

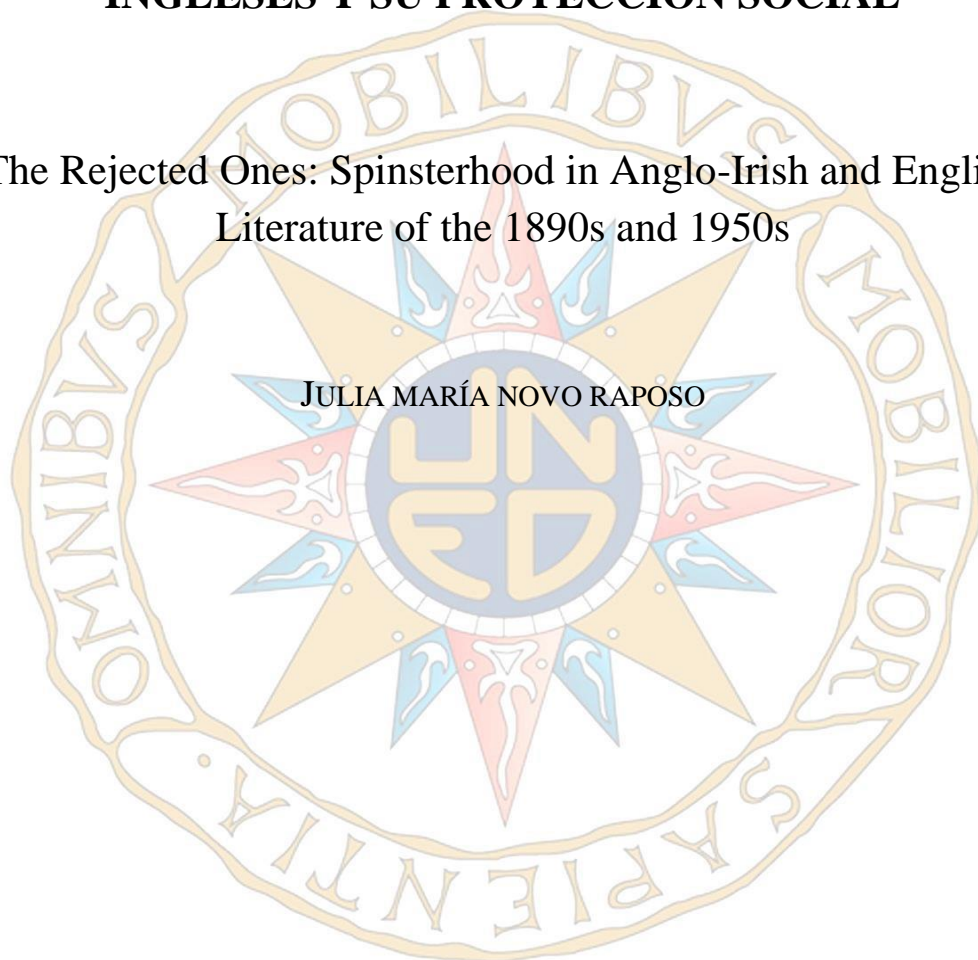


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The Rejected Ones: Spinsterhood in Anglo-Irish and English
Literature of the 1890s and 1950s

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation and social construction of spinsterhood in late-nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century Anglo-Irish and English literature. Focusing on an Anglo-Irish Victorian novel, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross's *The Real Charlotte* (1894), and a post-Second-World-War English novel, Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), this study explores how unmarried women were portrayed in literature and what stereotypes were associated with them. By analysing the novels within their historical and sociocultural contexts, the paper aims to illustrate how societal expectations and gender norms influenced the lives of spinsters. This study follows a feminist approach to literature, exploring the experiences of unmarried women in terms of identity, agency, social acceptance or rejection, and adherence or challenge to traditional notions of womanhood. The analysis of the main characters of *The Real Charlotte* and *Excellent Women*, Charlotte Mullen and Mildred Lathbury, identifies common themes in the portrayal of spinsters, such as social isolation, self-reliance, pressure to marry, and subversion of traditional gender roles. This paper also aims to determine whether negative stereotypes of and prejudices against the spinster remained in the mid-twentieth century, at a time where women had achieved more rights and independence than they had had sixty years before. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of gender roles, stereotypes, and dynamics in literature, as well as the construction of one's identity through social conventions and expectations.

Key words: Anglo-Irish literature, English literature, nineteenth century, twentieth century, spinster

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1. Objectives	8
1.2. Literature Review	9
1.3. Methodology	16
2. Single Women in the 19th and 20th Centuries in Ireland and England	17
3. <i>The Real Charlotte</i>: Charlotte Mullen.....	23
4. <i>Excellent Women</i>: Mildred Lathbury	32
5. Comparison of Charlotte and Mildred	39
6. Conclusion	50
7. Works Cited	60

1. Introduction

For centuries, unmarried women – particularly those who, no longer young, had lost all hope of ever forming a romantic attachment – were seen as outcasts, unable to fit into their expected societal roles. Literary representations of the figure of the spinster throughout history show not only the evolution of the position and acceptance of single women in Western society, and how they navigated a world mainly dominated by men, but also how unwed women’s self-perception began to shift when matrimony and motherhood ceased to be seen as the only female aspirations. In the first decades of the twentieth century, attitudes towards spinsterhood began to shift. As women gained access to the workforce and became increasingly able to support themselves without the aid of a man, marriage became just one of many acceptable options for women. This change is reflected in literature, where spinsters began to be depicted in more sympathetic and understanding ways. In some works, spinsters are presented as independent and autonomous, rejecting the pressure to marry and instead fulfilling their own personal goals, as the analysis of Barbara Pym’s *Excellent Women* in this paper will show. More modern representations of spinsters portray an evolving society in which women started to challenge gender stereotypes, roles, and constraints placed upon them.

It is important to note that, while women throughout centuries have opted out of marriage for varied reasons – due to their never finding a suitable partner, or not wanting to become a wife, or not being able to enter a heterosexual relationship with a man due to lesbianism, or not wishing to marry again after widowhood –, this paper will focus primarily on single heterosexual women who, willingly or unwillingly, never married. Thus, although circumstances such as having already been married and lost a husband, or being homosexual, are reasons for many women to remain single or to avoid attachments to men, this study will analyse those women who were attracted to men but failed to enter a romantic relationship, the reasons behind that, and how society reacted to what was seen as a failure or as a challenge to a social organisation based on heterosexual bonding aimed at reproduction. For centuries, and even nowadays in certain spheres, a woman’s “essential” and “natural” role has been considered to be motherhood after marriage. This essentialism is at the core of patriarchy, and explains the idealisation of marriage as the best situation for a woman. In this paper, two female characters were chosen to represent single women outside of the patriarchal system in two different periods and societies – 1890s Ireland and post-Second-

World-War¹ Britain, the main objects of study being the novels *The Real Charlotte*, written by Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin (under the name of Martin Ross) in 1894, and *Excellent Women*, written by Barbara Pym and published in 1952.

The Real Charlotte was chosen as it stars a powerful female character (Charlotte Mullen) who is arguably discriminated against in the male-dominated society in which she lives. Although intelligent, ambitious, and highly capable, Charlotte is not respected because she is a woman – in addition, an older and unattractive one – and, above all, a spinster. The following pages will analyse how she is diminished by men based on her marital status, age, and physical appearance. Thus, taking the above into consideration this paper defends that male characters in *The Real Charlotte* use stereotypes of the spinster to belittle Charlotte Mullen, an older, single woman who attempts to achieve a higher social position in a hostile male-centred environment. A hypothesis explored in the upcoming pages is that, were she a man, Charlotte would have succeeded in society and would be regarded as a highly respectable member of her social circles.

Excellent Women, on the other hand, was selected for this paper because, although the central character of the novel is also a single woman in a society that appears to revolve around marriage, she lives in a world in which women no longer entirely depend on men or male approval to live a full life. Mildred Lathbury is over thirty and unattached, yet her lack of a husband is not a result of a lack of opportunities. Mildred does have potential suitors, but she decides against them based on her personal preferences, since she observes that being married is not always the most desirable alternative to spinsterhood. Furthermore, a woman in her society and position does not need a man, and her life would not necessarily become more complete through the addition of a male companion. Mildred, although single, is not alone, as she has friends around her; nor is she idle and without a purpose, since she has an occupation. Due to her kind and easy-going nature, she is also a respected, beloved member of a supportive community that revolves around the church and that comprises other unmarried women – who also do not seem to be in search of a husband.

While the topic of spinsterhood may no longer seem relevant as women in the twenty-first century do not face the constraints that society had placed on their ancestors, the concept of equality between genders – including whether women are under more pressure to marry and start a family – is still an ongoing debate, particularly when considering that single

¹ Henceforth referred to as simply “post-war.”

women may face more financial difficulties such as job insecurity, a lower income, or insufficient financial support after retirement. That is one of the reasons why the topic of spinsterhood was chosen for this paper. Literary studies help better understand society and the struggles faced by our predecessors, some of which are present, to a lesser extent, in today's world. Analysing the social acceptance and position of unmarried women in the late nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century allows us to comprehend what society saw as a threat in singlehood and rejection of gender roles, stereotypes, and constraints, and why that may still be considered problematic in the twenty-first century.

Although the two works analysed in this paper serve as examples of literature about spinsters in Ireland and England only between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, they offer a general idea of the evolution of the acceptance of single women in society through time and show progress in the struggle for women's rights in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the results of which are seen today. Nowadays, in Western society, a woman can freely choose to remain single and childless without facing the amount of prejudice that unmarried women felt a century ago. Without the work that women in general, including female writers, and feminists in particular carried out in the past, current society would be significantly less egalitarian. Although sometimes taken for granted, women's rights are a relatively new achievement in the history of patriarchal cultures, and it is essential that one remembers not only how they were obtained, but also what losing them would mean. Revising literary texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helps raise awareness about the importance of women's independence and freedom of choice, which, although already accomplished, is easily destructible and must be protected. Furthermore, literature about women demonstrates how single women, especially as they begin to age, are more vulnerable in times of crisis or instability.

The following pages will display, through the analysis of Charlotte Mullen, what Anglo-Irish society expected of women in regards to marriage and how unmarried women were perceived. Then, an examination of Mildred Lathbury will present what societal expectations of women were in 1950s England and whether any negative stereotypes about spinsters from previous centuries prevailed. As a reading of *Excellent Women* shows, the figure of the spinster did gain in sympathy and support over the decades, with marriage becoming more of a secondary thought and individual lives and careers being the new focus

of modern women, yet the question remains of how much prejudice unmarried women still had to face in the twentieth century.

1.1. Objectives

In this paper, the main objectives are:

- to demonstrate that Charlotte Mullen is being undermined due to her spinsterhood, and that her value as a successful businesswoman is being diminished only because she is an older, unattractive woman who lacks the support of a male figure in the male-centred, misogynistic nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish society;
- to prove that Mildred Lathbury is, in spite of her independence and reluctance to wed due to her awareness of the downsides of marriage, still thought of as not having a full life; and
- to determine if stereotypes associated with spinsters changed and if prejudices remain half a century after the 1890s by comparing Charlotte Mullen to Mildred Lathbury, the former being described as an old, hateful figure and the latter being a single woman just over thirty in early 1950s England who lives by herself and is an esteemed member of her community.

To achieve the first goal, the following analysis will focus on the treatment Charlotte receives by society in general and men in particular when it comes to her aspirations of owning land. It will be questioned whether the opposition she encounters would be the same had she been a man. Following this, in order to accomplish the second objective, the character of Mildred in *Excellent Women* will be analysed. This paper will take a look at what her goals and desires are, what is expected of her as a female member of society, how she sees matrimony as a whole and whether she is considered to be incomplete or less than married women due to her single status.

Finally, the third goal will be addressed by comparing the circumstances and personal lives of Charlotte and Mildred, taking into account any social changes that may have enabled women to avoid marriage without being marked as outcasts or doomed to remain alone. Moreover, a secondary objective throughout this paper will be to determine whether readers are inclined to dislike Charlotte due to her being consistently presented in negative terms in *The Real Charlotte* and if this may be a consequence of her marital status. It will be examined what kind of language is used to refer to her in the text, and this will be later compared to

how Mildred talks about and presents herself in *Excellent Women*, and how other characters perceive her – particularly married women or firm believers in marriage.

1.2. Literature Review

This section contains a brief summary of what scholars have written about the topic of spinsterhood or female survival in a man's world in Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte*, as well as analyses of the figure of the unmarried woman and the character of Mildred Lathbury in Pym's *Excellent Women*. *The Real Charlotte* (1894) narrates the events that take place after the beautiful nineteen-year-old Francie Fitzpatrick moves from Dublin to the West of Ireland to live with her forty-year-old cousin Charlotte Mullen, an unattractive and ambitious unmarried woman trying to rise socially while attempting to enter a romantic relationship with her friend Mr Lambert, who marries Francie following the death of his first wife. *Excellent Women* (1952) follows the life, struggles, and changing views on marriage and love of Mildred Lathbury, a single woman in her early thirties in 1950s London, after the arrival of her new neighbours, the Napiers.

Interestingly, when reading critical works on *The Real Charlotte* it becomes clear that not every author treats Charlotte in the same manner, thus allowing me to divide secondary sources between those which present Miss Mullen as a cold-hearted, cruel woman, and those who actually take her situation into consideration and defend her to some extent. There seems to be more consensus, however, when discussing Miss Lathbury's life, as she appears to be a more widely liked character who, despite her secret desire to get married, is a spinster by choice and not simply because of male rejection.

John Cronin's chapter "Somerville and Ross: *The Real Charlotte*" in *The Anglo-Irish novel* discusses *The Real Charlotte* and whom he considers to be "the central figure of the novel, the redoubtable Charlotte Mullen," a woman whom is first presented "in the role which will come to seem almost her characteristic one, that of menacing death-bed attendant" (145). It is significant that Charlotte is introduced to readers at the hour of someone's death, as it foreshadows her later alleged role in the deaths of Mrs Lambert and Julia Duffy. Furthermore, Cronin argues that Charlotte's first scene shows how "her selfish pragmatism is not abated even in the presence of death itself and her greedy and unremitting calculation contrasts strikingly with Francie's vulnerable insouciance in everything that has to do with her own worldly welfare" (145). According to this author, Charlotte "makes an

ugly and dangerous figure as she is described for us for the first time” (Cronin 145), and from the beginning of the story the reader is made aware “of Charlotte’s antagonism to Francie and the dangers arising from that” (Cronin 145). Cronin, in a merciless analysis aimed at presenting Charlotte under a very negative light without considering her reasons, also explains that the “central struggle of the novel” is that between Charlotte and Francie (146). Charlotte would be both presented as a “dangerously dominant figure” and “an angry and jealous woman twice the age of her intended victim” (Cronin 146). In short, Cronin does not seem to wish to understand what Charlotte may have gone through and why she has become the “angry” and “jealous” woman he makes her out to be. Instead, he offers a strong criticism of Charlotte and does not offer any sympathy towards her or her precarious position as a woman in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish society.

