

Harriet Martineau, White Women, and Slavery in the Antebellum South

Iain Crawford

*T*his essay brings together two threads in the critical discussion of Harriet Martineau to examine a previously unrecognized element of her representation of slavery. A striking anomaly, given the context of her dedication to the abolitionist cause, is her erasure of the normative role of white women in the South's slave-based economy. While her American books embody her profound commitment to abolitionism, her concomitant advocacy for the freedom of the press, and her lifelong dedication to women's agency, they also reveal a largely invisible tension between her wide-ranging accounts of a slave-based economy and her almost complete erasure of white women's engagement in actively managing both slavery and the cultural episteme it created. Exploring her representation or its lack illuminates not only Martineau's own complexities but also those of the wider culture in which she lived and worked.

Two letters that testify eloquently to Harriet Martineau's enduring commitment to the abolitionist movement appear at the end of Deborah Logan's five-volume comprehensive edition of the correspondence. Written in late May and early June 1876, and addressed, respectively, to William Lloyd Garrison and Maria Weston Chapman, they reflect on Martineau's pivotal experience at a meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (1835) and on "half a lifetime" of friendship and solidarity with these two principle leaders of the abolition movement (*Collected* 5: 350-52). Martineau's long commitment to the abolitionist cause is

evidenced throughout her career, beginning with “Demerara” (*Illustrations of Political Economy*, 1832); continuing with her “historical romance,” *The Hour and the Man* (1841); and through her prolific periodicals writing (1820s-60s). Martineau was, as Logan has shown, “a primary voice in the transatlantic abolitionist movement” (*Harriet Martineau* 85). No other major British writer of the time was so consistently engaged in the cause; no one made the case against slavery in such a range of publishing venues; and no one compares to Martineau, whose “role in American abolitionism as a literary liaison between Britain and America is essential for a comprehensive understanding of Anglo-American relations during this crucial period in United States history” (Logan, *Writings* xxiv).

The depth of Martineau’s commitment to the abolitionist cause notwithstanding, recent scholarly work demonstrates that her engagement with slavery, race, and history exhibits a range of complexities. As Cora Kaplan notes: “Martineau is as interesting to us now for the contradictory and unresolved elements of her thought as for its undoubted boldness, rigour and innovation” (180). To demonstrate her point, Kaplan draws on Adam Smith’s formulation of the concept of sympathy as a lens through which to read Martineau’s writing about slavery. For Smith, sympathy is an imaginative act embodied in the sensations that, requiring “changing places in fancy” with another individual, is both “inherent in human psychology” and “essential to moral judgment” (181). Kaplan examines a particular form of “dissonance” she finds in Martineau’s representations of slavery and race, identifying a “discursive space” in her writing resulting from “her own inability to sympathize—in Smith’s broader definition—with cultural others who do not conform to the formulaic and imaginatively controlled terms in which she imagines difference” (187-88). As a result, Kaplan concludes, what we find, especially in Martineau’s more ethnographic work before 1850, is a set of “manifest contradictions between [her] strong abolitionist sentiments and the disturbing racial tropes that erupt from her observation of actual slaves” (192).

This essay brings together the two threads in the scholarship represented by Logan and Kaplan's work to examine a previously undiscussed element of Martineau's representation of slavery and to illustrate one of those "unresolved elements in her thought." Specifically, this analysis considers a striking anomaly, given the context of her undoubted dedication to the abolitionist cause: her erasure of the normative role of white women in the American South's slave-economy. Historians' work linking American capitalism with Antebellum plantation society reveals two central elements of Martineau's liberal ideology existing in tension with one another, as seen in representations of slavery in the books resulting from her 1834-36 American tour. On the one hand, these texts clearly do embody Martineau's profound commitment to abolitionism along with her concomitant advocacy of freedom of the press. Slavery, she argues, is fundamentally incompatible with America's founding ideals of liberal democracy; further, a free press is essential to realizing those ideals in a rapidly evolving society. On the other hand is her lifelong dedication to female agency, particularly her commitment to expanding women's work beyond the sphere of domestic labor—another essential theme throughout her career. Together, as I have explored elsewhere,¹ these fundamental components of Martineau's liberalism coexist at the heart of her progressive activism, shape her rendering of the American project, and are especially prominent in her accounts of southern culture. Consequently, a recurring theme in the three books written as a result of her American tour—*Society in America* (1837), *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838), and *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838)—is the definition of slavery in America and the cultural entities that support it as an almost exclusively masculine phenomenon. In contrast, the abolitionist cause is largely presented, with the exception of heroic leaders such as Garrison, in predominantly feminized terms. The overlap between the abolitionist and feminist causes has been a mainstay in critical discussions of Martineau's representation of America. Caroline Roberts provides an extensive exploration of how "Martineau's discourse participates in a tradition of abolitionist rhetoric [whereby] women writers

projected their anxieties about their own subordination onto their representations of slaves” (42). Roberts argues that this merger through language speaks to the ways both groups were excluded from the rights fundamental to full participation in a liberal society.

Recent studies by historians of American capitalism, especially those focused on white women’s role in a slave economy, have increasingly problematized the notion of straightforward symmetry between the abolitionist and feminist causes during the Antebellum period. Such scholars as Thavolia Glymph, Caitlin Rosenthal, and Stephanie Jones-Rogers demonstrate that white women were profoundly imbricated in every aspect of slave-economy, both in the private space of the home and in public commercial and legal venues. Examining Martineau’s representation of slavery in the American writing reveals a largely invisible tension 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. Exploring her representation—and her lack of representation—of white women’s role in the slave-economy—in Kaplan’s terms, “the contradictory and unresolved elements of her thought”—illuminates not only her own complexities but also those of the wider culture in which she lived and worked.

