

The Truth and Harriet Martineau: Interpreting a Life:¹

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But no one but myself can properly do the most important part – the true account of my conscious transition from the Christian faith to my present philosophy.

(letter from HM to Holyoake, 15.02.1855, British Museum)

Her love of the truth is proverbial among her friends, and even among such are averse from her present views. One friend says... “I always was of the opinion that Harriet Martineau was at once the most veracious and the most credulous person of my acquaintance”, ... and a chorus takes up to chaunt... (Letter from Elizabeth Browning to Miss Mitford, January 15, 1845, (Miller, 1954, p. 233-4).

Harriet Martineau used to say of me, with a show of ACCURACY never accurate which distinguishes her.... (Jane Carlyle in McQueen Simpson A & M, 1977, p. 253

‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘régime’ of truth (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

Introduction

I start this paper with four quotes: the first two subscribe to the truth claims of Harriet Martineau; the third implies that Martineau made a show of truth (accuracy) which was unfounded; and the fourth refers to the way in which truths are socially and culturally constructed and maintained. The quotes set the scene for the paper, which puts forward the proposition that far from being an advocate of ‘the’ truth, Harriet Martineau recognised that control of communication was crucial to the advancement of ‘her’ truth. We can recognise this impulse today, for example, in the rush into print of ex-politicians and celebrities, and in the communication management strategies of New Labour.

By way of an introduction, however, I first present briefly the outcomes of my doctoral study, which throws light, perhaps, on why anyone should be concerned about Harriet Martineau and truth-telling. I then consider some ideas about truth-telling before presenting evidence on Harriet Martineau’s own engagement with the truth.

I was initially attracted to researching Harriet Martineau for two reasons; a request from the Australian feminist, Dale Spender, to rescue Harriet Martineau from obscurity for her book *Feminist Theorists* (Spender, 1983) and Martineau’s work on education and women which seemed substantial enough to provide the basis for a doctoral thesis.

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However during my eight years' or so work (part-time) on the thesis (completed in 1991), my research focus shifted as I began to doubt the 'truthfulness' of what I was reading, whether that written by Harriet Martineau herself or by her numerous biographers and commentators. Each appeared to take up a different position on the value of Martineau's life and work, and on her importance to different disciplines and to history. Yet, even if they disagreed, biographers drew primarily on the same texts (the *Autobiography* and *Illustrations*). As I worked on my thesis, I pondered on how I could determine who was closest to the 'truth' about Harriet Martineau (Weiner, 1991).

Harriet Martineau as subject of history and object of text

In the event, my thesis provided a reassessment of Harriet Martineau's place in mainstream and feminist scholarship. It focused on Harriet Martineau, first, as a subject of research and, second, as an object of text.

As a *subject* of research, I argued, Harriet Martineau can be understood as a nineteenth-century, female, unmarried, middle-class, writer, reformer and intellectual, who, on the one hand, achieved public recognition and acclaim in patriarchal Victorian England, and on the other, provided a bridge between the Enlightenment and first wave of feminism of the second half of the nineteenth century. Harriet Martineau's prioritisation of economic and legal advances for women mark her out as an advanced feminist theorist. At the same time, her life experiences led her to prioritise different features relating to women's rights at different periods. For example, in her earliest writing, Harriet Martineau focused on woman as *equal* to man, socially, politically and educationally; later, she focused on the importance of *economic independence*; and towards the end of her life, she placed greatest emphasis on woman as *self-contained*, and as responsible for her own destiny. At other times, her womanhood was subsumed as she identified more with Unitarianism, Victorian radicalism, people with handicaps, the intellectual elite and so on.

As an *object* of text, Harriet Martineau was examined through the eyes of biographers and commentators, ranging from her contemporaries to commentaries written more recently (including my own). I detected distinct differences, according to historical period and ideological positioning. For example, many writing in the *nineteenth century* emphasised her unmarried status and the extent (or not) of her womanliness. The perception of unmarried women as unfulfilled, unnatural and sexually repressed led to judgements that those who strayed into the male discourse of the public sphere, were masculine and also in Harriet Martineau's case, 'egotistical'. By the *early twentieth century*, public sphere women were re-conceptualised as unusual and eccentric, rather than unnatural. Interest in eugenics generated heightened interest in appearance and mentality, and the new science of psychology led to speculation about Harriet Martineau's personality, sexuality and her relationships with family and friends. Nonetheless, several (women) writers toward the end of this period, such as Rivenburg (1932) located women such as Harriet Martineau within mainstream developments in the history of ideas, rather than in the ghetto of historical eccentricity. In the early *post World-War II period*, there was greater availability of historical sources, which meant that biographers knew more about Harriet Martineau. This was counterbalanced, however, by entrenched views about the preferred qualities

of women. At a time when women were being exhorted above all else to be homemakers, Wheatley writing in 1957 was most concerned to establish her subject as a warm and sensitive woman, somewhat distanced from the nineteenth century feminist movement and Webb writing in 1960 regarded Harriet Martineau as a somewhat inferior representative of an extraordinary historical era. Tellingly, he placed highest value on her writing style and the neatness of her manuscripts.

