

**LEGAL QUESTIONS AND LITERARY ANSWERS: POOR LAW  
TAXONOMIES AND REALIST NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN HARRIET  
MARTINEAU'S *THE TOWN***

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*Abstract*

This essay examines the ways in which Harriet Martineau's short novel *The Town*, commissioned as part of the *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* series to popularise planned reforms that would become the New Poor Law, offered responses to the Old Poor Law's ancient practice of legislating poor relief using subjective categories for the poor: idle, able-bodied, deserving and undeserving. Martineau (1802-1876) and her contemporaries believed that the principles of political economy could inform policies that would alleviate the problems associated with flawed judgments of character. *The Town* dramatises the administrative challenges of the old law by showing how the knowledge and labour of a diligent and fair-minded public servant is insufficient for producing a just distribution of poor relief. Analysis reveals the ways Martineau's formal strategies both assist and complicate these efforts. Her construction of character responds directly to her contemporaries' interests in political economy and the morality of the poor in order to support calls for reform on both humanistic and scientific fronts. Specifically, examples demonstrate the text's use of a technique Martineau and later social problem writers adopt of acknowledging the limitations of individual social positions and imaginatively overcoming those limitations by employing a range of narrative focalisations. These strategies allow Martineau to engage readers' sympathy and other emotions, bringing the experience of reading to bear on arguments about the real-world challenges of poor law administration in urban communities. In so doing, this unlikely novel testifies compellingly to the importance of literary models for discerning salient qualities of character necessary to imagine social change and ultimately justice.

For all its importance to later social history, one of the earliest acknowledgments in British law that 'the poor' might include different sub-categories of people appears decidedly understated. In 1563, Queen Elizabeth's 'Acte for the Reliefe of the Poor' sets this idea – 'that idell and loytering [persons] and valiant Beggars may be avoyded, and thimpotent feble and lame [which] are the Poore in very dede, should bee hereafter relieved and well provided for' – as the groundwork upon which the foundations of responsibility for the relief of poverty would rest for hundreds of years.<sup>1</sup> Even more instructively, further within its provisions, a subcategory of the deserving poor emerges with the suggestion that alms should be distributed 'that the more impotent may have the more Helpe, and suche as can get parte of their Lyving to have the lesse, and by the discretion of the Collectoures to be put in such Laboure

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1 5 Elizabeth c.3 (1563), 4 Statutes of the Realm 411 (1547-1624).

as they bee fitt and hable to doo'.<sup>2</sup> In its acknowledgment that certain cases might require additional discretion and more diverse types of help, the law simultaneously acknowledges a more complex responsibility toward those individuals. So began the uneven efforts of government to accommodate the category of the able-bodied deserving poor.

Two and a half centuries later, when reforms to the Poor Laws had begun to seem urgent, it was partly because the apparent simplicity and usefulness of this procedure for the relief of poverty had come into question. In response to the mandate of the Elizabethan law, the 1834 *Poor Law Commission Report* offers several examples like the following, in which an officer, in this case the Reverend W. Bishop of Ufton, testifies to his inability to effectively distribute alms on the basis of such judgments:

When I first came to this parish, I instituted rewards for virtuous conduct amongst my parishioners, but I soon found that I did more mischief than good by the proceeding, and I was compelled to abandon it. I found that my parishioners, from their situation, knew more of the objects whom I selected for reward than I possibly could. They saw actions of which I could obtain no knowledge. With all my desire to do justice, there were actions which I forgot to take into account; and of those which I did take into account, they probably often made a more correct estimate than I could: under these circumstances, I probably was led to decide unjustly, and excited more ill feeling by my decisions than emulation by my rewards.<sup>3</sup>

Identifying 'the deserving' proves to be a complex problem. Somehow, he notes, even when his assessments are essentially correct, and even though he is searching for behaviours to reward, something about the poor's conduct and their motivations confounds an administrative response. Edwin Chadwick, the assistant commissioner who interviewed Bishop, insists that this experience is common: 'I did not find one magistrate of extensive experience, who had found it practicable to take character into account, except on rare occasions'.<sup>4</sup> The large abstractions both speakers employ are telling; the problems of legal classification assert themselves in their reluctance to offer anything resembling specific criteria or examples. In Bishop's case, it comes across as amusing, but also significant for a study of literary representations of legal reasoning, that he finds it less difficult to admit to this array of failures (including forgetfulness) than to put the specific materials of any single judgment of character within his audience's reach.

