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Finding Their Natural Place as Housewives: Harriet Martineau, Political Economy, and Irish Women

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<1>During her fact-finding tour of Ireland in 1852, the well-known English author Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) described the "anomalous condition" of the country that created "an economic symptom, [which utilizes] the employment of the least in place of the most able-bodied." She declared it was a

> ...piteous sight to see households supported by their children and grannies, instead of by the strong arm of him who stood between. The women were at work at the same time. The women of Ireland so learned to work then that it will be very long indeed before they get a holiday, or find their natural place as housewives. We do not say recover their place as housewives; for there is abundant evidence that they have not sunk from that position, but rather risen from a lower one than they now fill (*Letters from Ireland* 65-66).

<2>For those familiar with Martineau's advocacy for women's rights, this call for Irish women to become housewives may seem to state the antithesis of feminism. But she was a political economist as well as a feminist, and this combination gave her a unique perspective, especially when it came to addressing the condition of Ireland in the wake of the famine. She saw first-hand the utter poverty of many Irish peasants, and undoubtedly realized that advocating for women to have access to higher education, more employment opportunities, and greater civil rights had little immediate meaning for those who lived in one-room hovels with dirt floors and lacked sufficient food and clothing for themselves and their families. Moreover, her vision of Irish women as housewives was shaped by her understanding of political economy which held that capitalist development was key to social improvement. As a result she advocated *laissez-faire* economics, population limitation, and free trade,

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while for the individual, she promoted thrift, forethought, hard work, attention to duty, cleanliness, and sobriety. But unlike most of her peers who commented on the Irish situation, she believed that these principles applied to women as well as to men, and she argued that social progress could only be accomplished by creating a stable domestic economy in every home. This perspective made her unique among her contemporaries, for she argued that the domestic role of women was crucial to the rebuilding of Ireland's economy, thus giving domestic labor intrinsic value in economic and social reform.

Martineau and Feminism

<3>Although most modern scholars recognize Martineau primarily for her advocacy of women's rights, she wrote prolifically on a wide variety of subjects from the 1830s to the 1870s. Yet because many of her works were so topical, interest in them declined rapidly after her death in 1876. But Martineau's work was rediscovered by a new generation of women scholars in the 1970s and 1980s who were attracted by statements such as this one in her *Autobiography*:

> [W]omen, like men, can obtain whatever they show themselves fit for. Let them be educated, — let their powers be cultivated to the extent for which the means are already provided, and all that is wanted or ought to be desired will follow of course. Whatever a woman proves herself able to do, society will be thankful to see her do, — just as if she were a man (1: 401).

<4>In her groundbreaking work *The Feminist Papers* Alice Rossi called Martineau "an ardent defender of women's rights throughout her life" (123). Valerie Kossew Pichanick described her as one of the few voices in the 1840s and 1850s that called for an extension of women's rights ("An Abominable Submission" 14-15). In the first feminist biography of Martineau, Pichanick cited Martineau's chapter "Political Non-Existence of Women" in *Society in America* (1837) as a "too much neglected early manifesto in the women's rights campaign" (*Harriet Martineau* 92-93). Others agreed: Gayle Graham Yates called her "a role model from history" (3) and Shelagh Hunter declared that Martineau "must be part of any history of nineteenth-century women and the growth of feminism" (7). More recently, Gaby Weiner identifies her as a "an early lone feminist voice, of considerable relevance later to first-wave feminism" who continues to have significance today (157).

<5>Yet even as these studies accepted Martineau as part of the history of the modern women's movement, they also recognized that at times her work seemed at odds with a feminist perspective. For instance, Martineau appeared to accept the idea that

a woman's natural place was in the home, and in *Household Education* (1848), she defended better schooling for women by pointing out that it would not make them unsuited for "the work-basket, the market, the dairy, and the kitchen" (222). In 1859, her essay "Female Industry" in the *Edinburgh Review* declared that "every girl has an innate longing, we are confident, for the household arts, if nature but had her way" (316). Two years later, she concluded that employed working-class women do not "look upon [paid labor] as the settled business of their lives. They marry or think of marrying" (386). Even in her *Autobiography* she pointed with pride to her own domestic accomplishments, noting that she could "make shirts and puddings, and iron and mend, and get my bread by my needle, if necessary" (1: 27).

<6>Thus, Martineau's views on women appeared to present a contradiction for modern scholars. Valerie Sanders described her as a feminist who was a "Janus-figure" (195-196) while Alexis Easley noted the "contradictory terms" of Martineau's feminism and her "conflicting viewpoints on the role of women in society" (81, 82). Ann Hobart characterized Martineau's feminist analysis as "paradoxical" because she seemed to accept the traditional gendered division of labor even while calling for greater opportunities for women (239). Some tried to explain these contradictions by drawing parallels with the women's movement of the 1970s. While Pichanick pointed out that many feminists of Martineau's era saw no conflict between traditional domestic duties and women's intellectual growth, she argued that Martineau would have been disappointed if she could have foreseen that women's *de facto* emancipation had not been achieved in the century since her death ("An Abominable Submission" 15). Easley explained that "Just as modern feminists contend with the contradictions of their roles within the patriarchal institutions, so did Martineau struggle with her own relationship to liberal ideology" (93). But Lana L. Dalley has more recently argued that feminist readings of Martineau in the 1970s and 1980s "perpetuate the conventional denigration of the domestic sphere within much feminist scholarship" and fail to consider Martineau's own middle-class position and liberal politics (104).

