

A Suitable Attachment: Partnerships in *Excellent Women*

Deb Fisher

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It seemed now as if we had changed sides. Before, Helena and Everard had been ranged against Rocky and me – now Everard was my partner.

I was slightly startled by this passage while re-reading *Excellent Women* a few months back. When I learned of the theme of this year's conference, almost my first thought was of the collaboration between Helena Napier and Everard Bone, which plays such a significant role in the novel. Some of you will recall that Everard was much discussed in our 2002 conference, 'Unexcellent Men'; it was finally concluded that he compared favourably with most of Pym's other male characters. The key to his popularity seemed to be summed up by a member of the Society who commented that, although showing minimal emotional involvement in his dealings with Mildred, 'Everard is passionate about his work'.

This must, I think, be the secret of Everard's attraction – not just for the reader, but for Helena and indeed for Mildred. Helena misinterprets his interest in their joint project as a personal interest in her, while Mildred goes the opposite way and believes him uninterested in her because he does not say so, and yet we sense her tacit approval of his professional detachment from the everyday as well as a degree of admiration for his academic achievements.

Like many of Pym's heroines, Mildred at first looks in the wrong place for a potential romantic partner. She considers Rocky Napier, Helena's husband, who, apart from being good-looking, is an amusing companion, perhaps rather like Frank Churchill in Jane Austen's *Emma* or even Mr Wickham. But Rocky, like Austen's anti-heroes, proves shallow and undependable.

When I thought about it a little more, I realised that I need look no further than *Excellent Women* for examples of every type of partnership one can imagine, with the possible exception of a homosexual one. Everard and Helena, Everard and Mildred, Helena and Rocky, Mildred and Rocky, Julian and Winifred, Julian and Allegra Grey: the list goes on and on. Professional partnerships, personal alliances, and romantic entanglements, either one-sided or mutual, are to be found throughout the novel. What this says about Barbara Pym is that she was an immensely sociable person who interacted with people on many levels and understood human relationships of all kinds, except perhaps those between parents and children. Does she avoid writing about them because they are not partnerships? Never having been a mother herself, does she consider the parent-child relationship to be an unequal one and thus less interesting?

On the very first page of the novel, the scene is set by the words of a minor character, Mr Mallett, the churchwarden. This is rather appropriate to my theme, because churchwardens normally work in pairs, although I suspect that, as well as partnership, there is often some rivalry involved. Mr Mallett and Mr Conybeare do not contribute anything significant to the plot of the novel beyond representing the kind of men who give excellent women a bad name – in other words, men who, as Sister Blatt puts it, would not 'soil their hands with a little honest toil'. The character of the typical churchwarden was probably more noticeable at the time Pym was writing, as churchwardens at that time were normally men, with

women tending to be relegated to what were seen as less responsible roles such as flower-arranging, tea-making, and organising social events.

Miss Statham and Miss Enders fall into the latter category, and are also partners in many senses. They tend to appear in the book as a couple, and might represent the kind of women who, never having found partners of the opposite sex, have been forced to team up with one another so as to display a brave face to the rest of the world. Later in the book, Mildred partners her old school friend Dora – with whom she has previously shared her flat – on a visit to their alma mater, and finds the experience not at all to her taste. She is rather glad to see the back of Dora, who is really not on her wavelength any more.

Mildred's 'romance' with Rocky is of course entirely hypothetical. Although she is attracted to him from their first meeting, she is already aware of his reputation, and recognises that there can never be anything physical between them. Unlike the predatory Allegra Grey and the emotionally needy Helena, Mildred is pragmatic and fully aware of her own weaknesses, and her brief fantasy of involvement with Rocky is no more than a daydream. There is enough of a rapport between her and Rocky for them to become, in a sense, 'partners in crime', as they discuss other people's activities behind their backs in much the same way Emma Woodhouse does with Frank Churchill.

Mildred's heart is not really in it, however. Unlike Rocky, she is not a gossip at heart, and in a way she looks down on him for being so ready to talk about his wife to a relative stranger, as he recounts how he and Helena have separated because of her 'lack of consideration' in putting a hot saucepan down on the table. More to the point, however, Mildred does not feel the need for a life partner. It is no disappointment to her when Julian Mallory, having claimed not to believe in marriage for the clergy, chooses someone else to hold hands with, and William Caldicote even tells her she must not marry. Both seem to make the assumption that she is doomed to eternal spinsterhood – but already, she confesses in an unguarded moment, Rocky's arrival has caused her to start dressing more smartly and wearing more make-up.

