

Socks and Underthings: Desire, Seduction, and the Private Life of Spinsters in *Some Tame Gazelle*

Victoria Patterson

*Paper presented at the 18th North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 12-13 March 2016*

In Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle*, a subtext of desire and seduction is evoked through socks. Just as socks are hidden or half-visible when worn, Pym's church women express flickering, subterranean yearnings and desires through the ostensibly demure and domesticated actions of knitting, mending, and cooking for men. But it is the overt gifting of socks (and possibly a "pullover") that signifies—in Pym's hands—a seduction, one that is risky and potentially shameful. Throughout the novel, socks—the knitting of them, the mending and giving of them, the knitters' varied and competing skills—form a motif with comedic, subversive and at times heartbreaking twists.

Other undergarments—specifically the curate's combinations and Harriet's corsets—similarly gather meaning and hilarity as, throughout the novel, these items are being obliviously exposed or stuffed under sofa cushions. Underthings also point to the powerful forces of loneliness and sexual desire peeking out from under the ostensibly chaste social relations between Pym's clergymen and "excellent" laywomen.

The sisters Harriet and Belinda have made their own accommodations for happiness, and it is in their own private world where hand knit socks and a tight corset form the channels for interacting with the opposite sex. Through the recurrent motifs of socks and underthings, Pym trains the reader to see the world of men and women as Harriet and Belinda do, and the effect is comic, endearing, and bewildering.

Pym wrote her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, in her early twenties, modeling the two main characters, the spinsters Belinda and Harriet Bede, on herself and her sister Hilary, projecting them into middle age and setting them in a country village. The surrounding characters were based on Pym's friends. Pym's early love obsession, Henry Harvey, whom she remained friends with her entire life, despite Harvey's prior cruel conduct toward her, became the prototype for Belinda's lifelong love obsession, Archdeacon Hoccleve.

In her diaries and notes, Pym wrote about herself in third person, and she also created Pym alter egos—Cassandra and Sandra—and a Harvey alter ego, Lorenzo. Life and fiction had blurred. According to a September 1, 1934 entry, Pym began the short story that would become *Some Tame Gazelle* in July 1934, at an especially emotionally fraught time, feeling jealous of Harvey's flirtations with other women. During the tumultuous period when Pym and Harvey had a sexual relationship, Pym felt at the mercy of her emotions, and she sometimes longed to grow old quickly, perhaps believing age to be a respite.

By casting herself and Hilary and her friends thirty years into the future, Pym might have hoped that as an older woman, she wouldn't be as troubled by uncontrollable emotions (not to mention the downside of depression). Early drafts of the novel reflect Pym's confusion (the novel had a fifteen year gestation for Pym to work out the tone), with Pym commenting in a diary entry that her narrative offered "an excuse for revealing" some of what she felt for Harvey. She was too close to the material but was already mining her experience of romantic rejection, which would become a propelling force in her work—and in her life, where she would continue to form attachments to unavailable men, who would ultimately hurt her. Pym had a lifelong struggle with romantic impulses and desires, and she continued, at times, to be at the mercy of them. Age proved not to be the

completely imagined respite, though she continued to mine her vulnerabilities.

With fifteen years between inception and publication to brew, *Some Tame Gazelle* is a unique example of autobiographical fortune telling, wherein Pym, in some respects, was able to tamp her passions and confusions into a masterly comic creation. Pym is in control, utilizing detachment, acceptance, humor, and irony. Desire and seduction are still forces—though far more obedient—thrumming beneath the surface of Pym’s narrative, with socks and underthings as vehicles of subtext.

“The new curate seemed quite a nice young man,” the very first sentence of *Some Tame Gazelle* reads, “but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down.” (As a side note, it’s worth googling “men’s combinations underwear” for amusing and instructive visuals. Combinations are, essentially, union suits, tops and bottoms all in one.) Thus the reader, via underthings and socks, is introduced to Pym’s driving motifs and themes: the mocking of sexual inhibition for comic effect, the suppression of desire, and the need to save face for the sake of modesty.

The first paragraph is worth examining at length. Belinda had noticed the curate’s combinations “when they had met him for the first time...and had felt quite embarrassed.” Belinda’s propriety takes hold in the face of such a careless, offhand indiscretion that suggests—as undergarments do—bare skin, nakedness, and the sex organs. Perhaps, Belinda muses, Harriet, her flirtatious, outgoing, plump, and elegant sister, might, “say something to him about it.” Harriet, who has a thing for young curates, “could carry off these little awkwardnesses much better than Belinda’s timidity.” Yet “he might think it none of their business, as indeed it was not, but Belinda rather doubted whether he thought at all, if one were to judge by the quality of his first sermon.”

