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Caroline Roberts. *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. Pp. 253. Cloth. \$50.00.

In 1855, convinced she was about to die, Harriet Martineau prepared her own obituary, began to write her autobiography, and waited for death to take her. It did not. Instead, Martineau lived for another 21 years, publishing regularly on subjects as diverse as political economy, the 1791 Haitian revolution, and mesmerism; corresponding with Elizabeth Barrett, Jane Welsh Carlyle, and Florence Nightingale (among others); and campaigning to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, which legislated often brutal gynecological examinations for any woman merely suspected of soliciting in English port towns. “Female Industry” (1859), Martineau’s trenchant argument for pay equity published in the prestigious *Edinburgh Review*, aptly describes not only the women’s work she enumerates in that article but also her own *modus vivendi*.

Long neglected, Martineau’s industry has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, not only among Victorianists working in the disciplines of English and History, but also among sociologists, some of whom have recently claimed her as “a founding figure in the discipline” (Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale ix) alongside Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim. As Helena Znaniecka Lopata remarks, “Martineau’s recent ascendancy ... lags somewhat behind Martineau’s earlier popularity and fame among the literate public in England and America” (Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale xv). Caroline Roberts makes clear, however, that Martineau’s “earlier popularity and fame” were always controversial. In her valuable new book, *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*, Roberts traces the controversies surrounding seven of Martineau’s early publications, from 1832 to 1851, ending her study just shy of the illness that prompted Martineau to pen her autobiography in 1855.

Roberts reconstructs what she felicitously terms the “noisy reception” (4) of Martineau’s works, but eschews a strictly biographical focus. Making use of historical analysis, exegesis, and theory, Roberts focuses on “Martineau’s texts and nineteenth-century culture rather than on her life” (6), “[situating] these texts historically in order to understand why they were controversial” (3). Given Martineau’s intellectual interests and commit-

ments, such historical contextualization entails a broad range of research, and Roberts cuts an admirable swath through nineteenth-century theories of political economy, the abolitionist movement, mid-Victorian medicine, and questions of historical representation and religious faith.

Although critics have proclaimed the weakness of Martineau's fiction ("Her fiction lacked personal commitment, she neither developed character nor evoked realism, her dialogues were wooden and didactic, and she relied upon the narrative to carry the action along" [38], states recent biographer Valerie Pichanick), Roberts is at her critical best on the novels. Her argument is most compelling in her chapters on *Deerbrook* (1839), a novel whose focus on its "apothecary-hero" (52) adumbrates Victorian fictional representations of the medical profession such as Lydgate's medical career in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), and *The Hour and the Man* (1841), Martineau's novel about Toussaint L'Ouverture, the "self-proclaimed 'Buonaparte of St. Domingo' (now Haiti)" (76). In these chapters, Roberts addresses previous criticisms, like Pichanick's, about the veracity of Martineau's characterizations, reading these characterizations not as flat or inauthentic, but as strategic. Unlike critics who fault Martineau for failing to represent either historical verisimilitude or feminist possibilities for change, Roberts shows how *Deerbrook's* "clinical perspective" (65) and *The Hour and the Man's* "description of Toussaint's crisis of identity and cultural dislocation" (89) actively disrupt early Victorian "middle-class ideological norms" (60). Historicizing both Martineau's language of characterization and the genres of realism and historical romance, Roberts demonstrates convincingly Martineau's serious engagement with contemporary issues—the increasing "professionalization of medical practitioners" and the status of "clinical medicine" (52), "the relation of women to medicine" (75), "problems surrounding the knowledge and representation of history" (77), and "the experience of history by the colonized subject" (77).

Martineau's serious engagement with contemporary issues began in the early 1820s when she contributed regularly to the *Monthly Repository*, a politically radical Unitarian journal. The only paid contributor from 1829 to 1832 (she earned £15 a year), Martineau produced 52 items for the *Repository* in 1830 and supplemented her income with fancy work. After the serial publication of *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34), Martineau no longer needed to supplement her income. John Stuart Mill might deride her as a "mere tyro" for what he perceived as her "superficial, impressionistic, and often ill digested" knowledge of political economy (qtd. in Pichanick 49), but by 1834 *Illustrations* was selling 10,000 copies a month. (In contrast, Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* [1848] sold 3,000 copies in four years.)

