

'A Difficult Letter': Impolite Post in Barbara Pym's *The Sweet Dove Died*

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Oh how absurd and delicious it is to be in love with somebody younger than yourself!
Everybody should try it – no life can be complete without it. – Barbara Pym, diary entry
March 1940 (AVPE)

I first discovered the novels of Barbara Pym as a teenager. Reading them at that time was something of a guilty secret. If Pym had languished out of fashion for a period – and was still considered by some to be a little out of step with the late 1970s and early 1980s - then my reading of her novels, as a young woman, made me perhaps also a little unfashionable too, and I think I was aware of this. Of course, I did not realise at the time that the novels available in my local book store were there after a long and distressing publication impasse – marking their appearance on sale a renaissance, as it were, of Pym's work. I bought and enjoyed the late novels *The Sweet Dove Died* and *An Unsuitable Attachment* and I borrowed others from my local library. When many years later a chance conversation with colleague, Nick Turner, revealed that he was planning an academic conference for Pym's Centenary in 2013, I was delighted to talk about a writer who I still largely enjoyed in splendid isolation - I still knew no one who read Pym. Following my conversation with Nick I went to my book shelves to find that the slim books with covers that I remembered so very well were missing. This felt like a serious loss – I think we locate ourselves in time with familiar book covers: they remind of our past reading selves. Realising with some dismay that I had most probably misplaced them in a recent house move, I replaced them with used copies and was careful to replicate the original familiar covers that nostalgically fit my early memories of reading Pym.

Little did I know all that time ago as a teenager fan of Pym that I would one day in the very distant future be visiting Boston to talk about her work. At the time I bought her novels I was working in very dull lawyer's office - a very Pym-like world of fusty documents, clacking typewriters, and middle-aged women (each with their own quiet life story to tell during tea breaks – tea made by me as office junior). This was a world of mostly stifling boredom – a world of 'endless afternoons' similar to those that Hazel Holt says she shared with Pym at the International African Institute. I never dreamed whilst typing letters, delivering letters ... and making tea in that stuffy office long ago that one day I'd be privileged to make my living writing and talking about books – still less that I would have the opportunity to talk about mid-twentieth-century women writers like Barbara Pym who have to some extent been marginalised by the literary academy.

I'm going to begin my talk today by acknowledging Pym as a prolific private letter writer. I will then consider the role of letters in a selection of her novels before concentrating on *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Leonora Eyre* as a woman out of time. I will consider Leonora's self-conscious politeness and lady-like manners and the ways in which duality in her personality is exposed by epistolary scheming. This paper will argue that epistolary dynamics reveal a level of impoliteness that is at odds with carefully constructed masks of social decorum. I want to suggest that letters in *Sweet Dove Died* are exercises in power that expose moral and social hypocrisy as Leonora's fatal flaw.

Pym as correspondent

In *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*, Dale Salwak gives extensive details of Pym as a correspondent.¹ As a keen letter writer and diarist Pym reflects the writing culture of the world she lived in. In 1950s Britain the telephone was only just beginning to impact upon daily communication and letters continued to be a

¹ Dale Salwak, *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987)

prominent feature of everyday lives. David Barton and Nigel Hall in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* point out that:

...letter writing is one of the most pervasive literate activities in human societies, [...] letter writing crosses informal and formal contexts, and a wide variety of forms of letter can be found in most domains of life.²

There are many references in Pym's diary to being busy with letters, catching up with letter writing, delight at arrival of the post, and frustration at delayed missives. Letters can be a chore or a treasure and, on some occasions, a source of heartache.

Pym regularly corresponded with a wide range of friends, acquaintances, and also a selection of ex-boyfriends or her 'chaps', as Robert Liddell says she termed them. She exchanged letters with novelist Elizabeth Taylor and perhaps most famously with Philip Larkin from 1962 until her death. Larkin talks of 'the innocent irony that characterised all her letters' to him, and he kept them, as he did all his letters, categorised with colour-coded ribbon.³ The longest and most complete correspondence is between Pym and Robert Smith spanning a period between 1952 and her death in 1980. She also wrote to Rupert Gleadow during her first year at Oxford, and Yvonne Cocking, archivist of the Barbara Pym Society, has detailed their relationship. An examination of Gleadow's letters proves fascinating, with all the intriguing ellipses raised when we only have access to one-side of a correspondence; this situation is also the case for Pym's correspondence with Elizabeth Taylor and her friend, the writer and critic, Robert Liddell.

