

The Reality behind
Barbara Pym's
Excellent Women

The Reality behind Barbara Pym's Excellent Women:

*The Troublesome Woman
Revealed*

By

Robin R. Joyce

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Reality behind Barbara Pym's Excellent Women:
The Troublesome Woman Revealed

By Robin R. Joyce

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by Robin R. Joyce

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8928-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8928-5

Dedicated to Jill Stevens whom I was so fortunate to meet at the 2001 Barbara Pym Conference in Oxford. From there we spent many hours discussing Barbara Pym's writing and life and visiting the locations of many of her novels. Barbara Pym brought me not only her wonderful work but a dear friend.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Abbreviations	x
Preface	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	37
Pym's Writing and its Biographical Contexts	
Chapter 2	88
Splendid Spinsters and Melancholy Spouses: The Troublesome Woman in <i>Some Tame Gazelle</i> , <i>Excellent Women</i> and <i>Jane and Prudence</i>	
Chapter 3	116
The Troublesome Woman in the Spiritual and Scientific Worlds: <i>Less Than Angels</i> , <i>A Glass of Blessings</i> and <i>No Fond Return of Love</i>	
Chapter 4	143
Village Paradises or a Cosy Cover? <i>A Few Green Leaves</i>	
Chapter 5	174
Sixties Rejections: <i>An Unsuitable Attachment</i> , <i>The Sweet Dove Died</i> and The Short Stories	
Chapter 6	209
Seventies Success: <i>An Academic Question</i> and <i>Quartet in Autumn</i>	
Conclusion.....	239
A Richness of Troublesome Women	
Appendix A	256
Explanation of Archival Material	

Appendix B.....	258
Pym and Germany	
Bibliography.....	262
Index.....	279

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family and friends for their support throughout the PhD process that has now become this book. The PhD thesis is now in the Bodleian Library. Appreciation is due to the Bodleian librarians who provided such friendly support while I was researching the large range of material available there.

Rewriting has required a great deal of additional assistance, and once again my family has contributed to the work. Fleur Joyce and Rosemary Joyce offered astute advice on the manuscript. Kate McMullan was also significant in this regard, but so importantly, read Barbara Pym's novels to discuss them with me. Joe Treasure gave me excellent advice, with the result that I was encouraged to write this book. Bob Dobbie's comments were supportive and helpful. Jocelyne Scutt's advice throughout has been invaluable.

Bob McMullan took on the challenging task of not only reading the manuscript in total but dealing with the endnotes. His comments were thoughtful, and his support added to the ease with which I found the time to work on the manuscript.

My most grateful acknowledgement must go to Andrew Lennard whose knowledge of Pym and her fiction added another aspect to the way in which he was able to help with the manuscript. He not only read the whole manuscript, but his understanding of the material and what I wanted to achieve was everything a writer could want. His comments were always astute, knowledgeable, and made with sensitivity.

ABBREVIATIONS

Barbara Pym novels in order of first publication

STG *Some Tame Gazelle*

EW *Excellent Women*

JP *Jane and Prudence*

LTA *Less Than Angels*

AGB *A Glass of Blessings*

NFRL *No Fond Return of Love*

QA *Quartet in Autumn*

TSDD *The Sweet Dove Died*

AFGL *A Few Green Leaves*

AUA *An Unsuitable Attachment*

CH *Crampton Hodnet*

AAQ *An Academic Question*

CS *Civil to Strangers*

PREFACE

Barbara Pym was an English novelist born on June 2 1913 whose work was first published between 1950 and 1986. Pym wrote novels, short stories and plays from her youth. She died in January 1980, leaving her last novel, written between 1977 and 1979, in its final stages of writing. Her literary executor, co-worker, and friend Hazel Holt, saw *A Few Green Leaves* into press and so it was published in 1980. Other novels published posthumously are *Crampton Hodnet*, which Pym began writing in 1939, redrafted over the period until 1950, but was first published in 1985; *An Unsuitable Attachment*, written between 1960 and 1965, and first published in 1982; and *An Academic Question*, which was written in the 1970s, and first published in 1986. Some of Pym's novellas, short stories and talks were published in magazines during her lifetime, and several were brought together in *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings* posthumously. The novella of the title was written between 1936 and 1938, and the collection, including this work, was first published in 1988. As well as writing, Pym read prodigiously and widely, sometimes completing two books in a day. She also loved the cinema, once going to a film on Christmas Day. She would have attended church first, as she was deeply committed to the Church of England.

Pym's life, her notebooks and diaries in the Bodleian, and her writing have been pored over, and numerous biographies have been written. The most recent, *The Adventures of Miss Pym* by Paula Byrne, has won accolades for its comprehensive account of Barbara Pym's life over her whole lifetime. Pym's sister, Hilary Pym (Walton) and Hazel Holt gathered an intriguing array of material from Pym's notebooks and diaries, which they drew on together with their recall of their novelist sister and friend whose personal life was not straightforward, involved great and long-term friendships and thwarted love affairs. She is the subject of several documentaries and contributed to the BBC's flagship radio programme, "Desert Island Discs."

