

The Conflicting Purposes of “Obscure Research” in *Some Tame Gazelle*

Adam Shoemaker

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Given the trajectory of Barbara Pym’s life, from her days at Oxford to her literary career and employment in the International African Institute, it’s not a surprise that her first published novel is concerned with the value of “obscure research,” and the ultimate worth of literary knowledge. *Some Tame Gazelle* is awash in literary allusions, with an average of one quotation per page. Critics have proposed various reasons for Pym’s inclusion of so many references. To some, they show Pym’s relative immaturity when writing *Some Tame Gazelle*, a project she began shortly after completing her studies Oxford University. To others, the quotations reveal Pym’s attempt to mine literature for tools to frame her life’s purpose and meaning (O. Allen 69). Another critic has shown that the quotations function as an ironic discourse underlying and enriching the plot of the novel (Pilgrim 138). I’d like to suggest another, complementary purpose that they serve. By illustrating Belinda Bede’s erudition and love of literature, Pym highlights an alternative path that Belinda could have chosen: devotion to pure literary research instead of to a frustrated love for Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve. Belinda’s life is undoubtedly enriched by her appreciation of “our Greater English Poets.” But could it have taken a more rewarding, more independent course had this appreciation been matched by ambition?

The role of obscure literary research in *Some Tame Gazelle* is not just as another dimension of stunted passion, however. Belinda’s literary aspirations illuminate the complexities of striving for a self-confident, happy existence as a single woman in the midst of a culture that limits professional opportunities while, at the same time, promotes an ideal of unrequited love.

The world that Pym created around Belinda Bede is a striking reflection of Pym’s time at Oxford. Not only are the characters full of literary quotations, but their very names and occupations enhance the book’s “atmosphere of literature and learning” (Pilgrim 125). The village’s surnames reveal Pym’s knowledge of English history and literature (Burnett 4). And this unnamed village contains a population of admirable erudition. This is Pym’s “Oxford novel,” written shortly after an intense period of scholarship (and romantic tumult) at the university. Its characters, Belinda in particular, overflow with literary quotations and allusions. *Some Tame Gazelle* has more literary allusions than Pym’s later novels, perhaps because Pym was closer to her time at the university (Ackley 34).

These quotations aren’t just for show, at least for Belinda. Her love of literature is more than that of a casual reader, and her facility with English literature is easy and precise. Belinda’s studies have given her more than comfort: they have given her the tools with which to analyze her life and the lives of those around her, placing them within a larger literary context. She spends a great deal of time thinking of the ideal quotation to deploy in conversation. Casual conversation spurs remembrances of beloved hymns and poems. And when Belinda contemplates decisions or surveys the track of her life, it’s to literature that she turns for guideposts. She drifts back to “our greater English poets” for comfort and intellectual sustenance.

Literature is a defining part of Belinda’s internal life, and her engagement with it reaches deep into the obscure. As Anne Pilgrim points out, “[n]ot only is Belinda’s learning extensive, but it tends to the esoteric”: she is familiar with the obscure prose discourses of authors quoted by others (134). Belinda “not only reads and recollects, but actually thinks about the passages that come to mind with a critical intelligence—a habit that sets her above

other quoters of literature” (135). As Harriet Bede evaluates her sister’s attention to obscure readings, “[s]he often wasted her time reading things that nobody else would dream of reading.”

It’s this intelligence that sets Belinda apart and hints that her love of literature could have offered something more than comfort. Pym suggests that Belinda’s passion could have been the foundation of a rewarding vocation—and an alternative to unrequited longing for Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve. Indeed, Belinda tells Henry and his wife, Agatha, that she wished she could have pursued “obscure research.”

In her mind’s eye, Belinda’s appreciation of literature is what makes her different from other frustrated lovers:

Once, she knew, she had been different, and perhaps after all the years had left her with little of that difference. Perhaps she was still an original shining like a comet, mingling no water with her wine.

