Mona Scheuermann’s book *In Praise of Poverty* is an examination of the social and political contexts and content of Hannah More’s most influential late-eighteenth-century writings, including the *Cheap Repository Tracts* and *Village Politics*.

Scheuermann’s approach is multifaceted. She is chiefly concerned to identify More’s writings as powerful, or at least highly valued, instruments of social control in the hands of English defenders of Church and king at the time of the French Revolution. Scheuermann demonstrates the very deliberate way More attempts to counteract the effect of her most potentially dangerous antagonist, Thomas Paine and his subversive book, the *Rights of Man*. Scheuermann constructs her proof by focusing not on particular works, but by tracing the development of key themes and conceits throughout More’s writings of the 1790s. Scheuermann shows More taking on Paine directly, for example, in *Village Politics* when the hapless Tom Hod wanders in, disconsolate upon reading *Rights of Man* and discovering that he has long been wretchedly unhappy without even knowing it. But Scheuermann argues that More persistently attacks Paine and his ilk obliquely, by praising the traditional and necessary British virtues of unswerving Christian belief and practice, which emphatically include humble acceptance of one’s divinely ordained lot in life and all that it may entail. More is particularly concerned that her intended audience, the literate poor, find contentment in their poverty, moderated as it surely is by the benevolence of their social superiors and the superiority of the government that rules over them.

Another of Scheuermann’s goals is to demonstrate that More’s steealy focus on maintaining the social order unchanged was not unique to those who shared her social and political conservatism. Indeed, although More might have found the comparison odd, Scheuermann argues there are strong parallels between the messages of patience, thrift, obedience, and perseverance inculcated by More, and those put out by more reform-minded, or even radical contemporaries. Specifically, she compares More’s themes, lessons, and language to those of Josiah Wedgwood and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Scheuermann turns to Wedgwood’s *Address to the Young Inhabitants of the Pottery* (1783) to find the industrialist’s unintended endorsement of More’s list of virtues to which the working classes must aspire: ceaseless, happy labor devoted to the greater good of England and the fulfillment of God’s divine plan. Scheuermann rejects the frequent interpretation of Wedgwood and his fellow Dissenting industrialists as radical visionaries. Rather, she argues, Wedgwood and his colleagues, “like the more traditional upper classes, had a distinct stake in keeping the poor working, and working on their terms,” as he demonstrates in his *Address* (p. 126). Wedgwood advocates an eleventh commandment, this one a proscription against idleness. He encourages his workers to save their money, marry wisely, raise families, and avoid the evil seductions of alcohol. These, as Scheuermann points out, are precisely what More prescribes for her poor readers in the *Cheap Repository Tracts*.

Similarly, Scheuermann finds common ground between More and Wollstonecraft, though not as early feminists, as some recent scholars would have it. Rather, Scheuermann develops a convincing case for More as a consummate propagandist, one who is fully aware and deeply appreciative of the power of the written word.
Sensitivity to the power of print was not unique to either More or her circle, however, and Scheuermann argues that, “belief that the printed word can change society is equally powerful on both sides of the political gate.... And at both ends of the political spectrum this particular perspective sometimes results in very similar pronouncements” (p. 207). While Scheuermann sees similarities between the didactic writings of More and many of her contemporaries, it is Wollstonecraft that gets special attention. Scheuermann compares Wollstonecraft’s *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) with More’s *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), and comes up with some interesting parallels. This early Wollstonecraft advises mothers to bring up their daughters to behave in a manner appropriate to their rank in society. Wollstonecraft further admonishes mothers not to leave child-rearing to servants whose own ignorance and low nature will in turn corrupt the children in their care. Scheuermann points out that this is precisely the message More delivers in her writings on the education of girls, suggesting that both women are participating in a common mainstream of middle-class thought, rather than articulating extreme views from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Likewise, both authors hold up the danger to impressionable young ladies represented by “improper books,” which will fill their heads with useless, romantic, and immoral ideas (p. 218).

Overall, Scheuermann’s study is a provocative examination of More’s most significant writings and her intent in writing them. The work is thoughtful and shows a mastery of the recent literature. She constructs her arguments carefully, and carries them through persuasively. But let me offer a few reservations, which admittedly deal with points outside of Scheuermann’s primary foci.

Most important, the reader who does not know More’s biography before reading Scheuermann will be left unenlightened. Aside from some tantalizing comments, concentrated in the first chapter, little of More’s life or personality are revealed. This is perplexing, especially since the personal history of a woman who seems to so thoroughly defy her own well-publicized advice on the proper behavior of women, would be particularly useful for the purpose of analysis. More does not marry, appears to reach both above and below her station, and in many ways lives her very private life in the public eye. A fuller discussion of that life would, in this case, seem appropriate, though I recognize that Scheuermann does not set out to be a biographer.

It is also perhaps significant to note that Scheuermann finds the most compelling affinities between writings completed by Wollstonecraft and Wedgwood during the 1780s, and those composed by More during the 1790s. I propose that this is potentially problematic, as the outbreak of the French Revolution had a profound effect on just that comfortable middle-class consensus to which Scheuermann looks for her analysis of More’s writings. Is it possible that a broad consensus on station was becoming a thing of the past by the time More began her didactic writing in earnest? If this is the case, it would seem that More is less a representative of her times than she is of times just past, which is an important distinction.

Finally, Scheuermann quotes extensively from the correspondence of More’s friends and allies, who celebrate her writings and take delight in her humorous ability to take in her audience by writing in what is supposed to be their own idiom. But does she indeed write in a way that is both accessible and acceptable to the poor and working class? Scheuermann does not speak to the effect of More’s writings on anyone besides her friends and supporters. More may indeed articulate what her class wants their inferiors to believe and practice, but Scheuermann offers little evidence that the writings had their intended effect. The pamphlets were printed and distributed, to be sure. But were they read, and were her lessons accepted by the target audience? While a bit of additional research reveals that the *Cheap Repository Tracts* enjoyed tremendous popularity among both the middling orders and the elite, it appears more difficult to gauge the extent to which the potentially rebellious poor actually read them, or more importantly, accepted their message.[1] It seems problematic to assume that the working class audience who read and understood Paine’s subtleties would not see through More’s more obvious contrivances.

Another related issue left unresolved is that of More’s collaborators. Scheuermann notes in passing that More was not the only author of the *Cheap Repository Tracts*. This leaves the reader to wonder who the other authors were, and how many of the tracts were written, and whether they were of a piece stylistically and thematically. None of these collateral issues are addressed satisfactorily, and may indeed have a bearing on the overall significance of More’s contribution to the fight against the radical threat.

It is regrettable that these criticisms of Scheuermann’s lively analysis will surely seem more pointed than is intended. *In Praise of Poverty* is an intriguing and
scholarly reappraisal of a writer to whom too little attention has been paid, and will be a welcome addition to university and research libraries.

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