

Harriet Martineau: Introduction

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As a writer, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) enjoyed enormous popularity during her life. Over a half-century career, hers was an authoritative voice in the literary world. Although by the mid-1840s she had exchanged London's intellectual center for the bucolic peace of the Lake District, Martineau's influence continued through the early 1870s, with renewed interest generated by the posthumous publication of her *Autobiography* (1877). But following this, excepting a few biographical studies between Florence Fenwick Miller's *Harriet Martineau* (1887) and R.K. Webb's *Harriet Martineau. A Radical Victorian* (1960), Martineau all but disappeared from literary history, until a compelling revival of interest—stimulated in large part by second-wave-feminist criticism—illustrated once again that this writer, far from anachronistic, was not only ahead of her time but, in some respects, ours as well.

From a young age, Martineau's intellectual inclinations were encouraged and fostered by her family and by the broader Unitarian community. Both family and community valued education for all, including girls; and, despite the dearth of formal educational opportunities for females, Martineau came of age intellectually in an environment steeped in classical thought and contemporary studies. Books and periodicals were read, shared, and discussed, with ideas old and new shaping the exceptional intellectual climate of the widespread Unitarian network. From her earliest contributions to *Monthly Repository*, Martineau's writing demonstrated an intellectual and literary precocity remarkable in anyone, let alone a twenty-year-old, informally-educated female. The intellectual depth and quality of her *Monthly Repository* papers set the tone for a career characterized by historical and socio-

cultural, religious and philosophical, political and economic explorations of the human condition.

Martineau's literary apprenticeship unfolded between 1822 and 1832, revealing the exploration of her authorial voice through verse, fiction, opinion pieces, reviews, and analyses. Both her personal and published writings evidence a self-styled intellectual evolution that in retrospect seemed inevitable, if not unwavering, in its ultimate trajectory. Viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, Harriet Martineau saw clearly the obstacles confronting any female who presumed to offer herself as a woman of letters, and these she addressed in interesting—some might claim, passive-aggressive—ways. She presents herself as a docile participant in the domestication of young girls that was typical of the time: she learned how to make proper puddings under her mother's stern rule while also rising hours before breakfast in order to study Latin and poetry; she engaged in the perpetual needlework expected of females, with open books and periodicals on her lap; she endured the lengthy formalities of family meals while glancing surreptitiously at the volume of Shakespeare hidden by her skirt. When brother James left for university to undertake divinity studies, Harriet produced her first two publications, most pointedly entitled "Female Writers on Practical Divinity" and "Female Education." When her fiancé's untimely death released her from marriage and motherhood, her relief seemed almost palpable; when her father was ruined by bank failures and her own "portion" lost, she welcomed the prospect of supporting herself with both needle and pen. With few exceptions, she wrote under her own name, not a pseudonym; and her topics deviated away from the romances and lyrics associated with women writers and toward those topics—political economy and philosophy, sociology and history, Malthusian population theory and the international slave-trade—associated with men. On the one hand, then, Martineau implies that she was prepared to accept the domesticated life, as all good girls must do; on the other, she doesn't seem at all sorry that the alternative life-of-the-mind she was so clearly suited for opened up instead.

The idea that Harriet Martineau was a unique force accounts for her early popularity and the long endurance of her career, sustained even through several phases of public notoriety. But that same force also accounts for the swift decline of her reputation in the century following her death. This harkens back to the striking example of James going to university while Harriet, for no other reason than being female, stayed home to prepare for marriage, although hers was generally held to be the superior intellect. While it is not my purpose here to rehearse Victorians' entrenched patriarchal privilege or the growth of misogyny in the context of muscular Christianity, it is clear that, seen through the retrospective lenses of feminist analyses, many women thinkers, writers, and artists—women of extraordinary accomplishment, women like Harriet Martineau—were marginalized to the point of being written out of intellectual and social history. What is the reason for this? Where does this come from? How did women's progress in the century bookended by Wollstonecraft and the New Woman so quickly fall into obscurity?