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2 5 Elizabeth c.3 (1563), 4 Statutes of the Realm 411 (1547-1624).

3 *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws* (London: B. Fellowes, 1834), p. 48.

4 *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, p. 48.

To those who sought scientific explanations for this mismatch between Elizabethan ideals and Victorian experience, the principles of political economy seemed to offer them, rearranging the old taxonomy so that the deserving and undeserving could be more productively considered as a sub-category of the able-bodied.<sup>5</sup> Gordon Bigelow, in an examination of the history of what we now call economics from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries explains how ‘[the] emergence of economics as a social science was [...] predicated on the separateness of a thing called “the economy” from other forms of human judgment’.<sup>6</sup> In the discussion that follows I want to explore a specific – in some ways, awkward – moment in that narrative, when Harriet Martineau attempted to cast the thing called the economy as a distinct and primary ingredient for the human judgments involved in poor law administration, creating novels whose characters somewhat literally assert themselves as arguments about these same problems of legal classification: what makes people deserving, what makes it hard to tell, and the possibility of – in her view, the urgent need for – laws that could sidestep inevitably flawed judgments and mitigate the harm that they produced. In this aim, these novels may be seen to create for economic subjects a parallel of the trend outlined in Cécile Bertrand’s article in this issue of the early nineteenth century’s gradual separation between the legal and literary representations of criminal subjects.

In her earliest public writings, the *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34) series and the later *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (1833-34), Martineau draws attention to exactly those questions of morality that earlier efforts to regulate the poor had maintained as primary but makes them secondary, exemplifying behaviours and attitudes as she saw them defined by a variety of economic laws. Scholarship on these texts has been increasingly abundant and insightful, focusing on multiple points of connection between the abstractions of her economic vision and her novels’ grounding in the social.<sup>7</sup> Although Gregory Vargo has situated the poor law novels’ support of reform within the trajectory of working-class radicalism, what has received less attention is the reflection of her economic vision in the novels’

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5 I am using the concept of taxonomy in a very general sense, to indicate the ways in which common practices of categorisation frequently assume a hierarchical structure with broader categories arranged above the sub-categories they include.

6 Gordon Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 3.

7 See especially Lana L. Dalley, ‘Domesticating Political Economy: Language, Gender and Economics in the *Illustrations of Political Economy*’, in Ella Dzelzainis and Cora Kaplan, *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 103-17; Brian P. Cooper ‘“A not unreasonable panic”: Character, Confidence, and Credit in Harriet Martineau’s *Berkeley the Banker*’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 32.4 (December 2010), pp. 363-84; and Annette Van, ‘Realism, Speculation, and the Gold Standard in Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34.1 (March 2006), pp. 115-29.

arguments about equivalent ideals for legal practice.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Martineau's interests in poverty, individual agency, and the relations between classes put her works at the beginning of a narrative that continues with the social problem fiction of the 1840s. Studies of that sub-genre have enhanced our understanding of the novels' interactions with the legal history and politics of the early Victorian period, literary conventions, public discourse and aesthetic values.<sup>9</sup> One of the most recent and important of these discussions is Carolyn Betensky's *Feeling for the Poor* (2010). Her central claims about the early Victorians' appetite for social knowledge and the ways that novels supplied it and 'volunteered the experience of their own reading as a viable response to conflicts that seemed daunting or irreconcilable'<sup>10</sup> thoroughly informs the reading I offer here and may arguably go further than Martineau studies have to explain the reading habits that made these novels wildly popular in their time and widely ignored afterwards.

