

SECULARISM IN HARRIET MARTINEAU'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM FOR  
THE REPEAL OF THE CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACTS IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
BRITAIN

University of Oulu  
Department of History  
Bachelor's dissertation  
14.2.2020  
Nea Ristimäki

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	2
1. Secular perspectives in Martineau's letters.....	8
1.1 "It is the way of Englishwomen": unity through patriotism .....	8
1.2 The battle against ignorance: repeal through education .....	12
2. Martineau's motivation for political activism.....	18
2.1 Victims of men or society? Martineau's attitude towards women in the sex industry.....	18
2.2 Call of duty.....	23
Conclusion .....	27
Sources .....	28

## Introduction

The Victorian period (c. 1837-1901) was an age of great reform in Britain, with people aspiring to improve the existing social conditions. For the first time women rallied one another to partake in the discourse on the inequalities between the sexes – such as unequal education opportunities and marriage laws.<sup>1</sup> The women's rights movement was one of the century's greatest movements in Britain, and was an international phenomenon by the turn of the century.

Religion often served as the driving force for social and political activism.<sup>2</sup> However, religion itself was not exempt from increasing calls for reform. By the mid-century many new denominations had emerged alongside the state's Anglican religion, challenging its dominant status. Renouncing one's faith became another phenomenon of the time, and the secularist movement was a small but prominent part of Victorian society.<sup>3</sup>

The connections between early feminism and religion have been widely researched and it has been proven that religion offered women a platform for political activism.<sup>4</sup> In the new era of feminist studies the activism of anti-theist women has remained relatively unexplored. However, the feminism of the 19th and early 20th century, though predominantly Christian, nevertheless relied on religious controversy and contestation. Women's rights discourses developed in the extensive debate between secularist and Christian feminists, which reveals the importance of anti-religious culture to the feminism of the time.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, secularism in 19<sup>th</sup> century women's activism is worth examining more thoroughly.

The primary focus of this thesis is to study how secularly grounded women's rights activism approached the crucial subjects of the women's movement. My main research questions are: How does the secular perspective appear in the political activism of anti-theist women? What motivated their activism and how did it differ from that based on religious conviction?

---

<sup>1</sup> Vicinus, 1972, xiv-xv.

<sup>2</sup> Melnyk, 2008, 103.

<sup>3</sup> Melnyk, 2008, 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 2.

## THESIS' FOCUS

The focal point of this study lies on the significance of secularism in women's activism against the Contagious Diseases Acts (C.D. Acts), which was an important issue for the women's movement, and can be regarded as a starting point for feminist political organization.<sup>6</sup> I examine its significance through the writings of a prominent secularist Victorian writer and political activist Harriet Martineau (1802-1876). Her diverse work provides an excellent topic for research. For example, her writings on abolitionism and economics have been covered in many different studies. However, the focus on the C.D. Acts is appropriately narrow in scope for a bachelor's thesis.

The timeline of this thesis concerns the period between 1860-1890 - the years during which the C.D. Acts were implemented, expanded and the protest against them was at its height. In the 1860s when Martineau wrote her letters on the Acts, she had already renounced her Christian faith over a decade before and converted to atheism<sup>7</sup>, allowing her writings to be analysed as secular activism and contrasted with its religious counterpart.

Similar legislation took place in many countries, but this thesis focuses mostly on the British women's perspective, after all, Martineau's letters are directed to the British audience, especially to English women.

## SOURCES AND METHODS

The primary sources used are the four letters on the Contagious Diseases Acts published in the *London Daily news* in December 1869 written by Harriet Martineau under the alias Englishwoman. Martineau's *Autobiography* (written in 1855 and published in 1877) is also used at times as a supporting source.

Due to their political nature, Martineau's letters are a problematic primary source. Their purpose was to advance the agenda of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA) and, as such they are liable to be misleading. Their writing came at the request of the LNA's spokesperson Josephine Butler, so her, or other LNA

---

<sup>6</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Melnyk, 2008, 151.

member's, influence might be present. Autobiographies aren't straightforward either – memoirs can be, intentionally or not, fabricated by the writer. This sometimes happens because of a writer's tendency to cleanse the past and inclination to present the facts in a favourable light.<sup>8</sup> These factors and their effect on the reliability of the sources have been kept in mind throughout the research progress.

I have categorized the information found in the sources using the methodological tools of qualitative content analysis. As a form of text analysis, it is used to find the presence, meanings and relationship of words, themes or concepts.<sup>9</sup> I have mapped groups of recurring themes found in Martineau's letters and examined the meanings which they give to them. This helps to reveal Martineau's true intentions and the ideals of Victorian culture.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Women's secular activism has not been very widely researched. LAURA SCHWARTZ's *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (2013) is significant in illuminating the work of anti-theist women in the Secularist movement. Schwartz is the first to study freethinking women's activism and sheds light on the important role of unreligious women in the women's rights movement. Her book is used in order to understand the nature of the secular and its effect on freethinking women's activism.

JUDITH WALKOWITZ's *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (1980) is referred to in order to map the historical context of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Her book also offers great insight in religions effect on the LNA's members and the motivation behind their activism.

Women's religious activism in the 19th century has been greatly covered in academic research and concerning this thesis NANCY BOYD's *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their world* (1982) and ANNEMIEKE VAN DRENTH's and FRANSISCA DE HAAN's *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (1999) are worth mentioning. These works are useful

---

<sup>8</sup> Suvanto, 1977, 47-48.

<sup>9</sup> Columbia University, "Content Analysis".

in comparing women's religious and non-religious activism against the Contagious Diseases Acts.

In addition to her autobiography the biographies written by RICHARD WEBB (1960) and DEBORAH LOGAN (2002) offer great insight into Martineau's life and thoughts, thus helping to analyse her letters on the Acts.

## CRUCIAL CONCEPTS AND STRUCTURE

The most essential concept in this work is secularism which in the 19th century was understood as the ideology of the secularists—also referred to as freethinkers. They were people, often apostates, who dedicated their life to ridding society of what they saw as a repressive belief-system.<sup>10</sup> Secularism was deeply rooted in anti-religiousness that lobbied for the separation of political, cultural and moral life from religion.<sup>11</sup> The concept of materialism, together with science (in opposition to religion) were crucial aspects of secularist intellectual identity.<sup>12</sup>

Harriet Martineau never associated herself with the Secularist movement, but her writings show that her thoughts were very similar to that of 19th century secularism. For the secularists, Martineau was a “Great Heroine” of freethought and they were eager to claim her as one of their own.<sup>13</sup>

In this study I use “secularist” and “freethinking” as synonyms and refer to antitheist women with both terms. Generally, I refer to all women involved in the repealing of the Contagious Diseases Acts as repealers.

