

# Sister Acts: The Unlikely Pair in the Early Novels of Barbara Pym

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In 'Fashion in A Glass of Blessings,' Sandra Goldstein invited us to consider all the 'contrasting pairs' in Barbara Pym's novels, citing among several examples Belinda and Harriet from *Some Tame Gazelle*, Jane and Prudence from that novel, and Mildred and Helena from *Excellent Women*. Goldstein's observation about the sartorial habits of Pym's characters interests me because I find that it is especially relevant to Pym's first three published novels, in each of which the author presents two female characters who are opposing figures: the 'unlikely pair' motif. Consistently in these early works, the older figure of the unlikely pair is depicted as the less modern of the two — she is more conservative, out of step with a changing world. Importantly, each of these 'excellent women' — as we have come to call them — has a romantic association with the main clergyman of the novel, an attachment that vividly reflects the older character's devotion to the Church. The motif contrasts this 'excellent woman' with a 'younger sister' figure who shuns the conventions of the past. The younger of the pair is more modern (more glamorous, even), more relaxed where sex is concerned, and is generally a reluctant church-goer, if indeed she goes to church at all. Belinda and Harriet Bede are the prototype for this motif, and the phrase 'unlikely pair' is used in both *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence*. In *No Fond Return of Love*, the motif is still perceptible, though to a lesser degree.

These unlikely pairs, these opposites, evoke a cultural shift in Britain that occurred during Barbara Pym's lifetime, a lifetime that began shortly after the reign of Queen Victoria and ended during the first term of Margaret Thatcher. During this era, of course, important and related events and phenomena conspired to change the world out of which Pym's work grew: two world wars, a population that became increasingly less rural and more urban, the dismantling of an Empire, waning global influence, encroaching (and fearsome) technology that undid age-old rituals and customs, and a social and economic mobility that made people unsure of their places in the modern world. This conflict between a parochial English past and a 'global' (more diverse, more urban) British present, I believe, can be seen in Pym's juxtaposition of parochial, Victorian-style Englishwomen with figures who are aligned with an urbanized, more cosmopolitan European impulse.

In *The World of Barbara Pym*, Janice Rossen observes that Pym creates 'a twentieth-century society with roots in Victorian times'. The world of *Some Tame Gazelle* without a doubt conjures the atmosphere of a time earlier than its publication date in the 1950s,<sup>1</sup> a feature that owes perhaps to the novel's rural setting, a world of relative ethnic homogeneity where the Established Church still held social and political sway. Universal church attendance among middle-class Anglicans during the Victorian era is the source of what was known even up to our own time as the 'English Sunday.' One survivor's account from the 1870s describes the rigorous ecclesiastical schedule of the Englishman of that period:

My back still aches in memory of those long services.... Nothing was spared us — the whole of the 'Dearly Beloved,' never an omission of the Litany, always the full ante-Communion service, involving a sermon of unbelievable length. (Hibbert p. 642)

This description, so familiar to those who have read Jane Austen or E. M. Forster or Anthony Trollope — and so elemental, I would venture to say, to our concept of a certain kind of Englishness — might well have been

delivered by one of Archdeacon Hoccleve's country-parish flock from *Some Tame Gazelle*, who kneel down angrily in protest of the archdeacon's refusal to shorten the Litany.

As Katherine Ackley points out, 'the solid friendship of sisters in Pym's novels is nowhere illustrated more happily than in the relationship between Belinda and Harriet', and relationships like theirs reverberate throughout the novels. In *STG*, Belinda Bede has pledged herself to the parish clergyman in an unofficial and unconsummated 'marriage,' a characteristic that links Belinda to the later characters Mildred Lathbury and Jane Cleveland and that establishes her as one of Pym's 'excellent women.' Belinda, dowdy and old-fashioned, favors dull, ill-fitting, but respectable clothes that suit her modesty — a kind of clerical habit for excellent women. When she worries that her neighbors will get the wrong impression about her relationship with Archdeacon Hoccleve, her younger sister, Harriet, comfortingly says to her, 'I don't think anyone would be likely to gossip about you in that old tweed coat', foreshadowing the old tweed coat in which Jane Cleveland later turns up. Accordingly, she resents the Archdeacon's wife, Agatha, for her extravagance: 'It isn't right, thought Belinda indignantly, for a clergyman's wife to get her clothes from the best houses. She ought to be a comfortable, shabby sort of person, in an old tweed coat and skirt or a sagging stockinette jumper suit.'

