

The Novels of Barbara Pym: A Dance of Many Partners

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In the world of 2015 a person introduced as another person's partner might be many things to the introducer: perhaps an intimate partner of many years' standing, a partner in a legal firm, a partner in a commercial enterprise, or just two people who have agreed to share a ride to the Barbara Pym Conference. It becomes the job of the newcomer to listen and watch carefully for further clues to the real relationship between these partners. Leaping to an erroneous conclusion could lead to misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and perhaps, umbrage.

Well, it turns out that the world has not changed much since Barbara Pym wrote her novels, although we throw the word "partner" around more than people did in post-war Britain. Pym's novels are replete with partnerships of all sorts: would-be partnerships, incomplete partnerships, bosom-buddy partnerships, broken partnerships, highly problematic romantic partnerships, in short relationships of all sorts between all sorts and conditions of men and women.

So we have a mighty large topic on our hands for a three day conference. Where to begin?

From Pym's earliest published work, *Some Tame Gazelle*, she shows a fascination with partnerships of all sorts. Belinda and Harriet Bede are the original partners by virtue of their births as sisters. Although Harriet has many suitors including the courtly Count Bianco, Mr. Mold, and the Rt. Rev. Theodore Grote, the bishop of Mbawawa, who actually proposes, she remains faithful to her sister partnership with Harriet. Belinda once hoped to be the wife of Archdeacon Hoccleve, but now he is the lord and master of the worthy Agatha. Belinda, who has a lingering crush on Hoccleve, knows she is lucky not to have caught him, and is happy in her partnership with her sister Harriet.

The relationships in *Some Tame Gazelle* are only the opening dance in a series of complex pairings in the many novels and stories of Barbara Pym. I always enjoyed diagramming sentences when I was in grammar school, so, in preparation for this paper, I made rough diagrams of the partnerships in each book. (Fear not, I will not share all of them with you.)

Crampton Hodnet, begun in 1939 and published in 1985, is, like *Some Tame Gazelle*, the product of revision over a long period of time. Academics and the Anglican clergy figure prominently in the pairings in the book. Tepid Oxford don Francis Cleveland attempts a flirtation with his young student, Barbara Byrd, but is such a poor candidate for adultery, as his wife Margaret says, "[he] simply hadn't got it in him to fall in love with somebody else and break up a comfortable home." (146).

The Rev. Stephen Latimer, cleverly named for St. Stephen, the first martyr, and the Oxford martyr Hugh Latimer, is mostly a martyr to his own lying ways and the scheming of the formidable Miss Doggett and her companion Jessie Morrow.

Miss Doggett represents a special kind of partner in the Pym oeuvre. She expects to be the distinctly unequal senior partner of everyone in her sphere, from Miss Morrow to a series of hungry male undergraduates who put up with her bossiness in order to enjoy her tea cakes, to her new lodger Latimer.

Like almost everyone else, Miss Doggett gushes over the handsome young cleric who will undoubtedly mature into an ecclesiastical gargoyle like Archdeacon Hoccleve.

The only check on his vanity is his partner manqué, Jessie Morrow, who calls his hand about the fictitious village of Crampton Hodnet which he has invented to explain why he skipped evensong and makes wry private observations about the other fishy goings on in Oxford. Latimer would never be interested in a real partner like Miss Morrow—she’s too clever for a scallywag like him. The end of the novel sees him paired with a nineteen-year-old he can safely mold into a clergy wife to his liking.

Even though Barbara Pym reworked *Crampton Hodnet* after writing several other novels, we can see that she had a sophisticated view of the possible pairings of life from her early writing days.

