

The Company of Women: Women's Friendships in the Novels of Barbara Pym

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With close to twice as many women as men in the novels of Barbara Pym, women by necessity frequently find themselves in the company of other women. What one finds when examining the relationships among women, however, is a certain ambiguity. While women's company can be a comfort, it is often disparaged. Women seem just as likely to belittle or think negatively of other women as they are to enjoy their company. Much of the rancor among women is the result of their relative position in a society that elevates the status of men and exaggerates their importance. Thus, unmarried women find themselves competing for the same man, while married and widowed women feel superior to their unmarried sisters. These dynamics are exacerbated by the fact that, in Pym's fictional world, unmarried women outnumber married women by about five to one. Despite these troublesome factors, a number of women do manage to form friendships with other women that are genuinely affectionate and mutually enriching.

These ambiguous views of women's relationships with one another are consistent with Pym's portrayal of female-male relationships. If, in the social milieu of the novels, women's identity and status depend on their being attached to a male, if men are considered ultimately more important than women, their needs more pressing, then women will not view one another in the same way as they view men. Their relationships with one another may well be characterized by suspicion, rivalry, or spite. On the other hand, given a world where the number of women is far greater than the number of men and where relationships *between* the sexes are neither particularly intimate nor satisfying, then women understandably look to other women and even rely on one another for companionship, encouragement, or support.

My paper looks at the ways in which women view the company of other women. I suggest that men have a profound effect on their relationships, that women are at times quite vicious about their female friends and acquaintances, but that female friendships have the potential to be--and often are--solid, nurturing, and beneficial. Women's relationships with one another can be, as Mildred Lathbury describes them in *Excellent Women*, "dull, solid friendships without charm" (226), yet they may also be, as Wilmet Forsthe of *A Glass of Blessings* exclaims, "splendid and wonderful" (137).

In her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter* (1972), Anthropologist Margaret Mead writes the following about her circle of women friends in college:

We belonged to a generation of young women who felt extraordinarily free--free from the demand to marry unless we chose to do so, free to postpone marriage while we did other things, free from the need to bargain and hedge that had burdened and restricted women of earlier generations. We laughed at the idea that a woman could be an old maid at twenty-five... (quoted. in Alpert 20)

Although Barbara Pym was born twelve years *after* Margaret Mead, most of the women in her novels do not share Mead's sense of liberating freedom from the pressures to win men's favor and marry. Hazel Holt tells us in *A Lot to Ask* that Pym herself never really wanted marriage but rather, like Prudence Bates (in *Jane and Prudence*), enjoyed being in love (149), and Charles Burkhart asserts that "for every one negative statement a woman makes about a woman [in the novels] there are a dozen positive ones" (99). I would agree that, ultimately, Pym's novels quietly celebrate the strength of women and the value of their friendship, but much of her comedy and wit find expression in her portrayal of the inflated importance of men and the effect that men have on the way that women interact with one another. Her novels thus articulate and comment on this lopsided world.

Mildred Lathbury points out the difference that men can make in women's relationships with one another when, shopping one afternoon with her old friend Dora Caldicote, she is able to forget for a while the complications that Rocky Napier has brought into her life. "I was back in those happier days," she reflects, "when the company of women friends had seemed enough" (*Excellent Women* 102). Women's friendship, the passage implies, is happier without men, yet it is something that one settles for: if it now is something that had once "seemed enough," then something else--in Mildred's case, the excitement of Rocky Napier--is more desirable. Indeed, just a moment later, Mildred is thinking nastily about Dora's appearance and her preference for always wearing the same color dress. Similarly, in *A Few Green Leaves*, when Emma Howick's mother Beatrix and her friend Isobel visit Emma at Christmas, Emma resigns herself "to a quiet female celebration of the festival. . . . There seemed little prospect of any other form of entertainment" (235). The "other form of entertainment," it is implied, is spending the day in the company of a man. Prudence Bates in *Jane and Prudence* at one point thinks of the way that husbands always take women friends away and considers herself fortunate that Jane Cleveland, despite her marriage, has remained steadfastly her friend.

