

# Another Barbara: New Insights into Barbara Pym

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*Paper presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 16-17 March 2013*

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Barbara Pym, like all of us, cannot be truly known, even to her best friends. Biographers can only tell another person's story through their own eyes and experience, we all 'get in the way' of the person about whom we are writing. This has happened to Barbara Pym in the biographies that have been written about her, and will happen in my interpretation of the Barbara I believe I know. However, new insights into a beloved author such as Pym are worth raising; my work joins, rather than dismisses, earlier biographies.

Hilary Pym's correspondence with Robert Liddell raises doubts about accepted understandings of her sister, such as suggestions she was a quiet spinster writer of 'small' novels. Hilary believes that Barbara Pym was an interesting amalgam of a number of personalities! Her contribution to *A Very Private Eye*, in conjunction with Pym's Literary Executor, Hazel Holt, created a rather racy image of Pym. Robert Liddell found the work distasteful: it is clear that he sought to protect his image of Barbara. Hilary strongly defended the biography, suggesting that it corrected the erroneous depiction of Pym as a quiet person in a village, she described Barbara as frivolous rather than spinsterish.

Hazel Holt's contribution to *A Very Private Eye* appears to support Hilary. However, she also created her own version of Pym in *A Lot to Ask*. Pym's friend from the late 1940s and literary executor, Holt concentrates on Pym's relationships with men and their portrayal in her fiction, reflecting the views of other biographers who see romantic liaison as her eternal quest. Holt makes some very pertinent connections between Pym's life and her novels, demonstrating the interconnectedness of her fiction and experience. However, although no biographer can write about every piece of fiction, and is fully justified in being selective, it is interesting that Holt concentrated on the published works for her assessment of Pym's life. Her undoubted access to all Pym's work and thus decision to ignore the stronger ideas expressed in the unpublished short stories is an example of the way in which a biographer's selective view of her subject can colour that subject. Biography is about seeking out information and giving a voice to characteristics that the person often hides, consciously or unconsciously. When we are talking about an artist we need to look assiduously for their voice. Perhaps it is only in their art that their true voice can be found. Pym's reference to the likelihood that people may hide their real nature is crucial to my argument that Pym adopted an approach to her writing that, until the 1960s and 1970s, amounted to self-censorship.

Other full length biographies have presented various assessments. Anne Wyatt-Brown's psychological account<sup>1</sup> is a revealing work, possibly more about the writer than the subject! Wyatt-Brown criticised the edited biography as an inaccurate reflection of Pym's life. She suggests that as a result of a difficult childhood Pym remained focused on 'domesticity and human relationships rather than action' in both her youthful and mature works. Wyatt-Brown bases her assumptions about Pym on Karen Horney's feminine psychology. In keeping with Horney's theory, Wyatt-Brown assumes the major influence on Pym's work was her family life. She maintains Pym's childhood was hurtful and disappointing, thus establishing a pattern that undermined her adult relationships with lovers and friends. Wyatt-Brown concludes that Pym's work demonstrates her anxiety about marriage. She suggests that Irena Pym's strong role in the family and lack of interest in 'feminine' activities such as fashion damaged Pym. As a result, she claims that 'Pym wrote perceptively about inhibited, conforming but

acutely sensitive women [because] she was one herself'. Strangely at odds with Hilary's belief, Wyatt-Brown speculates that Pym's father's illegitimacy may have had a negative effect on the family.

One example of the problem I find with Wyatt-Brown's speculation about Pym is her reference to 'The Magic Diamond'. Nine-year-old Pym's work revolves around resolution of a problem set for two young protagonists, a prince and a princess. They are of equal status. The prince is unable to reach a solution and asks the princess to assist him. Bemused by the enormity of their task both are rescued by the king. Wyatt-Brown finds a solution in which Pym gives power to age, status and masculinity evidence of her inability to embrace independence. However, Pym's use of a technique with which she was familiar through her parents' love of Gilbert and Sullivan is not particularly instructive about her psychological state.

