

Women , Wealth and Power: Women And Knowledge Production Producers and Consumers: Women enter the Knowledge Market¹

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Abstract

From the turn of the nineteenth century women in Britain began to make significant contributions to the production of knowledge via the printed word. In the previous century they had increasingly articulated their feelings and thoughts through fiction, although this development was frequently ignored or underplayed in literary history until recently. From the late eighteenth century several notable female authors built on this to produce educational works underpinned by the knowledge they had consumed in various subjects including science, political economy and educational philosophy and psychology itself.² It will be argued that they frequently feminised and rendered accessible ideas from contemporary (male) theorists and writers, in new and sometimes subversive ways. The success of such women authors as teachers and purveyors of knowledge, the restrictions that bounded their achievements and the significance of both of these aspects in nineteenth century gender relations is the focus of this paper. Through examining the writings of Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau, their education and the subjects they chose to write on, their negotiated pathways through the masculine world of knowledge and what they achieved, some conclusions can be drawn about how far it was possible for a woman to obtain power and influence through authorship in that period.

Jane Marcet

The first woman whose writings we wish to explore is Jane Marcet. After her mother died in childbirth in 1785 when she was fifteen, Jane ran the household of her father, a prosperous Swiss merchant and banker who had settled in central London. She supervised her siblings' lessons and was hostess to her father's regular large parties of bankers, scientists, writers and important visitors to London. At thirty she married Dr Alexander Marcet, a Swiss graduate of Edinburgh University who became a physician at Guy's Hospital and an enthusiastic chemist. The couple lived with Jane's father, continuing the lively social and intellectual life which had brought them together. During the next decade they had four children and Jane began her successful writing career. By 1822 the successive deaths of her father and husband left Jane a wealthy widow who divided her life mainly between Switzerland and England. She continued to write until her death at 89, increasing the four publications issued by 1822 to 35 by 1858, plus many new editions especially of her first two highly popular works, *Conversations on Chemistry* and *Conversations on Political Economy*.³

It was quite amazing that Jane Marcet's most remembered writings were both on subjects which were largely assumed to be masculine. From the late eighteenth century women were

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² E.g. Anna Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Catherine Macaulay, Priscilla Wakefield, Mary Wollstonecraft. Discussions on these can be found in Mary Hilton & Pam Hirsch (eds.), *Practical Visionaries: Women, Education and Social Progress 1790-1930*, Harlow, Essex, Pearson Education Limited, 2000; Camilla Leach, 'Advice for parents and books for children: Quaker women and educational texts for the home, 1798-1850', *History of Education Society Bulletin*, May 2002, No. 69, pp. 49-58; Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860*, London, Longman, 1998.

³ *Ibid.*, passim.

increasingly writing both fiction and non-fiction, particularly educational works for children. Even so, the numbers who did so were comparatively few and serious books on knowledge were expected to be written by men who, among the upper and middle classes, generally had access to a deeper and more prolonged education.⁴ Furthermore, 'science' with its rational, logical overtones, was considered at its highest levels and especially in the physical sciences to be peculiarly masculine although, as Ann Shteir and others have shown the picture was more complex than commonly depicted,⁵ especially in the early nineteenth century, before the real professionalization of science and when science was still usually termed 'natural philosophy'. Nevertheless, the exciting new discoveries in chemistry which were revolutionising the understanding of their world of those who took any notice, appeared to be the preserve of men.⁶ Similarly in the next decades the pseudo science of political economy was led by male thinkers of high repute.⁷

Jane Marcet was aware of this situation. At the beginning of *Conversations on Chemistry* she felt it necessary to apologise for writing such a book since she could have 'no real claims to the title of chemist'. She was apprehensive that her book 'might be considered by some, either as unsuited to the ordinary pursuits of her sex, or ill-justified by her own recent and imperfect knowledge of the subject.' In her other books on science she began with similar diffidence.⁸ Her preface to her *Conversations on Political Economy* spoke of her 'limited knowledge' although she also alluded to 'the real difficulty of the science' and the fact that she only omitted either the 'most abstruse questions and controversies' or any conclusions not soundly established.⁹

Marcet, therefore, accepted to a certain extent, at least publicly, the gendered assumptions that prevented most women from venturing too far in any form of 'science'. In '*Chemistry*' she dealt with some subjects fairly cursorily, for example, the preparation of medicines (once the province of women), as 'it properly belongs to professional men' and advised girls against scientific conversation or enthusiasm which might invite accusations of 'pedantry'.¹⁰ Her scientific books were published anonymously for many years although acknowledged to be written by a woman and celebrated in her own circles.¹¹

Nevertheless Marcet played a significant role in these male worlds. Her *Conversations on Chemistry in which the Elements of that Science are familiarly explained and illustrated by Experiments*¹² was intended for the public generally but 'more particularly' the 'female sex'

⁴ See for example, Ruth Watts 'Making women visible in the history of education' in (ed.) Anja Heikkinen, *Gendered History of (Vocational) Education - European Comparisons*, University of Tampere, Finland, 1996, pp. 9-28.