One influential notion behind the C.D. Acts is the moral reform, or purity movement. Moral reform was a movement against prostitution and “vice” which followed the repeal of the C.D. Acts in the 1880's. The purity movement emerged from within the repeal movement and many LNA members advocated the mission to raise the moral of the people.<sup>14</sup> In their

---

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 4,6.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 164-166.

efforts to raise society's morality the repealers' attitude towards prostitutes (which they claimed to aid) often became controlling and punitive.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately it was the moral reformists strong Christian faith that shaped their vision of a purified public<sup>16</sup> ; thus, when speaking of moral reformists, I mostly refer to the Christian repealers.

Another recurrent term in this thesis is "prostitute". Prostitute was and is used to describe someone working in the sex industry, but in her recent study Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen highlights its somewhat negative origin. The word comes from French, meaning "shameless" or "ill-mannered".<sup>17</sup> Due to its negative connotation, I use the word only in its historical context and refer to women in the sex industry as sex workers.

In the first chapter I demonstrate how Martineau's secular worldview emerges in her writing by comparing her language to that used by the Christian women activists. I will argue that Martineau's rhetoric has slight but distinct differences from her Christian counterparts and that her appeal to patriotism along with her constant emphasis on science reveal her secularist outlook.

In the following chapter I address the motivation behind Martineau's secular-based activism and try to offer an answer to what motivated her to write against the Contagious Diseases Acts and whether she shared the Christian repealers agenda of moral reform. I will argue that while her attitude towards prostitution paralleled that of her fellow reformers, her primary agenda was to improve the world through education.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACTS AND THE REPEAL MOVEMENT

The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 were special legislation enacted to control the spread of venereal disease in Britain. The first statute was introduced exclusively in port and garrison towns in 1864 in the hope of preventing the spread of diseases among enlisted men. The acts also possessed a moral purpose: they were believed to reduce prostitution and venereal diseases, thus elevating the moral standing of the society.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 132.

<sup>16</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Vainio-Korhonen, 2018, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 1, 72.

Under the Acts a woman could be identified as a common prostitute by a policeman and be forced to undergo internal examination by a doctor. If found suffering from a VD she would be placed in a certified lock hospital for treatment. If a woman resisted the arrest or the examination she would be brought before the local magistrates and face the possibility of a jail sentence, on top of having to prove her virtuousness.<sup>19</sup>

Organized public agitation against the acts rose as late as 1869 in response to efforts to extend the Acts. Two prominent organizations for the repeal of the acts were formed quite close to each other. The National Association was born first. However, it's exclusion of women led to the birth of a parallel but separate female association: The Ladies National Association.<sup>20</sup>

The LNA's protests main points and goals were announced in the four letters by Martineau published in the *Daily News*. The last letter also listed the members of the organization. They were mostly middle-aged middle-class women who were unified by religious affiliations and strong social conscience. The organization is best remembered for its charismatic leader and the face of the battle against the C.D. acts: Josephine Butler.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1870s the publicity around the repeal movement grew and other organizations against the acts were formed. The movement tried to influence public opinion about the Acts by organizing public meetings, petition campaigns and electoral leagues. They also published lots of propaganda and statistical evidence against the Acts. The LNA's women even included rescue work in their repeal efforts and means of furthering their political goals.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the social pressure brought about by the campaigns the Acts were eventually overturned in the 1880s. First the internal examination of prostitutes was forbidden and in 1886 the Contagious Diseases Acts were wholly repealed.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 91-93.

<sup>21</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 91,94, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 98-99.



## 1. Secular perspectives in Martineau's letters

As Laura Schwartz has pointed out, the similarities between freethought repeal rhetoric and that of Christian repealers is very similar, thus making the attempt to characterize the secular aspect of the movement quite difficult.<sup>24</sup> However, Martineau's letters prove that subtle differences between the arguments of the secularist and the Christian campaigners can be detected. Martineau uses the same sort of linguistic tactics as her Christian counterparts only to a certain extent, while still staying true to her own secular beliefs. This can be seen in her use of patriotic rhetoric in unifying her readers as well as her constant emphasis on rationality and science.

### 1.1 "It is the way of Englishwomen": unity through patriotism

In the early days of the repeal movement, the most crucial task was to draw attention to the subject and to attract middle-class women to join the ranks of the movement against the Contagious Diseases Acts. In order to get their attention, the repeal movement often used religion as a lure of sorts. For example, the LNA stressed the importance of a religious setting in recruiting middle-class women for its familiar and reassuring ambience.<sup>25</sup> Religious rhetoric and prayer meetings, for example, were greatly relied on in unifying a broader, mobilized collective protest against the C.D Acts.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned earlier, religion provided a mandate for women in their political activism. It was especially important for the women in the repeal movement, for the issue of prostitution and venereal diseases were inappropriate for respectable 19<sup>th</sup> century women to even know of. Religious piety provided the women activists with the cloak of respectability to discuss the forbidden subject publicly.<sup>27</sup> Religion was also a great way to bring women from all social classes together, since it allowed the strict class boundaries to be surpassed.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 134-135.

<sup>26</sup> Webster, 2019, 151-153.

<sup>27</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 154.

<sup>28</sup> Webster, 2019, 153.

