

Can Excellent Women Marry?

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Unlike the other novels we are looking at today, *Excellent Women* presents views of marriage through a first-person narrator. Mildred Lathbury, a “spinster” at the ripe old age of thirty, gives much thought to this institution in which she has never partaken, and to which she has not had a great deal of exposure. As Diana Benet points out in *Something to Love*, “her set...consists of women, older men and young boys...” But because Mildred has been so little tainted by the realities of marriage, she is free to conceptualize and define her ideas without worrying about the actualities of burnt saucepans and demanding careers. And when she does witness a marriage first-hand, it is as a third party; her views are not influenced by the very real existence of a spouse.

Excellent Women is set in the London Parish of St. Mary’s, where Mildred’s social circle involves a close friendship with Father Mallory, the parish’s unmarried vicar. Two events disturb Mildred’s placid, if somewhat predictable, existence. First, an unusual married couple, Rockingham (Rocky) and Helena Napier, rents the flat below Mildred’s. Their marriage is unconventional: Rocky attends to things domestic – the cooking and housekeeping – while Helena pursues a demanding career in anthropology. Each, we suspect, has been unfaithful to the other, if not in the flesh, then at least in spirit – Rocky while serving his country (and himself) in the navy during World War II, and Helena while doing field work with her anthropologist colleague, Everard Bone. The complication is that eventually Mildred herself begins to feel romantic stirrings toward both Rocky and Everard. Second, the vicar takes on an attractive widow, Allegra Gray, as a boarder. Allegra dupes the vicar into proposing to her, and the parish congregants feel sympathetic toward Mildred, wrongly thinking that she loves the vicar. When the vicar’s engagement falls through, Mildred must face the expectation that she will be the vicar’s second choice.

Mildred is a self-described “excellent woman.” She is “involved or interested in other people’s business.” She is “capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life.” Most important, she will do so while “expecting very little, nothing, really” for herself. Hers is a life of observation, not of action: “Perhaps I really enjoyed other people’s lives more than my own,” she says. The implication is that excellent women do not marry. Her chum Dora’s brother William, a confirmed bachelor, tells her over lunch, “I always think of you as being so very balanced and sensible, an excellent woman. I do hope you’re not thinking of getting married?” “Oh, no, of course not!” she says, for she believes that “it was not the excellent women who got married.” The Napiers’ marriage and the vicar’s failed engagement influence the evolution of Mildred’s self-perception from that of an excellent woman who will never marry, to that of a woman who very well might.

As she perks up her appearance, men start to notice her and she attracts the attention of Julian Mallory and Everard Bone. Both begin to see her as a potential wife. We see Mildred transformed: although she was once satisfied to reminisce about a failed youthful romance, believing that “love was rather a terrible thing...not perhaps my cup of tea,” by the end of the novel she’s entertaining thoughts of marrying Everard Bone. But do her ideas about marriage also evolve? Can excellent women marry? These two questions are resolved simultaneously.

Initially, Mildred holds a fairly traditional idea of marriage. When Helena states that Rocky cooks because she is too busy, Mildred thinks: “Surely wives shouldn’t be too busy to cook for their husbands?” And when Helena is not home to greet Rocky upon his return from service in Italy, Mildred thinks, “Wives ought to be waiting for their husbands when they come back from the wars.” But though she accepts this sense of wifely duty, she cannot reconcile herself to the fact that most marriages appear to be dull. Following a class reunion, she does not envy her married schoolmates, whose sole concern was “the

ring on the left hand.” Mildred is all too aware that it was “nearly always...an uninteresting ring,” and she is sure that “the husbands were also of this variety.” Through Rocky and Helena, Mildred is exposed to a marriage very different from that to which she is accustomed. Although this does not necessarily alter her views on marriage, it does broaden her horizons and helps her step away from the sidelines – from observer to participant. She maintains her initial sense of what a marriage *should be* – her ideas of duty – but she is no longer tied to the assumption that marriage *need be* dull.

The Napiers appear to have very little in common. They “met at a party during the war and fell in love in the silly romantic way people did then.” Now that the international drama has passed, these differences are not so endearing. In fact, before Rocky even appears on the scene, Helena reveals to Mildred that they probably “will go [their] own ways. That’s how most marriages turn out and it could be worse.” Mildred later reflects that, “Such married couples as I knew...did not talk about their difficulties to comparative strangers.”

Almost immediately upon meeting Rocky, Mildred senses that he is the type who would appeal, and be attracted, to the opposite sex, regardless of his marital status. These suspicions are confirmed on the train returning from her school reunion; Mildred meets a Wren officer who knew Rocky in Italy and describes him as: “the most glamorous Flags in the Med. People used to fall in love with him but it only lasted a month or two usually. After that, one saw what a shallow kind of person he really was. He used to take people up for a week and then drop them,” and “of course, he had an Italian girlfriend.” Rocky later implicitly confirms this description of himself: “Once you get into the habit of falling in love you will find that it happens quite often and means less and less.”

Helena herself is no angel. While it’s unclear whether she knows the full extent of Rocky’s dalliances, Helena makes no attempt to conceal her affection for Everard Bone. She confides to Mildred that she and Everard have a “special link” because of their mutual work and that this would naturally predispose them to a more intimate relationship. Later Helena stoops to catty comments when Everard pays attention to Mildred: “You and Everard seemed to be having an interesting conversation...Was he declaring himself or something?” Rocky certainly knows what’s going on. Everard and Helena have just presented a paper about polygamous cultures, and Rocky can’t resist commenting: “I wonder if the study of societies where polygamy is commonplace encourages immorality... Do anthropologists tend to have many wives at one time?” Yet Rocky does not appear to be threatened or alarmed by his wife’s flirtation. In fact, when Helena leaves him, he is more horrified by the mess she has left than by her departure. Mildred asks where she could have gone, and he responds coolly, “To Everard Bone, I suppose.” He declines Mildred’s offer to telephone friends to try to locate her: “Oh, don’t bother. One can’t go ringing people up all over London.” Not only is Rocky indifferent to Helena’s departure, he is actually sympathetic when Everard rebuffs her: “Poor Helena. It was one of those sudden irrational passions women get for people. She is completely disillusioned now. When he should have been near at hand to cherish her she found he had fled to a meeting of the Prehistoric Society in Derbyshire.”

