

Part 1: Manuscripts, First Editions and Rare Printed Works of Hannah More Part 2: Gift Books, Memoirs, Pamphlets and the Cheap Repository Tracts Part 3.

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WOMEN, MORALITY AND ADVICE LITERATURE

Manuscripts and Rare Printed Works of Hannah More (1745-1833) and her circle from the Clark Library Los Angeles

Part 1: Manuscripts, First Editions and Rare Printed Works of Hannah More

Part 2: Gift Books, Memoirs, Pamphlets and the Cheap Repository Tracts

Part 3: Writings by The Eminent Blue Stockings

'Hannah More, Revolutionary Reformer' by Anne K. Mellor

Hannah More was the most influential woman living in England during her day. Through her writings, political action and personal relationships, she carried out a radical program for social change in the existing British social and political order. Rather than promoting the political revolution urged by the French Jacobins or the proletarian revolution of the workers later envisioned by Marx, Hannah More devoted her life to reforming the culture of the English nation from within. What she desired was a *"revolution in manners"* or cultural mores, a radical change in the moral behaviour of the nation. Writing in an era which she considered one of *"superannuated impiety"* (Works II : 316), of notable moral decline marked by *"the excesses of luxury, the costly diversions, and the intemperate dissipation in which numbers of professing Christians indulge themselves"* (II : 309), More set out to lead *"a moral revolution in the national manners and principle would be "analogous to that great political one which we hear so much and so justly extolled"* (II : 296).

More fought her moral revolution on four fronts. Confronted with the decadent practices of the late eighteenth-century aristocracy - with codes of behaviour that licensed libertinism, adultery, gambling, duelling and fiscal irresponsibility - she first attacked the high-born members of "Society." Although generally overlooked, the Cheap Repository Tracts of the mid-1790s contain as trenchant a critique of the morally irresponsible aristocracy as of the revolutionary workers. In "Village Politics," for instance, Jack Anvil the Blacksmith, while warning workers against the evils of violent rebellion, at the same time recognises the evils perpetrated by the "great folks": *"I don't pretend to say they are a bit better than they should be ... let them look to that; they'll answer for that in another place. To be sure, I wish they'd set us a better example about church, and those things: ... They do spend too much, to be sure, in feasting and fandangoes"* (II : 230).

In two major tracts addressed directly to the upper classes, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great General Society* (1788) and *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (1790), Hannah More directly condemned the hypocrisy of the "merely nominal" Christians among the aristocracy. Since the rich and powerful are the role models for the lower classes, they have an increased social responsibility to set a good example, More argued. She pointed out all the ways in which the leaders of her time were failing in that civic responsibility: they did not attend Church, or did so half-heartedly, combining Sunday services with visiting, concerts, and hair-dressing; they gambled, even the women, at card-parties in their own homes, using their winnings to tip the hostess's servants; they were engaged in a sustained practice of social lying, forcing servants to tell visitors they were "not at home"; they tolerated adultery, especially for husbands; and they systematically failed to develop an appreciation of what was for More at the center of personal and social fulfilment - *"family enjoyment, select conversation, and domestic delights"* (II : 285). Their behavior thus corrupted rather than educated their children and servants, forcing these servants to encourage gam

and to lie, cheat and steal.

More calculatedly attributes the amoral practices of the rich to their excessive dependence on French fashions and behaviours. By identifying aristocratic English society with France, at the very moment of the French Revolution, she subtly defines the British aristocrats as potential Jacobins, corrupted from within by their adherence to French Phil - the anti-Christian scepticism of Voltaire - and to French culture. By classifying upper-class social practices not merely amoral or non-Christian but also as French, More undercut the aristocracy's claim to both political and social authority at the time of the Terror. If the upper classes were to rule the British nation, they must become more English - which More defined as devoutly Christian, rigorously Sabbatarian, pious, chaste, honest and benevolent in thought and deed.

More's clarion call for the reform of the manners of the rich was heard by many of the aristocracy and landed gentry. David Spring had documented, an increase in aristocratic morality in the 1820s could be directly traced to the writings of More and the other members of the Clapham Sect of Evangelicals. Linda Colley had also concluded that the attack on "*cultural treason*" of the elite mounted by More and others produced a new ideology of the British ruling class: one not by "*public probity*," "*regular church-going and conventional sexual morality*," and "*ostentatious uxoriousness*" (Colley 189).

