

The Spinster's Natural Clothing: Postwar Styles in *Excellent Women*

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Poet Philip Larkin found *Excellent Women* “full of a harsh kind of suffering... a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state’s natural clothing. ...[T]ime and again one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn’t suffer, like a Victorian cabhorse” (Bodleian MS Pym 151:25-26). Barbara Pym’s response to that and to a similar evaluation by her friend Richard Roberts, was, “Why is it that *men* find my books so sad? Women don’t particularly” (Bodleian MS Pym 154-7).

This well-known exchange—not a direct rejoinder to either man but, typically for Pym, a forthright “aside” to a third friend, Robert Liddell—inspired this paper on Pym and postwar styles, in clothing and in literature. In these men’s interpretations, and in the author’s gloss, we see the gender divide which characterizes, and also amuses, delights, and disturbs us in all Pym’s fiction. We should not swiftly dismiss Larkin’s image. Well into the twentieth century, the horses that pulled hansom cabs were part of the London landscape. Like traditional spinsters, with whom Mildred so often identifies, the cab horse could expect “very little—nothing, almost” from life: humble servants of man, cab horses were both neglected and overworked, blinkered so as not to see disturbing incidents but also drearily-burdened and often abused.

Are such conditions the spinster’s true “natural clothing”? Throughout the novel, Mildred struggles to find out. She does this through experimenting with dress, with drink (a subject for another paper), and through a rigorous observation of relations between the sexes. I think the novel’s immediate postwar setting is vital, first to Mildred’s quest as shown in her modes of dress, and second to Pym’s authorial success. Pym’s pared-down, minimized language joined with the pared-down conditions of Austerity, postwar and post-empire Britain to create the ideal conditions for what we might term the apotheosis of Mildred Lathbury—and of Barbara Pym.

Excellent Women, though written in 1949-50 and published in ’52, is set clearly in immediate postwar London: a note on a manuscript draft states that it begins in February 1946 (MS Pym 14). A multitude of soldiers, including Rocky Napier, have been de-mobbed and are returning from their wartime postings; a multitude of buildings (including churches where Mildred attends services) remain damaged by bombing. And the plot is driven by acute housing shortages, which bring the Napiers to live in the flat below Mildred, on “the ‘wrong’ side of Victoria Station” and sharing a bathroom, yet. The “desperate business of flat-hunting” also inspires Julian and Winifred to charitably offer their spare rooms for rent—though as it turns out Allegra Gray may have other motives for accepting their offer. This necessary joining-together of disparate people was, like the queuing which rose to fearsome heights in wartime Britain, and continued thereafter, a spur to democratic leveling. In Pym it enables many comic juxtapositions, including the picture of Sister Blatt and her friend, not “the type to attract a man,” moving into the Malorys’ house at the book’s end—an outcome which is, we feel, just what Julian deserves for losing his head over a pretty but nasty woman. The shortages of postwar Britain extended to food, rationed until 1954; meat was especially short, as is mentioned frequently in *Excellent Women*, notably in Mrs. Morris’s

lovely *non sequitur*: “‘Strong passions, isn’t it?... Eating meat, you know, it says that in the Bible. Not that we get much of it now’”.

Clothing also was rationed, in complex ways. And the exigencies of wartime clothing help explain Mildred’s adventures in dress. Why does she buy *another* brown hat? Does it matter that Allegra’s new summer hat is decorated with fruit, while Mildred’s hat bears only a posy? And what about that new black dress at the end? The men in her life may not notice Mildred’s re-styling efforts; “‘You seem to be very nicely dressed,’ said Everard without looking” (146); and when Mildred timidly fishes for a compliment William responds quite rudely, “‘You mean an improvement on the way you usually look? But how do you usually look? One scarcely remembers” (251)—a Victorian cab-horse evaluation if there ever was one. But the styles matter to Mildred, who mentions them repeatedly, and they mattered to Pym, who regularly characterized people by their dress and bore a lively interest in clothes to her life’s end.

Immediate prewar fashions had been excessive, in their feminine silhouettes, in their use of materials, and often in the demands they put upon the wearer. In January 1939, a *Vogue* headline dictated “Nipped-in Waists: Dresses Demand It, Corsets Contrive It” (1/11/39:34). Hence this prewar corset ad (made famous by Madonna)—and a design for the requisite “hippettes,” to pad out the wide skirts. But the war nipped that incipient style in the bud, along with full skirts and long silken evening gowns. Nobody needed extra discomfort while engaged in war work, and no extra materials were available. Suffering to be beautiful fell out of fashion.