Certainly Letty Crowe's relationship with her longtime friend Marjorie in *Quartet in Autumn* is one example of the way that relationships with men supersede those with women. Marjorie has traveled abroad with Letty several times since her husband died, and they plan to live together when Letty retires. However, on a visit to Marjorie, she is once again reminded of her secondary role when Marjorie becomes involved with David Lydell, the new vicar. He receives much more of Marjorie's attention than Letty does. When Marjorie and David become engaged, Marjorie suggests that Letty move into a retirement home, but not long after, her engagement broken, Marjorie assumes that Letty will once again change her plans and move in with her. Marjorie's behavior toward Letty is one example of the often-tenuous nature of female friendships, or at least their instability, when men come into the picture.

Published in 1977, *A Quartet in Autumn* presents a view of friendship between Letty and Marjorie that is out of step with both the heady first decade of the contemporary women's movement in which it was published and the freedom that Margaret Mead and her friends felt during the period just before Marjorie and Letty would have been young women. But Mead also remarks in her autobiography on the uniqueness of her female friendships:

"Never break a date with a girl for a man" was one of our mottoes in a period when women's loyalty to women usually was -- as it usually still is -- subordinate to their possible relationships with men. We learned loyalty to women, pleasure in conversation with women, and enjoyment of the way in which we complemented one another. (quoted. in Alpert 20).

Far too many of the relationships between women in Pym's novels could not be described in these terms. It is true that many women's relationships in the novels might better be classified as acquaintances, but Marjorie and Letty have regarded themselves as friends for years. Despite their history together, Marjorie treats her friend unfeelingly.

Another way that men affect women's relationships is that there is a good deal of rivalry among women for men's attention. Part of the subplot involving Marjorie in *Quartet in Autumn* is the competition Marjorie has with Beth Doughty, both women attempting to woo David Lydell with food and wine and solicitous concern about his gastric troubles. This contention of women with one another for the attention of men is a recurring motif in Pym's novels. *Some Tame Gazelle* treats it lightly in Belinda Bede's relationship with Henry Hoccleve after Agatha goes on holiday alone. It is more serious in *Jane and Prudence*, as Jessie Morrow operates behind the backs of Miss Doggett and Prudence Bates to seduce Fabian Driver away from Prudence. One of the conflicts in *An Unsuitable Attachment* involves the rivalry Penelope Grandison feels with Ianthe Broome over Rupert Stonebird, even though Ianthe has absolutely no interest in Rupert as a lover.

Backbiting, cattiness, and distrust among women are concomitant characteristics of the rivalry between them. When Letty wonders how Beth Doughty could have stolen David out from under Marjorie's nose,

with all the other problems David was having, Marjorie responds: "You can't know what a woman is up to.... It's something that can never be expected or explained" (*Quartet in Autumn* 207-08). In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet's reaction when Mary Beamish announces her engagement is "the perhaps typically feminine one of astonishment that such a good looking man as Marius Ransome should want to marry anyone so dim and mousy as Mary Beamish" (*A Glass of Blessings* 228). Similarly, Viola Dace in *No Fond Return of Love* is amazed that Dulcie could once have been engaged to the good-looking Maurice Clive. In the same novel Laurel's roommate Marian resents the attention that Laurel gets from Aylwin Forbes and Paul Beltane, while "she had herself only the constant and boring devotion of the young bank clerk who lived on the top floor" (165). Catherine Oliphant makes a telling comment in *Less Than Angels* when Tom's aunt, Mrs. Beddoes, calls on Catherine the very day that Tom has moved out and chides her for having lived with Tom without being married to him. Catherine observes: "Yes, of course women do think the worst of each other, perhaps because only they can know what they are capable of" (135). Catherine is one of Pym's most reliable observers of human behavior, and her wry comment is illustrated in the behavior of many other women in Pym's novels.

