

'Thankless tasks': academics and librarians in the novels of Barbara Pym

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From 1950, until her death in 1980, Barbara Pym published ten novels. However, the social and literary climate of the 'sixties and early 'seventies was not receptive to her subtle and ironic literary style, and her writing suffered an eclipse of 16 years. A renaissance in her fortunes came in January 1977, when the *Times literary supplement* asked a selection of critics to comment on which writers they considered the most underrated of the twentieth century; both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil selected Barbara Pym. This critical acclaim stimulated renewed interest in her work, and *Quartet in autumn* was nominated and shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1977. Her new status led to her canonization in the literary world, and several previously unpublished novels, as well as her edited diaries and notebooks, appeared after her death in 1980. An analysis of character in the novels reveals that Pym's peripheral characters include a large cast of academics; in addition, some of her most malicious creations are librarians, who, with their petty concerns, are averse to both books and borrowers. This article highlights her countless subtle jibes at academe; while her characters are frequently intrinsic to theme and plot (the adjective 'peripheral' is therefore to be used with caution), her most caustic scenes deflate academic ambition and pretension. The role of capable women as adoring amanuenses to complacent male academics is also discussed briefly.

Vanaf 1950, tot haar dood in 1980, het Barbara Pym tien romans gepubliseer. Die maatskaplike en literêre klimaat van die jare sestig en vroeë sewentig was egter nie ontvanklik vir haar subtile en ironiese literêre styl nie, en vir 16 jaar het geen werk deur haar verskyn nie. 'n Herlewing het egter in Januarie 1977 gekom toe die *Times literary supplement* kritici genader het om kommentaar te lewer oor wie hulle as die mees onderskatte skrywers van die 20ste eeu beskou; beide Philip Larkin en Lord David Cecil het Barbara Pym gekies. Hierdie kritiese lof het nuwe belangstelling in haar werk tot gevolg gehad, en *Quartet in autumn* is genomineer en op die kortlys vir die 1977 Booker-prys geplaas. Haar nuwe status het gelei tot erkenning in die letterkundige wêreld, en verskeie ongepubliseerde romans, sowel as haar geredigeerde dagboeke en aantekeningboeke, het na haar dood in 1980 verskyn. 'n Analise van karakter in die romans toon dat Pym se randkarakters 'n groot aantal akademici insluit; verder is van haar bitsigste skeppings bibliotekaris, wat met hulle kleinlike belangstellings, beide boeke en gebruikers verafsku. Hierdie artikel lê klem op haar talle voorbeelde van subtile spottery met die akademiese wêreld; terwyl haar karakters dikwels noodsaaklik tot die tema en verhaal is (die term 'randkarakters' moet dus versigtig gebruik word), word haar vernynigste tonele gebruik om akademiese ambisie en pretensie te verkleiner. Die rol van bekwame vroue as aanbidende handlangers van selfvoldane manlike akademici word ook kortliks bespreek.

From 1950, until her death in 1980, Barbara Pym published ten novels. However the social and literary climate of the 'sixties and 'seventies (the era of the Bishop of Woolwich's controversial *Honest to God* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of cancer*) was hardly compatible with Pym's infinitely milder comedies of manners, and her writing suffered a devastating publishing eclipse of 16 years.

Pym, however, had been corresponding with the poet Philip Larkin (Librarian at the University of Hull) since 1961, when he had intended to review her next novel (the ill-fated *An unsuitable attachment* [Pym 1984c], rejected by her publisher Jonathan Cape). A renaissance in her publishing fortunes came in January 1977, when the *Times literary supplement* asked a selection of critics to say which writers they considered to be the most underrated of the past 75 years. Only one author was mentioned twice; both Pym's mentor, the poet Philip Larkin, and Lord David Cecil, writer and critic, former Goldsmith Professor of English Literature at Oxford, named Pym as one of the most underrated novelists of the twentieth century (Cecil & Larkin 1977). Although Pym had never

stopped writing, this critical acclaim stimulated renewed interest in her work, and in 1977 *Quartet in autumn* (Pym 1984a) was shortlisted for Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize (ultimately won by the author of that other famous quartet [the Raj quartet], Paul Scott, for *Staying on*).