Nothing demonstrates the serious import of seemingly trivial things like the history of clothes rationing in wartime. Shortages began before actual rationing: British wool was needed for uniforms and silk (usually an artificial “silk”) for parachutes. Even the bits of non-cloth used in women’s foundation garments soon would be in short supply, as described in the words of a wartime ditty: “Ships of steel for even keel / Need tons and tons of corset steel. / Army trucks if they’re to hurdle / Need the rubber of the girdle” (Walford 109). Then too, clothing prices rose steeply, more than doubling between September 1939 and May 1941 (Walford 42). Rationing seemed in order, though it was veiled in secrecy up to its introduction in June 1941. The plan, modeled upon a rationing scheme created by the Third Reich, and stolen by British spies, tried to avoid a last-minute run on the stores by inserting extra margarine coupons at the back of

Britons’ food-ration booklets. Then the announcement was sprung: citizens must use those coupons when they purchased cloth or clothing, along with a green card of 40 more clothing coupons. The initial allowance was 66 clothing coupons per adult per year, though this number soon was cut. A man’s coat was 16 coupons; a pair of trousers was 5 to 8 coupons; a woman’s coat required from 11 to 14 coupons, a dress 7 to 11 coupons. (You can sense the obsessive counting of small things required.) Length and material affected the coupon “cost”: wool trousers or a wool dress used up more coupons than the same garments in cotton. Underwear, socks and stockings, handkerchiefs, ties, and footwear, all required coupons. Special cases were allowed extra coupons. But the ration “gave adults something like half their pre-war consumption of clothing” (Calder 377)—if they could pay the sky-high prices. So dressing oneself in wartime required a veritable obsession with trivial rules, especially if one cared about dress style. Even the wealthy learned to “Make Do and Mend.” The queen



publically set an example, by adhering strictly to wartime restrictions and having her own clothes cut down for the young princesses (Walford 29). Thrift and restraint became all the more wrapped up with the ideal British character, epitomized of course in Pym's Mildred Lathbury.

Even *couture* suffered in wartime, featuring shorter, slimmer skirts in modest good taste. The government helped people “make do,” through Austerity regulations and through Utility styles. Austerity restrictions compelled manufacturers to limit pockets, buttons, seams, and pleats. Lace and decorative trim for infants' and women's clothing (and, eventually, underclothing) were banned, as were double-breasted suits and turn-ups (cuffs) on trousers for men. The net effect on fashion was depressive: Austerity panels, as Peter McNeil has noted, “did not so much dictate how garments should appear as how they might not” (285). This ethos of negation—again, an important postwar inheritance—implied that stylish dress had no place in wartime: clothing should be thrifty and functional. It is true that the Board of Trade also produced the Utility Clothing Scheme, which instructed certain firms to design attractive clothing following Austerity rules. Utility garments were well-constructed and unmemorable (1/42:52-53), good quality clothes at an excellent (because government-capped) price, but like most wartime clothing these garments were born of necessity not desire. Again, a Pym-ish quality?



Utility suit design, 1943

The wartime changes in British dress style were striking even to other nations at war. American G.I.s posted to England were given a booklet which warned them not to look down on British civilians for appearing “dowdy and badly-dressed.... The British know that they help war production by wearing an old suit or dress until it cannot be patched any longer. Old clothes are ‘good form’” (Longmate 23). The circumstances of wartime life also mitigated fashionable dressing. When materials for hats were expensive, and stockings hard to obtain, wearing either to church began to seem optional, as the Archbishop of Canterbury was obliged to proclaim (Calder 279). Perhaps when Mildred comments that she's had “a lapse” when she encounters Everard late in the novel, because she is “hatless and stockingless in an old cotton dress and cardigan”, she is reverting to wartime dress habits. Some soldiers did use the shortages to their own advantage. One G.I. recalled that a gift of nylon stockings “got you a weekend in bed” and became known as “shack-up material” (Longmate 273). If American nylons were “shack-up material,” the traditional silk stockings were the more classy intimate gift—especially the Italian-branded versions such as Rocky brings to Helena on his return, causing Mildred to edge towards the door.



