

Not Really First in Anybody's Life: Friendship in *Excellent Women*

Orna B. Raz

*Paper presented at the 16th North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 21-22 March 2014*

The world of Barbara Pym's novels contains almost twice as many women as men, and by necessity women often seek out each others' company. Women always outnumber men at church and in parish activities, (*EW*, *GB*), and they are often colleagues at work (*EW*, *J&P*, *LTA*, *NFRL*), or share living quarters (*EW*, *LTA*, *NFRL*). Rather than the family as a paradigm for relationships, the interaction between women is a prominent aspect of the social setting of Pym's novels.

Kathy Ackley observes a certain ambiguity in such interactions: "While women's company can be a comfort, it is often disparaged." The women themselves tend to "think negatively of other women as they are to enjoy their company" and to be "quite vicious about their female friends and acquaintances." (Ackley 2002:1-2), and we could see the tendency to disparage women's company has already been noted by Vera Brittain who claims that historically friendship between women has been underestimated by society: "From the days of Homer the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women, in spite of Ruth and Naomi, have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted" (Brittain 1942: 2). Moreover, sociological studies, conducted around the middle of the twentieth century, suggest that relationships between women tend to be viewed through the prism of negative "conventional images and stereotypes," with their actuality "usually masked in a fashion that favours the interests of more powerful groupings" (Allan 1989: 76). However, at the same time, Pym's women are also capable of a close friendship which transcends ill will and cynicism. As many of Pym's heroines are alone in the world, with almost no family or other significant social bonds, their friend often provides their only constant relationship and a source of compassion, solidarity and support.

In the talk today I shall use the definition of the sociologist Graham Allan of friendship as an informal, voluntary, reciprocal, equal, and non exploitive personal relationship (1979: 43, 1989: 15). Friendship is formed not "for instrumental reasons, but ones that exists only simply because it is found it to be enjoyable. It should be undertaken for its own sake rather than for some ulterior motive or as a means to some other end" (43). I shall focus especially on the oldest friendship in Pym's work that between Dora and Mildred in *Excellent Women* and also mention the two new friendships in the book: that between Mildred and Winifred and the tentative one between Mildred and Helena. I shall place the friendships in the social context of post-war English society.

In Pym's novels close personal friendship between women, whether it is ambivalent or not, is a constant anchor of women's lives.

As her heroines mostly belong to the upper middle class, many of them have met their best friends early on in life. They met them in places such as boarding school (Mildred and Dora), university (Jane and Prudence), or military service in the Wrens (Wilmet and Rowena). According to the sociologist Elizabeth Bott who studied the topic at that time, friendships are usually forged during the trying times of identity formation in adolescence and early adulthood (1960: 298). Sociological studies highlight common background as a foundation of friendship, and emphasize the role of institutions such as clubs and churches in creating and fostering social ties within the upper classes (Wilmot and Young 1960: 99). Researchers of English society of the 1950s see friendship as characteristic of primarily the upper and middle classes, in which friends often fulfill roles that in lower classes are

associated with the family (see Wilmot and Young 1960: 109-110 and Klein 1965: 138). “Many of the functions conventionally thought of by the middle classes as characterizing friendship- mutual help, comfort, advice stimulus” are seen by the lower classes as “the traditional prerogatives of relatives, who are not thought of as friends but as mothers, aunts, and so on” (Klein 1965: 138).

Pym’s contemporary, the writer C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), distinguishes between companionship stemming from “a common religion, common studies, a common profession, even a common recreation,” and friendship between those who “share something more. . . . Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one’” (1960: 96).

Lewis’ view of Friendship is useful in the discussion of the relationships between many of Pym’s heroines. In her novels, friends are generally presented as kindred spirits who have selected each other amid people with similar backgrounds. Their connection is private and excludes others who do not share their particular “interest or even taste.” The reason why women choose to become friends is never present in the novel, but, according to Graham Allan. “[I]n English culture . . . friendship is taken as not needing explanation. There just happen to be some people whom you come to regard as friends. Why this should be so, why you in fact get on with them, is not questioned” (1979:43).

Among Pym’s heroines, the oldest friendship based on similar background and education is that of Mildred Lathbury and Dora Caldicote (*EW*). Having met at the age of thirteen, when they were sent away to school and in effect ceased to be part of their own nuclear families, their friendship is most similar to that of two sisters. They both come from educated families; Mildred’s father, a country clergyman, is an alumnus of Balliol College Oxford, while Dora’s father was a provincial doctor in a suburb of Birmingham.