Pym went on to publish the ill-fated *An unsuitable attachment*, the elegantly brittle *The sweet dove died* (Pym 1983c), and the rather more plangent *A few green leaves* (Pym 1985b) before her death in 1980. A high-spirited piece of juvenilia, *Crampton Hodnet* (1985a), was published posthumously in 1985, followed by Pym's less successful attempt at a campus novel, *An academic question* (Pym 1986). Hazel Holt, Pym's long-time friend and colleague at the International African Institute where Pym worked as Assistant Editor of the journal *Africa*, and subsequently Pym's literary executor, published *Civil to strangers* (Pym 1987), written in 1936 when Pym was 23; the volume included a further collection of novels and short stories, mostly written before or during the war. Her diaries, letters and notebooks were also edited by Holt and

Pym's sister, Hilary Pym (Pym 1984d), and Holt subsequently published a biography, *A lot to ask* (Holt 1990). Pym's consequent inclusion in the literary canon has sparked a plethora of criticism on various aspects of her work; this has included research by South African academics, ranging from a general comparative study (Van Aswegen 1987) to more specific feminist literary criticism (Blair 1996).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the academics and librarians Pym encountered at the International African Institute, with their pretensions, pettiness and oddities, provided cannon fodder for many of her novels. Hazel Holt, who worked with her for 25 years, comments on this: 'She was a capable and conscientious editor but had no real interest in Africa as such, being far more interested by the anthropologists and the linguists than by the subjects they were studying' (Pym 1984d:183). Pym's work among the anthropologists and academics therefore provided her with endless mildly satirical jibes, which surfaced 'in comic images, similes, titles of pedantic articles, jargon, incidental sly descriptions ...' (Burkhart 1983:48).

The failed academic, Alaric Lydgate, in *Less than angels*, moping in his attic at his inability to collate his fieldwork notes (the name has connotations of George Eliot's idealistic Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, who dies frustrated, as well as, more ironically, the prolific medieval poet John Lydgate)¹ finds consolation in writing vituperative reviews for scholarly journals:

'In one field, however, Alaric had achieved a mild though limited fame. He was well-known as a writer of sarcastic reviews, and he was engaged this night in completing one for a learned journal. The fact that he had not been able to produce an original work himself was perhaps responsible for his harsh treatment of those who had.

He had been pacing about the room, seeking fresh inspiration, but now he flung off his mask and returned to his desk ...

In his search he came upon a native word wrongly spelt. His pen gathered speed. "It is a pity," he went on, "that the proofs were not read by somebody with even a slight knowledge of the language, so that the consistent misspellings of vernacular terms in everyday use might have been avoided."

In unfavourable reviews it is sometimes customary for the reviewer to relent towards the end, to throw some crumb of consolation to the author, but this was not Alaric Lydgate's practice. His last paragraph was no less harsh. "It is a pity," he concluded, "that such a reputable institution should have allowed a work of this nature to appear under its auspices. Its reputation will certainly not be enhanced by unscholarly rubbish of this kind, and it can hardly be gratified to learn that its funds, which are known to be limited, have been squandered to no purpose'" (Pym 1982: 55-56).

The tautology of funds 'squandered to no purpose' does not escape Pym's sly authorial comment either.