Was fashion dead then, in a world where you might count yourself fortunate to salvage a few belongings from your bombed house, as we see in these oddly beaming women? And did British women relinquish high style, in the quest for survival? After all, the traditional essence of British womanhood lies elsewhere—in making of cups of tea, for instance. Angus Calder observes that “the famine of clothes” meant that “fashion sense expressed itself increasingly in elaborate attention to the head and face” (378-79). Hats were not rationed, though materials cost more; and women who could afford it sported styles from very large cloches to patriotic little “Monty” berets (Monty berets being imitations of Field-Marshal Montgomery's wool Kangol beret).

The war also saw shortages of cosmetics, especially lipstick, that nonessential essential. Once the province of flappers, motion-picture stars, and fast girls, by the late Thirties painted lips were becoming typical of women of all classes (Horwood 68-69). Remember that although Mildred describes herself (and indeed others seem to see her) as modest and drab, she does wear lipstick, as emphasized in her memorable purchase of “Hawaiian Fire.” Here is the sort of prewar lipstick ad that I suspect Pym had in mind when she had Mildred pick out that lipstick. The Hawaiian and South Seas motifs were common. Tattoo spreads featured sultry models in exotic locations, evoking cinema glamour rather than upper-class dignity. The prewar spreads also inched towards erotic suggestion, as in a 1937 ad, where they’ve “gone about as far as they can go.” Prewar ads featured mottos such as “Lips that open like a flower to love...in soft, sweet surrender...by Tattoo!” (*Vogue* 4/19/39:139).

Soon, however, wartime advertisements would proffer lipstick refills rather than brand-new tubes. South-Seas exotica gave way to Helena Rubenstein’s Regimental Red and Cyclax of London’s “Auxiliary Red, the Lipstick for Service Women” (*Vogue* 9/39:67; 12/39:58). Women donning dreary uniforms hoped to span the beauty gap with makeup, and lipstick offered bright color at a relatively low cost—despite problems with shortages. The irrepressible Tattoo creators paraphrased Admiral Nelson: “England expects these days that every woman shall be a beauty” (*Vogue* 5/40:106). To continue to wear lipstick became a sign of stubborn survivors’ spirit.

After the war Tattoo lipstick ads were less frank, though still seductive. A 1947 version proclaimed: “Hawaiian—with the accent of a blazing sun!” To the condescending salesgirl behind the makeup counter, Mildred insists that she has a right to this blazing accent: “‘Thank you, but I think I will have Hawaiian Fire,’ I said obstinately, savouring the ludicrous words and the full depths of my shame”. Typically, Mildred casts her lipstick purchase as a milestone. Then she takes her hard-won Hawaiian Fire to the department store Ladies’ Room, where she meditates upon the seriousness of cosmetics: “Inside it was a sobering sight indeed and one to put us all in mind of the futility of material things and of our own mortality. *All flesh is but as grass...* I thought, watching the women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder-puffs”. The grand language is employed in parody; yet there also is something bestial about these women arming themselves to return to the public world: they are disturbingly “savage”: “biting,” “licking,” and “stabbing.”

Ostensibly Mildred wistfully admires stylish women. Helena’s distance from Mildred’s virtuous spinsterhood is suggested by her unusual attire: when Mildred first meets her she is “gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey” ; Helena is pretty, undomestic, and more devoted to anthropology—a “man’s” calling—than to her charming husband. But the trousers are a telling postwar touch. Note that Mildred’s “oldest clothes” consist of a “shapeless overall and old fawn skirt”. She does not seem to don trousers even for cleaning around the house. More women did wear trousers in wartime, for their jobs, although Pym herself admired the Wren uniform which in its dress and office versions sported a ladylike skirt. So what do Helena’s “gay trousers” say of her?

Trousered females were a topic of considerable discussion during the war period, when many Britons seem



to have expected that, with world war threatening civilization, women soon would breach the gender barriers by wearing trousers as frequently and casually as men. At the war's start *Vogue* magazine had preemptively condemned "slackers in slacks," "who think war is also declared on all the elegance and artifices of our beauty-conscious age" (9/39:19). Novelist Evelyn Waugh would complain that mid-war London was "shabbier and shoddier," inhabited by "horrible groups of soldiers ... lounging about with girls in trousers and high heels and filmstar coiffures," sourly adding, "I never saw so many really ugly girls making themselves conspicuous" (*Diary* 536: 15 March 1943). This may have been unfair, because many women had to dress male-style for war work as did these women window-cleaners, photographed here en route to their jobs.



