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SPINNING THEIR WHEELS: SPINSTERS AND NARRATIVE IN EIGHTEENTH-
AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH WOMEN'S FICTION

by

STEPHANIE OPPENHEIM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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CHAPTER ONE: "THE MOST USELESS AND INSIGNIFICANT OF ALL GOD'S CREATURES": SPINSTERS IN EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY DISCOURSE

My project brings to light the vital narrative issues raised by the spinster, a figure rampant in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century British fiction whose function in the novel has been consistently overlooked. The spinster has been ignored because she does not fit the standard plots available for women's fiction. Yet it is precisely her inability to fit the model that allows her to expose the exigencies of female plots and what they forcibly exclude. Beginning with Richardson's major novels of the 1740s, two basic plots, marriage and seduction, become codified as the only legitimate options for feminocentric novels. In either scenario, the plot hinges on an erotic event set in motion by male desire. What is clearly missing is an *autonomous* female plot--one that is not determined by erotic events, not fulfilled by marriage or defloration and death. In its purest form, this is what I am calling the spinster plot. As a central plot of female fiction, it does not exist.

This dissertation both accounts for the glaring absence of a central spinster plot and examines how the plot nevertheless works its way into narrative. Most frequently, spinsters make their appearance in the *subplots* of women's fiction. Because women authors employ the same stereotyped characters as their male contemporaries, it is easy to overlook the divergent *narrative* functions they serve. In the eighteenth century, male authors such as Smollett and

Fielding regularly depict unmarried women as caricatures who provide comic relief or make convenient villains. Burney similarly deploys the stereotype of the spinster as libidinous, embittered, and conniving. In the nineteenth century, Austen resorts to the stereotype of the chattering, tedious, gossipy spinster, while Brontë exploits that of the stony, cold, paralytic spinster. Yet to dismiss these figures on the level of character--or caricature--means to overlook the dimension they add to the plot. The spinster subplots comment on the central plot, disclosing its proscriptions as well as its possibilities. They imply a critique of the social conditions that make spinsterhood so problematic and the literary conditions that write the spinster out of fiction. Burney faults her society for subjecting spinsters to economic hardship and physical danger; Austen, for refusing to hear spinsters; Brontë, for denying them meaningful work and human connection. All three authors dramatize the quandary of the woman writer and reader who wish to bring the spinster's story to light. They call into question those narrative practices that make it so hard to spin such a tale.

In the nineteenth century, although the spinster subplot persists, the figure of the spinster moves closer to the center of the novel. While both male and female authors continue to exploit the courtship and seduction plots, women novelists make a distinct attempt to imagine plots for heroines who are neither married nor seduced. They

foreground the question of how women can structure and understand their destinies autonomously, outside an erotic context. In so doing, they raise the question of how a female author can structure a narrative beyond the purview of this familiar territory. Jane Austen creates in Emma Woodhouse a heroine who envisions a future outside of marriage. Charlotte Brontë grants her final heroine a vocation. Yet despite this emergence of heroines who seek a *raison d'être* beyond the erotic, the central spinster plot fails to take full form. Those heroines who would be spinsters are ultimately shunted back into the marriage plot or silenced by their own narratives. While women authors hint at a different story, they seem unable to sustain it. This raises the question of whether the life of a single woman is somehow *nonnarratable*; and if so, why? Once again we must look to the spinster subplot to understand what remains unwritten at the heart of the novel.

In exploring these questions, I will build on the work feminist narratologists have done over the past two decades to reassess narratological definitions of plot in order to make them more relevant to women's fiction. Feminist narratologists such as Susan Lanser, Susan Winnett, Nancy K. Miller and Marianne Hirsch have pointed out the inadequacy of theories of plot that ignore the question of gender. In particular, they have questioned the universal applicability of Peter Brooks's celebrated study, Reading for the Plot.

Brooks makes a crucial shift from the static models of structuralist narratology to one that explores the *dynamic* aspect of narrative--what makes it move forward and "makes us read forward" (xiii). Brooks introduces the notion of *desire* into the study of plot, arguing that desire is what initiates narrative, carries it forward, and anticipates its end. He describes narrative desire as "the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention" (103). Plot begins at the moment a story is "stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability" (103). For Brooks, this stimulation is associated with ambition and eros.

Brooks's theory of plot has provided both a foundation and stumbling-block for feminist analyses of plot. As Marianne Hirsch remarks, his dynamic model is "particularly appealing, but also particularly gender-blind" in its exclusive attention to male sexuality and psychology (53). Susan Winnett similarly notes the limitations of a model that considers only male-authored, male-centered texts, and male dynamics of desire. As she points out in "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure," such theories stand in the way "both of women's conceiving (of) their own pleasure and of men's conceding that female pleasure might have a different plot" (507). Winnett asserts that "we have been taught to read in drag, and must begin to question seriously the determinants that govern the mechanics of our narratives" (516). She suggests that were we to read

according to *different* notions of pleasure--our own--we might be able to "rescue female experience from the margins of narrative and to render it intelligible in its own right" (515). My own attempt to uncover the spinster plot--the female plot not determined by the dynamics of male desire--is an effort in this direction. Following Winnett, I acknowledge that it may only appear nonnarratable because our reading is governed by a model that cannot comprehend it. Or, as Winnett suggests, "The other stories have already been written; we simply have to learn how to read them" (515). At the same time, I maintain that the major women authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not finally tell these stories. I find, rather, what Hirsch has called "not a radical departure" in female plots, but "at least the will to difference" (54).

Like Hirsch and Winnett, Susan Lanser calls for revised notions of plot that will allow us to discuss women's fiction with less condescension and greater precision. She looks specifically at several works which depict communities of women, and which have been slighted by traditional critical approaches. Such novels as Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford, for example, "relegate heterosexual intrigue to minor subplots. These novels thus operate on what has been viewed as stasis--the position of utopian fiction--rather than on conventional novelistic movement, and are therefore claimed not to be novels at all" (Fictions of Authority 241). In other words, since such works do not employ the few plots generally

allowed women's fiction ("heterosexual intrigue"), they are condemned as plotless and denied the status of novels. Yet as Lanser argues in "Toward a Feminist Narratology":

If again and again scholars of women's writing must speak in terms of the "plotless," then perhaps there is something wrong with notions of plot. . . . Perhaps narratology has been mistaken in trying to arrive at a single definition and description of plot. We will learn more about women's narratives . . . if we make ourselves find language for describing their plots in positive rather than negative terms. (357)

Lanser's argument is particularly relevant to the spinster plot, which is typically identified through a series of negations: spinsters do *not* marry; they are *not* seduced. Since the spinster is the female figure who most clearly lacks a plot according to standard definitions, it is through my study that a language appropriate to women's narratives is most likely to be found. Once again, however, I must add the observation that the major authors do indeed retreat from the divergent plots they propose. Their "will to difference" is registered without being fully embodied.

Rather than merely viewing this move in "negative terms," I would like to explore the possible reasons for this retreat. In her essay "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," Nancy K. Miller indicates the constraints put upon a woman writer in her fabrication of plots. She explains that

the plots of women's literature are not about "life" and solutions in any therapeutic sense, nor should they be. They are about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction. (43)

The maxim she refers to is the ideology that determines what is legitimate material for fiction; what meets the approval of public opinion. When the plots of literature go beyond the bounds of such conventions, they are called "implausibilites" (35). A heroine--such as a spinster--who departs from the traditional romantic plots of women's literature thus renders her story implausible to the conventional reader. As Miller states, "A heroine without a maxim, like a rebel without a cause, is destined to be misunderstood" (26). This helps to explain why women writers may have chosen not to describe such lives in fiction. Aware of the conventional standards for what was acceptable in fiction, they may have been reluctant to brave public censure or misunderstanding. Nevertheless, Miller finds in women's writing a "repressed content" which she identifies as "not an erotic impulse but an impulse to power" (35). She uses the term "italicization" to refer to the heroine's "extravagant wish for a story that would turn out differently" (40). Finally, "the emphasis is there to be read, and it points to another text" (45). What I wish to do in this study is take seriously this emphasis, or italicization, in fiction by and about spinsters.

This emphasis is, I believe, more readily perceived when such fiction is read alongside spinsters' autobiography. My study focuses on the works of three authors, Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë, all of whom have received a great amount of attention from feminist critics in recent

years. I have selected them not solely based on their literary and critical status, but because they all contemplated spinsterhood in their personal writing as well as in their fiction. While only Austen remained a spinster to the end of her life, all three authors began their literary careers as single women and remained single well into their professional lives. More important, they identified themselves as spinsters. Though Burney and Brontë would both make late marriages, neither of them expected to marry after turning down early, undesirable proposals. This identification as spinsters inevitably informed how they depicted their fictional counterparts. For this reason, in each chapter I am looking at their autobiographical writings in conjunction with the novels.

Most of the autobiographical material available consists of informal writing, chiefly personal correspondence. Neither Austen nor Brontë produced a formal memoir; and while Burney did (a memoir of her father in which she appears), I have chosen to look at her letters and journals instead. This is because I am less interested in public retrospection than the thoughts and problems recorded privately at the time the fiction was being produced. The very inconsistencies and oscillations that characterize the letters illuminate the conflicts written into the novels and the dynamics of their production. Patricia Meyer Spacks, looking at the personal writings of eighteenth-century women, has noted:

Collected letters have a special value as autobiography because they record not the distillation but

the dynamic of experience. Formal autobiography presents itself as the product of a life reflected upon. The sort of informal autobiography amassed in a published accumulation of letters represents the processes of life . . . rather than a product. (Boredom 93)

It is these processes, and what they reveal about the process of fiction-making, that interest me.

It is important here to clarify what I am doing and what I am not doing by reading the autobiographical writing in conjunction with the fiction. I wish to return to Nancy K. Miller's call for a "double reading" of female autobiography and fiction which is not a reductive reading of women's fiction as naively autobiographical ("Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France" 59-60). Miller proposes instead "an intratextual practice of interpretation which . . . would privilege neither the autobiography nor the fiction, but take the two writings together in their status as text" (60). Accordingly, I do not read the autobiography as primary, as revealing the "truth" behind the fiction.¹ Rather, I take the letters as a further text that explores the question of how a woman's life is to be "read" without the usual "plot points" of marriage and motherhood.

In Writing a Woman's Life, Carolyn Heilbrun makes the important observation that women have been deprived of the kinds of narratives that would enable them to take control of their own lives (17). She remarks that "The choices and pain of the women who did not make a man the center of their lives seemed unique, because there were no models of the lives they

wanted to live, no exemplars, no stories" (31). The spinster authors of my study might presumably serve as such exemplars. Their letters, indeed, show the attempts of women writers to live such uncommon lives and to account for them autobiographically. Yet, as Heilbrun asserts, "lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts" (37). Crucially, as Heilbrun also notes, women writers did not allow their heroines to live the unconventional lives they themselves enjoyed. They did not, in any obvious way, provide new narratives for their (female) readers.

My point here is not to fault the writers. Instead, I wish to look at the letters in order to help account for why this might be so. These texts shed light on the constraints and departures that shaped the fictional lives of spinsters. The authors did not simply deny their heroines their own opportunities and achievements. They recognized the "oddity" of such lives, and the difficulty--perhaps the futility--of trying to justify them in fiction. The letters and the fiction do not, therefore, present two contradictory accounts of spinsters' lives. Rather, they present an ongoing investigation of the social and literary conditions that made such lives both difficult and difficult to textualize. They offer divergent scenarios of how such conditions might be negotiated.

What is perhaps most important to note in the letters of all three authors is the self-consciousness with which they construct their own identities as spinsters. They simultaneously "read" their own lives as spinsters and register how they are read by others. All three writers turned down proposals of marriage. While we do not have Austen's account of her decision, Burney and Brontë both felt compelled to justify their refusal. This compulsion reflects an awareness of how indefensible such a refusal would appear in the eyes of others. That is, in their lives and their life writings, they had to face charges of "implausibility." They understood that their fictional heroines would face the same hazards.

The letters also reveal how these authors made sense of the lives of other spinsters. This is particularly clear in the case of Austen and Brontë. In contemplating their fellow spinsters, they acknowledge how the lives of spinsters are commonly constructed by others. They alternately defy and accept such constructions. In their search for a precedent, they indicate a need for such precedents--the "models" or "exemplars" that Heilbrun mentions. Their struggle to read the lives of other spinsters sheds light on the narrative uses to which they put spinsters in their fiction. The spinster subplots in these works serve a particular function. They offer models within the text of how the heroine might live if she doesn't marry. The precedents they offer, however, only serve as negative examples. In Burney, the

distress of the comical spinsters tells the heroine there is no desirable option besides marriage. In Austen, the babbling spinsters suggest that an unmarried woman can say nothing that will register as important--will never be able to make herself heard. In Brontë, the tragic spinsters show the isolation of the single woman, cut off from time and generation. This does not mean the authors wholly subscribed to such readings. Rather, it shows a parallel in the fiction of the search for precedents they conducted in their lives. It flags the need for and lack of alternative stories in their fiction. One might say that the submerged plot of their work is precisely the lack of plots. Their works are about the endless replication of stories and the difficulty of finding one's way out. And they are about the beginnings of an attempt.

Although my focus is on the *narrative* problems posed by the figure of the spinster, it is necessary to survey the social/historical context out of which this figure arose in order to understand her place in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. While the spinster's place in the life and fiction of her times cannot be equated, there is clearly a correlation between the two. The term "spinster" itself does not merely signify an unmarried woman, but an identity constructed at a particular historical moment out of a set of economic, social, and ideological determinants.

The period considered by this study ranges from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. While the development of domestic ideology and novelistic conventions in the eighteenth century determine my choice of starting point, a few words should be said about the point at which my study ends. In part my chronology is determined by the lifespan of the authors I have chosen. Yet I also believe that Charlotte Brontë, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, inhabited a very different literary and social climate than women writing in the subsequent decades. After 1850, there developed a more vocal feminist movement, more employment opportunities, and a much more public debate about the social status of spinsters.² I am looking at women from an earlier period, who had less access to work, political organization, and public rhetoric. Moreover, in this earlier period, the figure of the single woman had not yet been foregrounded in fiction as she would be by the New Woman authors and other late Victorian novelists.³ As Rita S. Kranidis notes: "Fiction that gained popularity in the later decades of the nineteenth century facilitated the public visibility of the spinster and guaranteed her exposure as a domestic social problem" (181). This visibility was advanced as well in the press. Such writers as, for instance, W.R. Greg and Frances Power Cobbe openly contested the spinster's place in Victorian society. While much of the spinster's publicity was damning, her exposure as a topic of hot debate had a galvanizing effect. As Sheila Jeffreys argues, "The

Victorian feminists fought the idea that woman was simply man's appendage and the very notion that women could be surplus, surplus to the needs of men" (87). The very opposition spinsters met in an effort to assert their single status as a positive choice and to gain a political voice helped them to define themselves. In fact, their anomalous position became a political boon:

The single woman necessarily took a leadership position in the effort to redefine women's role in society. Her very lack of an ascribed role--she was not a mother or a wife--and in public--she was not part of the male political spheres--was to prove both drastically limiting and immensely liberating. (Vicinus 12).

Charlotte Brontë did not live to see these social and literary developments and labored in comparative isolation. Her death may be said to mark the end of an era. I choose to focus on this earlier generation of women writers who lacked access to a public polemic and feminist movement; who still contended with invisibility and had little help in defining themselves--whether in social life or in print.

I would also like to account for my choice of terminology, as I invoke the term "spinster" instead of referring generically to single women. Many consider it to be pejorative, outdated, and offensive (see what a different reaction you'll get inviting someone to a spinster party versus a bachelor party, at your spinster pad versus your bachelor pad).⁴ Some feminist scholars, such as Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, have elected to use the more neutral term "singlewoman."⁵ Nevertheless, I feel it is

important to retain the term "spinster" in order to keep in view the significance it had for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers and writers.⁶ They did, after all, have to wrestle with the terminology available at the time.

Unmarried women, even if they were successful authors, understood that they were labelled as spinsters; and they subjected their characters to the same label. I have declined, however, to use the equally popular "old maids" with its implication of infantile decrepitude.⁷

The term "spinster" originally referred simply to the occupation of spinning practiced by many single women. Beginning in the seventeenth century, it appeared in documents as "the proper legal designation of one still unmarried" (OED). With the devaluation of their industry and the enforced idleness of single women, the term lost both its positive and neutral content. The OED cites the first use of the term to designate "a woman still unmarried, esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid" as occurring in 1719. The term old maid occurs as early as 1673, and is disparaging from the outset: "An old Maid is now...look'd on as the most calamitous Creature in nature."

A number of factors marked out single women for special--and especially negative--attention at this time. The most obvious factor was the dramatic rise in the number of unmarried women. Although demographers and historians have hotly debated the cause of this demographic trend, there is a consensus that the number of single women in northwestern

Europe rose between the late sixteenth through eighteenth centuries (Kowaleski 53). Among the British upper classes in particular, the number of upper-class women who never married rose from five percent at the end of the sixteenth century to around twenty-five percent in the eighteenth century (Stone 47).⁸

While the proportion of single women in the eighteenth century brought them to public attention, it was the economic problems they presented that made this attention overwhelmingly negative. The question was, how were these "surplus" women to live? As Ian Watt notes in The Rise of the Novel, "unmarried women were no longer positive economic assets to the household because there was less need for their labour in spinning, weaving, and other economic tasks; as a result many unmarried women were faced with the unpleasant choice between working for very low wages, or becoming largely superfluous dependents on someone else" (145). As their value in the domestic economy and labor market decreased--their numbers brought down wages to about a quarter of the average male wage (142)--single women indeed found their situation "calamitous."

In such a precarious financial position, single women had to find some alternative means of support. Their options were severely limited. Women with any pretension to gentility could not enter the few trades open to them without forfeiting their social status.⁹ Neither could any but the very wealthy afford to live alone. As Betty Rizzo explains,

"it was never intended that women should be provided with money sufficient to allow them to live independently; they were always intended to be dependent on father, husband, brother, or son" (33). This dependence, however, was resented as a financial drain on the family, particularly if it were voluntary: "A woman who rejected an advantageous offer could not expect such luck a second time, but could expect forever afterwards to be counted responsible for her own misfortunes" (Rizzo 33-4).

The main option available to those women who wished to retain their class position was to become a humble companion to a wealthier woman. The duties of a humble companion might involve childcare, housekeeping, attending to laundry and linen, reading to and walking with her employer, and escorting her on travels (the more genteel the companion, the lighter her duties). Yet while the gentlewoman in financial distress might find shelter beneath the wing of her social superior, this was hardly a comfortable position. In many cases she was treated with contempt by her employer. Jane Collier, in her Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting, details the indignities a humble companion might have to bear. Sarah Fielding (among other female novelists) similarly depicts the hardships of the humble companion in The Adventures of David Simple. Her heroine laments that "I was to appear in a Character I could not bear, namely that of a *Toad-eater*," which she defines thus: "It is a Metaphor taken from a Mountebank's Boy who eats Toads, in order to

shew his Master's Skill in expelling Poison: It is built on a Supposition...that People who are so unhappy as to be in a State of Dependence, are forced to do the most nauseous things that can be thought on, to please and humour their Patrons" (113). The term was widely circulated during the century, contributing to the overall opprobrium directed at single women.

In the nineteenth century, spinsters continued to struggle for remunerative employment. Working as a governess was the most likely occupation for middle-class women. This position carried with it many of the same burdens as being a humble companion. Like the humble companion, the governess was considered little better than a servant. As Charlotte Brontë wrote from her own post: "I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil" (Letters 191). Yet aside from schoolteaching, which could be still more draining, there remained few employment opportunities until late in the century. The spinster's social and economic displacement designated her as not merely useless, but a national liability. As Kranidis points out: "Seen as engaging in meaningless occupations that merely consume time, spinsters also are potentially capable of depleting the Victorian hegemony. . ." (4).

Beyond the association of single women with financial burdens and unsavory occupations, they were also cast as

ideological misfits throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As numerous critics and social historians have noted, the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of domestic ideology.¹⁰ At mid-century, the prosperous middle class ensconced its women within the home, making household deities of wives and mothers. Domestic life became a matter of public concern, since "private, individual acts of sex and reproduction had public consequences in the size and health of the population and its labouring potential. . . . Each life was assigned a value based on what it could produce: work in the case of men, healthy children in the case of women" (Jordanova 111).

In order to ensure that women performed their proper labor, motherhood was extolled in all cultural arenas, from bio-medical treatises to novels. By midcentury, according to Ruth Perry, "motherhood became the focus of a new kind of cultural attention. Writers began to wax sentimental about maternity, to accord it high moral stature, and to construct it as noble, strong, and self-sacrificial. Admiration for mothers--and for maternal devotion--came to be a banner under which the newly constituted middle class marched" (214). This exalted maternal feeling was, moreover, considered an essential part of female nature. The implications for spinsters, chief among non-maternal women, is clear. Not only were they seen as nonproductive members of the state, failing to contribute to the work of nation-building; they were viewed as unnatural moral wash-ups. Indeed, the national

zeal for population growth was spurred precisely by "the dramatic discrediting of the female body that did not reproduce" (Lanser, "Singular Politics" 309).

In her periodical The Old Maid (1755-66), Frances Brooke demonstrates the resulting discomfort of the spinster's position. Although her narrator, Mary Singleton, praises the merits of single life, she also sounds a note of embarrassment and apology. She confesses an old maid to be "the most useless and insignificant of all God's creatures" and offers her writing as a means "to obtain pardon for leading my life in a way so entirely unserviceable to society" (2). Whatever Brooke's own view of the comparative value of writing and reproduction, this emphatic self-justification acknowledges a public that sees marriage and motherhood as the only female activities of any worth. In fact, Brooke's suggestion that writing might be equally useful seems to falter when her narrator recasts herself as a quasi-maternal figure. Singleton palliates her position by explaining how she has raised her sister's orphan daughter: "If any old maid is excusable, I hope I am; for though I have not had the honor of being a mother, I have had all the cares of one" (7). In a society which accords respect only to wives and mothers, the single woman must strike a maternal pose, or risk public scorn.

With wifedom and motherhood seen as the only legitimate channels of female sexuality, what can be said about the sexual identity of spinsters? For it is crucial to bear in

mind that spinsterhood is a sexual category. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought, the spinster was not simply a single woman, but a virgin. This does not prove that single women at this time were unanimously chaste. They may indeed have been involved in sexual relationships with men or with other women.¹¹ In fiction, however, the spinster was constructed as a virginal figure. She was distinct from the sexually active single woman--the "fallen" or "ruined" type. Some of her other names make the connection between spinsterhood and chastity explicit. She is, for instance, frequently referred to as an "old maid." As maidenhood is the condition of virginity, the term really means "old virgin." The term "celibate" is also commonly used. My personal favorite is Frances Brooke's phrase for her narrator's condition, "superannuated virginity."

The chastity of the spinster figure is closely bound up with many of the negative stereotypes surrounding her. Earlier I cited her economic dependence and nonproductivity as the foundation of her bad press. Yet the spinster was as harshly blamed for being out of sexual circulation as economic circulation. Unlike the youthful virgin, who would eventually go on the marriage market, the spinster would remain forever on the shelf. In Sexuality and Textuality in Henry James: Reading Through the Virginal, Lloyd Davis examines the connotations of virginity in Victorian fiction.¹² As Davis explains, "Within the conventional 19th-century social-aesthetic conception, the virgin is a pre-

marital figure, yet to experience 'legitimate,' 'recognized' sexual activity" (5). While outside the dominant social group, "the virginal character is not an outcast but has yet to enter the represented society" (7). In other words, virginity is a provisional state, and the virgin is accepted (not cast out) on the understanding that she will eventually give it up. Davis goes so far as to claim that "the narrative gains its power to proceed from the socio-sexual fate of the virgin: that s/he cannot remain virginal" (11). He fails to consider the fate of those characters who *do* remain virginal--spinsters. For Davis, as for the Victorians of his study, celibate women just don't count.

The sexuality of "superannuated virgins" is not, however, simply ignored. Rather, it is contemplated as something horrific.¹³ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the fact that the spinster isn't sexually active makes her a suspect figure. As Lanser notes, eighteenth-century texts "obsessively write the old maid's body as morally and physically repugnant, incarnating her as woman reduced to materiality in its repellant rather than its seductive form, as a danger to younger marriageable women and especially to men" ("Singular Politics" 300). The eighteenth-century spinster is commonly characterized as sexually frustrated and rapacious. A classic example of the sex-starved spinster is provided by Tobias Smollett in Humphry Clinker. Aunt Tabitha's desperate crusade to lose her virginity makes her both grotesque and pathetic. The

disturbing nature of her unlegitimized sexual desire is written into her very flesh, as Smollett renders her body as repulsive as possible. If marriage at the proper age would have tied up her sexuality in a tidy bundle, her protracted celibacy leaves her a kind of roving, rampaging monster, ready to clamp her hideous jaws onto the nearest male prey. In the nineteenth century, the spinster is more commonly depicted as cold, stony, and arid--what sexologists would later dub "frigid."¹⁴ An example of the frigid type is another spinster aunt, Aunt Leigh in Aurora Leigh. This dry and austere guardian threatens to suck the very life out of her youthful niece. Whichever extreme she falls into, the aging virgin is physically and morally out of whack.

What most brands the spinster as constructed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture is clearly her failure to produce, be it capital, desire, or offspring. Her economic and sexual nonproductivity (nonreproductivity) mark her as useless, sterile, and static. In the estimate of her society, she doesn't do anything, for she fails to do what it requires. Within this cultural context, the narrative problems she poses begin to make sense. The spinster is a figure that fails to generate narrative--to produce a plot. That is, she fails to do what novels require. Perhaps, then, if we dig beneath the social and narrative requirements of the period under consideration, we can discern what this figure, in fact, accomplishes.

While this overview of social attitudes toward spinsters helps clarify why spinsters tend to impede, paralyze, and generally foredoom plot, I now turn to the fiction itself to show how the plots of feminocentric novels become codified over the course of the eighteenth century, and what implication this has for spinsters and the novel. It is crucial here to pay particular attention to Samuel Richardson. Richardson's novels of the 1740s delimit the narrative options of fictional heroines for at least the next century. Earlier in the century, the novel was not only a more amorphous form, but was open to a far wider range of female characters and plots. Daniel Defoe, Delarivier Manley, Aphra Behn, and Eliza Haywood, for instance, created scandalous heroines, whose adventures were sexually risqué, even criminal.¹⁵ While many factors were at work in the shift of English social mores at midcentury, Richardson certainly played a major role in how these attitudes were embodied in fiction. It must be remembered that Pamela has been traditionally regarded as the first English novel. Whether or not it is accorded this primacy, its "enabling and conditioning influence on the whole subsequent development of the form" (Rader 74) seems indisputable.

One of Richardson's most lasting contributions to the novel was the sexual dichotomy he inscribed in Pamela and Clarissa. In the Richardsonian novel, a heroine is defined by which of two sexual categories she belongs to: the virtuous (chaste) or the vile (unchaste). According to her

sexual identity, she must follow one of two narrative trajectories: for the virtuous, the courtship plot, ending in marriage; for the vile, the seduction plot, ending in death. These trajectories correspond to what Nancy K. Miller has called the "euphoric" and "dysphoric" text in The Heroine's Text. As Miller observes, what distinguishes Richardson's fiction from its predecessors is the "reduction of human identity to sexual definition"; subsequently, "the war between the sexes in the 18th-century novel changes from comic skirmishes to tragic violence; everyone can be said to lose, but the signifying casualties are female" (84). Among the losers are those authors who would tell the story of a female life *not* plotted along the lines of male desire. If, as Rader argues, Richardson's narratives guided the development of the novel form, what was excluded by Richardson would seem thereafter not to belong to that form. Hence, those heroines who are neither courted nor seduced--spinsters--appear to have no legitimate place in the novel. By themselves, they are unable to generate narrative.

The dominance of the Richardsonian model of plot does not mean that novels were not conceived on other models at the same time. Women novelists did work against the courtship and seduction traditions, creating alternative fictions which emphasized relationships among women. In Virtue's Faults, April Alliston rereads women's epistolary fiction, for instance, as resisting heterosexual plot through female correspondence. Yet Richardson presents a stumbling

block to this literary tradition, in part by appropriating some of its features. As Alliston explains, although Clarissa expresses a desire to live a single life with her friend Anna Howe as companion,

Richardson uses this feminine convention to show his heroine in fact entirely entrapped by the either/or of the marriage choices available to her, from which the only exit is death. Her identity and her all-important virtue are entirely defined within the rigid framework of opposing male wills. (26)

Later women authors had to rewrite Richardson, in part because he himself had rewritten an earlier tradition which posed a threat to domestic ideology (27).

One striking example of an alternative type of feminocentric narrative is Sarah Scott's A Description of Millenium Hall (1762). In this novel, Scott describes a female utopia which provides just the sort of haven Clarissa sought but could not find. Millenium Hall is a female community offering single women a way out of "the either/or of marriage choices." The women there engage in such artistic and intellectual pursuits as reading, painting, playing music, writing, and gardening. In addition, they have implemented a thorough system of social improvement. They run a school for girls, provide asylum for distressed gentlewomen, maintain the elderly and infirm, and run a local business. They help find occupations for those who need to work, and husbands for those who choose to marry. Thus, while they do not oppose matrimony, they provide alternatives which loosen its stranglehold on female destiny.

Though Scott provides her female characters options excluded by Richardson in Pamela and Clarissa, the narrative structure of her Description offsets its radical content. The description of the Hall is only given when the male narrator stumbles upon the scene. Comprised only of observation, with no incident, it is utterly static. What keeps the narrative going is the interpolated histories of the women who inhabit the Hall. The plots of these histories are highly Richardsonian, hinging on erotic incidents. Most of the "ladies" of the Hall wind up there after failed courtships or attempted seductions. This is not to overlook the unusual ends of these stories, which conclude when the ladies find asylum from importunate males at the Hall. Indeed, as Lanser has remarked, the novel "subverts the mid-century 'heroine's text' by presenting the company of women as the highest reward for the ideal heroine" (Fictions of Authority 226). Yet by making this utopia the place where stories end rather than begin, Scott does not challenge the sexual definition of plot. Hence, while Scott's political agenda is fairly radical, she has difficulty giving it dynamic narrative form. A female utopia seems to provide a refuge from plot, rather than a plot of its own.¹⁶

Given Richardson's great influence over the development of women's fiction, it is worth noting how, in at the moment of tightening the constraints on female plots, he textualizes the very struggle for alternative visions that his own fictions will make so difficult. It is easy to understand why

Richardson's heroines defend their chastity so fiercely. As far as they know, there exist only two options: to live chaste, or to die. For both Pamela and Clarissa, virtue--for which virginity serves as physical evidence--is no mere attribute. It is constitutive of identity. To lose one's virtue is to lose one's self. This is because (as far as they know) there exist only two kinds of women: the virtuous and the vile. If a woman loses her virtue, she must automatically become vile. This reversal amounts to the death of all she once was. It is hardly preferable to actual death, which at least proves her rejection of this new identity and hence wins back her claim to virtue.

It is a mistake, however, to confuse what Pamela and Clarissa know about their options with what Richardson knows. On the surface, of course, their beliefs are borne out. Pamela preserves her virtue and lives (happily ever after). Clarissa loses hers, and clears her reputation only by dying. Those women who have lost their virtue and lived, such as Mrs. Jewkes and Mrs. Sinclair, suggest that the life of a fallen woman can only be depraved. They are lewd, demonic, and grotesque. Yet Richardson knows that there are more than two kinds of women, and more than one ending to the story of a virtuous woman who falls. This knowledge reveals itself in Pamela's other story: the story of Sally Godfrey. Sally is Pamela's predecessor, Mr. B--'s former mistress. She surfaces only at the novel's end, and never enters the text proper (hers is more or less an interpolated tale narrated by

Mr. B--); yet Pamela's obsession with Sally thrusts her upon the reader's attention. What most distinguishes Sally Godfrey is her defiance of the binary oppositions that Pamela herself has had to negotiate. Sally is neither vile nor virtuous. She is a decent woman who loses her virtue and lives--a fallen woman who survives the fall. She does not become a vile prostitute. She gets a second chance. Given this fact, Pamela suddenly appears to have been guided not by limited options, but by limited vision. Her compulsion to live chaste loses its urgency. So too does Clarissa's compulsion to die, when her story is reread by the light of Sally Godfrey's. We must take this shadowy figure as Richardson's hint that the imperatives by which his heroines live may not be imperatives after all. Through Sally's story, Richardson gives the reader what he would not give his heroines--the precedent for an alternative female life.

I would like to suggest, then, that my spinster authors inherit from Richardson not only a strict taxonomy of plot but an awareness of its artificiality. They, too, depict heroines who are (like their creators and perhaps their readers) looking around for an alternative plot--a spinster plot--and coming up short. They are confronted by the apparent "nothingness" of the female life that doesn't conform to social and literary precedents. Such a life fails to register within their cultural context. Interestingly, unlike Richardson, they do not even offer interpolated tales like that of Sally Godfrey to suggest an alternative life

story as a *fait accompli*. What they do, however, is to reveal their dissatisfaction with the limitations placed on women's lives and women's fiction.

Each author's response to the presumed "nothingness" of spinsterhood foregrounds her own concerns with social conditions and with the elements of fiction. From one author to the next, linguistic and narrative concerns begin to overtake social concerns. The more explicitly the author tries to challenge the rules of fiction, the more formidable her task appears. Burney is most interested in making social commentary, and satire is her method of achieving this end. In her work, the spinster plot appears as "nothing" because it is all about maintenance; more of a situation than a plot, it goes nowhere. Burney suggests that spinsterhood is a matter of survival, subsistence, and preservation from danger. Her inclusion of the spinster subplot calls attention to economic injustices. Austen is chiefly concerned with the issue of language. She takes on the charge that spinsters have nothing to do and hence nothing to say. Her heroine expresses the desire for an alternative plot; and while Austen does not finally grant her one, she suggests that female agency is partially available through language--through authorship. Brontë's concern is with (going back to Brooks) the dynamics of narrative--specifically, narrative time. In Brontë, we finally have an actual spinster heroine, but her plot is fraught with narrative problems--her story still cannot be told. The spinster figure, cut off from

erotic connection and generation, seems to drop out of time itself. The spinster life of work and independence turns out to be the biggest nothing of all. With each author, the more explicit attempt to tell a spinster's story makes the final refusal to do so more glaring. It makes the strictures preventing its telling more stark. And it brings us back to the subtext of all the texts: the practice of social and literary reading that makes the spinster's life appear nonnarratable because it is in fact unreadable. In the public eye, a spinster does no more than spin her wheels. What is spun from them remains the unasked question.

Notes

¹As Miller points out, "Every inscription of the self is an approximation and a projection; a matter of details, shadows, adjustments, and proportion--an arrangement of truths" (61).

²For a thorough discussion of single women and work in the late Victorian period, see Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920. For a discussion of single women and the feminist movement, see Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930.

³These include Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Grant Allen, George Meredith and George Gissing.

⁴The connotations of the terms "spinster" and "bachelor" have always been radically different. As Sociolinguist Robin Lakoff explains in Language and Woman's Place:

Bachelor is at least a neutral term, often used as a compliment. *Spinster* normally seems to be used pejoratively, with connotations of prissiness, fussiness, and so on. . . . A man may be considered a bachelor as soon as he reaches marriageable age: to be a bachelor implies that one has the choice of marrying or not, and this is what makes the idea of a bachelor existence attractive in the popular literature. He has been pursued and has successfully eluded his pursuers. But a spinster is one who has not been pursued, or at least not seriously. She is old unwanted goods. . . . The metaphorical connotations of "bachelor" suggest sexual freedom; of "spinster," puritanism or celibacy. (qtd. in Weigle 27)

So ingrained are the negative connotations of "spinster" and the positive connotations of "bachelor" that the former term seems to be beyond recuperation. In popular culture, those who wish to improve the image of the single woman refer to her as a "bachelorette" or "bachelor girl." In this way she is meant to shed the traditional stigma of spinsterhood and assume the aura of sexual freedom and choice associated with bachelorhood. The recent reality television series, The Bachelorette and Bachelorettes in Alaska, probably would never have gotten the green light if they had been called The Spinster and Spinsters in Alaska.

⁵As Bennett and Froide explain:

Today, "spinster" carries a negative connotation shaped by pseudoscientific research and popular

culture during the last three hundred years. For the study of Europe before 1800, "singlewoman"--a word found (in the compound form used here) in English documents from the fourteenth century--more neutrally describes a woman who lived without having married. (2)

Bennett and Froide further distinguish between singlewomen who eventually married and those who never did, referring to them as "life-cycle singlewomen" and "lifelong singlewomen" (2). Froide also distinguishes between women who have been married (such as widows) and those who have never been married, labelling them "ever-married" and "never-married" women (237).

⁶Laura Doan makes a similar case in her introduction to Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: "By specifying the spinster per se, as opposed to the single woman in general, we wish to denote a highly particularized entity, emerging from a complex set of historical circumstances, with a defined relationship to a particular class, race, and so forth" (2).

⁷As Nina Auerbach has noted, the term "old maid" combines

the most horrible attributes of youth and age: "maid" turns her into a perpetual virgin and humble servant, while "old" mocks the grotesquerie of her preadult status. An old maid is not merely a servile creature out of nature; the long middle of life, the phase in which most of us make our lives, is amputated so that there is only a beginning yoked to an end. (Old Maids to Radical Spinsters x)

⁸Stone provides an explanation of this trend in The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800. According to Stone, the custom of primogeniture in the landed classes left younger sons and daughters without the requisite money or property to attract suitable marriage partners (42-4). While younger sons had the opportunity to enter the professions, thereby accumulating the capital needed to move in genteel society--and, if they chose, make later marriages (to women ten years younger, on average)--single women had no such option (46-8). In addition, there was a mysterious decrease in nuptiality among male heirs. Finally, there was a surplus of women over men in the population, due perhaps to higher mortality rates among men (380-91).

