Women without Means -
An Analysis of Female Caricatures and Ironic Effect in Jane Austen’s *Emma* and *Pride & Prejudice*

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Spring -13
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Abstract

Jane Austen’s novels include various degrees of social satire. Part of her social satire exposes the social and financial vulnerability of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This comes through in the characters Miss Bates in *Emma* and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. This essay will show how these characters are both double. On the surface they are caricatures: characters with personal traits that are exaggerated for ironic effect. Looking beyond the caricature, these characters are also statements about female social vulnerability.

As I show in an analysis of irony, based upon Linda Hutcheon’s theory, the degree of irony differs. While Miss Bates is treated rather kindly, Mrs Bennet is not shown any mercy. I analyse the difference between the two caricatures against the background of Jane Austen’s own situation in life when writing the two novels; the young Austen who was an observer and critic of the busy, husband hunting mothers at social events, and the older more forgiving Austen, herself a spinster living in small circumstances.
Introduction

Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony.
-- Jane Austen

Economic and social vulnerability for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was based upon their marital status. A single woman from the upper- or middle–class had no proper means of income. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

For women with no inheritance to fall back on, marriage was a desperate economic need, especially in a society that afforded very little opportunity or sanction for middle–class women to earn a living.

(29f)

As it was not suitable for a woman to have a profession, a woman with neither relations nor employer was in danger of slipping off the scale of gentility altogether. In short, the loss of economic stability inevitably led to a change in social status. Hence, becoming an old maid was not considered a desirable fate. The only chance for a woman without wealth to have a “career,” that is, securing economic and social stability, was for her to marry (Mukherjee 29). There is no doubt that marriage, as Mukherjee expresses it, served as a ”nodal point” for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (29). In fact this nodal point includes the concerns with property inheritance and economic survival. The paradox of real life, Mukherjee concludes, was that those without a private income needed marriage most urgently, and those with an income were the most sought after (30). It is not surprising that female poverty and the social system of marriage are two recurrent themes in Jane Austen’s novels. Since Jane Austen wrote realistically of life in a country society she could not have ignored marriage.

Both *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* include satirical portraits of women who are financially vulnerable: Miss Bates, who is a kind yet an extremely talkative old maid, and Mrs Bennet, who is loud, ignorant and nervous. Miss Bates is quite happy and content in her unfortunate situation and very thankful for all her friends. However, she is not always treated with respect, because she is poor. As a poor old maid trying her best to survive on a very small income, she has sunk from her former high status in the social circle she belongs to. Mrs Bennet is terrified of ending up in Miss Bates’s situation. She is obsessed with marrying her girls well,
and with the entail. The entail of course means that on Mr Bennet’s death their estate will slip out of her hands and go to a distant male relative, leaving her without home, status or property. Mrs Bennet’s fight to get her daughters married as well as possible is understandable from the historical situation, as this is the only way to make sure that her daughters, and she herself, will live on economically and socially secure.

The fact that women were very financially vulnerable was something Austen was keenly aware of as a woman of these times. She seemingly created her stories from her own experience as part of these social circles and as a shrewd observer of country life and social standings. This relationship between an author’s work and his/her own experience is expressed by Henry James, who makes much of such life lessons:

> Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. (qtd. in Fullbrook 40)

However, Austen’s life changed dramatically from her first draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, finished in 1797, until the publication of *Emma* more than fifteen years later (Aitken Hodge 78). These changes in life experience can be related to her novels and consequently to the tone and characters in them.

If examining where Jane Austen was in her life when writing the two novels what we know about her as a person can be used to create an understanding of how her writing evolved. Our knowledge of Jane Austen, as Virginia Woolf describes it in her essay, “Jane Austen,” is drawn from her letters, gossip and her own books.

It is well documented that when Austen wrote the first complete draft of *Pride and Prejudice*, she was in her early twenties and living at home with her family. As a young girl she has been described by Mrs Mitford as “the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband hunting butterfly” (qtd. in Woolf 16). Austen was fond of dancing, even excelled in it, and attended numerous social events within her class, the landed gentry (Tave 213). The probability that she must have come across husband-hunting mothers like Mrs Bennet at these events is rather high. However, alongside Mrs Bennet and the unforgiving portrait of her, Charlotte Lucas’ reality and practical decision to marry Mr Collins despite his ridiculousness, shows that Austen was already aware of the limited life choices and chances at an early age (*Pride and Prejudice* 85).
Much had altered in Austen’s life by the time when she wrote *Emma* in 1815. By then she was 40 years old, and an old maid, living with her mother, spinster sister and a friend in a small house supported by her brother who lived at an inherited estate nearby. Although never rich in her younger years, when her father lived Austen was at least used to a comfortable life. By the time when she wrote *Emma* she was poor, withdrawn from public life, and considered herself as an old maid.

