

**Messages towards the British Public:  
Literary Ambitions in *The Two Wealthy Farmers,  
or the History of Mr. Bragwell* \***

Bora Im

(Jeonbuk National University)

**Im, Bora.** “Messages towards the British Public: Literary Ambitions in *The Two Wealthy Farmers, or the History of Mr. Bragwell*.” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 48.2 (2022): 113-128. The 1800s saw the prominence of counterrevolutionary discourses and Hannah More contributed to them considerably through her political, religious, and moral works. This paper attempts to discuss one of More’s influential works, Cheap Repository Tracts, which anthologize extremely intriguing anecdotes and stories. Many stories included in Cheap Repository Tracts need attention, but I would like to focus on a story, which is titled *The Two Wealthy Farmers, or the History of Mr. Bragwell*. The story, *The Two Wealthy Farmers* characterizes two farmers, Worthy and Bragwell to show the triumph of moral wisdom and the correction of follies. In *The Two Wealthy Farmers* More shows her great literary ambition for moral educations and didacticism. More thought that her own didacticism was opportune as Britain had to cope with the disorder following the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars at that time. More’s *The Two Wealthy Farmers* was a message sent to the British public; More recognized the value of order and moderation in the time of crisis. (Jeonbuk National University)

**Key Words:** Hannah More, Britain, didacticism, peer tutoring, the 1800s

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## I

The significance of Edmund Burke in Romantic studies has been well established; but some critics such as Kevin Gilmartin focus on the prominence of other contemporary writers, William Paley and Hannah More (Gilmartin 11). In this paper I would like to examine the literary capacities of one of Hannah More's renowned works, Cheap Repository Tracts. Hannah More is one of crucial figures in British counterrevolutionary discourses and her Cheap Repository Tracts need to be explored in detail as they enunciate the counterrevolutionary philosophies efficiently.

More attempted to rectify the behaviors of the lower orders. More wanted the poor to be obedient to instructions from the authorities and the government; her Cheap Repository Tracts were to be the illegitimate organ for the dissemination of didactic messages to the lower orders of Britain. In this vein, Marjean D. Purinton noted More's didacticism by regarding her Cheap Repository Tracts as "didactic discourse expressing teacherly force and technical innovation" (Purinton 114).

In this paper I would like to examine a story titled, *The Two Wealthy Farmers, or the History of Mr. Bragwell*, which is one of the episodes anthologized in Cheap Repository Tracts. *The Two Wealthy Farmers* represents dialogues between two farmers, Bragwell and Worthy. The two friends' dialogues uncover More's didactic scheme and pedagogical ambitions so well. More wanted the lower orders of Britain to avoid depending on passion and violence: it was crucial for the society to be away from passion and violence as the social, political, and cultural state of Europe including Britain was in great disorder due to the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars. More composed Cheap Repository Tracts to bring order out of the chaos through her didactic messages towards the British lower orders.

We will examine the extreme subtlety and impressiveness embodied in More's literary attacks against moral paralysis evinced in the behaviors of the lower orders at that time. In so doing we will explore More's emphasis on the practice of self-reflection. More criticizes people who do not reflect on their own actions and

speeches. More's focus on self-reflection is certainly related with her identity as an enticing leader of contemporary religious propagandas. But the religious dimensions of Cheap Repository Tracts need not to be too underlined; the Christian instruction represented in Cheap Repository Tracts was a medium through which More could provide moral education to the lower orders of Britain at that time.

What is remarkable about More's Cheap Repository Tracts is that she tried peer teaching or peer tutoring in them through the elaborate characterization of those two farmers, Bragwell and Worthy. More tried to insinuate conservative principles into the minds of the British people. And More's conservative and counterrevolutionary philosophies were closely interrelated with her didacticism.

## II

For our fruitful discussion, we need to observe a very important monograph closely; Kevin Gilmartin's book, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832* (2007). Gilmartin's book has revisionist aims to recover "the range and complexity of counterrevolutionary expression and to demonstrate the productive presence of counterrevolutionary voices in the romantic period" (Gilmartin 9). As Gilmartin points out, romantic literary studies paid much attention to radical expression, but they ignored the impact of counterrevolutionary print expression on the formation of the romantic culture.

