

'A CONSOLIDATION OF SPINSTERS'

Fiction, Food and Self-Awareness  
in the Early Novels of Barbara Pym

by

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MASTER OF ARTS

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HEIDI REES

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Dedicated to my parents who have shown through their love and support that they have always known that I am capable of accomplishing anything.

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"There was a vase of catkins and twigs on the table in my sitting room. 'Oh, the kind of women who bring dry twigs into the house and expect leaves to come on them!'"

Mildred Lathbury of Barbara Pym's Excellent Women

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## INTRODUCTION

Whore, vamp, angel of mercy, bluestocking, suffragette, eccentric, man in disguise, wallflower, victim of circumstance: spinsterhood is a sign of something else, a sign of deficiency, of sublimation. Consider the psychologically-scarred lesbian Miss Wade, or the desperate, delusional Blanche DuBois, or the 'plain Jane' Catherine Sloper<sup>1</sup>. These women can hardly be considered regular women who have chosen not to marry.

In contrast, Barbara Pym transcends political motivation and sexual agenda by simply creating women who are not married, women who are spinsters. With a detachment similar to that of an anthropologist at work, she observes her characters with sympathy. In this thesis, then, I will explore this image of the spinster and the ways in which the spinster characters create themselves within the novels, and how Pym ultimately and simply presents unmarried women. My discussion will focus on Pym's first three published novels: Some Tame Gazelle, Excellent Women and Jane and Prudence. I have chosen these novels because they best reveal Pym's interest in spinsters and their ability to find personal freedom in a world that largely ignores their existence.

In chapter one, I wish to explore a brief critical history in order to situate my work on Pym. For example, the reader will notice that Pym criticism is not divided or polemical; her texts have not been studied enough for scholars to become divided about

their meanings and interpretations. Moreover, the majority of the criticism is simple and does not explore, in any great depth, the value of Pym's work. For example, until 1971 when Robert Smith published a short article on Pym's publishing career in *Ariel*, most of the scholarship consisted of newspaper and magazine reviews of her recent or recently released work; she had not been embraced by the academic community. Once Philip Larkin, one of Pym's long-time supporters and close friends, and Lord David Cecil both declared in *The Times Literary Supplement* on January 21, 1977 that Pym was one of the most underrated writers of the twentieth century, people began to notice her work. At this time, after a long period (1961-1977) where she was unable to find any company to publish her material, a new interest in her work was born, and she had much of her unpublished material published and all of her previously published novels re-issued. Consequently, in the period after her first set of works was initially published, she was a new writer without an established reputation or corpus, and the period where she remained unpublished became a time when scholars and critics forgot about this new writer. Only a short period of time has elapsed (since 1977 when she was re-discovered) during which her reputation has been re-established and scholars have introduced, or re-introduced, her work into their studies. With this publishing history in mind, my critical history will present an overview of the most significant Pym criticism and outline some of the resources that will be used in the remainder of the thesis and

their importance to my arguments.

Chapter two will begin by providing an intensive study of one area of Pym's work that is presently missing from this canon; I will explore the way in which Pym's spinsters find a form of self-identity in fiction. Using her first three published novels, I will examine the way that they use fiction and imaginative relocation to move outside rigid social positions and find a critical self-awareness that enables them to cope with their lives within a constrictive social environment.

In chapter three, I will extend this idea of coping within a restrictive society in examining the way that these spinsters please their bodies in a social world that denies their sensuality. These women find pleasure in the consumption of food. Food becomes a method of expressing sensuality in a world that assumes spinsters do not enjoy physical pleasures and are restricted from partaking in all types of physical pleasure. In a society that demands female pre-marital virginity, Pym's spinsters find ways of expressing their sexuality through food. This use of food in Pym's novels has not yet been properly explored, and I hope to extend Pym criticism by providing this study in chapter three.

Finally, in this thesis, I hope not only to extend Pym criticism, but also to excite interest in the work of Barbara Pym. Her disjointed publishing career has made it harder for public and academic interest in her work to gain momentum. Her work, which reflects the lives of women who have been ignored by

society, is an important part of British literature in the twentieth century. She not only creates witty, resilient and resourceful characters, she also chronicles the plight of the spinster in the changing world that existed after World War II and, in this way, creates a literary history of forgotten women.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BARBARA PYM - A CRITICAL HISTORY

The street lamps were already lit, and the Victorian-Gothic house looked mysterious and romantic in the misty half-light. Its ugliness was softened and the monkey-puzzle and the dingy laurels were blurred masses of darkness. (19)

This passage from Pym's Crampton Hodnet reflects the attitude some critics have when approaching the work of Barbara Pym. The slightly Victorian attitudes of the characters and their world seem incongruous with twentieth century women's writing. Thankfully, breathe these critics, we cannot be expected to examine closely the ugliness in this blurred darkness. Not surprisingly, the critical work of the past sixteen years on the novels of Barbara Pym has not always furthered Pym scholarship or presented her as a writer worthy of academic interest. Many critics insist on evaluating her work in biographical terms. A common critical error is to assume, due to her being a spinster, that her work is solely based on personal experience. Certainly, correspondences exist between some of her literary characters and events in her own life. However, to reduce each of Pym's characters and stories to real people and

events in Pym's life is to misunderstand the whole purpose of fiction and, specifically, the beauty of Pym's novels.

This chapter will contain an overview of the types of criticism that exist concerning Pym's work and, in particular, will examine the criticism that is essential to the argument of this thesis. For example, articles by Margaret Bradham and Barbara Brothers contrast with this thesis' assertions, while Niamh Baker and Michael Cotsell's books contain ideas that will help inform this study. Also, The Life and Work of Barbara Pym, an anthology edited by Dale Salwak, is central to this critical history. This work includes a review of Pym's personal and professional life, a study of some of her novels and reminiscences about Pym by critics who had met her. Salwak has collected a variety of information about Pym's life and provided some introduction to the discussion of the various themes in her novels. Although this text represents one of the most comprehensive studies of Pym, it is one of the earliest. Salwak should be congratulated for providing early recognition of Pym, and contemporary scholars can use his anthology as a foundation on which to develop their work.

First, John Bayley's "Where, Exactly, is the Pym World?", in Salwak's anthology, answers the inquiry into the appeal of Pym's novels and addresses Pym's location in the world of modern fiction. It also begins my overview of Pym criticism. In this article, Bayley attempts to define the elusive essence of Pym's artistry. He says that "we can never fix our gaze on how she

does it, on how she obtains her effects" (51). He focuses on "her novels' lack of pretension" (51), and "[t]he unconscious selfhood of a Pym novel" (52). His emphasis throughout the article remains on Pym's success in combining the two worlds in which we all live: our daily, trivial lives and our romantic, emotional lives. He points out that modern writers generally "systematise this contrast" (53) (between these two worlds) and we become "fully conscious of the author's probable satiric or didactic purpose" (53). Bayley praises Pym for her skill in having these worlds "completely coincide without losing their separate identity" (53).

Further to this idea, he states that "Pym novels contain no satire" (53). He makes this statement to show how Pym is unlike most novelists who work in "[t]he flat world of modern fiction" which "is suited to black jokes and satire, not to comedy" (53). Again, he emphasises that "her genius is in the art of being funny without being superior" (54). This point is most important when discussing Pym's work. She has great sympathy for her characters and her readers, therefore she highlights human folly with a gentler, non-satirical comedy. He concludes that Pym's world is undefinable in that "[t]here is really no such thing as a 'Barbara Pym world.' [And] [t]hat is the final paradox about her, and the final triumph of her art" (57). Bayley's article insightfully addresses one of the most intriguing aspects of Pym's work, the undefinable nature of the world that she creates, and is important to this history in that it helps provide the

reader with a primary critical base from which Pym's novels can be approached.

Many Pym scholars consider Diana Benet's book Something To Love as a significant critical work among the book length studies of Pym's fiction. Benet examines Pym's novels primarily in terms of their various themes. She observes that Pym's vision changes from a feminine vision to a "universal perspective" (2), that is, one that contains both a feminine and masculine viewpoint. Benet sees Pym as an accomplished writer because she "was to become an astute chronicler of concerns and issues fundamental to both sexes" (2). While Benet's praise is appropriate, she falls into the same trap as many other critics. In Pym's early work, Benet observes, she only represents the female point of view and focuses on women while the male characters are "incompletely realized" (15). Benet, like others, see this as a failure. However, several hundred years of literature have produced many strong male characters and female characters who are similarly "incompletely realized." Clearly, Pym is using these male characters as types or functions just as Charles Dickens used certain female characters to represent various aspects of femininity. Benet's suggestion that Pym's early work is not as strong as her later work is a common theme throughout Pym criticism. I would argue that Benet would have been more correct in her suggestion that Pym's achievement came in her "novels [which] tell us a great deal about the lives of women and the problems peculiar to them" (2).



Benet states in her chapter on Pym's early novels that "her early characters and plots suggest that radical differences separate women and men, with women having different natures, needs, problems, and perceptions" (15). I would suggest that Pym frames these plots in this way because women and men in her fictional worlds are treated in radically different ways. For example, in Jane and Prudence, Prudence who is unmarried is constantly judged by her peers because she is still single. Her co-workers often express their pity for her. However, the single male in the office, Geoffrey Manifold, is never subjected to such scrutiny or pity. This difference in treatment might explain Benet's characterization of Pym's early novels as inadequate.

In her discussion of Pym's Jane and Prudence, Benet examines the use of the imagination by the protagonists and their reliance on literary models for their lives. Her discussion of this issue is worth mentioning because it will be important for the argument presented in chapter two. Benet summarizes Pym's use of the female protagonists' employment of imagination: "...they fall in love with images of their own creation and with images of themselves whose reflections they see in their lovers' eyes" (13). Benet says the women in Jane and Prudence use their imaginations "to create Man, a remarkable being" (13). The women in this novel do use their imaginations to create "Man" because the men who are present are not good examples of their sex. While this aspect of creative imagination is very important in this novel, Benet overlooks another aspect of the female imagination,

the necessity to create one's own identity through the imagination. Benet focuses her discussion on the ways that these women's imaginations affect their relationships with men. I think that she has shifted the focus of Pym's novel. Pym's focus is on Jane and Prudence, and not on how the men interact in relation to the women. Pym is addressing the relationship that these women have with each other and themselves, and this major concern should be the focus of critical discussion.

Benet asserts that the female characters want the men to be self-centred so they (the women) can feel needed. "They see men as a class with greater vulnerabilities and different, more important needs than their own, and usually rush to fill the needs they have themselves created" (60). Benet suggests, then, that Pym's female characters construct their own identity through men by creating the men's identity. And, consequently, "these women often define their purpose from their idea of male needs" (60). Benet proposes that these women do define themselves according to men, but manage to define themselves in an inferior position. She does not see the imagination as a means for creating emotional freedom for these women. She says that Jane and Prudence "are still under the grip of imaginative models that lead them only to discontentment and unfulfillment" (57). Benet does not see that the only method that these women have for coming close to a truer definition of themselves exists in fiction because no matter how inept or inferior men really are in their world, they control the social and economic power of that

world.

Like Diane Benet's book, Jane Nardin's Barbara Pym is another significant piece of Pym's critical history because many critics and readers of Pym see this text as a central critical work. Nardin begins by outlining Pym's background, personal and professional life. Her most interesting discussion, though, involves the types of characters that Pym presents in her novels. While she spends most of her specific discussion of Pym's texts presenting plot summary, this section dealing with character types is beneficial to any scholar of Barbara Pym.

First, Nardin, like many critics, acknowledges the "unfailing respect and sympathy with which [Pym] treats [her characters]" (10). Because Pym's heroines are always women, and often women who are on the margins of society, it is important for each critic and reader to be aware of the respect that Pym has for her characters. More importantly, the reader must see that while the humour is sometimes aimed at the heroines, it is the gentle humour of recognition and identification. Pym sympathizes with them and refuses to abuse them as many writers might. Nardin emphasizes that "Pym builds into the structure and texture of her novels a convincing refutation of the idea that those who never achieve much or experience dramatic events and emotions are bored emotional cripples" (24). This idea is crucial to understanding Pym's heroines. Although their lives appear dull and uneventful, the situations in which they find themselves do produce in them a heightened awareness of their

desires and emotions.

Moreover, Nardin notes that because many of them do not actively seek what they desire, they "avoid painful collisions between imagination and reality and so...keep the imagination alive" (19). Many critics see the lively imaginations of Pym's heroines as negative aspects of their characters. Nardin does not make it clear whether she sees this feature as positive or negative. However, she does downplay the importance of fiction within Pym's texts. She says "if the literary allusion does not mingle pain and pleasure, it can simply be a source of quiet fun" (22). Nardin has understated the importance of fiction. Pym clearly connects the imagination with literature. As her heroines search for self-identity, they rely on their imaginations for guidance. And it is literature that provides the models in this quest. Therefore Nardin's dismissal of literature as mere comfort is a lamentable oversight, and one that will be addressed further in chapter two of this thesis.

Another text that is invaluable to the study of Barbara Pym is Michael Cotsell's Barbara Pym. While he does address biographical aspects of her work, his discussion does not detract from the value of his analysis. Cotsell addresses the most obvious aspect of biographical criticism, the author's gender. Cotsell sees Pym's value in her difference from male writers.

Where Pym fundamentally differs from the braggadocio of some male modernist writers...is in her refusal to identify with meaninglessness-which is also a refusal to separate art from

our human need to make meaning in our lives. (5)

Cotsell is the first to consider what Pym sees as the value of art, and his type of biographical criticism is the first to address certain philosophical issues that previously had gone unmentioned.

Cotsell also addresses one of the main themes of Pym's work, the theme of creation:

One of the attractions of Pym's novels is that we sense in them the author's own repeated commitment to hopefulness, the repeated act of imagining possibility. If we sometimes detect in her what she explores in some of her characters, a refusal at some level of life and relationship, we can also admire the candour of her exploration and her delight in the range of experience she does allow herself. (5)

Cotsell's criticism finds a relationship between the author and her work in a way that previous critics have not. And although she does present a commitment to hopefulness, it does contain a sense of precariousness and risk that does not appear in the work of writers who address similar topics<sup>1</sup>. Cotsell sees that Pym tries to communicate, through her characters, her sense of the world and her idea of creation and art which include the precariousness of (daily) emotional flux. Clearly, the focus of Cotsell's criticism remains on Pym's texts rather than on the details of her personal life.