The relationship between Rocky and his wife Helena goes much deeper than his flirtatious friendship with Mildred. Although we often see them separately in the book, there is a sense of collusion between them – almost as if Rocky were toying with Mildred's affections simply so that he can report the results back to Helena in private. The sharing of the bathroom introduces an almost incestuous element into boarding-house life, as Mildred imagines she can see into the couple's relationship, and she can also hear them arguing as she passes their door. Her cleaning lady, the plain-speaking Mrs Morris, reports back disapprovingly on their activities, speaking of the washing-up – 'and glasses. You'd think they lived on wine.'

Mrs Morris has her own partner in crime, of course, in the shape of the vicarage's Mrs Jubb. I have a clear mental picture of Mrs Jubb, as bearing a distinct resemblance to a scout who worked at St Hilda's in my first year. Barbara Pym would have been able to derive her portraits of cleaning ladies both from Oxford and from those employed by her parents, and no doubt she listened to many a tale of how neighbouring families conducted themselves in private. She may have heard the scouts, on the landing outside her room, discussing their work and comparing notes on some of the occupants of the bedrooms, whom they seem to have believed were stone deaf. The relationship between Mrs Morris and Mrs Jubb, like most of the partnerships we will discuss today, includes an element of one-upmanship, but it remains

essentially symbiotic. After Mrs Morris disappointedly notes that ‘Mrs Jubb didn’t say’, her mood perks up when she learns that Allegra Gray has gone to stay with a friend in Kensington – here is a titbit of her own she can take back to Mrs Jubb as evidence of her own ability to winkle out information; thus the partnership continues as an equal one, with the cleaning ladies – much as they may like their individual employers – united against the world of capitalist exploitation and eager to note its flaws.

Yet Mildred ultimately finds herself excluded, as Rocky and Helena make an effort to mend their marriage and move to the country with a cursory thank you, revealing that neither of them has ever thought of her as a potential partner or anything more than a rather useful neighbour. Both have used her as a go-between in the patching-up of their relationship, yet neither bothers to tell her of the outcome until it is all done and dusted. Mildred sees this and wonders why one can ‘never stop trying to analyse the motives of people who have no personal interest in us, in the vain hope of finding that perhaps they may have just a little after all’.

Mildred has realised, from the moment of their meeting, that she and Helena are not destined to become friends. ‘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.’ In papers presented to past conferences of the Barbara Pym Society, Sandra Goldstein and Thad Cockrill have both drawn attention to the ‘unlikely pair’ situation in which Pym brings together two female characters who are near-opposites. Mildred’s ordinariness deceives Helena into thinking that her minor part in the couple’s lives is the only thing that keeps her occupied (‘What will you do after we’ve gone?’ she asks, as she and Rocky prepare to leave their lodgings), but it is also Helena who introduces Mildred to the man who will one day become her partner in more than one sense, Everard Bone.

What saves the Napiers’ marriage, in the end, may be the fact that Rocky, though not himself remotely interested in anthropology, is prepared to indulge Helena’s interest in it and to put it before his own career – a career he has already said goodbye to and doesn’t appear to miss. In many ways, Rocky is what later came to be called ‘a new man’, receptive to the idea of role reversal and feeling no obligation to be the breadwinner in their partnership. Rocky and Helena prove to be like-minded in their attitude to Mildred. ‘They were talking about me as if I wasn’t there,’ comments Mildred as the couple discusses her future fate in her presence. Rocky sees more in Mildred than Helena does, because he is aware of her potential attractiveness as a woman. “‘Oh, she’ll marry,” said Rocky confidently.’

Rocky has already revealed that he has no sympathy for the lonely people who live in bed-sits and Mildred is rather shocked by his callous dismissal of them. She foresees that Rocky would not be without a partner for long, even if Helena did leave him permanently. But it seems likely to me that Helena’s willingness to leave Rocky, rather than fawning over him as the Wrens did in Italy, is one of the most attractive things about her, in her husband’s eyes.

Helena, although she at times shows jealousy of Mildred and comes close to accusing her, cannot seriously believe that Everard could be interested in this non-academic, mousy woman (and I would love to be a fly on the wall when she hears of their engagement, although of course that does not happen within the covers of this book). As she accepts that she will never have Everard for herself, Helena appears to be thrusting him Mildred’s way, even suggesting that he might take Mildred to hear a paper at the Learned Society – so as to ‘widen her outlook’.

It is not entirely clear, even to the reader, what Everard does see in Mildred, except that she is a genuinely considerate and understanding young woman who is unlikely ever to put her own interests before his. At times it is also clear that he finds her conversation entertaining. We do not know, and she would never tell us, whether she is physically attractive; her claim to be 'rather plain' is probably false modesty. We do, however, know that she has other admirers besides Everard.