One answer concerns the period's signature urge to legitimize the professions—legal, medical, academic—which in turn cemented men's hold over education and employment opportunities. One result of this trend was that university credentials outweighed original thinking and informal education in terms of credibility and intellectual authority. Another result was to keep those deviant Angels and New Women in the home and away from the employments and economic self-sufficiency they sought—opportunities many men considered to be their sole province. These ideas lead back to the example of Harriet Martineau, whose natural intellectual orientation was what is now termed *interdisciplinary*, the antithesis of rigorously defended disciplinary boundaries. Her productions always involved syntheses: her didactic fiction aimed to entertain *and* to teach; her political economy applied classical theory to real-life situations; her advice to travelers on "how to observe" originated sociological methodology; her comparative studies of religions and philosophies emphasizes their similarities over their differences; her prolific periodicals writing is steeped in both historical precedent and contemporary cultural

relevance. Recent trends in academia value such a capacious intellectual perspective—a perspective not long ago dismissed as amateurish dilettantism; today, some scholars are ready to revisit and re-evaluate what Harriet Martineau represented in her life and writing, although not all do so with an open mind.

While twenty-first century attitudes are more welcoming in terms of women's contributions to intellectual history, resistance persists among those who view "intellectual woman" or "woman historian" as contradictions in terms. Martineau is celebrated by some contemporary sociologists as not only the "first woman sociologist" (applied sociology in fiction) but also the originator of sociological theory and methodology (*How to Observe Morals and Manners*), while other sociologists vehemently reject such notions. Literary scholars credit Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot with developing the defining genre of the Victorian era, the social-problem or industrial novel; but Martineau initiated the genre in the 1820s, in her endeavor to facilitate a literary mode relevant to the concerns of the industrialized world. And, during the great expansion of newspaper and periodical publishing marking the century, Martineau wrote thousands of articles for dozens of publications, writing of a depth and quality associated more with formal research-scholarship than with the sensationalistic sound-bites characterizing modern journalism. This "first and foremost" of women journalists was, in some ways, a powerful reflection of her time; in others, she seemed far ahead of her time. Today, a century and a half after her death, and a half-century after the remarkable renaissance of her life and work, the question of her timeliness and relevance continues to be debated, to be promoted, and to be resisted. How can an informally-educated female be the "mother" of modern sociology? Of modern political economy? An historian, a philosopher, a theologian? Some answers to these questions are teased out and examined below, in this compelling collection of new research on the life and work of Harriet Martineau.

One of the most notorious aspects of Martineau's career alluded to above concerns her writing about theology and metaphysics, considered

by some the most egregious of all presumptions perpetrated by a woman. This episode marks a period in Martineau's spiritual development, beginning with *Letters on Mesmerism* (1845) and including *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848), *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851), and Auguste Comte's *The Positive Philosophy* (1853). Collectively, this period constitutes her definitive shift away from Unitarianism toward what some have called atheism, although Martineau rejected "vulgar" atheism in favor of what would now be termed agnosticism. From her *Monthly Repository* days, Martineau's theological and philosophical commentary was a prominent feature of her oeuvre, and this surfaces most provocatively in the travel memoir, *Eastern Life, Present and Past*. Lesa Scholl's "Exploring the Holy Land: Harriet Martineau's Engagement with Comparative Theology" looks at Martineau's three prize-winning Unitarian essays, her *Traditions of Palestine*, and *Eastern Life* from two perspectives: first, a Comtean framework, in which "she seeks to trace the primitive roots of human belief and belief structures" in terms of similarities and differences. The second perspective is more complex, in that it involves her personal evolution—or, some would say, devolution—seen unfolding against the backdrop of her Middle Eastern travels. *Eastern Life* compares ancient Egyptian belief systems with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emphasizing their archetypal links and measuring their *practices* against their stated *principles*. Scholl notes that Martineau sought "to establish a coherency between faiths as well as reveal the corruption of human religion in relation to theological thought [...] she also saw the importance of each religion's theological construct as a necessary part of the development of human civilization." Demonstrating the autobiographical aspects of Martineau's endeavor, Scholl's discussion investigates the "strong links between Martineau's life-writing, travel writing, and comparative theology."