More's attack on the lax morals and irresponsibility of the upper classes was also aimed at the Church of England. As Gilbert has documented, by the end of the eighteenth century the Church of England was in severe decline. More's impassioned pleas to the Anglican clergy to play a central role in bringing about the moral reform of the nation inspired numerous members of the clergy to join the Evangelical branch of the Church of England - by 1830, over one-quarter of the clergy were openly identified with the Clapham Sect Evangelicals. Their efforts, both as resident clergy and as missionaries, effectively re-vitalised the Anglican Church, absorbing much of the religious energy that had previously flowed to the New Dissent.

Equally aggressively, Hannah More attempted to reform the working classes of England. In her propagandistic Cheap Repository Tracts explicitly aimed at workers, of which she claimed over two million were sold or otherwise distributed in 1795 alone (Spinney 296), Hannah More hammered home her message: if workers would become sober, industrious, thrifty, healthy and religious, then they could rise into the lower rungs of the bourgeoisie. By providing numerous examples of workers who financially bettered their lot in life through sober industry - together with counter-examples of drunken, lazy, immoral workers like Black Giles the Poacher and his wife Tawney Rachel the thieving fortune-teller who end up in jail or transported or dead, cruelly neglecting and abusing their children along the way - More attempted to persuade the working classes that they too had a stake in an economically prosperous and politically stable England. In effect, she told the workers, you can have the material rewards your employers have; you can become the middle class. And at the same time you can save your Christian souls.

To bring about the reformation of the working classes in a systematic way, More turned to the charity Sunday School institution recently initiated with success in Gloucester by Richard Raikes, as her primary instrument of social change. Between 1789 and 1799 she and her sister Martha established nine Sunday Schools amongst the rural poverty and social depravity of the Mendips Region. Described at length in Martha More's Journal, these nine schools educated over a thousand children and adults a year. Designed to bring literacy, Christianity, sobriety, industry and good health to the rural poor, combining vocational training with religious instruction, these Sunday Schools have been widely criticised as exercises in the "*politicisation*" of children, even by so judicious a historian as Linda Colley (Colley 226). But as Thomas Laqueur had demonstrated in detail in his study of Sunday Schools and working class culture, these schools in fact functioned to improve and to empower the working-classes. "*What appears to have been an imposition from above*," he concludes, "*was, in fact, a way in which those who spent their lives in disorder, uncertainty, dirt and disease brought some order into this environment. Cleanliness in body, punctuality, neatness in dress and in one's home, and orderliness in one's life were very much part of the fabric of 'respectable' working class society and by no means inhibited those engaged in their pursuit from attacking the repressive aspects of the contemporary political and economic system; rather the reverse*" (Laqueur 170 in italics). As Laqueur points out, "*a highly developed culture of self-help, self-improvement and respectability, which nurtured many of the political and trade-union leaders of the working class, emerged from the late 18th and the 19th century Sunday Schools*" (Laqueur 155).

By teaching the workers to read, Hannah More's Mendips Sunday Schools for the first time made available to these poor the social world of Evangelical middle-class culture, a culture which they on the whole eagerly embraced. Both the Cheap Repository Tracts and the Sunday Schools strongly asserted a Christian and bourgeois ideology as normative for the entire nation. Together with the wide-spread growth of voluntary philanthropic societies in the early 19th century they helped to stabilise a class system now controlled, not by the landed gentry and the "old corruption," but by a growing and newly empowered commercial and professional middle class which by 1800 included, according to Jonathan Bailey, over half of the population.

Fundamental to Hannah More's project of social revolution was a transformation of the role played by woman of all classes in the formation of national culture. Unlike Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued that the two sexes were in all significant aspects the same, Hannah More insisted on the innate difference between the sexes. To women she assigns a great delicacy of perception and feeling and above all, a greater moral purity and capacity for virtue. Men on the other hand have better judgement, based on their wider experience of the public world; at the same time their manners are coarser with "rough angles and asperities" (VI: 266). If a "revolution in manners" is to occur, then, it must be carried out by

women.