Thus the reader is also introduced to the first of an array of ineffectual and virility-deficient men. In Pym’s novel, there are no heroic, passionate, masculine men, and the women point this out with their sharply amusing and disappointed observations, time and time again.

In a comically subversive twist, Pym’s men are the opposite of the generic romance novel hero: a sexy bare-chested hunk of action, swooping a woman off her feet and seducing her with carnal aptitude. One wishes Pym’s men could perhaps glean something from Harriet’s “Apes of Brazil,” who beat their chests so loudly in their mating calls, that remarkably they are—Harriet keeps insisting—audible for two miles.

We need only read two paragraphs farther in for socks to reemerge in *Some Tame Gazelle* (along with a more commitment-oriented pullover), alerting us to their textual prominence and importance. Belinda notes Harriet’s affections for young clergymen and her frequent visitations as an opportunity for the townsfolk to gossip, but decides that there is nothing scandalous about these visits, as Harriet always takes food with her for the curates’ nourishment, “or even a hand-knitted pullover or pair of socks, begun by her in a burst of enthusiasm and usually finished more soberly, by Belinda.”

The impetuous Harriet—whose actions riddle the novel with sexual innuendos (she can’t keep her hands off fruit left on the sideboard, and her face gets greasy with the “white sauce” at dinner)—serves as a foil to the staid and faithful and far more intellectual Belinda: they complement each other and ultimately, the reader concludes, they belong with each other and to each other, far more than they do to the undeserving men.

The reader learns just a few pages on that Harriet “liked her clothes to fit tightly and always wore an elastic roll-on corset.” In fact, when the reader first sees Harriet, she wears only her undergarments, “a celanese vest and

knickers,” and Belinda worries that someone (men) might see Harriet through the window. Harriet, it seems, would have a large and worthy sexual appetite if given the opportunity, but there is no man willing or able to satiate it, or no one she would choose.

Mr. Donne, the young curate, converses with the sisters, and sexual innuendo proliferates while his combinations continue—to Belinda’s chagrin—to show. All the while Belinda knits something pajama-like for herself, “a pink lacy-looking garment,” utilizing a material that Harriet wears in the winter, which “fitted her plump body like a wooly skin.”

Throughout the novel, Harriet’s main domestic task seems to be “strengthening her corsets” with elastic thread, insinuating that she—bodily and otherwise—cannot be contained. Twice, these corsets are thrust “under a cushion in one of the armchairs.”

The first time happens when the Archdeacon comes by for an unexpected visit. Harriet hurriedly hides her corsets and, “Belinda noticed to her horror that they were imperfectly hidden and planted herself firmly in front of the chair.” Two cats are curled up in the only other available chair. Belinda doesn’t know what to do, but “Harriet recovered her composure more quickly than Belinda, turned the cats with a quick movement and offered him the chair.” The Archdeacon remains oblivious—not only to the corsets, but also to Belinda’s sexual yearning for him, and to her loneliness, which peek through, much like the corsets poking out from the chair cushion.

When the deputy librarian Mr. Mold calls on Harriet with a marriage proposal, once again she must roll up her corsets and hide them under a cushion. She finds him

...holding in his hand a copy of *Stitchcraft*, in which he had been reading how to make a table runner. It is always difficult to know how one ought to be occupied when waiting for a lady in her drawing-room, and he had resisted the temptation to probe into the pigeon holds of the large desk, which stood invitingly open. *Stitchcraft* was dull but safe, he felt.

What Mr. Mold doesn’t know—but we know by now—is that anything sewing-and-stitch related is not innocuous.

Harriet turns down his marriage proposal. After the rejection, Mr. Mold regains something of his composure as he leaves. But Harriet deflates him one last time:

As he stood on the front doorstep, Mr. Mold extended a cordial invitation to her to come and visit him some time. “You’ll find me in the Library,” he added jovially, almost his old self again.

“Reading *Stitchcraft*, I suppose,” said Harriet, on a teasing note.

Belinda, who had hidden behind “a large rhododendron bush” to avoid Mr. Mold, rejoins Harriet after he leaves, and, to her great relief, discovers that Harriet will not marry. Harriet gives a comic reenactment of the proposal “with many ludicrous and exaggerated imitations,” and she and Belinda engage in a little gloating and laughter. They laugh even more when the corsets are discovered under a cushion, imagining what it would have been like had Mr. Mold—and earlier the Archdeacon—found them. Harriet’s hidden corsets become the sisters’



inside joke—and along with the corsets, their private inner feminine spirits are joyously preserved.

Harriet's antics suggest a boisterous sexuality, which worries Belinda—but the youth and interchangeability of the curates tempers this worry, for Harriet's desires are denied, repressed, or confounded, and Belinda's safe harbor with her sister continues.