Thus, although *The Town* (1834) is not well known, I turn to it here because, as a text from the series dedicated to popularising legal reform and political economy, it presents the parallels and disjunctions between the two discourses with particular clarity. Additionally, because of the novel's setting in a large urban parish and because the plot dramatises the administrative challenges of judging the poor in that context, *The Town* engages a valuable possibility of literature and law scholarship identified by Robin West: 'The empathic knowledge of others that narrative practices facilitate may provide a point of shared reference for moral criticism and growth, including moral criticism of law and its progressive reform'. This is particularly true, West continues, when that reform is 'made on behalf of those who have traditionally been excluded from the processes of law'.<sup>11</sup>

As one answer to the question of how narrative practices facilitate this knowledge on behalf of the poor, in what follows I trace the effects of a technique Martineau and other social problem novelists deploy throughout these fictions of recognising the range of readers' social positions by invoking a range of narrative

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8 Gregory Vargo, 'Contested Authority: Reform and Local Pressure in Harriet Martineau's Poor Law Stories', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3.2 (2007), <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue32/vargo.htm>>.

9 Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform. British Literature and Politics 1832- 1867* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Deidre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels, 'North and South', 'Our Mutual Friend', 'Daniel Deronda'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Kate Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel: The Market, the Individual, and Communal Life* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

10 Carolyn Betensky, *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p. 1.

11 Robin West, *Narrative, Authority, and Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 10.

focalisations. Shifting between focalisations allows readers to imaginatively overcome the limitations of individual positions, an effect similar to that theorised by Erica McCrystal elsewhere in this issue with respect to crime fiction: ‘authors create moral subjectivity through perspective and sympathy, allowing their fiction to prevail as a way to redefine a punished individual who can emerge as virtuous’ (p. 42). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains focalisation as the presence of differently positioned voices in a text: ‘speaking and seeing, narration and focalisation, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent. The distinction between the two activities is a theoretical necessity, and only on its basis can the interrelations between them be studied with precision’.<sup>12</sup> Within the argument of the novel, this complexity corresponds to three distinct rationales for legal reform: the disadvantages the unreformed system placed on the deserving and independent poor, the difficulties faced by officers in organised resistance by the opportunistic masses, and the entire community’s vulnerability to fraud, moral degradation and even violence at the hands of the worst of the idle poor due to the complexity and inconsistency of legal practices between and within parishes.

*The Town* provides a moving example of the interactions of principles of political economy and sympathy for independent poor through the story of John Waters, an honest and hard-working shoemaker who has lost his job because of policies against manufacturers’ abuses of the system. Waters himself defends these policies, citing principles of supply and demand: ‘[The employer] would have the preference, if he would sell shoes to the workhouse as cheap as other people do’.<sup>13</sup> Waters’s attitude of approval for a situation that directly disadvantages him recalls Catherine Gallagher’s discussion of William Allen, the tragic hero of Martineau’s novel *A Manchester Strike*, whose admirable qualities she reads as an argument that ‘strikes are not simply the result of quick tempers or vanity, but are, rather, one of the disastrous consequences of an overloaded labor market. Allen’s complete integrity is vital to the illustration of this economic causality’.<sup>14</sup> Waters’s poverty and his complete resignation in the face of the injustices that cause it serve as an analogous claim about pervasive corruption under the old poor law. Claudia Klaver has emphasised the reversal such a strategy represents: ‘For Martineau [...] the injunctions of political economy *themselves* constitute the groundwork of a new moral system’.<sup>15</sup> Klaver contrasts Martineau’s project with the work of other early nineteenth-century didactic writers like Hannah More and Jane Marcet, who

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12 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 74.

13 Harriet Martineau, *The Town* (London: Charles Fox, 1834), p. 27. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

14 Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 56.

15 Claudia Klaver, *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), p. 55.

attempted to reconcile political economy with conventional morality.