Women's cattiness extends to their remarks about other women's appearances, the clothes they wear, including hats and shoes, and the food they serve. Both overdressing and under-dressing bring the scorn of other women. Thus, Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* thinks that Agatha's wardrobe is too sophisticated for even the Archdeacon's wife, while Mildred in *Excellent Women* believes that Allegra Gray dresses rather too nicely for a clergyman's widow. On the other hand, in *A Few Green Leaves* Emma Howick looks with amusement on her friend Ianthe Potts, with her "lugubrious tone and appearance--she was tall and droopy, with mousy hair hanging in curtains round her pale face" (123). And in *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet's initial disdain for Mary Beamish comes in part from the fact that Mary is plain. Early in the novel, the self-assured, beautiful, and complacent Wilmet is horrified lest she become friends with Mary, so unlike herself, almost mousy in appearance and demeanor. A final example: Viola Dace's first impression of Dulcie Mainwaring at the beginning of *No Fond Return of Love* is that she is "already half way to being a dim English spinster" (2-3), while Dulcie is later struck by the oddity of Viola's red canvas shoes.

As for food, Belinda and Harriet Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle* are both disgusted at the meal that Agatha Hoccleve serves them. The unsavory meal served by Edith Liversidge when she invites Belinda to take potluck with her is one thing--beans, bread and coffee, a meal made all the more "interesting" when an ash from Edith's cigarette drops into the beans--but a formal meal served to company is quite another. Furthermore, entertaining one's women friends is an entirely different matter from entertaining a group of mixed company. Thus Dulcie Mainwaring is genuinely surprised by the delicious meal of exotic salads and croissants that Viola serves her, for she had anticipated the most distasteful foods: "Tripe, brains, figs and semolina" (*No Fond Return of Love* 34).

Because men's work and men's needs are viewed as more important than women's, women can be quick to dismiss other women or to devalue them. For instance, Miss Prideaux, in *A Glass of Blessings*, herself a single woman living in a bed-sitting room, surprises Wilmet Forsythe by the strength and violence of her language when she suggests that Father Ransome stay in the spare flat in Julian and Winifred Malory's Pimlico vicarage: "I believe there's a deaconess in it at the moment, but I've no doubt she could be got rid of" (122). The deaconess to whom she refers is Sister Blatt, whom readers first met, along with Julian and Winifred Malory, in *Excellent Women*. In that novel, the renting of the flat in question produces a good deal of stress when the woman to whom it is rented, Allegra Gray, becomes engaged to Julian. As soon as that event occurs, Mrs. Gray sets about devising a way to remove Winifred from the vicarage. A particularly wry comment is made in *Less Than Angels* when Minnie Foresight, attempting to listen politely to Miss Lydgate's description of her anthropological article, has an expression "of rather strained interest" on her face: "Women must so often listen to men with just this expression on their faces, but Mrs. Foresight was feminine enough to feel that it was a little hard that so much concentration should be called for when listening to a member of her own sex. It seemed, somehow, a waste of effort" (16).

An extreme example of dismissing or devaluing other women occurs in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Leonora Eyre has “little use for the ‘cosiness’ of women friends, but regarded them as a foil for herself, particularly if, as usually happened, they were less attractive and elegant than she was” (53). This attitude toward other women is in keeping with Leonora’s icy personality and her need to collect and control men. She does have two “close” friends. One is Meg, whose relationship with the homosexual man Colin gives Leonora an opportunity to treat her with contemptuous pity but becomes an object lesson when her own relationship with James turns out to parallel Meg’s. Leonora’s other friend is Liz, whose bitter experience with a broken marriage again provides a contrast to Leonora’s customary success with men. Liz and Leonora have what strikes me as a strange relationship: when the two have supper together one evening, each is equally bored by the other’s conversation. Liz would go on and on about her unhappy marriage, we are told, and Leonora would eventually get around to her reminiscences of her girlhood and romantic adventures. Nevertheless, “at the end of the evening each woman would feel a kind of satisfaction, as if more than just drink and food had been offered and accepted” (58). Their friendship lacks the genuine concern friends ought to have for one another and instead seems self-serving and false. They provide company for one another, but each is too involved in herself to offer much else.

