An Unsuitable Correspondence: Equivalencies of Style and Theme in the Novels of Barbara Pym and Raymond Chandler

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When Barbara Pym appeared on *Desert Island Discs* on the 29th of July, 1978, the announcer asked how she would find shelter while shipwrecked on that desert island. Imagine Pym's refined accents as she replied: "I suppose I will contrive something with leaves and branches."[1] Listeners will note the humorous clarity of expression so familiar to Pym's readers. One is tempted to scan the phrase – *contrive something with leaves and branches.* It could serve as an introduction to my talk.

To "contrive" a connection between Barbara Pym's bittersweet comedies and Raymond Chandler's hardboiled mysteries may seem unwise to the point of foolishness. Pym was, in the words of Shirley Hazzard, "the poet of the lonely, the virtuous, the ironic; of the unostentatiously intelligent and witty; of the angelically self-effacing."[2] Chandler, meanwhile, according to Frank McShane, his biographer, wrote "in a language that combined the strength of the classical English … with the vitality of American vernacular speech … the romantic and the realistic."[3]

This paper will trace the Venn diagram of these authors' shared qualities. One could say that they are similarly consumed by considerations of character. How will someone respond when confronted, say, with an unexpected proposal from a man who wears African masks around his house; how will they face such moral quandaries as an anonymous gift of Victoriana, or a request for help from a writer afraid that he will kill his wife in a drunken rage?

This paper will compare Pym's *An Unsuitable Attachment* (1963) to Chandler's sixth and last novel, *The Long Good-Bye* (1953). Both novels, written under the influence of a rapidly changing society, attempt to move beyond their respective formulas. The novels' female protagonists, Pym's Ianthe Broome and Chandler's Eileen Wade, are women pressed into traditionally passive feminine roles who, in the course of the narratives, discover newfound, even transgressive, freedoms. For Pym, as for Chandler, the equilibrium of their fast-moving and witty prose is jarred by a deep unease with newfound reconceptions of faith, community, and family. These novels, I will show, exhibit a disconcerted response to modernity, a breaking out, even as they acquiescence to the popular genres – "lady's novels" and "pulp fiction" – to which they were consigned by publishers and reviewers.

Both are known for a wry humor rooted in observed behavior – a keen eye for the ridiculous, the corrupt, the hypocritical. For instance, Pym at her amusingly cruel best in *An Unsuitable Attachment* introduces the Fairfaxes:

> "– oh, here are the Fairfaxes," [Rupert] declared, as the door opened to admit a tall middle-aged man and an even taller woman, obviously husband and wife, who had grown to look like each other in a rather unfortunate way, their small heads and long stringy bodies seeming as if they must have combined the worst features of each. …
>
> "Yes, here we are." Robina Fairfax's mouth opened in a smile which revealed teeth that could only have been her own, so variously colored and oddly shaped were they. [4]

And here is Chandler, known for his sarcastic similes. Here are a few from *The Long Goodbye:*

> "She had eyes that could count the money in your hip wallet."
> "He had a face like a collapsed lung."
> "I was as hollow and empty as the spaces between the stars."

And, describing Dr. Verringer, a suspect, whose "eyebrows waved gently like the antennae of some suspicious insect … He looked sad … (and) The eyebrows drooped at the outer corners to match his mouth. Give them a little more growth and they would be *in* his mouth."[5]

Literary critic James Woods situates the primary importance of literature as a vehicle for helping us readers see, evaluate, and understand. What Woods calls "serious noticing" are the moments so particularly rendered as to become

universal. Both these writers observed ordinary people – elevator operators, taxi drivers, waitresses and church ladies are granted a masterful attention. Shirley Hazzard said of Pym: “Nothing escapes such persons; and they escape nothing.” [6]

The ordinariness that Pym celebrates irritated some critics. “Nothing happens,” one complained. A review of *Less Than Angels* in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1955 praises her work as “amusing” despite the limitations of a “a small canvas and a neat, feminine talent.”[7] Neither was Chandler celebrated. The *Washington Post* described his plots as “rambling at best and incoherent at worst.” [8] And the *London Review of Books* had this to say:

> [We follow] the detective on a series of clues, only to find out, in the end, that the book wasn’t really about solving mysteries at all, but about the resolution of a search for a missing person whose fate, apparently determined at the outset, turns out to be radically otherwise. He who was thought to be alive turns out to have been long since dead; he who was thought to be dead turns out to be alive; she who was thought to be one person turns out to be another. [9]

Indeed, Chandler’s taste in endings is distinctly idiosyncratic for a mystery novelist. There are no open and shut cases, no Agatha Christie-style denouements with all suspects in one room to observe a bravura performance by the detective. Instead, Marlowe discovers truths the police reject as too complicated, too inconvenient to those in power. It is almost as if he is solving crimes to and for his own satisfaction. By the end of the novel, romantic ideals have been tested, loyalty proven, and cynicism buttressed.