To make this case, the current essay is organized into three parts. First, it summarizes key insights into southern women’s roles in a system using slave labor with extraordinary efficiency to generate commerce and wealth critical to national development. The economic effectiveness of that system, and the roles of southern women in it, were obscured by prevailing modes of representation of southern life and culture as regressive and obsolescent. Second, the essay argues that, ironically, Martineau’s portrayal of the South has much in common with those enduring modes of representation. Throughout her depiction of the United States, she uses the paradigm of stadial historical development that, like her understanding of sympathy, drew from the work of Adam Smith.² Adam Smith’s theory of stadial development, which traces human progress

through a sequence of phases built around hunting, shepherding, agriculture and commerce respectively, had become an important assumption within the Scottish Enlightenment and would be foundational to Martineau's thinking throughout her life (Crawford 31). Using that lens, she presents the South as a simple exemplar of how the stadial model positioned agrarianism as an earlier, more primitive phase of economic development, one that, morally and spiritually corroded by its adherence to slavery, was condemned to inescapable anachronistic decay. In this version of southern economy, white women, no less than people of color, are victims of a patriarchy that enforces both slavery and the principle of coverture.

The third point considers the two historically identifiable women Martineau presents in her accounts of the South: Madame Lalaurie, an infamously cruel New Orleans slave-owner whose notoriety led to her having to flee the country; and Caroline Gilman, wife of a Charleston Unitarian minister and editor of *The Southern Rose*, a widely circulated and influential weekly magazine for juvenile readers. While Gilman is discussed but not named in Martineau's immediate post-visit texts, her identity is confirmed retroactively in the *Autobiography* (written 1855-56, published 1877). Her presence in the earlier texts, however, illuminates the challenges Martineau faced in unifying her abolitionist and feminist positions. Gilman and her husband were originally from Massachusetts and embedded in the socially progressive Unitarian denomination that, especially in New England, played such a key role in the abolitionist movement. Madam Lalaurie was born in New Orleans and had moved through marriage into the elite circle of French creole society. Despite their very different origins, the two women are not the simple exemplars of extreme distinction in their involvement in the slave economy they might appear to be.

White Women and the Economy of Slavery

Although many details and major issues remain contested, historians of American capitalism agree on the importance of Antebellum slavery to

the nation's economic system. As Edward Baptist notes, "slavery's expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics" (xxi) of a nation that was the first to follow Great Britain through the transition into large-scale industrialization. Revising the assumptions of an earlier generation of historians, for whom slavery had been assumed to be as inefficient as it was immoral, Baptist and others examine the far-reaching ways slavery contributed to the formation of the nation's economy. Caitlin Rosenthal argues that "slaveholders (and those who bought their products) built an innovative, global, profit-hungry labor regime that contributed to the emergence of the modern economy" (3). Her study demonstrates in compelling detail how core organizational techniques of later industrial operations were first developed under plantation slavery and included complex management structures, pioneered in the British West Indies and adopted and refined in the American South; standardized methods of accounting; highly developed record-keeping that enabled sophisticated analyses of labor productivity; and valuation practices to allow the calculation of appreciation and depreciation. Anticipating the task system conceptualized for factory labor by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the early twentieth century and operationalized by Laurence Gantt's eponymous scheduling chart, slavery thus laid the foundations of modern business practices in ways and to an extent that have only recently been recognized.

What distinguished the slave-economy from succeeding modes of industrial production was the extent to which it merged public and private spheres of life into a single entity. In recent years, this unified episteme, and the deep involvement of white women in it, has been explored by historians of southern plantation society.³ Thavolia Glymph considers "the public character of the plantation household" as integral to the construction of slave-economy, and examines how "violence on the part of white women was integral to the making of slavery" (5). Stephanie Jones-Rogers furthers Glymph's insights into white women's roles in disciplinary violence against slaves and in their buying and selling, demonstrating how extensively they operated beyond the supposed limitations of coverture and were supported by the legal system in

maintaining control over the slaves they owned. White women, Jones-Rogers shows, were fully engaged agents in the system of slavery. They obtained slaves as gifts, through inheritance, or by purchase; they administered discipline not just by delegating it to overseers but also by inflicting physical punishment themselves; they commissioned the recovery of runaways; and they sold at will the humans to whom they held title. Marriage contracts frequently documented express protection for these provisions, and courts were willing to intervene and safeguard women whose husbands attempted to rob them, squander their assets, or otherwise violate their rights of ownership. Consequently, the concept of coverture, to which Martineau and other liberals attributed women's supposed lack of agency beyond the home, was often "a legal fiction, and an imperfect one at that [...] the legal petitions brought by married women repeatedly informed jurists that [it] was not working" (Jones-Rogers 13).

"The desolation it has made": Martineau, Slavery and the South

These understandings of slavery's economic efficiency, its significance to the nation's development, and the extent of white women's participation in it are decidedly not evident from the work Martineau published in the years immediately following her visit. To be sure, a recurring thread in those texts is the extent to which the commercial life of the northern states, in particular Massachusetts, depended on southern slavery. In emphasizing this connection, Martineau echoed a theme articulated during the 1830s by some of her closest abolitionist allies, including Lydia Maria Child and the southern-born Quaker sisters, Sarah and Angelina Grimké.⁴ Yet Martineau's vision of the American project affirms the promise of a nation developing rapidly through the unleashing of its enormous economic potential. Distinct from such contemporaries as Frances Trollope, Frederic Marryat, and Charles Dickens, her account of the United States rests on a faith that "America is meant to be everything" (*Society* 2:222). Her descriptions of the continent's immense natural resources along with the entrepreneurial creativity of its new inhabitants repeatedly emphasize how dynamically the young republic was fulfilling its potential.

