

ALSo ...

**The Journal of the Alliance of
Literary Societies**

Volume 7, 2013

Humour in Literature



President: Jenny Uglow

Vice Presidents: Bill and Kathleen Adams

Chair: Linda J Curry

Hon. Treasurer & Membership Secretary: Julie Shorland

Hon. Secretary: Anita Fernandez-Young

Journal Editor: Linda J Curry

For more information on the Alliance of Literary Societies, contact Linda Curry (tel. 0121 475 1805, or email l.j.curry@bham.ac.uk) – or visit the ALS website at <http://www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk>.

Further copies of this journal may be purchased (£7 per copy) by contacting the ALS as above. A discount is available for members of societies subscribing to the Alliance.

If you wish to place an advertisement in future editions of this journal, please contact Linda Curry for rates.

© 2013 published by the Alliance of Literary Societies

ISSN 1753-9862

If you wish to contribute an article to the 2014 edition of this journal, please contact Linda Curry by email to l.j.curry@bham.ac.uk or by post to 59 Bryony Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4BY, by 1 December 2013.

The theme for 2014 will be 'The Literary Fantastic'. Some examples of the sort of thing this might cover are:

- The use of myth and legend in writing (particularly in fantasy) – for example Tolkien.
- The place of magic – as in Harry Potter.
- The gothic – from Ann Radcliffe to Mrs Gaskell.
- Ghostly happenings
- Witchcraft in literature

As always, the theme is broad – open to many forms of interpretation and the above are just some ideas.

Would someone from your society be willing to contribute a piece for the journal – of around 1,000 to 1,500 words? If so, I would be delighted to hear from you. Remember – it's good advertising for your society!

Linda J Curry

Contents

| | Page |
|---|-------------|
| Editorial | |
| Comic Rapiers: Barbara Pym's Comedy and its Targets | 1 |
| Robin Joyce | |
| The Humour of Hypochondria | 4 |
| Clemence Schultze | |
| That Great Master of Humour and Pathos ... | 7 |
| Anita Fernandez Young | |
| Subversive Humour in Hari Kunzru's <i>Transmission</i> | 9 |
| Iwona Filipczak | |
| Virginia Woolf, Entertaining Essayist | 13 |
| Stuart N Clarke | |
| Women's-Eye View: Social Satire in 20 th Century Fiction | 16 |
| Hazel K Bell | |
| Note on Contributors | 29 |

Editorial

Welcome to ALSo... – the journal for the Alliance of Literary Societies. Each member society receives two free copies of the Journal and an electronic version is circulated to the email contact we have for your society. It is therefore essential that you keep us up to date on any changes to contact details.

Humour is not just an innocent emotion, providing a form of escapism from the everyday: it can be used very effectively to subvert social conventions. Barbara Pym was one of many espousing the ‘feminist’ cause, long before Germaine Greer started urging women to ‘burn their bras’. Austen used frailty, worn like an old sock and therefore difficult to cast off, as a comic counterfoil. Virginia Woolf wrote very witty book reviews – not necessarily usual reading matter but well worth a visit.

I do hope that you will enjoy reading the articles in this issue. It has been hard to match the article on ladies’ underwear which appeared in last year’s edition, but we have certainly tried!

My thanks, as always, go to the contributors, and, of course, to the ALS for supporting the production of this journal.

Linda J Curry

Comic Rapiers: Barbara Pym's Comedy and its Targets

Robin Joyce

Barbara Pym's comic touch is subversive. Although her fiction is usually seen as comforting, one of its important features subverts the way in which women's and men's relationships are observed. Analysis of Pym's work demonstrates that she challenged hierarchies based on gender and professional status, consciously or unconsciously developing a feminist cause.¹ An important feature of the way in which Pym undermined hierarchies is the humour in many of her novels and short stories.² Men are Pym's natural targets. They are the perceived prize in gender relations. They are considered to be the natural recipients of paid positions in the powerful professions, the church, medicine and politics. In both capacities, Pym uses comedy to emphasise the fallacy of both positions.

Pym's first full length novel is the 'star' of her explicit comic approach. After all, as reported by Pym's biographer and long term friend, Hazel Holt, *Crompton Hodnet* has made readers laugh aloud in the Bodleian! It is also unlikely that, having read the novel, a person walking amongst the glasshouses in the Oxford Botanical Gardens could resist at least a wry smile at recalling Gabriel and Michael's feigned consternation at seeing Barbara Bird and Francis Cleveland crouching amongst the foliage. Pym compounds the easily observable humour in her repetition of the community's artificiality at the Killigrews':

“ ‘Oh dear’, thought Olive Fremantle, ‘I hope they're not going to forget about Mr Cleveland. It sounded as if they had something interesting to say about him’ ... But the Killigrews had not forgotten. They were keeping their guests in suspense a little longer, so the titbit might be all the more appreciated when it came. ‘Now we are not gossips,’ said Mrs. Killigrew. ‘We do not tell stories about people for our own amusement’. There was an almost imperceptible pricking up of ears and drawing forward of chairs.” (1986, p.123)

Pym also uses humour in dealing with the more significant dishonesty she observes. In this novel, men's failures in their chosen professions of the church and academia are questioned through Pym's depictions of the curate, Jeremy Latimer, as well as the Professor of English, Francis Cleveland. Similarly, their ineffective attempts to

¹ A more detailed argument for this approach to Pym's work is included in my doctoral thesis, 'The Troublesome Woman: A Study of Barbara Pym's Novels and Short Stories', 2012.

² *The Sweet Dove Died*, *An Academic Question* and *Quartet in Autumn*, as well as many of the unpublished short stories pursue more serious themes.

conduct love affairs create some of the most comical, but telling, moments in Pym's lexicon of comic rapiers. Latimer's proposal to Jessie Morrow, Francis's wooing of the romantic and eventually reluctant Barbara Bird, and his return to his wife to be coddled like a child, question men's value. Men's superior position in the workplace is also scrutinised through the lackadaisical manner in which Cleveland treats his profession. In turn, his shortcomings, morally and academically, are subtly associated with the pomposity and worldliness of his superior, Dr Fremantle, Master of Randolph College. Both treat Cleveland's responsibility as a tutor to Barbara Bird, recognised by women academics as a potential First, casually. Their attitudes, although treated with comedy, question attitudes about women's place in academia. Hopefully, if the *Crampton Hodnet* Bird becomes the successful novelist in *Jane and Prudence*, as suggested by Holt, Pym is indicating the ephemeral influence of Cleveland's behaviour on her deserved First.

More subtle humour can be observed through Mildred Lathbury's behaviour and ruminations in *Excellent Women*. Mildred's dual voice is the ultimate emissary of all that is comic about men, marriage and spinsterhood. When she involves herself in the Napiers' lives, Mildred's quiet activities around the church and gentle women are juxtaposed with Helena's anthropological life. Subtle comedy is palpable through Mildred's debates about Helena's shortcomings which she contrasts with Rocky's charm and the privileges to which she believes he should be entitled. Her arguments on his behalf, based on his gender rather than on intrinsic worth, comically undermine a hierarchy based on gender. When, at the end of the novel, Mildred speculates about the work she will have to do for Everard Bone, Pym's irony is apparent. Mildred's role as a destabilising agent is compounded by her spinsterhood which is emphasised throughout *Excellent Women*. From early in the novel, Mildred's internal voice proclaims the absurdity of stereotyping spinsters when she describes her own appearance and behaviour as spinster like. Further undermining the stereotype through comedy is the depiction of Mildred's activities and responses to marriage, the church and expectations placed upon women by men.

Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, is an exercise in comic moments interspersed by a faltering love story. In this novel, Pym places the personnel of church and medicine under severe scrutiny, whilst returning to her early familiar comical touch. The approach taken in her serious works, *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn*, together with her most clearly feminist novel, *An Academic Question*, is replaced with the competitiveness between old and young doctors and medicine and the church to be considered the pinnacle of the village hierarchy. Daphne Dagnall's discussion of foxes' dung, and the conversation which follows, comically highlights the way in which language can hide an unpleasant reality, as does the unromantic end to a walk in the wood when Emma Howick and Graham Pettifer are confronted with the smell from an old chicken house. The Reverend Tom Dagnall is likened to 'Poor Tom' from King Lear and also a character in a children's

rhyme. He is also threatened with shrouding by his spinster sister. The doctors are portrayed as childlike, in settings that question their prestige: greed at a famine supper; casual attitudes towards their patients; and the way in which they are “hoodwinked” by their female relatives. Church and medicine confront each other over the right to visit the mausoleum – a venerable site already made comical by the presence of Terry Skate, the gardener.

Barbara Pym has been widely recognised as a writer of comic novels, her comedy often seen as arising from Jane Austen’s example. Pym was also an important social commentator, and comedy was one of the rapiers with which she dissected her society to lay bare its failings. Through questioning hierarchies in which men had the predominant status, Pym used humour to great effect. Her novels remain comforting reads to those who wish only to be charmed by their comical moments. At the same time, Pym’s humour provides a deft social commentary on her observations.

Works Cited:

- Pym, B. (1986), **Crampton Hodnet**, Grafton Books: London.
---- (1983), **Excellent Women**, Penguin: Middlesex.
---- (1980), **A Few Green Leaves**, Macmillan: London.

- ooOoo -

THE HUMOUR OF HYPOCHONDRIA

Clemence Schultze

Illness may be the subject of black humour in literature, but hypochondria's hue is perhaps best imagined as a delicate greyish-pink – now prosaically known as 'dusty pink' but formerly termed *vieux rose*. It is a colour that one can imagine being worn (perhaps as a tea-gown) by Mrs Dean in Angela Thirkell's *August Folly*. "I have a Heart, you know", she confides to sympathetic hearers. This Heart, of course, is a most accommodating organ. It permits her to recline in the garden, flirt idly with young men (to their peril rather than her own), and never to do anything she does not want to. Rachel Dean, in short, is a fine example of the manipulative hypochondriac, and we laugh gently at her self-regarding charm. But she is a mild manipulator, compared to some.

In the mode of high comedy, there is Aunt Ada Doom from *Cold Comfort Farm*, the ultimate family tyrant. Having once seen *Something Nasty in the Woodshed*, she enjoys an easy life, being pampered by her relatives whilst controlling every move they make. Her behaviour suits the comic-gothick genre adopted by Stella Gibbons, where the parody requires exaggeration so extreme that characters are not disturbing. But, in Dickens' blend of melodrama with realism, a personality like the languid and sensitive Mrs Julia Witterly (to whom Kate Nickleby is companion) is sinister as well as amusing. Every excitement tells upon her delicate nervous system, as she relates:

"I'm always ill after Shakespeare ... I scarcely exist the next day; I find the reaction so very great after a tragedy ... and Shakespeare is such a delicious creature."

Her husband is an admiring foil: her "complaint is soul", he avers, and he regards it as "no trifling distinction for a man to have a wife in such a desperate state". But, along with indulged sensitivity go snobbishness, jealousy, vanity and hypocrisy, which lead Mrs Witterly first to connive at a seducer's pursuit of Kate, and later to drive Kate from the house under the pretext of blaming the girl herself.

In *Persuasion*, a classic manipulator is Mary Musgrove, Anne Elliot's married sister:

"While well, and happy, and properly attended to, she had great good humour and excellent spirits; but any indisposition sunk her completely. She ... was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used."

Thanks to the “very good spirits” of her husband Charles – and, one could add, to their comfortable circumstances – “they might pass for a happy couple”. Austen shows us the male of this variety too, in the person of the “valetudinarian” Mr Woodhouse. Weak nerves, an anxious disposition, and spoiling from all in his circle have made him little better than an elderly baby. Even his occasional near-insights that he might just possibly be “fanciful and troublesome” are kindly contradicted. And how can one not laugh as he urges gruel or a very small egg upon guests as “not unwholesome”, while Emma quietly supplies them with ample better fare? It is just as well that Emma has warmth, self-confidence and patience: she needs them, in order to withstand the continual undermining (too passive to be called an onslaught) of these manipulations. Nevertheless, it is hard to smile when Emma’s scruples about leaving her father come near to delaying her marriage indefinitely, and one sympathises with Mr Knightley for the long evenings he will undergo after moving into Hartfield, and the many bowls of gruel he will have to refuse. For hypochondriacs – like bores – are only humorous in masterly hands.

For there to be humour, it is essential that the hypochondriac’s self-regard is pointed up either by a character or in the authorial voice. Thus, in Charlotte Yonge’s *Hopes and Fears*, the portly Augusta Fulmort condescends once in a way to visit her younger sisters in the schoolroom; she eats heartily of their lunch while discussing a proposed trip abroad:

“ ‘Do you think those foreign wines would bring me down a little, or that they would make me low and sinking? ... You know some people take a spoonful of vinegar to fine themselves down, and some of those wines *are* very acid.’ ...

‘If it be an object with you, Miss Fulmort, I should recommend the vinegar,’ said Miss Fennimore [the governess]. ‘There is nothing like doing a thing outright!’ “

Similarly, in Nancy Mitford’s *The Pursuit of Love*, when Davey Warbeck is first introduced into the Radlett family he amazes them by his concern over food:

“ ‘No, thank you, no twice-cooked meat. I am a wretched invalid, I must be careful, or I pay ... it imposes a most fearful strain on the juices, you might as well eat leather,’ replied Captain Warbeck, faintly, heaping onto his plate the whole of the salad ... ‘Raw lettuce, anti-scorbutic,’ and, opening another box of even larger pills, he took two, murmuring ‘Protein’.”

Fad succeeds fad, in Davey’s diet. At one period, red meals must alternate with white, and he requests a white one (“an egg, with a little hock”):

“But when a chocolate cream ... came round, it was seen to count as white. The Radletts often had cause to observe that you could never entirely rely upon Davey to refuse food, however unwholesome, if it was really delicious.”

The narrator, makes clear, however, that Davey’s health is his hobby, not his life’s occupation. Maybe it renders him a trifle inconsiderate, but there is no malice or manipulativeness in him. The same is true of one of Barbara Pym’s curates, Mr Latimer, from *Crampton Hodnet*. After a country walk in the rain, this healthy thirty-something young man is eager to have a mustard bath at once, to ward off his rheumatism. But which of us has not sometimes felt like this – a trifle tired, off-colour, and in need of some TLC? Take the narrator of J. K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*. Feeling ‘seedy’ he reads a medical encyclopedia: he can thus inform his doctor that he has every complaint from ague to zymosis, with the sole exception of housemaid’s knee. He hands over the resulting prescription, unread, to the chemist, who rejects it, saying:

“I am a chemist. If I was a co-operative stores and family hotel combined, I might be able to oblige you. Being only a chemist hampers me.”

