Hannah More and the English Poor

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Eighteenth-Century Life, Volume 25, Number 2, Spring 2001, pp. 237-251 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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Hannah More and the English Poor

Hannah More was one of those fortunate human beings who fit precisely into their society and so garner much praise for their actions and much psychological comfort from their situation. She lived a marvelously successful life, celebrated for her goodness and talent. The ideology of her works, which sold in enormous numbers, reflects the dominant ideas of the influential strata of her society, who praised and made use of her talents toward what for them seemed immediate social and political needs. Her reemergence into importance in the work of today’s critics is only a minor reflection of the fame she experienced in her own time. This reemergence is in some cases quite ironic, because the extremely conservative eighteenth-century writer is redrawn as a standard-bearer for late-twentieth-century feminist concerns. Within such a context, we would do well to recall that More’s most famous and influential works directly respond to the terror upper-class English society felt in the face of the French Revolution. More is the precise opposite of a revolutionary: she is indeed a standard-bearer, but for the status quo.

The problem with More is that while she is a most interesting figure, her ideas are largely repugnant to modern sensibilities. Critics often deal with this inconvenience either by apologizing for their subject or by changing what she says so that she seems closer to us in spirit. But although More’s position on social issues is not in harmony with ours, it is entirely representative of her own times. Her full welcome into the most influential circles—she was a Bluestocking and an intimate of Samuel Johnson and his friends—points to this acceptance by her peers. The extraordinary sales of her Cheap Repository Tracts attest to the chord she struck in her own society. And when we look at eighteenth-century laws regarding the poor, and contemporary commentary on those Poor Laws, we understand just how accurately More reflects the spirit of her time.

More’s most recent biographer, Patricia Demers, makes a charmingly earnest effort “to deal justly with Hannah More,” although that “means admitting both the expansiveness and the limitations of her charity, methodology, and vision.” She worries about “how to accord justice” to this woman “who is—and, as some would argue, always was—so devastatingly out of step.... More’s central belief in a natural hierarchical social order...is now angering in its condescension and immobility” (p. 2). More’s work “is now widely assumed to have been a narrow exercise of knowing and keep-
Feminist criticism has been understandably and rightly severe about More’s dedication to the doctrine of the two spheres and her solemn discourses on submission” (p. 21). Gamely, Demers insists that More “is altogether more complex and conflicted than most detracting comments or piecemeal excerpts indicate” (p. 22). Mitzi Myers, delighted to have found a female eighteenth-century writer who was clearly successful, largely rewrites More so that her “didactic” works “scarcely stand second to the canonical novel in interest and importance” in terms of “what they reveal about women.” More becomes “a pioneer social novelist” (p. 267), although Myers is talking about short tales. Ignoring entirely the form More used for the tracts, Myers insists that “Transcribing her society’s exigent problems into fiction, More helped give the novel a new seriousness, relevance, and direction” (p. 267). More’s tales, designed to teach the poor to be satisfied with their lot in life and those better off how to help the poor without raising them too much, become in Myers’ reading fresh literary analogues of urgent social awareness; her thematic message of domestic heroism occasions a new domestic realism, ideas and aesthetics are generated from the woman novelist’s characteristic stance. In its complex mix of literary and cultural innovation, More’s Repository illustrates how women’s educative and caretaking role fed into new strains of social fiction, and her work exemplifies how women could translate female ideology’s didactic imperative into an authoritative voice capable of documenting and interpreting historical realities. (p. 268)

Other recent readers fall somewhere between Myers’ and Demers’ readings; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, for example, presents a rather strange More who, along with sister Patti, has a morbid response to the physical nature of the poor; much of Kowaleski-Wallace’s discussion centers on “the ‘grotesque’ body” and More’s presumed need to tame it, especially in the poor. In other words, Kowaleski-Wallace, like Myers, reshapes a More who fits her own interests. The very title of her book, in fact, suggests a biased reading: Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity.³

So the More that contemporary critics discuss is troubling and, in Kowaleski-Wallace’s case, troubled. What we don’t get is much of an eighteenth-century More, and before I get to my own discussion of More’s work—my own discomfort with More’s perspectives apparent at many points—I want to present a context for her ideas by looking first at some aspects of the eighteenth-century’s Poor Laws. As we shall see when we look at More’s Tracts, the stories are largely directed at helping the poor so that they can continue to work. This connection between relief and labor goes back in English history at least to the Middle Ages, as does More’s insistence that only the laboring poor (with perhaps the addition of the truly disabled) should be helped.³ More’s poor people, except for a scurvy few, are lovely folks. They respect their betters, they work hard all day and continue to work by the light of one candle at night. They are
heart-warmingly grateful for any help from their superiors, but they would
never demand any aid—and, in fact, should they (unlikely case) ever be
offered more than a modicum of help, they would turn it down, for they
are content with what they have and grateful for their “blessings.” They
are, in short, the upper-class’s ideal, fantasy poor.