But if Martineau's positive appraisal was exceptional among pre-Civil War travelers, she was even more unusual in her attention to critiquing the possibilities American cultural practices made available to women. As she argues in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, the standing of women is the most revealing indicator of a society's progress: "the degree of the degradation of woman [... is] as good a test as the moralist can adopt for ascertaining the state of domestic morals in any country" (174). She posits an inseparable connection between the moral development of the body politic and the roles it allows women to occupy: "where moral force is recognized as the moving power of society, it seems to follow that the condition of Woman must be elevated" (37). Finally, she articulates a claim consistent throughout her life and career—"the public mind is awakening to the necessity of enlarging the sphere of female industry" (177); she urges the importance, not only for individual women but for social progress as a whole, of the expansion of women's work beyond the space and confines of home and family. Not surprisingly, then, when shortly before the publication of *Society in America* she received a letter from William Empson urging her not to "put into my book any opinions concerning what are vulgarly called the 'Rights of Woman,'" she rejected his advice as both "clear impertinence" and wholly misguided:

The appearance of my book will show you the impossibility of anyone who does not know the scheme of it being able to offer acceptable advice. I analyse society in America,—of which women constitute the half. I test all by their own avowed democratic principles. The result, you see, is inevitable. (*Collected* 1:339)

Given this rebuff to its editor's counsel, it was perhaps also not surprising that the *Edinburgh Review* carried no review of *Society in America* as, and not for the last time, Martineau thus rejected the views of the great Whig periodical as incompatible with her own social theories. The "test" underlying her account of the American project was to examine women's socially assigned roles against the foundational ideals of a liberal democracy. And, for all the affirmation she offered to the young nation,

her overarching focus in her American writing was on women's exclusion from politics and economic activities driving the nation's stadial advance. Confined to the culture of republican motherhood, women's agency was subordinated to the authority of male relatives and husbands. As she claims in her chapter, "The Political Non-Existence of Women":

the best friends of half the human race peremptorily decide for them as to their rights, their duties, their feelings, their powers. [...] Woman's lack of will and property, is more like the true cause of her exclusion from the representation, than that which is actually set down against her. (*Society* 1:203, 201)

Scholars of early American culture demonstrate that the doctrine of republican motherhood, still in place during Martineau's visit, was a powerful form of social regulation. As Gillian Brown argues, it restricted women to a form of domesticity that "signifies a feminization of selfhood in service to an individualism mostly available to (white) men" (7). Elizabeth Maddock Dillon notes how it subjected women to the "symbolics of sentimental liberalism" (203). By examining the position of women through the lens of republican motherhood, Martineau subjects America to that analysis of "the degree of the degradation of women" through which she ascertains "the state of domestic morals in any country" (*How to Observe* 174). Her conclusions, moreover, anticipate arguments by such modern scholars as Brown and Dillon by highlighting how "Americans unite some of the low qualities of feudalism with some of the highest of a more equal social organization" (117):

the old feudal notions about the sex flourish [...] and these notions, in reality, regulate the condition of women. American women generally are treated in no degree as equals, but with a kind of superstitious outward observance, which, as they have done nothing to earn it, is false and hurtful. (176-77)

Anticipating the analyses of female sequestration developed in modern scholarship, Martineau thus portrays American women as "shut out of the world of reality, and compelled by usage to endure the corrosion of

unoccupied thought, and the decay of unemployed powers” (*Society* 2:296). To be sure, in rendering the new society through this lens, Martineau makes one of her most distinctive contributions to writing about America. As Michael Hill and others have argued, she was also shaping a field of knowledge as well as perceptions of the new nation, for it was through her emphasis on women’s experience over the two years and ten thousand miles of her American tour that Martineau developed a methodology that would prove profoundly influential on the formation of sociology as a discipline.

Despite these contributions, Martineau’s lens for examining America had certain excluding limitations. Nowhere is this more evident than in her account of the South. By depicting the region as an outlier, lagging behind the industrialized North and expansionist frontier West, a place where cultural resistance to female agency was at its deepest, she offers her most extended representation of the dilemma posed by the combination of America’s immense potential and the deleterious consequences of slavery and republican motherhood. Claiming that “the times have outgrown slavery” and the rest of the nation “seems to be already passing out of this stage into one even more advanced” (*Society* 2:123), she presents the South as an anachronism, its fate of being left behind in the stadial advance of history inscribed into its very soil. On the one hand, she writes lyrically about the rich potential of its natural resources, describing the formative powers of the Mississippi River and the literal “world-making” that occurs through its immense sedimentary power of transferring particulate matter across the continent to create new land and opportunities for growth (*Society in America* 1:210-11). On the other, she points to the damage inflicted on southern soil exhausted by slave-based agricultural practices and of states with “more slave labour than their deteriorated lands require”; in consequence, “slavery, like an army of locusts, is compelled to shift its place, by the desolation it has made” (2:107). Inverting the model of stadial progress, expressing southern decay in language redolent of God’s punishment of the Egyptians in the Book of Exodus, the forcefulness of Martineau’s image is all the more remarkable because it is so inaccurate a

representation of southern rural economy, which was achieving unprecedented advances in cotton production and wealth generation at the time of her visit.⁵

Within this broader representation of a decaying South and essential to her account of it is her description of plantation society, which, as Martineau scholars note, she renders as degenerate, patriarchal, and built on practices of sexual violence that intimidate both the enslaved women who are its direct victims and the white women portrayed as its collateral damage. Traveling across Alabama, she describes "the mechanical, unintelligent pioneers" running plantations with financial gain as their only object, along with their self-alienated offspring: "some, fit for a better mode of life, discontented; some youths pedantic, some maidens romantic, to a degree which makes the stranger almost doubt the reality of the scenes and personages before his eyes" (*Society* 1:299, 298). Adult white women, the mistresses of these plantations, are almost invariably represented as limited to the kind of domestic roles prescribed by republican motherhood, either in regard to their own directionless children or as maternal supervisors of slaves incapable of taking care of themselves:

