

**Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in
Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

Ella Dzelzainis

Having signed off a personal letter to her friend, Fanny Wedgwood, on 3 August 1846, Harriet Martineau (1802-76) added a postscript:

So poor “Charlotte Elizth” is dead. How amazed she will be yonder at finding she could be mistaken; and that there are things visible to others beyond what she saw! I trust she will be happier there.¹

This acrid response to news of the painful death from cancer of the journalist, editor and novelist, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846), alludes primarily to Tonna’s pamphlet, *Mesmerism. A Letter to Miss Martineau* (1844), in which she denounced Martineau’s *Athenaeum* articles describing the therapeutic powers of mesmerism.² As a pre-Millenarian Evangelical who believed in the literal truth of scripture, Tonna regarded mesmerism as a form of witchcraft and concluded that Martineau had been ‘led captive’ by Satan.³ In the pamphlet Tonna declares her trust in the Bible as ‘the Word of God’, quoting scriptural testimony in proof of her belief that mesmerism was a ‘branch of sorcery’.⁴ She wonders aloud whether Martineau was herself ‘a believer in Divine revelation’ and was therefore ‘content to bow’ to the Bible’s ‘inspired enunciations’.⁵ Of course, as a Unitarian who would move decisively to atheism just a few years later, Martineau was not content to believe or do either of these things: her approach to biblical hermeneutics was, to say the least, questioning.⁶ Instead she placed her faith primarily in reason rather than revelation, and – as Tonna knew full well because she had been attacking Martineau personally on the matter for the last ten years – the system of Malthusian political economy was the banner under which she marched.

The references in Martineau’s postscript to Tonna’s ‘mistaken’ views and her inability while alive to recognize ‘things visible to others beyond what she saw’ in fact invoke a much longer history of antagonism between the two women. Their outright disagreement on Christian doctrine and bibliolatry manifested itself clearly in this clash of responses to mesmerism. But it also led them to adopt diametrically opposed positions toward the need for the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and toward the doctrine of

Malthusian political economy that provided the ideological framework for it. Notwithstanding these differences, both women used fiction as a means of disseminating their views. Martineau's first major statement of her fervent Malthusianism appeared in the *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-4), a monthly series of twenty-four tales with a twenty-fifth work in summary. Initially, Tonna's retort to Martineau came through her articles in the *Christian Lady's Magazine*, a periodical she edited from 1834 until her death in 1846. But then she, too, turned to fiction as an instrument of propaganda in her crusade against Malthusian political economy, producing a serialized novel, *Helen Fleetwood* (1839-41), and four separately published short stories collected under the umbrella title of *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843-4).⁷

Overwhelmingly, recent literary scholarship has regarded the *Illustrations* as providing scant evidence of Martineau's feminism.⁸ For example, Deirdre David construes Martineau's series as 'ratifying' the patriarchal discourse of political economy – a discourse with which her later feminist writings are understood to be in conflict.⁹ At best, reference is made to the number of strong women characters that people the series; or there is fleeting observation of the feminist views expressed in it, but without detailed consideration of how Martineau conceived their relation to political economy.¹⁰ Yet fundamental to Tonna's visceral opposition to Martineau was her recognition of the way in which the *Illustrations* had articulated a version of Malthusian political economy that saw an industrial future replete with feminist possibilities. Accordingly, this essay considers the narratives of Martineau and Tonna as a *locus* for a heated debate over the status, nature and role of women in a commercial society. It takes as its focus their conflicting response to the Poor Laws, specifically considering their representation of women's position in relation to the Malthusian theory of surplus population and the institution that symbolized it: the workhouse. Integral to the discussion will be an examination of each writer's interpretation of what has come to be known as 'four stages' or stadial theory. This Enlightenment model of history, civilization and progress – which placed the treatment of women at its centre – resonates throughout their opposing analyses of English society.