It stipulates:

“1 lb. beefsteak, with 1 pt. bitter beer every 6 hours.
1 ten-mile walk every morning.
1 bed at 11 sharp every night.
And don’t stuff up your head with things you don’t understand.”

That’s the stuff to give hypochondriacs!

Works cited:

Austen, J., **Emma**

-----, **Persuasion**

Dickens, C., **The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby**

Gibbons, S., **Cold Comfort Farm**

Jerome, J. K., **Three Men in a Boat**

Mitford, N., **The Pursuit of Love**

Pym, B., **Crampton Hodnet**

Thirkell, A., **August Folly**

Yonge, C. M., **Hopes and Fears**

- ooOoo -

THAT GREAT MASTER OF HUMOUR AND PATHOS ...

Anita Fernandez Young

In those words, the constitution of the Dickens Fellowship describes the author who began his career as the writer of humorous sketches for magazines: 'Boz'. The *Sketches by Boz* caught the attention of Chapman and Hall, the publishers, who were looking for someone to write text to accompany some comic drawings by Robert Seymour, and so Charles Dickens began *The Pickwick Papers*. Whilst the early issues of the monthly *Papers* were popular, their sales rocketed to astronomical heights once Dickens had introduced the first of his most memorable comic characters, Sam Weller, the inn servant whom Mr Pickwick takes on as his valet.

What is funny about Sam Weller? Dickens is sometimes said to have based the character on his own coachman, Topping, but since he did not acquire a coach until after *Pickwick* was such a success – so as to enable the newly married Charles and Catherine Dickens to move to Doughty Street in Bloomsbury - this is unlikely. Sam is clearly a 'Cockney character' with the London lisp of 'werry' for 'very' and 'vith' for 'with', no final 'g' sound (astonishin', a-goin') and a wonderful talent for repartee. ('Out vith it, as the father said to the child, wen he swallowed a farden.') In fact, it is generally believed that Dickens put into the mouth of Sam Weller the earliest examples of this form of joke, now more often referred to as 'the actress said to the bishop' jokes. The remarks themselves are not always very funny, but the context in which Sam deploys them gives them such liveliness and originality that, like the earliest readers, we cannot wait to see what Sam says next.

Dickens was to use his facility for reproducing the speech of the everyday Londoners he heard around him to comic effect throughout his writing life. He was not limited to 'Wellerisms', of course. He could equally well make fun of upper-class nitwits like the aristocratic Cousins of the Dedlock family in *Bleak House*:

"A languid cousin with a moustache, in a state of extreme debility, now observes from his couch that – man told him ya'as'dy that Tulkinghorn had gone down t'that iron place t'give legal 'pinion 'bout something ..."

One can almost hear James Fox drawling away, and the vagueness of "man" and "something" clearly demonstrate Dickens's satirical intentions towards the class of wealthy wastrels.

Dickens's novels are often described as 'many-layered' because of the huge numbers of characters they contain from many walks of life and with many rich connections to the complex networks of plots through which he explores his themes. His irrepressible humour is not confined to supporting characters, or those on the side of the angels. Some of his most entertaining episodes emerge from his comic villains, like Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend*, the one-legged ballad-seller. His self-importance and inability to admit when he cannot read the long words in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Polybius becomes the Roman virgin Polly Beeious, and Commodus, Commodious) are entertaining because they let us feel superior to Wegg, while also poking fun at the notion that Gibbon's great work is somehow sacred and too serious for the likes of Wegg and his patron the illiterate Golden Dustman, Mr Boffin, to whom he reads. Even Wegg's wooden leg is a source of humour - the taxidermist Mr Venus invites him to sit by the fire and "warm your - your other one".

In Dickens's youth, there were many amputees around in Portsmouth and Chatham, his childhood homes, after the Napoleonic wars sent sailors and soldiers back to England with serious injuries. He was always intrigued by their wooden legs or hooks for hands, and they appear in several novels. Mrs Gamp, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, reminisces about her late husband:

"Ah dear! When Gamp was summoned to his long home, and I see him a-lying in Guy's Hospital with a penny-piece on each eye, and his wooden leg under his left arm, I thought I should have fainted away. But I bore up."

This is all the funnier when we are told that she went on to dispose of his remains "for the benefit of science" (in other words, sold them to the hospital for dissection) and that the Gamps had been separated for years on account of their "incompatibility of temper in their drink". The humour of Mrs Gamp is accompanied by a kind of horrified fascination, that someone can be so greedy and deceptive, so drunken and selfish, and get away with it - but of course, Charles Dickens sets her up for exposure along with all the other fakers and fraudsters at the end of the book.

There is so much more to Dickens than his humour. When he was alive and writing, it was the fun and exuberance of his work that endeared him to his reading public, and his public readings in which his energy and imagination took flight only reinforced this aspect of it. Today, we cherish the humour which pervades the novels and shorter works, such as *A Christmas Carol*, rather cringe at the pathos of children's deaths and the more melodramatic moments like the death of Sidney Carton at the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities*, but value more and more the artistry with which he presents us with the rich texture of London life and human nature.

Works Cited:

Dickens, C., **The Pickwick Papers**

-----, **Bleak House**

-----, **Our Mutual Friend**

-----, **Martin Chuzzlewit**

- ooOoo -

Subversive Humour in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*

Iwona Filipczak

Hari Kunzru's second novel, *Transmission*, can be called a global novel. Not only does it bind various locations all over the world but it also presents characters who participate in various globalisation phenomena, and whose decisions often have far reaching, global consequences.

The novel does not glorify the contemporary times with their high-speed connections, fast-emerging new opportunities, and increasing possibilities of exchange of people, goods, money and ideas on the global scale. *Transmission* is, in fact, highly critical of these issues.

The novel ridicules a wide range of things: an aspiration to think and act globally in the globalised world; an assumption that we are citizens of the world, who feel at ease at every location and in every culture; the consumer society and materialism; and increasing uselessness of products which can be bought in a world that has everything.

Kunzru exposes the surprisingly limited perspective of his characters. Though they live in the globalising world, which has more and more to offer, they tend to lose touch with reality and thus are prone to misunderstandings and blunders. In his review of the novel, Amit Chaudhuri captures its dominant spirit: "Is *Transmission*, Hari Kunzru's second novel, geek lit? Or is it a subtle, often humorous, analysis of the infantilism that, everywhere, defines the culture we live in?" (2004) Kunzru indicates dangers lurking in the processes of globalisation, and contrasts the phenomenon of the opening world with the more and more restricted, and superficial, vision of man.

One cannot overlook the fact that the most important and comical figure in the book, who allows the global scope of the satire, is Arjun Mehta. He becomes the pivotal figure in the novel as his actions influence two other plots: the story of British entrepreneur Guy Swift and that of Indian actress Leela Zahir. The humorous presentation of Mehta exposes his naivety, mingled with innocence and a very limited understanding of the world, which lead to a series of comic events, and eventually to global disorder and confusion. The function of the humorous portrayal of Mehta is to hold back the realisation of his tragedy – a tragic lot of an immigrant from the so-called Third World, who suffers from new ways of exploitation. When laughing at Mehta's weaknesses and deficiencies, the reader may attribute many of the man's failures to his simplicity and lack of experience, or perhaps even to his infantilism. Yet the louder the laughter, the more painful is the sudden awareness of his plight.