She gratifies your curiosity about her "people;" telling you how soon they burn out their shoes at the toes, and wear out their winter woollens, and tear up their summer cottons; and how impossible it is to get black women to learn to cut out clothes without waste; and how she never inquires when and where the whipping is done, as it is the overseer's business, and not hers. She has not been seated many minutes when she is called away, and returns saying how babyish these people are, that they will not take medicine unless she gives it to them; and how careless of each other, so that she has been obliged to stand by and see Diana put clean linen on her infant, and to compel Bet to get her sick husband some breakfast. (*Retrospect* 2:48)

However, even as the intent here is clearly satirical, the passage also works to absolve the mistress of anything more than a quasi-maternal role.

Indeed, by stressing her willed ignorance of “when and where the whipping is done,” the text places her in a position analogous to that of slaves themselves: just as they know nothing of the functions she must carry out, so too she is excluded from knowledge of the system of punishment maintained by the male overseer and thus placed outside the disciplinary practices on which slavery depended. That exclusion is further extended to other aspects of slave economy, notably the buying and selling of slaves. While the “Morals of Slavery” does include two references to incidents in which white women initiate sales, both are exceptional occasions, prompted by specific, unusual moments of emotional disruption in the household (*Society* 2:319, 335). Nowhere are white women shown routinely engaged in the everyday commercial activity that was central to slave economy and in which, as the work of Jones-Rogers and others has demonstrated, they did in fact fully participate.

Underlying Martineau’s accounts of the South as a region regressing under the impact of slavery and of the vitiated nature of the individuals maintaining plantation society is her emphasis on the state of the press. While other British writers addressed this topic, none made it so central to their analysis of the condition of American democracy. She repeatedly emphasizes how white rule constrains the expression of opinion and prevents the formation of a dynamic public sphere essential to the healthy formation of a liberal society. In addition to pointing to how legal sanctions support the erasure of slavery from southern newspapers, with “laws against the press [...] as peremptory as in the most despotic countries of Europe,” she notes how undeveloped the press of the region remains—with 79 newspapers in Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina combined, compared with 595 in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania—as well as how “empty and poor” so many of them are (*Society* 2:344, 345). The combination of the coercive force of these laws and the impoverishment of the public sphere, she suggests, has debilitating effects on “the gentry of the south” as, out of touch with the wider world and embedded in “delusions on their own affairs,” they remain unable to imagine alternative futures for their society, remaining “fettered by their own presses” (2:344, 345, 352).

At the heart of her representation of southern culture lies an issue absent from the public discourse of the press, one that white women acknowledged to her privately: the commodification of female slaves and the practice of miscegenation. Unique among British travel writers of the period, she emphasizes the sexual violence endemic to slavery. By placing it at the heart of her diagnosis of southern moral corruption, she defines "the licentiousness of the masters" as "the proximate cause of society in the south and south-west being in such a state that nothing else is to be looked for than its being dissolved into its elements" (*Society* 2:330). She draws on "the access to women and domestic scenes" that is fundamental to her methodology (Hill 72), sharing hosts' assertions that "every white lady believes that her husband has been an exception to the rule of seduction" (*Society* 2:327). But some women reveal an awareness that their husbands are not exceptional, which leads to "an end to all wholesome confidence and sympathy" and destroys the trust of marriage: "woman sinks to be the ornament of her husband's home, the domestic manager of his establishment, instead of being his all-sufficient friend" (*Society* 2:328). The combination of slavery and the culture of miscegenation thus not only eliminates free agency and consent for the enslaved but also, by corrupting the marriage relation and the ideal of republican motherhood to which it is tied, erodes the trust essential to a moral community. While Martineau describes both the physical barbarism associated with slavery and the emotional devastation created by the selling apart of families, it is thus miscegenation and its consequences that are central to "Morals of Slavery." That she followed this chapter with one on "Civilisation," prefaced with a quotation from Jefferson, ironically reinforces her final point: "This country, which has given to the world the example of physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation also; for as yet it is but nominal with us. The inquisition of public opinion overwhelms, in practice, the freedom asserted by the laws in theory" (*Society* 3:1). Invoking the ultimate representative of the southern elite, one of the nation's founding fathers, a man whose private life at Monticello manifested the very practices she had condemned in "Morals of Slavery," brings home forcefully the contradictions embedded

in American liberalism and its multiple exploitation of the bodies of enslaved people.⁶

In her emphasis on miscegenation and its consequences, Martineau was an outlier in her time even as she anticipated the recent work of historians of southern plantation society. That work, exemplified by Jones-Rogers, brings new attention to “the slaveholding household” as a “place of coerced production and reproduction, racial and sexual exploitation, and physical and psychological violence” (83). While other early Victorian British writers occasionally alluded to this pervasive and defining feature of southern life, they did so only in passing. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example, Dickens excoriates the “noble patriot, with many followers!—who dreamed of Freedom in a slave’s embrace, and waking sold her offspring and his own in public markets” (341). The obliquely generalized nature of the Dickensian narrator’s comment, while shocking, does not carry the force of Martineau’s recurring emphasis in calling out miscegenation as the definitive characteristic of southern slavery. This emphasis becomes all the more distinctive through her position as a welcomed guest in southern households, placing readers in the uncomfortable role of witnessing vicariously how the domestic ideal actually operated. Unlike Dickens, who never stayed in private homes, she was “received into the bosom of many families, not as a stranger, but as a daughter or a sister” (*Society* 1:xv), and she exploits this vantage point to describe southern life from within. For some contemporary readers, such a focus, particularly from a woman writer, was evidently shocking. A hostile reviewer of *Society in America* in *Fraser’s Magazine* referred caustically to her familiarity with the “arcana of slave-state debauchery” (“Practical Reasoning” 567). For Martineau, however, this emphasis was clearly essential to the thesis her writing about American democracy consistently argues: that women were excluded from agency by their enforced roles as republican mothers and that, in this respect, white southern women were aligned with enslaved African-Americans as fellow victims of patriarchal power indifferent to the consequences of its actions.