Belinda’s love of literature is a complete consolation in itself, but perhaps it could have given her more had she not committed her heart to the Archdeacon. His flaws, which include self-centeredness, arrogance, pedantic cluelessness, and emotional insensitivity to others, are so obvious that thoughtful Belinda’s devotion to him becomes a comic counterpoint. How much more productive and rewarding would her attentions have been if directed in a professional, or at least more ambitious way, toward literary scholarship? As Helen Clare Taylor has written regarding female characters in Pym’s later works, “[t]he male protagonist often attempts to divert the heroine’s serious work...which stands for her intellectual independence, towards himself, as if his presence is the only object worthy of her attention” (76). This is abundantly true of Henry Hoccleve.

It’s not clear that Belinda ever seriously considered channeling her love of reading into amateur research or professional study. She downplays her deep knowledge of literature, believing that her obscure quotations are merely “little remembered scraps of culture” that “had a way of coming out unexpectedly.” Nevertheless, her reaction to others’ work suggests that some part of Belinda wishes she had pursued literary research. In particular, her thoughts about Olivia Berridge reveal internal conflict and a hint of envy. Olivia, Agatha’s niece, researches Middle English at the University and, as the curate and her future husband Edgar Donne describes her, “[s]he’s a kind of female Don.”

What’s most notable about Olivia, from Belinda’s perspective, is that she doesn’t have to sacrifice her research in order to marry her clergyman. When Belinda first contemplates that Mr. Donne might love Olivia, she deems the idea “so upsetting that it could not possibly be so.” Belinda’s primary concern is Harriet’s sure reaction to losing this promising young curate from her doting care. But could the thought also upset Belinda because in it she sees a recapitulation of Henry’s love for Agatha, whom she believes won the Archdeacon’s heart through intellectual accomplishment? This thought must be compounded by the realization that Olivia will be able to continue her research at the University.

It would be anachronistic to suggest that Olivia is able to “have it all” in the terms that Anne-Marie Slaughter describes in her 2012 article about twenty-first century women in the workplace. But her ability to obtain a research position at the University; propose marriage and be accepted by a curate; and keep her professional position as a married woman: all of these make an impression on Belinda, who in her life has managed nothing similar. Her initial reaction is to join with Harriet in declaring the match “unsuitable,” and Olivia’s professional aspirations an impediment to a successful marriage:

‘But Miss Berridge is some years older than Mr Donne,’ said Harriet, equally persistent. ‘It would be a most unsuitable marriage. Besides,’ she added, her tone taking on a note of disgust, ‘she’s doing some research or something like that, isn’t she, Belinda.’

‘Yes, on some doubtful reading in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. It doesn’t seem a very good training for a wife,’ said Belinda uncertainly, thinking of Agatha and her inability to darn.

Note here that Belinda is familiar with both the poem and the specific details of Olivia’s work on it. It’s not difficult to see her dismissal of Olivia’s suitability for Mr. Donne as shaded with envy:

‘He doesn’t sound as if he were in love with her,’ said Belinda doubtfully. ‘But of course Miss Berridge may have made up her mind to marry him. She sounds a bit like Agatha,’ she added.

But if Pym suggests scholarly research as an alternative ideal for Belinda, she stops short of advocating for a life of pure work—without love. One has a hard time imagining sensitive and social Belinda shutting herself in to work alone, like the narrator in Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation*, who keeps a sign in her office proclaiming “WORK NOT LOVE!” (Blair). “It seemed a sturdier kind of happiness,” she confesses. It’s difficult to believe that Belinda would agree. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Mr. Mold, the deputy librarian spurned by Harriet, quotes Samuel Johnson’s stark line in his Preface to Shakespeare: “Love is only one of many passions and it has no great influence on the sum of life;” Belinda Bede’s heart lies far from this harshness, and it’s impossible to see her (or Pym) committing seriously to this extreme position.

Pym undercuts the ideal of scholarship with typically subtle humor, making the image of the library as a sacred space ridiculous with Nicholas Parnell’s Latin-inscribed tract about central heating. She likewise pokes fun at the end result of a life spent obsessing over obscure research and little else, painting the picture of the doddering librarian whose concerns in life have been circumscribed to worrying about pronunciation of the Russian letter “l.” Belinda remembers the “strange people” who used to read in the library during her undergraduate days, “many of whom could hardly have been called human beings if one were to judge by their looks.” And, ultimately, Belinda recognizes, when looking at her friend, that even a life devoted to scholarship could easily lead to nowhere in particular: “Dr. Nicholas had rather sunk into obscurity since his scholarly publications of twenty years ago, and now had definitely abandoned all intellectual pursuits.”