This position contrasts with Angela Ryan, as presented in her article “Tragic Heroines and Wise Women in the Novels of Somerville and Ross.” Ryan compares Charlotte to “the heroine[s] of tragedy, Anglo-Irish tragedy ... and also tragedy in general” whom, according to her, “may not have the same possibility of enabling catharsis as the hero, because of reduced potential for representation and also because of constraints on the body of the heroine as a representational mode” (118). Thus, Charlotte would represent a type that typically “does not act, or cannot move, or is under the governance of another” (Ryan 118). The author then goes on to discuss how “many of [Somerville and Ross’s] heroines are strong-minded and forceful, and evoke resentment by being lively and active” (Ryan 118). Particularly, in *The Real Charlotte*

Charlotte’s personal tragedy is that the man she loves, who did express love for her, married another, and no-one else has wanted to marry her. This is a social, more than an emotional reality in this period, where marriage is a dynastic and an economic matter, not simply an affective process. (Ryan 118)

This would explain why Charlotte had become a character that may be perceived as bitter, ambitious, or jealous of younger, prettier women.

Ann McClellan’s “Dialect, Gender, and Colonialism in *The Real Charlotte*” also shows understanding towards Charlotte, deprived of marriage and motherhood owing to her physical appearance. McClellan argues that, because she could not fulfil the roles traditionally assigned to women in her society, “Charlotte sought out a replacement in the realm of business. But this success, rather than compensating for her poor personal appearance, serves to exaggerate her abnormality, her difference from ‘normal’ women” (85). Furthermore, McClellan believes that the criticism of Charlotte as a “monstrous

leviathan” is a suggestion of “not only a fear of social mobility and the destabilization of the Irish middle-class, but it also implies a cultural fear of women in positions of economic and social power” (84). Accordingly, Charlotte is resented by her most of her neighbours and acquaintances as “a result of her outwitting them in business ventures” (McClellan 84).

Finally, Donald McNamara’s chapter “*The Real Charlotte: The Exclusive Myth of Somerville and Ross*” found in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* parallels *The Real Charlotte* with some classical Irish myths with a “the older man-loves-younger-who-loves-another man theme,” although it insists on how

the noteworthy aspect of the love triangle theme in *The Real Charlotte*, however, is that the older person who is smitten with desire, and who therefore drives much of the action, is a woman, Charlotte Mullen, and the younger person who is the object of her desire is a man, Roddy Lambert. (357)

In this text, McNamara argues that in *The Real Charlotte* “the Dysarts can be seen as the metaphorical model of the debilitation, dissolution, and desiccation of Anglo-Ireland” while Charlotte Mullen “stands as the grasping, ruthless individual from any religious or ethnic background who rises to the top by standing on the heap of rubble that is composed of everything and everyone around her” (356-357). Once more, it is noted that Charlotte is “portrayed very early in the book as grasping, cruel, and vindictive” (McNamara 360). In this analysis, that takes a look at Charlotte’s failed romantic interest in Lambert, he is however more to blame than other scholars have pointed out; Lambert uses Charlotte and her affection for him, “and he views Charlotte’s feelings more in reference to manipulating them so that she will lend him money than to returning them with equal intensity” (McNamara 361). It is no surprise that Charlotte would resent him and turn into a powerful enemy who would try to cause his downfall.

To conclude, criticism of the spinster in *The Real Charlotte* can be summarised as presenting the character of Charlotte Mullen as a strong, unattractive, ruthless single woman trying to rise socially by taking advantage of the downfall of the Big Houses.² The main difference in the treatment of this character lies in whether authors acknowledge the valid reasons why she acts this way, or whether they just dismiss her as the villain of the story and a bitter, jealous woman with a corrupted heart.

² The Big Houses were the country estates of upper class of Anglo-Irish landowners, known as the Protestant Ascendancy. Their decline was partly caused by land reforms after the Great Famine of the 1840s and the Land War of the 1880s which enabled tenants to purchase land from their landlords.

In contrast, as mentioned above, Mildred Lathbury and her status as an unmarried woman is judged less harshly among critics of *Excellent Women*. According to Hope Howell Hodgkins's article "Stylish Spinsters: Spark, Pym, and the Postwar Comedy of the Object," in Barbara Pym's fiction "the spinster often takes pride of place as never before" (523-524). In *Excellent Women*, readers witness how "the spinster – usually the object of pity, neglect, or scorn – becomes the subject of a novel" (Hodgkins 524). Mildred Lathbury is a modest, realistic character – "a spinster surprised by her own longings" – who has an "all-too-conscious sense of herself as a potential object of ridicule" (Hodgkins 525) and does not think so highly of herself as to become obnoxious. Mildred, whose "limited romantic expectations" are typical of "post-World War II fiction," pines after "an exciting, unattainable object" as she longs for "her handsome and charming neighbor Rocky" but, ultimately, "must settle for less" (Hodgkins 532). This corresponds with the idea that "spinsterhood traditionally suggests lack and frustration" and that, as was the case with many other postwar spinsters, Mildred's life is "small" and "their stories conclude in minor keys" (Hodgkins 535-536). Yet Mildred's lack of ties and married responsibilities "may also imply the freedom to define oneself" (Hodgkins 535). While it is true that she "looks forward and so perhaps succeeds in breaking out of the spinsterish stereotype of the 'excellent woman'" Mildred also learns that "'becoming minor' and living a life of trivial satisfactions is no great tragedy" (Hodgkins 536, 541).

Pym's not pressuring her female characters into marriage is also discussed in Lynn Veach Sadler's article "Spinsters, Non-Spinsters, and Men in the World of Barbara Pym." While Pym acknowledges "the drab, pathetic-seeming lives of her contemporary middle-class English-men ... and women" she watches them with a "nonjudging, reporting eye" (Sadler 141). There is no real criticism of spinsterhood in *Excellent Women*; simply, "Pym's fictional world teems with spinsters" because "here is England as it really is" (Sadler 142). Furthermore, Pym's heroines "are seldom old maids because they have no other choice" (Sadler 142), as can be seen in Mildred, who has potential suitors in Julian and Everard. However, there is "a certain animus between married and unmarried women that has its effect in turn on the stereotype of the spinster," as married or widowed women question what women do if they do not marry (Sadler 148).

In her essay "Women Victimised by Fiction: living and loving in the novels by Barbara Pym" Barbara Brothers also asks: "what of those who never light a flame in a man's

heart? ... Are their lives needless stories?" (61). Although Pym's 'excellent women' such as Mildred have "no romantic aspirations" their stories do not necessarily pale in comparison to married women's since, "if the women in Pym's novels do marry, their husbands are neither passionate nor profound, neither great lovers nor great thinkers" (Brothers 62). *Excellent Women* has the purpose of showing readers that marriage often only consists of "[loving] and [serving] as the mirror for beings who are so frequently dull, self-absorbed, and pretentious" that it "may be an experience a woman could do without" (Brothers 62). In Pym's works, romantic idealizations of love are mocked; being married to a man often "lacks the rewards of love and meaning that adolescent romantic fantasies project for it" and "is little different from the life of the spinsters of the church who 'dote' upon the clergy" (Brothers 62). Thus, in her novels Pym emphasises that "fiction should cease portraying an idealised version of love" since "women who look for romance and excitement do not find it" (Brothers 69). Yet, despite of this recognition that marriage is not ideal, "little has changed in the contemporary world: women are still psychic victims of ... a self-serving, male-created myth that a woman fulfils herself only through love" (Brothers 63). Pym's defence of Mildred is that she is one of "those who have been ignored by fiction and by history, those who have neither jobs of importance nor loved ones who depend upon them" but are, nevertheless, "worthy of being attended to" (Brothers 77).

Paying special attention to those ignored by fiction is what John Halperin's essay "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes" calls Pym's "deep sympathy for the hapless fate of the undowried, unmarried woman" (206). Halperin argues that Pym's works "are funny, but no one in them is very happy" (213), which is clear in *Excellent Women* and the protagonist's indecision as to whether marriage is desirable or not. Mildred, faced with men who are both "overbearing and egotistical" and "weak and incompetent, dependent for their survival from day to day upon the unselfish and untiring support of exhausted and harassed ... women" (Halperin 202), is neither fully satisfied with her single life nor does she expect to find happiness in marriage. In the end, she "regarded men with affection, yes, but also with wariness, cynicism, and some contempt" (Halperin 212).

This ambivalence toward married life, often found in Pym's fiction, is described as well in Mary Strauss-Noll's "Love and Marriage in the Novels." Many of Pym's single women, such as Mildred, "seek marriage (or at least yearn for it) while realising that it has drawbacks" (Strauss-Noll 73). Pym's heroines may be "aware that most of the men in their

lives are not exactly prizes” yet “it is taken for granted that marriage should be women’s goal, and they are considered failures if they do not achieve it” (Strauss-Noll 73). Consequently, in *Excellent Women* there are “moments when we pity Mildred Lathbury” for not having anyone to love and not being content with her solitude (Strauss-Noll 75). After all, Mildred “wants what most human beings crave: to love and be loved in return” and feels the pain of not being anyone’s most important person (Strauss-Noll 75). As a single woman who failed to fulfil society’s expectations of what a woman ought to be, “she is considered by others to have inferior status and must suffer the often patronising and sometimes cruel treatment of married women” (Strauss-Noll 75). Yet Mildred does want marriage; she has “mixed feelings for the anthropologist Everard Bone” and she is either “beginning to like him, or her need to be ‘first’ with someone is prompting her to show an interest,” which prompts her to accept his second invitation to cook for him (Strauss-Noll 76). However, when “Everard asks her ... if she will help him read the proofs and make the index of the book he is writing,” Mildred’s reaction “is completely devoid of all romance” (Strauss-Noll 77). What *Excellent Women* exemplifies is that Pym “was neither a man-hater nor a frustrated old maid, nor was she opposed to marriage”; she merely “saw advantages and disadvantages in both states” (Strauss-Noll 80).

Similarly, in her article “Jane or Prudence? Barbara Pym's Single Women, Female Fulfilment and Career Choices in the ‘Age of Marriages’” Estella Tincknell argues that “Pym’s novels repeatedly suggest that the postwar marriage and the emotional work women were supposed to put into it are really too much trouble to bother with” (36). In *Excellent Women*, Mildred is represented “as emotionally detached from, rather than accidentally marginalised by, the nuclear family” that rose in importance in the 1950s (Tincknell 37). While Pym’s early success “coincides with the cultural moment of the nuclear family” her writing “consistently distances itself – and us as readers – from the nuclear ideal,” centred as it is around unmarried women that do not always adhere to the romantic and marital ideal (Tincknell 31). Mildred, for instance, is “acutely conscious of [her] exclusion from the socially normative model of postwar femininity – the housewife and mother” while also being able to “reflect on this with humour and a strong sense of the absurd” (Tincknell 35). Mildred is aware of

her social marginality, but also enjoys it as a space of some (limited) autonomy outside the usual social expectations: her apparent exclusion from the conventionally approved marital model is actually a space of freedom. (Tincknell 40-41)

As a typical Pym heroine, Mildred is “aware of – and knowing about – [her] degree of autonomy and the costs involved in surrendering it in marriage” (Tincknell 42). Ultimately, readers do not have to choose between spinsters and married women, just “to recognise the complexity and the contingency of their options in the ‘age of marriages’” (Tincknell 43).

Again, this idea of spinsterhood as a valid alternative to marriage is found in Jeffrey Peer’s “Hot Spinsters: Revisiting Barbara Pym’s Virtuous Style.” Peer argues that in Pym’s world “what it might mean to live ‘a full life’ ... finds a perfect embodiment in the figure of the unmarried, not-so-innocent, church-going lady, whose life is neither full nor empty, but simply a life” (97). Without sentimentalizing them or “turn[ing] them into feminist heroes,” Pym makes her “unmarried, stoical women escape ... the marriage plot and live, to a degree, independently” (Peer 97). Therefore, readers see Mildred struggle “to defend the personal freedom of having her own flat, and to organize a social life, ‘a full life,’ outside the institution of marriage and almost entirely independent of men” (Peer 104). Throughout the novel, and even in its ambiguous ending, “Mildred seems to want to avoid the traditional gender roles of a conventional marriage” as she “vacillates between wanting her possible matches and wanting to escape from them” (Peer 104-105). Yet it is not the possible refusal of the marriage plot that is interesting about Mildred’s mixed feelings, but “that ‘spinsterhood’ does not mean remaining alone,” because Mildred has a group of female friends and acquaintances around her and does not need a man to have companionship (Peer 106).

Finally, Katherine Anne Ackley’s essay “Proving One’s Worth: The Importance of Marriage in the World of Barbara Pym” also questions the desirability of being married in Pym’s fictional world. Ackley argues that “although many of Barbara Pym’s characters want to be married, her portrayal of marriage makes one wonder why they bother” (132). On the one hand, Pym depicts men as “ineffectual, childish creatures who want women to be little more than domestic servants and clerical help, believing such services are their due and taking for granted that women should devote themselves exclusively to their needs” (Ackley 132). On the other hand, “women are defined almost entirely in relationship to men, most having accepted the prevailing social belief that a woman is not fulfilled until she has married” (Ackley 132). However, Pym contests this view using comedy “by creating unmarried central characters who, despite their reduced social status, are strong, self-sufficient women; by portraying married women as disappointed and disillusioned; and by

intimating that widows enjoy the best position of all” (Ackley 132). As other authors have discussed, Ackley states that “Pym’s spinsters feel ambivalent about entering relationships” despite societal expectations that women ought to marry, and those who do not are seen negatively (133). Therefore, it follows that in *Excellent Women* “having failed to marry, Mildred has failed as a woman” (Ackley 136). Nevertheless, she is not too eager to marry, since “the marriages themselves are not particularly comforting or loving” (Ackley 139).

What all the cited works on *Excellent Women* have in common is their emphasis on Barbara Pym’s portrayal of Mildred as a spinster who, in spite of her longings for love, has decided that marriage is not as idyllic as fiction presents it after all. As Ackley explains, “the problem in Pym’s world is that there are no good men, that society defined women’s worth in terms of their ability to marry, and that marriages themselves usually turn out to be unsatisfactory” (143). Pym repeatedly rejects Victorian notions of spinsterhood and marriage by “[reclaiming] the figure of the unmarried old woman, affirming female solitude as a life choice” and “[denying] that the ‘dramatic love affairs of history or fiction’ were ever anything but fairy tales, at least for the Mildred Lathburys of the world” (Peer 105, 109). Thus, the ambiguous ending of the novel is seen as an optimistic and potentially happy one, since Mildred has a chance of leading a fulfilled life – whether that means marrying Everard or not.