Rupert Stonebird is a mild-mannered (and, more importantly to the parish, maritally unattached) anthropologist in *An unsuitable attachment* (Pym 1984c); like Darcy's in Jane Austen's *Pride and prejudice*,² his arrival in suburban London causes a flutter in the hencoop of unmarried female parishioners. He is an infinitely more successful academic than Alaric Lydgate, but the perils, pitfalls and vainglory attendant on the academic dictum 'publish or perish' are narrated with malicious glee:

'Rupert opened the envelope and unfolded the bundle of galleys. "SOME ASPECTS OF EXTRA-MARITAL RELATIONS AMONG THE NGUMU".³ Not strikingly original as anthropological titles go, but it looked well with his name set out underneath it in italic capitals. The sketch map and kinship diagrams had come out well, also, and the French summary, with its cosy phrase "chez les Ngumu", seemed adequate. How many offprints did he want – would the usual twenty-five free ones be enough? asked the letter accompanying the proof. Better make it fifty, he thought, seeing himself distributing them like Christmas cards. Then he remembered the eager questioning eyes of the four women he had met that evening – it would hardly be suitable for *them*. And his colleagues would have read it in the journal anyway. It seemed that he was like the poet with his nosegay of visionary flowers:

"That I might there present it – O! to whom?"

All the same, he thought, better make it fifty. When he was an old man the younger generation might clamour for it' (Pym 1984c:43-44).

In many of Pym's novels women are seen as the doting amanuenses to their more successful and complacent male academic counterparts: typing theses, proof-reading and indexing scholarly articles and monographs are 'women's work', as the following succinct and satirical authorial comment on post-graduate students who are sustained by the ministrations of good women demonstrates:

'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' (Pym 1982:46).

In *No fond return of love*, Dulcie Mainwaring goes to a conference of indexers in order to recover from an unhappy love affair, and muses:

‘Do we all correct proofs, make bibliographies and indexes, and do all the rather humdrum thankless tasks for people more brilliant than ourselves?’ (Pym 1981:7).

Even Miss Foy’s eminence (she is recognized by Dulcie as ‘the librarian of quite a well-known learned institution’)⁴ does not preclude her from serving the soup at the conference dinner table! (In similar vein, Miss Clovis, a ubiquitous peripheral Pym character from *Excellent women* [Pym 1989] until her death in *A few green leaves*,⁵ [Pym, 1985b] and the stalwart of the learned society, is fired for her inability to make tea!). The handsome Aylwin Forbes, the keynote speaker at the conference at which all papers are entitled ‘Some problems of ...’, and who is resourceful enough to have found for research a poet so obscure that not even the Americans have ‘done’ him, is complacently served his early morning tea in bed by Miss Randall, a competent indexer. No possibility of romantic attachments here, as she is prosaically clad in hair-net, pince-nez and a quilted floral dressing-gown! (Except for Ianthe’s somewhat faded and old-fashioned elegance [Pym 1984c], librarians are a frumpish lot, not generally characterized by sartorial style in Pym’s novels.) Aylwin subsequently faints at the lectern, and is resuscitated by the ministrations of the predominantly female conference delegates, thereby paving the way for infinite emotional entanglements.

Some of Pym’s most malicious creations are male librarians. Her letters to Philip Larkin are replete with references to the peccadilloes of the librarians at the Institute. Most Pym librarians have an antipathy to books and an aversion to borrowers:

‘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’ (Pym 1986:38).

Pym gleaned her gleeful accounts of male librarians like the henpecked Edward Killigrew of *Crampton Hodnet* (held in an emotional stranglehold by ‘Mother’ – the capital M is intentional), the bitchy Mervyn Cantrell of *An unsuitable attachment*, and the sour Evan Cranton of *An academic question* from the Institute library:

‘Our library has been made slightly more interesting – in a macabre way – by a rather peculiar young man given to cryptic utterances which one can only half hear. I don’t have much to do with him myself but hear all this from the other staff. I find it is pleasanter to observe these things rather than actually participate in them ...’ (Pym 1984d:249).

‘Eliz. Bowen said that people never recognize themselves in novels (even if they have been “put in”) but I think one sometimes makes up a character and then he or she appears in the flesh, like a man now

working in our Library, who is so like “Mervyn” in my unpublished one, and even speaks of “Mother” ... (Pym 1984d:249).

