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From the Margins to the Centre: The Spinster as Author, Narrator and Actor

LORNA J. CLARK

"To grow old & be poor & laughed at"¹ was a fate deserving of the dread accorded it by many a real as well as fictional spinster in eighteenth-century England. A woman's life was shaped by her marital status; hence, one who failed to marry was considered to have missed her proper destiny, the purpose for which she was created. The future was bleak for those who were forced to seek what Brontë's Shirley called a "place and occupation in the world"² or who (in the words of one Victorian commentator) "not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificially and painfully sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence on their own."³

One of the obvious problems was financial, since single women might well have to "earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men."⁴ This was not unproblematic, given the unequal legal status as well as restricted economic opportunities of women at the time. Women's work in the early modern period was likely to be low skill, low status and low pay.⁵ Not surprisingly, the

majority of women-led households lived in poverty, and the poorest households were likely to be headed by a woman.⁶ Also revealing is the fact that one in three single women over the age of sixty-five was forced to live on poor relief.⁷

In a society in which the family was central, the spinster stood apart, excluded from the “web of obligations and expectation[s]” created by marriage, which effected the “transmission of worldly goods and cultural values from one generation to another.” While she might enjoy familial relations as a daughter, sister or aunt, there were certain categories of kin she would never know (those of husband, in-laws and, most likely, children)⁸ and certain functions she would never perform. As Olwen Hufton has noted: “All women lived in societies in which marriage and motherhood were regarded as the norm, spinsterhood and infertility as a blight, and in which the notion of the family economy, of the family as a composite working unit permitting the sustenance of the whole, was axiomatic.”⁹ A woman who failed to find her proper place in this nexus would become a social anomaly.¹⁰

Until recently, relatively little work has been done on the role of spinster in the early modern period. This is hardly surprising, because the same social factors which pushed them to the margins of their family and society, also tended to minimise their presence in the historical record.¹¹ Moreover, feminist historians have tended to concentrate on married women, since marriage is perceived as the site of female oppression,¹² which “determined the social, economic and legal condition of women in early modern times.”¹³ Yet the number of celibates was felt at the time to be a cause for concern. For one thing, the contemporary impression was that their numbers were increasing. Statistical study does confirm a high rate of “life-long” (never-married) as well as “life-cycle” (not yet married) spinsters in north-western Europe during the early modern period. (These figures can be compared with those of other industrialising societies such as Japan where spinsters were virtually unknown.)¹⁴ Studies by Wrigley and Schofield have estimated that between 1560 and 1720 between 5% and 27% of the population of England never married. More recent revisions put the figure at about 9 per cent (for those born in 1666); the rate peaked at the end of the seventeenth century, fell for most of the eighteenth, then rose again at the end. From 1780 to the mid-nineteenth

century, the number of single women fluctuated between 6 and 10 percent.¹⁵

The high rate of celibacy is one of several factors which affect population growth. Others include the mean age of first marriage (which was lowering), the likelihood of remarriage when either partner died, and fertility rates (or average number of children per couple). For the working-classes, employment opportunities for women and high wages may contribute to a delay in (or lowered rate of) marriage.¹⁶ For the upper-classes, the high cost of dowries (in proportion to jointures) would be an inhibiting factor. Migration patterns, residence in urban areas, an imbalance of genders, and a large population of servants or indentured labour all have an effect. Areas with an active religious community show a greater incidence of celibacy. Whatever the cause, the large surplus of women, as revealed in the 1801 census, particularly in London, gave rise to a general belief that marriage was in crisis, threatened by the increase in celibacy, that there was in short a "spinster problem."¹⁷

This may account at least in part for the increasingly harsh cultural stereotyping (although Susan Lanser points out that other countries, such as France and Italy, experienced a rise in celibacy rates without the correspondingly negative discourse of England and America).¹⁸ The apparent rise in numbers may have created a sense of threat: "for middle-class social commentators the plight of the single woman was symbolic of the larger social disorder brought about by industrialization and urbanization."¹⁹ The etymological history of the word "spinster" is a case in point. The original meaning was occupational, a woman who spins, a useful function in an agrarian economy. In the seventeenth century, it became the proper legal designation for an unmarried woman.²⁰ More generally applied in the eighteenth, it began to take on the pejorative connotations of "old maid."²¹ The decline in status is connected to economic specialisation which replaced the home cottage industry and depreciated the value of the spinster's work, rendering her a superfluous member of the household, a burden rather than a boon.²²

