



NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 3.2 (SUMMER 2007)

Contested Authority: Reform and Local Pressure in Harriet Martineau's Poor Law Stories

By [Gregory Vargo](#), Columbia University

Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 3.2

<1> Contemporary critics largely affirm historian R.K. Webb's evaluation of the complex and often contradictory politics of Harriet Martineau's early didactic fiction. Webb argues that *Illustrations of Political Economy* aims at more than simply "convincing the lower classes of the inevitability of the bourgeois industrial order and social morality," for it at the same time exposes a whole catalogue of contemporary abuses and diagnoses several varieties of entrenched power—of industrialists, financiers, slaveholders, and others (118). Recent criticism emphasizes how Martineau's political ambivalence marks her tales with a series of formal disjunctures. Mike Sanders points out that although Martineau's narrators expound a "theoretical commitment to the harmony of interests" between classes, the narratives themselves "positively revel in class conflict" (193). Eleanor Courtemanche parses Martineau's multi-sided depiction of industrial conflict in *A Manchester Strike*, which views the walk-out alternately as justified and unavoidable and as naïve and doomed to fail. Linda Peterson demonstrates how Martineau adapts the formal techniques and even the physical format of evangelical "little books" to advocate a radical agenda of political reform, the expansion of educational opportunities, and more equality for women.

<2> My paper, which looks at *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* as well as *Cousin Marshall*, a story from *Illustrations*, suggests that one way to understand Martineau's ambivalent politics is to take cognizance of the profound split in the 1830s between philosophical and working-class radicalism, a rupture which culminates by the end of the decade in Chartism, the militant movement for working-class political power. A dialogue with plebian radicalism shapes all aspects of Martineau's second series of didactic tales. Time and again her characters expound or refute traditional justifications for the right to relief, and her storylines as a whole reformulate the Cobbettite narrative of inheritance and dispossession, which is central to radical ideology about the rights of the poor. Martineau also explores whether poor law reform can be successful given anticipated popular resistance to proposed changes. Surprisingly, two of her four stories chronicle the defeat of poor law reformers and thus reflect on the limits of abstract principles of political economy, which poor law reform is meant to embody, to transform the social and political world.

<3> The New Poor Law of 1834 shifted the responsibility for the administration of social welfare from local communities to a national bureaucracy, the Poor Law Commission. It consolidated parishes into larger administrative units and professionalized local poor law governance. These bureaucratic changes were used to carry out a program of social austerity, contracting the ability of the poor to access relief. The Commission attempted to restrict support to recipients who entered workhouses, though popular pressure largely stymied this change. Other means of retrenchment proved more successful: the Commission replaced cash payments with payments in kind, decreased the overall amount of relief, and instituted work tests, where paupers had to perform menial labor for the union.⁽¹⁾ The government recognized that these changes would encounter stiff opposition, which it anticipated with an elaborate program of propaganda. An inexpensive report by a commission of inquiry into the poor laws sold 15,000 copies, more than all "other state papers put together," according to the Commission's secretary Edwin Chadwick (in Webb, *Working-Class Reader* 125).

<4> Martineau's *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* was an important part of the government's public-relations campaign. The Lord Chancellor Brougham, the Bill's chief sponsor in Lords, commissioned the four novellas to advocate the legislation, sending preliminary manuscripts of the Commission's report to Martineau, who drew extensively on its highly literary anecdotes, its concrete proposals, and even its schizophrenic tone, which alternated between a quiet confidence in the policy prescriptions it recommended and despair at the enormity of the crisis. Brougham agreed to supplement by 25£ the fee the publisher promised for each novella, but he dropped out

of contact when payment came due, and Martineau only received 300£ instead of 400£ for the series. Martineau came to regret the publication of *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* for involving her in a bitter partisan conflict. The series lost money, a testament to its unpopularity, a surprising fact considering the extraordinary success of *Illustrations*. In her autobiography, Martineau lamented her connection to Brougham and his Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as “so much mere detriment to my usefulness and my influence” (in Orazem, 164).