<7>Yet some scholars have pointed out that drawing parallels between nineteenth-century feminism and the modern women's movement can ignore the historical context within which Martineau wrote. In the 1830s, she was a young, unmarried woman writing about a subject that was considered improper for ladies, either because it was too intellectual or too indelicate when it included discussions of population control as occurred in her novel *Cousin Marshall*. The lengthy review of this volume in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* expressed horror that "a young lady [has] put forth a book like this . . . written by a *young woman* against *marriage*!" (403). The anonymous review of *Illustrations of*

Political Economy in the *Quarterly Review* declared that it was "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" (136). But as Linda Peterson points out, her use of "masculine" language was dictated by the need to attract a sufficient audience to earn a living ("Harriet Martineau" 182). Caroline Roberts similarly notes that as a professional author in the 1830s, Martineau had to use "the discourse of the dominant sex and class." But Roberts also points out that her success as a writer on political economy was due to the fact that she used ordinary and every-day (feminine) language rather than the dry scientific (masculine) prose of academic political economists (14-15).

Pre-Famine Ireland in the Works of Martineau, Edgeworth, and Owenson

<8>One place that these seeming contradictions between feminism and political economy becomes apparent is in Martineau's extensive writing on Irish affairs. In the 1850s, she told the editor of the *New York Evening Post* with some truth that "I have gone deeper into the Irish subject in my 'History of the Thirty Years' Peace' than any other writer" (*Harriet Martineau and America* 87). In addition to this broader history, she published several books and lengthy articles specifically on Irish affairs and even began planning for *Illustrations of Political Economy,* the series of novels that made her famous in the early 1830s, while visiting her brother James in Dublin (*Autobiography* 1:160).

<9>The ninth novel in the series was set in Ireland, but this was not the first instance of a nineteenth-century female author exploring the condition of Ireland through fiction. *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812) by the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth were all set in Ireland, and *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) made Irish author Sydney Owenson famous. These authors witnessed the Irish rebellions of 1798 and 1803 and the 1801 Act of Union that dissolved the Irish Parliament and made Ireland a component part of the United Kingdom, and their novels reflect their hopes for a peaceful political union through the device of marriages that unite English and Irish characters. Edgeworth bluntly stated this hope in in her preface to *Castle Rackrent,* declaring that she looked forward to the day when "Ireland loses her identity with an union [*sic*] with Great Britain" and its inhabitants conform more closely to English standards (xvi).

<10>This theme is evident in Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl* as well. Initially, the English hero despises Ireland but over time learns to love its people and its culture. After a plot twist that threatens the happy ending, the novel culminates in his marriage to Glorvina, the title character. The Englishman's transformation is what

makes him an acceptable husband for the wild Irish girl, but as Mary Jean Corbett points out, it also mirrors the new relationship that Owenson perceived between the nations; (masculine) England would come to appreciate (feminine) Ireland while at the same time "the collective work of mastering Ireland" took place (93).

<11>A similar, albeit more complex situation occurs in Edgeworth's *Ennui.* After the Earl of Glenthorn, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, learns he was switched at birth with an Irish peasant's child, he gives up his lands and titles to the rightful heir, an uneducated blacksmith. Glenthorn adopts his birth name of O'Donoghoe and becomes a successful barrister, gaining enough financial stability to propose to the quiet, unassuming Anglo-Irish woman he loved. But after his future mother-in-law exclaims "what a horrid thing it will be to hear my girl called Mrs. O'Donoghoe," he agrees to take his wife's more socially acceptable name of Delamere (394). Providentially, the girl is also the heir at law to his former estate, and she unexpectedly inherits after the new Earl's only offspring dies after setting the castle on fire while drunk. Thus, even though the hero was born Irish, his upbringing had been that of an Anglo-Irish lord, and by the end of the novel, he has given up even his common Irish name and regained his place in the Anglo-Irish gentry.

<12>Some have criticized Owenson and Edgeworth for "manufacturing easy, sentimentalized solutions to real political problems" (Bartoszyńska 128). Both could have applied some of the principles of political economy in their fiction to create more realistic scenarios; each was familiar with Adam Smith and was to some extent influenced by him (Bartoszyńska 129). Edgeworth's father Richard had given her a copy of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to read before he turned over management of their Irish estate to her (Picken 188). In his *Essays on Professional Education* (1809) written with assistance of his daughter, Richard Edgeworth declared that all country gentlemen should read it because it was the "best book to open his views, and to give him clear ideas" (297). Smith's ideas did shape Maria Edgeworth's perspective in her Irish novels to some extent; in the background to the plot, she suggests that the solution for Ireland's problems was to create a new relationship between landlord and tenant, one in which they worked together for a common goal under the paternal direction of the landowner who presumably had read *Wealth of Nations.*