But first women must be educated to understand their proper function in society. More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) lays out her program for the education of "excellent women" (III : 200): a systematic development of the innate female capacity for virtue and piety through a judicious reading of the Bible, devotional and serious literature, extended by rational conversation and manifested in the active exercise of compassion and generosity. The goal of More's educational project for woman is no less than a cultural redefinition of female virtue. It is summed up in that "*pattern daughter ... [who] will make a pattern wife*," Lucilla Stanley, the heroine of More's novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808: 246), female virtue is equated with rational intelligence, modesty and chastity, a serious commitment to spiritual values and the Christian religion, an affectionate devotion to one's family, active service on behalf of one's community, and an insistence on keeping promises. More's concept of female virtue thus stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing cultural definition of the ideal woman as one who possessed physical beauty and numerous accomplishments and who could effectively entice a man of substance into marriage.

More's concept of female virtue also stands in opposition to the prevailing masculine concept of virtue as "*devotion to public good*," and "*the practice ... of relations of equality between citizens*" could no longer be reconciled with the "idea of commerce which required an exchange between non-equals, credit and dependence. Hence masculine "*virtue*" was redefined as the possession of property and "the practice and refinement of polished manners," manners which would engage the trust and credit of like-minded men of property (Pocock 41-8). This specifically male "*commercial humanism*" seemed to More to be soul-less and mechanistic, substituting the form of good manners for the substance. Female virtue was not a matter of credit and exchange but rather a matter of spiritual conviction, sincere compassion for the welfare of others, humility and self-sacrifice.

Embedded in More's program for the education of women was a new career for middle-class women, namely, a sustained and increasingly institutionalised effort to relieve the sufferings of the less fortunate. As Lucilla Stanley's mother describes this career: "*Charity is the calling of a lady; the care of the poor is her profession*" (Coelebs 138; More's italics). More here conceptualises for the first time the career of what we would now call the "*social worker*," the organised and corporatized profession opposed to the spontaneous and individualistic - practice of philanthropy. As exemplified by Lucilla Stanley, this profession involves spending one day each week collecting "*necessaries*" for the poor - food, clothing, medicine - and evenings each week visiting them in their own cottages where she can best determine "*their wants and their characters*" (Coelebs 63).

In her *Strictures on Female Education*, More advocates a more institutionalised philanthropy, a "*regular systematic plan*" resulting in a "*broad stream of bounty ... flowing through and refreshing whole districts*" (*Strictures* III 270). She urges her women readers to participate actively in the organisation of voluntary benevolent societies and in the foundation of hospitals, orphanages, Sunday Schools and all-week charity or "*ragged*" schools for the education and relief of the poor. And her call was heard: literally thousands of voluntary societies sprang up in the opening decades of the nineteenth century to serve the needs of every imaginable group of sufferers, from the Bristol Orphan Asylum to the Sailors Home, from the Poor Printers Fund to the Pensioners at Wrrington, to name only four among the 71 charities to which More herself contributed generously in her will.

More's Evangelical demand that women demonstrate their commitment to God through a life of active service for their time gave her middle-class sisters a mission in life, the personal and financial support of institutionalised charities, orphanages, work-houses, and hospitals to asylums and prisons. These philanthropic activities contributed directly to the emancipation and increasing social empowerment of women, as F K Prochaska has documented in his superb study *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*.

Women were particularly suited to the active exercise of charity because, according to More, they possessed greater sensibility or active compassion for the sufferings of others than do men. Secondly, women were more versed in what she calls "*practical piety*," the immediate assessment and relief of the day-to-day requirements of the poor, the sick, the disabled. Finally, women who had learned how to manage a household properly could more readily extend those skills to the Sunday School or workhouse.