⁵ Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760-1860*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1996

⁶ For example, Joseph Priestley and John Dalton in England and Antoine Lavoisier in France.

⁷ Such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo in England, Jean Baptiste Say and Jean Sismondi in France and Switzerland.

⁸ Jane Marcet, *Conversations on Chemistry* 2 vols.. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1806, pp. v, viii-ix; *Conversations on Natural Philosophy*, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, 1819, p.2; *Conversations on Vegetable Physiology*, , Brown & Green, 1829, vol. I, pp.v-vi.

⁹ Jane Marcet, *Conversations on Political Economy*, London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1817; 1st ed. 1816, pp.vii-viii.

¹⁰ Marcet, *Chemistry*, vol.I, p.3, vol.II, p.264.

¹¹ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, p.52 - even her husband had occasional qualms about the possible 'incalculable' consequences of her 'growing celebrity' on their domestic life.

¹² 'Special Collections', Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison, <http://www.library.wise.edu/libraries/SpecialCollections/womennature/imagepages/ed...>

whose education she said was seldom calculated to prepare their minds for abstract ideas or scientific language.¹³ The book was to enable them especially to attend intelligently the public lectures on science that were becoming so fashionable among the upper classes. In particular Marcet referred to the dramatic, lectures of the young, brilliant chemist, Humphry Davy, appointed lecturer at the fledgling Royal Institution in 1801 and mainstay of the institution until succeeded by his brilliant protégé Michael Faraday from 1824.¹⁴

The truth was that most people of all ranks had very little knowledge of science. Except amongst very progressive educationalists it was not taught as a subject in schools or private education and even among those who flocked to public lectures it was often chiefly as an entertainment. Outside the tiny number of university professors there were few professional scientists and they were poorly paid. Jane Marcet, in seeking to educate the public, was therefore breasting relatively uncharted waters.

Furthermore, as Marcet said herself, chemistry had only recently evolved ‘from an obscure and mysterious art’ to ‘a regular and beautiful science’.¹⁵ In her *Conversations*, therefore, she sought to establish its general principles.¹⁶ Her work, immediately popular, had sixteen English editions and two French in her lifetime. There were twenty-three American editions plus some popular imitations, the book there inadvertently becoming the most successful chemistry text of the first half of the nineteenth century. Jane Marcet’s own new editions were so up-to-date that she was once criticised for adopting Davy’s theories and discoveries before they had been proven by the scientific community. She was greatly admired by leading contemporary thinkers including Faraday who famously attributed his foundation in chemistry to reading her book when he was a teenager apprenticed to a bookbinder.¹⁷

It was the same in her *Political Economy* when leading figures in the subject such as John Malthus and David Ricardo praised it highly and the French Jean Say translated “sizeable passages” for his students. At the Political Economy club of Edinburgh, J. R. McCulloch toasted her as the first to show that “women could rival men in the abstract sciences”.¹⁸

Power from and in education

So how was this upper middle class mother able to win such an unusual position for herself? Firstly she added to the unusually excellent education she received at home, where she delighted especially in mathematics, astronomy and philosophy, by the further education that was continued in the very social life of her home. Apart from her husband himself being a pioneer chemist, leading scientists and political economists from both England and abroad,

¹³ Marcet, *Chemistry*, vol.I, p.vi.

¹⁴ Jan Golinski, (1999) ‘Humphry Davy’s sexual chemistry’, *Configurations*, vol. 7, 15-41, printed <http://www.unh.edu/history/golinski/paper1.htm>; Thomas Martin, *The Royal Institution*, London, The Royal Institution, 1961, 8-47.

¹⁵ Marcet, *Chemistry*, vol.I, pp.3-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vols. I & II.

