

# Attempting Adultery in *A Glass of Blessings*

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When I think of Barbara Pym, I think of her many unmarried female characters: her “excellent women”; her spinsters, be they 28 and working office jobs in the city, or 50, doing parish work in the countryside. In any case, Pym has written innumerable single women, complex, intriguing ones with rich inner lives at a time when marriage was still the crowning achievement in a woman’s career. *A Glass of Blessings* stands out then, as it is one of the very few Pym novels featuring a married heroine.

Wilmet Forsythe is a rarity amongst Pym’s protagonists. She is married, attractive, and financially comfortable; qualities which few of Pym’s other heroines possess more than one of at a time, most having none of them at all. Most significantly, perhaps, she transgresses the boundaries of sexual propriety (which, again, Pym’s heroines very rarely do) by conducting an extramarital emotional affair with her best friend’s brother, Piers Longridge. This makes her an unlikely Pym protagonist, but the character type of an unfaithful wife is a recurring figure in British postwar literature across novels, theatre, and film, such as Hester Collyer in Terence Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), a barrister’s wife who leaves her husband for a former RAF pilot and, perhaps most famously, Laura Jesson in David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945), a wife and a mother who also conducts an emotional affair outside of her marriage. Lean would go on to make *The Passionate Friends* (1949), almost identical to *Brief Encounter*. These examples are too few to confidently declare this phenomenon a wave or perhaps a marketing trend, but it is noteworthy how a good number of the most enduringly popular and affecting women-centric postwar stories to come out of Britain deal with unfaithful women: *The Deep Blue Sea* was adapted by Terence Davies in 2011, and *Brief Encounter* is still widely considered a masterpiece of cinema. A fascinating phenomenon, considering how contradictory this type is to the stereotypical image of the postwar woman, an image that is culturally quite strong: perhaps we imagine her wearing pink or red lipstick and big bustling skirts, making strange concoctions set in aspic, raising her children patiently and most importantly, she is totally faithful to her husband. What happens, then, when a writer like Pym, ever focussed on single characters, takes on the topic of marriage and infidelity?

When investigating the character of the British postwar adulterous housewife, it is important to consider that she has emerged from a climate of danger and extreme anxiety, followed by gradual relief. The very word ‘postwar’ suggests peace; life was far from being back to normal, though: cityscapes remained destroyed and incomplete (consider the impressive imagery of the bombed church from *Excellent Women* in which Mildred worships at least three years after the war), people were still traumatised, and less tragically but nevertheless prominently, food rationing would continue until 1954, an element that prominently features in other Pym novels. Simultaneously, the desire for peace and order on a nation-wide level grew. How *does* one reinstate these on a society-level, though? By strengthening and reinforcing the smallest social unit that is emblematic of these very values: the nuclear family. Its dominance is certainly a response to wartime chaos; the uncertainties and physical displacements of the war had caused a briefly muddled moment in sexual behaviour: “almost a third of all babies” born in Britain between 1940 and 1945 had been born out of wedlock, and divorce petition counts went from 10,000 in 1938 to 25,000 in 1945 (Richards 113). Traditionalism in the post-war era became desirable as an antithesis to all exceptional occurrences of the war era. Families could now survive on a husband’s sole income, which led to a moment of a strict divide in gender roles. Beaumont writes that the “desire for a return to ‘normal’ family life after the disruption of war meant that married life and motherhood was scrutinised like never before” (148). As homemaker and primary caregiver to her children, she was supposed to keep the peace in the home and instil traditional values in her children. Henceforth, British women were facing two sources of pressure: a social climate that had still not quite recovered from the war, and increasing rigidity in gender conformity. Almost all of Pym’s single characters, so very much products of this time, struggle with this. Tincknell writes that “Pym’s spinsters in particular are acutely conscious of their exclusion from the socially normative model of postwar femininity – the housewife and mother” (35). Ackley, too, writes that “Pym’s heroines, especially, are conscious of their distance from others, feeling displaced, not firmly tied to one human being... None of

them wants to be considered useless, unloved, or unloveable. All around them are signs of disturbing changes in postwar England which reinforce the sense of isolation and fragmentation.” (116)

What happens, then, when Pym investigates this climate through the character of a married woman, one who, superficially, does very much conform?