<13>The Edgeworths' promotion of Adam Smith's ideas reflects contemporary efforts to spread knowledge of the principles of political economy. In 1816, Jane Marcet attempted to make the complex ideology intelligible to schoolchildren in *Conversations on Political Economy.* The introduction points out that "no English writer has yet presented [political economy] in an easy and familiar form" and that because of the ongoing debate and controversies about it, it had "not yet become a

popular science" that was taught to children (v-vi). She hoped to remedy this with her book that presented concepts through conversations between Caroline, a schoolgirl, and Mrs. B, her teacher. Caroline's role was to raise questions about how political economy applied to daily life, while Mrs. B answered in simple language that explained how people could prosper by following its principles. Marcet's book was popular, and by 1830, six English editions had been published, as well as American, Dutch and French versions. But this remained a rare effort to explain the principles of political economy to the broader public, and it inspired Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*. According to her *Autobiography*, it was after reading *Conversations on Political Economy* in 1827 that she realized that "the whole science might be advantageously conveyed . . . not by being smothered up in a story, but by being exhibited in their natural workings in selected passages of social life" (I:105). This was the goal of the *Illustrations*; her emphasis on theory was evident, and unlike the novels by Owenson and Edgeworth, her Irish novel *Ireland: A Tale* had political economy as its heart.

<14>Martineau's story featured an Irish peasant girl named Dora and her family, in stark contrast to the gentry who dominated Owenson's and Edgeworth's tales, and for Martineau's protagonists there was no happy ending. After Dora's father, a tenant farmer, imprudently commits himself to a financial obligation that he ultimately is unable to pay, the family loses both their cottage and the land that supports them. But Dora's sweetheart Dan arrives in the nick of time, marries Dora, and uses money he had saved up to rent a small farm. They live happily for a year, sharing the home with her parents, raising crops, and improving the farm. But Dan fails to sign a lease, and at the end of the year, the landlord evicts them to rent the farm at a higher rate, based in part on the improvements they had made. Dan destroys as much of the farm as he could before taking his family to an isolated region where they join others who had also become homeless through the rapacity of property owners and unjust land laws. Dan and the other men attack local farms and landlords while Dora lives in a ruined cottage with her parents where she gives birth to her first child. Because Dora has more education than most peasants, Dan asks her to write a threatening note to a landlord. Fearing that he might leave her and her child if she refused, she writes the letter which leads to her arrest, conviction, and transportation. The story ends with her father and the infant watching from afar as her ship sailed away, while Dan pursues an increasingly violent life.

<15>Throughout the tale, other characters including landowners, educated travelers, and clergymen comment upon the impact of the existing landholding system in Ireland, which Martineau saw as the primary cause for Irish poverty. They were the ones who voiced the principles of political economy, and, as in her other novels in

the series, she concluded by emphasizing these principles in a summary at the end of the book. She declared that the current system in Ireland “affects the security of property, or intercepts the due reward of labour” and ultimately discourages “industry and forethought” (134-35). Dora’s family symbolized the thousands of evicted tenant farmers who had no stable domestic economy and whose efforts to make a successful farm and home life were stymied by the insecurity of land tenure and the rapacious demands of landlords and middlemen. This tragic injustice not only undermined the domestic economy of such families but also destabilized the local and national economy, and even the wealthy suffered. All of this meant society could not progress.

<16>*Ireland: A Tale* was typical of the series by focusing on a single family as an exemplar, and the plots highlighted the importance of domestic well-being as essential to family and national progress. In the preface to *Life in the Wilds,* the first volume of *Illustrations, s*he explained her reasons for focusing on domestic settings to illustrate her larger principles:

> Domestic economy is an interesting subject to those who view it as a whole; who observe how, by good management in every department, all the members of a family have their proper business appointed them, their portion of leisure secured to them, their wants supplied, their comforts promoted, their pleasures cared for; how harmony is preserved within doors by the absence of all causes of jealousy; [and] how good will prevail towards all abroad through the absence of all causes of quarrel (v).

An anonymous reviewer of the *Illustrations* in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* lauded this approach, pointing out, “The economy of empires is only the economy of families and neighbours on a large scale” (613).

<17>In the various volumes of *Illustrations* women played a significant role in the family economy and often exemplify the personal characteristics advocated by political economists. In the fifth volume, *Ella of Garveloch,* the orphaned title character used prudence and thrift to care for her younger siblings. As their only support, her role included the “masculine” tasks of commercial fishing and negotiating with the landlord over the rent for her family’s plot of ground and cottage. At the same time, she carried out the more traditional duties in the home, including spinning cloth, baking and taking care of her brothers. In the novel, other women in more purely domestic situations also play a significant role in the family economy, and those families who showed prudence, self-moderation and thrift prospered. In *Weal and Woe in Garveloch,* the sequel to *Ella of Garveloch,* the now-

married Ella continued to supplement her husband's earnings by fishing to feed and care for their nine children. Martineau emphasized the importance of a proper home by having Ella state that both father and mother had a divinely-ordained duty to provide food, clothing, and good lodging so as not "to corrupt them by letting them live like brutes" (37).