A number of historians have since challenged Stone's findings. Eileen Spring, for instance, claims that younger sons did marry; peerage daughters married gentry sons and gentry daughters married professional men; and the female mortality rate was higher than the male ("The Family, Strict

Settlement, and Historians" 386). For a comprehensive discussion of the debate among demographers, see Maryanne Kowaleski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective."

⁹Bennett and Froide note that the majority of singlewomen in early modern Europe were day-laborers or servants (16). Working-class women were always more employable than middle-class women. In addition, their marital status was less problematic than that of their middle-class peers. As Kranidis notes, this held true throughout the nineteenth century: "Whether working-class women married was not a pressing concern for Victorian society since it did not in any way dramatically affect their status as cheap labor" (32).

¹⁰ See, for instance, Janet Todd, Jane Spencer, Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, and Ruth Perry.

¹¹For a discussion of the sexual lives of single women in early modern Europe, see Ruth Mazzo Karras, "Sex and the Singlewoman." For a discussion of same-sex relations among single women, see Margaret R. Hunt, "The Sapphic Strain: English Lesbians in the Long Eighteenth Century."

¹²See also Davis's Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature.

¹³Simone de Beauvoir's observations in The Second Sex are relevant here:

Virginity has this erotic attraction only if it is in alliance with youth; otherwise its mystery again becomes disturbing. Many men of today feel a sexual repugnance in the presence of maidenhood too prolonged; and it is not only psychological causes that are supposed to make "old maids" mean and embittered females. The curse is in their flesh itself, that flesh which is object to no subject, which no man's desire has made desirable, which has bloomed and faded without finding a place in the world of men; turned from its proper destination, it becomes an oddity, as disturbing as the incommunicable thought of a madman. (144)

While Beauvoir is speaking of her own times, these attitudes toward older virgins are nothing new.

¹⁴Lanser claims that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the figure of the old maid was partially recuperated; no longer "physically and morally repulsive" but merely "irksome, prattling and small-minded" ("Singular Politics")

305). Lanser attributes this softening of the old maid's image to a decline in the perceived urgency of population growth. Lanser's effort to denaturalize hostility toward spinsters by situating it within a specific historical and demographic context is an extremely important move. I do not fully agree, however, with her assessment of the nineteenth-century spinster. While irksome prattlers abound, so do withering, frigid old maids. Sheila Jeffreys in fact argues that the most damning image of the spinster as "associated with sterility, destructiveness, and anti-life values" (142) developed as part of a backlash against the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jeffreys attributes the concept of the spinster's frigidity to twentieth-century sexologists. Like Lanser's, Jeffreys's effort to denaturalize such images of spinsters by tracing their historical development is very useful. Yet in this case, too, I would question the strict chronology. Sexologists may have been the first to name the frigid woman, but her image abounds in the nineteenth century.

¹⁵For a discussion of earlier eighteenth-century writers, see Janet Todd, The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800. See also Catherine Gallagher, Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820.

¹⁶Lanser similarly comments on the tensions within the novel. She speculates:

A novel about a (privileged-class) female community, *Millenium Hall* is not yet a novel of the community. Its narrative compromises, by which signs of resistance remain subtle and signs of lesbian eroticism are indirect, and its voyeuristic structure by which men "penetrate" women's secrets, are surely connected to the novel's successful reception, measured by its run of four editions in sixteen years. (Fictions of Authority 230)

CHAPTER TWO: GETTING OFF: FRANCES BURNEY AND THE LAMPOONED SPINSTER

Frances Burney, writing in the late eighteenth century, entered a literary culture inhospitable to certain stories: stories such as her own. The young Burney, having put aside matrimonial expectations, pursued her literary ambitions instead. The novels she wrote adhered to Richardson's taxonomy of plot: her virtuous heroines, fending off all seducers, resist the call of the vile and marry. Clearly, spinsters are not the central figures of Burney's novels. In fact, they seldom appear even as minor characters. Yet Camilla, Burney's third novel and the first written after her marriage, is (relatively speaking) rife with spinsters. If this profusion of spinsters suggests a concern for single women, however, that concern manifests itself in a dubious manner. In her delineation of spinster characters, Burney is far from charitable. She subscribes to the same caricatures as her male peers. Her spinsters are at best comical; at worst, grotesque. In a survey of old maids in eighteenth-century fiction, Jean Kern observes that they "appeared in men's novels as sex-starved, frustrated, and disagreeable stereotypes"; yet "because women novelists were more sensitive to the problems of old maids rejected by the society in which they must live, these women writers modified the stereotype caricatures" (201). In Camilla, however, each of the old maids seems to fit a well-worn stereotype. Miss Margland is stupid, vain, and conniving; Mrs. Mittin is a manipulative parasite; and Mrs. Ecton is a hypocrite who

spouts empty pieties while lusting after young men. All three appear as the butt of old jokes at the expense of aging, single women.

Yet while Burney draws her spinster characters along old lines, their arrangement throughout the plot suggests her deeper concerns. My contention is that while Burney adopts the figure of the ridiculous spinster, she uses it to convey sharp social criticism. Her spinster subplots reveal what is at stake in the novel's main plot: the courtship of the heroine. Specifically, the spinster subplot underscores the precariousness of the heroine's position. By depicting the ruses and manipulations to which single women must resort as they age, and the indignities they must suffer, Burney suggests how crucial it is that the heroine play the marriage game properly. The marginalized spinster represents the alternative that awaits a heroine who fails in her prospects. Burney suggests that any woman, should she remain single, can degenerate into such a figure of contempt. In so doing, she both intensifies the drama of the central plot and offers a critique of the conditions that make female fate so precarious. This critique is aimed at a system that fails to educate women or provide them with useful occupations, and that deprives them of economic independence, thereby leaving them to the contempt of those on whom they are dependent. She underscores the increasing vulnerability of the aging spinster, as youth and beauty alone (sometimes) inspire decent treatment at male hands. She also exposes the double

standard of a society that accords respect, security, and economic opportunity to single *males* only. Since Burney depicts marriage as a risky enterprise for women, she reveals how *all* women suffer from a system that renders the option of living single untenable for all but (perhaps) the wealthiest.

In addition, Burney's humor differs from that of her male precursors in that she calls her own jokes at the expense of spinsters into question. She stages scenes of humiliation for her spinsters, in which the reader seems to be invited to laugh at them. Yet for each of these scenes she provides an audience *within* the text with which we must identify if we are to share in the joke. We must ask ourselves whose views we are adopting. On examination, all of those laughing turn out to be callous, irresponsible, yet powerful men. Burney seems to be asking the reader *not* to join this company--not to laugh at these vulnerable old women. She makes us aware that under the veneer of comedy lie realities that are no laughing matter.

While the chief end of Burney's satire is social criticism, her novel also gestures toward another story: that of the woman author and the woman reader. In dramatizing the social conditions that menace single women, Burney also implicates the conditions of writing and of reading that make their lives so hard to capture in fiction. For Burney's heroine shares the space both of the author, seeking an alternative female story, and the reader, seeking a literary model for an alternative life. Within the scope of Camilla's

world, however, those women who don't follow the marriage plot are trapped in the money plot--the desperate struggle for subsistence. This is hardly a plot, but an endless round of schemes for survival--and for fending off abuse. It is a mere spinning of the wheels. There is no viable precedent available for Camilla to "read" as a model by which to "write" the plot of a different life story. Burney, as an author, must similarly proceed without a precedent. Her struggle points out the dearth of alternatives either to live or to write by.

Burney's own encounter with spinsterhood, as detailed in her letters and journals, informed how she depicted her fictional counterparts. Once again, I am not suggesting that her novels should be read as thinly disguised autobiography. Rather, reading her autobiographical writing *alongside* her fiction helps clarify the social and literary concerns that run through both kinds of text. Burney herself identified as a spinster from a young age. At twenty-three, she rejected the proposal of Thomas Barlow, a man who was considered a good catch by her family but whom she found wholly undesirable. Without financial resources, Burney knew she was unlikely to receive many more offers. She was therefore confronted with the prospect of a single life and the limited choices that such a life presented. She could not be content as a humble companion, and her years at court in the Queen's service proved utterly miserable. In the end she achieved some degree of independence through writing, yet she was

never wholly at ease in the public role of author. Nor was she exempt from parental control and social strictures which curtailed her freedom. In short, until her unexpected marriage at forty-one, Burney experienced the difficulties and doubts involved in growing older as a single, middle-class woman. Burney's voluminous journals and correspondence help clarify what this status meant to her. Her recurrent self-justifications and the sense of being under seige she expresses show how hard it was not only to live as a spinster but to account for such a life choice. It becomes clear that she herself was looking for a place of safety, and finding it hard to come by outside of matrimony. Whatever safety her fiction could provide, it could best do so by staying within the lines of the marriage plot. For herself as for her heroine, "getting off" to the marriage market appeared expedient. Following this expedient helped her career get off the ground again, as well.

I will begin by looking at Burney's life and autobiographical writing prior to the publication of Camilla, focusing on her early journals and letters and discussing more briefly the period of her engagement, marriage, and major work on the novel (1793-6). Burney did not take any notable interest in, or make any judgment of, spinsters as a class until she was forced to contemplate joining their numbers. There were several spinsters in her life of whom she was very fond, most notably her aunts Ann and Rebecca,

who lived with her paternal grandmother. She was also close to her mother's best friend, Dorothy Young (whom her dying mother wished her husband to marry, but apparently she was too ugly for Charles Burney). Yet I'd have to say that Burney's early spinster acquaintance was mixed. Though some were near and dear to her, this did not prevent her from poking fun at others (such as the Burney family cook, "a maiden of about fifty, short, thick, clumsy, vulgar" who married a younger man "who had the appearance of being her son"--like Miss Ecton in Camilla [Early Journals Vol. I, 66]). In other words, she did not take up the cause of spinsters in any special way--until it became her own cause.

For young Burney, the issue of spinsterhood was raised by the issue of marriage, when she received the proposal of Thomas Barlow in 1775. As described in The Early Journals and Letters Volume II, he was in every way suitable, but she found him stiff and uninteresting. She wanted to reject him immediately, but her whole family started to gang up on her, becoming "the most zealous Advocates for Mr Barlow" (119). Even her aunts warned her against sharing their fate if she should be too finicky. Burney answered "that I had rather a thousand Times Die an old maid than be married, except from affection" (119). She stated her convictions firmly: "To unite myself for Life to a man who is not infinitely dear to me, is what I can never, never Consent to" (120).

It is evident in this part of the diary that Burney's relatives refused to hear her objections to this *particular*

suitors, indicating that a woman ought to take any decent offer that presented itself. They warned her against spinsterhood and forced her into a defense of the single state. Her surrogate father, Daddy Crisp, was especially harsh on her. He told her that "You may live to the Age of your Grandmother, & not meet with so Valuable an offer," and painted a grim picture of her fate:

the Opportunity is never to be recover'd--the Tide is lost, & You are left in shallows, fast aground, & struggling in Vain for the remainder of your life to get on--doom'd to pass it in Obscurity & regret--look around you Fanny--look at yr Aunts--Fanny Burney wont always be what she is now! . . . Oh Fanny this is not a marrying Age, without a Handsome fortune! . . . Suppose You to lose yr Father--take in all Chances. Consider the situation of an unprotected, unprovided Woman--. (123)

In her response, Burney not only repeated her refusal to marry "from *Worldly motives*," but also challenged Crisp's dreary picture of spinsterhood: "I have long accustomed myself to the idea of being an old maid--& the Title has lost all its terrors in my Ears. I feel no repugnance to the expectation of being ranked among the Number" (125). She quickly added the following clarification: "Don't imagine by what I say that I have made a Vow for a single Life--no. But on the other Hand I have no *Objection* to it, & have all my life determined never to marry without having the highest value & esteem for the man who should be my Lord" (126). In a later letter she asserted that "I have no idea why a single Life may not be happy. Liberty is not without its value--with women as well as men, though it has not equal recommendation for both,--& I hope never without a prospect

brighter to myself to lose mine: & I have no such prospect in view" (129). All this is to show that the harassment of her family forced her seriously to contemplate the subject of spinsterhood. If she hadn't had any notion of being a spinster before they tried to bully her into marriage, she came out of this conflict with an understanding and acceptance of what single life meant.

While Burney acknowledged her willingness to marry a man of her own choosing when discussing the matter with her family, she became an out-and-out advocate of spinsterhood when attacked by Barlow himself. He arrogantly assumed that Burney's rejection of *him* meant that she was rejecting marriage per se--and she went along with this line of argument. When he insisted that men and women were created to marry, she answered: "All this may be true . . . I have nothing to say in contradiction to it--but you know there are many odd Characters in the World--& I am one of them" (143). She responded to his further pleading by suggesting he "think me singular--odd--Queer--nay, even whimsical, if you please" (143). Her choice of adjectives is striking and suggests that the concept of "odd" (not to mention "queer") women predated the Victorians by a century.¹ Burney acknowledged the apparent singularity of choosing single life, the oddness of remaining the odd one out of the marriage game. To reject the common path of women was to make a queer appearance in the world. She was willing to do this.

It should be noted, however, that although Burney was staunch in her own defense against Barlow and his advocates, she stated that she would marry him if it were the will of her father. She was afraid even to raise the issue with Charles Burney for fear that his wishes would overrule hers. When he spoke on Barlow's behalf, "I wept like an Infant--Eat nothing--seemed as if already married--& passed the whole Day in more misery than, merely on my own account, I ever did before in my life" (146-7). She finally begged her father to let her remain under the paternal roof as a single woman, and he consented.

With the end of the Barlow affair, Burney felt hugely relieved and seemed content with her lot. She told Crisp, "though I am difficult & saucy, as you call me, in regard to giving another the sole power of settling my fate, yet I am by no means difficult to be pleased & happy as I am" (164). Two years later, in 1777, she referred to herself for the first time as "Frances Burney, spinster" (231). It is no doubt significant that the assumption of this identity coincided with the beginning of her writing career--this was the same year she wrote and published her first novel, Evelina. In signing herself "spinster," Burney hinted that matrimonial ambitions were behind her. Her current ambitions were professional.

Although Burney's first novel was a great success, its publication hardly guaranteed her a secure future. It did not give her economic independence (nor did her second novel,

Cecilia).² Moreover, she was extremely uneasy about taking on the public persona of an author. As is well known, she published Evelina anonymously, only letting a select few into her secret. Gradually the secret leaked out, however, and she no longer had any control over who knew it. Volume II of the early diary obsessively recounts each discovery of her authorial identity and her attendant mortification. At the same time, her painstaking record of every compliment paid her--despite her claims of distress--shows how mixed her feelings must have been. That is, praise of her writing, though it may well have embarrassed her, also meant a great deal to her.

As a number of feminist critics have pointed out, Burney's discomfort with authorship had everything to do with gender.³ Often quoted is her remark in a 1779 letter to Crisp, "I would a thousand Times rather forfeit my character as a *Writer*, than risk ridicule or censure as a *Female*. I have never set my Heart on Fame, & therefore would not if I could purchase it at the expence of all my ideas of propriety" (212). As a woman--especially a single woman--she did open herself to accusations of impropriety and indelicacy. It was for this reason that she suppressed her play The Witlings upon the advice of her two daddies, Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp. Despite her apparent pride in the manuscript, she abandoned her hopes for it when they expressed their disapproval. They feared that this satire on the bluestockings would damage her reputation.

Burney was unable to shake her discomfort with authorship until her marriage to Alexandre d'Arblay. The irony here is that what might have insured her independence as a single woman only lost its peril upon marriage. When she and d'Arblay were courting she informed him of her renewed interest in publication: "Fear of public annotation, & love of tranquillity have hitherto joined to make me insensible to whatever has been urged to me of again venturing my little Bark on the Ocean of Literature; but, lately, something like a spirit of enterprize has occasionally raised me to higher courage" (VOL. II 117). The fact that she was now writing to finance her nuptials emboldened her. She was no longer pushing herself into public life, but serving her future husband and their family. As Catherine Gallagher points out, "Marriage and motherhood had, ironically, given her a new sense of ownership in her works at the very moment when, legally, she had lost them" (254). Her new, socially recognized role provided a safe context in which to work. She no longer had to maintain the defensive stance that being a *spinster* author exacted.

Long before reaching this point, however, Burney struggled in various ways to carve out a place for herself as a single woman. This was difficult--she found herself constantly having to contend with the demands of those on whom she was dependent. As Betty Rizzo explains, at home she was frequently called upon to attend to her needy stepmother, Elizabeth Allen Burney (87). It was a relief to escape to

the Thrale household at Streatham, yet Hester Thrale had her own set of demands. According to Rizzo, Thrale wanted Burney to serve as a full-time companion. Burney chafed at this new form of servitude and, "determined to remain independent, she stipulated for equal friendship or nothing" (91). She did not want to become Thrale's humble companion, no matter what advantages the older woman could offer her. Eventually the struggle to maintain her independence would lead to Burney's total estrangement from Thrale.⁴

It was far more difficult for Burney to refuse her beloved father than Hester Thrale. When she was offered a post at court--that of the second Keeper of the Robes to the Queen--she accepted it in compliance with Charles Burney's wishes. Her primary duty turned out to be waiting not on the Queen, but on the tyrannical first Keeper of the Robes, Mrs. Schwellenberg, "to whom she soon learned to her horror that she was intended to be a toady" (Rizzo 101). After five years of miserable service, during which her health dramatically deteriorated, Burney was finally able to obtain permanent leave from her post. She received a pension of £100 per annum from the Queen.

Sprung from the miseries of court, Burney embraced the comparative freedom of her father's home. She took her place as his companion and expressed her satisfaction with this arrangement:

Indeed--I now live with him wholly; he has himself appropriated me a place, a seat, a desk, a table, & every convenience & comfort, & he never seemed yet so earnest to keep me about him. We read together,

write together, chat--compare notes, communicate projects, & diversify each other's employments. He is all goodness, gaiety, & sweetest affection,--& his society & kindness are more precious to me than ever. (Journals Vol. I, 73).

Yet despite the professed comfort of her domestic situation, Burney's single status continued to restrict her freedom and hamper her conduct. In the journals of 1791-2, one of her chief preoccupations is the gossip surrounding her and George Cambridge, from whom she had received romantic attentions--but no marriage proposal--prior to her service at court. Repeatedly confronted by rumors of their engagement, yet reluctant to discuss the awkward matter (and thereby clear it up), she was in a state of constant embarrassment. She lived in fear of coming face-to-face with Cambridge himself, and their eventual meeting was inevitably awkward. She was tormented by how it might look to others, especially when he showed her any special attention. She experienced a similarly awkward encounter with Stephen Digby, the potential suitor of her court years. Burney's excruciating sensitivity to gossip and any hint of impropriety made her situation as a single female in society extremely trying at such junctures.

More forceful than such embarrassments in restricting her social activity was the will of her father.⁵ Though forty years old and a celebrated author, Burney was under her father's power as long as she remained under his roof. Her single status continued to infantilize her, as it kept her subject to his authority. At no time was this more palpable

than when Charles Burney blocked his daughter's friendship with Germaine de Staël. Burney was powerfully drawn to her fellow author, yet her father coerced her to give up the friendship due to rumors of Staël's adulterous affair with Narbonne. Burney openly resented this interference:

I have regretted excessively the finishing so miserably an acquaintance begun with so much spirit & pleasure. . . . I wish the world would take more care of itself and less of its neighbours. I should have been very safe, I trust, without such flights, & distances, & breaches!--But there seemed an absolute resolution formed to crush this acquaintance, & compel me to appear its wilful renouncer. (123)

It is worth noting that Burney's sister Susan, as a married woman, was not compelled to avoid Staël. Clearly a single woman, even at the age of forty, was much more tightly controlled in terms of her (female) acquaintance. She was considered somehow "unsafe" in society at large--like a young girl in danger of corruption. No matter how advanced her age, she still had to live in fear of a stain to her reputation should she associate with the "wrong" kind of woman; she still required the protection and supervision of her father.⁶

Charles Burney's continued power over his middle-aged daughter was exerted most dramatically at the very moment when she threatened to slip from it. She and d'Arblay applied for his consent to their marriage--and Charles Burney refused it! Dismissing their wishes as those of children who did not know their own best interests, he wrote to his daughter's suitor:

. . . it is wholly out of my power to render

an alliance with my daughter a prudent & eligible measure for either of you. A person of your abilities and habits of life has a right to aspire to something better than obscurity and a cottage. Affection dissipates every cloud of difficulty, in Theory, and colours every object agreeably; but as the school of adversity will be new to you both, I very much fear that its effects will be more irksome in participation, than to either of you, singly. (168-9)

According to Burney's explanatory note, Susan pled the couple's case and obtained her father's reluctant consent for them. Charles Burney did not, however, attend the marriage ceremony.

Although Burney ultimately embraced a woman's conventional fate, she did not forget her experience as a single woman or renounce her belief that single life is preferable to a bad marriage.⁷ She expressed this perhaps most clearly in her sorrow over her friend Mrs. Waddington, who had made a very unhappy marriage of convenience. Burney declared: "I grieve eternally at . . . her barbarous destiny! tied for life to an establishment!--oh Heavens! how preferable is poverty! Whether in the single or Married state, with a Mind unshackled, & Friends dear to it!" (Journals Vol. II, 74). In a letter to Mrs. Waddington upon her own marriage, she revealed her youthful inclination toward spinsterhood and asserted the continued relevance of her earlier principles. Acknowledging the "general astonishment" which met her sudden marriage to d'Arblay, she remarked to Mrs. Waddington:

My own, however, at my very extraordinary fate is singly greater than that of all my Friends united. I had never made any vow against Marriage, but I had LONG--LONG been firmly persuaded it was--

for ME--a state of too much hazard, & too little promise, to draw me from my individual plans & purposes. I remember, in playing at Questions & Commands, when I was thirteen, being asked *When I intended to Marry?*-- --& surprising my playmates by solemnly replying 'When I think I shall be happier than I am in being single.--' It is true, I imagined that time would never arrive; & I have pertinaciously adhered to trying no experiment upon any other hope --for many & mixed as are the ingredients which form what is generally considered as happiness, I was always fully convinced that Social Sympathy of character & taste could alone have any chance with me. All else I always thought--& now KNOW to be immaterial. I have only This peculiar--that what many contentedly assert, or adopt, in Theory--I have had the courage to be guided by in practice. (Journals Vol. III, 9)

Burney here confirms a lasting respect for the choice of spinsterhood. She does not dismiss her youthful intentions, but sees her present condition as consistent with them. There is no ideological rupture between Burney, the spinster author, and Madame d'Arblay, the author of Camilla.

This suggestion in Burney's personal writing allows a certain "emphasis" (to return to Miller's term) to show through her fiction. For the "theory" that guided Burney in practice also guided the practice of her craft. Her heroine, too, winds up married at the end; but her path to marriage is uncertain, and along the way she, like Burney, entertains the possibility of single life. While one cannot equate Burney's experience with Camilla's, I believe that Burney meant Camilla's intention to live single--if she cannot have the man who is "infinitely dear" to her--to be taken seriously. This was, after all, Burney's own intention. Burney, who never made a vow against marriage, neither made a vow against

the marriage plot in fiction. But the fact that the marriage altar is Camilla's final destination does not negate her steps toward another path--or Burney's toward another plot. When read alongside her letters and journals, Camilla verifies Burney's interest in other possibilities--the "individual plans and purposes" of single women. Burney and Camilla wind up happier in marriage than in single life, and the fate of Camilla winds up happier this way as well. Had it not been for Burney's marriage, the novel might not have been completed; and had it not been for Camilla's, it might not have been (widely) read. But the very conditions of its writing--conditions that make certain stories too risky to tell--make for its own submerged plot.

At the end of Camilla, after the muddled, 900-page courtship of Edgard Mandlebert and Camilla Tyrold has finally reached its conclusion, Camilla delivers a narrative to her lover which the reader does not get to hear. After being assured of Edgar's love,

Faithfully she returned his communication, by the fullest, most candid, and unsparing account of her short life, from the still shorter period of its being put into voluntary motion. With nearly breathless interest, he listened to the detail of her transactions with Sir Sedley Clarendel, with pity to her debts, and with horror to her difficulties. But when, through the whole ingenuous narration, he found himself the constant object of every view, the ultimate motive to every action, even where least it appeared, his happiness, and his gratitude, made Camilla soon forget that sorrow had ever been known to her. (902-3)

One can infer that Camilla's account of her life is an encapsulated version of Camilla (save for the final ten pages). In Camilla's version of Camilla, then, the plot centers not around the heroine, but around her hero--even in absentia. The action is motivated entirely by the desire to provoke male desire. The female life described is only set in "voluntary motion" by an external, male force--without which, presumably, it would remain immobile. If we are to review the novel by this light, it amounts to the most basic of love plots. This is reconfirmed in the final chapter, where not only do Camilla and Edgar tie up their story in the matrimonial knot, but the three lesser heroines--Eugenia, Indiana, and Lavinia--are bound to grooms of their own. If spinsterhood loomed as a prospect for the Tyrold sisters, the signposts were ultimately spurious. Their pledges to live single prove empty, mere narrative ruses to obscure the plot's true course to the marriage altar. What may have masqueraded as a spinster plot reveals itself as no more than the usual marriage plot.

Yet this reading of the novel contradicts Burney's avowed conception of her project. Burney explicitly protested against a reduction of her work to its romantic elements. In a letter to her father, she explained "I own I do not like calling it a *Novel*; it gives so simply the notion of a mere love story, that I recoil a little from it. I mean it to be *sketches of Characters & morals, put in action*, not a *Romance*" (Journals Vol. III, 117). To her brother Charles

she reiterated, "It is to all intents & purposes a Novel,-- but I annex so merely to that title, in a general sense, a staring Love Story, that I hate so to call it" (137). The question remains, did Burney in fact, despite her own protestations, produce a "staring Love Story"? Or is Camilla's account, in which the winning of the lover is "the constant object of every view, the ultimate motive to every action," but the distorted vision of a besotted young girl? Is it Camilla's hazy picture of herself rather than Burney's Picture of Youth?

I have already argued that Burney's autobiographical writings complicate reductive readings of her work. It is useful here also to consider narratological questions--in this case, how much weight to attach to the ends of novels. If the heroine ultimately marries, is marriage the direction, the motive, of the narrative as a whole? While there is no final answer to this question, Peter J. Rabinowitz provides a useful alternative to reducing a narrative to the sum at its end. In "End Sinister: Neat Closure as Disruptive Force," he argues with what he calls "the Rule of Conclusive Endings: we tend to guide our readings with the assumption that the author intended us to take the ending of the text in a special way, as a conclusion, as a summing up of the work's meaning" (122). He proves the insufficiency of such readings with the example of what he calls "excessive cadence": "when a plot convention is undermined not by overthrowing it, but rather by following it in such an ostentatious way that it

looks absurd" (125). Rabinowitz illustrates such an ending with the work of a non-canonical woman writer, E.D.E.N. Southworth's Allworth Abbey. He explains that Southworth provides an uncalled-for number of final marriages, thereby foregrounding the artificiality of the plot convention. As a result, the reader

begins to doubt *all* of the marriages, and perhaps the institution of marriage itself. . . . Read in this way, the novel becomes a disturbing commentary on patriarchal social relations. But its subversive nature doesn't come from an attack on closure; rather, it is neat closure itself which is politically disruptive. (128)

Such a reading seems applicable to the end of Camilla, which can easily be viewed as "excessive cadence." Claudia Johnson suggests such a reading when she remarks that the affirmation of dominant values in the novel "comes at such a high cost that it seems to take away with one hand what it has (too) profusely granted with the other. The plethora of concluding marriages, for example, flouts the convention by glutting it incredibly . . . " (Equivocal Beings 164).⁸ While Burney may not have intended the ending itself as subversive, her plea for the novel not to be read as a "mere love story" warns us not to take the connubial conclusion as the be-all (though end-all) of the narrative.⁹

Having said this, I must add an important qualification to these remarks. Burney's overuse of the marriage convention at the end of her novel may well subvert the social values it appears to endorse. Here and elsewhere,

Burney questions the institution of marriage. Yet she is by no means advocating its rejection. Rather, she is demonstrating the double-bind in which women of her class found themselves. On the one hand, the reader is made to doubt the possibility of the happily-ever-after of marriage, and to confront the alternative of spinsterhood. On the other hand, through the use of the spinster subplot, the reader is forced to acknowledge how fraught with difficulty that alternative is. Camilla's (and her sisters') disastrous career as a single woman, and the discouraging examples of the novel's true spinsters, render marriage the more viable option for her heroine.

In Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy, Kristina Straub examines just such narrative divisions in Burney's work. Straub comments that "Burney's fiction . . . often seems awkwardly strained in opposite directions" (1). Yet she suggests we cease putting too much emphasis on textual unity; thus "we shed the anxiety of needing to resolve our conflicting readings into a coherent, consistent aesthetic or political statement" (2). As she goes on to explain:

the disrupted and disruptive nature . . . of all of Burney's fiction, results from strategies for surviving some of the psychic and social contradictions that confront any human being in a constantly changing social context but are often especially acute in women's thinking. The ability to sustain and express contradiction is both a response to ideological conflicts in the culture and a strategy for female psychic survival in mid-eighteenth-century life. (3)

Certainly Burney's own experience as a single woman taught her that there was no easy solution to the problem of a woman's destiny. She herself found more freedom and security in marriage than in single life. Thus, while she recognizes that it is better to be a spinster than to have a miserable marriage, and regrets a social system that makes the single path treacherous, she chooses marriage for her heroine as the lesser evil. Given the status quo, Camilla *must* marry.

To understand what spinsterhood means to Camilla and to Camilla, it is crucial to begin with the novel's spinster characters and the subplots they are granted. Although Miss Margland, Mrs. Mittin, and Mrs. Ecton are minor characters, they provide the novel's only index of what spinsterhood looks like. These characters elucidate Burney's view of the pitfalls of single life and her resentment of the social conditions that render it so unpalatable. Their example delimits the view of Camilla and her sisters--as well as the reader--regarding a woman's alternative to marriage. For author, reader, and characters, therefore, they up the stakes in the marriage game. From the perspective of plot, they show why the marriage altar is the critical direction of the narrative. Their subplots hint that as long as it is mired in the same cycle--a repetitive struggle for maintenance--the spinster plot has nowhere to go.

The most prominent of Camilla's spinsters is Miss Margland, "a woman of family and fashion" whom an improvident

father has compelled into service as a governess. Yet "neglected in her own education, there was nothing she could teach, though, born and bred in the circle of fashion, she imagined she had nothing to learn. . . . a mind proudly shallow kept her unacquainted with her own deficiencies..."

(45). Through Margland, Burney indicts the typical education of women of her class. Such an education is anatomized when Margland prescribes it for her charge, Indiana. The governess

ran over all the qualifications really necessary for a young lady to attain, which consisted simply of an enumeration of all she had herself attempted; a little music, a little drawing, and a little dancing; which should all, she added, be but slightly pursued, to distinguish a lady of fashion from an artist. (46)

Burney implies that the frivolous instruction offered to women renders them unfit even for the few occupations available to them. Moreover, it perpetuates a cycle of female incapacity. With such a program of study, it is no surprise that Indiana grows up as empty-headed as her preceptress.¹⁰

Miss Margland's character is no better than her accomplishments: "The spirit of Miss Margland was as haughty as her intellects were weak; and her disposition was so querulous, that, in her constant suspicion of humiliation, she seemed always looking for an affront, and ready primed for a contest" (46). While Burney hardly paints this irritable spinster in flattering colors, she provides an immediate clue as to why Miss Margland is so unpleasant. As a dependent with no financial or educational resources, and

as an older woman without erotic attractions, she has reason to expect humiliation. Though her employer is the supposedly benevolent Sir Hugh, she is frequently insulted by him and the other male members of the Tyrold household. In scene after scene, Burney demonstrates the abuse that lies in store for single, financially dependent women as they age. Only money and the ability to excite male desire provide some degree of protection. For a woman who is poor and old, there is every reason to be in a state of constant suspicion.

For Burney, the problem of aging is a particularly pressing concern in a society which fails to respect the elderly. In the first volume of her early journal she remarks that "there is something in Age that ever, even in it's own despiht, *must* be venerated, *must* create respect--& to have it ill treated, is to me worse, more cruel & wicked than any thing on Earth--" (Vol. I, 27). In her first novel, Evelina, she goes to great lengths to show how poorly the elderly can be treated.¹¹ This is particularly the problem of elderly women who lack the protection of male relatives or financial security. Bachelors who grow older can maintain their comfort and dignity as long as they have their own homes and incomes, compelling the attendance of their heirs.¹² Yet what becomes of women as they age, if they possess neither money nor homes of their own?

Burney addresses the particular problems of aging women in her discussion of female beauty. Through her second heroine, Eugenia, as well as Miss Margland and Indiana, she

demonstrates the high premium placed on sexual desirability in women. Burney indicates that a single woman can compel decent treatment as long as she is still young and attractive. Once youth and beauty go, however, she is at best ignored, at worst held in contempt. Mr. Tyrold gives the disfigured Eugenia a lecture on the transience of female beauty:

To be wholly disregarded, after engaging every eye; to be unassisted, after being habituated to seeing crowds anxiously offer their services; to be unheard, after monopolising every ear--can you, indeed, persuade yourself a change such as this demands but ordinary firmness? Yet the altered female who calls for it, has the least chance to obtain it; for even where nature has endowed her with fortitude, the world and its flatteries have almost uniformly enervated it, before the season of its exertion. (308)

The point of Tyrold's speech is to teach his daughter not to lament her lost beauty, since the greater a woman's beauty in youth, the severer her trials in old age. Yet Eugenia learns no such lesson. On the contrary, her experience teaches her just how necessary female beauty is. As she writes in her memoirs near the novel's end, addressing a male readership: "the value you yourselves set upon external attractions, your own neglect has taught me to know; and the indifference with which you consider all else, your own duplicity has instructed me to feel" (905). If an older woman is by society's definition an unattractive one, then what can a woman hope for after her youth is over, if she is alone in the world?

Burney provides the depressing answer to this question through her juxtaposition of Margland and her young charges.

In a succession of scenes, these characters are exposed to various "dangers" which require male attention or assistance. In each case, the young women are surrounded by male protectors while Margland is utterly ignored. Just as Tyrold explained to Eugenia, the older woman is "wholly disregarded," "unassisted," and "unheard." By thus demonstrating the ill treatment received by single women no longer (if ever) physically attractive, Burney elucidates the urgency of the marriage game for her heroines. While lampooning such matchmakers as Miss Margland, Burney shows that their schemes make sense. A self-appointed marriage-broker for Indiana, whose establishment she sees as her own ticket to higher living, Margland is materialistic and cunning. It is partly her interference on Indiana's (and her own) behalf that keeps apart Camilla and Edgar, with such disastrous results. Yet within the social context Burney describes, such manipulation is understandable. Margland doesn't want her pupil to miss the matrimonial boat, as she did. Indiana's establishment is her own second chance at a comfortable life. Moreover, there is not much time to be lost. As Margland evaluates Indiana's prospects, she fully realizes that they will diminish with every season.¹³ Her own case proves that if a woman is single longer than she is desirable, she can expect a lot of hardship.

The first comic scene which pokes fun at Miss Margland occurs when a number of characters are taking a Sunday walk in the neighborhood of Cleves. Lionel, the roguish brother of

the Tyrold girls, is instructed by his uncle to escort Miss Margland. He mocks the governess by making an exaggerated show of gallantry, dropping to his knees and kissing her hand. Such ridicule is typical of Lionel, who repeatedly pays sarcastic compliments to her youth and beauty--in other words, implies she is old and ugly. In this scene Miss Margland refuses his attendance and chooses the unctuous Bellamy, Eugenia's fortune-hunting suitor, to escort her instead. When the women are alarmed by the roar of a bull in the next field, Lionel decides to play a little joke. He tells Miss Margland a mad bull is chasing her, whereupon:

A second astounding bellow put a stop to any question, and wholly checked the immediate impulse of Miss Margland to ask why she was thus selected; she snatched her hands from her face, not doubting she would see her esquire soothingly standing by her side; but, though internally surprised and shocked to find herself deserted, she gathered strength to run from the gate with the nimbleness of youth (132).

When the party finally regroups, Margland expresses her anger at Bellamy:

She resented his deserting her while she was in danger, and desired to see no more of him. But when he had respectfully suffered her wrath to vent itself, he made apologies, with an obsequiousness so rare to her, and a deference so strikingly contrasted with the daring ridicule of Lionel, that she did not long oppose the potent charm of adulation-- (141).

This scene exhibits Miss Margland as a figure of fun. First she is made ridiculous by falling for Lionel's prank. She takes alarm at an imaginary danger and bolts off at a speed inconsistent with her age. There is an absurd discrepancy between the role she is playing as a maiden in distress and her actual appearance as an ugly older woman.

This is heightened by the fact that she is running from a bull--a symbol of brute male power which would underline the femininity of a pretty young victim. What is so comical here is that Miss Margland seems to take herself for such a victim. She expects her handsome young esquire to dash to the rescue, when in fact he has completely forgotten her. She then falls for Bellamy's false show of admiration. Once more, she imagines herself entitled to the sort of flattery due to blushing maidens. She is exposed as being both gullible and vain. Miss Margland appears to deserve our mocking laughter.