There are occasions when Pym's letters flag up incidents that she considers potentially useful for her novels. In a letter to Richard Roberts (30 June 1964), she remarks 'how full of fictional situations life is'. One such situation is when Henry Harvey (generally agreed to be the love of Pym's life) found an old letter from her in a drawer and he replied to it; Pym wrote back:

To Henry Harvey in Oxford
47 Nassau Road
27 March 1952
Dear Henry

Many thanks for your letter. There is something irresistible about your finding an old letter of mine in a drawer and answering it! You mustn't mind if I use the incident in a story one day....
With Best Wishes
Yours - Barbara

Perhaps the best illustration of 'life being full of fictional situations' is noted by Pym in a letter to Bob Smith 8 February 1963:

40 Brooksville Avenue
8 February 1963
Dearest Bob

Such an ironical thing happened – I had started a letter to you last weekend on my typewriter, telling you that on Friday last, 1st Feb., we had a burglary and leaving the letter in the typewriter to finish later. But on Monday, 4th Feb., the thief or thieves broke in again, this time taking the typewriter with the letter in it! So I suppose you will never get that letter'. [...]

Love
Barbara

² David Barton and Nigel Hall (eds.), *Letter Writing as Social Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), p. 1.

³ Philip Larkin, 'Introduction to An Unsuitable Attachment' (London: Pan, 1982), p. 5.

With typical modesty, Pym claimed to reserve her wit for fiction rather than letters. To Elsie Harvey (wife of Henry) she wrote, ‘This doesn’t seem to be a very amusing letter (all the amusing things I think of have to be saved for the novel, so my letters are all very dull!)’. This is not, of course, the case, and her letters offer endlessly fascinating glimpses to her life, work, and relationships.

Of course, prolific letter writers are always useful for biographers. Hermione Lee suggests that:

Letters are dangerous, seductive, and invaluable for biographers. The familiar gestures of traditional letter writing – ‘all my love’, or ‘thinking of you’ – tell us that it is a mistake to think of a letter as a solitary independent, free-standing document. It must be seen as part of a relationship that moves through time. And the evidence provided by letters can never quite be trusted.⁴

Whilst acknowledging the ambiguities of personal letters and their inherent unreliability, it is still interesting to consider Pym’s letters to Richard Roberts in relation to *The Sweet Dove Died*, as he is said to be the inspiration for the character James Boyce. One such situation involving ‘Skipper’ is a letter from Pym requesting that he return a letter she wrote to him:

40 Brooksville Avenue

18 August 1964

(Night)

My dearest Skipper,

Thank you for sending back the letter. It was perhaps silly and capricious of me to ask for it, but I was punished by the disappointment of finding that an envelope addressed in your hand contained only my own letter back again. So that will teach me.[...]

But love anyway.

Barbara

Here we may perceive the weight of anticipation for a longed-for missive; the joy at recognising well-loved handwriting and the symbolic weight of seeing one’s name written by one’s heart’s desire. As Johanna Drucker observes, “‘personal writing’ is always an inscription of the individual within the symbolic’.⁵ A point emphasised by David Henkin, who suggests that in complex ways emotional connections are emphasised with handwriting: both are ‘pulling a metonymic string that link[s] chirography to hand to bodily presence’.⁶ It is cruel irony on this occasion that Skipper’s handwriting signals delicious expectation that is sadly disappointed. A similar investment of letters and handwriting with romantic longing is well illustrated in *A Glass of Blessings* when Wilmet Forsyth entertains romantic fantasies about Piers Longridge with ‘his fair good looks’:

When I came downstairs I saw that there was a letter on the hall table. It looked almost beautiful – a blue rectangle against the polished mahogany, like some long expected letter for which one had hardly dared to hope. It was addressed to me – Wilmet Forsyth, without any Mrs – in a small neat hand, the kind of writing a clergyman might have. When I opened it, I saw at once that it was from Piers.