Women and the "Irish Problem"

<18>Martineau wrote extensively on a variety of topics following the success of *Illustrations of Political Economy,* but she returned to Irish affairs in her multi-volume *History of England during the Thirty Years' Peace: 1816-1846* (1849-1850), a sweeping history of events since the close of the Napoleonic wars. Like other English commentators in the 1830s and 1840s, she discussed at length the continuing unrest in Ireland, which demonstrated that despite the hopes of authors like Owenson and Edgeworth, political unification had not led to peace and prosperity. Proponents of the Act of Union in 1801 had promised that it would be followed quickly by "Catholic emancipation" or granting full civil rights to Ireland's Catholic majority. Yet it took nearly thirty years before the measure was enacted in 1829, and other issues remained unresolved, such the tithe imposed on agricultural property to support the Protestant state church which served only a small minority of the population. The tithe had been extended in 1823 from tilled land to all agricultural lands including pasture. Not only did this impose new taxes on some agriculturalists, it also led some landlords to increase rents to cover the costs. A wave of anti-tithe protests, known as the Irish Tithe War, swept across parts of the island in the 1830s once police and militias began seizing property of those who refused to pay (Shaw 92). At the same time, Irish Catholic lawyer and MP Daniel O'Connell who had led the Catholic emancipation campaign was advocating a repeal of the union and re-establishment of an Irish Parliament as the solution to Irish problems.

<19>The ongoing unrest played into long-standing stereotypes; for centuries, English writers portrayed the Irish as inherently savage and uncivilized, a portrayal which continued in the English press in the early nineteenth century (de Nie 17). This stereotype was also evident in travel accounts, letters in periodicals, and official reports. For instance, one observer in 1826 remarked that the "extreme poverty and privations" he saw in the homes of the peasants was worse than the "barest wig-wam of the North American savage" (Coad 80). More than twenty years later when Thomas Carlyle toured post-famine Ireland, he made a similar comparison, describing Kildare as "one of the wretchedest wild villages I ever saw . . . exotic altogether, 'like a village in Dahomey'" (70). Some British politicians of the 1830s accepted the idea that "Irish poverty was indelibly tied to moral corruption,

economic underdevelopment, and agrarian agitation" (Nally 720). Such comparisons implied that there was something in the Irish character that contributed to the island's widespread poverty.

<20>However, a minority of observers argued that Irish unrest was a natural consequence of unjust laws which created a system that kept the rural population in poverty. In 1820, Thomas Cromwell argued that uprisings were symptoms of resistance to a system that so oppressed the Irish peasant that he had nothing to feed his "clamorous and starving family" (18). Martineau clearly agreed with this point of view and believed that the best way forward was for Irish leaders and landowners to adopt the principles of political economy, making this point repeatedly the *History of the Thirty Years' Peace.* She castigated Daniel O'Connell and his campaign to repeal the union, charging him with misleading the population about the true causes of their poverty. She argued that "the miserable tenure of land, and the multiplication of a destitute population, were the chief causes of the miseries of Ireland" and that O'Connell "certainly knew that these evils could not be cured by a parliament sitting in Dublin" (2: 391). She believed that the condition of Ireland would improve only if its economy became based on justly-compensated waged labor, security of land tenure, and free market exchange. She hoped that this would result because of the union with Great Britain which brought Ireland into "intimate connection with a country of superior industrial conditions and habits" (2: 393). She believed that this was already underway because "agriculture was improving in Ireland, and manufactures were advancing every year" (2: 395).

<21>But even as she discussed changes to the land laws and promotion of manufacturing, she also portrayed a stable domestic life as part of Ireland's progress. She saw Father Mathew's temperance campaign in 1830s as promoting a better home life, which increased prosperity and decreased crime and disorder. She pointed out that abstainers could afford more home comforts and described how "the decent table, with decent seats round it, appeared again in the middle of the lately empty room. There was a bed now, inviting to a sleep which had become light and sweet. The chest gradually filled with clothes, and the stocking in the thatch grew heavy with money." Sober and industrious people became law abiding, and she claimed that "at the end of two years, when the number of [those who took the temperance pledge] exceeded two millions and a half, no one of the whole host had appeared before judge or jury" (3: 314-15).

Political Economists, the Famine, and Irish Women

<22>Despite her hopes for Ireland, Martineau recognized that even the principles of political economy could not stop the disaster that arose from the 1840s potato blight, and as the first signs of famine appeared, she concluded that the "work of preparation for a new age for Ireland was taken out of human hands; and a terrible clearance of the field of Irish soil and society was about to be made" (4: 251). She saw the impact of this disaster first-hand when she traveled to Ireland in 1852 to write reports for the London *Daily News*. She was by no means the first to publish eyewitness accounts of famine-stricken Ireland, nor the first political economist to make recommendations for Ireland's relief but her assessment of the vital role of women in creating a stable domestic economy was virtually unique.

<23>Possibly the most famous contemporary descriptions of famine-stricken Ireland were written by Thomas Campbell Foster, reporter for the London *Times*. Like many previous foreign observers, Foster described the utter poverty he saw across the country, and he faulted Irish housewives for their domestic ignorance:

> I entered several cottages on the road-side, but they were all alike filthy and wretched. Sometimes a calf as well as a pig would be inside them; sometimes three or four ducks in addition, dabbling in a pool of dirty water in a hole in the mud-floor. If you point out this filthy condition to the women in the cottages they generally laugh at it. In fact, they know no better; they don't know how to live differently, and they never had a better example set to them (107-108).