All of which could define the modus operandi of Barbara Pym’s heroines in *An Unsuitable Attachment,* whose high ideals – and maidenly fears – are tested, and their cynicism – and romanticism – after an ethical struggle, is ameliorated by experience.

Pym and Chandler describe domestic routines – the making tea, the and making of coffee – as near-religious rituals. The celebrate the openings of jumble sales and the opening of bars, “When the air inside is still cool and clean and everything is shiny and the barkeep is giving himself that last look in the mirror to see if his tie is straight and his hair is smooth.” [10]

James Fenton in *The London Times,* thought Pym “obsessed with surfaces, with fabrics and foibles” [11]; and it was Chandler who, in the assessment of *The London Review,* “possesses a fantastical power to name the things of the world – an astonishing vocabulary of plants, fashion and interior design … In one short passage … he identifies juniper logs in a fireplace, walnut in the wainscoting, and a dozen kinds of hardwood in the parquetry….”[12]

Chandler’s private detective Phillip Marlowe (with an “e”) was named after the gentlemanly poet Sir Phillip Sydney and the playwright Christopher Marlowe, who was killed in a tavern brawl. Gumshoe Marlowe is as nearly fond of quotations as a Pym heroine, dropping allusions to Shakespeare, Pepys, Flaubert, Eliot, and Hemingway while navigating the hard-hearted streets of L.A.

Older than Pym by twenty-five years, Chandler shares with Pym some interesting biographical commonalities.

Chandler was the child of divorce. His father abandoned his Anglo-Irish mother in the Midwest and she returned with young Raymond to live with family in London. Chandler was educated at Dulwich College, where P. G. Wodehouse was a recent grad. He was gifted in the classics but rejected university to live in France and Germany for a year and write. He returned to London and worked as a freelancer for the newspapers and magazine, writing puff pieces, romantic poems, and reviews. In 1912, he returned to the US. “I had to learn American just like a foreign language,” he told a friend.[13]

Like Pym, who served in the WRNS, Chandler had wartime service – he enlisted in the Canadian Grenadiers in WWI and saw most of his regiment slaughtered in France. After a bout of the Spanish flu, he returned to the US, took an accounting course and became oil executive. In 1932 he was fired for his drinking, and he began to do what he wanted to do: write. He began writing for the pulp magazines such as *Black Mask*, as a way of learning to write and getting paid for it.[14]

Hollywood came to Chandler, and he was nominated for an Oscar for his script for “Double Indemnity” which starred Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck. He also wrote scripts for Hitchcock’s “Strangers on a Train” and the noir classic “The Blue Dahlia.”

Interestingly, his private life resembles a Pym narrative. His mother was quite dominating and he lived with her until he was 36, then married the mother of a school friend, 17 years his senior. It was a happy marriage, despite her chronic health problems, and he fell apart after her death. Binge-drinking and suicidal, he moved back to England where he was critically appreciated as a novelist. He died in 1959.

Conversely, Pym's genealogy features a Chandleresque mystery: her father's parents were not who he thought they were. Her father's "sister" was actually his mother, seduced or raped while working as a housemaid in a large 19th c. mansion. He never revealed this secret to his children, nor was it discovered before Pym's death, although we can speculate that a legacy of family secrets may have spurred her intense curiosity to *know.*

For Barbara Pym was "ravenously inquisitive."[15] She played detective, stalking her crushes as her heroine Dulcie does in *No Fond Return of Love* and creating "sagas," imaginary biographies of strangers glimpsed in passing. Pym's biographer and friend, Hazel Holt, describes how:

> Barbara and [her sister] Hilary (like Harriet and Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*), liked to sit by the window – they sat in their upstairs sitting room at the front of the house – from which they could observe the comings and goings in the road beneath. [16]

Pym contended that:

> To those who have never invented and maintained a 'saga' the whole thing must seem very strange indeed. The subject can be anyone at all ... but it is most rewarding to weave a saga around someone you can actually observe. [17]

Indeed, some officiants at a nearby church who were spied upon by the Pym sisters – and even furtively tailed by car! – became the characters Wilt Bason, Keith, and Bill Coleman in *A Glass of Blessings*. Even Bill Coleman's reliable Husky originated in this "saga." [18] No small wonder that the collection of Pym's letters and diaries was titled, punningly, *A Very Private Eye.*

"Her favorite place to watch human behavior was a restaurant," writes Holt in *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym*. "[F]or there she could sit quietly in the background while people interacted with food. Each glimpse of the intimate relationship between the person and the plate cried out to her. Cafeterias, tea shops, cafes, pubs, dining cars, a park at noon – anywhere people were eating was fertile ground."

Here is an example of such an observation from Pym's diary circa 1964. Notice the efficiency of this description of a co-worker: "Mr. Claydon in the Library – he is having his lunch, eating a sandwich with a knife and fork, a glass of milk near at hand."

She ends this passage with a *cri de coeur:*

> "Oh why can't I write about things like that anymore – why is this kind of thing no longer acceptable? What is wrong with being obsessed with trivia? What are the minds of my critics filled with? What nobler and more worthwhile things?[19]

Let us compare two moments of intense observation that open *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *The Long Goodbye. An Unsuitable Attachment* begins with an act of mutual surveillance.

> They are watching me, thought Rupert Stonebird, as he saw the two women walking rather too slowly down the road. But no doubt I am watching them too, he decided, for as an anthropologist he knew that men and women may observe each other as warily as wild animals hidden in long grass. … One day, he thought, we shall probably know each other, and for that reason he turned away from the window, not feeling quite equal to meeting the unashamed curiosity of their glances as they came nearer. " [20]

From this passage, we can predict Rupert's shy hesitations, his passivity, and poor timing, all of which run through subsequent encounters with Ianthe and Penelope. The two women who are observing him – sisters Sophia and Penelope –

are ravenously curious in their own ways: Sophia dutifully wondering if he'll join her husband's congregation; Penelope speaking loudly and self-deprecatingly in hopes of attracting the man's notice. The themes of the novel are jump-started.

And this is Chandler, opening *The Long Goodbye:*

> The first time I laid eyes on Terry Lennox he was drunk in a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith outside the terrace of The Dancers. The parking lot attendant had brought the car out and he was still holding the door open because Terry Lennox's left foot was still dangling outside, as if he had forgotten he had one. He had a young-looking face but his hair was bone white. You could tell by his eyes that he was plastered to the hairline. …
>
> There was a girl beside him. Her hair was a lovely shade of dark red and she had a distant smile on her lips and over her shoulders she had a blue mink that almost made the Rolls-Royce look like just another automobile. It didn't quite. Nothing can." [21]

What do we notice? As in the passage from Pym, we find a "private eye's" fascination with people and the environments that define them. Lennox has one foot on the ground, like an actor in a Hollywood bedroom scene. He is half-in/half-out of the Rolls and of the jet-set life, and he ends up on his keister on the blacktop, prefiguring the novel's plot. Could it be that these descriptions perform a writerly practice, allowing a scene to play out as characters reveal themselves? For both novelists, the real mysteries seem to be other people.

Let us consider Ianthe. Phillip Larkin, in the introduction to *An Unsuitable Attachment*, found himself "not caring very greatly for Ianthe … her decency and good breeding are stated rather than shown." Ianthe – a former "head girl" – a canon's devoted daughter, is called "a little inhuman" by an acquaintance, "a little too good to be true." Rupert Stonebird finds her aesthetically pleasing. Seeing her, "A vague idea formed in his mind – not that he loved her but that he would like to see her always in his house, like some *suitable* (italics mine) decoration or finishing touch." [22]

Named after a love poem by the minor Victorian poet Walter Savage Landor, Ianthe possesses all the virtues of a Victorian lady: She is generous, honest, humble, helpful, dutiful and always appropriately "suitable." Until, that is, she meets John Challow, a new hire at the library where she works. John is either a sincere lover or a conniving young – younger – man. Everyone warns her against him – the jealous Rupert calls him an imposter. John, they say, wants her money, her furniture, her "virtue." But, in an act of near-heroic courage, Ianthe chooses this young man as her husband. She opts for an attachment of the heart; she activates a belief in her own future. Others in the novel seem too attached to the past or too enmeshed in the present, bound by class and gender and unable to take a risk. They resent Ianthe's choice; As Sophia (clearly a mother stand-in) tactlessly comments: Ianthe "seems to me to be somehow *destined* not to marry." Almost as if Ianthe were biologically determined to be eternally suitable and isolated, an island unto herself, but there's an irony here: even Sophia, who loves her cat, Faustina, more than her husband, is stultified by the "suitable" roles she plays. She is wishing upon Ianthe a similar sterility.