Gilmartin speculates that if counterrevolutionary ideology was treated in romantic studies, the treatment was done by focusing on Burke's conservatism only. But Gilmartin argues that Burke is not a representative man of right and that counterrevolutionary culture in the romantic period was much more enterprising and productive than we think (Gilmartin 11). If we read until this point, at which Gilmartin ends his introduction, we cannot be sure whether he writes about British conservatism from left or right. But following chapters answer our question. My

suggestion is that the intentional ambiguity must be his strategy to evoke and sustain his readers' attention.

William Paley and Hannah More are two counterrevolutionary writers that Gilmartin presents to redress a balance in romantic studies that emphasize the prominence of Burke. In *Writing against Revolution*, Paley is studied in his relation to John Reeves's Association, which sponsored his renowned tract, *Reasons for Contentment: Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public*. In *Reasons for Contentment*, Paley flatters the common readers by saying that the rich are really envious of their poverty; the philosophy greatly appealed to conservative minds in Britain at that time.

Gilmartin reads the corpus of contemporary conservative tracts as a complex political address to the ordinary reader, which is away from "a simple defense of the established order" (Gilmartin 37). Contemporary conservative authors knew that such "a simple defense" was not effective in quieting ever increasing envy and resentment of the lower orders in the revolutionary period. As Gilmartin aptly suggests in his monograph, contemporary conservative philosophers also knew very well that their envy and resentment needed "to be organized rather than suppressed" (Gilmartin 37).

As Gilmartin points out, if Paley was a theorist of counterrevolutionary enterprise, Reeves and his allies were activists who, acting in concert with the government, organized the arena within which "the labouring part of the British public would be permitted to achieve political self-awareness" (Gilmartin 54). An important word in this quotation is "permitted." Here Gilmartin rightly highlights the complex quality of John Reeves's Association.

Gilmartin argues that the Association was neither under "complete government control nor spontaneous public initiative but was rather a more complex and compromised product of both" (Gilmartin 38). Government supported the Association because the latter supported it. But it was always aware of a danger that lurked in any kind of public opinion though it was conservative one: the government could be destroyed by the political sentiment of ordinary people that it tried to arouse.

Therefore, it needed to give Reeves and his fellow projectors “a right Direction” (Gilmartin 39) and to clarify what it permitted them to do. The British government tried to control the activities of the Association.

As stated above, Gilmartin deals with another crucial figure of the Romantic period, Hannah More, whom I would like to examine in more detail in this paper. While a number of prominent scholars present More as a reformer, Gilmartin describes her as a reactionary. As Gilmartin aptly describes, More wanted to “innovate in order to preserve, and educate in order to subordinate” (Gilmartin 92). Gilmartin observes More’s innovation and education very closely; in particular, More’s Cheap Repository Tracts are read.

More’s Cheap Repository Tracts were based on the innovational process of distribution, in which the middle class bought them, which were very cheap, and gave them freely to the lower orders. The reason why the middle class elites became willingly subscribers and distributors of the Cheap Repository Tracts was that it promised the security of their privileges. As Gilmartin points out, More in The Cheap Repository Tracts wanted “to reform a licentious popular culture and to prevent the spread of an emerging radical culture, and above all to impose habits of subordination and discipline upon the lowest orders of society” (Gilmartin 67).

Of course More wrote works which convey didacticism for the rich. *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* was composed for the reform of the rich (Jones 114). But More was primarily interested in the poor people. More’s didactic message to the poor in the Cheap Repository Tracts was that they had to replace their festive and prodigal traditions with more decent practices ordered from above (Prior 50). By educating the poor to suit the middle class elites’ needs, and thus appealing to them with such an educational propaganda, More could control the minds of the lower orders effectively (Stott 170). In other words, More was aware of middle class elites’ fear and hope.

Gilmartin argues that conservatives’ efforts to subordinate the lower orders and to preserve the unreformed Constitution were manifest in periodical expression too.

Through the detailed discussions of counterrevolutionary periodicals that were published during 1790s and 1800s like the *Anti-Jacobin: or, Weekly Examiner*, the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, and the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Gilmartin shows that the counterrevolutionary periodical forms depended on “a dynamic interplay of antagonisms and affiliations” (Gilmartin 129). Indeed, the function of the periodicals in the Romantic period was paramount.

