

'But I have that within that passeth show': The Polite Sufferings of Spinster Life in the Narrative Voice of *Excellent Women*

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Barbara Pym's books, characterised by church, parish or village life, by storms in teacups, by clerics and spinsters and librarians and beautiful, unreliable, fey young men, dramatic jumble sales and rain on a Sunday afternoon, are distinctively Pym in that they may seem the material for wry comedies of manners, but are so very much more. People habitually call them 'gentle, amusing, beguiling, sweet.' Make no mistake, Pym is a rigorous writer in the world of Larkin, Eliot, Kingsley Amis, Betjeman, Brookner and Murdoch and her novels reward rigorous reading.

Excellent Women is a funny book: a comedy of manners with laugh-out-loud moments, eccentric characters and everyday absurdities described to us with the dry wit of our narrator, 'that nice Miss Lathbury.' What makes it more than an amusing book, what makes it a fine novel, indeed (according to P.D. James) 'a perfect novel,' is that the foil to this humour is loneliness, anguish and emotional suffering.

This anguish is suffered by our heroine who, despite her strenuous attempts otherwise, is preoccupied with her post-War spinster status, 'the negative state.' Barely noticed by the man she falls for, she considers compromise rather than an empty life. Mildred is extraordinary among Pym narrators—not merely a first person narrator, she addresses the reader directly, even positing herself as observer and writer. We conflate Pym herself with Mildred more than with any other character and Mildred's understatement of her own feelings, her determination to conquer and dismiss her own distresses, can be seen as the attitude of Pym and her lack of luck in love. It is this very understatement, this gallant restraint, having 'that within which passeth show,' the very model of a modern unreliable narrator, which makes the novel so moving and so rich and its author/heroine so very excellent.

I myself, *Excellent Woman* or not, first came to Pym's work as a 6th Former, when I got my offer to read English at St Hilda's. I promptly grabbed a couple of Pym's to try. They happened to be *Crampton Hodnet* and *Excellent Women*. *Crampton Hodnet* was, of course, especially fun to read just before becoming an English undergrad at the very same college! *Excellent Women*... what I remember vividly upon first reading it was this passage which plunges us almost straight into encountering the vivid Helena Napier but, which is really more of an introduction to our humble narrator, Mildred :

We were, superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly. She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn skirt. Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her.

Reader, she had me at 'Jane Eyre' because, while I love Jane Eyre devotedly, as teenager I was aware that this love was a lot to do with sentimentality and romance and the triumph of the clever, plain girl getting the man, rather than for Bronte's brilliant usurping of the conventions of the Gothic novel in a literary struggle for female independence and identity! (I loved how Mildred/Pym makes fun of me/the reader for this, as if she spoke to me

directly from the page, pointing! What leapt out was Pym immediately positing Mildred as very aware of literary conventions and narrative. Anyway, we'll come back to that.)

So, to *Excellent Women*. Pym is forever being rediscovered, but she really is all around at the moment; name checked within the first few pages of Donna Tartt's latest epic, *The Goldfinch* (as a sign of flair, wisdom and all round awesomeness at that, with a copy of *Jane and Prudence* lying on the character's cashmere cardigan); *Excellent Women* itself was on BBC Radio 4's *A Good Read* a few of months ago; and at a talk celebrating an exhibition devoted to Pym at the Bodleian Library, no less than P.D. James singled out *Excellent Women* as 'a perfect novel.'

The basics: the book details the late 1940s/early 50s London life of Mildred Lathbury, 31, spinster. A clergyman's daughter adjusting to post-war life, Mildred keeps busy with her church, charity work, and friends. Into this apparent equilibrium spring her glamorous new neighbours the Napiers, career woman anthropologist Helena and dashing ex-naval officer Rockingham/Rocky. Through the Napiers, she meets another anthropologist, Everard Bone, a handsome but proud man to whom she is not attracted, initially. A sub-plot revolves around her friends Winifred and her brother, the local vicar, Julian Malory, who becomes engaged to a glamorous widow, Allegra Gray. Allegra attempts to oust Winifred. Meanwhile, Mildred occasionally meets her old friend Dora who vaguely hopes her brother, William, and Mildred will marry.

