

Scholarship on Women in Auto/biography and History: Placing Harriet Martineau

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This paper draws on my doctoral thesis completed in 1991 part of which focused on the treatment of Harriet Martineau by historians and biographers². It reflects on Harriet Martineau's place within mainstream history and recent historical scholarship on women. How, for example, can we understand and explain the different perspectives of the work of feminist (and other) scholars of Harriet Martineau (including my own)? Why were certain approaches taken and not others? And what impact do these have on scholars' ultimate summation of Harriet Martineau's achievements? This paper, therefore, first addresses some of the debates which have illuminated feminist scholarship, about the nature of history and its relationship with the expanding genres of biography and autobiography, and then considers Harriet Martineau's place within that scholarship.

History, Biography and Autobiography

Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886), professor of Berlin from 1825 laid the foundation for much modern historical research in advocating archival research as a means of providing an *accurate narrative* of the past.³ Most nineteenth century scholars thought they were charting the inevitable progress of western civilisation. However, historians living in the twentieth century identified different challenges since they lived in the shadow of Marx, Freud and Einstein, each of whom provided a new perspective on the world. Twentieth century scholars also experienced, sometimes at first hand, wars and social upheavals on a global scale. As a consequence, concepts such as 'progress', 'continuity', and 'inevitability' proved problematic in the twentieth century context. Further, whilst the main concern of nineteenth century historians was with the documentation of diplomatic and constitutional affairs, this was replaced in the twentieth century by a multiplicity of sub-histories to address the wider concerns of contemporary society. Economic, social, intellectual, demographic, family, black and women's history all served to illuminate areas of public interest and anxiety.⁴

At the same time, historians themselves, male for the most part, began to reconsider their roles as creators of knowledge. Challenges were made to Ranke's 'objectivism' as historians began to reconstruct themselves as subjective interpreters of the past at the behest of the present. Thus, Collingwood (1889-1943) contended that understanding the past in a properly historical way requires on the part of the historian 'a re-enactment of past experience' or a 'rethinking of past thought'. For Collingwood, all history is properly the history of thought, and involves the power of the imagination.⁵ On the other hand, Charles Beard (1874-1948),

¹ Paper presented at annual conference, Martineau Society, 1-4 July 2004, Birmingham University.

² Weiner G. (1991) *Controversies and Contradictions: approaches to the study of Harriet Martineau 1802-76*. Doctoral thesis. Open University.

³ Ranke L. Von (1834-1886) *History of the Popes in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Ranke's works are collected in (1867-90) *Sammtliche Werke*. 54 volumes, Leipzig.

⁴ Marwick A. (1970) *The Nature of History*. London: Macmillan.

⁵ Collingwood R. G. (1946) *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

husband of the eminent feminist historian Mary Beard, wrote history in order to illuminate the present. He expressed doubt about whether historical enquiry could ever provide an unpolluted account of the past and did much to heighten the methodological self-consciousness of the historical profession in the United States. He also argued for the importance of *values* to the historian. He posited that historians, when they come to study the past, bring to their enquiry certain standards of value which they impose in giving their accounts⁶.

If, then, historians are not factual story-tellers or independent purveyors of the truth, what are they? Carr, writing in 1961, argued that the task of historians is to represent the perspective of their generation:

The historian, then, is an individual human being. Like other individuals, he is also a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs; it is in this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past.⁷

Hill elaborated on Carr's theme to provide some indication of why a multiplicity of histories developed in the second half of the twentieth century:

History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experience of its predecessors.⁸

Historians may indeed, then, be ordinary people with partial understandings of earlier generations or eras? If this is so, what particular qualities separate them from non-historians? Thompson argued that empirical enquiry and the utilisation of a distinct historical logic must be regarded as significant specialisms of the historian. He emphasised that historical evidence is of crucial importance, yet it has no meaning of itself; it needs to be scrutinised by minds held in what he called a mode of 'attentive disbelief'. Further, there is a distinctive logic appropriate to the scrutiny of historical evidence which is different from the logic used in science. Accordingly, historians need different ways of examining data from those employed in scientific experiments or in laboratories and also employ different forms of logic from philosophers.⁹

These developments, among mainstream historians, of ideas about the historian's task, have implications for research on women. As we have seen, much conventional historical practice has turned on recording the facts of a given situation. Responses to complaints about the absence of women have been that women were simply not present, not important enough or not doing anything of major significance. However, the work of some of the historians

⁶ Beard C. (1934) Written History as an Act of Faith. *American Historical Review*. 39: (2): 219-31: Beard C. (1935) That Noble Dream. *American Historical Review*. 41 (1): 74-87.