Critics may, rather conventionally, celebrate Pym as a champion of "the non-special, the unheroic, the humble, the steady, the meek;" – but Ianthe, Sophia, and Penelope, who certainly fit these *non-/un* categories, wish to be more than helpmeets: typing up hubby's manuscripts, keeping house, making "endless cups of tea." Pym offers other life-models in the characters of Sophia's aunt living happily in Italy and the "common" spinster Miss Grimes, who surprise Ianthe by their self-sufficiency, but she also reveals her own hesitations about feminism: Prudence, reader of women's magazines, is ribbed for her attempts at Swinging 60s fashion – her eyeliner smears, her metallic mini-dress splits its seams, her bouffant goes sideways, and she comforts herself with chocolate bars found among the sofa cushions. It is only after the disappointment of her relations with Rupert, when she lowers her expectations, dresses more modestly, more drably, that she is rewarded by – surprise! – Rupert's attentions.

Pym, that "very private eye," ties up the plot's loose ends, but she leaves larger questions unanswered. As Rupert plots his pursuit of Penny – echoing the opening metaphor of animals stalking each other – do we really believe that they are "well suited"? All signs point to no. And yet, does it matter? Readers recognize the *gesture* towards a happy ending and, like most of the characters, we accept what's offered: some kind of attachment. Penelope's happiness is similarly gestured toward, but whether she will choose the reticent Rupert or some version of happy single-ness, is unknown. The possibilities

of different unions: Sophia with her cat; Mervyn with his mother; Harriet with her pet cleric, Basil; the Pettigrew brother and sister team– exemplify other satisfyingly or unsatisfyingly unsuitable attachments.

In *The Long Goodbye*, we find another kind of unsuitable attachment and a *femme fatale* version of Ianthe. Eileen Wade is a lady – a rarity in Chandler's Hollywood – and described as a princess from an Arthurian romance:

> She was slim and quite tall in a white linen tailormade with a black and white polka-dotted scarf around her throat. Her hair was the pale gold of a fairy princess. There was a small hat on it into which the pale gold hair nestled like a bird in its nest. Her eyes were cornflower blue, a rare color, and the lashes were long and almost too pale. She reached the table across the way and was pulling off a white gauntleted glove and the old waiter had the table pulled out in a way no waiter ever will pull a table out for me. She sat down and slipped the gloves under the strap of her bag and thanked him with a smile so gentle, so exquisitely pure, that he was damn near paralyzed by it.… She was unclassifiable, as remote and clear as mountain water, as elusive as its color." [23]

Eileen is a gracious hostess, a selfless support to her husband, Roger Wade – the alcoholic writer of popular sword and sandal novels – and a vengeful murderess. The love of her life, a wartime romance, has betrayed her and she wreaks a bloody revenge. Her seeming suitability disguises boundless rage. If, as most readers agree, Roger Wade is a stand-in for Chandler, himself – a man who despises himself as a hack writer – Eileen is the woman he idealizes. Perhaps fittingly, it is Eileen who kills the hack writer, and it is Phillip Marlowe who catches her, teases out the threads of the crimes that link her to Terry Lennox, and who allows her the "respectable" punishment of suicide rather than turning her in to the authorities.

The Long Goodbye began as a novel, a breaking away from expectations, but without Phillip Marlowe Chandler soon found himself out of steam, out of sorts, and out of funds. He reintroduced Marlowe to the narrative and everything began to move forward, to pop with energy, but the two threads of plot – the man, Terry Lennox, who everything thinks is dead but who isn't dead, and the man who hires Marlowe to keep him from killing his beautiful wife – never quite align. Readers may find the mystery oddly akimbo, like a bad renovation, the new sitting uneasily upon the old. In a letter to his London publisher, Hamish Hamilton, he offered his own opinion: "I am afraid Mr. Marlowe has developed far more than a suspicion that a man of his parts is beginning to look pretty ridiculous as a small-time private detective. He's getting self-conscious, trying to live up to his reputation among the intellectuals." [24]

It is the intellectuals who now champion Raymond Chandler and Barbara Pym's novels, who, working within and transforming the boundaries of their respective genres, created literary styles deemed "Pymian" and "Chandleresque."