¹⁷ Marcet, *Chemistry*, vol.I, pp.19-97; Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.29-30-4, 124; ‘Jane Haldimand Marcet, 1769-1858’, <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/exhibits/marcet/marcet.htm>; Louis Rosenfeld, (2001) ‘The chemical work of Alexander and Jane Marcet’ *Clinical Chemistry*, vol.47, number 4, p.790; Steven T. Corneliussen, ‘What did Thomas Jefferson do as a scientist?’, http://education.jlab.org/qa/historyus_01.html See ‘Comparison of parallel sections of two editions modelled on Mrs Jane Marcet’s *Conversations on Chemistry*, <http://www.sunydutchess.edu/mpcs/cavalieri/marcet.html>

¹⁸ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.54-5.

were regular visitors and Jane had recourse to them for her writings.¹⁹ This did not mean she slavishly followed their ideas; for example, she refused to accept the labour theory of value espoused by both Malthus and Ricardo.²⁰ Nevertheless, armed with such friends as these and studying science at home in both England and Geneva, she was able to bring out updated editions regularly and particularly to write many more scientific works between 1819 and 1843.²¹ Using her continental links as sources in her books, Jane Marcet was an international player in the dissemination of science and political economy.

Furthermore, the significance of Marcet's books lay not only in their content but in the educational process inherent in them. Her chief strategy was to use dialogue as a means of learning.²² In *Chemistry* the conversations are between Mrs B and two teenage girls whose characters grow as the conversations proceed. The teaching is through dialogue, illustrations, and experiments small enough to take place in the home. Diagrams and drawings aid explanation, Mrs Marcet putting to good use her excellent training in art which she had learnt from Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Lawrence. There are many references to every day things, for instance how to remove a mulberry stain from a dress. Mrs B does not pretend to know everything and frequently points out where scientists need to know more before even sensible sounding ideas can be relied upon. On the other hand as far as possible she allows the girls to work out things for themselves, clarifying their knowledge through the errors they make as well as through their successful experiments. The girls never proceed further until their understanding is firm and are taught to take notes and index them so that they do not have to rely on memory alone.²³

Thus understanding is deliberately allowed to grow through sound learning and personal discovery.²⁴ In such methods, of course, Jane Marcet was not entirely original either in earlier times or her own but she was supremely successful in her day.²⁵ How far she knew the books of others before she started writing is not easy to discern although she mixed in Unitarian and progressive educational circles and later she became friends with some of the leading female authors who shared her interests and ideals such as Maria Edgeworth, Mary Somerville and Harriet Martineau.²⁶ Many of these found that writing books ostensibly for children and/or

¹⁹ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.4, 8, 16-19, 44-56, passim; Rosenfeld, 'Chemical Work', pp. 784-8; 'Major ions are conservative', <http://bell.mma.edu/~jbouch/OS212S00G/sld007.htm>; 'From alchemy to chemistry: five hundred years of rare and interesting books', <http://www.scs.uiuc.edu/~mainzv/exhibit/marcet.htm>

²⁰ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman* pp.52-4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 64-70, 85-6, 90, 95-6, 133-4

²² Marcet, *Chemistry*, pp.vii-viii.

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. I passim; Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, p.8.

²⁴ Marcet, *Chemistry*, vol. II, pp.74-5; Marcet, *Political Economy*, pp.12-13; Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.23, 70-1, 117-18; Rosenfeld, 'Chemical Work', 787

²⁵ Gerald Dennis Meyer, *The Scientific Lady in England 1650-1760*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1955, pp. 16-48; Maria and R.L.Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2 vols., London, Joseph Johnson, 1801, 1st ed. 1798, vol.1, pp.v-vi, 41-5, vol. 2, pp.342-5; Priscilla Wakefield, *Mental Improvement or the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art 1794-7* [ed. Ann B. Shteir, East Lansing, Colleagues] ; Dr Aikin & Mrs Barbauld, *Evenings at Home*, Edinburgh, William P. Nimmo, 1868, 1st ed. 1793, passim.; Ruth Watts, 1998, 'Some radical educational networks of the late eighteenth century and their influence', *History of Education*, vol.27, no. 1, pp.1-14.

²⁶ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.30-1, 33-4, 67, 69-70, 77-9, 96, 100-03, 118-9, 122; Shteir, *Cultivating Women*, pp. 99-102; Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians* pp. 39, 49-51, 128-9; Mary Somerville, *Personal Recollections from Early Life to Old Age*, Boston, Roberts Brothers, 1876 (New York, AMS Press INC. reprint, 1975), pp. 114, 209-10; Anna Laetitia le Breton (ed.), *Correspondence of Dr Channing and Lucy Aikin (1826-*

young people was a prime way for women to enter the knowledge market just as living in an educational social milieu was a principal means of women gaining sufficient expertise to write their books. Jane Marcet, thus was a leading light in a small but significant group of women writers who in the years around 1800 at last ensured that women could make a crucial contribution to the shaping of public understanding and part of that cluster of overlapping and interacting elites who shared a mission to modernize, described by Roy Porter.²⁷