Everything ends happily. Allegra leaves the vicarage after a quarrel and Winifred is safe. In the meantime, Helena, who has been on the verge of leaving Rocky for Everard, accepts that Everard does not really care for her and leaves the neighbourhood, along with Rocky. Mildred comes to see more of Everard Bone and it seems that a proposal is imminent. Even William has his pigeons.

Good, except that Mildred fell in love with Rocky, hopelessly and foolishly and horribly in love. Helena (successful career woman or not) had been having an affair with Everard Bone who cast her off once she got serious and her husband reappeared. Rocky, as well as entertaining some number of WRNS whilst stationed out in Naples, had an Italian mistress and is almost certainly up to his old tricks whilst briefly separated from Helena. William is as content as a non-practicing homosexual, yearning for a life of romance ever out of reach, can be. And Mildred, who everyone thinks should make tea, make time, listen to woes, take in strays, cook roasts and marry the vicar (who is distinctly listless on the subject)—Mildred begins to resign herself to being wife-cum-cook-cum-editorial assistant to a man who does not love her and whom she does not love because, it is better than the sheer, grinding (and sexless) subservient loneliness and that is the lot of the unmarried woman. Hilarious!

Now, of course it *is* a funny book. (Julian Malory half-heartedly proposing while in his mackintosh and carrying a pair of ping pong bats. Mrs. Bone alone is an almost grotesque Dickensian comic figure: 'At least we can eat our enemies.')

In examining how *Excellent Women* is generally perceived, I think it is fair to say that received opinion is that it is a funny if touching book. The emphasis tends to be on the humour and only then on the poignancies. On Radio 4's *A Good Read*, the presenter Harriet Gilbert went further than some describing it as 'a very funny book and a heartbreakingly sad book at the same time.' Her other panellists were not on quite the same page, one was earnestly but patronisingly sorry for Harriet because 'She's sweet, she is soo sweet!' P.D. James rails against this idea of 'sweetness' and 'littleness' and quiet humour. I wonder what she made of Alexander McCall Smith's intro to the lovely Virago Modern Classics edition in 2008:

Excellent Women stands as one of the most endearingly amusing English novels of the twentieth century. Like Jane Austen, Barbara Pym painted her pictures on a small square of ivory, and covered much the same territory as did her better-known predecessor: the details of smallish lives... Neither used a megaphone; neither said much about the great issues of their time. In *Excellent Women* the reader is made aware...that not long before, there had been a war, but what that war was about is not touched upon... And yet, [Pym's novels] are powerful reminders of the fact that one of the great and proper concerns of literature is that motley cluster of small concerns that makes up our day-to-day lives.

Austen, however obliquely, wrote about the Napoleonic Wars in the context of nationalism and money and faith and God and marriage and love and the cold economics of love. She is not writing a historical novel, she is not Hilary Mantel who has to explain to you, however subtly and brilliantly, who Thomas More was before making him out to be such a baddun. Similarly with Pym, in *Excellent Women* we have a complex first person narrator who has just lived through World War II. It would be comically out of character if she turned around to the reader and gave us a little Wikipedia account of it. What she does do is give an evocative portrait of post-war austerity London life—its privations, its ruins, vast nightmarishly impersonal self-service capps, lonely secretaries in bedsits, shared bathrooms on the landing, the little woman making coffee on a Primus stove in the ruined aisle of St Ermin's—and she writes about the seismic shift in class and money and status experienced by the whole nation, but thrown into sharp relief by the pace, the anonymity, and the brutality of London life. Most trenchant of all, through Mildred, Pym tells the story of a whole generation of post-war women widowed, literally or figuratively, by the war that decimated the generation of their future husbands and lovers, their place in the home altered forever, the notion of 'home' altered forever, finding their way in a new society, new workplaces, new feminism, but still defined by the old order: spinster of this parish. I wouldn't call that a 'motley cluster of small concerns!'

McCall Smith does acknowledge that this is a fine if very specific portrait of London. He does praise it for what says about human aspirations and the poignancy of unfulfillment, but then he goes and spoils it:

That world of vague longing...which shows us not only the poignancy of such hopes, but allows us to smile at them. One does not laugh out loud when reading Barbara Pym; that would be too much. One smiles.... It is these asides, I think, that make *Excellent Women* so beguiling.

Asides?! I have laughed out loud reading Pym, often whilst on public transport, and I'm even less genteel than that as it's more often a snort; I certainly snorted when I read that.