Deb Fisher is going to go into the partnerships in *Excellent Women* for us, so I will touch on that book only lightly. My diagramming exercise did tell me that much of the underlying humor in the novel arises from the fact that Fr. Julian Malory seems to have so many would-be partners, from scheming women to the much more congenial Boy’s Club denizens and men in the parish. The novel’s protagonist, Mildred Lathbury, is seen as a likely wife for Fr. Malory, occasionally by himself, by Mildred, and other women in their parish, but she is content to be an “excellent” single woman and enjoy a “full life” correcting Everard Bone’s proofs and peeling his potatoes. The attractive widow of a clergyman, Allegra Gray, almost captures Mallory, but he escapes only to find himself lumbered with a lodger in doughty Sister Blatt and his sister Winifred.

Jane and Prudence features a married partnership, a mentor/student partnership, and a number of possible romantic partnerships. The reader also becomes reacquainted with Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow of *Crampton Hodnet*. I say “reacquainted,” but most of us read *Jane and Prudence* before we read *Crampton Hodnet*. How are we to deal with recurring characters?

Phillip Larkin mentions to Barbara Pym in one of his letter that he thinks she ought to curtail her use of recurring characters. He feels that Angela Thirkell weakened her work by using too many recurring characters, although he says he realizes that Pym’s recurrences are more coincidental, like Trollope’s Barchester novels. (Ms. Pym 151, fol.2). The mention of the marriage of Mildred Lathbury and Everard Bone at in *Jane and Prudence* and the travels of Harriet and Belinda Bede of *Some Tame Gazelle* in *An Unsuitable Attachment* are cases in point. But what would Larkin have made of Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow had he read *Crampton Hodnet* before he wrote the letter to Pym?

Just such a conundrum has been presented recently to readers of Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and her newly published older book, *Go Set a Watchman*. Which book presents the “real” Atticus Finch? I suggest that we, as readers of Lee and Pym, adopt a mature critic’s attitude and take each book as we find it, rather than imagine married bliss for Mildred and Everard or a trip to Rome for Harriet and Belinda just because they are mentioned briefly in later novels.

But what of Miss Doggett and Jessie Morrow? They are certainly an important pair in both novels in which they appear. Their behavior seems pretty consistent to me. The same shrewd Jessie Morrow who catches the Rev. Stephen Latimer in lies is every bit as capable of snaring Fabian Driver while no one else is noticing. Of course, how she is going to manage him now she has him is another question. And Miss Doggett is a force of nature in both books, although she does let Miss Morrow elude her permanent grasp when Jessie marries Driver.

Jane fails as a matchmaker for Prudence but she and her husband Nicholas bump along nicely together in his sleepy provincial parish while he plays with his animal soaps and she dreamily quotes poetry. Prudence, who seems too immature at twenty-nine to be permanently paired with anyone, takes up her old life in London with a new boyfriend *du jour*. Jane seems to think it is “a good thing [that] there is to be no marriage or giving in marriage in the afterlife” [because] “it will . . . help to smooth things out.” (214). But one has to wonder whether even heaven can iron the wrinkles out of the pairings in *Jane and Prudence*.

Less than Angels, published in 1955, is full of pairings and would-be pairings, perhaps in honor of the anthropologists which people its pages and delight in the complex kinships of so-called primitive peoples. Pym shows the reader of *Less than Angels* that the observers are no less primitive than the observed.

Catherine Oliphant is the sometime lover of anthropologist Tom Mallow, who spends much of his time on research trips to Africa and is angling to add the other principle character of the book, Deirdre Swan, to his list of conquests. Deirdre’s mother and aunt, Mabel Swan and Rhoda Welcome, live together and seem to be based on Hilary Pym Walton and Barbara Pym. By the time Mallow returns to Africa, where he is killed in a riot, he has dumped Catherine and annexed Deirdre; ironically, his death devastates Catherine, but hardly moves Deirdre, who has moved on to another anthropologist. At the end of the novel Mabel and Rhoda imagine Catherine marrying Alaric Lydgate, a retired colonial administrator. They muse, “What a difficult and peculiar couple they would make!” (526)

The dance of partners in *Less than Angels* is distinctly difficult and peculiar and definitely unangelic.