1.3. Methodology

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study which follows a comparative approach, as two literary works were analysed in order to understand a particular social issue (the perception of single women in the Anglo-Irish and English societies) and observe its evolution from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In order to fulfil the objectives presented above, primary and secondary bibliographic sources were used. The primary sources are Edith Somerville and Martin Ross’s novel *The Real Charlotte* (1894) and Barbara Pym’s novel *Excellent Women* (1952). As secondary bibliographic sources, this paper relies on scholarly articles, critical essays, and books discussing the topic of spinsterhood and the position of women in Anglo-Irish and British society between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

First, this paper provides a brief overview of the historical and social context in which the works were written, focusing on the attitudes and expectations surrounding spinsters and

unmarried women during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, this study offers a close reading of the representation of spinsters in *The Real Charlotte*; the issue of gender inequality in the male-dominated society of the novel will be addressed in order to highlight the obstacles women – particularly, unmarried women who did not have the protection of a man – faced in the Anglo-Irish society of the late nineteenth century. Third, spinsterhood in *Excellent Women* will be examined, paying attention to themes related to marriage and female independence and observing the ways in which Mildred is portrayed and whether her gender and unmarried status prevents her from living a fulfilled life. Finally, a comparative analysis of the figure of the spinster and the idea of female autonomy and agency in both novels will be carried out in order to establish any differences in treatment, acceptance, and stereotyping of single women between the 1890s in Ireland and the 1950s in England.

Throughout this paper, a sociological approach to literature with emphasis on feminism was adopted to see whether Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte* and Pym's *Excellent Women* challenge gender stereotypes and societal expectations or, on the contrary, reinforce existing gender roles and ideas of womanhood at the time. Furthermore, this feminist perspective helped highlight the agency and autonomy of unmarried female characters who are often dismissed or marginalised by society. In short, the following pages acknowledge the historical and social context in which the literary works were written, and how women were viewed and treated between the 1890s and the 1950s. The limited opportunities available to women will be discussed, as well as the societal expectations of marriage and the stigma surrounding single women. Through a close reading of *The Real Charlotte* and *Excellent Women* it will be analysed how the portrayal of spinsterhood in literature perpetuates or challenges gender stereotypes and expectations, and what options were available for women who could not, or chose not to, get married.

2. Single Women in the 19th and 20th Centuries in Ireland and England

Since “marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman” (de Beauvoir 415), the next pages will focus on what it meant for women to be either married or single, and to what extent their marital status depended on economic or social factors. Assuming that “marriages ... are not generally founded upon love” (de Beauvoir 423) means that there must have been other reasons for women to seek a husband, mostly “because of pressure put on them, because it is the only sensible solution, [or] because they want a normal existence

as wife and mother” (de Beauvoir 423). This chapter offers an introduction to the topic of single women in the Anglo-Irish society of the nineteenth century and in the English society of the early to mid-1900s: what marriage entailed for women, what alternatives – if any – there were, and what motivated women to get married.

In Ireland, “nineteenth-century women of the middle and upper classes were not expected to earn their own living, but to remain dependent forever upon a man, initially their father, later their husband” (Cullen 33). This meant that women relied completely on marriage to provide them with financial stability and a place in society. Furthermore, since “a married woman could not own property in her own right; upon marriage a woman’s property became her husband’s” (Cullen 34), women remained dependent upon men even after marriage.

It is then not surprising that “economic circumstances conspired to make Ireland an increasingly male-dominated society after the Famine” (Cullen 218). Only men inherited and owned land, and “the patriarchal society that emerged post-Famine was distinguished by an increasing emphasis on larger farms, land becoming the principal criterion for status” (Cullen 218). Thus, “within the context of property, lineage and inheritance becoming important concerns for the family, the position of women deteriorated and the authority of fathers and the position of sons within the family grew stronger” (Cullen 218). As if this were not enough to diminish women’s place in society, “another factor that promoted patriarchalism was the strong desire to preserve the identification of the family name with the land” (Cullen 218). Women such as Charlotte Mullen in *The Real Charlotte*, therefore, would have no chance at obtaining a prominent place in a society that favoured sons, husbands, and fathers, and pushed women aside.

Generally, in the nineteenth century in Ireland women were relegated to roles within the home. Even in the twentieth century, years after the publication of the Big House novels, “the 1937 Constitution emphasises that the primary role of women in Irish society was that of wife and mother” (Chang 46). As a result, women who failed to fulfil this role and remained single and childless had failed as well to integrate themselves into society. At the time when *The Real Charlotte* was written, there was a “clear association of women’s singlehood ... with social inadequacy and exclusion” (Chang 46). The main character in Somerville and Ross’s novel, Charlotte Mullen, is a so-called “spinster.” The word “spinster” refers to “a woman who is beyond the usual age for marriage, in other words, an

old maid” (Chang 47), a concept that spread across most countries in western Europe. As marriage tendencies began to change towards the turn of the century, mostly due to economic constraints – which is also seen in *The Real Charlotte*, as Charlotte is unable to marry Lambert in her youth owing to her lack of financial means –,

the resulting growth in social anxiety due to the rising number of single women transformed the spinster in media and literature into a negative caricature implying women who are typically middle-aged, eccentric, ill-natured, selfish or even evil. (Chang 47)

Hence, older, unmarried women were viewed as suspicious characters whose motives were always questioned, their every move analysed and criticised.

Marriage had traditionally been a way to secure social stability and gender roles. Since “the status quo of gender politics is secured once women are forced into marriage and family, and therefore have to obey,” any woman falling “outside this domain” would “risk either being demonised or expelled as social outcasts so as to intimidate younger women into not following a similar path” (Chang 47). Given that the goal of society was to ensure unions between men and women, and to encourage married couples to procreate, young women would be warned of the negative consequences of failing to procure a husband. This was effectively done through literature, as is clearly seen in *The Real Charlotte*. Typically, in literary texts “a spinster may be represented stereotypically as a comic, grotesque, ugly, dull woman, or as an alienated misfit who displays a pitiful prudery and who is incapable of a human connection due to her ‘failure’ to achieve a relationship with a man” (Chang 47). As a consequence of their unattractive qualities “people either dislike or fear them,” which results in their exclusion (Chang 48). Moreover, “the image of a pathetic, neurotic, single woman who envies and longs to be like other normal women is another aspect of the stereotype” (Chang 48). This is, once again, plainly seen in Charlotte’s envy³ of Francie in *The Real Charlotte*.

All of this served to strengthen the belief that “a single woman’s life is never complete without marriage” (Chang 48). Consequently, “the idea that a single woman can enjoy a fulfilled life outside marriage is inevitably looked upon with suspicion by the general majority within society” (Chang 48). This was a wide-spread belief in the Anglo-Irish society of the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the literature of the time. There are plenty

³ Charlotte is jealous of Francie because the girl possesses an “aggressive beauty” (*Charlotte* 200) which Charlotte never had, enabling Francie to secure the affection of the man Charlotte had desired for years without success.

of stories that depict single women as “prudish or evil, alienated monsters, or as social mothers” (Chang 55). These texts “reflect a bigotry against female celibacy and demonstrate the imposition of ideologically charged as well as socially imposed roles upon women in a male-dominated Irish social context” (Chang 55). It is undeniable that Anglo-Irish society was sexist and centred around men, since no such criticism of single men was present either in literature or in real life. Men were allowed to be successful in financial as well as social terms regardless of their marital status, whereas women were under pressure to find a husband and fulfil the only roles available to them.

Any women who opted out of marriage and chose to educate themselves and live independently – that is, free from gender constraints – were also viewed with suspicion. As Chang argues,

the malice displayed routinely by society towards single women may also be interpreted as a reaction against women who appear intelligent or independent, are not content to play a passive role or otherwise do not conform to the socially appropriate roles of submissive wife or mother. (55)

While intelligent, educated men were praised and regarded with respect, and could access positions of power within society, women did not enjoy the same privilege. A woman’s place was thought to be at home, as a loving wife and devoted mother – an “angel in the house”⁴ –, not as an independent being who succeeds without male support. In a society where women still had fewer rights than men, where their voices were not heard and their opinions not respected, any individual failing to become part of the controlled system of marriage and motherhood would be regarded with fear and dislike.

In England, the last years of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a version of femininity that challenged traditional views of gender roles: the New Woman. A “new woman” was a “modern female who recognized and frequently fought against the inequities women faced ... and who did not regard marriage as the sole or best career for all women” (Gorsky 68-69). However, the apparition of this new female figure did not change drastically the position of women in society, since “the New Women were also few in number and were scorned and ridiculed by a large majority of men and women alike” (Gorsky 69). Traditional ideas of family and marriage were still prevalent in the years leading up to the First World War (1914-1918), and “to read the typical popular novel written by a woman during these

⁴ Term based on Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House,” which defines the traditional Victorian domestic and gender values an ideal wife has.

changing years is to be told that virtually all women, consciously or unconsciously, desire only one career – marriage” (Gorsky 69). When authors offered alternatives to marriage these were “few and, among heroines, either spring from or lead to disaster” (Gorsky 69). Mainstream literature thus seemed to contribute to the belief that “for many if not most women, marriage is the center of life and alternatives to marriages are considered only as stopgap measures before – or between – marriages or when marriage is impossible” (Gorsky 84).

Consequently, in spite of the promising arrival of the New Woman, the turn of the century did not see a great improvement in women’s lives and opportunities outside of marriage. In the 1920s, English women’s magazines “attempted to convince women that marriage, after all, was their most important job” (Holtzman 42). While in the 1930s in England there was an “acceptance that many women would work for their living up to their early twenties,” there was also a belief that “they remained as anxious as ever for the pleasures of home and family life” (Pugh 210). This meant that while 1930s feminists “remained keen to advance women’s opportunities for employment [they] recognised that the majority of women were unlikely to be primarily interested in a career – rather, they would continue to be wives and mothers” (Pugh 250). Even though in the interwar period “the traditional imbalance between the sexes in British society had long meant that marriage was denied to large numbers of women,” becoming a wife was still “regarded as the only proper calling” (Pugh 222). The urgency to find a husband did not decrease among women; indeed, “from 1930 a greater proportion of all women began to marry, and the trend was particularly marked in the second half of the decade ... apart, that is, from an interruption caused by the Second World War” (Pugh 222).

The prevalence of marriage in English society did not falter in the following decade. In the years of the Second World War (1939-1945) “the widespread separation of married couples, the extra-marital affairs, and the growing number of marriages hastily contracted by young partners after fleeting affairs resulted in an unusually high level of marital breakdown” (Pugh 270). Notwithstanding, and although “the marriage rate dropped sharply during 1941-4, ... thereafter it rose above the pre-war level and continued to rise until 1972” (Pugh 270). Proof of the popularity of marriage after the war, which “helped to keep the birth rate in Britain surprisingly buoyant,” is “the famous baby boom of 1946-8” (Pugh 270). The marriage rate after 1945 shows that “men were keen to return to home and family life”

and “women were on the whole anxious to withdraw from war work to settle down and start families” (Pugh 271). Moreover, after 1945 there was a “continued trend in favour of marriage and motherhood” as women were able to combine careers and domestic life (Pugh 283). Furthermore, while “society was becoming more relaxed” about certain issues such as having children out of wedlock or divorce during the war, “if war weakened moral attitudes in the short run, it also generated a moral backlash which was still making itself felt in the 1950s” (Pugh 271), which would explain societal pressure for women to get married.

After the Second World War “the deliberate encouragement of family life became one of the central objectives of the welfare state” (Pugh 294). As a consequence, in the late 1940s and early 1950s “the institution of marriage continued to gain in popularity in Britain” (Pugh 293). The 1950s “represented a return to ‘traditional’ forms of femininity” in which “the family as a site of intersection between the postwar welfare state and an emergent consumer culture based around an intensified domesticity” was emphasised (Tincknell 32). Similar to previous decades, “one of the defining discourses of the ‘long 1950s’ was the renewed emphasis on home and family as a woman’s true career” (Tincknell 37). This period was the setting of Barbara Pym’s novel *Excellent Women*, in which readers see this persistent insistence on marriage as a woman’s most desired goal; nevertheless, as the following chapters will show, Pym’s heroine Mildred Lathbury treats remaining single as an acceptable and even appealing option for a woman. Through her protagonist’s reluctance to get married and her freedom and independence as a single woman – but who also often dreams of having someone in her life – Pym’s work problematises

an idea of the 1950s as a period in which the nuclear family is uncontestedly hegemonic [yet also] privilege[s] a cultural conservatism that insists on enduring continuities between the past and the present, thus reminding us that the modernisation of femininity also involved struggles over autonomy and claims to citizenship. (Tincknell 43)

The world pictured in Pym’s works is one in which “the prevailing view of women at this time, as illustrated in popular women’s magazines, was that the vast majority aspired only to marriage and motherhood” (Beaumont 2). When considering that “over two thirds of women aged twenty to sixty-four identified as full-time housewives in 1951 it is perhaps not surprising that this period has often been regarded as a time when women conformed to an ideology of domesticity” (Beaumont 2). However, Pym challenges this assumption and shows that “women during the 1950s were not just housewives and mothers but were also workers, ... consumers, spinsters, widows, lovers, divorcees, ... and citizens” (Beaumont 2). Through characters such as Mildred Lathbury, Pym also suggests that, even though “the

primary role associated with women throughout the decade continued to be that of a wife and mother ... [it] would be wrong to assume ... that women in the 1950s were compliant and complicit in attempting to live up to these stereotypical roles” (Beaumont 3). In post-war Britain there were many women associations that campaigned for gender equality, women rights – both for married and unmarried women – and social and political representation. These groups “directly challenged the myth of the happy housewife and in its place offered a more modern interpretation of domesticity” (Beaumont 12), similarly to what Pym does in her novel *Excellent Women*, as will be seen in the following chapters.

3. *The Real Charlotte*: Charlotte Mullen

Somerville and Ross’s 1894 novel *The Real Charlotte* is, above all, a novel about the Anglo-Irish rural society of the late nineteenth century. The novel presents “a society not merely in decline, but in the advanced stages of disintegration” (Kreilkamp 112), as “the viability of the Big House and traditional systems of land tenure came under specific attack in the late nineteenth century” (Kreilkamp 112). Changes in possession of land in Ireland came about as “by the 1890s, parliamentary legislation had begun to shift control of Irish land from the ascendancy class to the tenantry” (Kreilkamp 112). This is explained through the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, which “encouraged landlords to sell their property to tenants by reducing the interest rate on loans and by extending the time of repayment to sixty-eight years” (Kreilkamp 112). Throughout *The Real Charlotte* one can perceive the “powerful appeal that Anglo-Irish tradition held for [Somerville and Ross]” (Kreilkamp 113), since the Somervilles and the Martins were “long-established, Protestant, Anglo-Irish, Ascendancy families” (Cronin 137). It is the decline of these Big Houses that is at the core of *The Real Charlotte*, and from which characters such as Charlotte Mullen try to benefit.

