

Scandal On The Street

It's hard to feel much personal sympathy with most of the participants in the Pamela Bordes affair. The career of Ms Bordes, after all, is not exactly what feminists usually mean by a woman's right to work. And her VIP admirers, however manly she may have made them feel at the time, are inclined to look a bit absurd in the glare of the subsequent spotlight.

But perhaps the main protagonist of the story, largely invisible except as the transparent 'medium' that relays the narrative to the world, is the press. While the tabloids gawp and pry, quizzing family and friends for details of the pouting stunner's social life, the quality newspapers have found the whole event profoundly comic. Their recurrent line has been the plural meanings of the word 'research' and the rich ambiguities of 'riding lessons'. There's nothing new or shocking for them in the Bordes affair. Sophisticated people have always known, after all, that the ideal of the family survives only on the basis of a good deal of supplementary activity by the head of the household.

And if you can't afford to join in, you can at least read

about it - again, and again, and again - thanks to the unremitting vigilance of the tabloids. Early efforts to present Bordes as the new Christine Keeler foundered on the disparity between the minister for sport and the minister for war. It was hard to believe that Colonel Gadaffi's cousin was ferrying back information about football identity cards.

Captain Mark Phillips was a godsend, but in the slack period before the royal connection surfaced, Fleet Street interviewed Bordes' mother, her husband, her fiance, anonymous friends, named friends, a distant cousin, a shop assistant who sold Bordes her clothes, and every cabinet minister they could get hold of. They revealed details of her childhood, her domestic habits, her wardrobe and her horoscope. And each new story was an excuse to reprint the familiar pictures.

The project, of course, is to sell newspapers. Never mind whether there's anything in it; never mind the cost; think of the circulation figures - and invoke the public's right to know. As *Today* sanctimoniously insisted: "There must be no cover-up. We must have the facts. All of them."

But what exactly is it that all these self-styled 'family' newspapers are encouraging us to know? It's Pamela, as they call her, in the proprietary way the tabloids have with young women. The press 'understands' Pamela, and leads us to believe that

we do too. We know her type. She is presented as sexy, attention-seeking, heartless, somehow psychologically inadequate and on the make. Pamella Bordes as we (feel we) have come to know her is a Fleet Street production, recognisable as the latest of a long line of spoilt, seductive women stretching back to Pandora and Eve. She is the woman men don't marry, the mistress, real or imaginary, who props up monogamy by supplying in fantasy the mystery and the excitement which would be so dangerous in a wife.

That's why she sells papers. But there is a price to pay. Kate Trelford, standing by her man, represents another long line: this time of loyal wives who are hurt by the press revelations.

And the story of Bordes herself throws into almost emblematic relief the damage the press does to its victims. Her disfiguring motorcycle accident occurred as she fled from the Fleet Street pack, who triumphantly tracked her down to the cheap restaurant in Bali where she had gone to escape them. 'Gotcha Pamella.' The tabloids piously condemn the gang of reporters and photographers who harass their victims, often to breaking point, as if 'the pack' had nothing to do with the stories they print.

Personal sympathy is not the central issue in the Pamella Bordes affair. But perhaps in the end the Fleet Street entertainment industry is not the central villain either. If the press constructed Bordes, and helps to construct the values of its readers, it didn't invent the stereotype she represents and they recognise. On the contrary, that image has its roots in the coercions and constraints of the patriarchal family; and the idealisation of the family pervades our whole culture.

What are we to make of a society that so consistently betrays the institution it sentimentalises, and gets a thrill out of images of women it longs - and fails - to repress? •

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