No man equals Harriet's passion, especially the young curates, who are more like small helpless boys. Sexual freedom doesn't exist for Harriet, and she contents herself as a mother figure enjoying sexual repartee. She also likes to tease men. (In fact, one wonders, as Belinda does, whether Harriet purposefully misadjusted the slide of the Mbawawan agricultural instrument to an upside down position in Bishop Grote's lantern slide presentation, simply for its phallic visual potentiality.)

By chapter two, the reader unconsciously knows to pay attention to socks and underthings. Socks are arbiters of worthiness and desirability and vehicles of seduction (and possible love). Who knits and darns socks—how well it's done—and for whom, is an ongoing meter of worthiness, desirability, and desire.

Harriet bristles with antagonism when she learns that her young curate might not need her to knit him socks, as Olivia Berridge, a relative of Agatha Hoccleve, the Archdeacon's wife, has already furnished him two pairs. "This Olivia Berridge," Harriet thinks, "knitting socks for him, that was the trouble." She's right: Olivia, despite advanced age and height and unsuitability (according to Harriet) knits Donne socks (and a pullover), and she eventually marries the curate, taking him away.

Belinda's simmering thirty-year lust for the Archdeacon is revealed in a powerful sock-darning scene. With his wife out of town, the Archdeacon visits the Bede sisters. Noticing a hole in his sock, Belinda offers to darn it, and she does so while the Archdeacon still wears it. Unconsciously she pricks him with a needle—he almost loses his temper—but it's the most physically intimate she's been with him in years, and afterwards, it takes her awhile to cool down. (As a curious and parallel side note, in her diary Pym acknowledged biting Harvey once, and accidentally burning another man.) Belinda decides to make risotto, but wanders aimlessly around the kitchen, trying to gather ingredients. "For somehow it was difficult to concentrate. The mending of the sock had been an upsetting and unnerving experience, and even when she had made the risotto she did not feel any pleasure at the thought of eating it."

As if to prove the seductive precariousness of knitting and gifting, whether real or imaginary, The Bishop, on meeting Belinda, insists she had formerly knitted him a "beautiful scarf." Though she denies this, he ends up—to Belinda's consternation—not only sending her a dozen chrysanthemums (which she prematurely throws away), but also proposing to her. Cut flowers and their afterlife in water form yet another Pym subtext—but not the subject here.

Belinda and Agatha Hoccleve's rivalry for the Archdeacon plays out through a continual display of sock darning and knitting (Belinda is good at the domestic, while the seemingly more stylish and sophisticated Agatha, to Belinda's gratification, not-so-much) and the imagined knitting of a pullover. Something of the complexity is revealed when Belinda visits Agatha and finds her mending the Archdeacon's socks:

Belinda noticed rather sadly that the crimson socks Henry had bought in Vienna were not among the pile on Agatha's sewing table. But how stupid of me, she thought, socks don't last thirty years, and how could a man in Henry's position wear crimson socks! The ones Belinda noticed tonight were of the most sober archidiaconal colors. She wanted to say, 'Oh, Agatha, let me help you,' but thought better of it. Agatha might consider it a reflection on her darning, and certainly

would not care to be reminded that Belinda had darned socks for Henry before she had ever set eyes on him. “Never interfere between husband and wife,” as Belinda remembered her dear mother telling her, and one could not be too careful, even about an apparently trivial thing like socks.

The saga continues, with Belinda agonizing over whether to knit the Archdeacon a pullover, a far more committed and commitment-worthy endeavor. “When we grow older,” she muses, “we lack the fine courage of youth, and even an ordinary task like making a pullover for somebody we love or used to love seems too dangerous to be undertaken.”

Belinda purchases the gray wool anyhow, wondering, as the novel progresses, whether to shuck the pullover idea all together and make a jumper for herself instead; but she can’t decide. “No doubt,” she consoles herself, “she would know what to do with the wool as time went on.”

Later she opens a drawer with the gray wool inside. “She knew now that she would never do it. She would make a jumper for herself, safe, dull and rather too thick. Surely this was proof that her heart had now become the convert of her head? Or was it just fear of Agatha?”

But later still, Belinda cherishes her decision to forfeit the pullover, following a loaded sock-conversation with Harriet, the curate, Father Plowman, the Bishop, the Archdeacon, and Agatha Hoccleve, concerning Olivia’s sock-gifting to the curate:

‘Has she made you any more socks?’ asked Belinda innocently.

‘Yes, indeed, and a pullover too,’ said Mr. Donne. ‘She’s really awfully good.’

‘Well, I hope she knows how to graft a toe by now,’ said Harriet bluntly. ‘Belinda could show her.’