This event encapsulates all the inappropriately girlish longings of a married woman with time on her hands occupying herself by fantasising about an unsuitable man. Notably the ‘Mrs’ is missing from the envelope, and also arguably from the front of Wilmet’s mind at this heady time. Like James Boyce in *The*

⁴ Hermione Lee, ‘Dangerous Letters: A Biographer’s Perspective’, in *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. by Jonathan Ellis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2015), n. p.

⁵ Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 2005), p. 62.

⁶ David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 65.

Sweet Dove Died, Piers is also fundamentally unsuited to be the romantic interest of an adoring female. Wilmet may deem Piers ‘frustrated and unloved’, but she later discovers that his affections lie with Keith, a man whose good looks allow him to model for knitting patterns, and more importantly promote him as ‘an object of devotion’ for Piers.

Unlike the chatty, amusing, and playful letters that Pym wrote in life, letters in her novels have a quite different function, as demonstrated with Wilmet and Piers. Within fiction, the writing and reading of letters tends to illuminate the fault lines in mismatched relationships. There are regular comparisons made between Pym and Jane Austen and it is observed that ‘key moments in Austen’s mature fiction involve the reading and interpretation of letters’.⁷ So too in Pym’s work, where letters are woven into the fabric of fiction to organise key illuminating moments. Letters may be written spontaneously, as in *A Few Green Leaves* when a failed relationship between Graham Pettifer and Emma Howick is weakly rekindled following a chance sighting of Graham’s appearance in a television programme. Emma’s decision to write him an ‘impulsive letter’ ultimately plays out as an anti-climax for both Emma and Graham; he notes it was ‘not the kind of amusing romantic encounter he had imagined – certainly not romantic, hardly even amusing’.

There is a skill to writing amusing letters, a skill very evident in Pym’s own correspondence, but in fiction letter writing may highlight essential incompatibilities between potential lovers. So, in *Excellent Women*, Mildred Lathbury is put in a difficult position when asked to write to Rocky Napier for whom she harbours an unwise affection. I suggested in an essay on postcards in Pym’s work that fundamental romantic incompatibility between Mildred and Rocky is symbolized by her inability to write him even a simple postcard. Letter writing is even more distorted. Mildred is asked by Rocky’s estranged wife, Helena to write a letter to him. Here, as in *The Sweet Dove Died*, we have another battle over custody of furniture. Mildred broods over composition of what proves to be another ‘difficult letter’ realising that ‘a list of furniture is not a good beginning to a letter’.

After several starts, I managed to produce some kind of a letter, beginning ‘Dear Rocky,’ stating the facts and giving the list of furniture and ending ‘I hope you are settling down well, Yours ever, Mildred.’ The ending had cost me more anxious thought than was justified by the result, but I believed that ‘yours ever’ was the correct way to finish a friendly letter to a person for whom one was supposed to have no particular feelings. I dare say there would have been no harm in sending my love, but I could not bring myself to do this.

The use of the word ‘supposed’ here indicates a small deception on Mildred’s part; she takes cover behind surface convention and polite social language as a means of detaching herself from feelings that must be disguised. This is a quite different type of politeness than that of Leonora Eyre, as we will see shortly. Later, Mildred decides to write another letter to Rocky – this time one of mediation that is first interrupted in composition, and then remains unanswered. However, her epistolary intervention is successful and Rocky returns to Helena acknowledging Mildred’s role as mediator ‘I know how you love contriving things’.

In *Jane and Prudence* it is more epistolary skill – or the lack of it – that indicates a central unsuitability between Prudence Bates and Fabian Driver. From his perspective:

...he had never been much of a letter-writer, and then her letters were of such a high literary standard so much embellished with suitable quotations that he found it quite impossible to equal them. He felt that this was wrong; the man should be the better letter-writer, not the woman.

This position is reiterated by Prudence:

7 Thomas O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 180.

His last letter, indeed, had been unsatisfactory, perfunctory almost – it was difficult to describe exactly what was wrong. It had begun affectionately enough, but after that it had meandered on about nothing very much, the weather, even, and then come to an abrupt end, with half a sheet left blank. But then Fabian was not at his best as a letter writer. Prudence had been uncomfortably conscious for some time that her letters were much better written and fuller of apt quotations than his were.