Many members of the Pym Society identify Wilmet Forsythe of *A Glass of Blessings* as one of their favorite characters. Wilmet, her mother-in-law Sybil, and good friends, Rowena Talbot and Mary Beamish, are the women whose concerns undergird the novel. Rowena is the wife of Harry Talbot and the sister of Piers Longridge, both of whom have brief flirtations with Wilmet. In essence, Wilmet flirts with Talbot and Longridge and toys with becoming one of Fr. Thames’s excellent women at St. Luke’s church before deciding that her comfortable if boring husband suits her quite well. Wilmet has a mid-life crisis, Pym style, which does not include flaming affairs or rushing off to be a missionary in Africa, but merely a few lunches and Portugese classes with men not her husband and collecting jumble for St. Luke’s.

Much of the humor in *A Glass of Blessings* is provided by the clergy. Fr. Thames, a white-maned social lion who collects Fabergé eggs and other bibelots, and holds forth in the parish magazine in a “troubled and confused” manner in which “spiritual and material matters jostle each other in a most inartistic manner” lives with “mild, dumpy Fr. Bode” in the clergy house. Thames pleads with the parish women in the magazine to clean and cook for them as the housekeeper has female problems which he explains in graphic detail. Young, handsome Fr. Ransome is sent to the parish to complete the clerical *ménage à trois*, but he is unable to live in the rectory because it is thought that he would vie with Fr. Thames too much. Wilmet wonders if they would both be too busy collecting Fabergé eggs to accomplish much in the parish. As it turns out, Fr. Ransome is too occupied with the Church of South India problem, a problem which is not much worry to anyone else, to think about Fabergé eggs.

Fortunately for Fr. Thames, Wilf Bason comes to be his housekeeper and the sometime keeper of the Fabergé egg, which disappears into his pocket for days at a time only to reappear when least expected. Wilmet decides to leave the denizens of the rectory to their own devices and learns to care for her own home after her mother-in-law Rowena marries Professor Root. *A Glass of Blessings* is one of Barbara Pym's sunniest books, and the many comic pairings in the novel help to make it so.

No Fond Return of Love, published in 1961, is a story of broken partnerships, missed partnerships, and incomplete partnerships. Dulcie Mainwaring has just broken off an engagement, Aylwin Forbes has separated from his wife, and his brother, the Rev. Neville Forbes, a confirmed celibate, has fled his parish during the busy Easter season because he thinks a parishioner has designs on him. Aylwin attracts the attention of Dulcie, Dulcie's lodger Viola Dace, and even Dulcie's niece Laurel. The end of the book finds Dulcie indexing Aylwin's book and musing about a possible future romance with him, but the reader has her doubts about the sustainability of any such romance. *No Fond Return of Love* does not appear to have a permanent partnership within its pages.

An Unsuitable Attachment, rejected by Barbara's publisher Jonathan Cape in 1961 but finally published in 1982, is the product of several revisions. Philip Larkin and others who read the book in embryo liked the story very much, but editors at Cape thought the book was too old-fashioned for modern tastes. The novel asks the question, who shall be the partner of Ianthe Broome and thereby assume co-partnership with her Hepplewhite chairs and Pembroke table? Will it be Mervyn Cantwell or John Challow? Or Rupert Stonebird? Can Ianthe be loved for herself or only for her furniture and her handsome apartment? And who is "suitable," the right age, the right class?

Almost every character in the book has an opinion on who would be suitable for Ianthe beginning with her rector, the Rev. Mark Aigner and his wife Sophia, both of whom have the pleasant, patronizing manner of those who have washed up in a London neighborhood unworthy of their talents and social pretensions. Aigner is said to have the "air of seeming not to be particularly interested in human beings—a somewhat doubtful quality in a parish priest, although it has its advantages." (17) as Pym notes. Sophia would like to find a suitable partner for her sister, Penelope Grandison, but such a match does not develop. Fortunately for Ianthe, she has the gumption to choose her own partner, who seems a decent sort, although considered unsuitable by others. Perhaps John Challow is the very man to rescue Ianthe from her stifling Anglican family and friends.

