

INFANTICIDAL MOTHERS AND DEAD BABIES: WOMEN'S VOICES ON POLITICAL ECONOMY AND POPULATION

Josephine McDonagh
Birkbeck College, University of London

There is an arresting moment in Matthew Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" when he cites a newspaper report of "a girl named Wragg", who had strangled her illegitimate child. Arnold alights on the example with some excitement, for it controverts the jingoistic sentiments of self-satisfied Tories and Utilitarians alike, who have celebrated the "old Anglo-Saxon race" as "the best breed in the whole world" (Arnold 1973, 272-3). Wragg, on the contrary, represents the "touch of grossness in our race", its "original short coming in the more delicate spiritual perceptions", not by her crime, but rather by her name, a hideous "Anglo-Saxon name", like "Higginbottom, Stiggins and Bugg!". Her crime becomes but a device of her characterisation, a constituent in a list of props, "the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child" - a metonymic representation of her gross nature that is merely the fulfilment of her charmless name. In Arnold's argument, the infanticidal Wragg makes an important contribution to his formulation of the case for disinterested criticism - characterised as the free play of the imagination, by which the mind, detached from material and practical concerns, might contemplate "the best that is thought and known in the world" (283). Wragg exposes the investments of the ideologically transparent rhetoric of politicians and social critics. She reveals the Philistine tendencies of English intellectual work, which, Arnold hopes, will be alleviated by an influx of continental philosophical ideas during the time of peace in which he writes.

The 1860s also marked the peak of an apparent epidemic of child murder in Britain (Rose 1986). Newspapers of the period were filled with ghoulish accounts of the discoveries of the corpses of infants, and there was widespread public debate concerning the legal and medical treatment of infanticidal mothers. Ironically, perhaps, social historians have recently suggested that this period of peace, on which Arnold's hopes for an intellectual renaissance in Britain were pinned, was one of the factors responsible for the explosion of interest in infanticide. Among the other factors are listed the development of the profession of forensic science and increasing concern about the too lenient treatment of women perpetrators of the deed (Behlmer 1979, Sauer 1978). In the absence of other news stories, journalists sensationalised accounts of infanticide to satisfy the public demand for gore and conflict. Arnold's passing reference to Wragg then, comes at a time of widespread incidence of and heightened social concern for the crime of infanticide. But his

absorption of infanticide into an argument about disinterested criticism makes a suggestive commentary on the relationship that the infanticidal woman bears to the culture in which she is represented. It is this relationship that requires examination.

Recent feminist interest has focused on the dead or dying woman in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse. As Elisabeth Bronfen has shown in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), the dead woman functions as a sign of transcendence, the refusal of materiality, marking the possibility of entering the (Kantian) sphere of disinterestedness of which Arnold describes a version. Romantic and Victorian literature is littered with the corpses of women. The infanticidal woman crops up less often than the dead woman in nineteenth-century cultural representations, but with some persistence - Mad Martha Ray, Hetty Sorrel, Effie Deans, Carlyle's infanticidal mothers in *Chartism*, the Mammomite mothers in *Maud*, the Medeas of Turner and Delacroix, J. S. Meyr's opera, *Medea in Corino*, the mass infanticides recorded in *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* that titillated the British reading public in the 1830s. Unlike the dead woman, the infanticidal woman seems to function as an overdetermined social text - she is the sign of poverty or of depravity, of the impossibility of culture and civilisation, the sign of the barbarian, the marker of cultural alterity. In this study, I am attempting to map the anxieties and fantasies that the figure of the infanticidal woman encompasses in mid-nineteenth-century British culture. I am proposing that the infanticidal woman figures as a recurrent and constitutive element of cultural ideation, an understanding of which will tell us a little more about the represented and lived relations of gender in this period, but also about the formation of that culture.

The infanticidal woman figures in a range of discourses in this period - in medical and legal texts, economic tracts, and writing on social policy, as well as in art and literature. In this paper I want to deal with just a small part of this material, and consider her function in writings on political economy. I will approach the material by asking a much more general question about the place of women in the discourse of political economy. What will emerge are two opposing figures of femininity - the mother, the inculcator of civil values, and the barbaric, infanticidal woman. Around these two women visions of social life revolve. I will be talking with particular reference to two women writers on political economy, about which little has been said: Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau. But I will also make a brief excursion into the work of Thomas Malthus.