'Vague longing'? It is not vague; Mildred wants love and sex and a man of her own, a partner, a significant other, and this is not even precise enough; it's Rocky, she wants Rocky, she falls in love with Rocky. 'Shock, grief, longing, bewildered, buffeted, lost'—not so much smiling there. I think McCall Smith takes Mildred too literally. Because she smiles bravely, we readers should be more aware of the effort it takes her to do so. But, I am not convinced that McCall Smith is all that adept at reading a slightly slippery female voice. The famous 'two inches of ivory' quote comes from Austen's letter to her beloved nephew James:

What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow? — How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?

Oh come on, McCall Smith, she's a genius, a towering literary genius, and woman of wit and tact buttering up her nephew and letting him down lightly.

Compare then the assessment of Philip Larkin. Undoubtedly one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century if not one of the greatest poets, full stop, Larkin became a friend and then a champion of Pym, but only after he became a fan of her work. And he was not uncritical; in their many letters he does take her to task about certain too familiar tropes and characters, almost laziness, in her work. So, on any level, we can respect his views, and his vary a great deal from those of McCall Smith.

On 1 Oct 1961 Larkin writes to Monica, his on/off life partner, when he first starts writing to Pym:

Wrote 3 letters to BP before feeling satisfied with it, becoming progressively more impersonal. Do you think she has many admirers? I have looked at EW again and think it very good; that it has the large white rabbit thrust suddenly into one's arms in it. (What Mildred says when Everard describes unwanted gift of the love of Helena Napier.)

They correspond, and in Feb 1964 he wrote to Monica, 'B Pym wrote... she says she was a WRN officer in Italy during the war! I thought there was something a bit plangent about that Rocky Napier stuff.'

14 July 1964, in a letter to Barbara, he re-rereads EW and finds it 'even better than I remembered it, full of a harsh kind of suffering... It's a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state's natural clothing—time and time again one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cab horse.'

Larkin identifies two characteristics of the novel here, the first being that the narrative is not obvious, that emotions 'seem' rather than being presented, that the reader has to be alert to them, and the second that Mildred is classed as being below other people.

Throughout the book Mildred is treated by others as second class citizen: Helena, Rocky, Everard, even Julian take for granted that she can have no life of her own but, must be available, happy, privileged even to make tea, stay in for the removal men, and listen to the woes of others, implicitly more important than any of her own. Mildred is as bad as everyone else; in the second sentence of the book she says that Mr Mallet 'made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.' Not only this, people are always trying to marry her off, or find out why she isn't married, or who she might marry '“Oh, she'll marry,' said Rocky confidently. They were talking about me as if I wasn't there.' And if she really *isn't* going to marry anyone, then why shouldn't Winifred move in with her as, not being married, her own concerns can be of no substance?

This is, of course, the attitude of the monstrous, controlling, undermining, passive-aggressive Allegra Grey who, having snared Julian, is ruthlessly reorganising his life to her taste and tries to foist Winifred onto Mildred, the implication being that Mildred and Winifred (ten years her senior), both with no prospect of marriage or passion or anything much, may as well endure their grey lives together.

The lunch and the feeling of Allegra preying upon Mildred is distressing. Don't miss this distress, this claustrophobia, even though it is, with a typically Pym technique, undercut by comedy, the rather pathetic comedy, of the Hawaiian Fire.

The room seemed suddenly very hot and I saw Mrs Gray's face rather too close to mine, her eyes wide open and penetrating, her teeth small and pointed, her skin a smooth apricot colour.

'I don't think I could do that,' I said, gathering up my bag and gloves, for I felt trapped and longed to get away.

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

‘No, I’m not,’ I said ungraciously, for nobody really likes to be called a dear. There is something so very faint and dull about it...

I had a feeling I must escape and longed to be lost in a crowd of busy women shopping, which was why I followed blindly the crowd that surged in through the swinging doors of a large store. Some were hurrying, making for this or that department or counter, but others like myself seemed bewildered and aimless, pushed and buffeted as we stood not knowing which way to turn... There was a mirror on the counter and I caught sight of my own face, colourless and worried-looking, the eyes large and rather frightened, the lips too pale. I did not feel that I could ever acquire a smooth apricot complexion but I could at least buy a new lipstick, I thought, consulting the shade-card... The girl behind the counter...said at last, ‘What shade was it you wanted, dear?’ ...