The unenviable position of spinsters deteriorated, it has been argued, due to the shift towards the companionate marriage (first delineated by Lawrence Stone) and the ideology of domesticity which

prevailed among middle and upper classes during the eighteenth century. The private, domestic sphere was inscribed as a peculiarly female domain; women, constrained by their domestic roles as wives and mothers, became increasingly financially dependent upon men.²³ The household organised around the nuclear family left fewer resources and less tolerance for collateral dependents. Architectural innovations show the increasing value of privacy in the home. In what Randolph Trumbach characterises as the “brutal effects” of the “insistent heterosexuality” of the period, spinsters were but one victim among many.²⁴

Whatever the reasons or motivation, the criticism was real. Single women, particularly those few who lived independently, were suspect—simply because they lived outside the patriarchal system, beyond the reach of a male master. While most spinsters (80% or more) did belong to a conventional household, living with parents, siblings or employers, the minority who were able to set up autonomous households²⁵ tended to be viewed with suspicion. “When they had no man to control them, women were perceived as particularly dangerous,” writes one feminist historian,²⁶ while another notes, “Singlewomen might well have been the early modern patriarch’s worst nightmare—encompassing multiple characteristics of disorder all at once.”²⁷ Especially those who lived alone evoked in the authorities a sense of unease, for their tendency to turn to prostitution, bear illegitimate children or become a charge on the parish. Those living without a man and failing to conform to the expectations of marriage were likely to intensify male anxieties about female agency. “Spinsterhood clearly challenged the male need by refusing to meet it or to legitimate its demands on women.”²⁸

The effect of the unease is reflected in the extremely negative stereotype of the “old maid” which came to fruition in eighteenth-century England, focusing on their sterility and financial dependence. Theories as to why this may have been the case differ (perhaps evoking old associations with witchcraft?),²⁹ but the vilification is certainly real, in their depiction as meddlesome gossips—physically repugnant, and sexually and emotionally deprived. In fiction, Fielding’s Bridget Allworthy or Smollett’s Tabitha Bramble, might stand as classic examples of this type.³⁰

Whether or not their portrayal was any kinder in novels written by women is an interesting question, addressed by Jean Kern in a recent article in which she considers several works from the female pen. She finds fictional spinsters in various roles, including those of companion, governess and idle gossip. Some are simply "female variations on the male novelists' caricatures of old maids" but others are more sympathetic; Miss Woodley, for example, in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791) is a kindly character, who acts as the faithful confidante of one heroine and the surrogate mother of the other. Kern concludes that "in writing from a woman's viewpoint," the female novelists "individualized their old maid characters beyond stereotypes."³¹

Some studies on fictional spinsters focus on representations of communities of women (or "clustering"), beginning with Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694-7) which advocated a place of retreat where single women could pool their resources and seek intellectual or spiritual fulfilment. Sarah Scott's novel, *A Description of Millennium Hall* (1762), represents an idyllic community, created and managed by women, which includes those mistreated by men or voluntary spinsters. These works look ahead to the utopianism of the nineteenth century when the single life was consciously chosen as a positive alternative to the unequal role of women in middle-class marriage, and dedicated to female communities in the fields of education, religion or philanthropy.³²

Several of the novels considered by Kern were actually written by spinsters, of which there were a fair number writing at the time: Maria Edgeworth, Clara Reeve, Jane Barker, Sarah Fielding and Jane Austen come quickly to mind. Frances Burney is sometimes cited in this context, by virtue of her having married late (at the age of 41) and having spent most of her adult life and much of her writing career as a single woman. But her lesser-known half-sister, Sarah Harriet Burney, also a novelist, has not yet been considered in this context, despite the fact that her life and writing offers a unique opportunity to consider the construction of life at the margins and the role of spinster as author, narrator and actor.