In the *Illustrations*, Martineau uses the fictional form to reify the abstractions of political economy (which, as a Unitarian who believed in the doctrine of causation, she regarded as a Divine law operating in the universe), in order to introduce and explain them

to a general audience.¹¹ The series draws on the work of economists such as James Mill, David Ricardo, and J. R. McCulloch – but for Martineau the most influential political economic texts were Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and T. R. Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).¹² To both Smith and Malthus, political economy was not the science that it has since become, but a system of moral philosophy – a conception with which Martineau agreed.¹³ As Gareth Stedman Jones has recently argued, the hope of eliminating poverty that was made available by an optimistic reading of Smith in the early 1790s was dampened by the pessimistic conservatism of Malthus, whose *Essay* was written in reaction to utopian responses to the French Revolution.¹⁴ But, importantly for this essay, both Smith and Malthus draw on a stadial account of civilized progress in their discussions of political economy – a paradigm imported directly by Martineau into her series.¹⁵ Four stages theory was predicated on the assumption that in order to achieve civilization, societies had to work through a series of fixed stades or stages: hunting and fishing; pasturage; agriculture; and commerce or manufacturing. A society’s primary means of subsistence was fundamental to its position on the civilized scale, and from this position various political and social institutions followed. When Martineau began writing her series, England was considered to be in uneven transition, passing from the third, agricultural stage (associated with feudalism, paternalism and the codes of chivalry) into the fourth, commercial stage (characterized by a drive toward democracy, equality and the dismantling of hierarchies of class and gender).

Axiomatic within stadial theory was the assumption that the civilization of a society could be inferred from its treatment of women – indeed Barbara Taylor refers to it a ‘a veritable *idée fixe*’.¹⁶ For the most part the theory was used conservatively (and complacently) to justify separate spheres for men and women on the basis that such gendered demarcations were in themselves evidence of civilized achievement.¹⁷ Yet it was also amenable to a much more radical and subversive interpretation. One of the most influential four stages theorists was John Millar, a pupil of Adam Smith.¹⁸ In his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) he described how, as a society progressed through the four stages of civilization, the conduct of the strong (the husband and father) toward the weak (his wife and children) became steadily less oppressive, arbitrary and tyrannical.¹⁹ Discussing the notion of contingency in relation to gender, Millar (who was not alone among Enlightenment philosophers in this view) declined to judge whether the ‘peculiar

delicacy, and sensibility' attributed to women was 'derived from her original constitution, or from her way of life'.²⁰ He also argued that, of all our human passions, those that united the sexes were 'most easily affected by the peculiar circumstances in which we are placed, and most liable to be influenced by the power of habit and education'.²¹ Hence one of the most resonant concepts in four stages theory was its emphasis on the extent to which gender and family relationships were historically and socially contingent. It was an idea on which early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft seized, using it in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to advance her argument for equality for women.²²

In the *Illustrations*, Martineau explored the feminist potential of the stadial theory embedded in political economy. For her, further progress through the fourth stage would be signified by the increasing spread of social opportunity and political equality for men and women of all classes. Hierarchy would be based on individual merit rather than birth or gender. Revealing the inherent utopianism of her interpretation of Malthusian political economy, she extends the theory further in the series, positing a further, fifth stage 'when society shall be *wisely* arranged, so that all may become intellectual, virtuous and happy'.²³ In doing so, she blithely absorbs Malthus's *Essay* into an optimistic narrative of unbounded progress.²⁴ Recent critics of the series have tended to view the tales as insufferably dull.²⁵ But this is in part attributable to the difficulty of recapturing the experience of reading the series in the way that many among Martineau's audience did. However, some guidance is given by one of the more trenchant reviewers of her literary method, William Empson, who praised the blending of the realistic and the allegorical in her stories, which he called 'miniature models of select portions of society'.²⁶ Martineau herself considered this 'the best appreciation of the principle of the work that I have seen any where; – a page or so of perfect understanding of my view and purpose'.²⁷ She thus confirms that her series should be read on a symbolic as well as a realist literary plane – an inductive and deductive reading strategy comparable to that required by stadial theory. After all, if a society's position on the civilized scale could be read off its treatment of women, then, conversely, any shifts in women's behaviour would be *the* signal of change in the entire social and political organization of that society. With this in mind, a symbolic reading of the manners and mores displayed by Martineau's characters (or, as she referred to them, her 'embodied principles') becomes central to understanding her perception of Malthusian political economy as a means to a feminist future.²⁸ It is to just such a

consideration of two of the stories, ‘Cousin Marshall’ and ‘Weal and Woe in Garveloch’, and their account of women’s relationship to the social and political institutions of the workhouse and the Poor Law, that I shall now turn.