Helena Napier from *Excellent Women* is a proto-Wilmet of sorts; she is to her as Miss Bingley or Mary Crawford are to Emma Woodhouse. We know her marriage is troubled; she falls in love with her colleague, and the topic of divorce is on the table. However, being cold towards Mildred as she is, we never really get to see her side of the story, but certainly that of her husband. Rocky Napier certainly does know how to make Mildred feel sorry for him. By using Mildred as his own personal therapist, he effectively absolves himself of all blame within himself and her, abusing the intense emotional intimacy thus created to fully pull Mildred onto his side. Helena, admittedly, has been hiding her feelings for Everard Bone very poorly indeed. It is an unseemly way of carrying on, and whilst Mildred watches events unfold with her usual detached air, this does nothing to sway her low opinion of Helena. Though not very active within the novel, she looms over the story as a menacing presence: beautiful, married, academic and of unseemly sexual appetite; by being openly, publicly unhappy in her marriage, her character becomes an implicit critique, a deconstruction, of marriage as an institution, purported to be a woman's ultimate source of happiness and purpose. She is a contradiction of a frighteningly modern woman who is both something she should and should not be. Mildred, who is perfectly comfortable indulging Rocky Napier's attempts at inappropriate emotional intimacy with herself, cannot tolerate the same in his wife. I think it really speaks to Pym's range as a writer that she has taken this character type, which functions as a quasi-antagonist in one novel, and made her a protagonist in another, an act that allows for much deeper, more thorough exploration.

Wilmet's story is a deconstruction of marriage as much as Helena's. This conclusion may not be the most obvious one, as Wilmet is quite content; she likes her husband, who is nothing but nice, and is quite satisfied with the company she keeps in general. Compare that to Mildred Lathbury or Belinda Bede: women who continuously seek out community, yet barely appear to be able to stand the people they surround themselves with. Neither is Wilmet prone to great and constant introspection as, again, Mildred Lathbury or Jane Cleveland, one of Pym's very few other married protagonists. But she is not entirely satisfied (that would make for quite a dull heroine), as few of Pym's protagonists are. In spite of her pleasant current situation, Wilmet keeps finding herself longing for her late teenage years as a Wren officer stationed in Italy during the war. This is a time she remembers very fondly, for the beautiful Italian landscapes, for the food, and the thrill of being courted by several men at once (including, probably, the implied sexual freedom as a consequence). Now in her early thirties, Wilmet has been a respectable wife for over a decade, and what any 'excellent woman' would consider the peak in her life, Wilmet considers a personal decline, leaving a void to be filled.

Wilmet is a woman whose life is marked by stagnation. For almost fifteen years of marriage, Wilmet's life has stagnated: she went from being a silly teenager to being a respectable wife in the blink of an eye, and has seen no change since. She is not gainfully employed nor does she volunteer, and she is not occupied raising children or performing other 'housewifely' duties. In no way am I suggesting she should do these things, just that they are common activities that would keep fellow married women occupied. The war service gave her a purpose, now she feels insecure about being "particularly useless" in comparison to people such as Mary Beamish. *Excellent Women* contains a passage in which the Napiers argue with Mildred about the definition of a "full life", both suggesting that Mildred's life is *not* full because she is unmarried. Arguably, Mildred's single life, filled with work and community, is a great deal fuller than Wilmet's married life. We also know that Mildred has been in love before, we know that she was a caregiver to both her failing parents, and functions as her parish's quasi-therapist (these people never return the favour). For better or for worse, Mildred's life is decidedly not uneventful. It is questionable whether Wilmet would feel more fulfilled living a life such as this, but it is hard to imagine filling fifteen years with little else but church and restaurant visits. Neither does her husband, Rodney, contribute very much to the excitement in her life. Curiously enough, the reader practically knows nothing about Rodney; I even forgot a few times during reading that Wilmet is married at all, let alone to this man in particular. Pym is no stranger to being able to paint a clear picture with a few brush strokes, as it were, but Rodney remains hazy until the very end when he finally opens

