

CHAPTER FOUR

Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove:
Something to love, oh, something to love!

Thomas Haynes Bayly.

His most recent library book had been a Barbara Pym. He had read with envious disbelief the gentle and ironic story of a village parish where the curates were entertained, fed, and generally spoilt by the female members of the congregation.

P.D. James: *A Taste for Death*

4 SOMETHING TO LOVE

4.1 Introduction

This thesis will examine those characteristics which Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner have in common, with regard to their themes, characters, and style. The preceding critical appraisal of the work of these novelists has already foregrounded some correspondences; what follows is an in-depth examination, elucidation and assessment of shared traits.

In 1965, Philip Larkin took it upon himself to write a letter to Charles Monteith, an editor at his own publisher, Faber & Faber. The letter is important, as it vividly isolates some of the most important characteristics of Pym's writing; it is also important in that Larkin's remarks may be applied equally to the work of Anita Brookner:

"I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can't find a publisher these days. This is the tradition of Jane Austen and Trollope, and I refuse to believe that no one wants its successors today. Why should I have to choose between spy rubbish, science fiction rubbish, Negro-homosexual rubbish, or dope-take nervous-breakdown rubbish? I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful and lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in the little autumnal moments of vision, that the so-called 'big' experiences of life are going to miss them; and I like to read about such things presented not with self-pity or despair or romanticism, but with realistic firmness and even humour. That is in fact what

the critics call the moral tone of the book. It seems to me the kind of writing a responsible publisher ought to support (that's you Charles!)" (Epstein, 1986:39-40).

"Ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things", people who aren't "beautiful or lucky", and who "try to behave well" are certainly the protagonists who people Pym's world, and Pym, in a letter to Philip Larkin, clearly echoes his sentiments:

"I like writing, but am rather depressed at future prospects for my sort of book. Once you said, I think, that not everybody wants to read about Negro homosexuals. It seems appropriate that I am now reading James Baldwin's *Another Country* lent to me by a young friend. A 'powerful' very well-written book, but so upsetting - one is really glad never to have had the chance of that kind of life!" (Pym, 1984d:226).

4.2 Love in its various guises

Diana Benet (1986), in a seminal work entitled *Something to Love: Barbara Pym's Novels*, finds the title of Pym's first novel a perfect epigraph for her work as a whole. According to Benet, Pym "looks with a compassionate but penetrating eye at love in its different aspects" (1986:1). This need for "something to love", whether it is romantic love which is requited or unrequited, homosexual or heterosexual, or simply emotional sustenance from family and friends, is the key theme in Pym's work, and "in Pym's universe, the heart and

mind require an object as the bridge from their fearful isolation to the world of feeling and caring" (Benet, 1986:1).

Within Pym's exploration of this subject, Benet isolates five recurrent topics, and these gather increasing power and depth with each novel (1986:11). There is the need for love (emotional closeness, the wish to belong, options for emotional fulfilment) which culminates in *Quartet in Autumn*. Other characters are given a purpose in life by the needs of others, and so a sense of responsibility "vis-à-vis other living things" (Benet, 1986:12) provides these characters with their niche in life. Observation versus participation is another recurrent theme in the novels; although this provides much of the gossipy comedy in Pym's works, "the person who is only an observer is an unfortunate" (Benet, 1986:13).

In Pym's analysis of romantic love, the power of the imagination is pre-eminent; with the exception of a few clear-headed people, Pym's heroines fall in love with images of their own creation - thus "imagination has the power . . . to shape the self and others" (Benet, 1986:13).

Finally, there are the "unsuitable attachments"; although some of these attachments are superficially unsuitable because of difference in social class or some or other minor infringement of dress or behaviour, Pym deems no attachments truly unsuitable, unless they are "those devoid of affection or those motivated by purely self-enhancing reasons, such as the wish to feel superior, the need to prove one's power to attract others, or the desire to possess someone" (Benet, 1986:14).

Pym and Brookner have in common this quest for love, and this chapter will therefore explore this theme in some depth. (Brookner's search for emotional fulfilment appears more circumscribed than Pym's; her theme of hares and tortoises is more sharply defined, although this is also a recurrent motif in Pym's novels.) It is also important to note the development of this theme in Pym's novels, as the later works are more than comedies of manners, and chronicle the lives of individuals who respond to the indignities of emotional isolation, rejection and loss by clinging gamely to the wreckage of their lonely lives.

4.3 *Some Tame Gazelle*

Benet avers that *Some Tame Gazelle* develops as an "unmarriage" plot. Pym turns the staples of the romantic novel upside down: "her heroine and hero are settled into late middle-age; love in their world is rarely anguished or even unsettling; marriage is not the glorious conclusion to the heroine's story, though she is given the option; and marriage itself is not the supreme love-inspired choice by which a man supposedly validates a woman's singularity or worth" (Benet, 1986:16).

The novel's epigraph - Thomas Haynes Bayly's

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provides the central theme of the novel. Belinda Bede, the chief protagonist, having loved the Archdeacon for over thirty years (he is now married to the formidable Agatha), is not entirely oblivious of his failings:

Naturally one did not think of the clergy as expecting anything in the way of material luxuries . . . Belinda paused, for she was remembering the vicar, Archdeacon Hooceve, and how one couldn't really say that about him. But then dear Henry was different, in some ways not like a clergyman at all. For although Belinda had loved him faithfully for over thirty years, she sometimes had to admit that he had very few of the obvious virtues that one somehow expected of one's parish priest. His letter in this month's parish magazine, announcing the arrival of the new curate, had a peevish and condescending tone that a stranger might have thought not quite the thing for an archdeacon. But the village was used to it (STG:6).

The unsuitability of the visiting curate as a possible love object is clearly indicated in the opening lines. Belinda and Harriet, two spinster sisters in their fifties, are entertaining the new curate to supper, as curates are Harriet's particular protégés:

Neither she nor Harriet had ever married, but Harriet was making her usual fuss over the new curate and was obviously prepared to be quite as silly over him as she had been over his predecessors. She was especially given to cherishing *young* clergymen, and her frequent excursions to the curates' lodgings had often given rise to talk, for people did like a bit of gossip, especially about a respectable spinster and church worker like Miss Harriet Bede. There was naturally nothing scandalous about these visits, as she always took with her a newly baked cake, some fresh eggs or fruit - for the poor young men always looked half starved - or even a hand-knitted pullover or pair of socks, begun by her in a burst of enthusiasm and usually finished, more soberly, by Belinda. And then of course she would ask them to supper (STG:5-6).

1 STG refers to PYM, Barbara. 1984b. *Some Tame Gazelle*. London : Granada.

The covert animosity between Belinda and Agatha Hoccleve (more overt in Agatha's "good" clothes from the "best houses", in contrast to Belinda's tasteful but dowdier apparel, and in minor social skirmishes) is revealed in the conversation about Harriet's suitor, Count Bianco. The undercurrent of ever-so-gentle malice is prototypical Pym:

Ricardo Bianco was an Italian count, who for some unexplained reason had settled in the village many years ago. He was a gentle melancholy man, beloved by everyone for his generosity and courtly manners and he had admired Harriet Bede for more years than could now be remembered. He had the habit of asking her to marry him every now and then, and Harriet, although she always refused him, was really very fond of him and often asked his advice about her gardening problems . . . 'Ricardo is so devoted to Harriet,' said Belinda, giving the words a full meaning which was not lost on Agatha Hoccleve.

Agatha went rather pink and said angrily, 'Count Bianco comes of a very old Italian family. I always think he and Lady Clara Boulding would be very suited to each other, but of course her father's earldom was only a nineteenth-century creation,' she mused.

Belinda was rather annoyed at this. 'I don't think Lady Clara and Ricardo would be at all suited to each other,' she said, repeating his Christian name with triumph (STG:21-22).

Pym's anti-romantic view of marriage is epitomised by the relationship between the peevish Archdeacon and his clever and ambitious wife:

Belinda recognized the voice as that of the Archdeacon. He was leaning out of one of the upper windows, calling to Agatha, and he sounded very peevish. Belinda thought he looked so handsome in his dark green dressing-gown with his hair all ruffled. The years had dealt kindly with him and he had grown neither bald nor fat. It was Agatha who seemed to have suffered most. Her pointed face had lost the elfin charm which had delighted many and now looked

drawn and harassed. She had rheumatism too, but Belinda realized that she would have to have something out of self-defence and perhaps with the passing of the years it had become a reality. One never knew.

The voice went on calling. It seemed that the moths had got into the Archdeacon's grey suit and why had Agatha been so grossly neglectful as to let this happen? The tirade was audible to anyone in the garden or in the road beyond (STG:22-23).

This description of the churlish Archdeacon Hocceve, still-beloved of Belinda, is a good illustration of Pym's acute perception of women's capacity for transforming the objects of their love into something desirable, by the power of the imagination. Although Belinda is still beguiled by Hocceve's affectations and well-preserved good looks, she is not sufficiently self-deluded into thinking that his and Agatha's marriage is the proverbial bed of roses.

It is one of the Archdeacon's grievances that his parishioners do not dote on him to the same extent as those of a rival priest, Father Plowman, although he maliciously sees himself as a victim, rather than a revered vicar:

'You need not make fun of doting spinsters,' said Belinda, roused by his mockery . . .

'No, women like to have something to dote on,' he said mildly enough, 'I have noticed that. And we in the Church are usually the victims' (STG:26).

The arrival of an eminent librarian, Dr Nicholas Parnell, reinforces the anti-romantic view of love and marriage. Parnell is the librarian of what appears to be the Bodleian, although this is not overtly stated. The felicity of friendship is a Pym theme analogous to that of love:

How nice it would be to see dear Nicholas again, thought Belinda, eating her scrambled egg and feeling happy and proud that she, a middle-aged country spinster, should number famous librarians among her friends (STG:79).

This statement is not without the typical Pym qualification, however, since the librarian is more concerned with "conveniences" in the new library extensions, than with any higher intellectual pursuits:

At least, the Library was famous, she emended. Dear Nicholas had rather sunk into obscurity since his scholarly publications of twenty years ago, and now that he had definitely abandoned all intellectual pursuits, she assumed that no more in that line was to be expected from him. Still, *Floreat Bibliotheca*, and she was sure that under his guidance it would. And what was perhaps even more important, the Library would be adequately heated and the material comfort of the readers considered (STG:79-80).

For Belinda, sense triumphs over sensibility, as she muses while busy in her garden:

How wonderful it was, when one came to think of it, what a lot of hardships plants could stand! And people too. Here Belinda realized how well her own heart, broken at twenty-five, had mended with the passing of the years. Perhaps the slave had grown to love its chains, or whatever it was that the dear Earl of Rochester had said on that subject. Belinda was sure that our greater English poets had written much about unhappy lovers not dying of grief, although it was of course more romantic when they did. But there was always hope springing eternal in the human breast, which kept one alive, often unhappily . . . (STG:130-131).

Mr Mold, the slightly non-U librarian friend of Nicholas Parnell, arrives to propose marriage to Harriet in Jane Austen fashion, while Belinda, cowering in the toolshed, muses about his "unsuitability" - a recurrent Pym theme:

Belinda hoped Harriet was not going to be disappointed. She seemed to have taken quite a fancy to Mr Mold, and it would be so unfortunate if she got any *ideas* about him. For Belinda was sure that if Mr Mold ever *did* decide to marry he would choose for his bride some pretty, helpless young woman, perhaps a reader in the Library, who asked him in appealing tones where she could find the *Dictionary of National Biography*. In any case, he was certainly not good enough for Harriet, who would soon tire of his florid complexion and facetious humour. Also, he was not really a gentleman; that seemed to matter a great deal (STG:133).

Harriet receives periodic proposals from her foreign admirer, Count Bianco, but is not too complacent to perceive the irony in Mr Mold's proposal (reminiscent of Jane Austen's protagonists whose fortunes are calculated in pounds per year).

Encouraged by her silence Mr Mold went on: 'What I mean to say is, that I think we should be very happy if we married. My house is large and comfortable and my financial position is sound . . . and,' he added, rather as an after-thought, 'I loved you the moment I saw you' (STG:137).

Harriet rejects Mr Mold for various reasons, chiefly because a comfortable life of spinsterhood spent cherishing pale eunuchs is more attractive than the unknown trials of matrimony. Mr Mold takes his leave after this superbly comic interlude, more than somewhat annoyed at Harriet's refusal. On the whole he feels that he has had a lucky escape, as Harriet had not sufficiently realised the compliment he had paid her by asking her to be his wife. He departs in an almost ebullient manner:

As he went out of the gate, he even waved one of his new gloves at her. Perhaps after all the Librarian was right when he said that marriage was a tiresome business and that he and Mold were lucky not to have been caught. He looked at his watch. There would be plenty of time for a chat with the landlord of the Crownwheel and Pinion before lunch. Marriage might put a stop to that kind of thing (STG:139).

As Mr Mold returns to London, he muses on the Librarian, Dr Parnell's fondness for quoting Johnson: "Love is only one of many passions and it has no great influence on the sum of life".

A few days later Harriet and Belinda take tea at the vicarage. Amidst much talk of matrimony, the Archbishop hands Belinda a letter from Agatha, in which she mentions meeting one of Harriet's former tame curates, Theo Grote, now the Bishop of Mbawawa. The letter itself is a reflection of Pym's ironic view of the state of matrimony:

Belinda took the letter rather gingerly, thinking it odd that he should hand it to her so willingly. But when she came to read Agatha's neat handwriting, she saw that the letter contained nothing private. It seemed to be a long list of things he must not forget to do. It was admirably practical, but unromantic. And yet, after so many years of being married to a charming but difficult man like the Archdeacon, perhaps it was rather too much to expect that Agatha should dwell on the desolation of life without him. All the same, Belinda could not help remembering her own letters, and she was sure that even now she could have found something a little more tender to write about than Florrie's and cook's wages and the Mothers' Union tea (STG:147).

While musing on Agatha's imminent return (accompanied by the eminent Bishop), Belinda is under no illusion that things between her and Henry could ever be the same as when they were young:

How odd if Henry were a widower, she thought suddenly. How embarrassing, really. 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 (STG:157-158).

This comparison of old married love to the extremely prosaic (it alludes cleverly to the curate's combinations in the opening paragraph of the novel) is a recurrent one in the novels of Pym.

The Bishop, when he does arrive, is much changed; the pale and beautiful curate has grown into a tall, stringy man with a yellow complexion and a sheep's expression. He in turn remembers the sisters only vaguely as part of a veritable coterie of knitting spinsters. However, he is quick to propose to Belinda, catching her unawares while she is attempting to make ravioli. His proposal is not unlike that of Mr Mold, and he speaks in a Henry Jamesian manner:

'Miss Bede, I am sure you must have realized - have noticed, that is - my preference for you above all the other ladies of the village,' he said, and peered at her so intently that Belinda - they were sitting together on the sofa - drew back considerably alarmed.

'No, I don't think I have,' she said anxiously. 'In any case you can hardly know me very well or you would realize that there is nothing very special about me.'

'Ah, well, one hardly looks for beauty at our time of life,' he said, with a return of some of his usual complacency.

'She is not fair to outward view . . . how does Wordsworth put it?'

'Not Wordsworth,' said Belinda automatically. 'Coleridge, Hartley Coleridge, I think.' She felt rather annoyed. Not even a middle-aged spinster likes to be told in so many words that she is not fair to outward view . . .' (STG:223).

Spurned by Belinda (chiefly because of his insensitive remarks about Milton's *Paradise Lost*), Bishop Grote is not loath to turn his attentions to the next spinster, Miss Aspinall, an apt choice in terms of suitability. The marriage theme is further enhanced by the curate's marriage to Agatha's niece, Olivia Berridge, a don in the field of Middle English Studies. She is another of the "excellent women", Harriet's rival for the affections of Mr Donne *in absentia*, as it were, but her appearance belies her more stalwart sterling qualities (another example of Pym's female characters' intrinsic superiority to their male counterparts):

. . . Miss Berridge had come forward and was making a speech of thanks. Her voice was clear and ringing, as if she were used to giving lectures or addressing meetings. What an excellent clergyman's wife she would make with this splendid gift!

'Edgar and I are simply delighted . . .' there was comfort in the words, 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. She would probably help with his sermons too, and embellish them with quotations rarer than her husband, with his Third Class in Theology, could be expected to know. A helpmeet indeed (STG:236).

At the same time Belinda is finally reconciled to the Archdeacon's 30-year marriage by Agatha's revelation that she had in fact proposed to Henry, just as Olivia had proposed to Mr Donne. An additional factor is Agatha's evident

preference for Theodore Grote, with his sheep or fish-like face. Agatha has even knitted him an ill-fitting pair of socks!

There is also a new curate to take Mr Donne's place, dark and Italian-looking, but rather pale owing to a recent nervous breakdown. And so, as far as Harriet is concerned, the *status quo* is comfortably maintained:

'We older people remember a great deal more than you think,' said Harriet coyly.

'Oh come, now,' laughed the curate, and although his voice was rather weak as a result of his long illness, Belinda was overjoyed to hear that it had the authentic ring (STG:253).

Dr Parnell's quotation from Samuel Johnson is thus refuted by the sisters, and although contented with their comfortable lot, a slight hint of doubt (and irony) is introduced by Belinda, struggling in the kitchen:

The trivial round, the common task - did it really furnish quite all we needed to ask? Had Keble really understood? Sometimes one almost doubted it. Belinda imagined him writing the lines in a Gothic study, panelled in pitch-pine and well dusted that morning by an efficient servant. Not at all the same thing as standing at the sink with aching back and hands plunged into the washing-up water (STG:227-228).

According to Benet, other themes are encountered in the novel: "Other themes, in addition to the need to love, include options for emotional fulfillment, reality versus imagination, passion versus comfortable love, happiness as a minimalist art, and, the most important in our present context, unsuitable love objects" (1986:16). Pym points out that there are small but pleasant compensations in

the unmarried state, as the tea party, in contrast to the somewhat arch dinner party at which Mr Mold and Dr Parnell are present, illustrates:

At tea they were all very gay, in the way that happy,
unmarried ladies of middle age often are (STG:169).

The basic consideration of the novel, however, is Belinda's realisation at the end, where she merges Bayly's lines with those of an old song:

Some tame gazelle or some gentle dove or even a poodle
dog - something to love, that was the point (STG:252).

4.4 *Crampton Hodnet*

Although *Crampton Hodnet* was published some time after Barbara Pym's death, it is in fact her second novel, and contains much of the ebullient high spirits of *Some Tame Gazelle*. Diana Benet (1986) finds the novel over-plotted, as the various love intrigues (there are in fact three) are mirror images of "unsuitable attachments", rather than satisfactory parallel plots which illuminate one another in a satisfactory way (1986:29). Benet devotes a scant four pages to the novel; a more explicit examination of the theme of love that is "unsuitable" follows.

It might be useful at this point to mention Pym's *penchant* for autobiography in her novels. The characters of Belinda and Harriet in *Some Tame Gazelle* were based on those of Barbara and her own sister, Hilary, while the character of Henry Hocleve was based on the love of Barbara's student life, Henry Harvey -

an unrequited passion if there ever was one! Although Henry subsequently married someone else, as in the novel, he and Barbara were to remain close friends, and he was in fact the last person to visit her in hospital before her death.

Similarly, one suspects that Barbara Bird in *Crampton Hodnet* is also based on Barbara Pym as a student; her passionate interest in clothes parallels that of Barbara herself, as revealed by her diaries.

Pym explores three love intrigues in *Crampton Hodnet*, all unsuitable for some reason or another. The first one concerns Anthea Cleveland, the pretty daughter of an Oxford don, and a student, Simon Beddoes. Pym's introduction to these two characters places the novel within the framework of a comedy of manners, while also succinctly illustrating the difference between the sexes concerning matters of the heart. The reader, at the very outset of the novel, perceives Simon as an essentially shallow and callous young man:

At the exact moment when Miss Doggett was walking up the drive to her nephew's house, Anthea Cleveland, his daughter, was being kissed in the library. The light was on and the curtains were not drawn. And so Miss Doggett was able to see Anthea in the arms of Simon Beddoes, who was telling her that although he had not known of her existence before he entered the Cleveland's drawing-room that afternoon, he had fallen desperately in love with her (CH:12).¹

1 CH refers to PYM, Barbara. 1985a. *Crampton Hodnet*. London : Macmillan.

Simon has ambitions, and while Anthea is tossing in bed, her head full of wine (literally) and roses, he is not to be distracted from his purpose by what he sees as an incidental amorous dalliance. The scene is described with Pym's usual wry irony:

Anthea was lying in bed on her stomach, with her face buried in the pillow. She was, as usual, thinking about Simon, with whom she had been out that evening. She was wide awake and it was no use trying to go to sleep, because even in the dark she saw his bright eyes looking at her. She tossed and turned and then lay on her back, regretting that these romantic evenings with much wine always made one so frightfully thirsty afterwards. She gulped down two glasses of water, then went to the window and leaned out. 'Is he thinking about me?' she whispered to the night, solemnly blowing kisses in what she imagined was the direction of Randolph College, but which was actually, and most unsuitably, the nearest way to a seminary for Roman Catholic priests.

Simon was not thinking about her. He was lying happily awake in his college bedroom, going over a speech he hoped to make at the Union debate on Thursday. Of course he adored Anthea, but "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart", especially when he is only twenty and has the ambition to become Prime Minister (CH:28).

Anthea's father, Francis Cleveland, is an Oxford don in the Henry Hoccleve mould:

He was a tall, distinguished-looking man in the early fifties, with a thin, sensitive face and dark hair streaked with grey. Young women flocked to his lectures on the seventeenth century. It was a delight for them to hear him read Donne in his rather affected voice, or to smile - not laugh - at his subtle jokes, exactly the same jokes, had they but known it, that had delighted generations of admiring young women (CH:14).

This also touches on another theme in the novel, viz. that of the continuity of the Oxford scene, where the same small dramas unfold themselves with each generation of students. Francis Cleveland, when not churning out the same

lectures and tutorials he has given for the past twenty-five years (Pym's acidulous thrust at Academia, here), works in a desultory manner on a twenty-eight-year-long study of his ancestor, John Cleveland, the poet. This affords Pym some reflections on the blessed state of matrimony, much in the manner of *Some Tame Gazelle*:

Margaret Cleveland, who had at one time helped and encouraged her husband with his work, had now left him to do it alone, because she feared that with her help it might quite easily be finished before one of them died, and then where would they be? Francis was like a restless, difficult child if he had nothing to occupy him. This book meant that he spent long hours in his study, presumably working on it. It would not be at all convenient for Mrs. Cleveland to have him hanging about the drawing-room, wanting to be amused. After nearly thirty years of married life she had come to take very much for granted the handsome, distinguished husband whom she had once loved so passionately. Indeed, she even thought poor Francis rather a bore sometimes. She was two years older than he was, a sensible, kindly woman, stout and grey-haired, with many interests in her life, although vastly different ones from those of her youth. For now she never thought of seventeenth-century love lyrics but only of her house and daughter and the generations of undergraduates, who sometimes needed her help as a friend or even a mother (CH:14-15).

Benet (1986:30) sees Margaret as "remarkably unappealing and unsympathetic", in contrast to Pym's usual approach to her female characters. This is a statement one might take issue with, as it is at odds with Margaret's later behaviour when confronted with her husband's abortive fling by the Oxford gossips:

She was angry, not because Francis had deceived her, but because he had put her in such a humiliating and ridiculous position. She shot a glance at Mrs. Killigrew, sitting there so smug and splendid for her age, and there came over her a desire to squash down her stiff straw hat, to tear the bird off it and fling it into the unseasonable fire (CH:142).

She subdues this "jungle impulse", and while not a little amused at the thought of Francis setting up house with Barbara Bird (he is much too lazy), muses on the true nature of matrimony:

Dear Francis, he had really been such a good husband. She began to look back on her married life, remembering not all the loving things he had said or written to her, not romantic moonlight evenings or spring days, as a young girl does when she has been jilted, but silly homely things: Francis shuffling about his study in his bedroom slippers, taking Anthea for a walk in Port Meadow on a Sunday afternoon, and, only yesterday, standing in the doorway with a bowl of gooseberries. Remembering all this, she was somehow reassured (CH:170-171).

Francis, while *not* listening to Barbara's essay on the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets, is beguiled by her obvious worship. This leads him to wonder what to do about it, and so introduces the second "unsuitable" couple in the novel. Barbara's perceptions of love are highly coloured by her studies of poetry (a theme which Pym has in common with Anita Brookner, although the latter's is more assiduously developed), and she takes the camp gushings of Michael, a fellow-student (who together with his *alter ego* Gabriel, is one of Pym's typical effete homosexuals), all too much to heart:

Barbara sat on the edge of the sofa and smoked nervously. At last there was a knock at the door and Michael bounded into the room. 'Oh, Birdkin,' he said, addressing Barbara, 'do go quickly and soothe poor Mr. Cleveland. I hadn't done my essay and he was *heartbroken*. He needs womanly comfort.'

If only he really did need me, thought Barbara, who had indulged in all the usual dramatic dreams about saving his life or ministering to him when he was romantically ill (CH:33).

Francis's dilemma about "what to do" about Barbara's obvious adoration is solved when his wife and daughter bundle him off to the Bodleian, for lack of anything better to do with him. This again reflects Mrs Cleveland's view of marriage, for in reviewing Anthea and Simon's relationship, she muses:

After all, Anthea was only nineteen and there were in Oxford so many other more *suitable* people. A vague company of dull but steady men rose up before the anxious mother's eyes, young dons who wouldn't at all mind acquiring a wife so long as the courting and marrying of her didn't disturb their research in the Bodleian. It was an excellent thing for a husband to have something like research to occupy his time (CH:37).

Francis's dismissal to the Bodleian affords a chance meeting with Barbara, and she is invited to Fuller's for afternoon tea. This innocent pastime does not escape the alert attention of the Oxford crones, which leads to much of the comic action of the novel. As they walk home, the cross purposes of the relationship are described with considerable humour by Pym:

They walked on in silence over Magdalen Bridge. Barbara tried hard to think of some intelligent remark to make. He'll think I'm so stupid if I don't say *anything*, she thought desperately, and I may not get another opportunity to be with him like this again.

How sympathetic she is, thought Francis. She doesn't spoil the magic of a beautiful evening - it happened to be a particularly raw December evening - by making conversation. One could enjoy it in peace. She seemed to know one's feelings (CH:56).

Barbara, although intelligent, naïvely hopes that their love can flourish on smiles, kind words, long walks and talks about poetry (unlike the infinitely more physical love that is hinted at in Simon and Anthea's relationship). In a

ludicrous tryst in a hothouse in the Botanical Gardens, in which they hide in the bushes to escape detection by the ubiquitous Michael and Gabriel, Francis attempts a chaste kiss:

He put his arm round her and gave her a tentative peck on the cheek. Not very successfully, he felt. It was so difficult not to overbalance.

'I think we'd better be platonic,' said Barbara nervously. 'It makes things so difficult if we aren't.'

'Yes, of course, I suppose it does,' said Francis regretfully. It's too dangerous, he thought. We can't trust ourselves. Those dark passionate eyes. All or nothing.

Barbara rose eagerly and brushed the dust off her skirt. She hoped he wasn't going to be like *that*. So many beautiful friendships had been spoilt because of *that* (CH:72).

On his way home, Francis impulsively buys flowers for Barbara, and requests the florist to deliver them (the same lilies his craven age had prevented him from picking for her in the hothouse). He encounters the hen-pecked librarian, Edward Killigrew (Pym's male librarians are among her superb comic creations), and their conversation might be construed as an example of the theme of love as filial duty. However Pym soon dispels any such impression by a few choice words:

'How is Mrs. Killigrew?' he [Francis] asked politely.

'Oh, Mother is very well, thank you,' said Edward. 'Full of beans as usual,' he added, his tone losing a little of its joviality. He knew that it was wicked and unfilial of him, but he sometimes wished that Mother was not quite so full of beans (CH:74).

A further tryst follows at the British Museum, where they are doggedly tailed by Killigrew in the hopes of some juicy gossip for "Mother". This provides another of the marvellous comic interludes in the novel; while Edward is happily eating his "Beano" (poached egg on baked beans) at Lyons, the couple are contemplating their dilemma. In his agitation, Francis thinks of divorce, remarriage and a little house in one of the remoter Oxford suburbs, but this is tempered by his recollection of his present comfortable situation at home. Barbara is appalled by the prospect of the "affair" turning into a sordid intrigue. Although she has "unconventional ideas about morality" over night-time Ovaltine heart-to-hearts with her female friends in college, her reasoning about the morality of her situation only includes unromantic situations like kisses in railway carriages, and she fails entirely to see the immorality of a liaison with a married man.

The prosaic nature of their relationship does not escape Pym. They are observed by the female dons of Barbara's college, excellent women who may once have experienced love (indeed, Miss Kingley sadly remarks that she once used to walk in the garden with her tutor which introduces the theme of continuity once again), but now are sadly, or gladly, past it:

Francis Cleveland was considered by many to be quite an authority on the seventeenth century and Barbara Bird was the Senior Scholar of her year, yet there was nothing in their conversation which would have led one to suspect this. It was not even enriched with suitable quotations from the great treasury of seventeenth-century love lyrics. It was quite remarkable how like Simon and Anthea they sounded as they walked into the college garden, arranging to meet later in the afternoon on Shotover Hill (CH:134).

Barbara's high-flown romanticism begins to irk Francis more and more, and moreover, age begins to tell. He expects a little more from the beautiful

Barbara than he would from one of the excellent women (a theme tentatively engaged in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and fully realised in the later *Excellent Women*), and decries Barbara as a "cold fish":

Francis sighed. Barbara was in some ways a little unsatisfactory. These beautiful walks and understanding talks between intelligent people were all very well, but he was beginning to get just a little bored with them. It was a tiring business trailing around Oxford in the hot weather pretending to be more misunderstood and ill-used than one really was, he thought, with a sudden flash of honesty. Barbara was a sweet girl and he was very fond of her, but he could not help feeling that the affair was beginning to *drag* a little. Because, when one came to think of it, almost anyone could give sympathy and understanding - Miss Morrow, Miss Nollard and Miss Foxe, even Margaret. Indeed, sympathy and understanding were a great stand-by for a plain-looking woman who could never hope to be more to a man than a dear sister. But Barbara was young and pretty, and it was surely not surprising that he should expect a little more from her than from, say, Miss Morrow. Could it be, he wondered, that she was not quite what she seemed? Those dark glances, so full of passion, from those beautiful eyes: could it be that they were just her natural way of looking at everybody? There was nothing in the invaluable *Cambridge History of English Literature* - nothing, indeed, in the whole Bodleian, even - to provide the answer to this question (CH:177).