However women novelists too reveled in the comic and catty potential of what many considered an unbecoming trend. E. M. Delafield's eponymous *Provincial Lady in Wartime* (1940), in London seeking a job, continually associates "trousered women" with war work. The obnoxiously peppy Pussy Winter-Gammon, she notes, "[c]annot possibly be less than sixty-six, but has put herself into diminutive pair of blue trousers" (55). The Lady's own resistance to trouser-wearing is softened by the good taste of her young friend Serena ("Trousers brown"), who informs her that "this war is really being won on coffee and cigarettes, by women in trousers" (61, 64). In Angela Thirkell's *Cheerfulness Breaks In* (1940), lovely empty-headed Rose Birkett appears in grey flannel slacks for a golf outing. Her fiancé corrects her dress masterfully, and Rose quickly changes into a skirt (6). Indeed, in Thirkell's fiction it is not the fashionable young things who object to breeches. Mannish Miss Hampton, who sports "an extremely well-cut black coat and skirt, a gentlemanly white silk shirt with collar and tie, and neat legs in silk stockings and brogues," rejects the new trouser-look, remarking, "Can't abide those women who go about in slacks trying to look like men" (87). Later she adds, "I know exactly what I'd look like, neither a man nor a woman." To which the pot-valiant Mrs. Phelps retorts, "Well, that's exactly what you look like now" (196-197). Thirkell, throughout her rather trouser-obsessed novel, suggests that only the most feminine women—glamorous Rose, and Mrs. Phelps with "her abundant bosom" (165) — dare try men's attire, which for them accentuates the sexual differences. The worst thing of all would be to look like "neither a man nor a woman."

Helena's trousers, then, demonstrate that her beauty can overcome a masculine mode. Of course Mildred, though bemused by Helena's style, shows no inclination to try trousers. In fact fashion magazine evidence suggests that, although vastly more women were wearing trousers to work (Calder 334-5; Walford 31-32), they did not become a true fashion. Even the stocking-shortage did not induce stylish women to swathe their legs, it seemed; and women forced to wear trousers or austere uniforms sought to compensate through lipstick and fingernail polish (*Vogue* 12/40:22). Even the Land Girls' "green jerseys, brown breeches, brown felt slouch hats and khaki overcoats" often were worn with non-issue garments such as a flowered frock or a magenta jumper (Calder 428-9).

But war affected the most intimate women's styles. In 1934 the young Barbara Pym confided to her diary, "At Marks and Spencer's I bought a peach coloured vest and trolleys to match with insertions of lace. Disgraceful I know but I can't help choosing my underwear with a view to it being seen!" (*VPE* 33: 8 January 1934). However in mid-wartime, after an unhappy love affair, Pym even temporarily lost interest in lingerie: "I went into

Bright's and looked vaguely at materials—red spotted chiffon for a spinsterish nightdress” (VPE 124: 13 April 1943). We may assume that her fabric options in 1943 were depressingly reduced—and remember that Austerity measures banned lace on undergarments. But the contrast—between a young Pym's delight in choosing underwear “with a view to it being seen” and the thirtyish Pym's apathy—appears also in *Excellent Women*, when Mildred comments that her washing contains “Just the sort of underclothes a person like me might wear . . . so there is no need to describe them”. In other words, to be a spinster is to wear underwear that men never will see.



But postwar styles—like the modest Mildred, and like Pym herself—were full of paradox. Despite continued shortages and postwar rationing in Britain, the New Look, a combination of full blouse, tiny waist, and longer fuller skirt, made a sensation when introduced by Christian Dior in February 1947. Even as early as 1945 dresses had trended towards tightly belted waists, rounded hips, gathers, padding, and bloused backs—that is, towards many features that still were prohibited or simply impossible under wartime rationing (*Vogue* 3/45: 29, 33). So, while Mildred never mentions the New Look (which premiered three months after her story concludes), it was “in the air,” and a durable part of women's memories of the Forties. In *Quartet in Autumn* Letty specifically recalls “the New Look brought in by Dior in 1947,” leading into “the comfortable elegance of the fifties.” And in fact the New Look captures the contradictions of British women's postwar selves—and especially of Pym's women.

