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BOOK REVIEWS

The Varied Portrait of Barbara Pym: A Review of the Post-1985 Critical Explosion

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Since the "discovery" of British author Barbara Pym in 1977 when she was cited by both Philip Larkin and Sir David Cecil as the most ignored contemporary novelist, there has been a growing number of Pym readers and critics. But as yet there is little agreement in the Academy as to whether Pym is good merely for recalling sabbaticals in England or whether she is to be viewed as a serious and important novelist. The assessment of Pym's work is complicated by its complex tone: it is difficult to decide whether the humor is gentle laughing at our more absurd moments, or whether behind the (as Pym put it) "cozy" mood there is a much bleaker world view, perhaps bleaker than Pym herself was willing to acknowledge. This disagreement about tone has been evident at every MLA session on Pym's work I have attended. In the brief discussion following the reading of papers there has usually been an exchange between the Pym fanciers, dressed in tweed (looking not too dissimilar from Pym's academic Esther Clovis with her hair like a dog) who mainly want to worship the world Pym created and insist that her works are entirely celebratory; in opposition there are those critics, usually not in tweed, who insist that the works are much darker, that the good humor of the author and characters is close to desperation, for the world of the novels echoes Eliot's *Waste Land*. The more usual Pym comparison is to Jane Austen, and although there are some general similarities, the most revealing parallel may be between reader reactions. More than a few Janeites read Austen not for her insights, or even her irony; instead Austen is used as a non-prescription tranquilizer. The result is not very illuminating for the novels, and, as recent biographies of Austen have shown, creates an idealization of the author which obscures Austen's more disturbing world.

The nature of Pym's work has been similarly obscured by the "autobiography," *A Very Private Eye* (New York: Dutton, 1984), edited by Hilary Walton and Hazel Holt, Pym's sister and her friend and literary executor. The sections chosen from Pym's unpublished papers, along with the editorial comments, seem determined to demonstrate Pym as a "nice" and well balanced person. This view may even be essentially accurate, but the work as a whole did not further any notion of Pym as a serious novelist; instead we were treated to more anecdotes about how "charming" and "cozy" life in England can be. Beyond this autobiography a growing number of critical studies have been published since Pym's death in 1980. It is the purpose of this essay to briefly survey the next step in the acceptance of Pym by the Academy, the book-length study of the author. Even here, however, the critics seem divided as to whether Pym is a serious novelist or merely a charming friend, more prized for eccentricity than intellect. This mixed reaction

reflects Pym's continuing uncertain status. In addition it probably also parallels what might be expected from early critical works, a mixture of nostalgia and insight; indeed these books were needed as a background for the more complex works which one suspects are probably already underway on more than a few word processors.

The least of the already published works is *The Pleasure of Miss Pym* by Charles Burkhart. This slight book (116 pages of text complete with new photographs and a cloyingly insensitive title) seems determined to reassure readers that there is little to think about when reading a Pym novel: "Without exception the twelve novels conclude on an upbeat note, a major, if muted, chord. It comes to be as expected as her easy use of coincidence . . . " (24). At times Burkhart comes close to interesting observations, but often these are cut short by the breezy format of the book—the analysis of the novels in chronological order barely takes thirty pages (29-59), and then the book continues with "clever" chapters such as "Miss Pym and the Africans." Indeed Pym's attitude toward anthropologists and the academic world in general is worthy of study, but this attempt depends too much on biography with long quotations and little analysis. In the final section of this chapter with another cute subtitle, "The Congo and the Cotswolds," Burkhart seems to make a valuable observation about Pym's juxtaposition of Africa and England, but as usual the treatment is too brief and disjointed: "Barbara Pym has certainly done more for anthropology than other novelists have, and one is tempted to say more than it has done for itself. She has made Africa come home to England and found that they are the same. Nonetheless she kept in mind the similarities and the differences between the novelist and the anthropologist" (68). Even in the final, and one might hope, most revealing chapter, "God and Miss Pym," Burkhart does not deal with the paradox of many church settings and an absence of any declaration of faith. Instead we are treated to more non-conclusions: "She did not want a reader to dislike her novels. And that other writers both poets and novelists have displayed their faith or lack of it is beside the point; it was not in her to do so" (109). And so it goes; one can imagine editors at the University of Texas Press at first wanted desperately to change the title and get rid of the offensive "Miss," but after carefully reading this work, they left it because it so exactly fits both tone and "substance." And thus both the Press and Burkhart finally should be commended for retaining the title; few titles so briefly and accurately reveal both manner and content.

