

*Why Do We Care
about Literary Characters?*



BLAKEY VERMEULE

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

© 2010 The Johns Hopkins University Press
All rights reserved. Published 2010
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vermeule, Blakey.

Why do we care about literary characters? / Blakey Vermeule.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8018-9360-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8018-9360-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Fiction—Psychological aspects. 2. Characters and characteristics in literature.
3. Psychology and literature. 4. Reader-response criticism. 5. English fiction—18th century—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN3352.P7V47 2009

809.3'927—dc22 2009002903

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.

The Johns Hopkins University Press uses environmentally friendly book materials, including recycled text paper that is composed of at least 30 percent post-consumer waste, whenever possible. All of our book papers are acid-free, and our jackets and covers are printed on paper with recycled content.

*For Khedi and Terry,
with deepest love*

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
 Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
 It makes me most uncomfortable to see
 An English spinster of the middle class
 Describe the amorous effects of "brass,"
 Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
 The economic basis of society.

(Auden 2007, 81)

Auden is right. The more I read *Emma*, the more I realize how devastating Austen's vision of human psychology is. Her characters are locked in fierce but largely unconscious battle over a small parcel of land and all the good things that flow from it. The minds of some of them are fertile tracts, growing strange plants in wild abundance; but even these tracts turn out to be wholly owned subsidiaries of the economic basis of society. So, too, with the grip and hold of social norms. Where do values come from? From the economic basis of society.

Since the fact/value distinction is part of our normal conceptual armature, this is an impossible, uncomfortable way to think. Intellectuals are somewhat used to it—or at least they are used to thinking that they think this way. Actually I don't think anybody really does or can think this way, at least not consistently. It requires too great a suspension of ordinary habits of mind, an asceticism that not even our own skeptical priesthood really practices. I once tried to remonstrate on this point with an intense young professor—a man whose visionary brilliance allowed him to think his way into and out of any problem he wanted but whose domestic life was almost parodically dedicated to bourgeois comforts. Why, I asked him, do some people struggle so hard to define a set of values for himself or herself only to end up with a hand very nearly identical to everyone else's? To his credit, he didn't pretend not to understand the question, nor did he flinch from it. Instead, he owned it and gave his answer from a stubborn commitment to the irreducible dignity of human choice. If there is a best way to do something, then people will converge on it. Like throwing free throws in basketball—there is only one way to do it well. Of course I had expected him to flagellate himself, as I tend to do, with fantasies of being caught in ever more subtle forms of thought-control and ideology—such as, if I move quickly enough, maybe I can catch myself lurking outside the invisible tracks laid down for me by discourse, culture, patriarchy, Fortune 500 companies, and/or an array of repressive state apparatuses. But I never can catch myself. There was I—an obnoxious female Quixote enjoying the lather I could get myself into—and his answer shut me up.

One thing I do know about myself: even though I may very well end up a mediocre spinster dependent on the kindness of others (and dotty over my beautiful niece), I have long since passed the point where I can adopt the winning social strategy of Miss Bates. Even suggesting that somebody so guileless, so defenseless, has a strategy—although we all know she does—is to transgress the code of civility. The code of civility does not take kindly to being torn. It grows back quickly when ruptured—indeed, Miss Bates's social strategy depends on the deep conservatism of stable human communities. Miss Bates, we recall,

enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet 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 every body, was interested in every body's happiness, quick-sighted to every body's merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body and a mine of felicity to herself. She was a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip. (Austen 2003, 22)

To intimate that this happy woman is a social player in the mode of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, or Augusta Elton is to risk being called an-imaginist. But surely Austen wants us to wonder, just a little, about how Miss Bates has achieved an "uncommon degree of popularity" when she has nothing to offer in return (and no secret horde of psychic capital to console her—"she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect" (*ibid.*)).

The puzzle of Miss Bates goes deeper, though. At the very outset of the novel whose resolution consists in the Woodhouse property at Hartfield being re-absorbed into the Knightly property at Donwell Abbey (from which it had once been cut as a notch), a happy spinster is an anomaly. In fiction, an anom-

disagreeable,—a waste of time—tiresome women—and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever, and therefore she seldom went near them” [ibid., 145]).