The idea that close friendships with other girls should be part of the adolescent experience has been widespread since the late eighteenth century. Victorian advice manuals encouraged such ties, believed to foster the feminine qualities of empathy and expressiveness and to develop the capacity for sustained intimacy (see Gorham 113). With later educational opportunities, companionship nurtured in the school environment was regarded as one of the important benefits accruing to the students (14). The boarding school was the last educational opportunity for girls who did not go on to university (see Marwick 72), and sending a girl away was also regarded as a social opportunity: she could meet other girls from a similar background and to foster lifelong friendships.

Mildred and Dora’s childhood friendship is indeed presented as a lifelong relationship; Dora is not only Mildred oldest friend, but also the person closest to her in the whole world. When Mildred reflects on the death of “unmarried women with no ties,” she wonders who would be there “really to grieve for [her].” The first name that comes to mind is Dora’s, since otherwise she “was not really first in anybody’s life”. Their relationship is presented as reciprocal; she is as important to Dora as Dora is to her (Allan 43). As the two have no other relatives (Dora’s brother is presented as unable to maintain close ties), they have become a *de facto* family.

However, Mildred and Dora’s interaction does not manifest the “feminine qualities of empathy and expressiveness.” Instead, as in a family, it often consists of “foolish and pointless” arguments. Following the death of Mildred’s parents, the young women moved in together, and during the war Dora taught and Mildred worked in the Censorship. After the war, Dora accepts a teaching position at a boarding school, and Mildred thinks, “not for

the first time, how pleasant it [is] to be living alone". Although it had seemed natural for two single friends to share a household, their stay together was not unclouded:

The jingle of the little beaded cover against the milk jug reminded me of Dora and her giggles, her dogmatic opinions and the way she took offense so easily. The little cover, which had been her idea, seemed to symbolize all the little irritations of her company, dear kind friend though she was.

Mildred's attitude to Dora is ambivalent; on the one hand she is aware of her good qualities, yet, on the other hand, it appears that her enjoyment of being alone is enhanced by the relief of being rid of Dora's exasperating presence. Mildred's irritation stemmed in part from differences in their dispositions. While Mildred is normally "balanced and sensible", the red-headed Dora is feisty and can "look very fierce at times". The two women favor opposing lifestyles: Mildred likes stability, formality and refinement, but while she longs for "a civilized life," Dora prefers the provisional, informal, and the practical -- her "temperament makes her enjoy sleeping on a camp bed and eating of plastic plates".

It seems that the physical separation of the two friends hardly changes their relationship. Although they no longer live together, Mildred and Dora spend most of their holidays in each other's company. During that time they usually quarrel as well: "By the time we had got off the bus we were arguing quite openly. It was foolish and pointless but somehow we could not stop. I saw us in twenty years' time, perhaps living together, bickering about silly trifles. It was a depressing picture". In the story "The English Ladies", written at about that time, Pym describes a similar friendship between two middle-aged women civil servants who have been sharing a household for many years and go on vacation to Italy together. If Dora is "in the kind of mood to disagree automatically" with everything Mildred says, minor friction characterizes the relationship in the short story as well: "Throughout the many years of their friendship so much of their conversation had consisted of these little arguments, the automatic contradiction of each other's statements" (MS 92: 126).

Mildred's account emphasizes again the dual nature of this quasi-familial relationship; in spite of the security that Dora's friendship offers, Mildred is depressed to realize that they are destined never to part.

Dora's visit highlights additional familial qualities: upon seeing Mildred, Dora exclaims: "What have you done to yourself? You look different," and Mildred comments: "No compliments, of course; Dora was too old and honest a friend ever to flatter me, but she had the power of making me feel rather foolish". It seems that the familiarity of long years leads, in this case, to a lack of tolerance and a diminished capacity for kindness. Dora does not even offer sympathy, let alone flattery. As a result of this exchange Mildred feels "foolish," like a child again. Mildred's response to Dora's "power" is to withhold information; she neither confides in her friend nor volunteers the reason for her change. Yet it is telling that Dora is able to detect an unexplained difference in her friend.

Friends, especially old friends, often tend to compare themselves to each other in order to define their own identity and measure their achievement (see Bott 298). The similarities between Mildred and Dora are numerous, as they realize when attend the Old Girls' Reunion. They have "not made particularly brilliant careers," and, "most important of all," neither of them is married. However, since in her personality and choices in life Dora is an antithesis to Mildred, the contrasts between them help Mildred to realize who she is and what her preferences are.