⁷ Carr E. H. (1961) *What is History?* 1987 edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 35 & 37

⁸ Hill C. (1975) *The World Turned Upside Down*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 15

⁹ Thompson E. P. (1978) *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Merlin Press. 159.

quoted above indicates a way out of that particular *impasse*. Collingwood is helpful to feminists' understanding of the existence of male-defined knowledge by arguing that historians, however 'scientific' they think themselves, are not at all objective in their writing of history. For him, history is about entering the thought processes of historical actors and about empathy, rather than merely a narrative of factual occurrences. Beard goes further to discuss the inevitable incompleteness and selectivity of historiography whilst Thompson restates the importance of historical evidence, nonetheless maintaining that checks need to be developed to avoid distortion and misinterpretation. Thus, if these ideas are taken up, Harriet Martineau's treatment by mainstream historians might be as much to do with their inability to empathise with the female experience, their unconscious choices about what topics merit investigation or their partial interpretation of data, as with deliberate attempts to retain patriarchal domination of academic processes.

If history is so complex, what can be said about its relationship to biography and autobiography? The conventional definition of biography, as exemplified by Anderson in 1984, is that of 'the history of a particular human life'.¹⁰ Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of autobiography is 'the writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself'.¹¹ At the other end of the spectrum, Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) the American poet and essayist, argued for biography as embracing all forms of history. 'All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history, only biography'.¹²

Biography has also variously been claimed as gossip (by John Aubrey)¹³, a look through keyholes (by Samuel Johnson)¹⁴, a noble and uplifting enterprise (by Samuel Taylor Coleridge)¹⁵, the selective illumination of a life (by Lytton Strachey)¹⁶, and as art (by Virginia Woolf)¹⁷. Pimlott, a modern political biographer, extends Woolf's metaphor of biographer as artist by comparing biography to painting; both have the aim of building an impression that is both recognisable and revealing.¹⁸

As far as autobiography is concerned, it is generally agreed that Saint Augustine invented it as a form, at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, with his *Confessiones*, although Rousseau's similarly named *Confessions* written in the 1760s established it as a modern genre of literary expression¹⁹. Augustine's 'confession' involved a conscious double

¹⁰ Anderson J. A. (1984) *Biographical Truth: the representation of historical persons in Tudor-Stuart writing*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

¹¹ Quoted in Sanders V. (1989) *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: autobiography in nineteenth century England*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 5.

¹² Quoted in Hughson L. (1988) *From Biography to History: the Historical Imagination and American Fiction 1880-1940*. Virginia: University of Virginia. 2.

¹³ Dick O. L. (1949) (ed.) *Aubrey's Brief Lives*. 1972 edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

¹⁴ Quoted in Pimlott B. (1990) The Future of Political Biography. *The Political Quarterly*. 61 (2): 217.

¹⁵ Coleridge S. Taylor. (1810) *The Friend*. 338-9.

¹⁶ Strachey L. (1918) *Eminent Victorians*. 1980 edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

¹⁷ Woolf V. (1967) *Collected Essays: 4*. London: Hogarth Press.

¹⁸ Pimlott. *Op cit*. 214-224.

¹⁹ Rousseau J-J (1781, 1953) *The Confessions* (trans. Cohen J.M.) Harmondsworth: Penguin; Fowlie W. (1988) On Writing Autobiography. In: Olney J. (ed.) *Studies in Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press. 163-170.

meaning, containing praise as well as admission of faults, whereas Rousseau set out to write about his own personal feelings as an individual using a modern, more confessional mode²⁰. Rousseau was deeply conscious of the innovative nature of his autobiography:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.²¹

The term 'autobiography' is yet more recent; it was first used in the *Quarterly Review* in 1809 by the poet, Robert Southey, who predicted an 'epidemical rage for auto-biography'.²² If the volumes on popular bookstall shelves count as evidence, the 'rage' for autobiography has certainly extended to the late twentieth century!

Modern discussion about biography (and autobiography) has tended to blur the boundaries between genres. Clifford²³, for example, asks the questions: what is a biographer - a superior journalist or an artist? Is the writing of a life a narrow branch of history or a form of literature - or an amalgam of art and science? At various times, he claims, there has been intense interest in the writing of lives but not until recently has there been a focus on the complex psychological and artistic problems in recreating a character.

Pushing the boundaries even further, Spengemann argues for the expansion of what should be accepted as autobiography; accordingly, a writer's collected works might be thought of as autobiography as also might letters, diaries, travel journals, autobiographical fiction and so on. Thus, autobiography need require only 'some evidence that the writer's self is either the primary subject or the principal object of verbal action'.²⁴

Feminist biographers and autobiographers have been equally concerned with the diffuse qualities of the genres, though Heilbrun claims that whilst women's biography and autobiography are increasingly popular, there is still little sense of what they should look like.²⁵ Where should they begin, she asks: birth, Freudian family romance, oedipal configuration, relationship to mother /father, becoming or failing to become a sex object; looks; life if married or unmarried; women friends in middle or old age etc.? It is interesting to compare this suggested framework with those adopted for Harriet Martineau's biographies. Certainly, many of them addressed the areas listed by Heilbrun, whether or not they were written by consciously feminist authors.