The life of Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), a life-long spinster, is typical in many respects of middle-class women who failed

to marry.³³ For most of her adult years, she was a member of a conventional household living either with her own family or that of an employer. Until her mother died when she was 24 (in 1796), she lived with both parents; thereafter, she stayed with her widowed father (until 1798 and again 1807-14). The one child left unmarried, she cared for the aging patriarch, fulfilling thanklessly the roles of housekeeper, companion, nurse and secretary, which restricted her income and constrained her autonomy.

Once, when the strain was too great, she moved away from home to set up housekeeping with a half-brother, who was meanwhile separating from his wife. This rather unconventional household (which has mistakenly been sensationalised)³⁴ lasted five years. Paying her share of expenses, she found her small property diminishing, and left to take employment as a governess. She held two such posts which lasted (in total) more than a decade; one for a county family, the other for a peer, and both in male-headed households. Although suffering from the discomfiture of life as an upper servant, she proudly preferred paid employment to dependence in the home of wealthier relatives (287). She also had a brief stint as paid companion in a family headed by a wealthy widow where she was made to feel "on all occasions, quite one of the family, and most *kindly* as well as politely treated." This female-led household was apparently most congenial.

When not attached to a household, she had recourse to "clustering," a term used to describe single women banding together to ensure their economic and emotional survival.³⁵ Several phases of her life would fit this pattern; sharing lodgings with a companion, holidaying with a niece, or boarding with other women at spas and resorts. In Florence, where she lived (1829-33), she found company by rooming with a widow; on her return, she retired to Bath and later Cheltenham, where the shifting inmates of a boarding house provided her with a sort of familial substitute.

The lives of spinsters have been characterised as "strongly centered on women ...of all women, singlewomen were the most woman-focused and perhaps, indeed, the most woman-identified."³⁶ The letters of Sarah Harriet Burney describe the gendered sphere to which she was confined; her strongest emotional ties were formed with female employers, pupils and relatives, though she was lucky to have

male relatives and even friends through whom she could transact business with bankers and publishers. Her will also conforms to a typical female pattern, in naming other women as beneficiaries and leaving the bulk of her property to a spinster niece, whose life promised to repeat the pattern of her own.³⁷

Financial constraint, a frequent condition of the single life, certainly marked her own, especially after her father's death when she lost her home. However, his moderate bequest doubled her income to approximately 85£ per annum; augmented by earnings, it had increased to 100£ by the time she stopped working. Though hardly munificent, this placed her in the fortunate minority of aging single women who were able to live off the income from property.³⁸ To augment her holdings over the course of her life, she had recourse to her pen, publishing five works of fiction between 1796 and 1839, which she called her "only means of keeping out of Marglandism" (197), in reference to the mean-spirited governess in Mme d'Arblay's *Camilla*. Money troubles, which "sting and pinch" the heart (124-5), she deplored as a fetter to her independent spirit: "I am such a coward from my conscious insignificance" (230) she wrote.

Consciousness of her lowly status in society shows in her letters after she left home, which was obviously an emotional watershed. "The men intend never to make a wife of me" (43), she declared, attributing it to the lack of beauty of which she was painfully conscious ("here am I holding forth about my own ugliness," 101): "a *red nose* and a *dwarf's height*" (17), teeth "early injured," she had "not a single beauty" to speak of "except fine hair (435)." (These modest attractions are confirmed in the letters of those who knew her). At 29, she appropriated to herself the role of spinster aunt (joking that she intended to become "very cross, ugly, spiteful &c," 43) and believed that domestic happiness was beyond her reach (81) (though she tried to enjoy vicariously the good fortune of others). That the role did chafe at times, is seen in her scathing criticism of the fellow-spinsters with whom she was forced to associate (432):

"many of the individuals in these Boarding-Houses are, like myself, old Maids, who would have married if any body had asked them, but whose attractions were not sufficient to procure an offer. Of course they are not

rich, else they would have been gladly snapt up, faults & all. But, when not touchy, and ill-tempered, they are not seldom eminently trivial, inquisitive, and empty-headed.” (464)

By implication at least, she liked to consider herself exempt from these general characteristics of the species.