This conservative impulse carries over to Belinda's ethnocentric attitudes toward religion: she is suspicious of anything colorful, anything Catholic—that is to say, anything un-English. (One thinks of Charlotte Bartlett in Forster's *A Room with a View*.) Belinda displays this chauvinism in a scene with the Anglo-Catholic Father Plowman, at dinner with the Hoccleves. When the conversation turns to Africa and the competition there between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the mission field, Belinda ventures, 'I suppose the African's leaning towards ritual would make him a ready convert to Roman Catholicism... I mean, one knows their love of bright, gaudy things.... The Church of England might seem rather plain to them.' Father Plowman finds himself on the defense: "'Bright and gaudy?" said Father Plowman on a pained note. "Oh, Miss Bede, surely you cannot mean that?"'

If Belinda's suspicion of the gaudy identifies her as one of Pym's safely English Broad-Church Victorians, Harriet's penchant for rich foods and her 'rapacious' appetite suggest a passionate character, who is sexier, more 'elegant' than her older sister. Harriet's 'greatest interest' is curates, though she merely flirts with them, taking them about as seriously as she takes her religion. At another vicarage dinner party, Harriet takes a 'liberal second helping' of risotto, prepared after the recipe of Count Bianco, an expatriate Italian nobleman who resides in the neighborhood and in whom Harriet entertains a fleeting and intermittent romantic interest. From the book's outset, in fact, Harriet is described in terms such as 'blunt,' 'jolly,' and even 'silly', and Belinda 'soberly' worries that her younger sister might wear too much lipstick, a trait that prefigures simultaneously Mildred Lathbury's suspicions regarding Hawaiian Fire lipstick and Prudence Bates's predilection for expensive French perfume.

Also in *Some Tame Gazelle*, we witness Belinda's horror at Father Plowman's 'Romish' practices — incense, birettas, and such — and Pym, in the tradition of Evelyn Waugh, Rose Macaulay, and others, portrays the typical English churchman as suspicious of anything that suggests Roman Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> As Janice Rossen points out, 'Anglican symbolizes all that is homely and essentially English' to Pym. In *Excellent Women*, though, Anglo-Catholicism becomes the norm, with narrator Mildred Lathbury belonging to a sort of buffer zone between Anglican orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Here, Pym takes us to the very edge of 'safe' Anglicanism, where the slightest tip in the direction of Rome and away from Lambeth is even more alarming—and thus more hilarious.

Also with *Excellent Women*, Pym shifts from the rural setting of the earlier novel to an urban milieu. It is in this novel where the ‘unlikely pair’ phrase is coined, as Mildred muses about the possibilities of friendship with her new neighbor, Helena Napier:

We were, superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly. She [Helena] 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.

Mildred and Helena, though not technically sisters, are reminiscent nonetheless of the Bede sisters in that Pym juxtaposes a reserved Victorian woman and a liberated sexy one under the same roof — in this case, a London apartment building. The name Mildred carries vestiges of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with Lathbury — so close to Lambeth — we have a name that is marvelously right for this character, whose religious attitude rounds out a thoroughly Victorian persona. The Victorian imagery is enhanced by Mildred’s description of her own parish church, St. Mary’s:

I could just see the church spire through the trees in the square...it looked beautiful, springing up among the peeling stucco fronts of the house, prickly, Victorian-gothic, hideous inside, I suppose, but very dear to me.

She reveals that she has chosen to worship at St. Mary’s rather than at All Souls’ ‘not only because it was nearer, but because it was “High”’. On some level, Mildred feels this rebellion against normal Anglicanism to be a daring rejection of her conventionally Broad Church, middle-class upbringing as a clergyman’s daughter. But her choice to dabble in Catholicism is itself Victorian. Cardinal Newman and the Oxford Group movement, in fact, are invoked regularly by Mildred and her ilk.

