a dangerous illusion, a denial of common

and shared humanity with all creatures. When Janice Brabner attempts to deal with Marcia according to the preordained plan laid down by her department, she reduces Marcia to a stereotype. Obversely, Marcia's refusal to conform to these expectations frustrates all attempts to help or save her, yet within her eccentric scheme of things, her existence has sense and coherence. Marcia's behaviour is anathema to Letty, but her decision confirms their kinship. By choosing independence and a measure of autonomy, each rejects passive compliance with an impersonal system. But Letty is prepared to compromise and to allow for inevitable change within her life and routine. Both attributes confirm her readiness to participate in the larger community, while retaining a private and enclosed space for herself. Marcia denies any suggestion of either compromise or change, attempting by these actions to freeze her world into a formulated refuge against time and its incursions. Like Belinda Bede, Marcia wants to believe that "everything would be as it had been before"⁵; her denial of time becomes a denial of life. In this instance as in others, Pym offers no neatly formulated or all-embracing resolution. Her consistency lies in her insistence that all human existence merits compassion and respect on its own terms. The divisions which in her earlier work separate men from women, married from unmarried, transmute into those which divide youth from age.

In consequence, the gender principle assumes a new configuration, an altered definition that overrides any biological determinant. In a patriarchal world, "masculine" is equated with authority, a designation that, by default, designates "feminine" as subordinate. Because advancing age reduces both sexes to "feminine", both must share the periphery that was once the sole preserve of the "excellent woman". In her penultimate novel, this premise becomes Pym's informing principle. Accustomed to life on society's dustier fringes, the Pym heroine has the advantage of her fellows. As each heroine has accommodated to

her position, accepting it in full consciousness, she has learned to contribute according to these limitations. Defined by the larger group, she has shaped her existence accordingly. In the process, her awareness has shaped her life, most notably in her perception of herself. In old age, this lifelong practice comes into its own. Its guiding principles are recognized as the ideal preparation for old age.

In the final analysis, Letty's relative dependence becomes her means of survival, as her enforced move and Marjorie's betrayal emphasize. However painful her transition, Letty's modest expectations ensure this survival. Pym does not minimize Letty's plight, as evidenced by her quiet evocation of Christmas night, a prime example of the "plangent" sentence: "The radio offered a choice of comedy . . . or carols, with their sad memories of childhood and the days that can never come back" (p. 75). Neither does she trivialize Letty's survival strategies. Anticipation of the Boxing Day sales eases a lonely Christmas, and awakens a kind of hope for the future.

Norman and Edwin play a subordinate role within the novel's structure, but they confirm Pym's thesis that advancing age is no respecter of gender. Each is a departure from Pym's customary male creation, Norman more than Edwin. Seething with an impotent and undirected anger, Norman spends his life fulminating against all of the hostile forces that he fancies are ranged against him. A nuance of mutual romantic interest unites Norman and Marcia, a "family-sized" tin of Nescafe its most tangible expression. But in a more profound sense, his life resembles Letty's. Like her, he lives in a bed-sitter, and like her he feels his lack of power and influence. But while Letty accepts this circumstance, Norman's embittered and lacerating anger colors his every thought and action. Surprisingly, Marcia leaves him her house, an acquisition that promises to soften his anger and temper his bitterness. This effect owes as much to his enhanced influence, as to any monetary consideration. The realization that " . . . he had the power to

influence the lives of people like Priscilla and her husband, gave him a quite new, hitherto unexperienced sensation—a good feeling . . . and he walked to the bus stop with his head held high” (p. 165). Faced with the choice of living with Marjorie or Mrs. Pope, Letty makes a comparable discovery, and “ . . . experience[s] a most agreeable sensation, almost a feeling of power” (p. 176). In both instances, the circumstances of their lives have conditioned Letty and Norman to expect “very little, nothing almost”. In old age, this philosophy is vindicated and even rewarded.

Edwin completes the quartet. A widower, he spends most, if not all, of his time in church activity; his interest lies more in the intricacies of its structure and ritual than in any deeply-held religious faith. Each of the quartet lives apart from the larger society, but Edwin's isolation is least obvious. Of the four, he is the only one who has married, yet his family seems to provide little of the comfort or companionship traditionally associated with that group. For many years, the church has provided an unfailing excuse for his absence. Although he spends Christmas with his married daughter and her family, he makes his escape as soon as he can, “ . . . plead[ing] various pressing engagements”. These consist mainly of church services, “a good High Mass this evening at St. Johns”, one of several he anticipates (p. 77). After Marcia's death, Letty visits his house, where she notices “the old-fashioned embroidered cushion covers and chair backs” and wonders if they are evidence of “Phyllis's work on those long evenings when Edwin was at meetings of the parochial council?” (p. 149). Here, as elsewhere, Pym makes clear that loneliness comes in many forms, and that marriage offers no insurance. But Edwin finds Letty her new living accommodation, and some latent sense of responsibility prompts his fortuitous visit to Marcia, with his parish priest. Their arrival coincides with Janice Brabner's discovery of the unconscious Marcia when, as Pym notes with quiet irony, “Both the men were

prepared to take control" (p. 134). With their task defined, they will execute the necessary steps to bring it to a successful conclusion. Not for them the unsatisfactory and humiliating tactics that Janice must resort to, nor the sense of helplessness and frustration in the face of Marcia's intransigence. The sequence demonstrates Pym's mastery of her craft, the subtext as insistent as it is elusive.

Marcia's collapse and death entwines each of the novel's separate strands into a coherent pattern. In their differing ways, each of the remaining three rallies to her aid. Edwin's practical help is most obvious, but Letty's gift of lavender water, however seemingly inappropriate, most significant. The gift becomes a symbolic repository of the custom and ceremony that Pym honors in each of her novels. In the hospital, deprived of speech and near death, Marcia acquires a new persona. Recreated in the eyes of the beholder, she becomes a compilation of the hospital staff, and its collective assumptions. The most significant reaction is Mr. Strong's. The scent of Letty's lavender summons the memory of his grandmother, one he associates in turn with the unlikely Miss Ivory. Because his momentary regression to childhood coincides with the moment of Marcia's death, his concerned smile is the last thing she sees. But however ephemeral the surgeon's response, the moment eases Marcia from life with a rare sensation of fellowship and community. In the instant of her death, Marcia experiences communion with one of her fellow humans: as "Marcia smiled . . . he seemed to be smiling back at her" (p. 148). Even in this extremity, the uncertainty persists.