up to Wilmet. This distance from her husband, motivated by something other than dislike or resentment, is what causes Rosefield to call Wilmet a “married spinster”: “Jane [Cleveland] and Wilmet,” she claims, “are married spinsters. Their minds slide off housework into poetry or fantasy. They are fond of their husbands, but they live their inner lives alone”. Similarly, Brothers remarks that “if the women in Pym’s novels do marry, their husbands are neither passionate nor profound, neither great lovers nor great thinkers” (62), and Ackley writes that “Wilmet is an illustration of the fact that a ‘full life’ does not magically and immediately follow marriage. The status that Pym’s plain, excellent women lack does not guarantee a sense of personal fulfilment.” (57) Thus, essentially as emotionally unsupported as any of Pym’s single characters, Wilmet is (unconsciously) looking for distraction, which she finds in Piers Longridge.

Piers is handsome, an alcoholic Bohemian; excitingly improper without crossing any lines. He allows Wilmet to imagine herself being pursued again; he makes her feel desirable. There is the old excitement again that she has been lacking for all those years. He is strange – he has a keen interest in number plates and astrology – and just so very different from the respectably masculine men that usually surround Wilmet. He lacks the somewhat silly goodness of Pym’s clergymen; he lacks Rodney’s inoffensive blandness. He is also the polar opposite of his brother-in-law, Harry; loud, sleazy, arrogant Harry, one of Pym’s most vile creations in his unfortunately realistic characterisation. His marked dislike of Piers can be read as homophobic, and he has no qualms attempting to cheat on his wife, with her best friend no less. There is also a colleague of Rodney’s, a random character really, who excuses his wife’s absence from Wilmet’s birthday dinner by saying that she “has just had a child” in such a strange, detached manner as if it were not *his* child, too. Wilmet accepts these men as they are, but subconsciously appears to be quite tired of this type of man. She comments the following on Rowena and Harry’s marriage:

Harry was one of those non-intellectual men who are often more comforting to women than the exciting but tortured intellectuals. He might not have any very interesting conversation for his wife at the end of the day, might indeed quite easily drop off to sleep after dinner, but he was strong and reliable, assuming that he would be the breadwinner and his wife would of course vote the same way as he did.”

Here we have Pym’s famous sly tongue and subtly scathing wit, but these are not just her words but Wilmet’s, as the narrator. As a married woman herself, she is critical of this highly gendered postwar conception of marriage and power imbalance; presumably she reserves the right to vote whichever way she pleases, no matter what Rodney has to say about it. Piers’s appeal, then, is his total lack of machismo and middle-class indifference. As Brothers puts it, “he is a perfect romantic subject, brilliant but unsuccessful, a handsome man with a Byronic touch...What better vehicle for a woman’s desire to be needed, to do some good, and to escape from the mundaneness...of her life.” (69) And Wilmet’s life *is* mundane, as much as that of any excellent woman. She really is a “married spinster” at heart, reaping the social benefits of married womanhood, but not the emotional ones.

Still, why then does Wilmet take the risk? Why does she risk the emotional, social and legal ramifications of being found out? After all, were it not for Piers’s relationship with Keith, Wilmet appears quite willing to take the emotional affair further. The appeal of an affair, what makes the risks all seem worth it, is an implied sort of freedom. Attraction between women and men is rarely ever just that, but more often than not it is a specific set of rules and constructs. There are rules for courtship, consummation, cohabitation, procreation, and so on, differing by region and time, but existent nonetheless. Non-compliance with any of these rules is often socially or legally punished, with mostly women bearing the brunt. In the 1950s, sexual mores were already shifting, but marriage prevailed as the only widely sanctioned context in which expression of heterosexual attraction was permissible. And again, marriage is more than just that; it is a set of rules. A wife is not just a woman who is married; more often than not she has a role to perform, that of homemaker and mother. It is a performance that does not take into account the individual’s wants or needs. The appeal of an affair partner, then, is that he cannot really make those same demands of her. A husband might be legally and socially justified to expect the above-mentioned performance from his wife; an affair partner, however, has no system to support him here. He can hardly expect her to keep his house, bear him children and raise them, too. Most significantly perhaps, he cannot expect a woman to stay. An affair can be exited at any time, unlike a marriage; in England especially, there is the system of fault-based divorce, according to