Even though the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts relied heavily on religious aspects, many freethinking women became involved in it and embraced its religious rhetoric.<sup>29</sup> However, in her letters on the Acts, Harriet Martineau avoids using the crusading Christian rhetoric that her repeal sisters used in order to create an atmosphere of unity. Instead she attempts to cross the class boundaries of her readers by emphasising their national identity – their mutual status as English citizens. This was not uncommon for the radicals of the time, they aimed to create a mass platform for people that opposed oppression and corruption, and in this process the rhetoric of patriotism and the nation played a crucial part.<sup>30</sup>

Martineau starts her first letter (Tuesday 28.12.1869) with highlighting the danger the Acts pose to the whole nation: “*what the danger is in which we find our country and everybody in it involved*”.<sup>31</sup> She avoids using gender or class specific terms in the introduction of the letter in order to draw the attention of every reader, regardless to their sex or social standing. By straightaway stressing that the Acts do affect “everybody” Martineau aspires to create a unitary sense of alarm in the English men and women alike. The fact that her letters were published in *The Daily News* guaranteed that most, if not all, of them would be exposed to her troubling message.<sup>32</sup>

Portraying men as equal and important stakeholders can be interpreted as a tactic to leverage the considerable societal influence that men held towards advancing the repeal cause. However, Martineau brings up gender quite often in her writing in an attempt to create a sense of unity in her female readers especially. In her second letter (Wednesday 29.12.1869) she states:

*Up to the date of the passage of these bills [the C.D.Acts] every woman in the country had the same rights as men over her own person; and the laws extended its protection*

---

<sup>29</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 155.

<sup>30</sup> Rogers, 2000, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts” *London Daily News*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>32</sup> *The London Daily News* was founded by author Charles Dickens in 1846. Its purpose was to offer a liberal alternative to traditional conservative papers, especially *The Times*. By the late 1800s *the Daily News* had become one of the most popular daily papers with its circulation peaking at 93,000 copies. This made it an excellent platform for political discussion in the second half of the century. The British Newspaper Archive, “London Daily News”.

*over all alike-of both sexes, and altogether without regard to any question of character, manners, and calling.*<sup>33</sup>

Martineau emphasises the fact that all women in England share the same legal status, no matter what class they came from, or what their profession was. She stresses the equality of women before the British law, opposed to before the eyes of God<sup>34</sup>, thus creating a sense of unity amongst women through a more secular outlet.

The Christian rhetoric used by many of the repealers argued that prostitutes were sisters in Christ and thus should be helped.<sup>35</sup> Martineau, however, keeps referring to sex workers as “our countrywomen”<sup>36</sup> throughout her letters, thus reasoning that the readers of the Daily News should get involved with the repeal movement and help sex workers in their troubles because of the shared nationality, rather than the shared religion.

Martineau’s effort to integrate and mobilize people under national identity culminates in her choice of pen name: an Englishwoman. By embracing anonymity, she again stresses that the matter at hand is of Englishwomen, for Englishwomen, and is to be resolved by Englishwomen.

Martineau also resorts to patriotism in justifying the political activism of women. In her first letter Martineau brings up the sacrifice that the women of LNA are making in getting involved in the repeal movement: *“it is the way of Englishwomen to give themselves to a good work”*.<sup>37</sup> She continues by referring to Lady Godiva, the famous English noblewoman who according to legend rode naked through the streets of Coventry in protest of the heavy taxation of the people in her city. Martineau states: *“their [the women of the LNA] deed is of quality kindred of Godiva’s, while its scope is wider and its import infinitely deeper.”*<sup>38</sup> With the reference to Lady Godiva, Martineau characterizes the women working in the movement as the epitome of true English women in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their country and people.

---

<sup>33</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Disease Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Josephine Butler often argued that everyone holds an equal position as God’s children. Van Drenth, De Haan, 1999, 99.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Boyd, 1982, 76.

<sup>36</sup> For example Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>37</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts” *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>38</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts” *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

Martineau's emphasis on the sacrifice of the women activists could be seen as a sign of her reverence for martyrdom, as Webb has argued many times in his biography.<sup>39</sup> However, it is more sensible to see it as a linguistic device to mobilize her readers and justify women's work in the public sphere. With the emphasis on martyrdom and sacrifice Martineau shows that the women of England have no option but to get involved in the movement against the C.D Acts, out of loyalty to their country. In order to be true patriots, women must get involved in the movement to "*sustain the honour and life of our country and people*".<sup>40</sup>

The patriotic rhetoric seen in Martineau's letters is not only a secularist idiosyncrasy, since it was used by other women activists in order to gain moral authority. This rhetoric was also used, to an extent, by Martineau's fellow repeal women. For example, Josephine Butler used similar language in her *Appeal to the people* of 1870, when she signed her Appeal as "an English Mother".<sup>41</sup> Despite her invoking her nationality and choosing to remain anonymous like Martineau, Butler's use of the word "mother" in the same context reveals the difference between the rhetoric of the two.

For the women activists of the Victorian era, appealing to Christian motherhood was a more orthodox method to gain moral leverage and justification for their work from the public. For example, British women have used it in order to justify their meddling in the movement for abolition of slavery.<sup>42</sup> The rhetoric of motherhood was especially important in the repeal movement, for it was an easy way for the middle-class moral reformists to justify their dominant status over the sex workers of lower social standing.<sup>43</sup> Motherly care was often used as a tool in creating and shaping new identities of gender and class in order to control working-class women.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, by appealing to her motherhood Butler relies on the justification that the respectability of Christian motherhood brings, and in doing so she at the same time advocates the power status that divides the women from different classes. This typical Christian rhetoric is what sets her apart from Martineau.

---

<sup>39</sup> For example, Webb, 1960, 200.

<sup>40</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts III" *LDN*, 30.12.1869.

<sup>41</sup> Rogers, 2000, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Rogers, 2000, 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Markkola, 2002, 297-99.

<sup>44</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 1999, 24.

Martineau does refer to motherhood in her letters as well, however, not in justifying the involvement of women in the lives of the lower classes. By appealing to the readers motherhood, she emphasises the duty of women to other women, drawing attention to another similarity that crosses the class boundaries: shared gender identity. In her second letter she writes:

*The mothers of sons, sinning sons as well as pure, shrink from any sort of countenance of a law which, on the one hand proposes to render vice safe from its worst penalty, and on the other, compels the wronged and deluded victim of a man's guile.*<sup>45</sup>

Many repealers argued that men were to blame for prostitution, that women in the sex industry were driven to it by seductive men.<sup>46</sup> Martineau uses the same argument to tap into the sense of guilt and responsibility of "mothers of sons". She aims to evoke a sense of duty in mothers with sons- who upon reaching manhood were potentially apt to take advantage of women- toward their own gender.