Another new work with similarly slight moments juxtaposed against valuable information and insight is *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym,* edited by Dale Salwak. The limitations of this work lie in the brevity of the individual essays (19 different essays in only 190 pages of text) and the slightness of at least a third of the selections. Salwak has gathered material not only from some of the best Pym critics, he has also solicited material from some Pym fanciers who have little to say. Typical of these is the essay by Frances Bachelder called "The Importance of Connecting." This essay enthuses about the novels rather than critically judging them. The result is rarely illuminating and often confusing; about *Crampton Hodnet* (one of the two novels published by Pym's literary executors after her death) Bachelder courts contradiction: "We feel that this book is as exciting and well done as her later ones, though perhaps lacking depth and subtlety. It is written with youthful enthusiasm and with an amazing understanding of the ways of people much older than the author at the time of writing" (191-92). The problem with such essays is that the authors seem more interested in (and charmed by) Pym and her biography than the texts at hand.

Beyond the slight remembrances of Pym's life, several essays here give the Pym scholar valuable information. The best of these is Janice Rossen's "The Pym Papers" which outlines in just enough detail the contents of the material at the Bodleian Library. This catalog is accompanied by insightful commentary: "These two sets of diaries reveal much about the author's private life, stressing as they do two periods of intense suffering. They show the author's vulnerability, and they alternate between rationalising, posing and occasional despairing" (161). The notion that Pym was posing in the diaries helps explain their often insistently bright tone. And this leads one to fruitful speculation that in the novels Pym also used comedy as a means of coping with her dark insights. The result of Rossen's overview of the Pym papers is that scholars can accurately judge when a trip to the Bodleian is necessary and exactly which manuscripts might prove most illuminating.

In addition, Salwak's collection includes much first rate criticism. One of the best of these is John Halperin's "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes." Halperin confines his analysis to four novels (*Jane and Prudence*, *Less than Angels*, *A Glass of Blessings*, and *The Sweet Dove Died*) while indicating an often overlooked darkness in Pym's male-female relationships, for there are "dozens of female characters in Pym's novels who sometimes see themselves as fighting a lonely battle against superior odds—the power, the impregnability and the callousness to the other sex of men" (89). As Halperin outlines his thesis carefully in each of his four examples he provides insights about the individual works. He is best on *Jane and Prudence* ("arguably Pym's best novel" [89]) where he demonstrates that the surface "coziness" of the novel may disguise for many readers some dark and insoluable problems: "Both Jane and Prudence are asked again and again to prop men up in various ways, to massage their egos—and without much reward, for the men in the novel are clammily selfish. Thus the relation of the sexes in *Jane and Prudence*. Men, it is said, require love and attention, while it is left to women to type their theses, correct their proofs, put their sheets sides-to-middle, bring up their children and balance their housekeeping budgets" (91). Halperin goes further when he explains why many who have read the novels have missed the darker implications. The problem of correctly reading Pym's tone is due to both her irony and her comic vision: "Though hers is primarily a comic genre, her comedy, like all great comedy, is essentially serious, focusing as it does on psychological aberration, especially that of mental cruelty. Those who regard her work as trivial or light or cosy have perhaps failed to perceive the hard edge of the laughter in it" (100). The only frustration with Halperin's essay is the narrowness in considering only four novels. And this is the more general frustration with the better essays in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*: the best of this collection deserve more room to expand theses.

And this brings us to the two serious single-author books published on Pym. The first of these is Jane Nardin's *Barbara Pym*. On the whole this is a valuable work, but it suffers from a too apologetic introduction and a basic incompleteness, since Nardin chooses not to discuss in detail two (*No Fond Return of Love* and *An Unsuitable Attachment*) of the ten novels published during Pym's life because she considers them inferior. Indeed by the time Nardin is finished with her introduction one might wonder why anyone would bother reading Pym at all: "The unconscious mind is of little interest to her—as also are questions of social justice, so important in English and American literature, from the mid-nineteenth century onward. . . . Her language is simple; her contentment with the conventions of an old-fashioned realism complete; her stories are told chronologically; her handling of point of view

makes no attempt at innovation" (9). The implication of such statements seems to be that the novels offer little excitement either thematically or stylistically. And, indeed, this was the early view of Pym's work, a view which now seems oddly naive, especially from a scholar writing a book on Pym.