which a divorce can only be petitioned for on certain grounds. An affair, then, offers at least the illusion of a partnership that is free of performance, free of rules.

Clearly, infidelity can hold a very specific appeal for women that may not exist to this extent for men. Cheating, chasing one's youth; those, if one goes by the cliché, are usually masculine pursuits that more often than not overlap in fiction. Both major married male characters in the novel attempt infidelity – Rodney more unexpectedly than Harry. The latter is so sleazy that one almost expects him to be unfaithful, and the confidence he displays in his attempts at wooing Wilmet would suggest that he has perhaps done so before with other women. Rodney, however, has shown interest in Prudence Bates, many years his junior. *Crampton Hodnet's* married don Francis Cleveland rather uncomfortably pursues his student Barbara Bird; their whole affair is awkward and rather pathetic, and his having a daughter around the same age as Bird also gives it a touch of the distasteful. These men certainly fit that stereotype of men deep in a midlife crisis pursuing younger women as if helpless in the face of their own instincts. What is special, then, is how differently Pym treats her women who are confronted with those very same desires. Pym has little sympathy for Francis and Harry; as men in positions of some power, they go about their affairs rather confidently. One comes to the conclusion that they put themselves in these situations simply because they *can*; because there is opportunity. Certainly, Francis could maintain professional boundaries and remain emotionally faithful to his wife, but he does not really want to; the same can be said of Harry, who is appallingly confident in pursuing his wife's best friend. Either he assumes he can get away with it, or if he did *not*, he still would have no consideration for the repercussions this would have on his wife and children. Pym's unfaithful women appear to meet their socially unsuitable desires with more emotional turmoil. It is a gendered way of approaching the topic, but then again real-life attitudes towards men and women differed on the basis of gender as well. Pym's one unfaithful man – as far as I am aware of – from whom the author withholds her cynicism is Wilmet's very own husband Rodney. On that countryside holiday, what should have been Portugal with Sybil, Rodney admits to having gone to dinner with Prudence Bates twice. Although professing that "it was no more than that", he appears to tell on himself by admitting that he has seen her famous Regency-furnished flat. Perhaps Rodney is being truthful, and his acquaintance with Prudence Bates really only consisted of dinner and, say, a cup of coffee at her place. But perhaps it does not, perhaps "dinner" is a euphemism here; Rodney himself admits that "dinner is rather different somehow" from Wilmet's lunches with other men, which he seems to consider harmless in comparison. Reading *Jane and Prudence* is not any more enlightening here; Prudence's choice to sleep with men outside of marriage is strongly hinted at, but never confirmed. Assuming, then, that Rodney has physically betrayed his wife, why has Wilmet not made the same leap?

