

# Sisters Together, Spinsters Forever: Resisting the Goblin in *Some Tame Gazelle*

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In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Barbara Pym establishes at the beginning of her career her lifelong engagement with the questions of true knowledge and the uncertainty of human, and specifically, of spinster life. When Archdeacon Hoccleve announces the arrival of the new curate in the parish magazine, he cannot pass up a chance to display his familiarity with the poet-preacher of the same name: “The Reverend Edgar Donne—the name is of course pronounced *Dunne*—will be with us by the time you read these words.” However, as the curate confesses later to the sisters Belinda and Harriet Bede, that pronunciation of his name is incorrect. This leads Harriet to joke about the misspelling of her name on Gorrings’s catalogue as “Miss Bode,” and Miss Bode being her “dowdy” and “frumpish” alter ego. This is the first and the most innocent among the many instances in the novel of cacophony, duality and deception that characters in the novel, especially the spinster sisters Belinda and Harriet, will be called on to navigate. The sudden arrival in the village of outside men, beginning innocently with the new curate and peaking dangerously with Bishop Grote, will push the sisters into a goblin market of temptation. But the Miss Bedes will come out of it safe and together as spinsters, only momentarily waylaid by the lure of matrimony that would have separated them. By embedding the novel with misquotations, misapprehensions of love and desire and numerous literary allusions, Pym succeeds in capturing the unpredictability of the life of two spinster sisters in post-war England who long for the stability of their postlapsarian world before the Second World War.

The imagery of gardens and of vegetation is abundant in the novel, and the Archdeacon wants his garden to have “a ha-ha, a ruined temple, grottoes, waterfalls and gloomy, overhanging trees.” However, his wife Agatha preserves its suitability for a garden party. This party becomes the scene of many follies, not the least of which is Edith Liveridge’s preoccupation with a makeshift restroom for the men, ominously named ‘The Place Behind the Toolshed.’ Agatha effaces all marks of her former rival Belinda on the garden by removing her decorations and redoing them. The Archdeacon begins the garden party with a most unsuitable prayer: “O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do, mercifully grant that by Thy Power we may be defended against all adversity...” Pym gives us a glimpse through free indirect discourse into the minds of both sisters: Harriet thinks that “Prevent us O Lord in all our doings” would have been the correct prayer for the garden party, whereas Belinda’s love leads her to commit the false textual analysis that “[w]hen Henry prays for defense from adversity, he must mean too much confidence in all our powers.” However, even she cannot help but wonder if Henry recited the first prayer he could think of. The garden party is also the first time that the Archdeacon and Belinda discuss Agatha’s going away to Karlsbad without Henry. This conversation, which Belinda later considers inappropriate, leads her to imagine for the first time that the Archdeacon might at last understand her value in his wife’s absence—a dangerous temptation.

Unlike the Archdeacon’s idea of a garden, Harriet’s long-time suitor Count Bianco’s garden is a place of harmony and reminiscent of the grounds of Pemberley that helped Elizabeth Bennet overcome her ill-opinion of Mr. Darcy. Belinda is left to feel a surrogate longing for the estate of her sister’s admirer:

Every time they visited Ricardo's house, Belinda was struck by the excellence of everything in it. And the garden was delightful with its perfectly tended herbaceous borders and rockeries, a grove of lime trees and some fine Lombardy poplars... Belinda wondered how anybody could remain unmoved at the sight of the lovely marrows....

Belinda is especially sensitive to the loveliness of the marrows, having recently been berated by Agatha for wrapping Lady Clara Boulding's flowers in old newspaper. She is also appreciative of his attention to his native Italian flowers so that they may prosper in English weather, quite like the co-existence of his Catholic faith with his attendance of same church as Harriet. He is careful about preventing both his love for Harriet and the pears on the trees in his garden from languishing, and they are "carefully tied up in little cotton bags, so that they should not fall before they were ripe, or eaten by the birds." Belinda feels obligated to be sensible of the desire that her sister should be experiencing, like the knitting projects we're told Harriet begins "in a burst of enthusiasm" and which are "usually finished, more soberly, by Belinda." Harriet first visit to the curate's house stands in comic contrast to the description of Count Bianco's garden. She searches for Mr. Donne's personal touches to his new dwelling, but finds his collection of books "not a particularly original selection" that includes "Shakespeare, some standard theological works, a few paper-backed detective novels, and the Oxford Book of English Verse." Ricardo, on the other hand, reads Tacitus and Dante when not perusing his late friend John Akenside's writings, a project to which he is completely devoted.