What becomes the source of comedy in the presentation of Arjun Mehta is the clash between illusion and reality. Twenty-three years old Mehta is a well-educated IT

engineer from India, who dreams of getting a job in Silicon Valley. He is, perhaps, a bit of a loner, with no social life: he draws his knowledge of the world mainly from Bollywood movies and the Internet. Sentimental, colourful and unrealistic moving pictures strangely exert a strong power over Arjun's reality. The narrator comments ironically: "Not everyone would make a major life decision on the basis of a movie". Arjun, however, who thinks of himself as a "committed scientific rationalist", on having watched a Bollywood hit *Naughty Naughty, Lovely Lovely*, is able to act: he "found more than he imagined possible: the film was nothing less than a call to change his life". After he manages to land a job in California ("Amrika! Becoming his dreams!"), and, with his head full of glamorous Bollywood stories, Arjun believes strongly he will soon be rich and wanted, both by top American companies and most attractive females:

"Dressed in a button-down shirt and a baseball cap with the logo of a major software corporation embroidered on the peak, Future-Arjun was holding hands with a young woman who looked not unlike Kajol, his current filmi crush. As Kajol smiled at him, the compact headphones in his ears transmitted another upbeat love song."

Arjun's illusions of America are soon smashed. He is not a crucial specialist for the American IT industry, as he thought he would be, and America is not really desperate for people like him. He is not immediately offered a job upon his arrival in California, as he was assured he would be. In fact, he only works three and a half months out of the first twelve. Arjun's innocence is constantly exploited: it is the processing agency that makes money out of him, while he suffers poverty. Ashamed of his situation, he maintains a comedy of lies with his family in India, and never denies their interpretations of his success, while the reader, knowing the whole truth, can only bitterly laugh at the irony of the situation. Eventually, a job at Virugenix gives Arjun a sort of stability. He starts to make friends and his future looks bright. Yet, after a short period of stabilised life, Mehta is suddenly threatened with redundancy. In his desperate attempt to be indispensable in his work, he unleashes a computer virus with the name of a Bollywood actress, Leela Zahir. He plans to eliminate it and, in this way, show how valuable a worker he is. The virus, however, gets out of control. It multiplies, interferes with the numerous computer systems, and, in the end, the interconnected world is taken over by chaos. The once innocent, dreamy boy Arjun is eventually wanted – not by top firms or beautiful women – but by the FBI. In the most unexpected way, Arjun becomes one of the world's top terrorists. The man, who just wanted to get his job back, in the same city and with the same company, through his desperate attempt to prove useful for his company, suddenly wreaks havoc all over the interconnected world.

The more we laugh, the more we discover Arjun's desperate situation. We may be amused by his naivety mingled with innocence, but we must be touched when we begin to realise his helplessness. Mehta becomes a victim of exploitative practices. In America, he is on a restricted work visa and he is not treated equally with American workers. He is abused, regarded as an object or a tool: supplied for a short time when needed, moved around, and discarded when not needed. Eventually, he realises the huge rift between those whose dreams come true and himself:

“He knows what lies above him, the sublime mobility of those who travel without even touching the ground. He has glimpsed what lies below, the other mobility, the forced motion of the shopping-cart pushers, the collectors of cardboard boxes.”

The humorous presentation of Mehta draws a particular attention to this character. As a result, his case cannot be overlooked but, on the contrary, it is made prominent.

In *Transmission*, humour has the function of providing a critical perspective on social reality. Under a veneer of light-hearted entertainment, we are offered a novel about serious subject matters, ranging from an analysis of contemporary globalisation processes and their influence on people, to the practices of neocolonial exploitation. Thus, Kunzru’s novel is another postmodern text which reveals ethical involvement.

Works Cited:

Chaudhuri, A. (2004), “The revenger's tragedy.” **The Guardian**, Saturday 29 May 2004 –

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/may/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview17>

Kunzru, H. (2005), **Transmission**, New York: Penguin Group USA.

- ooOoo -

Virginia Woolf, Entertaining Essayist

Stuart N. Clarke

Virginia Woolf served a long literary apprenticeship. Shortly after her father died in 1904, she started writing reviews for *The Guardian*, a Church of England weekly of considerable influence in the nineteenth century but then in decline. She gradually moved her allegiance to *The Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, which had only been founded in 1902, and she remained loyal to it (with decreasing enthusiasm) until its editor Bruce Richmond retired at the end of 1937. Both journals published reviews anonymously and one might have thought that this allowed greater freedom to its contributors. In fact, it did not, as the reviews appeared as the mouthpiece of each journal. Of course, Woolf wrote for other journals and gained in confidence, so that she found that she did not always need to stick closely to the book under review.

Woolf was a generous reviewer, but one book was, to her, so entertainingly bad that she was able to produce three reviews of it: for *The TLS*, *The Daily Herald* and *The Athenaeum*. This was of Constance Hill's *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (1920). It is obviously the kind of book that goes in for:

“... as we looked upon the steps leading down from the upper room, we fancied that we saw the tiny figure jumping from step to step.”

In *The TLS* (E3 210–12), Woolf pretends to puzzle over why Miss Hill chose to write about Miss Mitford, and concludes:

“In the first place, Miss Mitford was a lady; in the second, she was born in the year 1787 ... Surroundings, as they are called, are invariably eighteenth-century surroundings.”

Despite Miss Mitford's respectability, she had a father – “terrible to relate” - an appalling, “gluttonous, bibulous, amorous old man”. Woolf sums up: “That is worst of writing about ladies; they have fathers as well as teapots.”

In her review in *The New Statesman* entitled ‘Trousers’ (E3 312–14), Woolf admits that she is unable to grasp the author's thesis, “[o]wing to native obtuseness, no doubt”. A. Trystan Edwards, the author of *The Things Which Are Seen* (1921), argues that “Nature does not tolerate duality”. Woolf is able to reassure her readers that “the origin of the Holy Ghost, long a subject of dispute among theologians, is now accounted for - quite simply too”.

Recently, *The Week-End Book* has been republished in a new incarnation. Indeed, since its initial appearance in 1924, it has rarely been out of print in various editions. Woolf thought little of it, and her review in *The TLS* (E3 414–16) is written in the form of a description of a country-house party where the guests bicker about the book. Woolf ends with enthusiasm for nature and the great outdoors:

“... what did we like[?] ... Everything in the whole world ... but not, we agreed, as we rambled off into the vast and glorious freedom of the universe, that book.”

When Woolf’s husband Leonard became literary editor of *The Nation and Athenaeum* in 1923, she gained an extra freedom, and she wrote signed reviews, short unsigned reviews, and even anonymous one-paragraph reviews in the ‘Books in Brief’ column. The Bloomsbury Group was less than impressed by the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, and Woolf’s ‘Thunder at Wembley’ (E3 410–13) is one of her great entertaining essays and pays re-reading. It was one thing to laugh a book to scorn, but quite another to sneer at the British Empire.

Woolf opens with “It is nature that is the ruin of Wembley” and she emphasises the mediocrity of the exhibition by pricing everything at six and eightpence (one-third of £1):

“Dress fabrics, rope, table linen, old masters, sugar, wheat, filigree silver, pepper, birds’ nests (edible, and exported to Hong Kong), camphor, bees-wax, rattans, and the rest - why trouble to ask the price? One knows beforehand - six and eightpence.”

She does not jeer at the visitors who have a “dignity of their own”, even when clustered around a model of “the Prince of Wales in butter” (she kids you not).