Gallagher's and Claver's attention to the ways in which the economic structures the moral comes at the end of a long tradition of regarding the stark contrast generated by that strategy as failures of realism and artistry. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1833 review entitled 'On Moral Fictions' suggests that each instalment of the *IPE* series is constructed as a new setting in which to demonstrate such oppositions in character, ignoring 'the diversities of mankind'.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Claudia Orazem concurs: 'The didactic purpose of her stories demands that a character is either good or evil, that a character's actions are either positive or negative [...]. Thus, Political Economy postulates an ultimately reductive view of the human being.'<sup>17</sup> Orazem offers Martineau some credit for a more deliberate effect, but also finally regards it as a failure.

What such readings at least partially ignore are the ways that descriptions of Waters's innate goodness and undeserved misfortune gather readers' sympathy. Inspiring it further, Waters is slightly disabled and walks with a limp, a detail that ought to make all other questions of his character redundant, since he represents the single point on which Elizabethan judgments of the poor agree with the Victorians'. Under the moral taxonomy that gives alms to all but sturdy beggars, the category of the undeserving implies a sturdy body. In a taxonomy that privileges economic criteria (like able-bodiedness) over moral, only the able-bodied are subject to classification as deserving or undeserving. To these points, Martineau adds another layer of redundancy, since Waters appears deserving to readers precisely because he refuses to accept most forms of parish relief. He articulates some of the finer points of this behaviour for his wife's benefit, urging her to 'make a distinction' when she questions the propriety of allowing their son to be apprenticed by the parish: 'Neither you nor I would go to the pay-table, or send our children into the work-house; but, our boy being growing up, and now idle for want of what we cannot do for him, it would be a sin not to take seasonable help in apprenticing him' (p. 28). Body and mind, Waters stands and speaks for the utter impossibility of Victorians to realise the ideals of their laws.

In another register, one that adapts Alex Woloch's theories of characters and space in the novel advanced in *The One vs. The Many*, the problem with Waters's goodness is not that it is reductive, but that it is in some sense structurally out of place. In this, his presence in the novel recalls Woloch's foundational example of the death of Lykaon in the *Iliad*, whose disproportionately brief story and death at the hands of Achilles are, in Woloch's terms, an 'instance of terrible luck that, in its very

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16 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 'On Moral Fictions: Miss Martineau's Illustrations of Political Economy', *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 37 (1833), pp. 146-51 (p. 148).

17 Claudia Orazem, *Political Economy and Fiction in the Early Works of Harriet Martineau* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 112.

rarity, speaks powerfully to the essential nature of warfare'.<sup>18</sup> Analogously, all the development of Waters's character, with its resistance to being categorised, stands in for a similar and, as Martineau saw it, equally terrible rarity of moral and economic responsibility under the unreformed poor laws. Thus, the sympathy that Martineau generates around him may be said to have unusual energy, despite fairly unremarkable descriptions of his poverty that she produces.

Crucially, the representations of John and his wife that draw readers' admiration and sympathy are narrated from a perspective that readers are privy to while Mr Orger, the representative of the system of poor relief, is not. The first description follows him through the streets and into his home, where the reader learns from his wife that his hopes for reform under Orger's management are misplaced: 'Prissy sighed, and turned away. She had heard such hopes expressed too often; and her husband's spirits were invariably depressed in the greater proportion when the disappointment of such hopes arrived' (p. 27-28). Not even Waters knows his own real feelings. Because of this sense that Waters is both deserving and sympathetic, when, midway through the novel, Orger hires him to be the master of the workhouse school, the change at first seems to prove Prissy wrong, a satisfying reflection of the 'true' worth of his character and of the success of the reforms Orger represents. Yet it is precisely these views that the narration, especially when focalised through Orger, seems determined to withhold:

John Waters was rising in the world. He looked no happier than before, it is true; but every one wondered at this, as he was made master of the workhouse school. Just when he had become reduced to such poverty that he must have asked parish aid the next week, this appointment was given to save him the necessity. He was considered by Orger, and those whom Orger influenced, as proper a person for the situation as the parish was likely to afford, feeble and sunk in spirits as he was; but John had not so good an opinion of his own aptitude. He accepted the appointment, because he had no choice; tried to be delighted, because he saw that his wife was made happy; and went unwillingly into the school every day. (p. 115)

The passage moves from a focalisation on the public, complete with its cliché of upward mobility, to that of Orger and his bureaucratic counterparts, to Waters's own perspective. The assessment that Waters is *only* the best the parish can afford is jarring after earlier depictions of his character, the bald commentary on his feebleness and sunken spirits particularly unfeeling. Even the public is presented as capable of noticing his unchanged attitude, suggesting that the problem with Orger's view is that it is simply too procedural to leave space for sympathy.

