For Hannah More, the Bible was the touchstone of her long productive career: a source of inspiration, a repository of allusions and phrases, a catalog of characters, a sustaining guide. Her deep knowledge of the sacred text, a central element of her daily reading regimen, and unwavering belief in its promises suffused her plays, poems, essays, tracts, and novel. She was an evangelical bluestocking and a socially hierarchical but “spiritually egalitarian” Tory who championed such radical causes as the abolition of the slave trade and the education of the poor. More, a counterrevolutionary par excellence, was also one of the most influential and financially successful women writers in Georgian Britain. As “a progressive rather than a traditionalist,” whose vision of social reform extended “from palace to cottage” (Sutherland 52), More continues to defy conventional ideological or class stereotypes. The range and complexity of her writing are critical to understanding literary politics and to enlarging concepts of Romanticism, extending its horizons to embrace the culture of female sensibility and activism. She “celebrated the workings of the rational mind, a mind relocated—in a gesture of revolutionary social implications—in the female body” (Mellor 87).

Hannah More was the fourth of five daughters of schoolmaster Jacob More and farmer’s daughter Mary (Grace) More. She was an eager pupil in the family’s quarters of the Fishponds free school in the parish of Stapleton, near Bristol. She quickly distinguished herself in Latin and mathematics, so much so that her father, fearful of creating a mere pedant, discontinued the lessons. Thanks to the paroled French officers, prisoners during the Seven Years’ War, whom Jacob invited to their home, the More girls spoke French fluently. When the three older girls moved to Bristol to establish a school for young ladies, Hannah and the youngest followed, first as pupils and then as junior teachers.

None of the More sisters married; however, Hannah’s canceled engagement became the target of snide comments from male critics who hid behind pseudonyms to attack her as a jilted bride or frustrated prude. Her dilatory suitor, an old bachelor who had postponed the wedding three times in the space of six years, eventually settled an annuity on Hannah and bequeathed her a thousand pounds. Thus he relieved her of the duty of teaching and launched her immensely prosperous career, which brought her to the attention and tutelage of Dr. Samuel Johnson, theater impresario David Garrick, Shakespearean critic Elizabeth Montagu, influential widow Frances Boscawen, and classical scholar Elizabeth Carter, along with a host of bishops and clergymen.

Two outstanding examples of More’s ability as a biblical interpreter bookend her career: the four blank-verse plays and one rhyming couplet monologue based on Old Testament stories, *Sacred Dramas*:
Chiefly Intended for Young Persons (1782) and An Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of Saint Paul (1815). Sacred Dramas ran to twenty-four editions, with poet William Cowper maintaining (1788) that these plays had “more verve and energy both in her thoughts and language than half the rhymers in the kingdom” (3:227). The entire first edition of Saint Paul sold out in one day.

More’s strong evangelical convictions influence and complicate her attitude toward the stage, her first love. An active participant in “women’s ethical spectatorship of governance,” she “engaged with the political life of the nation through media suited to forms of sociability deeply tied to the commercialization of culture” (O’Quinn 117)—in her case, initially through theater. She keenly experienced the countervailing influences of dramatic aesthetics and ethical ideas. In her “Preface to the Tragedies” (1801), she admits that “a well-written tragedy is one of the noblest efforts of the human mind” (More 2:127), but acknowledges the problematic opposition between the Christian principles of humility, charity, and peacemaking and tragedy’s preoccupation with anger, honor, and revenge. She understands this binarism as the threat posed to “the power of the word, ... the biblical logos, by the many voices, bodies, and images of the theatre” (Russell 231).

There is a world of difference between More’s tragedies—belabored, angst-driven adaptations for the public stage—and her Sacred Dramas, designed for private family, closet, or reading-theater enactment. Her well-loved biblical source actually released a creative outpouring: assured versifying, nuanced and poignant characterization, hard-hitting opposition to the order of the state, an acute understanding of the gap separating public acclaim and private integrity, and a humbling, expressive recognition of fallibility. Although most contemporary criticism, when it touches on More’s dramatic work at all, concentrates briefly and usually hurriedly on her tragedies, in Sacred Dramas the emerging power of Hannah More as a gifted, impassioned artist can be found.

