

# A Simple Though Nourishing Meal : Jane Austen Serves up a Basin of Gruel While Barbara Pym Poaches an Egg

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This is the second in a continuing series of discussions in these pages of issues raised by the work of two great masters of the novel of manners, Jane Austen and Barbara Pym. Our previous discussion focused on a rather narrow range of linguistic detail (Phillips & Clark, 2002). As the title implies, this study deals with food and attitudes toward food. Of Jane Austen (1775-1817), it can readily be claimed that she was among the first great masters of the form if not its inventor. By the present time at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it can equally be argued that the work of Barbara Pym (1913-1980) which stretches across the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also places her in the top rank of purveyors of this type of fiction written in English.

## Aperitif : Austen, Pym and the Novel of Manners

Among the factors that provide a rationale for discussing the works of these two writers together, are a set of remarkable parallels in the lives of these two writers as well as parallels in the history of the reception their work has received. These parallels have been illustrated by others as well as by us in these pages as part of our previous discussion (P&C, 100-104).

No lengthy discussion of the features of the novel of manners need be undertaken here. Since our previous discussion, we have rediscovered this favorite comment about the genre, which comes from Marylea Meyersohn. She begins a study of Austen's 'garrulous speakers' with this.

Although no one really knows what the novel of manners is, it is universally

acknowledged that its chief practitioner is Jane Austen. She would have liked the irony, that she was writing something for which there is no precise definition. (M, 35)

The difficulty of definition and the propensity for Austen lovers to enroll the lady into the lists of their own way of thinking about things, notwithstanding, a few points of common reference about the novel of manners seem warranted to clarify the following discussion. (1) Novels of manners are concerned more with the development of character than with the intricacies of plot or extensive descriptions of setting. (2) Novels which get grouped within this form use instances of behavior, set against a canvas of the details of everyday life, as the chief means of delineating that development of character, which is their focus. (3) These character studies usually incorporate a set of ideas about the propriety of the behavior of individuals in their relationship to society. (4) Finally, these portraits of character collectively illuminate the social rules imposed at various levels of society with an eye toward reinforcing those rules, subjecting them to parody or frequently, as is often the case in Jane Austen and Barbara Pym, doing both.

### Starter : On One Table...

... and on the other were tressels and trays, bending under the weight of brawn and cold pies... (*Persuasion*, Vol II, Ch ii)

The behavior related to our relationship with food is one of our most basic human activities, yet food related behavior may not initially strike readers as very central to most fictional portrayals of human activities.

At least one influential discussion of fiction claims that food has little significance in the world of the novel. English author and critic, E. M. Forster gave a series of lectures at Cambridge University in 1927. These were published in book form later that year under the title

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*Aspects of the Novel* and became quite influential in literary studies, having been used as a text in University Departments of English Literature well into the 1970s. He discusses human behavior under the heading "People". After identifying five essential facts of human life: birth, food, sleep, love and death, he pretty much discounts all of them except love as topics that novels treat in significant ways. Here is what he says about food.

Food in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it, and never digest it unless specially asked to do so. They hunger for each other, as we do in life, but our equally constant longing for breakfast and lunch does not get reflected. Even poetry has made more of it—at least of its aesthetic side. Milton and Keats have both come nearer to the sensuousness of swallowing than George Meredith. (F, 61-62.)

Annette Weld and others have already pointed out that this seems particularly strange where Barbara Pym is concerned. (W, 64-65) However, that is pointing out the obvious to anyone who has ever picked up one of her novels.

To have read any of Barbara Pym's novels is to have encountered bountiful detail about food and meals. This includes detail about the acquisition (and occasionally the stockpiling) of food, as well as the planning, preparation, serving, enjoyment (or lack thereof) and the washing up after meals. In one case, we even encounter the rather manic collecting of food containers. In *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), which many consider to be Pym's masterpiece, the quartet in question comprises four rather eccentric co-workers as they reach retirement. Eccentricity is no unusual trait in a Pym character, but in this darkest of Pym's novels, these four are a bit out of joint with time, or more precisely, time is out of joint with them. One of them, Marcia, is a rather compulsive and secretive collector of the glass bottles in which milk was still acquired in the England of the 1970s. She has hundreds of them, meticulously scrubbed and stored in her garden shed. While

this novel is not discussed any further here, this example clearly speaks to the squirrel-like nature of this character with a food related image.

