

Environmental and Economic Systems in Harriet Martineau's Illustrations of Political Economy

Rebecca Richardson

When Harriet Martineau set out to explain applied economics in *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834), she stressed the importance of representing a variety of geographic settings: “As society is in widely different states of advancement in various parts of the world, we have resolved to introduce as wide a diversity of scenery and characters as it might suit our object to employ” (Preface xvi). This resolution foregrounds various settings and the particularities of their environments and climates, as seen in certain opening statements:

There are few climates in the world more delightful to live in than that of the south of Africa. (“Life in the Wilds” 3)

Among the hills, in a wild district of South Wales, stood a dwelling [...] (“The Hill and the Valley” 1)

There is not a village in England that I love so well as Brooke... (“Brooke and Brooke Farm” 1)

The winter of the tropics is the most delicious of all seasons of any climate to inhabitants of the temperate zone. (“Demerara” 1)

Among the islands which are clustered around the western shore of Argyleshire, there is a small chain called the Garveloch Isles, or the Isles of Rough Rock. (“Ella of Garveloch” 1)

Martineau’s attention to representing particular places and climates in the *Illustrations* is significant, given that the history and contemporary

discipline of economics has tended to sideline discussions of the environment.

Mainstream economics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has too often taken the environment for granted, assuming that there will be plenty of breathable air, drinkable water, and disposal space for waste products.¹ This elision dates back to classical political economy, where the environment is barely mentioned, or else imagined as an inexhaustible natural resource. For example, David Ricardo, in theorizing rent, explains why there is no market for air and water: “nothing is given for the use of air and water, or for any other of the gifts of nature which exist in boundless quantity” (35). But not all early economic thinking appeared in such essayistic writing about the economy.

Illustrations of Political Economy was both popular and influential, notably bridging economic with fictional writing. The series was a great success, selling approximately 10,000 copies per number (total readership estimated at 144,000) and garnering the attention of both critics and readers. According to the *Spectator*, “The first day of each month is marked by no publication of more importance than Miss Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy*” (Logan, “Introduction” 34). The series was read by everyone from Princess Victoria to Samuel Taylor Coleridge to members of Parliament. It was exported and translated, read in the courts of Russia, taught in France’s public schools, and welcomed by American readers (35). There were some precedents, including Jane Marcet’s 1816 *Conversations on Political Economy*, which was directed at young people and students; but the *Illustrations* aimed at a wider audience and at fully narrativized economic principles. Claudia Klaver argues that, in translating economic thought into literary genres, writers like Martineau revealed tensions within economic reasoning itself. Klaver concentrates especially on the competing logics of the *Illustrations*: in keeping with novelistic conventions, the tales portray the agency of individual actors, but they also, in teaching political economy, trace larger historical or universalizing forces. This essay explores another source of such tensions, and another way that

Martineau went beyond her source texts, by examining the important role settings play in the *Illustrations*. These settings repeatedly gesture to how environments—what would now be termed ecosystems—both undergird the economy and act in ways that supersede human and economic control.

Ian Watt isolates two aspects specific to the realist novel: characterization and "presentation of background. [...] The novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment" (17-18). To think about the economy in narrative and novelistic terms necessitates attention not only to specific players in the economy, but also to the playing field. Environment and setting determine the conditions of local economies and also act as agents in their own right, particularly through major plot events like hurricanes or poor growing seasons. Most importantly, Martineau gestures to how regional environments and economies are connected globally, with links that can be difficult to trace, even for an omniscient narrator.

In recent decades, many literary critics have investigated the interplay between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economy and narrative, especially the novel. Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy*, Deidre Lynch's *The Economy of Character*, Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic*, and Anna Kornbluh's *Realizing Capital* have each considered key questions about how the discourses of political economy and literature emerged and developed in conversation across the Romantic and Victorian eras. Of particular relevance here, some of this work has analyzed what the field of economics gained by leaning on literary tropes or conventions. For example, Klaver investigates how both economic and literary writers constructed the ethos of economic reasoning, while Poovey traces how literary conventions helped to naturalize economic thinking: what "economic writing and Literary writing share, both historically and theoretically, is an engagement with the problematic of representation" (Poovey 5). Martineau's work is an

important touchstone for such studies because she was an interdisciplinary thinker and writer long before the term was invented, contributing to sociology, philosophy, economics, and literature. Her writing explicitly confronts Poovey's "problematic of representation" by illustrating economic principles via narrative.²

Approaching this "problematic of representation" from the other disciplinary side, a number of economists and historians have analyzed the rhetoric and metaphors of political economy. Economic writing has long relied on stories and models to better understand the real world. And yet, Martineau is rarely mentioned in such work.³ While sociologists like Susan Hoecker-Drysdale and Michael R. Hill recognize Martineau's importance for the history of their discipline, she has not received much attention from economists.⁴ And yet, her work adds an important layer to the history of economics, and particularly to histories that are attentive to the language and rhetoric of the discipline. She is unique in crafting sustained, realistic narratives about political economy (each tale is approximately 135 pages) that emphasize the particularities of environments and contexts. Martineau's approach can be compared with writers who engaged in philosophical debates via their fictional works, from Voltaire's *Candide* to Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁵ But distinct from philosophies and debates dramatized in literary form, political economy prioritizes the material world and its uses. Martineau asks, "Can anything more nearly concern all the members of any society than the way in which the necessities and comforts of life may be best procured and enjoyed by all?" (Preface iv). Her framing of political economy dovetails with the conventions of the realist novel, with its shared emphases on common experience, on imagining characters that represent real people, and on accurate, detailed descriptions of material settings. Her audience—"the masses" scattered throughout the empire—enjoys "a diversity of scenery and characters":