‘We continue to have trouble staffing our Library at the Institute. A Ghanaian we had was *not* a success and spent a large part of his day conducting endless telephone calls in his native language (Fanti, I think)’ (Pym 1984d:25).

Dr Nicholas Parnell and Mr Mold are librarians at a famous university library (‘our great Library’ – presumably the Bodleian) in *Some tame gazelle* (Pym 1984b). Dr Parnell is more concerned with the provision of central heating and ladies’ lavatories (‘conveniences’) in the library, than with the provision of books, while his deputy, Mr Mold, is partial to a morning snifter at the Crownwheel and Pinion. After a joke in dubious taste, Belinda, the female protagonist muses:

‘... one would have thought that moving in a cultured intellectual society would have cured him of any tendency to make jokes not quite in the best of taste. And yet, she thought doubtfully, the Library, great though it was, did not always attract to it cultured and intellectual persons. Nicholas himself, obsessed with central heating and conveniences, was perhaps not the best influence for a weak character like Mr Mold’ (Pym 1984b:123).

Similarly the peevish Dr Cranton in *An academic question* (Pym 1986) is obscurely delighted that the appointment of a new library assistant will pose catering problems during tea breaks.

The pettiness of Mervyn Cantrell in *An unsuitable attachment* (Pym 1984c) is exemplified by his disproportionate delight in pointing out Ianthe’s mistake in cataloguing, in which Pym also manages a sly dig at the Institute:

‘Later when she was drinking her tea Mervyn came into the room with a card index in his hand.

Ianthe realized from his triumphant expression that he had caught her out in a mistake and waited with resignation to hear what it was.

“*Government in Zassau*,” he declared. “The place of publication is London, *not* Oxford. It was published by the Oxford University Press for the International African Institute – do you see?” From behind his back he now produced the book itself, open at the title page.

“Of course – how stupid of me. I’m so sorry, I’m afraid I do make mistakes sometimes.”

“But there is no need to make *that* kind of mistake,” he said rather obscurely, and left the room with a springy step’ (Pym 1984c:28–29).

Philip Larkin (1977:260) contends that the reader of Pym’s novels is ‘always on the edge of smiling’. This ‘edge of smiling’ is particularly evident in Pym’s marvellous comic dialogue. She is much given to italics, and this stylistic tool imbues much of her writing with its wryly ironic tone. Despite her quips at the idiosyncrasies of the profession, Pym is under no illusions about its realities. The working life of

Ianthe, the genteel heroine of *An unsuitable attachment* (Pym 1984c), whose skirts are slightly too long, who wears ladylike stockings in a colour described as 'medium beige', with brown court shoes of good leather with a sensible heel, is described with a certain pathos:

'Ianthe was the only child of elderly parents, 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 Ianthe 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' (Pym 1984c:25).

Even Ianthe's disagreeable employer is treated with a modicum of sympathy:

'Poor Mervyn, she knew that she ought to feel sorry for him, living with his disagreeable old mother – at least, this was how she appeared in Ianthe's imagination – disappointed at not having got a job in one of the University libraries, unable to find staff accurate enough to appreciate the niceties of setting out a bibliographical entry correctly, with it seemed few friends of either sex, unable to eat restaurant food⁶ – really, the list seemed endless when one thought about it' (Pym 1984c:27).

However even libraries are not devoid of romantic possibilities, and when Ianthe announces her plan to marry John Challow, the handsome new library assistant, and the 'unsuitable attachment' of the title of the novel, Mervyn, who has designs on Ianthe's elegant little house and antique furniture rather than on her (his sexual proclivities being somewhat ambivalent), practically comes to blows with John in the library, a scene once again delineated with Pym's understated wit:

'None of the actors of the little scene realized that the door between the reading room and the library had been left open when John came in, so that the raised voices were plainly audible to the three readers who sat at the long working table. One, a moon-faced sociologist, went on reading as if he had heard nothing, nor was a bearded Dutchman in the least disturbed, for his understanding of the English language did not go beyond a knowledge of written sociological jargon. Only the third reader, a youngish woman of about thirty-five, who had come in to shelter from a heavy shower of rain, pricked up her ears and looked away from the book she had not been reading. To realize that two men could apparently be quarrelling almost publicly over a woman in this un-

chivalrous age sent her on her way with a new hope' (Pym 1984c:233).

