

# A Close Look at Chapter 1 of *Excellent Women*

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‘Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there’s something happening!’ The voice belonged to Mr. Mallett, one of our churchwardens, and its roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.

‘New people moving in? The presence of a furniture van would seem to suggest it,’ he went on pompously. “I expect *you* know about it.”<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Barbara Pym has opened the curtains on Chapter 1 of *Excellent Women*. Soon we see before us a building with a basement, three stories and an attic, a set of steps leading up to the front door, some furniture and perhaps boxes waiting on the pavement, and the back of a delivery truck. Stage left we have Mr. Mallett, a churchwarden, teasing a lady and fellow parishioner because she is observing what is happening. That lady, our narrator, starts “guiltily” when he addresses her, as though she has been caught doing something shameful.

If she could have loosened her tongue a bit she might have shot back with “Don’t be ridiculous, Mr. Mallett. I’m in front of my own front door!” Instead she recovers her composure and, with understated eloquence, responds, “Well, yes, one usually does. It is rather difficult not to know such things.” So right away, we know that our narrator tends to be reticent and apologetic, but is able to bounce back and stand her ground.

The opening lines also hint that we are starting to read a novel of manners with that classic subject – the arrival of newcomers and the changes they might bring. We also know that we will be dealing with at least one tiresome man and at least one clever, but reserved, woman. Her name is Mildred Lathbury, described by John Updike as “one of the last of the great narrating English virgins.”<sup>2</sup>

With *Excellent Women*, Pym offers readers and even writers a splendid example of a strong opening chapter. By using carefully crafted dialogue and Mildred’s observations and asides, she neatly packs the first eight pages of the novel with her major themes – from clothing and housekeeping, to spinsterhood, the church, and anthropology. But more important, by the end of the chapter we care about Mildred and we want to find out what happens to her. So we keep reading.

Two papers presented at past meetings inspired me to put together my talk today. First, Jan Fergus gave a close reading of the opening paragraphs of *Quartet in Autumn* at the 2001 conference.<sup>3</sup> Then in 2007, Susan Lumenello spoke on “Barbara Pym’s Lessons for the Fiction Writer.”<sup>4</sup> Those two presentations have stayed with me all of these years. When I contacted Jan and Susan to see what they thought of my taking a close look at Chapter 1 of *Excellent Women*, they encouraged me. So here I am. I also feel sure that two Pymians who are here with us in spirit have cheered me along the way: my dear friend Frances McMeen and our own Ellen Miller.

In preparing this paper, I reread and listened to a recording of *Excellent Women* over and over ... and then over some more. I looked at many books and articles on Pym and her work. There is so much good material! But I also felt that I needed to look at drafts of *Excellent Women* in Pym’s papers at the Bodleian Library. Thanks to Yvonne Cocking’s expertise and guidance, I spent three days in Oxford going through two handwritten drafts of the novel and side notes, as well as the little notebooks Pym kept from 1948 through 1952, the year the novel was

published. I also looked for letters, articles, essays, or anything in which Pym described how she worked as a writer. But here I had less success, which isn't surprising.

I say this because Pym was not Henry James. The English critic John Bayley once noted that whereas James prepared retrospective prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels to explain "how it was done"—how he got the ideas for a story and went about writing it—Pym did not do the same. Furthermore, no matter how often we reread her novels, Bayley believes that "we can never fix our gaze on how she does it, on how she obtains her effects." Instead, "each time we read her she seems more real."<sup>5</sup>

I agree. Moreover I can understand why many of Pym's devoted readers might prefer *not* to know how she does it. We do not need to analyze her!<sup>6</sup> But as an editor myself for almost 30 years, I would like to figure how she makes her books so funny, so real, so comforting. I have no clear answers to present, but a close look at Chapter 1 of *Excellent Women* hints at how Pym did her work.