I begin with a quotation:

The science of political economy is intimately connected with the daily occurrences of life, and in this respect differs materially from that of chemistry, astronomy or electricity; the mistakes we may fall into in the latter sciences can have little effect upon our conduct, whilst our ignorance of the former may lead us into serious practical errors. (Marcet 1817, 9-10)

The words here are spoken by Mrs B. to her young pupil, Caroline, the two conversants in Jane Marcet's *Conversations of Political Economy* (1816). This was one of the many works published in the early decades of the century to disseminate to a broader reading public the secrets of the relatively new science of political economy. Marcet sets political economy squarely at the heart of domestic life, as that which provides scientific rationale for a mode of living and the basis of a range of moral and political choices that determined public and more importantly, private lives. The text moves clearly through the various elements of the discipline - labour, utility, exchange, value, taxes, population, and so on, incorporating along the way large passages from the works of, for instance, Adam Smith, Arthur Young, David McPherson, and David Ricardo. As it does this, it insists on a set of political and personal values: the importance of restraint, industriousness and forbearance, the necessity of thrift, and the iniquities of luxury and indolence. It makes clear distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and asserts the virtues of free trade. As an account of the tenets of political economy, it is clear and competent, but its illustrative purpose means that it emphasises the ideological content of the discourse of political economy much more so than do the works which it disseminates.

Marcet's *Conversations* were enormously successful, running into five editions over a period of eight years. She was also the author of the *Conversations on Chemistry* and *Conversations on Natural Philosophy*, and similar works on *Language*, the *History of England*, and *Vegetable Physiology*. A broadly educated woman herself, Marcet participated in the Utilitarian drive for popular education - whose schemes included the establishment of the Society for Useful Knowledge, Mechanics Institutes, and other programmes for the education of artisans, women and children. Marcet is quite clear about her audience - "young people of either sex". But later on, she explains that the *Conversations* were designed for mothers, so that "they may be competent to teach it [political economy], that their children should not have anything to unlearn". Marcet's work then is addressed to women, in their key role as moral and social instructors of the young. And political economy, with its directive script for social and domestic life, presents a prime tool for imparting the version of civil values that Marcet believes in.

Given this, it is in one sense surprising (though in another sense not) that Marcet's *Conversations* is the sole work of a woman writer to be listed in J. R. McCulloch's fairly comprehensive bibliography of the literature of political economy, published in 1845. McCulloch praises Marcet's work in the highest terms, as the clearest introduction to the science he has encountered, as does, interestingly, Elie Halevy more than fifty years later, in his *Growth of Philosophical Radicalism* (1901-4, trans. 1928). Conspicuous for their absence in McCulloch's bibliography, though, are other women writers, among whom we might mention Maria Edgeworth and Jane Marcet's friend, Harriet Martineau, author of the multi-volumed *Illustrations of Political Economy* and *Illustrations of Taxation*, published in 1832-34. Like Marcet, Martineau prefaces her work with remarks concerning the centrality of political economy to the regular concerns of

daily life, and similarly asserts the need for works that present the science "in a familiar, practical form". But in Martineau's work, the balance between illustration and explication has shifted: Marcet had presented economic material in Socratic form, with fulsome examples of its social implications, but Martineau sweetened the pill of instruction further by presenting passages of economic instruction in the context of short stories with plots, places and reasonably well developed characters. Martineau thus extended Marcet's work, in so far as she sees political economy as the scientific basis of a way of civilised life that it is the duty of women to impart. But as Martineau utilised the conventions of fiction - after all the most suitable genre in which to discuss domestic life - her works slipped outside the purview of a political economist, like McCulloch. As the science "intimately connected with daily life" (Marcet 1817, 9), political economy is central to feminine concerns of domesticity and socialisation. Nevertheless, the conventions of political economy are such that there are limited ways in which women themselves might talk about it.

But to return to my question about the place of women in political economy, we might turn to the economist who had most to say about gender - Malthus, the man who put sex into political economy. For Malthus, it is the drive for sexual reproduction that is responsible for the formation of civilised society - demographic changes, the division of labour, the enclosure of land, the formation of property. But it is also sex that brings about its fall, for it is humanity's tragedy that population will increase at a higher rate than the resources that are needed to sustain it. Various checks - famine, disease, volcanoes, floods, wars, and so on - are always in operation to shrink the population to a sustainable level. Catherine Gallagher in her 1987 essay, "The Body Versus the Social Body in Malthus and Mayhew", has asserted that the significance of Malthus is that he positions the body as a problem at the centre of nineteenth-century social concern - the body as an entity with the irreconcilable needs to have sex and to be nourished. And while in earlier, Enlightenment political discourse, the healthy body was an analogy for and a sign of a healthy society, she points out that after Malthus, the vigorous body becomes a sign of imminent social decay, indicative of a burgeoning population that cannot be sustained. Malthus rewrites Godwin's narrative of perfectibility into one of endless fluctuations between states of progress and decay, in which a civilised society can easily slip back into a state of barbarity.