Liz and Leonora’s relationship is an example of the type that Mildred Lathbury of *Excellent Women* must have had in mind when, feeling low and dispirited after Rocky unexpectedly drops in to tell her that he and Helena have reconciled, she wonders: “[W]hat had I really hoped for? Dull, solid friendship without charm? No, there was enough of that between women and women. . . .” (226). Mildred’s view of women’s friendships is a commentary on life as a single female in a male-centered universe. She is not very forgiving in her descriptions of women she knows, such as Miss Statham and Miss Enders, whom she describes as birdlike and easy to confuse. Sister Blatt’s voice sounds like a lamentation to her, and she depicts both Sister Blatt and Esther Clovis as gruff and blunt. Mildred describes Winifred Malory as awkward and gaunt in her jumble sale clothes, and she notes that Dora Caldicote, her former roommate, wears unimaginative clothes and has an irritating habit of hanging dripping laundry in the kitchen.

But while Mildred’s experience with the Napiers, especially Rocky, seems to have darkened Mildred’s attitude toward her predictable and dull friends, she has never been very charitable toward women. When they first meet, for instance, Mildred instinctively dislikes Helena Napier, but she feels an immediate affinity with Rocky even before she meets him. She has “an inexplicable distrust of widows” (*Excellent Women* 45) and therefore is not at all friendly to Allegra Gray, though in all fairness to Mildred, Allegra’s superior air does not make her particularly lovable. Having lived with Dora Caldicote once, the prospect of living with her again in twenty or thirty years, bickering over trifles, is “a depressing picture” (*Excellent Women* 105). She is in a panic about the possibility of Winifred’s living with her, and at the end of the novel, she is not looking forward to the company of the two women who are moving into the flat vacated by the Napiers.

Mildred’s low opinion of herself and other women is what comes from living in a society where one’s importance hinges on one’s attachment to a man: it not only reduces one’s sense of self-worth but distorts and embitters one’s views of other women. We see this phenomenon elsewhere in the novels, as in *An Academic Question*, when Caroline Grimstone feels inferior to Iris Horniblow, whom she suspects of having won her husband’s affection, and even Cressida, the young woman that her husband actually has slept with. On her way to see who this Cressida is, “things being as they were, [she] supposed it was only to be expected that [she] should feel a deep sense of inferiority” (127). Certainly Belinda Bede’s sense in *Some Tame Gazelle* that Agatha Hoccleve is a stronger woman than she stems in part from having lost out to Agatha in her bid for Henry’s attention when they were all at university together.

Women seem only too ready to question other women, to feel smugness when they are humiliated or hurt, particularly where men are concerned. In *The Sweet Dove Died*, for instance, Phoebe’s friend Jennifer doubts Phoebe’s description of her relationship with James and has to suppress a smile when they are going through his things at the furniture depository. It is almost as if, by discrediting her friend she feels she has

gained some sort of superiority over her. In *An Academic Question*, Caroline Grimstone goes to Iris Horniblow's home, hoping to become friends with her now that she knows her husband does not love Iris. Indeed, she is seeking some kind of solace from another woman in the wake of having learned of her husband's infidelity. Instead, Iris is more interested in introducing Caroline to a very young new instructor who is obviously her lover than she is in learning why Caroline has unexpectedly shown up at her door. Caroline's first thought is that Iris is a cradle-snatcher: "This gave me an obscure feeling of satisfaction and I pitied her, seeing the end of the affair before she did" (140). Obviously the two women will not become close friends. In fact, some weeks later Caroline reveals that she is still a little jealous of Iris but consoles herself "by speculating how long it would be before Ian tired of her," a thought, I should note, that she immediately feels ashamed of having (157).

Jane and Prudence has several examples of critical, even cruel, comments of women toward other women. Telling Jane about Mildred Lathbury's marriage to Everard Bone, for instance, Miss Doggett mentions that Mildred had helped Everard in his work. Jessie Morrow's sharp response is, "'Oh, then he had to marry her. . . . That kind of devotion is worse than blackmail--a man has no escape from that'" (126). Elsewhere in the novel, Miss Doggett is most unkind about other women. Snooping through Jessie's things, for example, she runs across a photograph of Jessie's mother, her own cousin Ella: "She had married late and had made an unfortunate marriage--Miss Doggett's thoughts lingered with satisfaction on this theme for a few minutes, for Aubrey Morrow had left his wife and child after a few years" (179). Furthermore, when she considers whom to tell her suspicions about Jessie and Fabian, Miss Doggett runs over a list of possible confidantes: most of the women she knows are "married women too busy with their children and household cares; Mrs. Crampton and Mrs. Mayhew were stupid fluttering creatures; widows, she thought scornfully, with a silly, sentimental view of life" (181). Only Jane Cleveland, the vicar's wife, seems suitable to confide in.