Martineau's rhetoric clearly has similarities to its Christian counterpart, but her emphasis on patriotism is a key difference. Upon examining her letters, one must remember, that it was the LNA's leader, Josephine Butler, who requested she write them and the effect this might have on the contents. The publication of the letters is sometimes credited to Butler<sup>47</sup>, which shows Butler's involvement in them. Nonetheless, the lack of the traditional Christian rhetoric in the letters is very apparent, Martineau does not even refer to the repeal movement as a "holy cause" or a "crusade", like many other repealers had.<sup>48</sup> Therefore it is unlikely that Butler had exerted overt influence over Martineau's rhetoric.

## 1.2 The battle against ignorance: repeal through education

Secularists believed that ignorance was the root of all the "evils of society", thus educating the public was a key factor in achieving social improvement.<sup>49</sup> The secularist mission of eradicating ignorance can be seen in all of Martineau's letters on the Contagious Diseases

---

<sup>45</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Disease Acts II" *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>46</sup> Lee, 2013, 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> Boyd, 1982, 42.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Boyd, 1982, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 158.

Acts. The letters show that for Martineau the matter of the Acts truly was, more than anything, a battle against ignorance. This is revealed in her constant appeals to her readers' sensibility and her emphasis on rational thinking as the means to repeal the Acts.

Martineau clearly saw the passing of the C.D. Acts as a result of ignorance and poor reasoning, like her secularist counterparts. In her first letter she highlights the ignorance of the legislators and of the English citizens, men and women alike, who have not objected to the passing of the laws. She, however, tends to put most of the blame on men "*whose duty it is to know better*".<sup>50</sup> Also, her statement that the Acts are "*weak in reason*"<sup>51</sup> occurs in almost all her letters. By emphasising the ignorance of the advocates of the laws and the English citizens Martineau persuades her readers to think about the Contagious Diseases Acts critically, assuming the role of an educator on the issue.

Even though Martineau emphasises the illogicality of the Acts throughout her four letters, she dives deeper to explain the main issues of the laws in her second and third letters (Thursday 30.12.1869). She uses logical and scientific methods in proving her points about the incompetence of the laws. Through practical reasoning and statistics on the spread of VD's and the occurrence of prostitution Martineau highlights the weak logic behind the laws.

First, she starts by explaining why the new legislation is counterproductive. She reasons that the occurrence of prostitution will rise due to the laws which enable prostitutes to "*pursue their trade under the sanction of Parliament*"<sup>52</sup> and makes young men recognise prostitution as "*necessary*". By "*rendering vice safe from its worst penalty*"<sup>53</sup> the laws provide men with the illusion of safety, with registered sex workers undergoing examinations to ensure the absence of VD's. Thus, the demand of prostitution grows, and the supply rises to meet it. With economic reasoning Martineau disproves the belief that the Acts would eventually lead to the diminishment of prostitution itself.<sup>54</sup>

After presenting the logical outcome of the Acts, Martineau moves on to show the evidence of their failure. In her third letter she justifies her argument by relying on the statistics of the case in the military and naval areas. She says that a "*faithful study*" opposed to the

---

<sup>50</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>51</sup> For example, Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>52</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Disease Acts II" *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>53</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Disease Acts II" *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>54</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 79.

untrustworthy reports of the “advocates” of the system demonstrates that the number of soldiers and sailors admitted to hospital is larger in the areas under the supervision of the Acts. She states that the statistical observations show that

*in some foreign stations where rigid supervision and regulation have existed for a course of years, the proportion to strength (the number of cases under the disease) of admissions to hospital per thousand is, to “unprotected” stations, as twelve to nine.*<sup>55</sup>

She continues with a comparison to France, the origin country of the regulation of prostitution. She relies on the authority of French medical professionals in stating that “*the estimate of the number of prostitutes [in Paris] mounts up to more than threefold [in comparison to London]*”.<sup>56</sup> According to Martineau, the French physicians’ writings appear to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the Acts: if the attempt to regulate prostitution is a failure in its origin country, why should it work in Britain either?

Martineau’s appeal to scientific statistics was in line with the works of her Christian counterparts in the LNA. The feminist repealers realized that in order to have a greater effect on their audience, they had to support their arguments with “scientific documentation of the failure of the Acts as sanitary and social legislation”.<sup>57</sup>

It is hard to say whether the amount of prostitution and spread of venereal disease increased due to the regulation or not. This is because both parties, the advocates and the opponents of the C.D. Acts, used statistics as propaganda for their cause. For example, Walkowitz has pointed out, that the statistics used by the repealers were “sensational and misleading” and “largely propagated by the medical profession”.<sup>58</sup>

Even though her Christian counterparts had adopted some of the same secular devices for their arguments, Martineau is set apart through her appeals to her reader’s rationality as opposed to their sense of religious morality, which was the key factor in many of the repeal women’s political rhetoric.<sup>59</sup> Martineau appears unique in the early repeal movement in her

---

<sup>55</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” *LDN*, 30.12.1869.

<sup>56</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” *LDN*, 30.12.1869.

<sup>57</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 124.

<sup>58</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 256.

<sup>59</sup> McHugh, 1980, 187.

effort to “convince through logic and reason, those who have proven themselves illogical and unreasonable”.<sup>60</sup>

Martineau’s appeal to her readers’ rationality can be seen in her logical reasoning throughout the letters, but at times it reaches a more demanding note. In her second letter Martineau appeals to her readers’ pride as intelligent humans by writing: *“law and Government [are] enlisted on the on the side of animal passion, and against the old institutions of Marriage and the Home”*.<sup>61</sup>

In describing men’s sexual urges as “animal passion” and contrasting it to the esteemed family life of the Victorian era, Martineau is contrasting irrationality and primitiveness to sophistication and intelligence. This was in accordance with the zeitgeist; the framing of various political, social and moral issues as dichotomies of civilized humanity and primitive beastliness was commonplace. It was to be expected of any self-respecting person to denounce so-called “animal” behaviour, and therefore it was effective as a rhetorical device.

Of course, many Christian activists also relied on the sacredness of the home, which played an important role in Victorian culture. Victorians valued family and the home life almost above anything; for them family was “an island of purity and peace”.<sup>62</sup> Therefore many of the repealers quite naturally appealed to the home in presenting the dangers of the C.D. Acts. However, Martineau’s way of using the home as a corner stone of civilisation to highlight the irrationality of the C.D Acts is what sets her apart from the rest.