This was in a period when it was not easy for all men to enter what were becoming the gentlemanly portals of science as both the working-class Faraday and the provincial Humphry Davy discovered in different ways.²⁸ Jane Marcet was an upper middle class Londoner but was restricted by gender. Nevertheless through networks reaching to Scotland, England and continental Europe²⁹, she was able to write books which pushed the frontiers of knowledge and the most engaging processes of both science and education,³⁰ out towards others. Harriet Martineau, albeit aware of later developments in the prime subjects on which Marcet wrote, called her the ‘instructress’ of her times whose works promoted the ‘intelligence of the middle classes of England’.³¹

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) – a biographical sketch

Our second subject is Harriet Martineau who enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a feminist writer, journalist and political campaigner. The first and final public actions of her life illustrate the breadth and length of her career in public life. In 1832, at the age of thirty, she published a hugely popular introduction to the new nineteenth-century science of political economy (what we now know as classic economics). It made her a national celebrity overnight, provided her with financial security, and earned her the reputation of ‘popular educator’. Thirty years later, in 1863 at the age of 61, she came out of retirement to publish four letters in the *Daily News* alerting the public to the dangers of the Contagious Diseases Acts. These letters were to constitute the first shots in one of the most important British feminist campaigns of the nineteenth century. In the years between she exerted a degree of influence that is difficult for us to understand today, with our present perceptions of the patriarchal nature of nineteenth-century England. She was much aware of her good fortune as a woman in having such a popular success with her political economy series and consciously sought to build on it in order to exert political influence more widely. She wrote to a friend, ‘I wish I was in London. I want to be doing something with the pen, since no other means of action in politics are in a woman’s power’ (Martineau, 1832). She speedily moved to London from her home town of Norwich, to take up residence close to Westminster and Downing Street, suitably accessible to politicians, civil servants and society personages who sought her advice on a whole range of parliamentary and cultural matters for a decade or more. In her late 30s, exhausted, and with her health collapsing, she removed herself to the seaside town of

42), London, Williams and Norgate, 1874, p.126; *Record of Unitarian Worthies*, London, E.T. Whitfield, 1876, p.66.

²⁷ See Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, London, W.W. Norton & CO, 2000 pp.xxii, 286. See also Shteir, *Cultivating Women*, pp.81-103; Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific lady A Social History of Woman’s Scientific Interests 1520-1918*, London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1990, 107-11, 170-85; Watts, ‘Making women visible’ pp.9-28.

²⁸ <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/exhibits/marcet/marcet.htm> p.2; Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, p.79; Golinski, ‘... sexual chemistry’, 1-17; Watts, *Gender, Power*, pp.141-53.

²⁹ Polkinghorn, *Uncommon Woman*, pp.38-56, 98-108

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-15, 126-8.

³¹ Harriet Martineau, ‘Mrs Marcet’ in *Biographical Sketches, 1852-68*, Macmillan, 1870, 1st ed. 18 pp.386-92.

Tynemouth and then, five or so years later, to the Lake District. She made a famed recovery with the help of mesmerism (hypnosis), and both during and after her illness, continued to produce an impressive volume of books, articles, letters and other forms of writing, becoming a pioneer in a number of emerging nineteenth-century disciplines and fields including economics, politics, journalism, sociology, women's rights, travel writing and autobiography.

Harriet Martineau was an extraordinary figure in London society of the 1830s and 1840s, around the time that the young Victoria came to the throne. She was a woman from the provinces who became a recognised expert on determinedly male public-sphere issues such as the economy and the law; she was also a social celebrity; who managed to overcome a hearing impairment with the aid of an ear-trumpet. She contrived rather successfully to balance sociability and curiosity with authoritative comment (often dismissed by detractors as didacticism). For example, when she travelled to America in the mid 1830s, shortly after completing her political economy series which, though highly popular, was criticised for focusing on 'unwomanly' topics, the men she met were surprised by her evident sociability. As Webb (1960: 3), put it:

...the Americans were agreed. She was very pleasant, not at all so formidable as they had expected. She dressed well and quietly, and spoke in a low voice, rather rapidly. She was, to borrow their adjectives, womanly, vivacious, pleasant, unaffected, affable, courteous, communicative (Webb, 1960).³²

Women also seemed to enjoy her company. Elizabeth Sedgewick wrote to her New York lawyer husband Robert.