For the New Look was both conservative and rebellious. “I designed clothes for flowerlike women,” Dior famously explained. “I brought back the art of pleasing” (*Dior on Dior* 22). His stress on decorative femininity, and on “bringing back” an art from the past, raised many questions, and some hackles. Was this famous postwar style retrogressive, in terms of women's place in society? Was it even new? The second question is easier to answer: no. The New Look constituted a re-fashioning of Edwardian styles; it also echoed those full skirts and corseted waists that designers had attempted to introduce in 1939, just before the war.

British women certainly adopted the style enthusiastically, despite continuing material shortages and rationing, and despite the necessity of corseting or “hipette” padding once more. But probably it was the New Look's luxurious aura that attracted women in postwar, still-Austerity Britain. That, and the option of more specifically feminine garments which, after years of uniforms or factory trousers, seemed a freedom not a constraint. British women, who had been thrifty and patriotic, mended and made do, throughout the war, were weary of the struggle and eager to celebrate victory with a little luxury—even if it involved illogically wasteful styles. Clothing restrictions continued: Not until 1949 did most fashions in Britain become coupon-free, and Austerity rules were retained until 1952, the publication year of *Excellent Women*. Still, the British had won the war, and restrictions on clothing now seemed like rationing without rationale. Harry Hopkins points out that Dior's designs appeared during the Fuel Crisis of February 1947: *Daily Express* headlines screamed “LESS...LESS...LESS,” while women seemed to demand, “MORE...MORE...MORE!”—that is, more cloth, as much as eighteen yards for one

dress (91). The Fuel Crisis too, during an historically cold winter, is not literally depicted in *Excellent Women*, but fuel was short. Remember Mildred's obsession with how many bars of her electric fire are lit? She turns on another bar when Winifred comes weeping to her door, and at the novel's end she is pleased to find Everard's gas-fire "one degree better than the glowing functional bar into which [she] had gazed with Julian"—surely suggesting that Everard as a romantic prospect is *one* degree better than Julian.

Nor does Mildred mention small-waisted, wide-skirted styles. But what we find bursting out in the New Look is an extravagance of stubborn self-expression, nevertheless demurely and even stringently controlled (that waist!). It is the same artistic paradox shown in Mildred's story, in Pym's fiction generally, and more broadly in postwar British literature. For Pym and for Mildred, the debates over retrogressive domesticity certainly apply: Does Mildred epitomize meek womanhood and low self-image—that is, traditional feminine roles, in which marriage is required for a "full life"? (*A Full Life* was Pym's early title for the novel.)

Certainly the war's end meant for many women the loss of wartime jobs and a return to domestic roles—but their horizons had broadened. Mildred has worked in the wartime Censorship, as did Pym herself, but now lives on her small independent income (in itself, a retrogressive characteristic) and voluntarily works with "distressed gentlewomen." Many women, such as those London window washers or the Land Girls working on farms, had less decorous wartime employment. They did not earn as much money as men in similar positions but "fabulous sums" compared to their pay in prewar women's jobs (Braybon & Summerfield 185). They would lose those jobs to men as the war ended, or willingly relinquish them for the domestic hearth, but they acquired a certain net gain from the experience.

Certainly late-Forties Britain saw some yearning for that domestic hearth. There was a postwar boom in matchmaking services (Hopkins 141); and conservative psychologists and educators encouraged women to return to their natural careers as wives and mothers (Wilson 33). Above all, the psycho-sexual stereotyping of the spinster hardened. The Victorian spinster had been accepted as a natural if sad aspect of British society; then in the early twentieth century the modernist avant-garde looked to Freud, arguing that a celibate spinster must be sexually repressed. And now the spinster lived alone rather than as part of an extended family, and maybe she (like Mildred) even chose to do so! Clearly, just as the New Look did not truly revive an earlier dress style, so postwar women, men, and society could not return to tidily-circumscribed, prewar gender roles—such as they were.