Pym was a graduate of Oxford University, during the war worked at the Censorship Office in Bristol, became a Wren, and later made a lasting career at the African Institute. Here she became the putative editor of the journal, *Africa*. Together with a busy social life and enduring friendships, Pym wrote...and wrote... and wrote. Her output through which she is most well-

known are her published novels. They are the product of extensive drafting and redrafting. The drafts, notes and material accumulated in bringing a novel to fruition provide a myriad of ideas, crafted sentences, and beginnings and ends that at times are blended to make an accomplished whole. At other times ideas and partially written pieces appear to have been abandoned. However, it is unlikely that the ideas at least were forgotten entirely. Pym was adept at retaining ideas, and even people, for her future writing. Clothing was made over, writing was reassembled, and friends were woven into her fiction. Observations and strangers also became part of the fertile material she adopted and adapted to suit the writing of the moment. She was successfully published until *An Unsuitable Attachment* was rejected in the 1960s, but with the advent of a *Times Literary Supplement* feature in which she was deemed the most underrated novelist of the century by both Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin, publishers again sought her work. Her novels have continued to find new publishers and have been republished ever since. The latest are the Penguin publications complete with modern covers.

The published novels begin with *Some Tame Gazelle*, which Pym began in 1935 and redrafted until its first publication in 1950. This was a fictional account of herself and her sister as contented spinsters, enjoying a life of happily unrequited love, and a comic proposal in Barbara/Belinda's case, and for Hilary/Harriet flirtations, a constant admirer, and an ill-judged proposal. Barbara Pym's friends from Oxford also feature, in varying humorous and unappealing guises. The Bede sisters were to appear briefly in a future novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, still happy spinsters, but now seeing the world with the assistance of one of Harriet's devoted curates following in their wake.

Excellent Women, written between 1949 and 1951, and published the next year, the second novel to be published, features Mildred Lathbury, a spinster who to all appearances, has the features typical of her unmarried state. She is contrasted with Helena Napier, a vivacious anthropologist who, with her husband Rocky, complete with the glamour of his navy days flirting with Wrens, moves into the flat above Mildred. That they must share a bathroom is a lingering concern for Mildred, whereas Helena is serenely unaware of the niceties, dedicated as she is to her work. Rocky provides Mildred with some romantic moments that wilt like the mimosa she buys, but Everard Bone, Helena's co-anthropologist is more likely to provide a future, even if that, as Mildred ruminates, is making an index or washing dishes.

Pym wrote *Jane and Prudence* between 1950 and 1952, and it also achieved immediate success when it was published in 1953. In this novel, the relationship between Jane and Prudence, another example of sisterhood between quite different characters, is the focus. During their time at Oxford Jane was a tutor and the younger Prudence, a student. Maturing has brought them together as companions, and Prudence is by far the more worldly of the two. Jane is married to Nicholas, a pleasant clergyman, while Prudence has remained happily single. Although she affects a passion for her boss, and enters various flirtations, she relishes her flat which is abundant with furniture that provides little comfort for masculine visitors. Jane's rudimentary matchmaking skills are unsuccessful at finding Prudence a husband. Her domestic skills are also basic, and she and Nicholas must often eat out, or from a tin. Flora, their daughter, will be going to Oxford, but in the meantime, she provides the only domestic accomplishments in the household. Nicholas ponders the suitability of adopting celibacy as a requirement for Anglican clergy.

Less Than Angels, first published in 1955, is Pym's most anthropological novel, teeming as it is with anthropologists, young and old, women and men, serious and frivolous, knowledgeable and uninformed, and the prestigious mixing with, or ignoring, the humble; and anthropological phrases that must have resonated around Pym's office at the African Institute. An overall question Pym raises in this novel is the relative value of scientific thought and writers' creativity. Catherine Oliphant is a writer who lives with Tom Mallow, an anthropologist. Propinquity with an anthropologist does not modify the strong way in which Catherine carries much of this debate, which meets a dramatic conclusion at her hands. Together with this serious theme is Pym's delightful comic touch which impacts on all aspects of the novel, its environs and inhabitants.

A Glass of Blessings was written over a short period, 1955 to 1956, and was first published in 1958. This novel concentrates on Pym's other source of conjecture, wry affection mixed with unadorned love, the Church of England. Its values and questions about its importance provide the theme, with a mix of clergy, devout followers, an atheist, and those who commit nowhere, providing the voices through which Pym makes her arguments. The characters include the Forsyth family, Rodney and his wife Wilmet, and his mother, Sybil. Wilmet is cosseted, her only domestic task is to arrange the flowers. She attempts to achieve some goodness in her life but finds emulating the profoundly good Mary Beamish far too onerous, and relapses into attempting to rehabilitate Piers Longman, visiting the clergy house, and

befriending a gay couple. The clergy house provides not only characters but a delightful source of comedy and debate about religious observance.

No Fond Return of Love, written from 1957 to 1960 and first published in 1961, takes Pym away from a concentration on the anthropologists and religious features of her most recent novels, while not completely abandoning them. Dulcie Mainwaring attends a conference to help her overcome the sadness of a failed love affair. This expands her circle of friends and acquaintances and results in her undertaking research such as that Pym indulged in at Oxford when she wanted to know more about an attractive man – she follows him. Dulcie is also given responsibility for her niece who has come to live in London, but this is short lived as the niece is self-reliant and determined to go her own way.

In the 1960s Pym was faced with the hiatus that affected her publishing career and momentarily, her self-confidence about writing. *An Unsuitable Attachment* was rejected by her usual publisher, Cape. Despite her claim that she might not write again, an indulgence that on other occasions she used to reflect upon her misfortune with lovers, she showed her true love was indeed writing. She began new work immediately. The *Times Literary Supplement* article justified her faith in herself, although she remained quiet and self-deprecating, and *Quartet in Autumn* was not only published in 1977, but short listed for the Booker Prize. Both these novels speak of a different world from that of the Bede sisters in *Some Tame Gazelle*.