Later in life Austen was described by Mrs Mitford again as:

> . . . stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of single blessedness that ever existed . . . she was no more regarded in society than a poker or firescreen . . . the case is very different now, she is still a poker but a poker of whom everybody is afraid . . . (Woolf 16)

Yet Austen was loved by her family who were fond and proud of her because of her talents, virtues and engaging manners (Woolf 16).

To sum up Austen’s documented character we could see her as Woolf does:

> Charming but perpendicular, loved at home but feared by strangers, biting of tongue but tender of heart – these contrasts are by no means incompatible, and when we turn to the novels we shall find ourselves stumbling there too over the same complexities in the writer. (16)

In this essay I intend to show how Miss Bates and Mrs Bennet both show the vulnerability of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They are presented in similar ways, in that they are caricatures and double characters. However, the effect of irony differs. I will consider the novel’s attitude to the two characters in light of Jane Austen’s own situation in life when writing the two novels. We may expect a harsher treatment of an old maid by the young Austen than by the older Austen, herself an old maid. I will use the theory of irony by Linda Hutcheon and Claire Colebrook as a basis for an analysis of the degree of social satire, and the ironic treatment of the two characters.
Previous Research

In this section I will discuss briefly how the view of Austen’s work has changed over time, with attention to the realism of the novels, as this is crucial in establishing that Austen was a socially conscious writer. In addition, I will include a discussion of the different views of the politics of her novels, and of the gender aspects which are central to my subject.

Critics have different views of the general political tendency of Austen’s novels. Firstly, the view of Jane Austen as an author has changed over time, from her being conceived as having no politics, “to one who works consistently through the major political debates of her age” (Fullbrook 39). As Kate Fullbrook shows, in modern times we have left the idea about the “gentle Jane” behind us; the thought of her being an ignorant spinster sitting at home in her cottage, not knowing or caring about the world outside her little circle, where she made gentle fun of the world within her circle and the people inhabiting it, is no longer valid (39). Instead, Fullbrook argues, there is a new, “revised” Jane Austen, fitted for our modern view of the world (39). It is not a simple picture, however; to judge from modern critics, she seems to be:

. . . a curious cross between a politically sophisticated and committed Tory idealist who crusades against anything threatening the steady Christian gentry society that she loves, and a passionate supporter of radical ideas relating to the rights of women. (Fullbrook 39)

This shows that modern critics do acknowledge that Jane Austen was concerned with the rights of women and thus supports my claim that Miss Bates and Mrs Bennet can be seen as statements of female vulnerability. As such they showcase the limited powers women had and consequently the vulnerable economic and social situation it left them in.

“It is a truth generally acknowledged” that Jane Austen is one of the most researched authors of all times, and many critics have dealt with the social status of female characters in Austen’s novels. One of them is David Spring who claims that Austen’s major occupation was the fate of women in her neighbourhood (68). Another critic, among the many who have treated this subject, is Edward Copeland, who argues that “Jane Austen is a shrewd observer of the economic terrain of her class and always from the economically marginal female member of it” (145). There is thus a general agreement that Austen had a keen awareness of women’s
economical vulnerability in her time, and that this vulnerability is linked to the characters’ marital status.

In fact, all of Jane Austen’s novels concern the institution of marriage, and all her heroines are young women just at that time in life before they fall in love and find a partner in marriage. This may be because romantic love, as Mary Poovey claims, proved a rare opportunity for a woman of Jane Austen’s time to “exercise fantasies of autonomy and power” (396).

The courtship theme in Austen’s novels serves many purposes. The aspect that is of some relevance to this essay is that this was indeed a changing point in every young woman’s life at the time. This was in reality a time when young women had the chance to change their life forever and to steer it into another direction if they were lucky or played their cards right. However, the young eighteenth- or nineteenth-century woman could rarely be direct. She had to make a man choose her, and not openly make the choice herself. However, young women of this time did have the chance to refuse a man, but they had to face the social and economic consequences. Anna Quindlen writes about Jane Austen that “. . . men, money and marriage, [was] the battlefield for women of her day” (100).

Kate Fullbrook expresses the same idea when she claims that the time of courtship was a phase in life when “sexual display became overt and in which absolute female powerlessness is temporarily suspended” (43). Temporary female power of freedom is shown mainly in the right to refuse a proposal which is indeed used by Austen for analysis of social values and pressures (Fullbrook 43). In fact, the right of refusal is used by all of Jane Austen’s heroines at one time or another. One of Jane Austen’s heroes is putting this into words: “In both [a country dance and in matrimony] man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power to refuse” (Northanger Abbey 74). This is a fact that is commented on or hinted at in Pride and Prejudice on several occasions, the clear example of course being Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr Collins. The significance this limited power of refusal has for my analysis is to highlight the limited power of women at this time.