Also, when biographers come to write the life of a woman (as in the case of Young's biography of Margaret Thatcher), they have to struggle with the inevitable conflict between

²⁰ Griffiths M. (1995) *Feminisms and the Self: the web of identity*. London: Routledge.

²¹ Rousseau. Op cit. 13

²² Southey R. (1809) *Quarterly Review*. 236.

²³ Clifford J. (1962) *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*. London: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Spengemann W. C. (1980) *The Forms of Autobiography*. New Haven: Yale University Press. xv.

²⁵ Heilbrun C. (1989) *Writing a Woman's Life*. London: The Women's Press.

the destiny of being unambiguously a woman and that woman's palpable desire to be something else. Young exemplifies this difficulty in the following passage on Margaret Thatcher's 'womanly' concern for 'her trusty lieutenants':

She was a woman, with a woman's concern for those around her and a most assiduous attention to the details of their lives: whether they missed a meal, whether their wives had recovered from flu, whether their children had passed exams. Throughout her time as prime minister she took care to establish the strongest bond with each cohort of private secretaries and other officials, as they came forward into her personal service. The contrast was much to be remarked between this attractive trait and the inability she constantly manifested to register the same quality of caring for the nation at large'.²⁶

Thus, as we see from the above quote and also from writers on Harriet Martineau, many biographers of women have found it difficult to disassociate their subjects from 'womanliness' in their attempts to create an 'actor' as well as a 'life'.

There is also the problem of language, particularly in autobiography. Women have found it difficult to find a language or form of expression which does not lay themselves open to accusations of unwomanliness, since the act of writing defies the conventions and stereotypes of womanhood (e.g. selflessness, modesty, passivity). Thus, the autobiographical writing of Caroline Norton was criticised for 'stridency' and that of Harriet Martineau, for 'egotism'²⁷. According to Sanders, to avoid this criticism nineteenth century women biographers frequently claimed that they were writing for unselfish reasons; not for themselves but for other women or for the common good or, in the case of Harriet Martineau, to tell the truth about her life and loss of faith.²⁸ Women, as biographers and autobiographers, have thus been denied narratives and plots by which they can create their own texts and thereby take power over their own lives. Moreover, as Heilbrun claims, the maleness of language is problematic: 'How can women create stories of women's lives if they have only male language with which to do it...Through working within male discourse, we work ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written'.²⁹

In exploring the specific genre of women's autobiographical writing, Sanders echoes some of the previous discussion about history as well as focusing on issues of language; in particular she raises questions about the (in-) completeness of accounts. She admits that the most important interests she has in reading an autobiography are sub-textual i.e. what is implicit. For example, she wants to know what each biographer stresses or leaves out; how her own life has been shaped, artistically; the consequent evasiveness of her own portraiture, the

²⁶ Young H. (1990) *One of Us*. London: Pan Books. 159.

²⁷ Walford L. B. (1892) *Twelve English Authoresses*., London: Longman's Green & Co, in which it was asserted that Martineau was 'a personage possessed of powerful capacities' who was at the same time 'prejudiced, jealous, exacting, and inordinately egotistical'... 'it is "I, I, I," from morning to night, from year's end to year's end.' (49-50).

²⁸ Sanders. *Op cit*.

²⁹ Heilbrun. *Op cit*. 40-41.

existence of an undeciphered sub-text; and what to accept at face value and how much to read between the lines.³⁰

In the case of Harriet Martineau's autobiography as well as some of her other writings such as *Household Education* which clearly draw on her own childhood experiences, the impression gained is of an author wholly in charge of her account. She appears, deliberately and skilfully, to create a picture of her life that provides a platform for her views, yet also provides just enough interesting detail and anecdote to keep the reader gripped.

Perspectives on women's history

Whether they label themselves historians or biographers, it is clear that feminist scholars of both genres have interpreted their research objectives in different ways. Some have seen their principal tasks as researching individual women and evaluating the contributions of women to history; others have viewed their main priorities as exploring women's distinctive experiences and documenting their continued subordination; yet others have seen their task as more complex, considering the ideological construction and historical specificity of femininity, excavating the lives of hitherto invisible working class and/or black women or exploring the contribution of women to 'progressive' movements such as Chartism. Significantly, most have displayed some interest in women's rights and feminist campaigns.