Predictably, the resolution of the novel refuses reduction to a comprehensive thematic unity. Because she has become entwined within the community, however unconsciously, Marcia acquires an identity. Despite its largely illusory fabrication, its nature need not derogate from her final blissful moment. Marcia's essential life may span the period between the "cool wet

feeling on her forehead", and her final, trusting smile at Mr. Strong. Read in this way, the splash of lavender water becomes both baptism and benediction. Death does not ennoble Marcia. Her final thoughts confirm that her crabbed and suspicious nature prevails, yet she dies in a measured state of grace, with Mr. Strong smiling down on her. She cannot know that Letty's lavender water has jolted his memory, and that these momentary associations have altered his perception of her. In that moment, Mr. Strong has "created" Marcia, in much the same way as Leonora creates James, and Sophia Ainger attempts to create Ianthe. In Marcia's final moments of life, reality and illusion intermingle and blend, until one is indistinguishable from the other.

The poetry of George Herbert reverberates throughout Barbara Pym's novels. Prudence Bates puzzles over the meaning of "Hope", as she salves her injured pride, while Mary Beamish's allusion to his "glass of blessings" awakens Wilmet Forsyth from her self-imposed torpor. But in its defining spirit, *Quartet in Autumn* exemplifies Herbert's central theme while never making any direct allusion to his work. In her compassionate and courageous examination of old age, Pym gives overt expression to the final stanza of "Virtue":

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turns to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

Although Herbert's lines celebrate the Christian belief in life after death, they can be read as a tribute to all who suffer and survive adversity. As such, they honor Pym's pensioners, and their fortitude and determination. A sense of cautious optimism concludes *Quartet in Autumn* but no miraculous solutions are

promised. At best, the survivors have won a chance to participate in life for a while longer.

To Michael Cotsell, *Quartet in Autumn* is "a novel about age, but it is also a novel about the failure of a civilization".⁶ Although informed by compassion, Cotsell's argument may interpret the novel too narrowly. The grim difficulties of old age form one strand of Pym's theme, but her celebration of human resilience is another. Each of the quartet approaches old age, and lives it, in ways perfectly consistent with each preceding stage of their respective lives. Of the four, Letty copes most effectively with the changes which are transforming her once-familiar England into an increasingly alien land. Her response to the country of old age parallels this reaction. By refusing to acquiesce to Marjorie's proposal and move to the village retirement community, Letty asserts her own will. In each instance, she makes a modest adaptation to the inevitable, but never compromises her fundamental values.

Letty's story anticipates Barbara Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*. In it, she pleads for the survival of an England that she and her characters know and love. Her "excellent women", grown old, become the repository of its ethos and the medium of its transfer from one generation to the next. An English village serves as her setting, though one more realistic and contemporary than its enchanted predecessor, the setting of *Some Tame Gazelle*. Significantly, neither village is named, encouraging the interpretation that each transcends the local and parochial to assume a more universal dimension. If the first originated in adolescent fantasy, its later manifestation is set firmly in contemporary England, a society threatened by a kind of cultural amnesia. Like Letty Crowe, Pym does not advocate stasis, nor does she celebrate the past to the detriment of the present. She does recognize, and argue for, the necessity of individual consciousness as the best defense against increasing and dangerous apathy.

Notes

¹"*Quartet in Autumn: New Light on Barbara Pym as a Modernist*", *Arizona Quarterly*, 41, No. 1 (1985), 24.

²Philip Larkin, *Ms Pym* 152, qtd. in Cotsell, p. 122.

³*Quartet in Autumn* (London: Granada, 1980, rpt.1981), p. 24. All references are to this edition.

⁴"Lem and Pym", *The New Yorker*, 26 February 1979, p. 120.

⁵*Some Tame Gazelle*, p.251.

⁶*Barbara Pym*, p. 122.

Chapter 7

Apotheosis of the Excellent Woman

A Few Green Leaves, written in the last year of her life, is Barbara Pym's valedictory tribute to an England that she loves and fears to lose. In both its setting and its characters, the novel invites comparison with *Some Tame Gazelle*. Certainly its inhabitants betray a distinct resemblance to their predecessors, however their eccentricities may lack the panache of Edith Liversidge, that early incarnation of the excellent woman, whose relative poverty and general eccentricity earns her the accolade of "splendid".¹ In this early example, Belinda's ingenuous observation fixes the narrative perspective and orients the reader to Pym's singular world. In her final novel, that world threatens to disappear forever, submerged beneath a tidal wave of near-fatal indifference. If, as Michael Cotsell believes, *Quartet in Autumn* is "a novel about the failure of a civilization", *A Few Green Leaves* makes one last plea for its survival. A common metaphor informs each title, linking Pym's final novels together. The first anticipates the coming of winter, while the second announces spring's promise of rebirth and resurrection.

In its evocation of time and place, the novel bridges two specific and definable epochs. The traditional rural England, the setting of *Some Tame Gazelle*, is juxtaposed with the reality of England in the late-twentieth century. In a fragmenting rural society, accelerating division separates its inhabitants into increasingly disparate factions. These widening fissures threaten much that has given meaning and particularity to Pym's generation, but her concern transcends generational or class limitations. In its principal

concerns, *A Few Green Leaves* can be likened to George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language", despite any seeming incongruity between Pym's gentle persuasion and Orwell's truculence. Each identifies the incursions of mental sloth and argues that the surrender of individual consciousness must result in a comparable surrender of individual will and responsibility. Pym's argument may lack Orwell's riveting directness, but they are pleading a common cause. Each finds creeping apathy most clearly manifest in the increasing incidence and acceptance of a sterile codification, a ready acquiescence to external authority. Although Orwell decries the poverty of political and public language, and Pym concentrates on the erosion of individual consciousness, each discerns a common enemy. The deterioration of individual expression predisposes to a concomitant abrogation of individual will and responsibility, and finally to unthinking compliance with imposed thought and ideology. In *A Few Green Leaves*, Martin Shrubsole's prescriptions forecast this phenomenon, as do Adam Prince's restaurant reviews. Such dependencies diminish individual judgment as it curtails individual autonomy, while lack of concern infects public and private consciousness with equal virulence. For Pym, the malaise derives from a loss of all historic perspective and direction, a collective indifference to any concern not bearing directly upon the here and now. At risk is the entire fabric of English life, the custom and ceremony that shape and regulate life's incipient chaos. Robert Phillips likens the novel to *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf's valedictory work:

In pitting time present against time past, in parading history before us in the living flesh, the book approaches the daring and conceit of Virginia Woolf's final novel . . . also set in an English village. There Woolf tried to depict England as it

was then, but also to indicate that all Englishmen were members one of another, each a part of the whole, acting different parts but being of the same body. In this respect Barbara Pym's final vision compares with Virginia Woolf's.²