There are actually two sets of contexts for the Cheap Repository Tracts:
first, the assumptions shared by most of upper-class England in More’s
time about the poor and their place in society, and, second, the horror
with which so many in the upper classes viewed the political turmoil in
England that was a response to the events in France. In short, many in
More’s class were terrified that what had happened in France was going
to happen in England. This fear had adequate ground; the discontent to
which Tom Paine gave voice and direction in *Rights of Man* (two parts,
1791–92) was indeed widespread and potentially dangerous to the stabil-
ity of English society. To understand what More is doing in the Cheap
Repository Tracts, it is necessary to know that these tracts are a conscious,
and essentially commissioned, response to Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Jonathan
Wordsworth tells the familiar story: Bishop Porteus begged More to pro-
duce a response to the revolutionary pamphlets in circulation in the early
1790s. It was, More writes, to be “some little thing, tending to open [the
lower order of people’s] eyes under their present wild impressions of lib-
erty and equality.” Wordsworth comments that More “was an effective
propagandist” (p. 4). But Wordsworth’s account, like that of most critics
whose focus is on the stories themselves, somehow misses the urgency of
the social warfare played out in the 1790s. For this, we must turn to the
historians.

To understand what More was doing for the poor in her stories one
must first read E. P. Thompson’s classic *The Making of the English Working
Class*. It needs to be emphasized that those sweet, malleable poor and
laboring people whom we meet in More’s stories are rather far from the
poor and laboring classes that More’s class actually perceived. There was
real fear among the “Church and King” party (Thompson takes this label
from Burke via Paine) that, sufficiently incited, the lower classes might
rise up with formidable power. A demonstration in Copenhagen Fields
(Islington) drew more than 100,000 people. The economic situation of
the poor was at this time especially severe. Thompson reminds us that
“there was actual starvation in London” (p. 143). People talked about
taking away aristocratic land holdings. Thomas Spence, author of “an-
other *Rights of Man*...that goes farther than Paine’s,” explicitly wants to
expropriate the lands of the aristocrats: “Do you think Mankind will ever
enjoy any tolerable degree of Liberty and Felicity, by having a Reform in
Parliament, if Landlords were still suffered to remain?... A Convention
or Parliament of the People would be at eternal War with the Aristocracy”
(Thompson, p. 138). A pamphlet of 1794 titled *Revolutions without Blood-
shed* demanded, among other things, reform of the Poor Laws and of the
Game Laws and work for the unemployed (Thompson, p. 144).

The most dangerous pamphlet, of course, was Paine’s *Rights of Man*. 
One Christopher Wyvill, whom Thompson characterizes as a “moderate Yorkshire reformer,” nonetheless wrote in 1792 that “‘If Mr. Paine should be able to rouse up the lower classes, their interference will probably be marked by wild work, and all we now possess, whether in private property or public liberty, will be at the mercy of a lawless and furious rabble’” (p. 24). If these were “moderate” sentiments, it is not hard to guess the responses of the more conservative. Paine was not the only voice espousing the radical cause, nor had the radical movement erupted suddenly with the appearance of Rights of Man. As early as 1776 Dr. Price’s Observations of Civil Liberty had “achieved the remarkable sale of 60,000 within a few months” (p. 27). (These and other “remarkable” figures should be kept in mind to bring a bit of wholesome skepticism to the “millions” in sales universally claimed for More’s Cheap Repository.)

But in the 1790s the perceived threat seemed very alarming.

A large part of the upper-class discomfort centered on the fear that if the poor once noticed that they had human, or spiritual, value just as their “betters,” social order might become too difficult to maintain. Thompson’s analysis of mob behavior as an instrument of protest, as in the many food riots from the 1760s on, shows that the laboring classes and the poor were quite active in masses working together. When in the nineties the laboring poor seemed increasingly vulnerable to radicalization—a radicalization fueled to a large extent by a campaign to distribute Paine’s writings to the lower classes—the upper classes recognized that they had to fight back. Hannah More was the weapon of choice. Her first story directed to this lower-class audience, Village Politics (1793), was commissioned just for this purpose of counter-propaganda.