The approaches to women's lives which derive from projects of feminist scholarship, may be grouped into a number of different categories, for example:

- women worthies - 'the good and the great'.
- women's contributions to political movements.
- women in social and other histories.
- women's rights and feminist movements.
- separate spheres - women-centred scholarship.
- intersections of class and gender
- woman as subject of text

This categorisation provides the basis for a more detailed examination of historical approaches to women later in this paper. It is important to emphasise, however, that these categories should not be seen as necessarily discrete, and individual studies (such as my own)³¹ may be appropriately located in one or more of them.

Many early feminist scholars began by chronicling famous or exceptional women; that is, *women worthies*. Doris Mary Stenton's *The English Woman in History* relies on this approach as does Florence Fenwick Miller's biography of Harriet Martineau.³² Surveys of

³⁰ Sanders. *Op cit.*

³¹ Weiner *Op cit.*

³² Stenton D. M. (1957) *The English Woman in History*. New York: Schocken Books; Miller F. Fenwick. (1884) *Harriet Martineau*. London:, W. H. Allen.

eminent women such as that carried out by Sutton Castle³³ are part of this tradition. It was the predominant tradition at the end of the nineteenth century during the 'first-wave' women's movement, because, as Lewis points out, it arose from women's desire for a better self-image and a greater sense of self-worth. However, important though it may be to analyse the personal circumstances and external pressures which led to such women taking the centre stage, this approach may be criticised for neither describing the experiences of the mass of women, nor portraying the full complexity of society at any given stage in its development.³⁴

The approach which prioritises *women's contributions to political movements* conceptualises women's history in terms of the part women have played in male-defined movements in society. So, studies have been made of the parts women took, for instance, in the Chartist Movement or in the French Revolution which have gone some way to restoring the historical balance.³⁵ Harriet Martineau's place might seem less strong here since she played only a minor part in supporting the Chartists and was an advocate of Utilitarianism, yet not among its foremost proponents. Nonetheless, her unrelenting support for the Abolitionists cause in North America and her general support for reform (including the extension of rights to women) secure her presence in this category.

Reservations, however, have been expressed about the acceptance of traditional (or male) definitions of historical significance as subject matter. Thus, little attempt is made to re-conceptualise history and thus the analysis of women's role only appears where women are perceived as having had an impact on recognised political and reform movements. This, Smith Rosenberg claims, means that this approach still continues to define the experiences of women-as-women as marginal to mainstream academic thought.³⁶

There has also been an increase of *women in social and other histories*, noticeable particularly in the strong cross fertilisation of ideas between women's history and other emerging fields of study such as family and labour history. Social history was particularly popular with women scholars and Harriet Martineau, herself, wrote a competent history within this genre. Further, social history has contributed to women's scholarship in several ways; first, it provides alternative methodologies for the study of women's lives, drawn from sociology, demography and ethnography; second, it conceptualises as worthy of study, phenomena hitherto unrecognised, such as family relationships, fertility and sexuality; and third, it challenges the narrative line of political history by considering a wide range of human experience including that of women. It thus legitimises focus on groups traditionally excluded from mainstream consideration. Once again, Harriet Martineau's contributions are evident: first, in her utilisation of sociological methods to evaluate the structure of democracy in the United States in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century; second, in her focus on the condition of women and slaves; and third, in her work on political economy and particularly

³³ Castle C. (1913) *A Statistical Study of Eminent Women*. New York: Science Press.

³⁴ Lewis. *Op cit*.

³⁵ Thompson D. (1971) *The Early Chartists*. London: Macmillan; Abray J. (1975) Feminism in the French Revolution. *American Historical Review*. 80 (February): 43-62.

³⁶ Smith Rosenberg C. (1975) The new woman and the new history. *Feminist Studies*. 3 (Fall): 185-198.

her portrayal of mid-nineteenth century political and cultural concerns through her *Daily News* journalism.

Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*³⁷ may be regarded as a prototype of modern social history since it charts the growth of working class consciousness in Britain, identifying class as a 'historical phenomenon', something which happens in human relations. Class happens, Thompson claims, 'when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs'. The work was commended by Marwick for 'bringing into proper perspective the aspirations and conscious efforts of working people, too often treated by other historians as an inert and faceless mass, passive to the central forces of history'.³⁸ Thus, Thompson's historical treatment of class deals both with experience of being a member of the working class, and with working-class consciousness.

The obvious parallels between the emergence of class as a historically legitimate category, and that of gender, have proved compelling for feminists, even though Thompson failed to follow them through. Scott criticises Thompson for assuming that male and female class interests are identical.

