

Barbara Pym's Excellent Women: Subversion from Behind a Teacup

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I have an extra copy of *Excellent Women* that I keep just for lending out. *Excellent Women* is the first Pym book I read, passed on to me by my oldest sister, and the copy I keep for myself still has a note in it from a friend of hers: "Cher Jo-Ann," it reads: "This book was hilarious. I read it in a day and I laughed and laughed. I'm sure my neighbours were suspicious." It's a book I lend in total confidence that everyone will adore it.

So I was completely taken aback when I lent it to a colleague at work – a woman whose work I respected and esteemed and who seemed to be as sane as anyone else – and she told me she had hated it. "All those unhappy unmarried women," she said. I checked the cover of the book she was handing back to me, to make sure it really was *Excellent Women*, and then I started re-evaluating everything I had previously thought good about her work and her sanity.

That anyone could think Mildred Lathbury is unhappily unmarried is a mystery to me. I see her as a model of independence. And it's a trait shared, though to a lesser degree, by enough of Barbara Pym's women that I find it odd that her writing fell out of popularity just as feminism was coming into it.

It's true that her world can be an old-fashioned one. Women get one egg and men get two, as a matter of course. "Oh, a man needs eggs!" said Mrs. Crampton, looking pleased, when Jane noticed the larger portion on Nicholas's plate in *Jane and Prudence*. (p 51). Letty Crowe may pour herself a second glass of sherry in *Quartet in Autumn*, but "she still kept to her rules – one did not drink sherry before the evening, just as one did not read a novel in the morning, this last being a left-over dictum of a headmistress of forty years ago."

And even Mildred Lathbury, who I consider the most excellent of Barbara Pym's excellent women, doesn't seem to find it presumptuous of Everard Bone to ask her to read his proofs and work on his index. "Reading proofs for a long stretch gets a little boring. The index would make a nice change for you," he says – ever thoughtful. (p 237)

On one level, Mildred appears to fit into this old-fashioned world very well. She is a good soul with a small independent income who helps sort jumble for the church bazaar, trots off to a day's work at the Care for Aged Gentlewomen, and is always ready with a cup of tea. "So he did remember me like that after all - a woman who was always making cups of tea," she thinks. "Well, there was nothing to be done about it now but to make one." (p 206) She is, as she describes herself, "an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties" and therefore "must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business." (p 7)

In short, she is a spinster. This is her designated role in society: a secondary character, ever helpful and dutiful, who must expect to step back to the sidelines when people with real lives make centre stage.

But, all appearances to the contrary, Mildred has the audacity to believe that *she* is at the centre of her *own* life. And she acts on this, ever so quietly - so quietly that no one notices she isn't always following the script. Beneath her shapeless overall and her drab brown coat – (brown not having become the new black yet) – Mildred Lathbury is a deeply subversive woman.

She calmly wears the pleasant, helpful facade that leads people to underestimate her, and then she does what she must to maintain her independence. Unlike many single-woman characters, from Jane Austen's to Anita Brookner's, she is not looking for a rescuer, someone to sweep her off to a new life.

This strikes me as fairly modern. So why did Mildred and Pym's other Excellent Women appear to fall from popularity in the 1960s, a time when women were voicing their independence but Barbara Pym couldn't find anyone to publish her work? Perhaps it was the very subversiveness that Mildred showed that was out of step with the times. Mildred achieved a quiet and private independence, rather than the public and collective one that was the rallying cry of the decade. There are no marches, no picket signs in Mildred's life. Rather, there is a deft turning aside of this request or that expectation, carried out so politely that no one really realizes Mildred is going her own way.

Unlike the feminist movement, Mildred does not want to alter society – she just wants to be mistress of her own life.

Mildred's hardest-fought battle of independence is to be permitted to live alone. Why is it that society needs to ensure women are always in company? Spinsters are expected to make up for the lack of husbands and children by forming a community with other women in the same position they are – a kind of secular nunnery that keeps them reassuringly occupied, held in place by the constant application of peer pressure. If only Mildred would share a home with another woman – school chum Dora Caldicote, for example, could ensure Mildred never bought that smart black coat, not at her age; Miss Statham could ensure Mildred never sat alone in church to think – thinking always gets people talking; and Mildred would never be sharing a stairway and a bathroom with the good-looking Rocky Napier.

There is no opportunity for subversion in the nunnery.