In Barbara Pym's determinedly miniature world, these communal observances inject a modicum of individuality into the pervasive anonymity of modern life. Closely aligned to the notion of romance and illusion, such practices encourage a consciousness of historic continuity and shared experience. The cup of tea, offered at the right moment, affirms as it comforts, as with Letty Crowe's appreciation of "... tea and a comfortable chat about crematoria". Pym's gentle humor suffuses the observation, but does not deny its truth. The implications of community and of shared ritual transcend both comedy and potential pathos. These secular rituals soften and shade the stark outlines of reality, rendering it endurable. In Pym's world, romance is not limited to one facet of life's variety, but permeates any occasion that eases its drearier exigencies. The pleasure which Wilmet Forsyth and Letty Crowe find in dress is one such expression. Catherine Oliphant's delight in a "real calf's foot" for her *boeuf a la mode* or the bay leaf from Thomas Hardy's garden is another. For, as Catherine herself understands, "the small things of life [are] often so much bigger things than the great things . . .".³ For Barbara Pym, and the characters she creates, these moments bestow a dignity and beauty that transcend the ephemeral, polishing life's facets to a rare and lasting brilliance. *A Few Green Leaves* becomes a plea for their survival.

In her final novel, the excellent women have become the last bastion of these ideals, their champions in an increasingly disaffected world. In varying ways, each of these ageing women defends these values, to become a

kind of Greek chorus arbitrating and mediating between cultures and ages. Of these women, Miss Vereker, onetime governess and eternal excellent woman, stands above the rest, a kind of spiritual and moral exemplar of all that is worth preserving from this doomed society. Miss Vereker is Pym's last, and perhaps best, excellent woman, her tacit presence the novel's guiding and informing spirit. As a unifying and rationalizing device that resolves each of the novel's discrepant factors into one comprehensive unity, the near-mythic figure of Miss Vereker is the crucial factor. Structurally, the novel resembles a series of concentric rings, encircling her figure. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym presents an earlier variant of this idea. The associations attaching to the "little bundle of lemon leaves . . . [with] the deliciously flavored raisins at the heart", connect with those that Pym attributes to the figure of Miss Vereker. Intimations of *alpha* and *omega* invest Miss Vereker's figure, however muted by Pym's ironic humour.

Pym's faith in the individual, in evidence from her earliest work, melds with her belief in community. In her ideal world, the community ensures the order necessary to the optimum expression of individuality. *Some Tame Gazelle*, assumes the traditional order; *A Few Green Leaves* warns of its fragility, as time and change erode its institutions. The village world becomes a microcosm of contemporary England, a narrative tool that allows Pym a return to her pre-Larkin style. The novel rests on a complex but coherent structure. If this pattern lacks the sharply etched precision of the novel's immediate predecessors, time restrictions may explain the relative flaw. The novel was written during Pym's final illness and completed within two months of her death.

As Miss Vereker is a tacit presence throughout, so *Some Tame Gazelle* provides a model for this later village world. The traditional society,

composed of a lord of the manor and his loyal villagers lingers in the background, a handy referent for measuring the changes everywhere apparent in its contemporary mode. As the expectations encoded in the romance plot shape the reader's response to the narrative line, so a comparably idealized perception of the English village illuminates the profound societal changes which Pym chronicles. Pym's final fictional village bears little resemblance to its predecessor. The surviving De Tankerville daughter lives in the south of France, while the present occupants of the manor house "[make] little impact on village life".⁴ The "villagers", who live in the new council estate, intrude from time to time, but the novel concentrates on the occupants of the houses and cottages that comprise the original village site. With the exception of Miss Lickerish, none is native to the village, though Miss Lee and the Gellibrands have spent many years there, a relative longevity that carries a certain prestige.

Pym's protagonist is Emma Howick. An anthropologist and temporary resident, Emma is gathering facts for an intended study of the English village, providing a narrative point of view that affords access to all facets of its life. As the novel unfolds, Emma is drawn into the village and its activities, and discovers that she has replaced the determined objectivity of the scientific observer with the more subjective stance of the novelist. She has, in other words, become a part of the larger community. Her revelation concludes the novel, and coincides with her belated awareness of Tom Dagnall, portending a "love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one" (p. 220). Of all Pym's works, *A Few Green Leaves* comes closest to achieving a conventionally "happy ending". The projected marriage validates Pym's belief in community as the last, best hope of a beleaguered England. However debased by its associations with patriarchal oppression, the social

convention of marriage promises a measure of civil order that will encourage, if not ensure, the perpetuation of the species. As such, it becomes the functional unit of a civilized society. In that society, and in the marriage Pym proposes, neither partner dominates the other. In this union, the thematic strands of gender and community entwine, joining these dualities into one comprehensive unity, that yet retains the distinctive character of its composite parts. Finally, the marriage plot is vindicated, if somewhat diminished.

Pym's strategy is twofold. Emma's scientific orientation maintains the detachment necessary to examine a contemporary English village, and to note its gradual fragmentation and resultant alienation from its historic and cultural heritage. Pym's subtle evocation of the romance genre provides a subversive subtext, a gentle deflation of science and its portentous pronouncements. Her characters may have abandoned any hope of romantic love, but its hold is tenacious, and expressed in a multitude of ways. Emma's impulsive letter to Graham Pettifer is one example, as are Daphne Dagnall's longing for a dog and Miss Lickerish's devotion to her assorted wildlife. Tom Dagnall and Emma Howick may marry, or they may not. If this resolution seems unnecessarily indeterminate, its tone is in keeping with the general tenor of the novel. Miss Grundy speaks for everyone, her creator included, when she asserts that ". . . a few green leaves can make such a difference" (p.180). That difference lies in the promise of life and renewed hope that the leaves bring to the wilting roses. The image so evoked becomes a paradigm for the near-enigma that defines Pym's fictional universe. The so-called "difference" may be illusory, a futile attempt to forestall the inevitable, or to appear to forestall it. But the consciousness of the deception does not negate its intent. For Barbara Pym's faded characters, this intent becomes the crucial

factor, all that remains to them in a world grown steadily colder and more inhospitable. To acknowledge such disquieting truths, and to continue, suggests more than a modicum of courage and of faith. In a world where even the time-honoured rituals are in danger of losing their meaning, they become an end in themselves. This bleak perception colors Pym's depiction of contemporary England, the "few green leaves" that embellish the November roses a tenuous hope for the future.