Pym manages an academic joke at the expense of dons who cull their entire lectures from the *Cambridge History* (vide *Crampton Hodnet*:68).

A romantic outing on the river for Barbara and Francis ends in farcical chaos when Barbara falls into the river, but Barbara feels that Francis's gesture in leaping in to "save" her is "the most romantic moment she had ever known in her whole life", and so she agrees to go to Paris with him.

The idea of Paris seems less attractive to both the next morning, but they gamely set off for Dover. They miss the boat and when Barbara encounters

the solid Victorian gloom of the Druid Hotel's bedroom, her courage fails her, and she takes flight. Francis is left to make conversation with the incumbent fogies in the hotel lounge (where he is not entirely out of place), and Pym's feather-light malice is not entirely absent:

She might have been surprised and even disappointed if she could have seen Francis sitting calmly in the lounge of the Druid Hotel, making conversation with the old people.

'What's happened to your daughter?' asked an old lady. 'Has she gone to bed? I didn't know young people ever went to bed early.'

'My daughter?' For a moment Francis was puzzled . . . (CH:190-191).

On his return to Oxford his car breaks down, and he is rescued by Stephen Latimer, the curate, who is returning from his holiday in France.

The third love intrigue concerns the curate and Miss Morrow (one of Pym's more perspicacious excellent women, who surfaces again in *Jane and Prudence* as a more ruthless and hard-boiled character). Miss Morrow is the put-upon companion to Miss Doggett, an elderly gentlewoman, cossetter of curates in a rather more formidable and suffocating manner than Harriet Bede (the curate is provided with a heavy crimson eiderdown to boot), and chief gossip in the Cleveland affair. Latimer is less willing than any of the other male protagonists to be ensnared:

By instinct and from experience he distrusted all women under the age of fifty and some over it, for he was an attractive man with a natural charm of manner and had been much run after. Once, indeed, he had even got himself caught in the tangles of an engagement, so that before he knew what he was doing he found himself

strolling with a young woman before the windows of Waring and Gillow, looking at dining-room suites. But fortunately they had not got beyond looking, although there had been some unpleasantness and nearly a breach of promise case. He turned hastily from these uncomfortable recollections and was thankful that he had chosen to live with an old lady and her companion in North Oxford, where he hoped he would be safe from the advances of designing women (CH:21).

Miss Morrow is the archetypal observer, wise to Miss Doggett's hypocrisy and Latimer's complacency - "She glanced at Mr. Latimer, who sat like a handsome, complacent marmalade cat, telling Miss Doggett all his little fads" (CH:25). To Mr Latimer's horror, he finds himself drawn to Miss Morrow, as a possible sensible helpmeet, and this is further compounded by his duplicity in the matter of the vicar of "Crampton Hodnet" - an invention on the spur of the moment to excuse his absence from evensong. Miss Morrow is party to this duplicity, and Mr Latimer realises that his reputation is at stake by Miss Morrow's keeping her counsel. This, then, forms a counterpoint to the young impetuous love of Anthea and Simon, and the romantic illusions of Barbara Bird:

And it was then that it occurred to him that he might do worse than marry Miss Morrow. The idea framed itself in precisely those words - that he might do *worse* than marry Miss Morrow. Besides, he thought, warming up a little, he liked her, and as she too was a person of discreet years, he felt that she would understand the way in which this plan had come to him: not as a wild, romantic love; he had known that as a young man of nineteen, and although it had been an experience which had enriched his life, he had now reached an age when he preferred something less disturbing. Love was all very well for *young* people; he was sure Miss Morrow would understand that (CH:65).

Mr Latimer's ultimate proposal is quite as ludicrous as those of *Some Tame*

Gazelle; he is not even sure of Miss Morrow's Christian name. Miss Morrow is a more discerning arbiter of love than the other characters in the novel:

A man had asked her to marry him and she had refused. But did a trapped curate count as a man? It had been such a very half-hearted proposal . . . poor Mr. Latimer! She smiled as she remembered it. 'I respect and esteem you very much . . . I think we might be very happy together . . .' *Might*. Oh, no, it wouldn't do at all! Even Miss Morrow's standards were higher than that, so high, indeed, that she feared she would never marry now. For she wanted love, or whatever it was that made Simon and Anthea walk along the street not noticing other people simply because they had each other's eyes to look into. And of course she knew perfectly well that she would never get anything like that. It was only sometimes, when a spring day came in the middle of winter, that one had a sudden feeling that nothing was really impossible. And then, how much more sensible it was to satisfy one's springlike impulses by buying a new dress in an unaccustomed and thoroughly unsuitable colour than by embarking on a marriage without love. For, after all, respect and esteem were cold, lifeless things - dry bones picked clean of flesh. There was nothing springlike about dry bones, nothing warm and romantic about respect and esteem (CH:94).

Miss Morrow sees through Simon's arrogance and ambition, and realises that he will never marry Anthea. Despite Miss Doggett's ambitious match-making, Simon is more than a match for her, and abandons Anthea for someone more suitable in terms of his climbing the rungs of the parliamentary ladder. At the same time Mr Latimer makes a bid for freedom from the solicitous and suffocating ministrations of Miss Doggett, and sets off for France. His departure gives Pym the opportunity for a pithy aside about friendships of convenience:

As he got near the end of his journey he began to feel that he didn't want to go to France. His friend, the Reverend Theodore James, was rather too serious a companion for a holiday. He couldn't think now why he had suggested that he should join him. It wasn't as if

they had ever liked each other. Still, it was too late to do anything about it now, and at least they would be able to have a good talk about old times, rejoicing over those of their contemporaries who had not fulfilled their early promise and belittling those who had (CH:158).

Mr Latimer returns from Paris "unofficially engaged" to the daughter of Lord Pimlico, much to Miss Doggett's snobbish delight. Anthea finds a new young man, who courts her in identical fashion to Simon, and Francis, having taken a chill during his abortive fling, is cossetted by his wife. He settles back into "comfortable" married life.

It is October, there are new undergraduates, and the theme of continuity is maintained. The novel ends, as it began, with one of Miss Doggett's tea parties, and Michael and Gabriel have the last word:

'Oh, Miss Doggett, isn't it *frightful*, we're in our third year,' said Michael and Gabriel, rushing to greet her. 'Change and decay in all around we see, but not *here*.'

'No, I do not think you will find any change and decay in Leamington Lodge,' said Miss Doggett, smiling.

And Miss Morrow was inclined to agree with her (CH:216).

Benet demands more psychological insight from the characters of the novel, and censures it for failing to establish a clear tone (1986:32). It is important to note that the novel was shelved, and not revised in Pym's lifetime. Notwithstanding Benet's criticism of the novel, it has all the hallmarks of a comedy of manners. The love intrigues are given cohesion by the Oxford gossips, and the true Pym voice is heard both in the comic social interludes as well as in her sly asides. In the character of Jessie Morrow, Pym enlarges both the theme of

the "excellent women", tentatively introduced in *Some Tame Gazelle* in the characters of Belinda and Harriet, as well as introducing the perspicacious observer, who sees through the motives and social pretensions of even the most well-intentioned characters. Pym's comedy has been depicted as "high comedy"; in *Crampton Hodnet* it succeeds in being "broad", so humorous are the incidents narrated. Both traditional and modern theories of literary criticism see one of the more immediate functions of comedy as providing pleasure and entertainment, and this is precisely what, in the words of one reviewer,¹ this "period hoot" indubitably does.

4.5 *Excellent Women*

Excellent Women is an important novel for various reasons. After the good natured high spirits of both *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Crampton Hodnet*, *Excellent Women* shows Barbara Pym's maturation into a writer in full control of both themes and tone. The bolsterous fun of the first two novels has resolved itself into a fine use of dialogue, a maturity of insight, and a wry, ironic wit; also, Pym's use of the first person narrative makes for a more focussed point of view, as well as, in the tradition of *Jane Eyre*, providing for the reader's sympathetic involvement in the heroine's emotional development. In addition, the novel has sufficient psychological density to warrant the first valid comparison with the work of Anita Brookner. In *Excellent Women*, the virtuous protagonist is matched against those less excellent (the terms Brookner prefers are "hares and tortoises"); also, Mildred's drama, although this might be too

1. Bailey (1985).

strong a term for her tentative rebellion, evolves against the somewhat rocky marriage of two glamorous characters, much in the manner of Brookner's *Look at Me*. As in *Look at Me*, the heroine becomes involved with a male friend of the glamorous couple. Other resemblances are the peripheral characters, most notably the daily charlady. Mrs Morris foreshadows the appalling housekeeper of *A Start in Life*, but is more specifically reminiscent of Blanche's "daily" in *A Misalliance*.

The novel opens with a typical Pym scene, interest bordering on the rabidly curious about either arrivals or departures (*vide* Harriet and Belinda's hilarious observation of Agatha's departure in *Some Tame Gazelle*, from behind the suburban safety of a lace curtain). This provides an effective introduction to Mildred Lathbury, an "excellent woman", unmarried, a churchgoer given to good works among "distressed gentlewomen", who up until the present has had no option but to live life vicariously:

'Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there's something happening!' The voice belonged to Mr Mallett, one of our churchwardens, and its roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.

'New people moving in? The presence of a furniture van would seem to suggest it,' he went on pompously. 'I expect you know about it.'

'Well, yes, one usually does,' I said, feeling rather annoyed at his presumption. 'It is rather difficult not to know such things.'

I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her.

'Well, well, *tempus fugit*, as the poet says,' called out Mr Mallett as he hurried on.

I had to agree that it did, but I dawdled long enough to see the furniture men set down a couple of chairs on the pavement, and as I walked up the stairs to my flat I heard the footsteps of a person in the empty rooms below me, pacing about on the bare boards, deciding where each piece should go (EW:7).¹

Mildred is thus clearly the outsider, the observer, the tortoise, and at the outset of the novel she refutes any claims to romantic stature which the reader might cherish. The discrepancies between Mildred and Helena Napier, the new neighbour, are immediately illustrated:

We were, superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly. She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn skirt. Let me hasten to add 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, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her (EW:8-9).

Notwithstanding nomenclatural comparisons with *Jane Eyre*, it is interesting to note that the name Mildred means "mild warrior" - an apposite epithet for Mildred's charitable, and rather dogged nature. Mildred's character is central to the major themes of the novels, which are, as Diana Benet points out, in addition to the familiar one of "unsuitable attachments", rather more varied than in Pym's preceding novels:

1 EW refers to PYM, Barbara. 1981a. *Excellent Women*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

"The second novel Pym published, like the first, features a few unsuitable attachments, but emphasizes other themes: the burden of involvement, passivity versus self-determination, the onus of rejection, and, most importantly, the needs of others as emotional purpose, and observation versus participation. All these topics center on the character and fortunes of Mildred Lathbury: *Excellent Women* is about identity as the heroine struggles with the conflict of whether she will be an excellent woman, observing the lives of others, or a woman engaged in a full life of her own" (Benet, 1986:33).

Mildred's upbringing seems to preclude her from this "full life of her own"; although she is financially independent, having inherited money from her now dead parents, her life as a dutiful daughter of a country vicar, caring for her mother and father until their deaths, has not provided much opportunity for love. Unlike "Little Orphan Fanny", as she is maliciously called by the glamorous Alix in *Look at Me*, Mildred is both sanguine and phlegmatic:

But I have never been very much given to falling in love and have often felt sorry that I have so far missed not only the experience of marriage, but the perhaps even greater and more ennobling one of having loved and lost. Of course there had been a curate or two in my schooldays and later a bank-clerk who read the Lessons, but none of these passions had gone very deep (EW:44).

The notion of filial duty as a prerequisite for unfulfilled womanhood is touched upon here, but without rancour or self-pity. This is treated in a heavier symbolic manner by Brookner in novels like *A Start in Life*, *Providence*, and *Look at Me*, as will be seen later. Pym's characters have a more phlegmatic acceptance of their lot, and bear it with Christian fortitude; this stoic acceptance of the inevitable by the "excellent women" is not shared by Brookner's heroines,

for beneath their impeccable *coiffures* and cool demeanour, grovels an anguished psyche which demands love, recognition, belonging.

This is an important difference between the "excellent women" of Pym and Brookner's chic tortoisés, as the latter live in hope and expectancy, unresigned to their roles as "supporting actress[es] in others' dramas" (Benet, 1986:35).

The preceding description of the virtuous Mildred might seem too good to be true - a charitable stalwart, no doubt in sensible shoes, somewhat put-upon by her friends. However, in Pym's inimitable fashion, Mildred is revealed in low-key, throw-away remarks and thoughts, as humorously perspicacious, as the following instances reveal. Her discussion with Winifred, Julian Malory's sister, about suitable tenants to share the vicar's large house, is not without a hint of un-Christian malice:

I'm sure you'd have no difficulty in getting a nice tenant. Of course you'd want somebody congenial. You might advertise in the *Church Times*.¹ At this idea a crowd of suitable applicants seemed to rise up before me - canons' widows, clergymen's sons, Anglo-Catholic gentlewomen (non-smokers), church people (regular communicants) . . . all so worthy that they sounded almost unpleasant (EW:18-19).

When Mildred learns that the flat is to be let to the scheming Allegra Gray, whose name, clothes and general glamorous appearance are in contrast with the

1 In a letter to Philip Larkin, Barbara Pym wrote in 1972: "What a pity one can't still live in Bloomsbury for a pittance - that would suit me very well. I might advertise myself in the *Church Times* and now that I have definitely given up smoking I could say 'non-smoker', which would add to my desirability (gentlewoman, Anglican, quiet, 'business lady' etc) as a tenant" (Pym, 1984d:268).

conventional notions of a clergyman's widow, she is not unaware of the humour of the situation:

'How did she know about the flat?' I asked.

'She went to Miss Enders to have a dress altered and I suppose they got talking. She felt she did not like to approach me directly. She is a clergyman's widow, you see,' Julian added, as if this would explain a delicacy not usually displayed by people engaged in the desperate business of flat-hunting (EW:45).

Just as Mildred is displaced by Allegra Gray from what the gossiping parishioners perceive to be a "suitable" attachment between her and the vicar (the attachment is in their eyes only), so Helena's charming husband is out on a limb because of Helena's apparent infatuation for her anthropologist colleague, Everard Bone. As has been mentioned in the preceding critical appraisal of Pym's work, Miller (1978:24) likens Everard Bone to Jane Austen's Rochester. A more apposite analogy might be St. John Rivers, for Everard appears cold, ascetic and forbidding. Allegra and Helena are what Brookner calls "lucky", they get what they want because they are beautiful and ruthless, and a comparison with Tom and Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* is once again not inappropriate:

'You'd hate sharing a kitchen with me. I'm such a slut,' she said almost proudly (EW:10);

It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged (Fitzgerald, 1971:24).

As in Fitzgerald's novel, where Nick is the uncomfortable voyeur of Tom and Daisy's precarious marriage, and Tom's unwilling confidant in his infidelities, Mildred also assumes this role with the Napiers. Although Mildred thinks of herself as being *au fait* in social situations, she has never encountered glamorous people like the Napiers, and is out of her depth:

Platitudes flowed easily from me, perhaps because, with my parochial experience, 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 fête spoilt by bad weather . . . 'Mildred is such a help to her father,' people used to say after my mother died (EW:8).

A fascinated viewer of life in a faster lane than that to which she has been accustomed, Mildred is therefore an easy prey to Rocky's practised charms. Although beguiled, she is, however, less gullible and naïve than Frances is in *Look at Me*:

But then I remembered the Wren officers and I knew what it was that was worrying me. It was part of his charm that he could make people like that feel at ease. He must be a shallow sort of person really (EW:37).

After Mildred's tentative forays into other modes of existence, she is somewhat *distracte*, even going as far as to question the church ritual of tea on all occasions:

I began to see how people could need drink to cover up embarrassments, and I remembered many sticky church functions which might have been improved if somebody had happened to open a bottle of wine. But people like us had to rely on the tea-urn and I felt that some credit was due to us for doing as well as we did on that harmless stimulant (EW:36).

During lunch with William Caldicote, the brother of her school friend, Dora, and a previous rather tepid suitor whom she might once have married, Mildred's unaccustomed behaviour disconcerts William, who has become a fussy civil servant, more concerned with his food than with anything else. At Mildred's hesitant expression of fondness for Rocky Napier, William is quite put out of sorts:

'Life is quite disturbing enough as it is without these alarming suggestions. I always think of you as being so very balanced and sensible, such an excellent woman. I do hope you're not thinking of getting married?' . . . 'We, my dear Mildred, are the observers of life. Let other people get married by all means, the more the merrier' (EW:67).

In another of Pym's wryly observed scenes, William stands stolidly by while Mildred, impassioned by the fine Spring weather, buys herself a bunch of mimosa; however William is not immune to the need to be needed, as his feeding of the pigeons at his office illustrates.

Through Helena, Mildred is introduced to the academic world of Anthropology, and to Everard Bone. Over lunch with him, he refutes William's contention about excellent women and marriage:

'Would you have married Helena if she had not been married already?' I asked boldly.

'Certainly not,' he declared. 'She is not at all the kind of person I should choose for my wife.'

'What would she be like, that Not Impossible She?' I asked.

'Oh, a sensible sort of person,' he said vaguely.

'Somebody who would help you in your work?' I suggested. 'Somebody with a knowledge of anthropology who could correct proofs and make an index, rather like Miss Clovis, perhaps?'

'Esther Clovis is certainly a very capable person,' he said doubtfully. 'An excellent woman altogether.'

'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 (EW:175-176).

Mildred is changing subtly. Encouraged by Mrs Morris, her cleaning lady ('you're not bad-looking!'), and aggrieved by Allegra Gray's insidious behaviour and vampish wiles, she buys brighter make-up (a comic cameo with an intransigent salesgirl is offered here), and more colourful clothes. She even becomes more assertive; when Everard Bone issues a last-minute invitation to dinner couched in the most unromantic terms, she flatly turns it down:

'I rang up to ask if you would come and have dinner with me in my flat this evening. I have got some meat to cook.'

I saw myself putting a small joint into the oven and preparing vegetables. I could feel my aching back bending over the sink.

'I'm afraid I can't tonight,' I said baldly (EW:202).

When Julian Malory breaks his engagement to the scheming Allegra, Mildred is matter of fact in response to his elliptical remarks:

'I know the kind of person I should like to marry,' he went on, 'and I thought I had found her. But perhaps I looked too far and there might have been somebody nearer at hand' (EW:196).

After their separation, with Mildred acting as mediator and supervisor of the division of spoils, Rocky and Helena are reunited. Rocky's flippant approach to life does not admit of the love of an excellent woman:

'Personally, I can't imagine anything I should like less than the love of a good woman. It would be like - oh - something very cosy and stifling and unglamorous, a large grey blanket - perhaps an Army blanket.'

'Or like a white rabbit thrust suddenly into your arms,'¹ I suggested, feeling the glow of wine in me.

'Oh, but a white rabbit might be rather charming.'

'Yes, at first. But after a while you wouldn't know what to do with it,' I said more soberly, remembering that I had had this conversation about white rabbits with Everard Bone (EW:219).

Mildred receives a proposal of sorts from Everard (Miss Clovis having proved not to be a rival in love) couched in the most practical of terms. He has earlier stated that indexing and proof-reading are what wives are for, and so Mildred does not protest too much:

I had never seen Everard so enthusiastic before. 'And perhaps you could help me with the index too? Reading proofs for a long stretch gets a little boring. The index would make a nice change for you.'

1 An example of Pym's use of the *discordia concors*, or yoking together of apparently dissimilar elements, which is a constituent of wit.

'Yes, it would make a nice change,' I agreed. And before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proof-reading and indexing began to pall. Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all (EW:234).

Pym's views on marriage therefore are practical, rather than romantic. Mildred gets her man, having taken some initiative in her hesitant yet dogged pursuit of Everard, but the author questions whether men are worth the trouble of getting. Rocky is perceived as charming but careless of people's feelings; Julian Mallory is just a little foolish in his silly pursuit of a pretty face, and even the male parishioners are portrayed as dull and loath to exert themselves when there are women around to do the work.

According to Benet (1986:43), "Mildred's real story details her corruption, her ruination as a pure model of an excellent woman". A witty intimation of Mildred's fate appears early in the novel; Mildred is woken in the early hours by the roistering Napiers:

I hoped the Napiers were not going to keep late hours and have noisy parties. Perhaps I was getting spinsterish and 'set' in my ways, but I was irritated at having been woken. I stretched out my hand towards the little bookshelf where I kept cookery and devotional books, the most comforting bedside reading. My hand might have chosen *Religio Medici*, but I was rather glad that it had picked out *Chinese Cookery* and I was soon soothed into drowsiness (EW:21).

Mildred's surmised marriage to Everard Bone distinguishes her from the infinitely lonelier and more fraught ending of little orphan Fanny. Brookner's protagonist is left in agonizing isolation to chronicle her story, the hubris in

her presumptuous participation having been cruelly thwarted. Although Brookner's stringent control of tone precludes mawkishness, her heroines tend to forfeit some of the reader's sympathy by their unmitigated and unflagging suffering. What makes Mildred a much more agreeable heroine, is her lucid refusal to see herself as a victim, someone deserving a surfeit of sympathy, and her self-recognition is not *sans* wit:

I felt that I was now old enough to become fussy and spinsterish if I wanted to. I did part-time work at an organization which helped impoverished gentlewomen, a cause very near to my own heart, as I felt that I was just the kind of person who might one day become one. Mrs Napier, with her gay trousers and her anthropology, obviously never would (EW:13).

[On Julian's announcement of his engagement to Allegra, the following conversation ensues between him and Mildred]:

'Thank you, Mildred, it means a great deal to me, your good wishes, I should say. Allegra is a very sweet person and she has had a hard life.'

I murmured that yes, I supposed she had.

'The fatherless and widow,' said Julian in what seemed a rather fatuous way.

'Is she fatherless too?'

'Yes, she is an orphan,' he said solemnly.

'Well, of course, a lot of people over thirty are orphans. I am myself,' I said briskly. 'In fact I was an orphan in my twenties. But I hope I shan't ever be a widow. I'd better hurry up if I'm going to be even that!' (EW:125).

4.6 *Jane and Prudence*

In *Jane and Prudence*, Pym's fourth novel, the excellent women have temporarily been shelved. Although Jane is an excellent woman of sorts (similar to Sophia in *An Unsuitable Attachment*), she is disqualified by her ineptitude, and is unlike the unmarried, curate-cossetting spinsters of the previous novels.

Jane and Prudence may be seen as a novel of "sense and sensibility"; on the one hand there is sense, as epitomised by the attitude of Eleanor, an old university friend of Jane and Prudence:

Prue could have this kind of life if she wanted it; one couldn't go on having romantic love affairs indefinitely. One had to settle down sooner or later into the comfortable spinster or the contented or bored wife (JP:227).¹

Although Eleanor is an incidental character, Pym's nomenclatural choice is reminiscent of Jane Austen's heroine, and Jane and Prudence are both models of varying types of sensibility, moulded by literary models. One discerns a clear analogy with the novels of Anita Brookner: *A Start in Life*, *Providence*, and, to some extent *Hotel du Lac*, explore literary parallels assiduously in their treatment of the heroines' ill-fated love affairs.

Another strong parallel is the heroine's perception of men. In the novels of both Pym and Brookner, the heroines are generally well educated women - Brookner's heroines are usually academics. Despite this, they are singularly obtuse when it comes to seeing through the pretensions and failings of the men

1 JP refers to PYM, Barbara. 1981b. *Jane and Prudence*. London : Granada.

of their choice. This is more evident in the works of Brookner; however, this theme, what Benet (1986:45) describes as "the female imagination, activated by love or the mere gender difference, work[ing] on men, recreating them in different ways", is particularly important in *Jane and Prudence*. A more detailed elucidation of these parallels will be discussed when Brookner's themes are examined more closely.

Diana Benet delineates the themes of *Jane and Prudence* as follows: "*Jane and Prudence*, then, treats the effect of the imagination on the relations between the sexes, the way women see themselves and their lives, and the way they see men. In addition to the power of the imagination, the novel's other themes include the needs of 'Man,' the feminine subservience to those needs, the issue of unfulfilled promise, and the question of what men want" (1986:45).

Jane and Prudence are friends, having been tutor and pupil at Oxford. Jane is married to the vicar of a country parish, while Prudence, who is several years younger, is unmarried, having made a profession, as it were, of love affairs. At the Reunion of Old Students, the old students are classified by profession, with marriage to clergymen topping the list:

'Well, Eleanor has her work at the Ministry, and Mollie the Settlement and her dogs, and Prudence, her work, too . . .' Miss Birkinshaw's tone seemed to lose a little of its incisiveness, for she could never remember what it was that Prudence was doing at any given moment. She liked her Old Students to be clearly labelled - the clergymen's wives, the other wives, and those who had 'fulfilled' themselves in less obvious ways, with novels or social work or a brilliant career in the Civil Service. Perhaps this last could be applied to Prudence? thought Miss Birkinshaw hopefully.

She might have said, 'and Prudence has her love affairs', thought Jane quickly, for they were surely as much an occupation as anything else (JP:9).

Prudence is beautiful and exquisitely dressed, while Jane, although possessed of a faded prettiness, is a frump. In addition, she is given to fantastic trains of thought, amalgamating with hilarious alacrity disparate modes of experience much in the manner of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets (she published a book of essays in her youth and began an abortive study of the metaphysical poets), and is much given to quotations, mostly wild and inapposite. In addition, Jane has modelled herself on the clergyman's wife of Victorian fiction:

When she and Nicholas were engaged Jane had taken great pleasure in imagining herself as a clergyman's wife, starting with Trollope and working through the Victorian novelists to the present-day gallant, cheerful wives, who ran large houses and families on far too little money and sometimes wrote articles about it in the *Church Times*. But she had been quickly disillusioned. Nicholas's first curacy had been in a town where she had found little in common with the elderly and middle-aged women who made up the greater part of the congregation. Jane's outspokenness and her fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated; other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire were apparently necessary. And then, as the years passed and she realised that Flora was to be her only child, she was again conscious of failure, for her picture of herself as a clergyman's wife had included a large Victorian family like those in the novels of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge (JP:7).

Jane is unable to fit into the role she has chosen for herself; she is none of these things, as Prudence notes, recalling Jane's inept housekeeping as "the peculiar kind of desolation they [Jane and Nicholas] seemed to create around them" (JP:91).

Prudence is caught in the romantic mould; for her, love entails suffering and loss, and in keeping with her self-imposed romantic tradition, she reads poets like Coventry Patmore:

It was odd, really, that she should not yet have married. One wondered if it was really better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, when poor Prudence seemed to have lost so many times. For although she had been, and still was, very much admired, she had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was becoming almost a bad habit (JP:7-8).

This, then, recalls the "life ruined by literature" theme of Brookner, although Pym's denouement, characteristically, is less fraught.

Jane and Prudence exhibits an interesting *volte-face* on one level. In *Excellent Women*, the wives (and wives-elect) are glamorous, but are appalling housekeepers; here, the reverse is true:

One could hardly blame people for classing all university women as frumps, thought Prudence, looking down the table at the odd garments and odder wearers of them, the eager, unpainted faces, the wispy hair, the dowdy clothes, and yet most of them had married - that was the strange and disconcerting thing (JP:7).

Jane's initial view of the married state, compiled from literary gleanings, has become more utilitarian over the years. In response to Prudence's protests that she "should hardly know what to do with a husband", Jane muses:

Oh, but a husband was someone to tell one's silly jokes to, to carry suitcases and do the tipping at hotels, thought Jane, with a rush. And although he certainly did these things, Nicholas was a great deal more than that (JP:9).

Prudence's latest ill-fated infatuation is with Arthur Grampian, to whom she is a "sort of personal assistant". The love affair is mainly in her imagination, and her confession to Jane is revelatory with regard to both characters:

' . . . I suppose Adrian Grampian is the one now,' said Jane.

'His name isn't Adrian; it's Arthur.'

'Arthur; yes, of course.' Could one love an Arthur? Jane wondered. Well, all things were possible. She began to think of Arthurs famous in history and romance - the Knights of the Round Table of course sprang to mind immediately, but somehow it wasn't a favourite name in these days; there was a faded Victorian air about it.

'It isn't so much what there is between us as what there *isn't*,' Prudence was saying; 'it's the *negative* relationship that's so hurtful, the complete lack of *rapport*, if you see what I mean.'

'It sounds rather restful in a way,' said Jane, doing the best she could, 'to have a negative relationship with somebody. Of course a vicar's wife must have a negative relationship with a good many people, otherwise life would hardly be bearable.'

'But this isn't quite the same thing,' said Prudence patiently. 'You see underneath all this, I feel that there really is something, something *positive* . . .' (JP:13-14).

Arthur Grampian's "declaration" (JP:39-40) is even more cryptic than anything Julian Malory is capable of (cf. EW:125).

On Jane and Nicholas's move to a new country parish ("like a novel by Hugh Walpole", JP:11), Jane is met by a galaxy of the excellent women of the parish, but ironically fails to see the significance of the well-polished brass. Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow, two refugees from *Crampton Hodnet*, are among the parishioners. Miss Doggett is unchanged, Miss Morrow is just a little more

insinuating and shrewish. In attempting to extricate herself from the rigours of decorating the church for Harvest Thanksgiving (*Festival* has *pagan* connotations according to the parish worthies), Jane comes across the grave of Fabian Driver's dead wife, adorned with a photograph of Fabian Driver himself. In succinct and pithy Austen style, Pym disposes of Driver in a line: his late wife Constance "brought him a comfortable amount of money as well as a great deal of love" (JP:63). He is a dilettante, given to the grand gesture, rather than to remembering niggling details, but Miss Morrow has no romantic illusions about him:

' . . . I suppose even a photograph is better than nothing. You see, her husband was more interested in other women than he was in her. I believe that does sometimes happen. Her death came as a great shock to him - he had almost forgotten her existence.' Miss Morrow imparted this information in a cool, detached tone; there was nothing secretive or gossiping about her manner. 'He takes flowers to the grave sometimes,' she went on, 'flowers of a particular kind that are said to have been her favourites, but I often wonder if they really were' (JP:29).