Fabian's judgment of Prudence's expectations of him – 'Prudence would have wanted so much' are based on her 'letters, wonderful letters in a way, but so difficult to answer'. Prudence demonstrates the same sort of cultural capital that Pym's letters display – elegant epistolary weaves densely threaded with allusions and quotations that demonstrate a quicksilver literary imagination.

There is a similar situation in *Less Than Angels* and the tangled relations between Tom Mallow, Catherine Oliphant and Deidre Swan. Restless in suburbia, teenage Deidre longs for the kind of urban Bohemian living enjoyed by Catherine, as an independent woman who lives in her own flat and writes for women's magazines. A love affair with Tom seems to offer an opportunity to participate in the adult world that Deidre is impatient to join. Like all good love affairs, letters are involved, and yet Tom and Deidre never quite meet on the page. In his absence, she may pour over her mail - going through the motions of epistolary romance – kissing her air mail reply before sealing it, but her lack of knowledge of literature – she is said to be 'not much of a reader at the best of times' – is a handicap that highlights Catherine's more mature and confident use of literary quotation and writerly skill.

The failure of Tom and Deidre's relationship to work as epistolary romance exposes the essential shallow and insubstantial nature of the liaison, as Deidre realises 'the difficulties of correspondence with a person for whom one feels infatuation rather than love or friendship'. Tom is a bad fit for the type of person she feels her letters could be addressed. And for him, another of Pym's prevaricating, weak male lovers, Tom is careless in his epistolary relations. After he has finally left Catherine's flat, she discovers a crumpled letter in the wastebasket with 'large and rather childish handwriting':

'My own darling,' she read, 'this is going to be a silly sort of letter when I only said good-bye to you ten minutes ago, but whenever I'm not with you I feel like Scheherazade, if that makes sense, and so that's why I'm writing now.'

Poor Tom, Catherine thought, it had evidently *not* made sense to him, until he had asked who Scheherazade was.

Catherine said to be 'naturally of a sanguine disposition' is dispassionate about this discovery – a little confused as to why the letter was in the bin as she believes Tom's sentimentality is at odds with him discarding a love letter.

The letter ultimately proves inconsequential to all, however. It is indicative of a relationship that was never more than casual between Catherine and Tom who, after all, had ended up in her spare room by chance rather than design. Similarly, the relationship between Tom and Deidre is tenuous rather than tender and she, just like Scheherazade, fails to hold Tom's interest. Her infatuation with him wanes when he is out of sight because 'at nineteen, one's hopes do not remain blighted for long'. And so, a letter – instrument of betrayal and high drama in many a classic romance is ignominiously put back where it belongs – in the wastepaper basket. Catherine recovers from discovery of Tom's betrayal by viewing the letter as leftover from a previous time: 'it was not the kind of relic she would have cared to keep for herself, so she put it back into the wastepaper basket and then went to get ready for her luncheon'. Her casual response to the letter affirms that she will not be broken-hearted about the conclusion of her lukewarm love affair with the hapless Tom. Alaric Lydgate, with his eccentricities and 'rocky Easter Island features' shifts into view as a potential replacement love object.

As a postscript to this novel, an unfinished letter is discovered following Tom's accidental death – 'out in the field'. The reader must speculate to whom it is addressed for a couple of pages before finding out

that it was intended for Elaine, his childhood sweetheart – ‘a nice chatty letter’. For Tom, the pull of home and family in the shape of Elaine proved consoling in the face of unwelcome turbulence in his private life. Unhappy with ‘the cloying sweetness of love’ offered by the youthful devotion of Deidre and unsettled by Catherine’s ‘wild and frivolous’ flights of literary fancy’ that always perplexed (and sometimes irritated) him, he turned to gentle and undemanding Elaine (said to be also ‘not much of a reader’). Tom was belatedly beginning to recognise Elaine’s virtues as ‘the perfect dancing partner and companion’. Readers are encouraged to realise that there was always a much more suitable and potentially excellent woman waiting quietly in the wings.