Instead, enjoying the solitude of her flat after Dora moved out, Mildred has no intention of giving it up just to meet other people's expectations or make life easier for them – not to live on the top floor of the vicarage; not to take in Winifred Malory, orphaned when her vicar brother takes up with The Widow Gray; and certainly not to consider marrying the vicar herself.

When Julian announces he is engaged to the widow – who after all, as Sister Blatt says, has the knack of catching a man, having done it once before – Mildred finds she is seen in the parish as one of the rejected ones – in fact, the chief of the rejected.

"I felt it would not sound very convincing if I said that I hadn't really wanted to marry Julian Malory," Mildred thinks. "I was obviously regarded in the parish as the chief of the rejected ones and I must fill the position with as much dignity as I could." (p 158)

In truth, *she* has already rejected *Julian*. But she has done so, as is her wont, quietly and privately – so quietly and privately that even he doesn't know it. "It's so splendid of you to understand like this," Julian says of his engagement. "I know it must have been a shock to you, though I dare say you weren't entirely unprepared. Still it must have been a shock, a blow almost, I might say," he labours on, heavy and humourless, not at all like his usual self. Did love always make men like this? Mildred wonders. "I was never in love with you, if that's what you mean," she says, thinking it is time to be blunt. "I never expected that you would marry *me*. But Julian continues to be happily oblivious. "Dear Mildred," he smiles, "you are not the kind of person to expect things as your right even though they may be." (p 125)

It doesn't end there, for of course Julian breaks off his engagement with Mrs. Gray. "But that's splendid!" says Rocky Napier. "Now he can marry you. Isn't that just what we wanted?" "Let me stay as I am," says Mildred. "I'm quite happy." "Well, I don't know. I still feel we ought to do something," says Rocky vaguely. (p 207-08).

Only twice in *Excellent Women* – in the book (I have to keep reminding myself this is a book, or I find myself discussing Mildred as though she's a real person...) only twice is Mildred forced to take a really blunt position; she really does prefer leaving society's facade intact.

But when she comes up against Allegra Gray, subtlety won't do. The widow, anxious to get poor Winifred out of the vicarage now that she has snared Julian, suggests that Mildred take her on as a roommate. After all, as Mrs. Gray points out, "you haven't any other ties, have you?"

“I don’t think I could do that,” Mildred says, gathering up her bag and gloves, for she feels trapped and longs to get away.

“Oh, do think about it, Mildred. There’s a dear. I know you are one.”

No, I’m not,” Mildred says ungraciously. (p 120)

She is almost as blunt in turning down Everard Bone’s invitation to dine, again sensing an expectation that her role in life is to serve others. “I have got some meat to cook,” he says. Mildred sees herself putting a small joint into the oven and preparing vegetables. She could feel her aching back bending over the sink. “I’m afraid I can’t tonight,” she says baldly. (p 202)

Mildred is perhaps the Pym character with at once the strongest and the *quietest* sense of self. But almost all of Pym’s spinster heroines – I particularly like using “heroines” because these women are so unlikely to use that word to describe themselves – almost all are mistresses of their own lives in that they are not living in limbo, waiting for rescuers.

Going back to the first book Pym published, *Some Tame Gazelle*, Belinda Bede may enjoy a lifelong unrequited love affair; but she doesn’t expect or even really want dear Henry to sweep her off to a new life. Spinsterhood is a perfectly comfortable and satisfying place to be. She and her sister Harriet get to live exactly as they like. In fact, the suggestion that Henry might actually prefer her to his wife Agatha is not really a welcome one: “For she was now a contented spinster and her love was like a warm, comfortable garment, bedsocks, perhaps, or even woollen combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance.” (p 158)

The imperious Harriet is not only mistress of her own life, she is queen of all she surveys. She is not about to let anyone interfere with that. A marriage proposal from Nathaniel Mold – he of the florid complexion and the morning visits to the Crownwheel and Pinion – make her realize anew what a good gig she has: “Who would change a comfortable life of spinsterhood in a country parish, which always had its pale curate to be cherished, for the unknown trials of matrimony?” (p 136)

By contrast, Prudence Bates, of Pym’s third book, *Jane and Prudence*, is not comfortable with the idea of spinsterhood; she is one of the rare Pym women whose main interest is men. But is she looking for one of them to alter her life? Men are really more a career. “And Prudence has her love affairs,” is how her friend Jane thinks of it, “for they were surely as much an occupation as anything else.” (p 9) Romantic disappointment does not interrupt her carefully lovely life; it reinforces it. When Jessie Morrow steals Fabian Driver from under her nose, Prudence spoils herself with lunch in a restaurant where she muses, “Might somebody ask, ‘Who is that interesting-looking young woman, with the traces of tears on her cheeks, eating smoked salmon?’” (p 225)