Implicit both in More's *Strictures on Female Education* and in her novel *Coelebs* is the argument that household management or domestic economy provides the best model for the management of the state or national economy. As Stanley explains, "*Retrenchments, to be efficient, must be applied to great objects. The true [domestic] economist will draw by contracting the outline, by narrowing the bottom, by cutting off with an unsparing hand costly superfluities, which afford comfort but cherish vanity*" (Coelebs 184). By assigning to women - and their mentor Eve - the capacity to develop and execute a fiscally responsible plan of household management which satisfies the physical, emotional and religious needs of all the members of the household (servants as well as family members), More effectually defines women as the best managers of the national estate, as the true patriots.

It is in the role of mother that More's ideal of the well-educated, fiscally responsible and morally pure woman finds its fulfilment. But it is crucial to recognise that More's mother is the mother, not just of her own family, but of the nation as a whole. As More affirms in *Strictures on Female Education*,

"the great object to which you, who are or may be mothers, are more especially called, is the education of your children ... YOU are made over the awfully important trust of infusing the first principles of piety into the tender minds of those who must

day be called to instruct, not families merely, but districts; to influence, not individuals, but senates. Your private exertion at this moment be contributing to the future happiness, your domestic neglect, to the future ruin, of your country." (Strict III 44).

In emphasizing women's public role as mothers of the nation, More necessarily downplayed their more private sexual roles as females. More has been roundly criticised, by Nancy Cott and many others, for insisting on a new ideal of female "passionlessness." But this is too one-sided a reading of More's campaign. More does not urge women to deny their sexual desires, but only to channel them into marriage with a morally as well as sexually desirable partner. As Michael Mason recognised, "To Hannah More belongs the distinction of having written at greater length explicitly about sex than any other leading Evangelical" (Mason 77) in her novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*.

In making the private household the model for the national household, Hannah More effectively erased any meaningful distinction between the private and the public sphere. She insists that it is women, not men, who are most responsible for the progress of civilisation as such. Affirming the dominant role of women in establishing "*true taste, right principle, and genuine feeling*" in the culture of a nation, More assigns to women the primary labor in the production of what Norbert Elias has since called the "*civilising process*."

Essential to More's project of national reformation is the assumption that the "*public revolution of manners*" (Preface to *Works* I: ix) she demands must be led by women, and in particular by one woman, the supposed future Queen of England, Princess Charlotte. Her *Hints towards forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805), like Thomas Elyot's *Book of Government* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, is a treatise on the nature of good government. Part of the wisdom which the future female monarch must learn is the limits of her own royal "*prerogatives*." Even as she must stand firm in her endorsement of her own religious beliefs and intellectual understanding, she must acknowledge that her power is constrained by the laws of the British constitution which guarantee the freedom of her people. Tracking the history of fallen empires, More argues that the British constitution is uniquely "*favourable to virtue*," congenial with religion, and conducive to happiness" because it seeks to provide for the "*well-being of the whole community ... by effectually securing the rights, the safety, the comforts of every individual*" (IV: 67-8). More is here defining a concept of the reformed British nation as based on an ethic of care, a Christian concern to meet the needs of all members of the community.

By far the most important duty of the Princess is to set the moral tone of the nation through her own example and through the judicious selection of the bishops who are to lead the Church. In this role, as the moral leader of England, More suggests, "*the just administration of this peculiar power may be reasonably expected as much, we had almost said even more, from a female, than from a monarch, of the other sex*" (IV: 361). By making women the potential embodiment of what Myers has called "*aggressive virtue*" (Myers 209), by addressing her tract on good Christian government to a woman, Hannah More specifically called on women to save the nation.

And her demand for a "*revolution in manners*" was answered. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Mellor 1-38), the career of Hannah More, who was virtually canonised as an "*Anglican Saint*" after her death in 1833, made the moral reign - not of Charlotte - but of More's equally devoted disciple, Victoria - inevitable. After the Evangelical campaign of the early nineteenth century, the British public would not have tolerated the rule of another George IV: a fiscally irresponsible libertine devoted to luxury, stylistic display and dissipation. The new British nation required that its monarch be economically prudent, decorous in appearance and taste, and above all moral. And after the career of Hannah More, the physical embodiment of this new national morality had to be female: only a woman, in this case Victoria, could fully represent British national virtue, that Christian virtue that More had everywhere in her writings gendered as female. Only a woman could become the Mother of the Nation, Britannia herself.

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