As society is in widely different states of advancement in various parts of the world, we have resolved to introduce as wide a diversity of scenery and characters as it might

suit our object to employ. Each tale will therefore be usually, if not always, complete in itself, as a tale, while the principles it exhibits form a part of the system which the whole are designed to convey. As an instance of what we mean: the scene of the first tale is laid in a distant land, because there is no such thing to be found in our own country as Labour uncombined with Capital, and proceeding through many stages to a perfect union with Capital. In the next volume, which treats of the operation and increase of Capital, the scene is laid in a more familiar region, because Capital can be seen in full activity only in a highly civilized country. (xvi-xvii)

Such attention to both environments and economies offers a unique case study for thinking about how these factors interact. Collectively, the tales depict economy and environment in the context of empire and international trade networks, with settings that span from Ireland, Scotland and England, to South Africa, Sri Lanka and America, and to Australia, the West Indies and Russia.⁶ There is also a range of temporality, with some tales set in the 1830s and others in the past, like "French Wines and Politics" (French Revolution) and "Messrs. Vanderput & Snoek" (seventeenth century). Martineau takes as a given that these diverse settings and characters will "therefore" lead to each being a discrete tale, "complete in itself." But the tales also accumulate and interact in a number of telling ways; intertextual readings provide a foundation for thinking about the role of the environment, locally and globally.

This sort of intertextual reading manifests in a number of ways. As Martineau notes in the Preface, the tales are loosely linked through a developmentalist narrative.⁷ Some of the early tales mythologize primitive accumulation, with the natural environment providing an immediate source of value. For contemporary readers, this evokes Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.⁸ The first tale, "Life in the Wilds," opens with the narrator extolling the Cape Colony's "delightful climate," the "pure and wholesome" mountain air, and the "fertile" plains (3). The "Summary of

Principles Illustrated in this Volume” draws out the lessons of such descriptions: “Wealth is to be obtained by the employment of labour on materials furnished by nature” (xix). But here, as in Defoe’s novel, the abundant natural setting is already inhabited; and when the settlement is raided by a local Indigenous group, resulting in the destruction and loss of tools and supplies, they are forced to rely on the local ecosystem and their own labor. Martineau thus illustrates lessons about work, value, and the division of labor—in short, a myth of capitalism’s development which, like *Robinson Crusoe*, takes place *after* the characters have been part of a capitalist system and need merely reconstruct what they already know.

The settlers rebuild with limited resources, everyone contributing by engaging with the natural world, from scavenging for ostrich eggs and honey to building shelters out of clay, reeds, and grasses. Labor, mixed with the natural world, becomes the true basis of value. Even once the settlers start to recover—building new shelters, finding additional ways to feed themselves—the tale’s ending makes clear that they haven’t entirely regained their former ways of organizing labor and trade. For example, the group is not yet ready to use gold as a medium of exchange. When one of the settlers returns from a mission to purchase goods from the nearest trading post, the former shop owner, Mr. Arnall, offers to buy them, hoping to re-assume his former position as shopkeeper. But the group’s captain admonishes him:

Keep your coin, sir, and take care of it, I advise you; for I hope to see the time when gold and silver will pass from hand to hand; but much must be done first. We must have more productions before a regular system of exchange can take place; and that exchange will be of the productions themselves for some time before we find it convenient to pay in coin: and before coin can come into common use among us, there must be more of it than your bag holds, Mr. Arnall. (113)

The settlers continue to trade in use-value, or the “productions themselves”: they must work their way back to paying “in coin,” or

exchange value. In this and other tales, Martineau "scripts these economic actors into a teleological narrative of progress from barbarism to civilization" (Klaver, "Imperial" 21). She might also be read as scripting these *places* into a teleological narrative, with different settings reinforcing ideas about "barbarism" and "civilization."

But Martineau's tales complicate this sort of teleological narrative by revisiting principles and themes, further linking the tales together. For example, subsequent volumes revisit questions raised in "Life in the Wilds" about the role of currency—particularly in "The Charmed Sea" and "Berkeley the Banker, Parts 1 & 2." "The Charmed Sea" illustrates the need for a currency to facilitate trade, while telling the story of Polish prisoners exiled by the Russians to Baikal Lake, Siberia following the January Insurrection.⁹ The Polish prisoners initially use hides to trade with, but when these are scarce, a child suggests using the mammoth bones deposited yearly with the spring floods, which initiates discussions about systems of barter versus currency, gold and metal standards, and theories of value. "Berkeley the Banker, Parts 1 & 2" offers a different setting—a provincial English town—with events based on the 1814 bank failures. Characters confront uncertainties about the value of notes issued by local banks versus those issued by the Bank of England—and particularly when, learning about cases of fraud and counterfeit, the neighbors harbor suspicions about who is passing bad notes. Set in radically different contexts, these tales illustrate the same principles and suggest that, whether exiled in Siberia or living in a small English village, one might debate the same questions about trade, currency, and value.