Closer to Mildred in spirit, though more bohemian in appearance, is Catherine Oliphant of *Less Than Angels*. An observer by nature, Catherine earns her living writing for women’s magazines, sometimes making raw life more “palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing.” (p 7) She is not one to automatically accept what life lays before her. She is perhaps more open about this than Mildred - she has a more modern feel, living with a young anthropologist to whom marriage just doesn’t occur. “Catherine had always imagined that her husband would be a strong character who would rule her life ... (yet) it was always she who made the decisions and even mended the fuses.” (p 26) When Tom ditches her for the younger and the much more compliant Deirdre, Catherine frets momentarily about the force of her own character: “I should have let him go on writing ‘commence’ (instead of ‘begin’ or ‘start’) if he wanted to, Catherine thought. I wonder if that was what drove him away in the end?” (p 162) But she cannot change her nature. She is a strong individual, and she delights in the individual in others too - which amounts to her own form of social subversion. Even when spending a few days in the depths of suburbia with Deirdre’s mother and aunt, Catherine ends up encouraging an older anthropologist with a grim Easter Island face to set fire to the notes he has carted around for years like an albatross around his neck. “Do you *have* to write up the material?” she asks him. “I mean, wouldn’t it be rather a bother to

have to do it?" "Her suggestion was so outrageous that he could think of absolutely nothing to say. . . . He felt as if the ground were slipping away from under his feet and it was quite an effort to stand up and walk to the bar for some more drinks." (p. 216)

With Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love*, we go back to a heroine as deceptively pleasant as Mildred, and as adept at the art of small talk. On hearing there will be a "social gathering" with coffee at the learned conference she is attending, Dulcie says: "It will be nice to have a cup of coffee." "Viola thought with irritation that Dulcie was just the kind of person who would say it was 'nice' to have a cup of indifferent coffee with a lot of odd-looking people." (p. 15) But as Viola will learn, Dulcie does not *always* sit back and accept what society deems appropriate and nice. She turns out to be a woman who eavesdrops; who uses her indexing and research skills to track people who interest her; who plans weekends at cheerless hotels in Taviscombe in order to find out more about the innkeeper's sons. And she is the kind of woman who does not mistake solitude for emptiness, who politely turns aside what other people see as opportunities fit for a spinster if they don't fit her own idea of life. "Letting herself into the house, she realized that she was alone. Viola had gone, and Laurel too; she had rejected Maurice's offer of friendship, and even the comfort of Father Bengier and his church. But she still had her work. She was in the middle of making an index for a complicated anthropological book. And now that she really was alone she might well consider letting rooms to students ... then there was a summer holiday to be planned ... or at least another learned conference ..." (p 284-85)

I'll move on to Emma Howick of *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym's last novel. It was written in the late 1970s, almost 20 years after *No Fond Return of Love* and 30 years after *Excellent Women*. Society has changed in that time. Emma is a single woman, not a spinster; she is the anthropologist, not the indexer. But, oddly, she strikes me as less confident than many of Pym's earlier heroines. She seems to judge her actions not by her own sense of who she is but by how society would see them. Should Graham Pettifer walk her home after dark in the country, simply because she's a woman? She's annoyed that he makes that presumption, "yet she realized that had he *not* made the gesture she would have been even more annoyed. Women were not yet as equal as all that." (p 157) She takes a casserole to the cottage he has rented but half-conceals it in a basket and is irritated her deed has been noticed in the village. "'Carrying a casserole through the woods' – how ridiculous that sounded!" (p. 127)

It's as though, with women having made a collective advance, individuality is lost. Rather than subverting society's assumptions, one tries to meet them.

Perhaps I'm reading too much into one character. Not every Pym heroine is as beautifully drawn as Mildred Lathbury, and perhaps Emma Howick is simply sketchier. But at the risk of reading way too much into small details, I do find it interesting that unlike other Pym women, Emma has a mother - a fairly conventional mother who wishes Emma would marry and urges her to "wear something nice." It's as though Emma is not intended to be as complete an adult. Is that because the role of the sexes is in flux at the time? Is Pym just reflecting the awkwardness of a new social order? Or is it a comment on a substantive change in people - that the collective has overtaken the individual?

I wish Barbara Pym had had the opportunity to keep writing through the 1980s and 1990s, and through the millennium. I would love to have seen how her women developed.