The Sweet Dove Died

More skewed romantic triangles drive the plot of *The Sweet Dove Died*. Pym explained in a letter to Philip Larkin on 7 December 1967 that in revising her troubled novel she ‘tended to leave out boring cosiness and concentrate on the darker side’. This late novel certainly features possibly Pym’s most unsympathetic female protagonist. Unmarried, like many of Pym’s characters, the term spinster is somehow an uneasy fit for Leonora Eyre. A woman of leisure unsuited to good works with no need to work for a living - she tried this and found it dull and unrewarding – she is no ‘excellent woman’ in the Mildred Lathbury mould. Leonora is more like one of Nancy Mitford’s decorative heroines elegantly stepping out of taxis in ‘her dark fur jacket, a square of apricot chiffon draped over her head’. Striving for faultlessness in appearance and manner, ‘Leonora liked things to be flawless, expected them to be’, as befits the well-groomed and impeccably well-mannered lady she believes herself to be. Her infatuation with the much younger man, James Boyce, compels elimination of obstacles and unruly elements that stand between her full enjoyment of her ‘sweet dove’: aging lodgers, youthful girlfriends and wily boyfriends all prove rivals to be ‘vanquished’ in Leonora’s quest to contain James at her side.

Wedded to outdated ideals of femininity, Leonora is decorative and essentially passionless in her devotion to surface aesthetics, particularly Victoriana. Leonora embodies the Victorian obsession with things, the often-eccentric impulse to collect, display, and categorise curiosities. In similar curious manner, Leonora’s projection of ladylike virtues resurrects ideas of that hackneyed nineteenth century female ideal – the ‘angel in the house’ outlined by Coventry Patmore (cited by Pym in both her letters and fiction) in a famous Victorian (1854) poem named for the ideal:

In mind and manners how discreet!
How artless in her very art;
How candid in discourse; how sweet
The concord of her lips and heart
[...]
How amiable and innocent
Her pleasure in her power to charm⁸

Leonora fastidiously fosters the manners and etiquette of such a nineteenth-century heroine; the Victorian ideal of femininity is something she considers regrettably lost: “‘Oh to have lived in those days”, she lamented’. She is repeatedly compared to the ‘desirable Victoriana’ that she collects and tends: ‘she had always cared as much for inanimate objects as for people and now spent hours looking after her possessions’. Virginia Woolf observed that ‘For there we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience’.⁹ (Street Haunting). Leonora particularly prizes an object held temporarily in her custody – James’s fruitwood mirror with the cupids, said to be ‘very much Leonora’s style. The glass had some slight flaw in it, and if she placed it in a certain light she saw looking back at her the face of a woman from another century, fascinating and ageless’.

⁸ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm> > [accessed 13 March 2018]

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting and Other Essays*, ed. by Stuart N. Clarke (London: Vintage, 2014), n.p.

However, if we look at an alternative reflection of Leonora and see the two faces that appear in her letters, we see the modern reality of a woman aware of the ‘sad decay of one’s beauty’ and scheming to ensure attention from the youthful object of her affections. Here is a heroine removed from Patmore’s ideal – certainly less than ‘discreet’ and far from ‘amiable and innocent’.

Henri Bergson suggested in an essay entitled ‘Politeness’ that ‘at the bottom of true politeness, you will discover a feeling which is the love of equality’.¹⁰ In true narcissistic fashion Leonora views those around her as useful only as far as they enhance her view of herself – she has no interest in equality at all – it is an alien concept to her: competition is her mantra. Her female friends are largely kept at arms’ length: ‘Leonora had little use for the “cosiness” of women friends, but regarded them rather as a foil for herself particularly if, as usually happened, they were less attractive and elegant than she was’. She takes rather spiteful pleasure in pitying their untidy lives particularly their disruptive relationships with men – Liz with the unhappy marriage and Meg – uncomfortably close to home – with her slavish devotion to Colin, the homosexual child substitute she dotes on and writes unanswered letters to. Leonora is confident of her superiority in this respect – until, of course, she falls foul of the same one-sided devotion.