<24>In Sligo, where landlords had built new brick cottages, Foster gave women little credit for improvements in cleanliness, attributing it to the "constant supervision of their landlords" which forced the cottagers' wives "to be clean, until they began to appreciate that luxury which has been termed 'next to godliness'" (176-177). Yet while criticizing Irish women for failing to provide clean homes, he apparently did not recognize that his recommendation that women do fieldwork alongside the men to improve Ireland's agriculture would leave them with little time or energy to create clean, stable and orderly home life.

<25>While Foster downplayed the agency of women in the home as a part of Ireland's progress, Irish political economist Isaac Butt virtually ignored women as part of the solution to the country's problems. In some respects, this is surprising, for in 1837, as the chair in political economy at Dublin University, he gave a public lecture that suggested there were exceptions to the basic principle of political science

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that wealth is created only by productive processes by which something tangible is created and can be transferred to another. He effectively proposed that intangibles can convey value, if not wealth, stating that "A house derives additional value from commanding a view of fine scenery, from the salubrity of the air, from its having a warm or a cheerful aspect. In all these cases the means of enjoyment furnished by these gifts of nature are transferable, and the mind, therefore regards them as wealth" (*An Introductory Lecture,* 33). This theme, however, was virtually absent from his post-famine pamphlet, *A Voice for Ireland* (1847), originally published in the *Dublin University Magazine.* Following rather traditional lines, Butt largely ignored domestic economy in favor of an analysis of policy. He argued that Ireland's salvation would come from short-term economic support from the government while the country's productivity began to increase. He believed that a transformation to producing wheat and consuming maize would revolutionize the economy, allowing rural Ireland to become more fully integrated into an international market-based capitalist economy, which in turn would generate development of transportation, distribution, retailing and investment opportunities, ultimately spurring other forms of manufacture and production. In short, Butt predicted that "in the course of a few years the new social machinery which the altered habits of the people demanded would be called into existence" (*Voice* 9). Although Butt was calling for a change that included a new diet and a different approach to labor, he was silent on what role (if any) women would play in the process.

<26>The most prominent economist who commented on the Irish crisis was John Stuart Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). As a classical political economist, he distinguished between productive and unproductive labor, arguing that increasing the former and decreasing the latter were crucial to economic progress. In the case of Ireland, Mill, like Martineau, blamed Irish poverty on the system of landholding and competition for leases based on overpopulation; these pushed rents far beyond their actual value, creating a permanently indebted class of cottiers who lived at mere subsistence. Creating more secure land tenure would encourage peasants to take a real interest in improving the land, a step that was crucial for Ireland to become more productive and increase its population's prosperity. He argued that to do this, it was important that their condition be raised so that they could attain "a share of the necessaries and comforts of life" (1:384) and that if they were given secure leases at reasonable rents, they would develop "habits of prudence and a high standard of comfort" (1: 386).

<27>Based on Mill's discussion of productive and unproductive labor, it seems that the creation of domestic comfort could be considered a "productive" activity, since he defined labor as such even if it "yields no material product as its direct result,

provided that an increase of material products is its ultimate consequence" (1: 61). Thus, if encouraging Irish peasants to seek out and become accustomed to "comforts" was part of the process of encouraging forethought and prudence that would help the economy grow, then creating these "comforts" in the home would presumably be considered productive labor. Yet Mill never discussed Irish domestic life or the role that women in the household might play in creating this higher standard of comfort. *Principles of Political Economy* had limited discussion of women's labor, either paid or unpaid, and what it said was somewhat ambiguous (Hirschmann 199). When Mill called for English industry to open occupations equally to men and women, he decried a system where any woman who did not inherit wealth

> ...shall have scarcely any means open to her of gaining a livelihood, except as a wife and mother. Let women who prefer that occupation, adopt it; but that there should be no option, no other *carrière* possible for the great majority of women, except in the humbler departments of life, is one of those social injustices which call loudest for remedy (*Principles of Political Economy* 2: 323).

Yet according to Mill, English working-class women were "slaves and drudges" at home, and legislative efforts to limit the number of hours women could work in factories was "limiting their hours of labouring for themselves, in order that they might have time to labour for the husband, in what is called, by the advocates of restriction, *his* home" (2: 529). In any case, his discussion of industrial occupations for women did not apply to Ireland, since he was convinced that waged labor was not the answer for Ireland since it had no appeal for the population and was unlikely to inculcate necessary habits of "forethought, frugality or self-restraint" (1: 387).

Martineau and Irish Women

<28>Based on her repeated condemnation of the Irish landholding system in *Ireland: A Tale* and *History of the Thirty Years' Peace,* Martineau clearly agreed with Mill that this was the island's chief problem, but when she began her tour there in 1852, she brought her own unique combination of feminism and political economy to the task. She began in Derry and continued through Belfast, Dublin, and points south and west in a grueling schedule, yet Martineau wrote three letters a week which were published as *Daily News* editorials or "leaders" between mid-August and mid-October. These were subsequently collected and published as a single volume, *Letters from Ireland* in which Martineau repeatedly argued that Irish prosperity required applying the principles of political economy on both a family and national level. Long before Mill discussed the importance of comfort for

improving the condition of the working classes, Martineau had declared in the final volume of *Illustrations*:

> [For the working classes] every advance is a pledge of a further advance . . . every taste of comfort, generated to the poor man by his own exertions, stimulates the appetite for more. . . . If we do but apply ourselves to nourish the taste for comfort in the poor . . . they will fall into our way of thinking, and prefer a home of comfort, earned by forethought and self-denial, to herding together in a state of reckless pauperism (82-3).