‘It’s called Hawaiian Fire,’ I mumbled, feeling rather foolish, for it had not occurred to me that I should have to say it out loud.

‘Oh, Hawaiian Fire. It’s rather an orange red, dear,’ she said doubtfully, scrutinising my face. ‘I shouldn’t have thought it was quite your colour.’... She looked at me blankly, as if no shade could really do anything for me...

‘Thank you, but I think I will have Hawaiian Fire,’ I said obstinately, savouring the ludicrous words and the full depths of my shame. I hurried away and found myself on an escalator. Hawaiian Fire, indeed! Nothing more unsuitable could possibly be imagined.

This perception of Mildred, by others and often by herself, as a second-class citizen is distilled in her hopeless love for Rockingham Napier. Mildred, like Larkin’s Victorian cab horse, endures ‘the unconscious hurts,’ the slights and impositions daily and usually with a certain rueful good humour. The episode with Allegra is shocking to her, all the more so because her usual equilibrium, her sense of daily making do, has already been rocked (if you will forgive me). In falling for Rockingham she experiences the pain not only of not having him, but of being forced by it to her to examine her customary loneliness.

Throughout the novel we have to be alert to realise Mildred’s increasing love for Rocky, though her interest in him is clear from the beginning. Even before he appears Mildred, and thus the reader, are predisposed to make him the hero. ‘Rockingham! I snatched at the name as if it had been a precious jewel in the dustbin.’ She sees his artificiality, his shallowness, his stupidity really (he is not a clever man), and that his kindness blurs into not so much using other people, but smoothing their way for his own comfort. In this way Mildred’s vision of the WRNs clustered around Rocky on the Admiral’s veranda, awkward and adoring in their ill-fitting uniforms, becomes a cipher for his dangerous surface charm and lack of sincerity. After she finds out about the Italian mistress she is increasingly on her guard: ‘I was careful to say to myself “Italian girlfriend!”’ Of course Rocky is aware, even complacent about his own shortcomings, seeing even in them a sort of glamour and worldly wisdom ‘Once you get into the habit of falling in love you will find that it happens quite often and means less and less.’

Mildred’s efforts at self-protection are largely in vain. At lunch with William, under the influence of the Spring and the Nuits St George, she cannot resist bringing conversation round to the only thing on her mind, the Napiers: ‘I heard myself, to my horror, murmuring something about Rocky Napier being just the kind of person I should have liked for myself.’ William is surprised and horrified but other, more emotionally intact people, can see it already. Mrs. Morris rather darkly remarks, ‘Not that you’d want to marry a man who’s been divorced.’

This is when Rocky and Helena have separated and we have seen the real anguish this has wrought in Mildred. Rocky cavalierly takes off to the country cottage assuming Mildred will deal with the removal men. The pain is acute though still understated, and then Mildred isn’t even allowed that, the one time *she* gingerly allows

that she is in pain and in need of comfort this status is taken from her. It is comic, but the comedy is more painful than the Hawaiian Fire episode:

I wondered if he would suggest that we had tea together before he went, but he did not say anything and somehow I did not feel inclined to offer to make any. I suppose I did not want him to remember me as the kind of person who was always making cups of tea at moments of crisis...

After he had gone I stood looking out of the window until his taxi was out of sight.

The effects of shock and grief are too well known to need description and I stood at the window for a long time. At last I did make a cup of tea but I could not eat anything. There seemed to be a great weight inside me and after sitting down for a while I thought I would go into the church and try to find a little consolation there... I hoped that if I sat there quietly I might draw some comfort from the atmosphere... I was half unconscious of my surroundings now and started when I heard a voice calling my name.

'Miss Lathbury! Miss Lathbury!... You were sitting so still, I thought perhaps you'd had a turn.'...

'No, I'm all right, thank you,' I said, smiling at Miss Statham... 'I was just thinking something over.'

'Thinking something over? Oh, dear...' she let out a stifled giggle and then clapped her hand over her mouth fearfully. 'I'm sorry, Miss Lathbury, I didn't mean to laugh really. Only it seemed a bit funny to be sitting here on a nice afternoon thinking things over. Wouldn't you like to come home with me and have a cup of tea?'

'Shock and grief', not upset, not sadness, 'shock and grief'—language of bereavement.