Also, Cotsell, like Bayley, situates Pym as a twentieth century writer. He sees that "Pym's novels can answer to the

kinds of critical inquiries we characteristically make of contemporary literature" (7). .Cotsell says that it is important to see that Pym's work can be discussed, for example, "in relation to contemporary structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of language" (7). He is reacting to others who have sought to understand Pym by looking at her as either beneath or equal to the work of Jane Austen. While Pym may resemble Austen in various ways, Pym is part of the twentieth century and her work reflects the issues that are part of this century.

Cotsell also addresses the issue of poetry (and indirectly, the use of fiction) in Pym's novels. He examines the function of quoted poetry in Pym's work, and suggests that "the majority of her successful novels have a poetic text or texts as a kind of focus of the feeling about the world they proffer" (16). For example, both the main texts of Some Tame Gazelle and Less Than Angels are preceded by poetic epigraphs from Thomas Haynes Bayly and Alexander Pope respectively. He notes the skill with which Pym uses these poetic texts. These novels are "formed around a preliminary poetic characterisation...and this characterisation is extended through allusion and imagery into the texture of the novel" (16). .Cotsell makes an excellent point that Pym's use of poetry does extend beyond the fact that she, as a young woman, read for a degree in English literature at Oxford. His ideas about the use of poetry and fiction will help reinforce my argument in the remainder of this thesis.

A relatively new Pym critic Niamh Baker, in her book Happily

Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-60, examines some of the same issues that Diane Benet addresses in her book, but Baker observes them differently. Her book is included in this critical history because Baker addresses some of the critics' concerns about Pym's work, such as her underdeveloped male characters, and examines them within a literary movement. Baker places Pym's work in an historical context without relying on socio-historical criticism by addressing the post World War II women's rights movement. Baker also places Pym within a group of female British writers of her time such as Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Goudge and Olivia Manning who address issues similar to Pym's. By placing her within a specific literary movement, Baker has conferred upon her a certain authority that she might otherwise not achieve.

Baker begins her book by addressing the most common criticism of Pym and other women writers, that their male characters are not fully developed. Here she addresses this issue Benet finds so troubling. Baker says "[t]hey challenge the critical assumption that, because the male supposedly represents the universal, an inability to depict male characters satisfactorily excludes women writers from 'great' literature" (42). Often, Pym has been criticised for her two-dimensional male characters. Baker continues:

I think that when critics devalue women's novels because of their authors' so-called inability to create credible men, they are applying male-centered rules, without understanding

the *function* of heroes and lovers in women's fiction. (42) Baker has highlighted an important point. Just as female characters throughout literary history have served as functions within a male world, these men also appear for a purpose within these fictional worlds. Consequently, Pym's 'inability' to draw complete male characters is not necessarily a flaw, but instead a literary technique she uses to develop further her female characters and their responses to their world.

Like Benet, Baker organises her discussion around the various themes that Pym and other female writers explore in their novels. By using this method of organisation, Baker is able to emphasize the ideas that link and define this literary group. One such theme is marriage. Baker recognises that, during this period, the selection of a husband is literally the choice of a lifetime for most women. Baker says that "[t]he female love story is about the choice of a future" (45). Women writers in this postwar period reflect the difference between marriage and love, and marriage and women's achievement. Baker specifically addresses how the problem of marriage is treated in Pym's novels. She says that "Barbara Pym's treatment of marriage is critical and ironic, but not tragic" (48). Baker derives this opinion from the acceptance of marriage that many of Pym's women have. "[Pym] shows her women...accept that...they are expected to put marriage and the family at the centre of their lives" (48). And Baker is right to reveal that Pym in her female characters, whether married or single, "celebrates women's ability to extract



satisfaction from their unsatisfactory lives" (48). This optimism is the strength of all Pym heroines.

In her chapter on spinsters, Baker defines Pym's spinsters as "women who are still trapped into having to define themselves by referring to their usefulness to men" (68). Baker says that "even the humour and irony...fails to dispel this picture of women living at the margins of society, their talents and skills ignored" (68). Pym presents this picture deliberately. Often, these women have chosen to be single, but this decision does not imply that they have chosen to be useless. Because their society forces women to define themselves according to their usefulness to men, the spinsters see themselves in this manner.

But more importantly, Baker recognises that "Barbara Pym has rehabilitated the image of the faded dowdy spinster...giving her a dignity and courage that she lacks in other fiction" (70). For example, Pym presents us with Belinda Bede who is not only kind, but also intelligent and witty. Pym does give "the image of the spinster an individual human face, but...[does] not significantly alter it" (83). Baker sees this inability as a failure, but Pym avoids overt challenges to show the true inner strength of these women who do not have the power to initiate change in their social environments.

Baker's closing comments reinforce what Pym and the other female writers try to do in their texts - present an alternative definition for women and their roles. The characters often see marriage as "a threat to their autonomy" (174). Marriage is

"constricting; associated with passivity and dependence, it stunts mental and spiritual growth" (174). These writers suggest that freedom and independence are available to the spinster. But most of all, "[t]he ability of women to make something out of limited opportunities is celebrated, their failure to transcend their roles sympathetically portrayed" (176). Whether these writers are part of a feminist movement or not, their examination of women's roles is important, and Baker's work on these women is valuable to any study of Barbara Pym and others like her.

Mary Strauss-Noll's essay, "Love and Marriage in the Novels," located in Salwak's anthology, provides a careful and intelligent evaluation of the role of love and marriage in Pym's work. And in examining love and marriage, she naturally addresses the situation of the spinster. Subsequently, her essay will begin this section of criticism focused on Pym's spinsters. Strauss-Noll observes that "[t]here is a curious mixture of romance and cynicism in the attitude of most of Pym's single women" (73). Her identification of this very important feature of Pym's novels reveals her sensitivity to Pym's theme of the struggle of the spinster in a changing world.

However, not all Pym scholars are as insightful as Strauss-Noll. Margaret C. Bradham overlooks the subtlety in Pym's texts. In her article "Barbara Pym's Women," she says that "there is a great deal of disappointment, despair, failure, and loneliness in her works" (31). Clearly, Bradham does not see the freedom enjoyed by many of Pym's spinsters. Moreover, Bradham says that

"[m]arriage is an achievement, and it is the experience the Pym spinster wants; she never questions whether marriage will dispel her loneliness and make her happy" (32). Bradham has ignored Belinda Bede's thoughts at the close of Some Tame Gazelle. As Belinda considers that both she and her sister have refused various marriage proposals, she thinks "she could only be grateful that their lives were to be so little changed" (251). Belinda is happy to remain a spinster.

Bradham also addresses the issue of illusion in Pym's novels. She states "[h]aving found neither lukewarm love affairs nor suitable attachments, most Pym women are so desperate for affection that they will content themselves with illusions" (34). Bradham is wrong. While a few characters such as Connie Aspinall in Some Tame Gazelle act out illusions of love, we can look to Belinda Bede once again to find evidence against Bradham's assertion. Belinda has had an opportunity to marry and has refused the proposal. Yet, she lives happily with her secret love for the Archdeacon. She knows that life with the Archdeacon would be more unpleasant than she imagines, so she is content with her illusion of a generally unrequited love for this ridiculous man. This idea about illusion and reality will be explored further in chapter two.

Bradham concludes that Pym's women are "unhappy and lonely," "self-centered," "self-concerned, and at times petty" (36). She says that these women focus on daily and trivial matters to make up for their lack of success in love. "They cling to pathetic

illusions" and "keep their hopes vague and unspecific" (36). Bradham has fallen into the trap of seeing these women as their fictional societies do. Instead of observing the rich inner life these women have created for themselves, Bradham's viewpoint apes the marriage-centered, masculine view of women that is prominent within the texts' fictional world.

Robert J. Graham in "Cumbered with Much Serving: Barbara Pym's 'Excellent Women'" also examines the life of the spinster in Pym's novels. This respected Pym critic says that "spinster[s] [have] led a hard social and fictional life" (142). They are good, Graham states, at "observing the mating and near-mating going on around them," yet they "still manage to bear the brunt of introspection and insight with bemused detachment" (145). I would suggest that this ability for introspection is what makes these excellent women so excellent.

Graham adds that "their observations affirm spinsterhood while casting doubt upon marriage" (145). He points to the obvious disadvantages in marriage that Pym creates in her novels. "[I]n Pym's fiction men are inherently inferior" (146). Graham extends this idea. "Few men in Pym's novels are truly intellectual, and even those displaying modest abilities are not attracted to thinking women" (146). For example, in Jane and Prudence, Arthur Grampian, Prudence's boss and love interest for part of the novel, is only interested in Prudence because she is attracted to him, and therefore her admiration serves to boost his ego.

I agree with Graham when he states that "most Pym protagonists perceive marriage to be limiting" (147). He correctly points to Belinda Bede who sees marriage as "a union which erodes a woman's individuality" (147). Moreover, Pym's spinsters realize that romance more often than not disappears when one marries, and romance is not the only reason for choosing to marry. In Graham's evaluation, "romance becomes more a theoretical matter than an actuality" (150). In Pym's fictional societies, the institution of marriage is what counts; but, for her spinsters, respect and love are the most important aspects of marriage. For example, in Some Tame Gazelle, Connie Aspinall is willing to accept Theodore Grote's very sudden marriage proposal without reflecting on the feelings that either has for the other. It is this discrepancy in world-views that causes the spinsters' trouble: even though their ideals compel them to reject marriage as a mere *institution*, the spinsters are marginalized as outcasts rather than rebels to the traditions of their society.

He also adds a section to his article that outlines Pym's (lack of) publishing career. He declares that Pym's work went out of style because "women increasingly adopted a wider range of lifestyles than those commonly portrayed in Pym's fiction" (154). And he suggests that her success owes much to the fact that her novels "are anchored by tradition, natural goodness, unshakable optimism" (155). Graham is correct to highlight these aspects of Pym's work. However, he fails to stress her importance as a writer of women's fiction. Her value goes beyond the ability to

examine the daily issues of our lives: she helps to re-define the meaning and role of the spinster in the twentieth century.

Unlike Graham, Laura Doan in her article "Pym's Singular Interest: The Self as Spinster" closely examines Pym's attempts to define the role of the spinster. She demonstrates that Pym wanted to "present the single state to the reader as a positive choice" (140). While she begins with Pym's own decision to remain a spinster, Doan's work extends to careful and thoughtful analysis of Pym's texts. Doan points to Miss Morrow and Miss Doggett in Crampton Hodnet<sup>2</sup> where Pym displays in these two women "the inadequacy of an exhausted stereotype and the possibility of a new image" (142). Doan claims that, throughout her books, Pym is trying to re-imagine the image of the spinster.

Pym's attempt to re-image the spinster is found not only in the spinster herself, but also in the presentation of marriage. Doan says "Pym's critique of the institution of marriage is integral to her re-conceptualization of spinsterhood" (147). As Baker has suggested, Pym presents marriage as a less than agreeable option.

Doan concludes her study by examining the way in which Pym transmits these ideas. Specifically, Doan discusses Pym's narrative structure. "Pym adopts a way of writing that allows for the insertion of critical commentaries into the text so that, in effect, two voices, articulating differing positions, resonate from a unitary text" (149). Pym uses these two voices to deliver her 'subversive' message. When her heroine-spinsters are faced

with the rigid expectations of the dominant voice which represents the prevalent definition of the spinster and her duties, Pym "overrid[es] the voice of the dominant social order to insert a more subversive voice into the text" (150). By using this technique to give the spinster a voice, Pym avoids becoming a heavy-handed moralist.

Clearly, many do not see Pym as a writer who presents a feminist challenge to traditional values. But she does provide a challenge in the quietly subversive voice that she places within the mind of the spinster. Doan declares that "Barbara Pym's novels become an opportunity to undermine traditional notions of the spinster and to create a positive self-identity" (153). She sees Pym as presenting spinsterhood as "an alternative life-style which offers women an active role in society and allows them the opportunity to examine others critically". (153). Doan's informed and thoughtful work on Pym excites further discussion of Pym's interest and value to women's literature and will become an important part of this thesis.

The last critic included in this brief critical history is Barbara Brothers. I will argue, in chapter two of this thesis, against the main idea in her article "Women Victimized by Fiction: living and loving in the novels of Barbara Pym." In this article, she examines the detrimental effects of the use of the imagination in establishing self-identity in the novels of Barbara Pym. Brothers says that:

Pym contrasts her characters and their lives with those

which have been presented in literature to mock the idealised view of the romantic paradigm and to emphasise that her tales present the truth of the matter. (62)

Brothers clarifies this idea: "[T]he fantasy shapes the expectations of the characters" (62). While she is right to emphasize that fantasy shapes their lives, Brothers does not acknowledge that this imaginative process is essential for these spinsters to find their own identity. While Pym mocks the idealised view of love, Pym still has great sympathy for her characters and never abuses them in the way that Brothers suggests. In fact, Pym uses the literature as a means to provide her spinsters with a way to define their lives.

Next, Brothers indicates how both female and male characters fail to live up to the idealised literary models that are provided. She is disturbed that "the characters continue to accept that the paradigm reflects who and what they are or should be" (64). She says that "women cling to the notion that men and their world are as noble as they have been portrayed" (66). Brothers uses Prudence as an example of this situation. Certainly, Prudence does worry about the things that trouble Arthur Grampian, but at the same time, she over-dramatises her own troubles. Because Pym portrays Grampian as such a ridiculous character<sup>3</sup>, the reader can avoid being trapped into thinking that Prudence could be fooled by this man.

After examining various other examples of her thesis, Brothers concludes that Pym's "characters do not conform to the



model by which our society and fictions confer value upon men and women" (79). She says that Pym's art is subversive because "Pym raises the question of what it means to be human, and, in particular, what it means to be among those fiction has ignored" (79). I would argue that Pym's subversiveness takes root in the way the characters subvert the fictions to provide definitions for themselves. They are not finally victims of fictions.

While this critical history is not complete, it does highlight some of the important and influential Pym critics. In the past, Pym criticism has focused on such topics as her similarity to Jane Austen, Pym's own situation as a spinster, and her recurring literary subjects. Thankfully, critics such as Laura Doan and Michael Cotsell have looked further than these obvious characteristics of Pym's novels. Their work has provided readers with discussions that address Pym's quirky feminist ideas and her ability to re-create and re-image the spinster. As more critics consider and respond to the work of scholars like Doan and Cotsell, this critical history will expand.