In this changed and changing world, Pym identifies two forces struggling for dominance. Stated generally, the scientific community is gaining clear dominance over its humanist opposition. In Pym's village, these factions surface in the contrast between the church and the doctors' office, between the anthropologists and the excellent women of the congregation, and are delineated most specifically in Emma's conversion from anthropologist to novelist. As Jane Nardin describes it, "*A Few Green Leaves* portrays a world in which science is replacing literature and religion as the preferred mode of understanding human experience".⁵ This contest is waged among the inhabitants of the original village, the erstwhile "villagers" having abandoned their draughty cottages for the comforts of the council estate. From this vantage point, they view the newcomers with a mixture of disapproval and derision, a response epitomized in Mrs. Dyer's blanket dismissal of perceived pretension. Beyond this generalized contempt, the native villagers take little interest in anything beyond the here and now, as Tom learns in his frustrated attempts to delve into village history.

In *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym's portrayal of English society in transition and disarray reduces the essential conflict to a choice between masculine and feminine values, or as she presents them, between science and the humanities. As Emma Howick's story confirms, the humanities hold more

promise for a future that will harmonize the multiplicity of human needs and experiences; science threatens to engulf its gentler adversary and sweep it away in a tidal wave of spurious progress. In the figures of Martin and Avice Shrubsole, Pym distills her dismay at this prospect. Their shared penchant for beating down the undergrowth becomes a metaphor for their general response to life's obstacles.

In this final work, the medical profession supersedes the clergy; the Shrubsoles personify much if not all that Pym finds to criticize in that august calling. Most insidious is their cheerfully patronizing advice, a commodity they dispense as readily and liberally as their prescriptions, and with the same omniscient belief in their own narrow judgment. When Martin nags his mother-in-law because she likes sugar in her tea, or wonders if Daphne Dagnall might be a frustrated lesbian, or tries to delve into Emma's "unsatisfactory relationship", he is attempting to wrestle each of them into a preconceived formulation, a neatly defined construct that denies any troublesome individuality. Inevitably, reality intervenes, an irritating reminder of his limitations:

Martin had so far had a difficult morning. He had been obliged to tell an elderly woman patient that her days were numbered, for, in his usual frank way, he had not shrunk from the truth But she had come back at him by asking if he believed in life after death. For a moment he had been stunned into silence, indignant at such a question. Then of course he had realized that *he* couldn't be expected to answer things like that—it was the rector's business. The fact that death came to all of us seemed irrelevant at this moment. (p.186)

This situation defeats Martin Shrubsole's professed candour, exposing it as the emotional equivalent of the "ritual scrap of paper" (p. 18). The quiet

affirmation that "death [comes] to all of us" pervades *A Few Green Leaves*, to become the apotheosis of the gender theme. In the course of the novel, death claims both Esther Clovis, "with her tweed suits and dog-like hair" (p. 134), and the chronic philanderer, Fabian Driver. The contrast between the two could hardly be more striking, but death nullifies all disparity.

So Pym concentrates her essential argument on the narrow definitions imposed in the name of patriarchy, and verifies the inequities implicit within its hierarchical gradations. Most important, she understands that any implacable system injures those it professes to benefit, as well as those it oppresses. In *Jane and Prudence*, Fabian Driver provides an early example of this consequence. His actions, as he postures and preens his way through life, are dictated by an uneasy blend of vanity and guilt, both encouraged by his faithful wife, Constance. Tom Dagnall is caught in a similar trap. Marital infidelity and sexual vanity have no place in his situation; nevertheless his actions are grounded in a comparable guilt, and are as threatening to his autonomy and self-respect as they are to Fabian's. Like him, Tom is the beneficiary, or the victim, of female self-sacrifice. In Tom's case, his sister Daphne has devoted her life to him, and both are caught in a mutual, if largely unspoken, resentment. Daphne's unhappiness is manifested in vague physical complaints, relieved temporarily by visits to Martin Shrubsole and his placebo-like prescriptions. Tom's interest in local history and customs furnishes diversion from an equally bleak existence. But, as much as Fabian, he verges on caricature, saved from its worst excesses by his sensibility.

All of the associations clustering round him, as he is perceived by others, resonate with these implications. To Emma, he is "poor Tom", as in "Tom's a-cold", Shakespeare's quintessential outcast and victim (p. 40). Beatrix Tennant makes the same association, adding that " . . . 'ineffectual' was the

word that sprang to mind" (p. 93). Finally, Tom glimpses himself through Mrs. Dyer's chronically contemptuous eyes, as "... a comic parson or an absent-minded professor in a stage farce" (p. 27). In each instance, Tom is "created" in the eye of the beholder, and burdened with an identity that satisfies the preconceived prejudice of the individual. It must be added that the circumstances of Tom's life encourage such perceptions; his general passivity is a contributing factor. Meeting the "villagers" during the "Low Sunday" walk in the woods, he "... made no attempt to enquire after relatives or children or grand-children, or even livestock ... as his own predecessors might have done" (p. 11). The reasons for his lack of interest are never spelled out, although the general lapse in church attendance seems one consequence. Whatever else, the episode demonstrates the clergy's declining prestige and perceived irrelevance.

A minor theme, muted but insistent, intrudes periodically, its elusive notes picking out a complex pattern of allusion bordering on the supernatural. Such implications may not constitute a defence of either literature or religion, but they suggest that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in anyone's philosophy, much of it as inexplicable to science as is death's inevitability to Martin Shrubsole. Miss Grundy's insistence that she has "... seen something, some person from the past" is one example of this phenomenon, and may foreshadow Miss Vereker's return (p. 105). The repeated references to the mysterious Miss Vereker relate specifically to this motif. For Michael Cotsell, this episode is symptomatic of the novel's essential flaw, exemplifying its absence of any clearly defined focus. "It ... seems that Miss Vereker's unannounced return to the village ... will be an event of potential significance", he says. "But nothing comes of it, and nothing can be made of it".⁶ But Miss Vereker's influence reaches

beyond this single episode. From the first church outing, her name evokes the memory of other, happier times. To her devoted friend, Miss Lee, she symbolizes a more stable society that has all but disappeared. For Emma and Tom, her name becomes a shared joke. Together, they "create" her, a comic paragon of every possible recondite virtue. Even Dr. Gellibrand commends her, telling Tom that "she was quite a young woman "(p. 98). His regard may hint, though no more, at some romantic attachment between them. He uses her key to enter the mausoleum, and only he calls her by her Christian name. When she appears, her elegance, self-possession, and independence vindicate all of these forecasts. If Pym's dominant theme constitutes a plea for the survival of a society that reveres these deceptively gentle virtues, Miss Vereker's return assumes near-revelatory connotations, an affirmation of individual integrity and its survival in an indifferent, often hostile world. When she happens upon the medieval village, the object of Tom's frustrated quest, a coherent thematic pattern is confirmed; its design is rationalized both by her presence and her discovery.