While Belinda welcomes the idea of her sister marrying inside the village and becoming Ricardo's Countess, she perceives the arrival of Mr. Mold and Bishop Grote as a palpable sexual threat to their peaceful existence. Belinda receives a letter from her old friend Dr. Nicholas Parnell, who introduces his colleague Mr. Mold and describes his travels in Africa in the following terms: "He has penetrated the thickest jungles... where no white man, and certainly no deputy Librarian, has ever set foot before." Harriet finds Mr. Mold, who turns out to be a daytime drinker, charming, but not enough to accept a proposal of marriage from him. Harriet, however, takes his attentions towards Harriet as a sign of mutual attraction and love. She is in the garden when Mr. Mold comes to make his proposal, and the scene is only too evocative to be innocent: "Belinda concealed herself behind a large rhododendron bush... She was fully aware how foolish she would feel if she were discovered in this undignified crouching position, but she could not imagine that Mr. Mold would take the trouble to penetrate the thickness of the bush before he rang the bell and announced himself." Just as Belinda feels the need to honor Ricardo's value as a suitor, she takes the threat of Mr. Mold's advances as a personal one which would lead to a life of loneliness for her. Harriet, however, has the example of Ricardo's numerous avowals of love to compare Mr. Mold's proposal with, which falls decidedly short of the mark. Even if in jest, she tells Mr. Mold, "I'm afraid my sister and I are very confirmed spinsters." In rejecting the suit, Harriet rejects also the possibility of her sister or her ever having another way of life, knowing that she would rather be in love with whoever is the curate at the time and Belinda with the Archdeacon.

The biggest threat to the world of the sisters, however, is Theodore Grote, the Bishop of Mbawawa, who, having spent most of his life preaching in Africa, is the true goblin and racial other that Belinda truly is disgusted with and fears. Instead of being received as a hero at home for spreading Christian faith in a foreign country, this preacher from the fringes of the recently collapsed British Empire instead becomes the Mr. Collins of Pym's novel. During their first meeting at the station, he reminds Belinda that she knitted him a scarf when he was a curate, but Belinda remembers doing no such thing. Knitting for a man is a sign of romantic vulnerability in the novel, and the Bishop forces its avowal upon Belinda. We also learn that Agatha Hoccleve may be in love with the Bishop because she knitted socks for him. This creates an atmosphere in the novel of mistaken identities and misplaced love similar

to that of a Shakespearean pastoral comedy. But Belinda is not able to see any humor in the situation and would rather Harriet marry the indecent Mr. Mold than become Bishop Grote's wife and go away with him to Africa. She is so preoccupied with the impending loneliness that would follow Harriet's marrying that she hardly notices Bishop Grote's growing attentions to her, and nearly faints on receiving flowers from the Bishop. Yet, in the novel, even the sense of togetherness of the sisters is perverted, and Harriet and Belinda are not exactly the inseparable Lizzie and Laura of Christina Rossetti's paean to sisterhood. Harriet eggs Belinda on to take advantage of Agatha's absence and spend time alone with the Archdeacon, which makes Belinda extremely confused as to how she and Henry could possibly come together so late in their lives. It is as if Harriet, by encouraging Belinda to stoop to folly, wants her own flirtatious behavior to go unnoticed.

The announcement of the marriage between Mr. Donne and the older, taller and more erudite Olivia Berridge forces the sisters to reckon with the passage of time and changing mores. The sisters realize that a woman needn't undermine her knowledge or feel ashamed or unnecessarily modest about her lack of classical training in order to charm a man. In fact, Olivia Berridge's superiority seduced Mr. Donne. The news that Miss Berridge proposed to Mr. Donne and not vice versa sends Belinda back to Henry's engagement with Agatha thirty years ago, and she realizes that Agatha must have proposed to Henry. Miss Berridge will not merely be a "helpmeet" to her husband. She will enrich his sermons and her experience of navigating the "disputed readings" of the obscure medieval poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* will help her prevent them from ever becoming muddled like Henry's sermons. At the wedding, as Harriet enthusiastically seeks out the new curate, Belinda thinks, "For now everything would be as it had been before those two disturbing characters Mr. Mold and Bishop Grote appeared in the village...Harriet would accept the attentions of Count Bianco and listen patiently and kindly to his regular proposals of marriage." However, she does not let her imagination "go any further than this in her plans for the future: she could only be grateful that their lives were to be so little changed." In the goblin market of a world violently and unrecognizably changed by the war, the two sisters have only each other and their familiar loves to depend on.

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