To be sure, Forster does not say that food cannot be placed more centrally in novels. He simply observes that it isn't. It should also be pointed out that Forster stated that one of his goals was to be irritating. As Oliver Stallybrass, the editor of the 1974 edition of the work says, "Even when seen for what it is, *Aspects of the Novel* still has the occasional power to madden—as Forster intended it should." (F, 16). It could also be mentioned that Pym postdates Forster by some decades and could even have read him and there found a reason to focus on food. However, such motivation seems highly unlikely, given everything we know about Pym's life and work. The presence of food as both fact and motivation in Jane Austen already raises questions about Forster's observation. Given the fact that Forster was one of the most avid and vocal "Janites" of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the fact that he praises her as virtually the perfect novelist in the pages of *Aspects of the Novel*, it does strike us as strange that he should comment as he does about food and fiction.

How, then, have these two masters of the novel of manners used food, eating and attitudes toward both beyond the bounds of Forster's "just social," i. e. as more than something that characters do together or alone, solely as part of the story? The remainder of this discussion focuses on one main topic with particular attention to a few selected characters within the works of both writers. Our goal here is not to be exhaustive in any comprehensive way, rather simply to point out that for both these writers, food and associated beliefs, attitudes and behaviors become a vital carrier for content that is central to the novel of manners. In this discussion our claim is quite simple. Food, and particularly attitudes toward food are a main delineator of character in the works of both writers.

A brief digression around the title of this piece might be a good place to begin. The main title, "A Simple Though Nourishing Meal," is translated from Dutch. Dutch writer and cartoonist Maarten

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Toonder created a series of delightful stories in which all the characters appear as anthropomorphic animals in accompanying cartoon strips, somewhat like the “Pogo” or “Shoe” cartoon strips in English. The chief character in these stories is Heer Ollie Bommel, a rather bumbling country gentleman, portrayed as a bear, who inadvertently gets into all kinds of adventures and manages, usually through no particular talent or skill of his own and often through sheer dumb luck, to overcome the challenge and save the day. One consistent feature of his character is that he is always hungry. The characteristic ending to a ‘Heer Ollie’ story is that with evil vanquished, he invites his best friends to sit around a table groaning with a huge feast saying that what they all need is “Een eenvoudige doch voedzame maaltijd” (A simple though nourishing meal). While hardly in the league with Austen or Pym, Toonder’s deft parody of bureaucratic preposterousness, academic pretense, and the vacuous self-satisfaction of the idle (if frequently likable) rich, resounds with the irony of both novelists. In fact, recollecting the food motif in Toonder in part suggested the present consideration.

The sub-title speaks to food that is familiar to readers of Austen and Pym. Gruel is probably the most frequently mentioned dish in Jane Austen. This is certainly true for *Emma*, in which this watery porridge (most frequently of oats) is a mainstay in the diet of the hypocondriacal valetudenarian Mr. Woodhouse. By the same token, recourse to an egg appears with rather high frequency in Barbara Pym, particularly when “something” must be eaten and neither larder nor imagination extend very far. Both gruel and eggs are discussed below as delineators of character. While Gruel is a central motif for Mr. Woodhouse in Austen, we have not forgotten that he also discourses on boiled eggs.

### Main Course : Food and the Delineation of Character

The example of a single character from each of the writers should be sufficient to illustrate our claim that each of them used food and the

culture of food to delineate character. Following that is an example for each author of how food also provides a framework for contrasting characters and households in the social worlds of their novels.

(1) Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*<sup>(2)</sup>.

It is difficult to imagine how E. M. Forster, as an eminent Janeite could have failed to take into account such a much revered Austen character as Mr. Woodhouse when he made his statement about food in fiction. He even discusses Mr. Woodhouse elsewhere. Mr. Woodhouse is what Forster labels a “flat” character in that he is rather incapable of change. While Mr. Woodhouse has a most kind heart and a genuinely generous disposition, his character is grounded primarily in his preoccupation with his own health (poor) and that of everyone else (threatened) and his assurance that everyone else’s opinions are or should be exactly what his are. The three great obsessions of his life regarding health are (1) to avoid drafts, (2) to spend as little time as possible out of doors in anything approaching insalubrious weather, and (3) to refrain from eating that which is unwholesome—i.e. almost everything.

The opening chapter of *Emma* concerns the loss of Miss Taylor to the Woodhouse family to become established as Mrs. Weston. Virtually our first excursion into the thinking of Mr. Woodhouse is his opinion that wedding cake should have been forgone as unwholesome—followed by his dismay that the offending cake has all been eaten.

Soon after the wedding, we encounter Mr. Woodhouse’s first discourse on avoiding the unwholesome. At an evening party at Hartfield, while Emma as hostess does all she can to urge “the minced chicken and scalloped oysters” on her guests, the narrator gives voice to her father’s dilemma in this situation.