**Pym as editor.** One reason behind Pym's success as a novelist was her ability to edit her own writing—something she also loved doing. The 27 years she spent as an editor at the International African Institute meant that she couldn't work on her novels full time.<sup>7</sup> But editing manuscripts and essays sharpened her writing, and of course introduced her to the world of linguistics and anthropology—a world rich in comic material.<sup>8</sup> We can imagine Barbara at her desk, cigarette in hand, untangling knotted prose and striking out pompous wording (she hated "whilst" and "amongst" and we know what she thought of "commence"). Naturally, Barbara and her colleague Hazel Holt—who said that Barbara taught her how to be a good editor—enjoyed spotting amusing fragments in manuscripts they reviewed. They would also let their imaginations run a bit wild at times and make up stories about the scholars who regularly visited them. But they were very productive, even though they both typed with two fingers. I particularly like what Hazel wrote about Barbara's office persona:

Her general air of vagueness and tentativeness hid a formidable professionalism. She never seemed to hurry, there was always time for a chat—indeed, we had the reputation of never seeming to do any work; but, somehow, the work always was done. And well, and on time.<sup>9</sup>

**Pym as observer.** Even though Pym spent many years at the IAI, she had no great interest in anthropology or Africa. However, in editing the work of anthropologists, she learned to apply the techniques they used in her own writing. Not only did she jot down details, scenes, and scraps of overheard conversation in her little notebooks, giving herself a supply of material to insert in her novels, but her heroines carry out their own brand of fieldwork. We'll see Mildred do this in Chapter 1.

**Writing *Excellent Women*.** Based on the files I reviewed in Oxford, which Yvonne Cocking describes in *Barbara in the Bodleian*<sup>10</sup>, Pym made a general outline of the chapters in *Excellent Women* and wrote a first draft, much of it in note form, that she headed "A full life." Then she prepared another partial draft, which is the one I will always refer to in my talk. It is dated February 19, 1949, headed "No life of one's own," and has two other notations: "Spinster without ties...Inquisitive, willing to help others" and "the time the novel begins is February 1946."<sup>11</sup>

The basic structure of Chapter 1 is the same in the draft and the published version. However, Pym added many details to the final version and made it funnier. In general, I noticed that some of the other chapters in the draft were close to the final wording. And in a notebook I found where Pym had written a complete scene—I believe it was the meeting of the learned society—that remained almost untouched at publication. So certain vignettes may have just flowed from her pen.

This was not the case for Chapter 1. In fact, I think she might have made major revisions to it right before submitting the manuscript to Jonathan Cape. After all, in letters to friends she mentions how she loves “cutting out bits and crossing out whole pages,” noting that “revising and polishing could go on forever.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly Chapter 1 benefited from this passion, and we’ll look at some of the changes she made.

Someone said that all good comedy is basically serious, and subjects such as religion, anthropology, and certainly love can be made comical because they *are* so serious. Yet it is the exactness of Pym’s words that creates much of the humor and sets the tone of *Excellent Women*.<sup>13</sup> As the critic Annette Weld points out, the irony that identifies a Pym novel isn’t related to the plot but instead to dialogues and internal observations. Therefore readers “must observe in addition to scenes, the impact of single sentences, even single words.”<sup>14</sup>

Weld also notes how often Pym uses qualifying words both in a straightforward way and ironically. This allows her to avoid outright assertions, leaves room for error, and adds “an air of graciousness and tolerance to a bald pronouncement.”<sup>15</sup> We see this in the first words out of Mildred’s mouth: “Well, yes, one *usually* does. It is *rather* difficult not to know such things.” Likewise Weld notes that Pym has a fondness for understatement and the double negative.<sup>16</sup> She also tends to avoid adjectives but uses a lot of adverbs. So we have “guiltily,” “pompously,” “perversely,” “awkwardly,” “abruptly,” and so on.

Barbara Pym was a master at dialogue, knowing it needed careful editing and tweaking. She realized that an overheard remark might sound clever in real life, but not work in writing. And vice versa. In a talk she gave in 1956 on “The Novelist’s Use of Everyday Life,” Barbara said that she believed Jane Austen was brilliant with dialogue. But she noted that while the personality of Miss Bates comes out well for readers, we might not find her amusing if we actually heard her.<sup>17</sup>

We’ll also see Pym use various comic techniques in Chapter 1: using formal, stilted language when the subject is mundane, or generally putting the serious next to the frivolous. Thus we have, “I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life – birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fete spoiled by bad weather.”

