

Marriages Real and Virtual in *Some Tame Gazelle*

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I will be discussing “Marriages Real and Virtual in *Some Tame Gazelle*.” This first published Pym novel is about the need for “something to love” and how this need gives our lives meaning and a sense of (at least local and temporary) importance. “[S]omething to *love*, that was the point,” we are told, and although an object of love can, according to the poetry cited, be found in a “tame gazelle,” a “gentle dove,” even a “poodle dog,” it is not found, in this novel, in the institution of marriage. We are shown one long-term marriage (which seems to have failed), three proposals of marriage (one of which is serial, all of which are declined), one thwarted marriage (a disappointment going back some thirty years), and at the end of the novel two hasty marriages (perhaps ill-advised). Throughout the novel, marriage holds little hope for love and happiness. And yet the characters in Pym’s unnamed little village are so eccentric in their behavior and emotions that perhaps Pym is not faulting marriage per se, but simply showing us a selection of people who are more suited to find love and happiness somewhere else.

The technique of comparison and contrast is a standard literary device for examining different kinds of couples – we see this throughout Shakespeare, for example. But in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym has put a wry twist on this time-honored scheme: instead of presenting two separate couples, she shows us the interplay of two women, Agatha and Belinda, vis-à-vis one man, Henry – she positions a marriage that exists in the “real world” of the novel versus one that exists on a different level.

Henry and Agatha Hoccleve are in their late 50s and have been married since their mid 20s. They are both well-educated in arcane subjects (Agatha has studied Old English and can speak Anglo Saxon and Old High German; Henry can quote from the most obscure text and make the most elusive of allusions). They are most compatible in their common preference for the domestic discomfort of drab furniture, dim lighting and a poorly-laid table. In almost all other matters, and certainly in their temperaments, they are a mismatch, and we find them often “rather snappy with each other.”

Belinda Bede is also in the late 50s and has loved Henry “faithfully for over 30 years.” She fell in love with him at the age of 20, when they were “students together,” and had her “heart broken” at the age of 25. She too has *married* Henry. But it’s a figurative marriage. Belinda has never “found anyone to replace” Henry in her heart; she devotes much thought toward an adoration of her beloved. This devotional aspect of her love for Henry is, at times, almost reverential and bears some resemblance to a member of a religious order who considers herself a figurative bride of the Lord. Belinda has promised herself to Henry, and therefore can have no other.

With this set-up of couples – this real and this virtual marriage – the novel gives us the rare opportunity to compare and contrast two marriages, contemporary to each other, and both involving the same man. It’s a kind of civilized polygamy of interwoven emotions and is a tantalizing parallel to Pym’s running joke in subsequent novels about polygamy in “primitive cultures.”

Agatha is ambitious. She married Henry because she knew that with her “scheming” Henry could attain a certain status in the church, and indeed he has become an archdeacon. It was a marriage of practicality, the best means by which Agatha, the daughter of a bishop, could duplicate the life she knew as a girl. This urge for practicality extends even to her preference in landscaping: she likes “neat borders and smooth lawns.” Of course, a practical marriage does not necessarily mean there is consensual practicality. Henry’s landscaping preference would have included “a ruined temple” and “gloomily overhanging trees.” He is a brooder with a penchant for melancholy posing; he sleeps late, won’t pitch in with the work at church fund-raisers, is ill-prepared when called upon to deliver a proper prayer, and tends to break out into long poetical recitations at the most inapt moments. But to some extent it is true, as Belinda observes,

that “husbands and wives grow to be like each other.” Away on a recuperative holiday, Agatha sends Henry a letter that is “admirably practical” filled with “a long list of things he must not forget to do,” a letter so “unromantic” that he can show it to others and invite them to read it. Henry reciprocates this practicality upon her return, greeting Agatha, after not having seen her for a month, with a reproach for riding first class instead of in a more practical cheaper carriage. He kisses her, but “not very affectionately.”

And that brings us to the question of passion – in the sense of physical sexual attraction, with or without the action. As is usual with Pym, we’re given only the subtlest of clues.