So, Barbara Pym's sister and her literary executor presented one image of Barbara through their selection of the diary entries they selected for *A Very Private Eye*. Holt presented another version of Pym in her independent biography. Liddell hugged to himself another image. Wyatt-Brown developed yet another account. In the same way, I shall use examples from the novels and short stories as evidence of Pym's experiences and ideas, following in the footsteps of previous biographers. However, Pym's comprehensive engagement with a wider world and broader debates such as gender relations, class and racism has not been given thorough consideration. Pym constantly engaged with the contest of ideas. In almost all of the novels Pym's central women characters directly or indirectly engage in her overarching theme, in which she debates the relative value of scientific thought and the world of imagination. Pym also used women characters to grapple with the social and religious issues of the time. In her last novel she also brought to fruition her pre-occupation with the debate about what is history. Her 'research into the lives of ordinary people' became part of the debate she realised obliquely in novels such as *Some Fond Return of Love*, and fully in *A Few Green Leaves*. This is a Pym who has not been written about at length.

Factual information is the beginning of biography: dates of birth and death; where a person lived and worked; family membership, and in Pym's case, the books and short stories that were published, rejected and unpublished. Turning to the factual information we have: Barbara Pym was born on the 2nd of June 1913 in Oswestry, Shropshire in modest circumstances. The family later moved to Morda Lodge, a large Edwardian house. In 1925 Pym left home to be educated at Liverpool College. Although not unique, Pym's education was special in that the boarding school was for the 'highly intelligent, academically inclined whose sights were already set on Oxford'. She started studying English Literature at St Hilda's in 1931 and gained a second class degree. After she graduated Pym returned home and, apart from a short period teaching English in Poland, concentrated on her writing until she joined the local war effort, becoming a fire warden, helping at a baby clinic, working in the Food Office, a First Aid Post and YMCA Canteen at Park Hill Camp and caring for Birkenhead evacuees. In 1941 she became a Censorship Officer in Bristol where she shared a house with Honor Wyatt. Later she joined the WRNS. Pym worked at the International African Institute from the late 1940s for twenty-eight years. While acting editor of the Institute journal, *Africa*, Pym continued to write and attempt to publish short stories as well as novels. She saw herself as professional as revealed by her membership of the Society of Authors from 1947. She had mixed successes with her novels, with six being published before 1961; two being rejected before the publication of *Quartet in Autumn* in 1975, and its shortlisting for the Booker Prize; and the posthumous publication of novels and short stories. Pym died in 1980.

All of that is informative and useful. However, the interesting part of biography is interpretation of the events around the facts. An Astrologer would be most interested in Barbara Pym's birthday – the 2nd of June

which in Astrological terms makes her a Gemini and all that entails. Rupert Gleadow did an Astrological chart for Barbara and that will do for that type of interpretation! However, putting her in an historical context, the year of her birth raises some interesting issues, particularly in relation to her treatment of spinsters in the novels. Pym would have grown up with the knowledge that women who otherwise would have married were single because of the loss of young men during the First World War. In conjunction with that circumstance, is the observation that Pym's neighbours were her spinster aunts. It was Aunt Jane who provided an example and there are few references to spinsterhood as the result of WW1 losses. As a young woman growing up in the late 1920s and 30s she would have heard reference to 'the new woman', the term appears in *Jane and Prudence*. In the 1930s Pym was in her twenties and at Oxford – a privileged life while the depression affected the underprivileged. Class is the focus of the short story 'The Rich Man in His Castle' and subtly part of her other work. On a personal level, we hear about her romantic adventures and the men about whom she wove fantasies. In the novels men are less than romantic ideals! We hear little of her relationships with women, apart from Hilary and Hazel. However, she was in regular contact with other women writers. Sisterhood, biological and non-biological is an important theme in Pym's work and women writers appear, if only briefly (although sometimes as focus of humour). She was in her thirties during World War Two, in that period, she would have been seen and have seen herself as a spinster in the making. In the 1950s, the aftermath of the war, women who had been in the paid workforce were encouraged back into domestic life. How did Pym respond? With strong images of spinsterhood and women in paid work. The 1960s have been referred to as the 'swinging sixties' and her work was seen as irrelevant to this new era. However, when one thinks about the Beatles being told to discard their leather outfits for dark suits, it seems that the era was a little more complex. I believe, against accepted wisdom, that Pym, as with her other work, changed to suit the times. How did the beginning of the modern women's movement in the 1970s influence Pym's work? *An Academic Question* and *Quartet in Autumn* were written. And, as she wrote her last novel, what did she want to tell us in relation to the end of the decade of the era of feminist thought and practice? We get to the underlying grit in village life in *A Few Green Leaves*. Perhaps Pym's uncertainties were fictionalised in her work. But perhaps the concentration on marriage and love has blinded us to her theoretical contemplation of church practice; women's place; the role of anthropology in developing countries; class and race. She also thought about moral issues.