If Miss Vereker suggests one of the romance genre's stereotypical heroines, Miss Lickerish represents another variant. The last survivor of a moribund social structure, Miss Lickerish dies in her cottage, "with a cup of tea at her side and a cat on her knees", amid the litter and accumulation of a long life (p. 202). She may frustrate Tom's efforts to glean information about the past, but she honours its precepts unthinkingly, even instinctively. It is Miss Lickerish who buries a hedgehog in wool, the custom that Tom has noted in the writings of Anthony a Wood. Yet Pym refuses to romanticize Miss Lickerish, seeing in her death the natural conclusion of an era. In her study, Emma speculates that "[Miss Lickerish has] probably been in 'good service' in her youth" (p. 42), a theory corroborated by Miss Vereker, "who had known

Miss Lickerish when she had worked at the manor . . ." (p. 204). At the funeral, Miss Vereker is the sole representative of those days and, by default, of the DeTankervilles. With the disintegration of the family, and of the society they dominated, the governess assumes their mantle of responsibility and obligation.

But an association of greater and subtler complexity links these two women, both of them survivors from another time. Their respective histories suggest that they represent the two possibilities for the heroine, as she is depicted in the romance genre. The first of these, the child-of-nature, belongs to the long tradition of heroine as victim, the seduced and abandoned country girl, who learns too late that men betray. Death is usually her resolution, if she is fortunate enough to escape transportation to Australia, the punishment George Eliot devised for poor Hetty Sorrel. At the opposite end of this spectrum is the intelligent but impoverished young woman whose circumstances doom her to the "ambiguous status" of governess.⁷ Although neither of Pym's characters fit these categories with textbook precision, a sufficient number of parallels exist to suggest that Pym is alluding to these conventions. The names she has given each provides one clue. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "lickerish" as "pleasant to the palate", "eagerly desirous", and "lecherous". Each of these supports the contention that Miss Lickerish emblemizes the natural and the sensual, an etiolated descendant of Tess Durbeyfield or Hetty Sorrel.⁸ The absence of any specifically sexual component may qualify the association, but her clearly delineated connection to Miss Vereker bolsters this impression.

Both have belonged to and been defined by the manor house, symbolic of the traditional order. Within the context of romance, its blessed enclosure represents the pinnacle of every young woman's aspirations, before and after

Jane Austen's fortunate heroines earned admission. By and large, Miss Vereker's literary antecedents fared better than did Miss Lickerish's. Jane Eyre is the most obvious example, and a kind of patron saint of many of Pym's own heroines. But unlike Jane Eyre, and her countless literary successors, Miss Vereker has not married; neither has she died. Within the social disintegration of contemporary England, the essential function of this peripheral figure assumes crucial significance. As custodian of standards and morals poised on the verge of extinction, the governess figure comes into her own. As with Miss Lickerish, Miss Vereker's name enhances her symbolic function, with its intimations of veracity. A more obscure denotation connects the surname with "vere", defined as "spring-time". (*OED*).

Although both readings bear on her role within the novel, the second has specific application to her mysterious return to the village, and with the novel's metaphoric network of vegetation images, not least in its title.

For all of these reasons, her return unites the novel's divergent motifs into one cohesive unity. Tom's encounter with the Misses Lee and Grundy sets the stage for the episode, and illuminates its implications. Initially, Tom responds favorably to the women's acceptance of their marginal lives, then becomes impatient, thinking that "... it was somehow depressing the way these elderly women kept giving him ideas for sermons. He determined not to use them" (pp. 180-181). Perhaps to justify this decision to himself, he struggles to compliment Miss Grundy on her talent with "flowers and plants". From there, his thoughts run to his special interest in natural history, and to the idea that Miss Grundy might be the "one person who could raise corn from the grains of wheat found in the wrappings of a mummy". His musings culminate in the realization that, should this be possible, "Miss Grundy might come into her own!" (p. 181). Tom's half-

ironic conjectures conclude the chapter; the opening sentence of the next transfers the action to London, and to Miss Vereker as she resolves to pay one final visit to the village. Following so closely on Tom's renunciation, the sequence vindicates everything he has denied. In both her narrowly figurative and broader literary manifestations, Miss Vereker exemplifies both of Pym's major themes.

The archetypal governess figure incorporates all of the female fantasies that seek fulfilment in marriage, as they allow its heroine some measure of self-respect and identity within the crass and often brutal strictures of the patriarchal system. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis recognizes, the traditional romance plot has two possible resolutions: "... successful courtship, marriage—or judgmental of ... sexual and social failure—death".⁹ To counteract this culturally induced and tenacious perception and pattern, DuPlessis advocates a strategy she calls "writing beyond the ending", one she defines as "the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (p. 5). Miss Vereker fulfils this dictum, however muted its expression. In old age, her independence and self-esteem sustain her, while her unflinching assessment of her present circumstances vindicates both qualities. In perhaps the most devastating of her many "plangent" sentences, Pym writes that "... Miss Vereker had nothing to complain of in her present life, except that it was not the past" (p. 183). Pym presents a governess defined by the role's precepts, who has never transgressed its boundaries, but lived with honour and dignity within its prescribed limits.

Far from being a victim of the system, Miss Vereker has taken its measure and adapted its restrictions to her purposes. She has made it her own. As Karen Newman postulates about Jane Austen's novels, "... [they]

suggest that space, time, and human relations . . . are understandable and controllable, that power is in self-mastery, internal not external".¹⁰ Newman's perception encompasses each of Pym's excellent heroines, and none more than Miss Vereker. As such, she embodies the "excellent woman", who "[is] for being unmarried . . . a positive rather than a negative state".¹¹ To the archetypal heroine of romance, the role of governess is demeaning at worst, a possible entree to an advantageous marriage at best. Jane Fairfax denotes the first possibility, Jane Eyre the second. Each interpretation is predicated on the primacy of marriage to complete, to *resolve*, the heroine's story. Had Frank Churchill failed Jane Fairfax, she would have been doomed to a near-purgatorial existence, a life spent in the limbo separating gentry from servants, with no authentic claim to either category. These implications illuminate the ineffable power of the patriarchy, and of female dependence upon it. But more, they point up the tendentious position of the governess, who is charged with the indoctrination of these tenets even as she is victimized by them.

Yet despite the potential indignity of her nebulous position, Miss Vereker has prevailed and continues to honour the outmoded code. In a world where Daphne Dagnall buys her clothes at a jumble sale and "the older members of the villagers' party [wear] newer, smarter and more brightly coloured clothes than the rector and his group"(p. 11), Miss Vereker retains her taste for traditional English quality. When she is found in the woods, she is wearing "a jersey suit of patterned blue and brown design, a good Liberty silk scarf, ribbed woollen stockings and short brown ankle boots". As well, her handbag and gloves are "good brown leather rather than plastic" (p. 196). In this elderly woman, Pym superimposes romantic convention on contemporary reality, and creates a character who epitomizes the

irreconcilable dualities which animate her work. While she may not write beyond the ending, she does create a world (and a heroine) that refuses the anodyne of romantic resolution, even while regretting the necessity of that rejection.