The summer of 1924 was appalling. Woolf later called it “the deplorable summer that is dead” (E3 449) - and probably, when the Woolfs visited the exhibition, it rained - but perhaps not as apocalyptically as she describes in her essay:

“Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. For that is what comes of letting in the sky.”

When writing for American publications, Woolf was not always sure of her audience, especially in the case of the respectably academic *Yale Review*, but she allowed herself a humorous fantasy in a Hearst publication. ‘America, Which I Have Never Seen ...’ (E6 128–32) imagines a country that she would never visit:

“The Americans never sit down to a square meal. They perch on steel stools and take what they want from a perambulating rail. The Americans have swallowed their dinner by the time it takes us to decide whether the widow of a general takes precedence of the wife of a knight commander of the Star of India.”

It is certainly true, as a reviewer wrote in 1932, that

“ ... most readers ... will be enchanted by [Woolf's essays] ... whether or not they have read what she is writing about ... When a great novelist brings to the study of fact the qualities that give her such authority in fiction, lovers of fact must be grateful.” (quoted E6 477 n2)

However, those who do not feel ready for essays about *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* or Spenser's *The Faery Queen* or Madame de Sévigné's *Letters* among the six volumes of Woolf's collected essays might wish to consider picking up a selection of her essays. A few collections have been published, notably Michèle Barrett's *Women and Writing* (W&W), which includes many of Woolf's more feminist essays, and David Bradshaw's *Selected Essays* (SE), which includes a balanced selection under the headings, 'Reading and Writing', 'Life-Writing', 'Women and Fiction' and 'Looking On'.

So, I am waiting for a publisher to approach me. *My Favourite Woolf Essays* would be a self-indulgent title, but what about *Entertaining Essays* by Virginia Woolf? I happen to have a sheaf of such essays to hand. She once wrote: “I want fun. I want ... to give things their caricature value”. (D3 203) And why not?

Works Cited:

D3 Bell, A.O. (ed.) (1980), **The Diary of Virginia Woolf**, Vol. 3, London, Hogarth Press.

E3 McNeillie, A. (ed.) (1988), **The Essays of Virginia Woolf**, Vol. 3, London, Hogarth Press.

E6 Clarke, S.N. (ed.) (2011), **The Essays of Virginia Woolf**, Vol. 6, London, Hogarth Press.

SE Bradshaw, D. (ed.) (2008), **Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays**, Oxford, Oxford World's Classics.

W&W Barrett, M. (ed.) (1979), **Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing**, London, The Women's Press.

- ooOoo -

Woman's-Eye View: Social Satire in 20th Century Fiction

Hazel K. Bell

Satire before Jane Austen was a male prerogative, whether Juvenalian or Horatian in type - descending in the 18th century to Swiftian or Popean streams. The male targets were predominantly political, denouncing mankind in the mass or by the nation, or lampooning individuals. Jonathan Swift's satirical message culminated in the King of Brobdingnag's sweeping verdict on mankind overall, delivered to Gulliver:

“I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.” (Swift, 1726, Ch. VI)

Swift's satiric mission, self-proclaimed, was:

“My hate, whose lash just Heaven has long decreed
Shall on a day make sin and folly bleed.” (Swift, lines 743-4)

Meanwhile, the literature of the second sex developed in the form of the novel, domestic in setting, romantic in mood and matter, matching the restricted circumstances of women's lives. Dale Spender sees a hundred English women novelists before Jane Austen. (Spender, 1986) In her work, the forms converged. As Reuben Brower claims, “In historical terms, Jane Austen's feat in *Pride and Prejudice* was to combine the traditions of poetic satire with those of the sentimental novel.” (Reuben, 1951, pp 164-81)

These latter traditions were, of course, predominantly female. Julia Prewitt Brown wrote:

“From its inception, women have made up the major audience and often the major subject of the novel ... Feminine history [pre-feminism] was a great anonymous tradition, a set of values and beliefs that were passed on through generations of women ... Austen's novels were the first to voice this consciousness ... [a] feminine ethos primarily located in her view of social life ... characterized by a general definition of moral life, a concern for the actual and immediate quality of social existence ... and a value for social cooperation and personal adaptability ... The feminine consciousness was ... a kind of social conscience developed ... by the women in Austen's culture [the educated upper class].” (Brown, 1979)

This argument is reinforced by Erik Erikson, who suggests that feminine history, or domestic history, balances the official history of territories and domains; that marriage and family life maintain the stability and continuity of civilisation, which political and economic divisions and crises tend to corrode: women's creativity preserves and restores what official history had torn apart. (Erikson, 1964) The target of women satirists is generally social behaviour, relationships and interaction, with denunciatory portrayals of character types rather than of identifiable individuals.

Indeed, Austen's range is closely limited to domestic and social behaviour, social intercourse, and her strictures reserved for social and familial solecisms, with the traditional women's set of values and beliefs promoted by exposing their opposite, sharply delineated. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the "dignified impertinence" of Lady Catherine De Bourgh in hostess mode, with the egregious Mr Collins her sycophant, when Elizabeth Bennet's party is invited (or summoned) to dine at Rosings:

"When the ladies were separating for the toilette, he said to Elizabeth, 'Do not make yourself uneasy, my dear cousin, about your apparel. Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us, which becomes herself and her daughter. I would advise you merely to put on whatever of your clothes is superior to the rest ... Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved.'

While they were dressing, he came two or three times to their different doors, to recommend their being quick, as Lady Catherine very much objected to being kept waiting for her dinner ... Lady Catherine's air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank. She was not rendered formidable by silence; but whatever she said, was spoken in so authoritative a tone, as marked her self-importance ...

When the ladies returned to the drawing room, there was little to be done but to hear Lady Catherine talk, which she did without any intermission till coffee came in, delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted. Elizabeth found that nothing was beneath this great Lady's attention, which could furnish her with an occasion of dictating to others." (Austen, 1813, Ch. 19)

In our own century, any witty woman novelist touching on social matters seems dubbed 'a new Jane Austen'; it has become a literary marketing term. There is indeed a line of descent, of women writers offering witty criticism of their society, carrying forward the traditional women's "set of values and beliefs". (Brown, 1979) Each, though, has very much her own style.

Dorothy Parker, in the New York of the 1920s, had perhaps the softest target for social criticism, ridiculing the gathering twentieth century anomie which barely needed denominating. Her bright, stupid young things expose themselves without benefit of annotation, as in her *Diary of a New York Lady* (1932):

“Last night *couldn't* have been more perfect. Ollie and I dined at Thirty-Eight East, absolutely *poisonous* food, and not one living soul that you'd be seen *dead* with, and ‘Run like a Rabbit’ was the world's worst. Took Ollie up to the Barlows' party and it *couldn't* have been more attractive - *couldn't* have been more people absolutely *stinking* ... Tried to read a book, but couldn't sit still ... Started to read a book, but too nervous ... Began to read a book, but too exhausted ... Started to read a book, but too restless.” (Parker, 1932)

Twenty years later, Parker's countrywoman Mary McCarthy shows a similarly shallow-minded female who has advanced intellectually to a state of self-deception, in *The Company She Keeps* (1942):

“She could not bear to hurt her husband. She impressed this on the Young Man, on her confidantes, and finally on her husband himself ... That the deception was accompanied by feelings of guilt, by sharp and genuine revulsions, only complicated and deepened its delights, by abrading the sensibilities, and by imposing a sense of outlawry and consequent mutual dependence upon the lovers. But what this interlude of deception gave her, above all, she recognized, was an opportunity, unparalleled in her experience, for exercising feelings of superiority over others. For her husband she had, she believed, only sympathy and compunction ... It was as if by the mere act of betraying her husband, she had adequately bested him; it was superogatory for her to gloat, and, if she gloated at all, it was over her fine restraint in not gloating, over the integrity of her moral sense, which allowed her to preserve even while engaged in sinfulness the acute realization of sin and shame.” (McCarthy, 1942, Ch. 1)

Satire from these two American writers becomes mordant, exposing the nature of a type of woman with wicked glee.