Similarly, her relations with male friends – we cannot call them potential lovers – because Leonora has no interest in physical developments of this kind – are all designed to reflect a performance of anachronistic femininity back to her narcissistic self. She enjoys the vision of herself as fragile and feminine’ – ‘an exquisite creature’ – as reflected in Humphrey Boyce’s eyes. Humphrey, with his pomposity, receding hairline, and old-fashioned views supports an out-dated ideal of feminine frailty; he believes ‘she isn’t very strong’ and he deems the saleroom where they met to be ‘no place for a woman’. And yet, Humphrey nonetheless represents a hovering threat of unwanted intimacy as his reward for all the dinners and outings. This is at one point dangerously realised, as he makes a heavy-handed attempt at seduction leaving Leonora with ruffled feathers and stretched chiffon stitches.

Leonora prefers the company of Humphrey’s nephew, young, callow, and unsure of his sexuality. With some similarities to Leonora, James’s value lies in his ‘good looks and pleasing manners’; certainly, for his uncle who views him as ‘window dressing’ to attract customers to his antique shop. Leonora collects James as another of her perfect things; she catches him hovering on the fringes of experience – timid and unsure – a little intimidated by modern young girls and preferring the undemanding company of an older woman. The relationship fulfils mutual needs: Leonora seeks attention and adulation and appreciation of the aesthetic performance of her life, and James enjoys the undemanding attention of Leonora with ‘her dark beauty’ and the civilized niceties of her home. Yet the striking image of Leonora coming to meet James wearing a raincoat ‘like the iridescent wing of some beautiful beetle’ foreshadows a darker need to possess. It brings to mind another type of insect with similar iridescence of wing – the Praying Mantis, with unfortunate man-eating tendencies. Leonora becomes disturbingly predator-like in her bid to keep James at her side, and she turns to letter writing to set her trap.

As a letter writer Leonora reveals a ruthless side to her personality. She rationalises dishonesty and selfishness and letters reveal her hypocrisy. Mary Poovey talks about the ‘moral anarchy’ of epistolary form and letter manoeuvres obliquely reveal immoral facets of Leonora’s character.¹¹ This is best illustrated with her dealings with her sitting tenant, Miss Foxe, who occupies the top floor of Leonora’s house. Miss Foxe is a constant and unwelcome presence for Leonora. An aging gentlewoman ‘white-haired, fragile-looking’, her frailties and also paradoxically her independence are an affront to Leonora on several levels. She foreshadows a future of old age held in dread by Leonora and she disrupts the aesthetic harmony of a ‘perfect house’, with its ‘discreetly glistening cream or white façade and ‘gracious and elegant life’ conducted within. Privately she considers ‘One just did not want people like Miss Foxe impinging on one’s life’, and

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, ‘Politeness’ trans. by Leonard Lawlor, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 24 (2016) 3-9 (p. 4)

¹¹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 187.

rather inadvisably she lets her own polite glistening façade slip in front of James who is shocked to hear her vehemently declare an intent to ruthlessly remove Miss Foxe from the property:

‘How charming your house looks,’ said James, as they approached it.
‘Yes, doesn’t it – and do you know, I think I’m going to be able to buy it soon, so it will *really* be mine and I can do what I like with it.’
‘Will you have to buy Miss Foxe with it?’
‘Yes, but one hopes to be able to get rid of *her* pretty soon.’
Leonora spoke so forcibly that James gave her a startled look.
‘Here she is,’ she whispered harshly, as they entered the front door.

When Leonora discovers from Humphrey that James is seeing a young girl – Phoebe Sharpe – she begins manoeuvres to make the top floor of her house available for James to live in. Taking immediate steps to remove Miss Foxe, she writes an eviction letter:

‘Dear Miss Foxe,’ it began. ‘I am afraid I may have to ask you to vacate your flat at the end of the month instead of when the lease runs out, as we had arranged’. ‘Arranged’ was perhaps an exaggeration, for they had done no more than discuss the future in the vaguest terms. ‘Yours very sincerely’ – it was best to be sincere in this sort of letter – Leonora M. Eyre.

Janet Gurkin Altman points out that ‘the letter is an ambivalent instrument and as such lends itself to a correspondent’s self-deception’.¹² Leonora avoids any face-to-face unpleasantness and therefore preserves an unruffled, cool and ostensibly polite exterior by virtue of epistolary distance;

Getting rid of Miss Foxe proved surprisingly easy. Leonora had left the letter for her on the table in the hall where she could not fail to see it, rather than risk the embarrassment of an encounter by slipping it under her door.