<5> Martineau’s evaluation was correct. Her support for poor law reform irrevocably damaged her reputation in the unstamped press. To cite a few examples, Cobbett gave the “poor gossiping creature” the dubious honor of christening the law “the Mother Martineau Bill,” an ironic swipe at her unmarried status and defense of Malthusian restraint (reprinted in the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, Jan. 10, 1835).⁽²⁾ Both the breakaway Methodist J.R. Stephens and the militant Newcastle paper *The Northern Liberator* affiliated Martineau’s writing with the notorious Marcus pamphlet, an anonymous satire calling for euthanizing the children of the poor.⁽³⁾ And the frontispiece of an unnamed London tract described by the *Poor Man’s Guardian* equated her writing with oppressive legislation. According to the *Guardian*, the pamphlet showed a persecuted and blindfolded Old John Bull clinging to the Bible and Bill of Rights as two Poor Law Commissioners and the Whig leader Althorp pilfer his pockets. The latter is “trampling underfoot the Poor Laws of Elizabeth, while the Gibbetting Bill, and the Glasgow Lottery Bill, are seen in his pocket, together with a letter addressed to Miss Martineau” (*PMG*, September 27, 1834).

<6> Each of these examples credit Martineau with an extraordinary amount of influence, casting the young writer as the symbol of government policy. Martineau assumes an important role in radical demonology, not only because the popularity of *Illustrations* made her an influential figure, but also because she is an astute observer and critic of both the ideological tendencies of working-class radicalism and its organizational practices. Her stories offer a prescient geography of the resistance to the New Poor Law, mapping the variety of techniques available to the movement. In Martineau’s rural counties, the radicals rely on surreptitious violence against property, the rick burnings and “Swing” riots Hobsbawm describes. In urban settings, on the other hand, the paupers adopt strategies designed to influence the election of parish officers—packing meetings, harassing reformers, and threatening to boycott the business of any ratepayer who supports a punitive overseer.⁽⁴⁾ But for Martineau the battle over the poor laws is first and foremost a war of ideas, and her stories aim to satirize, refute and co-opt justifications for relief. Again, Martineau knows her sources. *The Parish* describes a manipulation of the language of deference one observes in radical periodicals, and *The Town* satirizes the use of biblical precedent to justify charity when a pauper defends her appetite for meat and beer by reminding the overseer that “man cannot live by bread alone” (22).

<7> Martineau views working-class radical philosophy as one of the major causes of pauperism. Combating it, therefore, is critical to her project. In this light, *Cousin Marshall* offers an example of the way Martineau’s use of economic theory is not simply reductive, for she translates Malthus’s naturalistic political economy to the cultural sphere. The existence of generous provision for the indigent increases pauperism, but this is not simply a matter of incentives and reproduction. For Malthus, of course, the poor laws are problematic because they encourage overpopulation by suggesting a non-existent abundance of social resources. The facts of biology push up against environmental limits. For Martineau, on the other hand, the poor laws are primarily an ideological question. Martineau suggests that paupers intentionally augment their ranks by persuading their peers that relief is a traditional or God-given right. *Cousin Marshall* tracks the *Bildung* of the young pauper Hunt by the veteran Childe, who demonstrates for his pupil cons and scams to use while begging, including how to obtain relief by faking a disability.

<8> Throughout the novella, Martineau is sharply aware of political arguments for relief. Burke, a doctor committed to reform, explains to his sister that guaranteed support is founded on the flawed analogy between society and a family. In this theory, society’s poorest members have as much a claim upon the community as a child does on his or her parents. However, the metaphor, according to Burke, ignores that parents choose to have children, incurring the responsibility for their welfare, whereas society cannot decide who will be born into it. Without the ability to limit the population, the promise of relief is misguided and fundamentally meaningless, because scarce natural resources circumscribe any social effort to ameliorate pauperism. Asked about the origin of the poor laws, Burke explains that Queen Elizabeth instituted them as recompense to the poor for the loss of Catholic charity upon the dissolution of the monasteries in the Reformation. Martineau derives this account from William Cobbett’s extremely popular *A History of the*

Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland, a surprising source, because Cobbett describes the seizure of Church property as a massive expropriation by the rich of resources held in trust for the common people, a narrative which becomes ubiquitous in the anti-New Poor Law movement, nourishing defenses of the right to relief and claims more radical still.