The above is an example of Pym's use of the device of the self-conscious narrator, and there is, in her novels, the frequent reiteration of the image of the observant, detached novelist (*The sweet dove died* [Pym 1983c], *A glass of blessings* [Pym 1983a], *No fond return of love* [Pym 1983b]).

Pym's jibes at academe, and the role of librarians in it, are endless; while they are frequently intrinsic to the plot, as in *An academic question* (Pym 1986), which centres around the academic rat race and the appropriation of the Stillingfleet papers, her funniest scenes concern academic ambition and pretension. In *Less than angels* (Pym 1982), Mark and Digby, two ambitious but indigent anthropology students, mindful of the scholarship race, try to win friends and influence people by treating Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate, whom they surmise to have academic clout, to lunch. The scene is reminiscent of the Somerset Maugham short story, *The luncheon*, as Mark and Digby are torn between thrift, hunger, and the desire to impress:

"This place is rather good," she said, stopping outside a reasonably modest-looking restaurant which had a menu up outside. Reading it, Digby noticed with relief that some of the prices were modest too. He hoped Mark would have the sense to order Chipolata Sausage Toad (2/2) or Braised Tripe (2/) and not go off the deep end with Steak and Chips (5/6). He supposed Clovis and Lydgate would want that; they looked like the kind of women who would eat red meat, he thought resentfully ...

"I feel one shouldn't go into learned societies or libraries smelling of drink," said Mark, at his most prim. "It might create the wrong impression."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," said Miss Clovis, sipping her dark foamy drink. "I don't suppose anyone would notice. Of course it's all right for librarians to smell of drink," she added jovially.

"Of course," said Digby enthusiastically. "But you see we are in a different position, more on show, as it were. We feel that we must be on our best behaviour."

"I am sure you are always well-behaved," said Miss Clovis with unusual warmth. "You were most helpful to me this morning."

The young men looked pleased. They all finished their first course and ordered the next. Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate had Apple Pie with Ice Cream (1/6); Mark and Digby declared that they were passionately fond of Jelly (6d). Afterwards the ladies had coffee but the young men declined it.

"It might keep us awake in Dr Vere's lecture," joked Digby.

"Oh, that would never do!" chortled Miss Clovis' (Pym 1982:97–99).

The meal is ironically and comically concluded by the ladies' insistence on paying!

The depiction of women in the academic world as mere appendages to men (librarians, indexers, typists and proof-readers) has not escaped the attentions of the feminist critics. According to Barbara Brothers (1984:65–66), for example, *No fond return of love*, Pym's wry tale about indexers and bibliographers working 'on the dustier fringes of the academic world', is a precursor of Kate Millett's *Sexual politics* (Millett 1969) while Blair (1996) has offered a more recent feminist reading of Pym's work, citing her as a humanist feminist of some importance, who succeeds in illuminating her heroines' struggles against patriarchy in the context of a changing British society.⁷ Women are educated in the humanities and social sciences, an education which, according to Millett, is hardly more than the 'accomplishments' women once cultivated in preparation for the marriage market (shades of Austen, again). Pym's women frequently land husbands through indexing and proof-reading men's scholarly books, but Pym indicates that these inept men are not necessarily intellectually superior to her 'excellent women whom one respects and esteems'. Pym's lightly acerbic comic touch is evident in the following exchange at the end of *Excellent women*, in a conversation which adroitly deflates the reader's expectation of a romantic marriage proposal of any kind:

"I should be interested to see the article you said you were writing for the Learned Journal," I said.