The Sweet Dove Died was written during Barbara Pym's "wilderness" period but not published until 1978. The protagonist, Leonora Eyre, is depicted as a person destined to be the partner of her Nineteenth Century antiques and books of poetry but not of flesh and blood human beings. To be sure, she enjoys and even requires a handsome young man like James Boyce or a suave older man like his Uncle Humphrey to squire her around, give her small gifts, and pay court to her in general. She wants admirers within her tether, but wants them at a proper distance and in their places but staying within her beck and call. Tension arises when James proves to be gay and desires a more fleshly relationship with the unpleasant American Ned and even somewhat woebegone Phoebe.

As in *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *A Glass of Blessings*, antique furniture and valuable objects substitute as love objects for real human partnerships in *The Sweet Dove Died*. In the end Leonora's pride is wounded by James's desertion and Ned's callousness, but she still has Humphrey to take her to the

Chelsea Flower Show and her charming peonies to go with her charming room. Leonora's stunted capacity for intimacy has rendered her incapable of a real partnership with other people.

Barbara Pym originally called *Quartet in Autumn*, *Four Point Turn*, a cue to her perception of the novel as a dance of many possible partnerships. Letty, Marcia, Norman, and Edwin have worked together in a London office for years but never become close. There is a suggestion that Norman and Marcia might have been drawn to each other at some point in the dim past, but it was only a brief moment, and came to nothing. Marcia does leave Norman her house, but once again in Pym, inanimate objects substitute for genuine human emotions. When Marcia and Letty retire, no one seems to remember what job they had in the company, so there is no need to replace them. The four retirees get together for lunch once, but no one has much to talk about or much in common, so they go back to their mostly sterile lives promising "to get together again very soon." They do note that Marcia is very thin and doesn't eat much but don't follow up on this observation in any way.

To be sure, Edwin is very wound up in his Anglo-Catholic church and the doings of his rector, Fr. Gellibrand, and Letty initially has the prospect of retiring to the country with her friend Marjory, but the latter's romance with the Rev. David Lydell nixes that plan. When Letty's new landlord proves to be Mr. Olatunde, the exuberant priest of an African religious sect, his friendliness and otherness put her off, and she scurries to the dull safety of a bedsitter in the home of Mrs. Pope. E.M. Forster's maxim "only connect," found in *Howard's End*, seems to have eluded Letty most of her life, as it has Marcia, Edwin, and Norman to differing degrees.

Yes, Marcia develops a crush on her doctor, Mr. Strong, and her neighbors and a social worker try to reach out to her, but she dies an isolated loner with a large supply of empty milk bottles and unworn lingerie. In the character of Marcia, Barbara Pym depicts the bleak consequences of failure to develop partnerships of any kind in one's life.

What of Norman who inherits Marcia's house? He sells it and stays in his bedsitter. Like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Norman has no will to change his life and elects to stay in his reduced state: once a cockroach, always a cockroach.

Edwin seems pretty happy with his church and Father Gellibrand who enjoys tending to the dead more than he does living people, but Pym's reader feels no inducement to follow Edwin's preoccupations with incense and church trivia. In the end Letty may have the greatest possibility of contentment of the four quartet members because of her happier nature and gratitude for the ability to make small choices.