The English Angela Thirkell was more obviously an Austen rediviva. Her eleventh novel, *Coronation Summer*, set in 1838, was even greeted by one reviewer as an amusing pastiche in the manner of Jane Austen. Its high-spirited though propriety-conscious heroine-narrator constantly betrays herself:

“Emily rose to her feet, looking, were her features better, almost sublime.

The expense of the journey, combined with his gout, will keep him at a distance where affection can still hold sway, unchecked by propinquity.

His deep manly accents thrilled my nerves. I bowed my head in assent and accidentally managed to drop my handkerchief." (Thirkell, 1938)

Thirkell embarked upon her sequence of 29 novels post-Trollope at the age of 43, with two broken marriages behind her, three sons, "years of exile in an unsympathetic continent [Australia]", (Bowen, 1966) and the *entrée* to the social life of town and country. Her confidence of being both deeply experienced and socially superior lent an assurance to her admonitory portrayals: her attitude in her bitter, later years becoming one of arrogant castigation. She took as her targets educated women ("One of those over-educated young women who knew everything") (Thirkell, 1933), foreigners ("They're all right in their place. It's here we don't want them") (Thirkell, 1934), refugees ("disagreeable, selfish and ungrateful") (Thirkell, 1940), evacuees ("greedy and selfish and have no manners"; their parents "having had nearly four happy months of freedom, and seeing no reason why their children shouldn't be lodged, fed, clothed, educated and amused at other people's expense for ever ... hoped that the same fate would overtake the new baby whom most of them had had or were expecting") (Thirkell, 1940), the Labour party (its Government always referred to with revulsion as "Them"), and the despised working classes.

Like Austen, Thirkell restricted her range to what she knew best. Libby Purves described her as, "very observant, very English, and, like Miss Austen, very happy indeed with her little piece of ivory". (Purves, 1988) Thirkell's social observation is exact and malicious, and often threatened to incur libel suits as well as offense. C.P. Snow credited her with "a most observant, and often attractively wicked, eye". Elizabeth Bowen observed in a *Tatler* review (of *Miss Bunting*, 1945): "If the social historian of the future does not refer to this writer's novels, he will not know his business."

As examples of Thirkell's blithe early satire, here are two young lady rivals for their charming host at lunch, in *Wild Strawberries* (1934). Joan is the last to arrive:

" 'Cocktail, Joan?' David asked.

'No, thanks. I can't work if I drink cocktails,' said Joan, looking at Mary's glass ...

David seized an arm of each to guide them to the lunchroom. He should have fallen a charred corpse, or stood convulsed, rooted to the ground, so strong were the angry waves that must have passed through him ...

Lunch was made even more uncomfortable for Mary and Joan than it need have been, as each made it a point of honour to pretend she could not touch anything that the other liked, so that neither got more than half of David's delightful meal. The caviar which Mary ate with relish was only pecked at by Miss Stevenson, who said she had eaten it fresh in Russia, where she had once been on a long vacation, and could never bear to eat it any other way ...

'No, no potatoes, said Mary, glancing at Joan's plate.

'Do you find them fattening?' said Joan. 'I am terribly lucky. I can eat whatever I like without having to worry.'

'I expect someday I'll get to that stage,' said Mary." (Thirkell, 1934)

And meet Thirkell's frequently presented Lady Emily Leslie attending church:

"Every Sunday had been a nervous exasperation for [the vicar] as the whole family poured in, half-way through the General Confession, Lady Emily dropping prayer books and scarves and planning in loud, loving whispers where everyone was to sit ... Lady Emily ... shepherded her convalescent patients into her pew, giving unnecessary help with crutches, changing the position of hassocks, putting shawls round grateful embarrassed men to protect them from imaginary draughts, talking in a penetrating whisper which distracted the vicar from his service, behaving altogether as if church was a friend's house ... She so bestirred herself with cushions and hassocks for the comfort of her wounded soldiers that they heartily wished they were back in hospital, and [she] invented a system of silent communication with the sexton about shutting a window, absorbing the attention of the entire congregation." (Thirkell, 1934)

The merry spirit did not survive, though. An element of supercilious disdain appears as early as 1939, as in *Before Lunch*:

"A very unpleasant gentleman called Sir Ogilvy Hibberd made an offer for [the house, 'Laverings']. The county, who disliked and resented Sir Ogilvy because he was a Liberal and not quite the sort we want (though admitting that there had been some perfectly presentable Liberals only one didn't really know them), resolved itself into a kind of informal Committee of Hatred ... Lord Bond, who had more money than he knew what to do with was pushed by his masterful wife into buying Laverings ... He had felt for some time that there ought to be a sound man at Laverings. What he meant by a sound man no

one quite knew, nor, apart from a strong feeling against anyone from Cambridge, did he.” (Thirkell, 1939)

“Alas, after the 1945 Labour landslide, cantankerousness was to infect her work,” as Bowen puts it. (Bowen, 1966)

David Pryce-Jones compares Thirkell's post-War novels with those of Evelyn Waugh, detecting in both “the same bitter, satirical fume ... For both of them the war seemed a watershed: civilisation and all things nice on the far side, and anarchy, snails and puppy-dog tails on this side.” He observes of post-War Thirkell:

“These latter-day Bassetshire chronicles ... seemed to fill a contemporary need for continuity ... The county families were seen as all that was best in Britain ... each generation seemed to make a point of modelling itself on its predecessor. Hence the survival of values which allot each person his place and take away the anguish of self-determination. But, more importantly it had to do with behaviour. There were some people, and only those, who could set a good example.” (Pryce-Jones, 1963, pp. 197 - 218)

Marghanita Laski, reviewing *The Duke's Daughter* (1951), wrote of her “high-class grumbling”.

Hear the middle class lamenting in *Private Enterprise* (1947):

“ ‘The Dark Ages are upon us, Fanshawe,’ said Noel ... ‘Human learning is on its death-bed and we shall never see her revival. Law students will probably be forced to study exclusively commercial law with a left bias and have to eat their dinners in a British restaurant.’

‘And we shall all have to spend our holidays in Mr Butlin's camps,’ said Colin, ‘and do everything communally with common Communists ... ‘

‘We are living under a Government as bad as any in history in its combination of bullying and weakness, its bids for the mob's suffrages, its fawning upon foreigners who despise it, its efforts to crush all personal freedom. The sun will shortly set upon every corner of the British Empire ... and even then they won't be satisfied.’” (Thirkell, 1947)

The Times observed in its obituary on Thirkell, “... the [later] novels tended to become a satirical running commentary or lament on the times”. (The Times, 1961)

Here is her depiction of English village society in *Never Too Late*. Mrs Carter, daughter of Lord Crosse, has moved. Her first visitor is Lady Graham. Mrs Carter asks:

“ ‘Do you know if this house has a pew of its own in the church?’ ...