Yet the comedy of the scene is undercut by the sense of real danger lying beneath its surface. Of course the bull is not really on the loose, and Miss Margland is not in actual peril. Nonetheless, the scene points to the way in which, as an aging spinster, Miss Margland is in a precarious position. When danger is announced, she suddenly finds herself "deserted." She is without the male protection rendered necessary by the society in which she lives. All the women on this outing are provided with escorts because they are considered unsafe by themselves. Yet without youth, beauty, or money, a woman cannot compel attendance. She is left to fend for herself. Her subsequent response to the false gallantry of Bellamy further underscores the pathos of Miss Margland's situation. She is bowled over by his polite attentions, "so strikingly contrasted with the daring ridicule of Lionel." In other words, she is not used to

being treated with respect. Her position as an aging spinster leaves her vulnerable to rudeness and contempt. It is no wonder she longs for a little flattery. One is more inclined to pity than to laugh at her.

Burney provides a further check to the laughter she inspires by forcing us to look at the company we keep. If we laugh at Miss Margland, we are participating in Lionel's joke--he is the one who sets the whole scene in motion. Surely we must question such a perspective. Knowing what we know about Lionel, we can hardly wish to ally our own view with his. Lionel is reckless, selfish, and insensitive. His rash behavior is responsible for much of the novel's conflict. His pranks, sexual intrigues, and financial fiascoes repeatedly place the members of his family in distress and danger. He is a particular menace to his unmarried sisters. Lionel's prank to extort money from his Uncle Relvil not only threatens his uncle's health, but removes his mother from home when her daughters most need her. He plunges Camilla into debt, compromises her reputation, and forces her into an improper financial dependence upon one of her suitors. Yet despite his misconduct (which includes an adulterous affair), his gender protects him. His reputation is never tarnished; as the only male child in his family, he remains his father's heir (though he is disinherited by his uncle in favor of a stepson). Through Lionel, Burney demonstrates the double standards of her society; the freedom and safety it accords

males and the snares it lays for females. Burney forces us to question the values Lionel represents. Surely we as readers must disassociate our perspective from his. When such a young man makes fun of a poor old spinster, Burney makes us consider if we really want to laugh along. In so doing, she implies that the proper object of her satire is not Margland, but the society that would debase her.

The next scene in which Miss Margland is lampooned takes place at a public entertainment in Southampton. Clermont Lynmere and Mr. Westwyn get into a fight, whereupon "The female party, in very serious alarm at this unpleasant scene, rose to hurry away" (667). Each of the young women is escorted from the fray by her own male admirer. As for their older companion:

Miss Margland, meanwhile, had not been remiss in what she esteemed a most capital feminine accomplishment, screaming; though, in its exercise, she had failed of any success; since, while her voice called remark, her countenance repelled its effect. Yet she thought it a disgrace to seem the only female who, from internal courage, or external neglect, should retire alone; she therefore called upon Dr. Orkborne, conjuring, in a shrill and pathetic voice, meant more for all who surrounded than for himself, that he would protect her (667).

Miss Margland's pleas are ignored, however, and she must look elsewhere for assistance: She

appealed to all present upon the indecorum of a lady's being kept to witness such unbecoming violence, and upon the unheard-of inattention of the Doctor: but a short, 'certainly!--' 'To be sure, ma'am!-- or, 'It's very shocking indeed!' with a hasty decampment from the neighborhood, was all of sympathy she procured (668).

Finally, after the fight is stopped, she asks Dr. Orkborne at least to attend her to the carriage. Once more the Latin

tutor fails to comply, and she must "walk on alone," climbing unassisted into the carriage where all the young ladies have been safely waiting (668).

As in the prior scene, Miss Margland cuts a ridiculous figure. With her screaming and her entreaties, she overacts the role of maiden in distress. She is to be laughed at for expecting the male concern so effortlessly won by her young charges. Her motivation is vanity, not any real fear of harm. Nevertheless, it is hard to blame Miss Margland for wanting to be treated like the other women in her party. After all, they are in no greater danger than she is. They merely wish to be spared the unpleasant sight of two men fighting--a sight considered offensive to female delicacy. Their alarm is taken seriously by the men around them and presumably by the reader. What Margland wants is really very meagre. Hardly expecting to elicit real concern, she longs at least for a show of concern. She fears the public humiliation of not being treated like a lady. Unfortunately, since male protection and respect are only the by-products of male desire, that's exactly what she gets. As an aging, undesirable spinster, Margland is the ultimate outsider. The hint of pathos in her lone, retreating figure underscores this fact. Redirecting her satire toward those who would withhold their sympathy, Burney prevents her reader from doing the same.

Miss Margland appears a third time as the butt of the joke when she and the young ladies attend a boating party.

The beautiful Indiana, shrieking in assumed fear as she boards the vessel, charms those who witness her distress. In sharp contrast:

Miss Margland had more than echoed every scream of Indiana, though nobody had seemed to hear her. Dr. Orkborne, the only beau she could compel into her service, was missing; her eye and her voice alike demanded him in vain; he neither appeared to her view, nor answered her indignant calls.--Nor, indeed, though she forced his attendance, had she the most remote hope of inspiriting him to any gallantry: but still he was a man, and she thought it a mark of consequence to have one in her train (701).

By now the joke is old: foolish Miss Margland mistakes herself for a delicate maiden when in fact she is a crone. What is most significant in this scene is the way in which Burney directly contrasts Indiana and her governess. Both women are carrying on in exactly the same manner, yet with very different results. Indiana wins admiration while Miss Margland is utterly ignored--no one even seems to hear her.¹⁴ This contrast suggests the bleak prospect that awaits even Indiana should she fail to marry. Now young and beautiful, she commands deference from the men around her--the ones who hold the real power in the society which contains her. Yet Indiana will one day lose her looks and her youth. Like Miss Margland, she lacks the financial and educational resources to live independently. She, like any other young woman of her background, has no choice but to marry if she hopes to avoid Miss Margland's fate--to be dependent and vulnerable, an object of derision when she is not wholly ignored. Miss Margland is in fact correct in thinking it a "mark of

consequence" to have a man at her side. It is the only mark of consequence her society confers on women.

While in these comic scenes the dangers confronting Miss Margland have been illusory, merely hinting at real dangers that confront single women, near the end of the novel her worst fears are realized. Miss Margland's one care in life has been to help Indiana make a good match. It has been her dream to accompany Indiana to her new establishment and make it the home of her own declining years. Yet Indiana unexpectedly elopes, and Miss Margland, "in losing thus her pupil, lost the expected reward of near thirteen years of unwilling attendance. She had, by no means, indeed, merited this treachery from Indiana, whom though incapable to instruct in much good, she had sedulously guarded from all evil" (818). Miss Margland is suddenly left destitute. She has no prospects, no resources. Here Burney does not invite us to laugh at poor Miss Margland. She is demonstrating how precarious the life of an unmarried, ill-educated, aging gentlewoman really is. By softening her satire at this crisis, Burney ensures that we acknowledge its underlying aim. Burney is critiquing the social conditions that render women so powerless. It is a relief at the novel's end when Indiana suddenly remembers her old friend and offers her a home after all. Yet despite this reversal, we are left with a sense of dark possibilities lurking beneath Miss Margland's happy ending.

What links the subplots of Miss Margland and Mrs. Mittin, the novel's other comic spinster, is a perpetual concern about money. As noted earlier, the spinster plot largely boils down to the money plot in Burney's work. Each spinster attaches herself to a nubile young woman in order to ensure her own financial security. While Margland pins her hopes on Indiana's success in the marriage market, Mrs. Mittin milks a livelihood out of Camilla's courtship dance with Edgar. By playing the marriage game vicariously, as a means of subsistence, both spinsters highlight matrimony as the chief financial resource of middle-class women. They suggest the constant financial anxiety that would fall to the novel's young heroines if they too failed to secure their futures through husbands.

Mrs. Mittin is, however, potentially better off than Miss Margland. This is due to her different class background. She was trained as a milliner, and so had a means of self-support. Yet after inheriting a small legacy and placing it in an annuity, she

quit her business, and set up, in her own conception, for a gentlewoman herself, though with so very small an income, that to sustain her new post, she was frequently reduced to far greater dependence and hardships than she experienced in her old one (688).

Ironically, her elevation in social status has increased her vulnerability as a spinster. Having renounced her trade to qualify as a gentlewoman, she must rely on favors from her economic superiors. Mrs. Mittin therefore lives as a

parasite. Obsequious and opportunistic, she latches onto those women from whom she can expect some reward.

Mittin's background in trade continues to provide her with some security. The skills she learned as a milliner render her "of serious utility" to Camilla when her wardrobe needs refurbishing (690). As Straub notes, Mittin "turns Camilla's need for proper clothes into a small-scale industry by which she always makes some profit" (201). Yet her sartorial skills alone cannot provide the genteel lifestyle she desires. For that, she must be as complete a toadeater as any humble companion or governess. As Burney details:

To be useful, she would submit to any drudgery; to become agreeable, devoted herself to any flattery. To please was her incessant desire, and her rage for popularity included every rank and class of society. . . . She would work, read, go of errands, or cook a dinner; be a parasite, a spy, an attendant, a drudge; keep a secret, or spread a report; incite a quarrel, or coax contending parties into peace; invent any expedient, and execute any scheme. . . .
(688)

Mittin's career as a gentlewoman evidently requires more ingenuity and perseverance than her original trade.

In addition to having a skill to fall back on, Mittin has the advantage over Margland of being somewhat more independent. Not being attached to any particular mistress, she is able to move about with some degree of freedom. Of course, being an aging, unmarried gentlewoman presents many of the same dangers for Mrs. Mittin as for Miss Margland. She must therefore invent strategies to evade them. Her chief method of self-preservation is disguise. When we first meet her, she is dressed as a lower-class woman in an apron,

big bonnet, and clogs. Taking off these articles of clothing, she explains to Camilla: "When I have put them on, people take me for a mere common person, and I walk on, ever so late, and nobody speaks to me; and so by that means I get my pleasure, and save my money; and yet always appear like a gentlewoman when I'm known" (424). While this ruse is comical--it highlights Mrs. Mittin's eccentricity and her stinginess--it also suggests the dangers she is attempting to avoid. Apparently a single gentlewoman cannot walk about alone without attracting unwanted attention. Mrs. Mittin is trying to avoid harassment.

For the same reason Mittin adopts a second mode of disguise. As she announces on another occasion: "I'm going to tell you a secret. Do you know, for all I call myself Mrs. I'm single?" (468). She explains "I'd a mind to be taken for a young widow, on account everybody likes a young widow; and if one is called Miss, people being so soon to think one an old maid, that it's quite disagreeable" (469). Having witnessed the treatment received by Miss Margland, we know precisely why it is so disagreeable. If everybody likes a young widow, nobody likes an old maid.¹⁵ Clearly Mrs. Mittin wishes to avoid the abuse an old maid can expect.

Just as Burney's juxtaposition of Margland and Indiana in various comic scenes underscored the neglect that awaits unprotected women past their prime, her juxtaposition of Mittin and Camilla points to still worse dangers for women on their own. Burney conveys this sense of menace most

effectively in a scene that begins comically yet evolves into a nightmare for Camilla. While in Southhampton, Mrs. Mittin and Camilla make a tour of the shops and--on account of Mittin's mindless loquacity and Camilla's absent expression--arouse the suspicions of the shopkeepers. The shopkeepers wager a bet on whether the women are shoplifters or lunatics, and follow them to the beach to study them further. At this point it is comical that the vulgar Mittin suggests "something wild, if not insane" to her viewers:

In truth, an opinion preconceived of her derangement might easily authorise strong suspicions of confirmation, from the contented volubility with which she incessantly ran on, without waiting for answerers, or even listeners; and his observation had not taught him that the loquacious desire only to speak. They exact time, not attention. (608)

Burney here seems to authorise our laughing at Mittin's expense.

Yet once Mittin and Camilla flee to a bathing room to avoid the stares of their pursuers, a sense of physical menace overtakes the scene. The shopkeepers are joined by men of the upper classes whose rude attention adds to the women's distress. Their situation as women on their own exposes them not only to misconstruction but to sexual predation. Camilla is laid open to these male gazers, as "her beauty, her apparently unprotected situation, and the account of the wager, seemed to render her an object to be stared at without scruple" (613). Her discomfort turns to terror when the upper-class men, led by Lord Valhurst, force their way into the bathing room and bar the women's way out.

Edgar finally rescues Mrs. Mittin and Camilla from Valhurst-- who, disappointed at "losing the beautiful prey he believed just falling into his hands," will continue to stalk her and compromise her reputation (615).

Mittin and Camilla quit their captors as befits their characters: Mittin ludicrously "boasting how well she had checked and kept them in order" and Camilla reeling from the "horror of the attack she had just escaped" (616). As in the scenes where Miss Margland is lampooned, Burney achieves two conflicting effects here. She invites the reader to laugh at Mrs. Mittin's eccentricity while exposing the cruelty of that very laughter. Camilla's very real scare reveals both single women to be in a position of extreme vulnerability. If we laugh at Mittin, we as readers ally ourselves with the powerful males who not only mock but physically threaten the two women. Burney forces us to ask ourselves if we really want to join such company. As in the Margland scenes, Burney redirects our attention from the ostensible object of the laughter to those who are laughing. These representatives of patriarchal power--with its abuse of women--are the larger game in Burney's satire.

Ultimately Mittin decides that the best deal is to be a married woman, and she quits the novel as Mr. Dannel's bride. This pairing is no love-match. The miserly Dannel, admiring Mittin's skill at getting something for nothing, marries her "in the full persuasion she would save him half of his annual expenses" (910). Though marriage itself offers no

quarantees, at least it provides relief from the strain of getting by as a single gentlewoman--with the scheming and subterfuges involved.

Burney's juxtaposition of Mittin and Camilla highlights not only the physical dangers to which single women are exposed, but the financial dangers. Camilla's descent into debt and despair is in part owing to her association with the older spinster. In acting as Camilla's milliner and liaison with the shopkeepers, Mittin repeatedly incurs debts on her young friend's behalf. She convinces Camilla of her need for a new cap, a new gown, a new cloak. Though Camilla depends on Mittin to discharge her bills, Mittin mishandles her money and protracts her debts. Ironically, the economic predicament of single women here induces the one to feed off the other. Mittin is not the sole cause of Camilla's debts, of course--the greatest of them arise from Lionel's importunities. Lionel's draining of her funds compels Camilla frequently to turn to male "bankers" to bail her out. Her subsequent indebtedness puts her in their power and can be extremely compromising. It is Mittin who provides Camilla a way out of her reliance on individual males. When Mittin finally realizes that Camilla is in real financial trouble, she introduces her young friend to a money-lender. These financial transactions provide only fleeting relief, however. They eventually lead to Mr. Tyrold's imprisonment and Camilla's guilt-induced emotional collapse.

The intersecting money plots of Mittin and Camilla emphasize the financial insecurity of single women and the lengths they must go to keep solvent. By introducing Camilla to the money-lender, Mittin reveals that she is acquainted with debt, and that the younger woman must also learn the desperate measures at her disposal. Clearly, there are few resources available for single women living in genteel poverty. As in her depiction of Margland, Burney is suggesting what Camilla and her sisters would suffer if they did not wind up safely married at the novel's end. The financial worries of both groups of women show us that as long as they are single, they are in the same boat.

Burney makes it quite clear throughout the novel that for Camilla, the choice between marriage and spinsterhood is tantamount to a choice between marriage and poverty. The outspoken Mrs. Arlbery puts it bluntly when she complains of Edgar: "He has stationed himself there merely to watch and discountenance her [Camilla]. I hate him heartily; yet he rolls in wealth, and she has nothing. I must bring them, therefore, together, positively: for though a husband . . . such a fastidious one especially . . . is not what I would recommend to her for happiness, 'tis better than poverty" (461). Though Camilla does receive other offers of marriage, we are reminded that a portionless girl cannot expect them as a matter of course. When Major Cerwood proposes (thinking, mistakenly, that Camilla is the heiress of her uncle, Sir Hugh Tyrold), Sir Hugh tells him that "never a one has come

to Camilla yet, except yourself, because my brother can spare her but a trifle, having another young girl to provide for, besides Lionel; which is the most expensive of them all" (533). The bottom line for the girls is that out of their father's yearly income of six hundred pounds, "he had always contrived to lay by an hundred pounds annually, which sum, with its accumulating interest, was destined to be divided between Lavinia and Camilla. Eugenia required nothing; and Lionel was to inherit the paternal little fortune. The portion of Mrs. Tyrold, which was small, the estate of her father having been almost all entailed upon Mr. Relvil [Mrs. Tyrold's brother], was to be divided equally amongst her children" (763). With Lionel's financial fiascoes, even this small amount is threatened. The girls are faced with the same prospects as the conniving Miss Margland and Mrs. Mittin. They, too, might turn into such despicable figures if forced to scrounge for their living.

The novel's final spinster is Mrs. Ecton. While perhaps the most stereotypical of the three, she is the least comical. Mrs. Ecton fits the stereotype of the hypocritical, sexually frustrated spinster. She is introduced as "a fanatical maiden aunt, who had taught her [niece] nothing but her faith and her prayers, without one single lesson upon good works, or the smallest instruction upon the practical use of theoretical piety" (487). We know that this sanctimonious spinster is really a lewd old woman, for she has secretly married her butler.¹⁶ She dreads making known

this match, as "the shame she felt of making the discovery of a marriage contracted clandestinely, after she was sixty years of age, with a man under thirty, threw her into a nervous fever" (632). Her shame indicates that she married for embarrassing reasons--namely, she was motivated by lust. Yet if she were motivated by romantic love, that too would seem improper in a woman of her years. After all, romance is the domain of young maidens, not old maiden aunts.

Surprisingly, however, Burney does not make a joke of this unseemly spinster. Rather, she paints a grim picture of her fate. Mrs. Ecton's passion has catastrophic repercussions. Her husband gains control of all her assets, leaving her unable to provide for her niece and nephew. She coerces her niece into a loveless marriage and renders her nephew powerless to choose a bride. She "saw his nearly desolate state with a compunction bitterly increased by finding she had thrown their joint properties, with her own person, into the hands of a rapacious tyrant" (672). We do not learn the details of his tyranny, but we know enough to realize Miss Ecton has been punished for her folly. Clearly the butler married her for money, not love. For who was Mrs. Ecton to imagine a man half her age could fall in love with her? She shares the folly of Miss Margland, who was taken in by the false gallantry of Bellamy. Perhaps she, too, was tired of being treated with contempt. She succumbed to flattery; she naively believed herself to be the object of male desire. Burney makes it clear she was a fool, of

course--but a fool to be pitied rather than laughed at. Our contempt is more wisely directed toward a system that places economic control exclusively in male hands.¹⁷

While Burney draws distinct parallels between Indiana and her governess and Camilla and her milliner, Mrs. Ecton is not clearly paired with any of the young heroines. Yet a parallel can be traced between Ecton's fate and that of Eugenia. Eugenia, the only sister with significant financial resources, finds herself also the prey of fortune-hunters. She is pursued and finally kidnapped by Bellamy, who coerces her into marriage and then cruelly mistreats her. Burney implies that even a single woman who has money is in a vulnerable position. The threat she faces is not poverty, but unscrupulous male adventurers. As Lord O'Lerney observes of single women in spa towns: "If she is without fortune, she is thought a female adventurer, seeking to sell herself for its attainment; if she is rich, she is supposed a willing dupe, ready for a snare, and only looking about for an ensnarer" (471). Both the economic and legal disabilities of women make them easy targets for male exploitation.

The three spinster subplots examined above provide the novel's key to the possible fates of its young heroines. They allow us to envision more fully the fates only vaguely indicated by the narrative and hazily understood by the girls themselves. They fill in the blanks left by the brief--though persistent--references to the girls' possible spinster futures. In so doing, they deepen the emphasis I pointed to

earlier--the emphasis provided by Burney's autobiographical writings as well as the use of "excessive cadence"--on Camilla's potential spinsterhood, and the potential of Burney's novel to furnish a spinster plot. A heroine beset by spinsters must be heeded when she sounds out this identity for herself. Its implications for the Burney's novel must be heeded as well.

Throughout Camilla's endlessly thwarted courtship with Edgar, she is frequently convinced that Edgar disapproves of her and that she has lost him forever. Whenever she loses hope, she determines to live and die a spinster (despite a series of unsolicited marriage proposals from other men). Her first such vow occurs fairly early in the novel: "Too reasonable, in such a frame of mind, to plan forgetting Mandlebert, she now only determined to think of him as she had thought before her affections became entangled; to think of him, in short, as he seemed himself to desire; to seek his friendly offices and advice, but to reject every offered establishment, and to live single for life" (312). Such vows are soon repeated: "Her night passed in the consolation of self-applause. My dear father, thought she, will see I strive to merit his lenity, and that soothing consideration with the honourable friendship of Edgar, will be sufficient for the happiness of my future life, in the single and tranquil state in which it will be spent" (346).

At first Camilla's determination to reject all offers of marriage is purely theoretical, but it is put to the test

when Sir Sedley proposes to her. Though he is a fop, he is also rich, handsome, witty, and basically a decent guy. Mrs. Arlbery pleads his case, asking Camilla if she will sacrifice "both him and yourself, to the fanciful delicacy of a first love?" Camilla replies that "I have no thought at all but of the single life" (510). She justifies her rejection of Sedley by imagining it would be the wish of her father, who "would himself plead against the alliance when he knew the state of her mind, and recommend to her, so circumstanced, the single life, in the true spirit of Christian philosophy and moderation" (543).

Camilla's vows of spinsterhood persist until the end of the novel, when all is cleared up between her and Edgar. Her picture of such a life is both vague and depressing. All she can say about it is that "she meant in future to reside in complete obscurity" (724). It seems that she can only conceive of such a life in negative terms. This remains the case even when her sister Eugenia resolves to share Camilla's spinsterhood. Eugenia also despairs of marrying the man who is "infinitely dear" to her. Her case is made even bleaker by the fact that she is disfigured and knows Latin (that is, she is too highly educated to be attractive to most men). She makes a vow of both spinsterhood and sisterhood, swearing to Camilla: "to friendship, and each other, we will devote our future days" (795). While this is somewhat consoling, Eugenia's picture of the single state is as dreary as her sister's. She explains that her romantic disappoint-

ment "had exalted her to a summit of happiness, from which she could never now descend to any new plan of life, beyond the single state and retirement" (797). Spinsterhood appears here like a last resort.

Even when Eugenia takes up writing, it provides only cold comfort: "For henceforth . . . I mean to regard myself as if already I had passed the busy period of youth and life, and were only the spectatress of others. For this purpose, I have begun writing my memoirs, which will amuse my solitude, and confirm my--I hope, philosophical idea" (905). If Eugenia, in her authorial role, represents the woman writer tackling a spinster plot, she fails dismally in the task. The only part of the memoir she completes merely harps on her inability to win male love due to her appearance. Having no other tale to tell, her memoir breaks off unfinished. She demonstrates the position of the woman author who lacks a model for framing a spinster life in prose.

Having examined the only models of spinsterhood that the Tyrold sisters have available to them, one can understand why they view the state in purely negative terms. The spinsters they have encountered are scrounging, desperate toadies at best, victims of ridicule and humiliation at worst. Their only view of spinsters in action--of a plot for the lives of single women--involves a pathetic quest for a livelihood and for attention. Never having witnessed alternative activity for single women to pursue, they see the best possible prospect as one of *inactivity*--of stasis. Camilla's best-

case scenario is a life of only negative benefits. She imagines nothing but passivity: "tranquility," "Christian philosophy and moderation," "complete obscurity." Eugenia similarly imagines nothing beyond "retirement," spectatorship, and philosophical solitude. Even the unusual education she has received presents no alternative plans to her, because she has seen no models of what a woman might do with an education. For her it provides nothing but a way to while away blank, inactive days.

I should add here that the third sister, Lavinia, also seems likely to become a spinster. Lavinia, the oldest, stays at home while her younger sisters are out falling in love or falling prey to suitors and seducers. Having no love interest, she has no plot. Her family seems to regard her as a spinster already. When Tyrold, the girls' father, is contemplating Camilla's marriage to Edgar, one of his considerations is that "it will afford our Lavinia, should we leave her single, a certain asylum" (753). Lavinia is basically left out of the narrative until she has a love plot of her own. She only really enters it when Hal Westwyn transfers his affections from Camilla to her (near the end of the novel). Until that point she functions merely as a confidante to her younger sisters. Neither does she have a money plot, as she remains secluded from the world and its material temptations in her parents' home. Her life is one of abstinence and self-sacrifice: a model of the blank fate

that Camilla and Eugenia project for themselves in their despair of husbands.

In a novel that concludes with a glut of marriages, it is notable that the institution is depicted as a mere last resort, an "asylum" from the world's dangers. Camilla's marriage to Edgar is seen as a refuge not just for the bride but for her single sisters. The heroine "in every evil reverted to the loss of Edgar, whose guardian care, had she preserved her, would have preserved, she thought, her loved Eugenia" (800). Tyrold tells Camilla that her mother, the only woman in the novel supposed to be happily married, "was sure Edgar Mandlebert could alone preserve you from danger, yet make you happy--" (899). Even Camilla herself, looking back at her time away from Edgar, declares "had I trusted you as I ought, from the moment of your generous declaration--had my confidence been as firm in your kindness as in your honour, what misery had I been saved!--from this connexion--from my debts--from every wide-spreading mischief!" (847-8). As asylum, guardianship, preserver, salvation, marriage is presented by Burney as a mere refuge from the dangers a woman faces on her own. Highlighting such dangers, Burney presents marriage as less desirable than necessary. Finding a husband is indeed urgent business.

The pitfalls of single life and the relief of marriage throw light on a curious expression associated with matrimony in this and other eighteenth-century novels: "getting off."¹⁸ Margland's schemes for Indiana are motivated by "the received

maxim amongst match-makers, that a young lady without a fortune has a less and less chance of getting off upon every public appearance, which they call a public failure" (755-6). Late in the novel, when Camilla's hopes of marrying Edgar seem dim, Lionel tells her: "You'll die an old maid, Camilla, take my word for it. And I'm really sorry, for you're not an ugly girl. You might have been got off" (735). This speech is echoed in the novel's last pages, when Sir Hugh tries to make a match between Miss Margland and Dr. Orkborne. Despite "the mortal dislike they have of one another," he considers this match a good idea, for "then we shall be got off all round: which would be a great thing off my mind" (908). From all of the above quotations, it is clear that an unmarried woman, be she young and charming or old and ridiculous, is considered a mere problem to be gotten rid of.

Burney is not asking the reader to subscribe to such views. After all, she puts these remarks in the mouths of narrow-minded Mittin, thoughtless Lionel, and muddle-headed Sir Hugh. Yet they do have a point. Their views reflect the attitude of a society whose treatment of women who grow old alone makes theirs a "sorry" fate indeed. It is not just the families of single women who want to get them off their hands. Burney has shown why women themselves seek shelter in matrimony. Her letters and diaries have also suggested the lengths to which spinsters must go to defend their position--even spinsters in the enviable position of authors. In so doing, they intimate why a female author might want to

shelter her heroine within the marriage plot. In the scene described earlier, where Mittin and Camilla are being hounded by a pack of aggressive men, Mittin declares: "I'll assure you, I think the best thing we can do, is to get off as fast as we can, for fear of the worst" (609). Perhaps that is the best way to sum up the "moral" of Burney's voluminous work.

Notes

¹Burney seems to prefigure George Gissing's Rhoda Nunn, who will declare "So many odd women--no making a pair with them. The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives. I, naturally--being one of them myself--take another view" (41).

²She was drastically underpaid for Evelina, receiving an initial sum of only 20 pounds. For Cecilia she was paid 250 pounds. At the time of her marriage she still had 20 pounds a year from her second novel, but the amount was not at her disposal: It was being distributed among various "pensioners" of the Burney family.

³See, for example, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Imagining a Self, Kristina Straub, and Jane Spencer.

⁴The two parted ways for good upon Thrall's marriage to Piozzi in 1784.

⁵For a fuller discussion of Burney's relationship with her father, see Margaret Anne Doody's Frances Burney: A Life in the Works.

⁶This kind of policing of female friendships is addressed in Camilla, when Edmund discourages Camilla from associating too closely with Mrs. Arlbery and Mrs. Berlinton.

⁷It is important to note, however, that Burney's marriage to d'Arblay was not a conventional marriage. The fact that he was a penniless French expatriate gave her the economic upper hand--thereby shifting the balance of power--in their relationship. Moreover, d'Arblay was unable to obtain an appointment, making Burney the sole breadwinner of the family. Not only did he tend to their home and garden while she wrote Camilla, he served as her amanuensis. The extant manuscripts of Camilla are in d'Arblay's hand with revisions in Burney's hand, and he also made the fair copy for the press (Journals Vol. III, 163). With a husband who was her dependent as well as her secretary, Burney did not have to relinquish her autonomy upon marriage.

⁸Janet Todd offers perhaps the most cynical reading of Burney's conventional endings in The Sign of Angelica. In her chapter on Burney she comments:

Although the plot of the female novel with its obligatory ending in happy marriages rescues the various young women from the horrors they have entered, the narrator seems uninvolved in the

rescue, allowing romance only as a sop to the weary reader and more implicated in repetition than in resolution. This repetition . . . works against the closure of romance. The heroines after Evelina have simply suffered too much, have been too embarrassed, too often interrupted, too watched and misinterpreted, and they enter marriage like invalids entering an asylum. (287)

⁹Indeed, though this 5-volume novel was much criticized for its length, Burney insisted that every line of it was essential. She explained to her father that

it *is* of the same species as Evelina & Cecilia: new *modified*, in being more multifarious in the Characters it brings into action,--but all wove into one, with a one Heroine shining conspicuous through the Group, & that in what Mr. Twining so flatteringly calls the *prose Epic Style*, for so far is the work from consisting of detached stories, that there is not, literally, one Episode in the whole plan. (Journals Vol. III, 128-9)

She further insisted that the novel "will be better for not being lopped, as it's materials are fertile, & I must otherwise cut off short some purposes now very principle in my perspective" (137). This confirms Burney's claim that the novel consists of more than an excessively protracted courtship. All that befalls Camilla before her happy ending--including her flirtation with spinsterhood--must therefore be taken as an integral part of Burney's project.

¹⁰Burney was not alone among her contemporaries in her criticism of female education. Best known is Mary Wollstonecraft's attack in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). Wollstonecraft blames women's inferiority on

a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. (79)

Wollstonecraft argues that until women are allowed to develop their rational capacities, they will remain childish, frivolous, and dissolute. She deplores the dependent and ignorant condition of women, and their resulting tendency to gain power through cunning and domestic tyranny. As a corrective, she calls for a national system of education to cultivate the minds and bodies of both sexes. Wollstonecraft does not make single women her chief cause, as the heart of her argument is that the improved education of women will make them better wives and mothers. Yet she acknowledges

that while most women ought to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers, "I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence" (265); "How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry" (267).

Maria Edgeworth similarly promotes female education in her 1795 Letters for Literary Ladies. Like Wollstonecraft, she argues that cultivating a woman's rational abilities will render her a more fit wife and mother. Yet, a spinster herself, Edgeworth does take unmarried women into special consideration. The male narrator of her "Answer" to a "Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend upon the Birth of a Daughter" explains:

Unmarried women, who have stored their minds with knowledge, who have various tastes and literary occupations, who can amuse and be amused in the conversation of well-informed people, are in no danger of becoming burthensome to their friends or to society . . . by a variety of associations they are connected with the world, and their sympathy is expanded and supported by the cultivation of their understanding; nor can they sink, settle, and concentrate upon cats, parrots, and monkeys. (17)

He concludes that, for the parents of a daughter, "it will therefore be prudent to make her felicity in some degree independent of matrimony" by providing her with a literary education (17).

Women writers of the 1790s were by no means the first to deplore the state of female education. Midcentury authors such as Frances Brooke, Elizabeth Haywood, Sarah Fielding and Sarah Scott anticipated the arguments of Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth. In The Adventures of David Simple, for instance, Sarah Fielding creates the figure of Cynthia as an example of all that is wrong in female education. Cynthia laments:

I loved reading, and had a great desire of attaining knowledge; but whenever I asked questions of any kind whatsoever, I was always told, *such things were not proper for girls of my age to know* : If I was pleased with any book above the most silly story or romance, it was taken from me. For *miss must not enquire too far into things, it would turn her brain, she had better mind her needle-work, and such things as were useful to women; reading and poring on books, would never get me a husband* (188-9).

When she refuses to marry the suitor hand-picked by her father, she must resort to the only employment available to

women of her class: that of a humble companion, or "toad-eater" (212).

Sarah Scott more explicitly addresses the connection between female education and employment in her 1762 work, A Description of Millenium Hall. The residents of this female utopia run a school of girls, where their pupils receive proper training according to their station and future prospects. The women of Millenium Hall have also founded a home for distressed gentlewomen who would otherwise have to serve as governesses or humble companions. As one of the Hall founders comments:

Sometimes they are unqualified to gain a maintenance, educated as is called, genteelly, or in other words idly, they are ignorant of every thing that might give them superior abilities to the lower rank of people, and their birth renders them less acceptable servants to many. . . . Possibly pride may still oftener reduce these indigent gentlewomen into this wretched state of dependence, and therefore the world is less inclined to pity them. (64)

This is a fairly exact portrait of Burney's Miss Margland.

¹¹Burney's most graphic depiction of the mistreatment of elderly women occurs in Letter VII of Volume III. Here, two men of fashion stage a race between two old women, their friends laying bets on the winner. Evelina remarks that the women "looked so weak, so infirm, so feeble, that I could feel no sensation but that of pity at the sight. However, this was not the general sense of the company, for they no sooner came forward, than they were greeted by a laugh from every beholder. . . ." (311). The women are goaded to run, despite their frequent falling, until one is too injured to move (312).

¹²There is a distinct connection between the allocation of money and power in the society, and the construction of spinster and bachelor figures in Burney's fiction. The novel's most prominent bachelor is Sir Hugh, from whose point of view the novel begins. He has various traits in common with the spinsters: they are matchmaking, blabbering busybodies with weak intellects and no useful occupation. Uncle Relvil, who never enters the narrative proper, also plays a large role in directing the novel's plot (albeit from behind the scenes). He is another weak, gullible, foolish man, though apparently well-intentioned. Yet these big babies are seen as good guys, while their female equivalents (Margland and Mittin) are seen as bad guys. The paradox is that while they are more beloved than the novel's spinsters, they are far more dangerous. This is because they possess far more power. Sir Hugh and Relvil possess all the money in their families, and therefore exert a huge influence over the

destinies of their nieces and nephews. They have the power, through their wealth, both to help and to harm those dependent on them. What Burney makes clear is that they do far more harm than good.

Sir Hugh, the beloved uncle at the center of the novel, is depicted simultaneously as a benign fool and serious menace. He maims Eugenia, disinherits Camilla, subjects Eugenia to fortune-hunters by making her his heiress, and plots disastrous matches. While his various matrimonial schemes threaten to render his nieces miserable, they willingly, lovingly acquiesce to whatever he proposes. He is censured by neither the narrative voice nor by his nieces, the chief victims of his bad judgement. The only character who dares to criticize him is their mother, Mrs. Tyrold. Claudia Johnson points out this peculiar lack of explicit blame, noting that the novel goes "to elaborate lengths to make sure that no damaging criticism falls on the hoary heads of men who are dear" (Equivocal Beings 142). Yet at the same time "Burney dramatizes the ruinous ineptitude of a figure beloved as a national institution. She thus assails sentimental authority for maintaining the offices and prerogatives of power without possessing the competencies of it . . ." (151).

Burney's critique of bachelors is far more oblique than that of her spinsters, perhaps because they stand for something far more sinister and daunting. While Margland and Mittin cause various minor mishaps, these bachelors direct--or misdirect--the fates of entire families. Lionel makes fun of both camps, declaring that "your bachelor uncles, and maiden aunts, are the most tantalizing fellows and fellowesses in the creation" (737). What he seems to mean is that they invite mockery and exploitation. Yet these bachelor uncles, holding their nephews' futures in their pockets, must ultimately be courted and conciliated. Mrs. Tyrold, for instance, must abandon her daughters when they most need her to tend to her ailing brother Relvil. No spinster (aunt or otherwise) warrants such deference.

The only bachelor who seems to be in the same boat with Margland and Mittin is Dr. Orkborne, as he is also financially dependent. Yet even he, through his negligence, has the negative power to put his charges in danger. In addition, though his scholarship is lampooned, he does have a skill upon which to trade: his knowledge of the classics.

¹³This is comically illustrated in Burney's final novel, The Wanderer, in which Miss Brindle puts off choosing a suitor too long and must only appear by candlelight, to hide her age.

¹⁴Burney reiterates this contrast in a later scene at a ball the women attend. Indiana pretends to be faint, and Melmond rushes to her assistance, "while Margland related that she could hardly keep from fainting herself, so much had

she been shocked and disordered by the horrid smell of Dr. Orkborne" (718). However, no one rushes to her side.

¹⁵As historian Amy M. Froide comments, "Mrs. Mittin knew what modern historians of women have often ignored: although a singlewoman and a widow were both unmarried women, people in early modern England did not at all think of these two groups of women in the same way" (236). Froide's essay "Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England" details the social disadvantages endured by spinsters as compared to their widowed peers.

¹⁶As both Susan Staves and Jean Kern point out, stereotypes of sexually rapacious spinsters commonly appeared in eighteenth-century novels by men. Staves notes that even female authors participated in "the joke that an unattractive old woman is more likely to want to be the object of a ravisher's desire than any man would want to ravish her, exactly the same sexist joke Fielding enjoys" (176).

¹⁷For a discussion of women's legal status and property rights in eighteenth-century England, see Janelle Greenberg, Susan Moller Okin, and Eileen Spring.

¹⁸See, for instance, Maria Edgeworth's Belinda. Mrs. Stanhope, Belinda's aunt, is touted as a tireless matchmaker: "There's no less than six of her nieces, whom she has got off within these four winters. Not one of 'em now, that has not made a catch-match" (24).