A number of women live together in Pym's novels, with varying degrees of success. Many are unhappy arrangements, as in *Some Tame Gazelle*, with Connie Aspinall berated and harassed by the gruff, commanding Edith Liversidge. Jessie Morrow in *Jane and Prudence* is a live-in companion to the imperious Miss Doggett, whom Jessie describes to Jane as more in need of a sparring partner than a companion. This same couple of women appear in the early novel *Crampton Hodnet*, where Jessie is even more verbally abused than she is in this novel. In *Crampton Hodnet*, Miss Doggett continually declares that Miss Morrow knows nothing of the world, cannot possibly have an opinion that counts, makes no impact on any gathering whatsoever, and in short, has no more importance than a piece of furniture or some other blank, anonymous thing. Dulcie in *No Fond Return of Love* is not particularly happy with her decision to share her house, large as it is, with other women. On the first night of Viola Dace's stay, Dulcie wonders with dismay if "the companionship of this rather odd woman was what she really wanted?" (68-69) and later acknowledges that Viola is a disappointment, so much so that when Viola leaves to prepare for her wedding and invites Dulcie to visit her after her marriage, Dulcie imagines that she will never do so.

Women put up with these unhappy arrangements for various reasons. In some, there's an obligation that comes from having known each other for a very long time, in others it is economic necessity, and in still others, it's simply that women are used to putting up with situations they would rather not. Mildred's friendship with Dora Caldicote in *Excellent Women* seems to be founded largely on schoolgirl loyalty. The same is true in *A Few Green Leaves*, with Emma's old school friend Ianthe Potts, whom she invites to visit more out of guilt and pity than anything else: "She had always felt guilty about Ianthe, who had doggedly kept up with her since school days when Emma would have let their acquaintance drop" (122). Also in *A Few Green Leaves*, Miss Flavia Grundy is bossed by her housemate Miss Olive Lee and harbors quiet resentments over small affronts, while Daphne Dagnall is woefully disillusioned when sharing a home with her long-time friend Heather Blekinsopp. Janice Rossen, in her excellent study of Pym's novels, *The World of Barbara Pym*, comments on the relationships between women who live together in *A Few Green Leaves*: "Companionship between women who band together seems to offer little more satisfaction than animals

do; the two pairs of women who set up house together become locked in a battle of domination and submission. They represent a bleak reflection of the cheerful Bede sisters of . . . *Some Tame Gazelle*" (159-60).

Women's friendship is not always marked by rivalry, antagonism, or resentment, however, for many times it is genuinely appreciated. Who else does one turn to if not to another woman when one is troubled by a relationship with a man, as when Helena Napier of *Excellent Women* goes to Esther Clovis when she walks out on her husband? The more positive treatment of women's relationships provides a comforting, reassuring balance to the negative view of them. Pym's contrasting views of women's relationships are not surprising to her readers, for she is often ambivalent in her treatment of relationships, whether they are male-female, brother-sister, parent-child, or husband-wife relationships. Thus, the friendship of women has the potential to be nurturing and enormously comforting. In *Less Than Angels*, for example, after discovering Tom and Deirdre together, Catherine wishes that she had some female friend to confide in, thinking regretfully of those she had not kept in touch with and "rather shamefacedly of others whom she had rejected as being dull" (108). Later, after Tom leaves for Africa, she feels the lack "of that cosy woman friend" with whom one can go shopping, to the cinema, and have a gossip tea, a companionable image that strikes her as much more comforting than any she might have with her male friends. Likewise, in *A Few Green Leaves*, Daphne Dagnall is pleased when Emma Howick drops by because, as the narrator tells us, Daphne "always enjoyed the company of another woman, aware that there was a comfortable feeling about it that the company of men did not provide" (47).