Of course, the subject's, friends' and family's commentary add flavour to biography. For example, Hilary described Barbara as 'observant and rarely forgetting a foible'. The diaries begun at Oxford include simple events such as outings with women friends; commentary on her university classes and work; visits from her parents and activities when she returned to Oswestry for holidays; the food she enjoyed, films and plays she attended; scenes and events add to our knowledge. Her relationships with various male friends and lovers, including poetry dedicated to 'Lorenzo' (Henry Harvey) were also there in copious quantity. Pym was also remarkably candid about tracking down and observing young men who excited her interest. Pym also noted the books she read, often two a day. Significant to my assessment of the voice in her writing is her enjoyment of novels by 'Elizabeth' such as *The Enchanted April* and *The Pastor's Wife*.

Although we like to believe that we can rely on diaries, letters, recorded conversations and interviews as sources that will lead us to the 'truth' about a person a lot of it is speculative. Pym has left us plenty of information about herself in such sources, but interpretation is important. Each source provides clues, but not necessarily the 'truth'. For example, when Pym refers to her letters being housed at the Bodleian for people to read in the future we can only wonder how this influenced what she wrote. Holt's comments on the diaries, that they 'were written – and certainly preserved – to be read, and are, especially those written in 1943, finished pieces

of writing' must also make us pause. In relation to her diaries, Pym at times refers to the reader and ponders whether her biographer or Harvey's will be disappointed in the end of their relationship. The notebooks, which replaced the diaries, included ideas for stories and detailed storylines and continued her commentary on her reading. Until she graduated in 1934 Pym led a 'relentless social life', with its 'endless round of dinners, tea parties, sherry parties (a newly fashionable form of entertainment) theatres and, above all, the cinema, to which she went several times a week, including Christmas day'.

According to some pundits the sadness of Pym's life is reflected in her work; in contrast, others see hope in the novels. Whether Pym's love affairs were unremittingly sad is questioned by her diary entry in which she suggests that unrequited love might not be entirely unpleasant. More significant is her intellectual approach to her writing in which she refers to the selectivity adopted by a writer. She also referred to an author's writing as an important factor in discerning the writer.

I think that we need to consider Pym as first and foremost a writer. Certainly she shows her commitment to her literary technique when she changed Belinda's character from her original notes where she was a stronger character. It is possible that everything she did was aimed at succeeding in a writer's world, rather than the traditional one to which it is assumed women aspire. Recently I came across a phrase that made me think about a context for talking about this biographical interpretation of Pym: the need to think about what sets up a commotion in the writer's mind?<sup>2</sup> I think that Pym's novels show 'what set up a commotion' in her mind and in turn this provides a useful tool for understanding her.

I'd suggest that the matter that made the biggest 'commotion' in Pym's mind was the relationship between women and men and the inequalities she observed. Biography is partly about what in her experiences might have led to this commotion. She is described as being 'surrounded by a cheerful and loving family' which included her younger sister Hilary with whom she was to live most of her life. I would like to address Pym's attitude towards family and firstly, children. The only feature of her childhood that relates to her experience as a sibling that remains intact in reality and fiction is Pym's role as a very satisfactory sister. However, as has been noted by other commentators, Pym's fiction is largely bereft of childhood or young person's activities. It is hard to determine anything from this, let alone that she did not like children. After all, that prolific writer of children's stories, Enid Blyton is renowned for being an unsatisfactory parent! Pym believed that children should be free of restrictions. How her children, if she had had them, would have adored this!