‘Olivia is a very clever girl,’ said Agatha. ‘I’m sure she is quite equal to it.’

‘I should hardly call her a girl,’ said the Archdeacon spitefully. ‘But I suppose women like to think of themselves as girls long after they are thirty.’

‘Oh, Olivia is only thirty-one or two,’ said Agatha impatiently, ‘and her work on *The Owl and the Nightingale* has really been a most substantial contribution to Middle English studies.’

‘All the same, it is important to know how to graft a toe,’ persisted Harriet. ‘What is it, Belinda, knit and slip off, then purl and keep on? I can never remember.’

Just as Belinda was thinking of a tactful answer, the Bishop broke in, saying with a reminiscent sigh, ‘Ah, the socks I had knitted for me when I was a curate!’

‘I know,’ agreed Father Plowman, ‘some small, some large, some short, some long, but all acceptable because of the good will that inspired the knitters.’

‘I should have thought a sock was very little use unless it was the right size,’ said the Archdeacon sourly.

When she heard this, Belinda was thankful that she had decided against knitting him a pullover and went cold with horror at the thought of what she had escaped. For there surely would have been something wrong with it.

Belinda does end up knitting herself the “dull gray jumper” while pining for her youth.

Agatha later suffers something of Belinda’s torment. Belinda learns from Bishop Grote that Agatha had knitted inadequate socks for him, “not quite long enough in the foot,” and she and the Bishop agree to keep the information in confidence. Belinda feels stirrings of affection for her rival, even thinking of her as a sister, knowing that Agatha had exposed herself and her desires for the Bishop in a pathetic malformed knitting

endeavor. “The pullover that she might have made for the Archdeacon,” Belinda understands, “would surely have been wrong somewhere, but as it had not even been started, it lacked the pathos of the socks not quite long enough in the foot.”

Belinda is so horrified by Agatha’s sock-knitting disaster that she doesn’t tell Harriet. She struggles with her knowledge. When Agatha is bitchy to Belinda at a wedding reception, where formerly Belinda would’ve felt crushed—in one of my favorite passages—she now feels relief:

The socks not quite long enough in the foot, which the Bishop had so unkindly mentioned, had been worrying Belinda. She had suddenly seen Agatha as pathetic and the picture was disturbing. Now she knew that there could never be anything pathetic about Agatha. Poised and well-dressed, used to drinking champagne, the daughter of a bishop and the wife of an archdeacon—that was Agatha Hoccleve. It was Belinda Bede who was the pathetic one and it was so much easier to bear the burden of one’s own pathos than that of somebody else. Indeed, perhaps the very recognition of it in oneself meant that it didn’t really exist.

Pym’s sublimation of sexual longing through socks and underthings takes on a comforting metaphorical note: after all, these items are worn close to the body and offer a type of protection. Of Olivia’s affection for her new husband, which Belinda observes in Olivia’s dialogue, Belinda suggests “...there was comfort in her words, as if she were protecting Mr. Donne in a sensible tweed coat or even woollen underwear.”

Belinda, too, thinks of her affection for Archdeacon Hoccleve as a safe garment, free of unruly passions. Belinda enjoys a quick fantasy of the Archdeacon as an available widower. What would Belinda’s attachment be like? Would it be embarrassing? She decides not: “For she was now a contented spinster and her love was like a warm, comfortable garment, bedsocks, perhaps, or even wooly combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance.”

Sexual inhibition and confusion is satirized throughout *Some Tame Gazelle*, but it is also clearly present in Belinda, as it surely was in Pym. The Bede sisters have no romantic options, and so they’ve remained in an adolescent limbo, failing to develop beyond idealized romantic fixations, which prohibit anything less than an ideal. The men they know—complacent, vain, and ineffectual—wouldn’t be up to the task anyhow.

It makes sense that Pym would use the seemingly quotidian channels of socks and underthings as subtext. Her female characters involve themselves in the small rituals of existence—knitting, darning, cooking, and the drinking of tea, for instance. Pym’s genius, though, and her originality, is to make these seemingly mundane and domestic channels meaningful and worthwhile, providing comfort in the otherwise befuddling and often pointless tide of life.

The relationships between men and women, Pym lets us know, are wholly absurd and comical, and nothing can be done, except to knit, darn, and love anyway, all the while adjusting oneself with poise and acceptance to an unromantic reality, thereby imbuing it with a note of romantic grace.

Victoria Patterson is the author of three novels: *This Vacant Paradise* (2012), *The Peerless Four* (2014), and *The Little Brother* (2015) and a short story collection, *Drift* (2009). Her essay on Barbara Pym “*A Nice Hobby, Like Knitting*” was recently published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She lives in Southern California and teaches at Antioch University’s Master of Fine Arts program.