In a fine piece of comic writing, Fabian Driver presents a vegetable marrow to the assembled ladies with a phallic flourish ("Jane felt as if she were assisting at some primitive kind of ritual at whose significance she hardly dared to guess"). Fabian excels at playing the disconsolate widower, but Jane has plans to change all this. Mindless of the ironies implicit in her new literary role models, she sets to match-making with a vengeance:

Perhaps Fabian and Prudence could meet in London. She began to plan lunches and dinners for them. Really, she was almost like Pandarus, she told herself, only it was to be a courtship and marriage according to the most decorous conventions. Fabian was a widower and Prudence was a spinster; there wasn't even the embarrassment of divorce. No, when she thought it over, Jane decided that she was really much more like Emma Woodhouse (JP:108).

As may be deduced from the foregoing, most of the men in the novel, with the exception of Nicholas and Geoffrey Manifold, a young researcher in Prudence's office, are wimps. Nevertheless, much of the novel is taken up by what constitutes "men's needs", and how these needs may be fulfilled by the ministrations of women. Men must have breakfast, meat, two eggs (women get by on one, and lunch at cheap self-service cafeterias, rather than at plush clubs), company and love to ease the burdens peculiar to their sex. Pym wittily encapsulates this in the form of Edward Lyall, the Member of Parliament (Conservative, of course) who needs to have his fatigue publicly acknowledged, as well as in the assiduous attentions of the female office workers in ensuring that the great god Grampian does not have to drink weak office tea. (Pym's depiction of the pettiness of office politicking must be the funniest ever written.)

Prudence is averse to Geoffrey Manifold, because he represents the realities of a love relationship, while she wants the romance and adulation:

He was a thin, dark young man in the late twenties who kept himself very much to himself, either because he was naturally of a retiring disposition or because he felt his position as the only man in the office apart from Dr Grampian. It was thought that he sometimes unbent with the typists, but Prudence did not like to imagine what form this unbending could take (JP:43).

Prudence is imaginative and romantic enough to be moved to tears by odd scenes witnessed in restaurants and in trains:

Disliking humanity in general, she was one of those excessively tender-hearted people who are greatly moved by the troubles of complete strangers, in which she sometimes imagined herself playing a noble part (JP:46).

Jane, with her metaphysical mind, has a more pragmatic and satirical view of love and marriage:

Mild, kindly looks and spectacles, thought Jane; this was what it all came to in the end. The passion of those early days, the fragments of Donne and Marvell and Jane's obscurer seventeenth-century poets, the objects of her abortive research, all these faded away into mild kindly looks and spectacles. There came a day when one didn't quote poetry to one's husband any more. When had that day been? Could she have noted it and mourned it if she had been more observant?

*'What doth my she-advowson fly
Incumbency?'*

she murmured. Unsuitable, of course, but she loved the lines (JP:52-53).

However, she has not discarded romantic notions entirely, nostalgically wishing to experience Oxford and young love vicariously through her daughter, Flora. Flora's love affair with a solemn, humourless geographer introduces the theme of continuity (he quotes Donne's more erotic poetry to her as have thousands of undergraduates to their girls before him), while reinforcing Pym's notion that men are transformed into objects of adulation by women's imagination.

Meanwhile Fabian Driver is growing weary of playing the bereaved widower, and Pym depicts him with malicious satire. (All the male characters in the novel, while bearing their "burdens" are living like complacent fat cats under the ministrations of women):

The steak was tender and perfectly cooked, as were the potatoes and french beans. Constance had not appreciated good food. She had been a gentle, faded-looking woman, some years older than Fabian. She had been pretty when he had married her and had brought him a comfortable amount of money as well as a great deal of love. He had been unprepared for her death and outraged by it, for it had happened suddenly, without a long illness to prepare him, when he had been deeply involved in one of the little romantic affairs which he seemed to need, either to bolster up his self-respect or for some more obvious reason. The shock of it all had upset him considerably, and although there had been several women eager to console him, he had abandoned all his former loves, fancying himself more in the role of an inconsolable widower than as a lover. Indeed, it was now almost a year since he had thought of anybody but himself. But now he felt that he might start again. Constance would not have wished him to live alone, he felt. 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 (JP:63-64).

This is the opportunity for which Jessie Morrow has been waiting. She is an excellent woman on the make, with far more spunk than that evinced by Mildred even in her more assertive moments:

Lately, however, he had become more conscious of her, though he could not have said exactly why or in what particular way. She did not seem to speak to him more than she ever had, but when he was with her he felt uncomfortable, as if she were laughing at him, or even as if she knew things about him that he didn't want known (JP:62).

This assertiveness, the worm (or tortoise) turning, as it were, is one common to Brookner: Ruth Weiss with her short-lived filial rebellion, Blanche, like Mildred of *Excellent Women*, changing her appearance, and Edith Hope, ditching her fiancé at the last moment.

Fabian Driver has kept his late wife's bedroom as it was before her death, not because of romantic sentiment (as in Victorian novels), but through laziness and lack of enterprise. That women could be capable of loving this vain so-and-so is once again illustrated by the intrinsic difference between men and women, concerning love. Jane is introduced to Dr Grampian at Prudence's office:

So this was Arthur Grampian. Certainly, now that she saw him, she realised that the name Adrian, with its suggestion of tall, languid elegance, would have been entirely unsuitable. He was of middle size, almost short, and gave an impression of greyness, in his clothes and face and in the pebble-like eyes behind his spectacles. Whatever did Prue see in him? she wondered, conscious as she asked herself of the futility of her question. Arthur Grampian and his wife Lucy - one mustn't forget his wife Lucy, though it was obvious that Prue did. But this insignificant-looking little man . . . Oh, but it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time, thought Jane. 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 - enabling them to preen themselves and puff out their plumage like birds and bask in the sunshine of love, real or imagined, it didn't seem to matter which (JP:84).

Jane is reminded of Frederick Langbridge's *A Cluster of Quiet Thoughts*, the poem about two men looking out through prison bars, one seeing mud, the other stars. However, Prudence is not entirely without insight, as she realises that marriage robs women of friends and opportunities:

Husbands took friends away, she thought, though Jane had retained her independence more than most of her married friends. And yet even she seemed to have missed something in her life; her research, her studies of obscure seventeenth-century poets, had all come to nothing, and here she was, trying, though not very hard, to be an efficient clergyman's wife, and with only very moderate success. Compared with Jane's life, Prudence's seemed rich and full of promise (JP:93).

Jane's match-making between Fabian Driver and Prudence pays off, to some extent, although Prudence's love letters outshine his in matters of erudite quotations from the English poets. Jane shows some insight here, as her private theory is that Fabian is forced to make love to his women friends as he cannot think of anything intelligent to say to them!

Prudence and Fabian's affair runs a rather banal (if "romantic") course of wining and dining, and Pym delineates the disaffected feelings of the couple with gentle acerbity:

Prudence chose what she would have, perhaps more carefully than a woman truly in love would have done, and Fabian made his choice, which was equally deliberate and not quite the same as hers (JP:114-115).

For Prudence it is a toss-up between a brilliant mind and no looks to speak of (Grampian), or "curly hair, fine eyes and good features" a little short on the *bon mots* (Fabian).

Amidst much speculation about "men's wants" (Miss Doggett contends that it is only *one thing*), Pym reaches two conclusions. Men want to be cosseted and made to feel important by women, as is illustrated by the ladies of the parish sorting through the departed Constance's "things", or they simply wish to be left alone, like Nicholas, with his animal soaps:

'We're nearly through,' said Miss Doggett briskly. 'There are one or two small personal trinkets, we thought perhaps . . .'

'Oh no . . .!' Fabian bowed his head into his hands, 'not that . . .'

'Somebody had better pour out tea,' said Jane sensibly, wondering when Fabian would raise his head.

'You, of course, Mrs Cleveland,' said Miss Doggett.

'I always do it rather badly,' said Jane. 'The ability to pour tea gracefully didn't come to me automatically when I married. I wish you would do it, Miss Doggett.'

'Very well, if you wish,' said Miss Doggett.

Fabian had by now raised his head and was taking a piece of hot buttered toast.

Mrs Arkright came into the room bearing an iced walnut cake on a plate. 'Mrs Crampton and Mrs Mayhew have just called,' she explained. 'They thought Mr Driver might like this cake. It's his favourite, I know.'

'How kind,' said Fabian, rousing himself. 'Are they at the door? Do ask them to come in so that I can thank them.'

'No, sir. They hurried away,' said Mrs Arkright.

Jane reflected how much more delicate their behaviour had been than hers and bowed her head (JP:126).

Jessie Morrow is another character who epitomises sense rather than sensibility, by making an all-or-nothing bid for Fabian (she is clad in the dear departed Constance's blue dress!):

She was not the person to cherish a hopeless *romantic love* for a man, especially if he were free and lived next door . . . (JP:158).

Jessie Morrow, too, is not blind to his shortcomings, his "unsuitability", the fact that he looks just a little common in his grey suit, and that he might be wearing brown-and-white shoes, like the hero of a musical comedy (JP:191-192). However, in a way, it is easier for Fabian to be with Jessie, as he does not have to pretend quite so much, for Jessie is immune to his posturings.

'Well, no; one has had to hurt people, I suppose,' said Fabian, tilting his head to one side. He had just realised that the distinguished-looking man sitting at that distant table was himself reflected in a mirror at the far end of the room. No wonder one had had to hurt people, he thought, resting his forehead on his hand.

'Now stop trying to look like Edward Lyall with his burden,' said Jessie sharply (JP:200).

Jessie is too sharp to allow Fabian his little lapses; Prudence relegates Fabian and Arthur to their places along with the other late lamented loves: Philip, Henry, Laurence and the others. The novel ends inconclusively, with Prudence making tentative plans to holiday with Geoffrey (he has become an object of pity to her, although in terms of "suitability" he scores fairly low), and one surmises that this romance may also be doomed. Jane is once again in London shopping for confirmation books. She meets Edward Lyall on her return home; despite failure, her passion for match-making is by no means assuaged:

Edward and Prudence . . . Why hadn't it occurred to her before? Prudence living at the Towers, a much more worthy setting for her than Fabian Driver's house . . . (JP:250).

Even Pym's questions about what constitutes true happiness in love, remain unanswered. Patience still requires to suffer in order to love, Nicholas wishes to be left alone with his harmless hobbies, while other men might require their theses typed, proof-read or indexed, or their sheets turned sides-to-middle, or even to be allowed a little of what they fancy on the side.

In *Jane and Prudence*, Pym explores with light-hearted acerbity the theme of self-centredness which she would perfect in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Less introspective than *Excellent Women*, it is a superb example of a comedy of manners, with a demure hint of the *risqué* discernible to only the most alert reader. Pym's reflections on marriage and the ideal helpmeet are centred on the sympathetic Jane's own marriage and her satirical speculations about men and marriage in general. Alice asked: "What is the use of a book without . . . pictures or conversations?" Pym gives us both, but above all, *Jane and Prudence* is a novel in which conversations are intrinsic to Pym's mildly satirical purpose. Pym's masterful control of comic dialogue is a consideration of style which will be discussed in a later chapter. *Jane and Prudence* has all the exuberance of Pym's early work; in addition it evinces the droll quirkiness and subtlety of style which characterise her best fiction.

4.7 *Less than Angels*

Less than Angels is rather less stringently about love than Pym's previous novels, and possibly less comparable to the novels of Brookner from that point of view. Of *Less than Angels*, Diana Benet (1986:64-65) says the following:

"There are many characters in this novel, but they and their communities are fully realized and integrated in two smoothly intertwined plotlines: the competition of three women for Tom's heart and the competition, among four students, for research grants. A third (and hidden) conflict involves the competition between Felix Mainwaring and Egidio Gemini for Minnie Foresight's money. The novel is about the uses, pleasures, and dangers of observation, and

some of the themes that elucidate this subject are observation versus participation, alienation or detribalization (referring specifically to characters who lack or have lost association with their tribes or tribal customs), loneliness, and the processing of life by fiction and by the study of anthropology."

In addition to the themes which Benet enumerates above, other themes (some of which Pym would expand in later novels) also surface. The novel gives a subtle picture of social change in Britain after the Second World War - a topic very tentatively broached in *Excellent Women*, and one which gains momentum in Pym's later novels.

The theme of continuity may be discerned to a lesser extent in *Less than Angels*. However, for the first time Pym looks closely at her male characters; the man's story is not chronicled from the Pym woman's doting but somewhat cynical observation; instead the man is given dreams, aspirations and despairs of his own. This is an important departure from the novelist's usual *modus operandi*, and one which distances her from Brookner's, as the latter's novels deal solely with the woman's point of view. Although Pym pays more attention to men and their *real* needs in *Less than Angels* (other than in *Jane and Prudence*), Pym seems to conclude in the end that men and women don't really understand each other, that they are in fact irreconcilable. Chiefly, however, the novel concerns observation and estrangement.

Observation and estrangement are embodied in the personae of the anthropologists, academics much given to disinterested observation. Tom is the epitome of the disinterested anthropologist, whose neutral attitude cultivated on behalf of his work in Africa permeates his personal relationships with women at home,

and ultimately leads to emotional deprivation, isolation and even to his death. This theme is reinforced by the remarks of a visiting French anthropological student, Jean-Pierre le Rossignol, a comic figure who is the detached observer *par excellence*. His observations are not without Pym's characteristic wit:

At last Jean-Pierre le Rossignol moved away from his companions and came over to her.

'This is an interesting occasion, I think,' he declared in his precise voice. 'I have not been to such a party before.'

'It isn't like any other kind of party,' said Deirdre rather desperately. 'I suppose it is interesting if you can be detached about it.'

'Oh, but one must be detached about so many things! Otherwise how could a Frenchman endure the English Sunday?' (LA:20).¹

The Frenchman's detachment is much in evidence as he studies all aspects of English society (observing the British holidaying at Bournemouth proves too much for him, however, and he escapes thankfully back to France). His comments (he has been invited to lunch by Deirdre to observe the English suburban Sunday) are telling. At the same time, Pym comments with elliptical English reserve on the social revolution in England:

'You must stay and have lunch with us,' she said. 'We are always so glad to meet Deirdre's friends. My sister, Deirdre's mother, that is, will be delighted. She is at home cooking the meal - of course things are not as they were,' she added obscurely.

Deirdre supposed that she must be remembering the old days when they would have had a cook.

¹ LA refers to PYM, Barbara. 1982. *Less than Angels*. London : Granada.

'There has been quite a social revolution in England, I believe,' said Jean-Pierre politely. 'The dynamics of culture change.'

'Such a pity,' said Rhoda, puzzling over the end of his sentence. 'In some ways, that is. Of course one does want things to be shared more equally, that is good . . .'

'Provided one gets the larger share oneself,' said Jean-Pierre, rushing forward to open the gate. 'What a delightful house!'

'It is detached, of course,' said Rhoda, 'which is an advantage.'

'Yes, detachment is a good thing. But one can be *too* detached, perhaps?' (LA:80).

Tom is the embodiment of this detachment, and this is what leads to his own emotional maladjustment. Observation versus participation is, of course, a theme explored in depth by Anita Brookner (in a very different manner, however), for her female protagonists are all outsiders who crave the participation in life enjoyed by more vivacious individuals.

Tom is the live-in lover of Catherine, and here the parallels with Brookner's heroines are more obvious. Catherine is another observer, a novelist in the manner of Edith Hope of *Hotel du Lac*. Like Tom, she is an observer, but of life closer to hand:

She felt no guilt, sitting idly at her table in the window, watching the sun streaming through the amethyst and gold stained-glass borders, while everyone around her gulped and hurried to catch trains home, for she earned her living writing stories and articles for women's magazines and had to draw her inspiration from everyday life, though life itself was sometimes too strong and raw and must be made palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing (LA:5).

In his research, Tom lays bare the layers of African society in order to dissect and examine it; Catherine does the same in order to make the rigours of life sweeter and more digestible.

In reply to Mabel's question about the happy endings in her stories, Catherine replies that life is "comic and sad and indefinite - dull sometimes, but seldom really tragic or deliriously happy, except when one's very young" (LA:86).¹ Catherine is therefore the antithesis of Deirdre, the young, yearning, inexperienced and rather naïve student Tom takes up with (in his characteristic detached fashion), after dumping Catherine.

Like the heroines of Anita Brookner, and like Jane Cleveland, Catherine has her literary role model:

Catherine was small and thin and thought of herself, with a certain amount of complacency, as looking like Jane Eyre or a Victorian child whose head has been cropped because of scarlet fever (LA:5).

She finds her male parallel in Alaric Lydgate, a disillusioned anthropologist with a trunkful of uncollated notes in the attic which are as much of a burden to him as ever Rochester's mad wife was. Catherine speculates that literary analogies might not be the prerogative of romantic women:

1 This might be interpreted as authorial comment with regard to Pym's own style and tone.

When he came back Catherine noticed that he carried two double whiskies. Oh, dear, she thought, he looks terribly Easter Island, or even like Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.

'And what is going on in your head now?' he asked, a little sarcastic.

'I was thinking,' said Catherine slowly, 'that it isn't only we poor women who can find consolation in literature. Men can have the comfort of imagining themselves like Heathcliff or Mr Rochester. I wonder if they often do?' (LA:221).

Catherine is unconventional and bohemian, and like Jane Cleveland, much given to wild and fantastic meandering of thought. She is also a departure from the archetypal Pym "excellent woman", as she realises when her relationship with Tom flounders:

I'm not one of those *excellent* women, who can just go home and eat a boiled egg and make a cup of tea and be very splendid, she thought, but how useful it would be if I were! (LA:105).

Although men are treated more sympathetically by Pym in *Less than Angels*, male chauvinist attitudes die hard. Mark and Digby, two ambitious students, personify smug male mores. On leaving the party at "Felix's Folly", they are reluctant to resume work, and justify their sponging on Catherine as follows:

'I know,' said Digby, 'let's go and see Catherine. She'll probably have some news of Tom.'

'And she may be cooking something,' said Mark practically. 'It's so depressing cooking for one person, or so one hears. Let's go and make it worth her while to prepare a good meal' (LA:22).

There is also succinct and satirical authorial comment on post-graduate students who are sustained by the ministrations of good women:

It would need the pen of a Dostoevsky to do justice to their dreadful lives, but they were by no means inarticulate themselves, often gathering in this room or in a nearby pub to talk of their neuroses and the psychological difficulties which prevented them from writing up their material. Some of them had been fortunate enough to win the love of devoted women - women who might one day become their wives, but who, if they were thrown aside, would accept their fate cheerfully and without bitterness. They had learned early in life what it is to bear love's burdens, listening patiently to their men's troubles and ever ready at their typewriters, should a manuscript or even a short article get to the stage of being written down (L.A:46).

On meeting Deirdre, Tom is tepidly attracted to her, and insensitively invites her to his mistress's party. His remarks reflect his detached manner:

Tom stood up and gathered his books together. In her eyes he had read the unspoken question, that was so often in women's eyes, 'When shall I see you again?' His first impulse had been to ask, 'Are you any good at typing?' for Catherine seemed to have so much work of her own to do at the moment, but his country upbringing had made him kind-hearted and fond of animals, and Deirdre was rather sweet really, like a puppy or a colt. So what he did say was rather different.

'Are you free on Saturday evening?' he asked. 'A friend of mine is giving a party - perhaps you'd like to come?' (L.A:64).

Although much mention is made of the usefulness of women, especially those who can cook and type, Pym shows sympathy for men, especially for Alarie:

Catherine, who had been observing Alaric closely and with the frank interest and curiosity which any new male acquaintance aroused in her, thought, why, he's rather attractive! So tall and rugged, and that rough-hewn face with its grim expression reminds me of those images from Easter Island, once seen in the British Museum. Poor old Easter Island man, bullied by his sister and her masterful friend - what things men had to put up with! (LA:88).

Catherine helps Alaric burn his notes and papers, so disposing of his burden. This elimination of the obstacle to their happiness' has obvious parallels with *Jane Eyre*, and the self-sufficient orphan shoulders the responsibility of the impotent hero, after being given refuge by the Swans, much in the manner of Jane Eyre's succour by the Rivers family:

The Swans had asked her to stay with them for a little while and she thought that she might enjoy it, entering into the comfortable kind of life which she had only seen from the outside. She would be able to keep an eye on Alaric too, for she felt somehow responsible for him since the evening when they had burned his notes (LA:238).

After seeing Tom and Deirdre in what she regards as *their* restaurant, Catherine is given to further speculation about male/female relationships:

Men appeared to be unsubtle, but perhaps it was only by contrast with the tortuous delicacy of women, who smothered their men under a cloud of sentimental associations - *our* song, *our* poem, *our* restaurant - till at last they struggled to break free, like birds trapped under the heavy black meshes of the strawberry net, she thought, changing her metaphor (LA:107).

Tom's intrinsic selfishness becomes increasingly apparent. After deciding to leave Catherine's flat, he takes two weeks to move out, convincing himself more and more of her guilt and complicity in the matter. He is not much better

with Deirdre: "He saw Deirdre as often as was necessary for his well-being and happiness, which was just a little less often than she would have liked" (LA:163). Rhoda's washing of Father Tulliver's albs again illustrates women's subservience to men, a subservience not mitigated by education. Deirdre is scornful of her aunt's ministrations, but her ministrations to Tom are similar:

'Well, I certainly wouldn't do that for a man,' said Deirdre scornfully, forgetting or perhaps putting into a higher category the typing she had sometimes done for Tom (LA:171).

Alongside these speculations about men and women, and their respective needs, Pym raises some pointers about the changing status of women. In a diary entry in 1956, Barbara Pym wrote:

"On TV I thought that women have never been more terrifying than they are now - the curled head ('Italian style'), the paint and the jewellery, the exposed bosom - no wonder men turn to other men sometimes" (Pym, 1984d:197).

This thought surfaces throughout *Less than Angels*:

He [Malcolm] finished his meal and left the room. He usually spent the evenings pottering about with his car or at the local club, where the young men of the neighbourhood gathered for mysterious manly purposes. Deirdre was reminded of the African men's associations which she had read about in the course of her studies. But the object of many of these seemed to be to intimidate the women, whereas here women were allowed to belong to some sections of the club and might almost be considered as one of its amenities. Perhaps they intimidated the men. Certainly they often led them captive in marriage . . . (LA:36-37)

and is frequently reiterated, for example in Mrs Swan's thoughts (LA:57), in the anthropologist Brandon's contention that "women were more likely to go off to Africa to shoot lions as a cure for unrequited love than in the old days, when this had been a man's privilege" (LA:70), in Catherine's discussion with Tom, "That's what seems wrong with so many relationships now, the women feeling that *they* are the strong ones and that men couldn't get on without them" (LA:111), and in trivial incidents like Digby's taking over the tasks which up till now have been the prerogative of the excellent women, and pouring the tea (LA:204).

Other themes which are touched upon in the novel are the themes of continuity, mostly evinced in the thoughts, deeds and observations of various characters, and social change. The latter reaches its peak in the later *Quartet in Autumn* and *A Few Green Leaves*, but there are already clear intimations of this in *Less than Angels*. A single example should suffice as illustration:

Mrs Beddoes lived in a terrace of large grand houses, all of which had once been lived in by wealthy families but which were now mostly turned into flats or even government offices. Even though Tom had, as Digby put it, seen the light and detribalized himself, he could not help feeling that there was something depressing about seeing rows of filing cabinets in what had once been somebody's drawing-room, wooden trestle tables standing on the parquet floors, wire trays and even a thick white cup and saucer glimmering faintly in the moonlight. If we lamented the decay of the great civilizations of the past, he thought, should we not also regret the dreary levelling down of our own? (LA:160).

The death of Tom, the alienated anthropologist (he is accidentally killed in a political riot in Africa), is not very convincing, and may possibly be seen as a way for Pym to extricate herself from the intricacies of her plot. Although

Pym employs a gallimaufry of delightful comic interludes and characters in her tale of academic aspirations, *Less than Angels* demonstrates a change in tenor, and the novel evinces more bleakness and introspection than the earlier Pym works.

Pym employs the metaphor of anthropology as a vehicle for observation and detachment; this detachment is a pervasive theme, and possibly the closest parallel with Anita Brookner's works (if one were to disregard the literary parallels already commented on) might be *Family and Friends*, where Brookner uses the device of the photographer's lens for her dispassionate survey of the human heart.¹

Furthermore, the alienation which most of the characters in *Less than Angels* suffer (from their chosen work, their families and friends), may be discerned in Brookner's analysis of her heroines' inability to reconcile the realities of their background with their romantic aspirations. Closer parallels will emerge in a subsequent analysis of Brookner's themes.

1 According to the Russian formalists, the primary aim of literature in foregrounding its medium is to *estrangle* or *defamiliarise*:

"Formalists have . . . made important contributions to the theory of prose fiction . . . An author is said to transform a story into a plot by the use of various devices to violate sequence and to deform and defamiliarise the story elements; the effect is to draw attention to the narrative medium and devices themselves, and to make patent the fictionality of its subject matter" (Abrams, 1981:166-167).

Although Pym is a more "traditional" storyteller than Brookner, both writers use devices to create fictionality, as will be indicated in subsequent chapters.

4.8 *A Glass of Blessings*

Jane and Prudence may be likened to Jane Austen's *Emma* because of its pervasive theme of matchmaking; *A Glass of Blessings* however, explores with trenchant observation and in meticulous detail a characteristic Austen theme: that maturity is achieved through the loss of illusions. Faults of character are corrected when, through tribulation, lessons are learned, and even the most minor characters are particularised in lucid style.

Unlike Emma Woodhouse, Wilmet Forsyth, the myopic heroine of *A Glass of Blessings*, tells her story in the first person. This tends to make her a more sympathetic character than Austen's Emma, and Pym's use of the first person point of view is reminiscent of Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Women*. The two characters are very different, however, for Wilmet is married, wealthy, idle, good-looking, exquisitely dressed (in the manner of a Brookner heroine), vain, complacent, a little patronising, and bored. Superficially there are few other parallels with Brookner's novels. The revelation of Piers's sexual preference towards the end of the novel is a shock to Wilmet, but the reader is cognizant of the facts long before they sink into Wilmet's immaculately coiffed head. One surmises that the Brookner heroine is in for a nasty shock; however, so anaesthetised is the reader, the jolt of the denouement so unexpected, that the reader is as stupefied as the Brookner protagonist herself.

Like Brookner's heroine in *Look at Me*, Wilmet craves participation; her yearnings are vaguer, however, and certainly not as rawly articulated. Wilmet's need for purpose to some extent parallels that of Blanche's in *A Misalliance*, although their circumstances are very different, and although Wilmet lacks the

academic excellence of Brookner's women, her obtuse short-sightedness mirrors theirs.

Many of the themes of *A Glass of Blessings* are opaque; not all are comparable to those of Brookner. Diana Benet enumerates the themes of the novel at length, but only those comparable to the themes of Brookner, and therefore the hypothesis of this thesis, will be examined.

"This desire to be needed, to have a particular purpose of some kind in relation to others, extends beyond romantic love and is central to *A Glass of Blessings*. The novel deals with a search for purpose and community that ends in success and renewal for Wilmet Forsyth, the narrator of the story. As Wilmet tries to find a particular context and way in which she might feel useful or necessary, Pym presents male characters whose emotional needs parallel Wilmet's. She might be Mrs Magoo when it comes to the needs and feelings of the people around her: at first, she fails entirely to see the similarities linking her to women and men she often considers unattractive. But Pym insists, through the parallels, that men and women are moved by identical needs, disquieted by similar yearnings. The novel is about Wilmet's education as she learns about herself, other women, men, and love - about her development as a mature woman by initiation into what she calls 'different worlds.' Some of the novel's themes, then, are the need for usefulness or purpose, detachment and engagement, the need for community, the emotional similarities of the sexes, the ubiquity of romance, and the tedium or blessings of familiarity" (Benet, 1986:77-78).

An important theme, therefore, is the theme of self-discovery, for Wilmet undergoes a sort of serendipity process in reverse, and less precipitately than Brookner's women.

Wilmet is married to a dependable but dull civil servant; she and her husband share her mother-in-law Sybil's large and comfortable house. She has no children and does not have to concern herself with the onerous problems of housekeeping, other than to arrange flowers occasionally. Wilmet's pride and snobbery emerge from her thoughts and comments: she thinks of Father Bode as a common little man, "the kind of person who would prefer tinned salmon" to smoked salmon or grouse (GB:7);¹ she preens when Piers Longridge compliments her on her appearance, and is complacent about her "talent for arranging flowers" (GB:11).

She is the reverse of the "splendid and formidable women" who are Rodney's colleagues at the Ministry, and we learn that Rodney does not wish her to work, for fear she might become like them. Wilmet craves romance, but even her birthday present is predictable and dull:

'... And that reminds me, I saw Griffin at lunchtime and arranged about your present.'

'Thank you, darling.' Mr Griffin was Rodney's bank manager. I imagined the scene, dry and businesslike: the transfer of a substantial sum of money to my account, nothing really spontaneous or romantic about it. Still, perhaps something good and solid like money was better than the extravagant bottle of French scent that some husbands - my friend Rowena's, for example - might have given. And the whole thing was somehow characteristic of

1 GB refers to PYM, Barbara. 1983a. A Glass of Blessings. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Rodney and those peculiarly English qualities which had seemed so lovable when we had first met in Italy during the war and I had been homesick for damp green English churchyards and intellectual walks and talks in the park on a Saturday afternoon (GB:12-13).

A delightful piece of understated irony occurs later, when Wilmet gives Rodney a wallet for Christmas; her complacency renders her immune to the probable wants of others, and she fails to perceive the irony in her gift to her husband.