“A mere peticoat party is rarely worth putting one foot before the other for” she once wrote; men on the other hand, could always be counted on to “bring home some news from the Library—and they know nothing about caps, & bonnets, & female bargains” (464). Her attitude suggests one of the less conventional aspects of her character, a declared preference for male company. Well-read, aggressively intelligent, restless and sharp-tongued, her rather prickly personality seemed rather odd in a woman but was appreciated by men of learning who could savour her sense of humour and provide the intellectual stimulation that she craved. A daring journey in which she travelled alone across Europe brought her to Rome where she was befriended by the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson and several young companions. Enjoying sightseeing expeditions with “all her ‘Merry Men’”³⁹ was perhaps the happiest period of her life. Later in Florence, she retreated into self-imposed isolation; finding that the women “occasion a thousand times more *suggezione* than the husbands” (359), she withdrew from the formal visits prescribed for female socialising—even though she was left alone with her books, the “dear mute companion[s]” (137) of her life. In her last years, she put “Mrs. S.H. Burney” on her cards (“see what we spinsters are brought to!” 418) and resigned herself to becoming a “Hermitess” (432); she had given up the search for stimulating female society.

Though marked by loneliness and intellectual isolation, she certainly experienced romance and turned down at least one offer of marriage. The proposal came from an exceptionable quarter, an elderly clergyman, when she was in her 50’s, and was relinquished with some regret,⁴⁰ which was expressed in her tale, *The Hermitage*, published some fifteen years later. In it, a middle-aged spinster is matched by scheming friends with an elderly bachelor. Though tempted by “the prospect of becoming mistress of an affluent establishment” and of “wip[ing] off the disgrace of Old Maidism,” she is not in love and does

not seriously consider changing her state. She is moved instead by the generous offer of a wealthy widow to make her financially independent, and chooses to remain as companion to her benefactress. The telling incident comes in her last published work and strikes a wistful chord at the end.⁴¹

Earlier works are less thoughtful in their portrayal of the single state; the treatment is harsh and seems adopted wholesale from the caricatures represented on the stage or in fiction. For instance, *Traits of Nature* (1812) contains a telling incident in which the heroine arrives to a cold reception in the house of rich but proud relations. A French governess is expected at the same time; not only is the heroine mistaken for this personage, but she is shocked by her cousin's "violence of antipathy."⁴² This scornful denigration of the "tall, raw-boned French woman" (2:40) is clearly meant to be amusing. The governess soon falls ill with an infectious fever which arouses little sympathy but necessitates the family's removal. The reaction of each of the characters to this needy stranger in their midst is a moral touchstone and few express any compassion—the fate of dependents in a heartless family is a grim one. Finally, the mistress of the house bursts into a memorable tirade, beginning: "Governesses, whether sick or well, are the plagues of one's existence! I never admitted one into the house yet, who did not, in some way or other, turn out a source of disturbance!" (2:122-23).

Perhaps it is her learning which earns the governess such opprobrium in this novel. A female pedant, that traditional target of misogynistic satire, figures here as well. Wrapped in "a cloud of pedantic jargon" (2:93), laying claim to proficiency in such unladylike subjects as science and Biblical languages, she is clearly headed for spinsterhood, condemned for her cold heart and love of self-display. She is paired with a spiteful coquette whose malice and envy torment the heroine relentlessly. Both are teased mercilessly for their failure to marry. But in the meting out of rewards and punishments at the end of the novel, it is the learned lady who fares the worst. The reformed coquette, chastened by suffering, achieves some measure of comfort and serenity, while the woman who dared aspire to learning is wholly condemned: she is left scornfully by the narrator, "wrapped up in self-consequence ...[to pass] through a life of imaginary importance" (5:249).

A similar patterning occurs in Burney's *Country Neighbours*, published in 1820, which features two unpleasant sisters who contrast with a third, more positive character. Here, the evil pair consists again of an affected coquette, who sets her sights too high, rendering herself ridiculous and risking a life of single blessedness and her foil, this time a girl of "inanimate" stupidity.⁴³ The family thus contains three spinster-daughters, none of whom are married or even engaged by the end (although one has hope that if she is willing to compromise her ambitions, she may not be left on the shelf). As in Austen's novels, the work focuses on "3 or 4 families in a Country Village";⁴⁴ the characters develop and interact outside the conventional linear narrative of courtship and marriage. Although love-interest is provided by a beautiful Italian niece suddenly introduced into their midst, who falls in love with the adopted heir of the neighbouring estate, this plot is not the main focus of the tale.