The contemporary periodicals from the conservative camp fiercely negated radical propositions to check the spread of subversion, while simultaneously promising to maintain social order and safety. In this way conservative criticism “contributed actively and constructively to the historical development of the cultural field in the early nineteenth century” (Gilmartin 134). Based upon the observation Gilmartin revises Terry Eagleton’s declaration that modern European criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state: Gilmartin says that it was born of “equal vigor and determination on both sides of an ongoing debate over the legitimacy of the old regime in Britain” (Gilmartin 137). As widely known, a movement which was called the Enlightenment was changing the old order of Europe (Winks 20).

Based upon the hitherto careful and detailed examination of the arguments included in the important monograph of Gilmartin, I would like to discuss the literary scope of More’s Cheap Repository Tracts. I want to focus on the facets and dimensions of Cheap Repository Tracts that have received little attention from Gilmartin. More was a writer and philanthropist and was born in 1745 at Fishponds, England. More composed significant works during her life; Cheap Repository Tracts are one of those compositions.

More did not want to write a political work, yet the threat of the French revolution and the ensuing war made her write loyalist, moral, and Christian tales for the lower orders that were published anonymously as Cheap Repository Tracts (Smith 23). A total of 114 tracts were sold every month from 1795 to 1798, funded by subscriptions, and distributed by booksellers and pedlars across Britain. Sales were enormous: within four months 700,000 had been sold, within a year over 2

million. They were mainly bought by the middling and upper classes to distribute to the poor but they also found a ready market in the United States (Skedd 20).

A story which is titled, *The Two Wealthy Farmers, or the History of Mr. Bragwell* is one of the episodes presented in Cheap Repository Tracts. *The Two Wealthy Farmers* shows passionate and lively dialogues between two friends, who are farmers named Bragwell and Worthy. In a stage of the story More provides a passage, which deals with the act of swearing and its moral effects:

Mr. Worthy, who had observed Bragwell guilty of much profaneness in using the name of his Maker, though all such offensive words have been avoided in writing this history, now told him, that he had been waiting the whole day for an opportunity to reprove him for his frequent breach of the third commandment. (More 38)

In this passage, Worthy points out the impropriety of “using the name of his Maker” freely and profanely. Both Worthy and the author of these Tracts, More detest “such offensive words”: More writes that she avoids registering those “offensive words” in detail in her Cheap Repository Tracts.

What is remarkable about the passage above is that More highlights the moral necessity of “reproving” the transgressor, Bragwell for “his frequent breach of the third commandment.” More was a charismatic and symbolic leader of the contemporary religious campaigns. Marjorie Morgan observes as follows:

The influential coterie of Evangelicals know as the Clapham Sect looked to Hannah More as one of its leaders - a woman who, in addition to churning out conduct books, spearheaded the Sunday school movement and moulded the minds of the working class with her barrage of morally charged Cheap Repository Tracts. (Morgan 14)

As Morgan points out, More played a leading role in spreading Evangelicalism in Britain. But the religious aspects of Cheap Repository Tracts need to be stressed moderately; More tried to provide moral education to the lower orders through the

medium of the tracts and the Christian didacticism explained in them.

Worthy's, or More's moral and educational intention to rectify Bragwell's habit of swearing is evident in the following discourses in Cheap Repository Tracts. But Bragwell's habit dies hard as he attempts to deny his act of swearing:

“Good L—d, I break the third commandment!” said Bragwell; “no, indeed, hardly ever. I once used to swear a little, to be sure; but I vow I never do it now, except now and then when I happen to be in a passion: and in such a case, why, good G-d, you know the sin is with those who provoke me, and not with me. Upon my soul, I don't think I have sworn an oath these three months; no, not I, faith, as I hope to be saved.” (More 39)

Bragwell keeps insisting that he does not “break the third commandment” at all. Quite indeed, he recognizes his frequent use of swearing “when I happen to be in a passion.” In other words, Bragwell tries to justify his habit of swearing as a very natural outcome of inevitable and inescapable emotion, which is “a passion.”

As Omar Tyree aptly points out, we need to consider the negative side of passion. Tyree states that “on the negative side, passion can lead to frustration, anger, and acts of violence” (Tyree 23). Therefore Bragwell's frequent indulgence towards passion can be regarded as acquiescence to “acts of violence,” as Tyree speculates. “Act of violence” committed especially by the lower orders was what More wished to avoid witnessing at that time. John Springhall suggests:

Hannah More wrote the Christian tracts as an antidote to the poison continually flowing through the channel of vulgar and licentious publications, accused of corrupting mechanics, artisans, labourers and children attending the new Sunday schools. (Springhall 6)

As Springhall rightly points out, the main purpose of the series of More's tracts was to prevent the heinous poison from affecting “mechanics, artisans, labourers and children.”