Charlotte is presented to readers as a cunning and manipulative person trying to rise socially in a traditional patriarchal rural Anglo-Irish society. Charlotte has three main goals in the novel that would elevate her social status and satisfy her personal desires: first, she wishes for her cousin Francie to marry the Dysart heir; second, she wants to move into Miss Duffy’s farm to become the mistress of what was one of the biggest manors in the village; third, she wants to marry Lambert, the only man she has loved in her life. Charlotte’s efforts in attaining a familiar connection with the Dysarts are reflected in how, although she thinks her cousin Francie to be “more trouble than she was worth” and she would have sent her

back to her family in Dublin, she keeps the young woman under her care and helps Francie attract Mr Dysart's interest, as "to have Sir Christopher Dysart of Bruff ... as a cousin was worthy of patience" (*Charlotte* 154-155). Charlotte's obsession with Lambert – which, as will be discussed later, is one of the reasons for her wicked behaviour – is clearly seen in how she deals with his wife. Although Charlotte is a dear friend to Mrs Lambert, Miss Mullen does not confirm Lambert's wife's suspicions of his romantic interest in Francie out of sympathy, but to ensure Lambert keeps a distance from the young woman of whom Charlotte is jealous. On hearing Mrs Lambert confide in Charlotte her fears that Mr Lambert cares deeply for Francie, Charlotte looks at Mrs. Lambert "with eyes that saw, but held no pity for, her abundant tears" as she thought the matter to be "far more serious ... to her, than to that contemptible whining creature, whose snuffling gasps were exasperating her almost beyond the bounds of endurance" (*Charlotte* 159). Charlotte ignores her friend's pain as she coldly considers what Mrs Lambert's revelations mean to her.

Charlotte's allegedly evil nature is made more evident in the tragic episode that results in Mrs Lambert's death. After having observed her husband for a period of time, Mrs Lambert assures Charlotte that Lambert does not have feelings for Francie; yet, although "it might be imagined that Charlotte would have taken pleasure in Mrs. Lambert's security, inasmuch as it implied her own," Charlotte insists on Lambert's guilt as "it was intolerable to her that her friend should be blind to the fact that tortured her night and day" (*Charlotte* 179). Here Charlotte is presented as selfish, as she is more concerned with sharing her pain with Mrs Lambert than with enabling her friend to trust her husband. Furthermore, Charlotte tells Mrs Lambert that her husband is "fascinated with that girl" Francie, and that the young woman is flirting with him although she does not care for him. Mrs Lambert defends her husband, yet Charlotte reiterates her accusations and "annoy[s] [Mrs Lambert] when [she] knows it's so bad for [her]" (*Charlotte* 180) to the point that Mrs Lambert, whose ill health could not take such agitation, has a deadly shock after Charlotte urges her to read letters between Lambert and Francie that confirm the man's infidelity. When Mrs Lambert collapses, Charlotte, who had instinctively gone to fetch some drops to revive her friend, "suddenly stopped," was "deftly and quickly replacing letters and photographs" and "slipped the keys into Mrs. Lambert's pocket" before administering the drops and ringing the bell to alert someone (*Charlotte* 183). While Charlotte did not cause her friend's death – it was, after all, Lambert's betrayal in his relationship to Francie that gave such pain to his wife –,

she prioritised her own preservation over Mrs Lambert's health, as Charlotte only aided her after having hidden all evidence that Lambert's private letters had been read.

This incident is probably the most obvious example of how Charlotte, a single woman in her forties whose nemesis is the young and gracious heroine Francie, is depicted as a self-serving, unrelenting individual hungry for power and wealth. However, this paper defends that she may actually be a victim, as she is undermined because of being unmarried and neglected and vilified by the society she lives in. Thus, the following pages are dedicated to the analysis of Charlotte's position in *The Real Charlotte*, that is, how she is portrayed, what her goals are, what obstacles she encounters and why. Ultimately, the aim of this section is to show that, more than any flaws in her personality or her undisguised bitterness, it is her status as an unmarried woman over forty attempting to thrive in a world dominated by men that proves problematic.

As stated above, one of the main objectives of this paper is to demonstrate that Charlotte's spinsterhood causes her to be undermined and her value as a businesswoman to be ignored. Were she married, she would have occupied a more honourable place in society, yet without a husband by her side she will always be pushed aside and even criticised if she attempts to rise socially. Her aspirations of owning land and being financially successful are seen as selfish and ambitious, while a man's efforts to do the same would be praised. In fact, one often sees male characters in literature

guilty of embezzling inheritances, doing shady business deals, and even murdering other characters, but ... few of them are treated to the kind of contempt, distaste, and vilification as Charlotte Mullen – solely on the account of her status as a woman. (McClellan 84-85)

Charlotte refuses to remain in the domestic realm assigned to women and enters into “traditionally forbidden discourses like business,” through which she “breaks down typical gender ... expectations, and, as a result, she becomes a dangerous force to those who uphold those structures” (McClellan 82-83). Far from being treated as equal to the men she competes against or works with, Charlotte is dehumanised due to “her ugliness ... as well as her powerful temper, business acumen, and social ambitions,” traits that her male opponents may show without repercussions (McClellan 85).

Throughout the novel, Charlotte, a ruthless woman whose “plots” and “tricks” are widely known in the village (*Charlotte* 176), is usually described in derogatory terms – most of which centre around her appearance and age –, and never shown any real sympathy. Throughout the narrative, emphasis is placed on how the sick Miss Duffy is driven out of

her farm so Charlotte can take over; when discussing with Lambert whether Miss Duffy will leave her property Charlotte does not care about her health but “venomously” suggests evicting her, “the spirit of her attorney grandfather gleaming in her eyes” (*Charlotte* 155). Consequently, Charlotte is accused of being the cause of Miss Duffy’s financial trouble, as even though it is “Lambert [who] will have [Miss Duffy] out of the road ... if [she does not] give him the rent” she owes, it is said it is Charlotte who “wants the farm ... and it’s her that’s driving Lambert” (*Charlotte* 170). Charlotte would be after the farm “to go and live in it, and to let on she’s as grand as the other ladies” in the area (*Charlotte* 170), and she would stop at nothing to achieve her goal. As a result of her constant scheming and apparent lack of compassion for others, Charlotte’s servants believe that “it’s little sharity⁵ ye’ll get from that one” (*Charlotte* 170). Furthermore, Charlotte’s temper is feared by almost everyone; for instance, when on one occasion Charlotte met her washerwoman, she addressed her “in a manner that brought every other washerwoman to her door, and made each offer up thanks to her most favoured saint that she was not employed by Miss Mullen” (*Charlotte* 52). It is also not uncommon that someone is reported as seeing, “with unfeigned terror, the approach of Charlotte” or admits to being “so afraid of Charlotte” (*Charlotte* 62, 144).

This contrasts with the way other characters are depicted; for example, Francie – Charlotte’s antithesis – is consistently portrayed as graceful, attractive, innocent, and deserving of attention – all owing to her beauty and young age, which make her desirable and marriageable. While Francie is described as “extremely pretty” (*Charlotte* 2), Charlotte is said to have a “plain” face, with deep “lines about her prominent mouth and cheek” (*Charlotte* 6), and is “under no delusion as to her appearance” and “its hopeless character” (*Charlotte* 8). Charlotte is not “sweet and twenty” like Francie but “tough and forty” (*Charlotte* 52), and possesses a “singular ungracefulness” (*Charlotte* 67). When she is upset, it is said that Charlotte has “an expression that was the reverse of attractive” (*Charlotte* 13). At one point she is called a “disgusting creature,” while it is pointed out that her acquaintances are “always saying censorious things” about her (*Charlotte* 85). Her face is often described as “ugly” (*Charlotte* 182) and as having “leathery skin” (*Charlotte* 200),

⁵ In this paper the original language of *The Real Charlotte* is preserved, which reflects the dialect spoken by the Irish peasants.

while her figure is “bulky” (*Charlotte* 50). It is made clear throughout the novel that Charlotte had been, even in her youth, “beyond all question, ineligible” (*Charlotte* 156).

When observing both characters from the outside it is easy to understand why Francie is the favourite, given her natural charms. Yet Charlotte is more worthy of compassion once one takes into account her life and circumstances. A single woman who has passed the age of forty, Charlotte has had the misfortune of being a member of a society “where marriage is the only respectable status for a woman, where all efforts must go to achieving it, and not doing so is to be humiliated for the rest of one’s life” (Ryan 118). This makes her vulnerable, as her marital status will always be seen as a weakness in an otherwise strong person. Charlotte is able to fend for herself economically, proof of which is the property she acquires while her neighbours and acquaintances struggle financially, yet her personal life is far from being as successful. Rejected by the man she loves, who on two occasions chose a different bride, Charlotte had desired nothing but marriage. As Cronin puts it, Charlotte is “apparently victorious in all her dealings yet utterly defeated in what matters most to the heart of ‘the real Charlotte’, her hungry desire for Lambert” (147).

Indeed, Lambert never regards Charlotte in the way she wishes him to. He sees her as a friend, a reliable companion in whom he has “an ancient confidence” and “an ease in her society” (*Charlotte* 205). He believed her affections to be wholly his (*Charlotte* 205) without having to return them, and, knowing she will never refuse him, he asks for her help on numerous occasions – even when it comes to lending him money, which ultimately ruins their friendship. Lambert, who may have shown interest in Charlotte in their youth but chose to marry a wealthier woman, has now no intention of being romantically involved with Charlotte and, when she implies a union between them, he “found something repellent in the thought of having to diplomatised with such affections as Charlotte’s” (*Charlotte* 155). He openly flirted with Francie, even when Mrs Lambert was alive, and married the young girl instead of his old friend once he found himself a free man again. It is not unexpected, then, that, on reading about Lambert’s new wife, Charlotte would suffer “the hardest blow that life could give her” and that she would feel nothing but “rage, and hatred, and thwarted passion” (*Charlotte* 238).

It may be this defeat in the field of love that has turned Charlotte into the seemingly cold and heartless woman she is when the action of *The Real Charlotte* begins. The first glimpse readers get of Charlotte is already quite unfavourable, as she is seen as showing no

sympathy to the dying Mrs Mullen. Charlotte talks to her weakened, sick aunt “roughly” and without the patience and gentleness that is usually expected in someone’s last moments: “few people would think it worth their while to dispute the wandering futilities of an old dying woman, but even at this eleventh hour Charlotte could not brook the revolt of a slave” (*Charlotte* 7-8). Charlotte is also said to be involved – directly or indirectly – in the deaths of Mrs Lambert, Julia Duffy, and Francie, which makes readers perceive her as a dark, dangerous figure that brings misfortune to those around her – or, rather, to those standing in her way. Charlotte wished to purchase Miss Duffy’s farm, ignoring the fact – or taking advantage of it – that she was a sickly woman and not able to put up a fair fight. In an attempt to achieve a higher social and financial position than her current one, Charlotte was “to have [Julia’s] farm and [her] house that [her] grandfather built, thinking to even herself with the rest of the gentry” (*Charlotte* 176). Her plan eventually succeeds, and it is believed among the villagers that Miss Duffy’s being sent away from her home ultimately caused her death.

All of this serves to paint a picture of Charlotte as an evil, calculating woman. It is even said that “upon [her] birth bad fairies had shed their malign influence” (*Charlotte* 271). Throughout the novel, Charlotte is described as “ugly, bonhomous, managerial, grasping, intelligent, ruthlessly selfish ... a figure of cumulative evil whose lustful desire for Roddy Lambert makes her even more dangerous because more vulnerable” (Cronin 151). However, Charlotte’s position may be more understandable and relatable than her harsh portrayal suggests. While it is true that she is ambitious and “claws her way laboriously upward by every means at her disposal” (Cronin 148), her motives are justified when one considers what her personal circumstances are. Since she was “twice spurned by the man she loves,” as he married Lucy first because of a generous dowry that Charlotte did not possess, and then, after Lucy dies, he marries a younger woman “with the prettiness Charlotte does not have, even though [Francie] is without money” (Ryan 119-120), Charlotte is arguably entitled to her bitterness, which she was reminded of “each time [she] stood before her glass [and] her ugliness spoke to her of failure, and goaded her to revenge” (*Charlotte* 246). This revenge takes the form of loaning money to Lambert, and then refusing to help him when he gets into financial difficulties with his employers the Dysarts; however, this plan is “transformed into epic disaster ... when, as a consequence of these events, her cousin Francie, Lambert’s new wife and Charlotte’s rival or counter-heroine, is tragically killed” (Ryan 120). Nevertheless, while some blame Francie’s death directly on Charlotte, it was

the young girl's own lack of sense that caused the fatal incident, as she drove her horse in front of a funeral march "heedless of the etiquette that required that she ... should stop their horses till the funeral passed" (*Charlotte* 300).

In spite of her negative portrayal and the efforts put into making her appear disagreeable, cruel, and resentful, Charlotte is an intelligent woman with a number of positive traits that would have made her a prominent member of a more modern, less misogynistic society. For instance, Charlotte is described as "a great and insatiable reader, surprisingly well acquainted with the classics of literature" who even read in French (*Charlotte* 18-19). Even a man such as Lambert must admit that "he had always been uncomfortably aware that [Charlotte] was intellectually his master, and ... he knew he could never outwit her" (*Charlotte* 263). Furthermore, while other characters show no common sense throughout the narrative – Francie being perhaps the best example of this, as she does not hesitate to put herself in compromising positions with unmarried, and possibly even engaged men, chases after Mr Hawkins while being married to Lambert, and causes the accident that kills her –, Charlotte remains composed in most occasions and makes rational decisions that result in her increasing her capital. Although it is not openly admitted by her friends and neighbours, Charlotte's blatant fault is being a spinster in a society that values marriage above all. Other female characters are less notorious and contribute significantly less to life in the small Irish community, such as Mrs Lambert – who is as uninteresting and plain as any person can be, and overall "a failure" (*Charlotte* 21) –, yet due to her marital status she is tolerated and "regarded with a certain regretful pity" (*Charlotte* 21). Francie, who is far from being an example of proper social conduct and manners, is treated with kindness and understanding based on her potential as a bride; she is young, beautiful, and charming, which ensures her finding a suitable husband and fulfilling the role that all women should aspire to. Lady Dysart, who married a much older man simply because of his fortune and title, is not criticised either as she is, after all, someone's respectable wife.

Only Charlotte is consistently judged throughout the whole novel. Her decisions and motives are often questioned, her appearance constantly commented on, her age never forgotten. To emphasise her ugliness animal imagery is used when describing how, on reading the news of Lambert's marriage to Francie, she tore a letter with her teeth and declared her hatred for her former friend "with a moan like some furious feline creature" (*Charlotte* 238). She is not supposed to have such emotional outbursts, as seen in the

narrator's criticism that "the weak side of Charlotte's nature was her ready abandonment of herself to fury," and when she does she is dehumanised by being compared to a "wild beast" (*Charlotte* 238). Charlotte's personal expression is thus restricted; as mentioned above, even characteristics that may be seen as positive in other people are perceived as negative in Charlotte. She is a force to be reckoned with, as Lambert exclaims at one point: "God help the man that's got to fight with Charlotte" (*Charlotte* 25). This clearly outlines Charlotte's strength and determination, two traits that all successful businesspeople ought to have, yet Lambert makes his statement sound derogatory, as if being a tough opponent were not desirable for a woman. Charlotte is portrayed as a "manipulator-in-chief," a "domineering and dangerous figure whose own comparatively humble origins give her a special understanding of the villager's mentality" (Cronin 147). While this is clearly negative, it also suggests her intelligence and ability to obtain what she wants and benefit from dealing with her acquaintances. Once again, traits that would be seen as positive in a man are criticised in a woman.

