Woman's-eye view: social satire in 20th-century fiction

Hazel K. Bell

ABSTRACT: Considers the development of social satire in women's writing, and how it differs from men's satire, in target and in treatment. Illustrated by the work of Jane Austen, Dorothy Parker, Mary McCarthy, Angela Thirkell, Barbara Pym, Doris Lessing, Alice Thomas Ellis, Catherine Heath, Molly Keane and Penelope Lively.

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'.[1] 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.'[2]

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.[3] 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.'[4]

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]'.[5] 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.[6] 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:[7]

`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.'

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'[5]. 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 20th-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):[8]

`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.'

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):[9]

`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.'

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

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.[10] 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 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]',[11] 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'"),[12] foreigners (`"They're all right in their place. It's here we don't want them'"),[13] refugees (`disagreeable, selfish and ungrateful'),[14] 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'),[14] 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 best knew. Libby Purves described her as, `very observant, very English, and, like Miss Austen, very happy indeed with her little piece of ivory'.[15] Thirkell's social observation is exact and malicious, and often threatened to incur libel suits as well as offence. 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).[13] 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 caviare 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 some day I'll get to that stage," said Mary.'

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'.

The merry spirit did not survive, though. An element of supercilious disdain appears as early as 1939, as in *Before lunch*:[16]

`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.'

`Alas, after the 1945 Labour landslide, cantankerousness was to infect her work,' as Bowen puts it.[11] David Pryce-Jones compares Thirkell's postwar 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 postwar AT, `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.'[17] Marghanita Laski, reviewing *The Duke's daughter* (1951) wrote of her `high-class grumbling'.

Hear the middle class lamenting in *Private enterprise* (1947):[18]

`"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."'

The Times observed in its obituary on Thirkell, `the [later] novels tended to become a satirical running commentary or lament on the times'.[19] Here is her depiction of English village society in 1956 (*Never too late*, chapter 4).[20] 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.'

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',[21] and parochial bodies. A.L. Rowse hailed Pym as `the Jane Austen *de nos jours'*, seeing both writers as moral perfectionists and as perfect artists;[22] and there are further parallels. 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'[23]: exactly true also of Pym and her works.

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'.[24] 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-fulfillment. 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.'[25] 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',[26] lonely and unappreciated. Typical is Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent women* (1952): 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'.[27]

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.'[28]

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'.[29]

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 technique, which she used to indulge in personal, social research. The restrictions of her own life led to 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.'[27] The heroine of her posthumously published novel, *A few green*

leaves [30], 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.' 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.'

Like Angela Thirkell, Pym may be taken as a most accurate social historian of the mid-20th century; both writers are blessed with Austen's own `sharp eye for the details of contemporary life'.[31] 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.[27]

`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.'

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.'

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.'

Like Thirkell's, the novels 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'.[32] 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'.[22] 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.'[33]

Doris Lessing, `the most wide-ranging of recent women writers',[34] extends her range to include social satire in *A proper marriage* (itself an ironical title; 1954).[35] Lessing grew up in (then) Rhodesia, before and through the second world war; her heroine, Martha Quest, leads a similar early life. Satirical observation becomes integral to this novel: deliberately practised by Martha and the shrewder characters, overt. Ironical complicity runs through it as a chorus. Alice and Martha `smiled ironically, exchanged a look'. With her father, `she smiled back, ironically'. Mr Maynard, the magistrate, `saw her offering him a look of such ironic pity that he stopped. … She remarked in precisely his own tone of cool self-punishing sarcasm … he seized upon the first part with an ironical "Well, well!" … Instilling a gleam of ironic complicity into his eyes … here she offered him an ironic smile'. He `raised his hat to her with an elaborate irony'. Martha's husband returns from the war: `On his face was an ugly, angry look; he grinned after a while with ironic appreciation. "There's no place like home", he produced at last.'

Martha is particularly aware of the irony of biology conflicting with - maybe subjugating - intelligence: rational women's life-courses being determined by blind drives. She seeks the company of wives whose `sharp physical yearning for a baby confused her out of her efficiency', so that pregnancy cannot be planned, `as they planned everything else in their regulated lives'. In pregnancy, Martha and her friend `exchanged heavy sighs which said that while they knew they were committed to this absurd process, they at least intended to remain ironical spectators of it'. `She traced the purple stretch marks with one finger, and felt something like satisfaction mingled with half-humorous appreciation of the ironies of her position.' Even suffering the early stages of childbirth on a hard couch, promised `a comfortable bed tomorrow', `she was able to achieve a humorous gasp that she wouldn't mind a confortable bed now.'