‘Cousin Marshall’ appeared in 1832 as the eighth tale in the *Illustrations*. Although she later wrote in support of the changes that were eventually enshrined in the controversial Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, ‘Cousin Marshall’ sets out Martineau’s earlier, even more extreme reconceptualization of the relationship between charity and the poor.²⁹ The Act of 1834 retained charitable relief of the indigent – but required that they enter the workhouse instead of receiving outdoor relief. However, in ‘Cousin Marshall’, Martineau argued for a gradual but *total* withdrawal of almsgiving in general and the poor rate in particular. The workhouse would be phased out, alongside other charitable organizations such as Foundling Hospitals and the Sick Poor Society, because these ‘bad institutions’ encouraged the poor to marry and reproduce indiscriminately.³⁰ In Martineau’s analysis, this surplus population led directly to the pauperism that acted as a moral contagion among the poor. The eponymous heroine of ‘Cousin Marshall’ is praised for scrimping and saving to keep herself and her family from the workhouse, while her pauper relatives and neighbours mock her scrupulosity and exploit the generosity of the existing Poor Laws to the full.

Cousin Marshall is shown to be ‘much cleverer ... than her husband’ (*CM* 73). But her strongest significance lies in her attitudes toward the concept of charity – attitudes that, in Martineau’s view, place her in the vanguard of social and political thought. In the story, Martineau deploys a doctor, Mr Burke, and his sister, Louisa, as her ideological mouthpieces. For these siblings, the ‘greatest question now moving in the world’ is “‘What is charity?’” (*CM* 34). The best person to answer to this question, Mr Burke considers, would be:

a wise clergyman who discerns times and seasons ... He will not follow up a text from Paul with a definition from Johnson and an exhortation from Paley. He will not suppose because charity once meant alms-giving, that it means it still; or that a kind-hearted man must be right in thinking kindness of heart all-sufficient. (*CM* 34)

Martineau’s answer, via Burke, stresses the historical and social contingency of notions of charity. St Paul’s scriptural exhortations on the topic required reinterpretation, and the declarations of the likes of Samuel Johnson and William Paley, who saw eleemosynary

relief as a paternalistic duty of the rich toward the poor, were anachronistic.³¹ Those who advocated alms-giving, Burke declares, were allowing their ‘kindly emotions’ to ‘run in the ruts of ancient institutions’ (CM 44). In other words, charitable organizations such as the workhouse belonged firmly to the feudalism of which they were a symbolic remnant.

Cousin Marshall’s death in poverty, resented by her neighbours for voicing her disapproval at their improvident behaviour, has been seen as mean reward for her earthly exertions.³² But the true lesson to be drawn from her fate is demonstrated when Burke concludes that ‘she lived too early’ – her manners and mores belong to the future (CM 129). By rejecting the workhouse and its paternalist ethic, Cousin Marshall instinctively displays the social and political attitudes that would complete England’s transition into the fourth, commercial stage of society and bring about the egalitarian democracy that was its institutional correlative. As far as Martineau was concerned, such women had a central role to play in ushering in this stage, as did scriptural revisionism in relation to charity and the poor. As analysis of ‘Weal and Woe in Garveloch’ will show, she regarded the Bible as an historical document whose injunctions on matters of sexual conduct were not for all time.³³ Instead the Divine law of Malthusianism was the lesson that women, at least as much as men, needed to understand.

Malthus’s *Essay* had anxiously expounded the belief that while population expanded geometrically, the food supply did so arithmetically. Unless it voluntarily restricted its numbers, the population would grow so rapidly it would be reduced by famine. To avoid this, Malthus advocated ‘moral restraint’ or ‘the preventive check’ – that is, couples should delay marriage until they could afford children.³⁴ Such a proposal inevitably hit the poor hardest. But, for its advocates like Martineau, such restraint would eradicate poverty by matching the size of the workforce to the available employment. ‘Weal and Woe’ is set on a group of Scottish islands, where a thriving fishing industry has led to a thriving population. It is the starvation that ensues when both the herring catch and the harvest fail that forms the subject of the tale. The Garveloch isles, in other words, are England writ small.