Read together, the tales also model how such debates could be staged, more implicitly, across plots, posing profound questions about the roles of faith and fiction in the use of currency. Given that these three tales—"The Charmed Sea" and "Berkeley the Banker, Parts 1 & 2"—appeared sequentially as monthly installments and were later collected into the same volume, many readers would have had this chronology in mind. On the one hand, in "The Charmed Sea" the mammoth bones are presented as a solution to the difficulties of trading with hides or other goods with

immediate use-value: the bones fulfill the needs of a currency—they can be cut up to represent different values, they are scarce, and they can be released in a controlled way as the system calls for more. Such needs are illustrated early in the tale, when a single hide is brought to market and exchanged slowly and for different amounts of goods. Alternatively, local bank notes and counterfeits wreak financial panic in “Berkeley the Banker,” suggesting how much can go wrong when a society takes a currency on faith. While “Berkeley the Banker” seems to “[hold] out the promise of resolving the uncertainty highlighted at the close of ‘The Charmed Sea,’” it raises new questions, including “the possibility of establishing permanent, unvarying values for gold and silver even without a supply restriction” (Cooper 367). No wonder the “Summary of Principles” ends with what Cooper calls “a note of uncertainty” (368): “commercial prosperity depends upon the natural laws of demand and supply being allowed to work freely in relation to the circulating medium. The means of securing their full operation remain to be decided upon and tried” (“Berkeley [...] part 2” 146).¹⁰ Martineau reinforces the idea of such laws being “natural” when she imagines the mammoth-bone currency in “The Charmed Sea,” which appears each spring through natural forces. The bones apparently offer themselves for the taking while also representing a “naturally” limited supply—amounting to something like a central banking system in rural Siberia.

Martineau’s characters model such thinking across contexts and settings. In conversations about trade and progress, they rehearse similar teleological narratives and gesture to the larger, global system they participate in. For example, “Life in the Wilds” includes an extended conversation about division of labor, in which the ingredients of plum pudding rely on a global system of trade and a *geographical* division of labor: “The flour and the butter may be had near home; but the sugar must be brought from one country, and the raisins from another, and the spice from a third, and the brandy from a fourth. There could be no plum-puddings without such a division of labour as it almost confuses one to think of” (81). Other tales’ characters similarly reflect on how their

livelihoods depend on this system of trade. In "The Hill and the Valley," the booming new iron-works eventually closes operations when foreign competition from Europe and America forces the owners to slash wages and increase their reliance on machinery, in turn leading the workers to revolt.

Other factors encourage reading these narratives as intertextually enacting—not merely gesturing to—a sort of global capitalism. One of the most telling examples of this intertextuality appears in "Demerara," the anti-slavery tale set in the West Indies, and in "Ella of Garveloch" and "Weal and Woe in Garveloch," set in the Scottish Hebrides and echoing concerns about slavery expressed in "Demerara." Two characters, the local laird and his steward, Callum, debate the proper relationship between landlord and tenant. In this exchange, the landlord-tenant relationship is compared to that between a chieftain/laird and follower, between a factory owner and worker and, implicitly, between enslaver and enslaved worker:

"I only know," replied Callum, "that in my young days, if the laird held up a finger, any one of his people who had offended him would have been thrown into the sea."

"Such tyranny, Callum, had nothing to do with their connexion as landlord and tenant, but only with their relation as chieftain, and follower. You have been at Glasgow, I think?"

"Yes; a cousin of mine is a master in the shawl-manufacture there."

"Well: he has labourers in his employment there, and they are not his slaves, are they?"

"Not they; for they sometimes throw up their work when he wants them most." (15-16)

As Deborah Logan has observed, "Martineau periodically invoked [the] popular analogy between England's industrial working poor and plantation slaves," even while insisting on distinguishing the two, given that the former had some measure of choice (*Harriet Martineau* 219).

Martineau further troubles easy analogies between slavery and the industrial system: the laird aligns slavery with the “tyranny” of the old system of chieftains and followers—drawing a distinction between these asymmetrical power relationships and the supposed free agency exercised by both factory owners and workers. Given that this tale followed “Demerara,” “Ella” seems to insist on distinguishing between the industrial system and slavery. In fact, after witnessing the horrors outlined in “Demerara,” readers might go further than the laird and question the analogy between feudal and slavery systems. With these three tales appearing in succession and, later, collected into a single volume, this exchange stands out as a sort of intertextual allusion, reinforcing the earlier tale’s abolitionist sentiments.

Subsequent intertextual allusions draw direct, causal links across the tales. The two Scottish tales follow Ella’s family as they establish a trade route to export herring. When a large fishing company supplants the island’s economy, villagers worry about the precariousness of their livelihoods: “A single bad season, the opening of a few more fishing stations, a change in the diet of the West India slaves,—any one of these, or many other circumstances, might reduce the Garveloch fishery to what it had been” (“Weal” 64-65). The gesture to “West India slaves” might seem to come out of nowhere, but to audiences reading the tales sequentially, it links the tales together. “Demerara” features enslaved people who are given herrings as a regular part of their diet, as when Hester sits down “to eat her mess of vegetables and herrings” (49). Scotland’s herring industry dated back to the 1240s, and contemporary reports corroborate that enslaved people in the West Indies were indeed given herrings as a regular part of their diet.¹¹ The example shows how the empire moved peoples and goods, with British subjects complicit in the system of slavery, in obvious ways—like importing West Indies sugar—and through more subtle chains of commerce, like the exportation of herrings.¹²

While the narrator of “Weal and Woe” foregrounds Garveloch’s dependency on the West Indies slave market, “Demerara” hints at why a

change in diet might come about. The relatively enlightened English plantation owner, Alfred, aims to eliminate slavery, for both moral and economic reasons. Alfred does not limit rations of enslaved workers, explaining, "We should get little work done if we gave each labourer weekly no more than two pounds of herrings and eight pounds of flour, with the vegetables they grow themselves" (68). He provides ample rations, including pork and beef. With such intertextual allusions, the tales suggest a global system through both vague gestures and through causal links, with different characters and settings acting on one another through systems of finance and trade. These links represent the movement between local and global networks. As Eleanor Courtemanche argues, "political economy and the realist novel share the intellectual project of describing human behavior in terms of the relation between concrete anecdote and a broader system of observation and analysis—or to put it in economic terms, between micro and macro levels" (129-30). But tellingly, there is an asymmetry of knowledge between the micro and macro levels: the reader of Martineau's tales has more knowledge of the intricacies of these links than the characters do, suggesting that one might not always see how economic principles are acting on one's own case. Combining economic and literary ways of imagining and representing the globalized economy, Martineau demonstrates how the tales can be read as part of a network, with actions rippling across economic and environmental systems—and how this system entails a lopsided sort of knowledge, reminiscent of Adam Smith's concept of the "Invisible Hand."¹³