<9> Burke's only explicit answer to the constitutional precedent for poor relief is an unsatisfying invocation of Malthusian theory. Whatever the terms of an earlier social contract, he says, relief desolates the subsistence fund, threatening eventual famine. However, other aspects of the narrative satirize and reformulate Cobbett's inheritance plot. Childe describes to his protégé the wonderful retirement he will have at Childe's hospital in London, a foundation established by a benefactor with his same last name, a name made rare by the "e" at its end. This single, silent letter guarantees the grifter a life of luxury and ease. Childe's capricious inheritance burlesques the radical assertion that the Elizabethan poor laws act as a universal social legacy. Similarly, *Cousin Marshall*, as well as *The Hamlets*, tracks the fates of orphans, the archetype of individuals who must rely on community support for survival. Martineau uses their stories to refute and mock Cobbett's claim that the poor laws are a social inheritance, arguing that they simply encourage adults to ignore their individual responsibility towards their helpless wards.

<10> Martineau's engagement with arguments about the right to relief helps her anticipate the difficulty local authorities will have implementing the law over community resistance. This awareness also shapes her representation of poor law reformers. Two sets of characters inhabit the stories. Paupers and independent laborers on the one hand and employers, reformers, and the poor law bureaucracy on the other constitute separate but interconnected universes. Martineau wants to show how the fates of the classes are intertwined, but her groups of characters rarely interact, their stories unfolding on parallel tracks. In fact, only the poor laws and related institutions—such as employment and private charity—mediate the working-class and middle-class plotlines. There are no interclass friendships or romances; no religious or civic rituals unite the worlds;

contingencies of crime or sickness do not bring the characters together. Stylistic features also distinguish the parts. With documentary precision, Martineau attends to the specifics of the daily lives of her working-class characters. Meticulous and extended descriptions of work and detailed sketches of household management stand as a significant development in the art of realism. But this detail is entirely missing from Martineau's representation of middle-class characters, about whose professional and private lives the reader learns almost nothing. Though drained of personality, the middle-class characters are surprisingly vibrant, because the competing positions they advocate serve to differentiate and define them. They have conflicts and crises, and they develop, but all in the realm of ideas.

<11> The relationship between the stylistic abstraction which make middle-class characters little more than ideological factors and the finely textured realism with which Martineau describes the lives of the poor sheds light on a central problem the novellas pose: who can effectively reform relief given an entrenched opposition to change? *The Hamlets* begins with images of a thoroughly pauperized village, focusing on the demoralized fisherman Monks, who relies on the parish to pay his rent. The novella quickly makes clear, however, that the administrators of the town share much of the blame for the crisis. The scene shifts to a conversation between ratepayers about the urgent need to replace the current overseer Reece, because, as a small shop owner who relies on the custom of laborers, he is exposed to constant pressure to grant unjust claims. The ratepayers settle on Mr. Barry as Reece's successor. As Barry is new to the district and has a small independent fortune, they believe he will be able to reduce the money wasted supporting the idle, hopes which he justifies.

<12> Martineau's novellas show the texture of pressures and loyalties that surround the poor laws, illustrating the complex web of social debts and responsibilities that are transacted through relief. At the same time, however, her representation of reform offers a fantasy of placing parish aid in a space free of the very relationships she evokes. Both supporters of the New Poor Law and its critics recognized that centralizing the administration of relief would not only create more efficient economies of scale but would also remove social welfare policy from local networks of pressure and obligation. Nassau Senior, a member of the Commission of Inquiry, put it succinctly: "The enforcement of improvements must devolve upon those who [have] no stacks to be fired" (in Brundage, 51). Interestingly, Martineau's poor law stories never advocate a central administrative body, one of the few suggestions of the Commission of Inquiry Martineau does not explicitly voice. Instead, the stories create a set of abstract characters who are independent from the world they wish to reform. The difference between Reece and Barry, after all, is the latter has no connection with anyone in the hamlet

<13> The protagonist of *The Town* is the exception to Martineau's flat middle-class characters, but the very attributes which make him a rounded figure interfere with the project of reform. The cooper Guthrie, a newly elected parish overseer, is sympathetic to the reform movement but is himself an ineffective officer. He is reluctant to press ratepayers for arrears because of personal connections with them. He knows collecting the parish's debt will offend the parents of his daughter's friends and cost his business customers. Similarly, his investigation of fraud by paupers is hampered when one unmarried mother threatens to claim falsely that he is the father of her child. These relationships, not untypical details of a private life, make it difficult for him to implement positive changes, and the reform movement in the town collapses. Guthrie's failure suggests the need for a professional class of poor law administrators, but this advocacy is left largely implicit. What the story mostly demonstrates is how pressures brought to bear on reformers make any change difficult. Family loyalties, career ambitions, friendships, rivalries, and romances, all mean that poor law reform does not occur in a vacuum.(5)

