

Catherine Heath — another novelist from St Hilda's

Hazel K. Bell

Barbara Pym is not the only satirical and literary novelist to have emerged from St Hilda's College. Catherine Heath, born Catherine Hirsch in Hendon in 1924, followed Pym there to read English likewise

The child of Dutch *emigré* Lutheran-Jewish parents, Catherine Heath was brought up according to their strictly religious principles, and grew passionately attached to the Christian Liberal values in which she believed. She read English Language and Literature at St Hilda's College, Oxford, 1943-6, with Helen Gardner and Dorothy Whitelock for her tutors. In 1948 she married Denis Heath, who had read Chemistry at Brasenose, and they adopted a son and a daughter. She was Assistant lecturer in English at the University of Wales from 1948 to 1950: twenty-two years old, teaching returned ex-servicemen. She then became Lecturer at Carshalton College of Further Education in Surrey, 1964-70; Senior Lecturer there, 1970-87. She and Denis were divorced in 1980. She died of cancer in Sutton in 1991.

Heath wrote five novels: *Stone Walls* (1973); *The Vulture* (1974); *Joseph and the Goths* (1975); *Lady on the Burning Deck* (1978); and *Behaving Badly* (1984), as well as unpublished stories and an autobiography. *Behaving Badly* is about a deserted wife who decides to return to her former home, now occupied by her ex-husband and his replacement, young, pregnant wife, to rejoin the household. It was made into a very funny television series starring Judi Dench – why it has not been repeated is a mystery.

Like Pym, Heath could be taken as a social historian as well as writer of thoroughly enjoyable, witty reading. She is concerned with the changing values of the society in which she was brought up, and those of the 1960s and 70s. In England these 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. '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.' Her satirical targets include 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?').

Gerard van Werson, Heath's friend and obituarist, described her fiction as 'charged with a dislike of pretension and hypocrisy', 'regulated hatred'. 'It portrays with sly, merciless affection the English middle class during the unsettled decades from the mid-Sixties to the mid-Eighties'.

My favourite, Frances in *Lady on the Burning Deck*, attempts,

with her two close friends, 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 à 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 would be 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".' Heath's work introduces a note of ethical philosophy into satirical fiction.

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 gives us a truly Pym-like image, apparently trivial, in fact charged with significance, illustrative of this failure to adapt when Frances tells us: 'A woman in one of the council flats flutters a yellow duster from her window, and I feel for her as if she were a sister, for I have often thought I must own the last yellow duster in England.'

Barbara Pym (in)famously suffered a period of her work's being out of print and neglected; then it came to enjoy cult status, academic recognition and multi-paperback publication. I do hope the same, most well merited, fate will befall the wonderful work of Catherine Heath.

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