And I intend to add to this history. Expanding on some of the ideas presented in this chapter, I will show that Pym's spinsters are not necessarily passive recipients of the dominant culture. Using the means available to them, specifically fiction and food, they can attain a critical self-awareness that helps them cope in their restrictive social environments. In doing this, I hope to contribute to the growing criticism on and interest in the work of Barbara Pym.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WOMEN 'SAVED' BY FICTION

What is the difference between an old maid and a glorified spinster? "An old maid is an unmarried woman *minus* something; the glorified spinster is an unmarried woman *plus* something" (Lewis, 125). While this pseudo-riddle may not leave an audience in stitches, it does reinforce the idea that spinsters are different from other women, that is, married women. In the 1850s, the abundance of single women was referred to as "the 'surplus woman problem'" (5), a term which might be used to define many of the unmarried women after World Wars I and II. Not only had the war killed many young men and reduced the number of possible husbands, but women had also experienced work outside the home and were not as eager to be married, have children and stay at home as they had planned. Also, the women's movement was supposedly over and women were returning to their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Such critics as Martin Pugh and Elizabeth Wilson address issues of women's rights in their books, but deal primarily with married women and the issues of 'mother's' rights and the right of the woman to work outside her home and related issues dealing with child care etc. (The British government encouraged marriage and, more importantly,

childbearing to replenish a depleted population). Once again, the spinsters were largely ignored. The idea that women did not want to marry was greatly disturbing to many. Even as late as 1963, the book A Quaker View of Sex, considered "the most advanced expression of 'permissive' views in its time[,]...sternly accused lesbian relationships of being thwarted and neurotic and expressive only of frustrated maternal feelings" while it expressed "a staunchly liberal defence of the male homosexual" (Wilson,104). The hostility towards lesbians is more than what is awarded to spinsters. Many books dealing with the women's movement after the war and the rights of women do not discuss the spinster's situation; in fact, many do not even have "spinster" (or "single/unmarried women") listed in their indices<sup>1</sup>. It is within this social and political context that Pym, a writer who celebrates spinsters and spinsterhood, begins her publishing career.

In this chapter, I will discuss Pym's treatment of spinsters and the positive aspects of their lives in this bleak social environment. Specifically, I hope to extend Pym criticism by revealing the way in which her heroines produce alternative definitions for themselves. These women appear to accept the social roles that their communities create for them, yet through their heightened self-awareness, they manage to recreate themselves within their imaginations and produce alternative identities. Characters such as Belinda Bede in Some Tame Gazelle and Mildred Lathbury in Excellent Women are spinsters who go

through this process. The married Jane Cleveland in Jane and Prudence also accepts the community's image of her as the clergyman's wife yet she still lives with a critical self-awareness that helps her realize a form of self-identity.

But first the terms "critical self-awareness" and "imaginative relocation" need to be defined in terms of this thesis. "Critical self-awareness" refers, obviously, to the way in which the characters think about themselves. While their identities are intricately tied to their social environment, these spinsters still develop an awareness that allows them freedom to examine themselves and their surroundings in a less constrictive and rigid fashion. Robert Graham and others have commented on these spinsters' ability to scrutinize both themselves and their environment because they are so removed from the positions of power in their communities. Because they are capable of such clear self-reflection, they are better able to imagine new possibilities for themselves. Specifically, these characters use their imaginations - it is the only means for self-exploration in a society of repressed economic, social and political power for women. In this way, they use imaginative relocation. They are able to place themselves outside the existing power structures and, within their imaginations, produce a self-awareness that will take them outside their social worlds. In other words, they are able to relocate their personal priorities outside the confines of their social milieux and find a type of self-definition outside their social roles. And they

use models available from fiction, the only area that is completely open to them, to facilitate this search. These women are not necessarily socially or politically subversive, but instead are subverting fictional models in order to take some control of their own identities. Therefore, instead of changing the role of women through external social and political methods, they begin by providing themselves with alternative methods of thinking about themselves that enable them to live within socially enforced and reinforced prescribed values and roles.

For example, in Some Tame Gazelle, Belinda often considers life's situations within poetic contexts. Specifically, after her upsetting sock-darning incident, she asks "'I wonder what it would be like to be turned into a pillar of salt?'" (79). Her own answer is "'I imagine it would be very restful...to have no feelings or emotions. Or perhaps...it would have been simpler to have been born like Milton's first wife, an image of earth and phlegm'" (80). In order to cope with the upsetting event with Hoccleve, she allows herself to move into a different time and place. First, through imaginative relocation into the Biblical story of Lot's wife and then the image of Milton's first wife, Belinda is able to understand the alternatives to the way she is feeling presently. When she is brought "back to everyday life" by her sister's cry "'don't be disgusting'" (80), Belinda is prepared to resume again life in her real world. The opportunity to explore alternatives for her existence allows her the realistic appraisal of personal options. Throughout her novels,

Pym's characters, particularly her spinsters, define themselves in this manner. They resist social definition and consider alternative definitions that they create for themselves. Because spinsters are often viewed as inferior women, Pym, in her novels, reveals the 'subversive' manner in which these women may regain power within their inner lives. Pym accomplishes this through using the close connection between the heroine and the narrator in her novels. While the heroines use fiction and imaginative relocation to create alternative roles for themselves, the narrator reveals the subversive manner in which these heroines are recreating their personal worlds.

In Some Tame Gazelle, the heroine, Belinda Bede, uses fiction to help her find an alternative definition for herself in a world of rigid, socially prescribed roles for women. Belinda lives in a world where she was expected to marry and have her self-identity linked with her husband whom society would see as being intellectually and morally superior to her. Pym's heroine does not actively rebel against her socially constructed identity, but instead, using various literary models, derives for herself an increased self-awareness about her personal and social world. To cope with these conventions and assumptions, she uses literature by imagining herself as a literary character or in a situation similar to one in literature. During this imaginary relocation, Belinda is able to examine her present situation and assess it from outside her rigid socially prescribed world.

Although both fiction and the imagination are also socially constructed, these fictional models and imaginary relocation still help Belinda see personal alternatives within her real situation, because they allow her to separate herself from immediate situations and manipulate the models to help her find some form of self-definition.

Pym explores and reveals Belinda's ability to 'transform' herself in several ways. Usually, the male characters, often lacking all self-knowledge, represent the conventions and assumptions of society. Barbara Bowman points out how Pym "poses the heroine's perception of the discrepancy between her own and the dominant culture's assumptions against a male character's lack of perception" (85). Pym, then, uses the narrator to both reflect and reveal these levels of perception. In fact, the narrator is closely tied to Belinda and at times appears to reflect Belinda's thoughts. Again, Bowman comments that "the narrators in her novels adopt points of view resembling those of her heroines and...think and speak in ways characteristic of women when they adopt a subordinate role" (82). Moreover, within Belinda herself, there are two voices-the guilty voice of the socially mindful Belinda and the voice of the socially rebellious Belinda who creates a self-awareness that allows her to reject the assumptions of her social world. The narrator guides the reader through this space between Belinda's two voices and the space between Belinda and her social world. And the comedy of the novel arises from the social criticism that Pym creates from

the discrepancies in perception between these worlds. Finally, what Pym creates is a heroine who appears to accept her social roles, but is constantly evaluating and re-evaluating herself in terms of fictional models available to her. With these models, she is able to achieve a critical self-awareness that she can use to make her life in a rigid social environment more rewarding. And she achieves some reward through the knowledge that she has begun to understand herself and consequently the world in which she lives.

The various movements between Belinda, her society and the narrator are clearly evident in the scene in which Theodore Grote proposes to Belinda. Here, Pym reveals what society's expectations are, how Belinda sees herself and how she uses literary models and imaginative relocation to achieve a critical self-awareness. This section (of the novel) opens with the narrator's observation that the person at the door is "[a] tall figure, but definitely not the Archdeacon" (221). The thought process that only eliminates Hoccleve as the man at the door appears to be Belinda's thoughts but in fact is reported by the narrator. And she (the narrator)<sup>2</sup> is privy to Belinda's imagination. For the narrator is able to report on Belinda's idea about whom is at the door. Belinda guesses that it is a salesman at the door, and imagines all the items he will have in his case. The narrator allows the reader to be only as prepared as Belinda is, and Belinda is quite prepared to greet a salesman. She is more than surprised to see Grote because she had committed



herself to the idea of the salesman at the door. The narrator is showing the reader the 'commitments' that Belinda makes when she locates her understanding of the world in her imagination.

Pym then plays with the idea of Belinda's imagined salesman. The narrator says that Grote's voice is "unctuous" (221), a term often used to describe salesman. But Pym uses this idea further to represent the men of the clergy. "It was an unctuous voice, a clergyman's voice, a Bishop's voice" (221). The narrator here is clearly presenting the socially-critical voice of Belinda through which a parallel is created between salesmen and clergymen. Then the reader is presented with the romantically faithful voice of Belinda who declares that "the Archdeacon's voice was different" (221). Belinda's long-standing love for the Archdeacon supersedes any critical comments she may make about other members of his vocation.

Belinda's confusion at seeing Grote at her door causes her to 'incorrectly' identify him. She exclaims "Bishop Grote" while the narrator continues "Theodore Mbawawa" (221). The confusion reflects two ideas. First, Belinda is expecting to see a salesman and is instead confronted with Grote<sup>3</sup>. She is so carried away with her first imaginative response that she does not know whom to expect. Second, the narrator further confuses Grote's identity by referring to him by a mixture of his Christian name and his title. The narrator is implying that Grote's identity is inter-mingled with his social position. When Belinda is not capable of direct social criticism, Pym uses the

narrator to complete the picture of this socially-directed man.

The incident where Grote's hand touches Belinda's on the door knob shows further Belinda's internal struggles. We are told "[h]is hand reached the knob simultaneously with hers...she even imagined it lingered for a fraction of a second, but then dismissed the unworthy thought almost before it had time to register in her mind" (221). Pym is communicating several ideas here. First, through the narrator, we can assume that Grote has let his hand linger and that Belinda is not imagining the incident. Second, Belinda is self-critical because she is trying to believe that Grote is a gentleman. Her doubt leads her to ponder whether she is the one responsible for this social blunder. And to resolve this issue, Belinda turns to fiction to see if she can find an appropriate model for this situation and behaviour. "She... had read somewhere that in any case middle-aged spinsters were apt to imagine things of this kind..." (221-222). Although Belinda's thoughts are expressed through the narrator, she (the narrator) still edits for Belinda. Belinda finds little comfort in the 'something that she read' because it would suggest that it was Belinda's hand that lingered. The narrator expresses the horror that Belinda sees in this idea by adding the ellipses which indicate her inability to imagine such a dreadful circumstance. Belinda is not attracted to Grote and the idea that she might have encouraged him is horrifying to her. But the reader knows that it is Grote who is responsible for this behaviour. Belinda's humility and her alarm at his previous

attempts of kindness indicate to the reader who the real transgressor is.

Grote also presents another of society's expectations of women. For example, Grote reflects societal conventions of marriage when he assumes that Belinda wants to be married. He also assumes that she would be willing to accept any offer. He comments that "'one hardly looks for beauty at our time of life'" (223). His implication that Belinda will accept any offer reflects the assumption that all women want to marry, at any age. Also, his implied insult of Belinda's appearance reflects that women are required to take what is offered them; in this case, the ill-mannered and boorish Grote expects Belinda to accept an *implied* marriage proposal. The narrator makes this idea clear when she says that Grote speaks these words with "his usual complacency" (223). He is unaware of his offensive manner.

While Grote may speak for society, the narrator reveals Pym's attitude to his ill-mannered proposal. For example, although Belinda does not confront the Bishop's characterization of her unattractiveness, Pym instead has the narrator undermine Grote's self-centredness when the narrator comments on Grote's words. When he says that Belinda might not be prepared to accept his offer, the narrator says that "it was obvious that he really thought quite otherwise" (223). The narrator's words highlight Grote's vanity and conceit.

Also, Belinda herself deflates Grote's offensive offer. When Grote suggests that "*She is not fair to outward view*" is a line

from Wordsworth, Belinda immediately responds with the correct poet. Her love for poetry supersedes Grote's insult, and we are told that "[s]he felt rather annoyed" (223). Pym places this phrase between the correction of the poetic reference and Belinda's internal response to Grote's insult, thereby creating ambiguity. With this phrase, Pym is creating for Belinda an offensive manoeuvre to combat Grote's gross insensitivity. Belinda's interest and investment in literature is greater than her interest in marriage, an interest society would prescribe for her.

Grote further reflects society's views about marriage when he reassures Belinda that "'you are equal to being the wife of a bishop'" (224). Grote sees his identity in terms of social position and assumes that Belinda's reservations reflect feelings of personal inadequacy in this proposed role. Of course the reader is aware that Belinda is above such social considerations and can accurately guess that she will reject his offer because she does not love him.

Grote continues to insult and amaze Belinda when he tries to reassure her by evoking Milton and *Paradise Lost*. The narrator reveals Belinda's response. "Belinda interrupted him with a startled exclamation. '*Paradise Lost!*' she echoed in horror. '*Milton....*'" (224). While Belinda does respond with horror, the reader should not be surprised that Grote would choose one whom many would consider one of the most patriarchal figures of English literature. Clearly, Belinda has a much clearer

understanding of poetry than Grote does. Also, her knowledge that Milton created his Eve as the inferior sex further reveals her insight into Grote's use of Milton to reinforce his marriage proposal. And in this example, the narrator and Belinda respond in the same manner. Notice that the narrator uses the word "horror" to characterize Belinda's response. Grote's desire for a mere "helpmeet" (224) is revealed by both Belinda and the narrator in Belinda's words. The comedy in this section becomes clear when Grote does not even notice Belinda's horror and continues with his proposal. His response to her horror is "'I think when one has reached er-riper years...things are different, aren't they?'" (224) His complete refusal to respond to her distress reveals the extent of his lack of self-awareness.

And because of his large ego, Grote cannot believe that Belinda will not marry him just because she does not love him. After Belinda refuses his proposal and implies that she loves someone else, the Bishop infers that her lover is dead. Pym is revealing the lack of communication between Grote, society's representative, and the world of Belinda. Specifically, Belinda responds: "[I]t sounded more suitable; there was even something a little noble about it. *She never married*...Belinda began to see herself as a romantically tragic figure" (224). Certainly no one else in the village, including the Bishop, would see Belinda as this figure. Belinda temporarily adopts the image of the tragic figure to see if this model suits her. She attempts to put her love for Hoccleve within this imaginative perspective to see if

this definition fits her love for him, and also to see if this is a possible model for defining herself outside the social constraints of her environment. She temporarily adopts this image in an effort to cope with this episode with Grote.