<29>Her reference to "our way of thinking" clearly reflects the belief that English middle-class ideology and lifestyle was the best model for the lower classes to emulate. She also had touched upon "reckless pauperism" in *Ireland: A Tale,* but in the wake of the famine, the largely rural peasantry was in a condition and mindset so different from English workers that Martineau initially wondered if some of the principles of political economy should be set aside (at least temporarily). In her last letter written during her tour, she raised this point:

> Up to a very recent time…there has been discussion among English political economists as to whether, in consideration of the Irishman's passion for land, there might not be, in his case, some relaxation of established rules, some suspension of scientific maxims, about small holdings of land; whether the indolence, improvidence, and turbulent character of the Irish peasantry might not be changed into the opposite characteristics of the Flemish and Saxon countryman, by putting them in the same position (*Letters from Ireland* 216).

<30>This language seems to echo mid-Victorian colonialism, reflecting a centuries-long history of English efforts to force the Irish to adopt English language and culture. But as Deborah Logan has shown, Martineau was highly critical of English policy which advanced its own interests at the expense of Ireland's economy (*Harriet Martineau* 47). She distanced herself from the typical English denigration of the Irish in a letter to Elizabeth Reid in the early 1840s, declaring "I never in my life had one transient feeling of dislike or mistrust of the Irish; & I have no distinctive national feelings at all… . [I]t has never occurred to me to consider the Irish separate or different from the English" (qtd. in Logan "Harriet Martineau's Irish Romance" 32). Nevertheless, she clearly believed that Ireland benefitted from the union which had substituted the "wisdom and impartial rule of the British government" for "turbulent native factions" in the eighteenth century (*History* II: 395). But Logan rejects the idea that Martineau was a typical Victorian imperialist and argues instead that it was her Unitarian background that led her to advocate for "the Civilizing

Mission" in Ireland that emphasized educational reforms, improvements in agriculture and industrialization (48). Yet these reforms also fit squarely into the principles of political economy. It was not the Irish character that was at fault, Martineau argued, but rather inequities in wealth distribution and land tenure; during her Irish tour she wrote that the "fine qualities of the Irish character...are acknowledged all over the world" and asserted that there was "nothing the matter with the country" or with its inhabitants "but what is superinduced" by economic conditions and mismanagement (*Letters from Ireland* 213).

<31>Because Martineau saw Ireland's problems as stemming from economic, political, and religious causes, she concluded that it would be a mistake to ignore the laws of political economy in Ireland's case. It was crucial to move towards a capitalist industrial economy, even though Irish peasants might resist because of their strong emotional ties to the land. But Martineau believed that if the Irish submitted to a "course of discipline" which required them to perform "regular and punctual labour" in industry or public works, they would experience both prosperity and peace (*Letters from Ireland* 216-217). Such labor would inculcate self-discipline, foresight, prudence and other virtues associated with the principles of political economy and would generate social and economic progress.

<32>Although division of labor was a basic tenet of political economy, relatively few of Martineau's contemporaries discussed women's household labor in this light. She clearly believed that modern prosperity was generated by an appropriate division of labor based on rational principles (*Letters from Ireland* 36). This meant that women devoted themselves to running the house, but unlike many of her contemporaries, Martineau did not claim that female domesticity was innate to women because of their intrinsic moral character. Instead, she argued that women played a significant role in the economy by maintaining the household as a smoothly running and vital component of the social machine that fostered the formation of a prosperous capitalist society. Although Mill characterized domestic labor as slavery and drudgery, Martineau used a machine metaphor to suggest that household labor was intrinsic to the smooth operation of daily life, writing after a visit to an English factory:

> As I turned away from the hundreds of women thus respectably earning their bread, I could but hope that they would look to it that there was no screw loose in their household ways, that the machinery of daily life might work as truly and effectually as that dead mechanism which is revolving under their care for so many hours of every day (*Health, Husbandry and Handicraft* 437).

<33>Unlike her contemporaries writing about Ireland, Martineau pointed out the extent of women's labor, observing that despite its low pay, it was "the industry of the women which is in great part sustaining the country" (*Letters from Ireland* 65). She added that "We observe women working almost everywhere," including pulling and steeping flax, digging potatoes, reaping and binding grain, digging and stacking peat, and working in the textile factories in the north (69-70). She pointed out that they are "not only diligently at work on their own branches of industry, but sharing the labours of the men in almost every employment that we happen to have witnessed" (65).

<34>But did Martineau's conclusion that this reliance on women's labour was "an adopted symptom of barbarism" (70) conflict with her statements about improving women's position in society? Over the years, she had repeatedly called for greater opportunities for women based on their ability. In 1834, she wrote to a correspondent that women needed "to discover what powers God has given us and what we are to do with them" (*Selected Letters* 40-41). She rejected the idea of separate spheres based solely on gender, declaring an individual's proper place was "appointed by God, and bounded by the powers which he has bestowed" (*Society in America* I: 153-4). On 1 November 1851, *The Liberator* printed a letter she wrote to the American women's rights convention in Worcester, Ohio that said "There can be but one true method in the treatment of each human being, of either sex, of any color, and under any outward circumstances — to ascertain what are the powers of that being, to cultivate them to the utmost, and *then* to see what action they will find for themselves." As she wrote to Florence Nightingale on 3 December 1858, "To me it seems right that all people whatever should *do what they can so in natural course*" [original italics] (*Selected Letters* 166-167).