Lady Graham said would Mrs Carter come to the Graham pew next Sunday and then they could enquire about the Old Manor House pew ... Lady Graham began to realize that this pleasant new-comer was going to be the very capable Queen of Hatch End in a very short time and determined to be on good terms with the rising sun. Not that her ladyship needed any social aspirations, for her position together with her husband's was unassailable and while the village would give lip service to the Carters as open-handed gentry living in a good house, it would be to Holdings that mothers would aspire to send their girls when they reached the floor-slopping and china-breaking age, to be trained by Lady Graham's old cook into wringing out your clorth in the suds, my girl, before you watch the kitchen floor with it and none of your slopping water about and if I catch you with the soap laying in the pail when there's water in it you won't have no chance to do it again, and mind when you do her ladyship's best china and don't go pulling the handles off the cups when you dry them the way some girls do as haven't been brought up proper.” (Thirkell, 1956, Chapter 4)

Barbara Pym, by contrast, born 23 years after Thirkell but beginning to write of English life at the same period, directed her wit, ruefully, at herself, “excellent women” like her, and the circles in which they moved, waiting on men: “the dustier fringes of the academic world”, and parochial bodies. (Pym, 1961)

A.L. Rowse hailed Pym as “the Jane Austen *de nos jours*”, seeing both writers as moral perfectionists and as perfect artists - and there are further parallels. (Rowse, 1987 pp. 64-71) Both wrote their first novel about a pair of sisters living together and enduring unrequited love (*Sense and Sensibility*; *Some Tame Gazelle*). Both these novels were not published until about fifteen years after their first writing (*Sense* begun 1795, published 1811; *Gazelle* begun 1934, published 1950). The writers' attitude to religion was similar.

Claire Tomalin writes of Austen, “Religion was ... an essential part of the fabric of her life ... more of a social than a spiritual factor. No one prays in her novels, no one is shown seeking spiritual guidance” - exactly true also of Pym and her works. (Tomalin, 1997, pp. 139-40)

Most obviously, neither woman married, and, as John Halperin suggests, “Barbara Pym seems to have shared with Jane Austen a deep sympathy for the hapless fate of the undowried, unmarried woman”. (Halperin, 1987 pp.88-100)

Robert Emmet Long puts it:

“Both Austen and Pym are preoccupied by the situation of women in genteel societies that restrict their potentialities, so that they must look almost solely to marriage for self-fulfilment. Eschewing strange and extravagant events, uninterested in such political issues as poverty and social unrest, they focus upon purely personal relationships in novels that are as formally arranged as English gardens. Neither married, yet wrote persistently of love and marriage, subjecting them to the scrutiny of their detachment.” (Long, 1986, pp. 201-2)

One of the war-ravaged generation replete with spinsters - then an allowable term - Pym depicted heroines who were, as she called herself in her diary, “drearly splendid”, lonely and unappreciated. (Pym, 1985) Typical is Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Women*: warned by a friend whose lecture she is to attend, “You mustn't expect too much”:

“I forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little—nothing, almost.” (Pym, 1952)

Similarly, Julia Kavanagh wrote of Austen in 1862, “If we look into the shrewdness and quiet satire of her stories, we shall find a much keener sense of disappointment than of joy fulfilled.” (Kavanagh, 1987, p. 18)

Margaret Crosland considers that the novels of both Austen and Pym “could only have been written by a woman; they are greatly occupied with the small practical externals which women do not seem able to avoid”. (Crosland, 1981, p. 182)

Pym's scenes, like those of her English lady satirist predecessors, are restricted to what she best knew: village life, parish churches, London offices, scholarly institutions, populated by clergy, office workers, publishers, anthropologists, and the subservient women who devote themselves to ‘good works’, pastoral duties and the clergy. The men are feckless; the women, condescended to.

Pym spent thirty years working at the International African Institute in London on journals of anthropology. This honed her powers of observation and taught her proper recording techniques, which she used to indulge in personal, social research. The restrictions of her own life led to an intense interest in others': she researched ordinary people. Observation becomes a substitute for, even precludes, full participation in life: poor Mildred is told by a settled bachelor,

“We are the observers of life. Let other people get married by all means, the more the merrier. Let Dora marry if she likes. She hasn't your talent for observation.” (Pym, 1952)

The heroine of her posthumously published novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, Emma Howick, is an anthropologist living in an Oxfordshire village - a true representation of her author. Attending a notice of a coffee morning and bring-and-buy sale:

“Emma wondered whether a serious sociological study had ever been made of this important feature of village life ... Afterwards she found herself making notes under headings.” (Pym, 1980)

These headings are: Entrance; Participants; Bring and Buy; The raffle. Watching the ladies of the village preparing the church for a flower festival, she ponders:

“ ... There might be material for a note on village status here. And was the festival itself in some way connected with fertility, perhaps? Looking again at the assembled group of ladies, she doubted this interpretation.” (Pym, 1980)

Like Angela Thirkell, Pym may be taken as a most accurate social historian of the mid-twentieth century. Both writers are blessed with Austen's own “sharp eye for the details of contemporary life”. (Watson, 1995, Ch. 2)

Here are extracts from a typical Pym scene, from *Excellent Women*, her second novel: low-key, closely observed, with Mildred Lathbury as the sharp-eyed but placatory narrator. A parish meeting has been called to arrange the traditional Christmas bazaar.

“Perhaps there can be too much making of cups of tea, I thought ... Did we really need a cup of tea? I even said as much to Miss Statham and she looked at me with a hurt, almost angry look. ‘Do we *need* tea?’ she echoed. ‘But Miss Lathbury ...’ She sounded puzzled and distressed and I began to realize that my question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind.

I mumbled something about making a joke and that of course one needed tea always, at every hour of the day or night.” (Pym, 1952)

There is gossip about the vicar's erstwhile fiancée who has abruptly departed. Sister Blatt arrives:

“ ‘Well,’ she said, sitting down heavily and beaming all over her face, ‘it’s a disgrace, I never saw anything like it. ... The way Mrs Gray left that kitchen in the flat ... The dishes not washed up, even!’

‘She left in rather a hurry,’ I pointed out. ‘I don’t suppose she thought of washing up before she went.’ People did tend to leave the washing up on the dramatic occasions of life; I remembered how full of dirty dishes the Napiers’ kitchen had been on the day Helena had left.” (Pym, 1952)

The vicar leaves the committee to arrange the details of the bazaar, returning to his boys’ club to run their darts match, causing general consternation.

“ ‘Really, I’ve never heard of such a thing,’ said Miss Statham. ‘The vicar has always presided at the meeting to arrange about the Christmas bazaar.’

‘I am reminded of nothing so much as the Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome is burning,’ said Mr Mallet.” (Pym, 1952)

Like Thirkell’s novels, those of Pym’s last years betray a diminished resilience. Penelope Lively calls her 1977 work, *Quartet In Autumn*, “more sombre than the others but with all their wit and accuracy; sadder, but shot with the same braveries, the same triumphs of humour over meanness and egotism”. (Lively, 1987)

Its heroine, Letty Crowe, newly retired, is isolated in the fast-changing London of the period: as Rowse describes it, “a broken-down, tattered society, with only bits and pieces of a better order showing through”. (Rowse, 1987, pp. 64–71) She comes to the flat beneath hers to complain of noise, and –

“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? ...