In this story the dialogic explanations of Malthusianism take place between Ella, her husband Angus, Mr Mackenzie the local magistrate, and Ella’s friend, Katie. Following Malthus, the problem of surplus population is situated within a framework informed by four stages theory: it is understood to be typical of older, advanced nations like England

where capitalism has led to significant population growth, but the means of subsistence is restricted. In contrast, savages have ‘no growth of either capital or population’.³⁵ Moreover, in an analysis that takes the concept of contingency inherent in stadial theory and applies it to the Bible, Mackenzie observes:

All depends on time and circumstances, Ella. When Noah and his little tribe stepped out of the ark into a desolated world, the great object was to increase the number of beings, who might gather and enjoy the fruits which the earth yielded, in an abundance overpowering to the few who were there to consume. (WW 44)

Thus God’s injunction to Noah – ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth’ – was not valid for all time, but could apply only to its specific social and historical context.³⁶ Not only were the words of St. Paul up for question, so too were God’s in the book of Genesis.

It is left to the female characters, Ella and Katie, to reveal Malthusianism’s more intimate, personal applications by focusing on the desire of Ella’s brother, Ronald, to marry Katie – a widow with young children. As the food supply dwindles, Katie recognizes the need to check population growth – and so does Ronald, who refrains from asking her to marry him. Such self-restraint is held up as a social duty, with the right to a family life contingent upon social circumstances: ‘If Ronald were in a new colony, where labour was more in request than anything else, he would be honoured for having ten children, and doubly honoured for having twenty’ (WW 99).

By putting this discussion in the mouths of two female characters, Martineau places the concept of restraint and the assertion of reason over passion in the feminine domain, thereby underscoring women’s rational capacities. At the same time, she insists that such rationality can be consistent with – even prompted by – maternal affection: ‘Ella and Katie, sensible and unprejudiced, and rendered quick-sighted by anxiety for their children, were peculiarly qualified for seeing the truth when fairly placed before them’ (WW 104). If women, as well as men, were to be required to subordinate their sexual and reproductive desires to the demands of Providence, then they too needed to understand the reasons why. The spread of reasoned conduct like Katie’s was required to secure the fourth phase of civilization. More widely adopted, it would inaugurate Martineau’s utopian fifth stage – a time when ‘a second Noah’ would see how all humankind have turned from the ‘animal’ to the ‘intellectual’ and become ‘philosophers’, living the life of the mind.³⁷

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

Unsurprisingly, Martineau's narrative assertion that such domains of rational knowledge were the province of women and that the family's right to exist was contingent upon social circumstances rather than biblical sanction caused outrage. The *Quarterly Review* dismissed her advocacy of Malthusianism as 'unfeminine and mischievous', dismissing Ella and Katie as 'a couple of bare-legged Highland queans'.³⁸ However, *Fraser's Magazine* went further: Martineau was worse than the 'disgusting' and 'shameless' Mary Wollstonecraft (who had argued in the *Vindication* that women be taught anatomy as part of a rational education) because her popular stories were corrupting 'the young and the fair'.³⁹ Critics have interpreted these attacks as personal to Martineau – she has stepped outside her proper sphere.⁴⁰ But analysis of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's four-part work, *The Wrongs of Woman*, suggests that such antagonistic reviews were also a response to the feminist manifesto intertwined with Martineau's advocacy of Malthusian political economy.⁴¹ The new mores and manners in the sexual arena and in relation to charity that were fictionally embodied in the *Illustrations* denoted broader social and political change: traditional hierarchies of sex and class were all under threat.