More and her friends had good reason to be horrified by the Rights of Man. Paine’s book (although Rights of Man usually is referred to as a “pamphlet,” both parts together run to 246 pages in a recent edition), is essentially an economic treatise that argues for an entire change in the distribution of the wealth of the nation. Rights of Man is an extraordinary work: it is as if Paine simply reinvents everything in the English system of government that had been taken as given, or perhaps even God-ordained. This last is not merely a figure of speech, for the “Church and King” party, including Burke, insisted that the standing paradigm of English society is God-ordained. More, we will see, argues repeatedly that to raise the poor from their poverty is to attempt to change God’s plan. Paine leaves God entirely out of the question, seeing hereditary monarchy as no more than a laughably inadequate—but highly expensive—system of handing on power. He views primogeniture as a corrupt and, again, socially expensive system for handing on property, and the current system of taxation as one that produces, and ensures, the continuance of a large class of poverty-stricken, powerless men.

In response to Paine’s perceived rabble rousing, More’s Village Politics includes the following discussion between “Jack” and “Tom.” Jack asks Tom why he looks so unhappy—can’t find work, maybe? Tom says there’s
"work plenty enough, if a man had but the heart to go to it." Jack notices Tom’s book.

Jack. What book art reading?...

Tom. (looking on his book.) Cause enough. Why I find here that I’m very unhappy, and very miserable; which I should never have known if I had not had the good luck to meet with this book. O ‘tis a precious book!

Jack. A good sign, though, that you can’t find out you’re unhappy without looking into a book for it! What is the matter?


Jack. Liberty! That’s bad, indeed. What! has any one fetched a warrant for thee? Come, man, cheer up, I’ll be bound for thee....

Tom. No, no, I want a new Constitution.

Jack. Indeed! Why I thought thou had’st been a desperate healthy fellow. Send for the doctor directly.

Tom. I’m not sick; I want Liberty and Equality, and the Rights of Man.9

More goes on in this way, taunting good Englishmen who would want to follow the French—the English system is as good as government can be, and as for equality, there can be no such thing, since men by nature differ in their talents. By the end of *Village Politics* good Tom has been thoroughly reeducated; after a round of singing "O the roast beef of England" he is off to the local tavern to put a stop to the "mischief" of those unpatriotic troublemakers who would challenge good old English ways.

*Village Politics* was soon followed by the Cheap Repository Tracts, which began to appear in March 1795. Jonathan Wordsworth sees the tracts as a response to Paine’s *Age of Reason* (two parts, 1794–95); but they clearly deal with many of the issues raised in *Rights of Man*, as the "Preface" to *Village Politics: Addressed to All the Mechanics, Journeymen, and Labourers, in Great Britain* in the 1830 collected edition of More’s work makes clear:

> Those who remember the beginning of the French Revolution need not to be reminded how much the lower classes of this country were in danger of being infected with the principles which occasioned it.... The alarm was aggravated by the eager circulation of numerous tracts subversive of all government, social order, and religion. By the activity of Paine and his adherents these were not only dispersed in the cottage and the workshop, but found in great numbers on the public roads, and at the bottom of mines and coal-pits. At this crisis some persons of high eminence, both in church and state, prevailed on the Author to use her humble efforts to aim at counteracting these pernicious publications by tracts of an opposite tendency. This little piece was hastily written, and many hundred thousand copies were circulated in a short time.... The success of this little tract encouraged her to pursue the idea, and the establishment of the Cheap Repository was the consequence.

(3:363)
The tracts of the Cheap Repository represent a much more ambitious project than \textit{Village Politics}, for they attack a broad range of social issues. They are designed, like \textit{Village Politics}, to keep the poor in line by convincing the poor of their contentment and persuading them that their position in society is the best they can enjoy. She will convince them that they would not want anything more, even if it were offered to them: hard, unremitting labor is not only their lot in life but their pleasure. In articulating these concepts More expresses to an extraordinary degree the social thinking of her class. Politically, as we have seen, the lower classes had come to be perceived as a threat, but economically, too, they were a problem because by the 1790s the taxes to support the poor rates posed a heavy burden to any above the level of poverty. Many contemporary commentators noted that in a significant number of cases these taxes could tip the balance from sufficiency to poverty for a working family. But the real concern was for those better off, whose taxes grew ever higher as the numbers of the poor grew ever larger.