<14> Yet the story also suggests that Martineau's engagement with the world of working-class radicalism makes it more difficult to present the New Poor Law in an unambiguously positive light. The reader cannot entirely regret the reformers' defeat, because this failure appears first as a stroke of good luck for John Waters, a moral and beleaguered shoemaker, whose difficulties the narrative sympathetically traces. Waters loses his job when a reformer refuses to pay his master the inflated prices the latter receives for supplying the workhouse with shoes. He complains bitterly about his master's jobbing and suffers greatly as a result of his unemployment, even attempting suicide. A victim of the corrupt old poor law but also of reform, Waters benefits when the parish reverts to its corrupt ways, because he receives back his old job, inflated wages and all.

<15> Martineau's vision of the collapse of poor law reform in her unnamed town proved partially prophetic. For it was in the northern cities and industrial centers where a militant and well-organized resistance slowed and altered the implementation of the New Poor Law, helping to shape relief policy for decades to come. Just as Martineau grappled with the arguments of opponents of the New Poor Law, so too did the Poor Law Commission have to confront the intense political and intellectual resistance of working-class radicals, who insisted on injecting questions of morality and politics into the fantasized space of an idealized market economy.

Endnotes

(1)For a history of the New Poor Law see Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (1998) and Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law* (1978).(△)

(2)*The Poor Man's Guardian*, August 16, 1834, makes this connection more explicitly: "Miss Martineau, the anti-propagation lady, a single sight of whom would repel all fears of surplus population as regards himself, her aspect being as repulsive as her doctrines." Deborah Anna Logan's introduction to Martineau's *Cousin Marshall* analyzes the *Guardian's* sexism. Logan's critique is apt, but it should be noted that the *Guardian's ad hominem* attacks were not limited to Martineau; the same paragraph accuses Malthus of fathering "a host of bastard children" and says of Brougham that his "juiceless body of bones has been impoverished in fathering one."(△)

(3)A sample of Stephens's apocalyptic rhetoric appeared in the *Northern Star*, May 11, 1839: "You well know that any truly honest and independent man, that comes forward to advise or defend the misguided and degraded slaves of Britain, [faces] all the thunders of those iniquitous and damnable laws that have been purposely framed to carry into effect the objects of the bloody trio—Marcus, Malthus and Martineau."(△)

(4)For a description of the variety of strategies employed in the anti-New Poor Law movement see Nicholas Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834-44* (1971) and John Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (1986).(△)

(5)Claudia's Klaver's excellent study of *Illustrations of Political Economy* argues that Martineau's project of popularizing abstract economic theories in narrative form involved profound difficulties. Klaver demonstrates particularly that the moral and political frameworks from which political economists strove to separate their discipline re-emerged in Martineau's

stories, which occasionally offered a critical perspective on the harsher aspects of economic laws.
(△)

Works Cited

- Brundage, Anthony. *The Making of the New Poor Law*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978.
- Cobbett, William. *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland*. London, 1829.
- Courtemanche, Eleanor. "'Naked Truth is the Best Eloquence': Martineau, Dickens, and the Moral Science of Realism." *ELH* 73.2 (2006): 383-407.
- Edsall, Nicholas. *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834-44*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1971.
- Klaver, Claudia. *A/moral Economics : Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003.
- Knott, John. *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law*. London: Croom Helm, 1986.
- Lees, Lynn Hollen. *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Martineau, Harriet. *Cousin Marshall in Illustrations of Political Economy*. Ed. Deborah Anna Logan. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2004.
- . *The Hamlets*. London: Charles Fox, 1833.
- . *The Parish*. London: Charles Fox, 1833.
- . *The Town*. London: Charles Fox, 1834.
- The Northern Star*.
- Orazem, Claudia. *Political Economy and Fiction in the Early Works of Harriet Martineau*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Peterson, Linda. "From French Revolution to English Reform: Hannah More, Harriet Martineau, and the 'Little Book.'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 60.4 (2006): 409-445.
- Poor Man's Guardian*. New York: Greenwood Reprint Corporation, 1968.
- Sanders, Mike. "From 'Political' to 'Human' Economy: The Visions of Harriet Martineau and Frances Wright." *Women: a Cultural Review*. 12.2 (2001).
- Webb, R.K. *The British Working-Class Reader 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1955.
- . *Harriet Martineau, A Radical Victorian*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