As her mind becomes focused on the literary aspect of the tragic figure, she forgets the (possible) gravity of Grote's marriage proposal. After the Bishop mentions Byron, she is unable to concentrate on the present situation. "*When we two parted in silence and tears?* Possibly, though the poem was not really applicable. 'Do tell me,' she said, her literary curiosity driving other thoughts from her mind. 'What *did* Lord Byron say?'" (225). Belinda, in coping with Grote's insensitive proposal, relies on fiction to help her come to terms with society's definition of romance and marriage. By trying to understand all the literary aspects associated with this proposal, Belinda is trying to regain some form of domestic control. It is also interesting to note that Belinda responds to Grote's Milton with an inquiry about Byron. If Milton represents patriarchal poetry, the Romantics recall an alliance between Eve and the female serpent and a refiguring of Milton's story of *Paradise Lost*. Sandra Gilbert suggests that women often "identif[y] at their most rebellious with Satan, at their least rebellious Eve, and almost all the time with the Romantic poets" (377). Belinda's preoccupation with Byron in this instance reflects Pym's affinity to the more 'liberating' aspects of Romantic poetry.

However, Pym takes this idea further. She juxtaposes Grote's lack of understanding or knowledge of Byron with Belinda's inability to remember offering tea. The narrator says that "the Bishop was standing up now and saying that he did not think he would be able to stay for tea, although Belinda was not conscious of having offered it" (225). Here, the narrator shows the reader how removed from her surroundings Belinda is. Belinda does not remember offering tea because she did not offer it. But she is so engrossed in her imaginative relocation as a tragic figure within a Byronic/Romantic tradition, she is no longer paying any attention to the immediate situation involving Grote. And the narrator is complicit in this event.

Grote attempts to hide his wounded pride when he tells Belinda that he will not think again of the rejected marriage proposal. "'I assure you that *I shall not*. After all, we must remember that *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform*'" (225). Grote's clichéd use of this hymn reflects his lack of poetic sensitivity. The narrator tells us that Belinda feels "a little annoyed that he should quote her favourite hymn" (225). Because Belinda is immersed in an imaginative world, her annoyance is directed at his use of poetry<sup>4</sup> and not his attempts to avoid personal embarrassment. In this way, Belinda is able to cope with the affronts of society, reflected in Grote's behaviour, but she is also oblivious to his damaged ego. Yet, her oblivion is beneficial because it prevents her from feeling guilty for hurting Grote's feelings.

Pym continues by revealing Belinda's tendency to undervalue her own intelligence and overestimate Grote's intelligence and character. The narrator says "it was presumptuous to suppose that God would be more likely to reveal His ways to her than to the Bishop. She did not quite see how the lines [of the hymn] applied here, no doubt he had something else in mind" (225). Again the narrator serves a dual role. She lets the reader know Belinda's thoughts as well as providing apt social commentary; the reader is aware that Grote is quoting cliches to cover his bruised ego and has no real meaning in mind. Belinda's generosity creates the comedy in juxtaposition with Grote's shallow sayings.

Belinda's literary fantasy helps her sustain her dignity during Grote's visit. And after the Bishop leaves, she sees herself in the mirror:

She paused for a moment by the looking-glass and studied her wispy hair, flushed face smeared with flour and faded blue overall. Looking like that one could not feel even a romantic figure whose lover had died. (227)

While she is able to create for herself a more interesting figure than she is, she is also aware of the reality within her life and her world. Cotsell says that "Pym seems to feel that we are truer to ourselves when we recognise our modest needs, desires and significance" (46). With the aid of poetry, Belinda is able to accept her "modest significance." The image of the romantically tragic figure is a method of dealing with a world



that excludes spinsters and their desires.

Moving from the image of the romantically tragic figure to the experience of everyday life, Belinda tries further to find comfort in literature as she evaluates the 'choice' she has made:

*The trivial round, the common task*-did it furnish quite all we needed to ask? Had Keble *really* understood? Sometimes one almost doubted it. Belinda imagined him writing the lines in a Gothic study, panelled in pitch-pine and well dusted that morning by an efficient servant. Not at all the same thing as standing at the sink with aching back and hands plunged into the washing-up water. (227)

Again, Belinda uses imaginative relocation to establish another view of life. She initially takes comfort from Keble's lines, but then is able to imagine his possible circumstances. Pym's rebellious subtext is evident in the narrator's description of Belinda's thoughts. Obviously, Keble lived in a different place and time from Belinda. Also, she is acutely aware that his position as a male gave him social advantages which she would never have had. It is the narrator who announces Belinda's implied idea that Keble did not understand his subject.

Finally, Belinda's success in the kitchen signals her superiority over Grote and her ability to transcend the restrictions of her society's conventions and assumptions. This situation is in contrast to the scene succeeding the sock-darning incident with Hoccleve where "she walked aimlessly about in circles trying to assemble all the ingredients she needed...and

even when she had made the risotto she did not feel any pleasure at the thought of eating it" (79). Pym provides, through the words of the narrator, this contrast in order to display Belinda's inability at this point in the novel to overcome her emotional attachment to the thought of marriage. The sock-darning incident has disturbed her because she has experienced first hand what she would have experienced everyday as Hoccleve's wife. She must deal with the social pressures of marriage and does this when Grote proposes to her. She is able to make her ravioli dough's consistency that of "the finest chamois leather" (229). Michael Cotsell says that "Belinda has discovered what she has been working at all along: the fine consistency of her life" (26). However, I would argue that Cotsell might have taken this idea further. Pym's continual description of Grote's "bleating" voice and his similarity in appearance to a sheep cannot be ignored. Pym's use of the words of "chamois leather," a leather made from the hide of either a goat or a sheep, reflects Belinda's ability to survive and triumph in this world of 'sheep' and 'goats.' And she survives by using fiction and imaginative relocation to help her cope with a world that restricts spinsters' social roles and behaviour. Her ability to create a critical self-awareness gives her a personal power, a power that allows her to create her own happiness, a form of personal control that she is not able to realize in her social environment. "[R]edefinition by the fictional universe...empowers their sensibility" (Bowman,91). And it is

this sensibility that gives her freedom in a social world of prescribed roles and behaviour.

Pym creates another world of spinsters, clergymen and socially prescribed roles in her novel Jane and Prudence. Her title characters, Jane and Prudence, provide a challenge to the traditional image of a spinster and a wife. In this novel, Pym presents Jane Cleveland, a vicar's wife, who appears to be a more stereotypical spinster than her unmarried friend Prudence Bates. Yet they still behave each according to the prescribed roles for women in their positions. Diane Benet suggests, in her book on the novels of Barbara Pym, that two types of fictional models are available for women, the helpmate which Jane adopts, and the romantic heroine which Prudence adopts. Benet says that each are "adopted for the sake of love and are models of women in relation to men" (46). She also makes the distinction between the physical bodies of these two models. The helpmate consists of "a pair of willing hands" while the romantic heroine "is...those eyes, those lips, and if she is hands at all, they are soft, white hands-upon which no sensible male would impose a burden" (46). The dismantling of the female body within the fictional model is appropriate for this discussion because it is from these multi-faceted, dismantled images of women that Jane and Prudence attempt to assemble some type of self-identity.

And like the narrator in Some Tame Gazelle, the narration is through a third person. But unlike the situation of Belinda

in Some Tame Gazelle, the narrator is not as closely aligned with one character. Although the narrator often appears to reflect Jane's point of view, the narrator does not stay with Jane throughout the novel. Yet, the narrator is able to achieve the irony and insight that Belinda's narrator achieves because she is a female narrator. The narrator appears to embody a female voice in that she makes, within the novel's subtext, critical comments about the male (and female) characters who are either immersed in the dominant culture<sup>5</sup> or have little critical self-awareness. For example, at the opening of the text, the narrator tells the reader that "Jane's outspokenness and her fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated [by her husband's parishioners]; other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire were apparently necessary" (8). The narrator is sympathetic with Jane's situation. She suggests that the qualities that Jane does possess are excellent characteristics and that the ones Jane does not possess are not worth acquiring. Throughout the novel, the narrator, when not aligned with Jane, presents a similar world view.

Therefore, when Pym presents Prudence with whom she can compare and contrast Jane's ideas, values and lifestyle, Pym also provides a narrator who can comment on Prudence's level of critical self-awareness. For example, Prudence, at the opening of the text, appears to reflect a non-stereotypical spinster's attitude toward life. She does not see her life constrained and restricted by her lack of a husband. Instead, she sees the

freedom of being a spinster.

Compared with Jane's life, Prudence's seemed rich and full of promise. She had her work, her independence, her life in London and her love for Arthur Grampian. But tomorrow, if she wanted to, she could give it all up and fall in love with somebody else. Lines of eligible and delightful men seemed to stretch before her, and with this pleasant prospect in mind she fell into a light sleep. (83)

While she relishes the freedom that her lifestyle entails, she still remains tied to the illusion of romantic love. The narrator's use of the word "seemed" in the first sentence suggests that Prudence's life is not so full. Also, she suggests that the lines of eligible men are part of a dream that will never come true. Barbara Brothers observes that "Prudence doesn't seek unsatisfactory love affairs so much as she finds love satisfactory only so long as it conforms to a romantic script" (68). Prudence maintains her image of the romantic heroine, and cannot escape society's demand that a woman be romantically linked to a man.

However, Pym allows the reader to see that Prudence's romantic script differs from the romantic script endorsed by society. For example, Pym uses the event of Prudence and Fabian's first drink together to reveal these conditions of romance and love. The narrator says:

[T]heir conversation did not improve very much even with strong drink, though they gradually became more relaxed and

their eyes met so often in penetrating looks that it did not seem to matter that they had little to say to each other, or that Prudence found herself doing most of the talking. She had spent many such evenings in her life and always enjoyed them. (94)

Several aspects of the qualities of romance that attract Prudence emerge from this passage. First, Prudence does not necessarily have to engage in exciting conversation to enjoy herself. In fact, the narrator tells us that Prudence enjoys herself because she does most of the talking. Prudence appears to be self-aware only in terms of her pleasures in life. Second, the act of staring into one another's eyes is as pleasurable as sexual intercourse. Pym's use of the word "penetrating" suggests that conversation and good drink are adequate substitutes, or perhaps, adequate in themselves. Because society's script requires the maintenance of Prudence's virginity and the passion of sexuality within the same relationship, Prudence finds the sexual fulfilment in the food and the drink. Prudence becomes the victim of the restrictions of the romantic script.

Similarly, the reality of love and romance is inadequate for Prudence. For example, Prudence imagines herself on holiday with Arthur Grampian.

She had often imagined herself with him in the South of France or the Italian Lakes-she in the most elegant beach clothes and he wonderfully bronzed and mysteriously improved in looks and physique. But to-day, looking at him in his

grey suit and dark tie, his shoulders hunched narrowly over his desk, it seemed quite fantastic to imagine him lying on a beach stripped to the waist. (151-152)

While Prudence does imagine romance and love, she is in constant touch with reality and the real image of Grampian. Her comment that Grampian is "mysteriously improved in looks and physique" indicates that she knows he is not the ideal image of a man and that she would not want to be on a beach with him. Prudence does not allow her imagination to modify her life as Jane does.

Prudence attempts to define herself in terms of fiction, but it is a type that grounds her in reality, therefore she will never be able to separate herself from socially-prescribed roles. Also, she is not able to use this type of fiction to move her into another time or place in order to find her self-awareness in an environment outside the existing power structure. For example, Prudence likes a different type of novel from Jane, "well written and tortuous, with a good dash of culture and the inevitable unhappy or indefinite ending, which was so like life" (156). Prudence does not see that she could use fiction to move into another time or place, and in that imaginary social structure, find a suitable source for critical self-awareness. Bowman suggests that Prudence, like Harriet, "lack[s] or ignore[s] the consciousness of [her] subordinate state necessary to transform subordination into an acutely-felt sensibility" (91). Prudence does not use fiction to her advantage.

When Prudence does use fiction, she uses it to create an

image of herself and her life rather than creating any type of self-definition. Cotsell observes that "Prudence is...self-centred, though that is not the right word, for she has more an image of herself than a self from which she can relate" (61). For instance, at the opening of the novel, Jane thinks how Prudence looks "like somebody in a woman's magazine" (9). This image of Prudence is also apparent in her letters to Fabian. The reader is told "her letters were of such a high literary standard, so much embellished with suitable quotations that [Fabian] found it quite impossible to equal them" (140). She uses fiction to create further the romantic script in which she is both hero and heroine. Pym makes it clear that Fabian is an inadequate romantic hero and that Prudence must recreate both roles in her literary letters. Rossen agrees: "Prudence is an illusionist who transforms men into actors in her personal drama...she creates art out of life, or heroes out of mortals" (292). And even though Prudence steps out of the female role, she remains trapped by the roles of the romantic hero and heroine that are prescribed by society within its fiction.

In contrast, Pym presents Jane as a woman who is able to transform herself through fiction. Pym begins the text at Jane and Prudence's Oxford college reunion to highlight the importance of Jane's interest in literature. At this time, Jane reminisces about the plans she made as a young woman. "For a moment she almost regretted her own stillborn 'research'--'the influence of something upon somebody' hadn't Virginia Woolf called it?-to



which her early marriage had put to an end" (11). Pym provides the equation of Jane's work as a scholar, to do research, and her work as a mother/woman, to bear children, to emphasize the true nature of Jane's desire. She wished to be a scholar, and her marriage to Nicholas literally concluded her dream. Barbara Brothers addresses this difference between a woman and a man's education. She says that "Pym seems to feel that at least a part of the reason why education has not made a difference is that a woman's education is anachronistic" (65). Brothers points to Kate Millet's idea that women's education consists of extending the talents necessary for the marriage market (66). Certainly, Pym sees the inadequacy of Jane's education in preparing her to become a wife and excluding her from becoming anything else. And she does not leave the reader with Jane and her failed dreams; she presents Miss Birkinshaw to show the role of the woman at the university. We are told that "Miss Birkinshaw's great work on the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets was still unfinished, would perhaps never be finished" (11). Pym lets the reader see what would have become of Jane if she had stayed within the academy; she would have become another Miss Birkinshaw.