Martineau has been criticized for other idiosyncratic qualities, such as her perspectives on charity. Her primary stand was against hand-outs to the poor, which at best provides a temporary fix and at worst fosters

exploitation of systems and those whose sufferings they are intended to ameliorate. For her, viable long-term solutions should provide the poor with means to help themselves on a permanent basis in order to facilitate autonomy and independence. Taking Martineau's sociological orientation as its starting point, Kristen Pond's "Harriet Martineau's Sociology of Charity" considers the *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* tales (1833-1834) which, due to their lukewarm reception, were largely ignored by subsequent scholars. Pond's analysis highlights the significant chronology of Martineau's writing on the topic, which includes *How to Observe Morals and Manners*—her sociological methodology that was also written in 1834, though not published until 1838. For Pond, the "kind of sympathy Martineau describes in *How to Observe* [...] is created through specific narrative techniques, like the use of dialogue." The way to engage with those in a foreign culture, in other words, is through conversation and, above all, by listening intently, respectfully, and without bias or prejudice. This same sociological methodology is modeled in *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*, wherein characters' dialogue generates mutual understanding, rehearses various perspectives on the same issue, and dramatizes socio-cultural interaction. A compelling analogy is provided by the example of Lady Visitors, women volunteers ministering to the poor under the guidance of training designed to transcend class barriers to communication.

Current debates about environments and climate change have eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precedents, from the Romantics to Ruskin. Rebecca Richardson demonstrates Martineau's prescience in "Environmental and Economic Systems in Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*," which features the prevalence of geographical settings in the context of economic systems. Richardson studies the centrality of setting and its impact on the lives, livelihoods, and economic situations of ordinary people, an idea applicable to this collection of "discrete tale[s]," each one "complete in itself." But Richardson's investigation reveals another layer of insight into these twenty-seven individual tales that were reissued in a nine-volume (three-

tales-per-volume) set in 1834: that is, each volume demonstrates intertextual links between the tales. As a result, reading three "discrete" tales in one volume yields unexpected insights into the global consequences of local and regional behaviors. Such "intertextual readings provide a foundation for thinking about the role of the environment, locally and globally [... so that] the tales can be read as part of a network, with actions rippling across economic and environmental systems," an idea resonating with Adam Smith's concept of the "Invisible Hand."

Over the course of her career, Martineau wrote more about America, the "American Experiment," and the Slave Question than about any other topic. Despite her aim to maintain sociological impartiality during her American travels, Martineau—challenged to speak publicly about "right and wrong" in America—aligned herself with the abolitionists. The ensuing public uproar clarified what would be a primary focus of her writing for the next thirty years. Iain Crawford's "'Cruelties ... incessantly in course of perpetration': Harriet Martineau, White Women, and Slavery in the Antebellum South" investigates tensions "between her wide ranging accounts of an economic order dependent on slavery and her almost complete erasure of the breadth of white women's engagement in actively managing both it and the cultural episteme it created." Crawford identifies and compares two key representations of white women's links with southern slavery: the notorious Madame Lalaurie of New Orleans and the Unitarian magazine editor, Caroline Gilman of South Carolina. Martineau's depictions participate in a set of assumptions about the South's agrarian economy (posed against northern industry), which is bound up with slavery and with the patriarchal divisions of labor that render white women victims of the system. In reality, Crawford asserts, white women's roles were far more complex and nuanced than the stereotype permits or than Martineau develops in her accounts.

Another primary topic throughout Martineau's career is the Irish Question, from such specific events as the 1840s Famine and associated socio-economic recovery to the enduring issue of Irish nationalism. Martineau's commentary stems from sympathy with Ireland's "troubles"

and her conviction that its problems are rooted in social, rather than political, causes. Yet for her, despite her critiques of British mishandling of Ireland, dissolution of the Union was not an option, making social reorganization imperative to resolving the culture's persistent problems. But many Irish claimed the reverse was true: that it was only through the rise of nationalism and dissolution of the Union that Ireland's troubles could be resolved. This poses one of those sticking points that perplex Martineau scholars: she was quite critical of imperial mismanagement, and yet she remained convinced that solutions depended on imperial solidarity.