An Unsuitable Attachment introduces a deft onslaught on class and gender expectations, as depicted through the love affair and eventual marriage of the genteel Ianthe Broome and the attractive but questionable, John Challow. A trip to Rome, led by the distraught Sophia who personifies yet another of Pym's imperfect marriages, not only creates the environment in which Ianthe makes a crucial decision but where Sophia's expectations are thwarted. A distinctive character is Sophia's cat, Faustina, who is an integral part of her marriage, a prominent focus of a discussion about fish and chips, and an entertaining reminder of Pym's affinity with her beloved pets.

Quartet in Autumn was published in 1977, after Pym wrote it on the crest of her success following the *Times Literary Supplement* article. It was carefully crafted between 1973 and 1976, relying in part on her experience of hospitalisation. Although her experience was not Marcia's, *Quartet in Autumn* is one of Pym's most poignant novels, with only glimpses of her comic touch. It centres on an office in which two single men, Norman a bachelor, and Edwin a widower, and two spinsters, Letty and Marcia, work

at ill-defined occupations. Women in paid work have featured in all of Pym's novels, from the household helps and seamstresses of the early work, to the professionals such as academics and anthropologists, and Ianthe Broome's position as a librarian in a superior role to that of her lover. In *Quartet in Autumn* there is little economic independence arising from the women's work. In Pym's other novels spinsters have been bequeathed houses and incomes ensuring them comfortable lives, making marriage unnecessary. Marcia has a large home left to her by her mother but has few resources to enable her to benefit from it; Letty is alone and dependent on her small income and meagre savings. She lives in a rented room and must deal with a bleak future. Friendships are part of the office life but change as retirement impacts on Letty, and ill health on Marcia. As well as the introduction of disadvantaged working women, Pym draws upon other changes to society. The church remains important to Edwin, but Marcia replaces its powerful influence with her admiration of the surgeon, Mr Strong. She firmly rejects the newest influence in people's lives, the social worker. Changes to worship also feature, as Letty is confronted with her neighbour's observances which differ markedly from her Church of England background.

The Sweet Dove Died was written between 1963 and 1969 but was not published until 1978 and is another novel of ageing. Single Leonora Eyre relies on her appearance and male appreciation to enable her to remain in an enclosed world in which she and her desires predominate. Her world is changed when she meets Humphrey and his beautiful nephew at an antiques sale. Later, there is more upheaval with the introduction of Ned, an American researching Keats' poetry, one of which poems provides the title for the novel. Leonora, who almost revels in other women's misalliances and imperfect worlds, while maintaining her own behind pink shaded lights and impossible imaginings, almost meets her match with this newcomer.

A Few Green Leaves is the last of Barbara Pym's novels to be written, and brings together independent women, married women, a rector, a former lover seen on television and a village complete with village characters and reminiscences about past residents of the manor. Emma Howick is an anthropologist, initially dedicated to observing the village and its inhabitants. She is a disappointment to her academic mother who would like her to have studied something else or to marry. Side by side with Emma's relative youth and options is the sometimes delicate, at others uncompromising, treatment of ageing. The changing relationships between doctors and their patients, and doctors and the church are drawn upon, at times in a comic manner, at others highlighting once again the approach of old age. Age is a major

feature of the novel, with a range of attitudes toward ageing observed by the characters. None is prepared to accept language or behaviour that undermines their authority and independence, and they find various ways of expressing their opinions to those who try thwarting them. Age is also an important facet of the debate about what history might be. Tom Dagnell, the rector, sees history as medieval, and unsuccessfully searches for a deserted medieval village. Many of his fellow villagers see history as relatively recent, and scoff at his ideas. The medieval village is found by chance by an ageing woman, returning to the village to relive her past at the manor.

Pym wrote two academic novels, *Crampton Hodnet*, written early in her career, and published in 1985. This novel is set in Oxford and features classics scholars. *An Academic Question*, written during the 1970s, and published in 1986, is set in a red brick university with sociologists at its hub. *Crampton Hodnet* is a delightful farce, seemingly with few forays into social commentary, while *An Academic Question* is almost pure social commentary. Both were published posthumously and make informative contrasts about academic worlds, study topics and women's role domestically and academically. *Crampton Hodnet* also introduces one of Pym's most splendid spinsters, Jessie Morrow, who features in a short story as well as being an important character in *Jane and Prudence*. The later academic novel demonstrates Pym's ability to clearly enunciate her concerns in fiction with searching social commentary.

Whether adeptly embracing social issues behind a façade or resonating with the openly social commentary in the short stories and later novels, Pym's writing is replete with enticing narratives, captivating characters, comedy and pathos, skilful writing and exquisitely placed observances and quotations. Pym was foremost a writer. She wanted to write about a world which she understood. This world was one in which the smallest of events might trigger a whole wealth of thought or remain a graphic reminder of the comedy or pathos in a character's life. Pym often wrote for her friends, but also wanted to be published. Her novels can be enjoyed almost like the comfortable socks with which her alter ego Belinda equates marriage. Or they can be enjoyed as an exquisitely woven social history. Again, they can be seen as a remarkable contribution to social commentary, deftly moving between serious social questions and comic delight in observing those depicting such serious pursuits. In this book I take the latter course in drawing out Pym's depiction of the world of inequality between the sexes that particularly exercised her mind and pen. Sometimes she approached her aim with the utmost gentility, but always with breathtaking insight. Barbara Pym was indeed worthy of Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin's approval

recorded in the *Times Literary Supplement* in the 1960s. As her novels continue to be published into the 2020s it is appropriate that a new reading from a feminist perspective joins the plethora of attributes to this distinguished writer.