The herrings are a specific example and easy to spot. But given these sorts of interactions, it is tempting to imagine every mention of export products as a subtle reminder of this system of dependencies. The sugar, spices, and brandy required for plum pudding ("Life in the Wilds") implicate a number of tales—sugar from "Demerara," spices from "Cinnamon & Pearls" and "For Each and For All," brandy from "French Wines and Politics." Such interdependency, particularly across nations, was typically imagined as a positive aspect of capitalist trade. Early political economists imagined that "domestic trade would create more

cohesive communities while foreign trade would help avoid wars between them”—resulting in “a strong *web* of inter-dependent relationships” (Hirschman 51-52). Martineau’s tales support this vision, particularly in repeated statements about free trade. In fact, free trade becomes a religious imperative in “The Loom and the Lugger, Part 2,” where Mademoiselle Gaubion explains that people

will certainly not know all the happiness that God has made for them, till they share as equally as possible what He has given to each; whether it be that which belongs to sea, air or earth, or the produce of man’s skill. Whatever any country produces best, that let it exchange for what other countries produce best. Thus will all be best served, and in the best humour with each other. (31-32)

Of course, given the genre, narrative complications are necessary; presumably, perfectly functioning economies would, like Tolstoy’s happy families, all be alike. As a result, even as Martineau repeatedly expresses faith in capitalism when well-studied and -regulated, she also offers examples of how this system can go awry. It is tempting, however, to read Martineau as expressing in these narrative complications larger truths about how capitalism intersects with empire. What began as seemingly innocent trade relations quickly turned, in the name of protecting economic interests, to colonization, and that in turn to territorial expansion and imperialism—with the resulting destruction and suppression of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Martineau’s tales tend to rely on similar narrative complications. A recurring culprit, appropriately enough for a series of didactic tales about political economy, is ignorance of economic principles. The tales also repeatedly portray how a given political party or law interferes with individuals’ decisions about how to employ their labor, who to sell to, or what to buy. Such complications tend to be presented as fixable, presumably by better education, better political economy, and better policies. But another major source of economic problems can be traced back to the natural world. Martineau repeatedly dramatizes characters’

encounters with their immediate environments, from the colonial settlers in "Life in the Wilds" who hunt and scavenge and, occasionally, die of snake bites, to depictions of farmers, fishers, and laborers who struggle to grow or gather enough produce ("Ireland," "Brooke and Brooke Farm," "Weal and Woe in Garveloch"). Also featured are natural disasters, with monsoons, hurricanes, fires, and floods appearing in a number of tales ("Demerara," "French Wine and Politics," "Cinnamon and Pearls," "Messrs. Vanderput and Snoek"). But the most frequent problem, often underlying the above examples, stems from Martineau's illustration of Malthus's population principle, which pits human communal growth against a finite environment. Although "Weal and Woe in Garveloch" was the primary and most explicit short novel illustrating Malthus's principle, the sense that the world is too crowded for everyone to live in material comfort haunts many of her tales. It is the justification for enclosing the commons in "Brooke and Brooke Farm," the premise behind emigration in "Homes Abroad," and the ultimate lesson in "For Each and For All": "That multitudes have little ease and no leisure is the fault of overpopulation" ("For Each" 42).

Martineau was aware readers might conclude that all the world's economic woes are traceable to overpopulation. In the Preface to "Berkeley the Banker," she responded to complaints from readers and critics that she paid undue attention to population dynamics, asking that they "give me time to show that I do not ascribe all our national distresses to over-population, but think as ill as they do of certain monopolies and modes of taxation" (Preface i). Indeed, she blames protectionist policies that impose duties and taxes on foreign goods for generating economic hardship ("The Loom and the Lugger, Parts 1 & 2"). But she also wedded such lessons with those of Malthus. For example, in "Sowers not Reapers," even as characters note the increasing number of people relying on food supplies, the primary concerns in this tale are poor growing seasons and the bread tax. The tale's Summary of Principles combines the issues of free trade and population theory: with free trade, "The capital of the thickly-peopled country will perpetually grow; the thinly-peopled country

will become populous; and the only necessary limit of the prosperity [...] will be the limit to the fertility of the world” (“Sowers” 146).

Malthusian theory was clearly important to the *Illustrations*, as Ella Dzelzainis has shown.¹⁴ But Martineau’s engaging a number of principles and economic thinkers complicates a straightforward reading. For example, she juxtaposes Malthusian theory with a progressive vision that touts nature as “inexhaustible” and human labor and intelligence as always improving. As the “Summary of Principles Illustrated in the First Volume” states:

Wealth is to be obtained by the employment of labour on materials furnished by nature [...]. As the materials of nature appear to be inexhaustible, and as the supply of labour is continually progressive, no other limits can be assigned to the operations of labour than those of human intelligence. And where are the limits of human intelligence?” (xix).

