

That Excellent Miss Bates

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Within *Highbury*, Miss Bates is known as the only surviving daughter of the vicar; to Austen's contemporary reading public, she was the youngest in a large family of sister-characters, all of whom were unlucky in love. The "Rise of the Novel" in the eighteenth century brought with it the ascendance of a certain fictional "type" of unmarried woman—Fielding presents us with Sister Western, Smollett crafted the unforgettable Tabitha Bramble and even Fanny Burney dipped her pen in vinegar for the portrait of *Camilla's* Miss Margland. To understand Miss Bates, one must look at her within the context of the pre-existing stereotypes of the Old Maid.

One of the best sources of information on the nature of this fictive "sisterhood" is William Hayley's *A Philosophical, Historical and Moral Essay on Old Maids* (1785). In this three-volume work, Hayley declares his intention "to redress all the wrongs of the autumnal maiden, and to place her, if possible in a state of honour, content and comfort" (xvi). The book's effect was somewhat different. At every turn, Hayley's work reveals his perception of unmarried women as necessarily inferior specimens of the sex. Even his most eloquent defenses are offensive: "to sneer at the ancient virgin, merely because she had a claim to that title, is . . . a piece of cruelty as wanton and malicious as it is to laugh at the personal blemishes of an unfortunate being, who has been maimed by accident, or deformed by birth" (16). Although we may be appalled by Hayley's insensitivity, it is precisely this quality which allows us to view the stereotype of the Old Maid more clearly than we could in the work of a more intellectually gifted—or less socially oblivious—individual.

Hayley's first volume sets out to educate unmarried women as to the "qualities and conduct" they must adopt in order to escape the public's "ridicule and reproach" (6). He does this in two sections titled: "On the Particular Failings of Old Maids" and "On the Particular Good Qualities of Old Maids." Hayley lists the "Good Qualities" of Old Maids as "Ingenuity, Patience and Charity"—three characteristics which dictate that the unmarried woman be as self-effacing and servile as possible. In contrast, his list of failings: "Curiosity, Credulity, Affectation, and Envy and Ill-Nature," is defined primarily in sexual terms. "Curiosity" is depicted as voyeurism; "credulity" is defined as tendency to interpret any masculine attention as a sexual advance; "affectation" is apparent when the Old Maid continues to try to attract a man by putting on "either such graces as she retains no longer, or such new attractions" (54). Similarly, the Old Maid's "Envy and Ill-Nature" is directed at women who have been more successful in securing male admiration. According to Hayley, "there is hardly a creature to be found more detestable in itself, and more pernicious to all around it, than the active and officious Old Maid, who . . . would gladly plunge the whole universe in dissention and misery" (88-89).



Hogarth: *The Four Times of Day: Morning*. 1738 (detail).

What does Jane Austen have to do with such a vision? Austen's depiction of Miss Bates defies the most brutal aspects of the stereotype. The stereotypical physical appearance of the Old Maid is seen in the tall, thin central figure in Hogarth's "Morning" painting (see illustration). In contrast, Austen deliberately rejects the traditional stature of the old maid and the stasis implied by the popular "blasted tree" imagery. Miss Bates is a figure in motion; she is "the short, neat, brisk-moving aunt" (255). There is also no hint of the sexual escapades implied by Hayley's "credulous" and "affected" Old Maids—Miss Bates is a social rather than a sexual being, devoted to the care of others rather than her own comfort. Certainly, Miss Bates is the antithesis of "envy and ill-nature"; in the narrator's first description of her the characteristics celebrated are her "universal good-will and contented temper" (21). We are told that "she loved every body . . . thought herself a most fortunate creature" (21) and that she was distinguished by "the simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit" (21). In this regard we can acquit Austen of contributing to the most negative images of unmarried women, and yet there are many echoes of Hayley found within *Emma*.

An early discussion with Harriet Smith shows that Emma (if not Austen) shares Hayley's vision of the "Good Qualities" of Old Maids. Emma concurs with Hayley on the value of "ingenuity," defined by Hayley as an unmarried woman's continuing to "practice any art, or to display any amusing accomplishment, which had ever gained her applause" (131). Emma says of her

future as a single woman of independent means: "Woman's usual occupations of eye and hand and mind will be as open to me then, as they are now; or with no important variation. If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work" (85). However, Emma's framing these activities as part of her speech about poverty, indicates that these activities are luxuries available to the rich, rather than (as Hayley would have it) "good qualities" indicating moral fibre. Emma and Hayley are also joined in their recognition of "charity" as a virtue practiced by unmarried women. Hayley urges unmarried women to perform charitable activities as a means of filling "a certain vacuity of heart, which is frequently the natural consequence of their particular situation" (216). Emma acknowledges that "Poverty certainly has not contracted her [Miss Bates'] mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it" (85).