In this oscillation women play a particular part. In the first edition of the *Essay on Population* (1798), Malthus shows that one distinction between a barbarous and a civilised society is that social divisions based on gender and age are replaced by ones based on class. He writes: "I should compare the warriors in the prime of life (in barbarous society) with the gentlemen, and the women and children and aged with the lower classes of the community in the civilised state" (Malthus 1970, 82). But a few pages later he writes that in a civilised society (such as in England), in which a man will wish to marry his equal in education and class, it is women who will first feel the social decline that is the necessary consequence of a too quickly expanding population. He gives the example of a "man of liberal

education, but with an income only just sufficient to enable him to associate in the rank of gentlemen", who, if he were to marry and have a family, should be obliged "to rank himself with farmers and the lower class of tradesmen". His wife, who will have been brought up in the "same tastes and sentiments as himself", will now be forced to associate with a class "two or three steps lower" in the social ladder, at a place where, Malthus holds, "education ends and ignorance begins" (Malthus 1970, 90). This, he insists, is a real social evil, caused by men's lack of sexual restraint, but the effects of which are played out on the woman's social being. Women, then, become a kind of litmus test of social progress - elevated by civilisation to the place of social equals, but displaced by the slip into barbarity, caused by man's too enthusiastic drive to reproduce. In Malthus's text it is the incorporation of women into society that is at stake, when incorporation is the sign of civilisation and the first casualty of its decline. The woman of civilised society is well represented by Marcet and Martineau - educated women who are themselves involved in the process of inculcating civilised values, reproducing civilised society at the level of ideology as well as of biology, crucially incorporated in society as the agents of reproduction of its own values.

But if the incorporated woman (the metaphorical and literal mother) is the sign of civilisation, another woman functions as the sign of barbarity, and that is the infanticidal woman. The state of barbarity, which society always aims to fend off, is marked by the abandonment of infants, a practice, Malthus tells us, "more frequent than ever acknowledged to Europeans" (Malthus 1970, 89). At this point Malthus is talking about the situation in China. But it is a practice that achieves iconic significance in Malthus's work and elsewhere in nineteenth-century writing.

The oscillations between civilisation and barbarity are figured then as an oscillation between the incorporated and the infanticidal woman. This is demonstrated very clearly in Harriet Martineau's tales, "Ella of Garveloch" and "Weal and Woe in Garveloch", numbers five and six in the *Illustrations*. Garveloch is a small island in Scotland. In "Ella of Garveloch", the small island community increases its wealth through careful husbandry and the development of trade and industry. In "Weal and Woe in Garveloch", the advantageous conditions of this new state of wealth have led to an increase in population such that, when the harvest fails one year, the community can no longer produce the resources to sustain itself. The part I want to draw attention to is a conversation between Ella, now a mother of six children, and another character, the widow Cuthbert, mother of three. Ella's brother, the noble and upstanding Ronald, has loved the widow with restrained passion throughout the entire volume. However, as a true Malthusian, and public-spirited man, he exercises moral restraint and, for the sake of the community, decides against marrying the widow. In this conversation, Ella and the widow, excellent mothers both, sitting with babies on their laps, discuss the connection between population and class. Widow Cuthbert says,

I have heard that neither the very rich nor the very poor leave such large families behind them as the middling classes; and if

the reason is known, it seems to me very like murder not to prevent it. (Martineau 1832, 100)