**The cast of characters in Chapter 1.** Barbara Pym liked to work with lots of characters – a “crowded canvas” – and quite a few of the major ones in *Excellent Women* have a role in Chapter 1. We have Mildred and Helena, a brief appearance by Everard Bone, and then references to Rocky, Dora, and Winifred and Julian Malory. Even the mysterious donor, Mrs. Gray, is standing in the wings at the end.

**The vignettes and the soliloquies.** The 8-page chapter transitions smoothly and more or less chronologically, from vignette to vignette, with lots of moving about on the staircase. Along the way, Mildred turns to us several times to talk about her life. In these soliloquies, we learn that she is single, in her early 30s, and a clergyman’s daughter. We also find out why she chose St. Mary’s, and then listen to her explain how she came to London, roomed with Dora, and worked at the Censorship. Now she is on her own.

Looking at the various scenes, we start with Mildred and Mr. Mallett in front of her building. Next the stage rotates 180 degrees to show the rooms and the staircase inside, like a doll’s house. Mildred mounts the stairs to her kitchen, bypassing a chance to stop and meet Helena. In the afternoon she descends with her rubbish to the basement, where she meets Helena and learns a bit about that “precious jewel in the dustbin,” Rockingham.

Unexpectedly invited to tea by Helena, Mildred then climbs up to the Napiers’ sitting room where she has a chance to observe and gather information. At 6:00 she returns to her flat where she mulls over the newcomers and

dresses to go out to dinner. In the closing lines she goes back down the staircase, passing by Helena and the tall, fair man; and then leaves the building and heads to St. Mary's, where she takes a seat next to Winifred at Evensong.

Turning for a moment to the original draft of the chapter, it starts:

I first met Mrs. Napier when I was taking the rubbish down on Saturday afternoon. The dustbins in the basement were shared by the occupants of the two flats in the house and as the ground floor was let as offices I generally avoided those hours when I might have the embarrassment of meeting smartly dressed businessmen [when I was carrying] a bucket and waste paper basket.

Clearly Mr. Mallett's pompous remarks are a better way to get things rolling. Also, the details about how Mildred came to London and how she chose St. Mary's are at the very end of the chapter, after she leaves for Evensong. So in her revisions, Pym wove the background details more smoothly into the chapter, and made it more detailed, sharper, and funnier. We'll look at some specific changes as we move along.

**The role of "things."** Inside each scene, we pick up information about Mildred's surroundings. Pym thought trivialities were very important. In that talk she gave in 1956 about how novelists use everyday life, she noted that one of her favorite writers, Denton Welch, said "I wish that people would mention the tiny things of their lives that give them pleasure, or fear, or wonder – I would like to hear the details of their houses, their meals, and their possessions." And in that same talk, she said that the novelist's most important gift was "the power to describe ordinary things so that the reader finds his own sensibility increased and looks at his own everyday life in a new way."<sup>18</sup>

So in Chapter 1, we have references starting with a furniture van and ending with a church window. In between are Chippendale chairs, thickly sliced bread, tea in mugs, gin in mugs, little silver dishes, a walnut bureau, snow storms, plastic plates, and camp beds. Some of these items Mildred actually sees, but others live in her imagination.

This brings up a technique – almost a trick – that Pym often uses. We see the same technique in *Rebecca* by Daphne DuMaurier and throughout Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* sequence. Pym lets the imagination of her characters expand the plot beyond the scene at hand: For example, in listing the platitudes that flow from Mildred about the business of moving, Pym includes a lost teapot or frying pan. Thus she adds new details without altering the plot. Another example is the coffee and biscuits that Mildred tells us she had planned to serve Helena one evening, using her best coffee cups and little silver dishes. Helena herself adds more images to the story by imagining that the rectory where Mildred grew up had "stone passages, oil lamps, and far too many rooms."

Barbara Pym was probably thinking about these types of details and the random jottings in her notebooks in February 1979, when she was undergoing medical treatments and working on *A Few Green Leaves*. In her diary she writes, "In the afternoon I finished my novel in its first, very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore."<sup>19</sup> She hopes to live long enough to add to her manuscript the final touches that are her hallmark.