When Martha brings her worries to her doctor, `She saw with a satirical appreciation of his skill in handling her that his word was deliberately chosen'; `There was a part of her brain which remained satirical and watchful, even amused, while it tried to analyse the process by which Dr Stern handled her'.

When the British Air Force arrives in the South African colony in which the novel is set, the residents encounter `patient and sardonic criticism … an atmosphere like an ironic stare'.

With Lessing, political behaviour also becomes a target of women's satire. She notices and records:

`In every city there is a group of middle-aged and elderly women who in fact run it. The extent to which they are formally organized is no gauge of their real power. The way in which they respond to danger is their gauge; and from the frankness with which they express their intentions can be measured the extent of the danger.'; and, `Unfortunately nine-tenths of the time of any political leader must be spent not on defeating his opponents, but on manipulating the stupidities of his own side.' Again, `The shortest acquaintance with politics should be enough to teach anyone that listening to the words people use is the longest way around to an understanding of what is going on.'[35]

Lessing is particularly observant of colonials, their motives, behaviour, and self-image:[36]

`It is no means an accident that people find themselves in the colonies. Mrs Maynard, as a girl, had infuriated her family by refusing to get married at the right time. Instead, she had become a crusader for better housing in Whitechapel. She had been prevented from marrying a penniless clergyman who was similarly devoted only by the greatest effort on the part of her relations. As a revenge she had married Mr Maynard; Africa had seemed to her both romantic and suitably exasperating to her family. She had seen herself ministering

to grateful savages. And Mr Maynard had left England because he found it insular. They had both been rebels, of a kind. Perhaps the strongest strand in their relationship was the feeling that they were rebels against tradition - even now, when their first concern was to uphold it.

`For that matter, there is no white person in the colonies who has not arrived there for some similar reason: they are crusaders against tyranny to a man. Which accounts for the shrill note of protest when the world suggests that it is both stupid and old-fashioned to suppress native populations: for when these same colonials are passionately engaged in fighting against a minimum wage of one pound a month, or advocating the sjambok as a means of guidance for the uncivilised, they are always, in the bottom of their hearts, quite convinced that this too is part of their character as rebels against the tyranny and conservatism of the mother country which they left as adventurers into a free world. …

`The Maynards' beautiful quiet room with its green-and-rose silks, its flowery carpet, was almost identical with the one in Chelsea from which he had plucked her 30 years before.'

Another political target of Lessing's is the total, all-exclusive earnestness of the commitment of young radicals. Martha seeks the advice of her friend, the local Communist party secretary, as to whether she should leave her husband, and is reproached: `There might be a revolutionary situation at any moment - and here you are wasting time on personal matters!'

Alice Thomas Ellis describes a peculiar form of practical, aesthetic satire: pastiche in domestic decor. Aunt Irene in *The twenty-seventh kingdom* (1982), offered Nottingham lace curtains, `narrowed her eyes considering. Looped swags of lace at the windows? A green plush tablecloth with bobbles? Lillies? A samovar? She could see herself, a character from Russian literature, tragic and bored behind lace curtains … "I'll have them," she said, "but I don't know if I'll hang them." Part of the trouble was that some of the neighbours still had Nottingham lace curtains adorning their windows in perfect seriousness. People might not see the joke.'[37]

Rose, in *The sin eater* (1977), similarly parodies periods in her rooms: `Part of her fondness for the house was based on the ease with which she could make a fool of it'.[37] Likewise of her guests: `"This is a lovely room," said Angela, … "It's what I always call a *traditional* drawing-room". The element of pastiche introduced by Rose - the tropical shells displayed on a small table, the wax flowers under a glass dome - seemed to have escaped her notice'. She stages her meals. Planning a tea to follow the cricket match, she considers, `An Edwardian tea on the lawn, white cloths and the Crown Derby … a thirties tea on the terrace … a traditional farmhouse meal …'. `Once she had cooked dinner for a Midland client of Henry's … she had given him prawn cocktail, steak and pretty little chips, and an antipodean thing called a pavlova - the sort of meal the family described as "Uxbridge Country Club" … he was a nice man and appreciative, and had left happily, sure he had had a splendid evening'.[38]