As I will demonstrate in my analysis, the way that Mrs Bennet is obsessed with property inheritance and economic survival only confirms the realism of the pressing gender issues represented in Austen’s novels. However, since Austen wrote in an ironic mode, the criticism of the vulnerable situation of women of her time in is not overtly displayed.
Austen’s social criticism is thus given indirectly. She wrote in a comic style and used irony as a means to create a social criticism. What can be achieved by such irony is to entertain and be critical at the same time. The criticism comes across as less severe. However, as I will elaborate on in the next section, there is a scale of severity in irony. The tone of irony is not one and the same all the time. The degrees of ironic affect the caricatures, as I will show.

**Theory and Method**

When looking up the term satire in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* we learn that it is “an artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule.” We also learn that caricature may be used to” inspire social reform.” This is the case in Austen’s novels, as we shall see. Furthermore, this also shows that these terms can be used consistently and are often connected.

In my analysis I rely mainly on two theorists of irony: Linda Hutcheon’s *Irony’s Edge*, which is not concerned with eighteenth-century irony but deals with the social and formal dimensions of irony. Irony,, according to her, can be used to create different effects and interpretations. Hutcheon writes that there is a range of ironic effect spanning from “cool detachment to engaged hostility” (48). These different levels or tones and their functions are, according to Hutcheon, “organized on a kind of sliding scale,” ranging from the most benign to a point where irony is used as a “strategy of provocation” (3). In the end it is the way irony is presented by the author and the interpretation of the reader that decides the effect of irony. It is, in other words, open to interpretation.

Claire Colebrook’s study, *Irony*, gives us a more general and classic idea of irony, starting with the general definition that irony is a way of saying what is contrary to what is meant (1). Consequently, reading ironically means not to take a text at its word; it means looking beyond the standard use of words and exchanging this for what they might really mean (18). However, Colebrook is in agreement with Hutcheon that irony and its effect depend on the communication between the author and the reader. Even the simplest and most stable forms of irony rely on the audience or hearer recognizing that what the speaker says cannot be what she means (Colebrook 18).
There is, in other words, a bond between the author, or ironist, and the reader. We are, for instance, given hints how the narrator of a novel perceives different characters or caricatures and how she wants us to share her view of them. The interpreter is the one who attributes irony: in other words, she is the one who decides whether the utterance is ironic and what particular ironic meaning it might have (Colebrook 22).

The main point of interest in Hutcheon’s work for my essay is her claim that irony is never as clear cut as saying the contrary to what is meant. According to her, there is always an edge to irony: it is “a weighed mode of expression as it is asymmetrically unbalanced towards the silent and the unsaid” (46). This balance, again, is partly due to the attitude between the ironist and the interpreter: “Irony involves the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude, and this is where the emotive or affective dimension also enters” (46). As I compare the caricatures from Pride and Prejudice and Emma, I will consider the difference in emotive effect.

As Hutcheon claims, irony has to do with the “expressive function” in language and works through indirection. When the irony is severe, as in satire, it is a “weapon of contempt” more powerful precisely because of its indirection (49f). This is the case in Emma, for example, since the narrator does not explicitly say that the treatment of Miss Bates is wrong, or that in Pride and Prejudice Mrs Bennet is ridiculous when trying to give her daughters a better life. However, we understand through indirection that the narrator wants to make this point. Mrs Bennet’s desperate actions, for example, make her comic and unlikable.

What goes into creating a caricature? Firstly, a caricature is a reduction of a character’s personality and characteristics to a few traits. Exaggerating those traits for effect is essential for the making of a caricature. All character portrayal is selective, as D W Harding claims, but a caricature resembles the stereotype in its incompleteness as characters (88). However, the reader does not look for an explanation of behaviour in areas that the author chooses to avoid; we accept the superficiality of a caricature. James Sutherland makes a point about the purpose of the caricature, in that the satirist is a reformer who “wishes to restore the balance, to correct the error; and often it must be admitted, to correct or punish the wrongdoer” (4). To do this effectively, he continues, the satirist must magnify, diminish, distort or even cheat to get the result. The effect, again, is dependent on the reader:

Satire is not for the literal-minded. It exists on two levels, the overt and the implied: and can only function properly when the tact and the
intelligence and the imagination of the satirist are met by corresponding response in the reader. (Sutherland 20)

Consequently we are reminded that the communication within irony is not explicit but indirect and that its interpretation relies on the communication between the satirist and the reader.

**Analysis**

In this section I intend to analyse the characters of Miss Bates and Mrs Bennet to show that they are indeed caricatures and as such can be seen as tools in Austen’s social satire. I will also show that they are double characters and discuss the difference in ironic effect.

**Miss Bates**

Miss Bates is a character with a double side to her. As a caricature she is ridiculous, shown for instance in her excessive speeches and exaggerated gratitude. However, she is at the same time very real, in the sense that she makes a statement about female social vulnerability; she is a portrait of a woman in an unfair position that was a fact for many English women at the time. To consider Miss Bates’ social status in relation to the socio-historical conditions for single women of small means of the time, I find it important to begin by considering her introduction in the novel.