However, feminists consistently esteemed Harriet Martineau highly: as one of the catalogue of great women of the nineteenth century and an important early campaigner for women's causes. As second wave feminist ideas began to take hold, the trickle of writing on Harriet Martineau early in the twentieth century became a steady stream from the 1980s onwards. Accounts of Harriet Martineau written in the *late twentieth century* displayed little interest in her appearance or womanliness, being concerned, rather, to explore whether claims about her intellectual and feminist achievements could be defended, and what implications this had for extending knowledge about women. This was certainly the position that I took when I started my research in the early 1980s.

As I pursued 'my' truth about Harriet Martineau, however, it became strikingly obvious that biographers' differential assessments of Harriet Martineau's achievements and 'their' notions of the truth about her life, were dependent both on individual political and cultural loyalties, and prevailing truth-regimes about women. This could also be said Harriet Martineau's work, which was clearly oriented towards producing 'her' own truth about herself. Discussion of the latter provides the main focus of the next section.

Harriet Martineau and the truth

In the remainder of this paper, I take this line of enquiry further to argue that Harriet Martineau was an early, conscious, producer of truths. Predating the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault by a century or more, she recognised an essential element of truth production - what Foucault calls 'the twilight zone of knowledge'. According to Simola, Heikkinen & Silvonen (1998, p. 65)

From the point of view of truth-production ... the central question is not whether the truth is true or false, scientific or ideological, but how it is produced, circulated, transformed or used. Foucault's ... analysis of discourses attempts to illuminate that twilight zone of knowledge.

Thus Harriet Martineau's *Autobiography* cannot be understood as a straight-forward, descriptive record of her life – but as a form of truth-production. It is a conscious and judicious production of a linear narrative that is meant to look truthful. The image conveyed is of a truthful, fearless, progressive, hard-working woman, who, by dint of self-education, effort and good luck, gained autonomy, economic independence, fame and a long and enjoyable career as a political commentator and writer - even if, at times, she faltered due to ill-health or ignorance on the part of others. It also enabled her to revisit and re-emphasise the important intellectual themes of her life - political economy, education, the 'Woman Question', politics, parliamentary reform and so on.

Yet, as Sanders (1989) has pointed out, questions need to be raised about construction, selection and incompleteness of autobiographical accounts. What may be left out is also important, as is what to take at face value or how to read between the lines.

Moreover in a recent book *A Social History of the Truth* (1994), Shapin argues that judgements about what is true are framed by the promotion of certain 'realities' and not others. He identifies a 'materialist' concept of truth grants which gives more weight to the beliefs we attach to the world and less to the beliefs of others (Shapin, 1994, p. 4). Such a materialist sense of truth suggests that individuals consciously ascribe truth in such a way as to promote their own convictions (of what happens etc.) and minimise or exclude the truths of others. In the next sections, I suggest that Harriet Martineau is an example *par excellence*, of how truth-regimes are created. She knew how to portray herself and to do so, she needed five key elements: (i) a strong sense of market; (ii) networking skills; (iii) a truth worth telling; (iv) the ability to tell it well; and (v) control over information channels