In return, Miss Bates allows herself to be a comic butt, and what’s worse, she has to thank everybody constantly for their favors—“so very obliged” is her mantra. How painful it must be to be “so very obliged” all the time—or at least so the narrator observes when she is talking about a different character: it is “a great deal better to choose than to be chosen, to excite gratitude than to feel it.” Miss Bates has none of these choices—not only no “power of removal” and no “power of refusal” (two abilities Emma herself longs for at different points). She has no power to choose or to excite gratitude. Let me fancifully suggest that underneath all that babble, Miss Bates is secretly, silently suffering. After all, to be utterly dependent, to be always aware that one is a grade below one’s patrons—in a society where such things are constantly measured and tacitly acknowledged—is the very antithesis of power and self-esteem. Mr. Knightley, the dominant male on the scene, is very nice about making people not feel dependent on him, but then he is an especially decorous and tactful person. This seems to be just what is required by social norms; Highbury is a place that frowns on excessive boasting and excessive displays. Like Miss Bates, Knightley has carefully adjusted his character to the niche of his circumstances: Had he been born in a different social organization, he might have been more overtly competitive—if, for example, he were a Northwest Coast T. Indian Chieftain, he would have been forced into ever more aggressive displays of gift-giving (e.g., at a potlatch, where, to mark his high status, an Indian chieftain throws food and goods on a fire).

My evidence that Miss Bates suffers more than she lets on is just how obsessed she is with status. Here is just a part of one of her speeches (describing a generous act that Frank Churchill performed for her mother):

For, would you believe it, Miss Woodhouse, there he is, in the most obliging manner in the world, fastening in the rivet of my mother’s spectacles.—The rivet came out, you know, this morning.—So very obliging!—For my mother had no use of her spectacles—could not put them on. And, by the bye, every body ought to have two pair of spectacles; they should indeed. Jane said so. I meant to take them over to John Saunders the first thing I did, but something or other hindered me all the morning; first one thing, then another, there is no saying what, you know. At one time Patty came to say she thought the kitchen chimney wanted sweeping. Oh! said I, Patty do not come with your bad news to me. Here is the rivet of your mistress’s spectacles out. Then the baked

apples came home, Mrs. Wallis sent them by her boy; they are extremely civil and obliging to us, the Wallises, always—I have heard some people say that Mrs. Wallis can be uncivil and give a very rude answer, but we have never known any thing but the greatest attention from them. And it cannot be for the value of our custom now, for what is our consumption of bread, you know? (Ibid., 220)

Miss Bates’s voice is an aggressive screen, which blocks as much as it shows. As the narrator puts it once, when Miss Bates is walking in town with Mrs. Weston, “voices approached the shop—or rather one voice and two ladies” (219). The voice swoops and drags, but it always homes back on the problem of what people owe each other. And the problem of what people owe each other is, in turn, closely related to the question of whether they stand socially above or below her, and by precisely how much. In short, Miss Bates, like many a more overtly social-climbing person, has a psyche exquisitely tuned to status. She calibrates her affections accordingly—she is much nicer to Frank Churchill than she is to her servant Patty, for example; and while she is pleased about the way Mrs. Wallis treats her, she is also wary because Mrs. Wallis has no economic motive to be kind. Miss Bates is the Greek chorus of the novel, her words a vent through which its collective unconscious comes bubbling up.

What really is the difference between an economic motive and a psychological one? What does it mean to choose something when there is a vast system around you telling you what and how to choose? What does it mean to choose when your choice is conditioned by the hydraulic pressure of other people’s choices? When you are simply part of a species acting out your species-being while believing somehow that your own choices are robust and unconditioned? So many different disciplines from the sacred (theology) to the secular (social economics) have thrived on these questions that we can be forgiven for thinking that they are central to the drama of human agency. Gary Becker, the founder of social economics, quotes a line from a review of one of his early papers: “Economics is all about choice, while sociology is all about why people have no choices” (Becker and Murphy 2000, 22).