Of course, Rocky breezes back into her life, casually revealing that he and Helena are reunited and simultaneously ruining his gift of flowers 'Helena said I must bring you some flowers and these happened to be in the garden.' They discuss Helena and Everard, but isn't Mildred really thinking of herself? And there is a sense here that Rocky, for once, recognises her love and is kind, that they almost understand each other, for a moment; then it is gone, over.

'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! Do you know how that happens?'

'You mean being disillusioned? Yes, I think I could see how it could. Perhaps you meet a person and he quotes Matthew Arnold or some favourite poet to you in a churchyard, but naturally life can't be all like that,' I said rather wildly. 'And he only did it because he felt it was expected of him. I mean, he wasn't really like that at all.'

'It would certainly be difficult to live up to that, to quoting Matthew Arnold in churchyards,' said Rocky. 'But perhaps he was kind to you at a moment when you needed kindness—surely that's worth something?'

'Oh, yes, certainly it is.' Once more, perhaps for the last time, I saw the Wren officers huddled together in an awkward little group on the terrace of the Admiral's villa. Rocky's kindness must surely have meant a great deal to them at that moment and perhaps some of them would never forget it as long as they lived.

She closes the book on him and he will never know how she loved him once and will, in some way, be changed by that, always. But, not, of course, in the way you might expect! Because

After he had gone I stood looking out the window after him. I seemed to remember that I had done this before, and not so very long ago. But my thoughts on that occasion, though more melancholy had been somehow more pleasant. Now I felt flat and disappointed, as if he had failed to come up to my expectations. And yet, what had I really hoped for?

A couple of weekends ago I had to sit back and admit I was in a muddle. I was going round and around in circles: Mildred loves Rocky, but bears no illusions about him, except that she does because she is disillusioned. Mildred's idea of love is realistic—she may be inexperienced herself, but was a censor in the war (like Pym) and has read hundred of illuminating personal letters—so she gently mocks Winifred's limp green suede copy of Christina Rossetti; then later, she admits that she too has an identical copy. She dislikes Everard, she almost hates him; she almost marries him. She experiences unbearable pain when Rocky leaves; she reflects that this pain was actually quite pleasant. Maddening! Ah, epiphany, what a fool. Mildred is an unreliable narrator, she has 'that within which passeth show', she is only behaving the way she was written. Unreliable not in the sense of being a liar or a psychopath or a trickster (see *Lolita*, *American Psycho*, *Catcher In the Rye*, *Tristram Shandy*) but more in the terribly English restraint of Mr Stevens of *The Remains of The Day*; a remarkably complex narrative where the reader is far more aware of the narrator's deep emotions than the character himself. (There was a beautifully realised scene in the film which had whole cinemas on the edges of their seats silently shouting 'Kiss her, kiss Emma Thompson!') Mildred is unreliable in that she is unforthcoming, and she is unforthcoming because it is in her character as an English almost-gentlewoman, but also for two more fundamental reasons: she is not entirely sure of her own opinions and emotions, and she is not entirely convinced that she is entitled to have any!

Over and over Mildred second-guesses her readers, or just does not share with us. A simple example: she doesn't tell us that she has made a marked difference, not to say improvement, in her appearance. It takes other characters' comments to tell us that; only then does she admit it to us, the readers. What is the effect of this? It is as if she is ashamed of changing herself, ashamed that encountering Rocky has made her want to appear and feel more attractive, and there is also, as always with the cab-horse, a sense that she does not deserve to look or feel better. In this she only straight with us at the very end when she tries, when going to visit Everard, to look like a woman who couldn't possibly do indexing. She buys a black dress and re-does her hair, only to achieve exactly the look of a woman who does indexing. Which is funny; Mildred shares more when she can make it comic at her own expense. Larkin wrote,

What a marvellous set of characters it contains. My only criticism is that Mildred is a tiny bit too humble at times, but perhaps she is satirising herself. I never see any Rockys but every young academic wife ('I'm a shit') has something of Helena.

[I've puzzled over this 'I'm a shit' a few times and I think there has been a mistake in the progress from the original letter to the published version. I think he means 'I'm a slut', quoting Helena, who says it twice, proudly, meaning that her life is too full and passionate and exciting to bother about cleaning.]

So, 'perhaps she is satirising herself.' Again, Larkin recognises the question mark over Mildred's reliability in relating what she 'seems' to do and feel and it is vital, in order to appreciate the book as a fine novel, for the reader to persist in asking.

