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HANNAH MORE IN CONTEXT

Eds. Kerri Andrews and Sue Edney
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Reviewed by *Natasha Duquette* on 2023-04-22.

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Hannah More's historical contributions to anti-slavery activism have brought her further into the twenty-first-century public eye, which has in turn generated more nuanced scholarly approaches to her writing. The inclusion of More as a character in the 2006 film *Amazing Grace* (dir. Michael Apted) exemplifies the former, and this collection of essays variously samples the latter. Edited by Kerri Andrews and Sue Edney, they not only illustrate More's influence on the political, intellectual, and literary sea changes of her own time, but also enrich the field of **public humanities** in ours.

As the editors explain in their introduction, this book grew out of a 2019 conference held in Hannah More's restored home, Barley Wood, in the Mendip Hills southwest of Bristol. The essays gathered here offer a fresh, collaboratively crafted, multi-dimensional image of More as a woman both shaped by and *shaping* the Romantic era.

The title of the collection brings to mind such Cambridge University Press volumes as *Jane Austen in Context* (2006) and *Samuel Johnson in Context* (2012). But while those books each contain many brief essays on quite specific topics such as "Dress" and "Anglicanism," this book offers just twelve essays, and each presents a focussed argument about a complex topic that is often explored by means of primary sources. At the same time, these essays often provide the sort of practical, contextual orientation more typical of essays in the Cambridge series. In particular, Robin Jarvis, Adam Bridgen, and Nicky Lloyd helpfully place More's life and work within its geographical, political, and cultural contexts. As a result of their innovative approaches to situating More in these historical streams, they each clarify how she left her mark indelibly on her environs.

Foregrounding More's poems of the 1770s, such as "Stop Traveller" and "The Speech of a Rose," Robin Jarvis explains that they were written for inscription on boards placed in the landscape surrounding Belmont, the home of More's fiancé William Turner. Disappointingly, Jarvis includes no pictures of the original poetry boards--only a photograph of Belmont itself. But he does provide a beautiful image of Dora Wordsworth's hand-transcribed copy of "Stop Traveller" with a sprig of evergreen at the top. This transcription of More's poem at Dove Cottage poignantly illustrates how More served as a role model for a younger generation of Romantic-era women.

Jarvis also notes that More's poetry boards adapted the *memento mori* tradition. For More, Jarvis writes, "nature [was] the tomb from which voices emanate to address the passer-by" (28). Inscribed on a 1778 cenotaph to the memory of a friend of Turner, More's words prompt any walker "who has lost that 'one friend' loved 'from early youth'" (30) to pause and contemplate their loss. Somewhat anachronistically, Jarvis tries to link More's memorial inscriptions to William Wordsworth's later ideas about epitaphs. Perhaps a connection to William Shenstone would have been more apt. More knew of Shenstone's work through her friendship with Samuel Johnson, and she may have been inspired by Shenstone's turn in 1764 "from the sparkling bowl to the dusty urn" in elegies representing "the innocence and simplicity of rural life" (William Shenstone, *Poetical Works* [1778] 1:xiii). In any case, the textual and visual evidence presented in Jarvis's essay suggests that Hannah More's poems of the 1770s may have formed an important bridge *between* the elegies of William Shenstone and Wordsworth's later thoughts on epitaphs.

In another trenchant essay, Adam Bridgen examines a single work by More: *Slavery, a Poem* (1788). Like many of his co-contributors, Bridgen builds on Ann Stott's *Hannah More, the First Victorian* (2003), but he subtly distinguishes between Stott's image of More the reformer and his own view of her "as a catalyst for national moral regeneration" (52). Since *Slavery* was commissioned by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade to support MP William Dolben's ameliorative bill in parliament, Bridgen convincingly argues that More addressed parliamentarians with structured rhetoric. Resisting "subtle sexism" (63), Bridgen writes, she used a "rhetoric of reason" (52) to dismantle "the dangerously dissociative, anti-rational thinking required to uphold slavery" (62). In other words, More was not only a fervent Christian morally admonishing slave traders, but also a savvy political agent deftly deploying rhetorical tactics. Though Bridgen presumes a split between religion and reason, More probably thought them quite compatible. As another essay in the collection testifies, she owned a 1777 printing of John Locke's four-volume *Works*, which includes Locke's arguments for *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). She appeals to an integrated rational faith, rather than complementing religious convictions with an overlay of reason, as Bridgen at times implies.