<35>Yet many, including some feminists, believed that a woman's place was in the home because of her innate morality which elevated the tone of home life. Scottish feminist Marion Kirkland Reid became well-known for her book *A Plea for Woman* (1843), in which she argued that "in the whole range of the middle and lower classes, the mother is the parent who has the most opportunity of influencing the moral education of a family," adding that "the power which the mother of a family exerts — and in the nature of things must exert — either for good or for evil, is beyond calculation" (37-38). Only a year later, the reformer Lord Ashley asked in Parliamentary debate "Whose experience is so confined that it does not extend to a knowledge and appreciation of the material influence over every grade and department of society? It matters not whether it be prince or peasant, all that is best, all that is lasting in the character of a man, he has learnt at his mother's knees" (*Hansard* 1100).

<36>Ashley's statement occurred in a debate on limiting the number of hours women and children could work in factories, and he clearly believed that married women should remain at home because of their moral influence. Others, however, took a different view on the bill, one that was more in line with Martineau's approach. At a public meeting on this legislation, the *People's & Howitt's Journal* for 28 March 1846 reported on the arguments in favor of the bill:

> Women who spend their whole waking hours in the factories cannot attend to their homes; cannot pay that attention to the well-being of their rising families which is indispensably necessary to the social well-being. When they reach their dwellings at night — after having spent the whole day, from six in the morning till half-passed seven in the evening, amidst the whirling machinery which they tend — they are too much exhausted to commence the work of either domestic economy or intellectual improvement.

According to this newspaper report, the participants concluded that this situation undermined future generations, as girls went to work at an early age and failed to learn the basis of domestic economy. When they married, "the slender means of the family run to waste; the home becomes uncomfortable; the husband seeks comfort, such as it is in the beer-shop; the children grow up reckless, uncared for, vicious, and uncivilised; and the evil reacts upon society in a thousand ways."

<37>Marianna Valverde has suggested such attitudes reflected working-class concerns about respectability that were not necessarily modeled on middle-class ideals, but rather on a fear that employment of women and children outside the home would lead to a breakdown of the family and bring shame and degradation on the male breadwinners who were unable to support their dependents (620). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also worried about the dissolution of the working-class family that they believed would result from the capitalist exploitation of the workers, and especially women. In the long run, their solution was to raise wages and equalize household labor between men and women, but in the short term caring for the household had to fall on women who thus needed to be "protected" by legislation that limited the number of hours they could perform factory work (Foster and Clark 5-6).

<38>In contrast, French socialist Charles Fourier agreed that women should have greater opportunity based on their ability but saw women's domestic labor as a sign of society's failure to make the best use of all its citizens. Women fulfilled servile roles because they were forced to do it by an inefficient system of production. This caused further inefficiency because women who resented the domestic role tended

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to do it poorly. He estimated that only a fraction of women had real talents for domestic labor, but even for these, there was no possibility of advancement (Grogan 43). Fourier dismissed domestic labor as unproductive and declared that because so many women in the city and countryside were engaged in "the labours of the household and in domestic complications" their economic worth was "only one-fifth of that of a man" (Fourier 89-90).

<39>Most contemporaries who addressed women's labor in the home did so from their own middle-class perspective and focused on their own class. However, women's rights advocates at mid-century who called for better education for women were divided over what skills and knowledge should be taught. Many decried the "accomplishments" such as drawing or music that were taught in schools for middle-class girls, arguing that these had little bearing on their future management of the household; others, however, insisted that these were necessary talents that would distinguish the middle-class household from those of the working classes (Jordan 452). But middle-class women who never married might have to support themselves, and this could color views about housework. For example, Charlotte Brontë's second novel, *Shirley* (1849), promoted increased employment opportunities for unmarried women while appearing to denigrate household skills. Caroline, a young unmarried middle-class woman who is dependent upon her relatives, declares that she longs for a profession and muses on the lack of gainful employment for single women, stating "I believe single women should have more to do — better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now" (401). She bemoans the lot of comfortable middle-class families in the neighborhood whose sons are in business or the professions but their daughters "have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing" (401). She notes that fathers expect their unmarried daughters to spend their time sewing and cooking "contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly all their lives long, as if they had no germs of faculties for anything else" (402).

<40>Irish women's paid labor did not fit into these ideals about increased opportunities for women. For them, manual labor was not undertaken as a rational decision based upon women's innate abilities; economic and political conditions, coupled with the famine, forced this labor on them. Although Martineau's concept of "development" included better education and character building so that all people could make rational decisions about their lives and actions, this was not possible in post-famine Ireland where a full day's work often consisted of trying to find enough food to ward off starvation. Thus, the country could not progress if it remained in this state; labor was not paid its due reward, families remained at a mere subsistence level, and free market commerce — the highest stage of human development according to Martineau — was virtually non-existent in many places. She saw this

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as a society out of balance, one in which "so undue a share of the burdens of life [is] thrown upon the weaker sex" (*Letters from Ireland* 70). In a subsequent essay published in the *Westminster Review*, she called it a "strange and fearful spectacle" that the "burden of the family maintenance was found to have devolved upon the women" ("Condition and Prospects of Ireland" 51).