When comparing Charlotte's position to that of Lambert one sees a gender bias in treating her as the villain and ignoring the difficulty of her circumstances. While "the anti-heroic Roddy Lambert is considered to be socially acceptable because he is the agent of the Dysart family, the local major landowners," Charlotte is still "an untouchable" who only enjoys "some independence by the acquisition of some relative prosperity – at the price of miserliness – and the cultivation of her mind and wit by reading" (Ryan 118). Although Charlotte is Lambert's superior in terms of business acumen, since "her father was a land agent, and she helped Lambert unofficially in the office, very effectively," it is Lambert, as a man, who "got the post and the social standing that goes with it" (Ryan 120). Charlotte's female condition has prevailed her from accessing the position that would be rightfully hers were she a man; thus, "whilst Lambert's agency for the Dysart estate determined his social status, marriage is the only status marker available to women" and throughout the text it is made evident that Charlotte "cannot achieve either: her looks disbar her from marriage status and her sex from career status" (Ryan 120). Regardless of what she does and how successful she becomes in financial terms, Charlotte will always remain in a secondary position, relegated to a pitiable figure who, at the age of forty, was unable to secure herself a husband and who, owing to her unattractiveness, is highly unlikely to ever become a married woman

– which would be the only thing that would provide her with the place she wishes to occupy in society.

Charlotte Mullen is an intelligent, successful woman who manages to rise and grow economically in a male-dominated society in spite of her lack of a husband – which was almost necessary for women at the time, in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish society. She outsmarts Lambert, who believed himself to be superior to her and who used her feelings for him for his own profit, and she fulfils her financial ambitions when she buys the farm and land she had wanted throughout the novel. Her character, although not presented as likeable, deserves praise when considering how difficult it must have been for a woman to get ahead of other landlords and to own her own land, to make her fortune without male intervention, and to climb up the social ladder alone. Charlotte’s personal traits may not be the most desirable in a traditionally feminine woman, but her sense of business should be admirable to any female character who does not wish to depend on a man to make a living.

In spite of the criticism that Charlotte receives, it should be plain for any reader to see that she is an educated, smart woman who “had fought a losing battle against fate all her life” (*Charlotte* 209). She was rejected by the man she hoped to marry first due to her lack of wealth, later owing to her age and physical appearance. She is, arguably, entitled to the jealousy she would feel when faced with wealthier, prettier women who were usually favoured by men and would, in consequence, be Charlotte’s competitors. Readers ought not to forget how competitive nineteenth-century society was for women, as young girls were raised to find themselves a husband and any failure to do so resulted in social exclusion. There was no place in that society for spinsters, women who had, either by choice or due to bad luck, not fulfilled their expected role as wives and mothers. Unmarried women were constantly reminded of their second-class citizen status as they did not live up to societal expectations of what a woman ought to be, or what her place is. Therefore, Charlotte is presented as not belonging to her community in full right, as she is nobody’s wife and, as a consequence, has failed as a woman.

Yet although a woman’s marital status often determined how she was perceived by others it does not automatically mean that she is an evil character. Too often in literature unmarried women have been depicted as cruel, cold, and manipulative, *The Real Charlotte* being just one example of many. Charlotte is considered by most just a calculating, uncaring woman whose ambition has turned her into a selfish character who only thinks of her

financial gain and is not afraid to use others to achieve her goals. Whether this portrayal is accurate or not, or whether this witch-like figure that Charlotte is made out to be is a result of society's rejection of single women, is for readers to decide. This paper defends that Charlotte is not a monster; instead, she is a character whose love was twice rejected due to factors entirely out of her control – such as wealth, age, and beauty – and whose ambition was only criticised because she was a woman. Were she a man, her objective of purchasing land and becoming the biggest landlord in the area would probably be seen as unremarkable, yet her female condition determines that her place is at home and that she should aspire to be a wife, not a property owner.

In conclusion, Charlotte Mullen accurately represents the spinster who, lacking youth and good looks, will never be with the man she loves and, as a consequence of being single, will never be taken as seriously as those who do fulfil their assigned role in society. Although she is more capable than her male counterparts, her successes in business and managing of land are either ignored or treated as manipulation and ambition given that she is not an attractive woman and, therefore, she is presented as dislikeable. She is considered to be ruthless, cruel, cold, calculating, manipulative, and jealous of younger, more beautiful women – such as her cousin Francie; yet this analysis of her character fails to address the reasons behind her behaviour throughout the novel. If she is, in fact, a cold-hearted woman it is only because society made her so. Her love for Lambert is unrequited, her friends and acquaintances are threatened by her talent in business, and she is considered by all to be old and unattractive. Deprived of a high position in society and of the respect of those around her, Charlotte has no option but to play the role of the spiteful spinster who plots against other women in order to benefit from their disgrace. After reading *The Real Charlotte*, one cannot help but understand Charlotte's motives and her interest in purchasing property and stopping Francie from marrying the only man Charlotte has ever loved. The “real” Charlotte is not cruel, but misunderstood; not ruthless, but determined; not bitter, but unloved.

4. *Excellent Women*: Mildred Lathbury

While the concerns of the main characters of the two novels analysed here are similar – social acceptance, gender constraints, love, marriage, domestic and professional life –, the setting of Barbara Pym's 1952 novel *Excellent Women* differs greatly from that of *The Real Charlotte*. While Somerville and Ross wrote about the fall of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy in

a rural Ireland where there was fierce competition over land ownership, Pym's world is more urban and revolves mainly around the church, where most disagreements are about jumble sales, who decorates the altar for a special occasion, and who – and if – a clergyman should marry. *Excellent Women* is set in a small parish in London, and the women readers see in Pym's novel are not the mistress of a grand country house like Lady Dysart, nor landowners like Charlotte, nor city girls falling in love with soldiers in the countryside like Francie. Pym introduces readers to her "excellent women," the "church-fixated 'elderly ladies and dim spinsters' throughout England" that one often sees in comedies of manners (Sadler 142).

One of these "excellent women" is Mildred Lathbury, the protagonist of the novel, an intelligent and independent woman in her early thirties who does not entirely conform to mid-twentieth-century notions of femininity as she is neither married nor, apparently, looking for a husband. In fact, throughout the novel Mildred tends to reject the widely accepted idea that marriage is the only path to happiness and fulfilment as she suggests that her life may already be full with her job, friendships, and other responsibilities without adding marital concerns. Mildred, a woman with "no high qualifications" whose professional career consists of "part-time work at an organisation which helped impoverished gentlewoman" (*Excellent* 9), also keeps herself busy by going to church and taking her place "with the half-dozen middle-aged and elderly women who made up the weekday evening congregation" (*Excellent* 9), organising parish jumble sales, as well as looking after her friends the Malorys – Julian, a clergyman, and his sister Winifred. Mildred is at work from morning till lunchtime and "after that [she] was free, but [she] always seemed to find plenty to do" (*Excellent* 18). The following pages will determine whether Mildred is in fact thought of in her social circles as having a complete life without marriage, and if society's expectations of marriage influence Mildred's own personal desires in terms of relationships.

Pym's protagonist, "an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties," is an English clergyman's daughter who has lived independently since the death of her parents (*Excellent* 1). Mildred is first introduced to readers as having a sense of humour, as she points out how it is expected that she "find[s] herself involved or interested in other people's business" (*Excellent* 1) due to her single status, which sets the ironic tone of the novel and suggests that the following chapters will offer a humorous critique of 1950s society and gender roles and stereotypes. The first pages of *Excellent Women* already anticipate that Mildred's story is not one of romance or hopes of forming an attachment.

Mildred, who describes herself as “mousy and rather plain,” does not strike one as being a woman with romantic expectations, as she asserts that she is “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 [has she] ever thought of [herself] as being like her” (*Excellent* 3). Mildred is not a typical nineteenth-century romantic heroine who succeeds in finding love; she is an average woman of over thirty who lives an independent life and has thus far stayed away from romantic relationships with men.

Throughout *Excellent Women* readers follow the private, inner thoughts of Mildred, who laughs at common beliefs that spinsters are “more inquisitive than married women ... because of the emptiness of their lives” (*Excellent* 4). While she does not initially overtly deny that unmarried women do in fact lead empty lives, Mildred appears highly satisfied with certain aspects of her single status; for instance, she “valued [her] independence very dearly” (*Excellent* 16) and often thinks of “how pleasant it was to be living alone” (*Excellent* 18). Rejoicing in her solitude and freedom to do how she pleases in her own apartment, Mildred seems to enjoy her apparently solitary, peaceful life as it is, without external interferences and relationship drama. On one occasion, which highlights how she had appreciated her quiet life before the addition of her new neighbours, Mildred explains that “the Napiers were away and [she] was feeling peaceful and happy, as [she] had felt before they came and disturbed [her] life” (*Excellent* 134). On the whole, Mildred appears to enjoy her single life. She goes out to town on her own, or with friends and acquaintances, has her own living quarters, and goes on holidays with her friend Dora. A married woman may not have been able to do those things as freely and independently.

Mildred, who as a spinster⁶ is described as one of “the observers of life” (*Excellent* 76), watches other people’s relationships and their problems develop, deciding that “love was rather a terrible thing ... Not perhaps [her] cup of tea” (*Excellent* 111). When her neighbour Rocky suggests finding a man for Mildred she claims that she “[does not] want anyone” (*Excellent* 119). Then, when invited to cook for Everard, Mildred “foresees a lifetime spent making a home for him, and she refuses” (Peer 104). A possible explanation for this reluctance to find a spouse is that “one sees so many broken marriages” (*Excellent* 140), an example of which is the Napiers’ dramatic on-and-off relationship. Furthermore,

⁶ Mildred is still young and could potentially marry at any time, yet she is defined here as a spinster because she has no apparent intentions of changing her marital status and it is often pointed out in her social circles that she is unmarried.

Mildred felt so “exhausted with bearing other people’s burdens” (*Excellent* 232) that she also avoids relationships in order not to be responsible for yet another person’s troubles. When Everard asks Mildred to do his indexing and proofreading she accepts, wondering if any man was “worth this burden” but concluding that “probably not” (*Excellent* 287).

This view of marriage as bothersome and less-than-ideal defies and mocks traditional romantic notions of love. Mildred is a woman who has “all the romantic ideas of the unmarried” (*Excellent* 27), which implies that after marriage one realises that romanticism and real relationships are not one and the same. Further mockery of the idealisation of love is found when Mildred admits that she had

never been very much given to falling in love and [had] often felt sorry that [she had] so far missed not only the experience of marriage, but the perhaps even greater and more ennobling one of have loved and lost. (*Excellent* 47)

Overall, *Excellent Women* can be read as a warning against believing the “idealised portrait of life” that literature has presented (Brothers 73). Real marriage is far from being flawless – rather, “marriages are often slightly antagonistic arrangements whereby each spouse has learned to tolerate the other’s idiosyncrasies” (Ackley 132). Accepting this instead of waiting for one’s perfect match is the only way to procure oneself a husband. What Pym tells her readers is that “if a woman insists on love as it is idealised in literature, she will likely remain a ‘sleeping beauty’” (Brothers 68). It is not surprising, then, that Mildred does not show much enthusiasm when faced with the prospect of giving up the perks of her single life to marry a man she is not madly in love with.

However, there is a certain delusion in this rejection of love and marriage. Mildred herself has mixed feelings about marriage and has not made up her mind about whether it is a blessing or a curse, as seen in her assertion that, as she had not been married, “perhaps that’s one source of happiness or unhappiness removed straight away” (*Excellent* 140). What is more, society will not let Mildred believe that life is full without a spouse. It appears the majority of people in Mildred’s community, particularly the women, “could not bear that anyone under forty should remain unmarried” (*Excellent* 88) and believe that “it’s not natural for a woman to live alone, without a husband” (*Excellent* 190). Mrs Gray goes as far as wondering “what ... women do if they don’t marry” (*Excellent* 144). This refusal to accept that a young, single woman can be happy without a man leads the whole parish to believe – in spite of her repeatedly denying it – that Mildred “must surely have wanted to marry Julian” (*Excellent* 141).

Nevertheless, underneath Mildred's insistence that she is perfectly fine without a husband one observes that she feels inadequate for not having married. When talking about other women, whom to Mildred "all sounded so married and splendid, their lives so full and yet so well organised," she "felt more than usually spinsterish and useless" (*Excellent* 28). Here "spinsterish" is used in a clear negative way, suggesting that stereotypes of unmarried women not fulfilling their supposed role in society still prevailed in 1950s England. Mildred sometimes displays thoughts of being unappealing and unlovable, which further strengthen the spinster stereotype: she thinks that no one "would care how [she] looked or even notice [her]" (*Excellent* 35), and on at least one occasion she claims that "a glance at [her] face in the dusty ill-lit mirror was enough to discourage anybody's romantic thoughts" (*Excellent* 128). In addition, when faced with the question of whether she "was ... to marry Julian" after his failed engagement, Mildred confesses that she "still thought of [herself] as one of the rejected ones" (*Excellent* 241). She strikes readers as a woman conscious of her physical appearance and overall charm who would find it difficult to believe that any man would be romantically interested in her.

Despite having accepted that being single may be her fate, Mildred is aware that "unmarried women with no ties could very well become unwanted" (*Excellent* 42). Her anxiety at spending her life alone is reflected in her wondering "who was there really to grieve [her] when [she] was gone" (*Excellent* 42) and admitting that, as she "was not really first in anybody's life," she "could so very easily be replaced" (*Excellent* 42). If she remained single, Mildred's only companions would be other spinsters, such as her friend Dora, which is discouraging. Mildred "saw [herself and Dora] in twenty or thirty years' time, perhaps living together, bickering about silly trifles" and thought it "a depressing picture" (*Excellent* 116). This fear of perpetual loneliness is further exemplified when both women return from the Old Girls' Reunion at their former school "where the gossip was all about who had finally managed to get married, ... [and] Mildred no longer seems as 'satisfied' with her luck as Dora" (Peer 105). Mildred reflects on how herself and Dora "had not made particularly brilliant careers for [themselves] and, most important of all, [they] had neither of [them] married ... It was the ring on the left hand that people at the Old Girls' Reunion looked for" (*Excellent* 124).

Mildred, who had previously expressed her satisfaction at living alone, now feels like a failure for not having found a husband when surrounded by women of her age who did

manage to get married. When, on her way back home from the school reunion, Mildred sees a cemetery from the train window “it is not so much the shadow of death that she sees outside as the promise of spinsterhood” (Peer 105). What this episode shows is that spinsterhood is, regardless of its potential advantages, still not seen as a woman’s ideal status – which also explains why, at the end of the novel, Mildred agrees to cook for Everard Bone and do his indexing and proof reading, which may lead to her later becoming his wife. It may not be the sharing of her life and home that she is looking forward to in marriage, but rather social acceptance and a feeling of having fulfilled her role as a woman. She may have envied her former classmates who are now married only because it is expected that she finds a husband as well. Despite her highly-valued independence and her scepticism towards marriage, Mildred may never be thought of as having a full life until she becomes someone’s wife.