Ellis's views are based on deeply held traditional moral values (she is a fervent Roman Catholic). She deplores and condemns the vulgar modernization of village life and of the church, bitterly presented in *The sin eater* as corruption:

`Phyllis's bungalow seemed almost to leap at them as they came to it … It was made of shiny, unvariegated brick and looked horrifyingly, angrily red - perhaps with embarrassment at being so out of place among the old fields and sheep roads. Inside, it had that uniquely rural squalor which results from the attempt to impose urban notions of "luxury" on quite unsuitable surroundings. … Awful pictures of charging elephants, weeping children and the Boul. Mich. in summer. Jack … liked to expound on their subtlety of execution and depth of perception. …

`Now they were coming to the building site, where architects had expressed themselves. … "Don't look", advised Rose.

`"I suppose the people who live in them like them," said Ermyn tremulously, looking determinedly before her. …

`The holiday drivers seemed unaware of the existence of such creatures as pedestrians. … Behind them on the road there were accidents. Survivors knelt bleeding and distraught begging someone to stop and aid them, but … Singlemindedly the motorists swept by on the other side, causing further accidents.

`The shopkeepers, smiling like spiders, were determined to gain every drop of nourishment from the seasonal swarm. … The greengrocer, in the general lust for money, had taken to selling fish, as well as tinned goods and lengths of Welsh flannel. … The bookshop had become a cake shop, where they sold soft drinks and sheepskins; and the cake shop was now a launderette, where they did television repairs on the side.

`"You will notice," said Rose as they threaded their way along, "that we no longer have anywhere that sells real bread. People who don't bake have to go thirty miles for a decent loaf".'

Through the bitter satire comes a yearning for the old, cherished values and ways: `Violets and wild strawberries had grown in that field once, and the ewes with their lambs had found it comforting after the winds on the hills. … Once, when you went out you could hope to see at least a few beautiful [nuns] in ample shapely robes, veils lifting on the wind - real clothes, with the significance clothes should have: reassuring, decisive. Now nuns were the ugliest people on the street.'

The novels of **Catherine Heath** illustrate the dilemma outlined by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, in his 1900 essay, *Laughter*. He saw reality as constant change, and the essential human quality to be a vitality, a spontaneous, changing, personal response to each situation in which we find ourselves. The comical element consists of `a certain mechanical inelasticity, where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and living pliableness of a human being; a certain inborn lack of elasticity in senses and intelligence, so that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible: to adapt ourselves to a past situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present.'

Catherine Heath lived in Britain 1924-91, the child of Dutch *emigré* Lutheran-Jewish parents, brought up in southern England with their strictly religious principles, and passionately attached to the Christian Liberal values in which she believed. The 1960s and 70s were times of turbulent change, even in predominating morality. Heath's heroines, like herself, are `trapped, wise, desperate', looking back longingly to a recent past, a safe world: in Bergsonian terms, failing to adapt. `It would be helpful, Jenny says, if one could still assume, as the old puzzles tell one, that Greeks always tell the truth and Cretans always lie. Such certainties we once lived among.' Thus Frances in *Lady on the burning deck* (1978).[39] She and her two close friends attempt at once to abide by their deep-seated, long-cherished principles, and to champion their six children of the times. These have become variously a subway guitar-player, a squatter, a nude model, a hippy drop-out, one of a *ménage á trois*, and a campaigning homosexual. (The mother of the last tells him, `There are times when you remind me of your great-uncle who used to preach teetotalism in every Nonconformist chapel from Leeds to Manchester'.) Because it is unthinkable for any of them to disown or appear ashamed of their children, two of the parents display their daughter's `peekaboo' photographs in their living room, where photographs have not appeared before. It is well-paid work: `She is at least, as Jenny remarks at frequent intervals, earning a good living. We do not pause on the word "good".'