Exemplifying in narrative form the theories of Jeremy Bentham, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and James Mill, Martineau's 25 tales successfully rendered principles of political economy understandable to the average reader and packaged them in an affordable, didactic yet amusing series. The success of Martineau's series makes clear readers' desire to grasp these principles; however, as Roberts succinctly explains, "The problem was that the theoretical language of male political economists seemed boring and obscure" (15). Far from "boring and obscure," Martineau's tales popularized theories of political economy and occasioned controversy. Roberts notes that "Demerara," an anti-slavery story, did not occasion the most controversy, which was instead accorded to Martineau's stories about overpopulation. Critics were appalled by one story which describes two financially solvent characters who are in love but nonetheless choose not to marry; critics viciously associated Martineau "with sexual vice" (22) and deemed her anti-marriage. Roberts's rigorous historicizing of the series' reception and early Victorian perceptions of its subversiveness problematizes recent feminist assessments of *Illustrations* as a handmaiden to patriarchal ideology. My only criticism is that this chapter seems short: at 15 pages, it is at least 9 pages shorter than other chapters, several of which extend to 30 pages or more. It is a measure of Roberts's stimulating argument that I would have liked even more analysis of the *Illustrations*.

Several years before Dickens recorded his observations of American life in *American Notes* (1842), Martineau articulated the disparity between the founding principles of American democracy and the social realities of American life, especially for women and slaves. Martineau's *Society in America* (1837) registered her disappointment with these social realities and prompted "bitter responses" (30) from American reviewers. As Roberts points out, Martineau identified the exclusion of women and slaves from the democratic process as, in part, a linguistic problem. Roberts shows how Martineau both used the metaphor of women and slaves (a metaphor that feminists used, not unproblematically, throughout the Victorian period) and differed from other abolitionists—by condoning resistance and rebellion, by supporting interracial marriage, and by repudiating the conversion of slaves to Christianity.

Martineau reprised this intellectual iconoclasm in much of her writing, as Roberts demonstrates, including her 1844 series of letters in the *Athenaeum* on mesmerism. Suffering from gynecological problems during an 1839 tour of Italy, Martineau returned to England and the medical care of her brother-in-law, Dr Thomas Greenhow. From her own astute descriptions of her condition in letters to her physicians to her eventual use of

mesmerism to alleviate this condition, Martineau participated actively in her diagnosis and ostensible cure. Martineau's proclamation of her cure by mesmerism in a respected weekly did not sit well with Greenhow, however. He responded by publishing a detailed *Medical Report* on her case as a shilling pamphlet. Roberts argues that this contest for authority in Martineau's diagnosis and cure bespeaks the precarious status of newly professionalizing medical men in the 1840s who were threatened by the ability of popular fringe practices like mesmerism to usurp their authority. This argument is certainly borne out by previous work on Martineau by Roger Cooter and Alison Winter. Roberts's more original contribution is to link Martineau's avowal of her cure by mesmerism to her publication of *Life in the Sickroom* (1844), published anonymously as "Essays by an Invalid." Contrary to recent assessments which read resistance and rebellion in Martineau's sickness, Roberts suggests that "For Martineau ... sickness was less of a virtually sanctioned means of rebellion than it was an atonement for a successful professional career" (118).

Although Martineau retained faith in medical men after her public conflict with Greenhow, Roberts remarks, her faith in the clergy was shaken: writing her autobiography in 1855, Martineau was distressed "by their sanctioning of illness" (138) and denounced "the Christian superstition ... [which] has shockingly perverted our morals, as well as injured the health of Christendom" (qtd. in Roberts 138). *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848) took on questions of religious faith, and Martineau considered it "her boldest text to date" (169). The book was both "an evaluation of Egyptian society in the late 1840s and ... an understanding of the implications of ancient Egyptian history for Christianity" (139). Contemporary readers admired Martineau's vivid descriptions, but perceived the book as atheist. No less distressing for the contemporary reading public was *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851), which Martineau co-authored with Henry George Atkinson. The book explicitly decried religion in favour of scientific rationalism in its meditation on "man's nature and place in the universe" (169), and confounded critics with its promotion of phrenology.

Writing her own obituary for the *Daily News* years before her death, Martineau modestly described herself thus: "With small imaginative and suggestive powers, and therefore nothing approaching genius, she could clearly see what she did see, and give a clear expression to what she had to say" (qtd. in Weiner xvii). In Roberts, Martineau has found a sympathetic critic, one who sees clearly what Martineau accomplished and gives clear expression to what Martineau had to say. Historicizing Martineau's own

historicist tendencies, Roberts has written an important contribution to the burgeoning field of Martineau studies and to the literary history of the early Victorian period. One hopes that this work will prompt other scholars to equally vigorous investigations of Martineau's later career, including her translation of Auguste Comte, the *Autobiography*, and her journalism for the *Daily News*.

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