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18 Alex Woloch, *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 8.

Orger's inability to appreciate Waters's full worth and his suffering is emphasised later, when Waters is physically attacked by his workhouse students and furiously quits. To be fair, in his raging, he fails to report the attack, and complains instead about on-going indignities. Still, when the focalisation shifts to Orger's perspective, it describes him as mildly shaking his head 'in a state of wonder that he should have got a man of so violent a temper appointed to the school' (p. 122). Later, Orger tries to get Waters to focus on calmer topics, and at one point comments blandly, mock-omnisciently, that '[he] believed, if the parish was canvassed, there would be universal testimony to Waters's desserts' (p. 128). The effort to calm him backfires, and in the diatribe that Waters lets loose, the realities of his situation present themselves as fully adequate for a certain amount of desperation:

Then why has my life been what it has been, sir? The natural wages of my employment have been deranged by the plotting and managing as to supplying the workhouse with shoes. It has been impossible for us to live in a neighbourly way among the people of the parish, helping one another as we should; for they have all run to the parish for what help they wanted, and had none to give us without hire. And did not they inveigle my boy to taste gin first, and now, they say – But *I* say that if he has done any thing much amiss, it is owing to the deceit and plotting he came to a knowledge of among his neighbours [...]. How does it signify what the parish thinks of me, if this is the way it treats me? (p. 128)

To the question of his desserts in the abstract, Martineau responds by having Waters interrogate, then lecture the representative of the system directly, producing one of the most comprehensive descriptions of its failures in the entire novel. Several elements are new information for readers and Orger alike, most notably the corruption of the young and broken references to deceit and plotting that will only be clarified for readers and characters alike much later. The strategy of building toward this fuller representation in violent plotting, effectively driving an otherwise gentle teacher and father to these complaints, argues more fully than the complaints themselves that the system to which he is subject is finally not just incapable of producing just desserts for individuals (as in the arguments of Rev. Bishop), but incapable of imagining them.

Simultaneously, however, descriptions of Orger's job performance and reactions to his official reappointment suggest strongly that he is aware of the failures of the system for Waters and others like him; several commentaries by characters represent him as a diligent and fair-minded public servant. In the first of these, the focalisation is external: 'Orger's re-appointment was not carried quite so easily. He was too active and determined an enemy to abuses to be any favourite with those who profited by abuses, and great efforts had been made to fill the church with his

enemies to the exclusion of his friends' (p. 12). Although this reporting of the event includes commentary on the opinions of those who oppose him, the opinions are represented as distinct from the reporting, and the behaviours associated with the opposition (to both Orger and the dominant ideology of the narrating agent) are clearly presented as unethical. A bit later, the narration represents the workhouse residents' reaction to Orger's reinstatement:

For another whole year, at least, the paupers must submit to be under the eye of one who knew all their circumstances, and kept a close watch over all their proceedings. All the devices which had been planned to be put in practice against a new officer must be laid aside for an entire year. Nothing better than work, food, clothing, and lodging was to be expected from the parish for twelve whole months. It was a severe disappointment. (p. 18)

The syntactical exaggerations of 'all their circumstances [...] Nothing better' and 'twelve whole months' invoke a group psychology, while references to proceedings and devices suggest widespread opportunism. As Vargo emphasises, 'Martineau's engagement with arguments about the right to relief helps her anticipate the difficulty local authorities will have implementing the law over community resistance'.<sup>19</sup> Although the outlines of what is being conveyed here appear similar to those in the previous example, in truth the second passage conveys very different information. In this unguarded moment the reader gets a glimpse of the reality of the system's vulnerabilities: another elected officer would have even more problems. Still, the attitudes remain, and they triumph; the election that ends the novel is successfully stacked against Orger.