London's lively community of Irish commentators thrived on ridiculing Martineau, as explored in Julie Donovan's "Defending Ireland or Attacking Woman? Literary Criticism and the Irish Riposte to Harriet Martineau." Donovan examines the responses of three contemporary Irish writers—Thomas Moore, William Maginn, and John Wilson Croker—to Martineau's "prescriptions" for their country. While sharing Irish heritage, these three represent a variety of ideological perspectives—nationalist and pro-Union, Tory and Whig, Catholic and Protestant—but they found solidarity in "making Martineau a common target." This dynamic reveals "not only the misogyny of her male critics, but also how she unwittingly became a galvanizing force in their arguments for a shift in public attitudes about Ireland." Donovan's analysis highlights a collective focus on Martineau as a target through which "to air Irish grievances." Their ribald attacks ridiculing her body, sexuality, and spinsterhood serve to "emphasize Ireland's relationship with Britain's body politic as overbearing and unproductive. Assertions of Irish worth were therefore bound up in assertions of female unworthiness."

Another welcome contribution that addresses under-utilized material is "'A Family History': Harriet Martineau's Victorian Fantasy of the South Sea Bubble" by Shu-Fang Lai. Martineau's late-career journalism incorporated her enduring interest in history, here cast as historical romances or "historiettes" published serially in *Once a Week*. "A Family History" is didactic fiction based on the notorious South Sea Bubble débâcle of 1720-21, in which many poor, working-class investors,

including women, yielded to the temptation to get rich quick, as Company brokers promised. Many were financially destroyed by the speculation, and yet each new era continues to give rise to similarly ruinous, insubstantial schemes. Shu-Fang Lai regards this last historiette as a return to Martineau's early interests in educating, through fiction, those classes most in need of comprehending how political economy works:

[...] economics is offered as a science that can be understood and managed; prosperity is not merely a matter of luck or fate, chance or superstition [...] her purpose is to educate, and to demonstrate that [...] understanding the marketplace safeguards the vulnerability of the poor from the machinations of the rich."

"A Family History" is a cautionary tale about easy money and greed, humility and family values. The historiettes, serialized as short novels or novelettes, recall Martineau's early efforts to design a literary genre that was practical, accessible, and suited to the audiences and concerns of the industrial era.

Finally, given the context of our current world situation, including the Covid-19 pandemic, social isolation, economic collapse, and climate change, it seems most timely to revisit another of Harriet Martineau's primary interests: health—both personal and communal, national and global. As the benefits and drawbacks of industrialization and the trend toward urbanization unfolded throughout the century, sanitary reform grew into a multi-faceted endeavor. This unromantic phrase incorporated a variety of Victorian concerns, from the cult of invalidism to the persistence of cholera and typhoid epidemics throughout the century; from the professionalization of medicine to the popularity of mesmerism and phrenology; and from a turn away from the health threats posed by urban living to the restorative promise of rural small-farming and self-sufficiency. These extremes highlight such then-radical ideas as the personal relevance, national importance, and global significance of clean water, fresh air, and sunlight. Today, long accepted as commonsense, this cluster of concerns has again been brought into sharp focus by the current

global pandemic. In “‘The honor of being your nurse, though I am myself laid low’: Harriet Martineau and Health” Deborah A. Logan considers Martineau’s health concerns from three perspectives: Martineau’s self-writing about health and illness in her memoir, *Life in the Sickroom*; her periodicals writing about communal health (the professions, working-class housing, and everything from diet to drainage); and her promotion of sanitary reforms as a matter of Empire-wide consequence. This range exhibits how thoroughly health matters permeated Martineau’s worldview, from her own chronic maladies to the challenges faced by the working poor, and from the cholera-pockets of London to the appalling standards endured by the military defending the Empire in all corners of the planet.

As guest editor, it has been most inspiring and gratifying for me to engage with these fine authors and their new work on Harriet Martineau. This collection adds to the existing wealth of Martineau studies while demonstrating, yet again, how much more work remains to be done on this most prolific intellectual woman. I am deeply grateful to Barry Tharaud of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* for proposing this special number and for his support and encouragement throughout the process.

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