It is this insistence on marriage as the core of a woman’s life that Pym challenges in her work. By presenting characters who value their independence and have lives and careers of their own without male companions, Pym “celebrates [her heroines’] successes in being individuals despite the pressures of an impersonal society which would make them into nothing more than spinsters ... or clergymen’s wives” (Brothers 79). Mildred is not portrayed as a shallow character who is nothing but a spinster who longs for love; she is a complex individual with – sometimes contradictory – dreams who has mixed feelings about committing to a life with a man because she sees both the advantages and disadvantages of such a union. Far from being naive and a hopeless romantic, Mildred is a sensible woman who carefully considers her choices before agreeing to enter any sort of relationship with a man. While she fantasises about loving and being loved, she is aware of how romance would affect her peaceful and overall satisfactory life, so she is not too eager to marry and sacrifice her individuality and freedom. After all, Mildred should not be too desperate to become a wife, since marriage is not about passion or undying love; instead, Pym explains that “those who do decide to join their lives with another do so more often out of a desire for comfort and convenience, a man looking for someone to care for him and a woman looking for ‘Something to Love’” as this is “what romance is all about” (Brothers 71).

Mildred, mostly happily unmarried and sceptical of relationships, is just one example among many of Pym’s characters who “do not conform to the model by which our society and fictions confer value upon men and women” (Brothers 79). While “Pym’s heroines and narrators are not overtly feminist in the sense that they set out to overthrow

male domination,” readers see in *Excellent Women* that “they do dramatize the heroine’s perception of the discrepancy between her own and the dominant culture’s assumptions” (Bowman 85). In what would be nowadays considered feminist, Mildred assumes that a life without marriage is acceptable and, sometimes, may even be desirable, but the dominant culture disagrees. Pym, who “wished to marry but never did” (Halperin 212), presents a world in which women do feel they have full lives without a husband yet the weight of societal expectations about gender roles and family on young women is such that marriage is never far from their minds. Ultimately, regardless of how insistent Pym and her heroines are in defying society’s gender constraints and stereotypes, single women are still pitied because they are seen as incomplete. Relegated to secondary positions beneath the more dominant married people, who did succeed at fulfilling their role even if that often brought unhappiness into their lives, unmarried women like Mildred are social outcasts, “the rejected ones” (*Excellent* 241), “subordinates in relation to a dominant culture’s assumptions” that marriage is the only acceptable path (Bowman 91).

In conclusion, Barbara Pym’s novel *Excellent Women*, published in 1952, presents an unmarried female protagonist who attempts to lead a fulfilling life despite societal expectations that she should find a husband. By the end of the novel Mildred thinks that her life may, in fact, be complete even without marriage, yet this is said after she has entered a sort of romantic relationship with a potential suitor. Moreover, one of Pym’s later novels, *Jane and Prudence* (1953), explains that Mildred did marry Everard, which undermines the idea that Mildred could have had a full life without marriage after all. Furthermore, while throughout *Excellent Women* readers see that Mildred “is torn between her desire to be loved and the intolerable amount of effort romance seems to involve” (Tincknell 37), it is society’s expectation that a woman marries and the pressure Mildred feels towards finding a husband that make her feel inadequate for being single in her thirties. She may enjoy her freedom and independence, yet she will be constantly reminded of her failure as a woman until she finds a male life companion.

In general, Pym’s spinsters “feel ambivalent about entering relationships” while also being “keenly aware of the stigma attached to a woman’s being unmarried” (Ackley 133), an ambivalence that “results in large measure from the expectation that women must marry in order to truly fulfil themselves and the negative view of those who do not” (Ackley 133). In Mildred’s 1950s English parish it is widely believed that living alone, working, and

finding comfort in female friendships – that is, the life of a spinster – “was the kind of life led by women who *didn't* have a full life in the accepted sense” (*Excellent* 268). Mildred is aware of this herself; even though she thinks that her responsibilities towards her friends the Malorys, the parish, and her work as Everard’s secretary will be “‘a full life’ after all” (*Excellent* 288), she is so influenced by societal notions of femininity and domestic life that she still wishes she were married and fantasises about love.

5. Comparison of Charlotte and Mildred

A feminist analysis of an 1890s novel such as *The Real Charlotte* and one from the 1950s like *Excellent Women* shows that, similarly to how in the Victorian age “marriage [was] the destiny traditionally offered to women by society,” in the twentieth century, to an extent, “it is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being” (de Beauvoir 415). The question that this poses is not so much whether remaining single is more socially acceptable in the mid-twentieth century than it was fifty or sixty years before, since the portrayal of a single heroine like Mildred Lathbury suggests that it was, but whether unmarried women are still characterised using the negative stereotypes of the nineteenth-century spinster.

As anticipated above, this section follows a feminist approach to the topic of spinsterhood to determine whether and in what way Somerville and Ross’s *The Real Charlotte* and Pym’s *Excellent Women* challenge or reinforce gender roles and stereotypes and societal expectations of womanhood. To achieve that goal, some of the most influential feminist works of the first half of the twentieth century are used in the following pages to paint a picture of what femininity and the true female nature were thought to be in the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries. Following feminist pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft, who rejected marriage as the ideal state for women, claimed that there is a lack of information in society about “how women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying nor giving in marriage” (59) and observed that in the eighteenth century “woman ought to be beautiful, innocent, and silly” (116), feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir – on whom the critical approach of this paper focuses – became central to the construction of an alternative image of womanhood in society, something which Barbara Pym includes and explores in her novels. To determine to how extent feminism reached its goal of empowering women and freeing them from the constraints of

marriage and motherhood, this chapter will also focus on what literature by women and about women said of unmarried female characters in the 1950s. It will be seen, then, whether Mildred's portrayal as a woman in post-war England adheres to traditional stereotypes of spinsterhood in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literature, or if said stereotypes are either non-existent or ridiculed due to progress made towards gender equality.

Mainly, however, this chapter is a comparison of two women in similar situations at different points in history. Both Charlotte Mullen and Mildred Lathbury are unmarried women trying to navigate a world in which one's success is determined by marital status. However, while the former is presented as a hateful figure who antagonises the real heroine of the story – a much younger and prettier woman who does become someone's wife – and whose obsession with marrying a man she could not have embittered her, the latter is an agreeable woman over thirty who, while reluctant to get married and give up her independence, can still hope to find a man with whom to spend her life. The two women are spinsters – and, therefore, social outcasts – in their own way; Charlotte because she is an older woman who has missed any marriage opportunity she ever had, and Mildred because she insists on not looking for a husband and is, as explained in a previous section of this paper, often reminded of her allegedly unsatisfactory existence as a single woman.

Charlotte's isolation from and rejection by conservative Victorian society is based on two essential factors: her being unmarriageable – mainly due to aspects such as physical appearance or age – and her intimidating financial and business skills. In the late 1800s and early 1900s “economic independence was consciously as well as unconsciously perceived to be a direct threat to male authority,” and even in novels of the 1890s “woman's independence in economic life is viewed with distrust” (Millett 87, 40). Thus, the intelligent and successful Charlotte, who earned her own living and was mistress of her house without the aid of a man, was not trusted either by men – who would see her as untameable or an adversary – or other women. As a woman, Charlotte was denied immediate access to “the sciences, technology, and business, because they are exclusively male [and] reflect the deformation of the ‘masculine’ personality, e.g., a certain predatory or aggressive character” (Millett 43). However, resorting to male activities is the only resource she has to make a living, since her unattractiveness prevented her from fulfilling the traditional female roles of wife and mother.

Charlotte is not only unmarried and childless, she is also the opposite of the feminine ideal, which makes her even less likeable and worthy of pity. In the nineteenth century “the eternal type of female purity was represented ... by an angel in the house” (Gilbert and Gubar 20), which Charlotte most definitely does not embody. Traditionally, women had been “defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power” (Gilbert and Gubar 21), and not as assertive individuals who are not afraid to express their opinions and take action when they wish to achieve something. Charlotte, who “by sheer power of will ... could force her plan of action upon other people,” does not tend “to change [her] mind about a thing [she is] set upon” (*Charlotte* 207), and her acquaintances know that “if she was ... determined the only thing was to let her do as she liked” (*Charlotte* 61), all of which subverts the submissive nature expected in a woman. Charlotte’s behaviour demonstrates that, although “even before 1800 manuals of etiquette and conduct exalted the ideal of the woman in the home” (Basch 3) and “from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic” (Gilbert and Gubar 23), not all women yielded to these conventions.

However, although Charlotte’s strong-willed and self-confident nature can be seen as an example of female agency, readers of *The Real Charlotte* are not encouraged to like her. Since “in patriarchal culture, female speech and female ‘presumption’ – that is, angry revolt against male domination – are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic” (Gilbert and Gubar 35), Charlotte’s refusal to remain quiet and compliant is seen as wicked. The language used to describe Charlotte’s thoughts, actions, personality, or appearance confirms that “the reader is not encouraged to sympathize with her ... but to revile her” (Honig 112). Throughout the novel, Charlotte’s speech is often reported with verbs such as “ejaculated” (*Charlotte* 7), “thundered” (*Charlotte* 17), or “vociferated” (*Charlotte* 19), which convey aggressiveness, determination, masculinity, and lack of patience. Furthermore, Charlotte is depicted as a loud and expressive woman; for instance, when singing hymns at church “Miss Mullen’s heaving shoulders and extended jaw spoke of nothing but her determination to out-scream everyone else” (*Charlotte* 44). This shows that “assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of ‘significant action’ – are ‘monstrous’ in women” as they are considered “‘unfeminine’ and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of ‘contemplative purity’” (Gilbert and Gubar 28).

In the Victorian age women were defined as “angelic beings who could not feel passion, anger, ambition, or honor” (Showalter 79). The Angel in The House, who was “intensely sympathetic ... immensely charming [and] utterly unselfish,” was not only married but also “excelled in the difficult arts of family life ... sacrificed herself daily” and, crucially, “she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (Woolf, “Professions” 237). Based on this definition, Charlotte Mullen is, without a doubt, not the Angel in the House. Moreover, as the “needs considered as part of ‘female nature’ [are] altruism, spirit of sacrifice and so on” (Basch 106) – traits which Charlotte does not possess – her female nature is questioned. She is someone who speaks “brutally” and “storm[s] on” when angry, and towards whom people feel “repugnance” (*Charlotte* 149, 154). Furthermore, her hatred and jealousy towards Francie makes her not only ungracious but revengeful, since an ageing woman such as Charlotte, aware of her lack of youth, “begins to be morbidly jealous ... and rightly or wrongly she holds some rival responsible for all her woes” (de Beauvoir 553).

The image readers form of Charlotte is that of a powerful woman “presented as an unnatural aberration, a monster, a witch” who is “abnormal in a very negative way” (Honig 112). Since “being old and female were regarded as key qualities which defined a witch, particularly a single woman,” the portrayal of Charlotte agrees with “myths of the ageing unattached woman as a monstrous hag” (Mortimer 155, 157). Charlotte is a spinster “whose failures as a woman render her both powerful and destructive” and represents “the ageing woman who had agency[,] was a threat to the ... gender hierarchy, and was inherently evil” (Mortimer 158, 157). Like other Victorian older, unmarried women who antagonise the hero or heroine such as Charles Dickens’s Miss Havisham, Charlotte is “an ageing spinster who is a selfish and isolated witchlike figure, driven by ... vengeance for how her own hopes had been dashed” when she was rejected as a bride (Mortimer 157-158). As a representative of “the trope of the frustrated spinster working to castrate male power, leading ultimately to self-destruction,” Charlotte is presented as capable of “be[ing] vengeful and even sadistic, using whatever leverage she has to destroy the happiness of others, visiting her wrath on the younger generation” (Mortimer 160-161, 163).

All of the above are characteristics of witches. What is more, Charlotte resembles women accused of witchcraft throughout history in that she is “quarrelsome and difficult for [her] neighbors to deal with” (Garrett 462). Intelligent, manipulative, spiteful, old, and ugly,

Charlotte is also alone – her only company being her cats, which mirror the animals that “were the familiars of witches or the embodiment of Satan himself in medieval Europe” (McNeill 8) as creatures that “were both ubiquitous, and common as domestic companions” (Parish 5). Even Charlotte’s pets reflect her own character as they are horrific beasts, described as “terrors” who would “claw the face off [people]” (*Charlotte* 46). Ironically, Charlotte’s relationship with her cats shows her nurturing side and the extent to which she is capable of love and affection, as seen in how she treats the animals: she calls one of them “[her] heart’s love,” she strokes them “gently ... administering, almost unconsciously, the most delicately satisfactory scratching,” and is very protective of her “poor cats” (*Charlotte* 7, 18, 47).

It seems clear that Charlotte is consistently presented as a problematic, malign, witch-like figure in *The Real Charlotte*, partly as a result of her age and marital status. The kind of language used to refer to her in the text is depreciative, which discourages readers from feeling any sympathy towards her. As the following paragraphs will show, this contrasts greatly with how Mildred Lathbury is depicted and perceived in *Excellent Women*, a light-hearted and humorous first-person narrative of a younger woman in 1950s England. From the beginning of Pym’s novel it is implied that Mildred is far from being a witch-like figure like Charlotte. The daughter of a clergyman and close friend of her parish curate, Mildred not only attends religious services regularly but also participates in parish events such as jumble sales or the decoration of the church, and even her job consists in helping other women. Furthermore, she assists the Napiers with every problem they have, and looks out for her friends the Malorys. Finally, Mildred is the “kind of person who was always making cups of tea at moments of crisis” (*Excellent* 186), which shows that she is invariably providing a service for others, even if she does not want to. She is selfless, thoughtful, and compassionate. She is like a sister to other characters to whom she offers a “sympathetic hearing” when necessary (*Excellent* 27).

Mildred’s accommodating attitude places her much closer to the figure of the Angel in the House than Charlotte Mullen could ever be. Mildred tends to follow other people “meekly” even if she is feeling “irritated” (*Excellent* 128, 176-177), which is another example of her being complacent. This also matches a belief expressed by feminists that, since the woman was thought to be “nothing,” she “can only justify her presence on earth by dedicating herself to others; through deliberate self-effacement, duty and sacrifice she will

discover the identity and *raison d'être* of which, by herself, she is deprived" (Basch 5). In short, women "must charm, they must conciliate" (Woolf, "Professions" 238) if they are to be integrated into society and be accepted or well-liked. Mildred successfully plays this role as passive, agreeable woman, in spite of her own personal thoughts – which she hides from others.

The first-person narrative in *Excellent Women* shows Mildred's thoughts – sometimes not polite enough to be expressed aloud – but "the reader is presented with a narrative voice fully compliant with normal social expectations – a voice politely civil even when answering an imprudent, audacious query" (Doan 63-64). Thus, while women "must ... tell lies if they are to succeed" (Woolf, "Professions" 238), the only lies the "honest and upbringing" Mildred (*Excellent* 177) tells are about how pleased she is in a situation or how highly she thinks of a person, instead of expressing her own opinions of them, in an attempt to spare their feelings and be polite – which is what makes her successful and beloved among her friends. Contrastingly, Charlotte Mullen was not honest about her schemes and what motivated her actions in business terms; by telling lies to save herself or achieve her own goals she achieved financial success but was repudiated by society.