Upon such occasions poor Mr. Woodhouse’s feelings were in sad warfare. He loved to have the cloth laid, because it had been the fashion of his youth, but his conviction of suppers being very unwholesome made him rather sorry

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to see anything put on it ; and while his hospitality would have welcomed his visitors to everything, his care for their health made him grieve that they would eat.

Such another small basin of thin gruel as his own was all that he could with thorough self-approbation, recommend ; (E, I, ii)

Mr. Woodhouse, who is also one of Austen's fabled garrulous speakers assays his first lengthy speech (of more than 100 words) immediately following.

'Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome. Serle understands boiling an egg better than anybody. I would not recommend an egg boiled by anybody else—but you need not be afraid, they are very small, you see—one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a little bit of tart—a very little bit. Ours are all apple-tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to half a glass of wine? A small half-glass, put into a tumbler of water? I do not think it could disagree with you.' (E, I, ii)

Other aspects of Mr. Woodhouses's character, his kind heart and generosity toward old friends who are less well off, are usually expressed in the form of gifts of food. Any mention of these is invariably accompanied by his firmly delivered dictates about the preparation and/or consumption of the generous gifts. He makes this rambling commentary to Mr. Knightley on the intention of presenting a gift of Hartfield pork to Mrs. and Miss Bates.

"Now, we have killed a porker, and Emma thinks of sending them a loin or a leg: it is very small and delicate—Hartfield pork is not like any other pork—but still it is pork—and, my dear Emma, unless one could be sure of their making it into steaks, nicely fried, as ours are fried, without the smallest grease, and not roast it, for no stomach can bear roast pork—I think we had better send the leg—do not you think so, my dear?"

"My dear papa, I sent the whole hind-quarter, I knew you would wish it. There will be the leg to be salted, you know, which is so very nice, and the loin to be dressed directly, in any manner they like."

“That’s right, my dear—very right. I had not thought of it before, but that is the best way. They must not over-salt the leg; and then, if it is not over-salted, and if it is very thoroughly boiled, just as Serle boils ours, and eaten very moderately of, with a boiled turnip, and a little carrot or parsnip, I do not consider it unwholesome.” (E, II, iii).

So much for novels having no concern for digestion! We need no further evidence from Mr. Woodhouse that food is central to his character. That centrality is also reflected in responses to Mr. Woodhouse by other characters. Not least among these is Emma, whose response to her father is suggested above in her behavior as hostess at Hartfield and confirmed in an amusing narration associated with the departure of Emma to dine and spend the evening at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Cole. Emma secured the company of both Mrs. Goddard and Mrs. Bates to dine with her father and sit with him in the evening. Emma dresses while they dine, but stops to pay her respects to the ladies before leaving Hartfield. Her attentions to the ladies show her desire to counteract the presumed dietary restraints placed on them by her father. She does all she can

to make the two ladies all the amends in her power, by helping them to large slices of cake and full glasses of wine, for whatever unwilling self-denial his care of their constitutions might have obliged them to practice during the meal. She had provided a plentiful dinner for them; she wished she could know that they had been allowed to eat it. (E, II, viii).

Other rather ironic comments on this aspect of his character come from one of the greatest recipients of his generosity, Miss Bates. She is so garrulous herself, that it is often easy to miss important nuggets of information and commentary buried within her long speeches. When she importunes Emma and Harriet to come across from Fords to see the new pianoforte that has been anonymously delivered to her niece, she delivers a rambling monologue of more than 1,200 words, which is interrupted after about 40% of its lengthy only by the movement of the party out of Fords towards the Bates’s residence. In the middle of her

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stream of consciousness, is a lengthy discussion of baked apples. As a reflection on the character of Mr. Woodhouse, this tidbit is tucked into the apple talk, "... only we do not have them baked more than twice, and Mr. Woodhouse made us promise to have them done three times ; but Miss Woodhouse will be so good as not to mention it." (E, III, ix) In spite of her tendency not to allow a word in edgewise, this shows that whether or not she really attends to Mr. Woodhouse, she does know what he says. One further example shows that Miss Bates, perhaps unwittingly in her dense verbal flow actually puts into words the slight irritation Mr. Woodhouse's quirkiness about food can create. During the ball at the Crown Inn, Miss Bates slips out to her own home to make sure her mother has returned safely from having spent the evening with Mr. Woodhouse. Upon returning to the Crown, she seeks out Jane Fairfax to give her a report on her grandmother, saying she had had a lovely evening at Hartfield, but

there was a little disappointment. The baked apples and biscuits, excellent in their way, you know ; but there was a delicate fricassee of sweetbread and some asparagus brought in at first and good Mr. Woodhouse, not thinking the asparagus quite boiled enough, sent it all out again. Now there is nothing grandmamma loves better than sweetbread and asparagus—so she was rather disappointed ; but we agreed we would not speak of it to anybody, for fear of its getting round to dear Miss Woodhouse, who would be so very much concerned. (E, III, ii)

Miss Bates is correct here. Had Emma been there, no doubt she would have found some way to distract her father long enough to allow Mrs. Bates to eat a bit of the sweetbread and asparagus.