On the surface, this tension can seem like a rehashing of Romantic-era debates on economic thought and philosophy, particularly Malthus’s focus on fixed limits versus Godwin’s vision of gradual perfectibility.¹⁵ But the tales can also be read as reconciling these positions. For example, scarcity turns out to be less the result of overpopulation than of systems that artificially redistribute material goods—particularly imperial power structures that exploit colonies’ populations and resources (“Ireland,” “Cinnamon and Pearls,” “Demerara”). Similarly, aristocratic and class privilege manipulate the legal and economic systems to benefit those in power (“French Wines and Politics,” “Sowers not Reapers”).

Martineau repeatedly dramatizes how such power structures exploit both human and natural resources. Alfred Bruce (“Demerara”) questions the morality of slavery, but he is also concerned with the economic and environmental degradation generated by sugar crops depleting the soil. Garveloch’s islanders overfish their environment to export food to the West Indies while themselves suffering from famine. Such depictions of global economic interdependence gesture to potential disaster and

collapse, reiterating the links binding distant and local ecosystems. Clearly, economic dependencies are also environmental dependencies. As a result, each tale's setting emerges as a key element, even if classical political economy often neglected this same element.

Critics studying the *Illustrations* note tensions between narrative impulses and didactic goals, claiming these elements are at odds. While some early reviewers appreciated Martineau's ability to popularize economic theories through fiction, others sought to draw a line between didacticism and literary craft. Martineau biographer Florence Fenwick Miller complained that the tales are "fettered" and "inevitably damaged, as works of art, by the fact that they were written to convey definite lessons" (qtd Logan, "Introduction" 37). Similarly, Mary Russell Mitford admitted to reading the stories while skipping the political economy. Claudia Klaver argues that the *Illustrations* are "plagued by internal contradictions produced by her combination of abstract, 'scientific' theory with fictional narrative forms" (*A/Moral* 58-59). These tensions arise between theory and narrative and within economic theory itself, specifically in the ways realism jostles against the universal and historical narrative devices Martineau imports from political economy:

The realist chronotope usually involves a temporality of one lifetime, and the individual characters in the narrative are responsible for creating their own fates within that lifetime. Central to this narrative structure, then, is an individual agent who interacts with and is able to *act upon* his or her physical, social, and cultural environment. (Klaver 58-59)

On the other hand, "In nineteenth-century realist fiction, when history is an active narrative force, it tends to be embodied in specific social, economic, and political realities or pressures of then-contemporary Britain" (Klaver, "Imperial" 26-27). Klaver clarifies tensions between a realist chronotope tracing an individual subject's lifetime and actions, and an historical chronotope spanning longer time, viewing larger forces as active, shaping subjects.

But the tales also negotiate both chronotopes, enabling a re-imagining of both genres: how the novel could represent individuals in systems that span time and space, and how political economy could move between micro and macro views. The *Illustrations* participate in a novelistic tradition depicting broader human action over time, from the intergenerational novel that traces plots across families (Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*) to naturalism's interest in representing environmental as well as human forces. This hybrid, realist-and-historical chronotope highlights another source of narrative tension in the *Illustrations*: translating economic theory to narrative involves agents who act upon the environment, and environments that act upon the agents—further muddling questions about agency. This concerns Martineau's lessons about self-sufficiency and responsibility, particularly when these environments are linked through larger systems—ecological, imperial, and economic.

In the *Illustrations*, environments and people shape one another, with economic motives triangulating the relationship. “Brooke and Brooke Farm” is a tale about enclosure, the practice of consolidating land that was previously open to public access and communal use into larger, privately owned farms. With this looming change to the village landscape, characters discuss how to manage the land in terms of soil and climate, present and future. As one character argues, Britain was once “overgrown with wood”:

Vast forests extending over whole districts; the climate as cold as now in the north of Russia; (for countries in our latitude become temperate only in proportion as they are cleared;) wolves abounding in every wilderness, and swamps spreading in all directions, to the great injury of the health of the savage inhabitants,—such was Great Britain once. (66)

This vision imagines collective human actions accumulating over time and marking the natural world.

In turn, these environments and climates shape human populations, their labor, and their economies. Martineau repeatedly draws on ideas about climate and human wellbeing that date back to the Hippocratic Airs, Waters, Places tradition, which theorized that environments influence human health and even physical traits. The idea that humans could adapt to their environment through the actions of climate, habits, and time fed into early theories of race. Martineau's depiction of racial difference in "Demerara" is suggestive of such theories about acclimatization.

"Demerara" features a white population that fails to adapt to the climate. Mrs. Bruce is sickly, while the other colonizers "repose" and "loll" "as English people are wont to do in a hot climate" (40), emphasizing the consequences of failure to adapt. Interestingly, the British characters claim they "cannot work in the summer time in this climate and on this soil" (75), while asserting that enslaved Black people "are made to live in sunshine" (6) and "bear the heat" (105). The most egregious examples of such comments are from the Anglo characters, providing rationalizations for slavery based on climate, environment, and types of work.

Such ways of imagining the relation between populations and climates is thus frequently bound up with theories of race. In turn, this logic extends to theories of knowledge formation associated with race or indigeneity. For example, Alfred's father, Mr. Bruce, hypothesizes that the enslaved workers might be more ingenious farmers, who, "being better adapted than ourselves to the soil and climate, might discover and practise modes of tillage from which we might gather many useful hints" (72). Martineau's tales repeatedly testify to the way that populations, either Indigenous or immigrants, given sufficient time in a new environment, gain special knowledge and skills. The settlers in "Life in the Wilds" imitate the Indigenous population's activities and knowledge, from how to barb and poison an arrow, to what plant to use on a snake bite, to how to trap animals in a pit.¹⁶ In "The Charmed Sea," Polish exile Paul advises his friend to do as he has done and take "a Mongolian wife" (21-22). His wife, Emilia, is described in disturbingly animalistic terms, as when she dives into a body of water to retrieve a duck, "and presently reappeared

with the prey between her teeth, seized upon two more unfortunate birds which happened to be within reach, strangled them, shook the water from their oily plumage, and laid them down at her husband's feet" (50). It is Emilia's knowledge of how to survive in the Siberian wilds that saves the Polish men, as when she predicts an imminent storm and acts swiftly to counteract frostbite.

