

Hannah More Meets Simple Simon: Tracts, Chapbooks, and Popular Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century England

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During the winter of scarcity of 1794, Hannah More wrote “a few moral stories,” drew up a plan for publication and distribution, and sent the package around to her evangelical and bluestocking friends.¹ Their response was enthusiastic; even Horace Walpole abandoned his usual teasing to write back, “I will never more complain of your silence; for I am perfectly convinced that you have no idle, no unemployed moments. Your indefatigable benevolence is incessantly occupied in good works; and your head and your heart make the utmost use of the excellent qualities of both. . . . Thank you a thousand times for your most ingenious plan; may great success reward you!”² Walpole then sent off copies of the plan to the duchess of Gloucester and other aristocratic friends. Following Wilberforce’s example, such wealthy philanthropists subscribed over 1,000 pounds to support the project during its first year.³ Henry Thornton agreed to act as treasurer and Zachary Macaulay as agent, and the ball was rolling.⁴

In March 1795, the Cheap Repository of Moral and Religious Tracts issued its first publications. Prominent evangelicals and gentry

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¹ Hannah More to J. Newton, 1794, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, ed. William Roberts (New York: Harper & Bros., 1836), 1:457.

² H. Walpole to More, January 24, 1795, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 15:336.

³ M. G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*; Standish Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 133.

Journal of British Studies 25 (January 1986): 84–113

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worked to distribute them to the rural poor, booksellers, and hawkers and among Sunday schools and charity children.⁵ During the Repository's three-year existence, the fifty or so tracts written by Hannah More were supplemented by contributions from fellow evangelicals Thornton, Macaulay, John Venn, and John Newton, the poet William Mason, More's literary friend Mrs. Chapone, her protégée Selina Mills, and her sisters Sally and Patty More and by reprints of old favorites by Isaac Watts and Justice John Fielding.⁶ Several million copies were printed.⁷ From its inception until its closure in 1798, the Cheap Repository was a major literary, financial, and administrative enterprise on the part of the evangelicals and their aristocratic friends.

The Cheap Repository has usually been discussed within the context of the turbulent politics of the 1790s and the resulting fears, on the part of the gentry and the aristocracy, of popular violence. Historians, from More's first biographer Henry Thompson to E. P. Thompson, have pointed to the publication of Painite pamphlets and the rioting of the 1790s as the catalyst of More's moralizing literature.⁸ J. L. and Barbara Hammond further identified More's writings as the ideological justification for the economic exploitation and formal political exclusion of the poor.⁹ Although some historians of the evangelical movement, Ford K. Brown in particular, have recognized that the tracts tried to reform the morals of the poor quite as much as their politics, these writers have also stressed the loyalist content of the tracts, emphasizing their attempt to give religious sanction to the existing social order.¹⁰

⁵ Mrs. Elizabeth Montague to Mrs. Carter, 1795, *Mrs. Montague, "Queen of the Blues": Her Letters and Friendships*, ed. Reginald Blunt (London: Constable & Co., 1923), 2:317; Mrs. Boscawen to More, 1795, Roberts, ed., 1:467; More to her sister, 1795, *ibid.*, 1:458; More to Z. Macaulay, January 6, 1796, *ibid.*, 1:473.

⁶ Jones, p. 139.

⁷ Circulation figures are discussed in more detail in the third section below. However, the most complete discussion of publication and distribution remains G. H. Spinney, "Cheap Repository Tracts: Hazard and Marshall Edition," *Library*, 4th ser., 20, no. 3 (December 1939): 295–340. I have also relied on Spinney's invaluable bibliography of the early editions of the tracts in my own search.

⁸ Henry Thompson, *Life of Hannah More* (London: T. Cadell, 1838), p. 158; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 141–42.

⁹ J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer* (London: Longmans, Green, 1928), vol. 2, chap. 9. E. P. Thompson has also pointed out the contribution of evangelical doctrines of the importance of husbanding time to the construction of a new "work discipline" ("Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 [December 1967], pp. 56–97).

¹⁰ Ford K. Brown has provided the best discussion of the content of the Cheap Repository tracts, although he is torn between admiration for More's skill and disgust at

This political explanation is appealing, and one can find support for it in the writings of the evangelicals. Like most of their upper-class contemporaries, the evangelicals were certainly worried by the flood of Jacobin and Painite literature in the early 1790s.¹¹ Furthermore, the success, among upper-class readers at least, of Hannah More's answer to Tom Paine, "Village Politics," acted as an incentive to her more ambitious plan for the Cheap Repository. Repository ballads such as "The Riot" and "The Loyal Sailor; Or, No Mutineering" expressly forbade both crowd action and political revolt, and Mrs. Elisabeth Montague thankfully distributed them to her country neighbors, who, she wrote, "I am sorry to say, are much disposed to rioting."¹² Social equality was dismissed in the tracts as an idle dream and its proponents, such as "Mr Fantom, the new-fangled philosopher," as either fools or villains. Hannah More, the series editor, was wholly deliberate in her attempt to quell unrest and wrote to her sister that the ballad "Turn the Carpet" was intended "to vindicate the justice of God in the apparently unequal distribution of good in this world, by pointing to another."¹³

Yet when one confronts the Cheap Repository as a whole, the political explanation becomes inadequate. Although the political content of "The Riot" is clear, this often-quoted ballad is one of the relatively few explicitly anti-Jacobin tracts in the Cheap Repository and is virtually lost among the reams of Sunday readings, allegories, and little moral tales that attack vices ranging from drunkenness to superstition and that defy a simple political explanation. The anti-Jacobinism of the tracts has blinded us to the fact that More's aims extended far beyond fostering political loyalty. As her biographer M. G. Jones has noted, More was deeply concerned about the lack of

her reprehensible social message (*Fathers of the Victorians* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961], pp. 123–55; see also Maurice Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude: A History of English Manners* [Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965], pp. 83–89; Jones, pp. 125–50).

¹¹ Albert Goodwin attributes the rapid development of the English radical movement in the 1790s to both the spread of Painite doctrines and the rise of a radical periodical press in the provinces (*The Friends of Liberty* [London: Hutchinson, 1979], pp. 220–33). Paine's own *Age of Reason*, the second part of the *Rights of Man*, had sold 200,000 copies by 1793 and 1.5 million by 1809 (Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], p. 70).

¹² Hannah More, *Village Politics. By Will Chip. A Country Carpenter* (London, 1793); [Hannah More], "The Riot; or, Half a Loaf is better than no Bread," in *Cheap Repository Shorter Tracts* (hereafter cited as *CRST*) (London: Rivington, Evans & Hatchard; Bath: Hazard, 1798), pp. 430–33. "The Loyal Sailor; or, no Mutineering," in *CRST*, pp. 419–26. Montague to Carter, Blunt, ed., 2:317.

¹³ [Hannah More], "Turn the Carpet; or, the Two Weavers," in *CRST*, pp. 450–52; More to her sister, 1795, Roberts, ed., 1:459.

“suitable” reading matter for the literate poor and the proliferation of penny pamphlets and ballads. While recognizing that the Cheap Repository was born of this concern, Jones neglects to discuss this popular literature, dismissing it, like More, as “dirty and indecent stuff.”¹⁴

“Indecent” penny literature may have been, but this essay contends that only by examining the Cheap Repository within the context of popular literature can we understand the tracts for what they were: a broad evangelical assault on late eighteenth-century popular culture. The panic over Painite literature convinced Hannah More to investigate the reading matter of the poor, but it was the popular chapbook literature she discovered that convinced her to organize the Cheap Repository and that dictated its contents. In her plan for the Repository she explicitly stated that its object was to combat the “vulgar and licentious publications . . . profane and indecent songs and penny papers”—in other words, chapbooks—sold by an army of 20,000 hawkers.¹⁵ The tracts were thus less an attack on Tom Paine than on Simple Simon: in their content they made a point-by-point critique of the perceived norms of popular culture as revealed by contemporary chapbook literature. Bishop Porteus of London, one of the Repository’s most enthusiastic supporters, recognized the scope of the project and wrote extravagantly to More, “Behold, like a true female adventurer, you dash at once without fear into the wide world, and will be content with nothing but a complete conquest over all the vulgar vices in Great Britain. I most devoutly wish success to your spiritual quixotism.”¹⁶ Furthermore, although the tracts were not typical of elite attitudes as a whole, they made an explicit bid for upper-class leadership in the moral reform of the poor. In doing so, the tracts proposed a remaking of the relations between the poor and the powerful and prefigured the nineteenth-century campaigns for the reform of popular culture.

As the histories of the societies for the reformation of manners and the charity schools attest, the attempt to reform the morals of the poor was not new to eighteenth-century England. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge had distributed religious tracts long before Hannah More, and Mrs. Trimmer pioneered the use of religious stories for popular consumption.¹⁷ Yet if More’s Repository can be

¹⁴ Jones, p. 140.