i. Having a strong sense of the market

Harriet Martineau was an incisive social observer and commentator. She had a researcher's eye and an understanding of social and cultural relations. For example, in *How to Observe* (1838), she produced a framework for identifying which social and political institutions were most indicative of a country's advancement. She argued that observers needed to be objective, impartial, and aware of their own prejudices. This clear perception of how society worked had earlier been evident in her preparation for the *Illustrations*. In the early 1830s, she surveyed the political and intellectual scene, detected a gap in the market and did her homework: 'I could never even have started my project but for my thorough, well-considered, steady conviction that the work was wanted' she wrote (*Autobiography*, 1, p. 160). Political economy was an influential discourse in the 1820s, as an intellectual response to the rapid shifts in class relations following the Napoleonic Wars. She was convinced that there was a need for a popular introduction to political economy, and that the people had to begin by informing themselves if they wanted reform. She used the medium of illustrative fiction, first pioneered by Jane Marcet in her two-people *Conversations on Political Economy* (1816). Harriet Martineau was more ambitious. She produced eye-catching titles and storylines (viz. *French Wines and Politics*, *Cinnamon and Pearls*, *The Loom and the Lugger*) and fleshed out characters so successfully, that contemporaries frequently read the stories for their fictional qualities alone. She was tenacious in her attempts to persuade publishers to take up the series, and even though James Mill advised the publisher that Harriet's plan 'could not possibly succeed', it was an instantaneous, popular success, perhaps because it was both 'educational' and entertaining. In the end, ten thousand copies were sold in Great Britain and America and the series was a best seller, vastly outselling John Stuart Mill more authoritative work.

Even though she never again achieved the publication levels of the *Illustrations*, her other books and articles were popular because they were well-prepared and researched, well-targeted, accessibly written, sometimes deliberately controversial yet always modestly framed. As now, her sense of the market told her that the more 'popular' a book, the more likely it would be to secure high sales.

ii. *Networking*

Harriet Martineau was a highly competent communicator, making good use of a wide variety of networks. As Richardson points out, ‘her political contacts were constructed, sustained and extended by her comprehensive use of correspondence networks, from her childhood to her death’ (Richardson, 2000, p. 58). Letter writing was one of the few socially acceptable, intellectual activities available to women and thus was used as a means of gaining access to ‘male bastions of power’ (p.58). Even when confined to the sickbed, her writing flow continued unabated. For example, in a letter to Fanny Wedgewood, Harriet claimed that she had dictated 23 letters within a week and had personally written several more (Arbuckle, 1983).

Harriet Martineau also drew strongly on her family, religious, political and friendship networks to help her get published, disseminate her views, support her in times of trouble (economic or physical) and take care of domestic arrangements. In the run up to the *Illustrations*, for example, she first consulted her brother James about whether to go ahead, accepted ‘small loans from two opulent friends’, used a ‘lawyer-cousin’ as a witness in discussions with publishers, consulted mother, aunt and brother Henry about whether to travel to London to secure the deal, and used another cousin’s ‘great Brewery house’ as a base in London, drawing on the same cousin and his family’s support at a time when the prospect of publication seemed dire. Moreover, when she needed subscribers for the series, she approached her ‘monied relations’ first, many of who were both encouraging and generous (*Autobiography*, 1, 161-178).

iii. *Having a truth worth telling*

One condition of the establishment of a particular truth is that it has to be seen to be of significance. From her earliest days, Harriet Martineau wrote because she felt she had something important to say – as she herself put it, she had ‘the need of utterance’ (*Obituary*, 1876). Her earliest writings sought to interpret theological doctrine and her first two articles for the influential Unitarian periodical the *Monthly Repository* were on women entitled respectively ‘Female Writers of Divinity’ (1822) and ‘Female Education’ (1923). These themes and others are much in evidence throughout her writing career.

An autobiography is clearly one means of promoting a truth. She had thought of writing an autobiography several times in her life: first at the rather early age of 29, predating her success with the *Illustrations* and 10 years later during her period of ill-health at Tynmouth. Both attempts came to nothing, perhaps because her main aim then was to recollect her childhood experiences before she forgot them. The *Autobiography* was finally written in 1855 when she thought she had not long to live. She wrote it out of duty ‘when my life became evidently a somewhat remarkable one’. The aim, she wrote in her introduction, was to offer a whole ‘from one point of view, and in a consistent spirit’ (pp. 1-2). So one reason for the *Autobiography* was clearly that it was to be her version and her’s alone. At the same time she moved to interdict the publication of her private letters, which might provide alternative viewpoints on her life.

One gains an insight into her stance on writing in her more journalistic pieces. For example, in a collection of letters sent to the *Daily News* on a visit to Ireland in 1851, she presents her work as impressionistic, honest, unaltered and concerned with common things.