Mary Beamish, an unmarried young woman who lives with her "difficult" old mother, is the antithesis of Wilmet, and the embodiment of selfless Christian charity and forbearance. What makes Wilmet a sympathetic, if not exactly endearing character, is her malicious streak, which she herself is well aware of:

Mary Beamish was the kind of person who always made me feel particularly useless - she was so very much immersed in good works, so *splendid*, everyone said. She was about my own age, but small and rather dowdily dressed, presumably because she had neither the wish nor the ability to make the most of herself. She lived with her selfish old mother in a block of flats near our house and was on several committees as well as being a member of St Luke's parochial church council. This particular morning, which seemed to me in my nastiness the last straw, she had just been to a blood donor session and had apparently come away sooner than she ought to have; for when Sybil and I arrived at the Settlement she was sitting on a chair surrounded by anxious fussing women, one of whom held a cup of tea seeming uncertain what to do with it (GB:19).

Mary Beamish has secured the participation in church and community affairs which Wilmet tentatively desires and needs. She is busy and involved, while Wilmet lingers on the periphery (Father Thames, for example, can never remember her name).

Another theme not mentioned by Benet is introduced at this point; the theme of filial duty is never fully explored by Pym, but the "excellent women" are *ex officio* also dutiful daughters. Mrs Beamish is in fact a figure who is given her oppressive stature only by Wilmet's comments, for she is never centre-stage, and therefore her character is not self-revelatory. She is a shadowy Miss Doggett, brought to life only by Wilmet's malicious remarks. At a committee meeting of the "Settlement", where Wilmet is typically the observer, rather than an active participant, she maliciously visualises Mrs Beamish:

'... the old people don't like fish,' I heard Mary Beamish saying. 'It's funny, really, Mother is just the same. She seems to need meat, and yet you'd think that somebody over seventy -' she gave her bright little smile and made a helpless gesture with her hands. I imagined old Mrs Beamish crouching greedily over a great steak or taking up a chop bone in her fingers, all to give her strength to batten on her daughter with her tiresome demands. I was thankful that Sybil was so independent and self-sufficient, and that my own mother, had she been alive still, would never have expected as much of me as Mrs Beamish did of Mary (GB:20-21).

Wilmet's need to be needed gives rein to vivid imaginings. She is, like the prototypical Pym excellent women, not immune to the blandishments of a charismatic clergyman. In response to Father Thames's appeal for a house-keeper, she is on the verge of insight, but in typical Wilmet fashion, she instantly dismisses thoughts which might be detrimental to her own self-image or well-being. At the same time, the dialogue is a masterful piece of comic writing:

'Good afternoon, Miss - er - Mrs . . .' Father Thames, in a splendid cloak clasped at the neck with gilt lions' heads, hovered over me like a great bird. 'Do you know,' he went on, 'I thought for one moment when I saw you sitting there reading the parish paper that you might be the answer to prayer.'

I flushed for a moment and preened myself, almost as if I had been paid some frivolous compliment at a party.

'I've just been reading about Mrs Greenhill leaving,' I said. 'I do hope you've got somebody else to keep house for you?'

'No, alas, not yet. That's why I was thinking how wonderful it would be if you, reading my *cri de coeur* -' he paused and gave me a most appealing look. I wondered whether many men, perhaps the clergy especially, went about cajoling or bullying women into being the answer to prayer. I supposed that the technique must often be successful. For a moment I even toyed with the idea that I might go and live in the clergy house and look after the priests. Then, of course, I remembered that I was married and could hardly leave Rodney even if I did nothing very much in the way of housekeeping for him. And then again I was obviously much too young to be able to live in the clergy house with two priests without fear of scandal. Why, then, had Father Thames seemed to think that I might be suitable? Perhaps I didn't look so young after all. The thought was disturbing and I put it from me quickly. It must be that the morning at the Settlement had temporarily aged me.

'You see, I have my husband to look after,' I began.

'Ah yes, women do have husbands,' he said a little peevishly (GB:27).

What makes Wilmet's half-formulated desire to care for the clergymen more ironic is the fact that she has no housewifely skills (apart from a touch with flowers), and scorns tea, classing herself as a martini drinker. The reader is constantly reminded that Mrs Greenhill, the clergy housekeeper, makes a fine cup (especially in the opinion of Father Bode, whom Wilmet considers non-U anyway).

A weekend in the country introduces Rowena and Harry, and Wilmet's complacency is once again evident:

I thought we must have made quite a pleasing picture - two tall tweedy young Englishwomen embracing on a Surrey road-side. Rowena was as tall as I, but fair, with blue eyes and a typically English complexion. We had met during the war in Italy where we had both been in the Wrens. We had also met our husbands there, two rather dashing army majors they had been then - and now they were Harry going up to Mincing Lane every day and Rodney working from nine-thirty to six at the Ministry. Both were slightly balder and fatter than they had been in Italy. I liked to think that Rowena and I had changed rather less (GB:33).

Wilmet's attitude to Rowena's children and to the solitude of the guest room (GB:34) reveals her selfish (but human) streak. Her bland assumptions about Harry are ironic, for he later makes a surreptitious pass at her. She casts him in the same mould as Rodney, equally oblivious that Rodney, too, might be unfaithful to her:

Harry was one of those non-intellectual men who are often more comforting to women than the exciting but tortured intellectuals. He might not have any very interesting conversation for his wife at the end of the day, might indeed quite easily drop off to sleep after dinner, but he was strong and reliable, assuming that he would be the breadwinner and that his wife would vote the same way as he did (GB:37).

At Rowena and Harry's cocktail party, Wilmet snobbishly feels herself superior to the "dreary cosiness" of the other couples' domestic lives. Rowena is the sister of 'Piers, an indigent ne'er do well, but possessed of "aquiline features and fair hair", and Wilmet's proposed pet project. Wilmet is given an entrée

into the world of participation, and Pym gives the reader a clear Emma-like vision of pride before the fall:

I smiled. The evening had been almost too successful, and I had the pleased and comfortable feeling I used to have after parties in Italy when I had been admired and cherished. But now, of course, it was rather different. Still, there could be no harm in having lunch with Harry or walking with Piers in the park. I could show Harry what a good wife Rowena was; and as for Piers, drifting and rootless, perhaps often drunk, it might be that my friendship could be beneficial to him. It seemed an excellent winter programme. Then, for no apparent reason, I remembered my promise to Mary Beamish to join the panel of blood donors. I saw myself lying on a table, blood pouring from a vein in my arm into a bottle which, as soon as it was full, would be snatched away and rushed to hospital to save somebody's life. There seemed at that moment no limit to what I could do (GB:47).

Ironically, someone else's blood donation proves to be more dramatic than Wilmet's, and her attempts to encroach on the men's conversation at the church social are rebuffed (she makes a *faux pas*, and puts Wilfred Bason, the new clergy housekeeper, in his place). Although Wilmet feels superior to Mary, it is in fact the dowdy but charitable Mary who draws Wilmet into the social circle at the gathering. Wilmet and the new priest, the handsome Father Ransome, exchange secret smiles, but the evening is not a success socially, as Wilmet's social prejudices are too much in evidence. It is a mark of Pym's subtlety that the reader finds the snobbish Wilmet sympathetic:

'Won't you at least have a drink before you go?' Sybil asked. 'I'm sure you'll need it.'

I refused, thinking that it might not mix very well with the refreshments I should get at the parish hall, and it occurred to me that one could perhaps classify different groups or circles of people according to drink. I myself seemed to belong to two very clearly defined circles - the

Martini drinkers and the tea drinkers though I was only just beginning to be initiated into the latter. I imagined that both might offer different kinds of comfort, though there would surely be times when one might prefer the one that wasn't available. Indeed, as I approached the parish hall, which was next door to the clergy house, I began to wish that I had paid more heed to Sybil's suggestion of a drink. I never think of myself as being nervous socially - I am always perfectly confident when entering the room at a party - but this occasion seemed unlike any I had experienced before. I suppose that church gatherings inevitably attract the strangest mixture of people . . . Would there be anyone to whom I could easily talk? I took courage from the assumption that practically everyone in the congregation would have come to meet or have a look at Father Ransome; it wouldn't be like a whist drive which attracted a very limited circle, so there was a chance that I might find somebody congenial (GB:53).

Wilmet decides to bestow the benefit of her charm and friendship on Piers, because he has had several jobs, is frequently drunk and is not yet married (traits unheard of in Wilmet's social circle). She and Sybil enrol for Piers's Portuguese lessons, and Wilmet lunches with the enigmatic Piers. Her world is divorced from his - he lives at an unsalubrious address and has a soul-destroying job. Wilmet, having led a sheltered life, cannot understand Piers's skrimshanking:

'Wilmet, when you work for your living - and I hope you may never have to - you find that there are some days when you can hardly bear to do your work, and others when you definitely cannot bear to. This has been one of those days. I woke up this morning knowing that I couldn't bear it, so I didn't go' (GB:72).

For Christmas, Wilmet receives an anonymous gift, an antique box with an enigmatic inscription. She immediately assumes it must be from Piers. At the same time she becomes more intimately involved with Mary, at first patronisingly (she helps her choose a more becoming dress in a store) and then more

practically at the funeral of old Mrs Beamish. Tellingly, Wilmet's advice to Mary is mostly about clothes, her only field of expertise beyond flower arranging. Wilmet assumes that Mary, freed at last from the tyranny of her mother, will travel, but is appalled to realise that her glib plans will come to nothing, as Mary is to join a nunnery.

Wilmet is equally deflated when she learns that the box was a gift from Harry; at the same time she is peeved that he has not asked her to lunch again (a clear case of having her cake with little appetite for it). When a bouquet of roses arrives at the house, Wilmet immediately assumes they are for her; she is disillusioned to learn they are for her gruff and practical mother-in-law. She muses over the need to be needed, but is too arrogant to see that Mary and Father Ransome are the ideal couple (rather like Harriet Smith and Robert Martin). Her daydreams revolve around Piers, and she is too obtuse and self-centred to realise that her thoughts should be turning towards her own husband. Like other Pym heroines, she is prone to romantic day-dreams:

I got into the train in a kind of daze. As it lurched on from station to station I gave myself up to a happy dream in which I went to look after Piers when he was ill or depressed or just had a hangover. And yet, had that been what I meant when I had made my offer to him? Not an offer, exactly. But if not an offer, then what? I felt that Piers really needed me as few people did. Certainly not Rodney, I told myself, justifying my foolish indulgence. Piers needed love and understanding, perhaps already he was happier because of knowing me. When I had reached this conclusion I felt contented and peaceful, and leaned back in my seat, smiling to myself (GB:159-160).

Piers doesn't want to be loved and cossetted, but wants Wilmet to be "cool and dignified". The denouement occurs when at last Wilmet visits him at his shabby

lodgings, where she is introduced to his lover, Keith. This meeting is as fraught as anything in Brookner's novels; at the same time it is horrendously comic, as Keith (he has a flat, common voice and models knitting patterns) bombards Wilmet with cosy household hints.

Piers's need is more basic than "having things in common . . . long dreary intellectual conversations [and] . . . capping each other's obscure quotations" (GB:195), and in response to Wilmet's question about what Keith does for a living, he spitefully puts the knife in, with infinitely more bitchiness than Emma's Mr Knightley:

'Not people you know, you mean, but there *are* others in the world - in fact quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world' (GB:195).

Wilmet has gained in self-knowledge and maturity:

I felt battered and somehow rather foolish, very different from the carefree girl who had set out across the park to meet Piers. But I was not a girl. I was a married woman, and if I felt wretched it was no more than I deserved for having let my thoughts stray to another man. And the ironical thing was that it was Keith, that rather absurd little figure, who had brought about the change I thought I had noticed in Piers and which I had attributed to my own charms and loving care! (GB:197).

More shocks lie in store for Wilmet: Mary's marriage to Father Ransome (a "suitable" attachment, for much good can be done with Mary's large legacy), Rodney's revelation that he has been having an affair with Prudence Bates, ironically a career girl of the type he is thought to despise, and Sybil's

announcement that she is to marry Professor Root and that Wilmet and Rodney will have to find a home of their own all contribute to the theme of the ubiquity of romance.

Wilmet is therefore forced to come to terms with reality, and this realisation gives her real as opposed to imagined purpose in life. The title of the novel is therefore an apposite one, as Wilmet is given blessings in the form of a home and caring husband, and rest in the form of the comfort of the familiar.

The theme of revelation and self-discovery is therefore comparable to many of Brookner's; unlike in the novels of Brookner, Pym's comic interludes lighten her heroine's journey (the incident of Wilf Bason and the Fabergé egg, for example, as well as Father Ransome's legacy from Mrs Beamish - too small to do good to anyone but himself), and the ending is hopeful, rather than dismal. Pym considers the needs of both the sexes, and the novel ends on a note of repose uncharacteristic of the ambiguity of Brookner's concluding lines. The novel carries a Christian message of hope lacking in Brookner's stark *angst*; the repose of what is familiar and comforting, and the maturity of counting blessings are left to the heroine:

I turned over in my mind her [Mary's] description of life as being a glass of blessings, and that naturally led me to think about myself. I had as much as Mary had - there was no reason why my own life should not be a glass of blessings too. Perhaps it always had been without my realizing it.

. . .

I turned into the street where our new flat was, and where I knew Rodney would be waiting for me. We were to have dinner with Sybil and Arnold that evening. It seemed a happy and suitable ending to a good day (GB:252).

4.9 *No Fond Return of Love*

With *No Fond Return of Love* Pym returns to the wholehearted pursuit of love; unsuitable love, certainly, but in this novel, at least in some instances, also requited. To a certain extent many of Pym's novels are constructed, albeit tenuously, around the Cinderella theme, for several of her heroines are rewarded, however ambiguously, with the hero of their choice. As Benet points out, even *A Glass of Blessings* exemplifies this theme, especially in the rewards meted out to the minor characters:

"The novel, as it draws to a close, mentions 'La Cenerentola' a couple of times, and we can identify several Cinderellas among the characters. Father Thames, in his happy translation from an English clergy house to an Italian villa, feels like Cinderella; Sybil and Mary, whom Wilmet saw as impossible candidates, are claimed by their princes; Marius Ransome goes, thanks to the glass slipper of Mary's money, from metaphoric rags to riches; and Wilmet herself, in terms of the emotional poverty she believed to be her pathetic lot, acquires a wealth of experience and insight and rediscovers her own prince" (Benet, 1986:88).

This is where Pym's method diverges from Brookner's; in Brookner's novels the princes generally reveal toadish tendencies which leave the heroines bereft, with only their intellectual *status quo* intact. A recent departure is *A Misalliance*, where the boorish Bertie is ambiguously reinstated in Blanche's life.

Besides the pervasive theme of love, for the most part happily resolved in Cinderella fashion, Pym also raises posers about filial duty, and women's

education. Another theme which surfaces is the importance of the menial - "the trivial round, the common task". An important departure from *Excellent Women*, which *No Fond Return of Love* to some extent resembles, is that Pym does not employ the first person narrative. The reader is therefore given diverse perspectives of all the characters, including the heroine, Dulcie Mainwaring, through the eyes of the various participants in love.

The participants of Pym's ménage are introduced at an incongruous setting, a learned conference of bibliographers and indexers working "on the dustier fringes of the academic world", doing humdrum, thankless tasks for people with more brilliant minds than themselves. Pym's protagonists are all in flight: Dulcie Mainwaring from a broken engagement to an "unsuitable" fiancé:

Theirs would have been one of those rather dreadful marriages, with the wife a little older and a little taller and a great deal more intelligent than the husband (NFRL:54);¹

Aylwin Forbes from an unsatisfactory marriage to an unsuitable wife, and from Viola Dace, an infatuated academic. Like Prudence Bates's affair with Arthur Grampian, the affair is largely in Viola's head, and Aylwin is discomfited by her dogged devotion:

The expression on his face as he looked at her was one of distaste, as if he were asking himself how he could ever have . . . and yet, really, when he came to think of it, he had *not*. There had been only that unfortunate evening when he had discovered her in tears in the British Museum reading room - the day before his wife Marjorie had gone

1 NFRL refers to PYM, Barbara. 1983b. *No Fond Return of Love*. London : Granada.

home to her mother. He had taken her to his house for a drink - she had confided a vague unhappiness which did not by any means seem to justify tears in a public place - he had said something about Marjorie. 'We are two lonely people,' she had said, and he had been forced to agree. Then he had kissed her and put her into a taxi. That was all (NFRL:135).

Although we are not spared the clergy in *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie (unlike Mildred Lathbury, whom she otherwise resembles) is not a churchgoer. The reader is introduced to her, at the outset of the novel, through the perspective of the dishevelled and moody Viola, an academic groupie. Dulcie's appearance typifies her as the prototypical excellent woman:

There was a light tap on the door and Viola turned round, startled, saying 'Come in' rather sharply. She saw a rather tall woman in her early thirties, with a pleasant face and fair hair, standing on the threshold. She wore a tweed suit and brogued shoes which looked too heavy for her thin legs.

Already half way to being a dim English spinster, Viola thought, conscious of herself 'making a contrast' in her black dress, with her pale, rather haggard face and untidy dark hair (NFRL:6-7).

While unpacking for the conference, Aylwin is more concerned about his bottle of gin than with his present matrimonial discord, and he relegates his wife's framed photograph to the suitcase which goes under his bed, a further illustration of his avoidance of positive action with regard to his unsatisfactory matrimonial affairs.

If Wilmet is Mrs Magoo, then Dulcie is a veritable Pink Panther (thin legs and all). She confesses that she enjoys finding out about people, as "a sort of compensation for the dreariness of everyday life" (NFRL:14). This introduces

the theme of observation - Dulcie, like Mildred, is revealed as an observer of, rather than a participator in life. Her passion for observing other people's more interesting lives is mirrored by her next-door neighbour, Senhor MacBride-Pereira, who in lace-curtain fashion, observes the ambiguous little riddles of courtship which are enacted on the pavement in front of his house.

Dulcie's compassionate nature - she broods on "beggars, distressed gentlefolk, lonely African students having doors shut in their faces, people being wrongfully detained in mental homes" (NFRL:17), extends to acting as mother confessor to Viola, and as in *A Glass of Blessings*, need surpasses love. Dulcie comments that women enjoy feeling that they are needed and doing good, and this is exemplified by Aylwin Forbes, complacently being served tea in bed. The scene is described with characteristic humour, as Pym describes academics in *déshabillé*:

Next morning Dulcie was conscious of a tramping of footsteps past her door, almost as if the place were on fire and people were hurrying to safety. It was some time before she realized that it was nothing more alarming than enthusiasm for early morning tea. All these people, whose thoughts were normally on learned matters, had shown themselves to be human. Dulcie got out of bed, put on her dressing-gown and combed her hair. She decided to get a cup of tea for Viola, who had probably slept badly after her disturbed night.

Aylwin Forbes lay in his bed listening to the clink of spoons in saucers. In his capacity as a lecturer at the conference he had imagined that a servant - perhaps even in cap and apron - would bring him a tray of tea at a suitable time. He was unprepared for the appearance of Miss Randall, in hair-net and pince-nez and the flowered quilted dressing-gown he already knew, standing in the doorway with a cup and saucer in her hand.

'You lucky men, lying in bed while we women wait on you,' she said, in an uncharacteristically arch tone, perhaps to cover her embarrassment at seeing him all tousled and in his pyjamas (NFRL:20).

When Aylwin faints during his lecture ("Some problems of an editor"), Dulcie is able to offer practical assistance in the form of smelling salts. Like other Pym heroines, Dulcie is captivated by a romantic image of Aylwin, even during the incongruity of his "nasty turn":

Why, he's beautiful, thought Dulcie suddenly. Like a Greek marble, or something dug up in the garden of an Italian villa, the features a little blunted, with the charm of being not quite perfect (NFRL:25).

Aylwin is comparable to Brookner's male academics, men who achieve stature through the adoring gaze of admiring women. He is a more sympathetic character than Brookner's cardboard men, however. A further Pym staple and side-kick is Miss Lord, Dulcie's cleaning woman, who urges Dulcie to "make more of herself" (NFRL:261), in order to secure her share of male attention. Miss Lord's derisive remarks about Dulcie's degree in English literature to some extent fuel Dulcie's own perception of the work she does:

'All this reading,' said Miss Lord. 'I used to like a book occasionally, but I don't get time for it now.'

'I took my degree in English Literature,' said Dulcie, almost to herself.

'But what does it lead to, Miss Mainwaring?'

'I don't know exactly. Of course learning is an end in itself, and a subject like English Literature can give one a good deal of pleasure.'

'Yes, I suppose it's nice,' said Miss Lord doubtfully.

'One can always teach,' Dulcie went on, 'or get some other kind of job.'

'Like you do, Miss Mainwaring, with all those cards and bits of paper spread out on the floor.' Miss Lord laughed, a light derisive laugh (NFRL:32).

The new equality of the sexes (or superiority of women, possibly) is illustrated by Dulcie's neighbour's daughter, Monica, who is a lecturer in botany, while her son is a florist. Although Pym does not comment on women's romantic ideals being fanned by a too rigid adherence to the false injunctions of literature to the extent that Brookner does, she does question the validity of traditional female education.

When Laurel, Dulcie's niece, arrives in London to stay with Dulcie while taking a secretarial course, she confesses to English and History being her favourite school subjects:

Ah, thought Dulcie sardonically, how many a young girl must have given the same answer to that question! And really what did it mean? A sentimental penchant for King Charles the First or even Napoleon, or a liking for the poetry of Marvell, Keats, or Matthew Arnold? That was what it had been with her, but she had been fortunate in having an ambitious English teacher and parents who, rather bewildered by the whole thing, could afford to send her to Oxford. And now she was making indexes and doing little bits of research for people with more original minds than herself. What, as Miss Lord would ask, did it lead to? And what answers should a girl give now when asked what had been her favourite subjects at school? Russian and nuclear physics were perhaps too far advanced, as yet, but English and History would hardly do (NFRL:50).

Dulcie's work, however, is compatible with the notion of filial duty, for it enabled Dulcie to care for her mother until her death. This is a peripheral theme in the novels of Pym, which is examined with greater force by Brookner.

Aylwin has good reason to feel persecuted by women (after sighting Viola sitting in the public gardens wearing eccentric red shoes, he believes she has become unhinged by her love for him), for Dulcie, by dint of some rabid reference work, is hot on his trail.¹

On perusing *Crockford* at the public library, she learns that Aylwin's brother, Neville Forbes, is clergyman of a parish close to the home of her Aunt Hermione and Uncle Bertram. From *Who's Who*, she learns that Aylwin's recreations are affectedly given as "conversation and wine". Her sleuthing extends to Aylwin's mother-in-law, and her too-early arrival for supper with Viola offers her the opportunity for a constructive ten minutes. The scene is described with Pym's usual sense of the ridiculous:

There was hardly enough to occupy her for ten minutes in the road; perhaps she would have to arrive too early after all. Then she noticed that there was a telephone box ahead. She could spend the time making a telephone call, though to whom she could not think, even when she had shut herself into the box. An anonymous call of a scurrilous nature? Were calls of this kind made by people who had an odd ten minutes to fill in before arriving

1 "She always had a passion for 'finding out' about people who interested her. Tracking people down and looking them up were part of her absorbing interest (that continued all her life) in 'research into the lives of ordinary people'. Her researches ranged from looking people up in *Who's Who*, *Crockford*, or street directories to the actual 'tailing' of the object of her investigation. She was very resourceful at this and often said that she would have made a good detective. Her powers of observation and research were certainly of great benefit to her as a novelist" (Pym, 1984d:10).

somewhere? Dulcie could think of nobody to telephone at this moment, when most people would be preparing or eating the evening meal, but she might do a little research in the directories. Why, for instance, had she not thought of looking up Aylwin Forbes's mother-in-law? (NFRL:61-62).

Viola is revealed as a sluttish housekeeper, much in the manner of Helena Napier. When Dulcie and Helena attempt a little unobtrusive sneaking past Aylwin's house, he is revealed on the doorstep looking "much older", and informally dressed in "a blue cardigan, old grey trousers, and red slippers". Nevertheless Dulcie builds him up in her romantic imagination as looking like Rupert Brooke, or a Greek statue - once again revealing the power of women's imagination in investing unexceptional men with larger-than-life traits.

Laurel sees Dulcie as a fuddy-duddy aunt, and when Viola comes to stay with Dulcie, her perspective of Viola is of a "repressed spinster". Laurel has struck up some sort of friendship with Paul, a relationship which in terms of intellectual level should be deemed suitable, but she is discouraged by his muteness and cold hands. When Dulcie hears that Viola is indexing Aylwin's book, she suffers pangs of jealousy, but being a character in a Pym novel, this is manifested only by her emptying the washing-up bowl with a violent movement. She is, of course, unaware of the circumstances which surround this:

'I suppose he's paying you for it?' Dulcie asked, her brusque tone concealing the twinge of unworthy envy she felt at the idea of it.

'Well, no . . .' Viola hesitated. She did not want to admit to Dulcie that she had offered to do Aylwin's index, unfairly waylaying him on the steps of the British Museum so that he could hardly have refused (NFRL:79).

They concede that the vain Aylwin is one of those people "from whom one asks no return of love . . . Just to be allowed to love them is enough" (NFRL:79), once again an example of women elevating the objects of their affection to the sublime.

Dulcie undertakes a reconnaissance of Deodar Grove, where Aylwin's wife, Marjorie, having fled her husband, is now living with her mother. Mrs Williton refers to Marjorie as "my girlie", but Marjorie, seen from Dulcie's perspective, is revealed as a dumb blonde, and middle-aged mutton masquerading as lamb, and she deduces that Aylwin Forbes has married beneath him.

Aylwin is melodramatically described as a "libertine" by the excellent women at the jumble sale. Both Marjorie and Viola are unsuitable attachments, and Aylwin is not unaware of the irony of his situation:

After all, he had known from the beginning that Marjorie could never enter into his work with him, but he had been touched and flattered by her show of interest and by the way she had listened when he talked. And the way she had looked - so fragile and appealing with her fluffy curls, almost a 'girl wife' - had been such a refreshing change from the frightening elegance, frowsty bohemianism, or uncompromising dowdiness, of those women who could really have entered into his work and would probably in the end have elbowed him out of it altogether. It was particularly ironical that it should have been Viola Dace, of all of them, who had brought about the break between him and Marjorie . . . (NFRL:87-88).

Unable to deliver his propitiatory bouquet to Marjorie, owing to the jumble sale and the profusion of excellent women, Aylwin dumps it on the nearest Cinderella, who happens to be Viola Dace. She is not at home, and he hands it

over to Laurel, who is immediately captivated by his good looks. With the arrogance of youth, she finds Viola's indexing both "comic and pathetic".

A visit to an art exhibition at the gallery where Maurice, Dulcie's ex-fiancé works, proves a cathartic experience for Dulcie:

The afternoon had been a rather painful experience altogether; but later, when she was able to analyse her feelings, she realized that it was not her love for Maurice that had returned during their short meeting in the art gallery, but the remembrance of the unhappiness he had caused her. And that, she told herself stoutly, would soon pass (NFRL:103).

Maurice, however, appears willing to take up the unsuitable attachment where it left off, and accepts a dinner invitation with Dulcie and Viola. The dinner party, with Aylwin and Laurel also present, is a maliciously detailed skirmish of "odd numbers", with Maurice attracted to Viola rather than to the more "suitable" Laurel, and Aylwin beguiled by Laurel, an even more unsuitable attachment:

So she was going to live in the house opposite with the young girls! 'We may meet some time,' he added. He had wanted to ask her if she would come and cheer a lonely old man some evening, but could think of no way of expressing it that might not be misunderstood. Besides, he was only forty-seven and did not want to make himself sound ridiculous (NFRL:136).

Aylwin's ridiculous plotting to secure a chance encounter with Laurel reveals his vain posturing, on the one hand, and his ludicrously pragmatic conception of Dulcie on the other:

The days were drawing out now and he could easily be walking round the square in the twilight at about the time the young girls were coming home. For the first time in his life he began to wish he was an animal-lover, that he had a dog who needed to be taken out for an evening walk. A vigorous, bounding animal, from whom the girls might need to be protected, might be the best, and he imagined himself apologizing for Nigger's or Rover's - he had conventional ideas of dogs' names - muddy paws soiling one of the fluffy coats. Or, again, a smaller animal, one who might be petted and exclaimed over, should also be considered. But then, advantageous though the possession of a dog might be, what was he going to do with it when he was not using it to walk round the square? He disliked animals in the house and it was too much to expect the servants to have it with them all the time. The only solution would be to ask that nice Dulcie Mainwaring to look after it, but then the animal would be too inaccessible to be available when it was needed (NFRL:145-146).

A second theme of flight and pursuit is introduced when Aylwin's handsome clergyman brother is forced to leave his parish on an extended visit to his mother's seaside hotel at Taviscombe after "unpleasantness" with one of the doting spinsters of his parish. Like Aylwin, Neville is extremely handsome, and complacently aware of it:

Neville flushed. He could not help knowing that he was exceptionally good-looking, but he did not like to be called 'pretty', even by his mother. Perhaps unconsciously - though who can be sure of this? - he glanced over towards the mirror and saw a face similar in features to that of his brother Aylwin, but less careworn, the hair fairer and curling round the temples like an angel in an Italian Renaissance painting. 'Miss Spicer didn't - er - fall in love' - he brought out the words with difficulty - 'with my appearance' (NFRL:178).

Although Miss Spicer is a shadowy figure, only perceived by Dulcie as weeping in Father Forbes's church, the theme of filial duty¹ is reiterated by Father Forbes's maliciously gossiping housekeeper:

'And Miss Spicer?'

'Well, she's still here, of course - can't leave her mother. Old Mrs Spicer's over eighty now and getting a bit difficult. Keeps falling out of bed,' said the housekeeper, with a callous little laugh. 'So she couldn't be left.'

'How dreadful,' said Viola in a faint tone, seeing the whole pathetic picture - spinster tied to elderly mother and falling in love with handsome celibate priest (NFRL:166-167).