¹⁵ Hannah More, “Plan for Establishing a Repository of Cheap Publications . . .,” quoted in Victor Neuburg, *Popular Literature* (London: Woburn Press, 1977), p. 255.

¹⁶ Bishop Porteus to More, 1795, Roberts, 1:470.

¹⁷ On the place of the evangelicals within a tradition of English moral reform organizations, see Quinlan. Peter Burke provides a general account of the attempt by elites

seen within a long tradition of attempts at moral reform, her strategy was uniquely subtle. By consciously adopting the forms, writing styles, and even distribution channels of popular literature, the evangelicals tried to infiltrate and subvert, rather than legislate and overtly control, the day-to-day lives and culture of the poor. Yet despite their familiar woodcuts and racy titles, the evangelicals' little books carried a message markedly different from—and sharply at odds with—the chapbook and ballad literature of the time. The first and second sections of this essay will discuss the characteristics and content of tracts and chapbooks in turn. The third section will discuss the significance of the tracts for the shifting relations between elite and popular culture, and the fourth will assess the effectiveness of the tracts as instruments of moral reform.

I

At first glance the Cheap Repository tracts do not strike the reader as didactic literature. Most are stories or ballads, with simple plots, vivid language, and a moral message made clear through actions rather than words. Structurally, the stories follow a predictable formula. Most begin by describing a single central character, usually poor, who is put to some kind of trial. The character either responds well and is moderately rewarded or goes dramatically downhill and dies repenting. The account is often rendered more authoritative by use of the first person or an intrusive narrator. For example, the *Cheapside Apprentice* tells his own story: how he goes bad through vanity and gaming, loses his money, seduces a young woman, forges a note, and eventually ends up on the gallows—in his own words, “a just victim to broken laws.”¹⁸ The *Lancashire Collier Girl* is more fortunate: through hard work, virtue, and perseverance she manages to maintain herself and her disabled mother by collier work and, when she eventually loses her health, is rewarded by a “relatively easy” place as a servant.¹⁹ In “The Two Soldiers” good and evil are simply personified in the characters of the two protagonists. After undergoing a trial by evil company and drink, the bad character goes off to highway robbery and

throughout Europe to reform popular culture during the Reformation and early modern periods in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 207–43. Victor Neuburg discusses the Cheap Repository tracts as part of an evolution of tract literature in an app. (pp. 249–64).

¹⁸ [Sarah More], “The Cheapside Apprentice,” in *CRST*, pp. 1–19.

¹⁹ [Hannah More], “The Lancashire Collier Girl,” in *ibid.*, pp. 20–31.

then jail and the good to repentance and promotion.²⁰ In “The Hampshire Tragedy” justice is even more direct and merciless: a servant girl who steals her dead master’s savings and claims they were given to her, calling on God to strike her dead if she is telling a lie, has her oath dramatically answered by a bolt of lightning.²¹

The reader of such tracts is immediately struck not so much by the pervasive moral message as by the skill with which that message is woven into the day-to-day lives of common people. As one outstanding example, the opening passage of “Betty Brown, the St. Giles’s Orange Girl” deserves to be quoted in full:

Betty Brown, the Orange Girl, was born, nobody knows where, and bred nobody knows how. No girl in all the streets of London could drive a barrow more nimbly, avoid pushing against passengers more dextrously, or cry her “Fine China Oranges” in a shriller voice. But then she could neither sew, nor spin, nor knit, nor wash, nor iron, nor read, nor spell. Betty had not been always in so good a situation as that in which we now describe her. She came into the world before so many good gentlemen and ladies began to concern themselves so kindly that the poor might have a little learning. There was no charitable society then, as there is now, to pick up poor friendless children in the streets and put them into a good house, and give them meat, and drink, and lodging, and learning, and teach them to get their bread in an honest way, into the bargain. Whereas, this now is often the case in London, blessed be God who has ordered the bounds of our habitation, and cast our lot in such a country.²²

In this colorful passage the author introduces the reader to an appealing character while at the same time inserting commentary on religion, patriotism, class relations, the business of getting a living, and a general historical trend toward improvement. It is the fact that the moral and social judgments are inextricable from the story that constitutes the tract’s efficacy as propaganda. To grasp the substance of the evangelicals’ critique of popular culture, and to discover their program for reform, we must pull apart these stories, isolating the particular vices that, time and again, lead people astray and comparing these to the idealized Christian life that appears in many of the tracts. What, then, causes the poor to fall?

Idleness at work, as one would expect, is a dangerous trait. One model footman confesses that loitering while doing errands was his

²⁰ [Hannah More], “The Two Soldiers,” in *ibid.*, pp. 191–208.

²¹ “The Hampshire Tragedy,” in *ibid.*, pp. 410–13.

²² [Hannah More], “Betty Brown, the St. Giles’s Orange Girl,” in *ibid.*, pp. 112–13.

particular sin.²³ Black Giles and a host of other ne'er-do-wells drift from laziness to theft to excruciating deaths in the pages of the Cheap Repository.²⁴ Yet worldly striving and ambition also bring grief, and money often appears as a temptation of the devil. Not work, however, but leisure time is particularly dangerous. Most popular amusements—particularly fairs, plays, and gaming—appear on the road to perdition. It is a fair that lures the housemaid Mary Wood into the sin of lying, and the Cheapside Apprentice opines: “To lounging about the purlieus of a playhouse I owe my ruin.”²⁵ Farmer Worthy labels the entertainment offered by a company of strollers “pernicious ribaldry,” complaining, “They go from town to town, and from barn to barn, stripping the poor of their money, the young of their innocence, and all of their time.”²⁶ In two separate tracts, gambling leads to poverty, family tragedy, crime, and death, and the author of “The Story of Poor Tricket, The Gamester” moralizes, “Let every reader lay to heart the dreadful consequences of gambling; for, by first bringing a man to want, it will harden his heart even against his most beloved wife and children; and who knows whether it may not also drive him to those criminal acts, for which his very life may be justly forfeited to the laws of his country.”²⁷ Charles Jones, the exemplary footman, inveighs against servants wasting their leisure in card playing and recommends that “they would amuse themselves in reading some godly book.”²⁸

Few books are godly, however, and the chapbooks and ballads bought by the poor are repeatedly condemned. In “The Sunday School” a woman selling penny literature is reprimanded by the minister for poisoning the souls of young girls.²⁹ In the same tract Mrs. Jones (Hannah More in disguise) chastises Farmer Hoskins for having loose songs and ballads in his kitchen, saying, “It would be better for your young men and maids, and even your daughters, not to be able to read at all, than to read such stuff as this.”³⁰ Fortune-telling books come in

²³ “The History of Charles Jones, the Footman, Written by Himself,” in *ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁴ [Hannah More], “Black Giles, The Poacher,” in *ibid.*, pp. 59–94; Hannah More, “The Two Shoemakers. Pt. 4. Jack Brown in Prison,” in Hannah More, *The Works of Hannah More* (London: T. Cadell, 1830), 3:496–514 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

²⁵ “The History of Mary Wood, the Housemaid,” in *CRST*, pp. 168–90; [Sarah More], “The Cheapside Apprentice,” p. 2.

²⁶ Hannah More, “The Two Wealthy Farmers. Pt. 5. The Golden Lion,” in *Works*, 3:205.

²⁷ “The Story of Poor Tricket, the Gamester,” in *CRST*, p. 255.

²⁸ “The History of Charles Jones . . .,” p. 153.

²⁹ Hannah More, “The Sunday School,” in *Works*, 3:304–8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

for special censure: More devoted an entire tract to dispatching one particular cunning woman, Tawney Rachel, to Botany Bay. She cautioned her readers against all popular superstitions, "I have thought it my duty to print this little history, as a kind warning to all you young men and maidens not to have anything to say to CHEATS, IMPOSTERS, CUNNING WOMEN, FORTUNE TELLERS, CONJURERS, and INTERPRETERS of DREAMS. Listen to me, your true friend, when I assure you that God never reveals to weak and wicked women those secret designs of his providence, which no human wisdom is able to foresee."³¹ On the whole, with the exception of Bible reading (and, one assumes, reading Cheap Repository tracts), all popular amusements are condemned.

Community life, with the exception of churchgoing, is equally inimical to virtue. While many of the "good" characters have a positively meddlesome concern for their neighbors' morality, the search for simple companionship usually leads to grief. Evil company—and, in some cases, *any* company—is tied to drink, one of the supreme vices. Few of the tracts can be read without coming across some reference to the evils of gin, and, in several, drink plays a major role in ruining health, thrift, and piety.³² Drink also destroys family life, and the tracts are peopled with countless patient wives suffering from their husbands' drunkenness, although Sally More turned the tables somewhat in "Sorrowful Sam," in which a slovenly, nagging Susan Waters virtually drives her husband to the alehouse.³³ At some critical point on the downward path comes the abandonment of the church, and all hope is lost: "Where once the Sunday is misspent, / The Week-days must be bad."³⁴

All these sins—idleness, profligacy, pernicious amusements, gaming, intemperance, unbelief—come together in London, where a succession of the leading characters of the Cheap Repository meet ruin. One tract describes it as a great but dangerous city and mourns that the workers traveling there "do not consider . . . the temptations they are under from bad women, wicked company, and the great number of alehouses."³⁵ Sinful Sally certainly did not, and the account of her life in London is the epitome of immoral pleasure:

³¹ [Hannah More], "Tawney Rachel," in *CRST*, p. 110.

