

INTRODUCTION

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A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work upon the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. The report of a provision for all that come fills the hall with numerous claimants. The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall, and by the clamorous importunity of those who are justly enraged at not finding the provision which they had been taught to expect.

T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*
(2nd ed., 1803)¹

First published in 1798, Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* was repeatedly revised by its author, the last version appearing eight years before his death in 1834: the same year that the New Poor Law Act, a piece of legislation inspired by his theories, was passed. Malthus's key theory in the *Essay* was that while the food supply expanded arithmetically, population grew geometrically, invoking the prospect of mass starvation as well as ever-increasing demands on the public purse by the indigent. The 1834 Act tore up the old paternalistic relation between rich and poor. Under its dispensation those who could not or would not work were denied charitable relief in their own homes and sent to the parish workhouse where the less-eligibility test was applied: the standard of subsistence for workhouse paupers was to be lower than that of the respectable poor man and woman outside its walls. Not only were the poor denied the public, paternal care of the state, but their poverty was further stigmatized by the suspension of their private family relations on entry to the workhouse: husbands were separated from wives, parents from children.

Perhaps the most famous literary protest at this abandonment of social paternalism is the orphaned Oliver's polite, twice-repeated request for more gruel in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838): 'Please, sir, I want some more'.² Ejected from the workhouse for his challenge to authority (or, to use Malthus's terms, his 'enraged'

¹ T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson, 1803), p. 531.

² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 13.

and ‘clamorous importunity’), Oliver exchanges one delinquent parent for another in the form of the criminal Fagin, who continues Malthusian logic by feeding him sausages as an inducement to a career in pickpocketing.³ As my opening quotation from the second edition of the *Essay* sets out, Malthus had argued that there was no place at the table for those who could not or would not labour; the non-productive citizen had ‘no claim of *right*’ to partake of ‘nature’s mighty feast’, especially as he or she imperilled the full bellies of those who had earned their share. This passage was excised from future editions, but such was the outcry at the terms Malthus used that it was never forgotten in the ensuing controversies his ideas provoked.⁴ His aim had been to warn the reader against what he saw as misplaced charity; that to show individual compassion toward the poor was really to be complicit in a larger social cruelty. The positive checks to population, death through famine, misery and war, were insufficient and preventive checks needed to be found. Among Malthus’s answers to the population problem was the production of fewer children through a combination of sexual self-restraint and late marriage. The reconfiguration of public and private attitudes to charity was an important part of disciplining the poor: an attempt to make them understand that they should not have children until and unless they could afford to support them. To his supporters, such as the writer on political economy, Harriet Martineau, Malthus was a ‘misrepresented’ man who spoke only ‘in the spirit of benevolence and candor [sic]’, while to detractors like the poet Robert Southey he was a ‘mischievous reptile’ whose ‘perfect system [...] would be to breed slaves and regulate population by the knife of the sow-gelder’.⁵

Whether praised or denounced, the provocations of Malthusian thinking proved influential across the nineteenth century and beyond. It was fundamental to the liberalism and feminism of J. S. Mill, for example, who also became an early enthusiast for birth control (never advocated by Malthus himself) and mounted a strong defence of Malthusianism in his seminal *Principles of Political Economy* (1848).⁶ Charles Darwin also acknowledged his debt to Malthus, confirming in his autobiography that reading the *Essay* in October 1838 had been pivotal in the

³ For more on *Oliver Twist* and political economy, see Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 92-105.

⁴ See Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of ‘Culture’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 1.

⁵ Harriet Martineau, *A History of the Peace: Being a History of England from 1816 to 1854. With an Introduction 1800-1915*, in *Harriet Martineau’s Writing on British History and Military Reform*, ed. by Deborah Logan, 6 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), vol. 1, p. 199; Letters from Robert Southey to John Rickman, 12th September 1803 and 8th February 1804, *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. by Kenneth Curry, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 327, 351, 821.