INTRODUCTION

This is a revisionist account of Barbara Pym's fiction written between the 1920s and 1980. Although over thirty authors have written about Pym's fiction and her life there has been no full-length feminist account of her work. Where authors have raised the possibility that Pym has adopted a feminist perspective, references have been meagre, comprising narrowly focused propositions, articles, or short papers. There are also commentators who deride the possibility that there can be any feminist interpretation of her work. The most prolific debate associated with Pym is located around her association with over thirty other writers,¹ or conventional biographical accounts.

The paucity of interest in the feminist nature of Pym's work is only partially remedied by the following articles which deal with Pym's novels as a protest on behalf of spinsters, raise questions about Pym's portrayal of romance or make some modest claims towards recognising Pym's attention to inequalities in women and men's relationships. Margaret J.M. Edgell's 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids? Pym and The Woman Question'² is an explicit reference to spinsters and the problems identified with their status. That single women are seen as a problem is, of course, a rejection of the idea that they may have something to offer, *because* of their spinsterhood. An oblique reference to feminism is made by Barbara Everett when she describes Pym's novels as 'romantic anti-romances'.³ Doreen Alvarez Saar suggests that Pym's novels have a hidden message, the superficial charm which is seen as the whole at times, covering criticism of society's treatment of women.⁴ The closest recognition given to the possibility that Pym is a feminist writer is Janice Rossen's *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym*⁵ which includes feminist articles, such as Barbara Bowman's recognition of the subversive nature of Pym's women characters' interrogation of conventional ideas about male and female roles. However, she diminishes her account when she adds the proviso that they 'are hardly radicals who protest loudly against the dominant culture's expectations.'⁶ Other commentators who see some aspects of feminist writing in Pym's work are Robert J. Graham,⁷ Joseph Epstein,⁸ Barbara Brothers⁹ and Kristin G. Kelly.¹⁰ Ellen Marie

Tsagaris writes convincingly of the way in which Pym subverts romance in her novels.¹¹

Graham makes a crucial feminist point when he recognises that Pym's novels question the value of marriage to women and acknowledges the poverty of the marriages, particularly as they affect women, in Pym's work.¹² Epstein states, 'Pym is not the usual feminist, but she implies that women are superior to men, who appear in her novels as bumbling and selfish, but amusing'.¹³ Brothers *assumes* Pym's feminism when she comments, 'Like others, Pym attacks the myths that have imprisoned women and the novelists who have perpetuated these myths'.¹⁴ She recognises the subversive nature of Pym's rejection of romantic love as necessary to women's fulfilment.¹⁵ Kelly acknowledges that *A Glass of Blessings* raises some feminist issues.¹⁶

Other commentators question whether Pym's writing can be feminist as her women characters appear to define themselves in terms of their relationships with men. Katherine Anne Ackley suggests that marriage is an important aspect of women's lives in Pym's novels as 'most have accepted the prevailing social belief that a woman is not fulfilled until she is married'.¹⁷ However, her counterpoint, that Pym includes women who are not desperate and do not accept marriage on any terms, recognises feminist aspects of Pym's work. Carol Wilkinson Witney¹⁸ suggests that fear rather than feminism is a crucial element in Pym's portrayal of conflict between women and men. She refers to Pym's women as formidable as, like Esther Clovis, a professional woman in *Less Than Angels*, they are not looking for a man. When a woman does so, Pym's depiction of Jessie Morrow's forceful and successful pursuit of Fabian Driver, a major theme in *Jane and Prudence*, is another form of formidability! In her comparison of Pym, Jean Rhys and Anita Brookner,¹⁹ Rajni Walia boldly states that none has a 'consciously formulated feminist commitment',²⁰ bolstering this pronouncement with the complaint that no women characters are 'career minded'.²¹ Robert (Jock) Liddell acknowledges that Pym's treatment of weddings is casual.²² However, his obtuseness about the implications of Pym's treatment of marriage, and indeed, spinsterhood, reflect his limited understanding and sympathy with her work.

Some commentators concentrate on Pym's negative characterisation of men in her novels. Laura L. Doan²³ highlights Pym's positive portrayal of unmarried women, and her work on the importance of the dual voice has been useful in relation to my assessment of Pym's feminist approach. Her 'Text and the Single Man: The Bachelor in Pym's Dual-Voiced Narrative'²⁴

and Charles Burkhart's 'Glamorous Acolytes: Homosexuality in Pym's World'²⁵ and 'Barbara Pym and the Africans'²⁶ make the argument that Pym largely limits men's world to bachelor activities and work, both of which are depicted as empty. Burkhart, writing about the homosexuality Pym introduces in her novels, points out that Pym's treatment of straight men is harsher than that of the homosexuals she depicts.²⁷ However, these writers do not associate Pym's cutting critique of men with binary feminism, one of the criteria used in this book to establish that Pym's writing is feminist. Where Pym is compared with other writers, this is also associated with the conventional view of these writers, rather than any re-reading from a feminist perspective that has taken place. Such commentators claim that Pym is following precedents established by writers such as Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope²⁸ and Charlotte M. Yonge;²⁹ coupled with her contemporaries such as E.F. Benson, Angela Thirkell and E.M. Delafield; and compared with modern writers, such as Salley Vickers, Elizabeth Jolley,³⁰ Jane Gardam,³¹ Anita Brookner, Margaret Drabble and Iris Murdoch.³²