³² See esp. "The Carpenter; Or, the Danger of Evil Company," in *ibid.*, pp. 373–78; "Robert and Richard; Or, the Ghost of Poor Molly," in *ibid.*, pp. 370–73; "The Gin-Shop; Or, A Peep into a Prison," in *ibid.*, pp. 389–93.

³³ [Sarah More], "Sorrowful Sam; Or, the Two Blacksmiths," in *ibid.*, pp. 209–30.

³⁴ "The Carpenter," p. 376.

³⁵ "The History of Charles Jones . . .," p. 158.

Powder'd well, and puff'd, and painted,
 Rivals all I there outshine;
 With skin so white and heart so tainted,
 Rolling in my carriage fine.³⁶

Sally knows, however, that a life of pleasure is one of sin, and she ultimately dies, poor and derelict, crying to God for mercy.

This summary of the proscriptions contained in the tracts amounts to a fairly substantial list of "don'ts." After the reader has appreciated the cautionary tales about drink, gaming, and whoring, what is left to constitute the "good life"? The good people of the tracts have, of course, a number of obvious virtues: they are temperate, industrious, humble, honest, pious, peaceable, and patriotic. The lives they lead are remarkably free of conflict. For example, Diligent Dick professes, "I rise with the lark, and lie down with the lamb. I never spend an idle penny, or an idle moment; though my family is numerous, my children were never a burden to me."³⁷ They are, interestingly, an almost entirely rural company, and Sinful Sally is not the only character to be described before her fall in beautiful, pastoral surroundings. This virtuous populace is, however, memorable mainly for its lack of vices. Unlike the villains, the virtuous lead lives of extraordinary dullness. What, then, saves them from a purely negative role as the backdrop to the various thieves, gamblers, and whores? Do they embody a transformation or simply a deadening of social life?

It is primarily within the sphere of family life that the Cheap Repository tracts present a new and powerful social message.³⁸ Although most other community ties are condemned, the bonds between husband and wife and between parent and child are considered sacred. "The well-being of a country depends, in a great measure, on the attention which is paid in it to the ordinance of God respecting mat-

³⁶ [Sarah More], "The Story of Sinful Sally, told by herself," in *CRST*, p. 382.

³⁷ [Sarah More], "The History of Diligent Dick, or Truth will out though it be hid in a Well," in *ibid.*, p. 293.

³⁸ The importance of the evangelicals in the creation of the Victorian ideology of domesticity has been explored by Catherine Hall ("The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. Sandra Burman [London: Croom Helm, 1979], pp. 15–32). As she points out, the members of the Clapham Sect themselves set the model for domestic life, and the Thorntons, Wilberforces, and Venns lived much like an extended family. Yet despite More's strictures against sociability, the Claphamites were exceedingly neighborly. (In addition to Hall, see Meacham [n. 4 above]; Ernest M. Howse, *Saints in Politics* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952], pp. 168–71; and E. M. Forster's "domestic biography" of his great-aunt, *Marianne Thornton* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1956].)

rimony," states one tract.³⁹ The virtuous men in the stories thus, understandably, take some care in choosing their wives. Farmer White "prayed to God to direct him in so important a business" and looked for a prudent, sober, industrious, religious young woman.⁴⁰ Charles Jones had similar criteria and described his choice as "no flaunter in fine clothes, none of your dancing, flirting, forward lasses . . . but a pious, sober, stay-at-home, modest young woman."⁴¹ Once married, the "good wife" rarely ventures out of her family, and her role is clearly that of helpmate: "To sooth his sorrows, calm his fears, / And help him thro' this vale of tears."⁴² The family, in the tracts, acts as a bulwark against a sinful world. One dying father tells his children that family unity will be their sole, but invaluable, inheritance.⁴³

A close-knit family also allows for the strict supervision and rearing of children.⁴⁴ One mother in the tracts states that "bringing up children in laziness is the root of all evil," and her children, like Hannah More's Sunday school pupils, are subjected to an endless succession of small tasks.⁴⁵ Since each child is, in the words of Isaac Watts, "By Nature and by Practice too / A Wretched Slave to Sin," the tracts strictly charge parents with absolute responsibility for their children's moral growth.⁴⁶ At his own hanging, Wild Robert, a thief and murderer, blames his mother for his death since she never taught him right from wrong. The concluding moral warns:

Ye parents, taught by this sad tale,
Avoid the path she trod;
And teach your sons in early years
The fear and love of God.⁴⁷

³⁹ "The Explanation of the Ten Commandments," pt. 2, *Cheap Repository Tracts: Entertaining, Moral and Religious*. By Hannah More and Others, rev. ed. (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 4:145–46.

⁴⁰ Hannah More, "The History of Tom White, the Post-Boy," in *Works*, 4:13.

⁴¹ "The History of Charles Jones . . ." p. 166.

⁴² [Hannah More], "The Shopkeeper turned Sailor," pt. 2, *Cheap Repository Tracts: Entertaining, Moral and Religious* (London: Rivington, Evans, Hatchard; Bath: Hazard, 1798), p. 435.

⁴³ "The Old Man, his Children and the Bundle of Sticks," in *CRST*, pp. 465–68.

⁴⁴ In their essential recommendations, the tracts do not deviate from Babington's classic text on evangelical child rearing (see Thomas Babington, *A Practical View of Christian Education* [Hartford, Conn.: Cooke & Co., 1831]).

⁴⁵ [Sarah More], "Sorrowful Sam" (n. 33 above), p. 210.

⁴⁶ Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs attempted in easy Language for the use of Children* (London: W. & I. Simpson, 1778), p. 7.

⁴⁷ "The Execution of Wild Robert, being a Warning to all Parents," in *CRST*, p. 397.

The familialism of the tracts is particularly striking; however, the tracts did propose a second series of social ties with which to replace communal interdependence and leisure. Just as the tracts stressed the importance of order and hierarchy within the family, so too they looked to the reinvigoration of the ties of hierarchy and dependence between rich and poor. Moralization, they imply, is a trickle-down process, brought about by a stream of discriminating charity and instruction flowing from rich to poor. Although some tracts distinguish the good from the bad by bolts of lightning and other *deus ex machina* devices, others introduce a character from the "higher ranks" of society who then becomes the arbiter of morality. Betty Brown's benefactor teaches her to go to church as well as to manage money, and Mrs. Jones distributes platitudes as well as recipes for cheap cooking to her impoverished neighbors. Indeed, when wealthy characters evade their responsibility for moral instruction, they bring about not only their own downfall but those of their servants and children as well. When Mr. Fantom, "the new-fangled philosopher," decides that "private vices are public benefits," his footman William takes to drinking in the evenings as a way of making his small contribution to the public good. William characteristically goes from drink to theft to murder to hanging, and More makes it clear that his fate is merely the "natural consequence" of the amoral and irreligious principles he learned from Mr. Fantom, who bears the main responsibility for William's death.⁴⁸

Insofar as the tracts stressed a new, close-knit family life and a reinvigoration of the ties of patronage and gratitude between rich and poor to the exclusion of other communal ties and action, they proposed a social transformation. However, the purpose of such a domestic restructuring was to integrate religion into daily life, and, for the most part, the message of the tracts was moral, not social. Although James Stock says, "The business of the world must not only be carried on, but carried on with spirit and activity," the main message of the *Cheap Repository* is that the business of the world is to be kept strictly secondary to the business of God.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the things of the spirit are to rule over all spheres of life, and every action is to conform to moral law. One tract, appropriately titled "On the Duty of carrying Religion into our Amusements," tells us that a Christian "must be

⁴⁸ [Hannah More], "The History of Mr. Fantom the New-fashioned Philosopher, and his man William," in *Cheap Repository Tracts* (New York ed.), 2:5–37.

⁴⁹ Hannah More, "The Two Shoemakers. Pt. 5. A Dialogue between James Stock and Will Simpson, the Shoemakers, as they sat at work, on the Duty of Carrying Religion into our Common Business," in *Works*, 3:521.