Tonna was one of several ultra-Evangelical Tories who campaigned for legislation to raise the condition of the labouring classes in the 1830s and 40s.⁴² From her pre-Millenarian perspective, apocalypse was nigh – and the guilty neglect of the rich to fulfil their paternalistic duty toward the poor meant that, at the apparent height of her commercial glory, England was in fact resting on 'an awakening volcano'.⁴³ From 1834 to her death in 1846, Tonna used her literary skills to launch a sustained assault on the Malthusian political economy that provided ideological justification of this neglect. It was specifically to the Malthusian version of the doctrine that she objected. As she succinctly put it in her social and political polemic, *The Perils of the Nation* (1843): 'the true secret of political economy, on a Christian basis, is not to war against the poor man's natural increase, but against his poverty'.⁴⁴ She accepted a stadial view of social and historical development, but subscribed to the predominant and conservative reading that saw separate spheres as evidence of civilized achievement. Although four stages theory was essentially secular in its explanatory focus on the mode of subsistence, it combined readily with the idea that the advent of Christianity was also a crucial factor in the development of civilization. Even Adam Smith's disciple, John Millar, had expressed concern that

progress might not be illimitable and that too much opulence could lead to dissipation in societies that lacked the moral regulation provided by the Christian religion.⁴⁵

Stadial theory's axiom on the treatment of women is central to Tonna's critique of Malthusian political economy. Indeed, describing the role of Christianity in enabling man's progress from savagery to civilization in the *Christian Lady's Magazine* in 1834, she locates the Christian woman in her role as domestic paragon at the heart of commerce:

It is when man has recovered, under the mild beam of gospel truth, somewhat of the original blessing which constituted woman 'an help meet for him,' – it is when his home becomes the abode of gentle sympathy and intellectual companionship, and spiritual communion, that man begins to feel he has somewhat worth fencing around, with more stable and enduring bulwarks than shield and spear. And thus in its most secret, most unconscious exercise, does the talent of female influence form the basis of even all commercial intercourse among the nations of the earth.⁴⁶

As Tonna's quotation from the Book of Genesis describing woman as man's 'help meet' implies, the more alarming implications of the idea of contingency in gender and family relations were to be contained by scriptural certainties on women's proper subordination.⁴⁷ Those who used Malthusian political economy as a means to speculate on the possibility and desirability of future change in women's role were straying far from the edicts laid down in the Bible. Someone like Martineau was dangerous enough as one of those women who, in the 'fashion of the age', had left 'their assigned sphere, setting themselves up for political agitators, political economists, and what not'.⁴⁸ But even worse, her 'pernicious little books' were popularizing a system in which 'the bright lamp of truth [was] wilfully hidden, and man's shallow reasonings substituted for the infinite wisdom of God'.⁴⁹ And, as Tonna concludes in 'The Lace-Runners', the final story of *The Wrongs of Woman*, Malthusian political economy was an infernal system that, in its preference for female over male labour, meant that 'our women [are] changed into men, and our men into devils'.⁵⁰

Such anarchy in gender relations was against God's plan, as Tonna makes plain in the introductory chapter to *The Wrongs of Woman*. Having deliberately invoked memories of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism by copying her earlier title, Tonna turns to scripture to dispute the claims to equality made by women like her and Martineau:⁵¹

When we name the infliction of a wrong, we imply the existence of a right. Therefore, if we undertake to discuss the wrongs of women, we may be expected to set out by plainly defining what are the rights of women. This is

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

soon done. We repudiate all pretensions to equality with man, save on the ground specified by the Apostle, that “in Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female”,⁵²

Drawing further on the teachings of St Paul, she characterizes woman’s capacity as that ‘assigned to her in Scripture, “the weaker vessel;” in which term we include the whole creature, mind, body, and estate’ (*MD* 6-7). Tonna mocks those ‘aspiring individuals of the female sex’ who claimed that women’s ‘intellectual powers’ should be rated equally with men’s (*MD* 3). She cites Eve’s ‘extreme instability’ in listening to the blandishments of Satan as evidence of women’s *inequality* (*MD* 6). Instead she suggests that she and her female readers ‘contentedly bear our impressive designation as “the weaker vessel,” and on it found the rights, that we may the more effectually show forth the wrongs, of woman’ (*MD* 7). In other words, if women’s subordination was premised on their weakness in all things, so was their entitlement to protection. The four linked stories that follow this introduction trace the effect of Malthusian political economy on a number of women and girls from the same parish, forced by rural poverty to seek work in towns.