Such narrative strategies endorse how environmental knowledge implicates indigeneity or acclimatization, both in turn associated with race. In "Demerara," the ability to predict the weather is central to the plot: "The whites have not yet become as weatherwise, between the tropics, as the negroes" (106). There are degrees to this knowledge, depending on one's connection to the immediate climate: as immigrants, both white plantation owners and enslaved Black people

fall short of the foresight which might be attained, and which was actually possessed by the original inhabitants of these countries. A negro cannot, like them, predict a storm twelve days beforehand; but he is generally aware of its approach some hours sooner than his master. It depends upon the terms he happens to be on with the whites, whether or not he gives them the advantage of his observations. (106)

This has profound implications in the tale when a hurricane hits the island and wipes out many of the crops, causing financial disaster. And here, the populations are indeed on bad "terms," meaning that the white colonists lack forewarning, which might have allowed them to mitigate the damage. In fact, quite the opposite happens: the most mistreated of the enslaved people rejoice in the destruction. This is shown, metaphorically and literally, in a scene where the enslaved witness their cruel overseer being swept away in the storm—but, rather than aid him, they watch as he drowns. The scene is a sort of *deus ex machina*, motivating the tale's moral impulses. If, as Courtmanche has suggested, the realist novel and Smith's "Invisible Hand" developed in tandem to imagine how individuals' actions are entangled, then Martineau's

version of the directing hand interestingly draws the natural world into this system of agencies.

In "Demerara," local climate and environment, combined with slavery, threaten the very tenets and logic of capitalism. Mr. Bruce laments "that security [in property] can never be reached here, son. As soon as a man thinks he is likely to do well, there comes a hurricane, or a mortality among his slaves, or, worst of all, an insurrection; and perpetually, some thwarting measure of our enemies at home" (17). Later, Alfred Bruce imagines how the dynamics and logics of local ecosystems, economics, and slavery interact, and outlines his plan to eliminate slavery:

Slavery can only exist where men are scarce in proportion to land; and as the population would by this time have increased, and be increasing, slavery would have died out. At present, land is abundant, fertile, and cheap in Demerara, and labour decreases every year; so that slaves are valuable, and their prospect of emancipation but distant. But in my estate, as I have told you, the land is by far less fertile, labour more abundant, and slavery wearing out. My exertions will be directed towards improving my land, and increasing the supply of labour; by which I shall gain the double advantage of procuring labour cheap, and hastening the work of emancipation. I hope no new monopoly will be proposed, which should tempt me to change my plan, and aid and abet slavery. (99)

This is a vision of a globalized ecological and economic system, where the condition of the land and soil plays a major role. In this, Martineau portrays, even more than her source texts and theories, the stakes of environmental conditions and human actions in a way that seems prescient and relevant today. Taken together, the tales suggest how preparing a plum pudding is related to the slavery system and to the climate and the soil of an island in the Caribbean.

It is no coincidence that the most explicit instances of this linkage—“Demerara” and the “Garveloch” tales—cluster around the issue of slavery. Martineau theorized slavery in terms of both interdependency and complicity. As Logan notes:

Martineau maintained that culpability for American slavery was international in scope. In 1858 she wrote: “I dare say it has struck you all how remarkably the fortunes of the civilized world have suddenly become dependent on the great question of free & slave labour. There is Russia, in the thick of it: & America: & now, France; &, as a consequence of the three, Turkey, Spain & Portugal.”
(*Harriet Martineau* 238)

Martineau’s attention to how distant places are linked invites, in turn, attention to how people, settings, and trade affect one another—and how the resulting effects might not be entirely visible to individual actors. Actions can very subtly redound across a system, or accumulate over time and involving varying scales of measure. It is difficult for individuals to understand how their actions will affect present and future material well-being, and how their economic choices affect others. From the late eighteenth century forward, many thinkers and organizers considered the danger and power in economic choices, particularly consumer choices. The free-produce movement was an early example of a boycott: it sought to turn everyday people away from goods that were produced by slave labor, and toward alternatives produced by free versus slave labor.¹⁷

Upon seeing such links exposed, a tempting response might be to withdraw completely from such economic and imperial systems, as depicted in “The Hill and the Valley.” The retired, hermit-like Armstrong lives on his hoarded capital, and he spins a fantasy of self-sufficiency, with his wellbeing springing from the immediate, local environment of his “plot of ground”:

[...] this plot of ground has produced to me something more valuable than ever grew out of a garden soil. It has

given me health, sir. My own hands have dug and planted and gathered, and see the fruits of my labour! Here I am, at seventy-nine, as strong as at forty. Not a grain of any drug have I swallowed since I came here; not a night's rest have I lost; not a want have I felt: for I pride myself on having few wants which my own hands cannot satisfy. I find no fault with other men's ways while they leave me mine. Let them choke one another up in towns if they choose, and stake their money, and lose their peace in trade. I did so once, and therefore I do not wonder that others try the experiment; but I soon had enough of it. I am thankful that I found a resting-place so early as I did. (14-15)

But as another character, Paul, points out, Armstrong has not adequately accounted for the difficulty of fully extricating oneself from imperial and economic systems that relentlessly link people and places:

Live where you please: but how do you justify it to yourself to share the benefits of society when you do nothing in return? You enjoy the fruits of the labour and capital of others,—you drink your tea from the East Indies and your coffee from the West; you read your newspaper, which is the production of a hundred brains and pairs of hands; you— (77)

Although Armstrong has ostensibly fulfilled his social responsibility by working and saving money, Paul argues that this isn't enough: to continue enjoying the fruits of the imperial and capitalist system, he suggests, Armstrong must comprehend his implication in a broader, more complex system.