Christian in his very diversions.”⁵⁰ In this statement we find the justification for the tracts themselves and for their condemnation of popular culture. Anything that diverts the mind and spirit from an obsession with Scripture, duty, the fear of God, and a concern for salvation is to be avoided. Not only are Christians to avoid outside evil, but they are also to bring their “inmost heart and secret thoughts” into line with true religion.⁵¹ Self-mastery is crucial, and one doggerel verse praising the “noble army of martyrs” runs:

Warriors who the world subdue,
Were but vain and selfish elves;
While my heroes good and true,
Greater far, subdu’d themselves.⁵²

This subordination of secular to religious life is demanded of all the characters in the tracts, whether rich or poor. In the words of Farmer Worthy, “If Jesus Christ died for no one particular rank, class, or community, then there is no one rank, class, or community exempt from his laws.”⁵³ Nevertheless, equality before God is never confused with social equality, and an explicit condemnation of class antagonism coexists with an implicit justification of class difference. While charity toward others is a Christian duty, political action to better one’s own place betrays a lack of faith in providential wisdom, a refusal to accept God’s chastening for one’s sins meekly. The irritatingly complacent Patient Joe is held up as an example of grateful submission:

He prais’d his Creator whatever befell;
How thankful was Joseph when matters went well!
How sincere were his carols of praise for good health,
And how grateful for any increase in his wealth!

In trouble he bow’d him to God’s holy will;
How contented was Joseph when matters went ill!
When rich and when poor he alike understood
That all things together were working for good.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ “The Two Shoemakers. Pt. 6, Dialogue the Second—On the Duty of carrying Religion into our Amusements,” in *ibid.*, p. 530.

⁵¹ “The Two Shoemakers. Pt. 5,” p. 520.

⁵² Hannah More, “The True Heroes, or the Noble Army of Martyrs,” in *Works*, 2:51.

⁵³ Hannah More, “The Two Wealthy Farmers. Pt. 4. The Subject of Prayer Discussed in a Morning’s Ride,” in *ibid.*, 3:179.

⁵⁴ [Hannah More], “Patient Joe; Or, the Newcastle Collier,” in *CRST*, p. 387.

Precisely because they insisted on the supremacy of religious, not material, life, the evangelicals found any social protest or discontent to be impious and immoral. "He is the happiest of men who has the strongest faith in God, and the fewest sins to repent of, let his condition in life be what it will," expounds one godly character.⁵⁵ According to the evangelicals, the law of God demands that the individual live peaceably and piously within whatever situation God has ordained.

The allegories, which make up a considerable proportion of the *Cheap Repository*, substantiate these points. Their very titles—"Bear ye one another's Burthens; or, the Valley of Tears," "The Strait Gate and the Broad Way," "The Grand Assizes," "The Pilgrims," and so on—betray the conviction that this worldly life is merely a passage to the next and a trial by which we are judged. One is to make the pilgrimage with one's gaze firmly fixed on heaven. In one tract a repentant Mrs. Incle describes her life after conversion:

I worked hard all day, and that alone is a source of happiness beyond what the idle can guess. After my child was asleep at night, I read a chapter in the Bible to my parents, whose eyes now began to fail them. We then thanked God over our frugal supper of potatoes, and talked over the holy men of old, the saints and the martyrs, who would have thought our homely fare a luxury. We compared our peace and liberty, and safety, with their bonds, and imprisonment, and tortures; and should have been ashamed of a murmur. We then joined in prayer . . . and went to rest in charity with the whole world, and at peace in our own souls.⁵⁶

If this rule sounds rigid, the reader should note that Hannah More was as strict with herself as she was with her characters. She wrote in her journal on January 1, 1798:

I resolve by the grace of God, to be more watchful over my temper. 2dly. Not to speak rashly or harshly. 3rdly. To watch over my thoughts—not to indulge in vain, idle, resentful, impatient, worldly imaginations. 4thly. To strive after closer communion with God. 5thly. To let no hour pass without lifting up my heart to Him through Christ. 6thly. Not to let a day pass without some thought of death. 7thly. To ask myself every night when I lie

⁵⁵ [Sarah More], "Sorrowful Sam" (n. 33 above), pp. 212–13.

⁵⁶ [Hannah More], "Bear ye one another's Burthens; or, the Valley of Tears. A Vision," in *CRST*, pp. 304–12; [Hannah More], "The Strait Gate and the Broad Way," in *CRST*, pp. 313–29; Hannah More, "The Grand Assizes; or, General Gaol Delivery," in *Works*, 4:74–84; [Hannah More], "The Pilgrims. An Allegory," in *Cheap Repository Tracts* (London ed.), pp. 389–406; Hannah More, "The Two Wealthy Farmers. Pt. 7. Mrs. Incle's Story," in *Works*, 3:241–42.

down, am I fit to die? 8thly. To labour to do and to suffer the whole will of God. 9thly. To cure my over-anxiety, by casting myself on God in Christ.⁵⁷

In sum, the tracts had several key characteristics. First, in style, language, and plot most were vivid and skillful propaganda. Second, in their particular content they strongly condemned both popular diversions and community life, attributing both temporal suffering and dire spiritual consequences to such immoral pastimes. Third, they proposed an alternative social structure—tight hierarchical families bolstered by vertical ties of moralization and dependence—as a forum for the religious instruction of children, a means of integrating devotion and daily life, and a framework for a Christian commonwealth. Finally, and most critically, they subjected every sphere of life to moral surveillance, subordinated daily concerns to a preoccupation with future glory, and placed a strict law of God over all people. How antagonistic was More's message to the norms of eighteenth-century popular culture? To answer this question we must turn to the chapbook literature, which served as both her model and her opponent.

II

Chapbooks—eight-, twelve-, or twenty-four-page imprints priced at a penny each—were still surprisingly popular and widely available in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁸ We have already seen More herself mention them: they are precisely those invidious publications hawked by the peddler woman in “The Sunday School.” Yet More's peddler was only one small part of a large and surprisingly lucrative publication and distribution network. In 1794 Bishop Porteus wrote to More from London, “There is a central set of booksellers, that are to the full as mischievous as your hawkers, pedlars, and match-women, in vending the vilest penny pamphlets to the poor people, and I am told it is incredible what fortunes they raise by this sort of traffic, and what multitudes of the lowest rabble flock to their shops to purchase their

⁵⁷ More, diary entry, January 1, 1798, Roberts, ed. (n. 1 above), 2:30.

⁵⁸ The best treatment of English seventeenth-century chapbook literature is Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London: Methuen & Co., 1981). Victor Neuburg has written widely on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular literature; for eighteenth-century chapbooks, see esp. *Chapbooks: A Bibliography of References to English and American Chapbook Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Vine Press, 1964), *The Penny Histories: A Study of Chapbooks for Young Readers over Two Centuries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), and *Popular Literature* (n. 15 above), pp. 102–23.

execrable tracts.”⁵⁹ Porteus did not exaggerate: Victor Neuburg has listed over 250 printers of chapbooks in London alone during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a further 140 in the provinces.⁶⁰ Dominating this London market was the firm of William Dicey and, later, his son Cluer. For half a century, the Diceys produced a variety of imprints, including over 150 chapbook titles.⁶¹ In the early nineteenth century James Catnach replaced the Diceys as king of the chapbook printers and allegedly made 10,000 pounds on his business.⁶²

These larger printers sold their wares wholesale to chapmen and hawkers, who reached even the most remote villages. By 1700 there were about 10,000 such peddlers throughout England, and when chapmen were taxed at four pounds per head in 1697, 2,550 failed to avoid such a tax.⁶³ By examining the inventories of chapmen’s packs, Margaret Spufford established that most of them did carry books, usually worth three- and ninepence—or about half a dozen chapbooks.⁶⁴ Most of the literature carried by chapmen was ephemeral, and it is difficult to know the amount distributed. We can be certain, however, that it was substantial: 400,000 almanacs alone, or one for every family in three, were printed annually in the 1660s, and sales continued at one-third of a million copies per year throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ These were supplemented by a great volume of chapbooks and broadsides. In 1700 one single publisher’s stock of chapbooks could have supplied one family in fifteen, and Neuburg has stated that distribution and sale of chapbooks grew considerably in the course of the eighteenth century.⁶⁶

The extent and amount of distribution was limited, of course, by the size of the literate population. Nevertheless, from a variety of studies it seems clear that a combination of considerable male literacy and “bridging” between the literate and illiterate populations made the

⁵⁹ Porteus to More, 1794, Roberts, ed., 1:436.

⁶⁰ Neuburg, *Chapbooks*, pp. 15–30. Harry B. Weiss found that one collection of chapbooks from 1785 to 1830 was drawn from over eighty London firms (*A Book about Chapbooks* [Trenton, N.J.: Edward Bros., 1942], pp. 6–7).

⁶¹ Neuburg, *Chapbooks*, pp. 9–10, and *The Penny Histories*, pp. 26–29.

⁶² Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1851), 1:224.

⁶³ Spufford, pp. 115–16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 5, esp. p. 119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2; Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press, 1500–1800* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), pp. 281–83.