Miss Bates is introduced as a character that “enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married” (*Emma* 11). Indeed, the sentence that introduces Miss Bates is quite revealing in consideration of how historical women of her situation were usually treated, as she enjoyed a most “uncommon degree of popularity” for an old maid (my emphasis). From this we can deduce that the society Miss Bates lives in values youth, good looks, and money, which are all qualities that the heroine, Emma Woodhouse, possesses. Women at this time who did not possess any of these things, as in Miss Bates’ case, were not thought highly of or perhaps not thought of at all.

Moreover, in order to understand the relevance of the socio-historical circumstances it is necessary to recall Miss Bates’ story. She spent her youth in the vicarage in Highbury enjoying the respect that particular status in society gave her, but at her father’s death she and her mother were left to survive on a small income. Miss Bates is at the time of the main events in the novel an old maid, living with her mother, who is of failing health, in a smaller
apartment above a shop on the main street of Highbury (Emma 12). In addition to becoming poor, which undoubtedly alters her living conditions remarkably, her situation as a single woman without fortune has made her fall in social status from a high position to a low position. This is commented on by the full characters in the novel, for example by Mr Knightley when he scolds Emma about her behaviour towards Miss Bates at the picnic of Box Hill, saying that Emma owes her respect not only because of her situation, but because of her fall in status; she is poor, she has sunk from the comforts she was born to, and if she lives to old age, must probably sink more (246). Indeed, this comment by Mr Knightley shows that there is room for us to sympathize with Miss Bates. As he commands Emma to show compassion, he also tells the reader to do so.

Since she has no relatives to support her, Miss Bates is dependent on her friends’ and neighbours’ good will: She was “…surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing” (12). Furthermore, she is never complaining or bitter about her bad fortune in life:

She was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will. It was her own universal good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved everybody was interested in everybody’s happiness, quick-sighted to everybody’s merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature. (12)

She is, due to her contented temper, a happy and caring person; her unfortunate position in society is never commented on by herself in the novel, but it is discussed by others.

The issue of being a poor old maid is discussed by Emma. Early in the novel she and Harriet are talking about love and marriage. Harriet is astonished by Emma’s intention not to marry and thus exclaims: “But then, to be an old maid at last like Miss Bates!” Emma replies that if she thought she would end up like Miss Bates she would marry tomorrow and concludes her reply by stating that there cannot be any likeness between her and Miss Bates except being unmarried (55). However, Harriet is not convinced but continues: "But still, you will be an old maid! -- and that's so dreadful!" (55). Here I will give Emma’s reply in full because of its revealing truth about the society that Emma represented and its opinion of unmarried women and money:

1 All further references to the novel will be given by page numbers
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 any body else . . . (55)

Hence, if a woman was a poor old maid she would be considered pitiful but if she had money, she would be considered a respectable single woman (Cf. Mukherjee 43). Obviously, as Mukherjee also points out, money could only be acquired by a woman by inheritance. We are reminded that nineteenth-century women who expected an inheritance had all the advantage. It is clear from this that the two young women characters here speak with different attitudes towards marriage due to their different economic and social status. Harriet, who has no fortune, is horrified by the idea of ending up a pitiful old maid like Miss Bates. This was indeed something which could be a probable fate for her if she did not marry well. Emma, on the other hand, with her large fortune to fall back on, is quite rightly not worried at all. In short, as Emma very level-headedly points out, “it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public” (55).

Thus, having explained Miss Bates’ character in the novel and the general opinion of and connection between poverty, status and spinsterhood, I will continue to analyse her characteristics as a caricature and the degree of the irony in the portrait.

Miss Bates’ character is not just a poor old maid; she is also known as “a great talker upon little matters” (12). It is her ability talk and to do so excessively that is her most pronounced trait. Indeed, it is this exaggerated feature that makes her a caricature. We may recall D.W Harding’s view that all character portrayal is selective, but that the caricature is a simplified and exaggerated character (81). As Harding remarks, the caricature in this sense has a likeness to the stereotype. In this case the stereotype would be the exceedingly talkative and silly old maid.

Miss Bates, Harding claims, is labelled as a caricature largely by being displayed against non-contributing listeners (85). Real characters may have long speeches, sometimes too long and prosy, but they are always offered as part of true conversation. The caricature of the
domineering or talkative person, by contrast, is largely “secured by eliminating any response that could establish social interchange” (Harding 85). Miss Bates is given long meandering monologues in the novel, where she does not censor any thoughts but says everything that comes into her mind. Her speech does not have any clear thought behind it and no standard punctuation. On one occasion Emma is visiting Miss Bates and inquires after Jane. Miss Bates is very grateful for her asking and is looking for a letter from Jane to read to Emma. She says:

Oh! here it is. I was sure it could not be far off; but I had put my huswife upon it, you see, without being aware, and so it was quite hid, but I had it in my hand so very lately that I was almost sure it must be on the table . . . I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only just under my huswife . . . (100)

As is clearly shown in this passage, Miss Bates gives all her thoughts to her silent listener. They come quite fast-paced, as what she says is broken up by commas, which makes her detailed information dense and cut up. It seems to continue without a real sense of direction. Moreover, the narrator gives information on her lengthy speech “all this spoken extremely fast obliged Miss Bates to stop for breath” (101).