⁶ See particularly Book II, Chapters 11-13 of J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 2 vols. (London: J. W. Parker, 1848), vol 1.

development of the evolutionary theory set out in *Origin of Species* (1859).⁷ The significance of Malthus for Darwin's thought had not been lost on Karl Marx who, on re-reading the *Origin*, wrote to Friedrich Engels:

I'm amused that Darwin, at whom I've been taking another look, should say that he *also* applies the 'Malthusian' theory to plants and animals, as though in Mr Malthus's case the whole thing didn't lie in its *not* being applied to plants and animals, but only – with its geometric progression – to humans as against plants and animals. It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovers, among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes* [war of all against all].⁸

For Marx, Malthusian ideas were deeply implicated in the formation of the economic individualism that was the hallmark of Victorian capitalism. At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Malthus's image of the life-or-death fight to find a 'vacant cover' at 'nature's mighty feast' put into play, brutally and indelibly, the idea that entitlement to consume should be tied tightly to the ability to produce. As a result, the individual's relation to production and consumption was the gauge with which their social value should be measured. The five essays collected here in this special issue on production and consumption range across the century: from the radical conceptions of 'the People' in the work of William Hone in the 1820s through to questions of emancipation, technology and gender in Bram Stoker and Henry James at the fin de siècle. What is absolutely central to each of them in their different interrogations of production and/or consumption, however, is a concern with the part played by producing and consuming in the formulation of identity: whether that self-definition is being enacted through notions of gender, class or community.

In her essay on collecting and masculinity in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Kirby-Jane Hallum identifies a 'split distinction' within the concept of cultural capital 'between a feminine-coded consumption and a masculine-coded production' (p. 27). Using the work of Pierre Bourdieu to think through the role played by aesthetic appreciation in the novel in the formation of gender and class norms, Hallum compares the cultural capital of the wealthy upper-class art collector, Frederick Fairlie, with the middle-class artist, drawing master and art connoisseur, Walter Hartright. Both men are respectful of each another's tastes, of the other's ability to consume the beautiful object with a refined appreciation. This is the case

⁷ Charles Darwin, *Autobiographies*, ed. by Michael Neve and Sharon Messenger (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 72.

⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18th June 1862, *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, trans. by Richard Dixon and others, 50 vols. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975-2004), vol. 41, p. 381.

even though Fairlie's money means that he is able to accrue a collection, while Hartright cannot. Hallum argues that the novel marks, promotes and negotiates a shift in the definitions of what constituted cultural capital in the period, driven by the rise of a powerful middle class. In Hartright's particular case, his successful 'economic and social self-reinvention' (p. 43) is achieved through proofs of his potency in the arenas of consuming and (re)producing: his 'aesthetic appreciation of women' (p. 28) means he marries the beautiful Laura Fairlie and through her inherits the art collection and estate on her childless uncle's death.

Hallum also explores the more disturbing aspects of Hartright's desire to collect: where Fairlie catalogues his art objects, Hartright's obsessive tendencies are fixed on Laura, expressive of the collector's 'desire for mastery' (p. 43). The coding of consumption as feminine is troubled throughout the article, but perhaps nowhere more so than here in the image of Laura as consumed rather than consumer. The multiple meanings of women's self-definition in relation to consumption, whether through eating, fasting or a diseased wasting, are the focus of Lisa Coar's essay. Reading works such as Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), Lewis Carroll's two *Alice* stories (1865, 1871), and George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) as (and also against) Victorian strictures concerned to regulate the gustatory practices of nubile young women, Coar exposes the extent to which girls were snarled in a web of 'contradictory rubric regarding consumerist practice' (p. 48). What is especially striking is her establishment of a complicated relation between eating and erotic desire in the period. As we have seen, for Malthus and his followers not eating more than one's entitlement was an established social good. However, Coar describes a culture that not only associated voracious hunger with sin, 'idolised the frugal appetite' (p. 50) in children, and praised the self-restraint of the non-consuming, ethereal girl, but also went so far as to find her child-like, wasted figure sexually arousing. In Malthus's theory, the reward for sexual restraint was that it would heighten desire, making its eventual consummation more pleasurable. Here, though, the pleasure appears to belong to one sex only. Seen through a Malthusian lens, the spectacle of a vampiric Victorian male desire feeding itself by pressuring nubile young women into reducing their appetites raises intriguing questions about the gendering of sexual self-definition through consumption.