Pym's decision to not make Wilmet and Piers's affair physical is in all likelihood owed to the era. Published in 1958, *A Glass of Blessings* is firmly embedded in the conservatism of the postwar. By the "1950s it was hard to escape the conclusion that the movement [feminism] had suffered an inexorable decline," Pugh writes, "and some historians have gone so far as to suggest that feminism had virtually ceased to exist as a result of the combined effects of the depression and the Second World War." (144) The introduction of the contraceptive pill in the early 1960s would gradually allow for greater sexual self-determination for women, and eventually contribute to the rise of the so-called sexual revolution and the second wave of feminism in the late 60s. Before then, the risk of pregnancy was far greater. Great pieces of literature around conception outside of marriage from the postwar era are *A Taste of Honey*, *The L-Shaped Room*, and *The Millstone*; ranging in publication years from the late 1950s to the early 60s, they are intelligent pieces of social realism that strive to be more than sensational or scandalous. Still, they are about unmarried women who have children with unmarried men. Logically, it is easier to argue for the moral innocence of characters or people in these circumstances than of married women, whose (hypothetical) extramarital pregnancy would automatically signal betrayal; they cannot remove themselves from the matter unscathed in the way a man could. How does one prove such a character's moral goodness, preferably in an intelligent, un-sensationalised manner? The risk of pursuing a sexual relationship outside of marriage before the 1960s was too great, a fact reflected in the restraint and repression of Wilmet Forsyth or Laura Jesson. Whereas Wilmet never really has the opportunity to go this far with Piers, *Brief Encounter* contains a memorable scene in which the protagonists find themselves in an empty flat, an almost perfect opportunity to consummate their affair. Laura hesitates and the moment passes as the

flat's owner comes home unexpectedly. Film historian Jeffrey Richards recalls an anecdote from a screening of the film for Cambridge students in the late 1960s, where viewers were apparently so incredulous at Laura Jesson's hesitation to cheat on her husband that they "were convulsed with laughter" (123), a moment that indicates to Richards the rapid change in morality that had occurred in just over twenty years. Wilmet forgives Rodney for whatever vague transgression of his, but would we as readers be able to forgive the same in her? Would we expect Rodney to? Perhaps he would, as he has noticed that married life has not improved for Wilmet "this last year or two", and blames himself and his infatuation with Prudence Bates for it. But would we, as contemporary readers? Could we forgive Wilmet? Could publishers and readers in 1958 do this? It is easy to see why an author such as Pym, who has always quite successfully avoided the melodramatic, might not want to cross into that territory.

Wilmet's problem, then, is twofold but intertwined. On a social level there is marriage, and on a personal level there is stagnation and avoidance. Wilmet's life stagnates *because* she is married. In this she resembles Laura Jesson from *Brief Encounter*, whose only excitement is going into the city once a week to shop. For the remainder of the week, she raises her children and helps her husband solve boring crossword puzzles. Both stories deconstruct the concept of marriage: where is the room for a wife's personal fulfilment? For her growth and goals?

Wilmet copes with her lack of perspective quite poorly: on the one hand there is Piers, on the other there is her tendency to seek out people within whom she senses a similar stagnation. Her mother-in-law, Sybil, is 69, widowed for a long time; Mary Beamish is around her age and very plain, and worryingly codependent with her mother; and Piers is an alcoholic with several jobs of little prestige, in his mid-30s. As long as these people's lives are as stagnant as hers, she can feel confident and affirmed in her life and her choices, as long her life remains the most objectively desirable. Any comparison, any introspection, can only result in a favourable light being shed on Wilmet. As long as things remain this way, she does not have to face her existence for what it is: inert. This causes her to conceptualise people only in relation to her, and she struggles to see their identity untethered from her. She has not planned ahead for the moment other people's lives progress and what this might do to her; consequently she is thoroughly unprepared for the emotional upheaval. Her blindness to Sybil's fondness of Professor Root is almost comical. "Sybil to be Professor Root's wife!", she ponders. "But she was Rodney's mother and my mother-in-law – how could she ever be anything else?" And when she confides in Mary about how much "upheaval" Sybil's nuptials are going to cause in her life, Mary replies the following: "Yes...marriage does do that, doesn't it – and death, too, of course." Marriage is presented as a sort of death here, first and foremost to the friend group. But perhaps marriage is also a death of the wife, of the self. Wilmet replies: "But not birth." "No," Mary concludes, "people seem to come more quietly into the world. It isn't until they've really become personalities that they make changes and upheavals." This really is how Wilmet perceives people; she struggles with accepting them as "personalities". So when Sybil decides to get married, when she realises that Piers is already in a relationship with a man and will never fall for her, and when Mary Beamish, not at all the eternal spinster Wilmet thought her to be, gets married, Wilmet's conception of the world crumbles. "It seemed as if life had been going on around me without my knowing it", she muses, realising life is not a concept anymore with her at the centre, but a space that she is outside of, looking in. "It had never occurred to me that Sybil and Professor Root would want the house to themselves," she admits. Although her life may not change, others' can and will; there is no point in basing her self-worth in the inferiority of others when those poor souls may surpass her in happiness at any moment. This gradual removal of sources of validation forces Wilmet to take a step back and reassess what she has left: Rodney. Rosefield writes that "Pym is not a romantic writer, but she is a cautiously hopeful one," and I agree. What is left in Wilmet's life is herself and Rodney, and their relationship; these are elements and facts that she has to work with. All of these changes – especially moving house, a rare change that she has not been able to effect herself – bring them closer together. Pym is certainly no proponent of marriage, but Wilmet *is* married, and not unhappily so; there is real partnership to be found in her and Rodney's marriage, which is something all Pym heroines long for. It is an arrangement that has the potential to fulfil Wilmet and Rodney, and make them truly content.