So the New Look embodied an ironic declaration of independence. The era's ironies ranged from lifestyle, to dress style, to literary style: Even as traditional wife-and-motherhood was celebrated, and celibate spinsterhood was deemed pathological, the postwar era saw increasing numbers of independent single women. And Dior's luxuriant New Look was purchased in mass-produced versions, enabling feminine style to say more for less. Meanwhile postwar literature also endeavored to say more in fewer words, emphasizing restraint and understatement, irony rather than tragedy and comedy rather than drama.

In *Excellent Women* Mildred's comically-diminished rhetoric does seem appropriate to her drab identity as a spinster—a state which, as Laura Doan has described, customarily is defined by lack and in Pym's novel is intensified by postwar exigencies (Doan 5-6). But it also is perfectly synchronized with Pym's years of success. In fact Pym's pared-down grammar is as wittily understated as any Fifties Movement poem, and as matter-of-factly hilarious as a Kingsley Amis novel. These qualities suggest certain reasons for her fiction's acceptance in the postwar world, an acceptance that had begun to seem impossible in Thirties England. Remember that *Some Tame Gazelle*, though started in 1934, completed, submitted to a publisher, revised, and re-submitted, finally was

accepted only in '49 and published in 1950; it then was followed quickly by five more novels in eleven years.

Postwar literary trends splendidly suited the ways that many women wanted to write, the ways that even high-modern *doyenne* Virginia Woolf had urged them to write, of the small, often-ignored, details of their own lives. "...say what your beauty means to you," Woolf urged, "or your plainness, and what is your relation to the everchanging and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs"(88). And Pym—through her protagonists—says these things over and over, especially in *Excellent Women*: "I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women"; "I might perhaps buy myself a new and more becoming dressing-gown, one that I wouldn't mind being seen in, something long and warm in a rich colour". The marvel of Pym's descriptions, especially of plain women and their relations to style, is that they are neither dull nor are they conceited "selfies." There is always that humble, comical insight:



I began taking off my apron and tidying my hair, apologizing as I did so, in what I felt was a stupid, fussy way, for my appearance. As if anyone would care how I looked or even notice me, I told myself scornfully.

'You look very nice,' said Rockingham, smiling in such a way that he could almost have meant it.

Mildred's self-deprecation is vintage Pym, and so is the sly, gentle undercutting: Pym embeds "what [Mildred's] plainness means to her" in a deceptively plain narration that slides in the knife at the passage's end.

So Pym's understated narration dovetailed neatly with the new minimalist literature. Often associated with Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and the "Angry Young Men" or Movement poets of the Fifties, this poetry and fiction employed a deliberately anti-eloquent language especially suited to leveling, comic fictions. High modernism had retained epic ambitions while expressing tragic regret for lost verities. But postwar writers used hesitation, apology, and qualifiers, even making an art of flat negation. Movement poets produced works with titles like "Saying No" (D. J. Enright), or "Nothing to be Said" (Philip Larkin). For the Movement's literary subjects, think of Larkin's most famous topoi: empty churches where "there's nothing going on" ("Church Going" l. 1), or a cold and lonely sexual revolution, in which "Talking in Bed" descends to a quest for words "not untrue and not unkind" (l. 12)—phrases which also capture the trend towards linguistic negation.

The Movement is rarely referenced in analyses of postwar women's fiction; yet women writers also developed a leveling aesthetic, the ostensibly shallow surface of a deep structure of protest. As Michael Cotsell noted, Pym's fiction typifies mid-twentieth century British self-perception: "the 'minor events in minor lives' ... belong to the postwar context in which 'something major—Britain—became minor'" (Cotsell 33; quoted in Little 78). And for a summary of the Movement's philosophy, and a prose exemplar of its anti-eloquent eloquence, one hardly could do better than the musings of Pym's Letty, in *Quartet in Autumn*, upon her own spinsterhood: "might not the experience of 'not having' be regarded as something with its own validity?" Recall too these samples of negating rhetoric in *Excellent Women*, already cited, though similar instances appear on nearly every page: "...women like me really expected very little—nothing, almost"; "Just the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear ... so there is no need to describe them"; "I was not very well dressed that day—I had had a 'lapse'

and was hatless and stockingless in an old cotton dress and a cardigan". Obviously a spinster's limited life and slim prospects epitomizes the lowered expectations of late-modern British literature.