There are also alternative views of Pym's undoubtedly comic touch. Pym uses her comedy as a feminist device.³³ The most recent publication in which Pym's humour is the focus, is Naghmeh Varghaiyan's *The Rhetoric of Women's Humour in Barbara Pym's Fiction*.³⁴ This is an excellent addition to the recognition of Pym's feminist approach but takes only one aspect of her work to make the feminist argument. Earlier commentary is oblivious to the argument that Pym's humour is a feminist tool. Hazel Holt's report that readers have laughed aloud in the Bodleian while reading *Crampton Hodnet*³⁵ is apt but does not examine the possibility that there are complex reasons for the laughter. Closer to recognising the biting nature of Pym's comic writing is Mason Cooley, who links Pym's writing with that of Moliere and Beckett,³⁶ and Bruce Jacobs who sees her as a satirist.³⁷ Annette Weld links Pym and Austen as typical of the comedy of manners oeuvre – Austen, Trollope, and Waugh, as well as lesser lights E.F. Benson, Elizabeth Taylor and Kingsley Amis'.³⁸ Jacobs' suggestion that there is an 'anti-intellectual strain in Pym's satire',³⁹ is counteracted by a feminist reading of her fictional accounts of libraries. Pym's approach to libraries was part of her strategy to conflate the professional workplace to a domestic equivalent. Contemporary writers of women's fiction have taken this approach to demonstrate that what has traditionally been seen as women's work and part of a domestic environment often has its counterpart in the professions. As with these writers, conflating the two was a critical part of Pym's feminist method.

Jane Nardin commends the quality of Pym's humour.⁴⁰ Judy Little⁴¹ recognises that Pym's irony subverts patriarchal language and Orphia Jane Allen sees Pym's 'deflation of feminine myths at the heart of her comedy'.⁴² Glynn-Ellen Fisichelli⁴³ suggests that Pym used comedy to deal with her own experiences as well as those of her fictional characters.⁴⁴ Rather than accepting that morbidity, Rhoda Sherwood suggests that Pym's work not only 'contemplates the benefits of sisterhood through *Some Tame Gazelle*'⁴⁵ but also 'transforms some conventions of romantic comedy in order to make her point that a woman may be happier with her sister than with a man'.⁴⁶ Like Fisichelli, she concludes that 'Pym uses romantic conventions [...] Pym's is a vision of warm, satisfying sisterhood, a vision that acts as an antidote to the treatment of sisterhood by Godwin, Trollope, Drabble, and West'.⁴⁷ Both approaches to the romantic nature of Pym's work contrast with my interpretation of Pym's use of romantic conventions to *challenge* them. In keeping with my interpretation is Tsagaris' suggestion that romance in Pym's work is the opposite of romantic when she exposes the way in which Pym *subverts* romance.⁴⁸

Pym is the subject of several full-length biographical accounts, *Barbara Pym*,⁴⁹ *Barbara Pym: Literature and Life*,⁵⁰ *The World of Barbara Pym*,⁵¹ *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*,⁵² *A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and Her Novels*,⁵³ *Barbara Pym*,⁵⁴ *A Lot To Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym*,⁵⁵ *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography*,⁵⁶ *Barbara Pym: Writing a Life*⁵⁷ and an edited autobiography, *A Very Private Eye An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*.⁵⁸ Most recently, Paula Byrne has written a well-received biography, *The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym*.⁵⁹ Byrne brings to the fore Pym's alter ego, Sandra, wearer of red lipstick and at times bravely defying convention. Various biographers have made Pym's multitude of free-thinking love affairs the focus of their work. However, none has associated Pym's lifestyle with the importance some feminists, such as Germaine Greer, have given sexual freedom as a facet of feminism.⁶⁰

A Lot To Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym was written by Pym's literary executor and co-worker for over thirty years, Hazel Holt. It brings together her insights with extracts from the correspondence Pym conducted with Henry Harvey, Robert Liddell, Robert (Bob) Smith, Richard Roberts, Honor Ellidge (Wyatt), Philip Larkin, and Rupert Gleadow, material from Pym's novels and short stories which illuminate the commentary and Hilary Pym's⁶¹ reminiscences and 'almost total recall'⁶² of the past. *A Lot To Ask* concentrates on Pym's experiences, emphasising those with men, as the foundation for her fiction. The concentration on these matters, almost to the exclusion of any other aspects of Pym's writing, accomplishes two

divergent outcomes. As a biography, *A Lot To Ask* produces a detailed and poignant picture of Pym, commendable for its insights into her character and the experiences that provided some of the material for her characterisations and narratives. However, the biography also neglects Pym's achievement in using her experiences for a wider purpose. She told others' stories as well as her own, applied her observations to the wider world and had a strongly developed consciousness of the broader issues that were part of her milieu.

Holt, together with Hilary Pym, also assembled *A Very Private Eye*,⁶³ selecting material from letters to and from friends, as well as notes from the diaries and notebooks. Although *A Very Private Eye* is an uncensored account of Pym's life, it again concentrates heavily on Pym's love affairs⁶⁴ and an abundance of material remains in the Bodleian Library unrecorded. Anne M. Wyatt-Brown criticised the edited autobiography as an inaccurate reflection of Pym's life and the sources of her fiction.⁶⁵ Her psychological biography suggests that Pym was unattracted to action. Pym's preference for providing a domestic framework around relationships⁶⁶ from her youthful to mature works is seen as cause for criticism. On a less negative note, Wyatt-Brown also reflects on the condescending approach to Pym's supposed conservatism and accessibility.⁶⁷ Like so many writers of accessible and popular fiction, Pym was deemed an outsider – she did not quite make the grade to be considered a part of literary circles! Wyatt-Brown's concentration on the domestic landscape of Pym's fiction concealed the true nature of Pym's works which went beyond the personal to the most philosophical of issues. Instead of recognising Pym's adept weaving of domestic and philosophical thought, Wyatt-Brown criticised what she saw as a restricted approach to human activity.⁶⁸ However, Pym's personal narratives suggest the opposite – her novels hold within them some profound arguments dwelling on broader spiritual and ideological ideas.