In an earlier scene we read that Henry “kissed Agatha in a hasty, husbandly way.” Seemingly no passion there. But this is a public display, and it’s in front of Belinda, whose unabated crush on Henry is not exactly a secret. In fact, Belinda is actually “rather surprised” because she “had not thought that any outward signs of affection ever passed between them.” While this husbandly peck is hardly an indication of intimate sexual passion, perhaps Pym is telling us that there is more to this marriage than meets the public eye. For a moment later the notion of sexuality again comes to the fore. Trying to justify why the beloved curate and Reverend Plowman receive gifts (such as plums and homemade cakes and jellies) from the parishioners while his own unlovable self does not, Henry retains his needed sense of superiority by saying, dismissively, “I suppose it has something to do with celibacy,” implying that the curate and Plowman require these favors because they are not being satisfied in another, more manly way. This comment is uttered in the midst of a rare “cozy, domestic scene” with the Hoccleves, where they are unusually companionable and affectionate, and in supportive response to his remark: “Agatha smiled complacently. ‘Well, dear, people know that you are not in need of these things.’” Certainly not overt, but, at least arguably, the sexual innuendo is there.

Of course, the relative heat of the Hoccleve relationship is often in the eye or mind of the observer. The Bede sisters witness another kiss, or lack of a kiss, when Agatha leaves on holiday, and while Harriet thinks Henry is “pleased as Punch” to be rid of Agatha, Belinda, perhaps remembering the earlier kiss, suggests that “they said their real goodbyes in the house.”

Or is this just a fancy? The novel is most certainly replete with strong evidence that the passion between Henry and Agatha has morphed into a kind of perversion, the kind of passion that prefers suffering to sensuality. Belinda observes that Henry and Agatha “wished to outdo each other in self-denial”; they vie for bragging rights about skipping lunch. Belinda notes that “it was Agatha who suffered most,” and while Henry complains that Agatha makes “a martyr of herself,” Belinda believes that Agatha has developed rheumatism “out of self-defense.” Henry too advertises his suffering. He is very much the idler and yet he claims fatigue and sleeplessness from being over-worked and he pouts about being under-appreciated.

As for Belinda, her passion has “mellowed into a comfortable feeling, more like the coziness of a winter evening by the fire than the uncertain rapture of a spring morning.” Belinda’s passion has ebbed, but interestingly, marriage is not the culprit – those years of physical familiarity that are sometimes blamed for the loss of passion did not exist for her, and therefore played no part in it. For Belinda it’s a question of age, or perhaps a self-perception of age. Belinda considered herself to have been in her prime at the age of 25, but now “the fine madness of her youth had gone.” Her passion was spent “before she was thirty” and has atrophied for want of exercise. Her love is now “like a warm, comfortable garment, bedsocks, perhaps, or even woolen combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance.” Ever contemplating the lyrics of certain hymns, Belinda believes that “we shall be purged of all earthly passions in that *other* life.” In this regard, Belinda has attained a kind of heaven here on earth, for this purging of passion has already happened to her.

If not passion itself, Belinda has at least a passionate imagination. Even when she sees Henry at his worst, in his tirade about the moth damage to his suit, Belinda thinks, “he looked so handsome in his dark green dressing-gown with his hair all ruffled. The years had dealt kindly with him and he had grown neither bald nor fat.” His image is a constant delight to her eye. When she sees him “against a background of

Victorian stained glass,” she thinks “he looked splendid, and somehow the glass set off his good looks.” On another occasion, discussing a minor poet with Henry among the gravestones, Belinda is unable to keep up with her end of the conversation because she has gone off into a kind of trance, “thinking how handsome he still is. His long pointed nose only added to the general distinction of his features.” And during a church service she cannot “concentrate on her sins” because she is staring at Henry’s back and “reflected that he was still very handsome.” Belinda “still saw [Henry] as the beautiful young man he had been.” This attraction to physical beauty is an instinct she has not suppressed. She confesses, “I like to see beauty in other people.” When it is suggested that she means “beauty of character,” she says, “No, I mean beauty of person.” Throughout the novel she spends as much time mooning over Henry’s physical attractiveness as she does ruminating on his intellectual acuity. Belinda’s loss of passion has more to do with her feelings toward herself – her sense of being past her prime and dowdy in dress – more to do with her low self-esteem than with any lessened attraction to Henry.