From what can be discerned from Pym's commentary on children, such as Rowena's three in *A Glass of Blessings* and Caro's daughter in *An Academic Question*, Pym observed them well, in a few short scenes. However, like in most adult novels, they are used to examine an adult's place in the family and society. In Rowena's story, the responsibility she has for children underlines her unequal status in what is a traditional and rather pedestrian marriage. They are driven by her in the small, secondary car, while Harry drives the large luxurious car; she cares for them outside while Wilmet, unencumbered by children, joins in Harry (also unencumbered by children because Rowena is caring for them) in the cosy bar for several gins. Caro is remote from her daughter as she ponders what to do with her life: she has done everything expected of her as a woman. However, with the 1970s comes the complexity of having to do more – should she find an occupation? What is her responsibility toward Alan and his academic career? What should she do about his infidelity? Ironically, neither mother contemplates their children's father's parental responsibility. However, we are not asked to think about Caro as a victim, but a woman who, despite appearances

might well be able to make decisions for herself and a satisfactory life that is not fully dependent on a traditional role. Pym said of the novel that ‘it wasn’t very successful because I haven’t been married and haven’t children. I showed it to a friend of mine who was married and had child. She said I made the girl much too detached about her child. She didn’t have the sort of feelings that a woman with child should have. She was much too casual about it. Apparently you can’t be detached about your children’. Oh dear, so we all have the same feelings about children because we are women?

The way in which Pym used the observations she made of her parents and aunts conflict with the interpretation of Pym’s depiction of marriage and spinsterhood made by other commentators. Most significant is what influences she took from her family life. The sisters frequently visited Frederic Pym’s law office. Together with his return home for lunch each day the family relationships combined the traditional role of a father around whom family life revolved with the less traditional approach apparent in much of Irena Pym’s behaviour. Irena Pym usually drove the family car and ‘owned a motor bike which she rode with great panache, wearing a workmanlike leather motoring coat’. She had a keen eye for eccentricities and was a splendid mimic [...] a subtle ironic sense of humour [...] and a gift for fantasy, inventing stories about people, and it was Irena who was the instigator of special little phrases and family jokes’. We see how Pym’s family life is reflected in her fiction most strongly through Jane Cleveland in *Jane and Prudence*. Possibly the loving and accepting Nicholas is a reflection of her father, too? I have spent so much time considering the way in which Pym depicts women and is dismissive of some types of man that I may not have given enough attention to men such as Nicholas. Significantly, he appears with the woman on whom she based Jane, her mother. Did Pym grow up in a household with a father who gently accepted his wife’s lack of convention?

Pym’s acceptance of non-traditional ways of looking at partnerships is apparent in much of her work. Her techniques provided a cosy cover for representations of women and men that disturbed conventional pieties about marriage and women’s social role. Her characters continually play with the notion of patriarchal power in the institutions with which she is familiar: most important, in novels full of spinsters, was the institution of marriage. Pym questions the value of marriage to women and puts women’s traditional role under scrutiny, using expectations about women’s domestic function in two ways. Firstly, Pym’s narratives question domesticity as women’s natural province. Families are virtually childless and women disregard domestic tasks. Where women accept a nurturing role, they combine it with unconventional behaviour. When women appear to accept a gender-based role, their internal commentary undermines their appearance of conformity. On occasion men are observed enjoying domestic tasks. Pym’s wry observation that they would avoid such work if it suited them to do so suggests that as well as the romantic notions she expressed in her diaries she was also realistic about men and prepared to express those feelings in her fiction. It has been suggested that Pym’s work is about women seeking marriage, who by remaining spinsters, are unfulfilled. However, Pym rebuts the fairy-tale image of marriage. She consistently depicts women in narratives that challenge romantic ideas about women and men’s relationships. She portrays women who question the difference in power between women and men and aspire to control their environment. Pym challenges the essential aspects of a romantic novel. Pym made the specific claim that her work was unromantic when she reacted to the publisher’s title for *No Fond Return of Love*, stating ‘My novels are not about love - not that kind of love.’