This is largely due to the narrative voice, that of the eldest daughter, a forty-year-old spinster, who is recording these family events. She begins in a retrospective vein, glancing back through the pages of a journal begun when she was sixteen and "full of hope ...classed amongst the belles of the county ...with a firm expectation of having sundry important adventures to detail." The hoped-for tale of courtship has somehow failed to materialise; instead, she finds only "preposterous vanity" about her supposed conquests, and a romance which never came to fruition. Reflecting on her former self, she finds "the airs, the self-complacency, the paltry attempts at wit" inspire her only with "contempt" (2:4-5). This framing device provides a rather ironic setting for the story of a beautiful sixteen-year-old who plays the part of romantic heroine.

The narrator, Anne Stavordale, is problematic in other ways as well. As an actor taking part in the family drama, Anne is a most sympathetic character. Winning the warm affection of her niece, she is favoured and trusted by the hero, and respected outside the family circle as the "properest person" to consult in all exigencies (3:199). The remarks of others clearly accord to her the role of kindly spinster aunt. ("I see nothing in my journal to love myself for, but my affection to my family," (2:5) she writes). However, this benevolent character does not seem to mesh with the acid tone of her private observations of her closest relatives, and her rather cynical view of human nature. The

Stavordale family circle, as she describes it, is a seething hotbed of sarcasm, malice, aggression and rivalry, far from the locus of "steady warmth of heart" and "social ease" which they supposedly represent (3:417).

The mother indeed is a formidable matron (or rather "shrew")⁴⁵ to whom the father is a mere cypher; sarcastic, supercilious, even abusive to her daughters, she savagely mocks their failure to marry, without acknowledging any responsibility for their social maladjustment. Nor is she the only strong woman in this matriarchal society, which includes Lady Tremayne and her weak-kneed son, Lady Horatia Tracy and her sprightly daughter, and the officious Mrs. Crosby. Only Sir Reginald Tourberville and his two scape-grace sons form the archetypal patriarchal family, which is even more dysfunctional than the rest; apparently poisoned by a *femme fatale*, their moral degradation has been amply displayed before the action starts, and they stand in need of purging, cleansing and rejuvenation by a pure young virgin, aptly named "Blanche."

Nor are these the only "feminist" elements we can find in this unusual tale. A spirited young girl who wins the hero's love by rescuing him from drowning, Blanche insists upon his *mother's* approval before she will listen to his professions. Her rectitude is based on filial reverence for her own mother's virtues; when these are placed in doubt, assailed by Sir Reginald's accusations, her sense of identity is threatened and she refuses to consider marriage until her mother's character is cleared. She refuses to enter a family which will not accept her on her own terms. In effect, the rigid patriarch has vilified as temptress the madonna she reveres as saint. In the psychologically resonant movement of a young woman from maternal to paternal spheres (often signified by courtship), Blanche refuses to make the transition, until the sanctity of her mother's character is reaffirmed and Sir Reginald, begging for forgiveness, humbles himself before her. Only then will she deign to accept her paternal lineage and inheritance; the emasculated hero will change his name to hers to secure his right in the succession.

Even then, Blanche expresses regret for the family she is leaving, the strong matriarchal circle of the Stavordales, for which the hero provides inadequate compensation. "Oh, what can ever make me amends for so

heavy a privation?" (3:362) she cries. The note of dissatisfaction reinforces the sense of incompleteness at the end of the tale; somehow the marriage fails to give any sense of closure as the thread of this narrative has not been central. Life in the country neighbourhood goes on and so does the story, to describe the death of Tourberville's heir and the departure of the broken old man from his mansion, absorbed into the female domain at last. The voice of the spinster remains front and centre, watching the ebb and flow of life around her, vividly recording it and acerbically commenting upon it; weddings and deaths are simply strands woven into the fabric of the whole community and contained within her consciousness. The curious displacement of Burney's narrative was unusual enough to puzzle readers at the time and is still unsettling today; it would make *Country Neighbours* a good candidate for re-issue in our time.