Yet much of her volume is sensitive to Pym's work; toward the end of the chapter on Pym's themes Nardin does much to dispel the cozy notion of the novels and somewhat paradoxically indicates that Pym was indeed interested in social questions: "Pym's pessimism in her last three novels . . . cannot be dismissed as the crotchetiness of an aging woman . . . or as the irritation of a good writer with a world that failed to appreciate her talent. The changes in English society that Pym sees with her usual clarity are changes that, by temperament and conviction, she was bound to deplore" (62). This turn away from reading the novels as veiled biography is commendable, and the acknowledgment of depressed observations is accurate. Yet, the basic organization of the book with its structural contrast of the early and late novels discounts the important similarities throughout the works. Thus the thematic darkness of the relatively early *Jane and Prudence* (1953) is essentially ignored as the novel is fit into the category of "early comedy." The treatment of the last three novels is the best section of this work; Nardin is particularly insightful about the too frequently ignored *A Few Green Leaves*: "Thus, *A Few Green Leaves* ends cheerfully with the prediction of a marriage and the affirmation of what is good in the social order. But since the happy conclusion is reached only because the heroine is able to reject the most significant tendencies of the modern world and to retreat into a life based on values that are becoming increasingly peripheral and obsolete, it is a positive ending of a new and puzzling sort" (147). The ending is perhaps less puzzling when one considers the parallel in the consistently complex Pym tone—an affectionate criticism. But the emphasis on the disapproving view of the loss of traditional social and religious values is entirely correct.

Perhaps the most interesting study as a model for further Pym criticism is Diana Benet's *Something To Love*. This work never patronizes the works and is firmly based on a thesis which takes into account all of the novels. Unfortunately, however, the thesis rather narrows the novels to echo its title, which in turn echoes a line from *Some Tame Gazelle*. The difficulty of relationships, particularly male-female relationships, is central to Pym, but to use the word *love* as the prime subject of the novels reduces them to a variety of "romantic novel." Indeed, Benet seems to recognize that any traditional definition of love is too narrow while insisting on its use: "There is no doubt that physical passion is a vital aspect of mature, fulfilled love, but Pym's typical subject is not such love; it is the choice to extend the isolated self into relationship with the world through any one of the forms of affection. Pym's protagonists must recognize or fail to recognize their need for love, and they must choose to satisfy or to ignore that need" (10). Although this thesis contains much validity, it is equally clear that the novels contain greater complexity than this focus allows. And commitment to the thesis leads Benet into some doubtful readings; because there is the strong suggestion of the possibility of a marriage between Mildred Lathbury and Everard Bone at the end of *Excellent Women*, Benet insists that Pym wants this read as a happy ending: "However Everard might or might not feel about her [Mildred], she is attracted to and ready to fall in love with him. As far as Pym is concerned, Mildred's happy ending is her decision to honor herself by making her best effort to fulfill her own desires and emotional needs" (45). One must wonder about Mildred's ultimate fulfillment married to a man who is mainly interested in finding a

proofreader and indexer. The end becomes even darker when we reflect upon the continual view of marriage as an unfulfilled state in Pym's work.

Often, however, Benet is able to go beyond her thesis and indicate the complex themes present in novels such as *Quartet in Autumn*: "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" (134). Regardless of such insights Benet seems committed to her pursuit of love and satisfactory conclusions: "happily, most [Pym characters] 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" (164). And this conclusion threatens to move the novels back into the realms of the "cozy."

The expected flood of Pym criticism has just begun. The second wave will be more sensitive to the complexity and paradoxes of Pym's tone. This change will be similar to the changing attitude toward the novels themselves by their publisher—each new cover becomes less feminine and more suitable for a serious novel. A similar "fading of the pink" will produce more significant criticism. And this more serious criticism will reflect more thoughtful reading of the novels. Barbara Pym will always be good fun, but her world is more than teacups and church socials. The novels reflect emptiness in both marriage and conventional religion—the stoutly cheerful protagonists remain good spirited in spite of their individual isolation.

Works Reviewed

Benet, Diana. *Something to Love: Barbara Pym's Novels.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986. 164 p.

Burkhart, Charles. *The Pleasure of Miss Pym.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987. 120 p.

Nardin, Jane. *Barbara Pym.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985. 154 p.

Salwak, Dale, ed. *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987. 210 p.