In addition to providing comfort, women friends can offer solace in difficult times. Catherine Oliphant discovers the real pleasure of women friends when, grieving over the death of Tom, she goes to Mabel Swan and Rhoda Wellcome, is asked to tea and then to dinner, and stays on for two weeks. Prudence Bates in *Jane and Prudence* is grateful for the friendship of both Jane and Eleanor Hitchens when, following Fabian Driver's engagement to Jessie Morrow, she thinks: "What would one do without the sympathy of other women?" (200). Similarly, Ianthe Broome in *An Unsuitable Attachment* feels a strong desire when she is in Rome to confide in another woman about her feelings for Jon Challow.

Even Mildred Lathbury, whose disparaging thoughts about other women I have already noted, feels more in league with women, as when she and her cleaning woman Mrs. Morris gossip and laugh, "a couple of women against the whole race of men" (*Excellent Women* 23-24). The camaraderie between employee and domestic help is not uncommon in Pym's novels. Cleaning women, sewing women, maids, and cooks are not only good sounding boards for ideas but also excellent sources of information about other households in the community. They listen to the women who employ them and offer suggestions about dress and relationships, sometimes critically but with the best interests of their employees in mind. They also seem to have wonderful relationships with other women domestics. Examples occur throughout the novels. In *Some Tame Gazelle* Harriet eagerly tells Belinda what the Hoccleves' maid Florrie told their maid Emily. In the famous caterpillar-in-the-cauliflower scene in the same novel, Belinda's sewing woman Miss Prior is generous about the incident, telling her how nice her meals are in comparison to those served by Mrs. Hoccleve: "'Very poor meals there.' She lowered her voice, 'Between ourselves, Miss Bede, Mrs. Hoccleve doesn't keep a good table'" (51). Belinda is moved to tears by the surge of joy she feels. The passage illustrates the way in which female domestic employees help pass on information about other families but also demonstrates, in both Belinda's and Miss Prior's response to the incident, the genuine concern that some of Pym's women have for other women. Another example is a scene with Mildred Lathbury's cleaning woman, Mrs. Morris. Bursting with excitement the morning after Julian Malory and Allegra Gray have broken off their engagement, Mrs. Morris relates details of the breakup to Mildred, as reported to her by the Malorys' maid Mrs. Jubb.

In *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie Mainwaring listens good-naturedly to the details of her housekeeper Miss Lord's meals and seems to enjoy her company, and it is not surprising that Neville Forbes's housekeeper is quite eager to tell Dulcie about Neville's troubles with Miss Spicer and later to share with her the

intricacies of handling lunch when Father Forbes returns unexpectedly. Her willingness to confide the Father's romantic entanglements to a woman she barely knows might seem unlikely, but in the context of Pym's novels, it is perfectly normal. The entire group of domestic help in the novels functions as a vast network of women who pass on news about other people, make important connections between households, and provide a solid support system for one another.

Seldom, however, do we get the kind of magnanimous attitude toward another woman as that shown by Belinda Bede toward Agatha Hoccleve in *Some Tame Gazelle* when she feels that Henry might actually prefer her to his wife. Generous to almost all women, Belinda is most uncomfortable thinking of herself as Agatha's rival--she sees it as unbecoming to a spinster of her age and unworthy of her, finally. Having long before accepted Agatha's victory, Belinda finds some comfort now in thinking that Agatha had probably proposed to Henry. She cannot stand the thought of Agatha's being pathetic, as she fleetingly does after the Bishop proposes to her. At one point the Bishop had told Belinda that Agatha had made him a pair of socks which were not quite long enough. Realizing that she has rejected something that Agatha wants, Belinda feels

...that she could almost love Agatha as a sister now. The pullover that she might have made for the Archdeacon would surely have been wrong somewhere, but as it had never even been started, it lacked the pathos of the socks not quite long enough in the foot. To think of Agatha as pathetic was something so new that Belinda had to sit down on a chair in the hall, quite overcome by the sensation. (226)

By the end of the novel, Belinda is genuinely relieved to find that Agatha is by no means pathetic but is, in fact, very much her old confident, sharp, critical self.