In her reflections on spinsterhood, Emma is quick to acknowledge the connection between the social and economic difficulties facing unmarried women without fortunes: ". . . it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls" (85). Hayley speaks sympathetically about the Old Maid's being "reduced to the shelter of some contracted lodging in a country town, attended by a single servant, and living with difficulty on the interest of two or three thousand pounds" (I:7). In the same vein, Mr. Knightley lectures Emma about the economic hardships experienced by Miss Bates: "She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must sink probably more. Her situation should secure your compassion" (375).

Mr. Knightley, Emma and Hayley offer a variety of views on the effect of this "situation" upon unmarried women. Mr. Knightley insists that Miss Bates' pathetic condition puts her beyond the reproaches of those better off ("Were she a woman of fortune . . ."). For him, Miss Bates' role as an unfortunate spinster precludes judgment of any flaws she may exhibit as an individual. Hayley acknowledges the "common evils" affecting the impoverished Old Maid, but posits two possible responses. Faced with such a situation, the virtuous Old Maid will exhibit "superior endurance . . . mild and graceful submission" (162). Women of less saintly character will develop "the particular failings, which are commonly imputed to the Old Maid in general, [and which] may be found to arise from the peculiarity of her situation and the injurious treatment she receives from the world" (18). Emma expresses a similar dual vision when she discusses how ". . . a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and who live perforce in a very small, and generally very inferior society, may well be illiberal and cross" (85) and then immediately absolves Miss Bates of the imputations of her statement: "This does not apply, however, to Miss Bates; she is only too good natured . . ." (85).

Emma does not see the connection between Miss Bates' economic situation and her personality, but it is clear that Austen does. As Marylea Meyersohn has written: "Miss Bates has only one story to tell: anxiety dominates all—apples, spectacles, soups, Jane— . . . anxiety produces and hangs on every revelation" (42). Seen in this light, Miss Bates' comic nature, "I am a talker, you know; I am rather a talker" (346), is less a personal foible and more a symptom of anxiety. Although "Poverty has not contracted her mind" in the mercenary sense, it has narrowed her world so that her self-expression is restricted to being "a great talker upon little matters" (21). All the words that tumble out of her do not constitute communication. As Emma says, "You will get nothing to the purpose from Miss Bates. . . . She will be all delight and gratitude, but she will tell you nothing. She will not even listen to your questions" (255). Miss Bates, despite her "uncommon degree of popularity" exists in a kind of intellectual isolation created by her own anxious chatter. She speaks constantly, but no one listens: "after a pretty long speech from Miss Bates, which few persons listened to" (344). . . . "Miss Bates, who had been trying in vain to be heard the last few minutes" (345).

Perhaps Mr. Knightley, who is so humane to her, can afford to be so supportive of Miss Bates because, unlike Emma, he is not really asked to interact with her. His "humanity" consists primarily in his role as "benefactor"—the one who supplies apples and sends his coach. Emma, as a woman, must supply "attention" (377), must remedy her "scornful . . . ungracious" attitude and must begin to play her proper role as a "great lady."

But does Austen consider even this to be enough? Throughout the text, she links social good will to condescension. She writes that Miss Bates "had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect" (21) and mentions that "As a counselor she [Miss Bates] was not wanted; but as an approver, (a much safer character,) she was truly welcome" (256). Mr. Knightley instructs Emma to pity Miss Bates; Austen insists that we extend that pity beyond "common evils" to the social and intellectual hazards of the condition of spinsterhood. Miss Bates, brisk of body and indefatigable of tongue, has no "life of the mind," and this is what makes her acceptable to the other villagers.

As Emma says, Miss Bates is "too silly to suit me; but, in general, she is very much to the taste of everybody" (85). It is clear that although she supplies a certain relish to the tale, she is not completely to the taste of her author, either. Within the character of Miss Bates, "what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended" (375). Mr. Knightley demands that Emma disregard her foibles, but Austen insists on presenting the ridiculous in full measure. Although Miss Bates' conversation is a rich source of privileged information for the careful reader, Miss Bates is unable to comprehend the content of her own chatter (see Meyersohn 40-42) and her remarks are relentlessly tedious, trivial and absurd. I find myself protesting to the author (with Mrs. Weston) "You divert me against my conscience" (225).

But Miss Bates functions as more than a mere diversion. Austen's creation of a cheerful and contented spinster opposes the many portraits of the "active

and officious" Old Maid. Her assigning the "Particular Good Qualities" of Old Maids to "so silly — so satisfied" Miss Bates also reveals the poverty of the positive stereotypes of single women available in literature. At the same time that she critiques the fictional depiction of unmarried women, Austen addresses the way society as a whole treats them. Mr. Knightley teaches Emma that an impoverished Old Maid is *not* the proper sport of young ladies, and Austen, in turn, scolds all the "humane" benefactors who prefer to view unmarried women as recipients of charity rather than as possessors of brains, self-respect, and (perhaps) a fluent pen.



Miss Bates was very chatty and good-humoured.

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