Pym uses several anti-romantic techniques to challenge the claim of romanticism in her novels. Characters such as Wilmet (AGB), Prudence (JP) and Leonora (TSDD) who appear romantic in dress or behaviour incorporate negative characteristics that undermine their romantic image. Pym also rejects the romantic device in

which marriage closes the narrative. Although *Some Tame Gazelle* ends with a marriage, its portrayal is unromantic. In the same novel, proposals are rejected in comic scenes and spinsterhood is valorised. Pym portrays marriage as practical rather than romantic in novels such as *Less Than Angels*, and uses it to destabilise gender expectations and class barriers in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. Pym does not focus on strong images of marriage breakdown in her published work. However, in some of her work, published and unpublished, it is implied. *No Fond Return of Love* depends upon a divorce to accomplish the two main characters' possible marriage; affairs are acknowledged in *Jane and Prudence* and assumed in *Excellent Women*. In other instances, divorce is excised from the published work, but is in the drafts. For example, the original draft of *An Unsuitable Attachment* features three sisters, the older one 'living in sin' and another divorced. Pym rarely depicts a happily married woman. As a result, the institution of marriage is constantly under challenge. While Pym's married characters in the published works would not contemplate divorce or express profound grief they are depicted as dissatisfied. The muted nature of the women's behaviour and inarticulate expression of their concerns are more compelling than the depictions in novels readily seen as feminist in that they so appositely reflect the theory in Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*. Pym also shows the converse of the unhappy married woman; unmarried women appear in happy relationships with friends of both genders.

Pym referred to the problems associated with a conventional domestic life in *Less Than Angels* when Catherine can adapt herself only for two weeks to the Swan household. The seeming comfort of family life is a trap Catherine has to leave to keep her independent personality intact. More overtly, she can only keep her economic independence by being free to continue writing her stories. 'The Funeral' is a short story that, while appearing to cover familiar territory is explicitly critical of women's traditional role, shown by two sisters. One theme questions the claim that women are inherently nurturers. The other feature of the story is a direct attack the comfortable image of domesticity, a house. Pym shows that a woman can be imprisoned when she accepts the role of nurturer. She also shows that a woman can also be imprisoned by her need for men's approval. When she wants to reject a man her adoption of domesticity only increases her attraction to him - demonstrating the value he sees in a woman as a nurturer. The other sister Meg plans to leave the house which she describes as a monster and criticises the architect as someone who had never thought of the women who would work in it. Only the death of the patriarchal figure gives the sisters enough economic and emotional freedom to leave the tyranny of domesticity.

Pym's depiction of women at work is instructive. Women's connection with performing unpaid work for men has been implicit in some novels, but the connection is suspect. While her early novels are set in the 1950s and early 1960s, Pym's women characters are often in the part time and full time workforce. Pym takes three different observational approaches to women and their work outside the home. Although she is consistently critical of anthropologists' observations, the theme that runs through the novels is Pym's reverence for the writer's voice. Pym gives authorial observations validity and she uses them with purpose. She gives some occupations greater significance because women are observed engaged in the tasks, giving the reader the opportunity to join with Pym's observation of women working. When Pym shows women engaged in work she is rendering it 'true': there is evidence in the same way as she collects evidence for her writing. The writer, who is given status throughout Pym's work, collects and presents the evidence. In the earlier novels, women are observed in conventional tasks. Later novels show women engaged in professional work. *Quartet in Autumn* reverts to depicting women in unidentified clerical work, but also observable in an office with work accoutrements of desks, papers and staff peripheral to the central characters.

Less identifiable as 'true' is when women are only referred to in paid occupations. Reference, rather than observation, gives women at work less immediacy than when Pym, and the reader though her, observes them. Sometimes the work referred to becomes observable, and therefore authenticated, when women apply skills learnt from the past to current situations. For example, where Mildred recalls her work in censorship during the war and then uses her experience in dealing with the Napiers (EW) her role as a censor is authenticated. Edith Liversidge's work during the war, initially only referred to, becomes observable and authenticated when she uses her past experience of sanitary services in making arrangements for the facilities at the vicarage garden party (STG).