Julian Mallory has never seriously considered marriage because he has never needed to. His sister Winifred is more than content to run the household for him, carrying out all but one of the duties a vicar's wife might be expected to perform. Julian does, however, have a romantic side, and is a plum ripe for the picking at the hands of glamorous widow Allegra Gray. The Mallorys' partnership has lasted a lifetime, but it is threatened with rupture by Allegra's machinations. At first friendly towards Winifred and Mildred, she gradually gets her claws out, and her engagement to Julian never looks like a serious contender for the description 'partnership'. You can tell that he isn't going to be teaching table tennis to teenagers for much longer if Allegra has anything to do with it. Having seen off one clergyman – her first husband – she believes she knows what is best for a vicar, or at any rate for a vicar's wife. Her running of Julian's household and indeed of his parish will not resemble Winifred's. She will not be the kind of vicar's wife who mucks in with the rest of the excellent women when it is time to serve tea or wash up, but the kind who smiles benevolently and does 'good works' from a distance without actually lifting a finger, except perhaps to arrange a few flowers artistically. Her anticipated marriage to Julian will be less of a partnership than a status symbol for her.

Allegra does, however, recognise that in order to have a successful marriage to Julian, she needs to get rid of Winifred. Mildred and Winifred are, to her, like two peas in a pod, born to be spinsters, and naturally the idea of their sharing accommodation is the ideal solution as she sees it. She may be thinking partly of Winifred's welfare, but I think we can be certain that it will take second place to her own.

Whether Julian actually sees behind Allegra's apricot-coloured mask when, as Mrs Morris puts it, 'the scales fell from his eyes', is debatable. If he finally recognises that Mildred would be a more suitable companion, he does not show it, though he appears unaware of her growing friendship with Everard and even – very briefly – forms a male bond with Rocky. In the end, it is Julian's sister Winifred whom he chooses as his life companion. In expelling Allegra from the vicarage, albeit unintentionally, he makes that choice, and it is a choice that confirms both himself and Winifred in a permanent state of celibacy. As a partnership, however, their relationship has already proved both successful and durable. To paraphrase a famous interviewee, three people in a marriage could make it seem a bit crowded, and Allegra wisely recognises that the strength of the bond between brother and sister is too great to be overcome when both are constantly present. Although Winifred says longingly that she wished he had married Mildred, it seems unlikely that the friendship between the two women, itself a kind of partnership, could survive their sharing a house and Julian.

But it's not just Julian who feels he could have a productive partnership with Mildred. William Caldicott, Dora's brother, is a platonic friend who nevertheless believes himself to have a special relationship with her: 'We, my dear Mildred,' he says, 'are the observers of life. Let other people get married by all means, the more the merrier.' What to make of William and his non-existent relationship with Mildred? Of course it is possible that William has feelings for Mildred that he is either too shy or too unde-

monstrative to reveal. His suggestion that neither of them should ever get married could be his way of keeping Mildred available to him.

It seems more likely, though, that William is a closet gay – perhaps one of Barbara Pym’s earliest attempts at portraying a gay character. She may not have wanted to go too far at this stage in her career, but William’s reappearance in a restaurant in *Jane and Prudence* does rather suggest that he is not the kind of man who is ever likely to marry, and Mildred also comments on this, although whether she understands why is unclear. William sees Mildred as an ally against the unwelcoming world of married couples. But what he may see as a kind of partnership with Mildred is nothing of the kind; she looks on him with pity rather than true affection. After all, they only meet up once a year.

Another pair who seem to have a kind of partnership, we presume of a professional nature, are the anthropologists Tyrell Todd and Apfelbaum, whom Everard Bone sees as rivals and nuisances, especially when they turn up outside his house at 1:00 am to witness Helena Napier leaving. Mildred speculates on whether the two men were engaged in some ‘disgraceful’ activity, an idea that amuses Everard and takes the tension out of the situation. Did Barbara Pym want us to speculate further? I find it hard to believe that their creator didn’t have some idea what they were doing there. Could they, in fact, be another undeclared gay couple, or are they simply two unworldly academics who are out of touch with conventional ways and unaware of the time of day – or night – so wrapped up are they in discussing their research? In truth, Apfelbaum and Tyrell Todd are better-educated counterparts of the two churchwardens.

It is only when Mildred is unexpectedly invited to dine with Everard and his mother that she – and the reader – become fully aware of how strange a partnership exists between mother and son. Everard is clearly embarrassed by his mother, but he performs his filial duties. Luckily for him, he does not have to spend too much time with her; the role of companion is fulfilled by the mysterious Miss Jessop, who is perhaps being paid to go along with Mrs Bone’s obsession with birds. We can almost see that Everard has deliberately gone his own way, for example by becoming a Christian despite his mother’s atheism, in order not to fall into her eccentric ways. The absence of a father could have turned him into a mother’s boy, like many another Pym character, but he turns out to be the exception. In spite of his curt rejection of Helena’s declaration of love, he shows a concern for others that makes us realise he is not without humanity as we had imagined early in the book.