The two friends enjoy an equal position; although Dora, who has graduated from a teachers' college, has a more formal education (and more employment opportunities) than Mildred, she has remained in the protected yet hierarchical school environment, first as a student and then as a teacher, and seems to lack social skills necessary for navigating the adult world, even within her own school. She reports on not "being on speaking terms" with her superior, and on altercations regarding wearing hats in chapel. Mildred is aware of Dora's immaturity, and wonders "that she should waste so much energy fighting over a little matter". But with Dora she lets herself be drawn to childish modes of behavior, "bickering about silly trifles", which she knows to be inappropriate to a grown woman.

In contrast, in her relationships with her new friends in her London neighborhood Mildred appears to be prudent and mature. Moreover, her relationship with her new friend Winifred Malory is characterized by thoughtfulness and consideration. As a daughter of a country vicar, she displays highly developed social skills, markedly absent in her relationship with Dora. The importance of these class-specific skills when first moving into a new neighbourhood, is commented on by Josephine Klein: "It takes rather a marked ability to discriminate, to perceive and use fine shades of meaning, to indicate and preserve delicate social distances if the chances of making friends are not to be impaired by a wrong move in the initial stages."(1965: 352)

This may be a reason why Mildred does not want to share a home with Winifred. If she must give up her privacy, she would reluctantly do so only for a best friend like Dora. Geoffrey Gorer terms these new relationships "cordial" and claims that it takes English people at least ten years to regard those treated "cordially" as "best friends" (1955: 51-52); an even larger distance lies between "neighbours" and "friends": "A neighbour is someone you happen to live beside, a friend is someone you've known all your life" (Mogey 1956: 91). It is noteworthy that in the description of her departure after first meeting the new neighbors, Miss Edgar and Miss Boniface, Mildred notes, "we parted on very cordial terms."

One of the characteristics of friendship is its being a voluntary relationship, consequent on free will and based on enjoyment (see Allan 1979: 40-41). Mildred and Dora do not always enjoy each other company; and yet, when Dora asks to come and stay with Mildred "for a part of her Easter Holiday," the possibility of refusing this request is not even considered. Dora and Mildred no longer have a home to go to, Dora's home being the school and Mildred's the rented flat in Pimlico. Thus, on school holidays Dora has no other place to go to besides her friend Mildred. It seems that in such entrenched friendships there is a sense of commitment that transcends any considerations of momentary enjoyment. Dora's request is mere formality; although in theory, Mildred has the right to refuse, this in practice it is never exercised, and the appearance of the friendship as voluntary is maintained. These qualities of their friendship bring it even closer to that of kinship, in which basic properties like concern and obligation are expressed in mutual aid (see Bott 298).

The specific details of Mildred's preparations for Dora's visit have semiotic meaning as they encapsulate the nature of their friendship. Mildred gets the guest room ready "arranging daffodils in a bowl on the mantelpiece and putting the rather useless little embroidered guest towels. The room looked pretty and comfortable, like an illustration in one of the women's magazines". In her attempt to show her friend hospitality, Mildred pays attention to all the necessary details, yet by admitting that the guest towels are useless, she reveals a personal preference for "pretty" over "comfortable." Moreover, in choosing the "guest towels," Mildred hints that she regards Dora, who once lived in that flat, as a temporary guest. She realizes that the room "would not look like that for long," and this statement implies that Mildred's efforts are more for her own benefit; she derives aesthetic pleasure from turning the room into a picture from a magazine. Indeed, once Dora arrives she makes herself at home,

appropriates the room, immediately filling it with her belonging, quite oblivious to Mildred's subtle hints. This scene reveals that although Mildred and Dora are aware of each other's needs and preferences, they choose to disregard them and behave as they please. This kind of behavior is only possible in an old friendship in which, like in a family, people take each other for granted and are completely confident of their own indispensability.

The basic property of friendship, according to Elizabeth Bott, is shared interests but not "the exchange of intimate confidences." Bott suggests that married women tend to confide in their friends less than their unmarried counterparts.

Allan P. Bates offers a useful definition of privacy as a "person's feeling that others should be excluded from something which is of concern to him, and also recognition that others have a right to do this" (1964: 429).