Extending the critique, the tale suggests a possible route enabling Armstrong to perceive his social responsibilities. Mr. Hollins also questions Armstrong's choices, but from a different ethical angle: is his way of life acceptable, if it is not practicable for the many? Hollins is particularly concerned with the land and its limits: Armstrong

takes up more room to much less purpose than could be afforded to people in general. I really grudge the quantity of food I see rotting in his garden every year; and I am sure if he was aware how many thousands are in want of it, he would give up his peace and quiet for the sake of sharing it among them. (16-17)

What might initially appear to be a Malthusian imbalance between the number of people and the amount of arable land (Armstrong “takes up more room”) is actually a question of resource management (Armstrong is a lackadaisical gardener). Martineau here raises a central tension between the dream of self-sufficiency and the difficulty of realizing that dream in the context of a capitalist system involving people and places linked by mutual dependencies and obligations. The issue is both that Armstrong still relies on the produce of other people and places, *and* that he owes it to others not to “waste” the land he occupies.

The ethical imperative to improve unproductive land in order to provide for the many, surfaces in a number of Martineau’s tales. For example, productivity is the greatest good in “Brooke and Brooke Farm,” overriding the tradition of the commons and the desire for beautiful places to take walks in. This is of course a problematic imperative, one that prioritizes economic productivity and human use of resources above all else—above valuing nature for its own sake, surely, and even above other competing human priorities, like tradition and pleasure. But there is also something prescient about how Martineau represents human wellbeing as wrapped up with what would now be termed an ethical and sustainable system of production, which is always grounded in particular environments, and which questions whether any one individual has the right to so many resources when others are in want of them.

Ultimately, Martineau’s tales are suggestive in terms of the ethics and sustainability of economies and for prompting readers to imagine the agency of the natural world. In “Demerara” and “Weal and Woe in Garveloch,” nature itself seems to rebel against the institution of slavery (the hurricane and soil depletion) and against overfishing (poor growing seasons and resulting

famine). By imaginatively applying economic principles to particular times, environments, and communities, Martineau added to economic debates, taking abstract ideas about nature and applying them to particular settings—settings that come to exert their agency through recalcitrant soil, or storms, or even venomous snakes. In her attention to how local environments act or react according to principles that cannot be summarized at the end of each tale, she indicates the difficulty of calibrating human actions to desired outcomes. As much as political economy might promise scientific precision, it fails to measure the impact on individuals' lives or ecosystems, any more than climate change and environmental degradation can be easily tallied in monetary terms. It is tempting to see in this a prescient model for how complicity could be represented and theorized through the global, nineteenth-century economic system, which relied both on slave labor and on environments that were appropriated and depleted, with human populations and ecosystems interacting to produce unanticipated effects, then and now.

Notes

The use of language and capitalization in this article is guided by conversations about the need to reevaluate the ways that language has embedded and reinforced power structures. For the philosophy behind using terms like "enslaved worker," see Daina Ramey Berry's introduction to *Enslaved Women in America: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Berry and Deleso A. Alford (ABC-CLIO, 2012), especially page xxi. For the philosophy behind capitalizing "Indigenous" when referring to people, see Daniel Heath Justice in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), especially page 6. For an oft-quoted discussion about capitalizing "Black" but not "white," see Touré's "Author's Note" prefacing his book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now* (Free Press, 2011). I am also indebted to the community-sourced document by P. Gabrielle Foreman *et al.*, "Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help," 2018, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYslX-hlKzLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/edit?usp=sharing>, accessed 23 May 2020.

¹ For more on the history of economic thinking and the environment, see Hans Aage, "Economic Ideology about the Environment: From Adam Smith to Bjorn Lomborg," *Global Environment*, Vol. 2 (2008), 8-45; and Agnar Sandmo, "The Early History of Environmental Economics," *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy*, Vol. 9, No.1 (2015), 43-63).

² See also Mark Blaug, "Political Economy to Be Read as Literature," *Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study* (Yale University Press, 1958), 129-39; John Vint and Keiko Funaki, "Harriet Martineau and Classical Political Economy," in *Harriet Martineau and the Birth of Disciplines*, ed. Valerie Sanders and Gaby Weiner (Routledge 2017), 49-68; and Willie Henderson, *Economics as Literature*.

³ See Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) for analyses of agency in complex systems, drawing on actor-network theory. See also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴ Hoecker-Drysdale and Hill cite Martineau's "unbounded" sociological imagination, reaching "from micro to macro, from theory to observation, from objective description to informed critique and social action" (9). But economists are only beginning to acknowledge her disciplinary contributions. Henderson notes that her significance "in the intellectual history of economics is beginning to be reappraised" (63), but few analyses are available, excepting Vint and Funaki's "Harriet Martineau and Classical Political Economy."

⁵ On links between philosophy and literature, particularly in the Enlightenment era, see Alexander Dick and Christina Lupton, *Theory and Practice in the Eighteenth Century: Writing between Philosophy and Literature* (Pickering & Chatto, 2008); Michael Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment: Theology, Aesthetics, and the Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Cecilia Miller, *Enlightenment and Political Fiction: The Everyday Intellectual* (Routledge, 2016); and Ian Balfour, "Allegories of Origins: *Frankenstein* after the Enlightenment," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2016), 777-98).

