

Well worth reviving: Catherine Heath

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The novels of Catherine Heath seem to have fallen into a most ill merited abeyance, despite the success on television years ago of a serialisation of her *Behaving badly*. In this, Judi Dench played 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 very funny.

Catherine Heath was born Catherine Hirsch in Hendon in 1924. The child of Dutch *émigré* Lutheran-Jewish parents, she 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 as 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(1974); *Joseph and the Goths* (1975); *Lady on the burning deck* (1978); and *Behaving Badly* (1984), as well as unpublished stories and an autobiography.

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.

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). 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 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 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's work could be taken as social history as well as marvellously 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.

Her novels illustrate the dilemma outlined by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, in his 1900 essay, *Laughter*.¹ 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 pliability 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.

Heath gives us a tiny image 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.'

Heath died of cancer in 1991. Appreciative obituary notices appeared in *The Independent* (29 Oct. 1991), the *Daily Telegraph* (11 Nov. 1991), and *The Times* (3 Dec. 1991). She was accorded a nine-page assessment by Gerard Werson in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.² *Vol. 14: British Novelists since 1960* (Gale 1983, pp 381-9).

Heath's near-contemporary student at St Hilda's College, 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 multipaperback publication. I do hope the same, most well merited, fate will befall the wonderful work of Catherine Heath.

References

1. Bergson, Henri. "Laughter" in *Comedy* (Doubleday 1956)
2. *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 14: British Novelists since 1960* (Gale 1983, pp 381-9).