Though in the “Advertisement” she reflects “with awe” on the “holy ground” on which she stands (1:xxv) and defines her aim as being “at once useful and interesting” to a young audience, “in whom it will always be time enough to have the passions awakened” (1:vivi), More does not shy away from the central concern of Truth, however unfashionable its tenets.

The clear fervor of her address to “undebauch’d,” “unsophisticate” youth (1:5) is one indication of More’s self-assurance. The twinning of classical and biblical narrative is another indication of her confidence in the power of biblical story “to rouse a holy zeal, / ... Correct th' irregular, reform the wrong, / Exalt the low, and brighten the obscure!” (1:6).

“Moses in the Bulrushes,” “David and Goliath,” “Belshazzar,” and “Daniel” are well-known stories, to which More brings a subtlety and deftness of character treatment. Pharaoh’s daughter—as a voice of solidarity for women, critical of her own father—rescues the infant Moses and understands immediately the dilemma the child’s mother must have faced in a time of aggression and ethnic cleansing:

Who knows but some unhappy Hebrew woman
Has thus expos’d her infant, to evade
The stern decree of my too cruel sire.
Unhappy mothers! Oft my heart has bled
In secret anguish o’er your slaughter’d sons;
Powerless to save, yet hating to destroy.
   (Works, 1:13)

This position results in a telling rebuke to her less compassionate attendant, Melita:
How ill does it beseem 
Thy tender years and gentle womanhood, 
To steel thy breast to pity's sacred touch! 
So weak, so unprotected is our sex, 
So constantly expos'd, so very helpless, 
That did not Heav'n itself enjoin compassion, 
Yet human policy should make us kind; 
Lest in the rapid turn of Fortune's wheel, 
We live to need the pity we refuse.
(1:19)

With her all-female cast in “Moses in the Bulrushes,” More makes a considerable effort both to 
individualize and to render some exchanges, such as these abrupt, tension-filled lines between Moses’s 
mother, Jochebed, and his sister Miriam, flashpoints of anxiety and release:

Jochebed. Come and lament with me the brother's loss.
Miriam. Come and adore with me the God of Jacob!
Jochebed. Miriam!—the child is dead!
Miriam. He lives! He lives!
Jochebed. Impossible!—Oh, do not mock my grief;
See'st thou that empty vessel?
Miriam. From that vessel
Th' Egyptian Princess took him.
Jochebed. Pharaoh's daughter?
Then still he will be slain: a bloodier death
Will terminate his woes.
Miriam. His life is safe!
For know she means to rear him as her own.
(1:23)

The predominantly male cast of “David and Goliath”—with the exception of the closing chorus of 
Hebrew women—also probes the consequences of war and aggression but mainly from the battlefront, 
the valley of Elah. Although David’s opening song praises the shade and humility of his “lowly cot, ...
remote from regal state” (1:37), most of the drama pits critical (Jesse) and vainglorious (Goliath and 
David’s jealous brothers) views against each other. While the description of Goliath’s “fearful stature,” 
the “helm of burnish'd brass” on his “tow'ring head,” “capacious trunk,” and “plaited cuirass ... of massive 
iron” (1:53) recalls chapbook details of giants, Goliath’s taunting speech to his opponent as “light boy,” 
“stripling,” “dainty-finger'd hero,” and “insect warrior” (1:70, 72) emphasizes how little he understands 
David's power. In contrast to his brothers’ “glozing speech” (1:50) and Saul's fearful reluctance to let 
David shine stands the young shepherd’s clear declaration of loyalty:

Far higher views inspire my youthful heart 
Than human praise: I seek to vindicate 
Th' insulted honour of the God I serve.
(1:62)