As my Venn Diagram fills, I would like to end with a more generalized assessment of *An Unsuitable Attachment*. As we know, it was rejected by Pym's publishers in 1963 as being "unsuitable" for the times and was only published in 1982, two years after her death.

Many have decried the injustice of this, but Pym, herself, though hurt, did not seem to think this novel one of her best efforts. She never attempted to revise it or tried another press. Perhaps she agreed with Philip Larkin's assessment. He found "there was a certain familiarity about some of [the characters] … What this adds up to is perhaps a sense of coasting."[25]

What must have been more galling was that her other books continued to sell and were even adapted by the BBC, while her new work remained unpublished for 14 years. Chandler, too, struggled against the rigid requirements of editors:

> "As I look back on my stories it would be absurd if I did not wish they had been better. But if they had been much better they would not have been published. If the formula had been a little less rigid, more of the writing of that time might have survived. [26]

It is sad to consider the many novels that went unwritten.

I would like to leave the last words of my talk to Barbara Pym. If there's one thing that makes my Venn Diagram viable, it is the way that she and Chandler both fulfill the requirements of a recognizable style – which was one of Pym's self-professed ambitions. In a radio talk she gave in 1978, she said:

One of my favorite quiz games on television some years ago was that one in which panelists were asked to guess the authorship of certain passages which were read out to them, and then to discuss various features of the author in question. There were no prizes for guessing, no moving belt of desirable objects passing before their eyes, just the pleasure and satisfaction of recognizing the unmistakable voice of Henry James or Henry Greene, or whoever it might be. I think that's the kind of immortality most authors would want – to feel that their work would be immediately recognizable as having been written by them and by nobody else. But of course, it's a lot to ask for.[27]

Like Chandler, Pym considered the ways that subtleties of class, race, and sexual orientation influence behavior and influence outcomes – that is, the tropes of happy endings. The acuity and efficiency of their observations convey the private eye's voyeuristic fascination while sketching anthropological clan systems or the Los Angeles class systems with slyly humorous exaggerations. To paraphrase critic James Meek, Pym and Chandler both "see through the material to the true meaninglessness of it all."

They are both part of "that small band of writers who have created a self-contained world, within which [their] characters move freely. This [they] achieved through [their] own personal, idiosyncratic view of life, expressed in a unique style. [28]

And that is asking a lot.

CODA: *New York Times* critic Anatole Broyard may have described Barbara Pym as "evidence that the English will never, God bless them, run out of obscure novelists suitable for reading"[29] This remains true on both sides of the pond, although Pym's obscurity may be debatable. My evidence: I spotted in the BBC mystery series "Endeavor" a village called Crampton Hodnet.

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Endnotes

[1] BBC *Desert Island Discs* on the 29th of July, 1978
[2] Shirley Hazzard, "Excellent Woman," 3
[3] Frank McShane, Introduction. *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: A Centennial Celebration*, Byron Preiss, ed. (Knopf, 1988), xii)
[4] *Unsuitable Attachment*, 125
[5] *The Long Goodbye,* 123-125
[6] Shirley Hazzard, 3
[7] Holt, 206
[8] Butki, Scott, *Blog Critics*
[9] James Meek, *The London Review of Books*
[10] *The Long Goodbye*, 23
[11] James Fenton in *The London Times.*
[12] Meek, *The London Review*
[13] McShane, xi
[14] MacShane, xi
[15] Dinnage, NYRB
[16] Holt, *A Very Private Eye,* 177
[17] Holt 175
[18] Holt 182
[19] Holt. *A Very Private Eye,* 225
[20] *An Unsuitable Attachment,* 13
[21] Chandler, 3
[22] *Unsuitable Attachment*, 88-89
[23] Chandler, 89
[24] McShane, xiii
[25] Larkin, Introduction, *An Unsuitable Attachment, iii*
[26] Chandler, Introduction. *Trouble is My Business, ix*
[27] Pym, *Finding a Voice*, BBC radio talk given 4 April 1978
[28] Meek, LRB.
[29] Broyard, NYT, 13