

† Dramatised Pym †

Those attending the Barbara Pym Literary Weekend in August 1993 much enjoyed a dramatised reading of scenes from *No Fond Return of Love*, directed by Tristram Powell and adapted by his daughter Georgia. This version had a cast of four: Aylwin Forbes, author and editor; Viola Dace, his discarded lover and indexer of his last book; Dulcie Mainwaring, 'a competent indexer and proof-corrector' whom he asks to index his next book and to whom he seems likely to propose marriage; and Dulcie's niece, Laurel.

There is another dramatised version of this novel. Adrian Benjamin, Vicar of All Saints Church, Whetstone, North London, prepared and directed an adaptation performed there in 1988, in Chelsea in 1992, Australia 1994, and again in its birthplace in November 1997. This is a more elaborately staged version, with 19 scenes involving four changes of setting. The cast is again of four, but this time playing Viola, a silent Laurel, Dulcie and Miss Lord who 'comes to help her in the house'. All other characters are greeted off-stage (and listed on the programme 'in order of non-appearance').

The Reverend Mr Benjamin provided a programme note for the first, 1988 production of his version of the novel, as follows:

'I have been unlucky with the baked beans recently.'

That's a line typical of a Barbara Pym character; and so is the explanation: as Miss Lord takes her turn in the cafeteria queue she's told they're out of baked beans, but a man after her, who laughs and jokes with the girl serving, gets them. In such a casual incident a Pym novel captures with no militant drum-banging, the way women betray women while men unthinkingly use them. Nor do the novels confine themselves to a stance on social issues: they gently probe our unconscious motives, our little cruelties, and their major moral consequences - and all with that humour and humanity that allow talk of ethics without vilifying villains.

'As a clergyman I have always attempted to remember when mounting

the pulpit the dictum that Jane Austen comes closer than Dostoevsky to depicting the bulk of sinful behaviour. And so as a dramatist I was very much drawn to the idea of adapting one of Barbara Pym's novels for the stage, letting the sharp dialogue and delightful twists of plot reveal the trivial ethical trip-wires of our suburban century.

'... Discussions with actors about the necessary economies of the current theatre scene - small casts and sparing sets - led to the idea of adapting Barbara Pym, who uses her small canvas so carefully and accurately to delineate her characters and their quandaries ... We set about staging *No Fond Return Of Love*. Towards its close a parallel is mischievously drawn with Greek tragedy; there is an inevitability about the sequence of events - and as in the Greek drama, the chief action happens off-stage: no spectacle distracts our attention from the protagonists.

'In this again, the parallel is with Jane Austen. *No Fond Return* concludes with its main character, Dulcie, meditating on the happy ending of *Mansfield Park* - an ironic touch, for all the way through the technique employed is that used in *Emma*. Like Emma, Dulcie observes and arranges the affairs of others, unconscious of the fact that the role of detached commentator and wire-puller is a dangerous one. From the wings she is drawn centre-stage. She is the one to whom things happen. Transposing novel to play means that the audience is caught in the same web. Seeing events through Dulcie's eyes, our emotions are engaged and drawn into the unfolding action's vortex - and this communal experience

is, after all, what a play, as distinct from a novel, is about.'

The 'Adaptor's note' on the 1997 programme quotes Dulcie and Viola's dialogue about the 'thankless task' of indexing, and the 'Prayer for indifference' by the 18th-century poet, Fanny Greville, from which the novel's title is taken (or adapted). It concludes:

'The Christian subtext of the novel may thus be found in another prayer - that of St Ignatius Loyola:

'Teach us, Good Lord, to serve these as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and to seek for no reward save that of knowing that we do thy will, through Christ our Lord.

'The thankless task of an indexer, the pain and equanimity of one whose love is unrequited ... they are thus not far removed from the errand of the incarnate Christ who comes to his own regardless of whether they "receive him" or not.'

I attended the performance of 'No Fond Return of Love' on 29 November in Whetstone, and found it a truly Pymian occasion. A wet night; we arrived in the church hall to find a small audience including two nuns, their habits glistening with raindrops. Chocolate biscuits and various, mostly soft, drinks were being sold on a table - no, not sold, but giving opportunity for donations, because of the parish licensing system. We felt the appropriate Pymian spirit pervading not only the stage, but the entire hall.

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