CHAPTER THREE: "JUST NOTHING AT ALL": JANE AUSTEN AND THE LANGUAGE OF SPINSTERS

She took up a book; it happened to be a volume of *Camilla*. She had not *Camilla's* youth, and had no intention of having her distress. . . . (Sanditon 178)

It is no exaggeration to say that Jane Austen adored Camilla. Her letters from 1796 make frequent references to the novel, which she read immediately upon publication. The young Austen even made a taste for Burney's work a touchstone for social approval, pronouncing on a female acquaintance: "There are two Traits in her Character which are pleasing; namely, she admires *Camilla*, & drinks no cream in her Tea" (9). In Northanger Abbey, Camilla is named in Austen's famous defense of novels as one of the works "in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (58). This did not mean, however, that Austen chose to ape her literary idol. As the quotation from Sanditon indicates, Austen followed a divergent narrative program. Sanditon was begun just before Austen's death in 1817, a year after the publication of Emma. It is the twenty-two-year-old heroine, Charlotte Heywood, who declines *Camilla's* distress. Yet her stated intentions reflect most precisely those of her predecessor, *Emma* Woodhouse--and, by implication, those of Austen for this earlier heroine. *Emma* doesn't want to go through the trials and tribulations of an uncertain

courtship. She wants to avoid the snares of the courtship plot altogether. Unlike Camilla, who views single life as a dreary concession, Emma wants to be a spinster.

This chapter focuses on Jane Austen's attempt to write a spinster plot in Emma. While Emma is, like Austen's other works, a courtship novel and presents no fully-realized alternative to the marriage plot, Austen intimates other possibilities for her heroine. Much more audibly than Burney's novel, Emma registers the "will to difference" that Hirsch identifies in female plots. Emma overtly demands a different kind of destiny. Her desire points to what Susan Fraiman has identified as a "counternarrative" in the novels of Austen and other women writers. Fraiman posits "the way to womanhood not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of crossroads" which "involves a struggle among diverse narratives: official and also oppositional stories of arriving at adult 'femininity'" (x).¹ Austen suggests such a counternarrative most explicitly in Emma--the spinster narrative that Emma attempts to author, that she ultimately abandons, but that marks a protest against her final submission to the exigencies of the marriage plot.

This chapter both uncovers the spinster narrative and accounts for Austen's reluctance to sustain it. Initially, Emma's ability to evade the marriage plot derives from her authorial imagination and verbal skill--precisely what enabled Austen to find a comfortable niche for herself

outside of marriage. Emma's superior use of language, which suggests control and agency, separates her from such stereotypical spinsters as the babbling Miss Bates. Moreover, Emma may be viewed as an authorial figure--a stand-in for the novelist herself--who is trying to tell a story that isn't a love story. What she succeeds in doing is only deferring her own love story by inventing ones for other people. Spinning conventional tales becomes a way of (Penelope-like) putting off matrimony. Yet while Austen carved out a life for herself by these means, Emma must abandon her role as authorial spinster and marry. This is because there is no place for herself in the stories she tells. Emma fails actually to create a different story. She acknowledges that in the eyes of the world she occupies the same blank space as Miss Bates. Emma may spin compelling plots while Miss Bates merely spins out an "incessant flow" (319) of language, but both women appear to be spinning their wheels. In the estimation of their social world, all they do and say amounts to nothing.

Like Camilla, Emma lacks a viable model of spinsterhood. Though Emma may be an "imaginist" (331), it proves too great a task to imagine the kind of life she has never seen. Austen implicates, as Burney does, the quandary of the woman writer who proceeds without a precedent. This predicament comes into sharper focus when Emma is read in conjunction with two of Austen's unfinished novels. The Watsons and Sanditon deal explicitly with spinsters and spinsterhood. In fact, critics

have read both works as refusing the marriage plot, proposing alternative endings for these works had they been completed. Each work places its heroine among older spinsters through whom she must read her future as potential spinster. The Watsons continues along the lines of Burney's novels, focusing on the economic problems of single women. Austen's abandonment of the work predicts her minimizing of such themes in Emma and the problems she will face trying to imagine alternative female plots. The novel also points toward the connection between female speech and agency, which will become significant in Austen's later work. Her last novel, Sanditon, moves farthest from economic concerns in its depiction of spinsters. This allows her to focus exclusively on what a spinster can do and say. The Parker sisters, like Miss Bates, suggest the premium Austen placed on verbal control and the relation of speech to activity; the style of a woman's language to the substance of her life. They also reinforce Austen's claims for the power of language--including, in the case of spinsters, its power to do harm.

Unlike her young heroines or the older spinsters they observe, Austen *did* clear a new path for herself as an author. Yet she also remained aware that there were no official narratives for women like her. Using conventional plots to deflect attention from her unconventional life, she could not carve a public space for such lives and stories in her fiction. Like Emma, she understood that in the eyes--or ears--of the world, no verbal superiority could spare her

from the indignities of spinsterhood. Austen inhabited a society in which spinsters went unheard--no matter how well or poorly they expressed themselves. Indeed, the verbal excesses of which spinsters stand accused in the fiction of the period suggests a desperate attempt to be heeded. Austen herself wished to be heeded. That is why she could never fully sever her identification with other, "lesser," spinsters, either in her life or in her novels.

Austen's conflict is more easily perceived through a reading of her letters as well as the early biographies. Both kinds of nonfiction writing reveal the attitudes toward spinsters against which she contended and which she held herself. The accounts of Austen's life by her brother and nephew reveal how spinsters were constructed--as inactive, static, a blank from which a biographer could hardly wrest a narrative. Such views not only informed Austen's own biases but made her insist upon distancing herself from other spinsters. Austen asserted her distance--her superiority--through her superior verbal skills. The ultimate sign of her distance was her status as an author. Yet she retained both her sympathy for less fortunate spinsters and a bitter awareness that within her social world she occupied the same position as they did. This dual vision, evidenced throughout Austen's extant letters, is consistent with the oscillations in her work between sympathy toward spinsters and condemnation of them on linguistic grounds. Once again, the novels are not simple reflections of Austen's biography.²

Yet her life writing and her fictional writing together tell a crucial story for female readers. They dramatize the difficulty of pursuing unorthodox narrative intentions without "distress."

Austen's concern for the condition of spinsters, addressed with the greatest complexity in Emma, is presented most graphically in The Watsons. Here, like Burney, Austen contemplates the social reality of unmarried women-- particularly, their economic situation. This early, unfinished novel ponders the destinies of four single, soon-to-be orphaned sisters. Their dying father is a clergyman who will leave his daughters both penniless and homeless. The Watson sisters must therefore try to establish themselves as fast as they possibly can. Their search for new homes takes the predictable form of husband-hunting. As Claire Tomalin has noted, the novel was eerily autobiographical. Austen began the novel in 1804; by 1805 her own father was dead, leaving herself and Cassandra, as well as their mother, at the mercy of male relatives. The Church did not provide for clergymen's widows and orphans. Mr. Austen's wife and daughters had no claim to his home or annuity, which had already passed on to James Austen, the next incumbent (Tomalin 186). While thirty-year-old Jane and thirty-three-year-old Cassandra did not, like the Watsons, resort to husband-hunting, their situation closely paralleled that of

these fictional sisters. Tomalin speculates that Austen gave up on the manuscript for this very reason:

the theme of the story touched too closely on Jane's fears for herself, Cassandra and their companion Martha Lloyd, whose hopes of marriage had fallen through, and who faced the same bleak uncertainty over her future. For someone who took care not to write autobiographically, this degree of parallel between her fiction and her own life may have become impossibly tricky to handle. (182-3)

Although this biographical argument is persuasive, a close reading of the text suggests that there were further reasons for Austen's abandonment of this work. Austen seemed to be losing interest in the money plot per se--in the issue of mere subsistence. While husband-hunting and the need for money are constant themes in her work, she was also toying with alternative plots. Austen herself found her path as a published author. That is, the manipulation of language allowed her control over her own life. While she never granted her heroines such a vocation, she began to suggest that the mere search for subsistence was not all a woman's life was about. It is through attention to language that Austen's heroines, too, begin to recognize--and thus resist--the insufficiency of their lot.

The Watsons, in its treatment of spinsters, resembles Burney's work more than any other Austen novel. Like Burney's spinsters, the Watsons are poor, vulnerable, and desperate to find themselves proper situations. While Burney's spinsters hope to benefit by playing matchmaker, the lesser Watsons attempt to marry *themselves* off. Penelope and Margaret function--like Burney's spinsters--as comic villains

and occupy--like Burney's spinsters--a secondary position next to the more respectable Elizabeth and Emma. These ridiculous spinsters, as shameless husband-hunters, pursue Burney's expedient of "getting off." Elizabeth occupies a kind of middle-ground. Emma Watson, anticipating Emma Woodhouse, begins to hanker after something else.

The most ruthless husband-hunter of the sisters, Penelope, does not actually appear in the finished portion of the manuscript. She is merely described to Emma, the novel's heroine, by her other sisters. The eldest sister, Elizabeth, claims she lost a suitor to the scheming Penelope: "She thinks everything fair for a husband; I trusted her, she set him against me, with a view of gaining him herself, and it ended in his discontinuing his visits and soon after marrying somebody else" (108). When Emma expresses her incredulity at such sisterly betrayal, Elizabeth explains:

You do not know Penelope.--There is nothing she would not do to get married--she would as good as tell you so herself.--Do not trust her with any secrets of your own, take warning by me, do not trust her; she has her good qualities, but she has no faith, no honour, no scruples, if she can promote her own advantage.--I wish with all my heart she was well married. I declare I had rather have her well married than myself. (109)

In her desperate bid to "get off," Penelope has gone to Chichester to snag a rich doctor; though Elizabeth remarks that "she has taken a vast deal of trouble about him and given up a great deal of time to no purpose as yet" (109). Margaret, the other husband-hunting sister, has also left town on a mission. Hoping to marry Tom Musgrave, she has

gone to spend a month with her brother's family "on purpose to egg him on, by her absence" (111). When we do meet Margaret, she reveals a competitive streak as she gloats over her sister's expected failure: "Have you heard from Penelope since she went to Chichester?--I had a letter the other day. --I don't fancy she is likely to make anything of it. I fancy she'll come back 'Miss Penelope' as she went" (141). Like her classical namesake, this Penelope seems perpetually to repulse potential suitors. The schemes she spins to catch a husband repeatedly unravel.

Clearly Austen is holding these characters up for censure. Yet like Burney's, Austen's mockery points to social and economic realities that make "getting off" so critical for portionless women. As Deborah Kaplan observes, "*The Watsons* sustains an analysis of the detrimental effects that women's social and economic dependence can have on their feminine identities. Two of the Watson daughters, the novel suggests, have been deformed by the imperative to marry" (171). Following Burney's satire, then, Austen's is aimed not exclusively at the spinsters themselves, but at the economic necessity of marriage that has had such a deforming effect.

Within the text itself, the remaining two sisters offer commentary on the necessity of "getting off." Elizabeth elicits sympathy for her sisters' marital ambitions. She explains their position to Emma, who was raised by a rich aunt and is consequently a little out of touch:

but you know, we must marry.--I could do very well single for my own part--A little company, and a pleasant ball now and then, would be enough for me, if one could be young forever, but my father cannot provide for us, and it is very bad to grow old and be poor and laughed at. (109)

Yet this little speech does not win sympathy for Penelope's tactics. Emma replies:

I am sorry for her anxieties...but I do not like her plans or her opinions. I shall be afraid of her.--She must have too masculine and bold a temper.--To be so bent on marriage--to pursue a man merely for the sake of a situation--is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of education and feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest.--I would rather be a teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a man I did not like. (110)

Although Emma here makes a strong statement, one cannot assume that this is Austen's final word. Even if, as Kaplan suggests, the narrative voice in the novel closely reflects Emma's point of view (175), Elizabeth's response also strikes a chord. As she informs her sheltered younger sister:

I would rather do anything than be a teacher at a school.... I have been at school, Emma, and know what a life they lead you; you never have.--I should not like marrying a disagreeable man any more than yourself,--but I do not think there are very many disagreeable men;--I think I could like any good humoured man with a comfortable income.--I suppose my aunt brought you up to be rather refined. (110)

While Elizabeth may indeed be faulted for her lack of fastidiousness, she does seem to have a greater knowledge of the world and what it offers single women than inexperienced Emma.

Jean Kern, in her discussion of The Watsons, claims that Austen "perceives the worst of spinsterhood as a lonely old age of poverty, neglect, and ridicule. But she also

criticizes the Watson sister who pursues a man just to be married and have a situation in life" (211-2). Kern concludes that "'To grow old, and be poor, and laughed at' sums up the loneliness and ridicule which the single, dependent woman must suffer, yet it is not a worse fate than a loveless marriage to achieve status in a male-dominated society" (212). Kern's purpose is to show that Austen displays sympathy toward old maids in her fiction. She suggests that (unlike Burney) Austen does not recommend "getting off." While a bad marriage and a bad spinsterhood are both uncomfortable, and a woman in either position is to be pitied, the spinster still merits more respect. Yet this conclusion does not entirely fit the case of the Watson sisters. Penelope and Margaret do provide an ugly example of husband-hunting, but Elizabeth's argument elicits sympathy for their mission. In order to judge Austen's perspective on spinsterhood, one has to ponder what the finished novel would have looked like. What kind of book was Austen planning to write? A point of departure is to consider that Austen left her manuscript unfinished for narrative rather than biographical reasons. There is a connection between Austen's ideas about narrative and about language--narrative's vehicle--and her ideas about spinsters. In other words, it is the linguistic and narrative problems posed by spinsterhood that turned her off the manuscript.

In her reading of the unfinished novel, Deborah Kaplan makes a provocative claim that Austen was edging away from

the courtship plot and experimenting with a plot based on the bonds among women. She draws parallels between The Watsons and Lady Susan, classifying the two works as belonging to Austen's "middle" period. Kaplan considers this period a time when Austen was beginning to depend more on her female friendships for intellectual and emotional support, and was thus more likely to "draw on the culture of her close female friends in constructing not only female characterizations and relationships but also plot, a crucial locus of a work's cultural perspective" (157). Kaplan claims that the works of this period offer such strong critiques of male power that "they challenge the comic courtship plot, which inscribes patriarchal social arrangements in romantic and heterosexual unions"; and while they "do not dismantle this plot . . . they shift the focus away from its structure" (157).

In looking specifically at The Watsons, Kaplan finds that although the work contains elements of a courtship plot, heterosexual bonds prove difficult to forge and female friendship appears to offer an alternative (170). Kaplan focuses on the growing friendship between Elizabeth and Emma Watson, claiming that the male love interests remain in the background of the narrative: "Much more in evidence is the close, considerate friendship of the two sisters, which functions as a viable alternative to the heterosexual love and esteem offered by courtship novels with comic endings" (174). Kaplan points out how the two sisters manage to

create a calm, comfortable domestic life despite their limited means. In fact, the male characters appear as unattractive and intrusive, disrupting the domestic harmony of the sisters' modest home. Kaplan asserts:

Expressions of the wide gap between men's and women's perceptions, of men's power and their disrespect, and of women's resentment--whether voiced by one female character to another or, on a larger scale, depicted by the narrator--do not point toward the heterosexual resolutions of comic courtship novels. Instead, they prompt us to consider whether a conventional, comic courtship plot could manage to override or outweigh the effect achieved by these expressions. (177)

Kaplan then detects a connection between the novel's perspective and its unfinished status. She considers that since none of Austen's published novels include such a perspective, it is likely that Austen felt she could not include it in this novel either, were it to be completed for publication. Austen may have sensed that her portrayal of female friendship "would ultimately be incompatible with the courtship plot and, if allowed to reshape that plot, would be not altogether appropriate for either her own community or a general audience" (180). Kaplan concludes:

She may possibly have opted not to finish *The Watsons* because she was reluctant to efface those features drawn from a women's culture. The work gestures toward a conventional courtship plot, but it stops before the female characters are drawn inexorably into the heterosexual unions of the courtship comedy. With the form of a fragment she could retain those representations. Its fragmentary nature declares the work's forever-in-progress status, which helps to mute the sentiments it preserves. (180)

I am highly indebted to Kaplan's study for highlighting the ways in which Austen gestured toward an alternative

female plot in place of the conventional courtship plot. I also find helpful her suggestion that Austen abandoned the manuscript because it was unlikely to be accepted by her readership. Yet I believe that Austen had additional reasons, grounded in her feelings about narrative and about spinsterhood, for giving up on the novel. If indeed Austen felt that she couldn't finish and publish the work without drawing the sisters into the matrimonial vortex, the alternative plot of female friendship posed as many problems for Austen as it did for her projected readership. For female friendship and domestic comfort do not in fact provide plot. They pose a static situation which, to Austen, would prove resistant to narrative. It was the alternative to *this* alternative that she did not know how to write. This plot is never named, but it bears traces of Miller's "impulse to power"; that wish for a story subject to the heroine's control. It might be called the plot of ambition, even if the precise ambition is never named. Its mark is linguistic control.

One indication that the plot of female friendship detected by Kaplan is not favored by Austen herself is that Elizabeth does not appear the ideal companion to her younger sister. As has been suggested already, her lack of fastidiousness--her inability to spot "disagreeable men" and her readiness to "like any good humoured man with a comfortable income"--disqualifies her from being an Austen heroine. She is like Charlotte Lucas to Elizabeth Bennet or Harriet Smith

to Emma Woodhouse, those female friends whose low standards ultimately render them unsuitable as intimate companions. We learn instantly of Elizabeth's pride over her one-time conquest of Tom Musgrave and her abiding disappointment over the fickle Purvis. And while she is generous to her young sister, she doesn't quite understand her sister's less mercenary views. Allowing Emma to go to a ball while she tends her sick father, Elizabeth claims that "though I am nine years older than you are, I would not be the means of keeping you from being seen.--You are very pretty, and it would be very hard that you should not have as fair a chance as we have all had, to make your fortune" (112). Elizabeth also seems unduly impressed by balls, finery and social distinction. At the same time, she is insensitive to the subtle rules of social propriety. For instance, she is surprised by Emma's refusal to let Tom Musgrave drive her home, not quite understanding the discomfort of such an obligation and show of intimacy for a single woman. Elizabeth is also thrilled by the visits of the supercilious Lord Osborne, which disturb the more discerning Emma. While Emma is sensitive to the haughty attitude of her guest, "Of the pain of such feelings, Elizabeth knew very little;--her simpler mind or juster reason saved her from such mortification" (135). Austen provides no evidence of such reason on Elizabeth's part, leaving us to conclude that Elizabeth is indeed simple-minded compared to her sister.

What kind of companion, however well-meaning, could such a sister provide to make a shared spinsterhood desirable?

The female world of which Kaplan has such high hopes promises to be dull and depressing in The Watsons. Its lesser appeal is indicated through the shortcomings of female speech--signalling the profound interest in the calibration of language that Austen will demonstrate most fully in Emma. In the world of the Watson sisters, women without the company of men have nothing of interest to do or to say. Austen dramatizes the contrast between female and male speech when Emma visits the Edwards family, who are to take her to a ball. She meets Mrs and Miss Edwards, whereupon "some very, very languid remarks on the probable brilliancy of the ball, were all that broke at intervals the silence of half an hour before they were joined by the master of the house" (114). This male presence provides far more interest: "Mr Edwards had a much easier, and more communicative air than the ladies of the family; he was fresh from the street, and he came ready to tell whatever might interest" (114-5). Circulating in the public world of men, he has more stimulating things to do and to say than his womenfolk. This phenomenon is repeated when Tom Musgrave visits the Watson sisters and Margaret tries to get his attention:

She had thus secured him from her sisters--but it was not immediately in her power to preserve him from her brother's claims, for as he came avowedly from London, and had left it only four hours ago, the last current report as to public news, and the general opinion of the day must be understood, before Robert could let his attention be yielded to the less national, and important demands of the

women. (46)

While there is no doubt a touch of irony in these remarks, Austen does not provide any counterexample of the interest of female occupations and speech. If indeed Emma's prospect is one of mere domestic intimacy with her sister, it is no wonder that such a prospect looks dull and bleak to her.

Emma

was become of importance to no one, a burden on those, whose affection she could not expect, an addition in the house, already overstocked, surrounded by inferior minds with little chance of domestic comfort, and as little hope of future support.--It was well for her that she was naturally cheerful;--for the change was such as might have plunged weak spirits in despondence. (151)

If Austen did wish to offer something other than the courtship plot for her heroine, this certainly was not it. Austen had not imbued her first Emma W. with the requisite qualities to defy this dim prospect. She would have to invent another Emma, giving her the resources and imagination to mount such a challenge.

Early in Emma, the heroine's former governess and future husband speculate about how her life will unfold. Knightley declares "There is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her!" (69). The next moment, however, he betrays the limits of his curiosity. He recalls "She always declares she will never marry, which, of course, means just nothing at all" (69). Knightley doesn't really wonder what will become of Emma, as he can only imagine her becoming one thing: a wife. Her words mean

nothing to him, because they describe a female future he can't comprehend. Knightley also implies that never to marry is equal to nothing--to being and doing nothing. I believe, however, that Austen means us to make *something* of Emma's vow of spinsterhood. In creating a heroine who avowedly shuns matrimony, who deliberately defers it, Austen raises the prospect of a different trajectory. She implies that there might be an *autonomous* female plot, one not contingent on heterosexual desire. This alternative female plot ultimately fails to take form, and Emma winds up just as Knightley predicted. Yet Emma's search for a purpose beyond the erotic, and Austen's suggestion that such stories might be told, gives a larger scope to the question of female destiny. By not finally telling such a story, the novel implicates the conditions of its own production--conditions that condemn the spinster plot to go unheeded.

To understand why Emma, the would-be spinster, is rerouted toward the marriage altar, it is crucial to look at Miss Bates, the actual spinster Austen provides in the novel. Superficially, the two women have nothing in common. Miss Bates is a prattling bore; Emma is imaginative and articulate. Miss Bates is poor; Emma is rich. Emma sees both her economic and verbal superiority as proof against comparison with the older spinster. Yet Austen's very insistence on the women's dissimilarity alerts us to their one potential resemblance. Their differences create a kind of smoke screen. When it clears during the famous Box Hill

scene, we see Emma and Miss Bates as occupying the same ground. Late in the novel, when Emma contrasts the rich widow Mrs Churchill with Jane Fairfax, who seems destined for impoverished spinsterhood, she reflects that "one was everything, the other nothing--and she sat musing on the difference of woman's destiny. . ." (378). When Jane's engagement is made public, however, her "days of insignificance" are declared "over" (393). At this point only Miss Bates, the genuine impoverished spinster, remains the "nothing" of Highbury. We must bear in mind that Knightley consigns an unmarried Emma to the same nothingness. To escape this nothingness, Emma--like Camilla--ultimately has to marry.

The novel opens with this familiar portrait: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence" (37). Several pages later Miss Bates is introduced as "a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married" who "stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much the public favour. . . . She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness" (51-2). This introduction is merely a string of negatives. Miss Bates is described here as *not* being precisely what Emma *is*; *not* having precisely what Emma *has*. By providing such an inversion of Emma's portrait, Austen asks us to read the two characters against one another. Their points of contrast suggest points of resemblance--for they are clearly cast as

doubles. The only resemblance Austen grants at first, however, is one of disposition, Miss Bates's "cheerful" and "contented" nature matching Emma's happy one. After this praise of her good nature, the portrait of Miss Bates concludes: "She was a great talker upon little matters . . . full of trivial communications and harmless gossip" (51-2). Here, again, we are presented with negatives. The content of her speech is "little," "trivial," and "harmless." Her words contain plenty of nothing. Though Austen does not spell it out here, she forces us to wonder what kind of speaker Emma is, and what bearing her verbal ability has on her position as the novel's possible second spinster. She hints that there is an intimate connection between marital status and female speech.

Miss Bates's crucial function as the spectre of Emma's spinsterhood is signalled most explicitly in a dialogue between Emma and Harriet. The two friends are walking down Vicarage-lane on their way to visit the cottages of the poor, when Harriet bursts out: "I do so wonder, Miss Woodhouse, that you should not be married, or going to be married! so charming as you are!--" (108). Thus begins a dialogue on the prospect of Emma's life as a spinster. Harriet's series of questions, and Emma's series of answers, provide a microcosm of the debate about spinsterhood, language, and narrative implicit in the novel as a whole. Harriet's assumptions reveal how spinsters are conventionally perceived, while Emma's rebuttals suggest how she struggles to escape such

perceptions. Harriet casts Emma as a second Miss Bates.

Emma casts about for a different story to tell about herself.

Emma first tells Harriet that she is tempted neither by any particular person nor by the general prospect of matrimony to change her single status. When Harriet exclaims that "it is odd to hear a woman talk so!" (109), Emma explains: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. . . . Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield" (109). Emma does not bother to rebut the charge of oddness. She sees herself as unusual--a woman who need not follow the usual path. Yet Harriet forces the connection Austen requires us to make: "But then, to be an old maid at last, like Miss Bates!" (109). Emma must acknowledge her projected spinsterhood as comparable to Miss Bates's--that is, to the usual kind.

Miss Bates's brand of spinsterhood is one Emma vehemently rejects. As Emma retorts, "That is as formidable an image as you could present, Harriet; and if I thought I should ever be like Miss Bates! so silly--so satisfied--so smiling--so prosing--so undistinguishing and unfastidious--and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body about me, I would marry tomorrow. But between us, I am convinced there can never be any likeness, except in being unmarried" (109). It is significant that the faults Emma attributes to Miss Bates are largely verbal faults. Clearly Emma sees

herself as a better speaker--and a better storyteller--than the older spinster. The novel bears out such claims. The chunks of the novel narrated by Miss Bates are almost unreadable. They convey the least amount of information in the greatest number of words, and the reader loses little by skipping them. As D.A. Miller observes, Miss Bates's words are "mere chatter" that "never comes to the point" (37); "though she threatens an abundant text, it is a boring one" (40).³ What Emma seeks is a different style of spinsterhood. Unlike Miss Bates, she wants to tell a good story.

It is not coincidental that the worst speaker in the novel is a spinster. There is an extensive tradition in eighteenth-century literature of spinsters being heaped with verbal faults. Our spinster acquaintance from Camilla, for instance, provides one example. Remember that Margland is "querulous" (46) and "screaming" and has a "shrill and pathetic voice" (667). The "loquacious" Mittin is suspected of insanity because of "the contented volubility with which she incessantly ran on, without waiting for answerers, or even listeners" (608). Their quoted speech in the novel corroborates the narrator's charges. By contrast, the widow Mrs. Arlbery is witty and epigrammatic.

Perhaps Miss Bates's closest literary kin can be found in Susan Ferrier's Marriage, published in 1818. The heroine's three spinster great-aunts, Grizzy, Jacky, and Nicky Douglas, speak incessantly and tediously, dwelling on domestic trivialities. The narrator comments that "there are

so many Miss Douglas' in the world, that every one of my readers is as well acquainted with them as I am myself" (41).⁴ Included in the novel are several long, badly written letters in the aunts' hands. The narrator ironically comments that "it is generally admitted, that the letters of single ladies are infinitely more lively and entertaining than those of married ones--a fact which can neither be denied nor accounted for" (323).⁵ Like Miss Bates with her speeches and Miss Margland with her screaming, the aunts run on endlessly in a desperate attempt to be noticed. Which points to the obvious: that they are not noticed. In the case of Miss Bates, we are occasionally told that no one is listening to her. Her auditors take for granted that she has nothing to say. Emma herself tells Frank Churchill that there is no point consulting Miss Bates about an upcoming ball: "You will get nothing to the purpose from Miss Bates. . . . She will be all delight and gratitude, but she will tell you nothing" (260). At one point Mrs. Weston speculates that if Knightley were to marry Jane Fairfax, her aunt "might talk on; and if he wanted to say anything himself, he would only talk louder and drown out her voice" (234). Although this does not in fact happen, it provides a sharp comment on the power relations in the novel. A spinster can be drowned out, particularly by male interlocutors. It seems that in anticipation of this, spinsters drown *themselves* out in a deluge of words.

If Emma's superior linguistic and narrative abilities seem effectively to distance her from the prosing Miss Bates, the next distinction she makes between them during the Vicarage-lane dialogue is even more substantial. What separates them most concretely is money. Emma assures Harriet:

Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and 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; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. And the distinction is not quite so much against the candour and common sense of the world as appears at first; for a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. (109-10)

One critical move that Austen makes in this novel is to separate the questions of a single woman's destiny and her livelihood. For single women like Miss Bates, destiny and livelihood are inextricably tied. Poverty leads to a preoccupation with the niggling minutiae of daily life. Yet Emma need not suffer from material constraints and petty cares. Austen decenters economic considerations by giving her heroine a fortune. The question of female destiny can therefore take a new turn. What Emma seeks is something larger: she wants a purpose--a plot--beyond marriage. Free of financial cares, she believes she is free to chart her own future course.

Harriet's next question, however, reminds us that money cannot save Emma from all the burdens of spinsterhood. Harriet asks: "Dear me! but what shall you do? how shall you

employ yourself when you grow old?" (110). For Harriet, as for Knightley, not marrying suggests precisely nothing. For what do women do if they do not marry? Harriet draws a blank when she tries to imagine an alternative future for her friend. If Knightley is unwilling to imagine anything else for a single woman, and Harriet is unable, Emma the "imaginist" ought to be willing and able to paint a brighter picture. Yet her response to Harriet's last question rings hollow. She assures her friend:

If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than one-and-twenty. 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. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is really the great evil to be avoided in not marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about.
(110)

Austen makes it abundantly clear that, in this instance, Emma does not know herself. She certainly has an active and busy mind; but even now she is "in want of employment." None of "women's usual occupations" interest her in the least. As she has just indicated herself, she is not the "usual" kind of single woman. Emma has little patience for drawing, reading, music, or carpet-work. Her sister's children provide meagre interest so far. Despite her greater imagination and resources, she apparently has nothing more to interest her than Miss Bates has.

Harriet's final question in this dialogue at first seems beside the point. "Do you know Miss Bates's niece?" she asks (110). Emma's subsequent tirade against Jane Fairfax is at once a strenuous denial of "any likeness" between the two aunts and evidence that the likeness persists.

Emma declares:

By the bye, *that* is almost enough to put one out of conceit with a niece. Heaven forbid! at least, that I should ever bore people half so much about all the Knightleys together, as she does about Jane Fairfax. One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every letter from her is read forty times over; her compliments to friends go round and round again; and if she does but send her aunt the pattern of a stomacher, or knit a pair of garters for her grandmother, one hears of nothing else for a month. I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death (110-11).

While this speech hints at Emma's rivalry with Jane Fairfax, it also betrays Emma's need to disassociate herself from Miss Bates. Once again, Emma distances herself from her fellow spinster on linguistic and narrative grounds. Miss Bates is a crashing bore who talks too much and says too little. Emma, on the other hand, would never go on and on about a pair of garters. Her ability to speak well, and to tell *interesting* stories, presumably sets her apart.

Emma's belief in the inseparability of speech and character reflects her creator's most fundamental conviction. As Rachel Brownstein has argued, Austen's novels "insist that people who use language thoughtlessly or credulously, pompously or stupidly or incompetently, are inadequate and even immoral"; while to "recognize the power of language and to use it with care indicates true sense and sensibility, in

the world as Austen conceived it" (92). Nancy Armstrong similarly notes that in Austen's fictional world "language may provide an accurate indication of an individual's value" (142). Emma estimates her own value above another spinster's according to this index. What we find beneath divergent styles, nevertheless, is a common kind of text. While Miss Bates relates news of her niece Jane, Emma also occupies herself by telling stories about other women. Harriet provides Emma's subject matter just as Jane provides her aunt's. In fact, Jane will also provide Emma with narrative material.

Although Emma is not the narrator of Emma, she largely functions as one throughout the novel. Wayne Booth, among others, has remarked that Austen uses "the heroine herself as a kind of narrator, though in third person, reporting on her own experience" (245). Yet Emma does more than simply report experience. Her impulse is to direct its course--to create experience. Emma's speech has the power to shape the world she inhabits. As Nancy Armstrong points out, "Emma's use of language creates desire where none would otherwise have existed. Matchmaking is for Austen simply another word for fiction-making" (143). As a fiction-maker, Emma can be seen as a figure of the novelist.⁶ Like Austen, she finds her true employment in creating plots. She plots one courtship after another for Harriet as well as a seduction for Jane. Emma thus succeeds in deferring her own love story by inventing ones for other women. Spinning tales becomes a way

of putting off matrimony. For a time, telling conventional stories allows her to live an unconventional life. It promises occupation for her spinsterhood.

Why, then, can't this occupation--and thus this spinsterhood--be sustained? The answer lies partly in Emma's narrative limitations. D.A. Miller offers one analysis of Emma's lapses as a novelist in Narrative and Its Discontents. Her habit of spinning out one plot after another is, in Miller's view, a narrative liability: "Emma's novelizing imagination never would seem to bind its energies in end-oriented plots. It only stylizes its free-floating release by throwing off little novel fragments that are at once unproductive and much too fertile" (19). In Miller's reading, the demand for closure requires that Emma be cured of this narrative incontinence. She must ultimately identify the proper object choice in the proper language. What this comes down to is that she must identify her future mate, marry him--and shut up.

While I am indebted to Miller for pointing out the problems raised by Emma's narrating habit, I dispute the values he attaches to the narrative/closure dichotomy in Austen. As he boils it down: "In Jane Austen . . . what motivates the narratability of a story coincides with what the novelist strongly disapproves of (waywardness, flirtation), and what motivates closure is associated with her most important official values (settlement, moral insight, and judgement)" (xiv). Yet more is at stake than

Miller allows. As mentioned above, Emma is a would-be spinster who wants to map another course for herself than marriage and motherhood. As a fiction-maker, she wants to tell another story. If her fruitless spinning out of plots leads nowhere, it is because she knows of no story to tell--there is no precedent for the spinster plot she wishes to unravel. All her fictions retrace the same two female plots: marriage and seduction. Clearly, there is no place for her, as a single woman, in the narratives she creates. As Susan Morgan points out, Emma lacks a "narrative paradigm that could contain her own story" (54). According to Morgan, Emma's mistake is to fall back on those narrative dichotomies of eighteenth-century fiction that entrap women in plots of sexual vulnerability. Morgan argues: "All Austen requires is that Emma be a better novelist, better morally and . . . imaginatively, than her use of eighteenth-century conventions would allow her to be. What those conventions precisely would not allow is for herself, her own powers to create" (54). The more she tells stories of other women's courtships and seductions, the more she consigns herself to nothingness. Emma realizes that while she can defer the usual destiny of women, she cannot escape it.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to account for the fact that in the world of the novel, it is not just Emma who can't imagine alternative plots for women like herself. Austen provides no model for other female plots. On the contrary, as Claudia Johnson has noted, ". . . Highbury is teeming with

highly conventionalized tales of love. . ." (Jane Austen 134). For instance, Emma correctly assigns the seduction plot to Jane Fairfax. Jane's physical and emotional decline during the course of the novel seems to confirm that this is her proper plot. She appears to be heading toward the conventional fate of the seduced woman: death. Although the scenario that Emma imagines for Jane--an affair with a married man--is more risqué than her actual situation--a secret engagement--Emma's speculations are not really off-target. Jane is wasting away from romantic disappointment. Though Emma is always telling herself the wrong story about the women of Highbury, it is never the wrong *kind* of story. This is obviously true regarding Harriet. Emma always finds Harriet the wrong love object, but she is right that Harriet's only possible plot is the marriage plot. As Knightley correctly observes, "Harriet Smith is a girl who will marry somebody or other" (56).

Jane Austen seems to be confirming that only two female plots exist. This complicates any reading of the novel that would fault Emma for her narrative shortcomings. In order to address this issue, I would like to return to my image of Austen and her heroine as Penelope figures. Each tells conventional stories as a way to avoid a woman's conventional fate. Numerous critics have pointed out that the author of Emma deals in just those romantic plots that Emma herself is so often condemned for inventing.⁷ Rather than trounce the heroine, we should therefore infer that Austen is not simply

holding her heroine up for censure. Rather, she calls attention to Emma's lack of options. Austen understood that to capture the public's ear, it was necessary to tell "plausible" stories. Emma's suggestion that her own story will be unusual--will be a spinster's tale--is, we must remember, poorly received. It is labeled as at best "odd," at worst "nothing." When she makes love matches, however, people *listen*. We can understand why Emma, caught like her creator in this replication of familiar plots, has trouble forming new ones. The very conditions of literary production prevent her, like Austen, from creating the precedents that she finds lacking.

The turning point in Emma's perceptions--and her fate--takes place during the famous Box Hill outing. This is where Emma commits her great crime: the humiliation of Miss Bates. Emma's mistreatment of this spinster turns out to be the pivotal moment in the novel's action, the hinge upon which her own courtship plot turns. To recap the scene: To amuse himself and Emma during a disappointing outing, Frank Churchill tells the assembled group that Emma wishes to be entertained. Churchill instructs them that Emma "demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated--or two things moderately clever--or three things very dull indeed." Miss Bates chimes in: "That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?"

Emma can't resist responding: "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me--but you will be limited as to number --only three at once" (364).

This incident leads to Knightley's shaming of Emma over her cruelty to Miss Bates, Emma's repentance, and the dawning self-knowledge that allows her to recognize her love for Knightley. Evidently Emma learns an important lesson here. But what the lesson is, and how it determines the novel's denouement, remain in question. According to Knightley, what Emma must recognize is the *distance* of her position from Miss Bates's. He lectures her on Miss Bates's economic inferiority:

Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation--but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! (368)

In stressing the economic issue, Knightley is missing the point. Recognizing the superficial differences between the two women, he overlooks their fundamental resemblance. That is, Knightley is incapable of perceiving Emma the way she perceives herself--as a spinster. He overlooks the real problem for single women--men like him, who perceive single women as nothing.

