
All the Single Ladies: The 21st-Century Legacy of the 19th-Century Spinster

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Abstract

In 1862, William Rathbone Greg published a sermon called "Why are Women Redundant?" Greg pondered what to do with the increasing amount of women who, according to an 1851 census in England, just wouldn't get married. While single women had of course always existed, U.S. and British social leaders alike began to see them as a unique and recognizable constituency in a new way in the nineteenth century. Greg and others proposed solutions ranging from literally shipping women across international borders from England to the United States and Australia to less drastic measures such as providing more career options. Today, the transatlantic literary market is once again fascinated by single women. The popularity of books such as Kate Bolick's *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* (2015) and Rebecca Traister's *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (2016), suggest that the world is still negotiating and defining the borders of an ever-shifting community of "single women." Focusing on Bolick and Traister, my presentation will argue that such contemporary discussions respond directly to nineteenth-century notions of singleness. The complex and often contradictory images of single women that emerged from Greg's pen, and from texts such as *The Bostonians* (1886) by Henry James and "Happy Women" (1868) by Louisa May Alcott, continue to shape concepts of "single women" as a collective in surprising and complicated ways. I'll explore how nineteenth-century assumptions about gender continue to inform our conversations about women in the twenty-first century as authors like Bolick and Traister both refute and reclaim the figure of the "spinster." To what degree, I'll ask, do conceptions of "single women" as a social and political group allow individual women the freedom to transgress gender expectations and borders, and to what degree do these conceptions restrict them?

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