Martineau’s belief in the power of reason as a catalyst for reform is most visible in her first letter. She advises all the legislators who *“know nothing of the matter”*<sup>63</sup> to

*study the question in the short time that remains, that they may be qualified to deal intelligently with the question of further extension, and to support the effort that will be made for the repeal of the Acts.*<sup>64</sup>

Her writing shows her reliance on the characteristic secularist notion of “self-responsible rational freedom”, which emphasises that the individual has a duty to make up her own mind

---

<sup>60</sup> Logan, 2002, 162.

<sup>61</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Disease Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>62</sup> Vicinus, 1972, xiii.

<sup>63</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts” *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>64</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts” *LDN*, 28.12.1869.



based on evidence.<sup>65</sup> Her words also show her faith in the legislators' ability to, upon reconsideration, see the Acts as the irrational and ineffective system that it is.

Martineau continues with reference to women's awakening on the matter of the C.D. Acts. She explains that the ignorance of her countrywomen on the subject is common, but that they are *"awaking, day by day, to a sense of the realities about them."*<sup>66</sup> She goes on to say: *"When the mind is awake all the rest follows of course."*<sup>67</sup> In her statement Martineau shows her belief in rationality as the key to social improvement: when individuals start to analyse their surroundings and think for themselves the social reform will naturally follow. The secularist thought of social improvement through eradication of ignorance is thus quite apparent in Martineau's letters.

For Martineau, appealing to science and reason was the way to social reform, in her autobiography she states: *"how much further sound reason and appeals to science go with the best of our people than a floating religiosity"*.<sup>68</sup> Even though Martineau refrains from such bold statements on the efficiency of religion as the key to social improvement, her reliance on science and rationality as the main solution can be seen quite clearly in her letters on the Contagious diseases Acts. Martineau's letters show that even over a decade later she still believed that the *"holy science"*<sup>69</sup> would be the remedy for social evil.

Considering Josephine Butler's position as the leader of the LNA, it is surprising how much Martineau's letters rely on secularist notions instead of Butler's Christian rhetoric. Butler believed that repeal of the C.D Acts could only be achieved through moral and social influences rooted in Christianity.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that she at times took issue with the more freethinking members of the organization.<sup>71</sup> This makes Martineau's role as the announcer of the LNA and its program unusual, since she was vocal about her atheist beliefs. One explanation for this is that Martineau was perhaps too influential to go

---

<sup>65</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>67</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 28.12.1869.

<sup>68</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography* (vol 1.), 1877, 428.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Martineau, *Autobiography* (vol 1.), 1877, 352.

<sup>70</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 1999, 100.

<sup>71</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 123.

unutilised.<sup>72</sup> Her bold writings on politics had stirred debate before<sup>73</sup> and made her famous and a controversial figure both in Britain and overseas.

---

<sup>72</sup> Logan, 2002, 216-17.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Martineau's writings on America and its practise of slavery in the 1830s received a lot of criticism. Logan, 2002, 90-93.

## 2. Martineau's motivation for political activism

In addition to being a legitimizer for political activism and a means of mobilizing people, religious faith also served as the greatest motivator for many of the repeal women. Christian repealers often felt they were "chosen by God" to help humanity<sup>74</sup>, and spiritual calling played a crucial role in the repeal efforts of many of the LNA women.

However, in their effort to improve moral standards, the upper-class women did use their position to control sex workers from lower-class origins. The moral reformist effort to spiritually save prostitutes and their goal of "guiding" them to Christianity and helping them become "good people" by example<sup>75</sup> shows their superior attitude, and their attempt to push their religious ideals and standards on to the lower-class women.

In examining Martineau's motivation behind her activism on the C.D. Acts, it is difficult to differentiate between her and her Christian co-activists. Her letters possess similar terminology on prostitution and an emphasis on sexual ideologies to that used by the Christian repealers'. For example, Martineau's constant victimization rhetoric and her description of prostitutes as "deluded"<sup>76</sup> can be connected to the moral reformists. However, the slight differences in her rhetoric on prostitution as well as her great effort to educate the public, sets her apart from her Christian repeal sisters.

### 2.1 Victims of men or society? Martineau's attitude towards women in the sex industry

Many of the women activists working with prostitutes emphasised the sisterhood and equality between women of different classes. However, their writings show that their true attitude towards the lower-class sex workers differed from this. In their writings repeal women often referred to prostitutes as "fallen" women. The term comes from the common

---

<sup>74</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 1999, 45-46, 96.

<sup>75</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 1999, 18, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts III" LDN, 30.12.1869.

argument of repealers that women had “fallen” into prostitution by seduction, and that prostitution existed only because of men.<sup>77</sup>

As Walkowitz has stated, describing prostitutes as fallen, passive victims of men’s lust worked as a political tool to get approval for the Cause.<sup>78</sup> However, this victimization tool used by middle-class women portrays sex workers as weak-willed victims, who cannot control their own life, thereby stripping lower-class prostitutes of their agency.<sup>79</sup> At the same time the term “fallen” emphasises their loss of respectability in Victorian society, highlighting the different status between chaste and unchaste women. By demoting sex workers to fallen women, the repealers seem to assert their authoritative status over them, which they legitimized by portraying it as motherly care.

This victimization trope is apparent in Martineau’s rhetoric as well, but one of the key differences between her and the other repealers’ is her abstention from using the term “fallen”.<sup>80</sup> However, in constantly referring to them as the “*victims of the vice of men*”.<sup>81</sup> Martineau also takes away the sex workers’ agency. Furthermore, by describing them as “*wronged and deluded*”<sup>82</sup> women, Martineau seems to support the repeal campaigners’ image of prostitutes as naïve girls, passive in their own life. However, by not depicting prostitutes as fallen Martineau refrains from drawing attention to the immoral status of sex workers.

In describing the “falling” into prostitution, it was common to use young women from rural areas as an example. Many repealers stated that young country girls were the most at risk of falling, because they were, due to their peaceful and simple environment, naïve to the evilness of the city’s upper-class men.<sup>83</sup> This example of seduction of rural girls can be seen in Martineau’s writing as well:

---

<sup>77</sup> Markkola, 2002, 213.

<sup>78</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 110-11.

<sup>79</sup> Lee, 2013, 68.

<sup>80</sup> She does refer to sex workers as “fallen” once in her last letter. However, the letter being a proclamation of the LNA and its program, it is likely that the association influenced the rhetoric of the list of objections in the end of the letter. Martineau “The Ladies National Association for the repeal of The Contagious Diseases Acts” LDN, 31.12.1869.