Dulcie and Viola, the super-sleuths, repair to Taviscombe for their Easter holiday. Pym gives a satirical picture of an English holiday resort and the discomfort of the holiday makers, who resort to drinking gin in their stark hotel rooms. Meanwhile Aylwin has despatched Mrs Williton and Marjorie to Taviscombe as well (his mother-in-law is by now convinced of his libertine nature when she visits him at his house and finds him plying Laurel with drink). Aylwin himself decides to visit Taviscombe to settle his unsatisfactory marriage for once and for all, and his thoughts about Dulcie are prophetic:

As soon as the train started moving, Aylwin opened the literary weekly he had bought at the bookstall and tried to become absorbed in it, or at least to seem to be absorbed . . . But as he turned the pages he was thinking of Laurel and the charm of her youth and freshness - à l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs - though of course that sort of thing don't last for ever. Some women never seemed to

1 Although many of Pym's male characters (mostly librarians) are held in an emotional stranglehold by Mother (the capital letter is intentional), the physical care of frail or dying parents, as in the novels of Brookner, is done by dutiful daughters.

have had it. Miss Mainwaring (Laurel's aunt), Miss Randall, Miss Foy, and even Vi Dace - or Viola, as she liked to be called - one could not imagine these women, working on the seedier fringes of the academic world, sparkling with that exciting freshness. Sure, he had not known any of them at the age of nineteen, so perhaps he wasn't really being fair to them. It was just possible to imagine that Dulcie, who was of course younger than the others, might have had it. Indeed, she still had that trusting, vulnerable look in her eyes which some women never lost, however unsuitably it went with their ageing exteriors (NFRL:234).

The Taviscombe episode is a clever piece of stage management by Pym, who succeeds in bringing together her protagonists as well as the peripheral characters of Neville Forbes and his mother (at the same time it is intimated that the widowed Mrs Forbes's marriage was an unsuitable attachment which worked).

Dulcie is an unwilling eavesdropper in the confrontation between Aylwin and his indignant mother-in-law. With the typical myopia of a Brookner heroine, she fails to realise that Aylwin has Laurel in mind as co-respondent in the ensuing divorce - she has already complacently dismissed the postcard which Aylwin sent Laurel from Italy as a purely paternal, pedagogical gesture. The episode has all the humour of a Restoration comedy of manners, as Dulcie, hidden by a screen, is party to the conversation. Aylwin now complacently sees himself as the impetuous romantic:

'So she's not Italian?'

'No - and the whole affair is at present of too nebulous a nature to be even - one might say - *dreamed of*. I have not - I dare not, indeed - you must understand this - say more. It would be most imprudent, to say the least of it.' Aylwin resumed his pacing and stood over by the window, his eyes fixed on a distant height just visible through the private hotels and boarding-houses opposite.

Why was Aylwin talking in this odd pseudo-Henry-Jamesian way, Dulcie wondered. Was it an affectation, the outcome of his sojourn in Italy, or did it indicate real uncertainty of mind? And who was this unknown, vaguely hinted-at, 'other woman'? Not Italian - that was something, but it didn't get one very far. Perhaps this time it was a sensible person of his own age or a little younger, with similar academic and literary interests - somebody he had met at the conference - somebody like herself, or, she thought suddenly, like Viola. It would certainly be ironical if, after all this time, he should decide to turn to Viola. But no, it must be somebody unknown to them and there was a curious kind of relief in acknowledging this - like finding only Pontings' catalogue lying on the mat instead of the more interesting but trouble-bringing letter (NFRL:246-247).

After Dulcie's confrontation with Aylwin on learning that he wishes to marry Laurel, he realises that there might be hidden depths to "that nice Miss Mainwaring". Laurel has found his proposal ludicrous, and abandons him in favour of Paul. Other knots are tidily tied: Marjorie has a romantic encounter on a train, Viola favours an apparently unsuitable, but romantic attachment with Dulcie's aunt's housekeeper's Viennese brother (Pym, in anthropological manner, makes much of "kinship ties"), while Aunt Hermione makes an eminently suitable match (she has proved a tower of strength, in fact) with a recently bereaved vicar. For one who has chosen to live life vicariously, and who has not even taken the trouble to improve her appearance in the manner of Mildred Lathbury, Dulcie is manifoldly rewarded. She rejects the role of excellent woman which both Maurice and Neville Forbes wish to inflict on her:

And Dulcie could see how it would be. Apart from the occasional kind word and fair distribution of favours he would be impersonal and aloof - as a celibate priest must be. And might she not find herself falling in love with him - unlikely though it seemed at the moment? All that church work, with so little reward, might well become an intolerable burden - a thankless task, indeed (NFRL:283).

Aylwin decides to play the role of Edmund in *Mansfield Park*. The Cinderella theme reaches its logical conclusion, with Senhor MacBride-Pereira watching like a benevolent fairy godmother from his upstairs window, content in his role as observer:

Leaning forward in the taxi - for he had still not worked out how to get to Dulcie's suburb by public transport - Aylwin wondered how he was going to convince her of this curious change in his feelings, when such a short time ago he had foolishly confided in her his love for Laurel. Obviously the pretext of having some work that she might do for him was the best way of arranging to see her, though surely she would not have refused a word of comfort to a lonely and deserted man, he thought, seeing himself now as this character which was not unlike the lonely old man whom Laurel was to have solaced.

As for his apparent change of heart, he had suddenly remembered the end of *Mansfield Park*, and how Edmund fell out of love with Mary Crawford and came to care for Fanny. Dulcie must surely know the novel well, and would understand how such things can happen. What a surprise it would be, not least to his family and to Dulcie herself, who had so often urged him to make a 'suitable' marriage, if, when he was free, this very marriage should come about! Yet here he was being true to type after all. For what might seem to the rest of the world an eminently 'suitable' marriage to a woman no longer very young, who could help him with his work, now seemed to him the most unsuitable that could be imagined, simply because it had never occurred to him that he could love such a person. It was all most delightfully incongruous. Just the sort of thing Aylwin Forbes would do.

...

Senhor MacBride-Pereira, watching in his window, had heard the taxi, but was not quick enough to see who got out. He took a mauve sugared almond out of a bag and sucked it thoughtfully, wondering what, if anything, he had missed (NFRL:286-287).

No Fond Return of Love is a serene work, a comedy of manners in which all loose ends are tied up by Barbara Pym's sedulous craftsmanship. Together with

the theme that people are created by other people's irrational perceptions of them, Pym emphasises the importance of the trivial:

'People blame one for dwelling on trivialities,' said Dulcie, 'but life is made up of them. And if we've had one great sorrow or one great love, then who shall blame us if we only want the trivial things' (NFRL:186).

Although Anita Brookner's women are consumed by the trivia of everyday life, they appear to gain little succour from the comfort of the familiar and everyday. In its satirical look at academe, as well as in the posturing character of Aylwin Forbes, *No Fond Return of Love* resembles Brookner's *Providence*, but characteristically, Pym's novel, even in fulfilling the Cinderella theme ambiguously for its heroine (for could anybody be happy with such a posturing prince?), is gentler in its subtle reconciliation of romantic attachments.

4.10 *An Unsuitable Attachment*

An Unsuitable Attachment, Barbara Pym's ill-fated seventh novel, brings together a plethora of themes, as well as a veritable family gathering of characters encountered in former Pym novels - from Mildred Bone (née Lathbury), *in absentia* at Rupert Stonebird's dinner party, to Wilf Bason, also *in absentia*, whose "Mum" has mercifully "passed on". In addition, there are constant nuances of former novels: the flotsam and jetsam of incidents (St Peter's toe), of characters (John's similarity to Maurice), and of conversations (Dr Johnson's pronouncements on love), make *An Unsuitable Attachment* a positive

Pym cornucopia, which gives the reader, to borrow a Pym phrase, "almost too much".¹

As the title suggests, the novel centres on unsuitable attachments, but other familiar themes encroach: a sense of purpose through the fulfilment of others' needs as well as detachment and observation as surrogates for involvement are articulated. Peripheral concerns adumbrate the gain and loss of faith, and speculate, not without irony, on Christian charity. Barbara Pym gives a more incisive picture of social change and nostalgia for what is past in *An Unsuitable Attachment* "suggesting beyond its miniature exactness the vast panorama of a vanished civilization"², while also commenting on the emancipation of women. However, these are peripheral themes, for the novel is essentially a comedy of manners about marriage, and people's need for "something to love", although this might well result in unsuitable attachments being formed as well as consummated.

Literary analogies are prevalent in Pym's style, in the form of Jane Austen-like authorial comment, depiction of character, and delineation of plot, rather than in the usual plethora of quotations or romantic literary role models, and this may be linked to the themes of stereotyping and foiled expectation which Benet discerns in the novel. The characters "think and judge in terms of stereotypes, expecting those around them to conform to these inflexible patterns" (Benet, 1986:103).

1 A remark by Barbara Pym about Margaret Drabble's novels (Pym, 1984d:329).

2 As somewhat grandiosely stated by the blurb on the dust jacket.

The novel opens on a Jane Austenish note - an unattached man moves into the neighbourhood, and is therefore a target for speculation among the ladies. The theme of observation and detachment is introduced in the opening paragraph, as Pym introduces us to yet another pothering anthropologist:

They are watching me, thought Rupert Stonebird, as he saw the two women walking down the road. But no doubt I am watching them too, he decided, for as an anthropologist he knew that men and women may observe each other as warily as wild animals hidden in long grass (UA:13).¹

Rupert's desire for observation extends to camouflage, for at a dinner party he changes into "a dark suit as a kind of protective colouring, so that he could sit quietly observing rather than being observed" (UA:39), rather than for reasons of social etiquette.

Diana Benet finds Rupert Stonebird one of Pym's "most interesting and sympathetic men", and comments:

"If Barbara Pym wrote about 'excellent men,' Rupert might be one of them: in his air of inexperience and awkwardness with the opposite sex, as in his essential decency, he resembles women like Mildred Lathbury Bone" (1986:105).

Mark Ainger, the vicar of the parish, has "remote good looks", and an air of seeming not to be particularly interested in human beings. His wife Sophia, who is childless, is consequently besotted by her cat, Faustina, an indifferent feline. Although Pym does not write about children, she demonstrates a

1 UA refers to Pym, Barbara. 1984c. *An Unsuitable Attachment*. London : Granada.

remarkable perspicacity for the yearning of the childless, without resorting to overt statement. Mark is vicar of an unfashionable parish; although certain sections are in the process of gentrification, with "newly done up houses with their prettily painted front doors and rather self-conscious window-boxes and bay trees in tubs" (UA:16-17), others show an alien culture insidiously encroaching on London:

This was the very fringe of his parish, that part that would never become residentially 'desirable' because it was too near the railway, and many of the big gaunt houses had been taken over by families of West Indians. Mark had been visiting, trying to establish some kind of contact with his exotic parishioners and hoping to discover likely boys and men to sing in the choir and serve at the altar. He had received several enthusiastic offers, though he wondered how many of them would really turn up in church. As he walked away from the house, Mark remembered that it was along this street, with its brightly - almost garishly - painted houses that Sophia had once seen a cluster of what she took to be exotic tropical fruits in one of the windows, only to realize that they were tomatoes put there to ripen. 'Love apples,' she had said to Mark, and the words 'love apple' had somehow given a name to the district, strange and different as it was from the rest of the parish which lay over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line (UA:16).

The tomatoes, which Sophia mistakes for something more exotic, are a symbol of what Benet calls "distortions attending observation" (1986:102), and other examples proliferate: Daisy Pettigrew mistakes drying washing for a statue of the Virgin Mary; Penelope mistakes that ubiquitous excellent woman, Esther Clovis, for a glamorous siren, and visualises Ianthe, rather than Sister Dew, as a purveyor of oxtails to indigent anthropologists.

Sophia has, in a sense, married beneath her, for Mark does not have money of his own. She is a loyal wife, but her nostalgic yearning for her more gracious

childhood life is paralleled by Pym's intermittent depictions of Britain's more gracious past. The novel is, to a large extent, a novel of parallels:

She sighed, not wanting to add that they reminded her of her childhood home in case Mark should be hurt. In these less gracious surroundings she had tried to recapture the atmosphere of her mother's house with bowls of quinces, the fragrance of well polished furniture, and the special Earl Grey tea, but she often realized how different it really was (UA:20).

Ianthe Broome, who lives in one of the little gentrified houses in the parish, appears to be the archetypal Pym excellent woman, from her dress, of an uninteresting shade of blue, and slightly too long, to ladylike stockings ("medium beige") and sensible court shoes (with heels rather too low). She is the only daughter of parents now dead, although her mother, the formidable "canon's widow", is given more prominence than the deceased canon. She is clearly a self-effacing "gentlewoman", who, in common with Pym's other female protagonists, fancies a decorous (and premonitory) literary role model:

She saw herself as an Elizabeth Bowen heroine - for one did not openly identify oneself with Jane Austen's heroines - and *To The North* was her favourite novel (UA:26).

Ianthe is more rigidly bound by convention than Pym's other heroines, and having been a dutiful daughter, the ghost of the canon's widow looms large in her more unorthodox actions. She lacks the whacky metaphysical mind of characters like Mildred and Dulcie, but Pym, as always, portrays her characters with compassion and understanding. There is a measure of caring and pathos (not to mention irony) in her description of the fragile and ladylike Ianthe,

forced to earn a living in less than congenial surroundings. The novel is full of intimations of what Benet calls "preconceptions, expectations based on them, and subsequent little shocks of discovery" (1986:103):

lanthe was the only child of elderly parents,¹ who seemed to be a whole generation removed from those of her contemporaries. When her father died it had been necessary for her to do some kind of work and the training in librarianship had seemed the most suitable. Working among books was, on the face of it, a ladylike occupation, Mrs Broome had thought, and one that would bring her daughter into contact with a refined, intellectual type of person. She had never seen lanthe handing out books to the ill-mannered grubby students and cranks of all ages who frequented the library of political and sociological books where she worked (UA:25).

Rupert Stonebird, the anthropologist who moves next door to lanthe, appears to be the epitome of a suitable attachment. He is the son of a vicar, and has recently regained his childhood Christian faith (reminiscent of Tom Mallow's losing his faith in anthropology in *Less than Angels*):

Rupert was a quiet sort of person who disliked pushing himself forward and was therefore well fitted to observe the behaviour of others. Nevertheless, now that he had come to live in this new house he was aware that he would probably be an object of interest to his neighbours. He was thirty-six years old and not yet married, mainly because his trips to Africa - where most of his work had been done - had not left him much time to find a suitable wife, though others in similar positions seemed to have achieved wives and marriages, whether suitable or not. He was quite good-looking, of medium height, with dark hair and brown eyes. He wore glasses for reading (UA:34).

1 Redolent of Brookner's heroines.

Sophia feels that Rupert would be a suitable husband for her sister Penelope, who at twenty-five, "had now reached the age when one starts looking for a husband rather more systematically than one does at nineteen or even at twenty-one" (UA:37). Penelope's appearance is in complete contrast to Ianthe's; she wears short skirts which do not flatter her fattish legs, generally *outré* clothes (in comparison with Ianthe, who is always *comme il faut*), and wears her hair in a sagging "beehive". Rupert classifies her as a "Pre-Raphaelite beatnik", and is attracted to her air of comic vulnerability. Despite her raffish appearance, she lays "great stress on . . . little courtesies, the formal acts of politeness that women in their emancipated state seemed to be in danger of losing" (UA:41).

The novel's overriding theme is the marriage of opposites, and that it is contained in the vehicle of a comedy of manners is apparent from the conversation at Sophia's dinner party:

Once in the drawing room the party seemed to divide, Ianthe talking to Edwin Pettigrew about dogs, Mark rather nobly taking on Daisy, and Sophia and Penelope plying Rupert with questions about himself, his life, and his work, probing to find out without actually asking whether he had a mother, wife, fiancée, or 'friend' in the background.

'I did wonder,' said Sophia at last in desperation, 'whether I had committed a grave social error in asking you to dinner alone when you may very well have a mother, wife or fiancée who should have been invited too.'

Rupert laughed. 'I can assure you that I have none of those - er - appendages.'

'Then you are without female dependants,' said Sophia, almost like a chairman summing up at a meeting.

'Well, I have a sister,' he admitted.

'A sister?' But that was nothing.

'Yes, married and living in Woking.'

'Ah yes, Woking,' said Sophia thoughtfully. 'There's a mosque there, I believe.'

'A mosque?' Rupert sounded surprised, as he had every right to.

'It's funny how one associates places with irrelevant things,' said Penelope, who had been listening to Sophia's probings with a kind of fascinated horror (UA:41-42).

Although Ianthe and Rupert appear to be suitably matched, they have little in common, other than their age and background. Sophia is distraught at the idea of Rupert's escorting Ianthe home, but decides that if they are flung together, they might take a dislike to each other. However, their attempts at conversation are strained:

They walked away from the vicarage in silence.

'I hear that you are a canon's daughter - and I am an archdeacon's son,' said Rupert lightly, trying to make conversation. 'So we must have something in common.' His tone faltered a little and he stared in front of him into the darkness (UA:42).

Although Rupert is perceived by the match-making women as leading a riotous bachelor's life, this is far from the case, as is indicated by his immersion in his anthropological studies. His introspection gives the lie to their imagination:

Oh, this coming back to an empty house, Rupert thought, when he had seen her safely up to her door. People - though perhaps it was only women - seemed to make so much of it. As if life itself were not as empty as the house one was coming back to. And now he too was returning to an empty house (UA:43).

lanthe, in deference to the shrewish librarian, Mervyn Cantrell, suggests that the new library assistant might be "quite unsuitable"; her remarks are prophetic with regard to her own dilemma. John Challow (the surname has intimations of both *shallow* and *callow*), is young, dark, good-looking and disturbing to lanthe's well-bred equanimity:

Left by themselves lanthe and John made a wary appraisal of each other. She saw a young, rather handsome man, whose brown eyes looked at her in a way she found slightly disturbing, though this was not the kind of thing she would have admitted to anybody but herself. He saw a rather pretty woman, not very young, with an air of good breeding that somehow attracted him. A woman rather shy of men, whose eyes did not quite meet his when he looked at her (UA:45).

He is younger than lanthe, and his unsuitability in terms of social class is initially evidenced by nothing more than outer trappings:

. . . lanthe found herself studying him and taking in the details of his appearance. She could find no fault with his dark grey suit, red patterned tie and white shirt. Only his shoes seemed to be a little too pointed - not quite what men one knew would wear (UA:49).

His previous occupation is also not quite the thing - he was a film extra - but his new employment is cruelly called a "stooge's job" by the librarian, fit only for "willing gentlewomen of uncertain age" - and reminiscent of Dulcie's derided indexing in *No Fond Return of Love*. This may be seen as a slight, but pointed jibe by Pym at women's secondary status in the working world (she herself was assistant editor of the journal *Africa*).

lanthe is disturbed by his quoting of romantically suggestive poetry, and her Christian sense of charity is touched by his apparent financial insecurity.¹ Pym gives subtle indications of the contrast between lanthe and Penelope at the church bazaar, and Rupert's reticence at arriving late, indicates his shy, reclusive nature:

Sophia herself was wearing a green jersey suit and a small hat, but she felt that she did not look so absolutely right as lanthe, whose plain blue woollen dress was set off by a feather-trimmed hat which had just the right touch of slightly dowdy elegance - if there could be such a thing. Her long training in church circles was evident too in her ease of manner with the other parish women, which contrasted with Penelope's slightly defiant air resulting from shyness and uncertainty (UA:60).

The changing face of Britain is comically illustrated by Lady Selvedge's penetrating remarks: "So many *black* people . . . And do I see *yams* on that stall? . . . It reminded me of our time in Nigeria" (UA:61-63).

lanthe's predilection towards Christian charity and good works takes her on a visit to John's predecessor, Miss Grimes, with a basket laden with delicacies which she deems suitable Christmas fare for an old-age pensioner living in parlous circumstances. Miss Grimes, like other characters in the novel, does not conform to lanthe's expectations. Surrounded by good pieces of furniture and fine china, she offers lanthe a drink, and in one of Pym's priceless comic vignettes, divests lanthe of Mervyn's and John's gifts to her (a bottle of Madeira and two bunches of violets). lanthe is dismayed that her good

1 Brookner's heroines are too wrapped up in themselves, and this sense of altruism is missing from her novels.

intentions have been foiled, and there is a hint of irony in her discomfiture at her foiled expectations:

She had set out with the idea of doing good by visiting poor lonely Miss Grimes but she did not seem to have achieved anything much. Miss Grimes had certainly been glad of the presents but she had not really seemed as destitute and lonely as Ianthe had expected - perhaps secretly even hoped - and she found herself resenting the way she had taken the violets (UA:77-78).

Further intimations of Rupert and Ianthe's intrinsic unsuitability are Rupert's avoidance of Ianthe, for fear of having to make conversation with her, as well as his inability to remember the appropriate lines of Landor's poem. He also finds her "tired and drab"-looking on occasion, in contrast to John's open admiration and predilection for quoting poetry.

Rupert's needs also seem to be more prosaic than John's; he classes her among the "excellent women", and is dismissive of her reading Tennyson:

How convenient women were, Rupert thought, accepting her offer, the way they were always 'just going' to make coffee or tea or perhaps had just roasted a joint in the oven or made a cheese soufflé (UA:86).

Rupert vaguely thinks of Ianthe as marriageable because she would look decorative in his house, and this parallels Mervyn Cantrell's materialistic offer of marriage to Ianthe later, because he craves her antique furniture. Rupert is sexually attracted to Penelope (oddly by her comic appearance), but decides to keep his options open when he joins the parish touring party on their visit to Rome:

Yes, he might have an amusing time with the two women, he thought suddenly, in the nicest possible way. Who knew what might come of it? (UA:88).

Meanwhile, Ianthe is more and more aware of John Challow, although her background, timidity and adherence to genteel conventions preclude any aggressive action:

Ianthe did not think of asking John to accompany her, because it was difficult to imagine him in a church. Then, too, she had felt rather shy of him since Christmas when he had given her the violets and had tried not to encourage his obvious interest in her. She often found herself making excuses to avoid him though in some ways she was interested in him, even attracted to him. But he was younger than she was and so very much not the type of person she was used to meeting. Ianthe was not as yet bold enough to break away from her upbringing and background, and while she did not often think of herself as marrying now, she still hoped, perhaps even expected, that somebody 'suitable' would turn up one day. Somebody who combined the qualities of Rupert and John, if such a person could be imagined (UA:92-93).

Ianthe has preconceived ideas of what clergymen's wives should be, and Sophia does not conform to type. Once again Ianthe's rigid and conventional ideas are stressed by Pym, and she is shown as an inflexible character. A further irony is that Ianthe is perceived by Mark as a suitable friend for Sophia. Ianthe finds Sophia disturbing and uncongenial, not realising that Sophia's odd attachment to Faustina reveals unhappiness with the state of her marriage. The need to feel useful and needed is a Pym *leit-motif*, and we are simultaneously given intimations of Ianthe's reticence in abandoning herself to a life which is not fettered by convention:

'What will your husband think?' Ianthe asked tentatively.

'Mark? Oh, he probably won't notice. He is not of this world, you know, in some ways we're so far apart. I'm the sort of person who wants to do everything for the people I love and he is the sort of person who's self-sufficient, or seems to be . . .' she paused. 'Then there's Faustina.'

Faustina? Ianthe was puzzled for a moment. Oh the cat, she thought but, perhaps wisely, didn't say it. Instead she remarked that cats were usually considered to be particularly self-sufficient sort of animals.

'But they aren't always,' said Sophia. 'I feel sometimes that I can't reach Faustina as I've reached other cats. And somehow it's the same with Mark.'

'Oh dear,' Ianthe heard herself saying, feebly, she felt, but it was difficult to know how best to express her sympathy. She felt she wanted to shut herself away from life if this was what it was like. Yet Sophia was not usually the kind of person to say disturbing things. Wives shouldn't talk thus about their husbands, she thought resentfully, especially when they were clergy wives. Nor could one really compare a sacred and honourable estate like marriage to a relationship with a cat (UA:98).

When Rupert discovers Ianthe ill in bed with the 'flu, he ineffectually tries to fill her hot water bottle, but is relieved to relinquish the task to Sophia, who is still fervently matchmaking:

Sophia noticed with mingled pity and satisfaction that Ianthe was looking extremely plain in her sickness, with red nose and eyes, pale lips, and straggling hair (UA:104).

When John also succumbs to the 'flu, Ianthe's intrinsic charitable kindness surfaces, and she visits him at his lodgings in the unfashionable section of Pimlico. Ianthe is really kicking over the traces, as she knows her mother would not have approved of her visit; nonetheless, she persists, braving Indians and commercial travellers. John borrows money from her in order to pay his

rent, and just as Ianthe, in a fervent moment of philanthropism, had almost offered to take in Miss Grimes, so too, she speculates on the pleasures of cossetting John:

She wanted to do things for him - it seemed to give some purpose to her life to have somebody depending even a little on her. That was what one was here for, she thought; doing things for people like Miss Grimes and John was, after all, one's Christian duty. The fact that it was much pleasanter doing things for John was really quite irrelevant. What a pity it was that he should have to live in that depressing room. If only conventions were not so rigid she could easily have had him for a lodger. But of course, that wouldn't do at all (UA:116-117).

The difference between Ianthe and Penelope is once again stressed at Rupert's dinner party. Ianthe is in sober blue wool, while Penelope is outrageously clad in Lady Selvedge's cast-off silver lamé. Rupert is sexually attracted to Penelope, especially when he notices her dress has split down the back, but is unable to kiss her goodnight as he would like, as Sophia, like a worried mother, is standing on the front steps of the vicarage calling Faustina. He feels a sense of power at having two women, although his reticent nature leaves him powerless to take any real initiative:

Now that he was left alone with the two women, both of whom (he imagined) rather admired him, Rupert felt a sense of power, though there being two of them rather limited the scope of what he could do - cramped his style, he might almost have said (UA:130).

Although Rupert is one of Pym's more sympathetic male characters, his complacency is ironic, for Ianthe is attracted not to him, but to the "unsuitable" John. Ianthe admits John into her life when she takes him to the café

where she generally lunches, and a delicate courtship ensues over poached eggs and *mille feuilles*. Ianthe's class barriers are finally eroded when John kisses her at the station, and her nightmare collision with a nun (a former school-fellow) compounds the difference between her old, cloistered life, and the new:

That John should have kissed her like that - in the way that she had quite often seen boys kiss girls on their way home - and that she should not have minded, apart from the slight awkwardness of the people surging around them, would have seemed incredible to her a few months ago. One did not behave like that in a public place with a young man, suitable or otherwise, and John was so very much otherwise. It was not surprising that at this moment the image of her mother - the canon's widow in the dark flat near Westminster Cathedral - should rise up before her (UA:135-136).¹

When the parish party goes to Rome, Pym gives a vivid and amusing picture of the British abroad, reminiscent of Brookner in *Hotel du Lac*. As Ianthe looks at the flowers on the Spanish Steps, she realises that she loves John, and gives way to the tumult of this realisation at Babbington's tea shop:

Oh, the benison of it, she thought, for she seemed to need comfort now, not only because she was tired after the journey and far away from John, but because she had admitted to herself that she loved him, had let her love sweep over her like a kind of illness, 'giving in' to flu, conscious only of the present moment (UA:146).

A new romantic lead appears in the form of the complacent Basil Branche, a coddled curate in the entourage of the Misses Bede of *Some Tame Gazelle*. While Ianthe is pining for John, and is irritated by Basil's affectation and Rupert's social ineptitude, Rupert feels himself drawn to Ianthe, in terms of

1 The sombre flat is redolent of Brookner's settings.

"suitability". Penelope and Rupert find themselves alone in a taxi, after a meal at a restaurant, and Penelope, sensing Rupert's disappointment, bursts into tears. Rupert's instinct is to flee, and to immerse himself in his work, as he realises his disinterested stance has been confounded:

As for Rupert, he could not help reflecting on the irony of a situation that now made him want to take Penelope to bed when he had intended to have a decorous flirtation with Ianthe. Was he in some way irrevocably committed to her? Perhaps it was a good thing that he had already decided to spend a few days working in the Vatican Library - that convenient hiding place and haven of scholars, to name only the least obvious of its uses. He was too modest to believe that Penelope could have fallen in love with him, yet the memory of her tears disquieted him and he realized that he could hardly at this stage start paying attention to Ianthe. That would have to wait until they were back in England (UA:181-182).

Ianthe and Sophia's visit to the Villa Faustina seems an unnecessary intrusion in the novel, and serves only to introduce yet another unsuitable attachment in the form of Sophia's aunt and the Dottore, and to allow Ianthe to confess her love for John. Benet (1986:110) comments that Sophia's remarks indicate her reluctance to abandon her stereotyped vision of Ianthe:

"When Sophia learns of Ianthe's interest in a man, she cruelly tries to make her friend conform to her expectations, to the stereotype of an excellent woman . . . Sophia's insensitivity is obnoxious and hateful, an index to the tenacity with which people cling to their expectations of others. But it also arises from her conviction that John Challow 'Isn't the sort of person one would marry.' Sophia forgets, or does not see as the same sort of thing, that her own marriage to Mark Ainger was considered unsuitable by her mother because he lacked private means. The novel, in fact, is full of unsuitable attachments."

One of the strictures raised against the writing of Barbara Pym is her class-consciousness, and if one were able to rate degrees of unsuitability, class would outweigh means.

Sophia's remarks reveal her as a less sympathetic character than her *alter ego*, Jane Cleveland, another matchmaker *par excellence*:

'You seem to me to be somehow *destined* not to marry,' she went on, perhaps too enthusiastically. 'I think you'll grow into one of those splendid spinsters - oh, don't think I mean it nastily or cattily - who are pillars of the Church and whom the Church certainly couldn't do without.'

Ianthe was silent, as well she might be before this daunting description. Yet until lately she too had seen herself like this.

'What about your sister,' she said at last, 'will she marry?'

'Oh, Penny will marry,' said Sophia confidently, 'she's made for it. In fact,' she added, with a laugh, 'I've arranged that she shall marry Rupert Stonebird' (UA:193-194).

Mervyn Cantrell's ludicrous proposal to Ianthe is compounded by the fact that he is a homosexual. With typical Pym delicacy, this is never overtly stated.

Miss Grimes hints at this, after a nudge-and-wink fashion -

'Now tell me the library gossip,' said Miss Grimes. 'What's this new young man like? More to our Mervyn's taste than a girl, I shouldn't wonder.' She gave Ianthe a sly look.