Even so, it’s obvious that Belinda sees, when looking at Agatha and Olivia, that she has missed some opportunity to dedicate herself to literary research. Pym stakes out the alternate path clearly enough for the reader to wonder—to see in Belinda the remnants of “the difference” and to mourn, if not its fading, then at least its unrealized potential to provide her intellectual and emotional independence.

But if the pursuit of obscure literary research is a rival to romantic love in Belinda’s heart, the two exist in a tangled knot. For, paradoxically, scholarly prowess serves as a measure of romantic desirability for Belinda and, she imagines, for Henry. Literature serves Belinda not only as a balm for unrequited love, but also as a language shared with the Archdeacon. Belinda, typically, speaks this language with care and deliberateness. Belinda’s thoughtful and considered deployment of her knowledge contrasts strongly with Harriet’s use of literature around curates, which is inappropriate and “racy” (Pilgrim 131-132).

It’s not simply that Belinda thinks she can win Henry over with obscure quotations. For most of the novel, she believes that his wife won his heart with erudition—not just appropriate references, but devotion to academic research. This is reinforced by Henry:

‘I do so admire people who do obscure research,’ said Belinda. ‘I’m sure I wish I could.’

‘Of course I have done a good deal of work on Middle English texts myself in the past,’ said Agatha, smiling.

‘Now, Agatha, Belinda does not wish to be forced to admire you,’ said the Archdeacon. ‘After all, academic research is not everything. We must remember George Herbert’s lines:

*A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine,
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine’.*

This stings, even if Belinda admits to herself that Henry’s words have “an insufferably patronizing air,” particularly his underhanded attempt to comfort her by noting that “[w]e cannot all have the same gifts.”

It’s easy to see why Belinda would view literary scholarship as the field of play in which Henry’s romantic affections could be won or lost. His typically insensitive remarks remind her that, indeed, it was on this field, many years ago, that he was won by Agatha. Belinda is constantly in mind of this fact, whether by noticing Agatha’s set of the publications of the Early English Text Society on her bookcase, or her constant references to her work in Middle English research. When the Archdeacon quotes Gray’s *Elegy*,

Agatha was reminded of *Piers Plowman*, Belinda of the poetry of Crabbe, which she could not remember very exactly, but she felt she had to be reminded of something out of self-defense, for Agatha had got a first and knew all about *Piers Plowman*.

Pym undercuts any hallowing of obscure research with well-placed, gentle absurdity, as when Agatha’s arrogance convinces her that she can travel around Germany speaking Anglo-Saxon, and when Henry’s speech devolves into the linguistic history of the word *dingle*. Nevertheless, even if Pym mocks the realistic value of obscure research, it remains a central and serious criterion of romantic suitability as Belinda looks upon Henry. Through this lens, she sees Agatha as “the efficient wife and good philologist.” When Harriet asserts that Henry and Agatha have nothing in common, Belinda offers a rejoinder that highlights the earnestness and absurdity of her conviction:

Oh, Harriet, you’re quite wrong,’ said Belinda stoutly. ‘Agatha is a most intelligent woman. She knows a great deal about medieval English literature. And then there’s palaeography,’ she continued, as if her emphatic tone would explain its importance in the married life of Agatha and the Archdeacon. ‘Oh, yes, that’s about apes, isn’t it?’ said Harriet, losing interest in the subject.

It might be true that Belinda’s devotion would be better directed elsewhere than the “peevish and condescending” Archdeacon, whom Kathy Ackley describes as “a self-centered, pompous curate whose own love for obscure literary references is a bore to everyone in his congregation except the faithful Belinda.” His love of obscure references is due almost entirely to his efforts to show himself superior to his parishioners, as even Belinda acknowledges:

The truth was, of course, that dear Henry could never resist a literary allusion and was delighted, in the way that children and scholars sometimes are, if it was one that the majority of his parishioners did not understand.