Arguably, Miss Vereker is the centre of *A Few Green Leaves*, the representative of the society Pym champions. Her mysterious walk in the woods, with its near-mythic implications, brings her to the deserted medieval village that Tom has sought in vain. The moment is imbued with a sense of recognition and resolution, as Miss Vereker takes refuge within "a kind of open clearing where there was a scattering of large stones, the kind one could sit down on for a brief rest" (p. 192). Lost in the woods, cold and tiring from her unaccustomed exercise, Miss Vereker finds a haven in the clearing, a respite from the change and decay that surround her.

In the specific construction of the sentence detailing this discovery, Pym stresses the sensation of momentary refuge and repose. The initial "and" in the phrase "[a]nd now she found herself . . ." encourages the impression of continuity and resolution, a consummation and completion as totally unexpected as it is instantly recognizable. As the "large stones" provide temporary refuge, "a *brief rest*" (italics mine), so an awareness of a shared past affords reassurance and welcome shelter in a bewildering present and an unknown future. The explicit usage of "brief" reinforces Pym's conviction that any life which attempts to recreate the past within the present, and to escape into that artificially maintained territory, engages in the flagrant self-delusion. Obviously, Leonora Eyre and Marcia Ivory are her most extreme examples of the phenomenon. Yet, as always with Barbara Pym, no explicitly conceived formula will suffice. She knows that the past can afford a temporary respite

from the confusion and incoherence of the present, a welcome support— a “brief rest”.

Miss Vereker's arrival neither heralds nor advocates a return to the past. But it does reaffirm the value of shared associations, and of their ritual expression in custom and ceremony. Digby Fox's eulogy to Esther Clovis, a particularly effective use of Pym's “chronicle device”, amplifies this theme. Momentarily, memories rise of Digby as a student, of his lunch with Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate. What happened to Mark, who deserted anthropology for the world of business? Did Catherine marry Alaric Lydgate? To a degree, these questions relate to Pym's naming of her characters, discussed briefly in my introductory chapter. As those allusions summon associations with England's past, most notably its literary heritage, they entwine with Pym's present to form one comprehensive and all-embracing unity. Comparably, memories of these earlier characters make us aware that we have been privy to only one part of the story, one season of each life. Inextricably entwined with these thoughts goes the awareness of life's cyclical dimension, a nuance of the more primitive agricultural society that dies with Miss Lickerish.

Too often, Pym's novels are praised (or patronized) for their “timeless” quality, the adjective implying that they take place in some remote limbo of existence, safe from the intrusions of time or reality. So determinedly misguided a blunder is troubling in itself, suggesting a rigidity of perception that sees only what it chooses to see. As the most cursory reading of *A Few Green Leaves* confirms, Pym's tough-minded pragmatism rejects even a modicum of the self-delusion that allows so blatant a misreading. The death of Miss Lickerish symbolizes the final link with an England of manor houses and villages, a society that marked its calendar by agricultural and religious

festivals, and was bound to its native soil by a near-mystic sense of kinship. Though this time cannot be recaptured, as Pym makes amply clear, its influence can linger on in the performance of rituals that assimilate past and present, enhancing each to mutual benefit. To abandon these practices is to surrender much that lends meaning and richness and, ultimately, joy to human life. Miss Vereker's return confirms this belief, and pleads for its perpetuation.

The possible love story between Tom and Emma never quite materializes but seems inevitable in the novel's final paragraphs. This anticipated resolution may resemble those of earlier novels; the match between Mildred Lathbury and Everard Bone is one example. But a crucial episode, in which both Tom and Emma become specifically and simultaneously conscious of the other, deviates from any similar encounter. As happens so frequently in Pym's work, a window separates the two; a mutual smile and wave are the only overt acknowledgment of the moment. Emma is preparing lunch for Graham Pettifer as Tom glimpses her "standing in the middle of her sitting-room with a dish of something in her hands". He smiles and waves to her and, she "smile[s] in what seemed a cordial way . . ." (pp. 32-33). The order is reversed, and the moment re-enacted from Emma's vantage point. "[S]he hoped that the dismay she felt . . . did not show in her face. . . . Still holding the dish, she smiled back; then, to her relief, he went on" (p. 34). Yet the moment of recognition, however ephemeral, is fixed in each of their memories.

Quartet in Autumn portrays a similar encounter between Norman and Marcia. But on that occasion, neither acknowledges the other. In numerous instances, one character will watch another, always protected by the window's mediating presence. So Mildred has watched Rocky leaving,

and Leonora hoped for James's return. Jessie Morrow realizes that Fabian might be attainable when she sees him looking down at her from an upstairs window. Senor MacBride-Pereira is another tireless observer, as is Daisy Pettigrew.¹² But Tom's and Emma's moment differs significantly from all of its predecessors in its mutual and positive affirmation of the other's presence. Admittedly, Norman and Marcia experience a comparable recognition, but respond in mutual denial. In the later example, an exchange occurs, a moment which, as Katherine Anne Ackley suggests, "is fixed, like the mold Emma holds, solidified . . ." (p. 19). In their evanescent encounter, Tom and Emma honour the precepts of community and initiate a possible romance.

The novel's conclusion returns to a more prosaic plane. The local history society is meeting at the rectory to hear Dr. Gellibrand discuss a history of medicine, enhanced by his collection of "old surgical instruments". Perhaps predictably, the talk disappoints Tom's expectations, since it is ". . . not so much a history of medical practice from the seventeenth century as a harking back to the 'good old days' . . . before the introduction of the National Health Service . . ." (p. 215). Yet Pym's invocation of the medical profession in this final chapter, and in this specific context, synthesizes the novel's thematic strains. Dr. Gellibrand's blithe indifference to the historic dimension is underscored by his refusal to be drawn into any discussion of Victorian medical practice, however Tom may try to elicit information from him. The older man has "noticed Daphne and Miss Lee doing something with cups at the back of the room and suspected that it was time for coffee" (p. 216). In this episode, Pym returns medicine to its rightful place, as custodian of the body and preserver of health. The clergy is charged with the spiritual dimension. Finally, Emma's decision that she "will stay in the village herself, . . . write a novel . . . and even embark on a love affair . . .", completes

the process, incorporating each aspect into one greater entity. The twin themes of romance and community combine, to presage a future which "need not necessarily be an unhappy one" (p. 220).