My first impressions of Miss M. are very agreeable. She has a vivacity and love of fun about her that was wholly unexpected. I thought to see her gravely wise and solemnly sensible... - but lo – in the place she sends forth – like any woman – delicate titbits – pleasant gossipings – and those little nothings – which gracefully uttered are the charms of conversations (Sedgewick, 1835).

Others were less complimentary about her, but this was frequently because they did not like what she was saying, or that it was a woman who was saying it, or that it was a woman who was saying it too passionately. For example, in a review of the autobiography when it was published after Harriet Martineau's death, Margaret Oliphant, the Scottish novelist, was deftly crushing.

The verdict of the world upon her will not, we think, be so high... She was a very sensible woman; yet not very much a woman at all, notwithstanding her innocent and honest love of Berlin Wool. She was a very clever writer, with a most useful, serviceable working faculty, and as little nonsense in her as could be desired. (Oliphant, 1877, p. 490)³³

As an authoritative commentator, who was also a woman, dissenter, and campaigner for advanced causes, Harriet Martineau was without doubt a highly contentious figure - attracting

³² Webb, R. K. (1960) *Harriet Martineau: a Radical Victorian*. London: Heinemann.

³³ Oliphant, M. (1877), Harriet Martineau. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. 121. April. pp. 472-496.

admiration from some (notably fellow Unitarians, political progressives, abolitionists and feminists), and much hostility from others. Thus while her achievements as nineteenth-century woman pioneer and writer were admitted by most people, there was considerable diversity in the evaluation of her historical and cultural importance, both among her contemporaries and over time. For example, on its publication her political economy series was mocked by the conservative periodical, *The Quarterly Review*, not only for poor quality of writing and misplaced reforming zeal but also on grounds of ‘unfemininity’.

But it is equally possible not to laugh at the absurd trash which is seriously propounded by some of her characters, in dull didactic dialogues; introduced here and there in the most clumsy manner; and worst of all, it is quite impossible not to be shocked, nay disgusted, with many of the unfeminine and mischievous doctrines on the principles of social welfare; of which these tales are made the vehicle (Croker, 1833, p. 136).³⁴

She was acclaimed by feminists writing at the end of the nineteenth-century (Miller, 1884); and viewed as an interesting, if narrow-minded and sometimes unwise, nineteenth-century eccentric, in the first decades of the twentieth century (Bosanquet, 1927). At the end of the 1950s, she was perceived by her main (male) biographer of the period, as representative of her times, even if she was also ‘second-rate’ and mediocre (Webb, 1960). More recently, from the 1970s onwards, she has been reclaimed once more by feminists as an important ‘foremother’ of modern feminism (Pichanick, 1981; Sanders, 1986, David, 1987; Weiner, 1991).³⁵

Harriet Martineau and Education

Certain issues occurred continuously in Harriet Martineau writing: doubts about Christianity, interest in science and alternative sciences (mesmerism, phrenology), optimism regarding necessary social change, and importance of popular education for social development. It is the latter area of Martineau’s work that is the focus of this part of the paper. The aim is to provide a close reading of *Household Education*³⁶, one of her most influential and ‘embedded’ texts, which reveals Martineau as a feminiser of language through which she rendered accessible the ideas of her time to different audiences, in new and often subversive ways.

Martineau took up different positions on education at different periods of her life. In the 1830s and 1840s she largely focused on structures. For example, she criticized the existing system of parliamentary grants for not extending provision to working-class children, and instead, advocated a national system of education based on trust and cooperation. Later in

³⁴ Croker, J. W. (1833) Miss Martineau's Monthly Novels. *Quarterly Review*. 1107, April.

³⁵ Miller, F. Fenwick (1884) *Harriet Martineau*. London: W. H. Allen; Bosanquet, T. (1927) *Harriet Martineau: an Essay in Comprehension*. London: Etchells and Macdonald; Webb, R. K. (1960) *Harriet Martineau: a Radical Victorian*. London: Heinemann; Pichanick, V. K. (1981) *Harriet Martineau: the Woman and Her Work*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Sanders, V. (1986) *Reason Over Passion: Harriet Martineau and the Victorian Novel*. Brighton: Harvester Press; David, D. (1987) *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press; Weiner, G. (1991) *Controversies and Contradictions: approaches to the study of Harriet Martineau (1802-76)*. Doctoral thesis, Open University

³⁶ Martineau, H., (1849). *Household Education*. London: Edward Moxon.