Really, she wasn't a very nice old woman, thought Ianthe, beginning to feel indignant that Miss Grimes wasn't conforming more to type (UA:77) -

while his camp *restaurateur* friend Eric, and his own effete bitchiness clarify it.¹

With his peripheral involvement in parish occasions, Rupert has felt nostalgia and a sense of moving backwards towards his vicarage childhood. When he invites Ianthe to the anthropological garden party, he is disconcerted to find her reminding him of his mother (during all their encounters he is struck by the "suitability" of her apparel):

Rupert called for her at her house. It was a fine afternoon, and Ianthe's blue straw hat brought back to him memories of his mother at parish garden parties of his childhood. But was this quite as it should be? he asked himself anxiously - that Ianthe should remind him of his mother? It was a comforting rather than a promising beginning to the afternoon (UA:208).

When Rupert attempts to kiss Ianthe, she weeps, and confesses her unrequited love to him. Rupert, although he cannot remember apposite lines of poetry, is not above imagining melodramatic Jane Eyre-like possibilities. An ironic touch is added; excellent women do not merit the same coddling as excellent men:

Rupert took her arm in a brotherly way and they walked in silence the few yards to her front door. Some married man, he thought, probably a clergyman with a wife in a mental home, or was that being too melodramatic and old-fashioned?

Such a nice couple they made, Sister Dew thought, seeing him return alone to his house. She wondered if she should take him one of the steak and kidney pies she had baked that morning, but then - with unusual delicacy - judged it to be not quite the moment. And of course there was no question of taking one to Miss Broome - one did not take cooked food to lone women in the same way as to lone men (UA:217).

1 Pym's homosexuals also seem to be characterised as foodies.

John at last declares his love to Ianthe. The irrelevance of their "unsuitability" is stressed by other marriages. Pym reiterates that Mark and Sophia's marriage is not only made unsuitable by the lack of money, but also by their different temperaments:

'No, better not to marry,' he [Mark] agreed, but he was thinking not of Ianthe and the young man from the library, but rather of the clergy in general and perhaps at that moment of himself in particular. How could Faustina's hairs have got *here*, he had asked himself at the early mass that morning, seeing them on the fair linen cloth of the altar (UA:226).

Ianthe's Aunt Bertha and Uncle Randolph's marriage is, by all accounts, another unsuitable match. When it appears that Miss Grimes has married Mr Slaski, a Polish widower whom she met in a pub, there appears to be no end to the possible unsuitable attachments.

Rupert is left to make tentative overtures to Penelope in St Paul's churchyard, while Ianthe enjoys the benefits of "a certain type of man who is always putting up shelves" (UA:244). Pym's blinkered characters are able to reconcile themselves to what they thought of as unsuitable attachments, and Sophia admits to the folly of their reasoning:

'I suppose it's wrong to have preconceived ideas about people - you as an anthropologist must appreciate the value of an open mind.'

. . .

'A single man probably inspires wider and wilder speculation than a single woman,' Sophia admitted, accepting another cup of tea. 'His unmarried state is in itself more

interesting than a woman's unmarriedness, if you see what I mean. We thought of you as somebody who went around measuring skulls, and that was our first wrong assumption,' she said lightly (UA:247).

Barbara Pym makes assiduous use of parallels in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. Other foiled expectations are comically revealed. Edwin and Daisy Pettigrew expect to bring succour to the starving cats of Rome; the cats are disappointingly sleek and well fed. The reader gathers that Mark has entertained thoughts of "going over" to the Church of Rome. The Roman Catholic priests on the flight (literally going over to Rome) are obsessed with buying up the miniature bottles of liquor. Sister Dew (a Sister Blatt clone) views all things foreign with deep suspicion. She is reassured to find osso buco and Chianti like savoury rice and Wincarnis.

The novel is stylistically more reminiscent of the writing of Jane Austen than any of Pym's others. As early as 1952, Pym wrote in her diary: "Read some of Jane Austen's last chapters and find out how she manages all the loose ends" (1984d:188). In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Pym manages the loose ends with consummate skill.

There are slight indications of the change of tenor in Pym's novels, which was to be exacerbated by sixteen years of enforced silence. Pym's male characters are portrayed with greater insight and sympathy than the caricatures of the early novels. Pin-pricks penetrate the ostensibly happy community of parishioners:

'We', the stupid, ignorant, umbrage-taking members of Mark's congregation, thought Sophia, moving closer to her husband as if to protect him from them (UA:140).

The novel has all the warmth of Pym's best writing, and the "unsuitable attachment" between Sophia and the supercilious Faustina,¹ is delineated with wit and penetration.

4.11 *Quartet in Autumn*

The facetious remarks of Gabriel and Michael, those *enfants terribles* of *Crampton Hodnet*, are ominously realised in the 1977 *Quartet in Autumn*, which was nominated for the Booker Prize of that year.² Change and decay is all around, as the excellent women of the 'fifties find themselves desolate and alone in the London of the 'seventies, in an England far removed from the safe

1 "In 1961 Hilary [Barbara's sister] bought a small house in Queen's Park (the district described in *An Unsuitable Attachment*). There they had a garden and were able to keep cats. Tatiana, the original of Faustina, a beautiful but highly neurotic tortoiseshell, had a short, tragic life" (Pym, 1984d:184).

A further entry in Pym's diary indicates to what extent she appropriated material from everyday intercourse:

"4 February. Going to the vet in Lancaster Gate to fetch Tati. Waiting room has large table with copies of *The Field* and *Country Life*. Round the walls photographs of grateful patients, some with their owners! The whole place slightly shabby as if the animals have made it so. Disconcerting cat's cry from the cattery. Where is it? One is not allowed to see the animals. The vet's assistant is almost excessively reassuring, more so than a human doctor, as if he expects tears, even hysterics, which they must often get" (Pym, 1984d:200).

2 The authors short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1977 were: Caroline Blackwood, Paul Bailey, Jennifer Johnston, Penelope Lively, Barbara Pym and Paul Scott. The prize was awarded to Paul Scott (author of that other famous *Quartet*), for *Staying On*.

and solid affluence of the days when British colonies were "pink on the map" (QA:50).¹ Private sleuthing into the credentials of clergymen now necessitates *Who Was Who*; exuberant black girls have invaded the offices of London, sedate, middle-class terraced houses are taken over by ebullient Nigerians, Ugandan Asians competently run grocery stores, but station walls proclaim graffiti like "Kill Asian Shit"; semi-nude couples make love in public parks; even the church, that traditional sanctuary, has been invaded by trendy charismatic services and priests with long hair and jeans. Not that much remains of the church in the 'seventies:

In any case it would be going a bit far to regard tonight's congregation as 'sunk in sin and whelmed with strife', as one line of the hymn put it. People nowadays wouldn't stand for that kind of talk. Perhaps that was one reason why so few went to church (QA:17).

Diana Benet's enumeration of the themes of *Quartet in Autumn* might fruitfully be quoted at length:

"The novel deals especially with the gradual deterioration of Marcia Ivory, as she moves further into mental imbalance and starves herself to death in spite of the many eyes being kept on her. Its central purpose is to show how desperate is the need for the connection of individuals by responsibility, the responsibility the Bible calls love. The central conflict, carefully ignored by all, is whether to do something about Marcia or to keep clear of the situation. It is not a simple conflict. Marcia resists most efforts made to help her, and

1 QA refers to PYM, Barbara. 1984a. *Quartet in Autumn*. London : Granada.

the people around her are average, decent types, governed by reservations and ideas most readers will recognize: it is better not to get involved; there is no need to worry about people in these days of the welfare state; some people do not want help and certainly cannot be forced to accept it - the novel expands the list with other familiar items. Related to the major themes of responsibility and the evasion of it, there are others: the need for Charity and the insufficiency of charity (the social services); the desire for independence and the need for community; the desire for privacy and the need to share; the general dislike of the old; and the seeming lack of options and hope for the elderly. In her treatment of these complex subjects, Pym raises large questions: Who is my neighbor? Who is responsible for someone who cannot be responsible for himself?" (Benet, 1986:134).

In addition to the major theme of the novel, which is the desire, and crippling inability of people in need to reach out to others, Pym also gives a vivid and disturbing picture of a Britain incontrovertibly changed.

Quartet in Autumn deals with four elderly and dispensable office workers: Edwin, a widower and churchgoer ("large and bald with a pinkish face"), Norman, an embittered inhabitant of bed-sitter-land ("small and wiry, with his bristly grey hair"), Letty, a lonly woman who tries to keep up appearances ("fluffy and faded, a Home Counties type, still making an effort with her clothes"), and Marcia ("with her general look of oddness"), who since the death of her mother and the cat, Snowy, lives alone, collecting free pamphlets on services for the aged, and hoarding milk bottles and carrier bags. Her dottiness is apparent early in the novel:

Now that she was in her sixties Marcia took every opportunity to find out what was due to her in the way of free bus travel, reduced and cheap meals, hairdressing and chiropody, although she never made use of the information.¹ The library was also a good place to dispose of unwanted rubbish suitable for the dustbin. These included bottles of a certain kind, but not milk bottles which she kept in a shed in her garden, certain boxes and paper bags and various other unclassified articles which could be left in a corner of the library when nobody was looking. One of the library assistants (a woman) had her eye on Marcia,² but she was unconscious of this as she deposited a small, battered tartan-patterned cardboard box, which had contained 'Killikrankie oatcakes', at the back of a convenient space on one of the fiction shelves³ (QA:6).

Like other Pym figures, Letty seeks a literary role model, but is disappointed by modern writers of fiction, and unaware of the benison of Austen and Tolstoy:⁴

Of the four only Letty used the library for her own pleasure and possible edification. She had always been an unashamed reader of novels, but if she hoped to find one which reflected her own sort of life 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. Gone were the days when she had hopefully filled in her Boots Book Lovers library list from novels reviewed in the Sunday papers, and there had now been a change in her reading habits. Unable to find what she needed in 'romantic' novels, Letty had turned to biographies of which there was no dearth. And because these were 'true' they were really better than fiction. Not

- 1 This is ironical, as Marcia doesn't go anywhere (except to Mr Strong's house), starves herself to death, and inexpertly dyes her own hair.
- 2 But characteristically does nothing.
- 3 Marcia's only sustenance after her retirement is tea and biscuits, and Pym gives an intimation of this early in the novel.
- 4 The novels of Anita Brookner might have fulfilled Letty's need for a literary role model, even if ironically. Pym seems to intimate truth as a condition of the novels of Austen and Tolstoy, a contention refuted by Brookner's novels. Although she does not use the analogies of Austen and Tolstoy, her intimation of "a life ruined by literature", does not fully accord with Pym's here.

perhaps better than Jane Austen or Tolstoy, which she had not read anyway, but certainly more 'worth while' than the works of any modern novelist (QA:6-7).

Throughout the novel, Pym gives poignant pictures of the loneliness of isolation, and the theme of "reaching out", of making contact, is stressed at the outset. Benet (1986:134) contends that the key to the novel's moral perspective lies in the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Though contemporary London is very far removed from biblical times and places, it is the locale of several modern versions of the parable."

Letty has an encounter in a fast-food restaurant, one of Pym's recurrent images of the demise of modern civilisation:¹

The man at Letty's table had been there when she sat down. With a brief hostile glance he handed her the menu, then his coffee had come, he had drunk it, left 5p for the waitress and gone. His place was taken by a woman who began to study the menu carefully. She looked up, perhaps about to venture a comment on price increases, pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT. Then, discouraged by Letty's lack of response, she lowered her glance, decided on macaroni au gratin with chips and a glass of water. The moment had passed.

Letty picked up her bill and got up from the table. For all her apparent indifference she was not unaware of the situation. Somebody had reached out towards her. They

1 Barbara Pym is adept at intimations of a modern day hell, much in the manner of T.S. Eliot. These are especially prevalent in her descriptions of people in self-service restaurants, women in powder rooms, and people nightmarishly marooned on traffic islands and surrounded by swirling traffic. *Vide* the following extract from her diary:

"10 May. Sitting at lunch in the help-yourself in Bourne and Hollingworth I think why, those women sitting round me are like lunatics in some colour supplement photograph of bad conditions in a mental home. Twitching or slumping or bending low over their food like an animal at a dish (especially if eating *spaghetti*) (Pym, 1984d:268).

could have spoken and a link might have been forged between two solitary people. But the other woman, satisfying her first pangs of hunger, was now bent rather low over her macaroni au gratin. It was too late for any kind of gesture. Once again Letty had failed to make contact (QA:7).

The foursome have resolved themselves into some sort of uneasy camaraderie at their office, but their acts are mechanical, and arise from notions of practicality, rather than from any overt altruism. Edwin offers Letty a jelly baby as a "ritual gesture", while Marcia and Norman have a convenient financial arrangement about coffee ("family-size" has ironic connotations here).

Much of their time is spent on desultory, but uneasy intimations of mortality (old people dying of hypothermia and lying dead for days before being found). As Edwin admits: "Four people on the verge of retirement, each one of us living alone, and without any close relative near - that's us" (QA:9).

Pym paints this appalling prospect of loneliness with succinct and bleak perspicacity, and the pathos is exacerbated by the blandishments of the mass media to purchase gifts and flowers for "Mother's Day":

Yet it could hardly affect people too old to have a mother still alive. Indeed, it was sometimes strange to reflect that each of them had once had a mother. Edwin's mother had lived to a respectable age - seventy-five - and had died after a brief illness without giving any trouble to her son. Marcia's mother had died not so long ago in the suburban house where Marcia now lived alone, in the upstairs front bedroom with the old cat Snowy beside her. She had been eighty-nine, what some might think of as a great age but nothing wonderful or to be remarked on. Letty's mother had died at the end of the war, then her father had married again. Shortly after this her father had died and the step-mother had in due course found another husband, so that Letty now had no connection with

the West Country town where she had been born and brought up. She had sentimental and not entirely accurate memories of her mother, wandering round the garden snipping off dead heads, wearing a dress of some floating material. Only Norman had never known his mother - 'Never had a Mum' he used to say in his bitter sardonic way. He and his sister had been brought up by an aunt, and yet it was he who inveighed most fiercely against the commercializing of what had originally been the old country custom of Mothering Sunday . . . In the past, both Letty and Marcia might have loved and been loved, but now the feeling that should have been directed towards husband, lover, child or even grandchild, had no natural outlet; no cat, dog, no bird, even, shared their lives and neither Edwin nor Norman had inspired love (QA:9-12).

The four make desultory overtures to each other, but are relieved when these come to nothing, as it obviates "getting involved", and all that that might entail. While watching the pigeons outside the office window picking insects off each other, Letty has a momentary revelation: "Perhaps this is all that we as human beings can do for each other, Letty thought" (QA:11). Although her offer to Marcia to make her a cup of tea is rebuffed, a *frisson* of what might have been remains with Marcia: "Marcia, glancing sharply at Letty, thought, she's a bit like an old sheep, but she means well even if she seems a bit interfering at times" (QA:12). The apathy, the fear of getting involved, the terrors of urban isolation and alienation are poignantly described in Letty's *memento mori*, as well as being a vivid illustration of Benet's analogy of the parable of the Good Samaritan:

So often now Letty came upon reminders of her own mortality or, regarded less poetically, the different stages towards death. Less obvious than the obituaries in *The Times* and the *Telegraph* were what she thought of as

'upsetting' sights.¹ This morning, for instance, a woman, slumped on a seat on the Underground platform while the rush hour crowds hurried past her, reminded her so much of a school contemporary that she forced herself to look back, to make quite sure that it was not Janet Belling. It appeared not to be, yet it could have been, and even if it wasn't it was still somebody, some woman driven to the point where she could find herself in this situation. Ought one to do anything? While Letty hesitated, a young woman, wearing a long black skirt and shabby boots, bent over the slumped figure with a softly spoken enquiry. At once the figure reared itself up and shouted in a loud, dangerously uncontrolled voice, 'Fuck off!' Then it couldn't be Janet Belling, Letty thought, her first feeling one of relief; Janet would never have used such an expression. But fifty years ago nobody did - things were different now, so that was nothing to go by. In the meantime, the girl moved away with dignity. She had been braver than Letty (QA:18).

Marcia has had a mastectomy,² and while Edwin fills his leisure hours with fanatic observation of all the church festivals ("now he had all the freedom that loneliness brings"), Marcia's god is the surgeon, Mr Strong.³ Pym describes Marcia's infatuation, while ironically portraying the demise of the church in modern Britain:

If the surgeon was God, the chaplains were his ministers, a little lower than the housemen . . . The Anglican chaplain offered her Holy Communion and although she was not a practising churchwoman Marcia accepted, partly out of superstition but also because it gave her a kind of

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- 1 The change in tenor in Pym's novels is illustrated by the wry humour in what Dulcie Mainwaring of *No Fond Return of Love* considers "upsetting" sights, compared to the plight of the destitute in the London of the 'seventies.
 - 2 This is another example of the autobiographical nature of much of Pym's work. She culled the hospital scenes from her own sojourn in hospital (she suffered from terminal cancer). Of course Brookner's novels are also purportedly autobiographical, although in a less piecemeal manner.
 - 3 Pym ironically insinuates that God has been supplanted by Mammon, in the form of television, vide QA:14,37.

distinction in the ward. Only one other woman received the ministrations of the chaplain. The other patients criticized his crumpled surplice and wondered why he didn't get a nylon or terylene one, and recalled their own vicars refusing to marry people in their churches or to christen kiddies because their parents didn't go to church, and other such instances of unreasonable and unChristian behaviour (QA:19-20).

Marcia imagines herself as a sort of Bride of Christ:

Marcia had been one of those women, encouraged by her mother, who had sworn that she would never let the surgeon's knife touch her body, a woman's body being such a private thing. But of course, when it came to the point there was no question of resistance (QA:19).

Marcia's sojourn in hospital has given her some intimation of human compassion; while reading the racist graffiti on the walls of the Underground, she is ironically reminded of the compassion of the bearded and turbanned Sikh orderly in the hospital, who had called her "dear".

Marcia has, in the past, even experienced "a faint stirring of interest" in Norman, which even manifested itself in her following him to the British Museum, where he contemplates the mummified crocodiles. She now cloisters herself in her increasingly neglected house, where she is visited by a voluntary social worker, Janice, who is determined that Miss Ivory should not "fall through the net" of the welfare state. Mindful of "caution" and "tact", the reassuring sociological jargon, she is relieved to be rebuffed by Marcia:

'Miss Ivory has funny staring eyes. And she obviously didn't want to ask me in,' said Janice, back at the Centre, basking now in the relief of an awkward duty done.

'Oh, you mustn't let that put you off,' said an older and more experienced colleague. 'A lot of them seem like that at first, but the contact has been made, that's the chief thing. And that's what we have to do - *make contact*, by force, if necessary. Believe me, it can be *most* rewarding.'

Janice wondered about this, but said nothing (QA:30).

The arrival of the annual summer holiday accentuates the loneliness of freedom. Marcia's two treats are a visit to the hospital for a check-up (where the houseman who examines her passes the buck by noting "I think perhaps somebody should keep an eye on you"), and by taking a bus on her pilgrimage to make obeisance to the house of Mr Strong. Pym depicts the poignancy of loneliness with delicacy, in Norman's early return to work:

He had a few days leave still in hand. 'You never know when they might come in useful,' he said, but he felt that those extra days would never be needed, but would accumulate like a pile of dead leaves drifting on to the pavement in autumn (QA:45).

When Letty learns that the house in which she lodges has been sold to a Nigerian gentleman, she is appalled by the changes she envisages:

This was cold comfort to Letty, for it was these very qualities that she feared, the noise and exuberance, all those characteristics exemplified by the black girl in the office which were so different from her own (QA:51).

Marcia is even more appalled at the prospect of becoming involved:

Marcia had so far contributed nothing to the discussion for there was a fear in her mind, even if it was not a very strong one, that she might have to offer Letty a room in her house. After all, Letty had always been kind to her; she had once offered to make her a cup of tea before going home, and even though the offer had not been accepted it had not been forgotten. But this did not mean that Marcia was under any obligation to provide accommodation for Letty in her retirement . . . Indignation welled up inside her, and she asked herself, why should I? But there was no answer to this question because nobody asked it. Nobody had even thought of it, let alone Letty herself (QA:51-52).

Letty finds living in the same house as the Nigerians intolerable, and Pym describes Letty's alienation with a keen sense of the ridiculous. Her reaction to Mr Olatunde's invitation to join the party typifies her as the archetypal outsider, while wittily depicting an English "gentlewoman" adrift in her own country. Her notion of Christianity is a non-committal one, in keeping with her non-committal attitude to life:

Now perhaps Letty really did feel like a drowning man, with the events of her past life unrolling before her, those particular events which had led her to this. 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? It must surely be because she had not married. No man had taken her away and immured her in some comfortable suburb where hymn-singing was confined to Sundays and nobody was fired with enthusiasm. Why had this not happened? Because she had thought that love was a necessary ingredient for marriage? Now, having looked around her for forty years, she was not so sure. All those years wasted, looking for love! The thought of it was enough to bring about silence in the house and during the lull she plucked up the courage to go downstairs and tap - too timidly, she felt - at Mr Olatunde's door.

'I wonder if you could make a little less noise?' she asked. 'Some of us find it rather disturbing.'

'Christianity is disturbing,' said Mr Olatunde.

It was difficult to know how to answer this. Indeed Letty found it impossible so Mr Olatunde continued, smiling, 'You are a Christian lady?'

Letty hesitated. Her first instinct had been to say 'yes', for of course one was a Christian lady, even if one would not have put it quite like that. How was she to explain to this vital, ebullient black man her own blend of Christianity - a grey, formal, respectable thing of measured observances and mild general undemanding kindness to all? 'I'm sorry,' she said, drawing back, 'I didn't mean . . .' What had she meant? Confronted by these smiling people she felt she could hardly repeat her complaint about the noise . . . We are not the same, she thought hopelessly (QA:56-57).

It is important to note that Pym feels sympathy and compassion, not to mention understanding, for Letty's predicament. Letty's romantic attitude to marriage is comparable to Edith Hope's in Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*, where she is unable to deny the courage of her convictions and make a loveless marriage of convenience.

Edwin manages to extricate himself from his voluntary apathy, and procures a room for Letty in the house of one of the parishioners. When Letty arrives at the home of the formidable Mrs Pope, Pym rewrites the traditional romantic Victorian scenario to fit a new era. Letty's possessions are indicative of her total isolation:

Letty felt like a governess in a Victorian novel arriving at a new post, but there would be no children here and no prospect of a romantic attachment to the widower master of the house or a handsome son of the family. Her own particular situation had hardly existed in the past, for now it was the unattached working woman, the single 'business lady' of the advertisements, who was most likely to arrive in the house of strangers. Letty had often found herself doing this, arranging her clothes in the drawers and wardrobe provided and putting out her personal possessions, the things that might give some clue as to what sort of person

she was. There were her books - anthologies of poetry, though nothing later than *Poems of Today, Second Series* - her current library book; her transistor radio, a bowl of hyacinths nearly in flower, her knitting in a flowered cretonne bag. There were no photographs. Not even of her friend Marjorie or of her old home, her parents, a cat or a dog (QA:65).

The prospect of spending Christmas day alone is a daunting one, and both Brookner and Pym describe it with pathos. Family ties, however tenuous, help the day to pass for Edwin and Norman, but without much cheer. For Marcia, moving rapidly into senile dementia, Christmas day is no different from any other:

Marcia worried less about Christmas as the years went on. When her mother had been alive it had been a quiet time, marked only by the cooking of a larger than usual bird - their butcher usually recommended 'a nice capon' as being suitable for two ladies spending Christmas alone - and the provision of special food as well as titbits from the bird for Snowy, the old cat. After her mother's death Snowy had been enough company for Marcia, and when he had gone there was no special point about Christmas day and it tended to merge into the rest of the holiday until it was no different from any other part of it (QA:71).

Marcia's relegation of Christmas day to one like any other is in contrast to the soothing rhythm of the church year described by Edwin (QA:63). Pym suggests that tradition is stronger than change, and Edwin's fervent adherence to the church calendar, as well as his admission to various small church circles and his drinks with Father G., sustains him to a greater extent than the others.

Marcia's Christmas is spent in mindless, compulsive activity:

Next day Marcia rose late and spent the morning tidying out a drawer full of old newspapers and paper bags, something she had been meaning to do for a long time. Then she checked the contents of her store cupboards but did not eat anything until the evening when she opened a small tin of pilchards. It was one left over from Snowy's store, so it was not really breaking into her reserves. She had heard or read somewhere that pilchards contained valuable protein, though this was not the reason why she had opened that particular tin. She did not even remember that the young doctor at the hospital had told her that she ought to eat more (QA:73).

Although Mrs Pope involves Letty in her own Christmas dinner by sheer force of her overbearing personality, her Christmas is marked by loneliness, as well as pride. She is described early in the novel as someone who "lived very much in the present, holding neatly and firmly on to life, coping as best she could with whatever it had to offer, little though that might be" (QA:24). This mental attitude sees her through Christmas:

Letty had made up her mind to face Christmas with courage and a kind of deliberate boldness, a determination to hold the prospect of loneliness at bay. It wasn't really as if she minded being alone for she was used to it; it was rather the idea that people might find out that she had no invitation for the day and that they would pity her . . . The radio offered a choice of comedy, with a braying studio audience, which she did not feel in the mood for, or carols, with their sad memories of childhood and the days that can never come back. So she took up her library book and sat reading, wondering what sort of a Christmas the others in the office had spent. Then she remembered that the Kensington sales started the day after Boxing Day and her spirits suddenly lifted (QA:75).

Pym details the retirement party of Letty and Marcia with sardonic irony. The speech maker is not exactly sure what the women had done during their

working lives; they are being "phased out" and replaced with a computer. Throughout the novel there are instances of people opting out of responsibility of any kind which might inconvenience them: Marcia's young neighbours make tentative overtures towards her, but are secretly relieved at her obduracy; Letty's old friend Marjorie, with whom Letty was to have spent her retirement in the country, does some cradle snatching instead, and is quick to point Letty in the direction of "Holmhurst"; the parish women are loath to let Letty have a room in their houses, and contrive various excuses. The organisation for which Marcia and Letty work is as unconcerned, passing the buck to that impersonal bureaucracy, the welfare state:

Retirement was a serious business, to be regarded with respect, though the idea of it was incomprehensible to most of the staff. It was a condition that must be studied and prepared for, certainly - 'researched' they would have said - indeed it had already been the subject of a seminar, though the conclusions reached and the recommendations drawn up had no real bearing on the retirement of Letty and Marcia, which seemed as inevitable as the falling of the leaves in autumn, for which no kind of preparation needed to be made . . . Each would be given a small golden handshake, but the State would provide for their basic needs which could not be all that great. Elderly women did not need much to eat, warmth was more necessary than food, and people like Letty and Marcia probably had either private means or savings, a nest-egg in the Post Office or a Building Society. It was comforting to think on these lines, and even if they had nothing extra, the social services were so much better now, there was no need for anyone to starve or freeze. And if governments failed in their duty there were always the media - continual goadings on television programmes, upsetting articles in the Sunday papers and disturbing pictures in the colour supplements. There was no need to worry about Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory (QA:83-84).

Benet points out that the quartet, with terrible irony, have adopted the generally negative attitudes towards the elderly:

"In one way or another, they unthinkingly conspire with the public relegation of the old to a life of diminishment. Old people do not need much to eat, do not need vacations (and certainly not trips to Spain, as Edwin's daughter concludes) - old people do not need any number of things. Marcia, remarking to her office mates that 'when you're older you don't really need holidays,' and eating less and less all the time, would seem to agree with her society's prescription for the aged" (1986:136-137).

This emphasis on the lack of old people's needs is in ironic contrast with Pym's other novels, where men's needs are emphasised as being comic and ludicrous.

Letty's salvation is her tentative grasp on life and her belief in the possibility for change: "She told herself, dutifully assuming the suggested attitude towards retirement, that life was still full of possibilities" (QA:88). She valiantly attempts to fill the first long day of her retirement with activity, dressing more carefully than usual and visiting the library to start a course of serious reading. In order to reach the library, she is forced to pass the office where she had worked, and she is overwhelmed by a sense of insignificance:

To reach the library she had to pass the office, and naturally she glanced up at the grey monolithic building and wondered what Edwin and Norman were doing up there on the third floor. It was not too difficult to picture them at coffee time, and at least there would be nobody installed in her and Marcia's places, doing their work, since nobody was to replace them. It seemed to Letty that what cannot now be justified has perhaps never existed, and it gave her the feeling that she and Marcia had been swept away as if they had never been. With this sensation of nothingness she entered the library (QA:94-95).

Marcia, on the other hand, is sunk in senile amnesia, and sitting in the darkness of her house, "had no memory of having experienced the first day of her retirement" (QA:96).

Edwin has uncomfortable intimations of his own culpability in the affair:

Nobody had heard any news of Marcia since her retirement, though Edwin occasionally passed the end of the road where she lived and had more than once thought of calling on her unexpectedly. But something, he wasn't sure what, had always held him back. The parable of the good Samaritan kept coming into his mind and making him feel uncomfortable, though it wasn't in the least appropriate. There was no question of him 'passing by on the other side' when he didn't even go anywhere near the house, and for all they knew, Marcia was perfectly happy. Of course Edwin did not know that she was, but for some obscure reason he felt that if anyone was to blame for not having kept in touch it was Norman (QA:105).

The contrast between Letty and Marcia is horrendous when they accept the men's invitation to lunch. Letty is wearing her best tweed suit and a new pair of gloves, and is oddly cheered by the sight of one of her office pot plants which has proliferated:

Again she experienced the feeling of nothingness, when it was borne in on her so forcibly that she and Marcia had been phased out in this way, as if they had never existed. Looking around the room, her eyes lighted on a spider plant which she had brought one day and not bothered to take away when she left. It had proliferated; many little offshoots were now hanging down until they dangled over the radiator. Was there some significance in this, a proof that she had once existed, that the memory of her lingered on? At least Nature went on, whatever happened to us; she knew that (QA:106).

Marcia eats practically nothing at lunch, and her manic and dishevelled appearance faintly stirs the consciences of the other three:

It took the others a moment or two to recover from the apparition standing before them. Marcia was thinner than ever and her light-coloured summer coat hung on her emaciated body. On her feet she wore old fur-lined sheep-skin boots and a pair of much darned stockings, and on her head an unsuitably jaunty straw hat from which her strangely piebald hair straggled in elflocks.