Mildred, the successor to Belinda Bede, upholds the pious Victorian values of church-going and sexual abstinence for unmarried women. She is fully in the Church, while the other member of the novel’s ‘unlikely pair,’ Helena Napier, is fully outside it. Helena is an atheist and shares something of an open marriage with her husband. People like the Napiers were, Mildred confesses, ‘beyond [her] experience’. An anthropologist (one thinks of the Emperor Constantine’s mother, Helena, the erstwhile pagan archaeologist), Helena occasionally displays a scientific curiosity toward Mildred’s religious habits, though mostly she dismisses Mildred as a bit of an oaf, awkward and old-fashioned in her piety. She seems to revel in shocking Mildred, for example, when exclaiming ‘proudly’ to Mildred, ‘You’d hate sharing a kitchen with me. I’m such a slut’, and later, ‘unabashedly’ serving tea in mugs, not cups: ‘I hope you don’t mind tea in mugs... I told you I was a slut’. Helena is one of Pym’s sexy, glamorous types, and her smug antipathy for the Church and for religion, as well as her rejection of old-fashioned manners and morals, aligns her with a modern, plain-speaking Britain, stripped of its global possessions and free of the Victorian piety and prissiness that belonged to an earlier age of Empire.

In her third novel, *Jane and Prudence*, Pym returns her focus to the country parish and, for the first time, develops as a central, sympathetic character the vicar’s wife, who in previous novels is more stock character: the wily Agatha Hoccleve and the predatory Allegra Gray (a fast, older woman). Of her friendship with former pupil Prudence, Jane says that they are an ‘unlikely pair.’ In stark contrast to Jane’s damp, inhospitable country rectory, Prudence lives in an urban flat with Regency furniture, where she sips gin and French. The contrast between country vicar’s wife and single girl in the city drives the novel.

Jane is the only married older sister — and she is married essentially to the church, an archaic role that leaves her somewhat disillusioned, and she bemoans a life that ‘hasn’t turned out like *The Daisy Chain* or *The Last Chronicles of Barse*’. Though initially optimistic in her role, ‘imagining herself as a clergyman’s wife,

starting with Trollope and working through the Victorian novelists to the present-day gallant, cheerful wives, who ran large houses and families on far too little money' disappointment sets in early as Nicholas is assigned an urban curacy and she is denied the country rectory brimming with children, for which she had prepared herself. Perhaps unable to appreciate fully the changing world about her, she blames herself for these failures and, as penance, goes without tea for all the times she has failed as a vicar's wife. Jane's initial disillusionment calls to mind Mildred, in despair after Rocky leaves, her forced reverie in the empty church interrupted by an unsympathetic and suspicious Miss Statham. Disillusionment is typical of the 'excellent women' in these novels and perhaps serves to heighten the sense of these characters as mourning a former, happier age.

Robert Emmet Long writes that 'with her peculiarities of dress and speech, Jane is decidedly not a success as a clergyman's wife'. But Jane complies faithfully with Belinda Bede's dress code (that a clergyman's wife 'ought to be a comfortable, shabby sort of person, in an old tweed coat and skirt'). Before going out to lunch with Nicholas at the Spinning Wheel café, Jane puts on 'an old tweed coat which hung in the hall—the kind of coat one might have used for feeding the chickens in'. Ultimately, Jane is just as peculiar and dated as the Church of England itself.

Recalling Mildred's Victorian Oxford Movement associations, Jane experiences flashes of catholic sympathy, and fantasizes about going 'wickedly' to a solemn evensong with lots of incense. But, a good Broad Church Englishwoman, she keeps these sympathies in check. The ecclesiastical and the culinary conspire to highlight these ironies when Prudence offers to lend a hand in preparing dinner at the vicarage by making a salad. She asks for some garlic, and Jane's replies with astonishment, 'Imagine a clergyman and his wife going about the parish smelling of garlic!' In addition to its being too strong for Jane's careful, mild tastes, garlic carries an association with the Continent and, therefore, Roman Catholicism with its fragrant incense. One might go even further to equate the sensual, earthy garlic with sexuality.

In fact, Jane worries that Prudence has gotten 'into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was becoming almost a bad habit'. The suggestion that Prudence is sexually promiscuous recalls Helena Napier's 'slut' comment, and it helps us to see Prudence, like Helena—and later Viola Dace—as one of Pym's worldly, un-Victorian, sexually confident characters. It places her, too, in the company of Harriet Bede, with her penchant for curates.