I wish to suggest that what Emma in fact learns is precisely her potential resemblance to Miss Bates. The verbal and financial superiority that have distanced her from

Miss Bates prove inadequate safeguards.⁸ For Emma, too, has failed to come up with a legitimate story of her own--one that would be recognized by the Knightleys of the world. Her true crime at Box Hill is constructing Miss Bates as she herself would be constructed as a spinster. In branding Miss Bates as "very dull indeed," she concurs that spinsters have nothing to say. This undermines her own authority to speak. For that she must be made to repent.

Emma's humiliation of Miss Bates amounts to a rude awakening. She confronts spinsters' tendency to be silenced, and she marries Knightley so as not to give up her voice. It is significant here that when Knightley shames Emma for her treatment of Miss Bates, Emma loses her voice for the first time: "He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted, her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. She had been unable to speak; and, on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome" (368). In the carriage, "Happily it was not necessary to speak. There was only Harriet, who seemed not in spirits herself, fagged, and very willing to be silent; and Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were" (369). Miss Bates's empty prattle and Emma's weepy silence add up to the same thing. Both women are "very dull indeed."

After the Box Hill incident, the wheels of Emma's imagination no longer spin as smoothly as they did earlier.

Ostensibly, Emma gains clarity of vision. Once she identifies her desire as sexual and its proper object as marriage, she suddenly seems to know everything: "Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before" (398). She has been transformed from a know-nothing spinster into an all-seeing romantic heroine. Yet this vision is wholly predetermined by social and literary conventions. As Finch and Bowen remark, Emma's "epiphany in fact marks merely an uncanny moment of recognition: the moment when the individual is brought into alignment with social imperatives" (12). Rather than becoming broad-sighted, Emma suddenly appears as blinkered.

After this point, Emma no longer even attempts to imagine the unusual life she always hankered after. When she believes that she has blown her chances with Knightley, her vision of the future is as bland and blank as Camilla's: "the only source whence any thing like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone" (411). Having renounced her narrative desire for sexual desire, she accepts nothingness as her due. All she can do is wait for male intervention. When she discovers that Knightley loves her and not Harriet, she accepts his

classification of women as all or nothing, depending on their ability to win male desire. Emma is relieved to find "that Harriet was nothing; that she was every thing herself. . ." (418). And she resolves never to imagine anything else: "What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in the future" (456).

Austen's narrator announces at one point in the novel that "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of" (194). From this statement one can derive several conclusions about the fate of spinsters and narrative. If a young woman who follows either of the two recognized female plots--toward matrimony or death (by seduction)--is in an interesting situation, then a spinster's situation is by definition *uninteresting* ("very dull indeed"). And a young woman in an *uninteresting* situation is sure of being *unkindly* spoken of. Emma wants her own story to be considered interesting. She does not want others to speak of her as unkindly as she has spoken of Miss Bates. Austen seems to concede that until alternative female plots are recognized as interesting, and are more likely to find a kindly reception, it is safest to let them come to "just nothing at all."

While Emma puts her spinster aspirations behind her, Austen did not fully abandon her concern with spinsters when she finished Emma. Her last novel, in fact, may have been her spinster work par excellence. The unfinished status of Sanditon has invited speculation about what shape the completed novel would have taken. Like The Watsons, it has prompted some critics to wonder if Austen might have baffled readers' expectations and opted not to provide a marriage plot. Laura Mooneyham White, for instance, suggests that the female protagonist may have been slated to remain unmarried, while only minor characters followed romance plots (80). She claims that the novel's subject is "the condition of society" rather than the heroine's education and romantic destiny (80-1). She concludes:

If marriage symbolizes the growth of the self, then Charlotte, a fully mature personality, might not require it; on her deathbed, the unmarried Austen may have recognized the limitations of her marriage plots and devised a plot that allows self-sufficiency to an unheroed heroine. Austen's earlier works all emphasize that through marriage one becomes part of a social and economic entity. Marriage allows the heroine to join the wholeness of society even as she joins the unity of male and female. But the social and psychological integration marriage has represented may never have been a narrative goal in this last Austen narrative.

White explains that in the unstable social world of Sanditon, marriage no longer stands as a guarantee of security. The result is a more open-ended picture: "As a text in which the erotic seems to be unmoored from its earlier position as social anchor, Sanditon allows the reader of Austen to experience that surprise, emptiness, and excitement appropriate to a new form of fictional understanding" (83).⁹

Such a claim is indeed enticing. It would suggest that Austen had finally resolved the perplexities involved in narrating a spinster's life. Yet is this in fact the case? My own reading points toward a different conclusion. The presence in the text of the Parker sisters, the least sympathetic, most caricatured spinsters in all Austen's novels, hardly suggests that this was to be a work celebrating spinsterhood. More glaringly even than Miss Bates, Diana and Sarah Parker call into question what a spinster can possibly have to do or say. Like Miss Bates, they speak badly and too much. Their lack of occupation and abundance of words, however, render them not merely tiresome but downright harmful. What implications could such characters have for a presumably single heroine?

White does not mention the Parker sisters in her analysis of Sanditon. Yet she raises the spectre of what they represent in her discussion of Charlotte. Comparing this final Austen heroine to her predecessors, she finds: "What Charlotte lacks are these heroines' traumatic situations. Charlotte is not disinherited, unhappy, disregarded, or oppressed; she is no Cinderella figure destined for a radical reversal of fortune. She bears her unmarried status with equanimity. What then can Austen do--or care to do--for Charlotte?" (81). What can such a heroine do for herself? The Parker sisters suggest the same answer which loomed over Emma Woodhouse's (and Emma Watson's) fate:

"just nothing at all." As Austen demonstrates, however, this nothing can become a destructive force.

If Miss Bates's flaws were tempered by the sympathy and goodwill she inspired, Austen makes it difficult to tolerate the equally tedious and verbose Parker sisters. She withdraws any material grounds for sympathy, granting the Parkers an independent income. We cannot conclude that, as Emma would have it, "poverty alone" has made these spinsters narrow-minded and ridiculous. The narrative perspective further baffles any tendency toward indulgence. In Emma, both the narrator and the more reliable characters proclaimed Miss Bates's better qualities. In Sanditon, however, only the overindulgent Mr. Parker insists that his hypochondriacal sisters are "excellent useful women" (174). Charlotte, the shrewdly cynical Sidney, Mrs. Parker and the narrator all express greater skepticism.

In Narrative and its Discontents, D.A. Miller places the Parker sisters in the company of Miss Bates as chatterers. He points out "the defining characteristic of chatter: namely, its excess--its constant overproduction in relation to what it can be said to communicate" (35). He notes that "as Diana fills her abundant leisure with the motions of bustle (mainly, only an active form of inefficaciousness), her language supplies its meager and trivial matter by over-articulating it, as though there were too much to tell" (36). The connection Miller does not make, however, is that the chatterers in both novels are spinsters. It is spinsters who

have nothing to do or say, and who paradoxically do and say far too much.

Austen initially provides an example of Diana's excessive language in the form of excessive writing: a tedious letter that details both her hypochondria and her officiousness (175-6). When she appears bodily in the text, her speech in person is equally flawed. She tells a long and confusing story about the visitors she is trying to bring to Sanditon. Diana herself comments, "But I seem to be spinning out my story to an endless length" and asks "Am I clear?--I would be anything rather than not clear" (194-5). Of course, that's precisely what this spinster narrator is. Ultimately, her prolific and baffling communications thwart her very plan to bring the expected two families to Sanditon: "the subject had supplied letters and extracts and messages enough to make everything appear as it was not," with the result that she had an untenanted house on her hands, and the "sensation of being less clear-sighted and infallible than she had believed herself" (205). Here her speech itself presents a danger. It will turn out to be the nothingness the speech is meant to mask that renders Diana a destructive spinster figure.

While their chatter aligns them with Miss Bates--Sarah, though "more subdued in voice. . . talked, however, the whole evening as incessantly as Diana" (199)--the Parker sisters have much in common with Emma. Like Emma, they are financially independent. Not occupied by seeking a living, they are looking for something to do--some way to occupy

their lives. Like Emma, too, they possess an abundance of imagination. Because they do not have any useful occupation, they fritter away their energy and imagination in futile endeavors. Imagination becomes a problem for them as it does for Emma, because they do not know where to channel it.

Where Emma became a matchmaker and storyteller, the Parkers turn themselves into patients and quack doctors. Mr. Parker cites his brother Sidney as observing "there is a good deal of imagination in my two sisters' complaints" (174).

Charlotte later concurs:

It was impossible for Charlotte not to suspect a good deal of fancy in such an extraordinary state of health. --Disorders and recoveries so very much out of the common way, seemed more like the amusement of eager minds in want of employment than of actual afflictions and relief. The Parkers were no doubt a family of imagination and quick feelings--and while the eldest brother found vent for his superfluity of sensation as a projector, the sisters were perhaps driven to dissipate theirs in the invention of odd complaints. (198)

While the eldest brother's business speculations may yield some practical results, the sisters' imagination only enfeebles them.

On top of their hypochondria and self-medicating, the sisters have a rage for being, as they see it, useful. Sometimes the two impulses go together, as when Diana treats the sprain of Mrs Sheldon's coachman. She boasts: "I rubbed his ankle with my own hand for six hours without intermission" (176). Such ceaseless, repetitive activity signals the futility of all the sisters undertake. After Diana details her scheme to bring visitors to Sanditon, "The words

'unaccountable officiousness!--Activity run mad!--had just passed through Charlotte's mind" (196). In its very madness and ineffectiveness, Diana's activity amounts to inactivity, her supposed usefulness to uselessness. For all the sisters' boasting, all their endeavors amount to nothing.

Actually, they amount to worse than nothing--for they cause palpable harm. Most obviously, they impair their own health. As noted already, their officiousness leads to confusion and business failures for their older brother. Yet it is apparently their younger brother who suffers most from their schemes. We first hear that Arthur "is so delicate that he can engage in no profession.--Sidney laughs at him--but it really is no joke--" (174). Mrs. Parker reminds her husband of his misgivings about his sisters: "You often think they would be better, if they would leave themselves more alone--and especially Arthur. I know you think it is a great pity they should give *him* such a turn for being ill" (177).

The implication is that the sisters have made a patient of Arthur for their own entertainment. This is particularly lamented because, as a man, he is the only one who has any chance for real occupation in the world. Mr. Parker concedes: "It is bad;--it is bad that he should be fancying himself too sickly for any profession--and sit down at one and twenty, on the interest of his own little fortune, without any idea of attempting to improve it, or of engaging in any occupation that may be of use to himself or others" (177). Of course, it was precisely at "one and twenty" that

Emma was expected to "sit down." The sisters, too, are expected to sit. They seem to be exacting a kind of revenge here. They turn their younger brother into an invalid. They interfere with their older brother's business transactions. Their nothingness becomes a black hole into which they will suck others. If the only thing they can do is harm, that's what they'll do. And it is the men who have the power in their world who will suffer.

The Parker sisters, spinning out their endless tales in language and spinning their wheels in useless activity, are in fact spinning a dangerous web. Attention to this danger will highlight some implications of Austen's treatment of spinsters if we return to Emma. I have already argued that the excessive verbiage of Miss Bates and her kind is a plea to be heard rather than completely ignored. Spinsters have no apparent claim on anybody's attention. They must therefore demand it in blunt, aggressive ways. Miss Bates's ceaseless barrage of language is aggressive, despite the novel's insistence on her good nature. It has a destructive effect on her niece. Jane is driven into an undesirable intimacy with the Eltons in order to escape Miss Bates's insufferable tongue. Mrs. Weston observes that Jane's aunt "is a good creature, but, as a constant companion, must be very tiresome. We must consider what Miss Fairfax quits, before we condemn her tastes for what she goes to" (287). Mrs. Weston concludes: "Poor Miss Bates may very likely have committed her niece and hurried her into a greater appearance

of intimacy than her own good sense would have dictated, in spite of the very natural wish of a little change" (287-8).

If Miss Bates here proves a social hazard to her niece, later she becomes an explicit health hazard. Even Mr. Perry, the doctor who examines Jane, considers her company a kind of pestilence: "Her present home, he could not but observe, was unfavourable to a nervous disorder . . . her good aunt, though his very old friend, he must acknowledge to be not the best companion for an invalid of that description. Her care and attention could not be questioned; they were, in fact, only too great. He was very much feared that Miss Fairfax derived more evil than good from them" (381). Austen seems to indict the spinster's marginality for making her a hazard, and to register that hazard on the level of language. And once again, she draws a connection between Miss Bates's position and Emma's potential one. For it is Emma who ultimately stands accused of letting her imagination and tongue run away with her to dangerous effect:

With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She was proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done nothing--for she had done mischief. (402)

Austen is calling our attention to how easily "nothing" degenerates into "mischief." She implies that as long as spinsters are dismissed as nothing, those near to them will pay the price.

To corroborate Austen's sense of how spinsters of her era were perceived, one need only look at how *she* was depicted in the early biographies. While Austen made a strenuous case for the power of verbal talent to distinguish one brand of spinsterhood (hers, Emma's) from another (Miss Bates's, the Parkers'), she understood that her public would not necessarily credit this distinction. While Austen might never have seen herself as "very dull indeed," that was, to some extent, the impression conveyed by her earliest and closest biographers, her brother and nephew. Critics--particularly feminist critics--have already challenged the portraits given to Austen's readers by Henry Austen and by James Edward Austen-Leigh.¹⁰ Without repeating their arguments, I would like to point out the connection between the early portraits of Austen and her status as a spinster. Unlike the spinsters in her novels, Austen in her life provided an answer to the question of what a spinster might do. This spinster wrote novels. Yet despite the fact that Austen was a woman with a vocation, her brother and nephew managed to resolve her image into that of the generic maiden aunt--that is, into a nonentity.

Henry Austen begins his "Biographical Notice" with the claim: "Short and easy will be the task of the mere biographer. A life of usefulness, literature, and religion, was not by any means a life of event" (29). He then describes his sister through a series of negations: She "never deserved disapprobation"; she "never met reproof"; she

had only reasonable wishes; she never lost anyone's goodwill. Though he makes note of her talent, her humor, and her skill in conversation, drawing, and dancing, he counterbalances the potential liveliness of his portrait with an insistence on "the regular habits, the quiet and happy occupations of our authoress" (30) her "perfect placidity of temper" (31) and her tranquility (32). Regular, quiet, and placid--what could be more dull?

The reader might well ask how such a vapid person could have become a published author. Henry Austen creates the impression that her publications were practically an accident, hardly the result of tireless effort and ambition. He states that "an invincible distrust of her own judgement induced her to withhold her works from the public, till time and many perusals had satisfied her that the charm of recent composition was dissolved" (30). He insists that "Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives.... It was with extreme difficulty that her friends, whose partiality she suspected whilst she honoured their judgement, could prevail on her to publish her first work" (32). As numerous critics have pointed out, the autobiographical evidence suggests otherwise. Austen's brother should also have known otherwise. As Margaret Kirkham speculates, "Had Jane Austen really been the pious mouse that he turns her into, she would not have been his favourite sister and life-long friend..." (57). Yet it seems that in constructing his literary portrait, Henry Austen followed literary convention

rather than personal knowledge of his sister. Spinsters in print cannot live interesting lives. Moreover, he proved just what Austen herself had hinted in Emma: that even an "imaginist," if a spinster, could not escape having her self-assertion nullified.

James Edward Austen-Leigh's 1870 A Memoir of Jane Austen further popularized the image of Austen as a placid, inactive spinster. Although this biography was a Victorian production, it is ideologically consistent with his uncle's portrait of Austen. Austen-Leigh opens his memoir with an apology:

Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course. Even her fame may be said to have been posthumous: it did not attain any vigorous life until she had ceased to exist. Her talents did not introduce her to the notice of other writers, or connect her with the literary world, or in any degree pierce through the obscurity of her domestic retirement. I have therefore scarcely any materials for a detailed life of my aunt. (273)

Austen-Leigh is stumped by the problem of how to present a spinster's life in prose, for such a life offers none of the usual "materials" for a biography. Linking this dearth with her single status, he declares her existence "singular" and "barren." He similarly subscribes to the notion that his aunt could have no significant knowledge: "She was always very careful not to meddle with matters which she did not thoroughly understand. She never touched upon politics, law, or medicine, subjects which some novel writers have ventured on rather too boldly..." (282). Faced with the problem of a famous aunt who, by his assessment, could not have done or known much, he falls back on praise of the feminine virtues

he attributes to her: "moral rectitude," "correct taste," "warm affections," a "sweet temper," and a "loving heart" (273).

Austen-Leigh makes an odd move in his memoir which deserves some attention. In describing the domestic occupations of women of his aunt's generation, he reminds the reader how few "sources of interest" were open to them, needlework being "their chief sedentary employment" (296). A few pages later he goes into a long panegyric on the lost female occupation of spinning. He explains that until the start of the nineteenth century, "poor women found profitable employment in spinning flax or wool. This was a better occupation for them than straw plaiting, inasmuch as it was carried on at the family hearth, and did not admit of gadding and gossiping about the village" (299). He then gives a detailed description of both the machines used and the women working them, painting an eroticized picture of the female body at the spinning wheel (299). After noting that the Austen family possessed "two such elegant little wheels," he offers a little history and etymology, observing that "this hand-spinning is the most primitive of female accomplishments, and can be traced back to the earliest times. Ballad poetry and fairy tales are full of allusions to it. The term 'spinster' still testifies to its having been the ordinary employment of the English young woman" (300). Finally, he laments that "alas, this time-honoured domestic manufacture is quite extinct amongst us--..." (300).

Though Austen-Leigh makes no direct connection between this digression and his aunt's spinster status, the connection begs to be made. While he distinguishes between the accomplishments of ladies and the occupations of cottage women, all provide "sedentary employment" of which he approves. This seems to be his ideal of female activity. If so, no wonder he doesn't quite know what to make of a spinster aunt who followed another course. It seems as though he would relegate her to an earlier lifestyle that would prevent her from asserting her ambitions. Spinsters should be kept from "gossiping about the village"--just what Miss Bates and Emma do; and what Austen did in print.

Austen-Leigh's mystification over his material--or lack thereof--is evidenced most strongly when he prefaces a selection of Austen's letters. He cautions that "the reader must be warned not to expect too much from them" (312). While he praises Austen's "accuracy of language," and her clear and animated style, he warns:

but the materials may be thought inferior to the execution, for they treat only the details of domestic life. There is in them no notice of politics or public events; scarcely any discussion on literature, or other subjects of general interest. They may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds out of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the trees in which it is placed; curiously constructed out of the simplest matters. (312)

The memoir ends, as it began, with an apology composed of a series of negations. Austen-Leigh protests that

the subject itself supplied me with nothing striking or prominent with which to arrest the attention of the reader. It has been said that the happiest individuals,

like nations during their happiest periods, have no history. In the case of my aunt, it was not only that her course of life was unvaried, but that her own disposition was remarkably calm and even. (389)

He insists upon her utter normality, arguing that "she was to be distinguished from many other amiable and sensible women only by that peculiar genius which shines out clearly enough in her works, but of which a biographer can make little use" (389).

What Austen-Leigh really means is that women--at least virtuous women--have no histories. The virtues he attributes to his aunt render her indistinguishable from other women. While women who marry offer at least the basic courtship plot, Austen provides nothing of which a biographer can make "use." The nephew raises the same question in his memoir that the aunt raises in her fiction: How does one tell the story of a woman who is neither married nor seduced? The difference is that the nephew doesn't think one can--and doesn't care. The aunt cares very much, and at least makes the attempt. That her attempt is not fully realized attests to Austen's awareness of the spinster's predicament--and, more specifically, the predicament of the spinster author. Assertions of desires beyond the erotic and domestic will simply be negated. The spinster's life will be dismissed as "not by any means a life of event," containing "nothing striking" and proving "no history." All that makes her distinct--in Austen's case, her gift with words--will come to "just nothing at all." Austen understood that this must be true for Emma as for herself.

While the early biographies establish the cultural climate in which Austen wrote, her autobiographical writing offers clues to her own perspective on spinsters' lives. As Austen did not write a memoir of her own, we have only her remaining letters to provide these clues. At first glance, some of her seemingly self-deprecating remarks appear to concur with her biographers' view that her life was uneventful and preoccupied by domestic trivialities. For example, she tells Cassandra: "I have got so many things to say, so many things equally unimportant, that I know not on which to decide at present, & shall therefore go & eat with the Children" (40); "I can recollect nothing more to say at present;--Perhaps Breakfast may assist my ideas. I was deceived--my breakfast supplied only two ideas, that the rolls were good, & the butter bad" (47); "My expectation of having nothing to say to you after the conclusion of my last, seems nearer Truth than I thought it would be, for I feel I have but little" (118); "I really have very little to say *this* week, & do not feel as if I should spread that little into the shew of much. I am inclined for short sentences" (122).

What are we to make of such comments? Does Austen really believe that she has nothing of importance to say? Deborah Kaplan reads such remarks in female correspondence as an assumption of patriarchal values: "Women enacted in their

letters the kind of self-suppression recommended by conduct books, adopting the perspective of men" (47). She explains:

When women did mention their own interests and experiences, they often diminished them, echoing the patriarchal view of their domestic activities as trivial and unimportant. Although their letters frequently conveyed news of their families, women did not view their child-care or socializing as newsworthy. Consequently, their accounts of such activities are often accompanied by apology or self-deprecation. (49)

Kaplan argues, however, that female friendships provided women with a second culture that allowed them to express opposing values. Through participation in two cultures, women were able "to re-perceive experiences imposed on them and to find worth in what was considered necessary but trivial" (64). Kaplan continues:

In their private discourse, women distanced and distinguished themselves from men and represented those separate selves; they also gave priority to their concerns and activities over those of their menfolk. Their women's culture inverted the value structure of the domestic ideology, often rendering the greater importance of women's private over men's public experiences through point of view. (74)

She sees women as expressing such contradictory views in a single letter, "switching their cultural allegiances sometimes line by line" (70). Indeed, despite frequent side comments like the ones quoted above, Austen goes on delightedly to detail the social and domestic activities of her household. She also relishes similar news from Cassandra, commending her "very entertaining" writing and begging for more minutiae (69). In addition, Austen questions the supposed unimportance of her news with paradoxical comments like "Where shall I begin? Which of my important nothings

shall I tell you first?" (125); "I have so many matters to write about, that my paper will hardly hold it all. Little matters they are to be sure, but highly important" (156). What may be little--or even nothing--in the common view is significant to the Austen sisters.

My interpretation of these seeming contradictions differs, however, from that of Kaplan. While I accept Kaplan's premise of cultural duality for women, I also see something else going on in Austen's letters. It is not that Austen finds substance where patriarchal culture sees trivia. It is that Austen values style over substance--and believes it compensates for the lack of substance. Her very praise of Cassandra's letters rests on their literary merit rather than their content. One of her responses to Cassandra begins: "The letter which I have this moment received from you has diverted me beyond moderation. I could die of laughter at it, as they used to say at school. You are indeed the finest comic writer of the present age" (5). It is not *what* Cassandra says that matters, but *how* she says it.

With this distinction in mind, Austen's self-deprecating asides appear as praise of her own ability to make much of little. She boasts: "Expect a most agreeable Letter; for not being overburdened with subject--(having nothing at all to say)--I shall have no check to my Genius from beginning to end" (74-5); "There, I flatter myself I have constructed you a Smartish Letter, considering my want of Materials. But like my dear Dr Johnson I beleive I have dealt more in

Notions than Facts" (121); "I can now write at leisure & make the most of my subjects, which is lucky, as they are not numerous this week" (159); "I am not surprised my dear Cassandra, that you did not find my last Letter very full of Matter, & I wish this may not have the same deficiency;--but we are doing nothing ourselves to write about, & I am therefore quite dependent upon the Communications of our friends, or my own Wit" (162). Austen is not reassessing the value and scope of her activities. She concedes that she has had little to do, and thus has little to say. Yet she says it well. It is in this that, like Emma distancing herself from the "prosing" Miss Bates, Austen distinguishes herself from other spinsters--from the boring ones. Her verbal skill lifts her above them.

At this point it is useful to turn to Patricia Meyer Spacks's discussion of boredom and women's writing. Spacks comments that the experience of middle- and upper-class women in eighteenth century England was commonly perceived as tedious, trivial, and repetitive (68). Yet Spacks observes that "women living private lives understood that not action alone but interpretation as well provides boredom's remedy" (83). Focusing on female letter-writers, Spacks claims:

Themselves victims of others' interpretation (for instance, the typical understanding of most female occupations as trivial), they apparently grasped that people impose meaning on their own and others' experience. Not that they say so directly. . . . But their ways of describing their own lives, of invoking the category of boredom only to reject it, of contemplating the possibility that they may bore others--these and other aspects of their personal writing implicitly claim and openly manifest the power of interpretation.

Spacks's reading of female correspondence is perhaps closer to my own than Kaplan's. Noting the effort to master boredom through interpretation suggests the acknowledgement of boredom on the female correspondent's part. Yet Spacks's views, too, differ from my own. My contention is that Austen does not interpret her situation as other than dull. To do so would diminish her accomplishment in making literary material out of the dull--the triumph of turning the dull into the interesting. Austen is not giving meaning to the meaningless, but congratulating herself on making the meaningless amusing. To make art out of nothing is the greatest artistry of all.

It is impossible to miss the patronizing tone of Austen-Leigh's valuation of his aunt's letters: "They may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds out of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the trees in which it is placed; curiously constructed out of the simplest matter" (312). Belittling as it sounds, however, I believe that Austen would have *applauded* Austen-Leigh's statement, for it makes the most of her skill. Moreover, it coincides with Austen's own comment on her novelistic method. Comparing her writing to her nephew's, she asks:

What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow?--How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour? (Letters

Austen-Leigh, as well as some critics, take this at face value, as self-deprecating. I read it as neither self-deprecating nor completely ironic. Rather, it is a form of boasting. If Austen is assuming the common perspective on female experience and knowledge, she is doing so in her own interest. Austen can claim a minuscule scope as a source of pride, for it attests to the fineness of her brushstroke.

Indeed, in commenting on her craft, Austen goes out of her way to claim the meagreness of her material. Think of her self-praise, thinly disguised as self-criticism, on Pride and Prejudice, which she declares "is rather too light & bright & sparkling;--it wants shade;--it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter--of sense if it could be had" or with "solemn specious nonsense" on literature, history "or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile" (203). It is just such a contrast with weighty subjects that highlights the weightlessness of hers--the better to show off the wonders of her style.

The same can be said of her comments to James Stanier Clarke, librarian to the Prince Regent, who was full of suggestions for Austen's subject matter. While Austen-Leigh interprets his aunt's responses as modest (350), in fact they are utterly self-assured. Claiming to "know nothing" of science and philosophy, Austen congratulates herself for this

supposed ignorance: "And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress" (306). Once again, her adoption of commonly held views on female knowledge smacks of irony. Yet Austen uses such views to her own advantage. Only a recognition of the nothingness of her material can prove what a phenomenon she is as an author. In that sense Austen does reverse the values attached to "nothing." It becomes a rich field in which to work.

This reversal of the value of nothing brings us back to Emma. The heroine gazing out at Highbury bears the stamp of the artist's gift:

Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;--Mr Perry walking hastily by, Mr William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the ginerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (241)

As Brownstein notes on this passage, a "heroine, like a novelist, can convert the least promising of lives into art, by the way she looks at it" (91). And the less promising it is--the more it is assumed by the world to be nothing--the greater an artist she proves herself to be. In this instance, Austen is surely not faulting her heroine.¹¹ She is a different kind of spinster than Miss Bates. Handed the

same lot of nothing, she *does* prove her difference. She *must*, if she is to survive--however briefly--as a spinster.

In order to appreciate fully Miss Bates's function in relation to Emma, one might ask how Austen saw the spinsters of her acquaintance in relation to *herself*. Though Austen does not dwell on such women extensively in her letters, she comments on them frequently enough to suggest the trend of her thoughts. I refer specifically to the *older* spinsters Austen knew, as opposed to herself and her peers (Cassandra, Martha Lloyd, and Anne Sharp). What becomes apparent is Austen's sympathy for their plight, awareness of how her own situation might come to resemble theirs, and contempt for their dullness and poor verbal skills. Austen simultaneously identifies with and distances herself from these older spinsters.

The spinsters of Austen's acquaintance merit sympathy and contempt to varying degrees. She exhibits pure sympathy for Mrs Leigh on the death of her brother, the Reverend Thomas Leigh: "We are very anxious to know who will have the living of Adlestrop, & where his excellent Sister will find a home for the remainder of her days. As yet she bears his Loss with fortitude, but she has always seemed so wrapt up in him, that I fear she must feel it very dreadfully when the fever of Business is over" (216). Clearly Austen is not indifferent to the hardships that may befall spinsters toward the ends of their lives.

The spinster for whom Austen shows the most sustained solicitude is Miss Benn, the penniless sister of the Reverend John Benn. Austen continually expresses concern that Miss Benn should have a roof over her head as well as companionship. She first appears in Austen's extant letters as the object of such concern: "Miss Benn has been returned to her Cottage since the beginning of last week, & has now just got another girl;--she comes from Alton.--For many days Miss B. had nobody with her but her niece Elizth--who was delighted to be her visitor & her maid" (189). Later she shows great tact in her advice to Martha regarding a gift for Miss Benn: "You have sometimes expressed a wish of making Miss Benn some present;--Cassandra & I think that something of the Shawl kind to wear over her Shoulders within doors in very cold weather might be useful, but it must not be very handsome or she would not use it. Her long fur tippet is almost worn out" (197). She keeps track of others' behavior toward Miss Benn: "She spent yesterday evening with us.--As I know Mary is interested in her not being neglected by her neighbours, pray tell her that Miss B. dined last wednesday at Mr Papillons--on Thursday with Capt. & Mrs Clement--friday here-saturday with Mrs Digweed--& Sunday with the Papillons again" (200). Miss Benn is even privileged to have Pride and Prejudice read aloud to her by the author (201).

Austen continues to follow the vicissitudes of the older woman's fortunes: "Old Philmore is got pretty well, well enough to warn Miss Benn out of her House. His son is to

come into it.--Poor Creature!--You may imagine how full of cares she must be, & how anxious all Chawton will feel to get her decently settled somewhere.--She will have 3 months before her--& if anything else can be met with, she will be glad enough to be driven from her present wretched abode;--it has been terrible for her during the late storms of wind & rain" (208). Austen subsequently exclaims: "I am thoroughly rejoiced that Miss Benn has placed herself in Lodgings--tho' I hope they may not be long necessary" (235). Finally she asks Cassandra: "Have you done anything about our Present to Miss Benn?--I suppose she must have a bed at my Mothers whenever she dines there.--How will they manage as to inviting her when you are gone?--& if they invite how will they contrive to entertain her?" (239). Austen understands that the ends of spinsters' lives may be marked by trouble, and she wants to contribute as best she can to the meagre pleasures of one such spinster.

Among the spinsters to whom Austen makes repeated reference, Miss Benn is the only one who escapes mockery. One may infer that this is because Miss Benn, unlike the others, was not guilty of verbal faults. Austen is always sure to point out such faults in the other spinsters. Her sympathy for them is mixed with a degree of ridicule that distances herself from them. Miss Milles sounds the most like the loquacious Miss Bates: "Miss Milles was queer as usual & provided us with plenty to laugh at. She undertook in *three words* to give us the history of Miss Scudamore's

reconciliation, & then talked on about it for half an hour, using such odd expressions & so foolishly minute that I could hardly keep my countenance" (245). On the death of Miss Milles's elderly mother, however, Austen--in a letter to her nubile niece Fanny--expresses both her compassion and identification with the "queer" old spinster: "I am very sorry & surprised that you speak of her as having little to leave, & must feel for Miss Milles, though she is Molly, if a material loss of Income is to attend her other loss.--Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor--which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony. . ." (332). The move Austen makes here is from sympathy for a particular spinster's case to an acknowledgement of its (potential) parallel to her own case. She herself, as a single woman, has such a propensity for being poor.

Austen similarly fluctuates between sympathy, distancing mockery, and identification in her discussion of two other tedious spinsters. One of these is Mrs Stent, glossed in Austen-Leigh's memoir as "a very dull old lady, then residing with Mrs Lloyd" (317). While this may be Austen's assessment of the old lady, she does not look on her as coldly as her nephew indicates. As she exclaims to Cassandra: "Poor Mrs Stent! it has been her lot to be always in the way; but we must be merciful, for perhaps in time we may come to be Mrs Stents ourselves, unequal to anything & unwelcome to everybody" (103). Such mercy for the dull is hard to muster, and comes only from Austen's awareness that one day she may

herself require it. Her final extant comment on this spinster is also a simultaneous expression of sympathy and acknowledgement of her dreary personality: "Poor Mrs Stent I hope will not be much longer a distress to anybody" (197).

The third of these spinsters who earn both Austen's compassion and her contempt is Miss Murden, whom she introduces as an unpleasant guest: "Our Even^g party on Thursday, produced nothing more remarkable than Miss Murden's coming too, tho' she had declined it absolutely in the morn^g, & sitting very ungracious & very silent with us from 7 o'clock, till half after 11" (160). The next day, however, Austen softens this portrait:

Miss Murden was quite a different creature this last Even^g from what she had been before, oweing to her having with Martha's help found a situation in the morn^g which bids very fair for comfort. When she leaves Steventon, she comes to board and lodge with Mrs Hookey, the Chemist--for there is no Mr Hookey--. I cannot say that I am in any hurry for the conclusion of her present visit, but I was truely glad to see her comfortable in Mind & Spirits;--at her age perhaps one may be as friendless oneself, & in similar circumstances quite as captious" (161).

Austen here expresses her understanding that circumstances may render an old spinster difficult and unpleasant. She sees that Murden's flaws as a companion derive from poverty, anxiety, and solitude. Moreover, Austen sees that as a spinster, she may find herself in the same situation one day. However dull Miss Murden is, Austen must acknowledge their common position.

Austen expresses her mixed feelings about Miss Murden again in a subsequent letter. She rejoices that "We found

our friend as comfortable, as she can ever allow herself to be in cold weather;--there is a very neat parlour behind the Shop for her to sit in, not very light indeed...but very lively, from the frequent sound of the pestle and mortar (167). Yet Austen's fellow-feeling can only go so far: "Miss Murden has been sitting with us this morn^g--as yet she seems very well pleased with her situation. The worst part of her being in Southampton will be the necessity of our walking with her now & then, for she talks so loud that one is quite ashamed, but our Dining hours are luckily very different, which we shall take all reasonable advantage of" (167).

Austen may feel obligated to render attentions to this loud talker, but she can barely tolerate her verbal improprieties. When Miss Murden is no longer in the vicinity, though, Austen once more expresses sympathy, telling Martha: "When you see Miss Murden, give her our Love & Good wishes, & say that we are very sorry to hear of her so often as an invalid" (197).

All of these comments shed light on the function of Miss Bates in relation to Emma. Emma must move from keeping a contemptuous distance from Miss Bates to sympathizing with her situation as a poor spinster. She also must come to see the potential parallel between her situation and Miss Bates's. Only money will keep her from becoming a Miss Bates if she should remain single. For a time, however, Emma can maintain her sense of superiority toward Miss Bates because of her superior skill with language. This is the case with Austen as well. She will not be like queer Miss Milles, dull

Mrs Stent, or captious Miss Murden, precisely because of her verbal superiority. She will be an author.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to return to the Box Hill incident. I would like to suggest that the reader is not meant thoroughly to approve Knightley's shaming of Emma, and her subsequent repentance. Indeed, Austen makes it impossible to blame Emma entirely for making fun of Miss Bates. We must accept as inevitable, perhaps, Emma's retraction of her demand for a unique destiny. Many critics have indeed noted that Emma has to learn her similarity to other women; and I have shown that she must come to accept specifically her common distress with other spinsters.¹² But we must also appreciate her desire to stand apart from the general run of spinsterhood. At Box Hill, she mocks Miss Bates's verbal incompetence in order to establish her verbal talent--as a mark of her distinction. It is through language that she asserts control over the shape of her life. Austen forces us to acknowledge that Emma is *indeed* distinct from the likes of Miss Bates. And while such distinctions might never be valued by the world at large, they are highly valuable to Austen. Emma may only be able to do briefly what Austen does permanently--separate herself from other spinsters through her superior use of language. But we must credit her for doing it at all. Even if Emma ends by submitting to the judgement that would negate her self-assertions, we cannot say that Austen endorses such negations. Her novel, like her letters, oscillates between

various positions--close enough for sympathy, far enough for contempt--in relation to spinsters. So we don't have to end at the end. We may go back to Box Hill and laugh (as I admit I always do) when Emma mocks Miss Bates. Earlier in the novel, when Emma imitates Miss Bates's speech to Mrs. Weston, her friend chides her: "For shame, Emma! Do not mimic her. You divert me against my conscience" (234). Austen uses Miss Bates both to divert us and to trouble our conscience. In so doing, she reveals the tricky balance a spinster novelist must maintain to establish her authorial position without undermining the very ground from which she speaks.

Notes

¹Karen Newman makes a similar observation in reminding us that the "happy ending of an Austen novel gives it an apparent unity that is false, for meaning is produced not so much by resolution, but by means of oppositions and contradictions, by the incompatibility of several meanings" (699).

²Nevertheless, I find Susan Morgan's speculation persuasive:

Perhaps Austen's own virginity, her status as a spinster, so long held to be a measure of her limitations as a writer, should instead be regarded as the catalyst for one of her profoundest achievements. Perhaps it required a virgin woman to introduce into British fiction the simple point that women can grow, be educated, can mature, without the guiding catalyst of a penis. (39)

³Claudia Johnson, commenting on the application of the term "chattering" to male characters in Emma, remarks on "chatter being a word reserved for feminine speech (like Miss Bates's)--excessive, undisciplined, diffuse, frivolous--and applied to a man, it is an insult" (Equivocal Beings 200).