In her analysis of the representation of Miss Bates in film adaptations, Sue Parrill argues that Miss Bates’ speech in the novel, as in the cinematic versions, is characterized by excessive repetition. An example of this is shown in the paragraph quoted above: “Oh here it is . . . I knew it could not be far off . . . so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is . . .” (100). Thus we can clearly see that her speech is moving in circles. She is giving a lot of unnecessary information and in six lines she has managed to mention twice how she accidentally put her huswife on the letter, once in the second line and then again in the sixth (100). She also uses various forms of gracious phrases such as: “you are so kind! you are very obliging!” repetitively in her speech (100f). Miss Bates’ habitual repetitiveness can be explained partly by the necessity for her to repeat everything she says for her deaf mother to understand her: “My mother’s deafness is very trifling you see - just nothing at all. By only raising my voice, and saying anything two or three times over, she is sure to hear . . .” (101). As Parrill notes, it is ironic how the talkative Miss Bates must live with a person who can hear so little of what she says (3).

However, it can still be debated whether Miss Bates is really a caricature. As I have shown in my analysis so far her character is effectively exaggerated for comic effect. As a silly old
maid who is an overbearing talker she is comic and yet quite harmless. It is thus not a severe caricature that is presented to us, but nonetheless a caricature. Her character is to some degree ridiculous, as Harding points out, and also a representation of a stereotype of the time: the silly talkative old maid. However, Sue Parrill disagrees with Harding and refers to Miss Bates as too established and complicated a character to be cast as a stereotype. She argues that even though she is not as fully developed as Emma or Mr Knightley, she has a clear and pronounced personality which makes her very real. She does not correspond to the typical picture of a caricature - a very simple and uncomplicated character (Parrill 2). However, although she might not be a typical severe caricature, she is indeed simplified and ridiculed enough to count as a stereotype of sorts, and as that she can thus be used to make an ironic point.

Bearing in mind Hutcheon’s scale of severity in irony I place Miss Bates as a caricature in the more benevolent, ludic part at the lower end of the scale (45). As a caricature, she is a weapon in Jane Austen’s satire about women’s roles and fates in her society, although treated with a mix of ridicule and respect. Although Miss Bates is a silly and talkative old maid, her life was a reality for many women of her time.

From the beginning of the novel, as I have discussed earlier in this analysis, we are made to sympathise with Miss Bates, both by the narrator’s comment and by Mr Knightley when he guides Emma on moral issues. We as readers can’t help but like her, although we at the same time find her silly. Miss Bates is clearly not to be ignored in the novel. She is quite a prominent character and has an important part to play as a realistic portrait of a single woman without fortune. In addition to this, readers who do take her seriously and actually listen to what she says can be told a few truths long before they are revealed by the plot.

Miss Bates relates everything she sees and hears and therefore in the midst of her scattered speeches truths lie hidden for those characters kind enough to take their time with her. One example of this is when Frank Churchill during a social occasion mistakenly gives out information about Doctor Perry and a carriage. He tries to laugh it away by saying that he must have dreamt it but Miss Bates reveals this to be a secret only the Bates, Jane Fairfax and the Coles knew about:

. . . there was such an idea last spring; for Mrs Perry half mentioned it to my mother, and the Coles knew of it as well as ourselves – but it was
quite a secret, known to nobody else, and only thought about three days. (226)

This shows that the attentive reader/listener is given a clue by Miss Bates to a connection between the Bates’ family and Frank Churchill that is not yet revealed. Later on in the novel we find out that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are secretly engaged and have been corresponding just as secretly for quite some time. This complexity of nonsense and hidden truths is a characteristic of Miss Bates speech.

Mrs Bennet

Another caricature created by Austen is Mrs Bennet. If Miss Bates is ridiculous in her role of caricature, Mrs Bennet is very much more so. In fact she is nothing but ridiculous. However, just like Miss Bates she has a double side to her. On the surface she is a ridiculous, tactless mother in the marriage circus. However, she is also aware of social and economic realities of her time. As I will argue, the driving force of Mrs Bennet’s actions is that she is desperately frightened of her and the girls ending up like Mrs and Miss Bates - herself widowed and the girls becoming old maids. This was a fate, feared by many, as shown by the example of Miss Bates - poverty, loss of social status and a dependency on others.

As the mother of five girls in their teens and early twenties Mrs Bennet is introduced as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Pride & Prejudice 4). There are two subjects that dominate her life and conversation: the problem of getting her girls married and the “injustice of the entail” (Watt 77). To discuss Mrs Bennet’s social status in relation to the socio-historical conditions of the time, and thus explain what motivates her, I will make a short summary of the social standings and her family background.