Her sincerity is, of course, a sham – a type of sanctioned insincerity dressed as politeness wrapped up in epistolary convention, but, as Jenny Davidson suggests, ‘both manners and politeness exist in dangerously close proximity to the less attractive quality called hypocrisy’.¹³

If Leonora’s letter to Miss Foxe reveals a quiet ruthlessness then her experience with Phoebe Sharpe perhaps most acutely illustrates a compromise to morality evidencing cracks in her front of ‘perfect manners and behaviour’. Leonora tracks Phoebe down, enters her house without invitation, and comes very close to reading a private letter from James to his erstwhile girlfriend. Phoebe and ‘the Bohemian discomfort of her cottage’ are presented in direct opposition to Leonora’s organised home, with all the comforts and charm that appeal to James. Travelling to the country to confront Phoebe about retrieving James’s furniture, Leonora finds her absent from her home, Vine Cottage, but the door is not locked. She therefore unhesitatingly goes in and takes a prying look around, chancing upon the familiarity of James’s handwriting on a letter within a book. She is moments away from reading this private letter – and the reader is confident that she would have – if she hadn’t been disturbed.

There were no pictures or objects to give any clue to Phoebe Sharpe’s tastes, except possibly the books. Leonora opened one of them – it was poetry, but without her glasses she could make nothing of it. A place in it had been marked by an envelope addressed in James’s unmistakable large sprawling hand, she didn’t need her glasses to recognize that. It gave her a shock to see a letter from him addressed to somebody else and she stood with it in her hand, wondering if she should open it. Of course one didn’t read other people’s letters, one wasn’t that kind of person, but in the circumstances, and bearing in

¹² Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 22.

¹³ Jenny Davidson, *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 147.

mind the close relationship between herself and James, going against one's better nature though it would be ...

There was a light tap on the door. Leonora quickly replaced the letter in the book and arranged herself in an attitude of waiting, realizing that it could hardly be Phoebe knocking on her own door.

Here we are reminded of the stalker tendencies of some of Pym's female characters. Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love* for example, enthusiastically pursuing Aylwin Forbes, with research that she relishes as 'investigation – some might have said prying – into the lives of other people'. Leonora goes away and puts her claim to custody of James's furniture in writing. She receives a reply to her note: a 'letter in a cheap brown envelope, addressed in a small spiky hand and with the stamps stuck crookedly down one side. Not the sort of letter one was accustomed to receive, thought Leonora, wondering who it could be from'.

'Dear Miss Eyre,' she read, 'I had your letter about James's furniture and it is certainly *not* convenient for it to be collected on Monday or at any time. I have no intention of giving up the things until James asks me to.

Yours sincerely, P. J. Sharpe.'

However disparaging Leonora is of Phoebe and her living conditions, and her less than perfect epistolary manners of cheap paper and crooked stamps, she has the gift of youth, and this is lost to Leonora. As the novel progresses, Leonora examines lines on her neck, indicates a preference for the shadowing of a wide-brimmed hat or candlelight and is particularly drawn to her image in the fruitwood mirror with its flattering distortion. 'Approaching fifty', age is a major preoccupation for Leonora; If her *raison d'être* is to be the object of male attention, then with beauty on the wane, she understands that she hovers on the brink of transition to face a prospect Germaine Greer would bleakly term 'invisibility'.

It would nonetheless appear at this stage that Leonora is winning the battle for James's attentions. He may be away on a collecting tour in Spain and Portugal in the company of the amoral and manipulative, Ned, who is a far more challenging opponent than Miss Foxe or Phoebe. But Leonora has an epistolary advantage here; she is able to materialise her attractions by way of charmingly elegant letters. James muses that 'Her letter, with all its news of her doings, had brought her vividly before him'; he misses the attractions of 'her unusual – old-fashioned elegance', as Ned proves a little overpowering. Ned is intrigued by James's secretive reading of Leonora's letter: "'Come now, Jimmie, there must have been something in that letter to make you fold it up and put it away so quickly. You should've seen the look on your face ...'". Feeling rather stifled now by a combination of Spanish heat and Ned's pushy presence, James takes refuge in fantasies of 'Leonora's cool green-walled room with the trailing plants and some delicious drink by his side'. Her letters materialise her elegance with descriptions of her outfits: a 'lilac-coloured tweed coat and dress and "yet another black number, rather filmy and floating and suitable for feeling emotional in", as she put it'. This contrasts with Phoebe who he cannot imagine describing her clothes to him and who has become something of a nuisance and guilty secret that becomes reflected in his studied lack of response to her letters (two perfunctory postcards are the only replies he has sent). The two women are compared and contrasted with their letter writing: Leonora's 'civilized account of life' contrasts with Phoebe's unwelcome emotional excess: 'a raw outpouring of feelings, full of references to things he wanted to forget', reminding him of his unmannerly behaviour towards her.