More's religious commitments and their connection to the history of print culture are explored within the collection's strongest essay. Reading More's *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) as an evangelical novel, Nicky Lloyd deftly combines intellectual and literary history. In doing so, she shows how More synthesized pre-existing forms to generate a new genre of prose fiction: an "intertextual domestic realism that would reshape the form of the novel" (131). By cloaking the didacticism of sermons, tracts, and conduct literature in the guise of a novel, More provoked both those who distrusted novels and those who consumed them. Still, as Lloyd points out, *Cælebs* went through twelve editions within just one year of its initial 1808 printing. Lloyd boldly suggests that More's foregrounding of common experience, transformative conversations, and everyday domestic details in her popular novel paved the way for novelists such as Mary Brunton and Jane Austen. For Lloyd, what early reviewers called More's "generic ambiguity" (131) was in fact a kind of "generic experimentation" (143) usually credited to male Romantic-era poets.

Rather than classifying More as a conservative contributor to evangelical print culture, Lloyd contends that her way of injecting domestic realism into the circulating libraries was a tactical intervention. In arguing that More intentionally wrought a radical shift in the way novels were received and conceived, Lloyd makes a provocative claim. Did *Coelebs* actually lead the way to the novels of Jane Austen, who bluntly wrote of it, "I do not like the Evangelicals" (letter of January 24, 1809)? Wrestling with this statement of Austen's could have brought even greater complexity and heft to Lloyd's argument. Nevertheless, she convincingly shows that *Coelebs* influenced Austen.

Other compelling essays in the collection focus on More's local and global impact. Kerri Andrews and Jo Edwards emphasize More's social engagement with rural communities to the South of Bristol. Citing her own [digital edition of More's letters](#), Andrews shows that More was a "shrewd, practical, and humane" businesswoman who ensured mining families had food while also maintaining their "dignity" (92). Likewise, Edwards explains how More and her sister creatively used land given them in the town of Nailsea to establish a school in 1792, and until the late 1990s, long after More's death in 1833, different modes of education continued at this site. At present, in an excellent example of public humanities in action, the fifteenth-century tithe barn at Nailsea functions as a heritage site for historical education, where local students can learn about Hannah More and her context. Re-enacting More's efforts to reach the working class families of Bristol and its rural surroundings, Jo Edwards describes her own work in coordinating educational programs at Nailsea. Turning to Ann Yarseley, Patricia Demers examines More's vexed relationship with "the Bristol milkwoman poet" (200) whose presence haunts this collection, appearing also in essays by Maeve Adams, Begoña Lasa-Álvarez, and Joanna Maciulewicz.

Perhaps most originally, through studies of translation, print culture, and book transport, this collection establishes More's international impact from the late eighteenth-century to the present. In studies of her international reception, Begoña Lasa-Álvarez and Marie Nedregotten Sørnbø explain how her play *Percy, a Tragedy* (1777) was translated by French and Spanish dramatists, and how her position as a woman writer and a Christian caught the attention of theologians and clergymen in Scandinavia. Commenting on the 1858 reflections of a Norwegian theologian named Erik Horn, Sørnbø marvels that "a young theologian writes with such longing about a paradise where men and women have equal relationships, equal chances of developing their talents, and where single as well as married women are valuable contributors to culture and learning in their society" (119). The fascination of this Norwegian theologian with British women's writing suggests that More may have influenced patterns of Scandinavian feminism still present today. Contributors also document More's influence on the United States (Sørnbø 126; Smith 175); Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands (Sørnbø 121 & 115); Malta (Smith 173); and even Sri Lanka, where, as Sørnbø notes, "Ceylon celebrated its own abolition of slavery by means of [More's] poem 'The Feast of Freedom' in 1819" (121).

Given the careful work of these contributors, scholars studying More will now need to take more seriously such cosmopolitan and global reverberations of her work. Overall, *Hannah More in Context* is an intensely collaborative, convivial collection. Full of fresh details, it offers multiple entry points for future research into More's impact and legacy, in England and around the world.

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