Notes

¹*Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 13.

² Robert Phillips, "Narrow, splendid work", *Commonweal*, 5 May 1981, p. 285.

³*Less Than Angels*, p. 101

⁴*A Few Green Leaves* (London: Granada, 1981, rpt. 1984), p. 8. All references are to this edition.

⁵*Barbara Pym*, 136.

⁶*Barbara Pym*, p. 134.

⁷Gubar and Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 349.

⁸In this context, "de Tankerville" may well echo Thomas Hardy's "d'Urberville".

⁹*Writing Beyond the Ending*, p. 1.

¹⁰Karen Newman, p. 706.

¹¹*Excellent Women*, p. 190.

¹²Katherine Anne Ackley, *The Novels of Barbara Pym* (New York: Garland, 1989), p. 19. In her introductory chapter, Ackley discusses this recurrence in Pym's work.

Conclusion

The foregoing study has examined the novels of Barbara Pym through the prism of gender, a device whose myriad implications radiate throughout the novels. The attitudes generated within a patriarchal society sanction specific modes of behavior; gender designation determines these modes and indoctrinates them through a variety of social reinforcements. This notion has particular application to my study, which centers on the insidious effect of the literary construct defined as the "marriage plot", an illusory article of faith that encourages as it perpetuates a self-defeating ideal. Within this context, women are designated as the system's chief victims; their perceived privilege and protection are exposed as social imprisonment, and an abnegation of any true sense of self, or any individual or collective autonomy. But these evils are not inflicted on women exclusively. In its demands and expectations, the patriarchy curtails and inhibits men, its effects as damaging if less overtly destructive. Clearly, economical factors privilege the masculine contingent far beyond its feminine counterpart. But money is rarely a concern in Barbara Pym's world; most of her characters are middle-class with no aspirations to advance beyond this comfortable enclave. With that condition in place, Pym examines the inequities that gender discrimination inflicts upon both sexes, and offers her highly individual but always plausible assessment. In Pym's hands, the "marriage plot" becomes the weapon of its own destruction.

Pym's ingenious adaptation of this convention has proved almost too successful. Her truncated publishing history is one evidence of this phenomenon, as is the tendency to perceive her novels as contemporary reworkings of Jane Austen's. This last has clouded critical response to Pym's work, though its deleterious effects seem, finally, to be receding. Yet parallels exist between Pym's

world and Austen's, notably in their characters and the world they inhabit. By reversing Austen's priorities Pym invokes her own unique, even subversive, vision. This reordering alters the configuration of both her characters and of their place within the scheme of things. For her protagonist, Pym chooses the convention's least likely heroine, that pillar of any community, the spinster of a certain age, who stands ready to assume any essential if unrewarding task. Jane Austen's cheerful Miss Bates belongs to this company, as does the quietly pragmatic Charlotte Lucas. By foregrounding this figure against the marriage plot's familiar setting, Pym emphasizes her essential role within both the convention and the society it reflects. But more, the marginal position attributed to this heroine becomes, in Pym's fictional universe, an advantage.

Unencumbered by the demands of marriage, the "excellent woman" is free to indulge in the shrewd observation which is her strength and salvation. In this respect, her apparently inferior status becomes a prized advantage, one she guards from any threatened incursions. Through this strategy, Pym deflects attention from romance's traditional heroine, the virtuous, often beautiful young woman whose only disadvantage is her lack of family or money. Yet it is her story that commands centre stage, its "happy ending" the marriage which resolves the problems posed above. In the telling of her tales, Pym plays on these conventional expectations.

As the preceding study has argued, the traditional heroine's role owes much, if not all, to the glamorized representation of marriage, as the genre has glorified and idealized it. Judged within this context, the choice lies between two sharply opposing hypotheses. Admission to the ranks of *bona fide* feminism requires abrogation of all the seductive and spurious precepts of the romantic myth, ideas which have shaped the thought processes of most women in Western society. This rejection frightens as much as it inspires, a response not exclusively

female. If romantic illusion has victimized and subjugated women in a multitude of ways, its pernicious consequences have infected men to comparably harmful, if less widely recognized effect. This aspect of the gender controversy commands Barbara Pym's attention, and constitutes her essential subject.

In the last year of her life, the *New Yorker* magazine commissioned and published one of Pym's rare short stories. As Hazel Holt remembers, "Barbara was very gratified to be asked to write for a magazine of international standing and felt that this really confirmed her 'rediscovery' as a writer".¹ In its concision and reticence, its subtle and meticulous structure, and its deceptively shrewd observation, this story, "Across a Crowded Room", is representative of Pym's entire literary *oeuvre*. Set in Oxford, the story describes an anniversary dinner as observed by one elderly woman guest. Echoes of Virginia Woolf's work resonate throughout the piece, most specifically in its treatment of time's aberrations, as the protagonist relives her student days in Oxford in the course of the evening. The title's romantic tag-line insinuates the essential theme, the romantic illusions which shape our memories and distort our recollection. Whether because of her age, or because of previous disillusionment, the protagonist's detachment survives the dinner relatively unscathed by the varying degrees of male insensitivity and callousness which she encounters.

Time's omnipotence frames the narrative structure, its multiple manifestations embedded within the textual whole, and all interwoven into one comprehensive web of association. In its introduction of an "anniversary dinner" to honor a "seventeenth-century worthy", the story's initial paragraph signals this intention. But most telling is the *memento mori*, "bones . . . in the college chapel". Finally, "the fresh young voices of the singers" contrast with the guests, who are "not, on the whole, fresh and young". The sense of time so invoked encloses the temporal within the eternal, while the dinner's progression, course by course,

intensifies these dimensions. The formalized observance of the anniversary celebration connotes the custom and ceremony Pym so values, and fixes the moment within its broader, universal context. As the title indicates, romantic illusion propels the slight plot, though reality extinguishes even the faintest hopes.

The story centers on the protagonist's sighting a once familiar face "across a crowded room", a situation rife with romantic possibilities. Not surprisingly, her subsequent encounter with its owner is devoid of any hint of past romance or even of remembrance on his part. Time has blurred reality for both. A walk around the college quadrangle and a mystifying piece of modern statuary result in mild embarrassment and nothing more. Despite its ironic and comic overtones, the episode echoes a recurring theme; Pym's awareness of individual isolation precludes any shared perception of defined or definable reality.