In the context of this discussion, the simile, "like murder not to prevent it", double-edged as it is, takes on great significance which I think should be clear. Ella continues the discussion by demonstrating that the reasons for the physical superiority of the middle class family are well known - both very rich and very poor women are bad mothers. While rich mothers live in luxury and dissipation, play cards all night in hot rooms, and drive in carriages rather than taking constitutional exercise, the poor woman "[dangles] her babe as if she meant to break its back and gives the poor thing nothing but potatoes ...". Neither, she goes on, are much better than the mothers in China, where "In great cities, new-born babes are nightly laid in the streets to perish, and many more are thrown into the river and carried away before their parents eyes". Or in India "where it is a very common thing for female children to be destroyed as soon as they are born" (Martineau 1832, 101). Martineau reiterates the distinction made by Malthus between good mothers and infanticidal mothers - as infanticide figures as the bench mark of the barbarous society - the state of decay that only the middle classes can fend off. Martineau's text however shifts Malthus's historical narrative in which the oscillation between barbarity and civilisation exists in a temporal continuum, on to particular social groups existing at the same moment in time. The barbarity that is to be fended off is now located in specially designated racial and class groups - the Chinese, the Indians, the very rich and the very poor. In Garveloch the barbarous group is the Irish family, whose indolence and vice will be the cause of its own downfall. Much is made of the Irish supposed proclivity for excessive reproduction, and their unwillingness to work, to save, to be sober, and so on. It is not claimed directly that the Irish kill their children, but their excessive reproduction and inability to support the children, in this context, amounts to the same thing. The text is very direct about the high rate of infant mortality in Ireland. Martineau's narrative is one in which the good middle-class Scottish mothers bear strong and healthy children through exercising restraint, thrift, industriousness and so on, while the Irish family withers into a state of decay and eventual extinction on Garveloch.

The point is that the Malthusian narrative depends on two versions of femininity - the good, 'incorporated' middle-class mother, and the infanticidal, barbaric woman. Incidentally, this helps to illuminate a problematic moment in another text, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), and that is Adam Bede's surprising, and otherwise unexplained emotional shift from Hetty Sorel to Dinah Morris at the end of the novel - from the infanticidal woman to the civilised and civilising woman, the Methodist preacher. It allows us to read *Adam Bede* as a Malthusian narrative in which the middle class will people the world with its vigorous and morally superior offspring.

In 1838, a pamphlet entitled "An Essay on Populousness" was printed for private circulation by an anonymous author, under the pseudonym 'Marcus'. During that year the same author published an essay which was generally available,

“On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness”, which was reissued in 1839 as the “Book of Murder”. In the spirit of Swift, ‘Marcus’ outlines his theory of painless extinction, how to “revoke or continue a child’s existence without infringing the laws of humanity, that is, without inflicting pain” (‘Marcus’ 1838, 22). The pamphlets were directed as a satiric attack on the Poor Laws. With mock scientific precision they mimic the discourse of political economy, and in particular Malthus’s work, which had a major impact on the government policy concerning poor relief. Later, Chartist leaders would cite the pamphlets as proof of a government conspiracy to restrict the numbers of the poor. If Malthus identified the practice of infanticide as the mark of a barbarous society, what is interesting here is that the same rhetorical device is being directed *against* Malthus. Malthus’s version of a civilised society is now the barbarous society in which policies tantamount to infanticide are legitimate.

Marcus’s tracts are the most fully developed statements of a position repeated in a variety of contexts at this time - infanticide comes to represent the iniquities of an industrial society whose grounding is in the discourse of political economy. We can find something like this expressed by Tennyson, for instance, in *Maud* (1855), in the line that refers to the “Mamomite mothers” who “kill their babes for a burial fee” (Part I, l. 45), and in Carlyle’s *Chartism* (1839). And it is the sentiment behind Arnold’s *Wragg*. Thus we can trace the use of the infanticidal woman in the rhetorical construction of high Culture, or Arnoldian civilisation, as she represents the barbaric work of industry - or anarchy - that will be fended off by the formation of the realm of Culture. By the same count we will find that the figure of the good mother is also formative, this time positively rather than negatively. In its civilising mission, Culture provides a site in which a class can reproduce its values. It thereby appropriates the function of the good mother, whose ideological work is perhaps most apparent in children’s literature, such as Marcet’s *Conversations*. In these works, designed for a mother to read to her children, the mother’s function as social educator tends to be performed within the context of the narrative. That is to say, they are generally narratives of development in which the mother plays a guiding role. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Lessons* (1795), a series of very short narratives designed to teach a child to read, tell the story of the development of the child’s eating habits - suckled by the mother, passing on to solids, and so on, all the time guided and nurtured by its mother, until it has become an assimilated, acculturated social being. The point is that the stories double the work of the mother as she guides the child into culture, allegorising the acculturating affect of reading through the idea of bodily consumption, and regulation of the body. Typically, the body and culture exist in such ambiguous relation to each other that it is never clear which is a metaphor for which.