Martineau, importantly, seems careful to demonstrate that Orger is not lacking an appropriate understanding of political economy. In fact, one way of reading the novel is as an elaborate argument in Orger's defence, one in which Martineau uses the forms of fiction to argue for the impossibility of anyone's succeeding under the problematic pre-reform poor laws. In this way, her novels reproduce but also complicate the arguments of the *Poor Law Commission Report*, where, in addition to the commentaries with which I opened this discussion, Chadwick argues that 'it is not surprising that persons in wealthy or superior stations, who have rarely the means of observing or knowing the daily arts of the labouring classes, usually fail of estimating them'.<sup>20</sup> Orger isn't wealthy, but the novel does take pains to show the ways that the rationale for judgment necessitated by his isolated position in the unreformed system of relief is inadequate for the kind of justice the old poor laws were intended to produce. Even officers as worthy as Orger will consistently fail to 'estimate' the labouring classes.

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19 Vargo, 'Contested Authority', para. 10.

20 *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners*, p. 48.

In this blurring of the effects of status and legal role, Orger provides a provocative application of Carolyn Betensky's construct of 'moral capital' to the interdisciplinary study of literature and law. If, as Betensky posits, moral capital is bestowed 'proportionally to a character's will to know and inversely to the extent of his or her knowledge', how does Orger fare?<sup>21</sup> The narrative shows him incorporating a certain amount of hesitation into his efforts at knowing the 'daily arts' of the poor:

No one was less disposed to play the spy than Orger. He was so scrupulous as to turn away his head when he passed the windows of humble houses, – windows too humble to have shutters or blinds. He felt uneasy when, by any chance, he saw a family collected in the firelight, or was an involuntary witness of any whipping or scolding of little boys who would not go to bed, or of the mother's caresses of her infant while preparing it for its rest. But he considered as fair subjects of observation, the comfortably housed who might close their shutters, and yet took their dessert in that which is called the dark hour, when there is gloom enough without to hide the observer, and light enough within to display the observed; and, yet more, the indigent, who, having put themselves under his care, with the profession of making him the guardian of their affairs, could properly have nothing of their daily proceedings to conceal from him. (pp. 55-56)

Is the poor law officer the exception that proves the rule about ideals of knowing the poor? The list of sights he is uncomfortable about seeing seems tellingly directed toward readers' sympathy, yet Orger, an apparently sympathetic man, imagines them to be inappropriate for his own, official, perspective. In such a system, admirable qualities like independence and humility actually unfit individual cases like John Waters's for the care to be bestowed by Orger's office, while the echo of 'proceedings' in this passage and the one above stresses the impossibility of anyone's effectively monitoring the demanding masses.

In *The Town*, Martineau is trying to show that there is a real problem with the system of poor relief in large cities, and that Orger's competence and Waters's independence mean that the failures of that system to deliver justice are not to be assigned to corrupt overseers or inherent immorality among the poor. That some poor are immoral is made clear, yet representative characters from that category are not, in the examples we've seen, afforded the same kind of individualised 'space' in the narrative, in Woloch's terminology, as John Waters.<sup>22</sup> Where this pattern is discontinued, moreover, the point is less about categorising the poor and more about advancing another rationale for reforming the system: namely, that the varieties of

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21 Betensky, *Feeling for the Poor*, p. 32.