The Archdeacon’s research for weekly sermons should give him ample opportunity to produce scholarly work, but he never does so. “That is,” notes Belinda, “no scholarly study of any of St. Paul’s Epistles had as yet appeared under Archdeacon Hoccleve’s name.”

Nevertheless, the Archdeacon’s absurd obscurity energizes Belinda’s devotion to reading. Her love of literature and her longing for Henry have the same origin, her time at the University, and are caught together in her mind. Her intellectual focus is so intertwined with her love for Henry that it has become impossible for her to separate them. For Belinda, it’s just as difficult to imagine a life of scholarship as it is to imagine a life without the

Archdeacon. Indeed, the single instance of Belinda's literary ambition in the book is both focused on and thwarted by thoughts of Henry:

But there was always hope springing eternal in the human breast, which kept one alive, often unhappily...it would be an interesting subject on which to read a paper to the Literary Society, which the Archdeacon was always threatening to start in the village. Belinda began to collect material in her mind and then imagined the typical audience of clergy and female church workers, most of them unmarried. Perhaps after all it would hardly be suitable. She must consider, too, what was fitting to her own years and position.

This moment, as Belinda plants bulbs in her garden, in sight of the vicarage, highlights the darkest aspect of a life focused on unattainable love. Perhaps, underneath Pym's humor and the comfortable life Belinda has made for herself, lies the sadness that Austin Allen describes in a recent essay: "[w]hen you want or miss someone badly, the world contracts...the plot arc of your life coils into a vicious loop."

Pym wrote *Some Tame Gazelle* as her "Oxford" novel, and it is self-consciously a projection of her young friendships, romances, and intellectual loves into a fully-formed world set in this unnamed village. To read her diary, it becomes clear that in her final year at Oxford, Pym was consumed by the same dilemma that we've mapped out: exploring her love of literary scholarship while at the same time enmeshed in the romantic conundrum that was Henry Harvey, the "Lorenzo" (a reference to the poet Edward Young, which is repeated in *Some Tame Gazelle*) to her "Sandra."

Some Tame Gazelle's Archdeacon is a caricature of Lorenzo in the library, reading the Icelandic Saga of Hrolf Kraki and a humorous book of Latin (VPE 22). "He says he's doing Palaeography," Pym wrote in her diary. (VPE 29). Like Harriet in the novel, she admits "I didn't know what it was!" But, like Belinda, she was impressed. When he wounds her, Pym, like Belinda, retreats to literature: "What a bad sign it is to get the *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* out of the library," she writes (VPE 29). But Pym's self-awareness, sensitivity, and humor make *Some Tame Gazelle* far more than a projection of schoolgirl infatuation and insecurity. Her gift, the ability to refine the dross of everyday life into sparkling wit and gentle heartbreak is evident even in her first published novel.

Even so, the novel can be read as an exploration of possibilities available to the young author. One might have expected Pym to use the exercise of fictionalizing herself and her friends 30 years hence as an opportunity to imagine a life following a commitment to one of her two university-age fixations: romance or literature. Instead, in the novel, while her alter ego shares both passions, her life has captured neither entirely. Was Pym simply not interested in imagining a life beyond chasing Henry and dropping literary quotations? That would oversimplify. The nuance of Pym's characterization and, above all else, the self-awareness she demonstrates in *Some Tame Gazelle* show it to be a project whose goal is not exploration of all of life's possibilities, but an examination of the themes in Pym's young life. As Orphia Allen has speculated, Pym's "concern with literature throughout the novels may reflect her search for meaning in her own life, a search that involves the function of literature itself and the need to discover her own niche in English literary history" (65). Still, the pathos of Belinda's life leads the reader to wonder whether it's a reflection of Pym's insecurities—or simply part of the exercise of projecting her milieu into the future with a minimum of manipulation.