If the Hoccleves’ marriage is one of practicality and questionable passion, the figurative marriage that plays so prominent a role in Belinda’s life is one of unilateral devotion. She can recite Henry’s remarks verbatim: “I always remember everything Henry says . . . Thirty years of it.” Indeed, she still wears light blue because Henry once told her more than thirty years ago that he liked her in this color. She “flushe[s] with embarrassment and secret pleasure” when he glancingly thanks her for “put[ting] up with” his “ill-humour”; this trifling compliment leaves her feeling “somehow exalted.” When Henry has delivered his Judgment Day sermon, so insultingly condemnatory that some of the parishioners actually wave away the passed collection plate “with an angry gesture,” Belinda tells herself, “loyally,” that “it had really been one of the finest sermons she had ever heard him preach.” At other times her mind jumps to sentimental memories of the “crimson socks” Henry bought in Vienna thirty years earlier, and the fact that she had darned Henry’s socks before Agatha “had ever set eyes on him.” Later Belinda mends Henry’s sock while he is still wearing it. In this pose she evokes an iconic image of the devotional figure – a kneeling woman tending to the weary feet of her Lord. The near-religious nature of her devotion to Henry is reinforced. Henry, we are told, “submit[s] himself to her ministrations” – certainly a charged phrase, and not only in the sexual sense: it resounds with the locutionary construct of the King James Bible. When Henry calls this ministration “exquisite,” Belinda goes “quite pink with pleasure and confusion.”

The opposite of devotion – paired in alliterative terms – is dalliance. But Belinda does not dally; she never directs her devotion, in a romantic way, toward another. Her devotion gives her comfort; it’s reminiscent of old clothes she no longer wears, and she knows that she can no more “clear out” the closet of her emotions than she can willingly part with faded favorites from her wardrobe. She declines Bishop Grote’s marriage proposal for the best of reasons: “I don’t love you.” No need to make excuses there. But Bishop Grote is not put off. He does not accept this as an adequate reason and challenges her, observing that at their age love is not something to be “expect[ed].” Belinda responds with an even stronger reason for rejecting him: “I did love somebody once,” she says, “and perhaps I still do.” Old love lingers; and for that reason, it is only new love that is not to be expected. Again this notion of the religious vow crops up – Belinda has dedicated herself to Henry, she has given herself to him in a spiritual marriage, and as his figurative bride, she is not free to marry another.

Agatha, on the other hand, is enticed toward a mild version of dalliance. She returns from her stay at Karlsbad looking “*splendid*” and she is noted to be “in very good spirits.” Not so much, as it turns out, because of the curative powers of the German waters, but because she has found someone on whom to “beam” – the same Bishop Grote whom Belinda will later reject. When Belinda learns of the apparent role reversal for Agatha’s and Henry’s engagement – that it was Agatha who popped the question – she tells Agatha that she herself could never “take on the responsibility” of asking a man to marry her for fear she might meet “somebody else afterwards.” Agatha admits, “That can happen. One wonders how often it *does* happen when one knows that it *can*.” By Agatha’s response we are given to understand that this has indeed now happened to her. Her affections have strayed. She has had the experience of meeting a man whom she might have preferred to her husband. But she is married, and she is not free to act on her feelings.