A negative narrative style sounds rather dreary; but both Pym and the Movement writers employed minimized forms and negation in moving ways, and also with comic *élan*. Even in the fairy-tale conclusion of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Dixon finally lands his dream job because of his negatives rather than his plusses. "It's not that you've got the qualifications, for this or any other work," his millionaire employer remarks. "You haven't got the disqualifications, though, and that's much rarer" (234). And consider a few more examples of postwar prose style, from *Excellent Women* and *Lucky Jim*; note the plain, unglamorous language, usually in the service of humility. We find a flat yet grammatical repetition,

I had observed that men did not usually do things unless they liked doing them. (EW)

He must be out of his mind to be talking to a girl like this like this. Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*
a mock-heroic presentation of small incidents in small lives,

All flesh is but as grass... I thought, watching the women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder-puff. (EW)

The burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed to me rather a heavy one. (EW)

The bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation, he thought. 'You bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation,' he said. (Amis, *Lucky Jim*).

and the very funny use of non-sequitur:

'Strong passions, isn't it... Eating meat, you know, it says that in the Bible. Not that we get much of it now.' (EW)

Mr Napier was called Rockingham! How the bearer of such a name would hate sharing a bathroom! (EW)

What could a man with such eyes, such a beard, and (he noticed them for the first time) such dissimilar ears have to do with a man like Gore-Urquhart? (Amis, *Lucky Jim*)

At first glance, then, Pym might seem to fit right in to the Movement. Yet her witty fictions remained segregated, as trivial "women's novels," for many readers. As Virginia Woolf pointed out, women's values commonly are called trivial because women must deal with all the unrecorded details of everyday life, such as the dishes that are washed every night (73). Therefore to focus on the trivial is to focus on the real conditions of life and, perhaps, to acknowledge one's own smallness. "[A]fter all, life was like that for most of us," Mildred remarks, "the small unpleasantnesses rather than the great tragedies, the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic love affairs of history or fiction". A trivial style is, then, a humble style. It also is a style that signifies non-signification: "The ideology of the trivial," Little writes, "is that it has no significant ideology, belongs to no master narrative, no great codes of quest or romance, and no *sermo patrius*"—that is, no traditionally male genre of worthwhile literature. Although Movement fiction celebrates ordinary life and the average bloke (Morrison 174), it does not use trivia as profoundly as does Pym.

In particular Pym's uses of dress details seemed to capture a specifically feminine experience and, I would say, a spinster's experience. A concern with clothing style entails a willing self-objectification, as Karen Hanson has noted: "A personal interest in dress and open responsiveness to the changing whims of fashion depend upon a recognition that one is seen, that one is—among other things—an object of others' sight, others' cognition" (70). Such a self-objectification serves as a prime characteristic for Pym's understated but confident humor. Her heroines objectify themselves, especially her neglected spinsters, who are accustomed to being regarded as objects.

And so Pym depicts that ironic process through the telling details of dress. Kingsley Amis, on the other hand, herded such details into a corral for female bad taste. In *Lucky Jim*, Dixon's hysterical girlfriend Margaret is characterized repeatedly by her hideous "green Paisley frock in combination with the low-heeled, quasi-velvet shoes" (11, 19, 155), while the dream-girl Christine is notable only for blond beauty and large breasts. (The style of Dixon's ripped pants is never detailed.) But if the details of dress are deemed too petty even for postwar fiction by men, then finally the parallels between Mildred's narrative style and her dress style suggest certain gendered reasons why Pym has not been more widely appreciated as a brilliant stylist. After all, even sympathetic male responses such as Larkin's reveal a deep gulf between the sexes in comprehending the spinster's "natural clothing."

Consider Mildred's dress style, dominated by brown. A. S. Byatt summarized the Pym world scornfully as "brown frocks, knitted socks in clerical grey and cauliflower cheese" (862), and certainly Mildred's brown dresses and coats exemplify an inconsequential dullness: "Unpretentious, just like me,' I said stupidly, touching the feather in my brown hat". Pym's Realism is real rather than a complex of aesthetically-stunning symbols. Nevertheless, when Mildred buys *another* brown hat we are offered a serious trope for stagnation, despite Rocky's venture that the hat "brings out the colour of your eyes which look like a good dark sherry" (76). It does match her winter coat, and need not be frumpy, as we see in these pictures of Forties styles.