Literature often seems to encompass both perspectives, the economic and the sociological, the perspective of individual choice and of people who have no choices. The techniques that writers have invented for expressing both situations at once are literature’s way of addressing how we form our preferences. Austen’s genius is to blend economic motives almost seamlessly with psychological ones. Compare Austen’s vision in *Emma* to Gary Becker’s vision of human choice:

Individuals still “choose” their allocations of resources when social capital is important to their utility and strongly complementary with the demand for particular goods. But . . . choices are seriously constrained, since a person’s actions are . . . partly determined by the actions of peers. Each member of a peer group may have little freedom to deviate from what other members are doing because his behavior would be mainly determined by their common culture, norms, and traditions.

When preferences sufficiently differ, everyone can choose whom to associate with. For example, peer preferences of teenagers and adults do not usually conflict, since teenagers want to be friends with other teenagers and adults prefer the company of other adults. Conflicts arise when preferences clash, so that the number of persons who want to join a particular group exceeds the number of places available. Many people want to be friendly with the rich and famous, to marry beautiful women or rich men, and to live near law-abiding and helpful families. But, alas, the number of friends of the rich, spouses of great beauties, or neighbors of good citizens is severely limited. (*Ibid.*, 23)

Suppose you were trying to devise a story to express Becker’s thoroughly unsentimental vision of human preferences. You want to shape a world in which “many people want to be friendly with the rich and famous, to marry beautiful women or rich men”—or, I might add, the converse—“and to live near law-abiding and helpful families.” But, alas! In literature as in life, “the number of friends of the rich, spouses of great beauties, or neighbors of good citizens is severely limited.” And yet your characters—or is it you?—suffer if they tear too mightily at the social fabric as they climb up it. Special scorn is reserved, even at this late date, for especially aggressive female social climbers. Social norms—which are really just signaling devices when preferences differ and information is scarce—regulate how aggressive your characters can be (Posner 2000, 41). In some small worlds, worlds in which people have to interact with one another repeatedly over time, those norms can grow so rigid that they catch at people like a stiff high collar.

The mind of man—so collared, so constrained—is a hive of subtlety. Austen practically trademarks new ways of dissecting it. Her scalpel—free indirect discourse—allows her to handle extremely volatile psychological material. The most volatile material arises when people are put in the vicinity of other people, especially people with whom they have some conflict. A wife complains about her husband in a querulous way; a young man fumes that people do not appreciate him. There is something squalid about hearing everyone else indulge

his or her petty complaints. Usually free indirect discourse is tinged with irony or worse. Authors show that human resentments are a flabby weapon in our quixotic war of all against all. The Ben Affleck character in the 2002 movie *Changing Lanes* is about two men locked into a murderous cycle of revenge: “Sometimes God just puts two men in a paper bag and says ‘let ‘er rip.’” Free indirect discourse is what it would sound like if we could put a microphone inside the heads of just one of those men but also register those thoughts in the third person. Most social interactions take place in a small world. We judge, we sum up, we put our version of events around; but so does everyone else, and the irrelevance of our views in the larger scheme of things is pathetic.

The village of Highbury is Austen’s version of God’s paper bag—a small world into which she drops her characters, giving them no way out, and then watching as they sort out resources among themselves. That they do so in a mostly civil fashion is part of the novel’s pleasure—we get to experience the vicarious frisson that comes from aggression deferred into comic play. At the risk of sounding too mechanical, the novel is a sophisticated hydraulic system for producing a guided distribution of resources. And human psychology is what makes the resource division all come out right in the end.

Human psychology, resource distribution, and the problem of living in a small world are all intimately connected: they form an axis around which facts and values rotate and converge. The problem of the small world comes up most forcefully during a conversation between Emma and Frank Churchill in which they discuss the problem of how to hold a dance at Mr. and Mrs. Weston’s house. Emma and Frank have different motivations for wanting a dance—Emma’s turns out to be somewhat vain, while Frank’s, typically, is utterly secretive. He wants to dance with his beloved—Emma believes that person to be herself, whereas we later discover that, of course, it is Jane Fairfax; Emma, meanwhile, wants to show everyone what a handsome couple she and Frank Churchill make (in an important moment of free indirect discourse, Emma thinks “they were a couple worth looking at.” Emma also wants to compete with Jane Fairfax in a contest she thinks she can win—dancing. But there are problems; the room at Randalls is too small to accommodate all the couples that would have to be invited—a problem that strikes Emma much more forcefully than it does Frank Churchill.