1861, she welcomed the Revised Code of Robert Lowe which tied grants to examination results: 'henceforward the State Payments must be earned by the fulfilment of the aims of the State'.³⁷ In the 1850s and 1860s, she looked more closely at the practice of education. For example, she argued for vocational as well as intellectual training. She was an advocate of 'progressive' schooling, wholly opposed, for example, to rote learning and reward systems, and highly critical of corporal punishment, describing, in 1854, the public schools' use of 'flogging and fagging' as a 'system based on brute force and despotism'.³⁸ She also displayed a consistent and long-standing commitment to girls and women's education.³⁹

Useful and interesting though this overview of Martineau's various positions on education may be, it does not provide the full flavour of how or why she came to hold these perspectives, nor indeed why we need to pay attention to them some 150 years later. Also because she wrote in so many places at different times about different aspects of education, it is impossible to integrate her range of views in a consistent seam. Martineau's greatest challenge to modern scholarship thus is her eclecticism, which defies unification or integration.

Nevertheless, Martineau's work is important not least because it exposed existing crises of knowledge and belief that were in the process of destabilising the nineteenth-century domestic family ideal. Thus, Martineau reveals that Victorian ideology was not stable and fixed, but fractured, contradictory and constantly changing – and that she had the ability to write from within yet interrupt popular discourses and ideas. As Roberts points out:

Martineau's steady and widespread appeal to the public means that her works are an important gauge of prevailing beliefs, opinions and attitudes within her society. She was adroit at establishing herself as a prominent speaker in many of her society's most vexing debates, and the topic of her publications addressed issues of general concern... This representative quality of Martineau's works is indicated by their noisy reception: if her interests had been tangential to the concerns of her society, her works would have been marginal which was not the case... Martineau believed that the author should be of his or her age... She also recognized that individuals were overdetermined by cultural influences, so that an author was also necessarily of his or her age.⁴⁰

Martineau's writing, Roberts argues, was most subversive when it seemed most integrated into the concerns of the Victorian age. This point is taken up in the next section which is devoted to an analysis of one of Martineau's most 'embedded' works, *Household Education*, which she wrote in 1849 in mid-career⁴¹.

Household Education

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, educationists stressed the role of the family and parents, especially the mother, in imprinting moral values on the child in infancy. Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More and others claimed, for example, that the main tasks of the mother were as educator and socialiser, in particular for the next generation of educators –

³⁷ Martineau, H. (1861). *Daily News*. 24 September.

³⁸ ³⁸ Martineau, H. (1853). *Daily News*. 22 March.

³⁹ Martineau, H., (1859). Female Industry. *Edinburgh Review*. 222, pp. 293-336

⁴⁰ Roberts, C. (2002) *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*. Toronto; University of Toronto Press. pp. 4-5

⁴¹ Martineau (1849). *Op cit*.

their daughters. Thus Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies*⁴² focused on women's education as a means of informing their judgement, cultivating their understanding and thereby, contributing to the domestic contentment of the family. Most writers on education emphasized the importance of mothers' role in the development of a Christian, moral viewpoint.

Thus when Harriet Martineau entered the fray with *Household Education*, she was following an earlier female writing tradition, which indeed she had also been part of - several of her earliest articles dealt with educational issues, as already noted. The topic of the book was thus uncontroversial (unlike much of Martineau's other work) in the sense that it was considered a socially appropriate topic for a known woman writer which engaged with a familiar literary form. However as with much of her other work, while the book was deeply rooted in contemporary cultural concerns, it was also challenging and subversive regarding nineteenth-century bourgeois ideals.

Household Education was a completed version of two series of articles on education published in 1846 in a short-lived magazine, *The People's Journal*. After the journal's demise, Martineau was encouraged to finish the series by John Saunders, the journal's editor. It received generally good reviews, as a useful practical guide on the topic, and as a suitable topic in itself. For example, a contemporary reviewer wrote:

She destroys nothing without supplying its place with something better; and a book on education has rarely appeared, combining more interesting illustration with real practical utility.⁴³

The same reviewer welcomed it as an important contribution from a distinctive yet 'fair', liberal and 'truthful' perspective.

If from her particular position in society she gives in many cases a one-sided view, she is on the other hand careful to present her own opinions without violently or illiberally attacking those of other people; and we are irresistibly led to follow a train of reasoning in which we perceive an earnestness of purpose that will inevitably reach at a truth in some form.⁴⁴

The self-proclaimed task of *Household Education* is authoritative:

I propose to say, in a series of chapters, what I have observed and thought on the subject of LIFE AT HOME, during upwards of twenty years' study of domestic life in great variety' (p1).