⁶⁶ Spufford, p. 2; Neuburg, *Popular Literature*, pp. 103–7.

written word accessible to most people.⁶⁷ Spufford has estimated a 30 percent male literacy rate in the mid-seventeenth century and has convincingly shown that many poor children would have had an education of sorts, generally between the ages of six and eight, when the child would begin working.⁶⁸ Sanderson has pointed to a slow but substantial rise in literacy throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, resulting in literacy rates of 50–75 percent for men and 15–40 percent for women throughout England.⁶⁹ Industrialization set back literacy toward the end of the century, and although a quarter of a million children were in Sunday charity schools in 1787, educational facilities did not keep up with population growth in the towns.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, literacy for laborers and servants did not drop below 35–40 percent for the greater part of the eighteenth century.⁷¹ Chapbooks and ballads were the only publications within the means of this literate populace.

This chapbook and ballad literature resists summary, for it is remarkable precisely for its variety. Chivalric romances coexisted with accounts of executions and prophecies with bawdy jokes. However, it is possible to arrive at a rough assessment of the content of the market by summarizing a 2,800-piece collection held by the Harvard College Library and exceptionally well cataloged in 1905.⁷² The nucleus of this collection is the Boswell collection, begun by James Boswell in 1763, continued by his sons, and now bound in fifty-five volumes. Most pieces in the Harvard collection date from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century and can serve as a fairly representative sample of popular literature at the time of the Cheap Repository. Within this literature, particular stories and titles recur, and special attention

⁶⁷ R. S. Schofield, "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-industrial England," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. R. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 313.

⁶⁸ Spufford, chap. 2, esp. pp. 22, 32.

⁶⁹ Michael Sanderson, "Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England," *Past and Present*, no. 56 (August 1972), p. 83.

⁷⁰ The estimate is from M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement* (London: Frank Cass, 1964), p. 26. The information on the decline of literacy is from Sanderson, pp. 75–83.

⁷¹ Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England, 1650–1900," *Past and Present*, no. 42 (February 1969), pp. 108–10.

⁷² In the following summary, I have adhered to the categories established by the 1905 catalogers. Although the catalog does list some American chapbooks, the overwhelming majority are English, and those of the Boswell collection, which number over 1,000, are entirely so. (See *Catalogue of English and American Chapbooks and Broad-side Ballads in Harvard College Library*, ed. W. H. Tillinghast and Charles Welsh, Harvard College Library Bibliographical Contributions, no. 56 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Library, 1905].)

must be paid to this canon of works. Chapbooks that are quoted below or mentioned by name are usually those of which multiple copies exist in the Harvard collection, and many can also be found on the trade lists of both William Thackeray in 1689 and Dicey and Marshall in the mid-eighteenth century.⁷³

A substantial amount of this literature—slightly over a third—consists of prose and metrical romances, chivalric and folk tales, and fairy stories. For the most part these stories have little relevance to day-to-day life and are packed with travel, adventure, and heroic deeds. For example, in “The History of Valentine and Orson,” originally a French chivalric romance, two brothers make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and fight pagans around Constantinople.⁷⁴ The old English favorite, “Jack the Giant-Killer,” has an equally vague historical setting: the witty and cunning Jack tramps about England slaying giants, ostensibly by leave of King Arthur.⁷⁵ Yet although these chapbook heroes lead lives very distant from the material existence of farmers or laborers, many are of humble birth or particularly sympathetic to the poor. In “The History of Sir R. Whittington and His Cat,” we find the archetypal story of the poor boy who makes good, and, as Spufford notes, English chapbooks are noted for their abundance of such “humble if risible” heroes.⁷⁶ For centuries Robin Hood dispensed justice against tyrants and misers, and Henry VIII was also perceived as a “poor man’s friend”: in one chapbook the king roams about the city of London at night and becomes the drinking companion of a cobbler.⁷⁷

Songbooks form the second largest category, over one-fifth of the Harvard collection. Amusement, dance, drink, and general jolliness are the subjects of most songs. A vast number are about “the Joys of Love” or, to be more straightforward, about men prevailing on women for sex. During the Napoleonic Wars a number of bellicose anti-French songs appeared; however, most songbooks were almost entirely innocent of explicit political content.

⁷³ The Thackeray list is published in Spufford, pp. 262–67; the Dicey and Marshall list is in Neuburg, *Chapbooks* (n. 58 above), pp. 37–42.

⁷⁴ *The History of Valentine and Orson* (London, n.d.), Boswell Collection of Chapbooks (hereafter cited as Boswell), Houghton Library, Harvard University, vol. 24, no. 2. For a version of this and a number of other chapbooks, see the compilation *Chapbooks of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Ashton (1882; reprint, New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1966).

⁷⁵ *The History of Jack and the Giants* (London, n.d.), Boswell, vol. 32, no. 8.

⁷⁶ *The History of Sir R. Whittington and His Cat* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 39, no. 8; Spufford, p. 147.

⁷⁷ *The History of Robin Hood* (London, n.d.), Boswell, vol. 32, no. 11; *The History of the King and the Cobbler* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 55, no. 4.

Jest books, riddles, and humorous tales constitute another sixth of the collection. The humor in these books is coarse and often scatological, misogynist, or anticlerical. The late eighteenth-century favorite "Joe Miller's Jests" includes the following entirely representative sample: "An honest bluff country farmer, meeting the parson of the parish in a narrow lane, and not giving way so readily as he expected; the parson, with an erected crest, told him, he was better fed than taught. 'Very true, Sir, (replied the farmer) for you teach me, and I foed [*sic*] myself.'"⁷⁸ Yet if clerics, lawyers, doctors, and misers routinely came in for such thinly veiled social satire, nothing, it seems, was quite so amusing as the vagaries of the never-ending battle between the sexes. Courtship, seduction, and mismatched marriages furnished endless "fun" in a fictional world where a clever maidservant could capture a lord. In one story a beautiful and virtuous chambermaid is, like Richardson's Pamela, much put upon by the advances of her mistress's son. Unlike Pamela, however, the chambermaid relies on wits, not pleading, and hires an aged whore to lie in her bed to await the son. The son, on discovering the ruse, wakes the house—but his mother is so amused by the trick of the "crafty chambermaid" that she tells her son that he must marry the girl to have her.⁷⁹ The chambermaid's trick is repeated in other chapbooks by farmers' daughters, apprentices, and others who have nothing to trade on but youth, beauty, and their quick wits.

Over 6 percent of the collection is concerned with a variety of description and nonfiction, including history, biography, and travel. This is a rather motley assortment in which two Spencian pamphlets and several speeches by Sacheverell and Wilkes rub against lives of Elizabeth and Essex, accounts of battles and shipwrecks, and descriptions of a series of "odd characters" from misers to feral children. A further 5 percent is concerned with crime and criminals. The latter books usually tell the story of a particularly horrible crime, dwelling on the details of ingenious murders, sexual abuses, painful deaths, and the like. The recurrent words of this literature—"dreadful," "vile," "barbarous," "cruel," and "melancholy"—give a good idea of their content, as does this title page: "Innocence Betrayed; or The Perjured Lover. Being a true and melancholy account of Miss Sarah Morton, a rich Farmer's Daughter, near Cambridge; famous for her Beauty and other accomplishments: who was decoyed from her Parents, by W—

⁷⁸ *Joe Miller's Jests Improved* (London, 1787), p. 21, *ibid.*, vol. 9, no. 16; see also *Joe Miller's Jests* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 30, no. 7.

⁷⁹ *The Crafty Chambermaid* (n.p., n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 8, no. 28.

M—— Esq.; who was debauched, and left her to Poverty and Ruin: when being driven to the greatest distress she on Friday last swallowed some poison, and expired in the greatest agonies, at Three o-Clock on Saturday.”⁸⁰

Finally, 5 percent of the collection is made up of religious or moral literature and another 5 percent of books concerned with the supernatural. The godly books are remarkable mostly for their similarity to the criminal literature. They include a number of deathbed conversions, visions, and horrible descriptions of everlasting torment but very few accounts of the kinds of prosaic Christian lives found in the Cheap Repository. The supernatural books, by contrast, are directly concerned with day-to-day life and problems. The ever-popular “Mother Bunch” is a classic example of the fortune-telling genre. Directed at young women, it tells how to interpret dreams, cast spells, distinguish lucky from unlucky days, and so on, relying on a combination of superstition and common sense. Most of the spells concern getting husbands or lovers. For example, Mother Bunch tells:

. . . all those of what constitution soever, that have languished in single sheets till sixteen; I will shew you how you shall see the person that is to ease you of your maidenhead, collected from Tismegistus Candornelius Agrippa.