More’s sense of oneness with her text in *Sacred Dramas* means that the doctrinal content is naturally 
high in a “script” that is both a palimpsest of biblical allusions and a series of comments on the 
challenges and upheavals of late eighteenth-century British life. The rhetoric of her day, oscillating 
between revolutionary discontent and reform impulses, supplied a theater of public discourse that 
deeply engaged More. Not content to be part of a political audience watching “preferably in silence,”

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she was unwilling “to sit back and partake vicariously in action from which [she] had been excluded” (Friedland 12). Through the warning of the prophet Daniel in “Belshazzar,” she voices concern about “the still-seeming safety of retreat” (1:117). Whether in ancient Babylon or Georgian Britain, political actors who purport to be working disinterestedly warrant careful scrutiny:

When selfish politicians, hackney’d long
In fraud and artifice, affect a glow
Of patriot fervour, or fond loyalty,
Which scorns all show of interest, that’s the moment
To watch their crook’d projects.
(1:143)

As an indication of where More’s career was headed, it is significant that Sacred Dramas, with its strong connections between “the governance of the nation and the regulation of the passions” (Purinton 116), includes the first appearance of her poem “Sensibility.” Enshrining sensibility in the home as “thy true legitimate domain” (1:175), the poem concentrates on the quick, intuitive perception of “sweet SENSIBILITY!” as “unprompted moral! sudden sense of right!” and “hasty conscience!” and “prompt sense of equity!” and “eager to serve” and “always apt to choose the suff’ring side” (1:173). Among the corrosive influences that destroy feeling, “Sensibility” catalogs a series testifying to the power of language and gesture: “the look oblique,” “the sneer equivocal, the harsh reply,” “all the cruel language of the eye,” and “the guarded phrase” (1:176). These lessons More could have learned from the theater and from experience.

Just as astringent principles prompted her withdrawal from the public stage, More embarked on prose biblical commentary, a discipline from which her sex was systematically excluded, with equally strong, candid conviction. Admitting “deficiencies in ancient learning, Biblical criticism, and deep theological knowledge,” she concentrates on the ways Paul “lets us into the secrets of our own bosoms, ... discloses to us the motives of our own conduct, and ... lays bare the moral quality of action” (10:vii, 407). In her positively charged review, Paul is a model stylist and moralist, as well as an accomplished strategist, especially in his pointed reproofs to the church at Corinth: “In no epistle is there more preparatory soothing, more conciliatory preliminaries, to the counsels or the censures he is about to communicate” (10:195). Because she sees Paul “always writing like a man of the actual world” (10:357), she undertakes to defend him on two hugely contentious issues: his treatment of women and of authority. More’s Paul is a friend of women (Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Julia, Chloe, Tryphena, and “our countrywoman Claudia,” whom she contends Paul met when “in all probability [he] preached the Gospel in Britain” [10:244]). More’s Paul is also no hothead or renegade. With his religion characterized by “a peculiar sedateness” (10:225), this Paul appears to have no connection to the apostle who was snubbed by Jews and Christians alike in Jerusalem, whom the Jews of Lycaonia greeted with violent hostility, on account of whom the silversmiths of Ephesus rioted, and for whom the deep hatred of the Jews of Jerusalem resulted in his arrest.

There are glosses and whitewashes in More’s essay on Paul. What remains consistent, however, from her earliest to last efforts, is the adherence to biblical doctrines that prompt the cultivation of the civil mind and feeling heart in everyday life and provide the ligature binding private and civic concerns, personal and institutional ethics. Such adherence did not blind More to ironies and shortcomings. In Christian Morals (1812), she contemplates why good nominal Christians are not better, drawing her simile from the beloved subject of gardening: “They live, it is true, but it is as the vegetable world lives

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in the winter’s frost, which does not indeed kill it, but benumbs its powers and suspends its vitality” (9:259). Like an expert homilist, she drives home the point about the otherworldly focus she strives to uphold through the simple device of contrasting monosyllabic adverbs: “To suppose that we shall possess hereafter what we do not desire here, that we shall complete then what we do not think of beginning now, is among the inconsistencies of many who pass muster under the generic title of Christians” (9:333).

See also Carter, Elizabeth (1717–1806)

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