The only work that is not observed, and therefore unauthenticated, either in practice or by association, is the voluntary work it is assumed women will undertake to assist men in their careers. One of the few stereotypical features of Pym's spinsters is the expectation that they will work on such an unpaid basis. However, if observation is the key, and Pym's utterances and fiction suggest that it is, it is essential to consider whether any voluntary work is actually observed. Ironically, the only observed 'voluntary' work undertaken by a woman to assist a man's career is when Caro Grimstone steals the Stillingfleet Papers for her husband.

Pym's commentary on women's voluntary work for men is an instance of her use of the authorial dual voice. Although there is a lot of talk about it, there is no instance of a woman proofreading, making an index or typing for a man. Catherine is observed at her typewriter working on her own stories and magazine columns; Tom is also observed at his typewriter typing his thesis. Although Tom suggests that Deidre could replace Catherine as his typist there is no evidence that either woman does any typing for him (LTA). Miss Clovis assumes that Mildred will be assisting Everard Bone with his indexing (LTA). Mildred also wryly comments that she will be expected to do so (EW), her dual voice connecting with Pym's authorial dual voice to reinforce the invisibility, and unlikelihood, of her undertaking any such tasks. Pym undertook secretarial work for Harvey in his preparation of his thesis and Holt refers to this work as the basis of Pym's fictional accounts. However, Pym was paid, although she believed the payment inadequate, her work at the Africa Institute was also poorly paid. Throughout the novels, Pym's ironic approach to voluntary work for men also ensures that its exploitative nature is understood.

Pym's collection of newspaper clippings for story ideas and copious notes about her observations also suggest that she was open to writing well beyond the minutia of her own life. In keeping with the idea underlying the politics of difference, Pym fictionalised women's, not a particular woman's, experiences. Pym valorises the unromantic heroine, adopting Austen's portrayal of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, which established a sympathetic pattern for this figure. In Pym's work, the unromantic heroine can be identified in characters such as Belinda Bede (STG), Mildred Lathbury (EW) and Dulcie Mainwaring (NFRL). Another recognisable Pym heroine whose image is unromantic is the attractive but mature spinster, such as Harriet Bede (STG) or Leonora Eyre (TSDD). The unromantic fiancé, such as Mary Beamish (AGB) or unpleasant fiancé such as Allegra Gray (EW) reaffirms Pym's work as the antithesis to romance.

In particular, she challenges the stereotype of 'spinster'. Katherine M. Rogers refers to understandings about fictional spinsters as follows::

The old maid provides a [...] convenient butt for hostility against women [...] since she [does] not justify herself by being a wife or mother. Hence she was often depicted as a figure of fun, stripped of the sentimental chivalry with which other women were swathed, caricatured as ugly, disagreeable, and relentlessly in pursuit of men.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the spinsters depicted by Pym typify Doan's description of women who 'challenge, even ridicule, a social order that calls for the repression of unkind retorts [...] and pits their individual needs against the larger set of social expectations' In doing so they 'challenge and subvert prevailing social expectations'. At the same time, spinsters, like most of Pym's women characters, often examine their own assumptions. They are depicted as complex as they are given internal as well as external dimensions. By making her central women characters introspective Pym achieves several aims. She is enabled, through them and as a narrator, in debating broad social issues; her characters' dual voices raise questions about conventional thought and behaviour; and what would be considered character flaws in women characters in non-feminist novels are examined sympathetically.

Although some depictions of spinsters are brief, they nonetheless demonstrate Pym's continuing and sustained interest in portraying single women as individuals rather than members of a stereotypical group. There are numerous different depictions of spinsters, from unmarried mothers to nuns; women in paid work and voluntary workers in domestic and social fields.

Another aspect of Pym's home life was the regular visits by curates at Sunday supper; Pym usually attended church; and her mother played the organ. And, of course, the clergy appear throughout Pym's novels. Hilary Pym noted that Pym was attracted to High-Church practice but stopped short of suggesting that she was fully committed.