### (2) Emma Howick—*A Few Green Leaves*

To make a similar point about food and character in Pym, here is a quick look at the main character of *A Few Green Leaves*, not least because she is the namesake of Austen's eponymous heroine. There may be no English novelist more concerned with food throughout her

work than Barbara Pym as we will see here by references to *Some Tame Gazelle*, the first novel she published and *A Few Green Leaves*, which is the last she completed. It was all set for publication when Pym died in January, 1980 and appeared later that year.

Emma has moved into Robin Cottage, a small house owned by her mother in a village in the west of Oxfordshire. Her widowed mother, a college teacher of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature named her hoping she might have some of the qualities of the Austen heroine. However this Emma is something of a disappointment, having unaccountably become an anthropologist and in her 30s remains unmarried. She has come to the cottage to complete an academic project and possibly move on to another. Emma's somewhat ramshackle appearance (and behavior) is alluded to in the second paragraph of the novel where she is described as "rather the type that women's magazines used to make a feature of 'improving'." (FGL, 1)<sup>(3)</sup>

The details of the opening chapter provide three separate insights into the character of Emma, whom we find to be somewhat bemused and indecisive about many things, particularly her future, but in possession of a wry sense of irony often directed at herself. Two of these glimpses of Emma have to do with food. Long time villager, Miss Lee, mentions the many uses of nettles, to which Emma replies, "'Would they be something like spinach when cooked? I must try them some time,' she added doubtfully, wondering how far living in the country need go." (FGL, 3) Emma's principal contact in the village is the widowed local vicar, Tom Dagnall, a long-time friend of her mother, who, as the novel opens, is leading an annual walk through the park and woods of the manor. Tom, a local history buff says of what one of the party calls "an untidy heap of stones,"

'It might be the site of the D. M. V. deserted medieval village' Tom explained. 'It's somewhere here, as far as we know.'

Emma reflected on the cosiness of the term D. M. V., which reminded her of a meat substitute she had once bought at the supermarket when she had

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been trying to economise, T. V. P. was it? She smiled but did not reveal her frivolous thought. (FGL, 5)

Emma's 'frivolous' response to an important local notion (that of the D. M. V.) begins to reveal her less than devoted attitude toward the anthropological field work she has come to the village to complete. Back at the cottage, her lack of willingness to work turns to thoughts of something to eat, "Too soon, for she had done no work, Emma began to think about supper. What did people in the village eat? she wondered." (FGL, 9) A fairly rambling rumination on Sunday evening village eating follows, at the end of which Emma reaches a kind of non-decision.

It would have to be an omelette, the kind of thing that every woman is supposed to be able to turn her hand to, but something was wrong with Emma's omelette this evening—the eggs not enough beaten, the tablespoon of water omitted, something not quite as it should be. But she was hungry and did not care enough to analyse what her mistake could have been. (FGL, 10).

Finally she muses that a person living alone should not be fussy about such things, not like Adam Prince who lives opposite. He is a former Anglican priest turned Roman Catholic, who now writes food criticism for a gourmet magazine. He is often away, traveling around, "eating—tasting, sampling, criticising (especially criticising), weighing in the balance and all too often finding wanting. (FGL, 10). Emma settles down to eat her omelet<sup>(4)</sup> and the scene ends in this rather desultory way.

With her omelette Emma poured out a glass of red wine from a bottle already started, which had been warming by the side of the storage heater all the weekend. She was sure that Adam Prince would not have approved of *that*, but she felt relaxed and at peace as she ate and drank. It was a moment to turn on the television, to watch idly whatever happened to be on. (FGL, 9-10)

What she sees on television sets up one of the most important plot elements for the remainder of the novel, but that is not germane here.

What is relevant is our observation of Emma, thirty something, uninspired by most of what is going on in her life, with all of that primarily refracted through the prism of food. The one neighbor her “not quite right” omelet prompts her to think of is professionally connected with food, and her negative or unconcerned assessments of him are also linked with food as the narrator, speaking from Emma’s point of view, draws on an allusion to Belshazzar’s Feast from Chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel.

