
Mona Scheuermann. *In Praise of Poverty: Hannah More Counters Thomas Paine and the Radical Threat*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. 255p.

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At the outset of Mona Scheuermann's book on Hannah More, 18th-century British writer of social tracts, the author makes clear that her study of More in the context of Thomas Paine's writing is as much a social history as it is a study of an individual author. This warning prepares us for an examination of the prolific More, embedded within her era's socio-political issues.

Scheuermann's strategy of exploring More's authorship in conjunction with that of Paine—but also in relation to other, equally renowned writers of her time—enables us to grasp the ideological coloring of More and her wealthy backers. The daughter of a schoolmaster, More and her three sisters all have early access to superb education, although Hannah is the most precocious. She teaches at her oldest sister's school, and later comes to the attention of London's intellectual elite when a letter she writes on a performance of Garrick's *Lear* gets circulated. She soon becomes acquainted with some of the intellectual giants of her day, and develops friendships that last her entire life.

More and her circle of influential friends and admirers believe in God's hierarchy as established on earth, which “conveniently supported the status quo.” According to this scheme, revolutionary ideas in general, but in particular those relating to the socio-economic betterment of the English poor, directly counter God's plan. Scheuermann establishes the strictly hierarchical nature of 18th-century English thought promoted by Church and King, and written about by such thinkers as Edmund Burke. He and like-minded writers assumed that poverty is divinely ordained, and at best may be ameliorated through charity, but can never be fundamentally altered.

In her chapter “Radical Contexts,” Scheuermann focuses on Thomas Paine's thought, especially in her discussion of his “The Rights of Man.” In this written response to Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution, Scheuermann vivifies what is at stake for the ruling classes in 1790s England. For scholars and teachers of early American Literature, Paine's *Common Sense* and other Revolutionary War propaganda will be familiar territory. Scheuermann details the impact the book has not only on the disenfranchised who quote its pages and discuss its ideas, but on the powerful who recognize the danger its call to equality presents. More's immediate enlistment by members of her circle to counter what they consider Paine's dangerous, ungodly attacks on the status quo begins a long, fruitful ca-

reer as pamphleteer, whose sole aim is to remind the poor of their religious and moral duties.

Scheuermann also points out the centrality of the written word to this grand “debate” between 18th-century reactionary and radical voices. By teasing out the social structures perpetuating the divide between the privileged and the poor, Scheuermann makes clear, for example, how education can be used “in praise of poverty”: taught to minimally read and write, the poorer classes are then fed a steady diet of didactic teachings aimed at reinforcing the divine provenance of social iniquity.

The author devotes ample space to close readings of More’s most popular tracts, though is quick to question how genuinely attractive More’s writing is to its intended readers, considering that her pamphlets are distributed to the masses for free. More is a competent writer with a flair for narrative, but Scheuermann illustrates how More’s characterizations are always drawn in black and white to make her didactic points as clear as possible. Her writing betrays a particular set of assumptions about the poor: limited to simplistic ideas and presentation, More reveals an attitude of innate moral and intellectual superiority towards the lower classes. Her *Village Politics* and Cheap Repository Tracts exemplify the ideologically driven, pedantic tenor of her “popular” writing in general.

Scheuermann’s *In Praise of Poverty* provides a multi-layered look at 18th-century British thought, disclosing the strain that Enlightenment ideas place on the ancient fabric of divine right and religious hegemony preceding the modern era. Teachers of American Literature, but also of British Literature, get a view of how revolutionary ideas emanating from North America and France influence British rulers, propertied classes, and the writers who perpetuate oligarchic rule. That a battle for the hearts and minds of the English lower classes is waged through More’s and Paine’s writing, but also through such writers as Burke, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft, may strike contemporary readers as unthinkable in an age dominated by visual and electronic imagery.

Scheuermann’s treatment of More and her milieu is written in accessible prose, betraying the former’s ironic eye and dry wit. She offers us a vivid, well-documented glimpse of the stature of writers such as Hannah More, whose pen, wielded with intellect and panache, rendered her a powerful player in 18th-century socio-political discourse. ✨