<sup>81</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” LDN, 29.12.1869.

<sup>82</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” LDN, 30.12.1869.

<sup>83</sup> This idea was also common among Finnish female repealers in the 1880s. The movement had drawn inspiration from their British sisters, especially Butler, for their own cause. Markkola, 2002, 221-22.

*many thousands of girls, as innocent as any of their countrymen, have been courted down in the rural districts. Each of these many thousands has probably believed herself the favourite of Fortune—destined to marry a great man. After an agonising decline she finds herself an outcast in the streets.*<sup>84</sup>

On top of emphasising the naïve picture of rural women, Martineau shares the repealers' inclination of exaggerating the numbers, as well as generalizing the causes of prostitution. It is true that some sex workers came to their field as a result of seduction, but the causes of prostitution were a lot more diverse than just the gullibility of young women. For example, poverty, low salaries, poor employment opportunities and, in some cases, even love of vanity were common reasons to enter the sex industry.<sup>85</sup> In many cases, women's move into prostitution was a "rational choice, given the limited alternatives open to them".<sup>86</sup>

Many of the secularist repealers also saw sex workers as victims, they described prostitutes as "women poor and friendless, who loathe the very trade they ply".<sup>87</sup> They however, blamed poverty as a cause of prostitution rather than seduction.<sup>88</sup> Thus, in the secularist notion, prostitutes were rather the victims of society than of men.

Martineau's reliance on victimization is surprising, considering that in reality she, together with the secularists of her time, thought prostitution to be a result of poor education and employment possibilities.<sup>89</sup> Her letters supports this: in her fourth letter (Friday 31.12.1869) Martineau refers to prostitutes as "*abandoned*"<sup>90</sup> which suggests more a failure of society generally than one of men specifically Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that some of Martineau's victimization rhetoric was purely a political tactic and may attest to the LNA's influence.

---

<sup>84</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts II" *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>85</sup> Sigsworth, Wyke (edited by Vicinus), 1972, 80-84.

<sup>86</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 161.

<sup>88</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 161.

<sup>89</sup> Logan, 2002, 148.

<sup>90</sup> Martineau "The Ladies National Association for the repeal of The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 31.12.1869.

Even though Martineau sticks to the common repeal rhetoric of victimizing prostitutes her victimization rhetoric does not only apply to them. In her last letter she hints that the whole female sex is “the victim of the vice”.<sup>91</sup>

Martineau’s victimization of women might be a sign of her belief in the Christian sexual ideology of the time.<sup>92</sup> However, by referring to all women as victims she again refrains from differentiating prostitutes from “chaste” women.

Martineau does however bring out the dichotomy of innocent and unchaste women by emphasising the danger which “innocent” upper-class women face under the legislation of the C.D. Acts. In her second letter she writes: “*Also innocent women suffer and are compelled to confess to sins which they did not commit*”.<sup>93</sup> She continues to say that the law does not make “*distinctions of degrees or kinds*” but that any woman can be charged by the police.

Her emphasis on the danger of the Acts for the upper classes continues in her third letter:

*the law is ostensibly framed for a certain class of women, but in order to reach these, all the women residing within the district where it is in force are brought under the provisions of the Acts.*<sup>94</sup>

In describing the disease (which ravages under the Acts) she again highlights the effect of the disease on the upper classes: “*disease poison the lives of a large proportion of the middle and upper classes*”.<sup>95</sup>

Many repeal campaigners addressed their speeches to upper-class men and women, firstly because they were seen as responsible for the exploitation of lower-class women<sup>96</sup> and, secondly, because their participation in the cause would have greater influence. Therefore, it could be argued that Martineau also emphasises the effect of the Acts on the upper classes in order to get them involved in the issue. At the same time, however, by describing sex

---

<sup>91</sup> Martineau “The Ladies National Association for the repeal of The Contagious Diseases Acts” LDN, 31.12.1869.

<sup>92</sup> The Victorian ideal woman was an innocent, pure lady. Women were seen as “sexless” and for respectable women sex was merely a wifely duty of “suffering and being still”. Sexual urges were only linked to men and women who seemed to enjoy sex were seen as abnormal and disgraceful. Vicinus, 1972, vii-xv.

<sup>93</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” LDN, 29.12.1869.

<sup>94</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” LDN, 30.12.1869.

<sup>95</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” LDN, 30.12.1869.

<sup>96</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 89-90.

workers as a “certain class of women” she highlights their separation from respectable women.

Even though Martineau at times depicts sex workers negatively as “offenders”<sup>97</sup> and “real sinners”<sup>98</sup> this actually gives more agency to prostitutes than the victimization narrative. At the same time, as noted in chapter 1, she states that prostitutes have always been in the same position as other men and women regarding personal rights, and they should continue to be so in terms of the British law. Therefore, even though she does not approve of their trade, Martineau emphasises their right to be treated as other women and men are.

Martineau’s recognition of the integrity of prostitutes in their chosen profession was shared by some of her Christian counterparts as well. For example, Josephine Butler acknowledged that even when selling their bodies, prostitutes like others, deserved to be respected and go “unmolested” by the police.<sup>99</sup> However, Butler, along with other moral reformists, emphasised the spiritual and physical rescue of fallen women, and saw this work as a “prime duty”.<sup>100</sup>

When prostitutes did not conform to the repealers’ wishes of spiritual and physical reformation, the moral reformists became morally indignant.<sup>101</sup> Prostitutes’ rebellious behaviour and lack of shame for their profession were seen as ingratitude or even childishness by the middle-class moral reformists, who had assumed the superior role of mothers of the “fallen”.<sup>102</sup> These encounters demonstrate the holier-than-thou attitude that often shined through the actions and words of the reformists – they obviously regarded their position as one of authority; and deciding the fates of the prostitutes as their prerogative.

It is not surprising that the aspect of saving prostitutes is quite absent in Martineau’s letters, given her atheist worldview of not believing in an afterlife. She does mention that “*the chance of retrieval has lately been cut off in this way from that class of women*”<sup>103</sup>, hinting at the popular moral reform ideal of saving “fallen” women from their doomed life.

---

<sup>97</sup> For example, Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts III” *LDN*, 30.12.1869.

<sup>98</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>99</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 130.