James is a weak man and his weakness is emphasised in his own epistolary relations. Under the influence of Ned, who with typical hypocrisy informs James that he 'thought it a waste of time to bother with letters when one was travelling, though he himself did write twice a week to his mother in Cambridge, Massachusetts'. James is persuaded by Ned not to write to Leonora and still later persuaded by Leonora not to write to Phoebe:

James had automatically laid his arm over the sheet of paper which was so far virgin except for the date and the beginning, 'My dearest Phoebe'.

‘A difficult letter?’ Leonora asked in her most sympathetic tone.

He sighed. ‘An impossible one, really.’

‘Yes, some letters do seem to be that, don’t they? And what a shame you should have to be writing letters on your birthday – surely tomorrow will do?’

James murmured something.

‘Perhaps this one isn’t really necessary,’ Leonora went on. ‘Silence is sometimes best, you know.’

‘Yes, I suppose it is.’ He would leave it for now, anyway. If Phoebe loved him she would understand, and if she didn’t what did it matter? He crumpled up the page and put it in his pocket. Better, perhaps not to leave it lying around’.

At the outset of the novel Leonora is presented as independent and not to be pitied by others or herself, but one year later after a bruising by the quietly malicious Ned whose ‘glitter of his personality’ makes him a more formidable challenge than ‘skinny and droopy’ Phoebe and ‘an enemy to be fought’. It is significant that on the ill-fated expedition to Keats’ house with both Ned and James, Leonora again wears her raincoat with colours that change when seen from different angles. On this hopeless occasion her iridescent wings are damp and dulled by both rain and Ned’s malice. He and his engineered distancing of James from her life bring Leonora to a point of despair and later, this time in fur:

She turned her head away and huddled into her fur coat, feeling herself debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground, indeed ‘brought to a certain point of dilapidation’. I am utterly alone, she thought.

And thus, we have the darker side that Pym explained to Larkin. And yet Leonora does rally as the novel draws to a close, with Humphrey arriving once again to take her out ‘encumbered by a large bunch, sheaf, perhaps of peonies’. Witnessed by a rather forlorn James, Leonora this time faces forward to the present rather than harking back to the past. In this respect, the ‘little Victorian flower book’ that started the whole *ménage à trois* is no longer on display in her home. The pink convolvulus that illustrated the page on the day that James first called is noteworthy with its inscription ‘worth sustained by Tender and Judicious Affection’. It is significant that this plant is alternatively known as bindweed and can be a significant pest. As an invasive weed, it encroaches on others – ruthlessly colonising whilst presenting a demure face, but ultimately strangling weaker plants in its path. Whilst secured for a brief spell in Leonora’s top floor (with bars on the window), James felt ‘that Leonora had taken him over’ and ‘He would never find a flat of his own. There was no escape from anything, ever’. However, with Ned’s help he does move out to a new flat and later returns to visit Leonora only to watch her disappear for her day out with his Uncle. Humphrey’s exuberant flowers with their ‘large and faultless blooms, so exquisite in colour, so absolutely correct in all their finer points’ are alive, tangible, and in the present unlike the faded images from the Victorian past. Leonora, as befits a pragmatic and strategic letter writer, chooses to accept that real flowers (and by extension perhaps Humphrey?) are ultimately more suitable than paper flowers as a relic from times long gone. Perhaps suggesting acceptance of a new stage of life, Leonora decides that the peonies ‘went so well with one’s charming room [and] possessed the added grace of having been presented to oneself’. And so, the novel closes if not with affection then certainly indicating the judicious good sense of a shrewd letter writer making a more suitable choice.

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