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, the male designation of general concepts is literalized in the persons of the political actors who are described in strikingly detailed (and easily visualised) images. The book is crowded with scenes of men busily working, meeting, writing, talking, marching, breaking machines, going to prison, bravely standing up to the police, magistrates and prime ministers. This is pre-eminently a story about men, and class is, in its origin and its expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are male.³⁹

However, Davidoff and Hall incorporate a gender and class analysis in their study of the English middle class, as does Kean in her portrayal of the ways in which socialists and feminist and socialist teacher trade unionists sought to bring pressure to change state education in the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁰

So, whilst social history has freed historians to write about women - Harriet Martineau has a place within this approach both as an author and as a subject *viz.* participant member of an early Victorian intellectual elite - it is still orientated towards male concerns. Social history has also been criticised for limiting the potential of women's experience to transform history, though studies of women's work have been undertaken which have provided important data

³⁷ Thompson E. P. (1968) *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

³⁸ Marwick. *Op cit.* 209.

³⁹ Scott J. Wallach. (1988) *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York:, Columbia University Press. 72.

⁴⁰ Davidoff L. & Hall C. (1987) *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*. London: Hutchinson; Kean H. (1990) *Challenging the State? The Socialist and Feminist Educational Experience 1900-1930*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.

for the analysis of family organisation and sex-segregation in the labour market.⁴¹ Research on women's experience has thus enriched social history, yet as Scott argues, women have not achieved centrality in social history's largely successful effort to challenge the dominance of political history.⁴²

Another set of questions concerns women's oppression and its opposing forces - *the struggle for women's rights*. Who oppressed women and in what ways? How did they respond to such oppression? Such questions have yielded detailed accounts of economic, social and physical injustices, and the means by which women have organised to struggle against them.⁴³ Harriet Martineau's use of census figures to denote patterns of women's employment and her articles on the poor conditions of female seamstresses are two illuminating examples of this aspect of scholarship.⁴⁴

Yet, while inferior status, abuse and subordination have undoubtedly been the lot of many women, such enquiry can imply deficiency on the part of women to cope with their circumstances. It can also fail to identify positive ways in which women have functioned in history. Mary Beard, for example, claims that the full contribution of women to the development of human culture cannot be found by treating them only as victims of oppression⁴⁵; and Harriet Martineau insisted that women must take ultimate responsibility for improving the lot of their own sex.

The development of feminist consciousness and how women have resisted their oppression have been the main interest of historians of women's rights movements, especially that of electoral reform.⁴⁶ Studies, however, have tended to be limited to organisational and institutional characteristics of the movements and the personalities of their leaders and, perhaps have thus diminished the part that others have played. Nonetheless, there have been important exceptions such as Barbara Taylor's study of Owenite women, Liddington and Norris's illuminating account of working-class women's participation in the English suffrage campaigns and Denise Riley's examination of the struggle for 'the Womanly Vote'.⁴⁷ In this work, Riley argues that the feminist campaigns of the nineteenth century were of necessity,

⁴¹ Alexander S. (1983) *Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London: a Study of the Years 1820-50*. London: Journeyman Press; John A. V. (1986) *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

⁴² Scott. *Op cit*.

⁴³ Benfield G. J. (1976) *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life*. New York: Harper; Banks O. (1981) *Faces of Feminism: a Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.

⁴⁴ Martineau H. (1859) *Female Industry*. *Edinburgh Review*. 222. 293-336; Leader on 'needlewomen'. (1857) *Daily News*. 13 January.

⁴⁵ Beard M. (1946) *Women as a Force in History*. 1986 edn. New York: Octagon.

⁴⁶ For example, MacKenzie M. (ed.) (1975) *Shoulder to Shoulder: a Documentary*. London: Allen Lane; Morgan D. (1975) *Suffragists and Liberals: the Politics of Women's Suffrage in England*. New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield; Evans R. J. (1977) *The Feminists*. London: Barnes & Noble.

⁴⁷ Taylor B. (1983) *Eve and the New Jerusalem*. London: Virago Press; Liddington J. & Norris J. (1978) *One Hand Tied Behind Us: the Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* London: Virago; Riley D. (1988) *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 67-95.

sectarian. In order to succeed, the women's movement was obliged to detach itself from earlier radical campaigns:

The advancement of 'women' must always take its tone from the differing backgrounds out of which their candidacy is to be prized;...

Nineteenth-century women, supposedly, embodying the benevolent truth of the social, could only present themselves as potential electors by breaking out of the old massifications, and departing, for instance, from the radical 'associationism' of the 1830s which had sought universal manhood suffrage. At such moments the suffrage claim takes on the look of being the narrow advocacy of a group interest, an individualism-for-sex. It must insist on attention to 'women', and yet challenge what it takes to be inappropriate insistences on 'women' which spring from sexual conservatism (67-8).