Lawrence Garner's account,⁶⁹ although modest in its length and scope, addresses the gender implications of the perception of Pym as middle-aged and middle-class that hampers analysis of her as a writer.⁷⁰ He describes as 'all sadly patronising [that] early commentators on her work seldom looked beyond that superficial image, treating the books as cosy products of a cosy literary life'.⁷¹ His belief that Pym conformed to the image only later in life⁷² is supported by Yvonne Cocking who worked at the African Institute and finds it difficult to equate the woman she knew there with her knowledge of Pym through the archives.⁷³ Garner dismisses commentary that saw Pym as 'A rather prim spinster, bemused by her unexpected success'.⁷⁴ Smith is also critical of descriptions in articles such as 'How Pleasant to know Miss Pym'

or the television documentary 'Tea with Miss Pym', suggesting that they are products of a media 'determined to make her the prim Miss Pym'.⁷⁵

Nardin, as with this book, studies Pym through her novels. She acknowledges the familiar theme of Pym's debate about the relationship between women and men. However, her conclusion that Pym's novels suggest that 'men [...] who have internalized [Pym's] society's view of their own inferiority, are its victims'⁷⁶ is distinctly different from my conclusions. On the other hand, she also locates Pym's work in a broader context,⁷⁷ recognising Pym's interest in the 'opposition between religious or literary and scientific or social scientific modes of viewing the world'⁷⁸ which is a valuable recognition of Pym as a writer of ideas. Halperin⁷⁹ suggests that Pym depicts men as well as women as victims. He likens Pym to Henry James in her portraying 'virtually no relationship between the sexes which is entirely satisfactory [...] as we see men victimised or taken advantage of by women, and women victimised or taken advantage of by men'.⁸⁰ The most recent full-length study which concentrated on the six early novels, rather than biography, Raz's *Social Dimensions in the Novels of Barbara Pym 1949-1963: The Writer as Hidden Observer*,⁸¹ while recognising the social commentary in the work, ignores the signs of her feminism.

Contemporary feminist publishers are divided on Pym's work. Virago is reprinting Pym's novels;⁸² Nicola Beauman from Persephone Publishers says she 'is not a Barbara Pym fan'.⁸³ A.S. Byatt adopts Beauman's distaste when she extends her earlier criticism of Pym,⁸⁴ by suggesting that increased interest in Pym's work was 'not only pretentious but unhealthy'.⁸⁵ This particular claim contrasts vividly with the conventional argument that 'readers find the goodness in the novels comforting'⁸⁶ or as Joan Gordon proposes, Pym's work 'values humility, community and even a kind of modest miracle'.⁸⁷

Disregarding the feminist thread that runs throughout Pym's work is in keeping with mainstream feminist critics who have ignored Pym's novels. Reasons for the lack of major feminist examination of Pym's work cannot be attributed to the period in which it took place. Interest in Pym and her novels burgeoned well after the 1970s, mostly post-1984, and by 1992 there were at least sixteen books and more than seventy articles as well as dissertations and numerous reviews of her novels in existence.⁸⁸ Pym's work and biography were variously analysed. In 1989, Barbara Stevens Heusel expressed the hope that someone would write a full-length feminist critique.⁸⁹ In her review of *An Unsuitable Attachment* Penelope Lively also suggested that Pym could be acknowledged as a feminist.⁹⁰

So much conjecture, so much hidden, so much the product of intense interest in this fascinating writer of novels that are cosy, sharp, social commentary – the list is endless. So, what impression did Pym choose to give of herself? Pym's answer is partly in the accounts from her diaries kept from 1931 and the working notebooks.⁹¹ She anticipated their becoming public and to preserve her privacy she removed some pages about her love affairs. What remains is entrancingly revealing. However, Rosemary Dinnage's suggestion that Pym chooses to 'conceal as well as reveal'⁹² is also pertinent. Possibly some of Pym's recollections are, like the feminist ideas in her novels, hidden in less confronting images. Dinnage suggests that the authors of *A Very Private Eye* have chosen material designed to create a story of Pym that 'ostensibly is the quiet progress of an unmarried lady novelist who produced ten books, very gently satiric ones, very English, much concerned with the provision of cups of tea in adversity and the workaday aspects of the Church of England'.⁹³ An alternative view is demonstrated in Liddell's heated response to Hilary Pym and Hazel Holt's selection of material. He decried the explicit nature of their choices; Hilary's rejoinder in defence of the material is acute and described in Chapter 1. The conflict suggests that Pym's work and her character led to a range of readings, revealing her complexities as well as assumptions about her work that bear examination.

The unpublished notebooks, letters, and short stories, suggest Pym had a stronger posture towards the complexities, as she saw them, of relationships between women and men than is readily perceptible through her published works or the biographies. This book takes a different approach. My examination is undertaken through interpreting the reality behind Pym's excellent woman, the "troublesome woman," through established feminist principles: Questioning the argument that there are inherently feminine qualities; Centring women in the narrative; The Politics of Difference; and Binary Feminism. The study of spinsterhood would ideally lend itself to yet another feminist principle that has not entered the feminist ideological canon. However, because Pym's troublesome woman was often a spinster, the link between feminism and spinsterhood is discussed in this introduction.

The Troublesome Woman

Barbara Pym's female characters are most often identified by the description "excellent women." Indeed, *Excellent Women*, first published in 1952, reflects the women considered to be Pym's ideal central character.