Joseph Townsend's \textit{A Dissertation on the Poor Laws} (1786) is typical of these analyses of the Poor Laws. Widespread, unmediated charity ruins societies, Townsend says. Not only is the national economy destroyed, but so too are the individual objects of the charity. Making precisely the point More will make in “The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain” and other stories, Townsend insists that the poor must help themselves through their own efforts—that, in fact, help from outside is no help at all. The only useful help to give the poor is to give them work. “He, who statedly employs the poor in useful labour, is their only friend; he, who only feeds them, is their greatest enemy. Their hopes and fears should centre in themselves: they should have no hope but from their own sobriety, diligence, fidelity, and from the well-earnt friendship of their employers.” Note the emphasis on the “well-earnt friendship” of the employer; More, too, repeatedly shows us that the well-off may be a source of aid, especially in emergencies, but only to those who have earned such aid through diligent, even health-shattering, attention to the interests of their “employers.” The poor have security, then, as long as they are careful not to “forfeit...by their misconduct, that favour and protection which would be their principal resource in times of sickness and distress” (p. 26).

For Townsend as for More the poor are a part of nature, their place God-ordained; their function in the natural economy, as Ashley Montagu remarks in the foreword to the \textit{Dissertation}, “is to cooperate with nature in making its wealth available by extracting it from the soil so that it can then be converted into consumable form.” Townsend writes,

\begin{quote}
It seems to be a law of nature, that the poor should be to a certain degree improvident, that there may always be some to fulfill the most servile, the most sordid, and the most ignoble offices in the community. The stock of human happiness is thereby much increased, whilst the more delicate are not only relieved from drudgery, and freed from those occasional employments which would make them miserable, but are left at liberty, without
\end{quote}
Townsend believes that trying to change this natural hierarchy goes against the intention of God himself, and is, therefore, evil. To Townsend, the poor laws, and the attendant laws limiting the free movement of beggars and laborers, seem directed precisely at remaking God’s natural order.

As More shows in story after story, the poor should get just enough to stay at a sustainable level of subsistence. One major exception is the poor apprentice who through diligent attention to his duties slowly rises to the position of independent master. Both “The Two Shoemakers” and “The History of Tom White,” More’s first story for the Repository, illustrate such successes. This exception to More’s general rule seems premised in the difference between the rural, or agricultural, poor and those who work in trades: trade can expand and absorb new men, while agriculture, based in land, cannot; and the fixed land distributions, in More’s view, should not be disturbed. In an agricultural context, satisfaction with one’s lot is framed as the most appropriate ambition.

Thus, “The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain” begins with “Mr. Johnson, a very worthy, charitable gentleman” (3:376), coming upon a shepherd “busily employed with his dog in collecting together his vast flock of sheep” (3:398). Mr. Johnson notices immediately that the shepherd’s clothes, while denoting his poverty, are well mended, patched, and clean. Mr. Johnson remarks to himself on the good housewife to whom the shepherd must be married. The first lesson More will teach, then, is about how the good housewife, through her hard work and management, prevents her family’s poverty from being a burden. The responsibility for decent living is hers; the question is not one of getting more, but of making do with what she has. So important is this lesson that it continues for two more paragraphs before we get back to the shepherd himself. More underscores her lesson:

This furnishes a rule of judging by which one shall seldom be deceived. If I meet with a labourer, hedging, ditching, or mending the highways, with his stockings and shirt tight and whole, however mean and bad his other garments are, I have seldom failed, on visiting his cottage, to find that also clean and well ordered, and his wife notable, and worthy of encouragement. Whereas a poor woman, who will be lying a-bed, or gossiping with her neighbours, when she ought to be fitting out her husband in a cleanly manner, will seldom be found to be very good in other respects. (3:399)

The irony of the several recent studies that discuss Hannah More in a feminist context is powerful; for More clearly says that women, especially poor women, should be something quite close to the servants of their
husbands. While the poor man should be happy with his subservient and often dependent state, the poor woman is doubly subservient; for she is at the disposal of her husband as well as of his masters. Her job is to “fit out her husband” and keep his cottage clean with whatever means she has.

These themes are repeated often in the Cheap Repository Tracts. The stories tell the poor how to behave and instructs those who would be their benefactors how to help them to be productive in their poverty. And so Mr. Johnson is “not more struck with the decency of [the shepherd’s] mean and frugal dress, than with his open honest countenance, which bore strong marks of health, cheerfulness, and spirit” (3:399). The poor in More’s stories generally exhibit good health and cheerfulness as long as they behave properly, that is, as long as they work hard, give themselves no airs and have no pretensions to luxuries (or even necessities) above their station, and, of course, as long as they are good Christians. One of More’s primary purposes in the Tracts is to foster appreciation of and belief in Christianity, and she ties poverty and belief together at every point. Belief supports poverty, making any burden not merely less irksome but simply not burdensome at all.