The heroine of ‘The Lace-Runners’, the teen-age Kate Clarke, thinks she is going into domestic service. Instead she is decoyed into the lace trade by one of its emissaries, sent ‘on the look-out for destitute labourers to increase the competition, and so lower the wages of the poor’.⁵³ Through Kate’s eyes we see the effect of the system on the Collins family, in whose home she works at lace-running. In order to keep her family from the workhouse, in which she and her husband would be separated from each other and their children, Mrs Collins suppresses all her maternal instincts and forces herself to be a ‘cold dry bit of stone’ (*LR* 59). Competition has reduced wages so much that where producing a veil once paid 12 shillings, it now pays 2 shillings and sixpence. Consequently she compels her three-year-old daughter to work till ten at night, and her newborn baby is suckled for just a day before being pacified with Godfrey’s cordial (opium and treacle). The children become ill – and when her baby dies from this consequence of enforced maternal neglect Mrs Collins cannot permit herself to cry because tears stain lace.

Accompanied by Kate, Mrs Collins asks her wealthy employer for a loan to tide her over this difficult period. Rather than fulfil his paternalistic duty to her, he allows his son to inform her that her misfortunes are her own fault for having married and had children: ‘[m]arriage among those who have nothing to live upon but their chance earnings are the root of pauperism’ (*LR* 71). Mrs Collins’ devout reply – ‘The very beasts and birds, sir,

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

are allowed to rear young ones, though *they* have nothing laid up, nor any thing to depend on, but that when God sends mouths he will send meat' – is met with derision (*LR* 72). Birds have feathers and don't need tailors. This mocking of the poor's trust in the Lord is followed by a leering allusion to Kate supplementing her income through prostitution: 'that young girl may do better. She's goodlooking enough, and may find ways of helping you out, as many do' (*LR* 72). This proves to be a prediction. Kate's unhappiness with her lot combined with misplaced optimism lead her to seek work elsewhere. Unable to find any, and with too strong a sense of shame to enter the workhouse willingly, she ends the story stepping through the doors of a brothel: the 'pleadings of destitution, not those of allurements' have prevailed (*LR* 123). In showing how and why a virtuous but destitute young woman would choose a life of prostitution over that in the newly reformed workhouse, Tonna reveals the moral turpitude of the system the latter epitomized. Quoting St Paul again in her final pages, Tonna constitutes Malthusian political economy as a system of:

oppression that actually FORBIDS the woman of a Christian land to be "a keeper at home," to "rule the house," to adorn herself with "shamefacedness and sobriety." Or to fulfil even the most sacred duties of a mother to her own baby offspring, yea, compels her to become an infanticide. (*LR* 137-8)

So thoroughly and knowingly does this system transgress the scripturally sanctioned status, nature, and role of woman that 'some fearful act of vengeance' on the part of the Lord will be the inevitable result (*LR* 136).

But Tonna's argument against Malthusian political economy in 'The Lace-Runners' consists of more than citing the eternal verities of the Bible. Her delineation of the fates of Kate and Mrs Collins figures this system as one whose economic and moral structures led directly to the practices of infanticide, slavery, and the sexual trafficking of women. One consequence of this figuration is that it allows her to fulminate against those English philanthropists who surely 'excite the derision of the Prince of Darkness' by showing concern about 'infanticide in India and China' and 'slavery on the African coast' while ignoring 'infanticide in Nottingham or Birmingham, slavery in Manchester or Leeds' (*LR* 98). But, even more pointedly, all these practices were indelibly associated with barbarism rather than civilization in four stages theory. Commerce unguided by the fixed moral truths of Christianity meant regression, not progress. In *The Wrongs of Woman* Tonna uses Malthusian political economy's own inherent, stadial assumptions against it,

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

demonstrating its reversionary impact on those most vulnerable of ‘weaker vessels’ – poor women and girls. For Tonna, it represented nothing more than a ‘murderous crusade of wealth against poverty – against the *bodies and souls* of the poor’ (LR 96; my italics). Harriet Martineau’s misguided prioritization of reason over revelation – of women’s minds over their bodies and souls – would inaugurate apocalypse rather than utopia.

This essay is based on a paper first given at the INCS conference on ‘Conflicts’ at Rutgers in Spring 2006. I am grateful to the audience for their helpful comments, but particularly Silvana Colella. Thanks are also due to my Birkbeck colleagues, Sally Ledger and David Feldman, for their critical insights and advice.