Although her education did not train her to be a wife and mother, Jane is held responsible for the family and social environment as seen in a discussion between members of the Parochial Church Council. Mr. Mortlake comments that "'Mrs. Pritchard filled her position well. And she was a wonderful cook...They say Mrs. Cleveland hardly knows how to open a tin. It

isn't fair on the vicar'" (132). Mr. Whiting replies that "'You never know, it might hold him back from promotion...A man is often judged by his wife'" (132). This discussion reveals how the society views the vicar's wife, in this case, Jane. She holds no power and is not able to assert any power, yet her domestic achievements may be responsible for her husband's future. With the help of the narrator, Pym is revealing the ironic nature of the structure of this society. For instance, the narrator reports that Mr. Whiting speaks with "a note of lamentation which seemed excessive for the triviality of the subject" (132). The narrator portrays the men as petty, gossipy and judgemental without any trace of critical self-awareness.

Further, while she often does not care what others think about her, Jane, on occasion, is impatient with the prescribed roles for women. For example, when Canon Pritchard and his wife call, he makes a remark that implies that all women perform certain chores at certain times of the day. The narrator reveals Jane's response. "Womenfolk, thought Jane irrelevantly, how silly that sounded. And all this emphasis on the mornings" (146). Because his comments annoy her, Jane imagines that they had intended "to surprise her in the kitchen, perhaps catch her in the very act of stubbing out a cigarette in the tea-leaves in the sink basket. She felt almost triumphant that they should have failed" (146). Jane is aware that, as the vicar's wife, she is on display to the world, but does not allow this situation to inhibit her movement into an imaginative space where she is able

to have some form of control over her environment. In a world where women are almost powerless, Jane must imagine her triumphs. Bowman addresses this issue in her work. She says "[Pym's] heroines...always fight their battles on an internalized landscape rather than on an external ground of confrontation" (89). Certainly this idea applies here. Jane is not in a social position to confront the Canon and his wife, and therefore must find triumph within herself.

Therefore, Jane, like Belinda Bede in Some Tame Gazelle, looks for her self-definition within the familiar and more flexible realm of literature. And like Belinda, Jane does choose inappropriate fiction on which to model her life. For example, in a conversation with Nicholas, she says "'I was going to be such a splendid clergyman's wife when I married you, but somehow it hasn't turned out like *The Daisy Chain* or *The Last Chronicles of Barset*'" (212). Jane has discovered that the role of the clergyman's wife in reality is tiresome and difficult. Diane Benet argues that Jane has "willingly exchanged a self-chosen role in which she was competent for the ready-made role dictated by Nicholas's work, a role she can play only badly" (49). But Benet does not allow that Jane had few options. Her role as a scholar within the university was restricted as seen in Miss Birkinshaw's situation, and she did not know that Nicholas intended to become a clergyman. As a result of these limited choices, Jane's only way to cope is by using fiction to help her define herself outside the social world in which she lives.

Jane uses various fictional models in the struggle for critical self-awareness. For example, when playing matchmaker for Prudence and Fabian, she imagines "she was almost like Pandarus" (96), but reconsiders this classical character and the connotations associated with his behaviour and decides that "she was really much more like Emma Woodhouse" (96). In switching from one model to the other, Jane is trying to find an appropriate model for her situation. For instance, the effects of Pandarus' matchmaking are radically different than Emma's. Also, the time and location of Jane's experience are better reflected in the Emma model. Pym is also telling the reader about how Jane thinks about herself or would like to think about herself. Clearly, Jane is not the good-hearted busybody that Emma is. The reader knows that Jane will eventually have to abandon the Emma model.

Pym also uses Jane's mental literary expeditions to tell the reader more about the action of the text as well as Jane's use of fiction. For example, when she is walking home one evening, as Jane approaches the church, the reader is told that "she lingered a while by the churchyard wall, thinking of eighteenth-century poets and charnel-houses and exhumations by the light of flickering candles. Then she saw there was a light on in the choir vestry" (113). Jane's grisly thoughts reflect the nature of the argument between the members of the Parochial Church Council who have congregated in the vestry. These men's long-standing arguments reveal the death of their souls and their

focus on life-defeating issues. Pym uses this reflection on eighteenth-century poetry to tell us further about both Jane's ability to construct her character through literature and the true nature of the situations in which she finds herself.

In this same situation, Pym reveals more about the characters and Jane's ability to cope with reality through her literary musings. When Jane asks if she can help, she is told, essentially, to mind her own business. Jane responds by adopting a fictional model to deal with the situation.

Really, thought Jane, it was like one of those rather tedious comic scenes in Shakespeare - Dogberry and Verges, perhaps - and therefore beyond her comprehension. She suddenly saw them all in Elizabethan costume and began to smile. (115)

Jane's smile indicates that she understands the triviality of their arguments. Her ability to situate the problem, through literature, in another time and place enables her to respond appropriately to the absurdity and foolishness of the men's disputes.

Jane's use of poetry as a method of defining life is seen in the image of a piece-bag. As Jane thinks of the two lines of poetry Fabian inscribed in Prudence's book, she wonders: "Had it been somewhere in the back of his mind for all these years to be brought out again, as a woman, searching through her piece-bag for a patch, might come upon a scrap of rare velvet or brocade?" (165) Certainly, Pym is using this image to describe life as

pieces of poetry sewn together to create a rich fabric. Further, Jane equates the traditionally masculine act of writing poetry with the traditionally feminine pursuit of sewing. Then, after Jane discovers that Fabian does not read poetry, Prudence comments that "'[m]en don't really go in for that sort of thing, and Jane replies that "'one has to accept that, together with their other limitations'" (165). Of course it is ironic that, historically, most English poetry and fiction was written by men, particularly the literature that Jane herself reads. (Jane comments that "'English literature stopped at Wordsworth when I was up at Oxford'" [147]). But Pym is obviously revealing women's sensitivity and use of literature in their daily lives. Using poetry as her model, Jane creates for herself a method for examining and dealing with the daily aspects of life.

Finally, near the end of the text, Pym has Jane display the extent to which literature defines her life. In describing Prudence's new love interest, Jane says to Nicholas, "'Dear Prue...I suppose she will be waiting in the bus queue now, or going out somewhere with Conjunction of the Mind and Opposition of the Stars'" (221). Jane's description of Geoffrey Manifold reflects the importance that Jane places on literature in her life. In fact, she has extended its (poetry) use to not only define herself, but also to define those around her. In discussing Prudence's new love, Michael Cotsell points out the onomastic reference to the petit-bourgeois interest in automobiles indicated in Manifold's name (62). Jane recognizes

the ordinary and the petty in his name and transforms it into something poetic and meaningful. The social world and its roles inadequately provide definition for its inhabitants. Therefore Jane and like-minded others must use literature to create a critical self-awareness that helps them deal with the unpoetic realities of life. Also, Jane is able to easily describe Prudence standing in the bus queue in immediate juxtaposition with the poetic description of Manifold. Pym does this to show how Jane uses literature to define the everyday things in life.

Pym summarizes, at the end of her novel, the power that imagination and fiction contain. When Jane meets Geoffrey Manifold, the narrator reveals Jane's thoughts: "it was their [women's] love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings. For most men, when one came to think of it, were undistinguished to look at, if not positively ugly" (217). Through Jane, Pym reveals that all aspects of life are effected by imagination, particularly romance. Diane Benet argues that "[j]ust as Prudence and Jane have imagined selves, they...collaborate in imagining 'Man,' creating a mysterious being with unique problems and pressing needs that women must alleviate" (50). Pym's portrayal of the men's absurd behaviour and ridiculous attitudes discounts Benet's argument that the women are the victims of these particular men. Instead, Pym shows that both women and men are victim to these socially prescribed roles, and it is the critically self-aware individual who is able to transcend them.

In conclusion, in Jane and Prudence, Pym outlines the difference between Jane, the 'married' spinster, and Prudence, the 'swinging' spinster. While each of these women uses fiction to create some form of identity, each arrive at different conclusions. Cotsell declares that "[i]n Jane, Pym creates a woman free of the constraints of the male gaze, and though there is a loss in that freedom, there is also the suggestion of some area of relationship more satisfying than the gaze allows" (65). While Prudence uses her imagination to create an image (rather than identity), Jane uses her imagination to step out of an image and into an arena of self-awareness. Cotsell says "[w]hat Jane has as a virtue of being herself is not romantic 'fulfilment', even attention, but a life" (65). He points to Jane's marriage which has become an "interweaving of their fancies in an easy fond relation" (65). Cotsell clearly disagrees with Benet's idea that "[i]n the end...both women are still under the grip of imaginative models that lead them only to discontentment and unfulfillment" (57). Pym cares too much for her characters to abandon them in this way. Prudence, at least, realizes that she will continue to have love affairs that end in disappointment, but this choice fits her constructed image of the romantic heroine. Jane will remain outside her social role, but within the life that she has managed to create for herself through literature. Jane's triumph is in her ability to reject a socially-constructed identity and to assemble, with the help of literature, an alternative method of examining herself.



In her novel Excellent Women, Pym again addresses the role of the spinster in society. Like Belinda of Some Tame Gazelle, Mildred Lathbury finds herself outside a society that ignores spinsters. And like the other heroines, she also defines herself in terms of the fictions she both reads and creates for herself. But in this, her second published book, Pym has a first person narrator in the character of Mildred Lathbury. Like Pym's other heroines, Mildred is an observer of the world, but unlike the previous texts discussed here, Pym chooses to have this character directly comment on the action she observes. Therefore, a discussion of the role of fiction in Mildred's life must concern two aspects, her relation to the fiction she reads and the creation of her own fiction in the form of her first person narrative.

First, Mildred lives in an environment similar to Belinda's. The community in which she lives has prescribed roles, behaviour for and expectations of Mildred. For example, all of the church members believe that Mildred and Julian Malory, the local vicar, will marry only because they are contemporaries and Mildred is a spinster. Mildred herself has never even considered marriage to Julian. When Julian's sister Winnifred mentions that Mildred could move into their spare rooms, Mildred declines and tells the reader that she "valued [her] independence very dearly" (19). Just as Belinda declared in Some Tame Gazelle that each person required something to love, Mildred chooses to love her independence. The diction in this sentence indicates that

Mildred cares for her independence as others would care for 'some tame gazelle.' And we are told throughout that her independence is the possession that Mildred treasures most. Like the other heroines discussed here, Mildred faces the same societal assumptions and pressures to conform with the ideas of the dominant culture.

However, Mildred's choice of fiction and reading materials is unlike Belinda's. At the opening of the text, we are told of Mildred's choice of reading material. "I stretched out my hand towards the little bookshelf where I kept cookery and devotional books, the most comforting bedside reading. My hand might have chosen *Religio Medici*, but I was rather glad that it had picked out *Chinese Cookery*" (21). Unlike Belinda, Mildred is not university educated and relies on books that are socially prescribed for women. Because she uses these books to lull her to sleep, Pym is suggesting that these books do not really interest women, and perhaps even lull them into conformity. Later in the novel, when Mildred is again looking for comfort, she turns to another cookery book "of recipes and miscellaneous household hints" (159). This time Mildred comments that "what use that knowledge would ever be to me I could not imagine" (159). Clearly, the contents of the prescribed 'women's' reading has no value for its audience.

Mildred's idea of what fiction, or in this example, poetry should address is certainly different from what is normally expressed in literature. At one meal, she is faced with Bone's

eccentric old mother<sup>6</sup>. As Mrs. Bone gives Mildred pamphlets to take home, Mildred thinks "[b]irds, worms and Jesuits...it might almost have been a poem, but I could not remember that anybody had ever written it" (140). These subject matters are different from the usual topics about which women read or write. The juxtaposition of three unromantic and possibly unrelated topics appear to Mildred to be obviously subjects for fiction. The regular topics for women's reading material does not address the types of situations that Mildred faces in her life. Barbara Griffin says that Mildred's movement into fictional or imaginative spaces reflects a lyric, rather than narrative, voice (138). She says that these "lyric passages...create for Mildred the private space for which she struggles throughout the novel—a space in which she is insulated from the events and expectations of the world around her and free to express and explore private responses and reflections" (139). Mildred's ability to create a private space enables her to examine herself and her world critically. Consequently, Mildred's ability to synthesize diverse topics reveals her creative and unconventional mind.

Often, instead of using fiction (much of what Mildred sees as inappropriate for women) to relocate herself in a place outside the present power structure, Mildred uses her imagination to relocate herself in an imagined situation where she can evaluate its problems and benefits according to her own experiences. For example, the incident where Everard Bone invites Mildred to dinner reveals such considerations. When she

first receives his invitation, she imagines "[her]self putting a small joint into the oven and preparing vegetables. I could feel my aching back bending over the sink" (202). It is the act of imaginative relocation that helps her decide to refuse Bone's invitation. Her desire for independence is reflected in this scene, for she would rather remain at home and be lonely than cook Bone's bone<sup>7</sup>.

Mildred's first person narrative is the most interesting aspect of her critical self-awareness. Pym has Mildred comment on this form of narrative at the opening of the text. Mildred describes herself as plain and mousy but asserts that "I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her" (9). Pym has Mildred mention Jane Eyre in order to situate this narrative in the twentieth century. Michael Cotsell in his book discusses the difference between Pym's world and the world of Jane Eyre.

Along with the loss of social authority went a loss of the shared-world confidence that provided the literary authority that underlies nineteenth-century realism. Rather than presuming a shared world, Pym's fiction enacts the seeking of some part of it. (119)

Cotsell is pointing out that while Pym's style appears to adopt a sense of nineteenth-century realism, her work, in fact, is much different. And this difference lies in the breakdown of literary authority. So even while there appears to be a breakdown in

authority, the dominant culture still imposes social roles on women and particularly spinsters, and Pym is attempting to provide a portion of the dominant culture where women can find some form of self-definition. Cotsell's comment also reinforces Mildred's plea not to be compared to Jane Eyre. Although readers might easily find similarities between Mildred and Jane Eyre, Mildred belongs to another century and another set of social circumstances. For example, Niamh Baker points out that in many novels written after the Second World War, "the goal-less life is portrayed as a disaster for women and there is covert criticism of men who, by enforcing idleness on middle-class women so as to demonstrate their own status, rob them of any means of self-definition" (161). While Mildred does not have a husband who enforces her idleness, the dominant culture instead creates her idleness. Bowman points to Mildred's job at the Society for Distressed Gentlewomen. She says that Mildred's "perception of her job's inferiority has three causes: it is a service for others; it is only part-time; and it serves women" (89). Mildred sees these qualities as inferior because society sees them as inferior. Consequently, the world of Jane Eyre and the world of Mildred Lathbury cannot be compared. The social roles and positions for women are radically different even though they appear to be similar.