⁴Certainly any reader of eighteenth-century British fiction is well acquainted with them. Rambling spinsters are even made use of in gothic fiction, where their inability to convey information efficiently helps prolong suspense. In The Monk, for instance, the spinster Jacintha drones on until

. . . Ambrosio's patience failed him. Eager to know Jacintha's business in which Antonia seemed to be concerned, he was almost distracted while listening to the rambling of this prosing old woman. He interrupted her, and protested that if she did not immediately tell her story and have done with it, he should quit the parlour, and leave her to get out of her difficulties by herself. This threat had the desired effect. Jacintha related her business in as few words as she could manage: but her account was still so prolix, that Ambrosio had need of his patience to bear him to the conclusion. (315)

Apparently a spinster can't hold her tongue even if lives depend on it.

⁵Another example of spinster correspondence is provided by Smollett's Humphry Clinker. Aunt Tabitha Bramble writes

notoriously bad letters, full of errors and malapropisms and dwelling on petty grievances.

⁶Numerous critics have identified Emma as a kind of novelist. See, for instance, Rachel Brownstein (104) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (158-9).

⁷The case is made, for example, by Gilbert and Gubar (168), Casey Finch and Peter Bowen (13-14), and Patricia Meyer Spacks (Gossip 169-70).

⁸Claudia Johnson has also noted Emma's increasing resemblance to Miss Bates toward the novel's end: "To a sobered Emma, who fears her days of insignificance are about to begin, the 'difference' between her destiny and that of Miss Bates is not so great, for the future which seems to stretch out before both of them consists of the solitary care of an aging parent" (Jane Austen 138). Johnson's conclusions concur with my own: "The 'resources'--beauty, wit, employment money--which Emma thinks can preserve her from sharing Miss Bates's ignominious destiny as a poor old maid finally amount to very little" (139).

⁹D.A. Miller also reads Sanditon as turning away from the marriage plot. He identifies a "culture of morbidity" in the fictional space of Sanditon, which "transfigures the elements and operations of social space, whose ethos can no longer be epitomized, indeed may not even be at all tenable, by the marriage plot that in Austen's other novels never relaxes the rigor of its grip on every episode" ("The Late Jane Austen" 75).

¹⁰See, for example, Tomalin (6) and Margaret Kirkham (53-60).

¹¹Spacks argues against such a reading of this passage. She interprets it as an instance of "Emma's characteristic compensatory self-congratulation. She invents lives for other people, she fabricates interest in two dogs and a bone, and she reassures herself that her capacity to do so implies her superiority" (Boredom 168). I believe, however, that Austen concurs with Emma's sense of superiority, as her letters reveal that a mind that "can do with seeing nothing and can see nothing that does not answer" is her own greatest source of pride.

¹²As Brownstein observes: "A Jane Austen heroine must separate herself from other women in order to realize her self, but on the other hand she must also learn that she is like her sisters and her mother" (99).

CHAPTER FOUR: "THE VERY CLOCKS SEEM AT A STAND": SPINSTERS
AND TIME IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S FICTION

She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well; there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her...Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death--~~this~~ Miss Austen ignores...Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (not senseless) woman, if this is heresy, I cannot help it. (Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, quoted in Barker 634-5)

I had a letter the other day announcing that a lady of some note who had always determined that when she married, her elect would be the counterpart of Mr Knightley in Miss Austen's 'Emma'--had now changed her mind and vowed that she would either find the duplicate of Professor Emanuel or remain forever single!!! (Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, quoted in Barker 723)

As her response to Emma makes clear, Charlotte Brontë acknowledged no affinity for Jane Austen. Following the lead of male readers such as James Austen-Leigh, she makes the small scope of Austen's fictional world a pretext to diminish it. Citing Austen's "Chinese fidelity" and "miniature delicacy," she overlooks the complexity of what Austen rendered with her fine brush. More strikingly, she joins the chorus of voices that would dismiss a spinster's creations as nothing. Presumably aligning her view with the male reader she posits, Brontë asserts that Austen "ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound." More severely, the Victorian author damns her literary precursor as "a very incomplete, and rather insensible . . . woman."

This is the sort of blatant slur commonly directed toward spinsters by those convinced a woman could not be complete without a husband or children. One would hardly guess from Brontë's criticism that her project and Austen's were fundamentally alike. Both authors sought to find a place in fiction for stories like their own--both tried to forge spinster plots.

If at first Brontë seems wholly to reject Austen as literary forbear, however, a closer reading of her criticism complicates that impression. In questioning Austen's womanly feelings, Brontë is not necessarily overlooking what connects the works of the two authors. Rather, Brontë is indicating the layer that she will add to her own portraits of spinsterhood. What seems to Brontë to be missing is the physical body: "what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death." In Brontë's work, as this quotation indicates, spinsterhood will be rendered a more dubious prospect by this concern for the body. Liquid imagery such as the rushing blood will figure largely in Brontë's fiction, signifying not just sexuality but the cycle of generations. Brontë is concerned about the "seat of Life"--the seeds of procreation that connect one generation to another, and the individual female body to the flow of time. The spinster's body, cut off from this flow, seems to fall outside of time itself. Brontë's overt refusal to identify with Austen suggests, then, her own commitment to

acknowledge all aspects of the spinster's experience. She will not deny her desire, nor the pain of desire blocked.

Despite Brontë's dissatisfaction with Austen, this author clearly made a lasting impression on her. As the second quotation indicates, Brontë continued to carry Emma with her as a kind of model and measure of her own work. She gloats that it is her hero, not Austen's, who would persuade a reader not to remain "forever single." When Brontë became engaged, in fact, her life imitated Austen's art; like Emma herself, Brontë insisted that her fiancé relocate to her father's home. Her final, unfinished fragment was called Emma. Perhaps, though she never publicly owned it, Brontë realized that she was picking up where Austen left off in her attempt to carve a space for spinsters in the nineteenth-century novel.

This chapter focuses on Brontë's Villette, and takes as its starting point the end of the novel--the temporal gap between the events narrated in the novel and the moment of narration. How did the years between the close of Lucy Snowe's story and its telling actually pass? Did they pass, as Shirley's Caroline Helstone imagines the years of a spinster's life, "like a vapour" (174)? Is its telling part of a momentary awakening after long slumber? Is it a swan song before death, like Miss Marchmont's narration of her own story from her deathbed, after a thirty-year silence? Significantly, these are the questions that Brontë raises and refuses to answer in Villette. Countless critics have noted

the ambiguities in the novel, focusing on the plethora of double readings it suggests and on the problem of its double ending.¹ Many have attempted to solve the riddle of the double ending, determining whether or not M. Paul has in fact drowned at sea and whether the preferred conclusion constitutes a happy or sad ending for Lucy Snowe. Some critics have chosen to preserve the ending's inconclusiveness, leaving the text open "instead of correcting the novel into a false coherence" (Jacobus 54). Yet even those critics who have celebrated the novel's resistance to fixed and final meanings have failed to grant the full range of possibilities to its ambiguous ending. All assume that, if M. Paul has indeed drowned, they know how Lucy has spent her life until, in her white cap, she tells her tale: she has been successfully running her school. This assumption shows a failure to appreciate Brontë's use of narrative elisions--of silence. What is not narrated is not known, nor is it meant to be. More important, Brontë's text suggests an alternative possibility to fill in the unknown, unnarrated space that the novel's ending leaves. To trace this possibility, one must ask what Brontë is silent about--what is the suppressed content of her elisions? It turns out that what Brontë will not or cannot narrate is the passage through time of the life of a spinster, a woman excluded from romantic plots culminating in marriage. How to pass the time is, according to Caroline Helstone, "the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve" (174). It is the question

which Brontë and her narrative are puzzled to solve as well; and for which silence is her method of deferring the answer.

For Brontë, this is a loud silence indeed. Of the three spinster authors in this study, she interests herself most explicitly in the social and narrative problems surrounding spinsterhood. Like Burney and Austen, she reveals in her letters a consciousness of her uncertain position as a single woman in society. Unlike Burney and Austen, she makes single women the focus of her fiction. Her acknowledged motivation in writing Shirley is that "I often wish to say something about the 'condition of women' question" (Barker 556) -- specifically, the condition of *single* women. In Villette, she creates a heroine unprecedented in the works of Burney and Austen -- a heroine who is still unmarried at the novel's end. These ideological and creative decisions throw a brighter light on the narrative problems presented by spinsters than we have previously encountered. Brontë is declaring her desire to write the missing spinster plot.

Not only does Brontë bring spinsterhood to the fore by refusing to marry her heroine off, she dramatizes the predicament of the spinster author and reader more explicitly than did Burney and Austen. Burney and Austen merely *implied* this dynamic in peopling their novels with minor spinster characters against whom the heroines had to define their own futures. The inadequacy of such models highlighted the dearth of precedents both for the woman reader and the woman author. In Brontë's novels, the search for such a precedent

becomes both more urgent and more explicit. In Shirley, most notably, there is an overt connection between the fate of the heroine and her spinster acquaintance. Caroline quite consciously looks to older spinsters to give her some inkling of how her story might unfold. Moreover, Brontë emphasizes the role of the spinster reader in bringing such stories to light. As Caroline provides a sympathetic narratee to Miss Ainley and Miss Mann, Brontë suggests that it is up to the reader to uncover the concealed spinster plot. Returning to Miller's terminology, "the emphasis is there to be read"--read perhaps only by those in the same position. Or as Sarah Waters has written: "Perhaps . . . it is the same with spinsters as with ghosts; and one has to be of their ranks in order to see them at all" (58).

Although Shirley is the novel in which Brontë most explicitly--and most polemically--discusses the social problem presented by single women, it is in Villette that the narrative problems spinsters present are directly tackled. Since my focus is on narrative rather than on social history, I am using the former novel largely as a tool for reading the latter. In my reading, there is a progression between the two novels.² In Shirley, Brontë explicitly thinks through questions that will be, to some extent, answered in Villette--questions about how single women are to occupy their time. One might say that she shows in Villette what she tells in Shirley. One might also say that what is a social issue in Shirley becomes a narrative issue in Villette. Leaving her

final heroine a spinster, Brontë has to handle the narrative fallout of this decision. She tries to work out by way of plot what she earlier tried to work out through nonnarrative, polemical asides. While she never puts Caroline to work, she does put Lucy to work. While she gives Caroline a conventional conjugal ending, she withholds one from Lucy. Caroline and Shirley's narrator ruminate over spinsters' lives. Lucy demonstrates such a life--and all the problems inherent in textualizing it.

What crucially distinguishes the two works from one another is their contrasting approaches to the question of time. The fraught relationship between spinsters and time is not unique to Brontë's work. Austen, in particular, presented time as a perplexing factor for the spinster. She grappled with the prevailing notion that spinsters had nothing worthwhile to do with their time, and therefore nothing worthwhile to say. In her letters as well as her fiction, Austen picked up this charge of "nothing" as a challenge, an occasion to burnish her linguistic style. Brontë's letters take up this refrain of "nothing" in a far more dismal tone. Until she becomes an author, she despairs of finding anything of interest to fill her time. In Shirley, this question of how a single woman is to occupy her time is a central concern. Brontë's suggestion is that women need work, just as men do. Yet in Villette, this answer--and even this question--prove inadequate. Lucy works, yet she still finds herself, as a spinster, unable to make time move.

Work appears as merely a way to *fill* time--and simply filling time is not enough. It is presented as an artificial substitute for a more organic relationship to time. Lucy may be able to fill up her time with activity, but she is unable to live *in* time. Cut off from erotic and generational bonds, the spinster is outside of time's flow. Hence, her narrative is frozen--locked up in the "frosts of time" (105).

All this leads back to the same problems encountered with Austen and Burney. However strenuously Brontë gestures toward the spinster plot, her novel provides not the plot itself but a more formidable monument to the struggle behind attempting it. Like the female reader Winnett and Lanser describe, Brontë lacks a model, or a language, for articulating a different plot. She colludes with the assumption that without the stimulus of male desire to propel her forward, the spinster has no entree into narrative time. Brontë's narrative dilemma in Villette foregrounds the sexual aspect of spinsterhood. In Shirley, Brontë emphasized how spinsters are outside of economic circulation. In Villette, we see how even the spinster who has an economic foothold in society is still out of sexual circulation. As Rita S. Kranidis has noted, the bodies of Victorian spinsters "were persistently negated. Spinsters were seen as asexual because they were detached from patriarchal processes that granted middle-class women some semblance of sexual identity" (171). Those processes consisted of marriage and motherhood. Thus, as Kranidis argues, "insofar as they were not valuable in the

broader ideological economy of gender that privileges motherhood, middle-class spinsters were decidedly 'excessive'" (99-100). It was within the context of such cultural attitudes toward spinsters that Brontë lived and wrote. She understood that the spinster was branded by her failure to *produce*, not just capital, but desire and offspring. Her economic and sexual nonproductivity--or nonreproductivity--reduced her to a blank. Through her own career Brontë found an economic niche, and she provided one for her final heroine. Yet she feared that this was not enough, for it still failed to fulfill the chief requirements society imposed on women. The woman who generated neither desire nor offspring was seen as a social and biological dead end. By extension, her literary representation led to a narrative dead end. Without a spot in the cycle of generations, she could not generate plot. And while Brontë sought proof to the contrary in her life, she wasn't sufficiently confident to provide it in her fiction.

Like those of Burney and Austen, Brontë's letters provide a valuable intertext for those thoughts on spinsterhood elaborated in the fiction. They contain the germ of her fictional preoccupations. Brontë's letters differ from those of her literary predecessors, however, in the directness with which she takes on the question of spinsterhood. Particularly, Brontë spells out far more plainly both the hardships of her single life and her need

for models of such lives. While Austen let her imagination play with the idea of the "nothingness" of spinsters' lives, Brontë picks up this theme in a much more plaintive key. Her complaint about having nothing to fill her time will become Caroline Helstone's lament. Yet while Caroline is truly idle, even when Brontë is working as a teacher, she feels the lack of a greater object. As she writes to her friend Ellen Nussey: "I have no news to tell you, no changes to communicate. My life since I last saw you has passed on as monotonously and unvaryingly as ever, nothing but teach, teach, teach, from morning to night" (Letters 171). Back at home, she grows impatient with her own inactivity and continues to apologize for her lack of news: "It is a singular state of things to be obliged to write and have nothing worth reading to say--" (306). Even when she attains her dream of going to Brussels, she confides to Branwell that "one wearies from day to day of caring nothing, liking nothing hating nothing--being nothing, doing nothing--" (317). Yet the thought of returning home only makes her feel worse: "I have an idea that I should be of no use there; a sort of aged person on the parish" (331). She fears that she will return only to "do nothing" (334); as she confesses to Ellen, "what I wish for now is active exertion--a stake in life--" (341). To M. Heger she makes the connection between this desire and authorship: "*I fear nothing so much as idleness--lack of employment--inertia--lethargy of the faculties--when the body is idle, the spirit suffers cruelly.*"

I would not experience this lethargy if I could write--"
(358).

Until she does become a successful published author three years later, however, Brontë continues to repine over her inability to fill her time. She remarks to Ellen:

I can hardly tell you how time gets on here at Haworth--There is no event whatever to mark its progress--one day resembles another--and all have heavy lifeless physiognomies. . . . I shall soon be 30--and I have done nothing yet. . . . I feel as if we were all buried alive here--I long to travel--to work to live a life of action. . . . (385)

These feelings only build up: "I know life is passing away and I am doing nothing--earning nothing a very bitter knowledge it is at moments--but I see no way out of the mist--" (503). Her despair intensifies as she contemplates getting older, anticipating her next birthday with a sense of shame over time wasted (520). Only when she becomes an author does this sense of nothingness recede.

Although Brontë understands that her future lies with authorship, it is still hard for her to see a way "out of the mist." As a self-identified spinster, she lacks the blueprints for a woman's life commonly provided by the prospect of a husband and children. Brontë is faced with the question Kranidis frames in her discussion of Victorian spinsters: "Who are the women who are made to stand outside the invaluable space of the national, cultural, and social ideal, the home of one's own, the space to which one belongs and which one invests with meaning and importance?" (57). Even in her youth Brontë identifies as such an outsider. Though

she rejects three proposals of marriage before she accepts the fourth near the end of her life, Brontë considers herself a spinster from an early age. After the first proposal she asserts that "I will never for the sake of attaining the distinction of matrimony and escaping the stigma of an old maid take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy" (185). After the second proposal she asks, "this is not like one of my adventures is it? . . . I am certainly doomed to be an old maid Ellen--I can't expect another chance--never mind I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old" (198). Even after the third proposal she declares that if it "be the only husband Fate offers me--single I must always remain" (Barker 670). As for her eventual husband, Arthur Nicholls, when Ellen suspects his feelings Brontë insists that he and the other curates "regard me as an old maid" (Letters 483). Clearly, this is how she regards *herself*.

Brontë easily makes a connection between the feeling of nothingness and the fact that single women are not granted other interests than finding husbands. She takes offense at Ellen's hint that she hopes to marry in Brussels. Denying that "I must forsooth have some remote hope of entrapping a husband somehow," she explains:

Not that it is a crime to marry--or a crime to wish to be married--but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt--for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty--to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions --not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive--and that they had better be quiet & think of other things than wedlock-- (315)

These "other things than wedlock" become Brontë's preoccupation as she plans her second published novel, Shirley.

Initially she sounds somewhat hesitant about what position to take. She writes to her publisher, William Smith Williams, in 1848:

It is true enough that the present market for female labour is quite overstocked--but where or how could another be opened? Many say that the professions now filled only by men should be open to women also--but are not their present occupants and candidates more than numerous enough to answer every demand? Is there any room for female lawyers, female doctors, female engravers, for more female artists, more authoresses? One can see where the evil lies--but who can point out the remedy? When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident--when her destiny isolates her--I suppose she must do what she can--live as she can--complain as little--bear as much--work as well as possible. This is not high theory--but I believe it is sound practice--. (Barker 556)

Her conviction that work is the best option for single women seems to strengthen. In 1849 Brontë returns to the topic with Williams, this time making the discussion more personal:

Lonely as I am--how should I be if Providence had never given me courage to adopt a career--perseverance to plead through two long, weary years with publishers till they admitted me?--How should I be with youth past--sisters lost--a resident in a moorland parish where there is not a single educated family? In that case I should have no world at all: the raven, weary of surveying the deluge without an ark to return to, would be my type. As it is, something like a hope and motive sustains me still. I wish all your daughters--I wish every woman in England had also a hope and a motive: Alas! there are many old maids who have neither. (601)

When Brontë learns that Williams's daughter Louisa is planning to attend college to train as a governess, she approves heartily of the plan:

Come what may--it is a step towards independency--

and one great curse of a single female life is dependency. . . . Believe me--teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised--but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst-paid drudge of a school. Whenever I have seen, not merely in humble, but in affluent homes--families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart. It is doubtless well--very well--if Fate decrees them a happy marriage--but if otherwise--give their existence some object--their time some occupation--or the peevishness of disappointment and the listlessness of idleness will infallibly degrade their nature. (602)

Through all of these letters, there runs a pessimism about the extent to which an occupation can really fill a life. She prescribes work for spinsters, yet paints a rather gloomy picture of the working life. Her own career as a teacher she describes as a round of nothing. Only her higher ambition as an author has given her "a hope and a motive." Even that great achievement she presents as a tenuous link to the world of the living.

What Brontë lacks is just what Burney and Austen lacked--a clear picture of how a spinster can live a full, rich life. Yet she articulates her need for such a precedent more fully and directly than her predecessors. This need is made explicit in a letter to her old schoolteacher, Miss Wooler. In 1846 she tells her retired friend:

I always feel a peculiar satisfaction when I hear of your enjoying yourself because it proves to me that there is retributive justice even in this world--you worked hard, you denied yourself all pleasure, almost all relaxation in your youth and the prime of your life--now you are free--and that while you still have, I hope, many years of vigour and health in which you can enjoy freedom-- Besides I have another and very egotistical motive for being pleased--it seems that even a 'lone woman' can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers--I am glad of that--I speculate much on the

existence of unmarried and never-to-be married women nowadays and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an u[n]married woman who makes her own way through life quietly pers[e]veringly--without support of husband or brother and who having attained the age of 45 or upwards--retains in her possession a well-regulated mind--a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures--fortitude to support inevitable pains, sym[p]athy with the suffering of others & willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend. (Letters 448)

Here Brontë clearly articulates her longing to see models of happy, successful spinsterhood. She admits that she needs such examples in order to face her own future.

Miss Wooler is a rather easy, unthreatening study in spinsterhood for Brontë. As a much older woman, she has already passed the potentially dangerous and difficult years that Brontë sees ahead of herself. Moreover, she lived a rather conventional, self-effacing spinster's life, as Brontë's remarks on her hard work, self-denial, and modest pleasures attest. Brontë has made it clear in her letters--and will assert in her fiction--that such a life leaves her cringing. Yet she has the model of another kind of spinster's life before her--a model whose very unconventionality fills her with both awe and fear. This is her lifelong friend, Mary Taylor.

In her exhaustive biography, Juliet Barker points out that Brontë's two best friends, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor, represented two sides of herself: Ellen, the wish to accept her lot quietly and live a conventional life and Mary, the desire for action and adventure and the rejection of social

constraints (182). Mary provided inspiration for Brontë. She was an example of a single, middle-class woman charting her own course in the world, finding invigorating activity and independence. Nina Auerbach goes so far as to claim that Brontë's letters about Mary "imagine an awesome paragon of courage, intellect, and love, whose heroic stature is inseparable from her spinsterhood" (Woman and the Demon 111). Mary studied and taught in Germany, moved to New Zealand to keep shop with her brother, built a boarding-house which she ran with a female cousin, and traveled for pleasure.³ On her return to England (after Brontë's death), she wrote articles on the position of women, travel essays, and a novel. She seemed to furnish an inspiring example of a spinster's life. Yet Brontë never told a story like Mary's in her fiction, and her letters shed light on why this might be. Mary filled Brontë not only with admiration but with fear. She admired Mary immensely, but was always anxious about how others would respond to her. She believed Mary was too singular ever to find a man who would accept her. No doubt she projected her own fear of being alone and unloved onto Mary. Her anxiety about how Mary would be judged revealed her anxiety about how she herself would be judged--and how her heroines would be. Never mind that Mary didn't labor under these concerns for herself. In fact, she relished being an "odd" woman, in every sense. As she wrote to Ellen regarding her studies in algebra: "I like it partly because it is odd in a woman to

learn it, & I like to establish my right to be doing odd things" (Letters 316).

Brontë's anxiety for Mary is demonstrated most strikingly when she recounts an episode involving her friend and her brother, Branwell. She blames Mary for Branwell's rejection of her, feeling that Mary's too frank and forward emotions alienated him. She asks Ellen:

Did I not once tell you of an instance of a Relative of mine who cared for a young lady till he began to suspect that she cared more for him and then instantly conceived a sort of contempt for her--? You know to what I allude--never as you value your ears mention the circumstance--but I have two studies--you are my study for the success the credit, and the respectability of a quiet, tranquil character--Mary is my study--for the contempt, the remorse--the misconception which follow the development of feelings in themselves noble, warm--generous--devoted and profound--but which being too freely revealed--too frankly bestowed--are not estimated at their real value. God bless her--I never hope to see in this world a character more truly noble --she would die willingly for one she loved--her intellect and her attainments are of the very highest standard--yet during her last visit here--she so conducted herself on one or two occasions that Mr Weightman thought her mad--do not for a moment suspect that she acted in a manner really wrong--her conduct was merely wrought to a pitch of great intensity and irregularity seldom equalled--but it produced a most unfortunate impression. I did not value her the less for it, because I understood it, yet I doubt whether Mary will ever marry. (234)

In this case, Brontë identifies the dangers that lie in wait for an "odd" woman. She worries that the "intensity and irregularity" of Mary's conduct subject her to contempt. The freedom and frankness of her manner are easily misconstrued as madness. Brontë implies that spinsterhood will be the punishment for the unusual woman, but it may be the other way

around. Mary will be punished precisely for the "irregularity" of being an unrepressed spinster.

This tone of mixed admiration and anxiety persists throughout Brontë's correspondence. Often the admiration is uppermost, as when Brontë speculates on what Mary will do following her father's death. She comments: "It is vain to limit a character like hers within ordinary boundaries--she will overstep them--I am morally certain Mary will establish her own landmarks" (242-3). Sometimes Brontë isn't sure how to respond to her intrepid friend. When Mary broaches the subject of moving to New Zealand with her brother Waring, Brontë refuses to join Ellen in her attempt to dissuade her. She writes to Emily:

Mary Taylor and Waring have come to a singular determination, but I almost think under the peculiar circumstances a defensible one, though it sounds outrageously odd at first. They are going to emigrate--to quit the country altogether. . . . Mary has made up her mind she can not and will not be a governess, a teacher, a milliner, a bonnet-maker nor housemaid. She sees no means of obtaining employment she would like in England, so she is leaving it. (251)

Brontë admits that she is unable "to say whether this is a rational enterprise or absolute madness" (251). But she is certain it is "singular" and "odd"--epithets commonly levelled at spinsters.

Ultimately, Mary decides to spend some time on the Continent before going to New Zealand. When Brontë receives Mary's news from abroad, her response is dramatic. She seems to regard Mary as a symbol of possibility--of all that a "lone woman" might do with her life. Brontë writes to Ellen:

I hardly know what swelled in my throat as I read her letter--such a vehement impatience of restraint & steady work, such a strong wish for wings--wings such as wealth can furnish--such an urgent thirst to see--to know--to learn--something internal seemed to expand boldly for a minute--I was tantalized with the consciousness of faculties unexercised--then all collapsed and I despaired. (266)

Here Brontë's fears are not for Mary but for herself. She imagines herself following Mary's lead and is afraid of the unusual course, even though Mary has gone before her.

Eventually, however, Mary's example spurs Brontë to follow her dream of studying abroad. She tells Ellen:

a fire was kindled in my very heart which I could not quench--I so longed to increase my attainments and become something better than I am . . . Mary Taylor cast oil on the flames--and encouraged me & in her own strong energetic language heartened me on. . . . (271-2)

Despite the fact that Mary is her greatest inspiration, Brontë continues to puzzle over her friend's choices. When in Germany, Mary surprises her friends by studying math as well as music and teaching English to boys rather than girls. Brontë comments to Ellen:

It is a step proving an energetic and active mind, proving the possession of courage, independence--talent, but it is not a prudent step--Often genius like Mary's triumphs over every obstacle without the aid of prudence--and she may be successful--hitherto she is so--but opinion & custom run so strongly against what she does--that I see there is danger of her having much uneasiness to suffer-- . . . (324)

Once again, Brontë is concerned about how opinion and custom will beset an unusual woman like Mary. She sees courage and independence in a woman as dooming her to suffer.

Mary Taylor not only provides Brontë with an example, but actively encourages Brontë to follow it. Mary urges her

friend to join her in Germany, but Brontë demurs: "To leave a certainty for a complete uncertainty would be to the last degree imprudent" (334). Mary even offers to share her teaching load with Brontë (336), but Brontë is not willing to embark on such a risky enterprise.

When Mary is at last ready to go to New Zealand, Brontë is shaken up: "Mary Taylor is going to leave our hemisphere-- To me it something as if a great planet fell out of the sky-- Yet unless she marries in New Zealand she will not stay there long" (372). Here she clearly underestimates her friend, who will live there unmarried for many years. While Brontë grants her approbation, she also imagines her friend's difficulties, speculating on the sickness and hardship she may suffer (388). Yet when all is said and done, Brontë can concede the benefits of such risks:

Yet these real--material dangers when once past leave the mind with the satisfaction of having struggled with a difficulty and overcome it--Strength--Courage--experience are their invariable results-- . . . Mary Taylor has done well to go out to New Zealand-- (388)

Brontë is not, however, without lingering reservations about her friend. They seem to derive more from Mary's personality than her current enterprise. Brontë informs Ellen:

I have just read Mary's letters; they are very interesting, and shew the vigorous and original cast of her mind,--there is but one thing I could wish otherwise in them, that is a certain tendency to flightiness--it is not safe, if is not wise, and will often cause her to be misconstrued; perhaps flightiness is not the right word, but it is a devil-may-care tone; which I do not like when it proceeds from under a hat, and still less from under a bonnet. (425)

Once again, Brontë cannot shake her dread of misconstruction. It is not safe or wise, it seems, for a single woman to defy convention. Originality and intrepidity are liabilities. If Mary has a "devil-may-care" attitude, Brontë cares all too much about the judgements of others. She understands that it is "odd" and "irregular" for a woman to live outside of the usual bonds of marriage. When she turned down her first suitor, she labeled herself as "eccentric," "satirical," a "wild romantic enthusiast indeed" (185-8). She made the same move as Burney, who told her baffled suitor to consider her "singular--odd--Queer." Knowing that simply to be a spinster is considered odd, Brontë seems to think that it's best for a spinster not to call attention to herself. Even to depict a fictional spinster might not be safe or wise.

Brontë's anxieties do not derive exclusively from the judgements and constraints placed on spinsters by their society. For Brontë, the great bogey of spinsterhood is isolation. After the death of her sisters, there is a change in the lament that marks Brontë's correspondence. Before she wrote about her need for occupation, her sense of futility with no meaningful activity to fill her time. Now a celebrated author, she has a clear vocation. Yet this is not enough to ease the ache of solitude. Without companionship, there is a sense of emptiness to her life. She writes to Williams: "In the day-time effort and occupation aid me--but when evening darkens something in my heart revolts against the burden of solitude--the sense of loss and want grows

almost too much for me. I am not good or amiable in such moments--I am rebellious" (Barker 598). Williams recommends Brontë find a young companion to live with her at Haworth, but Brontë feels this would be unfair to any young woman, with "the dead silence of the village parsonage--in which the tick of the clock is heard all day long--for her atmosphere--and a grave, silent spinster for her companion. I should not like to see youth thus immured" (599). The tick of the clock and the silence of the spinster are linked motifs. Brontë has found that work alone cannot keep time moving for a grave spinster. Her isolation walls her in, separating her from all that lives, moves, and grows. Her silence is indeed a "dead silence."

The depression caused by her isolation cripples Brontë's ability to write. She tells Ellen: "It is so bad for the mind to be quite alone--to have none with whom to talk over little crosses and disappointments and laugh them away. If I could write I daresay I should be better but I cannot write a line" (631). Periodically her trips to London and travels with her widening literary acquaintances perk her up. Yet when she returns home to her solitude, she feels a "craving for companionship" (650) all the more painful. She confides to Williams that "it is not in my power to bear the canker of constant solitude . . . even intellect--even imagination will not dispense with the ray of domestic cheerfulness--with the gentle spur of family discussion--. . ." (657). Writing for

Brontë cannot be everything; it cannot compensate for the "home of one's own"; the vital connection to others.

Once again Brontë casts about for models of "lone women," but these models fail her. In the case of Harriet Martineau, the two women are simply too different. She tells Williams after a visit to her fellow author:

if self-sustaining strength can be acquired by example, I ought to have got good--but my nature is not hers--I could not make it so though I were to submit it seventy times seven to the furnace of affliction and discipline it for an age under the hammer and anvil of toil and self-sacrifice. (665)

She is disheartened when Miss Wooler comes from a visit because, though her old teacher is in sprightly condition, "She seems to think so much of a little congenial company--a little attention and kindness--that I am afraid these things are rare to her" (685-6). As for her other model, Mary, Brontë learns of the death of her cousin and companion and is disturbed by Mary's fear that she should "in her dreary solitude become 'a stern, harsh, selfish woman'--this fear struck home--again and again I have felt it for myself--and what is my position--to Mary's?" (696).

Brontë states her feelings most poignantly in a letter to Ellen in which she responds to Ellen's charge that she writes with too much reserve:

I am silent because I have literally nothing to say. I might indeed repeat over and over again that my life is a pale blank and often a very weary burden--and that the Future sometimes appals me--but what end could be answered by such repetition except to weary you and enervate myself?

The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart--lie in position--not that I am a single

woman and likely to remain a single woman--but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely. But it cannot be helped and therefore imperatively must be borne--and borne too with as few words about it as may be. (701; Brontë's emphasis)

Having become an author, widened her circle of acquaintance, even travelled, Brontë returns to the refrain of her early letters. She sees her life as a "blank"; she feels she has "literally nothing to say." She has no sense of futurity and experiences the present as mere repetition. Brontë seems to be stuck in a perpetual present, and she links this temporal alienation with her condition as a solitary spinster. It is from this perspective that she is composing Villette, which will be published the following year.

In Shirley, Brontë sets up her major theme from the start: the dichotomy between male time and female time; male activity and female stasis; the busy world of men and the idle world of women. The mill owner Robert Moore, suspected of an engagement, announces that at the workplace "our discussions run on other topics than matrimony, and our thoughts are occupied with other things than courtships, establishments, and dowries"; business troubles "fill our hearts, I take it, pretty well at present, to the tolerably complete exclusion of such figments as love-making, &c" (23). Moore echoes Emma's claim that a busy man "has no occasion to marry, 'either to fill up his time or his heart'" (Emma 233). By contrast, Moore believes that "women talk and think only

of these things, and they naturally fancy men's minds similarly occupied" (25).

Brontë's novel corroborates this suspicion. Caroline Helstone, the young heroine, dreams only of marriage to her cousin Robert. When he questions her about her future, she responds: "As to the life I am destined for, I cannot tell: I suppose, to keep my uncle's house, till-- . . . till events offer other occupations for me" (71). Asked if she wishes to make money, she replies: "I do: I should like an occupation; and if I were a boy, it would not be so difficult to find one" (71). Yet her vision of work is a domestic image of serving Robert in *his* business, doing the indoor work at the counting-house while he is at market, helping him to get rich. Her current alternative to dreaming is to spend her days with her spinster cousin Hortense, who "by no means thought it a waste of time to devote unnumbered hours to fine embroidery, sight-destroying lace-work, marvellous netting and knitting, and, above all, to most elaborate stocking-mending" (81). Brontë's implication, of course, is that Hortense's activity *is* a waste of time.⁴ This spinster is merely spinning her wheels.

The conflict between male time and female time reaches a crisis, appropriately, in the chapter entitled "Old Maids." It is here that Brontë makes explicit that time is a special burden for unmarried women. Significantly, the chapter devoted to old maids opens in the male world of action. Brontë alludes to war, commerce, politics, economics--all

that engages the attention of the hero. Moore's fervid activity will throw into relief the inactivity of the women to be described in the chapter. Ironically, the work which occupies this man of action is running a textile mill. This mode of production is precisely what has replaced the original occupation of spinsters: spinning. Men have taken over a female occupation and rendered superfluous the women who used to be engaged in it.

At this juncture, Caroline notes the difference not only between her and Robert's outward activities, but the activity of their minds, as well. Watching Robert, Caroline realizes

that his thoughts were running in no familiar or kindly channel; that they were far away, not merely from her, but from all which she could comprehend, or in which she could sympathize. Nothing that they had ever talked of together was now in his mind: he was wrapt from her by interests and responsibilities in which it was deemed such as she could have no part.
(171-2)

She marvels at the difference she perceives between Robert's "mental condition" and her own:

I think only of him; he has no room, no leisure to think of me. The feeling called love is and has been for two years the predominant emotion in my heart; always there, always awake, always astir: quite other feelings absorb his reflections, and govern his faculties. (172)

Caroline does not object to this division of mental focus in general terms. Presumably, if she and Robert were to marry it would be fine for him to earn their bread and her to lavish him with love. The problem arises only when her expectations falter. Robert withdraws his attentions, and

Caroline suddenly realizes that she may never marry. She reflects:

I suppose, as Robert does not care for me, I shall never have a husband to love, nor little children to take care of. Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid. (174)

Troubled by the question of how an old maid is to "occupy her existence," Caroline calculates:

I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave? (173)

Time is a burden for the unmarrying woman, for she lacks guidelines to tell her what she is to do with it. The only example she has thus far is Hortense, who is clearly on a mission to waste time. To fill time, without the usual "duties and affections" of marriage and motherhood, is an onerous task. Caroline can only throw up her hands and exclaim: "Well, life is short at best: seventy years, they say, pass like a vapour, like a dream when one awaketh" (174). To slumber through time is the best that she can hope for.

On a quest to discover her "place in the world" (174), Caroline sets out to study the spinsters of her neighborhood. While the connections between the aging spinsters and youthful heroines were implicit in the novels of Burney and Austen, Brontë makes them explicit in Shirley. Caroline

studies spinsters' destinies out of sheer self-interest. She is trying to read her own future through their stories. Caroline is thus enacting the role of any female reader researching alternative plots. She is a type of the author herself, surveying the field to learn what stories it is possible to tell.

Caroline first visits Miss Mann. Her perception of Miss Mann is already mediated by Robert's contempt. She recalls how he contrasted his young cousin with the "shrivelled old, livid and loveless" and mimicked "the vinegar discourse of a cankered old maid" (177). Robert compared Miss Mann's eye with Medusa's, claiming that she had turned his flesh stony and that he required a kiss from Caroline to cure him. Robert here posits a dichotomy between the stony old virgin and the sexually promising young one. In going to see Miss Mann for herself, Caroline is questioning this dichotomy. Seeing herself as Miss Mann's likeness rather than her opposite, she refuses to accept this male reading of the older spinster.