This freedom – to pursue some other object of affection – has not been lost on Belinda’s sister Harriet. After Henry jokingly remarks that being single gives one the freedom to be late for lunch, Harriet says that, “if he were single *now*, he might have discovered that there were even greater advantages,” alluding to Belinda’s potential availability. The freedom of infatuation is Harriet’s motif – for the past 30 years she has been flirting with a succession of young curates. As with Agatha and Belinda, her interaction with the deservedly maligned Bishop Grote is instructive. Harriet “had certainly been very much in love with him” when he was “a willowy curate in his 20’s,” an early specimen in a long line of such “cherished” men; lest we be tempted to consider Harriet’s series of crushes immature and girlish, Bishop Grote gives us a not-very-pleasant insight into what “the unknown trials of matrimony” to one of these curates might have had in store for her. These “tall, pale men” do not age well. Bishop Grote, at 57 or 58, considers himself to have reached his “riper years,” echoing Dr. Purnell’s notion that a man “on the threshold of 60” “needs a woman to help him into his grave” – while the ever-irrepressible Harriet considers 60 to be “the Prime of Life.” And so we see that Harriet might be too easily dismissed as a mild case of arrested development. Perhaps she has been wise not to advance her romantic life beyond the stage of innocent infatuations, for she has escaped this attitudinal “*doddery*” – her word – for which she expresses such emphatic disdain.

Like his wife, Henry is himself no slouch at affectionate wanderings. Agatha is very much his intellectual equal, and although he recognizes this, suggesting that she might like to resume her academic research, his petty and puerile emotions often default to the less clever Belinda simply because she dotes on him. And this is notwithstanding the fact that the first time he strayed it was in the opposite direction – from Belinda, whom he courted for 5 years, to Agatha, whom he married. Now in his late 50’s it was one of his “grievances that people never made a fuss of him,” and his thoughts keep “going back to the days when Belinda’s frank adoration had been so flattering.” He thought of Belinda as “a nice, peaceful creature” compared to Agatha. He laments that “Agatha never asked him to read aloud to her when they were home together in the evenings,” and he is sometimes nostalgic for “the old days” when he used to read to Belinda. Henry wistfully remarks to Belinda how different it is when Agatha is away, and he says with a sigh, “But there it is. We can’t alter things, can we?” Of course, any regret he feels for marrying Agatha instead of Belinda is based in no small part on having “forgotten how bored he had been by [Belinda’s] constancy.” What he is really looking for is someone who will be fully indulgent of his moodiness. In Agatha’s absence, when Belinda feels “justified in adopting a wifely tone towards him,” – that he’ll catch cold brooding in the cemetery sitting on a damp bench – he responds “irritably,” thinking “it was just the kind of remark Agatha would make.” Henry resents these marital patterns by which husbands and wives rightfully encourage each other toward healthful and reasonable behavior. It is his desire to be indulged that has caused his affections to wander. Even Belinda recognizes that Henry doesn’t really “prefer her to Agatha”; it’s just that she is “the one he hadn’t married.” Henry wants a relationship based on poetry rather than practicality.

In *Some Tame Gazelle*, we see that marriage has its problems, but that these problems are not necessarily avoided by remaining single. Because she is married to Henry, Agatha is barred from Bishop Grote, the man she wants, while Belinda is barred from the man she wants, Henry, because they have not married. And while Henry resents his wife Agatha’s practicality, when Belinda speaks to him in a practical way, he resents her too. But in addition to problems, marriage has its privileges, and some of these privileges remain exclusive to the marriage. Belinda thinks to herself: “I love him more than Agatha does,” and yet it was Agatha, not Belinda, who “had the privilege of seeing [Henry] in his bath.”

Yet even though she is single, Belinda is not entirely denied such intimate domestic pleasures, for the enduring close connection in her life is with her ever-sensuous and happy sister Harriet. Preparing for an evening of entertaining, Belinda watches Harriet “splashing about in the tub like a plump porpoise,” the room “filled with the exotic scent of bath salts.” From the bath, Harriet appraises Belinda: “Yes, you look very nice,” she says, “but I think I should use some more lipstick if I were you. Artificial light is apt to make one look paler.” “Oh, no, Harriet, I don’t think I can use any more,” Belinda responds. “I shouldn’t really feel natural if I did.” Whether rejecting unwanted suitors, or flirting with non-suitors, or pining for

a long lost love, the sisters have indeed found the way of living that is natural to them – the very thing other people look for, and many find, in marriage – a harmonious joining together, a cohabitation in which they feel secure and loved.