One apparently minor incident concentrates the story's thematic content and, in a broader sense, that of the entire Pym canon. As the invited guest to an Oxford formal dinner, the narrator is acutely aware that her gender and her age exclude her from any serious consideration. If she is in any doubt, her dinner companions confirm this suspicion. No one, neither her contemporaries nor their younger colleagues, engage her in any conversation beyond the most perfunctory exchange. Left to her own devices, she enjoys the unaccustomed luxury of the dinner and surveys the room. She does what all excellent women have learned to do, and enjoys the pleasures that are offered. She fits in. When the "old flame", Gervase Harding, invites her to walk in the quadrangle, she protests neither the weather nor her light summer dress, though his insensitivity does not go unnoticed:

"This wasn't here in [the old] days," he said, indicating the new quadrangle through the open door. "Would you like to stroll outside? It's such a warm evening."

Not as warm as all that, she thought, drawing her Indian stole more closely round her shoulders, but of course men's clothes were thicker and warmer (p. 377).

Indeed, this minor incident becomes a classic expression of the "wars of gender", pivoting as it does on the divergence of perception between the two, and the male insensitivity to this difference.

In the story's final paragraph, her host describes the evening to his wife. The narrator imagines their conversation, particularly in regard to herself. "She had got on very well with that young American and she had even met an old flame or something—he wasn't quite sure what" (p. 380). Again, the humour and the pathos lie in the host's blindness to the evening's reality. Yet even here, the insidious effect of romance can be discerned, operating as a regulating principle. The illusion serves a useful purpose, an order which organizes life into familiar and reassuring patterns. In "Across A Crowded Room", Pym's protagonist has learned this lesson long since, and the advantage is hers.

This acutely developed awareness, this consciousness, distinguishes Pym's heroine. Relegated to the margins of the patriarchal order, her resourcefulness transforms an apparent constraint into an ideal vantage point. To this minor player, the plot's complexities prove no distraction. At best a tenuous participant in the main plot, the excellent woman discerns its structure, and its informing ethos. Her cogent observations, the contradictions she detects between illusion and reality, illuminate the absurdities and artificialities that sustain and perpetuate these conventions.

Pym's avoidance of the expected resolution reflects this perception. Although marriage can be inferred from several of her endings, none guarantees a "happy-ever-after" future. Ianthe Broome marries John Challow, but the match has been pronounced unsuitable; Deirdre Swan loses Tom Mallow, her romantic hero, and turns to Digby Fox. Though Jessie Morrow is in love with Fabian Driver, their courtship never conforms to any accustomed or acceptable mode. In each case, marriage is less an all-consuming passion than a logical culmination of a specific process. Similarly, Mildred Lathbury's marriage to Everard Bone becomes a postscript to her story, and not its resolution. Each of these indeterminate resolutions attests to Pym's assessment of the myths which maintain the romance ethos and ensure its tenacious hold on the popular imagination. For all that, marriage is neither denigrated nor dismissed. Rather, its significance is reduced from the miraculous and magical status conferred upon it, to more tangible dimensions. Again, these conclusions reflect her essential thesis, that gender discrimination as it is manifested within the marriage plot victimizes both sexes equally. These discrepant endings promise interesting possibilities for future research.

Pym's narrative voice and her point of view suggest further avenues of exploration. In her essay "Barbara Pym's Subversive Subtext: Private Irony and Shared Detachment",² Barbara Bowman investigates the linguistic component, most specifically the question of narrative voice and gender. Pym's command of her unique narrative mode, subtle and unobtrusive though it is, proves the dominant factor in fixing the characteristic point of view of her narrator. Further, the connection between narrator and fictional character or narrator and reader reveals a high degree of technical complexity. A barely discernible gap, which narrows but never closes, separates one from the other. Pym's narrative voice can prove deceptively reticent, so masking its essential irony. In this regard,

Gerard Genette's reinterpretation of the seventeenth-century concept of *vraisemblance*, might provide a valuable critical tool. For Genette, its twentieth-century equivalent is "quite close to what today would be called an ideology, that is a body of maxims and prejudices which constitute both a vision of the world and a system of values".³ If we accept that the marriage plot constitutes an ideology, then its maxims and prejudices, as well as its system of values, provide a familiar literary landscape within which its characters can play out their designated roles. Pym plays on these assumptions and expectations to subvert its informing body of maxims, substituting for them an alternate network, epitomized in her unlikely heroines. Yet these figures owe their identity to the system that their existence contradicts and deflates. As Nancy K. Miller has observed in her discussion of Genette's thesis and its application to feminist criticism, "a heroine without a maxim . . . is destined to be misunderstood. And she is."⁴ Though Pym's heroines do not lack maxims, these are not consonant with the expectations of the role assigned them within the world they inhabit, a world governed by the rules of romance.

Both of these areas merit future study. As she does in her perception of the wars of gender, Pym invites her reader into a literary landscape where nothing is quite as it seems. Yet once her unique view is adopted, it defies suppression. In novels that are at once bleak and comic yet suffused with a muted radiance, Barbara Pym celebrates the "trivial round, the common task", recognizing in each a universal application.

Each of these possibilities for future studies hinges on the irresolvable contradiction that lies at the heart of Pym's work. Much of the adverse criticism of her fiction originates in a perceived failure, her refusal to effect the resolution which her subject matter seems to demand. This denial is doubly troubling,

hinting as it does at possibilities which far transcend her comic irony. Touching on this aspect, Nicola Shulman offers the following reflection:

Pym's novels and stories reveal the battle but obscure the victor: it is not, ultimately, clear which sex has the upper hand. Her comic, forgiving vision of men and women's failure to come to terms with one another hits as near the truth as that of much greater novelists; in fact, the only other writer who braids the threads of masculine and feminine influence with such inconclusive subtlety is Edith Wharton, whose novels were tragic. It is sometimes thought that Pym's are tragic, too.⁵

If Pym's novels are tragic, their tragedy lies in their unblinking acceptance of human isolation, and in the concomitant refusal to deny this immutable truth. Although she utilizes the "wars of gender" to supreme comic effect, her humour masks an underlying intention which justifies Shulman's allusion to tragedy. Like her admirable excellent women, their creator does not shrink from acknowledging the darker side of her vision. Her resulting revelations may discomfit, but this response should not blind her readers to her essential theme. That "inconclusive subtlety" may well prove her finest achievement of all.

Notes

¹"Introduction" to "Short Stories", *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings* by Barbara Pym, ed. Hazel Holt (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), p. 328. "Across a Crowded Room" was published first in *The New Yorker* in July of 1979, and included in *Civil To Strangers . . .*, pp. 367-380. For the discussion that follows, the second source is cited.

²*Independent Women*, pp. 82-94.

³Gerard Genette, "Vraisemblance and Motivation", *Figures 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), p. 74.

⁴Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction", *PMLA*, 96, No. 1 (1981), 36.

⁵"To marry or to smoulder gently", *Times Literary Supplement*, 25-31 December 1987, p. 1422.

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