**Clothing.** Along with "things," clothes naturally play a major role in Chapter 1, as they will throughout *Excellent Women*. Pym wrote, "One wishes sometimes that Jane Austen had given us more detail about her heroines' clothes – what for example did Emma wear, when she went to dinner at the Coles'?"<sup>20</sup> When she meets Helena by the dustbins, Mildred is embarrassed that she is wearing a shapeless overall and old fawn skirt; but

later, on her way out for the evening, she is glad to be wearing “respectable clothes” when she passes by Everard Bone and Helena on the staircase. By contrast, Helena, with her sketchy housekeeping, serious career, and blunt ways, is gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey when *she* goes to the dustbins.

The ill-fitting white uniforms worn by the Wrens that Rocky charmed are mentioned repeatedly in the novel. In fact, in the typescript of *Excellent Women* prepared by the publisher for Pym’s final review, she made almost no changes. However, she did strike through some of the uniform references, figuring that she had over-used that image.

Just as an aside, and because appearance is a hot topic with Pym, in the dustbin scene in the draft, Mildred describes herself as “mousy and rather plump,” and at the end of the chapter she leaves the house for the vicarage wearing a “decent silk dress and navy coat.” Helena is tall, dark, and elegant in well-tailored slacks. So Pym slimmed Mildred down and took away her silk dress, while she turned the more flamboyant and headstrong Helena into a blond in colorful casual clothes. Perhaps Pym decided that since Mildred was going to smarten up as the novel progressed, it would be easier if she didn’t have to go on a diet.

**Jane Eyre.** Differences between the personality and appearance of Helena and Mildred will be threaded throughout *Excellent Women*. But when Mildred tells us about her drabness in Chapter 1, she might not be totally reliable. After comparing her mousy self with Helena and saying they are unlikely to be friends, she states the following: “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.”

This was not in the draft of the chapter, and I picture Barbara almost leaping for joy when the idea came to her – perhaps while she was commuting to work and going over the first chapter in her head. I’d love to know. Anyway, along with certain critics, I think Pym viewed Mildred as being *like* Jane Eyre. Both heroines left their old life behind and started a new one. Both are excellent women, and both could be said to succeed in achieving a full life.<sup>21</sup>

**Housekeeping.** At times Jane Eyre does a bit of housekeeping, and Mildred does too. So did Barbara Pym – even at work: She and Hazel kept dusters in their desk drawers at the IAI, and once Barbara took down the grimy curtains in their office and washed them herself at home.<sup>22</sup> And in the draft of *Excellent Women*, as I mentioned, the story opens at the dustbin.

Scrubbing, laundering, taking out the rubbish, and cooking bring everyday things into the story – tea leaves, potato peelings, buckets and waste paper baskets, the sink. In Chapter 1, the kitchen also offers Mildred a quiet retreat where she can think over what she has observed – do her fieldwork. On page 1 we see her do this rather than stop to meet Mrs. Napier. She said, “I felt, perversely, that I did not want to see her, so I hurried into my own rooms and began tidying out my kitchen.” Could Mildred already sense that she should put off meeting Mrs. Napier, that her new neighbors might complicate her life? But her curiosity reigns, and later Mildred admits to us that she had arranged to brush her staircase while furniture was being brought to the Napiers’ flat, using her work as an excuse to peer through the bannisters.

In Chapter 1, we quickly see that Mildred and Helena have different views on housekeeping. In fact, jumping ahead, Helena will eventually leave Rocky following an argument about the hot saucepan she put down on a polished table, and Mildred will find herself at *two* sinks: hers and the Napiers’. But back to Chapter 1, when Helena unexpectedly invites Mildred to tea after their somewhat “cool” meeting by the dustbins, we have this little scene:

“I hope you don’t mind tea in mugs,” she said coming in with a tray. “I told you I was a slut.” In the much tamer draft, she said, “I’m afraid I’m not very domesticated.” Helena also announces that she is too busy to cook. So whereas Mildred will view tidying and meal-preparing as natural – even a “treat” at times – Helena wants no part of it. However, with Rocky’s return looming and the Napiers’ nice “things” – not to mention signs at the end of the chapter that her frequent guest, Everard, is a bit fastidious – Helena cannot let the flat go to pot. So in Chapter 1, we could say that Mrs. Morris, like Mrs. Grey, is waiting in the wings.