In this way *Excellent Women* is a thoroughly modern novel, one which requires work from the reader. And why should we bother, why does Pym do it and what is in it for us? I would argue that it makes the comedy funnier and the sadness sadder. A more critical assessment would be to consider Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). It seems especially simpatico because it is in the language of love, by which I do not merely mean that it is in French. Barthes divides the effects of texts into two: 'pleasure' and 'bliss', but in French it carries the meaning of sexual bliss. The *readerly* text is a more straightforward narrative that does not challenge the reader's position as a subject. Our experience reading it is 'pleasure'. The *writerly* text allows the reader to break

out of his subject position, to engage, extrapolate, question, and this experience, this realisation of the text within yourself, this is 'bliss.'

'I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her.' Surely this is self-satire, which is not exactly to say Mildred thinks it is entirely untrue. The more you consider Mildred, the more complex she becomes. Pym continually posits her as narrator, writer, anthropologist:

My thoughts went round and round and it occurred to me that if I ever wrote a novel it would be of the 'stream of consciousness' type and deal with an hour in the life of a woman at the sink. [Perhaps this is a clue as to how to read, reminding us that it is perfectly possible to fill a novel with only an hour of apparently mundane human experience, so, dismiss nothing!]

Mimosa did lose its first freshness too quickly to be worth buying and I must not allow myself to have feelings, but must only observe the effects of other people's.

And not only is she an unreliable, unforthcoming narrator, she is a reluctant one too !

'We, my dear Mildred,' [says William], 'are the observers of life... Let Dora marry if she likes. She hasn't your talent for observation.'... It was not much of a compliment, making me out to be an unpleasant inhuman sort of person. Was that how I appeared to others? I wondered.

This otherness, this pressing your nose against the glass of Life, is then reinforced in William's office when he gestures towards the office block opposite:

...exposed as if it was a doll's house. Grey men sat at desks, their hands moving among files; some sipped tea, one read a newspaper, another manipulated a typewriter with the uncertain touch of two fingers. A girl leaned from a window, another combed her hair, a third typed with expert speed. A young man embraced a girl in a rough, playful way and she pulled his hair while the other occupants of the room looked on encouragingly...

'Ah, yes, the Ministry of Desire,' said William solemnly... 'They always look so far away, so not-of-this-world, those wonderful people,' he explained. 'But perhaps we seem like that to them.'

It seems very unlikely that they would, as what they would see is the pigeon-feeding. The contrast between this romantic idea and reality is comic but, also sad: 'One of the grey men looked up from his card-index and gave me a faint, as it were pitying, smile.' William, slightly embarrassed, says 'I feel like one of those rather dreadful pictures of St Francis...but it's a good feeling and one does so like to have that.'

And Mildred expresses our own reaction, 'there was something so unexpected and endearing about it.'

A question that tends to absorb readers and prolong discussion is 'What do we think about Everard Bone?' and, here again, awareness of Mildred's unforthcoming unreliability is crucial. (I rather fancy Everard Bone, more so than Mildred I think, whose relationship with the dry-as-the-proverbial Bone is a successive combination of dislike, pity, admiration, attraction and resignation.)

'Of course,' he went on, with a note of warning in his tone, 'I shall probably marry eventually.'

'Yes, men usually do,' I murmured.

'The difficulty is finding a suitable person.'

'Perhaps one shouldn't try to find people deliberately like that,' I suggested. 'I mean, not set out to look for somebody to marry as if you were going to buy a saucepan or a casserole.'

They then have the quite sensible conversation about Excellent Women, marriage and ‘the other things’—Everard alludes to sex! But his next move is to call her up for dinner, well, to come round and cook dinner, that night, because he’s got some meat in!

The portrait of this relationship is driven by unreliable narration and awareness of literary convention. Mrs Bonner hopes Mildred is dressed for lunch with ‘that good-looking man you spoke to after one of the Lent services.’ Mildred hastily puts her right:

‘Oh, he’s not at all the kind of person I like.’ I said quickly. ‘And he doesn’t like me either, which does make a difference, you know.’

Mrs Bonner nodded mysteriously over her card index. She was a great reader of fiction and I could imagine what she was thinking.