When Ellen asked me to speak at this conference, she had just been reading that wonderful book *Writing a Woman's Life* by Carolyn Heilbrun, and she reminded me of the chapter on women's friendships and the section on the friendship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby. Of particular relevance to this talk is her definition of "the essential qualities for friendship: intimacy, admission of vulnerability, the openness of the loving gesture" (102-103). In Pym's novels, the very best relationships, the ones characterized by those qualities that Heilbrun names, are between women who have no cause to feel jealousy or rivalry over a man. Thus sisters or married women have the best chances for successful female friendships, and these relationships often become more satisfactory than relationships with men, husbands included. Examples of sisters from the novels include Penelope Grandison and Sophia Ainger of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, who get along well enough. Like Jane Cleveland, Sophia wants to play matchmaker and in the process acts most uncharitably toward Ianthe Broome, who she mistakenly assumes is her sister's rival. In contrast, Caroline Grimstone's sister in *An Academic Question* isn't much comfort, though Caroline's first thought after Alan confesses that he has slept with another woman is that if he had told her earlier, she could have discussed it with her sister Susan, whom she had just visited. Rhoda Wellcome and Mabel Swan in *Less Than Angels* have worked out a comfortable living arrangement. While each does things the other finds irksome, in general they live harmoniously and are splendid companions for one another.

The solid friendship of sisters in Pym's novels is nowhere illustrated more happily than in the relationship between Belinda and Harriet Bede, who are wonderfully good friends and companions. They share interests and clothes--Harriet benefiting from Belinda's closet more often than the other way around--but more importantly, they know one another thoroughly and like each other anyhow. Despite their own particular weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, they accept and love one another openly. Harriet knows of Belinda's longtime love for Henry and anticipates hearing all about the pleasures of her evening alone with him. She knows the depth of Belinda's regard for the Archdeacon so well that, acquiver with excitement herself, she suggests a hot milky drink to calm Belinda down: "'Don't try to talk until you've finished,'" she says. "There'll be plenty of time for you to tell me all about it" (*Some Tame Gazelle* 155). Indeed, a few moments later, the Ovaltine having successfully loosened her tongue, Belinda is moved to confidentiality.

The only time that Belinda ever thinks negatively of Archdeacon Hoccleve is when Ricardo Bianco tells her that the Archdeacon has said that Harriet is going to marry Bishop Grote: “‘The wicked *liar*,’” thought Belinda angrily. An archdeacon making mischief and spreading false rumours, that was what it amounted to” (212). This uncharacteristic display of fierce disloyalty to her beloved Henry indicates that she cherishes her sister Harriet above all others. The prospect of living without her if Harriet marries and moves away from their home is almost more than she can bear to contemplate. Belinda is so relieved to hear that Harriet has turned down Nicholas Mold’s proposal that she “kissed her impulsively and suggested that they should have some meringues for tea, as Harriet was so fond of them” (142). Their relationship is ideal, for they are sympathetic to one another, share one another’s joys and disappointments, and provide the best kind of comfortable and nurturing relationship one could hope for. Diana Benet makes an interesting comment about the Bede sisters’ relationship in her study of the novels, *Something to Love*:

[I]t is a satisfactory alternative to the male-female relationship conventionally accepted as being primary. Unquestionably, Belinda and Harriet are happier with each other than they would be with the bishop and Mr. Mold. In a better world, perhaps Belinda would have married Henry. But things being as they are, she and Harriet have an option that enables them to express their loving natures, to fulfill their needs to love and be loved in return. (27)

Pym’s successful portrait of loving sisters is no doubt attributable to her relationship with her own sister Hilary. One example of how much she enjoyed her sister is in a letter she wrote to Henry Harvey’s wife Elsie in 1938, telling Elsie of her move to London and taking rooms with her sister. “It is such a pleasant life,” she writes. “I don’t think I’ve been so happy since I was a young girl of eighteen in my first year at Oxford! . . . [I]t is marvellous being with Hilary after being so alone in Poland, and we have the most wonderful jokes about everything” (*A Very Private Eye* 86-87). We know from her letters and other sources that Barbara and Hilary remained great friends, living together companionably for the rest of her life.