Household Education follows a standard format for a discussion of such a topic: introduction to the aims of education, whom it affects, what faculties and senses are involved, domestic education's features, concepts and so on. Yet, this is no platitudinous gallop through the various educational theories and ideas of the day: rather a means through which Martineau

⁴² Edgeworth, M. (1798). *Letters for Literary Ladies*: More, H. (1799). *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. 1802 edn. Boston: for J. Brumstead.

⁴³ (1849). Miss Martineau on Education. *American Whig Review*. 9. 18, June. New York: Wiley & Putnam (604-18), p. 618

⁴⁴ Op cit. p. 605

could provide insights into contemporary phenomena and simultaneously insert challenges to prevailing orthodoxies. For example, unusually for the time, it

- addresses parents of all classes;
- challenges the Victorian family patriarch as all-knowing – ‘But every wise parent has occasion to say, now and then-“I do not know, my dear”’ (p2);
- contains a notion of life-long learning viz. ‘there is room for improvement ... as long as we live’ (p3);
- asserts the equal rights and responsibilities of girls and boys, mothers and fathers - to education; and
- educational values are conceived of as arising out of the beliefs and values of particular cultures and societies.

Recent commentators such as Wheatley and Thomas have dismissed the work as pedantic or merely concerned with educational theory.⁴⁵ Webb emphasizes Martineau’s radicalism, ‘pseudo-scientific enthusiasms’ and materialist perspective while Peterson hails its ‘*feminist* position on education’ and ‘shrewd revision of an English *feminine* tradition of didactic writing on the subject of “female education”’.⁴⁶ Yet, while I am largely in agreement with Peterson and have some understanding if not total sympathy with the other viewpoints, I wish to offer yet another interpretation. *Household Education* was popular with contemporary readers because it engaged with popular discourse and incorporated the observations, skills and expertise of an incisive social commentator and communicator. However what it also dared, is to insert social justice and rights into a hitherto conservative, feminised discourse, and thus offer a challenge to already threatened bourgeois ideals concerning the patriarchal family. It managed to do so because when the text threatens to become too ‘serious’, Martineau inserts an intriguing phrase or anecdote to provide a temporary diversion. For example, the following extract captures wonderfully, the reading obsessions of childhood.

Some children’s greediness for books is like a drunkard’s for wine. They can no more keep their hands off a beloved book than the tippler from the bottle before him. The great difference as to the safety of the case is that the child’s greediness is sure to subside into moderation in time...while the drunkard’s is sure to go on increasing till all is over with him. (p145).

One of my favourites is in the section on how parents need to help develop children’s personal habits. A mother is described as using a child’s wish to have a particular book as an incentive for him to overcome his dislike of rice-pudding.

In a family, where it was the custom to have a great rice-pudding every Saturday and sometimes also on another baking day, - Wednesday, - there was a little fellow who hated rice....

His longing for this little book was of that raging sort which I suppose only children ever feel. He was to have this book if he would eat rice-pudding. He eagerly promised; feeling at the moment, I dare say, when there was no rice within sight, as if he could

⁴⁵ Wheatley, V. (1957). *The Life and Work of Harriet Martineau*. London: Secker & Warburg.; Thomas, G. (1985). *Harriet Martineau*. Boston: Twayne.

⁴⁶ Webb, (1960). *Op cit.*; Peterson, L. H. (1984). Harriet Martineau’s *Household Education*: Revising the Feminine Tradition. In: Scott, P. & Fletcher, P. (eds.) *Culture and Education in Victorian Society*. London & Toronto: Associated University Presses. 183-194.

live upon it all his days, to get what he wanted. I saw how his gorge rose at the sight of the pudding; but he fixed his eyes upon the opposite wall, gulped down large spoonfuls, wiped his mouth with disgust, and sighed when he had done, demanded his fee, ran for the book, and alas! had finished it, and got almost tired of it, before bed-time (p186).

One suspects that the ‘little fellow’ is indeed Martineau herself, who later in her *Autobiography*, recounts her inability to digest such foods as a child.

Many such anecdotes pepper the text. However the underlying message and themes are nonetheless clearly put. For example from the book’s earliest pages, Martineau emphasizes the social inclusivity of the text. Education, for her, is the right of all individuals, whatever their class.

The aim proposed [of education] – of doing justice to the powers of every human being under training – includes women, the poor, the infirm – all who were rejected or slighted under former systems – while it does more for the privileged than any lower principle ever proposed to do. (p.2).

She incorporates the most recent scientific understandings, for instance, about the need for cleanliness as enshrined in the Laws of Health.