Edwin, who was not particularly observant, did realize that she was wearing an odd assortment of garments but did not think she looked much different from usual. Norman thought, poor old girl, obviously going round the bend. Letty, as a clothes-conscious woman, was appalled - that anyone could get to the stage of caring so little about her appearance, of not even noticing how she looked, made her profoundly uneasy and almost conscience-stricken, as if she ought to have done something more about Marcia in her retirement. But then of course she had suggested a meeting and Marcia hadn't answered her letter . . . And now she was made to feel ashamed because she felt embarrassed at the idea of sitting in a restaurant with Marcia (QA:106-107).

In one of Pym's most poignant scenes, Marcia attempts to locate the body of the long-dead cat, Snowy. There is immense pathos in the relics of the cat - an ossified fur ball, and an unwashed dish with some fragments of cat food adhering to it - which become symbols of Marcia's loneliness. Her attempts to dig in the garden do not go unnoticed by her neighbour; as usual, it is not expedient to investigate:

Of course, Nigel had asked Miss Ivory if she wanted her lawn cut but she had preferred it the way it was and one couldn't bully the elderly, their independence was their last remaining treasure and must be respected. All the same, one could perhaps offer a little gardening assistance, digging, for example . . . but not now, when Priscilla had people coming to dinner, the avocados to prepare and mayonnaise to make. Perhaps it was a fine enough evening

to have drinks outside on the little patio they had made, but the view of the neglected garden next door would detract from the elegance of the occasion, and if Miss Ivory was going to go on digging in this disturbing way something would have to be done about it (QA:116).

Meanwhile, through the bullying of the formidable Mrs Pope, with whom she is striking up an uneasy companionship, Letty is becoming more involved in the affairs of the church. There is irony in her involvement in the parish collection of old clothes for aged refugees: "The horror of the pictures on Mrs Pope's television screen seemed so totally unconnected with the heaps of unsuitable garments piled on the floor of Mrs Musson's dining-room" (QA:117). The truth is that Letty herself is an aged refugee, adrift in an alien London, trying to immerse herself in the last vestiges of High Church Anglicanism:

On a bitter cold evening in March she joined a little group, hardly more than the two or three gathered together, shuffling round the Stations of the Cross (QA:118).

When Marcia is discovered unconscious at her kitchen table, the first gestures are the customary floral condolences with their trite platitudes. However, there is an intimation of willingness to assume responsibility when Edwin gives his name to the hospital as Marcia's "next of kin":

'She must have given some name when she had her operation. I think she's got a distant cousin somewhere, she once said.'

'Oh, has she?' Edwin seemed a little embarrassed. 'I think they wanted somebody on the spot, as it were, so I had to give myself,' he admitted. 'I said I was her next of kin.' Saying the words like that seemed to open up endless possibilities.

'Sooner you than me!' said Norman roughly. 'Goodness knows what you may have let yourself in for.'

'Oh, I think it will just be a question of keeping in touch and that sort of thing. I felt it was the least I could do.'

'Let's hope it won't turn out to be the most,' said Norman in a dark tone (QA:145).

Marcia's last semi-coherent thoughts are about loneliness, and the need to reach out:

Miss Ivory had a garden, hadn't she, and did she have lavender in her garden? Marcia hadn't been able to remember whether she had or not; she only remembered the catmint at the bottom of the garden and how she hadn't been able to find Snowy's grave. All that time she had watched him growing cold until the fleas left his body, and now she couldn't find his grave . . . Another time, when she had first gone to work in the office, she had followed him [Norman] one lunchtime all the way to the British Museum, up the steps and along to that place where they had the mummies . . . She had gone away, not knowing what to think . . . But after that? She was confused - nothing much seemed to have happened after that (QA:147).

If one is to accept the Bride of Christ parallel, Marcia's death scene might be interpreted as a vision of her meeting her Maker¹ face to face:

1 Cf. T.S. Eliot's *East Coker*:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart

and Emily Dickinson's *Poem 396*:

The Surgeon - does not blanch - at pain -
His Habit - is severe -
But tell him that it ceased to feel -
The Creature lying there -

And he will tell you - skill is late -
A Mightier than He -
Has ministered before Him -
There's no Vitality.

Marcia remembered what her mother used to say, how she would never let the surgeon's knife touch her body. How ridiculous that seemed when one considered Mr Strong . . . Marcia smiled and the frown left his face and he seemed to be smiling back at her (QA:148).

The novel ends on a tentative note of hope, as Norman, the beneficiary in terms of Marcia's will, shares a bottle of sherry and the tins of food with the remainder of the quartet, who have drawn closer to each other than ever before. As Letty realises that Mrs Pope and Marjorie can be affected by her decision whether to stay in London, or move to the country, she feels less of a cipher, a nonentity, and the novel ends with the hopeful realisation "that life still held infinite possibilities for change" (QA:176).

The central theme of the novel is overtly stated by Father G. as he contemplates the parable of the Good Samaritan:

'Who is my neighbour?' Father G. mused, as he and Edwin came to the road where Marcia lived. 'Surely one has preached often enough on that text? Perhaps that's where we go wrong - obviously it *is* - when my reaction to your suggestion is that the person isn't in my parish' (QA:133).

Benet correctly contends that everybody is implicated in Marcia's death (1986:144):

"Pym's allusions to the parable of the Good Samaritan implicate all of them . . . Reading *Quartet in Autumn* we move continually between indignation and

recognition. Pym reminds us of the Christian imperative and at the same time of the many attitudes and assumptions with which we have qualified it or made it easy to ignore . . . Pym insists that we recognize the ordinary defenses we all employ to keep from seeing in others or exposing in ourselves the emotional needs that might, at least, unite us. We hear the catchphrases like concrete blocks behind which we guard our *privacy* and *independence*, words beyond criticism, nearly sacred, that too often mean solitude and irresponsibility. Though Edwin . . . is a regular churchgoer, and though the novel's moral perspective is indicated by biblical allusions, Pym is not writing about love in the exclusively Christian context. Christianity has institutionalized the concept of loving one's neighbor, but the idea of a compassionate benevolence toward others is familiar to all."

Although the novel echoes with plangent images of death and loneliness:

On their walks she was always the one to find the dead bird and the dried-up hedgehog's body or to notice the mangled rabbit in the middle of the road (QA:38);

Of course there was no question of her living at Holmhurst, a large red-brick mansion standing in wide lawns which she had often passed when she went to see Marjorie. She had once noticed an old woman with a lost expression peering through one of the surrounding hedges and that impression had remained with her (QA:47),

vestiges of traditional Pym comedy are not entirely lacking. The warden of Holmhurst who ensnares the vicar with her superior poulet niçoise¹ is a

1 Men still need meat, although Pym provides a 'seventies update of the boiled fowl and roast duck provided for earlier coddled curates.

horrifically comic character, in similar vein to Brookner's Mrs Cutler. Pym is also not above a malicious jibe at the more risible pronouncements on racism:

Back in the office Edwin, who had a sweet tooth, bit the head off a black jelly baby. There was nothing racist about his action or his choice, it was simply that he preferred the pungent liquorice flavour of the black babies to the more insipid orange, lemon or raspberry 'type' of the others (QA:8).

Although Pym's earlier comedies of manners detail the experience of "not having" with forbearance, wit and a wry and gentle humour, *Quartet in Autumn*, with its plaintive chronicle of isolation, is possibly one of Pym's finest literary achievements. Pym avoids a diatribe, competently sidesteps the mawkish, and, while making the reader aware of the ridiculous, is careful never to ridicule. Philip Larkin, one of the adjudicators on the Booker Prize Committee, offered the following criteria for the novels: "Could I read it? Did I believe it? Did it move me?"¹ *Quartet in Autumn* qualifies admirably on all counts.

4.12 *The Sweet Dove Died*

Someone known as "good old Ba", with a "toothy ruddy face",² corners Leonora, the self-centred and hedonistic protagonist of *The Sweet Dove Died* at a party, and the following conversation ensues:

1 Pym, 1984d:310.

2 Surely another cameo appearance of the author in her own novel, cf. "And surely those photographs show that slightly mad jolly fun face" (Pym, 1984d:305).

'You mean you do *nothing*?'

'One lives one's own life.'

'But you could do voluntary work, surely?'

The question was not worth answering, but Leonora's silence gave the woman the chance to enumerate all the things she might do - hospital work, old people, mentally handicapped children - the lonely ones, there were so many lonely ones . . . (SDD:160).¹

Leonora disdains this as an option for justification of her self-absorbed existence:

But when Leonora came to consider them each had something wrong with it: how could she do church work when she never went near a church,² or work for old people when she found them boring and physically repellent, or with handicapped children when the very thought of them was too upsetting? (SDD:164).

Like *Quartet in Autumn*, *The Sweet Dove Died* is tragic, but the tragedy of the selfish Leonora Eyre (her name has connotations of Jane Eyre and of Beethoven's Leonora overtures, as Phoebe and her friend Jennifer recall) is chronicled in a coldly funny comedy of manners.

Barbara Pym herself thought that *The Sweet Dove Died* was "one of the best I have ever done" (1984d:302), and if high comedy may be said to evoke

1 SDD refers to PYM, Barbara. 1983c. *The Sweet Dove Died*. London: Granada.

2 The only Pym novel with a total absence of vicars, other than the posthumous *An Academic Question*.

"intellectual laughter",¹ - thoughtful laughter from spectators who remain emotionally detached from the action - at the folly, pretentiousness and incongruity in human behaviour, then this intelligent and sophisticated novel is an excellent example of this genre.

In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym explores the character of Leonora, a beautiful, complacent woman who is obsessed with perfection. "The novel centers on her relationship with James Boyce; it is about the testing of Leonora, as first love and then misery present her with the choice of joining or rejecting the imperfect world and human race. In addition to issues of perfection and accommodation, the novel particularly focuses on possessive romantic love, on asexual forms of love, and on the emotional options available to fulfill the need for love; finally, it raises the question of which is greater, the need to love or the need to be loved" (Benet, 1986:120).

The Sweet Dove Died is therefore more restricted in its themes than most of Pym's other novels. The protagonists are elegantly cocooned in Kensington and Knightsbridge, and though there might be pained references to places like Putney ("it was perhaps not where one would care to have one's mother live"), these remain determinedly outside the parameters of the novel.

James and Humphrey Boyce rescue Leonora from the rigours of a Bond Street sale room, and both uncle and nephew are attracted to her. Leonora does not work, as she has independent means, and lives in a pretty house surrounded by her treasured "objets d'art et de vertu". In the manner of Prudence Bates of

1 George Meredith's essay *The Idea of Comedy* (1877), quoted by Abrams, 1981:27.

Jane and Prudence, her youth has been spent on romantic flirtations which have come to nothing. She is unable to commit herself emotionally or sexually, and is unsympathetic and unimaginative. Beautiful, elegant, "well preserved", and nearing fifty, she is described by Pym with a certain amount of irony:

Leonora liked to think of her life as calm of mind, all passion spent, or, more rarely, as emotion recollected in tranquillity. But had there ever really been passion, or even emotion? One or two tearful scenes in bed - for she had never enjoyed *that* kind of thing - and now it was such a relief that one didn't have to worry anymore. Her men friends were mostly elderly cultured people, who admired her elegance and asked no more than the pleasure of her company . . . The wide bed with its neo-Victorian headboard was conducive to pleasant thoughts and Leonora arranged herself for sleep. No Bible, no book of devotion, no alarm clock marred the worldly charm of her bedside table. Browning and Matthew Arnold - her favourite poets - took their place with her Guerlain cologne, a bottle of smelling salts, soft aquamarine paper tissues, a phial of brightly coloured pills to relieve stress and strain, and presiding over all these the faded photographs of a handsome man and a sweet-faced woman in late Victorian dress. Leonora had long ago decided that her grandparents were more distinguished-looking than her father and mother whose photographs had been hidden away in a drawer. Her father had been in the consular service and Leonora's childhood and youth had been spent in various European towns of which she retained many personal memories. Indeed, the recounting of these memories, romantic episodes and encounters, sometimes made her conversation a little tedious, so that people who knew her tended not to mention Lisbon, Dresden or Vienna if they could avoid it. Her parents had left her enough money to live on, so that she did not have to work unless she wanted to . . . The only thing to be said for work was that it gave one less time to brood and it was supposed to be satisfying for its own sake to the middle-aged. Not that one brooded much. Naturally the thought of death came into one's mind occasionally but one tried to be sensible about it, not getting into a panic, not pushing it away . . . Yet there was no reason why one's own death should not . . . be as elegant as one's life, and one would do everything possible to make it so (SDD:16-17).

Leonora trades on people's kindness and admiration ("other people were always so kind"; "taxi drivers are usually sweet little men") and uses her friendship with Meg, whose protégé is the peripatetic homosexual Colin, as a foil for her own charms. Like all Pym's heroines, she is too obtuse to realise that Meg's behaviour with Colin, which she scorns, mirrors her infatuation with James. Her neighbour Liz, an embittered divorcee, who dotes on her Siamese cats, provides a further chiaroscuro, later to become an ironic parallel. Both women are portrayed as physically unattractive and living in uncongenial surroundings - a complete contrast to the elegant Leonora.

A subtle scrimmage arises between Humphrey and James for the pleasure of escorting Leonora. Humphrey, who is "suitable" in terms of age, appearance and bank balance loses out to James, for Leonora needs the adulation of the young and handsome:

Humphrey's invitation to lunch and the exhibition had taken Leonora unawares, before she had been able to 'find herself' near Sloane Square and to pay a surprise visit to the shop. She was a little piqued to have matters taken out of her hands and quite ridiculously disappointed when she found that she and Humphrey were to lunch alone, without James. She had been looking forward to meeting him again - one needed the company of young people sometimes and that of good-looking young men was always particularly agreeable. Being with Humphrey was really not much different from being with any other of her elderly admirers who took her to expensive restaurants and plied her with compliments (SDD:18-19).

Leonora strikes up an intimate friendship with James. He is a good-looking, but not particularly bright young man, and Leonora, like all Pym women, elevates him to a romantic, Byronic love object: "I think you belong to some

earlier period,' she mused. 'Perhaps the eighteenth century? One can imagine a portrait of you leaning against a ruined pillar'" (SDD:22).

Leonora's heartlessness is shown by her behaviour towards the elderly gentlewoman living above her, and whose mere presence casts aspersions on the type of elegant perfection which Leonora always achieves around her. The only other imperfections which bring tears to her eyes are minuscule signs of her own encroaching age.

Humphrey, although somewhat pompous and affected himself, is not entirely beguiled by Leonora's affectations. When he drives her to the country, and she enthuses about the romantic setting of Virginia Water, he involuntarily remembers his dead wife, who appears to be the epitome of sense, in contrast to Leonora's pseudo-sensibility:

'A *working day*,' Leonora mocked, thinking how pompous dear old Humphrey was and how much more agreeable it would have been if James had been her companion in this romantic setting. 'A distant glimpse of a temple - perhaps a *ruined* temple - among trees, over still water,' she mused. 'I think that's really one of my favourite sights.'

Dear Leonora, Humphrey thought, so sensitive and impractical. He wondered how many times she had seen such a sight to arrive at the conclusion that it was one of her favourites. Suddenly - he supposed it was the contrast that brought it to his mind - he remembered his dead wife as she had been in her ATS uniform during the war, walking with him among these same trees (SDD:34-35).

Meanwhile, James has entered into a desultory sexual relationship with Phoebe, once again the antithesis of Leonora in dress and demeanour. One realises at

the outset of the novel that both women are going to lose James, as his sexual preferences are ambivalent:

A tall man with a slightly raffish air, leaning against the wall, had fixed his gaze on James and was staring at him every time James happened to glance in his direction. James lowered his eyes, feeling foolish but also a little flattered. He was not quite sure if he wanted that kind of admiration and found himself wondering if the diversion of Leonora's near collapse had saved him from a fate worse than death (SDD:7-8).

In addition, the attractions of Leonora are starting to pall. Pym frequently uses the romantic walk as an image of the emotional excesses of women; his unwillingness to recount the episode of Phoebe Sharpe (to Leonora the name has sinister intimations of Becky Sharp, the unscrupulous heroine of *Vanity Fair*, as well as of a Gilbert and Sullivan character) is the initial divisive element in their relationship:

There was a little park near Leonora's house and it was here that she had asked James to meet her, so that they could have a walk before dinner. He had agreed rather unwillingly and now he felt decidedly tired after his exertions in the country and would have preferred to sink into a chair with a drink at his elbow rather than traipse round the depressing park 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. Wasn't it a slight affectation on Leonora's part to find it so 'agreeable' and the statue so 'appealing'? (SDD:42).

The image of Peter Pan is not fortuitous; Leonora, like all Pym's heroines, has created a part for James, which he is forced to play:

'You're looking particularly handsome tonight,' she teased. 'I wonder how many people have fallen in love with you today?'

One at least, he thought uncomfortably. To his chagrin he felt himself blushing, and yet by now he was quite accustomed to this particular kind of teasing from Leonora. 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, a woman so much older than he was. James had been content to play this part and of course there was no doubt of his devotion to Leonora. But now there was Phoebe - or was there? It was certainly not part of Leonora's plans for him, if she had any, that he should become devoted to a young woman. But somehow the word 'devotion' didn't seem applicable to what had taken place in Phoebe's cottage this afternoon (SDD:46-47).

Colin, the fickle homosexual protégé of Meg, forecasts Leonora's undoing at the hands of the colubrine Ned. Leonora's affected charm doesn't wash with Colin, as Pym maliciously illustrates. *The Sweet Dove Died* is a novel of great subtlety, and Leonora does not realise that Meg's suffocatingly maternal ministrations parallel her own:

The sadness of James's life had taken away her appetite. Really, one couldn't eat with such thoughts. That poor boy, and yet if his mother *hadn't* died . . . (SDD:36);

'Hullo, Leonora,' said Colin smoothly. 'What are you going to have?'

'I don't know - what is there? Some pâté, perhaps, and what do you think would go best with it? You must help me choose.' Leonora was at her most appealing, but in the dim light it was hardly possible to see what the dishes contained. Colin was also at his most appealing and Meg beamed proudly at the sight of him, so efficient and charming in a pink flowered shirt (SDD:50).

Leonora smiles sardonically at Meg's contention that you "have to let people be free" (SDD:51), and takes offence at Meg's description of her as a perfect person, leading a gracious and elegant life. She is unable to perceive that she

is relinquishing love for perfection, and the image of herself as "cold and fossilized" (SDD:52), perfectly reflects her narcissism and atrophied feelings about anything other than herself and her possessions.

It is interesting to note that during Liz and Leonora's typical tête-à-têtes, they are both exchanging information about the lack of love, although Liz has the cats as child/lover substitutes, just as Meg has Colin:

Eventually Liz would embark again on the subject of her unhappy marriage. 'All that love, wasted,' she would say. This was one of the rare occasions when Leonora would feel inadequate, having no experience of her own to match it. She had never been badly treated or rejected by a man - perhaps she had never loved another person with enough intensity for such a thing to be possible - whatever the reason she would keep silent, only observing that perhaps love was never wasted, or so it was said. Liz for her part would be equally bored by Leonora and her reminiscences of her Continental girlhood and later attachments mysteriously hinted at which never seemed to have come to anything. Yet at the end of the evening each woman would feel a kind of satisfaction, as if more than just drink and food had been offered and accepted (SDD:53).

At the Leopard Dining Rooms, where Phoebe and James repair for tea, Phoebe is again presented as the antithesis to Leonora:

Was this Phoebe's setting - plastic tablecloths, artificial flowers and bottles of sauce? he wondered, for she seemed happy and relaxed. Certainly it could never be Leonora's (SDD:57).

The antithesis of female characters, viz. Leonora ("cool, poised and exquisitely dressed") and Phoebe ("shy, on the defensive and in her odd clothes") is a common Pym trait (cf. Jane and Prudence, as well as Ianthe and Penelope).

When James goes abroad, he asks Leonora to supervise the packing of his furniture, as his lease is up. The furniture débâcle becomes a duel between Leonora and Phoebe, as James has promised bits of furniture to both women. Leonora appropriates a fruitwood mirror, which has satisfactory "mirror, mirror on the wall" characteristics:

The fruitwood mirror was, of course, very much Leonora's style. 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, and that softening and gradual disintegration of the flesh which was so distressing on a spring or summer morning (SDD:79).

Leonora's *memento mori* is occasioned by uneasy intimations of wrinkles and lines, indications of age which have not gone unnoticed by James. Benet suggests that the fruitwood mirror is analogous to Donne's famous image:

"Pym gives us, in the fruitwood mirror decorated with Cupids, the perfect image elucidating Leonora's love of James. As it recurs, it reminds us of Donne's image of the beloved's eyes as 'glasses,'¹ and the reminder suggests the psychological accuracy of Pym's observation about love. What Leonora experiences with James, and for the first time, is an objective, external view of herself in a guise that charms her and coincides with how she wishes to be seen - the mirror shows her the 'ageless' woman that James actually sees in the first flush

1 A favourite image with Donne, cf. *The Exstasie*, *The Good Morrow*, *A Valediction: of Weeping*, and *The Canonization*.

of affection. James sees Leonora and she sees that he does. She loves him for the impression she senses she has made on him, for the reflection she sees in his eyes and his mirror - though she knows the glass has 'some slight flaw in it,' and that it shows the ageless woman if she places it 'in a certain light'" (Benet, 1986:122).

Leonora is repelled by Humphrey's (a more suitable attachment) sexual overtures; the abortive seduction scene is a good example of a comedy of manners made more acerbic by Pym's ironic wit:

Surely freedom from this sort of thing was among the compensations of advancing age and the sad decay of one's beauty; one really ought not to be having to fend people off any more. But this was of little comfort in the present situation, and now Humphrey's hand, that hand so accustomed to appraising objects of art and of vertu, had strayed inside the neck of her dress and would certainly have torn the delicate chiffon, if nothing worse, had not a gentle knocking on the door caused its hasty withdrawal (SDD:84).

Miss Foxe, Leonora's apparently indigent lodger, and the interrupter of the liaison, is shown to have more genuine gentility and breeding than Leonora.

Leonora's preference for James resides in his asexuality, and her remarks to him at the cat show indicate this:

'Just kittens and neuter cats,' said Leonora, reading from the programme, 'that sounds so cosy, doesn't it?'

'Shall I be the only grown-up male thing there, then?' James asked, not altogether joking.

'Probably, darling - though one doesn't think of you as male, exactly. Not all tweedy and pipe-smoking and doing carpentry at week-ends' (SDD:59).

When Phoebe visits Humphrey at the shop, she ascertains from Miss Caton that Leonora Eyre is a friend of Humphrey's, and feels relief that "some sort of an aunt" had supervised the packing of James's furniture. We are given an intimation that Phoebe is going to be disposed of easily because of her ingenuousness; she is relieved to discover that the companion James has picked up in Spain is male. When Humphrey, not disinterestedly, breaks the news of James's liaison with Phoebe to Leonora after the opera ("Was her taste, her passion almost, for Puccini a little unworthy of her? Humphrey wondered. Was there just a hint of the second-rate about it and would he have admired her more if she had preferred Mozart?"), Leonora immediately orders Miss Foxe to vacate the flat above her, with the intention of installing James there on his return from Spain and Portugal. Benet discerns a "submerged but bizarre Oedipal situation" in the Leonora-Humphrey-James triangle:

"If Humphrey and Leonora are the parent substitutes against whom James feels the urge to rebel, Humphrey is involved in a submerged but bizarre Oedipal situation, competing against and resenting the 'son' who has taken his rightful place with the mother-figure in the psychic skit" (Benet, 1986:125).

Leonora becomes involved in a minor but undignified fracas with Phoebe over the repossession of James's furniture. Having made an uncharacteristic journey to Phoebe's cottage by Green Line bus, only to find Phoebe absent, she is given tea by a perspicacious neighbour, as well as another ironic intimation of her fate:

'The odd thing about men is that one never really knows,' said Miss Culver, 'Just when you think they're close they suddenly go off.'

Leonora was startled and wondered if she had heard correctly. For a moment the two ageing unmarried women looked at each other in a way that seemed to ask, 'What can you know of being close to a man?' It was a temporary embarrassment, however. Leonora quickly recovered, deciding that Miss Culver was obviously one of those eccentric women who live alone and don't always realize what they are saying (SDD:107).

On her return home she broods about her relationship with James, going to ludicrous lengths to complete his ensnarement:

In the bus she brooded a little over that unexpected remark about men 'going off' just when you thought they were close. She hardly liked to admit it, but she did sometimes feel slightly uneasy when James was out of her sight and this business with Phoebe Sharpe - whether there had been much or little in it - showed that her anxiety was justified. Not that one thought of James as 'men', of course, or regarded him quite as other people. It wasn't as if one could *marry* James, for instance, though it was amusing to toy with the idea. 'Quietly in London', one sometimes read, perhaps even 'very quietly'. Surely life - and literature - were not without precedents for such a marriage? Then she remembered Humphrey looming over her that evening, but of course dear James wouldn't expect anything like *that* . . . (SDD:107-108).

In one aspect, at least, Leonora is right, for James certainly won't expect anything like *that*: he has other fish to fry, and in the character of Ned, Leonora is up against a more formidable enemy than the easily vanquished Phoebe:

Ned's thin gnat-like voice went on teasing and probing. He was small and neat, with smooth fair hair and blue eyes, appearing much younger than his twenty-nine years until a closer look at his face revealed that life had, after all, left its mark (SDD:96).

One might take issue with Benet's contention that Ned is "the brash American . . . the irrepressible spirit of independence that will not permit James to be taken without a good fight" (1986:127). Ned is malicious, insidious, vindictive and even more selfish than Leonora, and his affair with James (or "Jimmie") is, to him, nothing more than an incidental dalliance. Ned's insistent insidiousness (his conversational mode is even more marked by italics than is Leonora's) fans James's uneasiness about his new lifestyle:

'But, Jimmie, is that wise?' Anxiety seemed to intensify the gnat-like quality of Ned's voice, so that combined with the noise of the plane James really did feel as if an insect were buzzing round his head.

'It isn't a question of its being wise,' he said rather crossly. Wisdom was somehow the last quality one would associate with Ned, anyway. 'It just happens to be a convenient arrangement until I find myself a new flat. After all, I've got to live somewhere.'

'But with Leonora, and in the same house . . . Jimmie, you'll have to be firm with her and not let her boss you. Believe me, it could be very difficult to get away. With your sweet nature you might feel yourself under an obligation to her, and then where would you be?' (SDD:115).

"The sweet dove", viz James, is properly ensnared: by the bars on the window of his flat (the irony of its being the nursery wing), by Leonora's expensive gift of antique vases, by her exquisite meals, and even by her sedulous observation of his "privacy":

It was almost frightening to realize that Leonora was willing to spend so much money on his birthday present. For now that he saw the vases again he felt that perhaps after all he didn't like them as much as he had remembered. There was something sickly in their colouring and over-elaborate in their design. Looking at them he felt like somebody - a child, of course - who has eaten too many cream cakes or whatever would be the equivalent nowadays. Saddened, he sat down at the table and prepared to enjoy his delicious birthday dinner (SDD:122).

Leonora does not find Ned as tractable as James. He is a worthy antagonist, as narcissistic and self-contained as she is:

Ned stepped into the hall, his glance moving towards his reflection in the fruitwood mirror and resting there for a moment (SDD:130).

Their encounter has much of the flavour of that between Wilmet and Keith in *A Glass of Blessings*; Ned "cases the joint" like an assessor, and on his departure, the wicked step-mother has been vanquished by a more invidious Snow White:

Going to the fruitwood mirror for reassurance she saw that she looked pale and tense (SDD:133).

Despite Leonora's contention that she is "stronger than any of them", her master plan for weaving Ned into the "fabric of their lives" is foiled, for "it occurred to her that when it came to weaving people into the fabric of one's life he had perhaps stolen a march on her" (SDD:137). Ned has appropriated the role of first lady, and has relegated Leonora to a has-been understudy role:

An exciting and dangerous prospect opened before her as she thought of it. Perhaps it would be best to reach a compromise whereby Ned could be woven into the fabric of their lives in such a way that he became an unobtrusive thread in the harmonious tapestry of the whole. Yet when he came into the room he immediately took the centre 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 (SDD:137).

During the visit to Keats's house, Ned cruelly stresses Leonora's exhaustion by constant allusions to his own mother. To James, who has fairly recently lost his own mother, to whom he was very attached, Leonora's defeat is not easily glossed over, and the full horror of Ned's actions is revealed by his cruel imagery:

'... she's the proud type who prefers to suffer in silence. Like a wounded animal crawling away to die.' Ned laughed in a light cruel way. 'Jimmie, don't look like *that* - what've I said?'

Ned's words had taken James back to his childhood. They had a much-loved cat who had been run over. He and his mother had found her in a wood where she had crawled after the car had hit her, dried blood on her mouth, her beautiful fur all dull.

'You don't understand,' he said.

'Believe me, Jimmie, I do.' Ned was suddenly gentle, there were even tears in his eyes. It would have taken the most cynically dispassionate observer to discern any hint of complacency in his tone when he added, 'Life is cruel and we do *terrible things* to each other' (SDD:144-145).

James's departure throws Leonora upon her own company; she passes the time like an elegant Mrs Tittlemouse, obsessively washing and polishing her possessions. There are intimations of change: her face looks shrunken and old in her new fruitwood mirror which Humphrey has procured for her ('Sensitive women

were really very irritating at times, he had thought"); she is moved to tears by the *memento mori* occasioned by a jewellery display at Christie's; she identifies herself with an old woman clearing away used crockery in a restaurant:

She turned her head away and huddled into her fur coat, feeling herself debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground, indeed 'brought to a certain point of dilapidation'. I am utterly alone, she thought (SDD:166-167).

The pathos is intensified by a momentary revelation from her childhood ("certainly not Leonora's mother with the young Italian lover one had been thought too much of a child to know about"), but this is temporary. Leonora glides smoothly back into her hedonistic, cushioned world:

Leonora, moving away in the direction of Fortnum and Mason, found herself entering that emporium. She wanted to feel soft carpets under her feet and to move among jars of foie gras and bottles of peaches in brandy (SDD:169).