On Midsummer Eve three or four of you must dip your shifts in fair water, then turn them wrong-side outwards, and hang them on chairs before the fire, and lay some salt in another chair, and speak not a word. In a short time the likeness of him you are to marry will come and turn your smocks and drink to you.⁸¹

“The True Egyptian Fortune Teller” teaches how to throw dice and read palms and marks on the face.⁸² Prophecies, particularly those by Mother Shipton and an idiot named Nixon, enjoyed continued popularity for several centuries.⁸³ Finally, a small but vigorous undercurrent of literature about witches existed that was subversive of established sex roles. For instance, in “The History of the Lancashire Witches,” a woman uses her supernatural powers to revenge herself on a false

⁸⁰ *Innocence Betrayed* . . . (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 14, no. 6.

⁸¹ *Mother Bunch's Closet Newly Broke Open; Containing Rare Secrets of Art and Nature* . . . (London, n.d.), p. 21, *ibid.*, vol. 48, no. 4.

⁸² *The True Egyptian Fortune Teller* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 21, no. 14.

⁸³ *The History of Mother Shipton* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 55, no. 7; *Nixon's Cheshire Prophecy* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 35, no. 9.

lover.⁸⁴ In “The Witch of the Woodlands,” four witches turn a particularly licentious man into a horse, and then “they rode him through such a number of bushes and briars, that they tore the skin from his flesh, insomuch that his whoring blood ran from him in great quantities.”⁸⁵

As a whole, then, chapbook literature encompassed a great variety of forms and subjects. Nevertheless, as a genre, it is not without coherence. If it is diverse in topic, it is unified in tone: the vast proportion is profoundly irreverent and often amoral. It is equally skeptical of natural laws, social order, and religious duty. Often chapbooks present either a fantasy landscape or a world turned upside down: a world of giants and witches, of poor but valorous heroes, of scheming wives and successful crooks. Above all, they are hostile to respectability: to industry, chastity, piety, and other bourgeois virtues.

In the realm of labor they are skeptical of hard work and glorify spunk and luck. Fortunes are made by chance, as with Fortunatus’s bottomless purse, or by marriage, valor, or cunning.⁸⁶ Thrift is ridiculed, and characters often gain and lose money with frightening rapidity. Family life is equally chancy and rarely affective. Simple Simon found marriage a series of tortures, and after his wife Margery’s death prayed, “she never more may rise.”⁸⁷ Seduction, rape, and sexual “meddling” are stock elements of both crime and jest literature, and stories are often misogynist and always forthright about sex. In “The Art of Courtship” Willie’s mother advises him about lovemaking, saying, “If ye meddle wi’ her, for my blessing gi’ her a guid rattle, she will like you a’ the better man.”⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the battle for sexual supremacy within chapbook literature is shifting, perpetual, and never won—as evidenced by the stories pitting clever servants against licentious masters or advising young men of the “rarest and most exact way of wooing a maid or widow by the way of dialogue and complimentary expressions.”⁸⁹

Despite the vast numbers of broadsides about crimes of passion, popular literature is casual about crimes of property. As the title “The

⁸⁴ *The History of the Lancashire Witches* (Wotton-Under-Edge, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 38, no. 4.

⁸⁵ *The Witch of the Woodlands* (London, n.d.), p. 14, *ibid.*, vol. 34, no. 1.

⁸⁶ See, e.g., *The History of Fortunatus* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 21, no. 8; “The History of Thomas Hickathrift,” in Ashton, ed. (n. 74 above), pp. 194–206; *The History of Jack of Newbury* (London, n.d.), Boswell, vol. 50, no. 1; *The Mad Pranks of Tom Tram* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 42, no. 7.

⁸⁷ *The Misfortunes of Simple Simon* (London, n.d.), p. 24, Boswell, vol. 47, no. 6.

⁸⁸ *The Art of Courtship* (Glasgow, [176–?]), p. 6, *ibid.*, vol. 8, no. 6.

⁸⁹ *The Academy of Compliments* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 21, no. 6.

Merry Frolics; Or, the Comical Cheats of Swalpo, a Notorious Pick-Pocket” attests, crime could be seen as a good jest and the dexterity of the thief much admired.⁹⁰ While knights, kings, and lords appear as popular heroes, more mundane and middle-class figures of authority are rarely accorded respect, much less deference. The title of one chapbook, printed in 1792, gives us a clue about popular feeling toward their “betters”: “An Explanation of the Vices of the Age: Shewing the knavery of Landlords, the Imposition of Quack Doctors, the Roguery of Petty-Lawyers, the Cheats of Bum-Bailiffs, and the Intrigues of Lewd Women.”⁹¹ An increasing number of eighteenth-century chapbooks directly addressed contemporary social relations and commented with impunity on issues ranging from the inadequate rations given apprentices to the propensity of the rich to spend their money on foreign luxury items—thus “shewing the pride and vanity of the English quality in relieving foreigners before their own country folks.”⁹²

Late eighteenth-century chapbooks are also, for the most part, irreligious. Godly literature constitutes only 5 percent of the Harvard collection, and, within that number, books concerned with practical Christian life (as opposed to deathbed conversions and visions) are relatively scarce. Furthermore, the influence of religion within popular literature was, it seems, declining. Although godly literature had constituted as much as 31 percent of publishers’ trade lists in the seventeenth century, when we compare the 1689 trade list of William Thackeray with that of Dicey and Marshall in the eighteenth century, we find that religion had little staying power. Only two of forty-one of Thackeray’s godly books survived until the Dicey list, compared with twenty of sixty-four merry books.⁹³ Again, while many of the merry books listed by either Thackeray or Dicey appear again on the trade list of the Cheney family (1808–20), no godly books are listed.⁹⁴

Its antiauthoritarian, subversive, “world-turned-upside-down” aspect gave this literature its ideological coherence. Within these stories, the poor found unaccustomed power and good fortune: they could perform brave acts, find treasure, watch the rich hang, or marry their masters. However, these adventures should not be interpreted as a reflection of either actual material possibilities in the lives of the poor or a conscious radicalism in politics or ideas. For chapbook literature

⁹⁰ *The Merry Frolics; Or, the Comical Cheats of Swalpo, a Notorious Pick-Pocket: And the Merry Pranks of Jack the Clown* (Darlington, 1788), *ibid.*, vol. 37, no. 12.

⁹¹ *An Explanation of the Vices of the Age . . .* (Glasgow, 1792), *ibid.*, vol. 8, no. 4.

⁹² *The cupboard door broke open; or Joyful news for apprentices* (Glasgow, 1790), *ibid.*, vol. 8, no. 12; *The English Lady’s catechism* (London, n.d.), *ibid.*, vol. 4, no. 26.

⁹³ Compare Spufford (n. 58 above), pp. 130, 262–67, with Neuberg, *Chapbooks* (n. 58 above), pp. 37–41.

⁹⁴ Neuberg, *Chapbooks*, pp. 41–42.

is, as a rule, innocent of ulterior motives, didactic or otherwise, and often without direct social relevance. Seventeenth-century chapbook literature was, as Margaret Spufford perceptively noted, designed simply to amuse: "It does not serve any other ends polemical or political."⁹⁵ Although the primarily eighteenth-century Harvard collection has a much greater number of chapbooks concerned with "social questions" (broadly defined) than does the seventeenth-century Pepys collection examined by Spufford, the old romances and adventure stories still remained the most popular. If "Mother Bunch" was a self-help manual of a sort, fully one-half of the Harvard pieces—stories and songbooks—are fictional, have little obvious relation to everyday life, and make no claim to practical aid or application. Furthermore, while many of the remaining chapbooks can be seen as thinly disguised social commentary, most of these content themselves with poking fun at the powerful or recounting how one particularly felicitous individual got the best of his or her "master." What unites all chapbook literature, regardless of subject, is the subordination of any message or moral to the dictates of amusement. It is, essentially, escapist literature; it let the reader experience the adventure or luck he or she did not find in life. Utterly removed from the earnest, rational, "useful knowledge" of the mechanic's institutes and working men's clubs of the nineteenth century, chapbooks could not teach the practical lessons of political organizing or social reform.⁹⁶

Yet if they were not consciously radical, chapbooks nevertheless constituted a formidable bulwark against the ideological dominance of either the pious or the powerful. Popular literature, read—and often produced—by the common people, was a coherent genre, largely autonomous from elite contact or control.⁹⁷ The coarse humor and glorification of adventuring that chapbooks contained became, over

⁹⁵ Spufford, p. 249.

⁹⁶ Robert Darnton has argued that French popular tales provide a "program for survival, not a fantasy of escape," reflecting the grim realities of everyday peasant life and offering a strategy for coping. However, Darnton concedes that English folktales present a happier and more fantastical world and often require little more from their heroes than a sort of blustering good humor. It is, therefore, difficult to derive "lessons" from English chapbooks, and I would argue, with Spufford, that this is not their purpose. See Robert Darnton, "Peasants Tell Tales," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), pp. 9–72. Peter Burke's account of popular attitudes toward various social groups also relies on a comparative reading of chapbooks (see Burke [n. 17 above], chap. 6, pp. 149–77).