<41>Encouraging women to aspire to be housewives hardly seems to be a feminist stance, but within Martineau's understanding of political economy, this was necessary for Irish social and economic progress. The reliance upon women's low-paid manual labor not only prevented Irish families from attaining a clean and orderly home life, but it also prevented economic development and the growth of a middle class. Nor was she alone in making this argument. On the eve of the Famine's outbreak, William Thackeray toured Ireland and became convinced that the "want of the middle class that has rendered the squire so arrogant and the clerical or political demagogue so powerful" and that only the growth of the middle class would lead to "the steady acquirement of orderly freedom" (*Irish Sketch Book* 352). Martineau argued that the way to achieve this goal was to give paid jobs to men rather than women; she believed that this would raise wages, allow women to care for the home, and improve conditions for all.

<42>Martineau had never opposed women's paid work so long as wives were able to provide a clean, stable, and efficiently run household and praised Irish women's paid piecework that allowed them to remain at home while earning an income. She lauded efforts to teach women fancy knitting in Stradbally, Queen's County which allowed them to work at home and noted with approval that once they began to earn an income from it, they "came in from the reaping and binding, – girls stayed at home from haymaking, and setting and digging potatoes. They kept their clothes dry, their manners womanly, and their cabins somewhat more decent" (*Letters from Ireland* 67). While Martineau acknowledged such work was poorly paid, she pointed out an additional advantage of working at home instead of in the fields or factories: "their wear and tear of clothes is less than formerly, and that there must, one would think, be better order preserved at home" (69). Her concern about women's clothing was not a frivolous issue; as Thomas Campbell Foster had observed, most Irish women could not afford "more than one shift, and some cannot afford any" (117). Even if they gave up better-paying agricultural labor to remain at home, they showed prudence and forethought: they extended the life of their already scanty wardrobe and they could provide a clean, well-managed home for their families. For Martineau, this was at the heart of social progress, and reflected the idea that women had a special obligation to manage the domestic environment to support able-bodied

men who did heavier work outside the home and to provide domestic stability and good care for their children.

<43>Helping society to understand the natural laws that governed it and encouraging everyone to do his or her duty to promote progress and improvement were at the heart of Martineau's thinking. Throughout her career she argued that the highest level of social development could only be achieved in an industrial society based on free-trade commerce in which everyone was educated to understand and do their part. This was the first step towards social progress; as she stated in her concluding volume in *Illustrations of Political Economy*, this would lead to a society "*wisely* arranged, so that all may become intellectual, virtuous and happy" [original italics] (*Moral of Many Fables* 141). For Martineau, it was only in a capitalist society based on free trade commercial exchange that women would be able to find opportunities to develop their capabilities to the fullest.

<44>This view sometimes put her at odds with other feminists of that era who embraced a more militant call for expanding women's rights. But Martineau argued that direct and radical change did not allow women to progress naturally through their own choice and rational action, and that women like Mary Wollstonecraft argued not from reason but from passion based on personal grievances. For Martineau, science and rational progress provided a better course, and she urged women to cultivate patience and rational, educated advancement, declaring in her *Autobiography* that "I think the better way is for us all to learn and to try to the utmost what we can do, and to win for ourselves the consideration which alone can secure us rational treatment" (1: 401-402).

<45>Thus, when Harriet Martineau's views of Irish women are placed into the broader context of her understanding of political economy, her feminism is revealed as being part of her larger early-nineteenth-century liberal ideology that emphasized conforming to natural laws to achieve social progress. While her calls for greater opportunities for women in England and America were made in the context of a modern commercial and industrial society, Ireland had not yet established this essential foundation, which needed to start with stability and order at home. In her understanding of political economy, a "comfortable" home was crucial for individuals and families to develop the dedication to duty, thrift, sobriety, forethought and perseverance that were the keys to social progress. Orderly homes were the building blocks of modern capitalist society, and like cogs in a machine they had to work together or else the whole economic and social system might operate only haphazardly or even cease to function. This was especially true in Ireland which was in shambles due to centuries of oppression and misgovernment,

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a situation made much more dire by the disastrous potato blight and subsequent economic collapse and famine. Martineau believed that modern Irish society had to be rebuilt from the bottom up, starting with the creation stable households where Irish women needed to "find their natural place as housewives." When a functioning, efficient commercial society finally emerged, then women and men would be able to develop their capacities to the fullest.

<46>In this context, Martineau's seemingly contradictory ideologies highlighted by modern feminist scholars diminish or even disappear. Without question, she was a Victorian feminist, but even more was she a political economist. To Martineau, the only way for society — and women — to progress was to adhere to the rules of political economy so that a more prosperous society could emerge. This would allow women (and men) to find the place that was best suited to their talents and abilities. But her analysis had flaws — she too readily assumed that that women were naturally domestic, that tenants and landlords shared common goals, that industrialization and capitalism was always beneficial to society, and that Ireland would be better off only when it became more like England. But Harriet Martineau's ideology, like her writing career, was multi-faceted, and needs to be read in its full complexities to gain a fuller understanding of the ideals she promoted so vigorously and for so long in the Victorian era.

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