22 Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 12.

poor law practice between and within parishes had multiplied to a point where only the fraudulent would be motivated to master it. Martineau mirrors this complexity through focalisations that stop short, shift and redirect readers' views, denying them purchase on character qualities and motivations for characters' actions. Whether or not she may be seen in this strategy to advocate for a centralised administrative body alongside simpler and more consistent laws (Vargo contends she does not) is finally less important for my purposes than the way that such centralisation might map onto an unproblematic consistent focalisation that the text does not offer.<sup>23</sup>

The multiple focalisations come to bear on Orger's – and everyone's – failure to recognise a monstrous criminality in their midst in the form of a pauper named Pleasance Nudd. Nudd is revealed in the end of the novel to be a competent manipulator of the system as well as a miser who has, the narrator suggests, effectively stolen from everyone in the parish through her constant pleas for relief. At all times, basic questions of her intelligence, sanity, motivations, morality – in short, all the stable qualities of realist characters – veer between possibilities depending on the situation and focalisation from which her appearance is narrated. Her age and gender are very nearly ambiguous. While pronouns clarify that she's female, she is frequently referred to as a 'creature'. Though there are hints that she is elderly, she seems not to have any personal history, and comes across as much more able-bodied than Waters.

Although the inadequate and inconsistent descriptions of Nudd could be identified as weaknesses in Martineau's characterisation techniques, they continually appear in the novel alongside an emphasis on characters' missed opportunities to judge her. In the scene when she is introduced, the vicar observes her among some children playing near the church; he 'always supposed' that she 'amused herself, as other idle people are fond of doing' by tending to them (p. 15). The focalisation shifts to a more omniscient perspective, however, to report that the children seem noticeably *untended* on that day. Eventually, readers will understand that the Vicar has seriously underestimated her intellect as well as her interest in the politics going on inside the church, a pattern that repeats itself in observations of her by several other characters in the scene, even as she observes their activities attentively:

The vicar at that moment, however, recognised her pale smiling face, under her large shabby black bonnet with its faded pink lining, – that half-smiling face which everybody in the parish knew, – peeping through the lowest lattice of the church window which was opposite to him. Mr. Thorn presently after saw it in another direction; and every one who happened to be in full view of a window, was aware of the same bonnet before the business was done. Nobody thought much about this, or cared at all, for Pleasance was known to be every where; and the only concern felt was that so much parish money should be spent on

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23 Vargo, 'Contested Authority', para. 12.

Pleasance Nudd's shoe leather. (p. 16)

Here again, individual assessments blur into a group perspective, even to the point of limp jokes about Nudd's wearing out her shoes by constant wandering. By the end of the novel, however, Nudd understands the subjects of the discussion in the church better than many characters and far better than readers, as she proves herself capable of negotiating, even manipulating the laws of poor relief to her own and others' benefit. In the scene when Orger spies on the indigent, the object of his observation is Nudd, who is forging documents that will allow her and her friends to get more relief than they have properly been awarded. Later she orchestrates an elaborate scheme to defraud a nearby parish under settlement law and tries to blackmail one of Orger's superiors by threatening to have him named as the father of an illegitimate child.

In detailing these efforts, Martineau uses focalisations to hint at the most serious problem lurking behind the characters' limited perspectives: Nudd is aware of social positions and takes advantage of them, a gremlin in the machinery of the unreformed poor laws. In the forgery scene, when Orger comes into the room, Pleasance begins to act as though she were mentally disabled. Others support her in these performances; anonymous voices report that '[she] was always scribbling and scrawling with every pen that she could lay hold of' (p. 65). Orger plays along to his own purposes; when she is found to have a significant sum of the parish's money in her possession, he takes it from her on the grounds that actual food would serve her pretended intellect better.

Similar manipulations and the serious problems of 'reading' Nudd's character come to the surface in a shocking moment when she strangles a new-born infant. The crime is fully witnessed by the vicar:

He stood with his back to the fire [...] and, as it happened, in sight of a looking glass which slanted from the wall, reflecting the greater part of that corner of the room which the drawn curtains otherwise concealed. The first accidental glance showed him Pleasance, in such an attitude, and with such a countenance as not only fixed his attention but made him grasp Mrs. Burcham's arm that she might see it too. Pleasance sat on the side of the bed, holding something at arm's length on her knees, and staring at the wall, her lips compressed, and her face paler, if possible, than ever. That which was covered up on her lap certainly moved. (p. 136)