⁹⁷ This survey of popular literature amply supports E. P. Thompson's contention that eighteenth-century popular culture "was remarkably robust, greatly distanced from the polite culture, and . . . no longer acknowledged, except in perfunctory ways, the hegemony of the Church" (see "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4 [Summer 1974]: 397).

many years, part of popular consciousness and resisted the values of seriousness and moral rectitude. If the evangelicals were to convert the common people to “true religion,” this consciousness—and indeed popular literature—would have to be radically altered. This was precisely what the evangelical writers set out to do.

III

Having summarized briefly the main characteristics of popular literature in the late eighteenth century, we can return to the Cheap Repository tracts with a new perspective. What was the significance of the appearance of the tracts within this wider body of chapbook literature, and what did the encounter of these two genres mean for the relations between elite and popular culture? This section will answer these questions by arguing, first, that a comparison of tracts and chapbooks reveals the tracts to be a deliberate assault on popular culture and, second, that the tracts rejected the very separation between elite and popular culture, providing a model for the construction of a new, universal Christian culture. Turning in the final section from aims to outcomes, we will see that the true success of the tracts lay primarily in their ability to win some portion of the upper classes to this model of moral reform, while their more specific attempt to moralize popular literature had little effect.

The Cheap Repository tracts were born as an attempt to replace popular with religious literature in the packs of rural hawkers. Yet however transparent More’s intentions, it is important to stress again that the tracts traveled in disguise. Their attack on popular recreations and communal life was concealed in a product that was not, at first glance, distinguishable from a chapbook. This similarity was deliberate: before Hannah More wrote the first Cheap Repository tracts, she bought a number of chapbooks and studied their form and style.⁹⁸ One can see in the language of the tracts the fruits of her labor. Titles such as “The wonderful Advantages of adventuring in the Lottery!!!” “Some Accounts of the Frolics of Idle Jack Brown,” and “MURDERS. True examples of the interposition of Providence, on the discovery and punishment of murder” fit perfectly within the sensationalism of the chapbook tradition—although readers may have felt themselves cheated when they confronted the tracts’ moral message.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Porteus to More, 1794, Roberts, ed. (n. 1 above), 1:457.

⁹⁹ “The wonderful Advantages of adventuring in the Lottery!!!” in *CRST*, pp. 256–73; Hannah More, “The Two Shoemakers. Part 3. Some Account of the Frolics of idle

Nevertheless, by comparing the tracts with chapbooks, one sees that More also addressed many of the same topics and made a point-by-point attack on their happy-go-lucky, irreverent contents. The correlation is startling and was certainly deliberate. The spells and superstitions of "Mother Bunch" were answered by "Tawney Rachel," in which the gullible young client of a cunning woman makes a bad marriage as a result and dies of grief. Fortunatus, the poor boy who makes a fortune, was combatted by Tom White, the poor boy who makes a living and is content. Adventure stories were answered by "The Shopkeeper turned Sailor; or the Folly of going out of our Element" and fantastical tales by an unswerving attention to everyday life.¹⁰⁰ Tom Paine found himself up against the law-abiding Will Chip of "Village Politics," and Joe Miller, the anticlerical jester, was lectured on the peril of irreligious levity by the godly James Stock. Chapbooks stressed the importance of courage, independence, sociability, and, above all, a sense of humor; tracts responded with a canon of respectable behavior diametrically opposed to that characteristic of chapbook heroes. Chapbooks presented a fictional world where the sexual and social order was fluid and changeable; the evangelicals countered by calling for strict domestic hierarchies and the grateful acceptance of one's social place.

Through this comparison of tracts and chapbooks, the Cheap Repository emerges for what it was—an assault on the perceived norms of eighteenth-century popular culture and an ambitious, concerted attempt to change people's minds—always a radical idea. As such, the Cheap Repository should be seen less as a specific anti-Jacobin work than as a part of a continuing upper-class endeavor to reform and moralize the poor. Yet within this tradition of moral reform, the Cheap Repository was unique, for in addition to attacking specific popular vices, it attempted to reconstruct the relations between elite and popular culture as a whole. As we have seen, chapbook literature existed as an autonomous genre in eighteenth-century England, subject to no authority except the requirements of popular amusement. Hannah More rejected not merely the content of this popular literature but also the very existence of a popular culture autonomous from dominant

Jack Brown," in *Works*, 3:476–96; Mr. Justice Fielding, "MURDERS. True examples of the interposition of Providence in the discovery and punishment of murder" (London, 1795), cited in Spinney (n. 7 above), p. 316. See Anne Goldgar, "Cheap Repository Tracts and the Chapbook Tradition" (Harvard University, Department of History, 1982, type-script).

¹⁰⁰ [Hannah More], "The Shopkeeper turned Sailor; or, the Folly of going out of our Element," in *Cheap Repository Tracts* (London ed.), pp. 430–50.

society. Her tracts confronted the divide between elite and popular culture by outlining the norms of a single Christian culture and differentiated the godly from the ungodly of all classes by their adherence to these standards.

Yet however universal More believed her criteria for a Christian life to be, they were, nonetheless, the precise antithesis of the ideals put forward by chapbook literature. Elite culture may not have been a blueprint of More's Christian society, but popular culture certainly provided her examples of evil vices. More therefore exhorted the elite to follow her example in attacking "vulgar vices" and, in the tracts, put forward a model for moral regeneration that emphasized the importance of upper-class example, patronage, and even surveillance in reforming the poor. Again and again the tracts emphasized that the poor were divided into mutually exclusive groups of godly and ungodly, respectable and unrespectable, and introduced wealthy figures to back up these distinctions by rewarding charity, patronage, and instruction to the moral poor. The tracts thus contributed to the process by which domesticity, temperance, thrift, and piety emerged as the criteria of working-class "respectability" in the eyes of the dominant culture and the minimum requirement for upper-class patronage or limited participation in political institutions. Essentially collaborationist, even colonizing, the evangelical's model for moral reform put forward in the tracts is a world away from the late eighteenth-century reality of separate and largely autonomous cultures for the privileged and the poor and of negotiation and compromise between the two on the basis of show, intimidation, and the threat of violence.¹⁰¹ More's vision of moral reform, and indeed the entire enterprise of the Cheap Repository, prefigures nineteenth-century campaigns for rational recreation, in which middle-class reformers attempted to "improve" popular leisure, "not through repression, but through the operation of superior counter-attractions."¹⁰² Insisting, like More, on a canon of respectable behavior, these reformers required proof of good conduct for participation in temperance and working men's clubs and relied on the support of self-improving artisans and workmen in their campaigns against unrespectable recreations.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ E. P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History* 3, no. 2 (May 1978): 133–65.

¹⁰² Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 170.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 176. The extent to which the working class adopted the standards of respectability put forward by More and others is too large a question to address here, although it is of major importance for the study of nineteenth-century moral reform

IV

If the Cheap Repository constituted an assault on popular culture, how successful an assault was it? Did the evangelicals' call for an elite commitment to the reform of the poor gain adherents? Did the poor abandon their affection for "vulgar vices" and "pernicious ballads" and become more pious, patient, and godly? Such questions are difficult to answer since the effects of popular literature are by nature diffuse and limited documentation exists on the fate of the tracts. Further, urbanization and new forms of political and industrial organization decisively altered the culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the Cheap Repository was necessarily only one component of this wider transformation. However, enough literary evidence exists to assess the impact of the tracts first on elite society and second on popular literature.

The real success of More's tracts is to be found less in their conversion of the poor than in their effective recruitment of the upper class to the role of moral arbiters of popular culture. Hannah More was by no means representative of late eighteenth-century elite culture; yet she and her fellow evangelicals were able to capitalize on a climate of political uncertainty to galvanize an anxious upper class into supporting a program of moral reform.¹⁰⁴ The tracts were, More admitted, "full as much read" by the higher ranks as by the lower, and although the majority of the tracts were, in her own words, for the "profligate multitude," she did include some stories aimed explicitly at the middle

movements. Certainly there was not a wholesale rejection, and many early nineteenth-century campaigns against popular recreations were supported by "respectable" artisans and better-off workers. For one excellent case study, see Anthony Delves, "Popular Recreation and Social Conflict in Derby, 1800–1850," in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590–1914*, ed. Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 89–127. Nevertheless, Peter Bailey has cautioned us against assuming that the adoption of some "respectable" behaviors meant the adoption of all: regularity and sobriety at work could coexist with an involvement in popular recreations frowned on by middle-class ideology. Compliance with bourgeois norms was selective: if few working-class individuals could afford to ignore these requirements altogether, many maintained a concomitant affinity with a working-class culture that remained remarkably vital and self-contained. (See Peter Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 3 [Spring 1979]: 336–53.)