Another difference between both women is how their respective novels talk about them. While the expressions used to describe Charlotte in *The Real Charlotte* serve to paint a negative picture of her and discourage readers from sympathising with her, the language used in *Excellent Women* to characterise Mildred presents her as likeable. Mildred, who describes herself as "unpretentious" and is "not the kind of person to expect things as [her] right even though they may be" (*Excellent* 73, 149), is, on the whole, modest about her appearance, charms, and even personality, as she insists on there being "really nothing outstanding about [her]" (*Excellent* 59). Other characters appear to have a higher opinion of her, however, and see her "as being so very balanced and sensible" (*Excellent* 76). She is also described as "the most wonderful person" and "very kind," and her friends often wonder "what [they would] do without [her]" (*Excellent* 175, 236). Even if someone does not really like her, Mildred admits that they probably "thought of [her] as a dim sort of person whom one neither liked nor disliked" (*Excellent* 135), which reinforces the idea that no one seems to take a strong dislike to her, hence encouraging readers to sympathise with her as well.

Nevertheless, despite having earned everyone's sympathy, Mildred can be paralleled to Charlotte Mullen in that both are still seen as inferior to married women. As Virginia

Woolf explains, “life for both sexes ... calls for confidence in oneself” and the quickest way to achieve said confidence is “by thinking that other people are inferior to oneself” (“Room” 40). Departing from the assumption that “women are hard on women [and] women dislike women” (Woolf, “Room” 120), one is not surprised to see how dismissive married women are of Mildred – for instance, Helen Napier thinks Mildred is less experienced than herself because she is still single, which “put[s] [her] in [her] place among the rows of excellent women” (*Excellent* 27) –, or how Charlotte is not only treated by her female acquaintances, but also how poorly she is handled in a novel written by women. Moreover, it is mostly other women who insist on the importance of marriage; in a patriarchal society “the celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution” (de Beauvoir 415). Thus, readers find that Charlotte’s behaviour is explained in terms of frustration due to not having married, while Mildred appears mainly indifferent. In both cases, whatever their personal views on marriage are, these two unmarried women are “reduced to the rank of parasite and pariah” as both in the 1890s and the 1950s it seems that “marriage is [woman’s] only means of support and the sole justification of her existence” (de Beauvoir 416). Because “for girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community,” the consequences of remaining “unwanted” – as Mildred fears in *Excellent Women* – are that they would be, “socially viewed, so much wastage” (de Beauvoir 417). This is another similarity between Charlotte and Mildred: since a single woman is seen as a “socially incomplete being even if she makes her own living” (which both Charlotte and Mildred do), in order to be respected, “attain the whole dignity of a person and gain [their] full rights, [they] must wear a wedding ring” (de Beauvoir 420).

In short, Charlotte and Mildred are mostly united in their otherness as unmarried women in a society that valued matrimony and the traditional family above all. Critics “regarded mothers as *normal* women,” which leaves out “the unmarried and the childless” (Showalter 70). Even in the years of the sexual revolution of the turn of the twentieth century “the major institutions of the old tradition, patriarchal marriage and the family, were never or rarely challenged (Millett 177); thus, although Mildred appears to have more alternatives to marriage than Charlotte, she is still expected to marry – and sometimes she even expresses that wish herself. Although Mildred often mirrors the opinions of the “select group of prominent feminist thinkers ... [that] argued that spinsterhood could offer freedom,

independence and empowerment” (Mortimer 55), this belief is “drowned out by the social consensus that to be labelled a ‘spinster’ connoted incompleteness, misfortune, even failure” (Mortimer 55). The 1930s belief that “the childlessness of the spinster was ... a tragedy and a curse, leaving her incomplete and unable to fulfil her biological and social destiny” (Mortimer 55) is clearly still present in Mildred’s 1950s society.

Yet while Charlotte and Mildred find themselves in similar circumstances as single women in a patriarchal, family-oriented society, their fates are quite different. If she does not marry, Mildred may end up as a “‘universal aunt’, a label for the middle-class spinster whose fate is to serve the needs of the wider family and community” (Mortimer 63). Charlotte, as noted above, could never be as selfless as to dedicate herself to the community. Furthermore, while Charlotte fully embodies “the character traits attributed to the spinster stereotype ... rooted in a failure to conform to ideals of feminine behaviour, rendering them unattractive and thereby unmarriageable” (Mortimer 70), there is hope in Mildred’s future, as she is still young and has a potential suitor in Everard Bone. However, *Excellent Women* does not suggest that this latter option is the most desirable for Mildred; by being ambivalent towards marriage and not throwing herself at the first man who shows interest in her, she represents “the feminist ideal to emerge later in the twentieth century of the independent single woman who prides herself on her self-sufficiency and freedom” (Mortimer 73). In this sense, Mildred and Charlotte are, again, quite similar: both are strong, self-sufficient women capable of leading complete lives without a husband.

When focusing once more on what separates these two characters it is important to note that they may also be evaluated in terms of their reproductive possibilities – that is, whether they can fulfil their assigned role as women or not. Charlotte would then be rejected because, as an ageing, unattractive and “unwomanly” woman, she is highly unlikely to find a husband and even more so to ever become a mother. On the other hand, Mildred is only slightly over thirty and at the end of the book she has found an admirer in Everard, which places her in a position of being able to start a family in the near future. That may be another reason why Mildred is shown more sympathy: she is still of use to society, so her acquaintances are nicer to her, and readers of *Excellent Women* can root for her and hope she has a happy ending. Charlotte can no longer contribute to society in the way a woman is supposed to, so her attaining her goals at the end of the novel would be irrelevant.

A further difference between Charlotte and Mildred lies on how they perceive men and what they hope to obtain from them. Charlotte is in love with Lambert and, in spite of his obvious lack of interest in a romantic attachment with her, she does not give up hope until his second marriage. Conversely, Mildred does not particularly love any man in her life, and she only considers a relationship with Everard after having thought about it and decided it may be a sensible decision after all. She has her own independent life, her own apartment, the love of her close friends, and a part-time job that provides her with an income. As Woolf explains it, when women have money and can be independent, they “need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give [them]” (“Room” 43-44). Neither Charlotte nor Mildred need a man; yet Charlotte is more dependent on men than Mildred as Lambert could give Charlotte something she does not yet have: love.

It is also possible for Mildred to be more emotionally detached from relationships and marriage given the evolution of spinsterhood. Historically, “for the spinster, single status rendered her subject to ... marginality, exposed and vulnerable by not following the life course determined by society on account of her gender” (Mortimer 53). While Mildred fears that she will eventually be alone and forgotten due to her unmarried status, *Excellent Women* shows, however, a change in how single women were seen by Pym’s contemporaries: after the Second World War “the spinster was not exclusively an object of derision or pity ... but was allowed an agency and valued role in the community ... which had been denied in the preceding decades” (Mortimer 53). Therefore, although in *Excellent Women* stereotypes of the spinster are mentioned, these are embraced in a comical, light-hearted way. For instance, Mildred “felt that [she] was now old enough to become fussy and spinsterish if [she] wanted to” (*Excellent* 9), and on a separate occasion she thought that she might be “getting spinsterish and ‘set’ in [her] ways” because she was “irritated at having been woken” (*Excellent* 19). As a “fussy spinster” she “could not comfortably sit and make conversation when she knew that yesterday’s unwashed dishes were still in the sink” (*Excellent* 180-181). She also points out that unmarried people may develop an “old-maidish delight in gossip” (*Excellent* 73). Here readers see that in 1950s England spinsters are still thought to be irritable, fastidious, inflexible, and too involved in other people’s lives – all undoubtedly negative traits –, yet Mildred does not, on the whole, strike one as being an unpleasant woman.

It can be concluded that, although unmarried women were generally more accepted in society in the 1950s than they were in the Victorian age, stereotypes of the spinster did prevail to some extent. Single women were maybe not as pitied or derided in the twentieth century as they had been in the nineteenth century, yet female writers and feminist activists at the time still thought it necessary to defend the figure of the spinster in their works. When Pym first began writing, “‘spinster’ was viewed by many as an almost dirty word” and it was generally assumed that “women ought to marry and were not complete human beings if they did not” (Ackley 132-133). In fact, “the prevailing image of spinsters for centuries in both British and American literature had been to denigrate them” – as is seen in *The Real Charlotte* as well; as a consequence, spinsters were traditionally “seldom admired and even less frequently emulated” (Ackley 133).

While Sommerville and Ross appear to adhere to that trend by presenting a stereotypical spinster who is unmarriageable, unlovable, and overall a hateful, witch-like figure, Pym challenges the tradition of demonising single women. Crucially, readers do not often get an insight into Charlotte’s personal thoughts and emotions – except for those that reveal her hatred and anger –, while Mildred’s portrayal is more intimate and allows readers to understand her on a more human level. Through Mildred’s sometimes contradictory inner thoughts, Pym “explores in detail the effects of the social attitudes of the 1950s about unmarried women on their lives, particularly on their sense of self,” which uncovers “a complex, at times ambiguous and conflicting, set of emotions” (Ackley 133). In *Excellent Women*, Mildred is an example of how “women have been conditioned to see themselves as secondary to men, to believe that they must have husbands to give validity to their own existence” (Ackley 136). Her social circles believe that, “having failed to marry, Mildred has failed as a woman” (Ackley 136). What Pym does by portraying her spinsters is granting attention to “badly maligned human beings who had rarely been treated positively in either literature or life” while revealing “the ways in which society’s view of spinsters can produce feelings of inadequacy in them” (Ackley 142).

Overall, *Excellent Women* shows that, far from being bitter, lonely, and disagreeable women rejected by society – that is, not like *The Real Charlotte* presents Charlotte –, spinsters can lead satisfying and fulfilling lives while being beloved members of society without conforming to traditional gender roles. By doing so, Pym’s work also subverts the notion that women’s sole purpose in life is to marry and start a family by rejecting the view

that “marriage rescues women from a life that is at best unsatisfactory” (Calder 57). This is not seen in *The Real Charlotte*, where readers the protagonist visualises herself as “helpless, and broken, and aimless for the rest of her life” without the man she wants (*Charlotte* 239). Contrastingly, *Excellent Women* ends on an ambiguous yet positive note: Mildred may or may not marry, but either way she will be alright. Marriage is all that Charlotte misses in her life, while Mildred sees it more as a complement to what she already has. Her life is complete as it is, and she values highly the independence and freedom that singlehood grants her.

While *The Real Charlotte* and *Excellent Women* offer different perspectives on spinsterhood and female independence, they both contribute to a broader cultural shift towards the recognition of women’s autonomy and freedom from the constraints of traditional gender roles. *The Real Charlotte* portrays an older, unattractive woman who is despised because of not adhering to Victorian female ideals such as the Angel in the House. An independent woman who governs in her own house and does not depend on a man, she is not gentle nor submissive; neither is she complacent, selfless, quiet, and always eager to please. She is more intelligent than the average individual in her community; she is not afraid to speak up and, above all, to outsmart others – including men – and to succeed financially, even at the expense of others. Therefore, she proves to be problematic and is described as a wretched woman whom no one could ever truly like or empathise with. She is the Victorian spinster that, deprived of the love that marriage and a family brings, must be jealous of those younger and more beautiful than her and seek revenge for what was taken from her.

Oppositely, Mildred is still young and has an agreeable personality. While she has her own private opinions, she does not often voice them and instead says what is considered appropriate or polite in each situation. She dedicates her life to helping others and often puts their needs above hers, which makes her a potentially ideal wife. However, while she is more submissive than Charlotte and definitely less quarrelsome, Mildred does not wish to abandon her independent and free life for any man. She sees marriage as a questionable state, one that she sometimes desires and sometimes actively avoids. Moreover, she seems to have accepted her place in society; although she sees herself as one of the “rejected ones” who have not found a husband, she enjoys her life as it is and does not regard married women with bitterness or even a great degree of jealousy. Whenever she describes herself as a spinster, it is often in a humorous way and not to express any sorrow for being alone. Thus, readers see that, while some stereotypes of the spinster have prevailed in the almost sixty years that

separate *The Real Charlotte* and *Excellent Women*, there are fewer prejudices towards unmarried women. Mildred is not despised because of being unmarried, and while almost everyone in her parish expects her not to want to remain single, she is not seen as bitter for not having found anyone yet. A spinster herself, Pym justifies her heroine's decisions by presenting marriage as what it is: a complex agreement between two individuals that, more often than not, has little to do with love or genuine feelings. Whether Mildred is right or wrong to remain single is up for readers to decide, but one thing is certain: she is more widely accepted in society than other unmarried women were in the previous century.

Ultimately, although both Charlotte Mullen and Mildred Lathbury can be seen as independent women who have achieved agency despite a patriarchal society that wants to reduce them to passive wives and mothers, how their autonomy and freedom from romantic attachments is seen differs greatly, which shows the evolution of the image of the spinster in society. Charlotte is the epitome of the single, lonely, dissatisfied old maid who blames others for her personal failures as disgraces. Mildred, on the other hand, is content with her choices and only sometimes regrets being alone. Respected and beloved in her community, Mildred gives hope to other single women who do not perceive marriage as the romantic ideal literature and society present it to be: life can be complete without a man, and one does not need to be bitter about being alone. While marriage can be a blessing and it ensures that one becomes first in someone else's life, there is more to life than sharing it, and more often than not companionship does not outweigh autonomy.

6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on discussing the prevalence of marriage in Western European English-speaking societies between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle years of the twentieth century. The position and perception of unmarried women in Anglo-Irish and English society between those time periods has been examined respectively with the aid of the Irish novel *The Real Charlotte* (1894) and the British novel *Excellent Women* (1952). It has been established that, in the Anglo-Irish world in which Charlotte Mullen lives, women of the middle and upper classes were expected to depend on marriage for financial stability and social standing. Property rights were limited, so women were marginalised in a male-dominated society that valued land ownership and lineage. Single women in Ireland were

viewed as social outcasts, and their singlehood was associated with inadequacy and exclusion.

Similarly, in the English society of Mildred Lathbury marriage was considered the primary role for women, and alternatives to marriage were often portrayed in literature as inferior, unsatisfactory, or leading to disaster. Feminist ideas such as the figure of the “New Woman” that challenged traditional gender roles did not significantly alter societal expectations, and marriage remained central to women’s lives. Furthermore, women’s magazines in England emphasised marriage as the most important career for women, despite some feminist efforts to advance women’s opportunities for employment and the progress made as a result of the incorporation of women to the workforce in the years of the Second World War (1939-1945).