<sup>100</sup> Van Drenth, De Haan, 103.

<sup>101</sup> Walkowitz, 1980, 132.

<sup>102</sup> Markkola, 2002, 309.

<sup>103</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

Harriet Martineau's attitude differed from that of the Christian moral reformers, even though she shared their victimization rhetoric. She abstains from using the typical terminology of "fallen women" and does not focus on rescue work in her writing. Her different attitude can also be seen in her patriotic rhetoric demonstrated in chapter one. She stresses prostitute's legal equality to other English women and men and by refraining from using the common repeal rhetoric of motherhood, Martineau exhibits herself as more equal with the sex workers. However, in assuming the role of a popular educator she does elevate herself above her readers from all social classes.

## 2.2 Call of duty

As demonstrated earlier, Martineau's faith in reform through eradicating ignorance was firm. However, it can be argued that she saw educating the public not only as a means to an end, but something important in itself, making it her greatest motivator. Martineau's autobiography along with her letters support this view. Her constant emphasis on duty in her autobiography and her way of assuming the role of an educator in her letters (and in all of her writings for that matter) show her primary agenda, which resembles the spiritual calling of the Christian repealers but is nevertheless ultimately founded in the secularist ideals of the time.

Martineau's autobiography gives insight into her motivation. Mostly – and modestly – she accounts her great activist efforts to a binding sense of duty: "*things were pressing to be said*" and that for her it is "*always impossible to decline the duty*".<sup>104</sup> By constantly describing writing as her duty Martineau emphasises that her long career of educating the masses is something she has had no say in, something that had to be done by her and no one else. At the time there was scarcely better ways for a woman to fulfil such a pressing obligation to enlighten people than to write. She states: "*I wrote with a view to the people, and especially the most suffering of them*".<sup>105</sup> In writing so Martineau highlights her tendency to side with the weakest in society – as on the matter of the C.D. Acts – to the extent she could.

---

<sup>104</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography* (vol 1.), 1877, 187-189.

<sup>105</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography* (vol 1.), 1877, 236.



Martineau's constant emphasis on duty has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Many previous researchers have pointed out her idiosyncratic dedication to the secularist ideal to "contribute to the diffusion of the truth" and her "mission as a popular educator".<sup>106</sup> Martineau biographer Deborah Logan suspects her "passion for justice" to derive from her difficult childhood, which she states reflected the exploitative mentality which pervaded the era.<sup>107</sup> While the exact origins of her mission to right societal wrongs are unknown, her dedication towards it seems clear.

Even though Martineau's autobiography's contents must be questioned due to it being a memoir intended to be published, Martineau's dedication to duty and her righteous persona are not merely self-serving fiction. On many occasions she continued lobbying for justice, whether for the abolition of slavery or the rights of the lower classes, even after falling ill. In her autobiography she writes about intending to take a break "*which soon gave way now, before a call of duty which I grudgingly obeyed*".<sup>108</sup> This shows that, even when sick and exhausted, she truly felt compelled to work for the weaker. Her involvement in the repeal movement supports this. In 1869, when the letters were written, she had already retired due to her fragile health but "found that the urgency of the issue required" her to take on writing once again.<sup>109</sup> Her coming out of retirement, despite her illness and old age, illustrates her deep conviction to fight for women's rights.

Martineau believed that everyone had an obligation to society. In her autobiography she writes: "*Social affairs are the personal duty of every individual*".<sup>110</sup> This ideal appears in her letters on the C.D. Acts as well. She stresses in her third letter that taking part in society's matters is "*a duty incumbent upon us all in any case*".<sup>111</sup> In writing so, Martineau attempts to convey her sense of obligation to her readers and reveals her belief that bettering society is truly everyone's responsibility.

In her last letter that announces the LNA and its program she continues to say that campaigning against the Acts is a "*painful task which only a deep sense of duty could have*

---

<sup>106</sup> Boucher-Rivalain, 2012, 27-43.

<sup>107</sup> Logan, 2002, 20.

<sup>108</sup> Martineau, Autobiography (vol 2.), 1877, 220.

<sup>109</sup> Logan, 2002, 257.

<sup>110</sup> Martineau, Autobiography (vol 2.), 1877, 104.

<sup>111</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts III" *LDN*, 30.12.1869.

*forced us [the LNA women] to undertake.*<sup>112</sup> Considering that taking part in the matter of prostitution could be detrimental to a woman's reputation at the time, taking on the Contagious Diseases Acts was truly quite dangerous. However, as demonstrated in chapter 1, this rhetoric also served as Martineau's justification for women's participation in politics.

Martineau believed strongly that her duty as a journalist was to inform the public of the new legislation.<sup>113</sup> She attempted to raise public awareness even at the expense of her own fragile health. Why did Martineau feel obligated to leave her sickbed? One of Martineau's constant themes in the letters, the astonishment at the failure of the press and Parliament in informing the public, offers one explanation for her strong sense of duty in the particular case of the C.D. Acts.

The Contagious Diseases Acts passed relatively quietly, without the knowledge of the public.<sup>114</sup> It has been suggested that the enactment of the Reform bill diverted attention from the Contagious Diseases Acts, thus allowing the legislation to take place unnoticed.<sup>115</sup> Going by Martineau's letters, the public felt essentially betrayed by the trickery present in the passage of the laws. Against this backdrop it is no wonder the failure of the press came up more than once in her writing.

Firstly, Martineau blamed the press and Parliament for forcing women to participate in the repeal campaign:

*negligence of the press and of Parliament, which have imposed upon women the painful task of agitation for the recovery of what they have lost, and the vindication of what remains.*<sup>116</sup>

She again states that the repeal women's sacrifice demonstrates women were forced to campaign for the repeal because of the failure of the press to raise awareness of the Acts and the horrors they included. However, her emphasis on the failure of the press also reveals

---

<sup>112</sup> Martineau "The Ladies National Association for the repeal of The Contagious Diseases Acts" *LDN*, 31.12.1869.

<sup>113</sup> Logan, 2002, 160.

<sup>114</sup> McHugh, 1980, 38.

<sup>115</sup> McHugh, 1980, 42.