**The shared bathroom.** Let us now turn our attention to the shared bathroom. In the draft, it does not pop up right away. Down by the dustbins the two ladies have a rather tedious talk about the neighborhood, the likelihood that they will both be out much of the time, and the difficulty the Napiers had finding a place to live. When they mount the stairs together, listen to their words:

‘I don’t quite know what Rockingham will say when he knows where I’ve landed.’

‘Rockingham!’ I exclaimed, unable to help myself. ‘Is that your husband’s name?’

She laughed. “‘es and he looks like one,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to laugh. It’s a very dignified name.’

‘And Rockingham is a very dignified man,’ she said. ‘He won’t like having to share a bathroom,’ she added.

‘Oh, well, I’m always very quick,’ I said. ‘And I’m a clergyman’s daughter.’

Mildred and Helena laugh together about this, and, with the ice broken, Helena extends her invitation to tea. Pym tore apart this dull scene, adding the “precious jewel” and the news that Helena has “no use for church-going.” She also sharpened Helena’s tongue. This was not the first time that Pym blackened a character in revisions. In a 1945 notation in the *Some Tame Gazelle* papers, she wrote herself this little reminder: “Go over all the characters and make them worse – as Proust did.”<sup>23</sup>

Keeping the shared bathroom properly supplied creates further comic twists in Chapter 1 and later: When Mildred is halfway up the stairs after tea, Helena calls out “I think I must have been using your toilet paper. I’ll try and remember and get some when it’s finished.” Mildred naturally says not to worry but tells us, “I come from a circle that does not shout aloud about such things, but I nevertheless hoped she would remember. The burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed to me rather a heavy one.”

Let me point out two things about this stairwell exchange. The “I come from a circle” language hints that, despite her plainness, Mildred is already becoming aware that, in some ways, she is superior to – or at least more refined than – Helena. And then the line about the “burden” is another example of the way Pym has fun juxtaposing the serious and the mundane – i.e., heavy burden and toilet paper.<sup>24</sup>

Here, I cannot resist adding another little detail about the draft to show the brilliance of Pym’s revisions: Rather than using the word “burden,” Mildred says, “I did not think it quite fair that I should keep three people in toilet paper. I only hoped that the brand I chose when it was my turn would meet with Rockingham’s approval.” And whereas in Chapter 3 of the published novel Mildred will tell us that Helena has supplied a “new roll of toilet paper of a rather inferior brand” and has not cleaned the bath properly – notes associated with the draft indicate that Helena supplies a “superior” brand.

So the lesson is, polishing and pruning and blackening characters make a better novel.

**Good taste.** Class appears in Chapter 1 in a couple of places, though maybe it’s just a case of Mildred mildly asserting that she is a person of “taste” – one who would not shout in the stairwell about toilet requisites.

As she learns more about Rockingham from Helena – his probable reaction to the shared bathroom, his cooking and love of Victoriana, his skills as a charmer of Wren officers – Mildred speculates that he would probably dislike drinking tea out of a mug.

The mug comes up again at the close of the chapter when, glad to be dressed in respectable clothes as she leaves for Evensong, Mildred hears Everard Bone's stiff tone of voice indicating that *he* would not like to drink *gin* out of a mug. And might not Mildred be just the tiniest bit proud of her high housekeeping standards when she overhears Everard say to Helena, "I suppose you haven't got things straight yet."

It's also clear that Dora, dear friend that she is, doesn't share Mildred's taste for finer things. Now that Dora has moved out, Mildred is free to live a civilized life, with a bedroom, sitting room, and spare room for friends. Furthermore she informs us that she does not have "Dora's temperament which makes her enjoy sleeping on a camp bed and eating off plastic plates." So forewarned by Chapter 1, we will not be surprised in Chapter 11 when Dora leaves her hairnet on the mantelpiece and strings damp underwear around Mildred's kitchen.