The Napiers’ relationship does not seem to espouse any of the values traditionally associated with marriage. This is certainly a marriage of equals, but instead of each bringing something of moral, psychological or economic value to the relationship, both husband and wife are equally capable of engaging in infidelities, and neither seems willing to back down in the course of their many fights and squabbles. This is also a marriage where the roles have been reversed. Rocky is the stay-at-home cook, concerned with domestic arrangements and outraged by Helena’s inept messiness. He laments that his new cottage “needs a woman’s hand, and Helena isn’t really interested. Perhaps I never should have married her.” Helena, on the other hand, has an intellectually challenging job and is annoyed that Rocky “knows nothing about anthropology and could care less.” The entire relationship is one of passion, almost to the exclusion of any sense of practicality. Saucepans burn tables, dishes pile up in the sink, casseroles are dropped on the floor because oven mitts are missing, and furniture is eaten by woodworm. The apartment is chaos, and to the extent that marriage is supposed to facilitate domesticity, the Napiers are an utter failure. They thrive on

drama – the anger generated by their constant arguments, the upset of Helena’s leaving Rocky, the excitement fostered by extramarital affairs – all these things are needed to sustain the relationship, to replace the initial passion that flourished during the war.

After Rocky and Helena reunite and leave the flat for Rocky’s cottage in the country, Mildred reflects: “It seemed that husbands and wives could part and come together again, and I was glad that it should be so, but what happened after that? It is said that people are refined and ennobled by their suffering and one knows that they sometimes are, but would Helena have learned to be neater in the kitchen, or Rocky to share her interest in matrilineal kin-groups? It seemed as if this was at once too little and too much to expect from the experience they had been through.” Through the Napiers, Mildred witnessed a reckless marriage, one that challenged her traditional views. But although they opened her eyes to the possibility that marriages can be of many kinds, the Napiers’ particular variety of marriage goes too far for her. Mildred still believes in the traditional virtues and duties; what the Napiers have shown her is that marriage need not necessarily be dull. Mildred is now ripe to entertain the possibility of a marriage that honors the basic duties and is nevertheless interesting.

Perfect timing for Everard Bone. Even early on, Mildred observed that, “There was certainly nothing romantic about him, but was he perhaps just a little splendid?” Although she saw his virtues, she thought at first that he was not the kind who would appeal to an excellent woman: “His rather forbidding manner would be useful to him. I realized that one might love him secretly with no hope of encouragement, which can be very enjoyable for the young or inexperienced.” But then she accepts Everard’s off-hand and impromptu invitation to lunch. Until this point she has flirted with the idea of change only in a superficial manner: a new hat, new lipstick, more make-up, hair carefully arranged, a more colorful wardrobe. During their lunch conversation, the change begins to permeate her thinking. Everard has noted that Mildred is a “sensible person.” A short time later, when she asks him what his ideal wife would be like, he responds, “Oh, a sensible sort of person.” “Somebody who would help you in your work?” Mildred suggests. “Somebody with a knowledge of anthropology who could correct proofs and make an index?” Mildred has been referring to Everard’s colleague. He responds that she “is certainly a very capable person. An excellent woman altogether.” Mildred jumps on this. “You could consider marrying an excellent woman?” she asks in amazement. “But they are not for marrying.” “Poor things,” Everard says, “aren’t they allowed to have the normal feelings, then?” “Oh yes,” Mildred replies, “but nothing can be done about them.” She still resists the idea, but the seed of a notion has been planted.

Willing to consider that perhaps she is the marrying kind after all, Mildred meets her first opportunity when Julian Mallory’s engagement is broken off. On the rebound, Julian makes oblique overtures towards Mildred, testing the waters, and Mildred considers that it might possibly now be her duty to marry Julian. But the problem of dullness cannot be surmounted: “Somehow morning had not brought any more enthusiasm than the night before. Of course I liked and admired him, perhaps I even respected and esteemed him...But was that enough?” Mildred has been excited by Rocky, and this excitement has made the dullness of other men all the more unbearable. After Rocky reconciled with Helena, she knew she would miss his special allure, she “felt flat and disappointed, as if [Rocky] had failed to come up to my expectations. And yet, what had I hoped for? Dull, solid friendship without charm? No, there was enough of that between women and women and even men and women. Of course, if he had not been married...but this suggested a situation all too unreal to contemplate.”

As Mildred begins to settle her affection on Everard, she realizes that she is willing to accept the wifely duties that go with it. She will prepare his meat after all. She purchases a black dress and sweeps her hair back in preparation for their dinner date, “trying to make myself look like the kind of person who could not correct proofs or make an index.” She is disguising herself; clearly, she still does not quite believe that an excellent woman is marriageable. But later that evening she does agree to assist him by reading his proofs and preparing the index for his book. She has sensed something in Everard that allows her to remain an excellent woman.

Though even now she is not without ambivalence. She thinks to herself that, “before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up... Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all.” The burden might be lightened by the circumstances, and Mildred has found the circumstances that are agreeable to her – an intellectual engagement with her husband’s work. She is therefore willing to accept the less edifying obligation of the household. In the end, Mildred maintains her sense of duty as an excellent woman, but is now able to transfer that duty to those of a wife. Excellent women can, indeed, marry.