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

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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 Barsetshire 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, “drearily 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 <u>need</u> 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.

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