Her incapability to adopt other options, to fill other needs, is illustrated by her inability to cope with Liz's cat:

The snow was falling quite thickly now and when she got home the little patio was almost covered. Leonora stepped out to look at it and as she did so, one of Liz's cats came up to her crying and rubbing itself against her legs. How had it got over from next door? she wondered. She tried to send it back over the wall but the animal would not go and continued to weave around her uttering its mournful cries. What did it want? She felt she ought to say something to it, but she could never distinguish Liz's cast [sic] by name, and 'Pussy' seemed altogether too feeble and inadequate a form of address. As she puzzled, Liz came to the wall in her usual fussing way, 'Oh there he is,' she said. 'I couldn't think what had happened to him.'

One would hardly want to be like the people who fill the emptiness of their lives with an animal, Leonora thought, going back into the house (SDD:169-170).

Leonora therefore rejects the love objects that have given Mrs Beltane, Sophia and Liz some purpose in life.

The complications of Ned's life necessitate his going back to America ("Mother" providing a good excuse), and he metaphorically flings James back into Leonora's lap. While realising the correspondences between her situation and that of Liz, Leonora's pride precludes her from entertaining thoughts of a second-best relationship:

She wondered how many times Meg must have enacted this kind of scene with Colin, always receiving him back so that as time went on it became easier and no explanation was needed. The bottle of Yugoslav Riesling - his favourite wine, always in the fridge - would be broached and by the time it was finished all would be well again. Meg would in due course, or perhaps immediately, buy another bottle and keep it there, ready for the next time. But there was something humiliating about the idea of wooing James in this way, like an animal being enticed back into its cage. Even if he had a favourite wine, Leonora did not think she could have brought herself to produce it (SDD:187).

There is irony in Leonora's apparent inability to equate her chocolate mousse with Meg's lemon meringue tart and Yugoslav Riesling. Leonora is possibly the most pitiable person in Pym's tragi-comedies, as her pride and self-absorption preclude her from the options presented to her. As Benet contends:

"Leonora's sole experience of love, with its potential to work radical changes, is a dead end because of her ineradicable self-centeredness and passion for

perfection. Unlike Humphrey, she cannot accept imperfection in another; unlike Liz, she cannot accept an imperfect substitute as the object of her affection; and unlike Meg, she cannot accept an imperfect relationship. Having rejected the options available to her, she retreats to perfect objects, some of which the faithful Humphrey (who deserves better) gives her . . . For Meg and Liz, the need to love is primary, but not for Leonora. The dove, the 'something' that died during her painful winter, was her desire and willingness to love. She prefers to be the object of her own admiration" (Benet, 1986:132-133).

In 1967 Barbara Pym wrote to Philip Larkin:

"The new book I mentioned [*The Sweet Dove Died*] really is new and I have finished the first draft. It will need some pruning and sharpening before I dare try it on a publisher, if I ever do. The friend who has read it thinks it almost a sinister and unpleasant book which may be all to the good. I didn't try to make it so, but tended to leave out boring cosiness and concentrate on the darker side" (Pym, 1984d:244).

The Sweet Dove Died is an infinitely bleaker, more brittle and sophisticated comedy than any of Pym's other novels; if one compares the cosy ménage of Wilmet with Piers, Keith and husband Rodney in tow making a guest appearance in *No Fond Return of Love*, the contrast between Pym's early novels and the latter is exacerbated. As Benet contends, Pym realised the potential for tragedy in many of her characters' lives. With *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, the tragedy is fully realised, owing to the inability of the characters to reach out, and to admit their need for love in whatever guise it

presents itself. *The Sweet Dove Died* is a model of stylistic craftsmanship, as Pym's plot evolves lightly but mercilessly through subtle but devastating nuances of Leonora's sybaritic fate.

4.13 *A Few Green Leaves*

Entries in Pym's diary for February 1979 poignantly read:

"5 February. Home again. Went to see Dr S. Very kind and practical. Asked me to consider now how I wanted my end to be, whether at home, in hospital or hospice, or private nursing home.

"14 February . . . In the afternoon I finished my novel in its first, very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore!" (Pym, 1984d:323).

A Few Green Leaves, published posthumously, presages the author's death in Pym's mild and unobtrusive manner, when the unimaginative young doctor of the village has to make an inauspicious prognosis:

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. In his opinion it was no good trying to hide things from an intelligent person. 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 (FGL:186).¹

A Few Green Leaves also, perhaps fittingly, sees the end of that excellent woman, Miss Clovis, a peripheral figure in practically every Pym novel since *Excellent Women*. The memorial service, with Professor Digby Fox (the ambitious anthropology student from *Less than Angels*) giving the address, is depicted with Pym's characteristic gentle humour:

. . . how you might think that this elegantly formal setting was not what Esther would have chosen, but that it was in another sense appropriate as typifying the high standard she expected and demanded from all those whose work she was called upon to sponsor . . . few would forget her advice to young researchers about to enter on a period of field-work, the comments that must often have seemed harsh, as was her criticism of written work that fell short of the high standard she demanded . . . Here Digby seemed to falter, to repeat himself and stammer nervously, as if he expected Miss Clovis to be looking over his shoulder at the address he had prepared or to be listening somewhere up above him (FGL:135-136).

A Few Green Leaves details portraits of village life in the late 'seventies, "the trivial round, the common task" of contemporary life in an Oxfordshire village. The novel is introspective, and although gently comic, is redolent of death, and tinged with disillusionment. Although mature, and mild in its ironies, it is somewhat tired and strained in tone, with a self-conscious use of trendy jargon.

Benet enumerates the themes as follows (1986:146):

1 FGL refers to PYM, Barbara. 1985b. *A Few Green Leaves*. London : Granada.

"In *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym returns to the comic perspective and to some of her favorite themes. Observation versus participation, unsuitable attachments, the need for love and relationship, options for emotional fulfillment, independence and the need for community - all of these are touched upon, in the context of the search for identity by a contemporary woman living in an outpost of our modern world. Some darker threads from *Quartet in Autumn*, having been turned just so, add their rich depth to this essentially cheerful tapestry: Pym deals with the need for faith in our largely secular world, attitudes towards the aged, and death, achieving resonance without grimness in her depiction of contemporary life. Her deliberate presentation of Emma Howick as a modern woman trying to find meaning in her life and surroundings, of Tom as a man preoccupied with the past, and of the general assumption of an enlightened or different 'present' combine to pose important questions: What is constant in a world of change? What has the past to offer aggressively modern people?"

The novel still offers clear distinctions between "them" and "us" - the village worthies as opposed to the villagers, now admirably chain-store clad in man-made fibres (in contrast to their ancestors buried in wool), and supermarket fed on frozen and junk food and living on a housing estate, with the effect that "we were all flattened out into a kind of uniform dullness these days - something to do with the welfare state and the rise of the consumer society. And then we were taken care of from the cradle to the grave, weren't we, and that must have an effect . . ." (FGL:102).

Tom Dagnall, the rector, doggedly cared for by his sister Daphne since the death of his wife, is obsessed by the seventeenth century and his attempts to

locate the site of the D.M.V., or "deserted medieval village". Emma, a social anthropologist, a "sensible person in her thirties, dark-haired, thin", is doing desultory research, and her qualities as a sterling "excellent woman" do not go unnoticed by Tom:

It occurred to him that even if she didn't come to Evensong, she might be helpful in other ways. She might be a good typist, though he could hardly ask her to do such menial work, or even be experienced at deciphering Elizabethan handwriting, a skill none of his willing lady helpers possessed (FGL:12).

Emma's mother, an English academic specialising in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, had named her for Austen's heroine, but Emma sees herself rather as Hardy's first wife - "a person with something unsatisfactory about her". It is intimated that, in her mother's opinion anyway, her life has not been fulfilling. The theme of filial duty, in the sense that Emma has not come up to her mother's rather rudimentary expectations of marriage, is introduced:

Emma had so far failed to come up to her mother's expectations but had become - goodness only knew how - an anthropologist. Nor had she married or formed any other kind of attachment. Beatrix would have liked her to marry - it seemed suitable - though she did not herself set all that much store by the status. Her own husband - Emma's father - had been killed in the war, and having, as it were, fulfilled herself as a woman Beatrix had been able to return to her academic studies with a clear conscience (FGL:13).

Beatrix's options for fulfilment therefore included marriage, however perfunctory.

The great god of the modern age is medicine, as indicated by the "congregations" at the surgery, where the young doctor, Martin Shrubsole, with his clinical and somewhat spurious interest in geriatrics, and the old doctor, Dr Gellibrand, in the light of his increasing years vicariously interested in obstetrics, minister. Mediaeval accidie, the former province of the church, is now diagnosed as stress and depression, and tranquillisers and psychiatric counselling are the panacea:

'They' - the patients - had not on the whole been to church the previous day, but they atoned for this by a devout attendance at the place where they expected not so much to worship, though this did come into it for a few, as to receive advice and consolation. You might talk to the rector, some would admit doubtfully, but he couldn't give you a prescription. There was nothing in churchgoing to equal that triumphant moment when you came out of the surgery clutching the ritual scrap of paper (FGL:18).

The medical world therefore seems more equipped to deal with the world's ills than "Old Tom", or "Poor Tom", who prefers delving into the past, and who appears ineffectual and ill-equipped to minister to his parishioners. Emma, the anthropologist, is once again the observer, rather than the participant in this new ritual, and thereby her loneliness is exemplified. "Emma may perceive her interest in others and her wish to be around them as doing her work, but anyone who sees people sitting in the doctor's waiting room as an attractive party is lonely. The image with which she remembers her scholarly role has an almost Dickensian pathos: the urchin-anthropologist presses her nose to the cold glass, looking at the merry feast that is not, alas, for the likes of her. Notwithstanding Emma's self-sufficiency and seeming contentment with her life, an underlying sense of emotional isolation and deprivation motivates her behavior" (Benet, 1986:152-153):

Peering through the half-open doors of the surgery, she was tempted to join in what seemed like an enjoyable occasion from which she was being excluded. But remembering her role as an anthropologist and observer - the necessity of being on the outside looking in - she crept away, meditating on what she had observed. There was obviously material for a note here (FGL:24).

Emma's half-articulated loneliness and need for love prompt her to write to Graham Pettifer, a former colleague and acquaintance, whom she recognises in a television panel discussion. Their previous relationship does not seem to merit an impetuous letter:

To say that he had been her 'lover' was altogether too grand a way to describe what their association had been; perhaps even 'love affair' was not strictly accurate, for there had not been all that much love about it, no more than proximity and a mild affection. But anyway, it would have been true enough to say that she had once known Graham Pettifer 'quite well', though she had not seen him for many years (FGL:16).

Graham's visit to Emma is not a success; his marriage to Claudia is floundering (Emma's subsequent encounters with her reveal Claudia's seeming indifference to her and to the marriage), and conversation is difficult - not too difficult, however, for Graham to unburden himself and enjoy a good meal:

She felt that she was babbling on foolishly, for now that Graham was actually here - had materialized, she almost felt - it was becoming evident that it was going to be rather difficult to talk to him. Even a mention of the old days at L.S.E., which she now threw into the conversation, did not do much to lighten the atmosphere. She had never before experienced the curious awkwardness of meeting somebody you had once loved and now no longer thought about . . . But she was gratified to observe that even in the telling of a painful story he made a good meal and congratulated her afterwards on the excellence of the ham mousse (FGL:35-37).

An example of the general air of disillusionment which pervades the novel is Miss Grundy's near-fall at Dr G.'s party. Pym proves the fallacy of literary role models and romantic embellishment:

Miss Grundy had stumbled and nearly fallen on the rocky path. She, the author of a romantic novel, had found herself in the situation that might have provided a fruitful plot; but it was not the son of the house who came to her assistance or a handsome stranger but Emma, the anthropologist and observer of human behaviour. Ah, the sadness of life, she thought (FGL:54-55).

Nostalgia for the past is apparent in the older people's reminiscences about the war, and especially in Miss Lee's effusive recollections of the de Tankerville family who lived in the manor house, and Miss Vereker, the governess of the "girls", who used to keep the mausoleum in order. The floral decoration of the mausoleum, a prominent symbol of death and transition, is appropriated by a modern young man, Terry Skate, until he loses his faith owing to the influence of trendy academics viewed on a television programme. Meanwhile Tom is subconsciously attracted to Emma (he is disconcerted and mildly peeved by Graham's move to the cottage in the woods, where he is to finish his book), and Emma to Tom, as her attraction to Graham wanes. Once again the theme of disillusionment is broached, as Emma does not imbue Graham with any heroic stature:

They were standing in the spare room, side by side, not touching. Emma realized that Graham was not quite as tall as she was - had it always been like that or had he shrunk, diminished, in some way? (FGL:82);

Emma slipped past him [Tom], not wanting to have that kind of conversation. She wondered why she had come to church, for it had not been to have another look at the flowers (FGL:83).

Graham is a carping, tedious little man; nevertheless Emma gamely carries casseroles through the woods to the cottage, and allows him to make love to her in a desultory fashion when it is convenient to him, while he displays complete indifference to her work as an anthropologist:

'That sort of thing has been done,' said Graham in an idle, uninterested tone, coming to sit beside her on the grass. 'Do people pass along this way? Will anybody see us?' He started to kiss and fondle her in a rather abstracted way. Emma found herself remembering Miss Lickerish and the goings-on in the ruined cottage during the war. 'I hope we should have some warning,' she said, 'see them coming through the trees.'

'This is rather pleasant, isn't it?' he said. 'I feel I deserve a break from my work,' he added, as if being with her could be no more than that (FGL:134-135).

Other needs stressed in the novel are those of Tom's sister and housekeeper, Daphne, who feels that she has wasted her life in caring for her brother, while craving Greek sunshine and a dog to care for (her friendship with the bossy librarian, Heather, turns out to be another unsuitable attachment in the novel); Avice, the bossy, social worker wife of Martin Shrubsole, who craves to live at the rectory as befitting her standing in the community; and more amusingly, the food critic, Adam Prince, who finds the impersonality and alienation of modern life encroaching on his sybaritic job:

Summer was also ending for Adam Prince, in disagreeable, even disquieting, experiences. The first, in a motorway café where, surrounded by eaters younger and less fastidious than himself, he sampled (in the course of duty) a kind of 'high tea' that was not at all to his liking. The second, in the impersonal surroundings of a motel or 'Post House', where his bodily needs were adequately catered for but there was a chilling lack of human contact. No charming elderly lady (and Adam frequently enjoyed conversations with such on his travels) knitting in the lounge after dinner; no cordial 'Buon giorno, signore' from a smiling young waiter, bearing his breakfast on a tray high on his shoulder, as nostalgically recalled in some Roman *pensione* not too far from the Spanish Steps. Adam's plastic 'continental' breakfast appeared early and mysteriously outside his door as if brought by computer, which it may well have been. That last might be a suitable note to introduce into his report which he would be writing when he got home.

But his desire for human contact, wasn't that the most disquieting thing of all? Could it be that he was getting old? (FGL:161).

Meanwhile Tom, too, has doubts about faith, wondering whether "the whole business wasn't an elaborate fiction" (FGL:179). His momentary fears are abated by the ministrations of the excellent women in the church, who find their reward in polishing the wood and arranging the flowers. "Wood is rewarding" and "a few green leaves . . . make such a difference", and Tom's doubts are assuaged. When the site of the deserted medieval village is accidentally found by the returning Miss Vereker, Tom is freed from his obsession, and the death of Miss Lickerish, a symbol of eccentric independence, provides him with the opportunity to minister to his flock once again. Miss Lickerish demonstrates need and compassion in the form of caring for cats, hedgehogs and toads. Tom and Emma strike up a tentative friendship, and the book ends on a positive but inconclusive note. One surmises that Emma might marry Tom; her discovery of his book of metaphysical poetry at the cottage in the woods, with its pages open at an inapposite poem, is indicative of Graham's return to Claudia. Like a

Brookner heroine, Emma decides to use her talent for observation, the penalty for being an outsider, to write a novel:

She remembered that her mother had said something about wanting to let the cottage to a former student, who was writing a novel and recovering from an unhappy love affair. But this was not going to happen, for Emma was going to stay in the village herself. She could write a novel and even, as she was beginning to realize, embark on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one (FGL:220).

A Few Green Leaves, together with the later posthumous *An Academic Question*, is possibly Pym's most disappointing novel. Emma's "notes" on various village characters are a forced stylistic device by Pym making for tedious reading, and the introduction of characters like the couple of modern academics, the Barracloughs, seems an unnecessary intrusion. Pym's jokes at the expense of contemporary jargon and vogue phrases, as well as the constant reiteration of examples of modern consumerism, place further strain on the novel. Although Benet sees Emma as a modern Mildred Lathbury, "equipped with an entirely different personality and perspective, living in a time of radically expanded options for a woman, our modern heroine has in common with her elder sister the need for fulfillment in love" (Benet, 1986:156), she never fully engages our admiration or sympathy. The novel remains a desultory hotch-potch of Pym's own observations of village life gleaned during her retirement, a novel written by a dying woman, with too many intrusions from previous novels and insufficient plot to sustain the reader's interest.

4.14 *An Academic Question*

In June 1971, Barbara Pym wrote to Philip Larkin:

"Rather to my surprise I find I have nearly finished the first draft of another novel about a provincial university . . . told by the youngish wife of a lecturer. It was supposed to be a sort of Margaret Drabble effort but of course it hasn't turned out like that at all" (Pym, 1984d:263).

According to Hazel Holt, the editor of the posthumously published *An Academic Question*, Pym felt that the first draft was too "cosy" to have any chance of being published in the unsympathetic literary climate of the day, so she wrote another third-person version, in an endeavour to make the novel more "sharp" and "swinging". One suspects, given the heroine and milieu of the novel, that Pym was attempting something along the lines of Drabble's *The Garrick Year*. In the event, this "transitional novel" is an abysmal failure, as it lacks the high spirits, dry wit and deprecating manner of the early novels, while failing to achieve the poignancy and plangent tone of Pym's later fiction.

Like most Pym heroines, Caroline Grimstone has appropriated a literary role model, although its inapposite nature does not escape her:

I had been christened Caroline, which in my teens I had changed to Caro because of poor Lady Caroline Lamb, who said she was like the wreck of a little boat for she never came up to the sublime and beautiful. At sixteen it had seemed touching and amusing to think of oneself in this way, but as I grew older I could see that it was less admirable. After the misery of the Byronic affair, which had been the inevitable result of this early foolishness, I

had tried to forget the Caro side of me, though the name still stuck (AQ:4).¹

The theme of need, which pervades all Pym's novels, is evident in Caroline's feelings of unfulfilment:

Fiction, journalism and the conversation of other university wives, some of whom had part-time jobs, tended to make me see myself as a frustrated graduate wife, though I had married straight from university and had never had anything that might be considered as a proper job, nor was there any particular career that I wanted to follow. I was, however, conscious of lacking any special maternal feeling and this seemed an even greater inadequacy. I loved Kate and worried about her very often, but Inge was so much better with her than I was. Still, I felt proud that I had produced a child, though disappointed that I did not feel more 'fulfilled' (AQ:4-5).

Caroline's life seems pervaded by a moody and petulant dissatisfaction. Her maternal ministrations are intermittent and perfunctory; her uxorial ones equally detached and indifferent. The "tide of mediocrity" of modern living seems to be epitomised by the provincial university at which her husband, Alan, is a lecturer, and which has grown up from the local technical college (the novel is full of vapid apologies for universities which are not Oxbridge). As Caroline seems superfluous in both her husband's and daughter's lives, she imagines that she might be able to please Alan, the aspiring academic, by appropriating an important manuscript from the papers of Mr Stillingfleet, an inmate of the local old-age home. The academic rat race is described with Pym's characteristic wit:

1 AQ refers to PYM, Barbara. 1986. *An Academic Question*. London: Macmillan.

He got the drinks and we sat together in silence. Some of Alan's colleagues were already eating, refuelling at the trough, to enable them the better to support what most of them regarded as a 'crushing teaching load' which could amount to as much as eight or ten hours a week. Most of them nodded to Alan as they came in but nobody joined us; each person was intent on his or her own business; there was nothing social about the occasion. Most of the young lecturers, except for the very junior ones, were at the stage of feeling dissatisfied with their positions. Alan himself - Dr. Alan Grimstone, for he was, of course, a Ph.D. - had been feeling for some time that he ought to be moving onwards and upwards. Just as our green Triumph Herald was no longer quite big enough, so the position of lecturer did not give him all the scope he needed. He knew that he was looked upon as able and promising, but he was like a card in a game of patience, his moves blocked by cards of a higher suit. The one most in his way was Crispin Maynard and, although Alan could not, of course, hope to get his chair when he retired, he felt that once Crispin had gone, his own upward path to progress would be easier . . . In the meantime, while waiting for Crispin to be removed by the natural process of retirement, Alan had entered into the field of academic rivalry in learned journals and the article he was working on now was likely to challenge Crispin's supremacy in his own field (AQ:28-29).

The thin and flaccid plot revolves around the amoral contortions of those engaged in the desperate dash up the academic ladder: Caroline and Alan appropriate the manuscript while Caroline is reading aloud to Mr Stillingfleet; Alan has a brief fling with the assistant editor of the learned journal which is to publish his article (which gives Pym the opportunity for a wry self-portrait); Mr Stillingfleet dies, and his box of manuscripts is deposited in the university library, where Caroline has to secure a part-time job in order to return the manuscript. The manuscripts are destroyed when the librarian's office burns down during a fifth of November celebration.

This exiguous plot is padded with the usual cast of Pym *dramatis personae*, suitably embellished for the 'seventies. Kitty and Coco are two Caribbean

exiles, adrift in an alien England which is not conducive to their sybaritic modes of existence; Susan, Caroline's brash sister, lives with a stage designer boy friend and has had an abortion; Dolly, Kitty's unlikely sister, is an elderly eccentric who collects hedgehog droppings. Trendy references to euthanasia, student demonstrations and the *Guardian*, and Pym's tentatively explicit language ("balls-up") are obvious attempts by the author to go upmarket, and her depiction of a "few gentle cultured people trying to stand up against the swamp of mediocrity that was threatening to swamp them" - more specifically the demise of the Third Programme on radio - as well as her descriptions of the clinical insensitivity of geriatric care, conveys the theme of a culture and people which are invidiously altered.

The novel lacks the high-spirited good fun and wry wit of the early novels, while not having made the transition to the darker, more poignant and plangent later novels. Intimations of the true Pym quirkiness remain in her acerbic and astringent thrusts at academia, as well as in her pithy and incisive portrayal of individual characters:

Coco sounded disappointed, excessively so for a man of forty-two (AQ:1);

"They'd be surprised to know that," I observed, thinking of my sister who was sometimes as bitter as an emancipated woman dared to be about her unmarried state (AQ:67);

Evan Cranton [the university librarian] had no interest in books for their own sake and did his best to discourage visitors to his library from taking books out of the shelves and reading them (AQ:38).

Shades of the true Pym voice emerge in the asides, as in the episode where Caroline and Alan are musing over the niceties of an academic letter, and on the rare occasions when the bitchy and disaffected Caroline shows a flicker of the off-beat quirkiness of Pym's more likeable heroines:¹

'How will you address him - I mean, what do you call him? Dear Rollo? Or Dear Professor Gaunt?'

Alan frowned and did not answer, appearing absorbed by the niceties of the problem. 'Dear Sir' was out of the question, for Rollo Gaunt was no stranger to him. I knew that Alan had more than once been on the fringe of one of Rollo's post-seminar drinkings, but did he know him well enough to call him by the diminutive 'Rollo'? Apparently nobody ever used his full name - Roland - and the old-fashioned 'My dear Gaunt' form of address was suitable only for an older and perhaps more eminent scholar addressing a younger - certainly not the other way around. 'Dear Professor Gaunt' was possible, but that might give the impression that Alan was thinking too little of himself, was being unnecessarily humble. After all, Rollo Gaunt had only recently got his Chair. It seemed to be a matter of some delicacy (AQ:45);

'Such a funny word, *data*.' I rushed into the conversation. 'I always imagine them as little dark things, aggressively plural and woe betide anyone who forgets it, like nails or cloves. Isn't it better to say "material"? Material sounds like an amorphous thing - homespun woollen or folk weave rather than exquisite brocade or silk . . .' (AQ:149).

As *An Academic Question* is somewhat of an embarrassment of a novel, one whose posthumous publication does Pym's reputation a disservice, it is difficult to reconcile it with some of the more ecstatic reviews, which, in their canonisation of Pym, place her somewhere between Jane Austen and God. Sybil Steinberg, writing in *Publishers Weekly*, epitomises the more gushing treatment:

1 In her foreword to the novel, Hazel Holt somewhat euphorically refers to Caroline as "by nature and upbringing an excellent woman, fitting uneasily into the more contemporary role of graduate wife".

"The depth and variety of this posthumous novel confirms that Pym's so-called comedies of manners are serious, challenging works . . . As in other of Pym's carefully plotted novels, a gallery of finely etched characters are set adrift in an England where the absence of sympathy for the differences among people has led to political and moral decline. Carolyn [sic] Grimstone is an especially compelling heroine, caught between the demands of an essentially comic world and the sincere drama of her inner being . . . Encounters with her mother, sister, friends and an ex-lover reveal her conflict lovingly and sensitively; the ease with which she and others rationalize amorality is exposed through small but meaningful plot twists" (Steinberg, 1986:53-54).

My treatment of this essentially banal piece of fiction is therefore correspondingly brief; Pym's literary executor, Hazel Holt, would have done better to have left the manuscript among the Pym memorabilia in the Bodleian Library, and to have spared the "wider circle of friends" its publication.

4.15 Conclusion

In Pym's perennial theme of the pervasive nature of love, and in her exploration of love in its various aspects, two important points may be discerned: the theme of romantic love is developed to include the more universal or Christian concept of "love thy neighbour" in the later novels, and Pym's themes are an integral part of her exploration of character. Her characters' overriding need for "something to love" makes of her novels, especially the later ones, infinitely more than comedies of manners.

The early novels amusingly contemplate love and marriage, unsuitable attachments, and men's love as opposed to women's, with ebullient and quirky high spirits which take comfort in, and are appeased by, the safe and familiar; there are pleasant compensations for the unmarried state, or even for the tedium of the married state, and the *status quo* and continuity of the scene are comfortingly maintained. *Excellent Women* is a transitional novel; while still depicting with good humour "unsuitable attachments", it explores more trenchantly themes of loneliness by virtue of characters who live vicariously, often ministering to the needs of others in order to compensate for a lack in themselves. Intrinsic to several heroines (and homosexuals) is the theme of filial duty, although this is intimated, rather than explored in any depth.

Most Pym heroines fancy a decorous role model, and although this is never explored to the same extent as in the novels of Brookner, it is used with ironic intent by Pym. Frequently this is tentatively but ironically broached by nomenclatural whimsy, as in Pym's calling her most glamorous and chilly heroines Leonora Eyre and Prudence Bates.

The unsuitability of the love objects is generally designated by class differences or simply by the intrinsic character of men. Pym intimates that women elevate ordinary male mortals to objects of worship, thereby transforming them through the blindness of love. Sometimes the unsuitable attachments may be animals, but Pym indicates that these surrogates for love fulfil human needs by their dependence, and are infinitely preferable to the nullity of self-absorption.

Greater psychological insight and a more plangent tone characterise *Less than Angels*, where Pym employs the metaphor of anthropology to explore themes of observation and alienation. A theme which is broached superficially in the early novels, and which culminates in *Quartet in Autumn* and *A Few Green Leaves*, is that of the changing face of Britain, an incontrovertible erosion of culture and middle-class values, with implications of social anarchy.

Matchmaking (*Jane and Prudence*) and the gaining of maturity through the loss of illusions (*A Glass of Blessings*), are themes which Pym shares with Jane Austen, and these extend beyond romantic love, indicating, on the protagonist's part, a desire for purpose beyond the immediate self. The loss of illusion necessitates a certain myopia, and this many of Pym's heroines have in common with Brookner's, although to a lesser extent.

Greater insight, depth and maturity are discerned in *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*; the former explores the need for community and the evasion of responsibility with great pathos, while the latter, a more brittle and sophisticated novel in the tradition of the comedy of manners, comments on the thwarting of love through narcissistic self-absorption. Marcia and Leonora, unlike most of Pym's characters, are unable to recognise and accept their emotional needs, either through premature senile dementia aggravated by physical and psychological isolation, or by pride, and the unwillingness to participate in life which can never be perfect.

Benet (1986:118-119) contends that Pym realised the potential for tragedy in many of her characters' lives; in the early novels this incipient tragedy is averted by the emotional props of family and friends. The self-centredness of

Prudence Bates and detachment of Tom Mallow are the materials of the tragic novelist, and suggest Pym's transition to the tragic mode, although the vehicles which Pym chooses preclude overtly tragic treatment. In *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym intimates that self-imposed isolation is more tragic than the death of Tom Mallow, for by his death he is saved from the self-immolation of his soul.

Pym's characters are intrinsic to her themes, and Benet contends that Pym's preoccupation with middle-class values¹ is essential to her artistic purpose:

"The lines ['The trivial round, the common task/Will furnish all we ought [*sic*] to ask'] might describe Pym's chosen artistic materials: middle-class orderly people living lives undistinguished by awesome burdens or astonishing achievements. Hers are people actuated by garden-variety kindnesses, cruelties, fantasies, and needs, acting as often from the almost obsessive desire for social ease and smoothness as from the wish to do the 'suitable' thing. Her achievement was to make these characters and their mundane actions reflect the most essential questions about the nature of life and love; her success, to demonstrate that such matters are not the province only of the great heroes and heroines of fiction or history but are the questions confronting ordinary people living ordinary lives everywhere, whose answers, implicitly or explicitly given, determine the quality and texture of life. By their very ordinariness, Pym's people represent humanity in the process of deciding just what kind of life it will live, what will be the nature of existence in an imperfect world that sometimes seems inimical to emotional fulfillment and happiness. Some of them

1 Several reviewers have taken Pym to task for her bourgeois milieu.

turn away from the questions or, facing them, give the self-defeating, isolating answers; happily, most celebrate life and themselves in the decision to extend, through the various kinds of love, the vital bridge between the solitary self and the world" (Benet, 1986:163-164).