Thus the “Shepherd of Salisbury Plain” turns from the Shepherd’s orderly outward appearance directly to that inward state so well represented by his outward demeanor. The shepherd, not surprisingly, is fully satisfied with his lot in life since this is the state that God has given him. Mr. Johnson remarks that “Y ours is a troublesome life,” to which the shepherd responds, “To be sure, sir... ’tis not a very lazy life; but ’tis not near so toilsome as that which my GREAT MASTER led for my sake; and he had every state and condition of life at his choice... while I only submit to the lot that is appointed me” (3:400–01). Of course the Bible is a great comfort to the shepherd in his troubles, which, although the shepherd says he has “but little cause to complain, and much to be thankful” (3:404), might seem significant to us. He, his wife, and his eight children live in a two-room hovel that barely has a chimney and the roof of which leaks prodigiously. But, the shepherd notes, “many better men have been worse lodged” (3:405)—in prisons and dungeons, for example—and his family doesn’t need much of a chimney anyway, since “we have seldom smoke in the evening, for we have little to cook, and firing is very dear in these parts” (3:404). The only real problem is that his sickly wife is not aided by the rain that beats through the thatched roof when she is in bed!

This exemplary woman, like her exemplary children, has no complaints. The shepherd is very proud of her; for she is “not only the most tidy, notable woman on the plain, but she is the kindest wife and mother, and the most contented, thankful Christian that I know” (3:410). Struck by a “violent fit of the rheumatism, caught by going to work too soon after her lying-in” (3:410), she becomes paralyzed, losing the use of all but her hands. This is truly a blessing, as both she and her husband see the situation; for, not even able to “turn in her bed,” she can still “contrive to patch a rag or two for her family” (3:410). More emphasizes her point:
“She was always saying, had it not been for the great goodness of God, she might have had her hands lame as well as her feet, or the palsy instead of the rheumatism, and then she could have done nothing; but nobody had so many mercies as she had” (3:410). And indeed, the “mercies” are many: a shilling from the minister allows the shepherd to “buy a little ale and brown sugar to put into her water-gruel, which...made it nice and nourishing” (3:414). And yet more wondrous, someone else bestows upon them “two warm, thick, new blankets” (1:28) and half a crown. The shepherd enthuses, “Thus...have our lives been crowned with mercies. My wife got about again, and I do believe, under Providence, it was owing to these comforts; for the rheumatism...without blankets by night, and flannel by day, is but a baddish job, especially to people who have little or no fire. She will always be a weakly body; but, thank God, her soul prospers and is in health” (3:415).

The children, naturally, work too. Even the smallest can pick “bits of wool...out of the brambles...they carry this wool home, and when they have got a pretty parcel together, their mother cards it” (3:408–09). So even the children “who are too little to do much work” (3:408) can make themselves useful in the family economy. More footnotes this particular part of the story, assuring us that “This piece of frugal industry is not imaginary, but a real fact, as is the character of the shepherd, and his uncommon knowledge of the Scriptures” (3:408). The mother cards the wool,

for she can sit and card in the chimney-corner, when she is not able to wash, or work about [sic] house. The biggest girl then spins it; it does very well for us without dyeing, for poor people must not stand for the colour of their stockings. After this our little boys knit it for themselves, while they are employed in keeping cows in the fields, and after they get home at night. As for the knitting which the girls and their mother do, that is chiefly for sale, which helps to pay our rent. (3:409)

The deserving poor, then, should be ready to work continuously, even in the interstices of other labor. No matter how sick or tired or young, the worker should be occupied. And by no means should he expect to keep the better products of his craft, which should be sold to keep himself afloat. Note too the emphasis on work for all the children, including even the youngest. Mr. Johnson, as he leaves the shepherd, “on the whole...was more disposed to envy than to pity the shepherd. ‘I have seldom seen,’ said he, ‘so happy a man’” (3:415–16).