In fact, Caroline's impression of Miss Mann is consistent with Robert's description. Caroline herself finds Miss Mann stony and immobile, a kind of living statue:

Certainly Miss Mann had a formidable eye for one of the softer sex: it was prominent, and showed a great deal of the white, and looked as steadily, as unwinkingly, at you as if it were a steel ball soldered in her head; and when, while looking, she began to talk in an indescribably dry monotonous tone--a tone without vibration or inflection--you felt as if a graven image of some bad spirit were addressing you. (178)

Brontë thwarts her heroine's desire to discover something else; something more promising for her own future. The author dramatizes the experience of the female reader who searches for that "story that would turn out differently" and finds it unforthcoming. Immobile as steel or stone, this spinster forecloses the potential for plot--which requires motion, at the very least.

The next day Caroline visits Miss Ainley, and finds the "decayed gentlewoman" in even bleaker circumstances than Miss Mann:

Not only was Miss Ainley poorer, but she was even plainer than the other old maid. In her first youth she must have been ugly; now, at the age of fifty, she was very ugly. At first sight, all but peculiarly well-disciplined minds were apt to turn from her with annoyance; to conceive against her a prejudice, simply on the ground of her unattractive look. Then she was prim in dress and manner: she looked, spoke, and moved the complete old maid. (181)

This, then, is to be "the complete old maid": to endure poverty and isolation, to frighten and repel. Yet Caroline, offering her attention, attempts to extract a fuller story. She refuses to concede that there is nothing further to read. In providing scenes of narration between the older spinster narrators and the younger narratee who is a *potential* spinster, Brontë implies that even a spinster might have a tale to tell the sympathetic auditor. As a young woman who expects to be a spinster, Caroline does indeed unlock the tongue of each previously silent spinster. Yet Miss Mann tells only of suffering, self-sacrifice, and privation. Moreover, her tale is not divulged to the reader. Caroline

alone receives it. As for Miss Ainley, although she also opens up to Caroline, she has no story of her own to tell. She speaks only of others. Brontë has indicated the need of women, especially single women, to read alternative stories. She has also indicated the need of spinsters to tell their stories. But the stories themselves are still missing.

If these spinsters fail to offer any models for imitation, Caroline at least does her best to muster up admiration for them. Yet while she professes appreciation for Miss Mann's endurance of misery and Miss Ainley's saintly ministrations, it rings hollow. For in speculating on her place in the world, "the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve," Caroline has already rejected the notion that their place is to be good and helpful to others:

That is right in some measure, and a very convenient doctrine for the people who hold it; but I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise: they call them devoted and virtuous. Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it. (174)

Caroline wonders at her own "queer thoughts" (174)--and queer they are. They are the thoughts of a young woman who is trying to imagine a path for herself that does not lead to the "ordinary destiny"--or to the alternative, a life that is no life.

Brontë, like Austen, seems to waver between championing and rejecting the conventional spinster figure. Caroline,

like Emma, is similarly torn between sympathy and distance; identification and disassociation. Caroline lacks the bravado to claim that "there can never be any likeness, except in being unmarried" between her and the likes of Miss Ainley. Yet this is what she implies. After her striking rejection of self-abnegation, Caroline and the narrator go on to praise Miss Ainley for just this trait. Yet this praise comes out like a backhanded insult. In contemplating the spinster, Caroline

found no high intellect to admire: the old maid was merely sensible; but she discovered so much goodness, so much usefulness, so much mildness, patience, truth, that she bent her own mind before Miss Ainley's in reverence. What was her love of nature, what was her sense of beauty, what were her more varied and fervent emotions, what was her deeper power of thought, what her wider capacity to comprehend, compared to the practical excellence of this good woman? (183)

Miss Ainley is being praised for precisely those virtues which Caroline has dismissed as hollow. Moreover, Caroline's qualities are obviously superior. They are the qualities of a heroine. Minor characters--lesser spinsters--like Miss Ainley may be satisfied with little or praised for virtue, but they are not worthy of being heroines. Such spinsters, lacking the potential for plot, are ultimately beside the point. But like Austen, Brontë concedes that the world at large--and the world of readers--may fail to make such distinctions.

More compelling than the novel's actual spinsters is the one youthful character who will grow up to be a spinster: Rose Yorke. Rose was modelled on Mary Taylor, Brontë's

adventurous spinster friend. Rose's depiction highlights not only Brontë's thoughts on her friend and on spinsterhood, but her narrative strategies and problems in presenting such a life. Brontë's elisions and shifts in tense in telling Rose's story foreshadow how she will tell Lucy Snowe's, and indicate Brontë's concerns about the narratability of a spinster's life.

While the novel's two heroines, despite their seeming approaches to an unconventional plot, wind up married, we are promised that Rose will not. At the time we meet her, however, Rose is merely a twelve-year-old girl. Brontë evades textualizing the life of an unconventional spinster by deferring it to the future, to a time that lies outside of the narrative's temporal scope. We are told that although her mother tries to turn her into a household drudge,

. . . Rose has a mind full-set, thick sown with the germs of ideas her mother never knew. It is agony to her often to have these ideas trampled on and repressed. She has never rebelled yet; but if hard driven, she will rebel one day, and then it will be once for all. (148-9)

By placing this rebellion in the future, beyond the boundaries of the narrative, Brontë recuses herself from the obligation to depict it. She spares herself and her character full liability. Brontë's fears for the spinster life she dares to imagine are attributed to Rose's father: "He sometimes fears she will not live, so bright are the sparks of intelligence which, at moments, flash from her glance, and gleam in her language" (149). This reflects Brontë's own fears for Mary Taylor, as expressed in her

letters, and for any single, original woman--herself and her characters included. By setting Rose's rebellion in the nonnarrated future, she protects both her character and herself from a hostile readership.

Indeed, this is the best explanation for Brontë's strange tense shifts in depicting the Yorke family. Throughout the novel, Shirley's narrator moves back and forth between past and present tense in order to create tableaux of novel's characters and locale. Yet when the Yorkes are introduced, the narrative repeatedly slides into the future tense. The narrator, who is telling this story from the vantage point of a distant future, queries:

Mr. Yorke, if a magic mirror were now held before you, and if therein were shown to you your two daughters as they will be twenty years from this night, what would you think? The magic mirror is here: you shall learn their destinies--. . . . (149)

While it turns out that Jessy is in fact the daughter who will die young (as did Mary's sister, Martha Taylor), Rose is pictured in distant parts:

This, indeed, is far from England; remote must be the shores which wear that wild, luxuriant aspect. This is some virgin solitude: unknown birds flutter round the skirts of that forest; no European river this, on whose banks Rose sits thinking. The little, quiet Yorkshire girl is a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere. Will she ever come back? (150)

The trope of the magic mirror allows Brontë to render Rose's adventures--which are of course Mary Taylor's--in a vague and fuzzy way. As mentioned earlier, Mary had gone to live in New Zealand, where she kept a shop and ran a boardinghouse. Yet Brontë declines to depict this outright, obscuring such a

story with a fortune-teller's smoke and fog. The narrator doesn't even state distinctly that Rose will be a spinster. She merely notes that Jessy intends for Rose to be one, so she can be her housekeeper. Jessy's plan is obliquely confirmed: "Rose was to have a fine, generous soul, a noble intellect profoundly cultivated, a heart as true as steel, but the manner to attract was not to be hers (156).

Rose's displacement to the colonies and to the future serve a common function. Rita S. Kranidis's study of Victorian spinsters and colonial emigration helps clarify this function, tracing the ideological position of emigrant women such as Mary Taylor and her fictional counterpart. Kranadis discusses how single emigrant women, as problematic subjects, were eliminated both from the physical space of England and the cultural discourse. Similarly, in the fiction, writers offered

foreign places as receptacles for English undesirables of any kind. This solution creates an alternative space for characters who are problematic either in terms of gender or class, or both. . . . The Victorian period's social undesirables are also its literary undesirables, and both are removed to discrete spaces in novels. (102)

Kranidis notes that the space occupied by spinsters in Victorian fiction "is best understood in its absence, when it is made clear that there is no appropriate hegemonic place for women existing outside the prescribed social arenas" (102). The case of Rose Yorke seems to corroborate this, for the life she leads is removed from England to the colonies. She is relocated geographically as well as temporally. As a

spinster, she falls outside the limits of the narrative in terms of both place and time.

Rose's major scene in the novel involves a heated dialogue with Caroline about the lives they expect to lead. In this case it is Rose herself, rather than the narrator, who projects her story into the future. Reading The Italian, Rose tells Caroline the novel makes her long to travel. When Caroline observes that she may be able to do so one day, Rose responds: "I mean to make a way to do so, if one is not made for me. I cannot live always at Briarfield. The whole world is not very large compared with creation: I must see the outside of our own round planet at least" (399). She continues: "I am resolved that my life shall be a life: not a black trance like the toad's, buried in marble; nor a long, slow death like yours in Briarfield Rectory" (399). Rose identifies the stasis of a story like Caroline's, rejecting it for herself:

Might you not as well be tediously dying, as for ever shut up in that glebe-house--a place that, when I pass it, always reminds me of a windowed grave? I never see any movement about the door: I never hear a sound from the walls: I believe smoke never issues from the chimneys. What do you do there? (399)

She refuses to be immured in the traditional spinster role, outside of time and change. She remarks to Caroline that "Nothing ever changes in Briarfield Rectory: the plaster of the parlour-ceilings, the paper on the walls, the curtains, carpets, chairs are still the same" (399-400). Rose announces, "I feel monotony and death to be almost the same" and proclaims, "Better to try all things and find all empty,

than to try nothing and leave your life a blank" (400). Yet as far as the reader is concerned, Rose's uncommon future remains a blank, pushed beyond the margins of the narrative.

When the narrator once more shifts into the future to describe the Yorkes, it is only to allude to Jessy's death. Here the temporal scheme becomes dizzyingly complicated. The narrator first seems to describe an evening in the narrative present--the moment of narration, long after the events being described--and then moves back into the past tense to describe the evening of Jessy's death, which is in the future in relation to the main action of the novel. The temporal contortions Brontë's narrator must perform in order to work in a minor spinster plot suggest that Brontë is indeed at a loss as to how to handle this material.

Brontë's difficulties textualizing the lives of spinsters are addressed explicitly in the narrator's allusions to potential critics and the polemical "Two Lives" chapter. This chapter not only makes an powerful case for a change in women's social position, but--like the overt references to critics--reveals the position of the writer who tries to depict the lives of single women. From the novel's opening passages, the narrator assumes a defensive pose:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto. (5)

Here Brontë confronts the demands of her projected readership and threatens not to meet them. Yet the novel she writes bears faint resemblance to the one she describes here. Neither of her young heroines work; both fall into sentimental reverie and into the love plot. What Brontë prepares us for is perhaps the novel she wished to write, rather than the one she actually wrote.

Shirley's defensive narrator baits her projected critics throughout the novel. Like the novel's first chapter, the last chapter opens with a bold attack:

Are you not aware . . . that a discriminating public has its crotchets: that the unvarnished truth does not answer; that plain facts will not digest? Do you not know that the squeak of a real pig is no more relished now than it was in days of yore? . . . "Impossible!" would be pronounced here: "untrue!" would be responded there. "Inartistic!" would be solemnly decided. Note well! Whenever you present the actual, simple truth, it is, somehow, always denounced as a lie: they disown it, cast it off, throw it on the parish; whereas the product of your own imagination, the mere figment, the sheer fiction, is adopted, petted, termed pretty, proper, sweetly natural: the little, spurious wretch gets all the confits,--the honest, lawful bantling all the cuffs. (632)

Perhaps this explains why Brontë did not, in the end, write a novel "as unromantic as Monday morning." While in the above passage the narrator is referring to the suppressed history of Malone, the "real pig" at issue is the woman in fiction. Brontë's objections to fictional heroines and their critical reception are voiced by Shirley:

the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in their true light; they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman is almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into extasies about each other's

creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem--novel--drama, thinking it fine--divine! Fine and divine it may be, but quite often artificial--false as the rose in my best bonnet there. If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where could I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour. (352)

Most significantly for Brontë, the "real pig" whose "squeak" the public will not relish is the spinster. This is made most explicit in the "Two Lives" chapter--a companion to the "Old Maids" chapter. Which two lives are designated by the chapter title remains significantly vague. Presumably the two lives under consideration are Shirley's and Caroline's, as the narrator contemplates the two young heroines in turn. Yet Caroline's thoughts revert to Miss Ainley, her chief model of spinsterhood. Caroline understands that their two lives could collapse into one. Once again Caroline seizes Miss Ainley's example as the only available text through which she can read her own position. Her frustration reflects that of the reader grasping for adequate models of single female life.

Like "Old Maids," "Two Lives" begins in the contrasting world of male activity. Robert's pursuit of the rioters who attacked his mill is presented: "These persons Moore hunted like any sleuth-hound; and well he liked the occupation: its excitement was of a kind pleasant to his nature: he liked it better than making cloth" (383). Meanwhile, Caroline sits "still as a garden statue" while she once again ponders at length the condition of single women.

Caroline returns in thought to Miss Ainley's example. Wondering how the spinster endures her lonely, dim existence, Caroline concludes that "she looks, I suppose, to the bliss of the world to come. So do nuns--with their close cell, their iron lamp, their robe strait as a shroud, their bed narrow as a coffin" (390). Caroline rebels against such a prospect: "Existence never was originally meant to be that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many, and is becoming to me, among the rest" (390). Here she reaches a firm conclusion: "I believe single women should have more to do--better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now" (390). She even hints at the injustice of the male mill owners taking over the work that originally belonged to spinsters. Commenting on "Lucretia, spinning at midnight in the midst of her maidens," Caroline declares that

she had something more to do than spin and give out portions: she was a manufacturer--she made fine linen and sold it: she was an agriculturist--she bought estates and planted vineyards. That woman was a manager. (392)

Through Caroline, Brontë makes her most emphatic demand for women to have the same work as men to occupy their lives.⁵

Caroline acknowledges, however, that her ideas, if uttered, are likely to meet with contempt; for

to such grievances as society cannot readily cure, it usually forbids utterance, on pain of its scorn: this scorn being only a sort of tinselled cloak to its deformed weakness. People hate to be reminded of ills they are unable or unwilling to remedy: such reminder, in forcing on them a sense of their own incapacity, or a more painful sense of an obligation to make some unpleasant effort, troubles their ease

and shakes their self-complacency. Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world: the demand disturbs the happy and rich: it disturbs parents. (391)

Just as spinsters dare not demand a place and occupation in the social world, the spinster author dare not grant them too large a place in her fictional world. She would thereby be reminding the public of ills it hates to acknowledge.

Of course, in this chapter Brontë *does* address these ills. Yet her emphatic objection to the plight of single women is largely confined to one long, polemical passage in Caroline's head. I do not mean to downplay the force of Brontë's political outcry. Bemoaning the futile lives of single women whose only aim in life is to catch a husband, she exhorts her male readers:

Can you give them a field in which their faculties may be exercised and grow? Men of England! look to your poor girls, many of them fading around you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or, what is worse, degenerating into sour old maids,--envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them; or, what is worst of all, reduced to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage, which to celibacy is denied. Fathers! cannot you alter these things? . . . You would wish to be proud of your daughters and not blush for them--then seek for them an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer, the mischief-making tale-bearer. Keep your girls' minds narrow and fettered--they will still be a plague and a care, sometimes a disgrace to you; cultivate them--give them scope and work--they will be your gayest companions in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness; your most faithful props in age. (392-3)

These are strong words indeed. Yet Brontë's narrator defers to her male readership, entreating their intervention, promising them in return companions, nurses, props. What she

doesn't acknowledge here are the lives that single women have already made for themselves--like her own and Mary Taylor's, for instance. And while the narratorial comments and the heroine's thoughts address the figure of the spinster, the plot itself does not.

Initially Caroline seems to will herself into plot. She resolves not to stagnate, even if she *does* have to be an old maid: "It was despicable, she felt, to pine sentimentally, to cherish secret griefs, vain memories; to be inert, to waste youth in aching languor, to grow old doing nothing" (183). Through Caroline, Brontë acknowledges that there are better things for unmarried women to do. Still, she doesn't allow Caroline to *do* them. Despite her character's good intentions, Shirley's narrator states:

Yet I must speak truth; these efforts brought her neither health of body nor continued peace of mind: with them all, she wasted, grew more joyless and more wan; with them all, her memory kept harping on the name of Robert Moore: an elegy over the past still rung constantly in her ear; a funereal inward cry haunted and harassed her: the heaviness of a broken spirit, and of pining and palsying faculties, settled slow on her bouyant youth. Winter seemed conquering her spring: the mind's soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation. (184)

Young Caroline, having been ejected from the love story which was to be the context of all her actions, is rapidly becoming a Miss Mann. We see her freezing solid, like Rose's toad in marble. The moment in her life when she cherished hopes of marrying Robert Moore will remain present to her, eclipsing all the years that come after it. The narrator comments that though the lovelorn seem headed toward death, they may

"survive to hang a withered apple on the tree late into autumn" (191). Theirs is a living death. As Caroline explains to Mrs. Pryor, "it is scarcely *living* to measure time as I do at the Rectory. The hours pass, and I get them over somehow, but I do not *live*. I endure existence, but I rarely enjoy it" (375). For the spinster, time stands still.

Despite all of Caroline's pleas for an occupation--for work--Brontë in fact rescues Caroline by restoring her man. Her context is thus restored--the romantic plot leading to "the ordinary destiny," marriage--and she recovers her spirits. Brontë performs a kind of narrative cryogenics. While spinsterhood is associated with images of frost, ice, and winter, male figures are associated with images of sun. Their erotic interest promises to thaw the frozen would-be spinster and restore her to time and change--to growth. A few passages serve to illustrate this. When Caroline is separated from Robert, she looks daily for the light of his lamp in the countinghouse window: "Her errand was to watch for this ray" (187). When she encounters him unexpectedly, "she received the boon of the meeting as an imprisoned bird would the admission of sunshine to its cage: it was of no use arguing--contending against the sense of present happiness: to be near Robert was to be revived" (251). After the two cousins have been reunited, everyone notes the return of Caroline's rosy color, and Robert himself asks, "what is the source of this sunshine I perceive about you?" (28). Though she answers that it is her mother's presence in her life, it

is obviously Robert's.⁶ Finally, at the novel's end, when their nuptials are in preparation, the narrator announces: "The winter is over and gone: spring has followed with beamy and shadowy, with flowery and showery flight: we are now in the heart of summer--" (635).

Brontë has declined the challenge of describing positively the life of a woman for whom marriage is not an option. She has revealed her interest in the question of how single women are to lead meaningful lives, then replied by her refusal to depict such a circumstance that they *cannot*. Or, if they can, she cannot tell about it. The plot of Shirley does not add up to the polemics. For all the talk of work and Monday mornings, we have, to use Burney's term, a "staring love story." It is only in Villette that we will get a real working heroine, one who doesn't marry at all. And with that we will encounter further problems with the textualizing of a spinster's life, and her relationship to time.

On the surface, the heroine of Villette solves the problem that the heroine of Shirley does not: she finds a way to occupy her time. Early in her career as a teacher, Lucy tells the reader:

My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mold and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale. (145)

Yet as the novel unfolds, it turns out that Lucy's relationship to time is no less fraught than Caroline's. Somehow, "filling up" time with work fails to fill the heroine's life--or to fill a narrative. Without erotic attachment--without the "ordinary destiny" of marriage and motherhood--the heroine still finds herself alienated from time's progress. And since the dynamic of narrative is inextricable from temporality, Lucy is alienated from narrative progress as well.

To appreciate the spinster's conflicted relationship to narrative time in Villette, it is necessary to highlight the novel's end--to look at the temporal gap between the novel's action and its telling. For it is only here that Lucy can be said to have fully become a spinster. While the novel follows Lucy's vocational development at Madame Beck's school in Villette, this experience is inseparable from the stories of her two loves, Dr. John and M. Paul.⁷ Only with the loss of both loves does Lucy accede definitively to spinsterhood. Yet rather than describe this moment and its aftermath, Brontë lets the narrative fall silent. In "Emphasis Added," Nancy K. Miller states that "in so much of women's fiction a world outside of love proves to be out of the world altogether" (45). She is referring to those novels in which the heroine who does not marry winds up dead. For Lucy Snowe, although she remains alive, a world outside of love proves to be similarly out of the world of the novel--outside of narratability. While Rose Yorke's singular destiny was

granted at a spatial and temporal remove, Lucy's is removed from the novel completely.

Several feminist critics have commented on Brontë's use of silence in Villette. Brenda Silver, in her essay "The Reflecting Reader in Villette," builds upon Miller's discussion of plots and plausibilities. Examining Lucy's strategies as narrator, she finds that "her silence and refusal reflect the lack of a language or plot by which women can communicate ambitions and desires outside of those encoded in the accepted social or literary conventions" (107). She determines that Lucy narrates her story in part to a projected reader against whom she feels a need to defend herself through silence and evasions. Silver describes this projected reader as "the conventional or socialized reader, who embodies society's maxims about women" (94), who is "depicted as judge and jury" (101), and who is presumably male. Silver also posits a receptive reader in whom Lucy can confide. She argues that the judgemental reader gradually loses his hold over Lucy, the sympathetic reader gains her trust, and she ultimately takes control over her own narrative. Karen Lawrence also analyzes Lucy's narrative silences in "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in Villette." Remarking that "Lucy presents herself as nontextualized, resisting the male reader" (451), she goes on to explain:

Lucy's resistance to being textualized stems partly from the sense that her person, failing to conform to the text that men view as significant enough to interpret, runs the risk of being misread. (452)

Her silence is a method of self-defense against such misreadings.

The fear of misreading to which Silver and Lawrence attribute Lucy's silence is, we must recall, the same fear expressed by Brontë in her letters and in her previous novel. Brontë's anxiety regarding Mary Taylor was due precisely to the fear of an "odd" woman's "misconstruction." The heroines and narrator of Shirley asserted that the true story of a woman's life would be scorned and denounced; and she who challenged the false would end up "Dead under a cairn of avenging stones." Moreover, Caroline's receptivity to spinsters' tales suggests the need for a more discerning readership--the sort of sympathetic reader Silver mentions. In Villette, however, such challenges to the reading public are not thrown out as boldly as in Shirley. Perhaps this is because more is at stake. Brontë is actually providing what she only toyed with in her previous novel: that story as "unromantic as Monday morning," the spinster's tale. Brontë's misgivings are therefore wrought to a pitch. They must go underground, marked now by silence.

While my reading is indebted to Silver and Lawrence, I differ with both critics' claims for the novel's ending. Silver argues the ascendancy of the receptive reader, yet Lucy's final silence after her lover presumably drowns in fact reveals a powerful, abiding awareness of the conventional reader's judgements. Brontë refrains from narrating that which is unlikely to be either approved or

understood, and for which the plots and language of literature provide no precedent. Nor does Lawrence appreciate Lucy's--and Brontë's--crucial silence in the novel's final chapter. She prefers to see Lucy as ambitious and thriving after M. Paul has dropped out of the picture. Yet it is here that Lucy is farthest from "the text that men view as significant," having been placed decisively outside the marriage plot which up to this point has provided her with a socially recognized context. It is here that Lucy stands most in need of the protection that silence provides. Shielding her heroine from censorious readers, Brontë declines altogether to textualize her at this point, choosing instead to bring her text to a sudden stop.

Interpreting silences is indeed tricky. As Susan David Bernstein argues, silence cannot simply be chalked up to resistance or subversion in women's writing. Bernstein reminds us, "silence in place of confession only reasserts the blank spaces of women's stories, which others in privileged positions in relation to discourse can exploit by inserting their own versions" (30). Yet at the same time, I believe that a careful reading of the novel as a whole can shed light on some implications of Brontë's final silence. For that silence is not a radical *departure* from what came before; rather, it has been intricately prefigured by the novel's structure, imagery, and subplots. Brontë leaves the careful reader a trail of clues that complicate the novel's ending. They lead us to the perplexed figure of the spinster

author struggling to forge a new plot. And while I agree that Brontë is protecting her heroine from censure, I believe there are further reasons for her final reticence. Brontë is wrestling with her own apprehension about the spinster's isolated body--about this body's place in time, and, by extension, in narrative.

The novel's ending, its cancellation of narrative time in the absence of the lover, is prefigured at key structural junctures. Each is a moment of absence and paralysis, of an excruciating slowing-down of time. The first is during the long vacation, when Lucy is left alone at the school (at the end of Volume One). The second is when Dr. John abandons Lucy after becoming reacquainted with Paulina (at the end of Volume Two). Both prefigure the departure of M. Paul (at the end of Volume Three). These moments in the novel force an awareness of time's passage, narrative silences, and the limits of narratability. Significantly, they also dwell on the image of the spinster's isolated body. Before looking at these moments, however, it is crucial to begin with two episodes: the primary Bretton episode and the Miss Marchmont episode. The subplots they introduce set up the opposition between spinsters and reproductive women; between spinster time and "ordinary" female time. Moreover, they establish the connection between these two forms of time and narrative movement.

The novel opens in Bretton, the home of Lucy's godmother and her son. Lucy comments almost at once on the passage of

time: "Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain" (62). The place where time flows smoothly and blandly is the domestic sphere, the world of women--yet not, significantly, women without men.⁸ This is a female world enlivened by male presence--the presence of John Graham Bretton. The novel's opening chapters therefore give an overview of the themes that occupy the rest of the work: female stillness in the absence of male objects and activity in their presence, and the corresponding stillness and activity of the narrative. They set up the relationship between women and time, and time and narrative.

Karen Lawrence has commented on the use of the river as a figure of time in the Bretton episode. Lawrence asserts that in the Edenic world of Bretton, "Lucy gives us a figure of time which fails to signify meaning, to be impressed, to be disturbed from quiescence" (458). I would argue, by contrast, that this figure implies the forward movement inherent both in temporality and narrative. Moreover, it suggests the forward movement of genealogy. The river represents time as experienced by the Brettons and the Homes, not by Lucy herself. These two families, a mother-son and father-daughter pair, suggest both erotic and generational bonds. John Maynard, in his discussion of the sexual imagery in Bronte's fiction, notes that the opening scenes of Villette highlight "the relations of parent-child love, specifically the father-daughter relationship, to sexual

love, even in its earliest manifestations" (182). Equally sexualized is the mother-son relationship. Only parentless Lucy seems excluded from such vital connection. The river of time flows for those who are, by contrast, sexually and generationally connected.⁹

Elissa Marder, in her discussion of time in Madame Bovary, offers some insights that are useful to my reading of Villette. Marder diagnoses Emma Bovary with a "temporal disorder," noting that "her life seems to unfold in a temporal void" (54). She connects this temporal disorder with the novel's location "in a realm where mothers no longer guarantee the existence of a state of nature" (57). In such a realm, there is "neither an inviolable, preverbal natural bond between mother and child nor a natural temporal frame in which birth and death constitute events and childbearing insures that the generations progress forward naturally through time" (57). This is the realm that Lucy inhabits. Although in Bretton relations with *opposite-sex* parents suggest erotic development and reproduction, the generational dislocation Lucy exhibits fits Marder's description. Lucy herself appears to suffer from a "temporal disorder." Marder also notes a connection between temporality and liquid imagery in Flaubert's novel. She observes that "time is made up of fluids (water, sweat, blood, saliva) that flow away drop by drop" (60). While Marder sees liquid time as time lost, dripping and slipping away, suggesting the detachment of time from the heroine's experience and her body, I would

argue that in Brontë, liquid time signals an attachment to life and temporality. It is associated with fertility; with both sexuality and the continuity between generations. As Maynard notes, in Brontë's imagery, with its evocation of fertility, the "juicy" is always preferred to the "juiceless" (115).¹⁰

The Bretton chapters provide an illustration of the conventional female life that Lucy's starkly contrasts. Later in the novel, M. Paul baits Lucy by making her contemplate a series of paintings called "La vie d'une femme." They depict the "ordinary destiny" of women: "Jeune Fille," "Mariée," "Jeune Mère," and "Veuve" (277). Lucy condemns the paintings' style as "flat, dead, pale and formal," their subjects as "insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities" (277-8). Yet the world of Bretton, where Lucy finds such peace, is inhabited by just these figures. Mrs Bretton is the widow; Paulina Home is the young girl--whose very name promises where her place will be, as a wife and young mother. They represent stages along a woman's conventional path through time; the main points along which her way is plotted. Lucy clearly looks down on this limited path. As Spacks remarks, she "seems to imagine the common lot of women--of other women, that is--as boredom" (*Boredom* 187).¹¹ From the start, Lucy seems slated for an *uncommon* lot. Marianne Hirsch has noted in women's fiction a "desire for the heroine's singularity based on a disidentification from the fate of other women, especially

mothers" (10). Yet for Lucy, this disidenti-fication will come at a cost, casting her up on the banks of time's river.

The widow and the young girl measure time by the daily comings and goings of Bretton's male inhabitant: "The evening, by restoring Graham to the maternal roof (his days were passed at school), brought us an accession of animation" (76). The son, as his mother's sun, effects a reversal of time--night becomes day for the female residents of Bretton. Lucy observes the dull daytime Paulina, "never kindling once to originality, or showing a single gleam of the peculiarities of her nature. I ceased to watch her under such circumstances: she was not interesting. But the moment Graham's knock sounded of an evening, a change occurred ..." (81). Lucy does not entirely approve of this transformation: "In his absence she was a still personage, but with him the most officious, fidgetty little body possible" (82). She reflects: "One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence" (83). As in Shirley, men are figured as the source of warmth and of motion itself. Lucy judges the women who only move in male presence, but she will fail to offer a counterexample.

Significantly, the "Miss Marchmont" chapter follows the Bretton chapters. Miss Marchmont lives out the future that a girl like Paulina would endure without Graham: a kind of

living death. Miss Marchmont reinforces the idea that without a male object, a woman's life is stillness and nothingness. We see that even little Polly would become a Miss Marchmont, if she too were ejected from the traditional "vie d'une femme." More important, this episode illustrates what happens when a spinster--like Miss Marchmont, Lucy, or Brontë herself--attempts to tell her story. While Brontë presented Caroline as a deliberate collector of spinster tales, she never designates Lucy as such. Nevertheless, Lucy also becomes the receiver of an older spinster's tale--just as the reader becomes the receiver of Lucy's. We are thus forced to read the two stories as parallel. In narrating her history to Lucy as Lucy narrates hers to us, Miss Marchmont assumes the position of the spinster author. Through this figure, Brontë therefore intimates the perplexity an author must encounter in shaping such material.

Although the "Miss Marchmont" chapter covers only a short span of narrative space (fewer than ten pages) and concludes less than one-tenth of the way through the book, Miss Marchmont's story reverberates even beyond the novel's last page. The narrative strategies Brontë employs in her depiction of Miss Marchmont illuminate those used for Lucy, and indicate her conflicted attitude toward both spinsters. Furthermore, Miss Marchmont's tragedy not only foreshadows what will happen to Lucy in the novel's final chapter, it also suggests one possible reading of what happens after the novel's close. Robert Bledsoe has called Miss Marchmont "a

depressing prefigurement of what Lucy Snowe is determined to become" (219). Yet she does more than cast a shadow over the end of Lucy's story. She also prefigures the issues with which Brontë will grapple and the narrative choices she will make in bringing it to its conclusion. Specifically, Miss Marchmont highlights the question of how a spinster is to inhabit time--and how an author is to represent her doing it.

Critics have repeatedly pointed out that various characters in Villette serve as doubles for Lucy.¹² Miss Marchmont is perhaps her most important double, as she is the only other spinster we meet in the novel. I use the term "spinster" in this instance to refer not simply to an unmarried woman, but to a female character who has been placed distinctly outside of any marriage plot. In the case of both Miss Marchmont and Lucy, this means having passed beyond the point at which marriage was possible. The death of the fiancé signals that the marriage ceremony toward which the plot was heading cannot take place. In other words, the spinster in Villette is the woman who, though originally headed in the "right" direction, has failed to marry. She is left not only outside of the marriage plot but seemingly outside of time and narration itself.

Brontë introduces Miss Marchmont as a singularly static figure:

she was a rheumatic cripple, impotent, foot and hand, and had been so for twenty years. She always sat upstairs: her drawing-room adjoined her bedroom. I had often heard of Miss Marchmont, and of her peculiarities (she had the character of being very eccentric), but till now had never seen her. I found her a furrowed,

gray-haired woman, grave with solitude, stern with long affliction, irritable also. . . . (95)

Paralyzed both physically and emotionally, she seems to be suspended in time. The reason for her stasis is revealed the night of her death. Unusually animated, she tells Lucy the story of her intended marriage thirty years before. "I possess just now the hours, the thoughts, the hopes of my youth. I renew the love of my life--its only love . . . (99), she begins. She then narrates what is the only story of her life, the romantic plot which was to culminate in matrimony. She gives it great immediacy as she tells it, "seeming to recall its incidents, scenes, and personages with singular vividness" (98). The night of her lover's death seems to have been Miss Marchmont's last living moment as well. She describes it moment by moment, dwelling upon the movement of the moon across the sky and the ticking of the clock. The instant her lover dies, however, the narrative abruptly ceases. "And that . . . happened thirty years ago" (101), she concludes.

Clearly, nothing has happened since. Brontë colludes with Miss Marchmont in refusing to represent the thirty years which separate this love story and its telling. In effect she cancels out these thirty years as if they have never passed. The suspension of her narrative reinforces the impression that time has stood still for Miss Marchmont. It is as if, having been ejected from her proper marriage plot, she has been ejected from time itself. This is the implication, at least, of Brontë's silence regarding her

unmarried character. She seems to regard the spinster as somehow outside the limits of the narratable. We are not permitted to see the spinster grow, develop, change--or, quite simply, live at all. It is as if, with the possibility of marriage behind her, she has nothing left to do. She cannot occupy time, and therefore cannot occupy a text.

To return to Marder's terms, Miss Marchmont appears to suffer from a "temporal disorder"; to exist in a "temporal void." She is unable to inhabit the present moment. Kranadis has noted a similar tendency specifically among spinsters in Victorian fiction. She notes that in Elizabeth Gaskell's work, the spinster seems to engage in "time travel" (148). Lacking any kind of mobility in the present, she journeys instead to the past. Kranadis refers to the spinster as an "anachronistic" figure who, unlike women preoccupied by their own families, "remains untouched by life" (149). As Kranadis elaborates:

Spinster novels generally concentrate on marriage or its failure as a feature of the past that is always pressing on the present moment. Unmarried women look into the past at a moment of chance or missed opportunity that has rendered them 'spinsters' the rest of their lives. . . . More than being not an asset to their societies, they are also a liability because they have not made an easy transition to the present moment. Such 'anachronisms' combine with the specter of lost status and lost security to suggest that the past moment in which the novel is set continues to impinge on the present and that it may not serve to change the present. (198-9)

We have to remember that the story Lucy is telling takes place in the past, just as Miss Marchmont's does. Telling this story of her youth, she too may be said to engage in "time travel." If Lucy's history is a "weak retrospect of

happiness past" (309), then the authorial Lucy may herself be a mere anachronism.¹³

This appears to be a contradiction in a novel specifically concerned with the growth and development of an independent, unmarried woman. It is tempting to look at Miss Marchmont as a contrast to Lucy, rather than as a "depressing prefigurement" of what she becomes. The text provides too many clues, however, that Lucy's story is to be read with reference to Miss Marchmont's. In the chapter immediately following that in which Miss Marchmont is introduced as a "furrowed, gray-haired woman," Lucy tells us that "I speak of a time gone by: my hair, which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now, at last white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" (105). Miss Marchmont has just told her life's one story. The implication is that Lucy is now telling hers--perhaps, like Miss Marchmont, after thirty years of stasis. Her allusion to "the frosts of time" evokes an image like that of the petrified Miss Marchmont, the spinster frozen in time. It is easy to forget about Miss Marchmont after this point in the novel, for the reader is engrossed by Lucy's adventures abroad and the dead woman is no longer mentioned. Yet she suddenly resurfaces, in the form of a legacy to Lucy, at the opening of the novel's crucial final chapter. The reader is forced to remember her and to acknowledge the shadow her figure casts, and what it signifies for the heroine.

Despite Miss Marchmont's long hiatus from the novel, Brontë never loses sight of the problem she embodies: the spinster's place in time and thus in narrative. The relation of the female body to time is explored further through other female figures--most notably, the widow and nubile girl. At the beginning of Volume Two, in the chapter "Auld Lang Syne," Lucy returns to the world of Bretton, which has been transported to Villette as if by magic. Waking up in Mrs Bretton's house, Lucy asks: "Where was I? Not only in what spot of the world, but in what year of our Lord? For all these objects were of past days, and of a distant country" (239). Earlier Lucy experienced the domestic world of Bretton as a place where time flowed smoothly and blandly; here she senses a regression of time. Yet while time may flow in a circular current for the widow Bretton, it has not stopped, as it has for the spinster Marchmont. Once again, Graham's filial attachment keeps his mother hooked up to time's flow. John Graham teases his mother: "I am indispensable to the old lady's happiness, Lucy. She would pine away in green and yellow melancholy if she had not my six feet of iniquity to scold. It keeps her lively--it maintains the wholesome ferment of her spirits" (260). Though he is joking, this is in fact the case. Lucy realizes that "the best treasure of Mrs Bretton's life was certainly casketed in her son's bosom; her dearest pulse throbbed in her heart" (260). Though hardly active, Mrs Bretton's life

is not stagnant; this infusion of male devotion saves her from paralysis.

Once again, the liquid imagery--the ferment of the spirits and the throbbing of the heart's blood--suggests fertility; both sexual desire and reproduction. The body's fluids, promising continuity from one generation to the next, insure the fluidity of time. Lucy, resorting to the figure of the river, longs for connection to this fertile world presented by the Brettons. She cautions herself to "let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream: Let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters: Let me not imagine in them a sweeter taste than earth's fountains know" (251). We must recall that this stream is specifically time's "full river"; that what Lucy thirsts for is a link to temporality symbolized by erotic and generational bonds.