That thesis, however, depends on the assumption that white southern women had little or no agency in the slave system, an assumption modern historians have thoroughly undermined and that it is hard to believe that Martineau's own observations can have warranted. She traveled across more of the South than any other contemporary British writer, spending the period from mid-February through June 1835 on a great circuit that took her from Charlottesville, VA to Charleston, SC, and across Georgia and Alabama to New Orleans. After ten days in the Crescent City, she traveled via the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to Kentucky before returning to the east coast in mid-July (*Society* 1:xiv). She stayed in private homes as well as public establishments, witnessing slavery at first hand. She met with, and discussed slavery with, leaders ranging from James Madison to John C. Calhoun; as she noted in the Introduction to *Society in America*, she "spent months in the southern States, with negroes ever at my heels" (1:xvi). And yet, despite a number of vivid and, as Cora Kaplan notes, deeply ambivalent descriptions of slaves at work, in their homes, or in transit across the South, she almost entirely excludes white women as a group from managing the slave economy other than in the limited domestic roles described above. Moreover, the exceptions to this pattern—the two historically identifiable women she names in connection with slavery—complicate her representation to extraordinary effect.

"Fiendish Cruelty"

When Martineau arrived in New Orleans in April 1835, the case of Delphine Lalaurie was still fresh in public memory. Indeed, it is Martineau's retelling of the oral accounts she heard during her ten-day stay that established the subsequent narrative about the torturer and serial slave killer. Lalaurie, whose Irish paternal family had come to New Orleans around 1730, was, through family ties and by marriage, a prominent member of the local French Creole community. Just over a year before Martineau arrived in New Orleans, however, after having drawn suspicion earlier and even having been convicted of illegal cruelty, she was discovered to have starved, tortured, and murdered at least seven slaves

and buried their bodies at her home on Royal Street. An outraged mob broke into the mansion, which they largely destroyed; Madame Lalaurie disappeared, rumored to have escaped to France where she lived until her death in 1862. Her crimes assumed an after-life in popular culture during the decades following their discovery and continue to do so even into this century.⁷

Martineau was the first major writer to record the event, an account of significance in the context of her representation of white women's role in slavery. Following a passing reference to Madame Lalaurie's "fiendish cruelty" in *Society in America* (2:332), she provides an extended retelling of the events in *Retrospect of Western Travel*. Introducing them as evidence of the "mutual jealousy between French and American creoles in Louisiana," her account exemplifies the power of the former group and its members' resulting impunity from legal scrutiny (*Retrospect* 2:136). Almost immediately, the text shifts away from her customary rationalist prose as Martineau adopts not only the role of a fictional narrator but also a voice and language more commonly found in Gothic fiction: the lady "so graceful and accomplished" abetted in villainy by an ominously "sleek and comfortable" coachman, starves her other slaves who all "looked singularly haggard and wretched" (2:137). The grotesque details accumulate and the truth is revealed when a neighbor lady observes Madame Lalaurie beating a young slave girl, "the child taken up, her body bending and limbs hanging as if every bone was broken" (2:138). Having "watched for many hours," the same vigilant neighbor witnesses "the body brought out, a shallow hole dug by torch-light in the corner of the yard, and the corpse covered over" (2:138-39). Then, having explained how even this event failed to spur the authorities into decisive action, Martineau raises the emotional intensity in her representation of a second incident that leads to the final revelation. When Lalaurie's cook in desperation set the house on fire, "the gallant French creoles all ran to the aid of their accomplished friend," only to make a gruesome discovery:

A horrible sight met their eyes. Of the nine slaves, the skeletons of two were afterward found poked into the

ground; the other seven could scarcely be recognized as human. Their faces had the wildness of famine, and their bones were coming through the skin. They were chained and tied in constrained postures, some on their knees, some with their hands above their heads. They had iron collars with spikes which kept their heads in one position. The cowhide, stiff with blood, hung against the wall; and there was a stepladder on which this fiend stood while flogging her victims, in order to lay on the lashes with more effect. (2:139-40)

Lalaurie flees; like a deserted Gothic castle, her "house stands, and is meant to stand, in its ruined state" (2:142), testifying to the horrors it contained. But although Martineau claims it was the sight of the house that "excited my wonder" and that she "gathered other particulars afterwards from eyewitnesses" (2:137), the hyper-emotionality with which this entire account is narrated is quite unlike anything else in her writing about America, adding to the complexity of her representation of white women in relation to slavery.