Emma’s ambivalence about “a crowd in a little room” is significant. The very phrase expresses some of the deepest moral, philosophical, and social concerns of Austen’s novel. For Austen’s characters, life in the small village of Highbury is very much like being a crowd in a little room, and from this social situation many of the moral and psychological facts about these characters follow. For example,

Emma laments that, after her failed matchmaking attempt with Harriet and Mr. Elton, the three of them are going to have to circulate in the same social world over and over again: they have no “power of removal”; “they must encounter each other and make the best of it” (Austen 2003, 135).

The phrase also describes the way most human beings throughout history have lived and continue to live. Sudden, constant mobility is a phenomenon of industrialization only. What would be the psychological effects of living in a crowd in a little room? It is sometimes fun to run it as a thought experiment, say, when waiting for a flight in an airport lounge: what would happen to everyone if the doors suddenly shut for the next hundred years and the group’s collective resource profile was sufficient for survival but depended on exchanging goods? The first thing that would happen is that cliques would form and dominance hierarchies would become the norm—social organization would go vertical. But this doesn’t mean that the feel of the place would be brutal. Why does it feel as if people are so much ruder in a large city than they are in a small town? Why does “small town” America stand metonymically for the all that is positive in the minds of the family-values politicians? For the simple reason that if you encounter the same people over and over again you have an incredible incentive to be known as trustworthy—reputation becomes the single most important currency that you can have; rudeness is a privilege reserved for those whom will never see you again. A corollary to this is that the skill of being able to read people correctly becomes more prized. Why? To be sure that other people are trustworthy.

In *Emma*, status hierarchies are closely connected to the theme of blindness and insight—and this is the theme to which free indirect discourse hews most closely. Consider: with two prominent exceptions, free indirect discourse in the novel is a matter of Emma’s quasi-mistaken viewpoint. (I will touch on the exceptions in a moment.) Specifically, free indirect discourse expresses Emma’s feeling that she is superior to somebody else, a viewpoint that both is and is not correct. Here is Emma on Highbury: “Highbury, the large and populous village almost amounting to a town, to which Hartfield, in spite of its separate lawn and shrubberies and name, did really belong, afforded her no equals.” An important subtheme is Emma’s feelings of rivalry towards other women. Emma on Augusta Elton (a social climber who resembles nobody so much as Emma herself):

that Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school, pert and familiar; that all her notions were drawn from one set of people, and one style of living; that if not foolish she was ignorant, and that her society would certainly

do Mr. Elton no good. Harriet would have been a better match. If not wise or refined herself, she would have connected him with those who were; but Miss Hawkins, it might be fairly supposed from her easy conceit, had been the best of her own set. The rich brother-in-law near Bristol was the pride of the alliance, and his place and his carriages were the pride of him. (Ibid., 253)

Emma on Jane Fairfax, the beautiful governess whom she may subconsciously perceive to be her rival for Frank Churchill: “She was, besides, which was the worst of all, so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved.” And in an example that combines status with rivalry (or in this case its containment), Emma thinks about Harriet Smith after first meeting her:

Encouragement should be given. Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm. (24)

The novel wants us to consider how reliable Emma’s feelings are. The examples I’ve just cited could be ironic, as when Austen immediately undercuts the objective-seeming first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* (“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”) by showing in the second sentence (“However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters”) that reality is just a collective hunch. However, like Don Quixote—a character on whom she is partly modeled—Emma is never completely wrong: Augusta Elton is a social-climbing snob, Jane Fairfax is cold and cautious, and she and Frank Churchill do make a handsome couple.