Summer in the village brings a visit from Emma’s mother, Beatrix and her old college friend Isobel Mound. Emma feels the need to hold a supper party while they are there. The company includes, Tom Dagnall, his unmarried sister Daphne who has acted as housekeeper for him in his widowhood, and to provide one additional male, the food critic neighbor, Adam Prince. As the supper is to be on a Friday, Emma wonders if Tom requires fish. The other ladies assure her that fish is no longer a requirement and is such a luxury these days that he would certainly not expect it. What about Adam Prince who is a Roman Catholic? Emma thinks he might expect fish as his due, being a food critic. Isobel says she isn’t current with the rules for Catholics, but Beatrix advises that it would be a “graceful compliment” to him to serve fish. The narrator then takes us into Emma’s thoughts.

But what kind of fish? The usual pie made of coley<sup>(5)</sup> would hardly do, though it could no doubt be disguised in a suitable sauce. Mushroom or shrimp. In the end Emma made a tuna fish mousse, and a French onion tart with a salad, to be followed by various cheeses and ice cream from the village shop. After all, it was only supper, and lobsters—which Adam might have expected at some of the places he visited—were not easily obtainable in a West Oxfordshire village. (FGL, 91)

In the event of the supper, her one compliment from Adam Prince, the food critic, is on the thinly sliced cucumbers with which Emma decorates the tuna mousse, saying it is a lost art and that the Victorians had a specific implement for slicing cucumbers very thin. Emma’s response

portrays both her wit and her ennui, “I just used a sharp knife,’ Emma said.” (FGL, 92) The story of Emma’s decision to remain in the village slowly unfolds against a constant background of such culinary detail. At one point near the end, the narrator, again from Emma’s point of view, sums it all up as “decorous eating and drinking. There seemed little prospect of any other form of entertainment.” (FGL, 235) This commentary may make the work seem rather bleak when it really is not. While Emma seems to suffer from ennui and indecision, she is not unlike Pym herself, who knew that she was nearing the final stages of cancer as she finished the book ; it is finally Emma’s wit and basically up-beat nature that win out as she contemplates the possibility of starting a love affair, hopefully not an unhappy one, with Tom. Perhaps this Emma is also more like her famous fictional namesake than she has ever realized. Pym might have described her like Austen described the earlier Emma’s response to Mr. Knightley’s proposal. “What did she *say* ? Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.” (E, III, xiii). Pym, 165 years later, doesn’t need to call upon such Regency propriety. The comment from our late 1970s Emma about slicing cucumbers has, in the final analysis, said it all. “I just used a sharp knife....” Of course, what else would she have done ?

### Food as a Means of Contrasting Characters

(1) Mrs. Norris and Dr. and Mrs. Grant in *Mansfield Park*.

While specific details of what is eaten are scantily presented, it is nevertheless, questions of life-style, particularly as they relate to the appurtenances of dining and the expenditures for the same that distinguish the Grants, who are resident in the parsonage at Mansfield for the great bulk of this novel from their predecessor, Mrs. Norris.

It is certainly nothing new to speak of the meanness of Mrs. Norris (of spirit and purse). Most everyone has her pegged as one of the nastiest of all Jane Austen’s nasty characters. The best thing about Mrs. Norris for most of us Austen devotees is that she is one of the few

nasty characters who get what they deserve in the end. We all certainly think of her as pushy and controlling with regard to the Mansfield Park family, ready to take credit for a great many things for which she deserves none, particularly mean spirited and tormenting where Fanny Price is concerned and less likely to spend money than almost any other character in all of Austen—even on herself. However, for our purposes here, we want to point out that her character is developed and contrasted with others as much in relation to food as in other ways.

The novel points out in more than one place that she dearly loves to dine elegantly at Mansfield Park rather than meagerly at her own expense in her own establishment in the White House in Mansfield village. From the moment the Grants replace her at the Mansfield parsonage, she is ready to find fault.