¹ *Harriet Martineau’s Letters to Fanny Wedgwood*, ed. by Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 91.

² Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna], *Mesmerism. A Letter to Miss Martineau* (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1844). The *Athenaeum* articles later appeared as Harriet Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism* (London: Edward Moxon, 1844). Arbuckle, *Martineau’s Letters*, p. 92, attributes Martineau’s remark directly to the spat over mesmerism.

³ [Tonna], *Mesmerism*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography, with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1877), vol ii, pp. 329-35.

⁷ *Helen Fleetwood* first appeared in the *Christian Lady’s Magazine* and was published entire in 1841.

⁸ Valerie Sanders, *Reason Over Passion: Harriet Martineau and the Victorian Novel* (Sussex: Harvester, 1986), p. 169.

⁹ Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 41. See also Elaine Freedgood, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39 (1995), 33-53.

¹⁰ Deborah Anna Logan, *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau’s “Somewhat Remarkable” Life* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 122-41, surveys ‘early examples of women characters that alternately promote and impede Woman’s Cause’ (p. 123). Susan F. Bohrer, ‘Harriet Martineau: Gender, Disability and Liability’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 25 (2003), 21-37 (p. 21), notes that ‘these fables include such issues as civil disobedience, anti-primogeniture and universal suffrage across class and gender lines’.

¹¹ On Martineau’s necessarianism, see R. K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 79-88.

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

¹² Webb, *Harriet Martineau*, pp. 116-7. Martineau's own acknowledgement of the importance of Smith and Malthus to her work can be found in Harriet Martineau, 'The Moral of Many Fables', *Illustrations of Political Economy* 9 vols (London: Charles Fox, 1834), vol ix, p. vi.

¹³ Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 3, 287.

¹⁴ See Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?: A Historical Debate* (London: Profile, 2004), *passim*, but particularly the introduction and chapters 1-3.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of four stages theory, see Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), *passim*. On Smith's contribution (which Meek identifies as formative), see chapter 4; on Malthus, p. 223.

¹⁶ Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 156. For a typical usage of the axiom, see William Alexander, *The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time*, 2 vols (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1779), vol i, p. 103.

¹⁷ Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 23, 30-32.

¹⁸ William C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801: His Life and Thought and his Contributions to Sociological Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 145-63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, chapters 1 and 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219. For a trenchant account of other eighteenth-century writers who alluded to the contingent nature of the female character, see Barbara Taylor, 'Feminists versus Gallants: Manners and Morals in Enlightenment Britain', in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. by Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 30-52 (p. 36). I am grateful to Barbara Taylor for her generosity in having allowed me to see this essay before it was published. The Enlightenment debate on women is a complex and burgeoning field of inquiry to which I cannot do justice here. For the purposes of this essay, I wish merely to stress that the idea of social and historical contingency was present in the debate in order to discuss the differing responses of Martineau and Tonna to it.

²¹ Lehmann, *John Millar*, p. 183.

²² For particularly clear examples, see Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, ed. by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 85-6, 235-6. On the use of the theory by early nineteenth-century feminists more generally, see Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-1851* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 28-30.

²³ Martineau, 'Moral of Many Fables', p. 141.

²⁴ In this respect, Martineau represents an interesting anomaly in the context of Stedman Jones's discussion of the bifurcation of Smith's legacy in *An End to Poverty?* This becomes even more striking when one considers the fact that she was the popular face of political economy, with sales of each monthly copy of the tales estimated to have reached 10,000 at their peak – see Valerie Kossew Pichanick, *Harriet Martineau: The Woman and Her Work, 1802-1876* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 50. Of course,

Ella Dzelzainis, **Reason vs Revelation: Feminism, Malthus, and the New Poor Law in Narratives by Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna**

19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, 2 (2006) www.19.bbk.ac.uk

including a utopian fifth stage in the framework of her account of political economy conveniently allows Martineau to dispatch the resolution of any contradictions or difficulties in her present argument to the utopian future.

²⁵ See, for example, David, *Intellectual Women*, p. 42.

²⁶ William Empson, 'Mrs Marcet – Miss Martineau', *Edinburgh Review*, 57 (April 1833), 1-39 (p. 7).