One social factor that Jane Austen was very aware of was money, and we are told the sources of income of many of her characters (Tanner 13). Spring claims that “an appropriate income, which Jane Austen called ‘independence’... was most desirable of all social states” (61). To come across this desirable independence a woman had to participate in the positional competition that, according to Spring, was widespread in the society Jane Austen wrote about.

2 All further references to the novel will be given by page numbers
People of the time had a sharp eye for “social escalators,” were skilled in getting on them, and also mostly very skilled at staying on them. Moreover, as Spring claims, marriage, of course, had an important place in this positional competition (61). Jane Austen obviously had thorough knowledge of this. Indeed, so has Mrs Bennet.

In the beginning of the novel Mrs Bennet is vexed with Mr Bennet for not visiting Mr Bingley, who is, as we know, a wealthy single young man of four or five thousand a year (3). Mrs Bennet is very keen to use him in her “positional competition” to marry off one of her daughters and thus secure a good social position. However, she cannot introduce herself and her daughters unless Mr Bennet presents himself to Mr Bingley first. She might therefore have to depend on one of the other local women characters who are already acquainted with Mr Bingley, to make the introduction. She expresses her unhappiness a conversation with Elizabeth;

- We are not in a way to know what Mr Bingley likes: said her mother resentfully, since we are not to visit.
- But you forget, mama said Elizabeth, that we shall meet him at the assemblies, and that Mrs Long has promised to introduce him.
- I do not believe Mrs Long will do any such a thing. She has two nieces of her own. She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, I have no opinion of her. (5)

Thus she accuses Mrs Long of acting in competition with her. Mrs Long would not, Mrs Bennet suspects, want to introduce Mrs Bennet and her five daughters as she has two single nieces of her own; she would naturally want Mr Bingley for them. In short, the conversation shows that these young men with a fortune were fair play to compete about, and that there was foul play in this competition. Of the participants in this game, Jane Austen can play out absurdities and be moral at the same time. In addition, she does reveal how vulnerable women’s positions were in this society.

Mrs Bennet comes from a non-landowning middle class home; her father was an attorney and had left her a fortune (155). Mr Bennet, a landowning gentleman, had been captivated by her youth, beauty and appearance of good humour, and married her. However, early on in their marriage her “weak understanding and illiberal mind” had ended the possibility for him to respect and esteem her (155). Thus, Mr Bennet had withdrawn from her and domestic life into his fondness for the country and books (155). In short, he had withdrawn from parental concern, mostly treated his wife with humorous contempt, and left the household and the
girls’ upbringing and concerns to Mrs Bennet entirely. As she had already married one step up in class, the socially conscious Mrs Bennet would now strive to do even better for the girls. As Marvin Mudrick maintains, her marriage to a man who treats her with contempt, and the constant material and economic concerns usual for a woman of her class, has combined become the driving force of her life (79). That is, by settling her daughters in prudent marriages she would secure herself and her daughters to a comfortable, and hopefully even better life materialistically (Mudrick 79). Moreover, as mentioned, the paradox of real life, as Mukherjee calls it, was that those without private income needed marriage most urgently, and those with income were the most sought after (30). Thus, since the Bennet girls were without fortune, Mrs Bennet might well feel that she had to play quite hard and loud to get them and their virtues noticed.

Interestingly, we can draw conclusions of Mrs Bennet’s economic nature as we are told that marrying off her daughters was the business of her life. The word business has an economic reference. Similarly, Mrs Bennet goes to quite far lengths to get her daughters noticed by rich male characters. One prime example of this is sending Jane off on horseback to Netherfield in the rain, forcing her having to stay the night to encourage Bingley’s courtship (21). This is a quick decision by Mrs Bennet, made without her caring too much about Jane’s health. Hence, she is acting like a cold cunning business woman, selling wares rather than marrying off daughters. This can be seen as a definite sign of a bad economic drive, Jane being treated as something “to sell” rather than a beloved daughter.

In addition to the fact that Mrs Bennet is an active and driven participant in the competition for social and economic positioning, she also has a more pressing and acute motive for her loud and sometimes vulgar action. Longbourn estate is not to be inherited by any of the Bennet girls but will at the death of Mr Bennet go to a distant relative; the entail was a patriarchal way of keeping the estate intact down a male line, leaving the female line of the family without home and almost nothing to live on. Nina Auerbach describes Mrs Bennet as a constant shrill reminder of the overpowering entail and argues that the author presents Longbourn as an inherently lost and already half vanished mirage (330). If this is how Mrs Bennet perceives the situation of her life, it would explain her desperation. Thoughts and fantasies about this occupy her mind a great deal and she often complains of it. At one point in the novel, for instance, she is bitter and paranoid about Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins as the future masters of Longbourn. She talks to Mr Bennet about how she cannot bear it. He just sarcastically, in his usual manner, replies his wife: “My dear do not give way to such gloomy
thoughts. Let us hope for better things. Let us flatter ourselves that I might be the survivor” (89). Fay Weldon claims that Mrs Bennet is the only one in the novel “with the slightest notion of the desperation of the world” (quoted in Fullbrook 49f). Indeed, Mrs Bennet is the only one in the Bennet family who is seemingly concerned and truly understands the predicament the entail has left them in, both economically and socially.