Therefore, Pym creates a first person narrator in Mildred in order to explore further the position of the self-critical spinster in this 'new' rule-bound society. Barbara Bowman

outlines this idea in her article on Pym's subversive subtext. Bowman contends that Pym uses the first person narrator to create irony in the same way that Jane Austen did. For example, Bowman says "Pym's irony uses some of the assumptions behind Austen's irony: (1) that the narrator and the reader's knowledge and points of view correspond, and (2) that the heroine will be initiated into this alignment of narrator and reader" (84). Pym uses this method to create the subtext. Bowman suggests that often "the reader and the narrator share an irony" and that "[t]his distance between the narrator and the heroine disappears when Mildred inverts her...conventional response[s]" (83). Mildred as heroine appears to accept the social rules of society, but Mildred as narrator presents a critical and self-critical subtext that undermines the 'social' narrative.

Pym provides an excellent example of this construction in the scene where both Julian Malory and Rocky Napier arrive at Mildred's door to be pampered. When she returns from making tea, she overhears their conversation. "Julian was asking about the church of Santa Chiara in Naples and quoting a poem about Palm Sunday, but Rocky said that the church had been destroyed by bombs and the poem always depressed him anyway" (147). In this instance, Mildred the heroine is describing the scene before her while the tone reflects the attitude of Mildred the narrator. As narrator, Mildred describes the men as uninterested in each other and in some way competing to be the centre of Mildred's attention. Mildred the narrator later describes Rocky as "both

affected and impolite" and Julian as "pompous and clerical, almost like a stage clergyman" (147). As she grows more impatient with these men, Mildred the narrator's voice becomes dominant. And it is this voice that explores the possibilities of renewed self-awareness.

Mildred the heroine, for example, considers what type of novel she would write. She says that "if I ever wrote a novel it would be of the 'stream of consciousness' type and deal with an hour in the life of a woman at the sink" (149). Previously, Mildred had rejected the types of prescribed books for women. Her choice of novels (to write) reflects not a Jane Eyre type of novel, but instead a twentieth century form that reflects the place of the woman within society. Like Belinda's response to Keble's lines of poetry, the romanticized life of the single woman is not what Mildred wants to read or chronicle. Instead, she wants to provide a new narrative and narrative structure for women. We know that this idea belongs to Mildred the heroine because she is thinking about this as she washes the Napier's dishes. Mildred the heroine continues:

I felt resentful and bitter towards Helena and Rocky and even towards Julian, though I had to admit that nobody had compelled me to wash these dishes or to tidy this kitchen. It was the fussy spinster in me, the Martha, who could not comfortably sit and make conversation when she knew that yesterday's unwashed dishes were still in the sink. Martha's back must have ached too, I thought grimly, noticing that

the plate rack needed scrubbing and the tea-cloths boiling.

(149-150)

In this passage, Mildred the heroine moves back and forth between guilt and assertion. She is assertive in her admission of bitter feelings, but guilty in her complaint. She admits no one forced her to undertake these chores, and accepts, through comparison to Martha, the social role of the willing servant. This section ends with these conflicting feelings. Mildred voices her physical complaint of the aching back, but deflates it by implying that she will continue to clean this kitchen beyond the chore of washing dishes. Mildred's desire to have a novel address this particularly female situation is achieved in this (Pym's) novel and within its form.

And Mildred participates in this new narrative structure. Pym's employment of a first person narrator would appear to function appropriately enough to reveal the 'woman's voice.' However, as discussed previously, the voice of the first person narrator does not always completely coincide with the voice of the heroine. Mildred the heroine essentially becomes the main character in Mildred the narrator's fiction. As Mildred the heroine longs for poems that address "birds, worms and Jesuits," Mildred the narrator is creating a text that does address women's needs. Bowman suggests that "[v]iewed from the outside as a man might view a woman, Mildred looks inconsistent, whereas from her own perspective her inversions suggest a dynamically process-oriented self-definition" (87). This self-definition comes in



the form of the novel-writer in Mildred the narrator.

Finally, many readers and critics are disappointed with Pym when she implies, at the close of this novel, that Mildred will marry Everard Bone. However, Mildred the heroine has made her decision with all the pertinent facts in mind. Mary Strauss-Noll believes that "Mildred has few illusions about men" (77), and knows that "[m]arriage to Everard Bone...would be a mixed blessing" (78). I would emphasize that both Mildred the heroine and Mildred the narrator have this information. Jean Kennard agrees: "[Pym] ends *Excellent Women* with...marriage only a possibility, not a solution. It is not marriage that matters...but living one's own story" (57). And because the final words of the novel are spoken by Mildred the narrator, we know that Mildred the heroine and Mildred the narrator have joined and achieved a level of critical self-awareness not previously seen in the novel. Specifically, Bone reminds Mildred of the late President's wife. Mildred remembers the woman sleeping during the lectures.

She was asleep, but it didn't matter. Nobody thought anything of it or even noticed when her head jerked up again and she looked about her with unseeing eyes, wondering for the moment where she was. After all, she was only the President's wife, and she always went to sleep anyway. (238)

The gentle sarcasm evident in this passage shows that Mildred realizes that she is trading one type of subordination for another, but at least she has chosen it within the context of a

new self-awareness. Brothers says that Pym "celebrates [her character's] successes in being individuals despite the pressures of an impersonal society which would make them into nothing more than spinsters, clergymen, or clergymen's wives" (79). Mildred does succeed in becoming what she chooses to be. Griffin's conclusion is similar: "[Mildred] neither abandons self or turns entirely away from others and thus continues the struggle to define a life in which neither self or affiliation is denied" (142). Mildred is able to achieve this balance through her acquired critical self-awareness.

In conclusion, literature and imagination are the only areas available to these women in their attempts to find some form of self-identity. They know that their positions in society are dictated through prescribed roles, and their struggle for self-identity rests first in their ability to overcome these roles. By examining both the society in which they live and their positions within that society, they are able to achieve a critical self-awareness that enables to cope with these restrictions. While they are not socially or politically empowered in this struggle, or achieve any liberation from these roles, they are personally empowered to cope with the absurdities of life that they face daily.

Similarly, literature and imagination were very important parts of Barbara Pym's personal life. Many critics find parallels between fictional events that she created and real

events that she experienced. While these comparisons are interesting and amusing, Mary Strauss-Noll suggests an alternative way of examining these similarities. She says "[t]here is a sharp contrast in tone between descriptions of real-life events in her journals and fictional accounts of similar situations in the novels. In her fiction Barbara Pym's tone is ironic, amused, detached" (86). Pym creates in her novels what her characters achieve within the fictional texts; Pym uses imaginative relocation within her literary texts to help her create a critical self-awareness that allowed her to deal with the challenges of being a spinster in the twentieth century. Each of her characters' triumphs are the triumphs of Barbara Pym.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ROASTING HIS JOINT AND DARNING HIS SOCKS

#### FOOD, SEX AND PLEASURE IN THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM

8 April 1958. How would she eat when alone? Half a lobster and a glass of Chablis at Scott's-or baked beans on toast and Coca Cola in the Kenbar at Barkers?

This entry from Pym's diaries, collected in A Very Private Eye, refers to the celebration meals that Pym is considering for one of her spinster characters. It reflects Pym's interest in the food that her characters eat, the role that food plays in their lives and what that food says about them. Most of the characters spend much of their time either eating, or talking about eating, or even thinking about eating. And Pym's critics could use this excessive discussion of food to reinforce their criticisms of her stories of quaint English villages. But this intense interest in food reflects more than the banality of everyday life. Charles and Kerr in their book on women and food point out that:

Food...carries social status and value and its differential consumption by men and women, adults and children, and between the classes, reflects differences in power and status which arise from the social divisions of gender, age and class. The food that is eaten...recreates [these social divisions] on a daily basis. (235)

And in Some Tame Gazelle, Pym does address these various ideas about society and the nature of food. For example, when Edith Liversidge and Connie Aspinall suddenly appear at the Bede's doorstep at suppertime, Belinda thinks they might serve "a tin of tongue" or "potato salad...[o]r would a macaroni cheese be better? With some bottled fruit and coffee to follow that should really be enough" (89). This meal, designed with women in mind, is an adequate meal for anyone, yet when the curate Mr. Donne also appears at the door, the meal is transformed.

Edith Liversidge moved into the dining-room with a confident step. They would all benefit from Mr. Donne's presence, she knew, and noted with sardonic approval that there was a large bowl of fruit salad on the table and a jug of cream as well as a choice of cold meats. (92)

Meals served to women and men are different, and are based on the social assumption that men require "high social status" food (Charles, 77). Mr. Donne's social status both as a man and a representative of the church requires that he be given higher status food.

Yet, in an article about food in Pym's novels, Mary Anne Schofield discusses patterns of eating in terms of Levi-Strauss' work in The Raw and The Cooked, and only sees food as serving to civilize men. She says that "[w]hen faced with a genuine male, one neither married, effeminate, nor homosexual, who is in need of culturing, the Bede sisters are unable to provide the necessary food" (3). Schofield is mistaken. She points to the

fact that they cannot "tame or civilize a 'real' man" (3) when really neither Bede sister wants to 'tame' a man. What Schofield fails to mention is that food represents more than a cultural and civilizing effect when cooked and given to men. And Jane Nardin claims that the phrase "'cooking his meat'...seems to have comic sexual overtones" (81) but does not elaborate on this idea even though the sexual overtones appear to extend throughout Pym's work. In fact, very little work has been done on the relationship between food and sexuality in her texts<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in this chapter, I will argue that, in Pym's novels, food functions to provide women, particularly spinsters, with a way of pleasing their bodies in a society that assumes they have no sensuality. Just as fiction is a way that the spinsters can find critical self-awareness, food becomes an expression of the spinsters' sexuality. Consider the following.

In this example from Excellent Women, Everard Bone has invited Mildred Lathbury to his home for dinner. She imagines herself "putting a small joint in the oven and preparing vegetables. I could feel my aching back bending over the sink" (202). These thoughts encourage her to refuse his invitation. After finishing this phone conversation, she reconsiders her refusal.

I paced about my sitting room, feeling uneasy and yet not quite knowing why. I had not wanted to see Everard Bone and the idea of having to cook his evening meal for him was more than I could bear at this moment. And yet the thought of

him alone with his meat and his cookery book was unbearable too...He would...puzzle over the heat of the oven, turning it on and standing over it watching the thermometer go up...I should have been nearly in tears at this point if I had not pulled myself together. (203)

This passage reveals many aspects of Pym's use of food that will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter. In the first passage, Mildred's response to Everard's invitation is one of physical discomfort which springs from her act of imaginative relocation of cooking the food in his kitchen. Notice that she imagines neither the smell of the cooking nor taste of the cooked food, the most pleasant aspects of meals and eating. Schofield comments that "Mildred is only concerned with the external trappings of dining" (4). In this example, Mildred is concerned with these external trappings because she is required to provide these trappings. Further, her physical response represents more than just her lack of desire to cook for Bone. In a world where spinsters have no method of expressing their sexual desires, food becomes their form of physical expression. Mildred rejects Bone's dinner proposal because, first, she does not want to experience the physical aspect of preparing the meal and, second, her preparation and consumption of the food with Bone would constitute a form of physical intimacy that Mildred is not yet ready to share. This idea is clarified in the second passage. Mildred's agitation, her pacing and her uneasy feeling, reflect her indecision regarding her relationship with Bone. She is

unsure whether she wants to become closer to him. Her concern about his ability to cook his own meat shows that she does care about him, and the fact that she is almost in tears reveals an unspoken emotional commitment to Bone. However, Pym does not use food in her novels to veil sexual activities inappropriate to 'women's literature,' or to maintain a sense of high comedy decorum. Food is simply the main source of physical pleasure for these women. And because Mildred's consumption of food in this example would mean a further commitment to the budding relationship with Bone, we can say that she has refused a potentially sexually-charged encounter. The "cooking of the meat" could be seen in sexual terms and Mildred's physical agitation in response reveals her discomfort with this possible intimate relationship.

Susan Bordo in her article on the body and femininity explores this idea of a woman's relationship with food and cooking. She says "[t]he rules for [the] construction of femininity...require that women learn to feed others, not the self, and to construe any desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding as greedy and excessive" (18). Mildred's refusal to cook Bone's meat suggests that she has much stronger sense of her desires than everyone (including the naive reader) believes. She has cultivated her ability to be greedy. Although she immediately goes off to the vicarage "to see if there was anything [she] could do there" (204), she has asserted her self-possession and has chosen to retain her 'virginity' in her



relationship with Bone. Again, Mildred's action will not aid the progress of women's rights, but she has preserved her own integrity in this case. We will see aspects of this example appear repeatedly in Pym's fiction.

The physical response and agitation, and the subsequent cooking of food is made clear in the episode in Some Tame Gazelle where Belinda refuses Grote's marriage proposal. After he leaves, she is able to create the perfect risotto. Her success in the kitchen indicates her successful claim to her self and her identity. Schofield says that the Bedes happily "return to salads and cheeses inwardly glad to be released from the rigors of cooked meat and prepared meals, of culturing and civilizing the male" (3). But Belinda's present success in the kitchen undermines Schofield's comments. She does prepare and cook a hot meal that both she and her sister enjoy, and Belinda's actions negate Schofield's idea that they cannot produce civilizing foods for themselves. Charles and Kerr note that usually "enjoyment of cooking for most women depend[s] on the end product being enjoyed by others. Their own enjoyment [is] secondary" (68). Belinda breaks this pattern by enjoying the meal that she has made for herself, as well as for her sister. And if her identity is tied to the kitchen (as most women's identities are), Pym is revealing Belinda's strength of character. Her triumph with food is a personal triumph of the self.