²⁷ Martineau, *Autobiography*, vol i, p. 138.

²⁸ Martineau, *Autobiography*, p. 194.

²⁹ See Harriet Martineau, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (London: Charles Fox, 1833).

³⁰ Martineau, 'Cousin Marshall', *Illustrations*, vol iii, p. 38 (hereafter *CM* with references in parenthesis in the text).

³¹ In his dictionary of 1755, Samuel Johnson's defined charity in terms of liberality to the poor and alms-giving. Similarly, see William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), foreword by D. L. Le Mahien (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), pp. 133-49.

³² Logan, *Hour and the Woman*, p. 125.

³³ In adopting a critical approach to the verities of the Old Testament Martineau is continuing an already well-established tradition within Unitarianism. See John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 158-9.

³⁴ T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the Principles of Population*, ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23.

³⁵ Martineau, 'Weal and Woe in Garveloch', *Illustrations*, vol iii, p. 44 (hereafter *WW* with references in parenthesis in the text).

³⁶ Genesis 9. 1.

³⁷ Martineau, 'Briery Creek', *Illustrations*, vol viii, pp. 82, 81.

³⁸ John Wilson Croker, John Gibson Lockhart, and George Poulett Scrope, 'Illustrations of Political Economy. Nos. 1-12. By Harriet Martineau', *Quarterly Review*, 49 (April 1833), 136-152 (pp. 136, 142).

³⁹ William Maginn, 'Gallery of Literary Characters. No. XLII. Miss Harriet Martineau', *Fraser's Magazine*, 8 (November 1833), p. 576.

⁴⁰ Patricia Marks, 'Harriet Martineau: Fraser's "Maid of [Dis]Honour"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 19 (1986), 28-34. Valerie Sanders, "'Meteor Wreaths": Harriet Martineau, "L. E. L.", Fame and Fraser's [sic] Magazine', *Critical Survey*, 13 (2001), 42-60.

⁴¹ Moreover, Martineau had invited such a response from the likes of Tonna and Fraser's by making approving reference to Wollstonecraft's work as an 'advocate of the rights of woman' in an article published in January 1833 while the *Illustrations* were still appearing. See Harriet Martineau, 'Achievements of the Genius of Scott', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 2 (January 1833), 445-460, (p. 455). This is in revealing contrast to her later and more widely known dismissal of Wollstonecraft as 'a poor victim of passion' to whose writings she could not reconcile her mind. See Martineau, *Autobiography*, vol i, pp. 399-400. Martineau wrote her *Autobiography* in 1855, though it did not appear till 1877, after her death in 1876.

⁴² Ella Dzelzainis, 'Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Pre-Millenarianism, and the Formation of Gender Ideology in the Ten Hours Campaign', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 181-91.

⁴³ Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, 'The Lace-Runners', *The Wrongs of Woman* (London: Dalton, 1844), p. 138.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, *The Perils of the Nation. An Appeal to the Legislature, the Clergy, and the Higher and Middle Classes* (London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1843), p. 155. For a detailed account of the complex relation of various Evangelical factions to Malthus and/or political economy, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence and Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), particularly parts 1 and 2.

⁴⁵ Lehmann, *John Millar*, p. 228.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, 'Politics', *Christian Lady's Magazine*, 1 (March 1834), 249-256 (p. 250).

Hereafter *CLM*.

⁴⁷ The quotation is from Genesis 2. 8.

⁴⁸ Tonna, 'Politics', *CLM*, 1 (January 1834), 73-80 (p. 74). See also Christine Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), chapter 7, for an excellent discussion of Tonna's hostility to Martineau. My analysis differs in focusing on the apocalyptic threat that Tonna saw in Martineau's social and political views.

⁴⁹ Tonna, *Perils*, p. 155.

⁵⁰ Tonna, 'Lace-Runners', p. 138.

⁵¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria, A Fragment* (1798).

⁵² Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, 'Milliners and Dress-Makers', *The Wrongs of Woman* (London: Dalton, 1843), p. 1 (hereafter *MD* with references in parenthesis in the text).

⁵³ Tonna, 'Lace-Runners', p. 87 (hereafter *LR* with references in parenthesis in the text).