My readers will take them for what they are – a rapid account of impressions received and thoughts excited from day to day, in the course of a journey of above 1200 miles. I have thought it best not to alter them, either in form or matter. There would be no use in attempting to give anything of the character of a closet-book to letters written sometimes in a coffee-room, sometimes in the crowded single parlour of a country inn, - now to the sound of the harp, and now to the clatter of knives and forks, and scarcely ever within reach of books; therefore have I left untouched what I wrote, even to the notices of passing incidents as if they were still present, and references to a future already fulfilled' (Martineau, 1852, p. iii)

Much of her other writing was characterised similarly. In the case of the *Illustrations* she promoted her ability to detect the truth. For example she said that the stories were written rapidly, like letters, and that she never altered 'the expression as it comes fresh from my brain' (quoted in Fenwick Miller, p. 79).

iv. *Sounding truthful*

Harriet Martineau was extraordinarily good at persuading others that she was telling the truth. She convinced the poet Elizabeth Barrett who asserted 'her (Harriet's) love of the truth is proverbial among her friends', as we saw from a quote at the beginning of this paper. In 1957, the *Times Literary Supplement* commented that seldom was there 'a woman who was so appallingly honest with herself'. In 1990, Sanders similarly acknowledged that the main impression gained from Harriet Martineau's letters is 'a sense of her honesty, integrity, and amazing energy' (Sanders, 1990, p. xii).

Yet, some did not agree with this supposition. For example, another contemporary, Jane Carlyle, clearly felt that Harriet Martineau was rather more complex than her reputation suggested, at least in connection to Harriet's behaviour towards Jane's husband Thomas.

There is Harriet Martineau presents him [Thomas] her ear trumpet with a pretty blushing air of coquetry which would almost convince one out of belief in her identity (Jane Carlyle quoted in McQueen Simpson A & M, 1977, p. 98)

Like Jane Carlyle, I too am suspicious of Harriet's artless 'truthfulness'. It is certainly the case that sometimes she seemed not to care about the impact of her writing on others or herself. Indeed she mentions five such occasions in the autobiography thus:

Of five occasions in my life, I have found myself obliged to write and publish what I entirely believed would be ruinous to my reputation and prosperity. . In no one of the five cases has the result been what I anticipated. I find myself at

the close of my life prosperous in name and fame, in my friendships and in my affairs (*Autobiography*, 1, p. 199).

Yet she managed to keep down a job for 14 years, writing editorials for the *Daily News* that clearly did not cause too much offence. And when she wanted to be heard, as in her letters concerning the Contagious Diseases Acts, she knew precisely how to go about getting maximum publicity for her views.

v. *Controlling information*

As we can see from New Labour, if certain truths are to be accepted as true (and others not) then it is important to control information channels. Harriet Martineau took a number of steps in this direction. First, as we have already seen, she urged friends and correspondents to destroy all surviving letters (a dictate which many ignored). The reason she gave was that correspondence was 'written speech' which should be protected and bound by the same codes of honour as private conversation (Martineau, 1877, 1, p.3). To her, publication of letters amounted to nothing more than gossip and tittle-tattle. Second, she pre-wrote her own obituary for *Daily News*, which was published on her death and was widely quoted in other obituaries. Third, the publication of her two-volume *Autobiography* followed speedily upon her death, such that occasionally her obituary and the review of the *Autobiography* were written simultaneously.

Evidently, as recent publication of her letters testify (e.g. Arbuckle, 1983; Burchell, 1995) Harriet Martineau was not able totally to eliminate alternative perspectives on her life and times. Yet the fact that so many of her biographers drew principally on the *Autobiography* and *Obituary* as key sources of information, suggests that to some extent, she was successful in retaining control over her image, way beyond her death.

Conclusions

To summarise, I have argued in this paper that Harriet Martineau was an outstanding self-publicist and market-strategist. This factor goes some way to answer the question many have put: how did she, a provincial, plain, deaf, dissident young woman, get to 'make it' in mid-Victorian society. As Webb says, for decades her name was on everybody's lips as she tried this fad and that - in modern parlance, she was a celebrity. My argument is that she had to work hard to become one of society's elite, which involved, among other things, being known for her candour and honesty. In so doing, she used a number of what we would recognise as modern methods of information gathering, dissemination and control. She was thus largely successful in ensuring that her own version of the truth remained predominant, and her carefully produced image stayed intact. In giving Harriet Martineau the last word, we can see that her own evaluation of her life's work offered in the obituary remains today a prevailing truth about her achievements and place in history.

Her stimulus in all she wrote, from the first to last, was simply the need of utterance. This need she had gratified early; and those who know her best were always aware that she was not ambitious, though she enjoyed success, and had pride enough to have suffered keenly under failure...her original power was nothing more than was due to earnestness and intellectual clearness

within a certain range. With small imaginative and suggestive powers, and therefore nothing approaching genius, she could see clearly what she did see, and give a clear expression to what she had to say (*Obituary*, 1876)

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