Despite Mrs Bennet’s very real issues and concerns which I have discussed so far, she is presented to the reader in the form of a caricature. In the tradition of caricature her character is simplified and exaggerated as she only concerns herself with what her introduction asks of her; marriage, social occasions and gossip. She is allowed a few ways of reaction, to have a nervous fit or to be vexed. She is very changeable and her conversation and reactions display her lack of education and intelligence, making her tactless enough not to hide her economic drive and often be an embarrassment to the superior members of her family. She is never allowed to grow as a character or stray from that path. Similarly, as Mary Lascelles argues, the first impression of Mrs Bennet we are given remains for the rest of the novel. As she is a woman of mean understanding, her comical essence being that she understands very little, she cannot evolve like a round and complex character would (151). She therefore has to remain incapable of any but her “habitual, and therefore inapposite reaction to life in all its variety” (Lascelles 151).

However, as Mrs Bennet is a character that we often come across in the novel she is not to be a dead weight but has to be able to be surprising, as the full characters, to keep up our interest (Lascelles 151). Lascelles argues that the author solves this by giving her the entail, which is an important feature in the novel, to react to in various ways. It makes her able to play out her full register of silliness, stupidity, nervousness and complaining:

And so she leaves us with the assurance that, as she had been talking of this subject before the story began, so she will continue after its close, with ever fresh turns of absurdity, happily corresponding with the busy futility of her actions. (Lascelles151ff)

This describes a caricature. We are at no point in the novel presented with any chance of sympathizing with her, but since she is able to play out her full register of loud and ignorant reactions she does manage to keep up the readers interest.
As Harding argues, a “caricature is maintained by concentrating on the outer layers of social behaviour” (102). This is why we cannot know Mrs Bennet as a real person. If she would have more real feelings and morality the caricature and comic character would dissolve (Harding 102). Mudrick similarly claims that one of Jane Austen’s triumphs in *Pride and Prejudice* is how she will not “sentimentalize Mrs Bennet once she has fashioned her to hard and simple consistency” (80). Although Mrs Bennet is funny, the author, as Harding holds, goes on “detesting her” (12f).

Except for the narrator’s comments on Mrs Bennet we learn most of her traits through dialogue. As this is a novel with a great deal of dialogue Mrs Bennet’s character is built up and presented to us every time she speaks. Mrs Bennet’s speech is, according to Mukherjee, “frothy, formless and instantaneous” (123). She tends to over-use adjectives and superlatives. One example is when she describes the assembly where they first meet Mr Bingley. She exclaims to her husband that they had a “most delightful evening, a most excellent ball” (my emphasis 9). Later on the subject of Mr Bingley she declares that she is “delighted with him” (my emphasis 10) and that Mr Bingley is “so excessively handsome!” (my emphasis 10)

Mrs Bennet does not use speech as an expression of clearly thought out ideas. With her, speech becomes rather a meandering monologue with no controlling logic or punctuation, much as Miss Bates does. As an uneducated silly woman she does not censor her speech but blurs out in public all that comes into her mind (Mukherjee 126). An example of this is at the assembly and dinner at Longbourn. Mrs Bennet starts by chatting about the dinner and how successful it had been and so much better than the Lucas’s lunch. She continues without pause or reply from anyone in the same monologue, and moves on to how well Jane looked and then further on to Mrs Long’s nieces, who apart from being well behaved turned out not to be handsome and that she liked them “prodigiously” (222f).

In conclusion, Mrs Bennet is shown to react to socio economic-pressures and take drastic actions to save herself and her girls from poverty and loss of social status. However, her character is simplified and exaggerated for comic and satiric effect.
Comparison

Up until now Miss Bates and Mrs Bennet have been analysed separately. It is now time to compare them more closely.

Mrs Bennet, compared to Miss Bates, has no redeeming traits. While Miss Bates is from the beginning (from her introduction) treated quite gently, both by the author and the other characters, Mrs Bennet is not once spoken up for or pardoned for anything she does. Therefore, Mrs Bennet is a more severe and purer caricature in comparison with Miss Bates.

When interpreting the character of Mrs Bennet we are, as shown in my analysis above, not treated to a sympathetic portrait of a good woman in dire circumstances. However, if we as readers choose to interpret Mrs Bennet as a woman of her time, considering the background knowledge of women’s situation, she can be seen in a more benevolent light. As Hutcheon claims, irony is always a communication between the author and the reader. Therefore, readers with the background knowledge of women’s social and economic situation can clearly see a double side to Mrs Bennet and may understand her unforgiving actions through it. Austen could hence offer social criticism through the caricature of Mrs Bennet. There are indeed critics who take this view. However to most readers, irony, as the authors “weapon of contempt,” applies to Mrs Bennet (Hutcheon 49).