A quick note about two items in the draft that Pym changed in the final version: First, Dora has left London to go home and nurse her mother, who has "outlived two long-suffering companions." Dora doesn't strike me as an ideal caregiver, so I think Pym wisely sent her off to a teaching post in the country instead.

Second, when Mildred goes out for the evening wearing that silk dress and navy coat I mentioned earlier, she hears Everard call Helena "what sounded like an affectionate name," after which they go "laughing into the sitting room." I don't think Everard ever laughs in the final novel, though he is amused at times.

**Spinsterhood.** With Dora and Mildred on the scene, let's next look at the theme of spinsterhood in Chapter 1. Mildred presents her first soliloquy as a detached observation, using the third person: "I suppose an unmarried woman just over 30, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business."

She then notes that being a clergyman's daughter, there is "almost no help" for her when it comes to such involvement. Throughout the rest of the chapter, Mildred continues to comment on the unmarried state: She mentions the curiosity of spinsters owing to the "emptiness of their lives," her right to be "fussy and spinsterish" now that she is old enough, and her belief that she might be "just the kind of person" who would one day be an impoverished gentlewoman. Such stock comments about spinsterhood flow out of Mildred almost too easily – like the platitudes that flow from her owing to her parochial experience.

In Chapter 1 we have clear evidence that Mildred is imaginative, curious, and witty. Here again, she might not be a "reliable narrator," as when she claims she is "not at all like Jane Eyre." She also states that she looks forward to living alone now that Dora is gone.

Furthermore, toward the end of the chapter, Mildred explains how she moved to London after her parents died, how she worked in the Censorship (which required patience, discretion, and a tendency to eccentricity – all of which she makes light of), and how she decided to attend a "High" church even though she could imagine her mother's horror. So although she claims she has managed to make a life for herself in London much like the one she had in a country rectory, she has shown that she is not afraid of change. Mildred may be a spinster, but she is *not* spinsterish.

We now turn to anthropology and then the church: two very different worlds that touch each other in Chapter 1.

**Anthropology.** Helena is the key link to the theme of anthropology, so let's make a few more observations about her before we go into her "field." She starts out being a character that Pym probably knew readers would relish disliking. She is abrupt, speaks in warning tones, and makes little unkind remarks, such as flatly stating – and for no good reason – that she would have hated living in a vicarage like the one Mildred grew up in. In Chapter 1 we see Helena at her worst. She was too nice in the original draft, as I mentioned, so Pym fixed that flaw. Nonetheless, she unexpectedly invites Mildred in for tea after their meeting by the dustbins – perhaps sensing that her neighbor could prove useful. Could she be thinking about palming Rockingham off on Mildred so she can elope with Everard?

By the time Mildred enters the Napiers' sitting room, she has already done a lot of her own field work about the couple. In their talk by the dustbins, Mildred, "driven by curiosity," managed to extract a bit of information from Helena, and prior to that she had watched the Napiers' furniture being delivered. And remember that even before Helena set foot in the house, Mildred had been eyeing her mail.

In the sitting room, Mildred gets a better feel for Rocky and Helena through the snow storms, paperweights, and furniture, not to mention the difference in their housekeeping standards through the tea in mugs and thick slices of bread. The only thing mysterious is the scientific books and the green-covered journals titled *Man*. The moment of truth comes when Helena declares that Rocky does all the cooking, as she has no time. Mildred is taken aback at first. Yet she then reflects that Rocky might indeed enjoy cooking, remembering – perhaps based on some prior field work – that "men did not usually do things unless they liked doing them."

But when Mildred hazards that Rocky learned to cook in the Navy, Helena sets the record straight immediately, explaining that he has always been a good cook, that the Navy hasn't taught him anything, and that he has been living in a luxurious villa overlooking the Mediterranean for 18 months as Flag Lieutenant to an Admiral in Italy. Meanwhile she has been "trailing round Africa" as an anthropologist. For the first time in the chapter, Mildred is speechless.

Helena is proud of her work and her constant state of busyness, and soon signals that it's time for Mildred to go so she can get back to her field notes. At this point in the chapter, Pym lets the reader know that Helena – and more generally, anthropology – will change Mildred's life.