However, Pym was a consummate observer who did not allow preconceptions to undermine her accuracy in depicting women, and the relationships they experienced with each other, with men, and the world about them. It is not too daring to claim that she interpreted her observations from a feminist perspective, although she would not have described herself as a feminist writer. Pym's use of what I call the troublesome woman motif is central to her writing. Troublesome women can be irksome to other women, as when Miss Doggett ponders the effect of Jessie Morrow in the short story "So, Some Tempestuous Morn" (CS, 353-367). Her thoughts illuminate the unease conventional women feel about women who do not fit the mould of what it is assumed a woman should be. Although Miss Doggett does not use the term troublesome woman when she ruminates about Jessie's conduct, her concerns are apparent. Her difficulty with Jessie, and her own misgivings, are illustrative of some women's behaviour when confronted with others who fit no clear stereotype of what a woman should be: a woman who does not smile when she should, is not compliant, pursues activities that do not become her, who makes demands, is difficult. Jessie is certainly seen as such, in the understanding used in this book, she is indeed a troublesome woman, a woman who might do something that undermines what is seen as the norm for the way in which relationships are conducted. Miss Doggett has mixed feelings, she finds Jessie's behaviour not entirely satisfactory, 'there was nothing one could put one's finger on. It was these remarks she let fall, these unsuitabilities. Were they clues to what went on in her thoughts, her mind?' (CS, 357).

Troublesome women hide behind the excellent woman's complicity in the stereotypes used by Pym, giving even more gravitas to the troublesome women who undermine the stereotypes. In *Less Than Angels* a hitherto devout excellent woman resists being used as a laundress by the vicar. Rhoda's acknowledgement to herself while she washes the vicar's albs, challenges the excellent woman's sympathetic contribution to the church. She dislikes being responsible for the cumbersome accoutrements of the vicar's position, musing that he could really take them to the laundry (*LTA*, 170). The perfected image of the spinster Pym creates in Mildred Lathbury in the first ten pages of *Excellent Women*, is immediately undercut. While ruminating suitably over Helena Napier's neglect of a wife's duty to cook for her husband, Mildred reflects that 'men did not usually do things unless they liked doing them' (*EW*, 11). Under the excellent woman façade, the troublesome woman in Pym's novels and short stories questions rather than endorses the social mores of the environment in which Pym places them.

The term troublesome woman originates from the work of Judith Butler,⁹⁴ Naomi Wolf⁹⁵ and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich.⁹⁶ The troublesome woman is essential to Pym's delivery of feminist ideas. Although Pym did not directly refer to troublesome women her concerns about conforming to social expectations are recorded in her Oxford diary. She wrote, 'If I had children I would let them run wild. People are too tame nowadays. That is why so few of them have charm [...] Why is everyone so much alike? Because we never follow our feelings.'⁹⁷ In an oblique reference to herself, and her adoption of what almost amounted to self-censorship until the 1960s and 1970s, Pym further observed that 'Incidentally people *may* be very un-tame inwardly – one can seldom know'.⁹⁸ Unlike the acknowledged feminist writers, whose work will be compared with Pym's, Fay Weldon and Zoë Fairbairns' relish in revealing the subversive nature of their fiction, contrasts vividly with Pym's typical concealment of her subversive inclinations. She demonstrates her willingness to present her material in a palatable manner when she admonishes herself about 'laying it on too thick'⁹⁹ or notes 'Don't let it become too much of a polemic! Prune and tone and reduce and refine'.¹⁰⁰ Pym was indeed guarded about what she had to say. She certainly had her say but did so within a cover of familiar village or pseudo-village, features in what I describe as the village novel - the vehicle for her feminist project. This camouflage is an important feature in most of Pym's novels written between 1929 and 1960, as argued in Chapter 4. Many of the short stories demonstrate Pym's application to the issues that interested her, untempered by the continual polishing that influenced her novels. One novel from the early period stands alone, not necessarily because of re-polishing, but because of its premise. *Civil to Strangers* is remarkably conservative on gender issues, making village imagery redundant as a concealing device. In the 1960s, Pym adapted the village imagery in a more receptive climate. Her two 1970s novels, written in a climate sympathetic to feminist ideas, fully abandon the village device.

While Pym's early work was circumscribed by the conservative context in which she wrote, from 1930 to the late 1950s, in the early 1960s she changed her approach. In writing her 1970s novels Pym was able to take advantage of the possibilities offered through the burgeoning of feminist ideas. From her earliest to latest work Pym used the troublesome woman to raise difficult questions about women's position in a patriarchal society. Women who flout convention appear in all Pym's novels, from her first full-length publication, *Some Tame Gazelle*, to the post-1970s work where advocacy for views endorsed by the troublesome woman were more likely to be accepted. Pym's central protagonists overtly or covertly defy convention when they question established ideas; create situations that discomfort their

companions, society and/or readers; and assume space in the narrative usually given to men in fiction other than romantic works. Their depiction is in keeping with the troublesome woman described by Judith Butler as creating ‘a sense of trouble.’¹⁰¹

Butler’s statement that ‘The very same behaviours (whether they are masculine or feminine) have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand and the female subject on the other’¹⁰² is also relevant to Pym’s approach. Her women characters function in strictly defined social circles and patriarchal institutions such as the church, community, workplaces, and the family. In these environments, in the period in which she wrote and considering gender differences, Pym’s women are as troublesome as those in novels that are readily acknowledged as feminist.