It is clearly possible for women in the novels to have successful, satisfying long-term relationships with women other than their sisters, and many of them do. Several friendships reflect the joys we expect from having a “best friend.” Dr. Joyce Brothers has written that “[b]est friends reach a higher level, nirvana if you will. It is a meeting of the minds, bound loyalty, and the person you want to go to first with good news or bad” (qtd. in Alpert 9). We find such a friendship between Wilmet and Rowena in *A Glass of Blessings*. At one point, when Wilmet and Rowena laugh about Rowena’s husband paying a bit too much attention to her, Wilmet reflects: “[W]hat a splendid and wonderful thing the friendship of really nice women was. It could surely be said that Rowena and I were fortunate in each other” (137). Wilmet is also fortunate in the friendship of her mother-in-law Sybil, with whom she gets on very well. She appreciates Sybil’s preparing her favorite dishes for her birthday, for instance, and the two of them willingly do things together, like taking a class in Portuguese.

Jane Cleveland and Prudence Bates are also excellent friends. Jane adopts a kind of motherly role with Prudence, treats her as an equal despite their age difference, and seems to view her with the same comfortable familiarity as she views her husband. Meanwhile, Prudence’s general aloofness toward everyone might suggest an inability to feel really close to anyone, but she seems to genuinely value Jane’s friendship. In *A Few Green Leaves*, Beatrix Howick and Isobel Mound have been friends from their college days, spend holidays together, and enjoy one another’s company.

One might almost judge a woman’s character by the success she has with female friendships. For example, one measure of Wilmet Forsythe’s growth to maturity in *A Glass of Blessings* is her acceptance of Mary Beamish’s friendship. Early on, Mary’s selfless devotion to church, social services, and her mother is repugnant to Wilmet, largely because Wilmet feels inadequate or less useful in comparison. This makes her revert to snobbishness about Mary as self-protection. We see this in the scene in which, having tea with Mary early in the novel, Wilmet is embarrassed by Mary’s quoting lines from a poem and reflects: “I felt I could not bear to be invited to a womanly sharing of confidences. I looked at her dispassionately and saw

almost with dislike her shining eager face, her friendship offered to me. What was I doing sitting here with somebody who was so very much not my kind of person?" (84). By the end of the novel, however, Wilmet comes to cherish Mary's friendship and humbly and sincerely compares her own life to that of Mary, with her "glass of blessings." Sybil is also an excellent friend and role model, but Wilmet has never had to measure herself against Sybil as she eventually does with Mary. Wilmet's self-absorption had blinded her to the reality of others and shaped her perceptions according to her own fancy. Warmly accepting Mary's friendship is a strong indication of the degree to which Wilmet grows by the end of the novel. In contrast, Leonora Eyre of *The Sweet Dove Died*, who uses women as foils for herself, is to many readers the least likable woman in all of Pym's fiction. She never grows out of her self-absorption as Wilmet does but remains frozen in her inability to establish meaningful emotional ties with others, female or male.

The truly likable women in Pym's novels are sensitive and sympathetic to other women. They are not without faults nor above making an occasionally too critical comment, but Belinda Bede, Jane Cleveland, Sybil Forsythe, Dulcie Mainwaring and Catherine Oliphant, for instance, are mature, sympathetic, and generous women whose wry and witty observations on human behavior endear them to the hearts of readers as well as to their fictional friends. They do not derive pleasure from the misfortunes of their women friends nor do they consistently disparage the company of women. In *The Pleasure of Miss Pym*, Charles Burkhart points out that women's positive comments about other women in the novels "are typical of her heroines, and of Barbara Pym herself. One finds entries in her notebooks like 'With the years men get more bumbling and vague, but women get sharper' (MS Pym 45, p. 23)" (99). By creating admirable central female characters who value other women and welcome their friendship, Pym emphasizes the desirability of those qualities. Indeed, those women are very likely the ones we would choose for our own friends.

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