Yes, as ever Pym/Mildred is alive and kicking against romantic fiction convention, in this case that the quarrelsome couple at odds with each other are bound to fall into each other’s arms at the end of the book. Of course, this does in a sense occur, but right here Pym warns us not to trust this potentially happy ending at its face value. Her vision of life with him that ends the book is, to say the least, ambivalent.

So Mildred is an unreliable narrator and Mildred is very easy to elide with Pym herself. And we come full circle to my title ‘But I have that within that passeth show’.

The quote within a quote (because this talk is nothing if not meta-textual) comes from a Pym letter and I confess that P.D. James flagged it up at a conference many years ago. I feel guilty that I have been referring to it ever since but, then again, so has P.D. James. She singles this letter out as revealing Pym the person as being inseparable from Pym the writer; the outsider, the observer, the singular, the narrator, the wry observer with the comic touch, resistant to self-pity.

Early in 1938 Pym wrote to Henry Harvey, recently married to Elsie. They are starting their new life in Finland and she is back home at Oswestry after Oxford, waiting for... life? War has not yet begun. She is 24.

Spring the sweet Spring, that season wherein everything renews itself,
even the unhappy lover Miss Pym.

Now it is Spring... And Miss Pym is looking out of the window – and you will be asking now who is this Miss Pym, and I will tell you that she is a spinster lady who was thought to have been disappointed in love, and so now you know who is this Miss Pym. Well now, as I am telling you, this Miss Pym is looking out of the window, and she is looking into the field opposite the house, where there are many lambs frisking, it being spring, the sweet spring, when maids dance in a ring. But this Miss Pym, although she is, so to speak, a maid, she is not frisking, no buddy, no how. She is seeing an old brown horse which is walking with a slow majestic dignity across this field, and she is thinking that it is the horse she will be imitating and not the lambs...

And now you are asking, what is this Miss Pym doing with herself in Oswestry? And I will tell you, she is writing, simply that. And she is writing a new novel, and Chapter One is nearly done... Darling Henry and more darling Elsie..you will be coming back to England, and you will be meeting this so dull spinster which is like the old brown horse walking with a slow majestic dignity, and you will be saying Well-fer-goodness-sake, Miss Pym, like they say in the films. But this spinster, this Barbara Mary Crampton Pym, she will be smiling to herself – ha-ha she will be saying inside. *But I have that within which passeth show* – maybe she will be saying that but, she is a queer old horse, this old brown spinster, so I cannot clearly forecast what she will be saying.

It's such a telling passage about Pym as a person and as writer, heavens she even talks about herself in the third person, she narrates herself! The quote is Hamlet when he is in deep mourning for his father. Gertrude thinks his mourning is long, too elaborate, but Hamlet says it is nothing to what he really feels:

...all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play.
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

In a funny, slightly silly letter to her ex-lover (who was then, and possibly always, the love of her life), only recently married to another woman, Barbara jokes, and while she jokes she quotes *Hamlet*, the most famous of all English tragedies. James is right that here is the wry humour, the hidden pain, the literary persona. What James has not done is take this to its logical critical conclusion: that Pym herself, even in her own letters, is an openly unreliable narrator.

In the office 3.55 pm. Even at this moment some dreadful thing may be happening – a husband deciding to leave his wife, a love affair being broken, somebody dying, languishing with hopeless love or quarrelling about The Church of India in the Edgware Road as I nearly did with Bob on Sunday. And I sit, typing, revising, translating ...

Barbara, the indefatigable observer, Pym the constant writer, Mildred, observer, writer, narrator and not at all like Jane Eyre. In being likewise constantly aware of Pym's understatement, of Mildred's gallant restraint, of the play of comedy and calamity, the reader will find *Excellent Women* rewarding on every level. Perhaps, with this insight, Mildred, the book, and Pym herself can be described rather as Mildred (at one point anyway) describes Everard Bone: not romantic, but 'just a little splendid.'

Triona Adams is a London-based theatrical agent, writer and performer. She read English at St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she was awarded The Rachel McClean College Prize and The Eleanor Rooke Award for English (named after Barbara Pym's own tutor, who used to make marmalade during tutorials and ask Barbara to stir). Her M.A. in Text and Performance is from Kings College, London, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. She spoke at the first official conference of the Barbara Pym Society and has been an active member ever since. In 2013 she edited a selection of the letters of Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin for performance at the Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival, taking the role of Pym, with Larkin played by Oliver Ford Davies.