Yet Mildred regularly feels a failure, fashion-wise. If we can assume that Mildred's new Whitsuntide hat trimmed with flowers (cast in the shade by Allegra Gray's more unusual choice) also is brown, it might look like this 1940s hat, which bears a very small posy typical of Mildred's understated personality. Another possibility is a stylish straw hat, since Whitsuntide signifies the beginning of summer. Why then should Allegra's hat, trimmed with fruit, have made Mildred feel outmoded?

Fruit was a less common and rather daring choice, and we already know that the "well-dressed" Mrs. Gray is a showy dresser. She is first identified by her "sad eyes" for Julian Mallory but by her "silver fox fur" for Winifred—and do we need to explain that image? Regarding silver fox-fur capes from the Forties, we recall the animalistic women applying makeup in the department store ladies' room and we might guess that an element of fierce competition is implied. Allegra's fruit-hat may well have been delicately pretty, with painted glass fruit; or it could have been spectacular, requiring a very striking woman to carry it off, as in this expensive 1940s Bes-Ben strawberry-adorned hat. What is certain is that fruit was not an ordinary choice, certainly not a decorous clergyman's widow style. Remember too that Mrs. Gray frequently is identified by her "apricot" makeup,



suggesting an artificially delicious appearance.

Mildred feels that apricot-tinted skin is beyond her, though she buys that bold Hawaiian Fire lipstick. Likewise, while she warns Dora against wearing brown—“It does the wrong kind of things to people over thirty, unless they’re *very* smart”—she is shy of changing her familiar dress habits. We know that *brown* bore one important association for Pym, since she had foreseen her life as an “old brown spinster” (VPE 69: 11 March 1938). And Mildred’s possible escape from brown spinsterhood, through a redefinition of her “natural clothing,” is signified when at the novel’s end she buys a *black* dress and changes her hairstyle. She then anticipates that moderately “full life” which may include marriage with Everard and certainly will involve doing his indexing.

But what can that black dress signify? Of course Mildred is imitating Helena, and many other stylish women. “Helena was very elegant in black. ‘One mustn’t *look* like a female anthropologist,’ she explained.” And Helena, Mildred recalls, “enliven[ed]” her black “with some brilliant touch of colour or ‘important jewel’”. But consider how Mildred describes her black dress with its little collar, and I fear it looked something like these little Forties numbers. And how does Mildred endeavor to enliven it? “I had no important jewels except for a good cameo brooch which had belonged to my grandmother, so I fastened this at the front of the little collar”. Is it significant that Mildred has “no important jewels”—or that instead of brilliant color she employs a pale and decorous Victorian cameo? And what of that little white collar? William describes Mildred’s appearance (including “scraped-back hair”) as *triste*—but it’s hard not to suspect that she has inadvertently styled herself like a traditional maid.



Does Everard Bone even notice Mildred's servant-style? I must leave the romance—or otherwise—of *Excellent Women's* conclusion to others, but note that Mildred's dress enables her, both boldly and humbly, to enjoy her date with Everard while remaining clear-sighted about its possible implications. Note too that the modest under-cuttings and negations of Pym's rhetoric suited her novels for minimized, postwar Britain. Finally remember that many men, even those who loved Pym and her writing, still didn't get it. Perhaps they could not grasp that domestic trivia such as clothing can possess profound meaning, while even loneliness may—for the modest, self-objectifying spinster—be shockingly funny. We can observe the difference in these two, strikingly different versions of ironic undoing, by the mischievous Pym and the grimmer Larkin.

Clergymen did not go holding people's hands in public places unless their intentions were honourable, I told myself, hoping that I might be wrong..." —Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*

All his life he had imagined people were hostile to him and wanted to hurt him; now he knew he had been right.... He was used to humiliating memories, but these seemed different, they had really existed." —Philip Larkin, *Jill*

Smallness, humiliation, loneliness: these were sadder states for Larkin than for Pym. In any case, Pym never has been considered part of the trendy, subversive Fifties "Movement," and her books remain tragic for a certain type of reader—even as they depict, for the rest of us, a richly full life.



'You seem to be very nicely dressed,' said Everard without looking.
(Barbara Pym and Henry Harvey)

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