Despite her opening claim that the episode exemplifies factional abuse of civic power, the narrative does not develop this claim, its emotional energies remaining entirely in the rendering of a white woman's sadistic cruelty. By representing Madame Lalaurie through the kind of language more commonly found in Gothic melodrama, Martineau presents her as a grotesque aberration, an exact inversion of the largely passive mothers she had described administering their plantation households. While she had certainly satirized those women, an essential part of her depiction of them was the erasure of their agency in maintaining the slave-economy. By contrast, she explicitly places Lalaurie in charge of family affairs, noting that her third husband "was many years younger than his lady, and had nothing to do with the management of her property" (*Retrospect* 2:137).⁸ Moreover, although she records authorities' subsequent efforts to prevent similar crimes, she concludes by noting that there can be no certainty of their success:

I was told that it was very possible that cruelties like those of Madame Lalaurie might be incessantly in the course of perpetration. It may be doubted whether any more such people exist; but if they do, there is nothing to prevent their following her example with impunity as long as they can manage to preserve that secrecy which was put to an end by accident in her case. (2:143)

Rendering female engagement in the management of slavery as one of two extremes—the passivity of domestic motherhood or the grand melodrama of a Lalaurie—Martineau erases the quotidian norms of southern slave-owning society. While her closing comment points to the “secrecy” on which Lalaurie had depended, her language not only recognizes that Lalaurie might be the exceptional revealed case but also implicitly acknowledges another hidden truth: the possibility of other “cruelties [...] incessantly in the course of perpetration,” cruelties more routine, more normative than those she addresses either in this account or elsewhere in her depiction of white women and slavery.

Given the overt direction of the comment on secrecy, it is not surprising that Martineau follows her summation of the Lalaurie case by reiterating one of her fundamental theses about the South: that the southern press played a key part in suppressing information about the forms of violence associated with slavery:

I could never get out of the way of the horrors of slavery in this region. Under one form or another, they met me in every house, in every street—, everywhere but in the intelligence pages of newspapers, where I might read on in perfect security of exemption from the subject. In the advertizing columns, there were offers of rewards for runaways, restored dead or alive; and notices of the capture of a fugitive with so many brands on his limbs and shoulders, and so many scars on his back. But from the other half of the newspaper, the existence of slavery could be discovered only by inference. (*Retrospect* 2:143-44)

Ironically, however, the New Orleans press had in fact played a major part in publicizing the Lalaurie case. The *New Orleans Bee* had carried stories about it on 11 and 12 April 1834, describing the discovery in its first report as "one of those atrocities the details of which seem to be too incredible for human belief"; contrasting with Martineau's lurid account, the paper states that "language is powerless and inadequate to give a proper conception of the horror which a scene like this must have inspired" ("Lalaurie" 2). Nor had the story remained simply localized: the following month, *The Pittsfield Sun* in western Massachusetts reprinted the *New Orleans Advertiser's* account of Lalaurie's "shocking barbarity to her slaves" ("Lalaurie" 1).⁹ Given the brevity of her time in the city, it is unlikely that Martineau had the opportunity to consult the press coverage of a year-old scandal. While the fact of that coverage and the language the *Bee* used suggests the importance of interrogating the carte blanche nature of her judgments, her broader comments on the press here do align with her assessment of the role it played throughout the South. Together with her account of the Lalaurie case, they offer a lens for understanding her representation of the only other historically identifiable southern woman in her 1830s writings about America, Caroline Gilman of Charleston, SC.

The month before she reached New Orleans, Martineau visited Charleston, where she experienced her first extended encounter with southern society. She was the guest of Samuel Gilman, the local Unitarian pastor, and his wife Caroline, editor of a weekly miscellany that went through a number of titles but is best known as *The Southern Rose*. The Gilmans were northern transplants and part of the extended Unitarian network that supported Martineau throughout her travels. One of the pleasures of the visit, indeed, was their shared history as contributors to the denominational press, as Samuel Gilman described in a glowing letter about his guest to her mother back in England:

One peculiar bond of interest between us was that all her early attempts at publication [...] were issued in the "Monthly Repository," just about the time when I used to contribute to the periodical a series of papers [...]. We

passed several hours in looking over those volumes.

(*Harriet Martineau's Autobiography* 3:110).

Unsurprisingly, then, *The Southern Rose* recorded Martineau's visit and, also unsurprisingly, she in turn evidently gave it permission to reprint some of her earlier work. Nine months later, however, having completed her tour through the southern and western states and settled in Boston for the winter, Martineau wrote to remonstrate with Caroline Gilman in very different terms. Her complaint was over the reprinting of two more recent *Monthly Repository* pieces in *The Southern Rose*, and the terms of her concern are revealing:

Since that time, circumstances have changed, on your part, not on mine. Your paper, the Rose, has become a decided Pro-Slavery paper. The four last Nos that I have seen are all strongly so; & it is no news to you, dear friend, that my principles will not allow me to support in any way a pro slavery publication. In the last No, I find an old article of your own on the religious opportunities of slaves, republished after the voluntary relinquishment of the schools for coloured people by the clergy of Charleston; & next to this, two parables of mine, with my name, & without the date, of their prior publication,—looking exactly as if I had just written them for your paper. (*Collected* 1:280-81)

Unhappy at the impression of “double-dealing” she feels this will create, Martineau asks Gilman to print nothing more from her “as long as your publication countenances Slavery.”