I fear it is still necessary to teach and preach that nobody has the right to health who does not wash all over every day. This is done with infants; and the practice should never be discontinued. Every child of a family should look upon this daily complete washing in cold water as a thing as completely of course as getting its breakfast. There was a time, within my remembrance, when even respectable people thought it enough to wash their feet once a week; and their whole bodies when they went to the coast for sea-bathing in August. In regard to popular knowledge of the Laws of Health, our world *has* got on... (180-1, original emphasis).

She sought also to demonstrate her knowledge and authority regarding the newly developing natural and social sciences. For example, she regards science as essential for a child’s intellectual development, displaying a post Comtean, pre-Piagetian perspective on scientific learning. Of two children reading ‘Conversations on Chemistry’ or ‘Scientific Dialogues’, the younger child, she argues, is likely to see Chemistry more as a ‘play-thing’ and:

find some entertainment, and particularly if allowed to try chemical experiments: but these experiments will be to him a sort of cookery; - a putting things together, in order to succeed in producing some result, - amusing or pretty (p 162).

The older child, however, might approach these texts in an altogether different, more abstract way.

He does not want to try chemical experiments. He would rather think quietly of the great agents of Nature, and see them, with the eye of his mind, for-ever at their work; - Heat, spreading through all things, and even hiding in the polar ice; - Electricity, darting and streaming through all substances and being the life of all that lives; and the flowing together and mixing of three airs to make air that we can breathe, - this flowing together and mixing having gone on ever since there were breathing creatures on the globe... (p161-2)

Martineau also uses *Household Education* to reaffirm her views on the importance of education for girls and, indeed, provides her most scornful, succinct and comprehensive demolition of the arguments used to deny them this right. Thus,

I mention girls, as well as boys, confident that every person able to see the right, and courageous enough to utter it, will sanction what I say. I must declare that on no subject is more nonsense talked, (as it seems to me) than on that of female education, when restriction is advocated. In works otherwise really good, we find it taken for granted that girls are not to learn the dead languages and mathematics, because they are not to exercise professions where these attainments are wanted; and a little further on we find it said that the chief reason for boys and young men studying these things is to improve the quality of their minds... If it is said that the female brain is incapable of studies of an abstract nature,- that is not true: for there are many instances of women who have been good mathematicians, and good classical scholars. The plea is indeed nonsense on the face of it; for the brain which will learn French will learn Greek; the brain which enjoys arithmetic is capable of mathematics. If it is said that women are light-minded and superficial, the obvious answer is that their minds should be the more carefully sobered by grave studies, and the acquisition of exact knowledge. - If it is said that their vocation in life does not require these kinds of knowledge, - that is giving up the main plea for the pursuit of them by boys; - that it improves the quality of their minds. - If it is said that such studies unfit women for their proper occupations,- that again is untrue. Men do not attend the less to their professional business, their counting-house or their shop, for having their minds enlarged and enriched, and their faculties strengthened by sound and various knowledge; nor do women on that account neglect the work-basket, the market, the dairy and the kitchen. (155-6).

However, perhaps even more unusually, she assumes a shared responsibility of the 'caring' of children, on the part of fathers as well as mothers. For example, of a 'conscientious and affectionate father', she writes:

Ernest he must be, for it appears that it was his constant habit, during the infancy of his children, to rise in the night, to see that they were well, and sleeping peacefully: an he invariably went with them to school, and met them at the school door, to bring them home again, - more than a mile, - though he was a busy man, - and obliged to work for their bread and his own (173-4).

Perhaps the model here is her brother James, who, whatever Harriet's quarrels with him, seemed to be a committed and caring father.

What has been attempted in this part of the paper is to demonstrate the importance of undertaking a close reading of texts, in this case, Martineau's *Household Education*. Such a reading reveals that Martineau's ambitions for the work were much wider than its title indicates. As in much of her other writing, it allowed her to revisit and reassert her ideas – on sex equality and social justice, the importance of science etc. – to yet another audience, using the popular writing form in which she excelled. In the latter sense I depart from Peterson and others who claim that Martineau's writing style is masculine. Rather, like Roberts, I suggest that she *feminised* and *rendered accessible* ideas from contemporary (male) theorists and writers, in *new* and often *subversive* ways.

Conclusion

What we have tried to show is that Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau used power through their writing. The topics they chose were not necessarily 'feminine' but were 'feminised' so as to make them more accessible to all, men and women alike. They had a belief in the female intellect and an interest in science and social concerns of their different periods. They also believed in their own powers and right to tackle 'masculine' subjects and to publish in ways that suited their own talents. This gave Marcet and Martineau unusual power as women in the world of knowledge of their era.

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