The Tracts present a world of extraordinary order in which it is by no means easier or pleasanter to be rich than to be poor, and in which virtue—especially Christian virtue—is itself a sufficient organizing principle for all social and familial relationships. Everything is always for the best, because when bad things happen to bad people, justice is done, and when bad things happen to good people, it strengthens them as Christians. The social hierarchy not only is recognized but applauded, for More sees
satisfaction with one’s lot as a sign of resignation to the will of God—and if God decided that someone is to be poor, then it is the poor man’s duty to accept it. Further, it is his duty to treat his betters as he would want to be treated were he in their place: he must be as honest and as productive as possible in the interest of those he serves. Much as children with parents, those in the lower reaches must work hard and obediently for their masters. Work, along with religion, is very good for the poor: More prefers that even their “leisure” be filled up with work. Only this kind of poor family is worth the richer person’s compassion and aid; and the poor who do not work constantly and who do not keep themselves and their (few) possessions in as good repair as possible, do not deserve, and should not expect, help from those above them.

In the story "Black Giles the Poacher: Containing Some Account of a Family Who Had Rather Live By Their Wits Than their Work," we know at once that "Poaching Giles" and his family can’t be worth much because his is "that mud cottage, with the broken windows, stuffed with dirty rags.... You may know the house at a good distance by the ragged thatch on the roof, and the loose stones which are ready to drop out of from the chimney" (4:115). More explains that "a short ladder, a hod of mortar, and half an hour’s leisure time, would have prevented all this, and made the little dwelling tight enough" (4:115). But More is quite sure it is not carelessness only that makes Giles neglect his house; he thinks the appearance of disrepair and need will attract compassion. Not so, insists More; this kind of sloppiness only excites disgust in the rich.

Giles fell into the common mistake, that a beggarly looking cottage, and filthy ragged children, raised most compassion, and of course drew most charity. But as cunning as he was in other things he was out in his reckoning here; for it is neatness, housewifery, and a decent appearance, which draw the kindness of the rich and charitable, while they turn away disgusted from filth and laziness, not out of pride, but because they see that it is next to impossible to mend the condition of those who degrade themselves by dirt and sloth; and few people care to help those who will not help themselves.                                                                                       (4:116)

More’s assumptions here are central to her view of the compact between rich and poor. If the rich do choose to help the poor, their aid is strictly a matter of voluntary charity. That “kindness” is drawn forth by their own sense of the deserving nature of the individual case. People do not care to help those who do not seem to be making the maximum efforts to help themselves. Thus, in the case of Giles and his children, the charity that they hope for is deflected by their own obvious unworthiness.

Giles and his family are to stand as lessons to the poor about how not to conduct themselves; but this story, like so many of the Tracts, also aims to teach the rich how to act toward the poor. Thus More disapprovingly notes that Giles tries to train his children to “tumbling” for the diversion of travelers,” warning that only the “unthinking” traveler will respond to
such behavior with “a reward instead of a reproof” (4:117–18). Even further, More wants “to put all gentlemen and ladies in mind that such tricks are a kind of apprenticeship to the trades of begging and thieving; and that nothing is more injurious to good morals than to encourage the poor in any habits which may lead them to live upon chance” (4:118).

Black Giles and his wife Tawny (!) Rachel are incorrigible. We know this because in addition to all the other bad things they do, they not only do not go to church but keep Sunday as a regular work day. In fact, since all good people are in church on Sunday, that day presents for Giles and his family an especially good opportunity to pilfer while property lies unguarded and vulnerable. Tawny Rachel uses Sunday as her one day for domestic work; the rest of the week she too is busy at different scams. Giles and Rachel are thoroughly corrupt. Dishonest themselves—Giles as rat-catcher plants rats to make sure of work—they train their children to be dishonest too. When the kindly minister shows favor to young Dick, giving him a job planting beans, Giles takes the beans from the contentedly working child and forces Dick to dump them on the ground rather than sow them—not forgetting to keep some for himself, however.