Where Coar focuses on the (non)consuming female body, for Laura James it is the producing female body that is the scene of 'staged eroticisation' (p. 93) in the theatre of the workplace. Discussing the representation of women's labour as typists and telegraphists in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Henry James's story *In the Cage* (1898), she builds on the work of critics such as Morag Shiach to counter and complicate Friedrich Kittler's argument about the emancipatory employment opportunities for women brought about by new technologies of communication at the fin de siècle. Stoker's typist, Mina Harker, and James's unnamed telegraphist are both devourers and transmitters of other people's stories, becoming eroticized figures as

‘the sexual and the textual’ (p. 94) converge in their labour to create ‘coherent narrative’ (p. 98) from the lives of others. This meeting of machinery, literary production and employment might appear to have liberating possibilities for women but, as Laura James argues, this is undercut as the erotic potential of each working woman is safely contained within a domestic ending. A maternal future is implied for each of them by their creators because, she suggests, ‘if women are working and textually reproducing, then they are likely not to be fulfilling their “natural” function’ (p. 100). To defeat this threat, ‘sexual reproduction must replace textual reproduction’ (p. 100).

Fin-de-siècle gender norms dictated that women should substitute one type of labour for another. Jordan Kistler’s essay, by contrast, clarifies the process through which the poet Arthur O’Shaughnessy comes to redefine labour itself in his poetry. Focusing particularly on his collection, *Songs of a Worker* (1881), Kistler notes how O’Shaughnessy ‘straddles the line between a Ruskinian utility-based art appreciation and the need for art to be governed by nothing but beauty’ (p. 74). She locates his allegiance to both theories in his dissatisfaction with his tedious clerical work at the British Museum. His alienation from his labour in his day job drove his need to ‘find the act of production in the creative’ (p. 85) and so led to his redefinition of art as work. In a careful reading of the poem ‘Song of a Fellow-Worker’, Kistler considers how O’Shaughnessy compares the sculptor’s carving of stone with the poet’s carving of thought, ‘both crafting something new’ (p. 85) and both working for the greater good of society. As O’Shaughnessy positions the poet’s labour within a wider community of workers, Kistler concludes that in *Songs of a Worker* he comes closest to ‘unifying the seemingly disparate concepts of “art for art’s sake” and “art for humanity’s sake” in one productive aesthetic theory’ (p. 88). What is particularly notable about O’Shaughnessy’s forging of poetic identity here is that it seems less about gender than about class: Kistler’s discussion produces a democratic image of artistic production taking place in a communion of labour from which the elitism of the Aesthetic movement stands above and apart.

This image of communal work leads us, finally, to Lucy Hodgetts’s essay on the shared participation of the People in the making of William Hone’s *Every-Day Book* (1825-6), a calendar of English historical events, feast days, pagan customs, and more. To create this ‘antiquarian bricolage’ (p. 8), Hone drew on reminiscences and factual information provided by his readers, thereby producing a ‘collaboratively authored record of popular culture’ (p. 8). Hodgetts’s aim in this piece is to examine the radical Hone’s ‘demotic concept of the people’ (p. 8) and to present his *Book* as an innovative publishing project in which literature became a form of shared property, breaking down the distinction between high and low political culture. Her analysis of the work is thus situated in a detailed discussion of the rise of a new reading public and of mass culture in the early part of the nineteenth century. As Hodgett notes, Hone’s egalitarian conception of the book’s readership was that it

should accommodate all strata of society: parents and children; masters and servants; men and women from the mansion to the cottage. In their joint roles as contributors and readers, they were partaking in ‘the formation of their own cultural history’ (p. 14), creating a shared identity as the People. What Hodgett shows is the way in which Hone’s *Every-Day Book* embraced not just the mass, but also the heterogeneous, the miscellaneous and the eccentric. Readers’ consumption of the *Book* is allied to production, but both activities take place within a framework of collective rather than individual enterprise. Published in the period when Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* was still being revised, reprinted and hotly debated, Hone’s literary celebration of plenty and sociality thus poses a challenge to Malthusian fears of scarcity and the crowd. Malthus may have anchored individual worth to the ability to produce and consume in 1803 but, as the essays in this issue amply demonstrate, the ways and means through which ‘worth’ was constituted came to be contested and reimagined in complex ways in literature across the nineteenth century. Ending on this note, I must thank and extol the contributors and the editorial team of *Victorian Network* who, in a spirit of shared endeavour, have combined to make work a pleasure.

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