NOTES:

¹Jane Austen, "The Watsons," *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, vol. 6, *Minor Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 317.

²Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 377, cited in Michael Anderson, "The Social Position of Spinsters in Mid-Victorian Britain, *Journal of Family History*, 9, (1984), 378.

³William Greg, *Literary and Social Judgments* (London: Trubner, 1868), 338-9, cited in Anderson, 379.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵See J.M. Bennett, "History that Stands Still": Women's Work in the European Past," *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988), 269-83.

⁶Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 26-7; Maura Palazzi, "Female Solitude and Patrilineage: Unmarried Women and Widows during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Family History*, 15 (1990), 443-59 (454-5).

⁷Anderson, 391.

⁸See Susan Cotts Watkins, "Spinsters," *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 310-25. This article introduces a special issue of the journal devoted to Spinsterhood.

⁹Olwen Hufton, "Women without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 355-76.

¹⁰Bridget Hill has considered the question of the status of women in a series of articles and books: *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); *Servants: English Domestic in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also her chapter on "Women Without Husbands," in *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 123-36; her article, "A Refuge from Men: the Idea of a Protestant Nunnery," *Past and Present*, 117 (1987), 107-30; and her most recent book, *Women Alone : Spinsters in England, 1660-1850* (New Haven : London : Yale University Press, 2001).

¹¹As Judith Bennett and Amy Froide point out in "A Singular Past," their introduction to *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1-37.

¹²See Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1: 1500-1800* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

¹³Christine Adams, "A Choice Not to Wed? Unmarried Women in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History*, 29 (1995-96), 883-94.

¹⁴Laura L. Cornell, "Why are there no Spinsters in Japan?" *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 326-39.

¹⁵E. Anthony Wrigley and Roger S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (London: Edward Arnold and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 260, Table 7. 28, cited in Bridget Hill, "The Marriage Age of Women and the Demographers," *History Workshop Journal*, 28 (1989), 135. The significance of

Wrigley and Schofield's figures are discussed in David R. Weir, "Rather Never than Late: Celibacy and Age at Marriage in English Cohort Fertility," *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 340-53, with a reply from Roger Schofield, "English Marriage Patterns Revisited," *Journal of Family History*, 10 (1985), 2-20. For a good summary, see Mendelson and Crawford, 166-7, or Margaret R. Hunt, "The Sapphic Strain: English Lesbians in the Long Eighteenth Century," *Singlewomen*, 278.

¹⁶As well as discussion in the articles cited above, Pamela Sharpe questions the hypothesis advanced by Wrigley and Schofield that the age at and chances of marriage were affected by real wage levels, in "Literally spinsters: a new interpretation of local economy and demography in Colyton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), 46-65.

¹⁷W. R. Greg described later in the century the problem of "an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportional and quite abnormal," cited in Anderson, 379. Ian Watt discusses the problem of spinsterhood in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 144-7. See also Hill, "Marriage Age."

¹⁸Susan S. Lanser, "Singular Politics: The Rise of the British Nation and the Production of the Old Maid," *Singlewomen*, 297-323.

¹⁹Vicinus, 3.

²⁰However, Carol Z. Wiener questions the exact meaning of the legal terminology in "Is a Spinster an Unmarried Woman?" *American Journal of Legal History*, 20 (1976), 27-31; see also subsequent comments by J.H. Baker, "Male and Married Spinsters" and "V.C. Edwards, "The Case of the Married Spinster: An Alternative Explanation," in the succeeding volume of the journal.

²¹*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. "spinster."

²²Watt outlines this argument in *Rise of the Novel*, 144-6.