"Oh, it's very dull: I shan't inflict that on you."

"Well, what about your book, then? How is it getting on?"

"I have just had some of the proofs and then of course the index will have to be done. I don't know how I'm going to find time to do it," said Everard, not looking at me.

"But aren't there people who do things like that?" I asked.

"You mean excellent women whom one respects and esteems?"

"Yes, I suppose I did mean something like that."

There was a pause. I looked into the gas-fire, which was one degree better than the glowing functional bar into which I had gazed with Julian.

"I was wondering ..." Everard began, "but no – I couldn't ask you. You're much too busy, I'm sure."

"But I don't know how to do these things," I protested.

"Oh, but I could show you," he said eagerly; "you'd soon learn." He got up and fetched a bundle of proof sheets and typescript from the desk. "It's quite simple, really. All you have to do is to see that the proof agrees with the typescript."

"Well, I dare say I could do that," I said, taking a sheet of proof and looking at it doubtfully.

"Oh, splendid. How very good of you!" I have 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."

"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 ...' (Pym 1989:236–237).

It is interesting to note that Pym's literary executor and friend Hazel Holt has recently emerged as a novelist in her own right: the Sheila Malory detective novels are cosy 'whodunits', which evince stylistic echoes of Pym's work. In *The cruellest month* (Holt 1993), which is set in Oxford, a particularly poisonous elderly female librarian comes to a sticky end when she is murdered in the Bodleian, 'struck on the head by a great heavy book, calf-bound with brass edges. *Horsley's Britannica Romana*' (Holt 1993:23). Barbara Pym, as Assistant Editor of *Africa*, would surely have appreciated Holt's scholarly attention to pedantic detail!

In conclusion, the popularity of the 'campus novel' (epitomized by writers as diverse as Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge, Tom Sharpe and J.I.M. Stewart) has resulted in considerable criticism being devoted to the portrayal of academics in literature. Although much has been written in both scholarly and popular literature about the stereotypical image of the profession, librarians, by and large, have been a largely neglected literary species. Barbara Pym, with her humorous, compassionate and perspicacious pen, captures in pointillist detail the small nuances of dress, speech and manner which make her librarians supreme comic creations. The yuppie 'knowledge managers' of the corporate culture of the 1990s are a less eccentric and (dare one add), less endearing species, yet to be similarly immortalized in fiction.

Notes

1. Many of Pym's titles and characters are culled from the author's familiarity with the English literary tradition, and appositely reflect and illuminate her themes. Her allusions are often subtly interwoven in her texts, and this sustained thread of intertextuality makes her work conducive to close textual analysis and appealing to the erudite reader.
2. Incidentally Austen, currently undergoing a cinematic renaissance, has been cited as a satirical forerunner of Pym, and *An unsuitable attachment* possibly demonstrates Pym's closest literary allegiance to Austen.
3. Given Rupert's marriageable status in English suburbia, another wry Pym touch. Love in a cold climate, perhaps.
4. And whose 'own greatest pleasure in life was a tricky item of classification or bibliographical entry' (Pym 1981:14).

5. Barbara Pym's predilection for intratextual gymnastics, or what Henry James called 'the revivalist impulse on the fond writer's part' is apparent from her third novel onwards.
6. Like many of Pym's more effete male characters, he is a 'foodie' who eats exquisitely prepared packed lunches instead. While berating Ianthe for allowing a book to be removed from his non-circulating library, he is appeased by the possibility that its stained pages might have been caused by 'a genuine tomato sauce from a dish of spaghetti or ravioli' rather than by HP sauce! (Pym 1984c:96).
7. Critics have been somewhat ambivalent in unreservedly categorizing Pym as a feminist writer. Glendinning (1978:8), for example, cites the irony of *Excellent women* as 'not the steel jab of feminism, merely a mild, fine irony toward the ways of the world', while Van Aswegen (1987:34) concedes that her heroines 'lack the gutsy raunchiness associated with much current feminist writing'.

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