Here, the mirror mimics the effects of the narrative's earlier focalisations, so that the vicar, Mrs Burcham, and readers all catch Nudd in a completely unguarded moment. Because she thinks she is concealed, something close to her interior character is revealed in the grisly description of her capabilities. As soon as the vicar goes over to her, her performance is back on: 'He could scarcely perceive that she started. Even

now she could smile. Before she had time to drawl, he had pulled aside her apron, and found, – what he had expected, – a dead infant, – strangled; – the string still round its neck’ (p. 137). In contrast to the shifting judgments of Nudd, the striking directness of the last descriptions suggests an unambiguous verdict: the entire community’s failure to estimate Nudd has left its most vulnerable member unprotected.

What kind of resolution is possible, given these problems of seeing and judging? What kind of resolution is strategic, given the arguments for economic and moral reassessments of law they support? *The Town* ends with Nudd’s arrest and trial, a rigged election, and some hints of domestic rewards. In the first of these, the law too proves to be subject to her manipulations: ‘Many who had before given her credit for a sufficient portion of sense, now doubted, – so vacant and quiet was her countenance as she walked on. It seemed incredible that any conscious person could look so, who had felt such a quiver and convulsion as had taken place under her hands within an hour’ (p. 138). When she is revealed to be a miser and her hoarded funds are taken from her, one character states that ‘[she] was so vexed at our finding it out, that you would hardly have taken her to be so wrong in the head as the judge and jury found her’ (p. 157). Thus, although the trial does, as Alison Moulds suggests elsewhere in this issue, serve as a ‘compelling plot device, where private narratives and marginalised characters finally [come] to the fore’ (p. 67), the verdict that Nudd is a lunatic represents not a victory of community judgment, but its continued absence.

The election itself occurs without commentary, but it rearranges relationships. Orger visits Miss Barbara Watson, a nurse in the local infirmary, to tell her that he is moving away. Although they agree that he may yet succeed in a less corrupt environment, he comments gloomily that his continuing search for a place where he can put his efforts into effect leaves little room for personal relationships. He explains the problem with a degree of specificity that invites interpretation: ‘I never change my friends [...] but how do I know what they may think of me, or how they may forget me, if I do not get on in the world, and live at a distance, and leave room for somebody else to fill my place?’ (p. 169) When Barbara points out that he can return to visit, he immediately interprets her comment as an invitation to continue their courtship, but also as a remedy for the problems of distance and perspective he identifies.

Waters’s son Tom is sent away to the country to be a servant. Although the position is to be unpaid until Tom has learned the tasks required, his mother views the opportunity to escape the corruption of the town as more beneficial to the boy than wages (p. 164). That this conclusion is contrary to what Waters himself expressed to his wife earlier in the novel underlines the truth about failed laws that has revealed itself in the tragedies of the story. Although Waters is himself returned to some prosperity with the restoration of the inflated contract between the workhouse and his

former employer, his wife is sceptical: ‘there are many that cannot help giving much weight to what the Vicar and his party say about what is likely to become of us; but it is a great thing to us to have the making of the shoes for the workhouse again’ (pp. 166-7). Here, as in the promise of Orger and Barbara’s courtship and Tom’s ‘adoption’ into a country household, private economies and affectionate domestic spaces serve individual flourishing, anticipating the resolutions of social problem novels in the decades to follow. Simultaneously, however, the shifting of the referents of Mrs Waters’s two uses of ‘us’ signifies the lesson in political economy that she is unconsciously neglecting, namely – Martineau would assert – that there is no real or lasting ‘private’ benefit to be had when the normal operations of the market are tampered with. In this, the end of the novel may appear doubly unsatisfying: against the failures of reform in the public sphere, the success of the interpersonal is merely an appearance. Yet if one function of narrative is simply, as Patrick Colm Hogan argues, ‘to broaden associations beyond the familiar, the immediate – to change and expand what is salient’,<sup>24</sup> then perhaps Martineau’s achievement is not the relative positioning of truths, but the simple fact of their juxtaposition.

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24 Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 244.

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