Ulrich’s title, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History*, suggests that women must refuse to follow social convention if they want to be recognised. She refers to the re-reading of Austen’s texts as feminist and describes Virginia Woolf’s literary contribution to the badly behaved woman, the troublesome woman who is also the subject of this book. Naomi Wolf¹⁰³ similarly reflects upon women designated troublesome, suggesting that rules about what it is to be feminine infects women’s ability to make their demands heard and respected. She also acknowledges that some women are complicit in women’s secondary position, reflecting that this sentiment is behind women’s concern about those who stand out from the crowd, those she refers to as Dragons of Niceness whose ‘ongoing commentary at the woman who tries to journey past them to reach the treasure stores of her authority, “Pushing hard, aren’t we? Maybe a little too hard? Not nice,” they mutter. No-one will like you [...] Thinks she’s awfully *special* doesn’t she?’¹⁰⁴ Wolf’s quote reflects a commonly held view that women are their own worst enemy.

Daphne Watson holds a view contrary to mine. She concludes that Pym’s writing is as guilty of propounding anti-feminist ideas as a fairy-tale.¹⁰⁵ Watson believes that Pym’s women characters are ‘diminished by a sense of hollowness’.¹⁰⁶ She suggests that Pym’s novels reinforce gender roles, in which women are encouraged to accept patriarchy because ‘alternative modes of being [are] rarely if ever held up to scrutiny’,¹⁰⁷ arguing that the comfort in Pym’s work is endemic.¹⁰⁸ However, what Watson sees as comforting images in the novels can be explained by re-reading Pym’s work through a feminist framework. What is seen as comfort in the novels is a façade. It can also be argued that Pym’s women characters have a keen sense

of play in relation to the patriarchal institutions they confront and that their internal lives, as well as their observable non-conformity, provide visions and examples of alternative models of living.

My interview with the feminist writer Zoë Fairbairns led into a discussion of the use of the term troublesome woman. Her concerns are that with a structure such as patriarchy, which is deliberately designed to disadvantage women, men's capacity to take advantage of women is troublesome to *women*. She says 'there is a limit to the extent to which I want to [place] men as the mainstream and women fighting against it. Sometimes it's just about women wanting reasonable human rights and men, quite rightly, seeing that as a threat.'¹⁰⁹

Fairbairns' statement illuminates the difficulties in addressing women's refusal to conform and negative interpretations of their behaviour. Fairbairns correctly suggests that patriarchy disadvantages women and their reaction to the conventions it upholds is understandable. It is also difficult to deny that patriarchy relies on the understanding that men and the conventions that support them are the mainstream. Their cause is valid but women's challenge to convention draws them necessarily into a fight against the mainstream as dictated by patriarchy. Women's refusal to accept patriarchal constraints on their freedom in their efforts to develop their world to their liking is not a particularly dramatic or violent demand. Pym's women's behaviour is also neither dramatic nor violent. Nevertheless, they are troublesome women who raise difficult questions about sexual inequality and its consequences. They are troublesome in a patriarchal society in which inequality is not only acceptable but also reinforced by institutions that are considered a bulwark. Men's status relies on women accepting a subservient role in institutions such as marriage, professions, and the church – the institutions that Pym's central women characters question. Feminist writers, in giving a voice to women's rebellion, validate their demands and concerns. Pym's treatment of spinsters is particularly important in assessing the feminist nature of her writing. She creates spinsters and women in conventional occupations and roles, writing them into the mainstream while questioning its values. Rather than a reality, it is the perceived threat experienced by men, and women who believe that patriarchy serves them well, that creates an impression of women's rebellion as troublesome.

The trouble that arises when women's traditional roles are questioned provides a valuable framework for examining Pym's work because, wherever women move outside the boundaries considered appropriate in the

historical context in which they operate, they are seen as troublesome. One of the boundaries challenged by Pym's women characters is marriage, which like trouble, is a constant in women's lives. Whether they are seeking it, avoiding it, involved in it or deprived of it, marriage is used as a way to define women's status.

Feminism in Barbara Pym's Work

At times Pym told her feminist story with clarity; at others she responded to circumstances which were inhospitable to feminist ideas. She was not alone in having to find ways of evading such conditions. Her guide was Jane Austen's work. Pym continued some of Austen's practices in her use of irony and mockery; confounding expectations of male and female behaviour; uttering truisms to highlight inconsistencies in behaviour; and using a conforming woman to contrast with a troublesome woman. Casting forward to 1970s acknowledged feminist work by Fay Weldon and Zoë Fairbairns, a comparison of Pym's work is instructive. When gauging Pym's astute assessment of the relationships between women and men, and women and the world in which they had every right to expect to thrive, her writing compares well with that of acknowledged feminists. Her feminist approach culminates in her own 1970s novels, *An Academic Question* and *Quartet in Autumn*. Looking even further ahead, to the 2020s obsession with domestic dramas and the domestic settings for many psychological thrillers, it is apparent that feminist ideas and domestic environments can live side by side; one does not determine the other. So, even with her penchant for domestic environments, Pym may not have tarnished her feminist credentials!

Pym's experiences, often portrayed through characters in her novels, demonstrate her own discomfort with challenging some conventions about women's role; at others she positively enthuses in dismantling the conscious or unconscious rules controlling male/female relationships. She skilfully ensured that her subversive texts remained popular with a wide range of readers by providing them with a familiar conservative village setting or context. These features provided much of her fiction with a cover under which she made a challenging exploration of the unequal nature of relationships between women and men. In the reception of Pym's fiction, the village has often been mistaken for the whole interest of the work. However, Pym's techniques provided a cosy cover for representations of women and men that disturbed conventional pieties about marriage and women's social role.