The literature of the time, examples of which are writers such as Somerville, Ross, and Pym, show that both Anglo-Irish and English societies placed a strong emphasis on marriage and motherhood. Women who deviated from these roles were viewed with suspicion and faced social stigma, a clear example of which is the treatment Charlotte receives in her novel. Even in the post-Second-World-War era, marriage continued to be highly valued, and family life was strongly encouraged in England. All of this took place in spite of feminist efforts to challenge the idealisation of marriage and domesticity, with some women advocating for gender equality and more women’s rights. Female fiction writers exhibited the state of their society in their works. This paper, through its analysis of two spinsters in Anglo-Irish and English literature of the late 1800s and mid-1900s, shows the evolution of unmarried women and the importance of marriage throughout the decades. It also shows how threatening single women were to a society which valued the traditional family above all and placed great emphasis on gender roles. Women should be wives and mothers, not single and successful without a man. Typically, unmarried women were called spinsters and treated as social outcasts. They were misfits who had failed to fulfil their role as women, and derogatory stereotypes were used to describe them in literature. Lonely, bitter, selfish, dangerous, manipulative – these are just some of the traits that old maids were thought to have in Victorian literature. Even decades later, when the position of women in society had improved and there appeared to be more equality between genders, spinsters were still seen as inferior to married women. Moreover, it was expected that a young single

woman wished to get married and that, even if she lived alone and had an independent life, she would look for a husband.

As has been explained throughout this paper, unmarried women of a certain age did not occupy a privileged position in Victorian literature. Proof of this is the portrayal of Charlotte Mullen in *The Real Charlotte*, which is that of a stereotypical spinster: an older, unattractive, bitter, cold-hearted woman who is jealous of those who have what she will never possess – beauty and youth. However, one could question whether this portrayal is accurate or impartial, and this paper has argued that it is discriminatory to describe Charlotte in such negative terms. While it is true that she is jealous of her cousin Francie, who is twenty years younger, more beautiful and charming, and ends up marrying the man Charlotte loves, the older woman is not without her positive attributes, and her reasons for being as bitter as she is described in the novel are completely understandable.

Regardless of what her neighbours may say, and what some scholars have written about her, Charlotte Mullen is more than a resentful old woman who envies younger, prettier girls and just wants to take advantage of anyone who shows her weakness. She is someone who was denied her greatest wish, and who is excluded from society due to her failure to find a husband. In short, she is misunderstood and mistreated. An intelligent woman with a business acumen that many would envy, in a more modern society Charlotte would be appreciated for her abilities and not criticised for her personal life and lack of male support. While it is true that she antagonised Francie and benefited from other character's losses – such as Julia Duffy's –, Charlotte did not do anything that a male character would not have done, and her dislike of young Francie is justified when considering how senseless and irresponsible the young girl was, and how easy it had been for her to achieve the life that Charlotte had always wanted. Francie did not even want to marry Lambert, yet it was very easy for her to do so; Charlotte, who had been after him for decades, could not help but feel hurt and angry after he chose, once again, another woman.

Charlotte Mullen is a character whose portrayal fails to provide readers with an accurate idea of what she is like. She is neither cold nor selfish, but a woman who has had to fend for herself in a world dominated by men. When she shows jealousy towards younger, prettier women, it is because they have obtained what she could only dream of, and her life was more difficult as a consequence. If she is bitter, it is because of her loneliness. Charlotte is a highly intelligent woman who has achieved more in her lifetime than any men in her

community did, which means she is a threat to any businessmen around her, and an anomaly – instead of conforming to social norms and gender roles, she became more successful than her male counterparts without the help of a man. She is the example of what strong, independent women should be. Instead of being admired, as would be the case nowadays given her talent for business, she is criticised mainly because of her personal appearance – something she cannot change –, age, or personality, the latter being something that was shaped as a consequence of the obstacles she encountered throughout her life. Charlotte Mullen is perhaps one of the most salient spinsters in Irish literature, and as such it is her destiny to always be portrayed as hateful, ugly, and undeserving of love. Yet anyone reading *The Real Charlotte* should understand that it is society that made her that way, and that she is so much more than a disagreeable face. The “real” Charlotte is not cruel; she is ambitious, intelligent, astute, and determined, and deserved to have her happy ending after all.

Almost six decades after the publication of *The Real Charlotte* marriage was still central to society in England. Even after two World Wars young women, who had entered the work force and achieved a certain level of social equality, were encouraged to get married and start a family. *Excellent Women* was published at a time when traditional values of the pre-war years were at an all-time high, yet Barbara Pym’s novel does not present marriage as the most desirable alternative for a woman. Her heroine Mildred Lathbury is satisfied with her independent and free life as it is, and is reluctant of entering any sort of romantic relationship with a man. However, Mildred feels insecure at times due to her being on the path to becoming a spinster – she is only in her early thirties but, if she insists on not marrying, she will become an old maid, the stereotypes of which Mildred is fully aware of. By showing Mildred’s being torn between marriage and singlehood she highlights that the way spinsters were viewed and treated in society led them to feel inadequate. Yet Pym’s portrayal of marriage as a less-than-ideal state for women suggests that Mildred would only find a husband to please others who expect her to become a wife, and to finally occupy her assigned place in society, not because she is particularly interested in love.

Nevertheless, regardless of how sceptical Mildred may be about sharing her life with a man, the shadow of spinsterhood is constantly hanging over her. She pictures a depressing life of loneliness with other unmarried women, of not being prioritised by anyone, of being forgotten, and she considers marriage as an acceptable alternative to oblivion. While she does consider her life to be complete and satisfactory without a husband – she has friends, a

job, her own apartment, and social activities at church –, she does not want to be one of the “rejected ones” who are cast aside by society because they could not find a partner. At the same time, however, Mildred is not willing to become the submissive and passive Angel in the House that does everything in her hand to please her husband, often at her own expense. She feels comfortable with her life and does not want to sacrifice the comforts of it for anyone – which leads her to reject cooking for Everard when he first asks her –, and even when she does accept a dinner with him and agrees to working for him she is still not too eager to become a traditional housewife that loses herself in doing everything for her husband.

In that sense, both Charlotte and Mildred are quite similar. They both lead full lives without men, and none of them would marry just for the sake of being a wife. Charlotte would only want Lambert – a man she unfortunately cannot have –, and Mildred is not too keen on the potential suitors she has – Julian Malory and Everard Bone. Further similarities between both women are found in how they are perceived as being inferior to married women because they never found a husband and, as such, they lack the experience married women have and have not fulfilled their roles in society. Helena Napier and Mrs Gray, for instance, think Mildred is somewhat beneath them because she is unmarried, while they have already been married once – even if Helena’s marriage is turbulent and falls apart once, while Mrs Gray has already lost a husband and her second engagement was broken off. Instead of being supported by other women, Charlotte and Mildred are either criticised by them – mostly Charlotte – or pressurised by them to adapt to a society that urges women to be complacent and agreeable ladies.

However, despite the similarities between their positions, Charlotte and Mildred are very different characters. Where Charlotte is self-centred and unfeeling, Mildred is selfless and compassionate. Charlotte has reached an age where she is extremely unlikely to ever get married, whereas Mildred is still young and has a more promising future ahead of her. As said before, Charlotte is the typical spinster who is comparable to a witch: cruel, bitter, jealous, vengeful; Mildred, on the other hand, is an agreeable woman whom most of her acquaintances like and who is often seen providing services to her community. Furthermore, Charlotte is described as ugly and unattractive in almost every possible way, while Mildred is, according to her descriptions of herself, an average-looking woman. The narrator’s insistence on Charlotte’s ugliness may be a way of informing readers that she has no real

choice as to whether she marries; thus, she is negated an election that Mildred does have, given that Mildred's physical appearance does not hinder her from finding a husband. In Charlotte's case, one could wonder whether she would marry if anyone showed interest in her, while Mildred is not sure she wants to marry at all even though she has options. A further difference between both heroines is that Charlotte is outspoken, loud, and not afraid to speak her mind even if that offends others. Mildred, on the other hand, is more careful of hurting other people's feelings and often keeps her personal opinions to herself. It is then not surprising that Charlotte is despised in her village while Mildred is a beloved member of her community, and that readers are also expected to dislike the former and sympathise with the latter.

Whatever their differences, Charlotte and Mildred represent threats to their respective societies and as such they must be controlled. Since the value of women relied greatly on their physical appearance, criticising a woman's looks and age was the main tool to ensure she would not be taken seriously. Furthermore, as women were expected to be kind and gentle, spinsters were often called cruel or evil, which would outline them as unworthy of being compared to other women who did conform to social norms. Charlotte Mullen is a perfect example of a spinster in a society where only an agreeable face, a gentle temper, and a willingness to marry and fulfil one's role were accepted. As an old maid, she is expected to be embittered and resentful, her life to be forever miserable. If she were to stay single, Mildred Lathbury, on the other hand, would be seen as the type of spinster that would give back to the community since she does not have a family of her own to look after. This shows a certain evolution of the figure of the spinster in literature; they are no longer only witch-like characters that are feared and despised by others, but can fulfil the role of a benevolent woman who wishes to contribute to society.

Interestingly, in spite of the decrease in hatred and criticism that unmarried women receive in the twentieth century when compared to the nineteenth century, stereotypes of the spinster do prevail. The difference between both time periods is how these stereotypes are treated. Charlotte is strong-willed and very particular about certain things, and Mildred is irritable and fussy about matters she considers important. Yet the treatment of Mildred's peevishness in *Excellent Women* is humorous. It is clear enough to readers that she is a good-tempered and well-mannered woman, so her calling herself a "fussy spinster" is comical as one cannot imagine her being too irascible about anything. Charlotte, however, is almost

always angry and ill-humoured, probably as a consequence of the emptiness and meaninglessness of her failed life as an unwanted woman.

The analysis of unmarried women in literature shows that characters such as Charlotte Mullen and Mildred Lathbury are far from being “a couple of women against the whole race of men” (*Excellent* 23). If anything, it is men that are against the whole race of (single) women. Rejecting marriage, or failing to be eligible – which strengthens the idea of passivity: women do not choose, they are chosen – and ending up alone on their forties, did not mean a woman rejected men and social conventions altogether. Sometimes it was only a consequence of bad luck, while it could also be a challenge to traditional gender roles and to the pressure of marrying even if this did not guarantee one’s happiness and well-being. After all, “it was not the excellent women who got married but people like Allegra Gray ... and Helena Napier” (*Excellent* 190), so the Charlotte Mullens and Mildred Lathburys of the world are likely to remain single. However, when one considers that the best thing is “to be free and independent” (*Excellent* 198), perhaps being a spinster is not the least desirable choice.

While the scope of this study is limited to the years between the 1890s and the 1950s, future work on the topic of spinsterhood could focus on how the perception and social acceptance of unmarried women has evolved between the 1960s and the 2020s. It would be interesting to analyse how the arrival of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s affected marriage and the traditional family, and how literature reflected that. Focusing on the twenty-first century would allow future studies to examine how relevant the feminist fight is to modern society. Elaine Showalter suggested that, decade after decade, “feminism seemed more irrelevant to women who were persuaded that in leading ‘emancipated’ individual lives, they had overcome the limitations of the feminine role” (Showalter 299-300). It could be questioned whether that is true after the turn of the twenty-first century, the arrival of the fourth wave of feminism – which seeks to use the Internet, new technologies, and social media platforms to defy patriarchy, empower women, and spread awareness about issues such as sexual assault, the objectification of women, or rape culture –, and the rise of feminist movements such as Me Too – which encourages women to speak up against and share their stories of sexual abuse. Moreover, modern feminist movements are intersectional and address topics of racial and class inequality as well, including women that had been neglected before such as women of colour and in lower social classes. A future study on

marriage and singlehood among women could then analyse how marriage and family expectations are different from culture to culture and whether people of the working class face more pressure and gender constraints than those with more financial means.

Since the current Western society is more egalitarian than, for instance, Victorian society, one could also question whether feminism is still necessary, as it appears that the most essential rights – such as voting, owning of property, or sexual freedom – have been achieved in the Western world. However, when one examines aspects such as the position of women at the workplace one may find that there are still different expectations for men and women. A young woman in a stable romantic relationship with a man may be expected to become pregnant in the near future, which could affect her employability and would lead to job insecurity and a lower income. Furthermore, it could be analysed how women in positions of power are viewed and whether this corresponds to the traditional perspective of powerful women: that is, if they are still seen as a threat or as problematic, and what stereotypes society (mostly men) use to describe female leaders. Finally, a study on modern literature about women could explore whether there are different expectations regarding relationships, family, and parenthood for men and women. Who stays at home with the children and who prioritises their career are aspects to take into account, as well as how people react when the woman chooses to go back to work and the man becomes a stay-at-home father. This would show that, in spite of the progress made by feminism in the last decades, there is still work to do, as there is no real equality between genders. Men are seen as providers and women as caregivers, the former being active and the latter being passive.

Ultimately, studying literature is understanding society. What fiction shows is nothing but a reflection of what is seen in daily life, which means that literary works about gender inequality exist because even in current times there is a wide gap between men and women. One's gender still determines how they will be perceived, how they will be expected to act, talk, and think, and what priorities they should have in life. As this study has shown, women such as Charlotte Mullen and Mildred Lathbury were expected to be gentle and passive due to their sex, and their priority should have been marriage and family life. Deviating from that norm results in social rejection, prejudice, and criticism. Although *The Real Charlotte* was published over one hundred years ago, it cannot be said that single women are finally on the same level as single men, since it is still true that unmarried women face more instability and pressure to find a partner than their male counterparts do. One can

only hope that the literature of the next century will show strong, powerful, independent women who occupy prominent positions in society and are respected as individuals and not just as females. A fully egalitarian society will be one in which studies such as mine are no longer relevant due to gender roles being dated. Literature can play a role in this and show more female characters living full, completely satisfactory lives without adhering to patriarchal gender stereotypes and expectations of marriage or motherhood. What the world needs is more novels of single women thriving and focusing on their careers or friendships, while any potential romantic relationship they may have is nothing but a complement to their already accomplished lives.

If all of the above does not provide a compelling argument as to how feminism is necessary in society, it could be added that men would benefit from defying the patriarchy as well. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes can be damaging to men as well as women, since men are expected to be physically strong, repress their emotions, and be financially and professionally successful in order to be able to provide for themselves and their future partner. Feminism seeks to help them break free of these stereotypes and constraints too, something towards which literature can contribute. Both male and female writers should create strong, independent male characters that do not adhere to traditional notions of masculinity. Where nineteenth-century literature presents men as aggressive and determined, twenty-first-century literature could portray men as gentle, caring, and sensitive. Feminism, after all, fights for equality in a world in which both men and women must embrace restrictive roles that do not allow them to be individuals.

Throughout this paper the figure of the spinster has been analysed and defended, with stereotypes assigned to her examined over the decades. Older unmarried women such as Charlotte Mullen who radically oppose the Angel in the House were treated with understanding, while indecisive young women such as Mildred Lathbury who are in two minds about marriage were given a voice. This is what literature should do: reflect what is happening in society and provide a sympathetic space for those who are rejected or misunderstood. One can only hope that future literary works will treat singlehood not only as a reality for many women, but also as a valid and maybe even desirable alternative to the highly idealised heterosexual marriage. Representation in literature is essential towards making social progress; telling the stories of the unmarried and forgotten ones will ensure that people can empathise with them and maybe respect them more when considering the

challenges they had to face. That is the ultimate goal of this paper: to find the “rejected ones” in literature and allow their full lives to be understood, validated, and appreciated.

7. Works Cited

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