Harriet Martineau has been identified frequently with campaigns relating to the 'Woman Question'; yet, until relatively recently, most attention has been paid to the fight for women's suffrage. As a consequence, whilst she was one of the signatories to John Stuart Mill's 1867 Women's Suffrage Bill, Harriet Martineau's main contributions to campaigns on behalf of women - for the repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, the reform of divorce legislation, and for the right of women to paid employment - have tended to be underestimated.

Thus, accounts of feminist campaigns, particularly concerning suffrage, have tended to be uni-dimensional, celebratory in tone and often poorly located in the culture and political climate from which they emerged.

Separate sphere - women-centred scholarship, in contrast, focuses on the rewriting of women's history as 'herstory' and the development of a narrative of women's experience either alongside or entirely outside conventional disciplinary frameworks. The aim is to legitimise as worthy of study, female experiences that have been ignored or rendered non-existent, and to insist on the female presence in the recording of history. It has sought to illuminate the structures of ordinary women's lives as well as those of notable women, in order to discover the extent of feminine or feminist consciousness underpinning female behaviour. Although she cannot be said to be 'ordinary', those of Harriet Martineau's commentators who sought to place emphasis on her repressed sexuality, her relationship with her mother and siblings, and her feelings about being a woman, are relevant here.

The central aspect of this strand, according to Scott, is exclusive focus on female action, on the causal role played by women in history, and on the way gender has determined their lives.

Evidence consists of women's expressions, ideas and actions. Explanation and interpretation are framed within the terms of the female sphere; by examination of personal experience, familial and domestic structures, collective (female)

reinterpretation of social definitions of woman's role, and networks of female friendship that provided emotional as well as physical sustenance.⁴⁸

The attempt to record past female experiences from a woman-centred point of view has resulted in substantial reinterpretations of woman's role. As Vicinus wrote in 1977, it is thus possible to write about areas previously unexplored.

Scholars of the Victorian period are expressing considerable discomfort with the old clichés about women. Earlier notions about female sexuality and prostitution have been substantially altered with increasing research and debate. The passivity, frigidity, and uselessness of the female model idealized during the Victorian era in etiquette books and some fiction has come under attack for its extreme simplicity.⁴⁹

Branca, like Vicinus, challenges the popular stereotype of middle-class Victorian women as ornamental, idle and helpless by showing how the majority managed on restricted budgets and with few servants.⁵⁰ Certainly, Harriet Martineau's youthful auto-didacticism and her later energetic responses to family hardship are similarly illuminating counter-claims. Further, Branca found that middle-class Victorian women easily adapted to technological changes such as the introduction of the sewing machine and were not averse to using birth control as a means of providing for their own health and the well-being of their families. Harriet Martineau's demand to Rowland Hill to make arrangements for mail delivery to be speeded up between Ambleside and London shows that she, too, was not averse to using modernised information channels to upgrade her own working conditions.

The role of spinsterhood is another interesting area of exploration in the context of separate sphere scholarship. Consideration of the advantages for women of remaining single has been addressed elsewhere and has revealed how positive Harriet Martineau and some of her contemporaries felt about spinsterhood⁵¹, offering an alternative perspective on Victorian spinsterhood and its negative stereotypes of poverty and oppression.⁵² Other studies within this approach have explored the motives behind the practice of birth control in the nineteenth century. In his classic study of the nineteenth century birthrate, Banks concludes that economic reasons were responsible for the increased use of contraception.⁵³ Moreover, both Branca and Scott Smith identify the existence of 'domestic feminism', whereby English and North American women were able to achieve greater personal autonomy over their fertility

⁴⁸ Scott. (1983) *Op Cit.* 148

⁴⁹ Vicinus M. (1977) Introduction. In: Vicinus M. (ed.) *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* Indiana University Press. xi.

⁵⁰ Branca P. (1975) *Silent Sisterhood*. London: Croom Helm.

⁵¹ Weiner. (1991) *Op cit.* Chapter 1. See also, for example, Levine P. (1987) *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*. London: Hutchinson and Banks O. (1986) *Becoming a Feminist: the Social Origins of 'First Wave' Feminism*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

⁵² See Gertrude Himmelfarb's (1986) *Marriage and Morals among the Victorians*. London: Faber & Faber, for an understanding of the debates of the era.

⁵³ Banks J. A. (1974) *Prosperity and Parenthood*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

and within the home.⁵⁴ Thus, some were able, like Harriet Martineau at Ambleside, to celebrate domesticity without being ensnared by it.