The Grants shewing a disposition to be friendly and sociable, gave great satisfaction in the main among their new acquaintance. They had their faults, and Mrs. Norris soon found them out. The Dr. was very fond of eating, and would have a good dinner every day, and Mrs. Grant instead of contriving to gratify him at little expense, gave her cook as high wages as they did at Mansfield park, and was scarcely ever seen in her offices. Mrs. Norris could not speak with any temper of such grievances, nor of the quantity of butter and eggs that were regularly consumed in the house. “Nobody loved plenty and hospitality more than herself—nobody more hated pitiful doings—the parsonage she believed had never been wanting in comforts of any sort, had never borne a bad character in her time, but this was a way of going on that she could not understand. A fine lady in a country parsonage was quite out of place. *Her* store-room she thought might have been good enough for Mrs. Grant to go into. Enquire where she would, she could not find out that Mrs. Grant had ever had more than five thousand pounds.” (MP, I, iii)

This sample tells us also that Mrs. Norris has done her utmost to discover what fortune Mrs. Grant brought to her marriage. That she had only 5,000 pounds means that her portion added only 250 pounds to the Grant’s income invested in the five percent government funds. It

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brings to mind also that Mrs. Norris, as Miss Ward, like her sister Lady Bertram would have had a fortune of 7,000 pounds to bring to her marriage. She would still have that plus what Mr. Norris had left her upon his death and also what she had saved over the years of her marriage by her stringent economies. We know that the total of Mrs. Norris's assets must now be at least 12,000 pounds as Lady Bertram has said at one point that Sir Thomas told her Mrs. Norris would have at least 600 a year. Such an income would have permitted a quite genteel independence. Since she does not know that Mrs. Grant has anything like that to work with, she is disgusted at the Grant's style of living and seems to blame it all on Mrs. Grant. We have plenty of evidence in the novel that she is simply complying with Dr. Grant's wishes. In addition, from what we know of Mrs. Grant, she is also in possession of a loving and generous nature.

Since we do not know what Dr. Grant's personal fortune may be, Mrs. Norris is quite out of line. She constantly berates Mrs. Grant for trying to live above her station, when Mrs. Norris's motivation is clearly that of finding fault, and possibly bitterness over the fact that Mrs. Grant has made the parsonage so much more hospitable than it was during her own tenure there.

Mrs. Norris is quite irritated on the occasion when Mrs. Grant has invited Fanny Price to dine at the parsonage. She grudgingly says that she hopes Fanny will enjoy herself, but expresses it in such a way as to make explicit that all will be wasteful and pointless. We take her up in mid-harangue.

But I must observe, that five is the very awkwardest of all possible numbers to sit down to table; and I cannot but be surprised that such an *elegant* Lady as Mrs. Grant should not contrive better! And round their enormous great wide table too, which fills up the room so dreadfully! Had the doctor been contented to take my dining table when I came away, as anybody in their senses would have done, instead of having that absurd new one of his own which is wider, literally wider than the dinner table here—how infinitely better it would have been! and how much more he would have been

respected! for people are never respected when they step out of their proper sphere. Remember that, Fanny. Five, only five to be sitting round that table! However, you will have dinner enough on it for ten I dare say. (MP, II, v)

Austen's rather quirky use of exclamation points here is quite successful in showing the vehemence of Mrs. Norris's distaste. When at the end of the novel, both Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Grant remove from Mansfield, they are dealt with in very different terms by the narrative voice. While there is some elaboration, the response to Mrs. Norris's removal is summed up in one terse sentence. "She was regretted by no one at Mansfield Park." (MP, III, xvii). By contrast when the Grants remove from Mansfield to London, the narrator speaks of it this way.

Mrs. Grant, with a temper to love and be loved, must have gone with some regret, from the scenes and people she had been used to, but the same happiness of disposition must in any place and any society, secure her a great deal to enjoy, and she had again a home to offer Mary; (MP, III, xvii)

This is the most explicit statement in the whole novel of her loving and generous character, even when her position as half-sister to the Crawfords makes it desirable that she remove from Mansfield. For our purposes it is important that hers has been a character that has been contrasted with that of Mrs. Norris through the earlier parts of the novel primarily by the generosity of Mrs. Grants table and the distaste of Mrs. Norris for that very generosity.

## (2) Harriet and Belinda Bede and Agatha Hoccleve in *Some Tame Gazelle*

Much of the entertainment in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym's first published novel is focused on the contrast between the households of the unmarried sisters Harriet and Belinda Bede, on the one hand and that of their vicar, Archdeacon Hoccleve and his wife Agatha. Throughout the novel, the spinster sisters display small-scale domestic concerns, which might strike most of us as just that, small. However, these concerns render the sisters, on the whole, quite happy and extremely

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successful at life. The somewhat vague yet rather arrogant Archdeacon and his rather desiccated wife provide the contrast. The principal contrasts are those of generosity of spirit and the welcoming nature of their respective homes. Nowhere are these contrasts more evident than in the care and quality associated with their tables.

The novel, in fact begins in a style that is readily identifiable to Pym readers. These two “excellent women”<sup>(6)</sup> of the local Anglican parish are entertaining the new curate, Mr. Donne, at supper. Pym novels abound in curates who need to be fed and found wives. The occasion shows us the sisters’ slightly bemused but none the less genuine generosity toward those who are important in their small circle.