The Grote episode can easily be juxtaposed with the sock-darning incident involving the Archdeacon where Pym explores

further the sexual aspects of food and cooking. The entire incident suggests sublimated sexual tension and contact. As Belinda kneels at Hoccleve's feet, the image of the foot in the sock, with the heel protruding, becomes sexually charged; notice its resemblance to a partially covered penis. Also, all three people present are anxious about the event. The reader is told that "[t]he Archdeacon submitted himself to her ministrations with rather an ill will, and there was one anxious moment when Belinda inadvertantly pricked him with the needle and it seemed as if he would lose his temper" (77). Note that Hoccleve 'submits' to Belinda. Even Harriet is involved as she does "her best to divert him with conversation" (77). After receiving Hoccleve's thanks and compliments, "Belinda smiled and went quite pink with pleasure and confusion" while Harriet collapses "heavily into a chair and [fans] herself with the parish magazine" (78-79). The language that describes the emotional and physical discharge after the event further reveals sexual connotations. However, as successful as Belinda is in this near sexual context, she is not able to accomplish anything in the kitchen.

[S]he walked aimlessly about in circles trying to assemble all the ingredients she needed. For somehow it was difficult to concentrate. The mending of the sock had been an upsetting and unnerving experience, and even when she had made the risotto she did not feel any pleasure at the thought of eating it. (79)

Belinda's agitation is similar to Mildred's after refusing Bone's invitation. Jean Kennard points out that "Pym deliberately undercuts the romantic daydreams of her characters with the mundane realities of everyday life. Her characters like the fantasy of romantic love but not the discomforts of an erotic relationship" (50). In Belinda's case, the reader has been told that she feels that she can love Hoccleve more because she does not have to deal with his demands in everyday life. This 'erotic' experience is uncomfortable because it intrudes on her idea of romantic love. And if the sock-darning could be described as her first erotic contact with Hoccleve, it is not satisfactory. We know this because it is in food and the consumption of food that this spinster experiences physical pleasure, and in this situation, both the preparation and consumption of the food is not pleasurable. When Belinda does successfully deal with her sexuality in the marriage proposal from Grote, she is able to create a perfect risotto.

The issue of meat and gender that appears in the Mildred/Everard situation is also repeated throughout Pym's work, and in writing about this issue, Pym is exploring the societal conventions of both female and male sexuality. Pym uses the image of meat to represent what society equates with male sexuality, and extensively examines this assumption in Jane and Prudence. For example, the idea that men must have meat is raised within the opening pages of the novel. During a discussion about the food served in the local tea-shop, Mrs.

Mayhew says "'Of course, a man must have meat'" (30). This statement becomes a focus of the novel in that women are often expected to go without certain foods while men enjoy their meat. Later, when Fabian Driver is called for his lunch, Miss Morrow says "'Of course. I shouldn't like to keep you from your steak. A man needs meat, as Mrs. Crampton and Mrs. Mayhew are always saying'" (57). Driver notices "the faintly derisive tone of Miss Morrow's remark, as if there was something comic about a man needing meat" (57). And he is right because there is something comic about a man needing his meat in this novel where the men are no more masculine than the women. Also, this passage reflects Pym's idea that spinsters are excluded from enjoyment, literally, of the flesh. Most of Pym's women do not often eat meat. Enjoyment of the flesh, that is, sexual enjoyment, is not to be experienced by women, even married women, yet they all seem to desire the experience as much as men. It is the conventions of society that restricts them from their consumption of meat.

Yet Pym never tires of emphasizing the effects of these societal assumptions, particularly the social construction of male sexuality. During a discussion between Miss Doggett and Jane Cleveland about Mildred Lathbury's new husband, Miss Doggett declares that Mildred has married "'an anthropophagist'" (126). Pym intends for both Jane and the reader to be shocked by Miss Doggett's linguistic error. And the humour in this error is, of course, two-fold. First, Miss Doggett is displaying her ignorance in her knowledge of the world outside her small

community. But more importantly, Pym is playing once again with the idea that men need meat. In this case, other people are the flesh that the men would consume, and, specifically, Mildred is the one to be 'consumed.' Miss Doggett also comments that Mildred "'learned to type so that she could type his manuscripts for him'" (126). Bone's consumption of Mildred, then, involves not necessarily sexual consumption but his consumption of her energy as he utilizes her practical, everyday talents. Pym is conflating the aggressive and sexual nature of the consumption of flesh with the mundane act of typing, thus reducing the consumption of meat to a socially constructed representation of male sexuality.

This idea is further emphasized in Pym's explosion of the conventions of masculine sexuality. Specifically, Miss Doggett, in conversation with Jane, reflects that "'men only want one thing-that's the truth of the matter.'" Miss Doggett again looked puzzled; it was as if she heard that men only want one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was" (70). Here, Miss Doggett, the speaker for conformity and convention, is repeating what is accepted as the truth about men. But Pym's narrator undermines Miss Doggett's words; she suggests that whatever it is that men want, women cannot seem to remember. Later in the novel, Jane wonders that "[i]f it is true that men only want one thing...is it perhaps just to be left to themselves with their soap animals or some other harmless little trifle?" (129). The dismissal of men's 'only need' suggests that male sexuality is as

easily trivialized as women's. Moreover, it suggests that traditional male sexuality is also a social construct because Nicholas' desire for soap animals does not represent Fabian's desire to indulge in his own reflection. Each man desires a different 'one thing,' therefore the male drive for sexual pleasure may not be as universal and important as Miss Doggett assumes it to be. Because Miss Doggett, a traditional spinster, knows nothing of male or female sexuality, she repeats only what she has heard is true. Pym means for the reader to join the idea of the male 'need for meat' with the cliché that 'men only want one thing.'

Pym emphasizes this idea further in situations where men eat 'women's' meals, and women eat or desire a 'man's' meal. Pym juxtaposes two such events in Jane and Prudence and reveals the discrepancy between the food that women and men are supposed to desire and the food that they truly desire. At the community whist drive, Pym creates a comparison between Edward Lyall's breakfasts and Miss Morrow's love of oyster patties. First, Mrs. Lyall tells her audience that Edward Lyall, in his role as the heavily burdened Member of Parliament, "'likes coffee and a cereal of some kind. He might have a boiled egg or a rasher of bacon occasionally...'" (90). His austere breakfast is opposite to the expected heavy breakfasts that are associated with male appetites. Charles and Kerr talk about "a 'cooked breakfast' consisting of bacon, eggs and so on, which is this meal in its most *proper form*" (italics my emphasis) (19). Pym, then, is

suggesting that Edward Lyall does not conform to the convention of the male appetite and thereby undermines his masculinity and power as the local Member of Parliament.

Jessie Morrow, on the other hand, does desire male food and takes action to obtain it. Moreover, Pym places this event almost immediately after the Edward Lyall breakfast description. Also during the whist drive, Miss Morrow hides some oyster patties.

"[W]hat have you got there?" [Jane] asked, seeing that Miss Morrow appeared to be secreting a paper bag behind her back. "Oyster patties," whispered Miss Morrow. "I like them too. I thought I would eat them when I got home in the privacy of my bedroom. I took these when nobody was looking." (91)

Miss Morrow's actions reveal her desire for male-status food, and her courage to take what has not been afforded to her. Yet while she does take what is not hers, she still follows the pattern that women must not openly desire food, and, when they do obtain the food of their desires, they must consume it in private. Bordo says that "[f]emale hunger...is depicted as needful of containment and control, and female eating is seen as a furtive, shameful, illicit act" (18). Morrow's attempt to hide the food and her plans to enjoy the patties in private reflect Bordo's ideas. However, Morrow is endowed with some power in this event because she has taken food prepared for a man. And the juxtaposition of her theft with the description of Lyall's 'powerless' feminine breakfast suggests that Miss Morrow is a

stronger, more masculine character than Lyall.

Miss Morrow's theft of the oyster patties can easily be compared to her 'theft' of Fabian Driver's hand in marriage where her sexual aggression<sup>2</sup> is revealed in the type of food that she steals. And that her theft of food consisted of oysters, considered an aphrodisiac, reinforces this idea. Also, because Miss Morrow will enjoy these oyster patties in her bedroom, Pym is suggesting further that Miss Morrow is willing to seek out physical pleasure denied her by her social community. Again, she operates outside the conventions of society. She secretly visits Fabian, and eventually persuades him to marry her. She reshapes his dead wife's clothing and literally appears before him as Mrs. Driver. Her aggressive behaviour shows how she has adopted the role of the pursuer. Also, the secrecy of the courtship ensures that she maintains control of the situation. She is, of course, aided by Fabian's own sloth and vanity. So, Miss Morrow's theft of the oyster patties becomes an indication of what she is capable, and the reader should not be surprised when Miss Doggett eventually uncovers their relationship. Pym is using food to illustrate that these spinsters do not have the opportunity to express their desires openly and therefore use food to express the sensuality that is denied them.

Prudence Bates, like Jessie Morrow, seeks physical pleasure in the food that she consumes. According to the conventions of society, Prudence should not be sexually active even though the men in the novel appreciate her sexually alluring appearance.



Therefore Prudence explores sensual pleasures in food. The best example of this idea is made clear during one of Prudence and Fabian's dinner dates in London. "The chicken will have that wonderful sauce with it, thought Prudence, looking into Fabian's eyes. She had ordered smoked salmon to begin with, and afterwards perhaps she would have some Brie, all creamy and delicious" (102). The description of the food supersedes all the other elements of the date. Janice Rossen in her article on Pym and love in Oxford libraries comments that "[t]he aesthetic arrangement of the evening does more than enhance an affair of the heart; it replaces passion altogether" (291). But the emotional or sexual passion is replaced by Prudence's passion for food. It is the chicken sauce that Prudence imagines when she looks into his eyes. And it is the cheese that will follow the meal that she desires in real physical terms. Certainly, the creaminess of the brie could represent male ejaculate. The possibility of embraces and other sexual intimacy is not the most important aspect of this encounter expressed by Prudence through the narrator. Pym uses this subtext to reveal that while the romance involves Fabian, Prudence cannot be physically satisfied by him. Also, Michael Cotsell observes that "[f]rom attendance on a handsome man, Prudence has moved to attendance on a handsome woman: a sort of fleshy narcissism" (61). Pym clearly intends this. This romantic script, provided in the restrictions of female sexuality, is not flexible enough to allow the admittance of women's real sexuality. Prudence must satisfy her physical

desires through the consumption of food.

But not all of Pym's spinsters are able to use food to satisfy their physical desires. Marcia Ivory of Quartet in Autumn accepts the assumptions concerning female sexuality, and succumbs to the pressures of society and its denial of female physical pleasure; she starves herself to death. Her denial of food and her disregard for her body is what society has demanded of women and we see this in the cliched remarks and expressions that she and the other office workers use to describe her eating habits. Marcia literally becomes a victim of the phrase "I've never been a big eater." According to societal assumptions about older unmarried women, Marcia lacks sexuality and she expresses this idea through the denial of her body. Even her beloved surgeon Mr Strong's instructions to eat more cannot break the ideas that have long been planted in Marcia's behaviour.

Pym makes this idea of the denial of the body clear in that Marcia dies with a full pantry. (Ironically, when she does decide to eat, she is too weak to open any of her tins. She is barred from the food that will save her because she has no physical strength).

Every week [Marcia] bought some tins for her store cupboard and now she spent some time arranging them. There was a good deal of classifying and sorting to be done here; the tins could be arranged according to size or by types of food-meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, soup or miscellaneous...There was work to be done here and Marcia

enjoyed doing it. (63-64)

While Pym is exposing this woman's aimless life in retirement, she is also revealing the idea that women have been trained to stock and organize the kitchen. This idea relates to the notion that women do not feed themselves but instead feed others. The food acts as an external symbol of femininity and does not serve as inner and physical nourishment. Marcia as a spinster has not had to feed others since her mother died and her cat Snowy passed away. Marcia therefore has no one to feed but herself and she does not know how to do that.

However, there is something triumphant in Marcia's store. For example, at the end of the novel as Letty, Edwin and Norman look through her house, they come upon her pantry full of tins. "'So beautifully arranged and classified,' said Letty with wonder in her tone" (215). Pym shows that Marcia's skill in organizing is finally being observed and appreciated. Also, the store in the pantry brings the three who remain together.

"Hesitantly...the three of them began making their selection. In some subtle way this reflected their different characters. Edwin chose spam and stewing steak, Letty prawns and peach halves, Norman sardines, soup, butter beans and the macaroni cheese" (216). Marcia, in leaving this store of food, has now become a nurturer for the food she leaves is suitable for all of her 'friends.' The sherry that is left in the cupboard is also shared. In essence, this scene becomes a celebration of Marcia's store of food. Her death from starvation gives others life. So

while her self-denial has horrible consequences and her death is a tragedy, she dies knowing that she has been faithful and different, and has left a store for her friend Norman from which he can feed himself.

But Pym does not leave the issue of Marcia and food on this simplistic level; she addresses the fact that women are capable of supplying nourishment from their breasts but yet cannot nourish themselves. Marcia, however, is a spinster and has never had a child, and, due to breast cancer, has had a mastectomy. Clearly, Pym wants the reader to recognize the importance of such surgery to a woman who throughout her life was not considered a complete woman because she was a spinster. Yet Marcia does not see this operation as a debilitating or reductive procedure. In fact, she is proud of her scar and has great love and respect for her surgeon. We are told that "Marcia had been one of those women...who had sworn that she would never let a surgeon's knife touch her body, a woman's body being such a private thing" (18). But when she sees a woman collecting money for cancer, "Marcia advanced, quietly triumphant, a 10p coin in her hand" and says "'I, too...have had *something removed*'" (18). Her pride, apparent in the tone of her words, reflects her pride in being different from others. She had been taught that her body is special and private, and when she does allow the surgeon to touch her breast, she remains emotionally faithful to his touch. Michael Cotsell speaks of her faithfulness as "a terrible metonymy for the satisfaction of desire" (129). Cotsell is

right; for Marcia, the surgeon's touch is a sexual act. This action also constitutes her secret from the rest of the world. She has shared her body with a man and this form of physical contact is something of which she is proud.

Yet, Pym takes the idea of the mastectomy and the breast even further to emphasize Marcia's attempt to satisfy societal expectations of her femininity and her need to nurture. Specifically, Marcia collects milk bottles.

[S]he went...to the shed where she kept her milk bottles. These needed to be checked from time to time and occasionally she even went as far as dusting them. Sometimes she would put out one for the milkman but she mustn't let the hoard get too low because if there was a national emergency...or even another war, there could well be a shortage of milk bottles and we might find ourselves back in the situation of 'No bottle, no milk', as in the last war.