Reading and writing were the means that Pym used to examine the dilemma that faced her as she contemplated life after Oxford, where she wrote of her practice of "[d]rowning sorrow in work" by reading "our English poets" (VPE 25). Later, she would be ready to commit: not to literary scholarship or romantic life, but to life as a novelist. In 1935 Pym wrote that she would rather have a published novel than find love. But an irreducible aspect

of this resolution was a “pose of romantically unrequited love” (VPE 27). This is not to diminish Pym’s real desire for romantic love. As she wrote while at Oxford, “[t]he trouble is that although I’ve renounced him I still love him – or I suppose it’s love” (VPE 28).

Pym’s university days show us another way to look at Belinda’s love of literature. Pym’s readings taught her how much of English literature cannot be fully appreciated without romantic disappointment. In one sense this is obvious: literature can provide a balm for the reader. As Ackley has written, “[I]f, [Pym] learned early, is difficult and often disappointing, but literature could provide some relief from real emotional trauma” (34). For Pym, like Belinda, literature served as “a rich source of comfort in both emotionally troubled and happy times” (Ackley 34). But if the young Pym had an infatuation with the literature of unrequited love, she could also believe that the sharpness of the pain would pass, as she wrote in her diary: “Lorenzo ignores me – and I ignore him. Oh Sandra, cheer up – you’ll forget one day” (VPE 29). But Belinda’s decades-long love contests this self-reassurance. As Mason Cooley has argued, “a belief in Belinda’s thirty-year unrequited love for the Archdeacon ‘is the sort of thing only a devoted reader of romantic literature would be capable of’” (Tsagaris 33).

Pym realized that appreciating, if not savoring, unrequited love allows for truer communication with the literature she loved. As Belinda puts it: “[h]ow much more one appreciated our great literature if one loved...especially if the love were unrequited.” “[W]hen you look at the great sequences of English love poetry,” Austin Allen writes, “you find that they overwhelmingly portray *wanting* or *missing*, not shared experience. In other words, they thrive on isolation.” Belinda’s love of literature and her love of *the idea* of Henry don’t compete, but are naturally symbiotic. As the possibility of mutual romance with the person of Henry faded, it was gradually replaced with a romance of the image Belinda created of him—as he had been, or could have been. “*Some Tame Gazelle*,” writes Anthony Kaufman, “is to a great extent about the selectivity of memory, how memory is transformed by current emotional needs” (94). David Foster Wallace expressed it starkly: “every love story is a ghost story” (Max). Some readers have indeed seen in Belinda’s situation the makings of an emotional horror story: “Few of us,” writes Diana Benet, “can think of a situation more intrinsically horrible than Belinda’s: the nightmarish idea of being stuck forever on the adored youth who rejected our girlish love is too terrible for words” (22). But if Belinda hasn’t moved on from loving Henry after all these years, she has turned this love into something valuable, at least to her. Henry, as a person, is not dominant, but merely a stand-in object on which Belinda can focus her literary appreciation. Her devotion to him hasn’t prevented her from leading a life focused on literature, but in fact enabled it. Does it matter that it wasn’t the life of a professional researcher or published scholar?

Belinda believes, or tries to believe, that her preferred state is a quiet, uneventful outward life matched with an active intellectual inner life:

Of course there was a certain pleasure in not doing something; it was impossible that one’s high expectations should be disappointed by the reality. To Belinda’s imaginative but contented mind this seemed a happy state, with no emptiness or bitterness about it. She was fortunate in needing very little to make her happy.

Perhaps Belinda is not quite convincing. Certainly there are times when she wishes she was more engaged with “obscure research,” and not just because of her innate sense of competition with Agatha. Belinda’s belief that it’s possible to find contentment without achieving—or even really trying to achieve—life’s potential victories—is striking and, indeed, subversive. But it’s at least in part a reaction to the paradox that Belinda faces as she contemplates her love of literature and admiration for obscure research—a devotion that creates a path away from Henry at the same time that it draws her back to him.

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Adam Shoemaker holds a Master's degree in Medieval Icelandic Studies from the University of Iceland as well as a B.A. in History and Art History from Williams College and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. He spent his junior year at Exeter College, Oxford. He practices telecommunications law in Washington, D.C., where he lives with his wife and son. In addition to reading Barbara Pym's novels, Adam enjoys tutoring, running, and designing educational board games.