Frances and her friends share the contemporary perplexities of Barbara Pym's Letty Crowe - all of them `excellent women' twenty years on. `Whatever the disasters of life do

to us, Jenny and Ruth and I remain pre-eminently copers. The word dates us. We are post-Girl Guide, pre-Existentialist. The golden mean, the norm.' Frances wryly describes herself preaching her traditional principles: `Cliché after cliché rolls from me. Toads from the mouth of an elderly princess.' Moral dilemmas abound as the good ladies strive to adapt to the changing times: `The whirlpools of moral paradox confuse me, swirl me round, engulf me. Drown me.' `You may decide … according to your moral viewpoint, if you are lucky enough still to have one.' Confronting the leader of her son's highly-organised squat, Frances reflects, `Causes, not people are the source of happiness these days, I see, or if not happiness, at least some way of surviving. … Nora has learned early not to trust affection. I cannot adapt.'

Heath is another whose work could be taken as social history as well as witty reading. Her targets are of her time, including the 1970s' penchant for spiritual food and yoga; popular music (`I thought you had to have a name like Zak and be C-stream secondary modern and come from Bootle to be able to play what people want to hear today. And be on pot as well.'); religious education (`the children no longer sing hymns. Instead they have sad stories about the third world read to them. … what can an eleven-year-old do about famine in Ethiopia?'). Her work also introduces a note of ethical philosophy into satirical fiction. Certainly she carries forward the set of values and beliefs that Prewitt Brown claimed were passed on through generations of women.[5]

Molly Keane practises the satire of cruelty. Many characters are victimised in her black comedies, set in the last days of the Irish raj, the 1920s and '30s, with a strong sense of aristocracy prevailing. In *Time after time* (1983), May Swift has a deformed hand with only a half a finger and a thumb, but has defied her disability to excel at crafts, craving adulation. She is to give a demonstration of flower arranging to her ladies' flower club, in the formerly grand home of a wealthy friend:[40]

`Lady Alys … had soft, well-taught manners, through which she was as quick to destroy as to please. "Oo-oo," she cooed out suddenly, "do I hear a car? I doooo - it's the first of the milk-in-firsts arriving."'

After the lecture, with May feeling triumphant in her skills, `The ladies made their polite thanks and tactfully early departure. Their comments on the afternoon went much the same as always. "Poor Miss Swift - she shouldn't take it so seriously"; `I could have cried for that poor little hand"; "Oh, it makes me so nervous, I never look near it"; "And what did you think of that idea for a centre-piece?"; "Frankly, in very poor taste"; "And what about the big house?"; "All that tat and peeling paint?" Unimpressed by other people's lifestyles, and filled with kind thoughts, they enjoyed agreeing with each other along every mile of their homeward roads.

`The thought of a bath and a little lie-down were uppermost in Alys's mind as she waited for May to say her good-byes. She liked May more and more at the prospect of her imminent departure. "Let me put some of those things in your car," she said.

`"No hurry," said May easily, "April [her sister, driving their car] isn't here yet".

`"April?" Alys's voice was frail in dismay.

`No sense of time," May sounded quite indulgent.

`Well, do come in and have a drink - if you don't think it's too early."

`"Never too early for cocktails," May quoted cheerily.

"Only sherry, I'm afraid. Perhaps Elizabeth has put it in the library." '

They repair to the library, where they find Alys's husband enjoying tea and toast. He asks whether the ladies enjoyed the lecture.

`"Oh, yes, absolutely riveted. Didn't you think so, Alys?"

"Darling May," Alys put a small glass of sherry into her hand, "her lecture was bliss. I don't know how she kept it up for so long."

`"Just practice," May said. "Two hours means nothing to me. They do love it so. I get inspired."

`"Yes."'

Keane makes her satiric points minimalistically.

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' (1978)[41] 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. 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' (1978)[41] 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 recognize 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 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".'[41]

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.'[42] Each of these ten 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; Lessing's shrewdly self-aware characters and added political element; the ethical perplexities of Heath's women; the bitter derision of Ellis; the acid exposure of Keane. 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.[41] Lively may be said to write like an angel: in this case, like Donne's guardian angels, acknowledging no difference of sex.[43] 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'),[4] Penelope Lively in her satirical work transcends them.

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tel. (01707) 265201
email HKB@aidanbell.com
7640 w