In the dining room Harriet sat at one end of the table and Belinda at the other, with the curate in the middle. Harriet carved the boiled chicken smothered in white sauce very capably. She gave the curate all the best white meat

Were all new curates everywhere always given boiled chicken when they came to supper for the first time? Belinda wondered. It was certainly an established ritual at their house and it seemed somehow right for a new curate. The coldness, the whiteness, the muffling with sauce, perhaps even the sharpness added by the slices of lemon, there was something appropriate here, even if Belinda could not see exactly what it was. (STG, 13)

One of the most amusing contrasts with the table at the Hoccleves is made when the sisters are among the party dining at the rectory during the visit of Bishop Grote from his missionary diocese in Africa. The Bishop has said that the flavor of the soup rather reminded him of the native fermented porridge of the Mbawawa people which his mission serves. Just as the main course arrives, the Bishop has been relating that while his was the first Anglican mission to be established among the Mbawawa, that the Roman Catholics were there first.

‘What a shame,’ said Harriet indignantly, but Belinda felt that her wrath was directed not so much towards the Church of Rome as the rather dry-looking rissoles, cabbage and boiled potatoes which were now set before

them. *Rissoles*! Belinda could imagine her sister's disgusted comments later. At least one would have expected a bird of some kind, especially when there was a bishop present, when indeed all the gentlemen were in Holy Orders. (STG, 205)

The dryness of the dishes is parallel to the character of Agatha. The slight air of resentment which the Bede sisters clearly hold for Agatha (Mrs. Hoccleve) is partly explained by the fact that Belinda and the Archdeacon had been in love when he was but a lowly curate. He, however, had married Agatha instead, partly for the politic reason that she was the daughter of a Bishop. Unfortunately for him, he had risen to the position of Archdeacon, but no further.

Nowhere in *Some Tame Gazelle* are the strands of food, competition with the vicarage, and humor woven together more deftly than in the incident of the cauliflower cheese. On the day in question, Miss Prior, the seamstress, has come in to do some alterations on dresses for the sisters and to work on chair covers for the sitting room. In consequence of the work, the sewing machine has been set up in the sitting room and Miss Prior is to take her lunch there. Miss Prior, it seems, would rather not join them at the table as she does not like to be observed eating. Even though Miss Prior has been given a cup of tea before she started her work, Belinda is somewhat anxious over only having cauliflower cheese for lunch. She arranges the tray herself which the maid Emily is to take into Miss Prior and consciously serves herself a smaller portion than she sends to Miss Prior. She thinks that she has told Emily to wash the cauliflower very well and add plenty of cheese. She also consoles herself with the knowledge that Miss Prior will certainly like the damson flan that they are having as a sweet. Still concerned after finishing her own lunch, Belinda goes to check on Miss Prior and to offer her some coffee. She is at first horrified to see that the cauliflower cheese has been pushed to one side and barely touched. She is almost relieved when she realizes that there is a rather long dead caterpillar on the plate. A torrent of apology flows out with the offer

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of a poached egg or two poached eggs. Miss Prior declines as it would seem like having things the wrong way round having eaten the flan already. Belinda insists that she must have an egg with her tea. Miss Prior thanks her, particularly as she is to spend the next day at the vicarage. If the implication of that isn't clear enough already, this exchange follows.

'I'm sure you wouldn't get a caterpillar in your cauliflower cheese there,' said Belinda lightly.

Miss Prior made a noise like a snort. 'It might be about all I *would* get,' she said. '*Very* poor meals there.' She lowered her voice, 'Between ourselves, Miss Bede, Mrs. Hoccleve doesn't keep a good table. At least *I* never see any proof of it. An old dried-up scrap of cheese or a bit of cottage pie, *no* sweet sometimes. I've heard the maids say so, too, you know how these things get about. Scarcely any meat except at the week-end, the Sunday roast, you know. You always have such nice meals, Miss Bede, and you give me just the same as you have yourselves, I know that. After all, it might just as easily have been you or Miss Harriet that got the unwelcome visitor today,' she concluded with a little giggle.