This is the man who turns in “poor Jack Weston, an honest fellow in the neighborhood” (4:125), for poaching. This part of the story is subtitled “The Upright Magistrate”: the magistrate is Mr. Wilson, who “was not only a pious clergyman, but an upright justice” (4:124). As minister, Mr. Wilson had been very kind to the needy Jack Weston. Desirous of somehow repaying that kindness, Jack, in a moment of thoughtlessness, knocks down a rabbit that crosses his path, intending to present it to Mrs. Wilson, who is, he knows, “fond of hare” (4:126). This best-case scenario—a good man poaching for a selfless reason—More takes as the occasion for a sermon on the evils of poaching. Motives are irrelevant, Justice Wilson tells Jack, as is character. The law makes poaching a crime; one who has committed a crime must be punished. Although Justice Wilson is “moved” and “touched” by Jack’s story, “this worthy magistrate never suffered his feelings to bias his integrity: he knew that he did not sit on that bench to indulge pity, but to administer justice; and while he was sorry for the offender, he would never justify the offence [sic]” (4:126). More makes only a pretense of doubting whether the poaching laws are just: “It is not your business nor mine, John [sic], to settle whether the game laws are good or bad. Till they are repealed we must obey them” (4:127). Resolving any doubt, “all property is sacred” (4:128), the justice and minister says flatly. More sees spiritual and temporal order as a continuum: Mr. Wilson says, “On Sunday I teach you from the pulpit the laws of God, whose minister I am. At present I fill the chair of the magistrate, to enforce and execute the laws of the land. Between those and the others there is more connection than you are aware” (4:126–27). The smallest transgression against the laws of property is quite dangerous, for, unchecked, it will lead irrevocably to a criminal career: “There is hardly any petty mischief that is not connected with the life of a poacher” (4:124), Mr. Wilson explains to Jack.
Throughout the Tracts, More’s aim is to teach the poor how to behave so that they can be productive and decent citizens within their social level. Far better, she insists time and again, for the poor man to behave properly from his conviction that such behavior is moral; but always standing next to this moral suasion is the explicit threat of punishment if he transgresses. The nature of the social contract being fixed, Jack’s character and benevolent intention are irrelevant. We should note, too, the degree of horror that More tries to inculcate for the specifically lower-class crime of poaching. As in her stories that deal with servants and their responsibilities toward their masters, More’s point is always that the poor not only must respect, but in fact should safeguard, the property of their betters. Whereas Jack Weston learns his lesson and goes on to prosper, Black Giles dies in misery as the result of injuries he causes himself while attempting a robbery. Justice in the Cheap Repository Tracts is absolute.

These principles of behavior for the poor are enunciated even more forcefully in the story of “The Lancashire Collier Girl” (which though not by More, was, like all the pieces published for the Cheap Repository, editorially supervised by her). For me, this is the most repugnant of the tales for the extraordinary lack of common compassion it shows while purporting to be a most compassionate telling of the life of a poor but very good young girl: it insists that work so brutal that it wrecks the health of the child is acceptable, even desirable. Even allowing for the differences in social perspective between More’s time and our own, the author’s disregard for any aspect of the heroine’s well-being except for her determination to stay off the parish rolls is remarkable. Mary, at the age of nine, along with her seven-year-old brother, joins her father in the mines. Two years later the father is killed in an accident, and Mary’s mother loses her sanity when she hears of the tragedy. When Mary takes on the responsibility for supporting the family, often having to work double shifts, the author merely commends her determination. When Mary’s health finally breaks, she is fortunate that “a lady” notices her plight and tells her about a job as servant that may be available in a local house.

One further aspect of the story bears particular attention. Surely, dear reader, you have been worrying about the virtue of a young girl alone in the mines with all those miners. The author knew you would be wondering and assures you that, while these are “a race of men rough indeed,” they are “highly useful to the community,” and, further, “have the character of being honest and faithful as well as remarkably courageous” (p. 148). Indeed, there have been “some striking instances of their readiness to receive religious instruction when offered to them” (p. 148). The condescension, not to mention suspicion, implicit in these remarks is striking; such workers are more than a little alarming, but they are, after all, useful, their courage making the comfort of other people’s lives possible. The compliments are carefully hedged: there even have been cases in which these men could be trained to religion, the story insists with unintentional irony. Such men may “take a cup too much” (p. 153) now and then, they may be “a set of coarse miners” (p. 153), but they have a “rule
of decency and propriety towards young women” (p. 153) that could be a model for “some of those persons who are pleased to call themselves their betters” (p. 153). “Among these men...Mary’s honor was safe” (p. 148); it is said that she even received help from them occasionally, help given “with great feeling and kindness” (p. 148). Notice that among class equals, then, even among these “rough” men, the author depicts common human sympathy, while between classes, it is quite enough for “a lady” just to tell Mary about that easier job down the street. The “Lancashire Collier Girl” serves to underline the fallacies to which the morality of More’s circle is fatally vulnerable.