Emma’s errors of observation are closely connected to Knightley’s observational powers. The novel prizes insight, a quality the Knightley brothers have in abundance (thinks Emma: “There was no denying that those brothers had penetration”—a word Austen plays on obsessively). The highest power is being able to read other people correctly; this power, of course, Emma lacks until the very end of the novel, when she starts talking obsessively about how “blind” she has been. Meanwhile, Knightley is the silent watcher, the omniscient observer who sees everything from his “superior” position (another word Austen plays on

workerish. The worst thing is “doing good”. Their snobbery is of a vulgarity beyond belief - yahoos capering in genteel suits.” (Toynbee 2001)

Auberon Waugh would have found this delightful. He certainly relished any attention, and the less flattering the better. His style was penetrating and deflationary, as much towards his own bullet-torn carcass and dipsomaniacal friends as towards anyone else. Perhaps his deflationary stance was therapeutic. After all, it cannot be worse to be posthumously described as a yahoo capering in a genteel suit than to be dismissed by one’s famous father as “a great bore” at the age of six or as “clumsy and disheveled, sly, without intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual interest” at the age of seven (Waugh 1998, 37, 7).

Polly Toynbee stokes satire’s reputation as a reactionary tool in the hands of gloomy Tories, those disgruntled elites who dislike the visible and rapid pace of change around them. But satire is just as likely to be a tool of democratization. For satire to flourish several conditions must be in place, including relative freedom from censorship and retaliation. Global communication is now instantaneous and low cost: for every propagandistic assertion, no matter how mild, the Internet allows for the speedy mass distribution of a response. Satire has always thrived on exposing pretense and grandiosity, comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable. Now information and images can be transmitted at the same time as the claims of the spin-doctors.

Politics seems to bring the satirists out in force. In the immediate aftermath of the contested 2000 presidential election, for example, the Internet was host to hundreds of occasional satires. One of the most classically eighteenth-century examples (recalling the famous caricature of the poet Alexander Pope as an A. P.—E, half monkey half human) is “Curious George” (fig. 2). “Curious George” is an eighteenth-century satire in several respects. First, it plays on the connection between humans and animals, a connection no less fraught with terror in the eighteenth century than in our own confusing post-Darwinian moment. Eighteenth-century Britons compared humans to animals with an obsessive frequency, upending for comic effect the metaphysical picture associated with the Great Chain of Being, in which humans are higher than animals and thus closer to God, reason, and the angels; animals are lower and driven by instincts, their actions and motives of a purely mechanical origin. Given that we know now that human beings share 98.6 percent of their DNA with chimpanzees, I wonder why we find this funny? George Bush, after all, is an ape—he just happens to be a hairless one and in good company with the rest of us.

Curious George is a manifestation of a metaphor cluster that had intense



Figure 2. “Curious George,” an anonymous Internet satire.

power in early eighteenth-century writing. Drawing on terminology from cognitive science and for reasons that will become clear, I call this metaphor cluster *situational mind blindness*. Situational mind blindness is a trope of dehumanization, albeit a very complex one: the point of it is to deny other people the perspective of rational agency by turning them into animals, machines, or anything without a mind. A simpler trope of dehumanization, if there can be such a thing, comes into play during war or conquest when one group of people demonizes another. In the presence of a hated counter group, ingroup solidarity becomes stronger. Social norms, memes, and moral rules are shared within groups but typically denied to outgroups. The members of the hated counter group do not count as human, and therefore moral rules do not apply to them. This tendency is so widely attested in human history that it hardly needs to be described. In only a few modern democratic cultures has such a tendency become scandalous. In one ancient democratic culture, by contrast, it was recommended as a spiritual exercise for warriors. According to Plutarch, Aristotle told Alexander the Great to “have regard for the Greeks as for friends and kindred, but to conduct himself toward other peoples as though they were plants or animals” (Plutarch 1931, 393–405). Situational mind blindness is more complex because it is a social trope, mobilized not against members of an out-group but against people whom one might encounter as part of the new trading economies of a mercantilist city at the hub of an expanding empire. What it means for writers to deploy a trope of such extreme aggression in the service of essentially social ends is one of the topics I take up in this chapter.

Situational mind blindness piggybacks on no special sense of groupishness but arises in the face of some apparent maddening irrationality. The point of