<sup>116</sup> Martineau "The Contagious Diseases Acts II" *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

her prior faith in its virtue as the platform for political discussion. In her fourth letter she continues to say:

*we hold that neither the representatives of the people nor the press fulfil their duties which are expected of them, when they allow such legislation to take place without the fullest discussion.*<sup>117</sup>

This matter is so important to Martineau (and the LNA) that she places it as the first item in the list of grounds for objecting to the Acts. This together with her appalled and amazed reaction to the fact that the Acts were “*effected in the dark and in silence*”<sup>118</sup> reveals the importance of the press to the Victorian people. At the same time, by highlighting the failure of the press in its main function, together with her emphasis on the ignorance of the legislators and medical professionals (see 1.2), Martineau justifies her position as the educator of the public on the matter of the C.D Acts.

Harriet Martineau’s sense of duty could be compared to the spiritual calling which the Christian repealers felt in their work. Martineau’s “call of duty” does share a similar characteristic as the compelling need to fulfil one’s Christian obligation to help others. However, as Schwartz has noted, the secularists shared a powerful sense of moral duty which “rivalled that of the most pious evangelical philanthropist”.<sup>119</sup> Martineau’s promotion of education can therefore be connected to the secularists, for their “moral duty” also involved bettering society through education, or the eradication of ignorance.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, it must be remembered that the female freethinkers’ Christian background had an impact on the birth of their secularist identity and did affect their new worldview.<sup>121</sup> It is likely that Martineau’s unitarian past surely had an influence on her political activism in her (secularist) old age as well.

---

<sup>117</sup> Martineau “The Ladies National Association for the repeal of The Contagious Diseases Acts” *LDN*, 31.12.1869.

<sup>118</sup> Martineau “The Contagious Diseases Acts II” *LDN*, 29.12.1869.

<sup>119</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 156.

<sup>120</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 78.

<sup>121</sup> Schwartz, 2013, 25-26.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined secularism in Harriet Martineau's political activism against the Contagious Diseases Acts. I have explored how Martineau's secularist beliefs show in her writing, how her rhetoric differed from that of the Christian repealers, and what ultimately motivated her secular activism.

Martineau's rhetoric reveals her secularist worldview quite clearly. In her attempt to unify and mobilize her readers she appeals to their sense of patriotism, instead of their religiosity. She argues that everyone holds the same status as English citizens, rather than as children of God. Patriotism also serves to justify women's involvement in the movement. This secular outlook is also apparent in her emphasis on science and rationality as the means for the repeal of the Acts. In her writing she explains the faults of the Acts and invites her readers to act rationally. Her secularist mission of eradicating ignorance is apparent in these appeals.

Martineau's autobiography together with her letters show what motivated her to take part in the repeal movement. Her letters reveal that she shared the Christian repealers thoughts on sex workers to some extent. The victimization of prostitutes is constant in her letters as well as the emphasis on the danger to the upper classes. However, Martineau refrains from differentiating prostitutes from other women by not referring to them as "fallen", which was common at the time. Declining to elevate herself above the sex workers as an authoritative mother figure, she portrays prostitutes more equitably than the Christian repealers'.

Martineau's lifelong mission to educate the masses can be seen as her greatest motivator, which her autobiography reveals she considered her personal duty. This conviction is shown in her letters, where she assumes the role of an educator. In addition to Martineau's personal worldview and motivation, the letters also reveal a great deal of Victorian culture. The struggle for women to enter politics as well as the depth of the class divide is apparent in the text.

Secularism in women's political activism leaves many possible avenues for future research – the relationship of secularist and Christian activists in Finland and their relation to the British activist, for example.

## Sources

### Primary sources

Martineau 1869: "Contagious Diseases Acts" *Daily News* (London, England), Tuesday, December 28, 1869; Issue 7382.

British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

Martineau 1869: "Contagious Diseases Acts II" *Daily News* (London, England), Wednesday, December 29, 1869; Issue 7383.

British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

Martineau 1869: "Contagious Diseases Acts III" *Daily News* (London, England), Thursday, December 30, 1869; Issue 7384.

British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

Martineau 1869: "The Ladies National Association for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts" *Daily News* (London, England), Friday, December 31, 1869; Issue 7385.

British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900.

Martineau 1877: *Harriet Martineau's autobiography Vol 1&2*

Smith, Elder & CO, London.

### Research literature

Boucher-Rivalain, Odile 2012: *Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), from Unitarianism to Agnosticism*. *Believing in Victorian Times*, 76 Automne | 2012 pp. 27-43.

Boyd, Nancy 1982: *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their world*.

The Macmillan Press LTD, London.

Columbia University: Content analysis. Read on 19.1.2020 at 15.32.

<https://www.mailman.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>

Lee, Catherine 2013: *Policing Prostitution, 1856-1886 : Deviance, Surveillance and Morality*

Routledge, New York.

Logan, Deborah Anna 2002: *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau's "Somewhat Remarkable" Life*.

Northern Illinois University Press.

Markkola Pirjo 2002: *Synti ja siveys: Naiset, uskonto ja sosiaalinen työ Suomessa 1860 –1920*  
Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki.

McHugh, Paul 1980: *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*.  
Routledge New York.

Melnyk, Julie 2008: *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain*.  
Westport, CT: Praeger.

Rogers, Helen 2000: *Women and the people: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England*.  
Routledge London.

Schwartz, Laura 2013: *Infidel feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914*.  
Manchester University Press.

Suvanto, Pekka 1977: *Yleisen historian lähteet ja niiden käyttö*.  
Gaudeamus, Helsinki.

The British Newspaper Archive: London Daily News. Read on 20.1.2020 at 19:25.  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/london-daily-news>

Vainio-Korhonen Kirsi 2018: *Musta-Maija ja Kirppu-Kaisa: Seksityöläiset 1800-luvun alun Suomessa*  
Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, Helsinki.

Van Drenth, Annemieke & De Haan, Fransisca 1999: *The rise of caring power : Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands*.  
Amsterdam University Press.

Vicinus, Martha 1972: *Suffer and be still: women in the Victorian age*.  
Methuen &Co. LTD.

Walkowitz, Judith 1980: *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*  
Cambridge University Press.

Webb, Richard 1960: *Harriet Martineau: A radical Victorian*  
Columbia University Press, New York.

Webster, Rachel 2019: *Community as Counterpublic: The Shield (1870–86) and the Campaign to Repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts*. *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Volume 52, Number 1, Spring 2019 pp. 146-165

Johns Hopkins University Press.