I began this essay by saying that More’s tracts grew out of the visceral fear of the lower classes that she and her friends experience in viewing the French Revolution and its bloody aftermath. The portrait of those rough miners helping the innocent Lancashire collier girl so gently nonetheless carries with it a frisson of danger; the story, after all, is directed entirely to controlling such people and to praising their restrained behavior. I end this discussion with some excerpts from More’s correspondence about the revolution and about the Tracts, from which it should become plain that the former calls forth the latter. More’s correspondence with Horace Walpole is typical; their mutual hatred of the radicals is apparent as they talk about not reading Wollstonecraft. His long discussion of the “sad events of the last five years” ends with a heart-felt salute to More: “Adieu! Thou excellent woman! Thou reverse of that hyena in petticoats, Mrs. Wollstonecraft, who to this day discharges her ink and gall on Marie Antoinette, whose unparalleled sufferings have not yet staunched that Alecto’s blazing ferocity. Adieu! Adieu! Yours from my heart.... PS. I have subscribed five guineas at Mr. White’s to your plan.”

And what plan is that? More has sent him a prospectus for the Cheap Repository Tracts. “Thank you a thousand times for your most ingenious plan,” Walpole—carried away with enthusiasm—writes on 24 January 1795. “I sent one instantly to the Duchess of Gloucester, whose piety and zeal imitate yours at a distance.... I sent another to Lord Harcourt, who I trust will show it to a much greater lady.... I sent to Mr. White for half a dozen more of your plans, and will distribute them wherever I have hopes of their taking root and blossoming—tomorrow I will send him my subscription, and I flatter myself you will not think it a breach of Sunday.” He ends, “how calm and comfortable must your slumbers be on the pillow of every day’s good deeds! (pp. 395–96). In another letter Walpole tells More she is “Not only the most beneficent, but the most benevolent of human beings—not content with being a perfect saint yourself, which (forgive me for saying) does not always imply prodigious charity for others, not satisfied with being the most disinterested, nay the reverse of all patriots, for you sacrifice your very slender fortune, not to improve it, but to keep the poor honest instead of corrupting them” (p. 401). It is difficult for a modern reader to understand how important it was for those in More’s circle “to keep the poor honest instead of corrupting them.”

The Bishop of London is so supportive of More’s efforts (we remem-
ber that he early enlisted her to reply to Paine) that, she recounts, he keeps “his table full of our penny literature. Above a thousand, I suppose; some of which he gives to every hawker that passes; and he kindly says that by letting them stand always on his library table, he cannot forget to make them the subject of conversation with all comers.”13 Further, “the Bishop of Dromore has been with me, to put me on a good plan about hawkers. The Bishop of London received the enclosed note to-day from the Archbishop of Canterbury...how much the heads of the church condescend to deal in our small wares” (2:434). Porteus, in fact, is “confident...that your pen might work wonders, and perhaps contribute, under providence, to save your country” (3:55). And this is precisely the context in which More herself sees her labors: “we labour strenuously to attach our people to the state as well as to the church” (3:52), she writes to Mrs. Kennicott. For the poor really are frightening, as we know, and so they must be shaped by those above them who know better than they not only about moral but about political values.14

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NOTES

4. Still among the most useful discussions of poor relief is E. M. Leonard’s classic The Early History of English Poor Relief (1900; rpt. N.Y.: Barnes & Noble, 1965).
7. The figure commonly quoted is “two million” copies, a number that is repeated by every critic who discusses these tracts. The fact that the number comes from More herself (I have not found any other independent corroboration of these extraordinary figures) generally neither is commented upon nor received with any skepticism from her time to ours. The source is the Mendip Annals, where More notes that “To teach the poor to read, without providing them with safe books, has always appeared to me a dangerous measure. This induced me to the laborious undertaking of the Cheap Repository Tracts, which had such great success, that above two millions were sold in one year, in the height of our domestic troubles” (Mendip Annals: or, A Narrative of the Charitable Labours of Hannah and Martha More


14. Nearly twenty years after the beginning of the Repository project, More still was being asked to put out political fires with her pen. Roberts notes that “Towards the close of [1817] the universal stagnation of trade, and depression of landed property, afforded too plausible an occasion to ill-intentioned men, for perverting the minds of the working people, irritated by the disappointment of their ill-founded expectations, that plenty would be the immediate attendant upon peace, and by the severe distress consequent upon the general scarcity of employment. The services Mrs. More had already rendered to the cause of loyalty and subordination, by her skill and success in accommodating sober sense and sound reasoning to plain and plebeian understandings, in the form of narrative and dialogue, and in a playfull and popular style, occasioned fresh applications to be made for her powerfull assistance at this alarming juncture. Without a moment’s hesitation, she set to work and with her usual celerity produced several appropriate and admirable tracts and ballads, which she continued to supply while the pressure of the danger existed, and which were circulated in great numbers throughout every part of the country, with very visible effect” (Memoirs, 3:466).