Belinda's eyes filled with tears and she experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day. Her heart like a singing bird, and all because Agatha didn't keep as good a table as she did and Miss Prior had forgiven her for the caterpillar, and the afternoon sun streaming in through the window over all. (STG, 51-52)

Afterwards, Belinda tells Harriet how important it is to show a bit of consideration to Miss Prior as the "poor soul" is sometimes made to feel inferior. Belinda concludes with this. "Next time she comes we'll have something really nice for lunch, perhaps even a chicken,' she mused." (STG, 52)

In spite of the slight undercurrent of resentment, there remains genuine affection on the part of both sisters for both the Archdeacon and indeed even for his wife. If this more negative undercurrent is what comes to the surface a bit more frequently in the novel, surely Pym can be forgiven for understanding that such points of dissonance are a great

deal funnier than points of harmony.

We would argue that the management of this apparent contradiction is one of the great strengths of Pym's writing, which throughout her work allows many of her characters to carry around conflicting emotions and conflicting motivations. In other words, her characters, despite the petit bourgeois concerns of many (or most) of them, are fully human. For our purposes, the point here is that the superiority of the Bede sisters' table is one of the primary ways we see these contending forces in them and in ourselves. Their hospitality and concern for generosity at table is one of their chief accomplishments. They know they do it well. Who of us doesn't need activities that we know we do well? If such self-awareness gives them (or us) a slight feeling of superiority, is that so damaging? At the same time, whether they completely understand it or not, the motivation of the Bede sisters comes from very genuine traits of kindness and generosity deep within their respective characters.

### Savory : A Few Final Comments

Given the two writers who were the focus of this discussion, the topic of food could have been elaborated at much greater length. Beyond the character of Mr. Woodhouse, food behavior may not be quite so pervasive a test of character in Austen as it is in Pym. However, there are glimpses of the importance of this detail of everyday life here and there throughout her work. Sometimes these are fleeting. For example, Austen tells us all we need to know about Sir Walter Elliot in the opening paragraphs of *Persuasion*. "Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character ; vanity of person and of situation." (P, I, i.) However, perhaps no detail in the whole of the novel displays this more completely than this brief sentence which sums up Sir Walter's response to having his daughter Anne arrive to stay in Bath after not seeing her for more than three months. "Her making a fourth, when they sat down to dinner, was noticed as an

advantage.” (P, II, iii).

In the case of Pym, short of filling dozens of additional pages with examples, we simply invite readers to explore her works for themselves. We invite readers to savor the delights of a literary pantry of delicious details ranging from Ianthe’s oxtail soup in *An Unsuitable Attachment* to Catherine’s using a bay leaf picked on the grounds of Thomas Hardy’s home for her Coq au Vin in *Less than Angels*.

While E. M. Forster’s comments in 1927 may have been a rather ‘soft target’ with which to begin our discussion, we continue to think it important to affirm our initial claim that the details of food and attitudes toward that basic human pursuit are particularly fruitful when investigating the novel of manners.

We started with the topic as a delineation of character in these two writers since concern for character is perhaps the most salient distinguishing feature of the genre. However, there are more culturally substantial reasons as well. Such novels may be seen as portraits within the frame of a particular time and place and within a fairly limited social milieu without being overly concerned with the broad sweep of history, issues of war and peace, public policy or profound changes within the existing social reality of the time when the work is produced. However, these topics are reflected in the genre in ways that may be quite honest and therefore quite conducive to our further understanding of a period, precisely because these topics do not define the main purpose of the work. Our investigation of food and character has also led to thoughts about how this same area of discussion, viz., details about food and attitudes toward it, reflects the broader social reality and can even provide evidence to confirm or deny what we think we know about a particular period of the past. For example, both Austen and Pym lived and worked in periods of food shortages due to population growth and war. In early Pym, the importance of eggs in part reflects the continuing scarcity of meat in a post WWII Britain where war-time rationing did not finally end until 1954. (O, 263) In Austen, the gift of a hind quarter of pork from Hartfield to the Bates

household reflects war time scarcities. Such gifts of food were a critical factor in the rural economy of an England in which the percentage of household expenditure on meat dropped from 26.2% in 1793 to 6% in 1812 at the height of the Napoleonic wars. (R, 105). In our next discussion, we hope to turn our efforts to exactly that relationship between details of food and the surrounding social reality of the novels of these two writers.

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### Condiments : Notes

- (1) Russell Clark is Director of the English Language Academy at DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA
- (2) All references to passages from Austen novels are cited with Volume Number followed by Chapter number rather than page references, as not all readers may have access to the “official” Chapman editions.
- (3) Citations from Pym are given as page numbers from the edition listed in “Works Cited.”
- (4) We use American spelling throughout our text. However, original British spelling is preserved within material quoted from either Austen or Pym. This may lead to apparent inconsistencies.
- (5) Rock fish or rock salmon.
- (6) The phrase in fact becomes the title of the second Pym novel to be published, *Excellent Women*, 1952.

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