When she is leaving Helena's flat, Mildred says, "Do let me know if there is anything I can do to help." Helena responds, "Not at the moment, thank you, but there may be." Then Mildred tells us "I thought nothing of her words at the time." So Pym momentarily moves Mildred into the future and has her look back. Also in the draft, she added (and then struck out) "but I was often to remember [her words] with weary amusement later."

Not much else will be said about anthropologists in the chapter – in fact Mildred is not even sure what one does. However, at the end she meets Helena with a tall, fair man on the stairs, and wonders whether he might be one. Right away she tells herself that it is none of her business and heads for Evensong. Yet as readers, we sense that anthropology *will* be her business.

**The church.** What surely is Mildred's domain is the church. St. Mary's is woven throughout the chapter – starting with the churchwarden's opening lines and ending with the vicar's sister whispering about the anonymous donation. The church is Mildred's community, the center of her active life.

Thus down in the basement she doesn't hesitate to reassure Helena that she will be quick in the bathroom, including on Sundays when she gets up early for church. A few other references to religion come up – such as the sharing of all things in common by the Early Christians (even kitchens).

Pym also pokes gentle fun at the church when Mildred envisions Mrs. Lathbury's pursed lips and fear of incense. But other than Mildred's failure to "say a word," references to the spiritual life are absent. Nevertheless, in Chapter 1 Mildred describes how she ended up at St. Mary's, and the genuine affection she has for the prickly, Victorian-gothic church with its hideous inside.

We end with Mildred hearing the bells for Evensong, and going to sit with a half dozen middle-aged and elderly women for the weekday service. It won't be long before we sense that the church and anthropology could possibly join forces to create a full life for her.

**Moments of self-doubt, loneliness.** In the opening pages of the novel, we see that Mildred is curious and intelligent, but also vulnerable. One critic said that the theme of *Excellent Women* is "melancholy overcome."<sup>25</sup> We feel compassion for Mildred when Helena responds with "I don't suppose I shall be in very much" to her remark about how nice it will be to have someone in the house. And when Helena seems to dismiss Mildred abruptly after their tea, we know that Mildred has been treated shabbily, and she knows it, too. She is strong, but she has a shy side.

Mildred's affectionate nature is clear when she talks about her love for St. Mary's, the kindness that Julian and Winifred showed her before she joined the church, and her memories of the "very pleasant" vicarage of her childhood. She is not afraid to face her own faults. When she tells herself that she doesn't like Helena very much (with good reason), she reproaches herself soundly and without irony.

Mildred will experience loss as the story unfolds, but as critic Janice Rossen tells us, she will "deliberately impersonalize and understate her grief." Rossen notes that none of the other characters in the novel share Mildred's sense of the comic or the absurd – no one "gets the joke" – but readers do get it.<sup>26</sup> In the same way, we understand her grief.

With Mildred Lathbury, Pym has created what Susan Lumenello refers to as a "resonant" character, one who will "go on and on" after the novel ends. We can imagine her having a life off the page or even being in another novel.<sup>27</sup>

**Opening and closing connections.** In closing, note how the opening chapter is echoed in the last pages of the novel. In Chapter 1 we have the arrival of Helena and the anticipated arrival of Rocky. Helena is not happy about the flat's location and lack of conveniences, and Mildred realizes that she will be dealing with newcomers from a different planet – an outspoken female anthropologist who doesn't keep house and a charming Victoriana-collecting naval attaché named Rockingham. At the end of the book, two former governesses, spinsters, will move into the flat, tell Mildred how happy they are with their new home, and quickly establish a rota to deal with cleaning the bathroom. Mildred will tell us that a new roll of toilet paper appears, "hung in a distinctive place," so the burden she once feared will be history.

But at this point we have reached the end of Chapter 1. Mildred, Winifred, and Julian are in church; Helena and Everard are drinking gin out of mugs and arguing; Rocky is packing his bags in the villa in Italy; and Mrs. Grey is perhaps in her furnished rooms, reflecting on how to capture Julian.

Such richness.