However, woman-centred scholarship is to some extent problematic. Reinterpretations, such as those by Branca and Scott Smith, place a premium on women as actors rather than victims, thus providing a tension between active and passive portrayals of women's behaviour. Awareness of the actor-victim dimension has resulted in some finely drawn analyses (for example, Smith-Rosenberg's study of hysteria⁵⁵), but there are occasions, Lewis claims, when the balance is less even. She suggests, for instance, that Branca, in her enthusiasm to overthrow the passive female stereotype, neglects to make clear the very real constraints upon the behaviour of nineteenth century middle-class women.⁵⁶ Once again, Harriet Martineau's retreat into illness at the age of 39 (in common with her female contemporaries Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Florence Nightingale) provides some insight into the strategies to which some women had to resort, in order to be freed from 'womanly duties' to pursue their own chosen paths.

Another problem is the occasional failure to distinguish between *evaluating* women's behaviour and awarding a positive assessment to all that women have said or done. It is argued, for instance, that this kind of feminist scholarship replaces men with women but does not re-conceptualise history.⁵⁷ Although women are substituted for men as the subjects of accounts, their story remains separate, with the use of different questions, categories of analysis and sources.

Yet other scholars of women's history focus on the *intersections of class and gender* in feminist scholarship. These emerged as a challenge to the classic 'economist' (Marxist) position of woman which stresses, according to Mitchell, 'her simple subordination to the institutions of private property. Woman's biological status underpins both her weakness as a producer, in work relations and her importance as a possession in reproductive relations'.⁵⁸ Acknowledging her debt to the work of Engels, Fourier, Bebel and de Beauvoir, Mitchell identifies four structures which, when combined together, produce the 'complex unity' of women's historical position: production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialisation of children. Accordingly, the liberation of women can only be achieved when *all* four structures are transformed.

Others such as Davidoff and Hall take up Mitchell's themes to develop greater understanding about the impact of mass industrialisation on the gendered role of women in the home and in the workplace. In their important study of the English middle class from the end of the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, Davidoff and Hall outline their approach:

⁵⁴ Branca. *Op cit*; Scott Smith D. (1974) Family limitation, sexual control and domestic feminism in Victorian America. In: Bauner L. & Hartman M. (eds.) *Clio's Consciousness Raised*. New York: Harper.

⁵⁵ Smith Rosenberg C. (1972) The hysterical woman: sex role conflict in nineteenth century America. *Social Research*. 39. 652-678.

⁵⁶ Lewis. *Op cit*.

⁵⁷ Scott. *Op cit*.

⁵⁸ Mitchell J. (1966) *Women: the Longest Revolution*. 1984 edn. London: Virago. 26.

While many facets of middle-class formation are explored, this is not a study of the relations between the middle class and other strata, an important but different story...Rather it argues for the centrality of the sexual division of labour within families for the development of capitalist enterprise. It also traces how new conceptions of sexual difference were built on existing traditions and maps the social and institutional effects of those beliefs.⁵⁹

Interestingly, scholars taking this perspective have differed in their evaluation of Harriet Martineau's life. Walters perceived Harriet Martineau's career in terms of 'a masculine choice, a masculine persona' as she set up the 'impassable divide between the personal and the impersonal, between - on the one hand - discipline, principle, duty, the rational mind; and on the other, passion'.⁶⁰ In contrast, whilst Davidoff and Hall agree with Walters about Harriet Martineau's feminism being grounded in the need for self-control and self discipline, they are more interested in her need to celebrate the more 'womanly' attribute of domesticity. Why, if her own experience of domestic life was so mixed they ask, did Harriet Martineau celebrate domestic life?

In *Household Education*, published in 1848, she argued that the most ignorant women she had known had also been the worst housekeepers...Martineau saw the artisan household as providing a good model for the running of a household for there women had to necessarily had to be heavily involved themselves and could not leave the upbringing of the children and the management of the home to servants. The mother would take major responsibility for the children but the father would be involved when he came home in the evenings. The children would learn to help from the beginning and girls would learn domestic management the best possible way. Love was the right source of parental authority she thought, and combined this with advice on breastfeeding, on fresh air and exercise, and the importance of cleanliness.⁶¹

This approach has greater explanatory power than those mentioned earlier, in relating changes in the role of women historically to changes in class structure and the development of capitalism and industrialisation. Criticisms concern its audience. The complexity of the theory and the concepts used can be daunting for beginning scholars or for those unfamiliar with its sometimes obtuse terminology.

Rosalind Delmar is rather more concerned with historically changing definitions of *woman as subject of text*. In her criticism of the over-strict identification in texts, of feminism with women's social movements, Delmar maintains that feminists and/or scholars have not shared the same concept of 'woman' either at any one time or over time. Different alliances were entered into at different times. For example, before the twentieth century women's movement, women had been thought of, by feminists and non-feminists alike, as a separate social group with needs and interests of their own:

⁵⁹ Davidoff & Hall. *Op cit.* 13

⁶⁰ Walters M. (1976) The rights and wrongs of women: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau and Simone de Beauvoir. In: Mitchell J. & Oakley A. (eds.) *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 336.