After the publication of *Quartet in Autumn* in 1977 and its nomination for the Booker Prize, Pym drew back from the abyss of loneliness depicted in *Quartet* and turned to the writing of her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*. In this book she returns to a country setting in which village life centers around the parish church and its rector, the Rev. Tom Dagnall, and its two doctors, Mr. Gellibrand (said to be the brother of Fr. Gellibrand of *Quartet in Autumn*), and Mr. Shrubsole. Emma Howick, the book's protagonist, has come to the West Oxfordshire village to study the vagaries and happenings of village life. Emma notices the efforts of kindly, ineffectual Dagnall, who represents the spiritual power of the Church, and those of the two doctors, who represent the power of the medical prescription pad to soothe the aches of life. Each of these men courts the allegiance of the women of the village. The doctors offer the charms of modern medicine, while Dagnall offers the chance to crawl around in the damp underbrush searching

for the remains of a deserted medieval village. The doctors find Dagnall's use of the labors of old ladies, "most unsuitable," but the rector seems to think his antiquarian research is a fine church activity. In essence, the three men wish to enter into a partnership of sorts with the women of the village, but it is Emma herself who becomes Dagnall's partner in marriage in the end.

Barbara Pym wrote *A Few Green Leaves* in the sure knowledge of her own impending death and worked very hard both to finish the book and to make it a final statement of her world view. She says in her notebook of February 14, 1979:

In the afternoon I finished my novel in its first very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore. (Ms. Pym 80, 26)

It would seem that Pym was consciously examining partnerships in village life through Emma who makes lists of all its people and their significance. Everyone seems to participate in the life of the Church even if they don't attend church. The Bring-and-Buy sale, the Jumble Sale, the Hunger Lunch in aid of Oxfam, and the Flower Festival constitute rural social life, and attract the participation of Mrs. Broome, who does the flowers, and Adam Prince, who has left the ministry and the Church because he has come to doubt Anglican orders but who donates a bottle of wine to the Bring-and-Buy Sale nonetheless. The partnerships in *A Few Green Leaves* seem pretty thin and pallid, but as Pym herself said in 1962:

To make my (literary) soup I don't need cream and eggs and Nave Well fish, but just this old cod's head, the discarded outer leaves of a cabbage, water and seasoning. (Ms. Pym 6, 3)

For those of us who love the novels of Barbara Pym, this ability to make a lot of a little and to show gratitude for the warmth of imperfect relationships is one of her most endearing qualities.

If George Eliot could read *A Few Green Leaves*, or indeed all of Pym's novels, except perhaps, *Quartet in Autumn*, she would probably describe them as "not optimistic but melioristic" as she did her own work; Eliot believed the world could be improved but not perfected. A more modern reader might see Pym's last novel as minimalistic because the few green leaves, the tentative signs of hope, community, and partnership are very slight.

Does Barbara Pym believe that meaningful partnerships are possible? I believe she would say they are essential. Then I think she would laugh a bit ruefully, and say, but don't expect too much from your partners. They may not understand the steps you think are essential to your understanding of the dance, and they may step on your toes from time to time. If you pair up with your sister like Harriet and Belinda, you will sometimes get on each other's nerves. If you marry, you may not end up with Prince Charming but with a kindly, ineffectual clergyman like Nicholas Cleveland or Tom Dagnall. If you become an excellent woman like Mildred, you will have many friends and acquaintances, but they often won't meet your needs while expecting you to meet theirs. If you think having a Pembroke table or a Hepplewhite chair for a partner will make you happy, you will lead a sterile life like Leonora Eyre or Mervyn Cantrell. But, if you avoid partnerships altogether, like Marcia Ivory, you are likely to die alone with your dozens of empty milk bottles.

Fortunately, Barbara Pym leaves us with more hopeful portraits than her depiction of Marcia. Imperfect human partnerships, like a few green leaves among fading roses, do make a difference. At the end of *A Few Green Leaves* Tom Dagnall muses about the presentation Dr. Gellibrand has just given the history society,

‘Not quite all I had hoped for, but I think people enjoyed it and I suppose that’s the main thing. Isn’t that what life is all about?’ he added, hardly expecting an answer.

A life not quite all they had hoped for but enjoyable is clearly the attitude of many of Barbara Pym’s characters, and indeed Pym herself. Those of us who love Pym’s books could do a lot worse than to take it as our own philosophy.

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