¹⁰⁴ The ability of the evangelicals to exploit their political loyalism to further their reforming aims has been stressed by Quinlan (n. 10 above); see also Gerald Newman, "Anti-French Propaganda and British Liberal Nationalism in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Studies* 18, no. 4 (June 1975): 397, 401–2; David Spring, "The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects," *Victorian Studies* 5, no. 1 (September 1961): 35–48.

ranks.¹⁰⁵ Middle-class demand for the tracts was great enough to lead the evangelicals to print more expensive copies on better paper and to issue bound volumes of the entire series. Through the tracts, the evangelicals acquainted polite culture with popular “vices” and informed the well-to-do in no uncertain terms that it was their duty to reform and set an example for the poor. This message of moral rejuvenation and a supposed “return” to a golden age of exemplary upper-class morality and popular emulation struck a responsive chord among the nervous gentry of the 1790s, who, in the wake of the French Revolution and domestic unrest, were quite willing to identify any popular festivities as potential revolt. Wealthy sympathizers therefore supported the Cheap Repository liberally and were by all accounts instrumental in distributing the tracts among the poor. Although the evangelicals were sometimes in conflict with the polite culture of their day, in this particular project they had the wholehearted approval of the less devout members of their class. After a century of divergence between elite and popular culture, in the Cheap Repository we find the return of the upper classes to popular culture, but as crusaders, not participants.

Nevertheless, if the evangelicals were instrumental in conceptualizing a new relationship for elite and popular culture and won over a good portion of elite society to their program for moral reform, turning once again to the literary evidence we can see that by no means did they “convert” popular culture as a whole. Hannah More judged the success of her enterprise by the degree to which she was able not only to make devotional literature available but also to overpower and replace chapbooks and Painite publications altogether.¹⁰⁶ Yet as an attempt to reform or replace popular literature, the Cheap Repository does not seem to have been a notable success. Certainly, forms changed; but the changes were largely due to urbanization, and the resulting publications do not seem to have been more godly. The rise of a taste for serious, cheap reading matter was answered by *Penny Magazine* and other journals, not by religious tracts.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, although More had no way of knowing it, at the end of the eighteenth century chapbooks were increasingly giving way to a new vital, urban

¹⁰⁵ More to Macaulay, January 6, 1796, Roberts, ed., 1:473; More to Newton, 1794, *ibid.*, 1:457.

¹⁰⁶ More to Macaulay, January 6, 1796, *ibid.*, pp. 472–73.

¹⁰⁷ On the changes in popular reading matter, see R. K. Webb, *The British Working-Class Reader* (1955; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), p. 30; J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790–1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 27–37; Neuburg, *The Penny Histories* (n. 58 above), pp. 59–64, and *Chapbooks* (n. 58 above), pp. 4–5.

street literature.¹⁰⁸ In Mayhew's time, street hawkers were noted for their "utter absence of all religious feeling," and their wares reflected their impiety.¹⁰⁹ On the streets, old stories, ballads, and folklore gave way to more sensational accounts of contemporary events; noting their focus on sex, crime, and the royal family, Victor Neuburg has called these publications the precursors of the tabloid newspaper.¹¹⁰ London "street-patterers" usually dealt in seductions, murders, accidents, love letters, and so on, notorious murders being the particularly "great goes."¹¹¹ In tone the single substantial change in popular literature is its adoption of emotionalism. Unlike earlier chapbooks, Victorian street literature discussed feelings, usually in lurid detail, as well as actions.

Nevertheless, even in London, older forms persisted. One patterer's stock included "The adventures of Larry O'Flinn" (a jest book), "A Hint to Husbands and Wives," and "A Pack of Cards turned into a Bible, A Prayer-book, and an Almanac."¹¹² Most important, the signal characteristics of the chapbook tradition—escapism and irreverence—persisted in the popular literature of the nineteenth century. In sum, there is little evidence that the piety and earnestness of the Cheap Repository significantly affected popular literature. Our final judgment of the Cheap Repository must therefore rest with the fate of the tracts themselves. Did they gain a popular following?

The evidence on this question is problematic and somewhat mixed. There is, to begin with, the testimony of the evangelicals themselves. Bishop Porteus wrote to Hannah More in October of 1795 that he encountered the tracts everywhere during his travels in the country: "Some of them I saw in a shop-window at York, and stopped to talk with the mistress of it, a fine, fat, round-faced, well-looking Quaker, who said she sold a great number of them, and gave many away to the poor people, who were very fond of them."¹¹³ The bishop personally took charge of distributing the tracts through missionaries, and a little later he wrote to More, "The sublime and immortal publication of the 'Cheap Repository' I hear of from every quarter of the globe."¹¹⁴ More

¹⁰⁸ Neuburg has stated that there is some evidence that chapbooks were in decline by the late eighteenth century (*Popular Literature* [n. 15 above], p. 121–22). On Victorian street literature, see Victor Neuburg, "The Literature of the Streets," in *The Victorian City*, ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 1:191–209, and *Popular Literature*, pp. 123–234.

¹⁰⁹ Mayhew (n. 62 above), p. 218.

¹¹⁰ Neuburg, "The Literature of the Streets," pp. 206–7.

¹¹¹ Mayhew, p. 226.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 241. Mayhew found that old ballads still sold in the city as well, although they were more popular in the country (pp. 283–85).

¹¹³ Porteus to More, October 9, 1795, Roberts, ed. (n. 1 above), 1:471.

¹¹⁴ Porteus to More, January 16, 1797, *ibid.*, 2:4.

was also convinced of the tracts' popularity and cherished the story of a poor sailor who refused two guineas for saving a man's life because "the *little books* told him he must not be paid for doing good, but must do it for the love of God."¹¹⁵ The collected letters of prominent evangelicals are also peppered with enthusiastic references to the tracts, although these statements are evidence only that the tracts were distributed to the poor, not that they were read.

There are also, of course, the stunning circulation figures: 300,000 sold or distributed between March 3 and April 18, 1795; 700,000 by July 1795; and over 2 million by March 1796.¹¹⁶ G. H. Spinney has cautioned against placing too much reliance on these figures and has estimated that, insofar as the tracts actually reached the poor, they did so through charitable distribution and not sales.¹¹⁷ However, we do know that Hannah More made a conscious effort to undersell chapbook literature and to have the tracts carried through the standard channels of book-sellers and hawkers. On January 6, 1796, she wrote to Zachary Macaulay that she was reorganizing the plan in order to meet hawkers' demands: "We were mistaken in believing them cheap enough for the hawkers. I find they have been used to get three hundred percent on their old trash; of course they will not sell ours, but declare they have no objection to goodness, if it were but profitable."¹¹⁸ Hannah More gives no clue as to whether this reorganization helped sales; however, we do have one final and telling piece of evidence for the popular appeal of the Cheap Repository. After Hannah More officially closed the Repository in 1798, John Marshall, the publisher, continued to issue religious tracts under its name. The new tracts did not maintain the standard of piety set by More, but evidently the series was too good a proposition to lose.¹¹⁹ People were buying; and the market, the final arbiter of all popular literature, ruled in favor of the Cheap Repository tracts.

¹¹⁵ More to William Wilberforce, 1797, *ibid.*, 1:466.

¹¹⁶ Spinney (n. 7 above), pp. 301–2; More, diary entry, September 22, 1798, Roberts, ed., 2:34.

¹¹⁷ Spinney, pp. 309–10.

¹¹⁸ More to Macaulay, January 6, 1796, Roberts, ed., 1:473.

¹¹⁹ Spinney, pp. 306–9; Jones, *Hannah More* (n. 3 above), pp. 143–44. Within the Harvard chapbook collection there is also a copy of the Repository tract "The History of Charles Jones . . .," printed by a non-Repository printer, suggesting that the more successful tracts were pirated and reprinted in the same manner as chapbooks. The tracts were also issued in bound volumes in 1798 and 1821 and published in America both by independent printers between 1797 and 1800 and, later, by the American Tract Society. For the future of the tracts in the United States, see Harry B. Weiss, "Hannah More's Cheap Repository Tracts in America, Parts 1, 2," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 50, no. 7 (July 1946): 539–49; 50, no. 8 (August 1946): 634–41.

Nevertheless, popular culture seems to have had the last word. As has been stressed, the strength of popular literature was not its social vision, literary merit, or morality but, simply, its ability to amuse. The tracts that survived within this context were those that met its criteria as entertainment. Of the seventy-two Repository tracts that survive as part of the Harvard collection, twenty-two are Marshall's later, rather sensational, imprints. A further substantial portion are ballads and stories, and only three are from the weighty "Sunday readings" that made up almost one-third of the Cheap Repository. On the whole, the stories that survived were those that were the most fast paced or action packed or that had the most interesting characters. Popular culture had its revenge on the evangelicals in reducing to the level of entertainment precisely those works that had set out to defeat it.