⁶ "Ireland" takes place in the eponymous setting; "Ella of Garveloch" and "Weal and Woe in Garveloch" are set in Scotland; and a number of tales are scattered across England—from industrial centers ("A Manchester Strike") to provincial towns ("Berkeley the Banker, Parts 1 & 2") to little villages ("Brooke and Brooke Farm"). "Life in the Wilds" is set in South Africa, "Cinnamon & Pearls" in modern-day Sri Lanka, "Briery Creek" in America, "Homes Abroad" in Australia, "Demerara" in the West Indies, and "The Charmed Sea" in Russia.

⁷ This narrative assumes that "all human cultures and societies are plotted along a developmental history whose teleological endpoint is modern 'civilized,' capitalist Europe" (Klaver, "Imperial" 22).

⁸ *The Quarterly Review* unfavorably compared "Life in the Wilds" to *Robinson Crusoe*—"a much more amusing and instructive story than any of Miss Martineau's"—and particularly objected to conversations about political economy, claiming they involve "unintelligible and fantastical refinements" (*Illustrations of Political Economy* 136).

⁹ See also Wojciech Jasiakiewicz, "Harriet Martineau and 'The Charmed Sea': Polish Travel Experience in Siberia," in *Travel and Identity: Studies in Literature, Culture and Language* (Springer, 2018), 21-38.

¹⁰ On "Berkeley the Banker" and its relation to debates about bank runs and failures, see Brian Cooper; also Elaine Freedgood, "Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1995), 33-53.

¹¹ For a source contemporary to Martineau, see James Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies* (Saunders and Benning, 1830), Vol. 2, 282. See also Colin Spencer, *British Food: An Extraordinary Thousand Years of History* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 54-56.

¹² Historians like Lizzie Cunningham trace how such networks of appetites and capitalist exchange shaped production practices and dietary habits. These systems undermined Indigenous eating cultures and integrated them into the "commercial food world of the Empire" (195).

¹³ Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* describes how a self-interested individual contributes to the good of the economy without necessarily

intending or understanding such wider, systemic benefits: “By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (IV:32). The idea that self-interest contributes to a wider social good was popular in the eighteenth century, as seen in Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*. Typically viewed in a positive light, the “invisible hand” also demonstrates that actions can also yield unintended consequences.

¹⁴ See Ella Dzelzainis, “Malthus, Women and Fiction,” in *New Perspectives on Malthus*, ed. Robert J. Mayhew (Cambridge University Press, 2016). 155-181.

¹⁵ Godwin, in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, argued that humans could gradually be improved and perfected: “Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement” (I:86-87).

¹⁶ The settlers rely on their preexisting knowledge but “also learn to cope by adapting native ways, although how they came by this knowledge—given the absence of cultural interaction—remains an unexamined mystery.” As a result, “The Bushmen, then, are both a disembodied threat to the colonizing endeavor and a crucial resource for settlers’ survival in this alien environment” (Logan, *Harriet Martineau* 222).

¹⁷ On boycotting, see Julie Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

Works Cited

Collingham, Lizzie. *The Hungry Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World*. The Bodley Head, 2017.

Rebecca Richardson, "Harriet Martineau's Illustrations of Political Economy"

- Cooper, Brian P. "'A Not Unreasonable Panic': Character, Confidence, and Credit in Harriet Martineau's 'Berkeley the Banker.'" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2010), 363-84.
- Courtemanche, Eleanor. *The 'Invisible Hand' and British Fiction, 1818-1860*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Gibbard, Allan and Hal R. Varian. "Economic Models." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 75, No. 11 (1978), 664-77.
- Godwin, William. *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. 2nd Edition. G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796.
- Henderson, Willie. *Economics as Literature*. Routledge, 1995.
- Hill, Michael R. and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale. *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives*. Routledge, 2001.
- Hirschman, Albert O. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Hornborg, Alf. "Cornucopia or Zero-Sum Game? The Epistemology of Sustainability." *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2003), 205-16.
- "Illustrations of Political Economy" [Review]. *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49, No. 97 (1833), 136-52.
- Klaver, Claudia C. *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England*. The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
- . "Imperial Economics: Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* and the Narration of Empire." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2007), 21-40.
- Logan, Deborah A. *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission*. Ashgate, 2010.
- . "Introduction." *Illustrations of Political Economy: Selected Tales*. Broadview Editions, 2004. 9-51.
- Martineau, Harriet. "Berkeley the Banker Parts 1 & 2." In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 5.
- . "Brooke and Brooke Farm." In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 1.

- . “The Charmed Sea.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 5.
- . “Demerara.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 2.
- . “Ella of Garveloch.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 2.
- . “For Each and For All.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 4.
- . “The Hill and the Valley.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*, Vol. 1.
- . *Illustrations of Political Economy*. 9 Vols. London: Charles Fox, 1834.
- . “Life in the Wilds.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 1.
- . “The Loom and the Lugger Part 2.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 6.
- . Preface. “Berkeley the Banker Parts 1 & 2.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 5:i.
- . Preface [series]. In *Illustrations of Political Economy*,. Vol. 1:iii-xviii.
- . “Sowers not Reapers.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*, Vol. 7.
- . “Weal and Woe in Garveloch.” In *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 2.
- Poovey, Mary. *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Ricardo, David. *The Works of David Ricardo*. Ed. J.R. McCulloch. John Murray, 1846.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations. Books IV-V*. Ed. Andrew Skinner. Penguin, 1999.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. University of California Press, 1971.