This incident has largely gone undiscussed by Martineau scholars, excepting Deborah Logan's note that Martineau's letter was written a week after the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society meeting, when she reluctantly made public her support for the abolitionist cause (*Collected* 1:281n2). A broader understanding of the incident emerges if we read it in terms of Martineau's growing insight into the role of the press in sustaining the culture of slavery and in creating resistance to the

development of a fully liberal society.¹⁰ The essay Martineau calls out in her letter, "Religious Privileges of the Negroes in Charleston," describes the slave-owning whites of Charleston as benevolent in their practices and suggests that "it must be delightful to those who are interested in the religion of this interesting class of people to perceive that not a narrow ray of light but the full glow of gospel radiance is thus poured on them" ("Religious" 42). This is certainly an accommodationist expression of white privilege and is in keeping with the larger pattern whereby *The Southern Rose* inculcated "the daily practice of slave ownership" into the minds of its target audience of young readers (Jones-Rogers 13). Given all that Martineau had learned in the months following her visit to Charleston about the republican ideology of womanhood, the conditions of slavery, and the role of the press across the nation, what her letter to Gilman appears to express is a judgment that her friend has gone native, assimilated to southern culture, participating in its work of maintaining slavery, and becoming, in effect, a collaborator.¹¹

Had this incident remained merely private, a largely unknown quarrel between two early Victorian women, its significance would have remained invisible. However, Martineau did not leave the dispute with her letter to Gilman but, instead, went on to make a number of references to her one-time friend in print. *Retrospect of Western Travel* thus includes, though it does not yet name, Gilman herself in its excoriating description of the Charleston slave market:

A lady chose this moment to turn to me and say, with a cheerful air of complacency;—"You know my theory, that one race must be subservient to the other. I do not care which: and if the blacks should ever have the other hand, I should not mind standing on that table, and being sold with two of my children." Who could help saying within himself, "Would you were! So that that mother were released!" (2:85)

Twenty years later as she wrote what she thought would be her final book and as the United States was moving ever closer to civil war, Martineau not only reproduced this passage almost verbatim in her

Autobiography but now revealed the identity of the other woman, identifying Gilman by name and describing her as “a northern wife, who had rushed into that admiration of Slavery which the native ladies do not entertain” (*Autobiography* 343). Martineau certainly had a pronounced capacity for quarreling with people who had been friends, and those disputes have often been read in simply personal terms. In this case, however, as in the fallings out she later had with figures such as Dickens and Thackeray, there is a much larger underlying importance to the conflict, and this becomes apparent in Martineau’s initial published references to Gilman.

That occurs with what at first seems a curious piece of reprinting buried in the appendices to *Society in America*. There, without any framing language to explain its inclusion, Martineau includes a chapter from Gilman’s novel *Recollections of a Southern Matron*, first serialized in *The Southern Rose*. Focused on the domestic life of a planter family, the chapter describes the family’s hapless efforts to home-school its children, and the culture of infantilized dependency in which their slaves are maintained. Cited without the context of Gilman’s larger text and positioned within the penumbra of Martineau’s overarching narrative of the United States, the chapter represents southern plantation life as trapped in the stadial past, closely paralleling the description in *Retrospect of Western Travel* (2:48). With none of the redemptive justification Gilman’s novel as a whole had offered to place it in a larger context, the chapter stands alone, serving Martineau’s thesis in a way its author had certainly not intended. Making the point even more forceful is the next appendix Martineau included, one that provides statistical data “respecting the public Educational provision in the United States” (*Society* 3:333) and, separated into sections on the Free and Slave states, lists four southern states with no schools at all. The juxtaposition with Gilman’s chapters and the deficiencies it had described are thus rendered as structural and systemic, not a merely picturesque account of a single plantation where the individual benevolence of a kindly mistress offsets the larger pattern.

By reprinting Gilman's published version of southern society and framing it with the kind of statistical data she so often deployed, Martineau formulated a harsh critique of her quondam friend. By using Gilman's work to serve her own purposes, she also made public the separation from Gilman's representation of the South that she had requested privately in her letter of November 1835. As she did so, she implicitly separated herself from a southern press that she had defined as one of the most important institutional supporters of slavery, recognizing that even as apparently anodyne a publication as *The Southern Rose* played a significant role in that work. The indirectness of the separation and, until the posthumous appearance of the *Autobiography* and Gilman's naming, stand in marked contrast, of course, to the highly emotive rhetoric with which Martineau had described Lalaurie and the horrors for which she was responsible. And yet what brings these two apparently very different women together in Martineau's texts appears to have been the one fundamental aspect of southern society that they had in common: slavery.

When Martineau described how she "could never get out of the way of the horrors of slavery in this region. Under one form or another, they met me in every house, in every street" (*Retrospect* 2:143-44), she was apparently directing readers' attention to New Orleans in the immediate context of the Madame Lalaurie narrative. But her encounters with "this region" began in Charleston, another port city with deep ties to the slave-trade. While her outraged shock at the experience of visiting the slave market speaks to that, what she does not do, and perhaps could not do, was make the transition from describing the public phenomenon of slavery to addressing the domestic norm that it was in the city. In particular, just as her representation of southern women as a category largely erases their role in the economy and culture of slavery, so too she offers no description of its place in the Gilman household. But, although no public records exist for the time of her visit in early 1835, the Schedule of Slaves included in the 1850 Federal Census reveals that by then the Gilmans owned 11 enslaved people: 7 female, 4 male; 5 Black,

6 Mulatto; ranging in ages from 3 to 30.¹² There is no evidence to suggest that any fundamental change occurred in the years after Martineau visited, and it seems more probable that, since they moved to Charleston in 1819, Samuel and Caroline had followed local practice and been slave-owners. If that was indeed the case, then we can only speculate as to what Martineau might have observed and heard, how what she saw in the Gilman household compared with what she learned as she moved on across the South, how it contributed to what she wrote, and what she erased, and how it helped shape her representation of one woman notoriously engaged with the most barbaric evils of slavery and one whose engagement was so normalized as to be invisible.