²³The classic statement about the progression towards the nuclear family based on a companionate marriage appears in Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Wiedenfeld, 1977). Later works on the middle class family include Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (London: Methuen, 1989); John Smail, *The Origins of Middle-Class Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); and Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁴Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender¹ Revolution: Vol. 1, Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); also of interest is his earlier *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

²⁵Palazzi cites interesting statistics for Pisa in 1841, where "the older unmarried women lived mostly with the families of employers for whom they were servants (38%), within parental households (35%), or even in households of people with whom they had no ties of kinship (11%)" leaving 9% of those over and 1% of those under 40 living in independent accommodations (455). Hufton discusses the social conditions of women and spinsters in eighteenth century England in "Women without Men." Anderson (388) finds higher figures for older

spinsters heading a household in Victorian England (e.g. 25% for those aged 45-54).

²⁶Monica Chojnacka, "Singlewomen in Early Modern Venice: Communities and Opportunities," *Singlewomen*, 217.

²⁷Amy M. Froide, "Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England," *Singlewomen*, 236-69 (241).

²⁸Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 193.

²⁹On misogynistic satire, see Felicity Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women 1660-1750* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984). Lanser argues that satire on unmarried women in particular was related to Britain's political and commercial interests and the desire to promote fertility and population growth.

³⁰See also Katharine Ottaway Kittredge, "'Tabby Cats Lead Apes in Hell': Spinsters in Eighteenth Century Life and Fiction," Ph.D. diss., SUNY Binghamton, 1991. William Hayley speculates on the origin of the association of single women with "apes in hell" in his *Philosophical, Historical, and Moral Essay on Old Maids* (London: T. Cadell, 1785). A more recent exploration is in B.J. Whiting, "Old Maids Lead Apes in Hell," *Englische Studien*, 70 (1935-36): 337-51.

³¹Jean B. Kern, "The Old Maid, or 'to grow old, and be poor, and laughed at,'" *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986), 201-14, esp. 204, 201.

³²For a discussion of the later phenomenon of spinsterhood conceived as emancipatory, a preferable alternative to the unequal conditions of marriage, see Vicinus and Chambers-Schiller; Ruth Freeman and

Patricia Klaus, "Blessed or not? The New Spinster in England and the United States in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 394-417. For its literary expression, see Laura L. Doan, *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

³³For details of her life and literary career, see Lorna J. Clark, "Introduction," *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. Lorna J. Clark (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxxiii-lxiii. All further references to this edition of letters appear in the text.

³⁴The exciting possibility of incest, first raised by Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 281-5, has been accepted as fact and improved upon by subsequent commentators. See e.g., Winifred F. Courtney, "New Light on the Lambs and Burneys," *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, NS no. 57 (Jan. 1987), 19-27; Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 277-82.

³⁵Hufton, "Women without Men," 361.

³⁶Bennett and Froide, 26.

³⁷The will of Sarah Harriet Burney, PRO/PROB/10/6242, dated 21 Sept. 1841, proved 15 June 1844, is transcribed in *Letters*, 485-6.

³⁸Anderson, 382.

³⁹Charlotte (Francis) Barrett to Frances (Burney) d'Arblay, 28 Jan. 1830, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

⁴⁰See Clark, Introduction, xlviii.

⁴¹[Sarah Harriet] Burney, *The Romance of Private Life*, vol. 3, *The Hermitage* (London: Henry Colburn, 1839), 334-6.

⁴²[Sarah Harriet] Burney, *Traits of Nature*, 5 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1812), 2:44. All further references to this work appear in the text.

The confusion of identities (between heroine and governess) continues until finally a wealthy baronet mistakes her for a kept mistress. Nor is the ambiguity ever entirely dissipated; the young girl who began the playful prank defends herself by claiming, "Why so she is [my governess]! She governs me by my own choice; and more despotically than ever yet was done by the stoutest compulsion" (2:204).

⁴³Sarah Harriet Burney, *Tales of Fancy*, vols. 2 and 3, *Country Neighbours* (London: Henry Colburn, 1816-20), 2:40.

⁴⁴*Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 275.

⁴⁵"Shrew" is the word used by Henry Crabb Robinson who seemed somewhat unnerved by Miss Burney's tale, as he recorded in his diary: "It would have been better had the supposed author not been a daughter and sister and aunt—by which a heartless character is given to her reflexions," Henry Crabb Robinson, 14 December 1831, *Diaries*, Dr. Williams's Library, London.