It is perhaps because the mother engages in the ideological work of a double reproduction that mothering slips so easily into its position as the invisible metaphor for cultural reproduction. This, of course, is a pervasive metaphor that needs resisting and unpicking. I propose this as an urgent project for feminist

criticism, since even feminist critics have tended to celebrate the use of mothering as a metaphor for culture. This is for good reasons: such a metaphor positions women at the centre of the processes of culture from which we are otherwise excluded. But it is nevertheless problematic.

There are two ways in which we might embark on this project. First, there is the work of the historicisation of motherhood. This is work that is already being done by feminist historians, inspired, for example by Leonora Davidoff's and Catherine Hall's important study of domesticity, *Family Fortunes* (1987).

Second, we might focus on the points in history at which mothering and cultural production are entangled, and it is in this context that I situate my study of infanticide. I want to conclude by gesturing towards the directions which I see this study taking.

For Malthus, infanticide is one of the many checks on population, and it is also the case that in many other contexts, in particular in medical and legal contexts, infanticide tended to be treated as a form of birth control. It was considered as an act perpetrated in desperation by unmarried women who had been seduced and lost their honour. Nevertheless, when we read these accounts we will find that the relationships between the mother, the corpse, and the father are configured differently, and part of my project is to map these relations. Various a victim of masculine lechery, a murderer, and a lunatic, the infanticidal woman will tell us a great deal about the legal, medical and moral treatment of women at particular moments.

But we must also remember that, as a practitioner of birth control, the infanticidal woman represents to others the decay of civilisation, the encroachment of modernity, the loss of humane values after industrialisation. In this case, the infanticidal woman bespeaks material and ethical poverty. She is the sign of all the hardships and problems brought about by capitalism. In each case, the infanticidal woman is a social text which we are able to read, but she is a text which bears quite diverse messages about the society she represents. So while she seems, in a sense, perfectly transparent, nevertheless, as the sign slips so frequently and so radically, there is also a sense in which she is unreadable. She seems to block all processes of interpretation and meaning. And it is this sense of disruptiveness that I am interested in too. As she resists reproduction, the infanticidal woman also resists signification - in a profound sense, she is anti-ideological.

I will close with the image of Mad Martha Ray, the strange woman in Wordsworth's poem, *The Thorn* (1798), who may or may not have killed her child. For all the narrator's humanitarian concern, she nevertheless casts him into a state of deep epistemological crisis - a crisis which we might more familiarly call Romanticism.

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Matthew. 1973 (1962). "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". *Complete Works*. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

- Press. III: 258-85.
- Behlmer, George K. 1979. "Deadly Motherhood: Infanticide and Medical Opinion in Mid-Victorian Britain". *Journal of the History of Medicine* 34:403-27.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. 1992. *Over Her Dead Body: Death Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Carlyle, Thomas. 1971. *Selected Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Davidoff, Leonora and Catherine Hall. 1987. *Family Fortunes*. London: Hutchinson.
- Gallagher, Catherine. 1987. "The body versus the Social Body in Malthus and Mayhew". *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 83-106.
- Halévy, Élie. 1928. *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*. Trans. Mary Morris London: Faber and Gwyer.
- McCulloch, J. R. 1845. *The Literature of Political Economy. A Classified Catalogue of Select Publications in the Different Departments of that Science with Historical, Critical, and Bibliographical Notices*. London.
- Malthus, T. R. 1970 (1798). *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Marcet, Jane. 1817 (1816). *Conversations of Political Economy; in which the elements of that science are familiarly explained*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown.
- 'Marcus'. 1838. *An Essay on Populousness*. London.
- Martineau, Harriet. 1832-34. *Illustrations of Political Economy*. 9 volumes. London: James Fox.
- . 1834. *Illustrations of Taxation*. London: James Fox.
- Rose, Lionel. 1986. *The Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain 1800-1938*. London: Routledge.
- Sauer, R. 1978. "Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain". *Population Studies* 43.2: 81-93.
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord. 1989. *Tennyson: A Selection*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Longman.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1989 (1795). "Lessons". *Works*. Ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. London: Pickering. IV: 461-74.
- Wordsworth, William and S. T. Coleridge. 1976. *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*. Eds. James Butler and Karen Green. Ithaca and

London: Cornell University Press. 77-85.