Pym's attitude towards the excellent woman of the church is interesting. Garner's assumptions about the excellent woman and Pym's attitudes towards her are questioned by her treatment of the excellent women in her novels. In particular, Belinda Bede, Pym's alter ego in *Some Tame Gazelle*, challenges Garner's conjecture (STG, p.9) when she finds that the description of her church activities makes her sound almost unpleasant.

So, Pym's years before she went to Oxford appear to have comprised a pleasant childhood and academically and personally satisfactory early education. During her time at Oxford her known truths that eased her way appear to have been damaged. It is from this time that the complexities in Pym's character become apparent through her diaries.

At Oxford, as is well known, Barbara met two men who featured throughout her life. I suggest that Henry Harvey and Robert Liddell were important contributors to some of the complexities which apparently appeared in this period. I am not referring to Pym tracking men and embellishing romantic stories about them. We know of the bank clerk, and doubtless there were others. However, what seem to have changed are Pym's self-confidence and her preparedness to see her own feelings and behaviour as legitimate. At Oxford she presented racy images of herself simultaneously with trying to appear conventional. She resented having to conform. Her adoption of an alter ego, 'Sandra' contrasts vividly with the apparent realisation of aspects of her character in Barbara Bird (CH). The 'wild streak' Pym adopted, was exemplified by 'Sandra's' example when she chose to wear a 'scarlet satin blouse and black skirt'. Pym's choice of red nail varnish was also a form of rebellion against the academic appearance of Oxford students. She delighted in her tutors' response as they were 'almost paralysed with horror'.

In contrast, she writes about an outing with Harvey and Liddell during which she felt inferior. However, she also delighted in deliberately exaggerating her interest in modern music, films and dance, interests that have their fictional expression in Jessie Morrow's character (JP). The conflict Pym experienced is reflected in her writing. Significantly, she sees this as her forte in communicating her ideas. In her novels she hides women's rebellious thoughts and characteristics from the observation of other characters.



Pym's romantic relationships with men at Oxford are dealt with in detail in *A Very Private Eye* and *A Lot to Ask*. Only a few points need to be made here. Pym's behaviour belies the stereotype of the suppressed spinster as attested by an incomplete diary entry which suggests that Rupert persuaded her...well, we do not know as the page was torn! Gleadow referred to them both as 'hard headed moderns' but did raise the possibility of marriage, possibly briefly.

Pym's relationship with Gleadow, and later with Harvey, makes an interesting comparison. The relationship with Harvey was complex. Gleadow's constant, loving correspondence compares with Harvey's intermittent contact with her. Comparison of the physical relationship she had with each man is also significant. Her sexual relationship with Henry appears confirmed when she records missing Henry but acknowledges that 'Of course, leading an entirely sexless life here may be responsible for much'.

Pym's comments about Gleadow make it clear that he wanted a sexual relationship with her, but accepted this was not what she wanted. In comparison, Harvey's behaviour and Pym's responses suggest that although Pym was complicit in his influence on her in public, Harvey also controlled their personal life. Harvey disregarded Pym's distress when Liddell and John Barnicot found them grappling in his rooms. Her distraught response to this incident contrasts with her earlier amusement at Liddell finding her naked with Harvey. To her the encounters were entirely different. She earlier records having been 'teased a lot about my appalling reputation!' to which her response was an amused 'Poor Sandra!' However, Harvey's comment 'Oh you're common property' suggests that the 'teasing' was at times an attack.

Pym's resilience was remarkable. Her recorded distress at Harvey's attitude appears to have had mixed effect. She continued to be independent, while encouraging male friendships, behaving as a woman enjoying life rather than one chasing a husband. However, she had received a blow to her self-image and her continued desire to remain in the circle of friends around Harvey, Barnicot, Count Roberto Weiss and Liddell, I believe, led her into a lengthy period of personal self-censorship. At the same time as she sought his friendship she was aware of his sporadic antipathy towards her relationship with Harvey. Liddell's *A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and Her Novels* provide some insights into that period, his attitude toward her and her writing.