Another way of viewing Prudence, Harriet, and Helena as figures of the modern age—is to note their religious attitudes. Harriet attends services out of habit, perhaps a little grudgingly. Helena is an atheist with an uncompromising disdain for church and churchgoers. Prudence's religiosity lies somewhere between the two, certainly, but it is plain that any residue of her conventional Anglican upbringing is mere nostalgia, almost like comfort food:

The whole business of religion was meaningless to [her], but there was a certain comfort even in the reedy sound of untrained women's voices raised in an evening hymn. Perhaps it was because it took her back to her college days, when love, even if sometimes unrequited or otherwise unsatisfactory, tended to be so under romantic circumstances.

If Prudence goes to church at all, she goes for romance, in the manner of Harriet, who goes primarily to check out male visitors, to recruit curates for dinner, or to see Count Bianco at parish garden fetes. The liturgical props of church serve merely to promote Prudence's own glamorous view of herself: she imagines herself 'on holiday in Spain, a black lace mantilla draped over her hair, hurrying into some dark cathedral'.

Like so many Pym characters, the black lace mantilla resurfaces in a later novel, *No Fond Return of Love*, linking Prudence to Viola Dace, and establishing Viola as another of Pym's fashion-forward, exotic types for whom religion is largely a matter of aesthetic. When Dulcie questions Viola concerning whether she should cover her head at Neville Forbes's church, Viola responds that she wears a black lace mantilla because she finds it 'more becoming' than a hat. (Clinton and Stacy would be all over that.) The reference to this dashing touch of headgear suggests that — again like Prudence — Viola's attachment to religion is neither spiritual or doctrinal. After all, the two women are visiting the church in the manner of Harriet Bede: to check out a man.

Even more interestingly, Viola wears neither a hat nor a mantilla in this scene. Rather, she enters the church with her head uncovered, a modern gesture for sure. And on Viola's statement that she hopes to 'get to Mass somewhere' during the weekend of the learned conference, the irrepressible Dulcie attempts to find her a 'Communion service' to attend. Yet Viola demurs, claiming a lack of sleep the night before. The glamorous, worldly, and slightly un-English Viola is presented initially in the novel as the presumably serious Anglo-Catholic, who hopes 'to get to Mass somewhere'. One suspects, though, that the appeal Anglo-Catholicism holds for Viola is less doctrinal than it is exotic. Such are the complications of the 'unlikely pair' in this, Pym's sixth novel.

If the motif is to be sustained intact in *No Fond Return*, we would expect Dulcie to be the counterpart of Belinda, Mildred, and Jane. After all, Dulcie's name, though 'sweet' enough, also suggests a dullness, a dowdiness. Likewise, the surname Mainwaring strikes that polysyllabic, Anglo-Saxon note that we have come to associate with excellent women like Belinda Bede, Mildred Lathbury and Jane Cleveland, characters whose consonant-filled, even alliterative names echo the starchiness of their characters. Case in point: Dulcie's niece Laurel on hearing Dulcie's surname, Mainwaring, imagines 'a little dumpy woman in a grey suit and pink felt hat, her gloved hands clasped tightly together'. Even so, the unlikely pair in this novel seem more complexly drawn than in the three earlier novels.

For one, despite her Victorian associations, Dulcie is not a regular churchgoer. In fact, she seems more like Prudence in that she has left the Church while retaining a vague residue of it, a fondness for its trappings and quaintness. It is Dulcie, after all, who at the learned conference is up to the job of explaining to a bored Viola the liturgical intricacies of the chapel service. But not for Dulcie the reverence of Belinda or the rigor of Mildred. Dulcie seems to have advanced beyond any sincere religious belief to an affiliation with Anglicanism as just another leftover from her past, like a well-rehearsed school hymn she cannot help but remember. While Viola is Anglo-Catholic, Dulcie is Anglo-Nostalgic. I think it's possible that, in Dulcie, Pym is recording already the waning influence of the church. In fact, I wonder if Pym thought that Dulcie would not be credible as a churchgoer in the way that the earlier characters were.

Not fossilized in amber, like a Belinda or a Mildred, Dulcie's actions suggest an awareness that she is living into a different time, even an openness to it. For instance, she notices that Mrs. Beltane, her next-door neighbor, rents the top floor of her house to a Brazilian man, Senhor MacBride-Pereira, something she would never have done in 'the old days'. Likewise, Dulcie is somewhat amazed that Aylwin Forbes has servants, and asks Viola: 'Do people have servants nowadays — I mean, ordinary people like Aylwin Forbes?' And seeing Viola's uncovered head in the Anglo-Catholic church, Dulcie asks, 'Oughtn't you to be wearing a hat — or don't they mind about that sort of thing nowadays?'