Whether it was in her accounts of the lives of anonymous plantation mistresses, her lurid retelling of Madame Lalaurie's story, or her evolving depiction of Caroline Gilman, Martineau's representation of white women in the slave-owning South clearly embodies one more of those "contradictory and unresolved elements" in her thought that Cora Kaplan identifies as central to her continuing significance today. These particular contradictions not only speak to the complexities of southern life itself but point to the challenges Martineau faced in advocating for her specific vision of progressive history and reconciling her advocacy of women's agency with her commitment to the fight for the abolition of slavery. One clue to those challenges lies in that final letter she wrote to Maria Weston Chapman on 14 June 1876, when, besides celebrating their decades of friendship and unity in the abolitionist cause, she responds to her friend's questions about G.O. Trevelyan's recently published biography of his late uncle, Thomas Babington Macaulay. For the last, but certainly not for the first time, Martineau lambastes Macaulay enthusiastically, dismissing him as "not lofty in views, or therefore in aims" (*Collected* 5:351). This final comment speaks to a much larger difference, one that sheds light on her complicated erasure thirty years earlier of Southern women's normative role in the economy of slavery. For Macaulay had been the principal voice of an ideology of Whig history that, while sharing her own faith in a progressive arc, had

been deeply masculinist in its focus and excluded women from shaping roles in the future directions of their societies.¹³ Martineau's entire life and professional career had been dedicated to arguing for an historical narrative in which women were in the vanguard of leading forms of change that would produce a fully liberal society. As this essay suggests, it was her commitment to making that argument that led her to resist the well-intended advice of William Empson, editor of Whig history's most important voice in the press, to abandon the thesis of her writing about the United States. The present essay demonstrates that, confronted with the actual complexities of a society based on slavery and in which white women were utterly imbricated, the only way Martineau could maintain her larger optimistic case about the American project was through the curious combination of narratives and erasures in her writing about the South and its "cruelties [...]" incessantly in the course of perpetration."

University of Delaware

Notes

¹ See Iain Crawford, *Contested Liberalisms*. This analysis builds from and extends the case made in the book, making Martineau's representation of southern women, rather than her account of the American press, the central focus.

² See Crawford (31-34).

³ See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina 1830-80* (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁴ See Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Allen and Ticknor, 1833 [Ch. 4]). See also A. E. Grimké, "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South" (*The Anti-Slavery Examiner*, Vol. 1 [September 1836], 1-36).

⁵ See Baptist (245-46) and Rosenthal (101-7).

⁶ Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemmings was alleged as early as 1802; the story was repeated throughout the nineteenth century and became a frequent trope in abolitionist attacks on slavery. See James Thomson Callender, "The President, Again" (*Richmond Recorder* [1 September 1802], 2).

⁷ See Carolyn Morrow Long, *Madame LaLaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House* (University Press of Florida, 2012). Long's study references Martineau's account extensively, emphasizing the lack of corroborating evidence for Martineau's version.

⁸ Martineau's *Retrospect* repeats, from *Society in America*, that Mme. Lalaurie "was no more responsible for her management of her human property than anyone else" (3:121).

⁹ See Long (96-97) on the wider dissemination of the story in the American press. The story was also picked up by at least two London papers: *The Standard*, which reprinted the *Bee*'s account, and *The Morning Post*, which reprinted from a New York source, both on 22 May 1834 when Martineau was still living in the capital.

¹⁰ See also Crawford (80-87).

¹¹ Gilman also published a critical op-ed in the *Southern Rose*—(31 October 1835), one of those "four last Nos" Martineau referred to in her letter, attacking Catherine Sedgwick's representation of slavery in *The Linwoods* and arguing that she did so as a means of "providing her young readers with a ready response to abolitionist attacks on southern slavery" (Jones-Rogers 14-15).

¹² The 1850 Slaves Schedule created as part of the 1850 Federal Census is held by the National Archives and Records Administration and was accessed using Ancestry.com: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8055/?f-80000002=samuel&f-80000003=gilman&residence=_charleston-charleston-south+carolina-usa_21847

¹³ For a fuller discussion of Martineau's prolonged engagement with Macaulay and the model of historical narrative he represented, see Crawford (274-83).

Works Cited

- Baptist, Edward. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Basic Books, 2014.
- Brown, Gillian. *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of California Press, 1990.
- Crawford, Iain. *Contested Liberalisms: Martineau, Dickens and the Victorian Press*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020.
- Dickens, Charles. *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Ed. Margaret Cardwell. Clarendon Press, 1982.
- Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*. Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Glymph, Thavolia. *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Hill, Michael R. "A Methodological Comparison of Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-1840)." *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives*. Ed. Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale. Routledge, 2001. 59-74.
- Jones-Rogers, Stephanie E. *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave-Owners in the American South*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Kaplan, Cora. "Slavery, Race, History: Harriet Martineau's Ethnographic Imagination." *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire*. Ed. Ella Dzelzainis and Cora Kaplan. Manchester University Press, 2010. 180-196.
- ["Lalaurie"]. *The New Orleans Bee* (11 April 1834), 2.
- ["Lalaurie"]. *The Pittsfield Sun* (8 May 1834), 1.
- Logan, Deborah A. *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission*. Ashgate, 2010.
- , Ed. *Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War by Harriet Martineau*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2002.
- Martineau, Harriet. *Autobiography*. Ed. Linda H. Peterson. Broadview Press, 2007.

- . *The Collected Letters of Harriet Martineau*. 5 Vols. Ed. Deborah Anna Logan. Pickering & Chatto, 2007.
- . *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman*. 3 Vols. Smith, Elder, 1877.
- . *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. Charles Knight & Co, 1838.
- . *Retrospect of Western Travel*. 3 Vols. Saunders and Otley, 1838.
- . *Society in America*. 3 Vols. Saunders and Otley, 1837; rpt Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- “Practical Reasoning versus Impracticable Theories.” *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, Vol. 19, No. 113 (May 1839), 557-92.
- Roberts, Caroline. *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*. University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- “Religious Privileges of the Negroes in Charleston.” *The Southern Rose*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (14 November 1835), 42.
- Rosenthal, Caitlin. *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