To continue the exploration of the private lives of the anthropologists, some years ago Kathy Ackley, in one of her many conference papers, drew attention to the parallels between Everard and Mildred’s relationship and the marriage of the President of the Learned Society and his wife, and I am much indebted to Kathy for that. This is in some ways the most successful partnership in the whole novel, in that the chairman’s wife feels able to support his career without giving up her own interests. She goes to the meetings and simply sits knitting, clearly not interested in the subject but giving up a proportion of her time, which appears to be all that is expected of her. In other ways, we might argue, it is not a partnership at all. The husband and wife, despite being in the same room together, are actually going their separate ways. Many would say this is a recipe for the perfect marriage. Kathy, if I understood her correctly, implied that this was the kind of marriage Mildred and Everard might well end up in. Certainly, the final paragraphs of the book lead the reader to envisage such an outcome, as Mildred muses on her future as an indexer of Everard’s work.

And here I must comment that Everard is rather clever in the way he coaxes Mildred into doing much the same kind of favours for him as Rocky had sought from her earlier. The difference, I think, is that Everard is genuinely fond of Mildred, and does not intend to drop her as soon as she has fulfilled her purpose.

We can take this a little further, as we know, from a later Pym novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, that Mildred and Everard do eventually marry. We also know that Everard leaves Mildred at home with a cold so that he can go out to dinner with other anthropologists. There is an unspoken suspicion that this is a diplomatic cold, invented by Mildred so as to avoid contact with Everard's professional colleagues who are bound to talk shop. If so, the implication would be that their marriage is not a particularly happy one, and certainly not the full partnership that seems to be on the horizon at the end of *Excellent Women*. On the other hand, Everard doesn't appear to get any great enjoyment from his evening out; perhaps he was complicit in the invention of the cold and secretly looks forward to getting back to Mildred and the electric fire. In the meantime, lucky Mildred has his mother for company. Is she now infirm and living with them, I wonder, and is that why the marriage has not turned out quite as both Mildred and Everard might have hoped?

Academic collaborations frequently end in rivalry and betrayal, as Pym reveals in other novels like *Less Than Angels* and *An Academic Question*. Everard's colleagues Dr Apfelbaum and Tyrell Todd, if his comments are anything to go by, appear to be despised by him. We do not know exactly how he came to collaborate with Helena, other than their having been thrown together by their choice of academic discipline. He seems to have no prejudice against her as a woman and no issue with her professional expertise. It is only when Helena begins to make amorous advances towards him that he seeks to disentangle himself from her. Mildred, by contrast, appears a sensible, reliable sort – not the kind who will cry or make difficulties if rejected. It would be unfair, I think, to suggest that he sees his burgeoning relationship with her as an easy way out of his partnership with Helena. At the same time, he can see the advantages of becoming intimate with a woman who is not only free but is capable of being trained to become an indexer.

In the course of one of their conversations, Mildred makes it clear that she knows what is expected of the wife of an anthropologist. She is rather shocked when the President's wife goes to sleep. 'Didn't she even do the indexing or proofreading for one of his books?' she asks, wondering how it is possible for a meaningful relationship to exist between a husband and wife who have no common interests. Yet she is upset at the President's sudden death and begins to wonder how his widow will cope without his companionship.

Possibly the last straw is the arrival of Mildred's new neighbours, the Napiers' successors. Charlotte Boniface and her companion are, to all intents and purposes, a married couple. Mabel hangs pictures, toolkit in hand, while Charlotte prettifies the flat. Although Mildred immediately recognises how suitable they are – not least because they volunteer to share the cleaning of the bathroom – she can hardly help seeing how she may once again end up as the odd one out in a triangle. Even Sister Blatt now has a partner, bringing her friend to town so that they can share the vicarage flat. Is it my imagination, or does Mildred suddenly begin to fear that she may end up being obliged to marry Julian Malory?

And so Mildred gives in to peer pressure and enters into a partnership with Everard. Mildred is of course one of Barbara Pym's many alter egos, but there is one notable difference between them. Mildred has no siblings. Barbara Pym may have looked wistfully into other people's relationships from the outside, but she did not need to marry. She had a life partner, her sister Hilary. I have no idea why Hilary's marriage failed, but it seems to me that she was happy enough to share her life with Barbara in later years. Because of my own experience – I have two sisters of my own – I surmise that no one could have been closer to Barbara than Hilary, not even a husband. And we owe Hilary a great debt, because, without her support, Barbara would probably not have written so many wonderful novels. A husband, after all, might not have stood for it.

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