As for Paulina, we meet her again when the "jeune fille" is ready to become "mariée." Progressing along the steps of the "vie d'une femme," Paulina is fully rooted in time. She recalls her days at Bretton, when she first met her future love, much like Miss Marchmont recalls the days of her courtship: "I remember it with minute distinctness: not only the time, but the days of the time, and the hours of the days" (359). Lucy is impressed precisely by Paulina's ability fully to inhabit time:

Her eyes were the eyes of one who can remember; one whose childhood does not fade like a dream, nor whose youth vanish like a sunbeam. She would not take life, loosely and incoherently, in parts, and let one season

slip as she entered on another: she would retain and add; often review from the commencement, and so grow in harmony and consistency as she grew in years. (359)

It is a typically female time Paulina inhabits, time which never flows with "tumultuous swiftness" but glides instead with pleasing serenity. Paulina's relationship to time is organic; part of a natural cycle of growth, she will develop with the seasons. She will not suffer the temporal disorder of the woman who takes her life "in parts," disconnected from this natural progress.

Yet Lucy never lets the reader forget the dangers that lie in wait for women whose only channel to life runs through men. She comments that her godmother knows "no true enjoyment" in the absence of her son:

How often, while women and girls sit warm at snug firesides, their hearts and imaginations are doomed to divorce from the comfort surrounding their persons, forced out by night to wander through dark ways, to dare stress of weather, to contend with the snow-blast, to wait at lonely gates and stiles in wildest storms, watching and listening to see and hear the father, the son, the husband coming home. (362)

This passage recalls the fate of Miss Marchmont, who waited in vain one winter night for the lover who would never come again. It is recalled in the novel's final chapter, when Lucy herself will wait through a winter storm for her own lover. In those cases, a woman's heart and imagination must be forever divorced from her person. Perhaps this carries the warning of Brontë's novels. As long as a woman is compelled to "live, move, and have her being in another"--as long as her pulse throbs through another's heart--then the

absence of this other means the end of life, movement, pulse. It means the end of time.¹⁴

As noted above, the first two volumes of the novel begin in the domestic world of Bretton, in the tranquil flow of female time. Volume Three begins with the growing intimacy of Lucy and M. Paul--with the promise held out that Lucy may enter this flow of time, progressing along the path of the "vie d'une femme." Since my focus is on the novel's end, however--on the moment when Lucy has become a spinster and is cast out of narrative time--I would like to turn now to the way each volume ends. Each volume closes with loss, isolation, the agony of waiting; with the cessation of time and motion. Each prefigures Lucy's final loss, after the novel's end, and helps us read the elided story of Lucy's spinsterhood.

Volume One concludes with "The Long Vacation." Lucy is left alone at Madame Beck's school while the students and other teachers are away on holiday, her only company a cretin in her care. "How long were the September days!" she laments, wondering how she will endure eight weeks of isolation:

My spirits had long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast. . . . Alas! When I had full leisure to look on life as life must be looked on by such as me, I found it but a hopeless desert: tawny sands, with no green field, no palm-tree, no well in view. The hopes which are dear to youth, which bear it up and lead it on, I knew not and dared not know. (227-8)

Isolation here brings a lengthening of days, a slowing down of time, a sense of lifelessness. The passage, however, is

somewhat ambiguous. What exactly brings on Lucy's vision of life as an empty desert? At first she suggests that it is the lack of employment, of work. Yet she refers to employment as a "prop," suggesting that is a mere substitution for a greater lack. Once again, it is an artificial "filling up" of time.¹⁵ What is Lucy really missing? What are the "hopes dear to youth" which she claims to "know not"? She cannot be speaking of work, for work is not generally considered dear to female youth. She seems therefore to be speaking of love, of male desire--precisely what she will lose at the novel's end. This is the "well" she longs to drink from.

Volume Two traces Lucy's growing intimacy with Dr John. By the volume's end, however, Lucy is once again severed from the possibility of erotic connection. The two families who have befriended her, the Brettons and the Home de Bassompierres, find their vital connection with one another. While Paulina and Dr John will mate and reproduce, carried along by the swift currents of time, Lucy once again finds herself in a temporal void. The letters she has received from Dr John symbolize her access to male desire, to temporality, to futurity. Suddenly, however, they cease to arrive.

Lucy awaits the letter that will not come from Dr John much as she awaits the lover who will not come at the novel's end. Though her isolation is not as complete as during the long vacation, Lucy feels the sudden absence of attention from the Brettons as keenly. The moment the Brettons are

reunited with Paulina and her father, they drop Lucy abruptly. She explains:

Those who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or of other walled-in and guarded dwellings, are liable to be suddenly and for a long while dropped out of the memory of their friends, the denizens of a freer world. Unaccountably . . . there falls a stilly pause, a wordless silence, a long blank of oblivion. (348)

Characteristically, Lucy's solitude seems to bring time to a halt. Yet she understands that time itself has not stopped. She herself is cast out of time's flow, while her friends continue to move within it:

Always there are excellent reasons for these lapses, if the hermit but knew them. Though he is stagnant in his cell, his connections without are whirling in the very vortex of life. That void interval which passes for him so slowly that the very clocks seem at a stand, and the wingless hours plod by in the likeness of tired tramps prone to rest at milestones--that same interval, perhaps, teems with events, and pants with hurry for his friends. (348)

By herself, Lucy lacks the power to generate movement of any kind. Without male desire to sweep her into the "vortex of life," she must stagnate. She has no inner force to magnetize the clocks and set them ticking.

In keeping with the novel's wintry imagery, the failure to propel time forward amounts to being frozen in time. If time is imagined as a river, ice is time locked up, unable to flow. During the long vacation, Lucy pictured her life as a desert with "no well in view." Now the well she has found is iced over. She describes her period of estrangement as an "inward winter" during which a hermit like herself must "make a tidy ball of himself, creep into a hole of life's wall, and

submit decently to the drift which blows in and soon blocks him up, preserving him in ice for the season" (348). Since time is understood as fluid, as literally a fluid, ice is therefore time solidified--time stopped. Lucy Snowe, with her wintry surname, is the symbol of this stoppage.¹⁶

In order for Lucy to find the channels back into time, she will have to liquify once more. In Lucy's view, however, such a thaw can only be effected from without. Male attention is the warming agent. As in Shirley, men are associated with the sun. Their erotic heat seems generative, the spark of life itself. The force of male desire animates female life, setting it in motion. Still picturing herself as a hermit, Lucy wonders if "his snow-sepulchre will open" and the "singing of liberated streams will call him to kindly resurrection"; or if "the frost may get into his heart and never thaw more" (349). We have already met such a spinster-hermit in Miss Marchmont. The frost got into her heart on the winter night of her lover's death, and never thawed again. Lucy's fate is still undecided, but seems dependent on male desire alone.

The return of spring that Lucy awaits is the return of Dr John's interest. She is, however, disappointed. There "came for me seven weeks as bare as seven sheets of blank paper: no word was written on one of them; not a visit, not a token" (349). It is significant that Lucy compares the weeks of male neglect to sheets of blank paper. She feels herself to be specifically cast out of narrative time. Lucy seems to

understand that narrative is inextricable from temporality. Peter Brooks has argued that narratives are "temporal syllogisms, concerning the connective processes of time" (21). As he explains, it is "temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive toward narrative ends" (xiii).¹⁷ Lucy's blank pages corroborate this claim. The obstruction of desire that has left the clocks "at a stand" has also brought her narrative to a stand. Outside of temporality--of "the play of desire in time"--she cannot generate a story. It is up to Dr John not Lucy herself, to bring "an accession of animation," allowing the blank pages to be filled.

The anguish of Lucy's waiting reaches a crescendo as she awaits a letter from Dr John. She endures an intolerable despair that seems to "make motion pause at my very heart, or proceed only under unspeakable oppression" (350). Dr John's refusal to write her back into time's narrative threatens to suspend her very heartbeat; to halt the flow of her life's blood. When she realizes that the correspondence is over, that Dr John's interest has turned elsewhere, she returns to the figure of the river:

That goodly river on whose banks I had sojourned, of whose waves a few reviving drops had trickled to my lips, was bending to another course: it was leaving my little hut and field forlorn and sand-dry, pouring its wealth of waters far away. The change was right, just, natural; not a word could be said: but I loved my Rhine, my Nile; I had almost worshipped my Ganges, and I grieved that the grand tide should roll estranged, should vanish like a false mirage. (378)

When the "grand tide" of sexual passion flows away, Lucy is left behind, motionless in time. Lucy finally ritually enacts her sense of entombment by burying Dr John's letters.

After the letters are buried, Lucy seems to rally. She feels for the source of motion in *herself*. She seeks to break through the ice which paralyzes her rather than waiting for male desire to melt it. Lucy wonders "how to break up my winter-quarters" and asks "But what road was open?--what plan available?" (381). What stymies Lucy at this moment is the lack of precedent. She wishes to move, but puzzles over what road, or plan, is available to a single woman. For the present, however, no independent road will be taken. In Volume Three, time's "liberated streams" will flow again. Yet they will be melted not by Lucy's inner heat, but by Monsieur Paul's fiery gaze.

While Volume Two told the story of Lucy's aborted intimacy with Dr John, Volume Three charts the growth of her love for M. Paul. To many feminist critics, this is also the volume in which Lucy follows her ambition and finds independent success.¹⁸ Indeed, she finds herself once again in motion. She tells Ginevra at the end of Volume Two, after the burial: "I am a rising character: once an old lady's maid, then a nursery-governess, now a schoolteacher" (394). Yet in the final volume of the novel, it is M. Paul's constant baiting that stirs Lucy's ambitions. He sees in her an "aspiring nature" that no one else detects (226). He tells her: "Je crois vois en vous je ne sais quoi de

rayonnante, petite ambitieuse!" (225). Ultimately, "his injustice stirred in me ambitious wishes--it imparted a strong stimulus--it gave wings to aspiration" (440). Lucy does have the inner flame to keep her running, but it takes male attention to fan it. Moreover, it becomes clear that Lucy does not aspire to vocational advancement alone. Like Brontë, she can never ignore "what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of death"; she will not disown the body and its craving for connection.

At one point when she is estranged from M. Paul, she returns to her musings on what steps she might take toward independence. She confesses that these thoughts, though suspended,

had never by me been wholly abandoned; and whenever a certain eye was averted from me, and a certain countenance grew dark with unkindness and injustice, into that track of speculation did I at once strike; so that little by little, I laid half a plan. (450)

Her plan is to save a thousand francs, rent some rooms, and open a school. It seems here that she has a goal in life and she can succeed independently. Yet the picture she paints of her future leaves her cold. She admonishes herself:

Venture not to complain that such an object is too selfish, too limited, and lacks interest; be content to labour for independence until you have proved, by winning that prize, the right to look higher. But afterwards, is there nothing more for me in life--no true home--nothing to be dearer to me than myself, and by its paramount preciousness, to draw from me better things than I care to culture for myself alone? Nothing, at whose feet I can willingly lay down the whole burden of human egotism, and gloriously take up the nobler charge of labouring and living for others? (450-1)

In part, this may be read as a woman's guilt in the face her own ambition. Yet her yearning for a "true home"--such as Polly Home has found with Dr John--resonates throughout the novel. Lucy feels cut off from erotic and familial bonds; from the cycle of generations. Though it may fill time, work alone amounts to "nothing" when pursued in a void. It is here that Lucy states:

It is right to look our life-accounts bravely in the face now and then, and settle them honestly. And he is a poor self-swindler who lies to himself while he reckons the items, and sets down under the head happiness that which is misery. Call anguish--anguish, and despair--despair; write both in strong characters with a resolute pen. (451)

In the face of her solitary plan, she feels despair. Lucy refuses to deny the anguish of her isolated body.

When M. Paul's departure from Villette is announced, Lucy enters a state of blank dejection such as she experienced during the long vacation and at Dr John's desertion. Waiting to hear from M. Paul: "As to that week of suspense, with its blank yet burning days, which brought from him no word of explanation--I remember, but I cannot describe its passage" (538). Here she suggests that which cannot be narrated, not even with a "resolute pen." In her isolation and passivity, Lucy seems alienated from her own experience. Time is once again suspended; its passage defies description.

The climax of Lucy's story comes when she finds herself, at long last, in the throes of the heterosexual love plot. This is when M. Paul presents her with her new school and reveals his love for her. Interestingly, this pinnacle of

happiness escapes narratability, much like the depths of despair. Yet here it is not because time has stopped, but because it is moving too fast. Lucy explains: "Certain junctures of our lives must always be difficult to recall to memory. Certain points, crises, certain feelings, joys, griefs, and amazements, when reviewed, must strike us as things wildered and whirling, dim as a wheel fast spun" (586). She continues: "I can no more remember the thoughts or the words of the ten minutes succeeding this discourse, than I can retrace the experience of my earliest years of life" (585). For the moment her plot seems to be following the model described by Peter Brooks, returning to the quiescence that precedes the disturbance of plot; the nonnarratability of fulfillment. By the light of M. Paul's desire, Lucy can reread her past experience as significant: "It was the assurance of his sleepless interest which broke on me like a light from heaven" (586-7). As for Burney's Camilla at the end of her endless courtship, the assurance that a man was *watching all along* renders all her actions, up to this point, worthy of recounting. Without her knowing it, the path she was following has always been the love plot.

That Lucy will not reach the conclusion of this plot is signalled by the sudden change in tense. We are jolted into the narrative present, the moment when the white-haired Lucy tells the story of Villette. The older Lucy pleads: "Happy hour--stay one moment! droop those plumes, rest those wings; incline to mine that brow of Heaven! White Angel! let thy

light linger; leave its reflection on succeeding clouds;
bequeath its cheer to that time which needs a ray in
retrospect!" (588). Locked into the "frosts of time," Lucy
lacks the melting ray that would defrost her story and return
her to narrative time. She summons the high point of her
doomed love plot as perpetual present. We are forced to
recall that Lucy's entire story is an exercise in time
travel; a regression to this "happy hour." What comes after
is willingly cancelled.

Significantly, this scene is marked by liquid imagery.
Lucy notices a nearby garden, in which "a jet rose from a
well, and a pale statue leaned over the play of waters"
(594). If the jet is M. Paul's desire, the statue that leans
over it seems to be Lucy herself. Even M. Paul's voice has a
liquid quality: "His voice was so modulated that it mixed
harmonious with the silver whisper, the gush, the musical
sigh, in which light breeze, fountain, and foliage intoned
their lulling vesper" (588). More significantly, however, it
is Lucy whose tongue is loosened. She confesses her tortured
emotions to M. Paul: "I spoke. All leaped from my lips. I
lacked not words now; fast I narrated; fluent I told my tale;
it streamed on my tongue" (591). Her fast and fluent
narrative streams at last into the river of time. Through M.
Paul, she is finally swept into time's rapid currents. Her
words become generative--they lead to Paul's proposal. She
lives three happy years because she believes her story is
still flowing toward a future that includes erotic union and

generation. During this time M. Paul's letters provide "living waters that refreshed" (594). No longer isolated, Lucy is finally synchronized with the rest of the fertile world.

Feminist critics tend to read Villette's final chapter as the conclusion to a success story, at least as far as Lucy's professional life is concerned. She may have lost her love, but she has gained her school. Through work, she has ostensibly escaped the fate of Miss Marchmont. She need not sit still in her bedroom for thirty years--she has work to do. Yet the structure of this final chapter undercuts such a straightforward, optimistic reading. Everything Lucy tells us about her activity, her school's expansion, her prosperity, takes place while her lover is still alive. Although M. Paul is abroad during the three years being narrated, the prospect of marriage which his expected return provides seems necessary if the plot is to keep moving. Male desire--if only in absentia--is what keeps the clock of narrative time ticking. Brontë could easily have drowned M. Paul at the beginning or middle of the chapter, and then proceeded to describe the growth and prosperity of Lucy's school. She deliberately chooses not to. The death of the lover not only cuts off the marriage plot, it brings Lucy's entire story to an abrupt halt. After M. Paul has most likely drowned, no mention is made of Lucy's career. No mention is made of Lucy at all. She informs the reader that "Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père

Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell" (596). All of the years between the end of Lucy's love life and the telling of her story are elided. We have no idea what happened to her or her school. We cannot assume a continued prosperity which Brontë distinctly refuses to represent in her narrative.

Brontë's silence creates the impression that time has indeed stopped for her heroine. Lucy's shifts in tense further recall the Miss Marchmont episode and ally Lucy with her fellow spinster. Like Miss Marchmont, she dwells on the period of waiting before her lover's expected arrival, carefully detailing the passage of time: "And now the three years are past; M. Emanuel's return is fixed"; "The sun passes the equinox; the days shorten, the leaves grow sere; but--he is coming"; "November has sent his fogs in advance; the wind takes its autumn moan; but--he is coming"; "wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the blast. The advancing hours make it strong" (595-6). She narrates them in the present tense, as if this were the last period she experienced as lived, immediate, unfolding through time. She then reverts to the past tense ("that storm roared frenzied for seven days"), apparently returning to the narrative present--the moment of the story's telling. She suppresses all the intervening years just as Miss Marchmont did in declaring "that . . . happened thirty years ago." Miss Marchmont's story was her swan song, told on the point of death after thirty years of paralysis. The reader must

wonder if Lucy's life, too, has been frozen in time; if she tells her story in a sudden burst of passion--a sudden thaw--before death. Certainly the possibility remains that Lucy's career continues, yet Brontë's refusal to verify this possibility must not be overlooked. Her frozen narrative forces us to acknowledge the bleaker alternative.¹⁹ Moreover, it suggests that Lucy's professional development is irrelevant. Lucy may *fill* her time with work, but is no longer present *in* time.

Villette's author is apparently conflicted. Brontë interests herself explicitly in the figure of the unmarried woman and the difficulties such a woman faces. At the same time, she refuses actually to describe such a woman's life as it unfolds through time. Lucy's career suggests the possibility of a productive life, yet this possibility is undercut by the lack of narrative space she gets once her marriage prospects fall through. There is a tension between Brontë's apparent effort to picture a single woman leading an active, meaningful life, and the narrative choices that counteract this effort--silence in place of descriptions of such a life. It seems that while she desires her spinsters to be active, she must depict them as inert, or not depict them at all. Brontë appears to dismiss her heroine just as Lucy dismissed Paulina, outside an erotic context: "I ceased to watch her under such circumstances: she was not interesting."

Rather than call this a flaw in the novel, I would like to return the position of the spinster author, and what Brontë implies about this vexed position. Lucy is, after all, an authorial figure--as is, to a lesser extent, Miss Marchmont. In dramatizing their attempt--and ultimate failure--to spin themselves plots, Brontë is telling us something about the production of fictions. And while she *seems* to reinforce the notion that the female body divorced from sexuality and the reproductive cycle is outside of time and narratability, I would like to suggest that she questions if this really must be so. We must recall Lucy's scorn for the woman who must "live, move, and have her being in another"; her misgivings for the woman whose heart and mind are "doomed to divorce" from her body in the absence of that other. Though Lucy winds up resembling such women more than her words would imply, we see the price she pays for it. We can't deny the *danger* of collapsing growth and development with sexuality and reproduction. Moreover, while Brontë does not overtly challenge standard reading and writing practices that would do so, she grants the reader space to question those practices.

Brontë provides a subtle clue that the conventions of literature that would sever the single female body from time's progress and her story from narrative movement may indeed be artificial. She does this obliquely, however--not finally through the spinster figure, but a parallel *male* figure. For what is to be made of the fact that M. Paul is

presented as a kind of male spinster in the novel, with his own spinster tale that parallels Lucy's? M. Paul first alludes to his lost love in terms strikingly similar to those Lucy uses. Having raised the subject of passion, he assures her ". . . I only uttered the word--the thing, I assure you, is alien to my whole life and view. It died in the past--in the present it lies buried--the grave is deep-dug, well-heaped, and many winters old. . ." (433). Lucy hears no more about M. Paul's buried passion until Père Silas takes it upon himself to tell her the whole story. She learns about the dead nun, Justine Marie, and her "affianced lover, to whom Fate, Faith, and Death, have trebly denied the bliss of union, who mourns what he has lost" (484). Père Silas recounts how Justine Marie's family forbade her to marry M. Paul, whereupon she entered a convent and died while still a novice. He tells Lucy that M. Paul, in his unending devotion to the dead nun, dedicated himself to the support of her family and thus "rendered it impossible to himself ever to marry: he has given himself to God and to his angel-bride as much as if he were a priest, like me" (486). When she asks how long ago the nun died, she is told twenty years.

Clearly, this narrative contains all the elements of a spinster's tale: the lost lover, the passions arrested in the past, the twenty blank years which follow. It is the story of Miss Marchmont and of Lucy herself. Yet Lucy is openly critical of this story. She characterizes it as

quite a little romantic narrative, told not unimpressively, with the accompaniment of the now

subsiding storm. I am bound to say it might have been made more truly impressive, if there had been less French, Rousseau-like sentimentalizing and wire-drawing; and rather more healthful carelessness of effect. (484)

Confronted with a version of her own history (as Lucy the narrator would already know), Lucy becomes a literary critic. One might attribute her skepticism to the fact that the subject of this history is *male*. I would like to suggest, however, that she is raising doubt as to the validity of all such stories--including her own.²⁰

Here Lucy recognizes the artificiality of the story's style, but she will also discover the falseness of its plot. The scheming Madame Beck adds her own embellishments to Silas's version. She tells Lucy that M. Paul means to join Justine Marie in the afterlife, "free from all earthly ties, pure comme un lis. . . ." (489). Lucy begins to realize that Madame Beck and Père Silas are collaborating for their own ends. It is with a twist of irony that she reports how they

opened up the adytum of his [Paul's] heart--shewed me one grand love, the child of his southern nature's youth, born so strong and perfect, that it had laughed at Death himself, despised the mean rape of matter, clung to immortal spirit, and, in victory and faith, had watched beside a tomb twenty years. (490)

She openly questions this version of Paul's history: "Was I, then, to be frightened by Justine Marie? Was the picture of a pale dead nun to rise, an eternal barrier? And what of the charities which absorbed his worldly goods? What of his heart, sworn to virginity?" (491). Lucy will soon discover that the nun is no eternal barrier, and that M. Paul is not devoted to virginity. So if this story, which so resembles

her own, is false, what are the implications? If the gender of its subject may be read as a cover, then perhaps all stories in which feeling is buried and time stands still may be questioned. In that case, Brontë is opening the door for a critique of her own work. Perhaps she is giving the reader permission to doubt. Perhaps she is saying that such stories are always told in somebody's interest, with some end in mind. She may have ultimately declined to present a true countertale: a spinster's tale endowed with temporality and narrative movement; a spinster's life that "teems with events, and pants with hurry." But she has exposed the contrivance behind the available fictions, and the transparency of the "little romantic narrative" with which she is still stuck. She is giving us a chance to be better readers--to see through even her own text, and trace at least the *possibility* of the spinster plot beneath.

Notes

¹See, for instance, Mary Jacobus, Patricia Yaeger, Patricia Johnson, Christina Crosby, Brenda Silver, Judith Lowder Newton, and Karen Lawrence.

²Mary Jacobus has detected in some of Caroline's assertions "the seed of Villette" (42).

³For a thorough discussion of emigrant Victorian spinsters, see Rita S. Kranadis, The Victorian Spinster and Colonial Emigration: Contested Subjects.

⁴In her 1870 The First Duty of Woman, Mary Taylor would remark that women are largely "satisfied with employment that is little better than digging holes and filling them up again" (qtd. in Spacks, Boredom 185).

⁵Martha Vicinus has argued that such a "passion for meaningful work, so often underestimated and misunderstood, was the sacred center of nineteenth-century single women's lives and communities. It was the means out of the garden, out of idleness, out of ignorance, and into wisdom, service, and adventure" (1).

⁶For a discussion of the mother-daughter plot in Shirley, see Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch asserts that this novel "offers perhaps the clearest articulation of the impossibility of motherhood in the context of the given social and familial structures" (49).

⁷Dr John serves as Lucy's first guide into the city's streets. Like a figure in a fairy tale, he leads her into the world of Villette. M. Paul is the keeper of the gates at Madame Beck's school. Like another fairy tale figure, he is the one who allows her to enter. As Lucy recalls on the eve of his departure: "At this hour, in this house, eighteen months since, had this man at my side, bent before me, looked into my face and eyes, and arbitered my destiny" (592).

⁸It is important to recall that in the nineteenth century, "bland" meant smooth, gentle, and pleasant--not flavorless and insipid, as it does today.

⁹It is worth noting that in Jane Eyre, the surname of the heroine's long-lost relatives is Rivers. Jane's bond with the Rivers establishes her place in the generational flow, and enables her ultimate erotic connection with Rochester.

¹⁰John Maynard's Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality does a good job of tracing the sexual imagery through Brontë's novels, noting the connection between water and fertility. Nevertheless, his interpretation of Brontë's spinsters is shockingly inaccurate. Maynard claims that at the end of Villette, Lucy's

analogue is of course not the symbol of suppression and closed feelings but the example of an open heart and the ability to celebrate the sexual bonds even where fate limits their realization : that is her earlier protector Miss Marchmont, who could die, as we imagine Lucy might, blessing the love that was allotted her. (210)

¹¹Spacks draws a connection between Villette and Emma, claiming for both novels:

What they resist is the social prohibition for women of many forms of meaningful action. The struggle against boredom is one consequence of such prohibition. Emma . . . and Lucy refuse to accept boredom as their fate. Misguided or conventional in form, their resistance helps constitute their characters and the plots that contain them. (Boredom 189)

I would argue that while Lucy does find "meaningful action," it ultimately proves inadequate to provide her with a plot.

¹²As Kate Millett observes, "Brontë keeps breaking people in two parts so we can see their divided and conflicting emotions" (198).

¹³Despite her many astute observations about spinsters in Victorian literature and culture, Kranadis provides an odd misreading of the end of Villette. According to Kranadis:

In the end, Lucy Snow [sic] has both marriage and property, and the freedom from societal conventions that accompanies marriage, since her husband conveniently dies at sea shortly after their marriage, leaving her a house and a school of her own. While she regrets that she has lost the man she loves, Lucy is now safely established in a school of her own and has realized every middle-class spinster's goal of self-sufficiency and independence. (191)

Kranadis does not indicate when in the novel this marriage supposedly takes place.

¹⁴Brontë further exposes women's dangerous dependence on male attention through another female character, Ginevra

Fanshawe. Lucy observes Ginevra one evening during a dinner party at the Hotel Crecy. While in the presence of the male guests--particularly of Dr. John--Ginevra is talkative and lively. When, however, the ladies retire to the drawing room after supper, and Ginevra finds herself banished from male company, she falls into a stupor:

Yet, no sooner had we reached the place of refuge, than she again became flat and listless: throwing herself on a couch, she denounced both the 'discours' and the dinner as stupid affairs . . . The moment the gentlemen were heard to move, her railings ceased: she started up, flew to the piano, and dashed at it with spirit. (399)

Only the restoration of the male presence reanimates Ginevra, giving her a context in which to act, to live, to read her own gestures as significant. Although Lucy Snowe heartily disapproves of Ginevra's behavior, it mirrors tendencies of Lucy's narrative and perhaps her life. The narrative, like Ginevra, falls into inactivity when men are not longer a part of it. Outside of the structure of the marriage plot which marriageable males provide, Lucy is without a context which will allow her to read, and therefore to tell--perhaps even to act in--her own story.

¹⁵The question of whether work can adequately fill a female life would be taken up in the public debate about spinsterhood in the decades following Brontë's death. Greg's 1862 "Why Are Women Redundant?" deplores the fact that thousands of women

have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial 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 of their own. (qtd. in Vicinus 4)

Presumably Brontë would have taken issue with Greg's valuation of single female life; yet her spinsters, too, seem to "carve out artificial and painfully sought occupations." Had Brontë lived to participate in the later Victorian period's public discussion of spinsterhood, she might have been forced to confront the implications of some of her views and thus to refine them. One can only speculate, however.

¹⁶It is impossible to overlook the resemblance between the icy spinster in Brontë's fiction and the concept of the frigid woman that would be popularized by sexologists in the early twentieth century. Sheila Jeffreys has described the

development of this concept in The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930. Jeffreys argues that the

main weapon which the sexologists used in the 1920s to pressure women into adjusting themselves to men's sexual behaviour and to undermine the feminist critique of male sexuality, was the concept of the woman's frigidity. Feminists, spinsters, lesbians, any women who showed reluctance to adjust, were attacked as frigid man-haters. (164)

Jeffreys claims that the notion of frigidity was an invention of this particular historical moment, and that before the 1920s it "had not been necessary because normal women had not been expected to have such a response to sexual intercourse" (169). While I do not question Jeffreys' account of the development of the sexological definition of frigidity, I find the image of the frigid spinster already established in the nineteenth century.

¹⁷For a further discussion of the relationship between temporality and narrative, see Paul Ricoeur's "Narrative Time." Ricoeur begins with the hypothesis that "narrativity and temporality are closely related" and continues: "Indeed, I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal" (165).

¹⁸See, for example, Kate Millett, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Judith Lowder Newton, Brenda Silver, and Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction.

¹⁹A second look at the close of Miss Marchmont's story makes our uncertainty regarding Lucy's fate still clearer. After concluding her reminiscence, Miss Marchmont tells Lucy:

I have suffered since. I doubt if I have made the best use of my calamities. Soft, amiable natures they would have refined to saintliness; of strong, evil spirits they would have made demons; as for me, I have only been a woe-struck and selfish woman. (101)

The questions that naturally pose themselves are: what kind of "nature" is Lucy's, and what "use" is she likely to make of her "calamities"? Lucy is neither "soft" and "amiable" nor "strong" and "evil." Where does that leave her? Surely she runs the risk of being "woe-struck and selfish," like Miss Marchmont.

²⁰While Brontë obliquely mocks her own figure of the petrified spinster, Dickens will blatantly parody this figure in Great Expectations. Miss Havisham literally stops the

clocks at the moment she is jilted by her lover, creating an elaborate--and ultimately false--spectacle of herself as the spinster arrested in time. Young Pip fantasizes that his (male) intercession will return Satis House to temporality; that it is up to him "to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a-going and the cold hearths a-blazing. . ." (252). He wants to perform the cryogenics of a Brontë hero.

EPILOGUE: SPINSTERS, BACHELORETTES, AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PLOTS

A look at today's popular media suggests that the spinster is attracting a resurgence of cultural attention. She is not often called "spinster" today, but goes instead by such names as "bachelorette" or "bachelor girl." These terms align her with single men, conferring on her the bachelor's aura of sexual freedom, economic independence, and *choice*. They acknowledge that marriage is no longer a necessity for middle-class women. What Brontë couldn't quite imagine has come to pass: there are "female lawyers, female doctors, female engravers"; women *do* have a field in which to exercise their faculties. Moreover, the spinster has been granted her sexual body; she may maintain her single status and have an erotic life. Single women today live in a totally different world from that inhabited by Burney, Austen, or Brontë.

Or do they? A survey of single women's portrayal in the current media reveals the startling persistence of some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas about spinsterhood. Right now the "reality relationship show" is perhaps the most popular kind of program on American television. These shows thrive on the notion that today's single women are desperately searching for marriage partners. This genre was inaugurated by the tasteless Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?, on which women in wedding gowns had to compete for a rich groom. Despite the show's disastrous fallout, it

spawned a host of imitators. The most successful has been The Bachelor, on which twenty-five women vied for the proposal of a thirty-one-year-old man. While the reverse seemed inconceivable--who could imagine twenty-five men competing on a show called The Spinster?--there was indeed a sequel called The Bachelorette. Because a thirtyish woman could not be *presumed* desirable, the show featured a runner-up from the first series who had already proven her appeal to male viewers (The Bachelor has had two sequels, and the man is always an unknown). The role reversal, however, was hardly complete. Though ostensibly given the privilege of choice, the bachelorette was nonetheless presented as a sex object. Her profession as a pediatric physical therapist was placed in a domestic framework, offered as evidence of her maternal instinct. She constantly touted her "traditional family values." She and the male contestants repeatedly voiced their discomfort with their reversed roles, and the host even thanked the men for consenting to be the ones chosen instead of choosing. In the end, though the bachelorette picked her potential groom, he subsequently had to get down on one knee and slip an engagement ring on her finger. "Who will she choose? Will he propose?" the host asked. The final choice was still not to belong to her.

Even more retrograde was the series Bachelorettes in Alaska. On this show, five single women were shipped off to Alaska to find husbands, since the men there supposedly outnumber the women. This scheme unwittingly paralleled the

Victorian project of exporting "surplus" women to the colonies. While the bachelorettes were presumably in control, in fact they were ritually humiliated when the *men* got to choose which women they wanted. The women dressed in bridal white throughout the series, from their hats to their boots. The snow-covered Alaskan landscape even contributed to the conceit of nubile virginity. The bachelorettes ranged in age from twenty-six to thirty-six, and all had careers. Nevertheless, they were described as "desperate to marry"; we were informed that "this may be their last chance." At the end of the series each woman had to wait lakeside in full bridal gear to see if the man she desired would propose or "leave her waiting at the altar" like Miss Havisham.

Within this popular climate, the show that stands out is the cable series Sex and the City. It is considered by many to be a positive portrayal of the lives of single women. The four heroines are sexually adventurous, professionally successful, wealthy, gorgeous, and glamorous. Of course, the show revolves around their sexual relationships with men. To that extent, the weekly plots are Richardsonian, female destiny still reduced to the erotic. Yet the show also stresses the centrality of female friendship. What I want to focus on, however, is the common thread that runs between this contemporary show and the novels of my study. For Sex and the City's heroine, Carrie Bradshaw, not only is (in the lexicon of the show) "single and fabulous," she betrays an inclination to *remain* so. And she finds herself pelted by

those old "avenging stones," the charges of implausibility-- as does the star and executive producer, Sarah Jessica Parker.

In the 2001 season of the show, Carrie finds herself engaged to Aidan, a man as unobjectionable as Burney's suitor, Thomas Barlow. For Carrie, too, something is wrong. She feels uncomfortable sporting his engagement ring, and wears it around her neck instead of on her finger. One day she and her friend Miranda go to a bridal shop to try on dresses. When Carrie beholds her reflection she is seized by a panic attack and breaks out in hives. She has to rip her way out of the dress. Finally, she breaks her engagement. What was so interesting to me was the way Parker, as star and executive producer, was forced to defend Carrie's choice. For to her twenty-first-century audience, Carrie's refusal of marriage simply *made no sense*. When Parker appeared on a late-night talk show after this episode, she was booed in Carrie's stead. After it was announced that the show was going into its last season, Parker was asked (in a Barbara Walters interview) if Carrie would ultimately marry. Parker suggested that Carrie might be single at the end, and she was met with groans. Parker rushed to her character's defense, explaining that Carrie might be more content single than married; that the most important thing was for Carrie to be content. Nobody seemed to buy it.

The show's penultimate season was particularly striking in the way it highlighted the figure I have found in the

works of Burney, Austen, and Brontë. Here was the figure of a young woman who might not be heading toward the "ordinary destiny"; the traditional "vie d'une femme." Here was the figure of a woman working out her "individual plans and purposes" and looking for models of other women who had done so. Our modern heroine was trying to read her future through the glimpses provided by whatever precedents she could find. And these seemed to be as meagre as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the producer was in the same quandary as the authors of my study. She was warned that the "discriminating public" would not stand for a heroine as exemplary spinster.

In one episode, Carrie is enjoying her freedom as a newly single woman. She goes to French movies, to museums, and to restaurants by herself. One rainy day, though, she tries to get a table in a diner and is shooed away with the command "singles at the counter!" She finally finds a spot next to a crazy sixtyish woman who commiserates, "we single girls gotta have a port in a storm." She informs Carrie, "I used to be like you"--signalling her function as a cautionary figure. Then she tells her spinster tale: She broke up with her boyfriend twenty years earlier, hoping someone better would come along; and he never did. Now her sole pleasure in life is "lithium-laced ice cream." What kind of precedent is this?

The episode that most explicitly takes on the issue of spinsterhood centers around Charlotte's thirty-sixth

birthday. Contemplating the prospect of growing older unmarried, Miranda asks why "we get stuck with 'old maid' and 'spinsters' and men get to be 'bachelors' and 'playboys'?" Carrie tries to buoy their spirits. "I say we spinsters take back Manhattan," she offers, tentatively reclaiming this terminology. At Carrie's behest the four friends take a trip to Atlantic City to celebrate Charlotte's birthday. On the way there they find themselves on the "old lady express"--a bus full of elderly women. Carrie suggests that the friends "need an emotional retirement plan" because "at the end of the line it's just gonna be us ladies riding a bus." Later Carrie tells Charlotte that since men die first anyway, the friends should "skip all the drama and enjoy each other's company, now." Charlotte, more traditional, rejects this proposal. She wants the drama of love, marriage, and children. "That's life!" she insists; "That's everything!" For her, drama--plot--continues to hinge on erotics and reproduction. Spinsterhood still connotes the absence of plot. Nevertheless, at the end of the trip the women are laughing together on the bus home, playing a hand of the card game Old Maid.

It is still unclear how the show will end; but it is clear that this contemporary television show exhibits the same concerns and constraints as the works of Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë. Through them all rises the figure of the heroine as both reader and writer, wondering what stories it is possible to tell about single

women. And even today, it is not quite possible to tell such a story to the general public. What is possible to tell is still only the story of the attempt to tell it. I hope that Carrie will be single at the end of the series. She may not have "solved" the problem of the spinster plot; but she will be a model of one who tried. She will by no means be the first. Since Brontë, other women writers have attempted to tell this story. From Gaskell's Cranfordians, to Woolf's Lily Briscoe, to Barbara Pym's "excellent women" and beyond, the spinster has struggled into view. Sex and the City will simply bring her to a wider audience; and from the thread of her spinster plot, others may be spun.

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