Rossen asserts that the revival of interest in Pym owed much to 'her recreation of a vanished upper-middle class world, of which the church [was] an integral part'. I would venture to say that today even middle-aged

English people are less likely to have been weaned on *Hymns Ancient and Modern* than on the Beatles' *White Album*. (Currently, according to very recent, though rough, evidence, a mere 6.3% of Britons attend church.<sup>5</sup>) In her earliest writing Pym was creating characters like Lady Beddoes of *Crampton Hodnet*<sup>6</sup>, who, as Dale Salwak writes, found herself 'bewildered by the horrid world into which she [had] survived', a world that was becoming more urban and less rural, more secular and less religious, more global and less parochial. And on a less academic note, in explaining his retirement from depicting the mid-century English milieu of his shows *Keeping Up Appearances* and *The Last of the Summer Wine*, Britcom writer Roy Clarke recently explained, 'That world isn't this world' (qtd. in *Behind the Britcom: From Script to Screen*, BBC, 2010). Something similar could be said to explain the difference between *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Quartet in Autumn*.

The lines separating Dulcie and Viola are less rigidly drawn, to be sure, than those that distinguish Belinda from Harriet those other pairs: the contrast is less extreme, less comic; it is subtler, more realistic, and more complicated. When we look at the seven-year gap between *Jane and Prudence* and *No Fond Return of Love* (remembering the two carefully wrought novels between them), we see an evolution from the quaint, autobiographical *Some Tame Gazelle* — her 'novel of real people' — to the mid-period writing that displays a more developed fictional world, one that we recognize as the world of the mature Barbara Pym.

Through this evolving fictional world, Pym chronicles a cultural shift that begins in the Victorian Age of empire and global sway and takes us up to our own time when the very word England seems quaint and anachronistic, less appropriate than the word Britain, which we use more often for the modern state. (In fact, I sometimes find myself at a loss for whether to refer to Barbara Pym as an English novelist, which sounds perhaps a little quaint; or a British writer, which seems somehow inappropriate.) To borrow Charles Hansmann's metaphor, I am inclined to view the unlikely pair as the reflection of two larger 'bookends' that framed Pym's own lifetime — the nineteenth century at one end and the twenty-first at the other — bookends that amplify a cultural shift that occurred in the author's lifetime, a shift as we know that gave dimension to her artistic determination perseverance and that animates the lasting appeal of Barbara Pym.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pym began work on the novel in 1934.

<sup>2</sup>In *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, Jasper (Charles Ryder's cousin) warns Charles before he goes up to Oxford to 'beware of the Anglo-Catholics—they're all sodomites with unpleasant accents'. Jasper's implication is that there is something unpatriotic, and therefore feminine, about those who stray from the Established way.

<sup>3</sup>The name Mildred peaked in popularity around the year 1900.

<sup>4</sup>Briefly in *Excellent Women*, Pym explores this motif with male characters, by contrasting Mildred's vicar, Father Julian Malory, with the dashing Rockingham 'Rocky' Napier, Helena's roué of a husband. In one scene in the novel, after Helena leaves Rocky following a spat, Mildred finds herself making tea for Rocky when Julian comes calling. The scene offers an opportunity to explore the 'unlikely pair' in a different key, and we find that 'the expressions of the two men when they [see] each other was something that [makes Mildred] smile'. When Mildred returns from the kitchen with tea, after having left the two men alone for a moment, she discovers them engaged in a discussion about a church in Naples, where Rocky served during the war. Julian quotes a poem about Palm Sunday, while Rocky observes that the church 'had been destroyed by bombs'. There is a similar contrast between brothers Neville and Aylwin Forbes in *No Fond Return*. Through their mother's description of them, Neville and Aylwin mirror Julian and Rocky: 'Just to think I should have two boys like you — one a professor

and the other a clergyman.’ Neville corrects their mother, pointing out that Aylwin is a Doctor of Philosophy, not a professor, to which his mother counters that he should be a professor.

<sup>5</sup>This figure is taken from an as-yet-unapproved final record of written evidence received by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee.

<sup>6</sup>Though the novel wasn’t published until after her death, Pym was writing *Crampton Hodnet* at about the time she was writing *Some Tame Gazelle*.

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