‘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 ... ‘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.” (Pym, 1977)

Penelope Lively expresses her satire primarily in her short stories, where she extends her range to masculine territory: the academic common room (in ‘Presents

of fish and game'), the persona of a male narrator ('Servants talk about people: gentlefolk discuss things'); but still with the perceptive, gently mocking, womanly irony that entered the stream of satire with Austen's writing. 'Presents of fish and game' reads like a morality tale, its characters denominated only by their professional roles - the Fellow in Philosophy and Science Tutor, the Fellow in Economics, the Bursar - as they debate the replacement of the departed Fellow and Tutor in Modern History. (Lively, 1978) Their descent by stages from, "We have to go all out for the best chap we can get, and no two ways about it", abandoning successively the quest for the perceived most suitable individual, for seniority, for academic distinction, for specialisation, for fellowship, to giving a research student "a bit of teaching" - perhaps sufficiently grateful for the chance not to require a stipend, certainly not to expect dining rights - is beautifully choreographed; the whole counterpointed with consideration of the economics of the staff's providing themselves with an annual rise and squash courts.

'Servants talk about people: gentlefolk discuss things' similarly counterpoints the vaunted claims of the narrator's aunt and uncle, taking him to a restaurant lunch, to being "absolutely fascinated by people", and wanting to hear all the news of their nephew (who, as we learn, but they do not appreciate, is starting a new job, writing a book, and standing for the local council), with their inability to talk of anything but their acquaintances, or to notice the drama being played out around them. They fail to recognise that their 'waiter' is a girl, to see her tears, hear the cries and breakages in the kitchen, register the waitress's luggage-laden departure or the frantic solo serving of all tables by the chef in a blood-stained apron. When the waitress "stumbled through the restaurant and out of the street door ... My aunt, lifting her eyes as far as the perambulant carrier bags, said, 'That reminds me, I must pop into Selfridges'." On the waitress's return, "sweeping through the room with an expression of proud endurance ... 'I should think she's a bit late to get a meal, that girl.'" Departing, the aunt admonishes her nephew, " 'You mustn't forget about people ... Don't you go shutting yourself up in an ivory tower, Tim - keep in touch with the real world'." (Lively, 1978)

Jane Austen was the first to combine a womanly delicacy of perception, subtlety of judgement, and keen observation of society with the male tradition of *saeva indignatio*, as she represented and analysed characters in their social environment, showing the relationships of the social scene. "Whereas Swift's irony is savage and destructive, Jane Austen's is gentler and keener." (Reeves, 1956) Each of these women writers of the century succeeding Austen's brings her own particular quality to the depiction of social behaviour: the brittle self-exposure of the women displayed for us by Parker and McCarthy; the insouciant, then arrogant, portrayals from Thirkell; rueful self-and-like-mockery of Pym. In the satirical stories of Penelope Lively, form becomes as significant as content, with contrasting sets of values counterpointed, and characters representing abstract qualities: the narrator in

'Servants talk about people', the Fellow in Economics in 'Presents of fish and game', may stand for Everyman. (Lively, 1978) Lively may be said to write like an angel: in this case, like Donne's guardian angels, acknowledging no difference of sex. While Jane Austen united the types of writing of men and women of her time ("[her] feat in *Pride and Prejudice* was to combine the traditions of poetic satire with those of the sentimental novel"), Penelope Lively in her satirical work transcends them.

Works Cited:

- Austen, J. (1813), **Pride and Prejudice**, Ch. 19.
- Bowen, E. (1966), Introduction to **An Angela Thirkell Omnibus**, Hamish Hamilton.
- Brower, R. A. (1951), 'Light and bright and sparkling: irony and fiction in *Pride and Prejudice*', in Brower, R. **The Fields of Light: an Experiment in Critical Reading**, NY, OUP, pp. 164-81.
- Brown, J. P. (1979), **Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form**, Harvard University Press, Ch. 7.
- Crosland, M. (1981), **Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the 20th Century**, Constable, p. 182.
- Donne, J., 'The Relique'.
- Erikson, E. (1964), 'Inner and outer space: reflections on womanhood', in **Daedalus**, 93(2), Spring, p.603.
- Halperin, J. (1987), 'Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes' in **The Life and Work of Barbara Pym**, Salwak, D. (ed), Macmillan, pp. 88-100.
- Kavanagh, J. (1987), **Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage**, cited by Brian Southam in vol. II, p. 18.
- Lively, P. (1978), **Nothing Missing But the Samovar**, Heinemann.
- (1987), 'The World of Barbara Pym' in **The Life and Works of Barbara Pym**, Salwak, D. (ed), Macmillan, pp. 45-9.
- Long, R. E. (1986), **Barbara Pym**, New York, Ungar, pp. 201-2.
- McCarthy, M. (1942), **The Company She Keeps**, Ch. 1.
- Parker, D. (1932), **From the Diary of a New York Lady**.
- Price-Jones, D. (1963), 'Towards the cocktail party', in **Age of Austerity**, Sissons, M. and French, P. (eds.), Hodder & Stoughton, pp.197-218.
- Purves, L. (1988), Introduction to **The Brandons**, Hogarth edition.
- Pym, B. (1952), **Excellent Women**, Cape.
- (1961), **No Fond Return of Love**, Cape.
- (1977), **Quartet in Autumn**.
- (1980), **A Few Green Leaves**, Macmillan.
- (1985), **A Very Private Eye**, Grafton Books.
- Reeves, J. (1956), **The Critical Sense**, Heinemann Educational Books.
- Rowse, A. L. (1987), 'Miss Pym and Miss Austen' in **The Life and Work of Barbara Pym**, Salwak, D. (ed.), Macmillan.
- Spender, D. (1986), **Mothers of the Novel**, Pandora Press.

Swift, J. (1796), **Gulliver's Travels**, Part 2, Ch. VI.
-----, 'To Congreve', lines 743-4.
Thirkell, A. (1933), **High Rising**, Hamish Hamilton.
----- (1934), **Wild Strawberries**, Hamish Hamilton.
----- (1938), **Coronation Summer**, OUP.
----- (1939), **Before Lunch**, Hamish Hamilton.
----- (1940), **Cheerfulness Breaks In**, Hamish Hamilton.
----- (1947), **Private Enterprise**, Hamish Hamilton.
Tomalin, C. (1997), **Jane Austen: a Life**, Viking, pp.139-40.
Watson, D. (1995), **Their Own Worst Enemies**, Pluto Press, Ch. 2.

-ooOoo-

Notes on Contributors

Hazel K Bell is an English graduate, a qualified teacher and a professional indexer. She received the Carey Award for services to indexing in 1997. She is also a member of the Barbara Pym Society.

Stuart N. Clarke has edited the *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* of the Virginia Woolf Society since its first number in 1999, and has edited *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vols 5 & 6 (Hogarth Press, 2009 & 2011).

Anita Fernandez Young was one of Simon Gray's students at Queen Mary College in the 1960s, and went on to teach tourism management at Nottingham University Business School. She is a Council Member of the International Dickens Fellowship and Hon. Secretary of the ALS.

Iwona Filipczak works in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Zielona Gora in Poland.

Robin Joyce is an Australian member of the Barbara Pym Society currently enjoying living in London. She has presented papers at various Pym Conferences; contributes to the Women and History Network blog; and has published articles on women and politics.

Clemence Schultze is the Chair of the Barbara Pym Society, with an interest in Roman republican history, Greek and Roman clothing, ancient historiography, and the reception of antiquity in later literature and art.