(64)

This collection of milk bottles reflects Marcia's hidden desire to nurture and be nurtured, and the emptiness of the bottles reflects her failure to satisfy her desire (to nurture). This collection also reveals the extent to which the demands of society have destroyed Marcia's sanity. Kennard observes that "Pym's superb description of [Marcia's] decline from eccentricity into insanity makes it clear that Marcia is only an extension of any of us" (52). As a spinster, she had no one to nurture, yet social convention calls for women to be nurturers. Her dilemma is

played out in her irrational desire to collect milk bottles. Although society had denied Marcia her individuality and physical pleasure, she tried to define herself in the terms that society has set for women. Cotsell sees her death as "a declaration that forces a kind of recognition of a commonness at the level of- however mean, frantic and grotesque-appetite and desire" (131). While Cotsell is right to point out the level at which we all can understand and relate to Marcia's death, he is discounting the responsibility of society. Marcia's inability to fit the definition of a 'complete' woman, designed for married women, shows her courage in a world that denies spinsters their appetites, desires and their bodies.

Pym also examines the social conventions to which married women are subject. At the close of Excellent Women, Pym details Mildred's evolution from a spinster and excellent woman into a woman engaged in "'a full life'" (238). As previously discussed, Mildred has trouble coping with her budding relationship with Everard Bone, and her uncertainty of her commitment to this relationship is seen in her refusal of Bone's supper invitation. However, her feelings are resolved at the end of the novel when she does accept a dinner invitation and is willing to cook for him. Yet, when she arrives at his house, the food has already been prepared and only needs to be served. Because Mildred has accepted the growing closeness between her and Bone, food is no longer necessary, in this situation, to stand as the only method of her physical satisfaction. But again I emphasize that food is

not a substitute for sexuality, but only stands in place of physical fulfilment in a community that maintains strict social conventions regarding female sexuality.

Schofield claims that in Excellent Women "[t]here is no substantial consumption of food; there is no substantial sustenance of human relationships; there is, ultimately, no socializing" (4). Although she is specifically commenting on Mildred's relationship with the Napiers, Schofield does see this as a pattern throughout the book. Yet, at the end of this novel, the reader does not see Mildred and Everard share a meal, but their relationship obviously does become more intimate. What Pym is communicating here, and what Schofield has missed, is that food no longer needs to represent physical expression for Mildred. Mildred as a spinster is not allowed to express her self physically until she is married. Bone's veiled marriage proposal gives Mildred the opportunity to find physical pleasure within the confines of a conventional marriage relationship. But that pleasure is bracketed by her agreement to proofread his manuscript and then possibly index it. The price of freedom from the restrictions of spinster sexuality is the everyday chores that will ease the burden on the male. Mildred may eventually return to the joys of physical pleasure found in food.

Pym also considers the inadequacy of the female nurturing role of mother and wife in the character of Jane Cleveland. But Jane does not conform to the conventions of either role. First, she is unable to cook or housekeep. When she initially moves

into the present vicarage, "she...hardly...grasped where the kitchen was and in any case it was a part of the house in which she took little interest" (18). When both the housekeeper and her daughter are away, Jane suggests that she and her husband eat at the local tea-shop so that she does not have to "'open a tin or something'" (48). Prudence, on another occasion, is horrified at Jane as she "swish[es]...wine-glasses about in an inch or two of brownish water at the bottom of the [washing] bowl," and describes Jane's kitchen as 'desolate' (161). Jane's inability to provide meals for either herself or her family reflects her inability to nurture in the traditional sense. She is not able to provide her family with food or comfort. Yet, Pym shows that she is still a loving mother to Flora and a loving wife to Nicholas. For example, Miss Doggett discovers that Miss Morrow and Fabian Driver are engaged and wants Jane to go with her to Driver's house to reprimand him on his behaviour. As Nicholas watches them leave, he thinks "[t]he whole thing seemed to be of very little importance" but he goes to the window "and saw that it was still raining. He wondered whether Jane had remembered to take a mackintosh" (186). Although he is exasperated with Jane's interest in Driver and Morrow, he still is concerned for her. In fact, he usually has to nurture and care for Jane because she does forget such things as wearing her mackintosh in the rain. Here, Pym explodes the societal assumption that women are natural nurturers and shows that, in some cases, particularly Jane's, she cannot learn to nurture and needs to be nurtured



herself.

Pym, then, uses Jane to show how food can represent other aspects of a woman's life. In Jane's situation, food reflects the state of her marriage. Because she is able to express herself sexually within the conventions of marriage, food does not serve as an outlet for physical expression. For example, Pym provides an excellent description of Jane and Nicholas' marriage in the form of a food image. The narrator says "they sat down on either side of the fire, two essentially good people, eating thick slices of bread spread with a paste made of 'prawns (and other fish)'" (138). The sturdiness and solidity of the thick slices of bread represent the solidity of the marriage, and the simplicity of the fish paste reflects the uncluttered relationship that they have with one another. Jane does not need to use food to nurture or to help her express her physical desires. The goodness of the "thick slices of bread" are an adequate description of the happiness that Jane's life involves.

In conclusion, just as fiction was the only method available to spinsters to help them find critical self-awareness, food becomes their only outlet for pleasing their bodies in a world that allows them no sensuality. Pym reveals the consequences of society's construction of both male and female sexuality and the assumptions that accompany them, and displays these spinsters efforts to overcome these restrictive roles. Unfortunately, a character like Marcia Ivory does let society construct her

desires for her, and her death from starvation is the result. But Susan Bordo points out that anorexia also serves as a type of protest, albeit self-defeating. She continues:

The anorexic's experience of power is...deeply and dangerously illusory. To reshape one's body into a male body is *not* to put on male power and privilege. To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities. (24)

Marcia would not even understand such social protest and shrink from attention. Her anorexia is not even an attempt to gain the illusion of power that Bordo suggests. Instead, Pym uses Marcia's death to show the reader the importance of food to the expression of female sexuality in a society that denies spinsters the pleasures of their bodies. Marcia believed society's assumptions about women and their roles, and tragically loses her mind and her life in her attempts to attain that image of femininity.

Prudence Bates also remains trapped sexually by the conventions of society. Unlike Marcia, she does reject the traditional image of the spinster, but instead becomes a victim of the commercial image of femininity in that she dresses in the latest Vogue fashions. She also passively awaits Fabian's marriage proposal. Miss Morrow, however, who never attracts attention to her physical self, is able to ensnare Fabian Driver because she does not allow society to dictate her desires and

physical pleasures. She acts on her desire for oyster patties, both literally and metaphorically. Food becomes her expression of and method for exploring physical desire.

Finally, Pym reveals how the spinsters in her novels use what is available to them to achieve their desires. These women are denied their sexuality by a society that demands female virginity until marriage, and become subversive in their attempts to reclaim their bodies from the sterility of society's assumptions. Pym attacks the ridiculous assumption that women are not capable of physical pleasure without the assistance of men. She shows Belinda Bede's triumph in the kitchen, continued in the dining room, as she eats her hot cooked meal. Schofield says that "these women fail to create a nourishing and sustaining relationship with a man" (7). I would argue that they are capable of creating such a relationship but that they are not interested in doing so. Schofield continues: "Debunking the predominant romantic myth, Pym shows that woman's place, though she might be in the kitchen, is not a nourishing role at all" (7). Schofield's mention of the romantic myth is good, but she fails to point out that these women know how to nourish themselves in a society that allows them little emotional and physical nourishment. Barbara Pym's spinsters find emotional fulfilment in what Kennard calls "an ideal of community based upon...a more genuine form of love" (47). This ideal replaces the socially constructed romantic love script and gives the spinsters emotional freedom. And they finally find physical

pleasure in their enjoyment of food.

## CONCLUSION

In Barbara Pym's An Unsuitable Attachment, Sophia Ainger, the clergyman's wife, declares that "'A single man probably inspires wider and wilder speculation than a single woman...His unmarried state is in itself more interesting than a woman's unmarriedness, if you see what I mean'" (247). I would argue that Pym devoted her literary career to revealing that a woman's 'unmarriedness' can inspire much speculation and is in itself far more interesting than a man's bachelorhood.

Her spinsters, throughout the novels, come to understand themselves and their lives much more clearly than any of her male characters simply because they are excluded from the power structure of their communities. The heroine in her exclusion from society is introspective and views herself and her life from outside the roles continually forced upon her. They are able to assess their experiences using available literary models. Then, through these models and using imaginative relocation, they are able to achieve a critical self-awareness that most of the men never achieve. In a world that does not accept that spinsters are anything more than unmarried women, that is, women without men, these spinsters create for themselves an identity that allows them freedom to be themselves within the context of their restrictive environments.

And using food, they are also able to express their sexuality. Because their social communities deny these women the

sexual pleasures of their bodies by restricting pre-marital sexuality, these spinsters instead experience it through the one of the only means available to them, through food. As Schofield points out, women throughout these novels are always associated with food and the kitchen (7). But Pym subverts this association and food experiences become an expression of their sexuality.

The issues that I have examined in this thesis recur throughout Pym's work, but her early novels best display her interest in the spinster's plight. As her career evolved, she continued to write about spinsters and other women that society had forgotten, but she expands her work to examine, more thoroughly, the similar problems that men face in a society that prescribes their roles and desires. Her incorporation of stronger male characters and the treatment of their ordeals is seen by some critics as evidence that she had become a 'better' writer. I would argue that her strength came from her ability to examine these people's lives without the political agenda and urgency for reform that often becomes a large part of socially-directed writing.

In this thesis, I hope to have enriched the body of Pym criticism and encouraged further scholarship on her texts. What I have not done is explore all the fascinating aspects of Pym's work. For example, no one has written at any length about the tension, albeit presented humourously, between the Anglo and Roman Catholic churches that is evident in the texts. What is Pym saying about English culture and society in that tension?

While critical material does address the similarities between the roles of the anthropologist and the novelist, none examines the correspondences between the roles of the missionary and anthropologist. No one has yet examined the animal and vegetable imagery in Some Tame Gazelle. Does this imagery tell us more about the types of spinsters that Pym presents? Very little has been written on the homosexual males present in her texts and the lack of corresponding lesbians. What does this vacuum suggest?

Also, almost no contemporary theoretical work has been done on Pym's work. Perhaps some see the texts as being too simple for this type of investigation. Or perhaps there are disadvantages to working within tight theoretical confines that might fail to acknowledge the subtleties of Pym's work. Perhaps phallogentric critical theory cannot adequately address women's issues. And feminist and lesbian studies may not be able to address the issues of spinsterhood, a social condition previously ignored by the women's movement.

Finally, the writings of Barbara Pym are important to the study of women's literature in the late twentieth century. Although we may no longer have an acceptable category for what were formerly termed spinsters (does an unmarried woman who is CEO of a Fortune 500 company consider herself a spinster?), the issues that Pym's spinsters face are issues that women still face today. Not many countries have female leaders; women, in overwhelming numbers, suffer from eating disorders and have problems with their body image. Women are still in the minority

in male-dominated careers such as engineering. And as Marguerite Holloway details, "some 100 million women are missing worldwide—the result of many sociocultural factors, including poor health care, nutrition and poverty" (80). Spinsters are not the only forgotten ones.



## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. These characters are found in Charles Dickens' Little Dorrit, Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, and Henry James' Washington Square respectively.

### CHAPTER ONE

1. In particular, consider P.G. Wodehouse's comedies of social class where the fictional world poses little danger or risk to either Jeeves or Wooster.

2. Many of Pym's characters re-appear in her other works in which they play minor roles. For example, Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow are central characters in Crampton Hodnet, and appear again in Jane and Prudence playing less central roles.

3. The name connotes the image of the grampus whale that is known for its constant blowing through its blowhole. Grampian also suggests the derivative "grampus" that describes a person who is always puffing him/herself up. Moreover, the name suggests both age from the word "grampa" and mood from the word "grumpy."

### CHAPTER TWO

1. I was not able to find very much information at all about the plight of the spinster in Great Britain during and after the Second World War. Also, I was not (easily) able to find out how many unmarried women there were in the years following the war, a statistic that I thought would be most easy to find.

2. Because the narrator is so closely connected to Belinda, the reader can easily assume that the narrator too is female. For instance, the novel opens with this sentence: "The new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down" (7). This observation is characteristic of the females within the text. In another example, the narrator describes the unpleasant state of the morning room: "Everything looked dusty, there were bits of cotton on the carpet, and worst of all, two vases of dead chrysanthemums" (47). The phrase "worst of all"

betrays the narrator's sensibility. She clearly is aligned socially and financially with the Bede sisters, Belinda in particular. Therefore I have concluded that the narrator must be female.

3. Pym's connection between the words "unctuous" and salesman is deliberate. She clearly is suggesting that Grote is there to sell Belinda on the idea of marrying him. As the reader discovers almost immediately, Grote is there to 'pitch' an idea. The concepts of love and romance do not fit his idea of marriage.

4. In this thesis, we can include Belinda's favourite hymn in the category of poetry as it serves as another form of writing that allows Belinda to escape from her social environment. And like the other types of literature available to her, it is rooted within a patriarchal culture, ie. the Church of England.

5. I use the term "dominant culture" to describe the community in which these women live. Specifically, this community is centred on the Anglo-Catholic church in which the hierarchy is based on the positions within the church. So, for example, the Archbishop would have the greatest amount of power and prestige, and all the other levels of clergy would have gradually decreasing power. Of course women at this time were not ordained into the church and therefore had little power within the church. The other person with significant power within the community is the Member of Parliament, as Pym displays in Jane and Prudence. Again, women's limited political activity excluded them from this position as well.

6. One might speculate that if Mildred and her friend Dora Caldicote remained spinsters, they might evolve into women similar to Mrs. Bone and her companion Miss Jessop. Here Pym is presenting another stereotypical image of women, specifically the elderly widow and the spinster.

7. The obviously sexual nature of Pym's food and cooking references and their relation to self-identity will be discussed further in chapter three of this thesis.

### CHAPTER THREE

1. I could find only Mary Anne Schofield's article that dealt extensively with the subject of food in Pym's work. Some other critics, such as Michael Cotsell, mention the relationship between the spinsters and food, but do not explore this idea extensively. Almost no critics discussed at any length what Jane Nardin calls the "comic sexual overtones" (81).

2. I use the phrase "sexual aggression" and later "aggressive

behaviour" only in terms of Pym's novels. While aggression denotes violence and force, I use it to describe forceful behaviour by a group of women who have no power in their communities and who very rarely express their desires or act on them.

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