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- <sup>1</sup> Barbara Pym. *Excellent Women*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978, p. 5. Note that all quotations from the novel are from Chapter 1 of this edition, pages 5-12.
- <sup>2</sup> John Updike. *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1983, p. 520.
- <sup>3</sup> Jan Fergus. "Reading Barbara Pym with College Students." In *All This Reading: The Literary World of Barbara Pym*. Eds. Frauke Elisabeth Lenckos and Ellen J. Miller. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2003, pp. 194-205.
- <sup>4</sup> Susan Lumenello. "Barbara Pym's Lessons for the Fiction Writer." *Green Leaves* 13(1), May 2007, pp. 4-8.
- <sup>5</sup> John Bayley. "Where, Exactly, is the Pym World?" in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*. Ed. Dale Salwak. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), pp. 50-57.
- <sup>6</sup> In fact, at a roundtable discussion on Pym at NYU in the fall of 2013, one of the panelists told us that after 9/11 she could read almost no writer but Pym. She declined to write a paper on Pym, fearing that she might lose the consolation her novels provided.
- <sup>7</sup> Hazel Holt. "The Novelist in the Field" in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*. Ed. Dale Salwak. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987, p. 33.
- <sup>8</sup> Barbara Pym. *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*, Ed. Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984, p. 184.
- <sup>9</sup> Holt, p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> Yvonne Cocking. *Barbara in the Bodleian: Revelations from the Pym Archives*. Oxford and Boston: The Barbara Pym Society, 2013, pp. 91-103.
- <sup>11</sup> MS Pym 14 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, contains the draft that I refer to and quote from in this paper.
- <sup>12</sup> Pym. *A Very Private Eye*, pp. 88, 234.
- <sup>13</sup> Luckily for us we can read Barbara Pym in English. I have many of the novels in French and her humor is lost in translation, and perhaps the sad parts seem sadder than intended. Years ago I gave a well-read friend in Paris *Les Femmes Remarquables*. She enjoyed it, but with a raised eyebrow said, "Elles sont méchantes ces petites dames." I take it she was referring to Allegra, but maybe she meant Helena too.
- <sup>14</sup> Annette Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992), p. 101.
- <sup>15</sup> Weld, p. 102
- <sup>16</sup> Weld, p. 101
- <sup>17</sup> Barbara Pym, "The Novelist's Use of Everyday Life" (a talk given by Pym in 1956 at Barnes). See MS Pym 98, fol. 56-73, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Annette Weld also touches on this remark about Austen in page 103 of *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners*.
- <sup>18</sup> Pym, "The Novelist's Use of Everyday Life." Note that Jan Fergus reminds us how Pym's use of an unexpected, sharply observed detail "transforms the mundane and opens up variety, possibility, vividness in what might otherwise be a drab existence." (*All This Reading*, p. 199)
- <sup>19</sup> Pym, *A Very Private Eye*, p. 323
- <sup>20</sup> Pym, "The Novelist's Use of Everyday Life."
- <sup>21</sup> Mildred's denial that she is like Jane Eyre primarily confirms the hope that "her Mr. Rochester may still appear," according to Annette Weld in *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners* (London: MacMillan, 1992, p. 86). Meanwhile, even though Charlotte Bronte commands more power and grandeur than Pym, Pym avoids

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being criticized for putting Mildred on the same footing with Jane by mocking the idea herself using exaggerated deference, according to Janice Rossen in *The World of Barbara Pym*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, pp. 14-15).

<sup>22</sup> Holt, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Graham. "The Narrative Sense of Barbara Pym" in *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*. Ed. Dale Salwak. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987, p. 154.

<sup>24</sup> The sentence – "The burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed to me rather a heavy one" – is one of Pym's funniest, so I cannot resist adding the French version here to show how it loses its simplicity, charm, and humor in translation: "Approvisionner trois personnes en papier hygiénique me paraissait une charge fort pesante." Barbara Pym, *Des Femmes Remarquables* (translated by Sabine Porte) Paris: Julliard, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Mason Cooley. *The Comic Art of Barbara Pym*. New York: AMS Press, 1990, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Rossen, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> Lumenello, p. 4.