The contrast between the sexual nature of her relationship with Gleadow and then Harvey, and Liddell's part in the friendship between Pym and Harvey, raises questions. The account of Pym's self-abnegation, charged with defiance in their company, is paralleled in her characterisation of women's duality in her writing. It is possible that Harvey and Liddell's influence on Pym's natural bent contributed to the facade she adopted later in her polished fiction.

*The Sweet Dove Died* includes a passage that is possibly based on the incident with Henry. When Humphrey attempts to make love to Leonora and only the interruption by a neighbour thwarts his violent overtures Leonora rewrites the scene 'Anyway, what had he done that he should apologise to her? Only shown that he thought her attractive, and surely all women wanted that reassurance occasionally? (TSDD, p.86). Leonora's physical and mental vulnerability is clear. Only her ego and desperation affords her the ability to resolve her vulnerability to her satisfaction. However, Leonora has to acknowledge her lack of control. Humphrey is a threatening figure 'his bulk looming over her' (TSDD, p.83). Her only a protection is to find a way of making the scene acceptable so she can remain in an otherwise satisfactory small world. Like Pym with her writing, Leonora applies self-censorship. However, unlike Pym's subterfuge, which enhances her ability to

communicate with a wider audience, Leonora's self-censorship is aimed at maintaining her place as the luminary in a limited environment.

Unlike the flowers that Leonora accepted to rewrite the 'incident', Pym tempered her romantic notions of Harvey with her recognition that he was better in her imagination than in reality. She also noted that her life would be empty without a 'consuming passion'. The title of her first novel *Some Tame Gazelle* resonates with Pym's comment in its reference to the need to love rather than necessarily to be loved. The difference between romantic imagination and reality also appears in novels such as *Jane and Prudence* (p.68).

'The Rich Man in his Castle' is an undeviating rebuttal of the class and economic differences that normally serve as an undercurrent in Pym's novels. Although Pym's concern with class is more explicit in *An Unsuitable Attachment* than her previous novels, in this short story class is the central issue. The source of the title is the hymn 'All things bright and beautiful'. The lines, omitted from the version sung in *No Fond Return of Love*, 'The rich man in his castle/ the poor man at his gate/ God made them high and low/And order'd this estate' provide the catalyst for a debate about class which focus on the immutability of class, the moral imperatives which support hierarchy and class collusion. In addition, Pym raises the issue of public and private morality, making the point that what appears to be affirmative behaviour, can hide an unpleasant reality.

The Barbara Pym I've have detected through her novels is far from a traditionalist. At every turn she questions perceived knowledge: revered institutions are questioned; anthropological endeavour is replicated by women's observational powers and even more authority belongs with the writer; history, she believes, should be about the 'ordinary person' (NFRL); men, including some clergy, are not the natural adjudicators of integrity; women are striking human beings who, married or unmarried, in the main have independent lives and thoughts. Although it has been said she would never have described herself as a feminist and believed the women's movement to be rather strident, my understanding of the way in which Pym used her experiences, the aspects she chose and the way in which she introduced them into her fiction suggest that there is Barbara Pym who articulates feminist ideas. That woman and writer gave women a central role in her novels, without writing romances. Most importantly, she gave spinsters important and varied lives in her work, relieving her novels of any stereotypical unmarried women. She replaced them with women who took control of the narrative, or provided vignettes of unmarried women who, rather than lamenting their lack of a husband, sometimes appeared well pleased without one, and are varied, interesting, active characters. In addition, in two of her unpublished short stories class and feminist ideas were untrammelled by any attempt to make them palatable. The writer of such work was not merely a writer of small stories about spinsters and clergy. However, by providing the reader with innumerable comforting and familiar images, Pym has encouraged seeing her in that light, if we wish to do so. For those who do not, I provide a new sightings of what Pym may have found made a commotion in her mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography*. University of Missouri Press, 1992

<sup>2</sup> Breen, Susan *Fiction Class* (headline: UK 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Rogers, Katherine M. *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 1966, p. 201