Miss Bates character is in comparison with Mrs Bennet handled in a much gentler way. As shown in my analysis above she has even been questioned as a caricature by critics because of this. However, as I have shown there is sufficient exaggeration and simplification of her character to make her into a caricature or stereotype. The less severe caricature of Miss Bates can still be used as social criticism as it does highlight a common situation for a woman in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that the public was very well aware of and that the unfairness of the powerlessness they had to succumb to just because they were women. The much more forgiving portrait of Miss Bates can also be related to Jane Austen’s life situation by the time when she wrote *Emma*.

In drawing parallels with Austen’s own situation in life at the time of writing the two novels, there are similarities between her experience and the treatment of the caricatures. At the time *Pride and Prejudice* was first written, Austen was young and living a secure life at home with her family and siblings, attending dances. Her situation put her more in parallel with the heroine Elizabeth Bennet and her independent mind. There seems to be little reason for her to
“forgive” the ridiculous mother. However, we are shown that even though we cannot forgive Mrs Bennet for her actions, there is in the novel a keen understanding of why she is acting this way. However, this understanding does not lessen the ironic effect of her as nothing but ridiculous.

Miss Bates, however, is treated with sympathy despite being silly and extremely talkative. When *Emma* was written Austen had lost her father and along with her mother and older sister she was dependent on her brother for economic support. As an old maid herself and because of her real experience of that way of life, there is undoubtedly a connection between her and Miss Bates. Miss Bates is shown to be silly but the effect of her ironic treatment is mild amusement. Indeed, the tone of the novel *Emma* as a whole is much more forgiving than the comic and fast paced *Pride and Prejudice* and so is the caricature of Miss Bates.

**Conclusion**

My intention with this essay was to examine the irony with which Miss Bates in *Emma* and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* are treated. I wanted to show that both these characters are presented in the form of caricatures. Nonetheless, despite the similar presentations, the effect and the treatment of the caricatures are quite different. While we are meant to sympathize with Miss Bates as a poor old maid, we are not at one point allowed to give any pardon to the desperate Mrs Bennet’s actions.

As shown in the theory section, a caricature is a tool for the satirist or ironist to make their point without being explicit about their agenda. As irony is saying the contrary to what is meant, the real purpose of the writer is hidden. Irony works as a communication between the writer and the reader. In the end, how the irony or satire is being perceived or interpreted by the reader is the effect created.

Even though Mrs Bennet and Miss Bates both are presented as caricatures the ironic effect of the two caricatures is quite different. My claim is that they are double characters in that they represent women’s economic and social vulnerability in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. Indeed, in comparing these characters/caricatures with Jane Austen’s own situation in life when writing the novels, we can see that there is a connection between the severity of treatment of the character and the author’s own life experience.
Mrs Bennet, when simplified for comic effect, exposes her unintelligence and lack of tact. This often makes her come across as ridiculous and vulgar. This is shown in her speech as she does not censor it. Also, it is unorganized and she tends to overuse superlatives. In addition, she is shown through her actions to be quite unfeeling towards her daughters and acting like a business woman when it comes to marriage, the primary example being when she sends Jane off on horseback in the rain to force her to be in the company of Mr Bingley. Apart for the seemingly superficial and constant worry of settling her daughters with rich men she is also desperately concerned with another economic aspect of her life, the entail. The events set off all of her exaggerated characteristics and she becomes a comic monster whom we as readers have little compassion for.

Miss Bates, on the other hand, is silly, extremely grateful and talkative. These are her exaggerated features. She is given lengthy speeches at such a speed that no one has a chance to take part; they become monologues. Her excessive speeches are characterized by being unorganized and seemingly without direction. This has the effect of her talking being quite repetitive and scattered, thus difficult to listen intently to. Much of what she actually says is lost in the excess of words. However, few characters in the novel are aware that Miss Bates does hold key information about the social group of Highbury.

Miss Bates is a good example of what happened in real life to a single woman without fortune. Her lack of wealth and the fact that she was not “allowed” to work as to secure financial stability or growth, meant that she and her mother were left to live on their small inheritance or income and to make it last as long as they could. At one point in the novel Emma and Harriet are discussing Miss Bates and it is clear from that conversation that the ruling idea in the country neighbourhood society is that a character’s social status (especially women’s) and how she was treated was all down to wealth.

Mrs Bennet knows the Miss Bates of her world and my conclusion is that this is what she fears most to become: becoming a poor old maid. To avoid this she does what she can to try to secure herself and her family from economic ruin. Mrs Bennet knows to play the game of keeping her social status.

In conclusion we are shown through Emma and Pride and Prejudice that the economic and social pressures on women of Jane Austen’s time were quite severe. All this is evident through the caricatures of Miss Bates and Mrs Bennet.