⁶¹ Davidoff & Hall. *Op cit.* 186-7

This does not mean that only feminists treated 'woman' as a unified category, or that anyone who does so is a feminist. Nor is it to say that all feminists share or have shared the same concept of womanhood. Although the suffrage movement effected a political shift away from exclusive considerations of women as sex to emphasize women as social group, the post suffrage movement...adopted a concept of woman based on the needs of reproduction and the social value of maternity.⁶²

In a similar vein, drawing on the work of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, Riley draws attention to the 'volatility' of the category of woman, which is historically and discursively constructed and always dialectically related to other social categories, which themselves are continually changing. Women thus regarded themselves only sometimes as women: at other times they identified with class, ethnic, national or other interests. Thus, in Harriet Martineau's case, her perception of 'woman' meant different things at different times of her life. In her earliest writing, she was concerned to construct woman as an *equal being* to man, socially, politically and educationally; later, she focused on the possibility of woman as *economically independent*; and towards the end of her life, she viewed woman more as being *self-contained*, that is, having responsibility for her own destiny. At other times Martineau's womanhood was subsumed as she identified herself more with Utilitarianism, Unitarianism, her particular middle-class origins, Victorian radicalism, people with handicaps, the intellectual elite etc.⁶³

Moreover, according to this view, the instability of 'woman' as a category has a historical foundation, and feminist scholarship provides the possibility for a systematic examination and struggle over, that instability. Thus, Harriet Martineau's positioning in texts, written by herself and her biographers, shows how much more influential is the author than the subject, in the creation of a 'life'; and in particular, the importance of the author's perspective on women, in the creation of a woman's life.

Post-structural theorists such as those mentioned above have been profoundly important in provided feminism with a 'powerful analytic tool'. It is thus the task of the scholar to pursue knowledge - 'understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in this case of those between man and women' - and to encourage questions about how hierarchies, such as those of gender, are constructed and legitimated historically.⁶⁴ Processes rather than origins are emphasised, multiple rather than single causes, and rhetoric or discourse rather than ideology or consciousness.

If the meanings of concepts are taken to be unstable, open to contest and redefinition, then they require vigilant repetition, reassertion, and implementation by those who have endorsed one or another definition. Instead of attributing a transparent and shared

⁶² Delmar F. (1986) What is feminism? In: Mitchell J. & Oakley A. (eds.) *What is Feminism?* Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 25

⁶³ Weiner G. (1991) *Controversies and Contradictions: approaches to the study of Harriet Martineau (1802-76)*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Open University Press.

⁶⁴ Scott. *Op cit.* 3 & 2

meaning to cultural concepts, post-structuralists insist that meanings are not fixed in a culture's lexicon but are rather dynamic, always potentially in flux.⁶⁵

This somewhat complex approach to understanding women's experience has sought to reveal the shared experiences, fragmentations and contradictions of women's position historically, by examining its dialectical relationship to other social formations and categories. It, thus, rejects attempts to describe and explain the chronological improvement of women's lot or to offer over-simplistic accounts of women's achievements or set backs

Harriet Martineau everywhere!

This paper has explored scholarship on women's history, biography and autobiography and how each relates to the other. Interestingly, while drawing on mainstream intellectual developments, scholars, feminist or otherwise, have constructed specific and multiple methodologies and theories to explain and challenge women's invisibility. Despite differences in perspective - and it must be emphasised here that the categories outlined above overlap as scholars develop more complex perspectives on their work - most agree that merely replacing men with women in history is insufficient. The establishment of a women's history 'demands a fundamental re-evaluation of the assumptions and methodology of traditional history and traditional thought.'⁶⁶

What is particularly interesting for this study is that, while as Todd points out that she has to an extent 'dropped out of sight'⁶⁷ it is possible to place Harriet Martineau and studies about her in all the areas of feminist scholarship outlined above. She engaged in a wide range of intellectual pursuits, for which she was condemned as 'second-rate' by Webb though Roberts more recently argues that this is 'eclecticism' was an advantage.⁶⁸ I would go further to argue that this eclecticism has guaranteed Harriet Martineau a place in the widest possible range of women's and feminist scholarship and endeavour, and therefore a more secure and enduring place in history.

⁶⁵ Scott. *Op cit.* 5

⁶⁶ Lerner. *Op cit.* 180.

⁶⁷ Todd B. (2002) *Harriet Martineau at Ambleside*. Carlisle: Bookcase. vii

⁶⁸ Webb R. K. (1960) *Harriet Martineau: a Radical Victorian*. London: Heinemann; Roberts C. (2002) *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*. Toronto, New York & London: University of Toronto Press