According to C. S. Lewis, friendship has "a non-natural" quality about it: "there is nothing throaty about [friendship]; nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale"; it is "the least natural of loves; the least instinctive" (1960: 88-89). Yet this cerebral attitude to friendship is not shared by Pym's heroines, for whom it is natural and essential to have women friends and who regret their absence with much emotion.

Longing for a woman friend is especially strong in times of trouble. Catherine Oliphant, for example, laments not having any "cosy women friends, some old school contemporary to whom she could run. Someone who would make her a scrambled egg and coffee and then 'sit ready to receive confidence'" (*LTA* 108). This view of the woman friend as one who gives both the emotional and practical support (see Allan 1989: 52-53) is characteristic of Pym's work: for example, after a crisis, Winifred Malory runs away to Mildred who offers her kindness and, in the best tradition, a cup of tea.

In addition, Catherine "often" feels the lack of "that cosy woman friend with whom she might spend an afternoon at a matinee, or shopping with a pleasant gossip tea afterwards". In the novels, friends take part in many such voluntary and informal activities, and offer each other company when lonely.

Since in Pym's world, most of the friendships between women were formed early on, it seems almost impossible to form close friendships later in life (see Bott 301). It seems that once a heroine has one close friend she does not need more intimate ties with other women friends. Thus, Mildred resists Helena Napier's attempts to confide in her. In addition, her heroines are quite critical, even suspicious toward new women acquaintances, especially if they are different (like Helena). Another important aspect of friendship is that it is reciprocal and non-exploitative, it is a relationship formed not for gain but for enjoyment (Allan 43). Pym elaborates on the predispositions and prejudices in judging a person unworthy of being a friend; difference in appearance and in style of dress tends to be a sufficient basis for deciding on rejecting the possibility of friendship in adulthood. For example, from Helena Napier's outward appearance Mildred immediately concludes that they are "superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly."

In Pym's work, friendships last for life, and make a valuable part of the heroines' identity; it is not always enjoyable, but its intrinsic value transcends any consideration of self-interest of momentary pleasure. It is presented as a voluntary yet abiding unwritten contract. In contrast to ties with men, which tend to be temporary and disappointing, friendships between women are constant, and their communication effortless and informal. As many of Pym's heroines have no relatives and no home, their friends become their family. Friendships, claims Lewis, is the noble of all loves since it "seems[s] to raise you to the level of gods or angels" (89). It will be inaccurate to claim that friendship between women in Pym's work is completely disinterested, as for single women, their best friend substitutes for lack of other significant relationships in their lives, and for the married ones the

friend is either a source of excitement or provides the intimacy and thoughtfulness missing in their married lives. Still, the love that Pym's women show each other could qualify as noble, since it is treated not as a means to an end but an end in itself.

Works cited

- Ackley, Katherine Ann. 2002. "The Company of Women: Women's Friendships in the Novels of Barbara Pym." In Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Conference of the Barbara Pym Society of North America.
- Allan, Graham A. 1979. *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Allan, Graham A. 1989. *Friendship: Developing A Sociological Perspective*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Bates, Allan P. 1964. "Privacy – A Useful Concept?" *Social Forces* 42/ 4: 429–431.
- Bott, Elizabeth. 1971 [1957]. *Family and Social Network*. London: Tavistock Publications
- Brittain, Vera. 1942. *Testament of Friendship: the Story of Winifred Holtby*. London: Macmillan.
- Brittain, Vera. 1960. *The Women at Oxford*. London: George G. Harrap.
- Gorham, Deborah. 1982. *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. London: Croom Helm.
- Gorer, Geoffrey. 1955. *Exploring English Character*. London: Cresset.
- Klein, Josephine. 1967. *Samples from English Cultures*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Lewis, C. S. 1960. *The Four Loves*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Janovich.
- Willmott, Peter and Michael Young. 1960. *Family and Class in a London Suburb*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Orna B. Raz is a Lecturer in English at the College of Management Academic Studies, Rishon LeZion, Israel. She holds graduate degrees from the University of Missouri–Columbia and the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. in English literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her current field of interest is social changes in England during the 1950s and British girls' magazines from the 1950s. She has published and presented articles on the works of Barbara Pym, education and feminism, the Church of England, and the representation of radio broadcasts in British novels, as well as translations of the works of numerous Israeli authors and poets, and is the author of *Social Dimensions in the Novels of Barbara Pym, 1949-1963*. She has an active blog on *Red Room*.