Admittedly, I have never been a great fan of the novel's ending; it seems somehow too saccharine, too inconsequential a conclusion to such an ambiguous story, as if Pym had struggled to finish it. Yet I cannot fault her for her excellent

characterisation of Wilmet, which demonstrates how much she has grown. Ackley writes that the “problem in Pym’s world is that there are no good men and relationships with other women are often unsatisfactory, facts which Pym’s heroines have learned to adjust to.” (119) I would certainly agree with this when talking of, say, *Crampton Hodnet* or *Excellent Women*, but I do not think the same can be said for *A Glass of Blessings*. Wilmet, who unlike Pym’s other heroines has always regarded other people with a sort of benevolent condescension, learns that friendships and relationships cannot be kept afloat if not sustained with genuine affection and respect. She really, truly humbles herself, and learns to appreciate people for what they are, not for what they can give her. By the end, she is able to maintain a friendship with Mary and Marius, and is able to be truly happy for them. Similarly, she looks forward to dinner with Rodney, and Sybil and Professor Root, and considers it a “happy and suitable ending to a good day”. I most enjoy her and Rodney’s cameo in *No Fond Return of Love*, however, in which they take a joint couples’ holiday with Piers and Keith. Not only is this scenario quite progressive for 1963, it is also another wonderful demonstration of Wilmet’s growth: she genuinely likes Keith as a friend (something she quite struggled with at first), instead of resenting him as the person who took Piers away from her, as the physical reminder of Piers’s personhood.

*A Glass of Blessings*, then, is about the same question as Pym’s stories about unmarried women: it is about conformity, about happiness. Pym’s single characters suffer from the loneliness and alienation that come with being unmarried, with nonconformity; but marriage does not offer fulfilment either. Wilmet is unfulfilled, as is Jane Cleveland, as is David Lean’s Laura Jesson or Terence Rattigan’s Hester Collyer. Marriage, that marker of conformity and purported source of companionship, is not that. It is a construct that creates shame in those women who live outside it, and it creates boredom and aimlessness in those who *have* entered it; because their husbands are lacking as partners; because society offers no goals or perspectives to married women; because being a wife is a performance. It is a state that is hard to exit, since a divorce in England can only be petitioned for on the basis of certain “grounds”. An affair, then, is a temporary distraction from this aimless kind of existence, offering excitement and the illusion of a life where partnership is not performative. But Pym suggests a solution: it is not the division of labour and roles, it is not the gulf between the sexes; it is not submissive devotion to her husband that makes a wife happy. When Laura Jesson finally breaks down in the arms of her husband who is so eager to help and comfort her; when Wilmet and Rodney burst out laughing after confessing to having “looked at” other people, it becomes clear, then, that the path to happiness, to not feeling “useless, unloved, or unloveable” is not paved with rigid adherence to differences, but with openness and honesty, with friendship and affection, with equality between people who have vowed to share their lives.

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