The heinous poison was, above all, violence or tendency to violent acts. Through Bragwell's utterance of the word, "passion" and the rhetorical implication of the intimate relationship between the two referents "passion" and violence, More teaches the lower orders. Her didactic message towards those people is clear: be wary of passion and violence. For More, it was crucial for the lower orders not to be dependant on passion and violence at that time, when Europe was in a great turmoil following the French Revolution and the consequent aftermath of the French Revolutionary Wars.

Margaret Anne Doody aptly points out the moral virtues evinced in More's works:

The moral of Cheap Repository Tracts is that piety, industry, and respect for the hierarchy of classes are rewarded (materially and spiritually), whereas the reverse qualities (especially an interest in pleasure, or in risign above one's station, or in any democratic notions) must be punished by moral and material decline. hools. (Doody 422)

Cheap Repository Tracts are rich in the moral. And thus, More describes the folly of Bragwell who insists that "the sin is with those provoke me, and not with me" as expressed in the passage above. More's bitter criticism of Bragwell is shown in the following conversation between Bragwell and Worthy:

Worthy. "And yet you have broken this holy law no less than five or six times in the last speech you have made."

Bragwell. "Lord bless me! Sure you mistake. Good heavens, Mr. Worthy, I call G-d to witness, I have neither cursed nor sworn since I have been in the house." (More 39)

Due to the habitual and almost unconscious exploitation of swearing in his casual discourses, Bragwell does not know that he already broke "this holy law."

In the passages above, More's literary attacks against moral paralysis or the absence of morality among the lower orders are extremely subtle and impressive. As

Patricia Comitini points out, More's Cheap Repository Tracts tried to find "a comprehensible narrative of a moral lower-class lifestyle" (Comitini 104). Worthy's advice to Bragwell is as follows:

Worthy. "Mr. Bragwell, this is the way in which many who call themselves very good sort of people deceive themselves. What, is it no profanation of the name of God to use it lightly, irreverently, and familiarly, as you have done? Our Saviour has not only told us not to swear by the immediate name of God, but he has said, Swear not at all; neither by heaven nor by the earth." (More 40)

In the passage above Worthy acts as a proper mouthpiece for More. In other words, Worthy's voice here is authorial. Worthy, or by implication More emphasizes the virtue of self-reflection; Worthy states that "many who call themselves very good sort of people deceive themselves." Here More criticizes the folly of people who are not properly aware of how they act and speak.

As T. Parent aptly suggests, "self-reflection is a rational practice, and we must have self knowledge of judgment, understood as a crucial ingredient of self-reflection" (Parent 106). Self-reflection needs rational mind and capacities for "judgment"; unfortunately Bragwell is lack of the capability of "a rational practice" and self-reflection, even though his mind gradually improves due to the long conversations with his friend Worthy. What is remarkable about the passage cited above is that the two characters, Bragwell and Worthy belong to the same social hierarchy, the farmer.

It means that More's Cheap Repository Tracts aim to achieve peer teaching or peer tutoring. Claire Howell enunciates the peer teaching as follows:

The term "peer teaching" is used in numerous ways; for this reason, it is not particularly easy to define. For example, some scholars define peer teaching as an exchange between a novice learner and an expert tutor whose position is paid or at least formalized—they may also refer to this scenario as "peer teaching," "peer

tutoring,” or “peer mentoring.” Others describe a variation of peer teaching, “peer learning,” as learning that takes place in a more reciprocal and democratic process without differences in authority and control. (Howell 140)

I do not attempt to be deeply engaged in the discursive capacities of the term, peer teaching, in this paper. But it will be fruitful to explore the term here so as to relate it with our discussion of More’s Cheap Repository Tracts. As Claire Howell suggests, peer teaching can be freely interchangeable with the terms, peer tutoring and peer mentoring.

In the passage above the two farmers Bragwell and Worthy show an example of peer teaching and peer tutoring. They present “an exchange between a novice learner and an expert tutor” as Claire Howell suggests; in this case Bragwell is a novice learner and Worthy is an expert tutor. The discussion between the two characters can be described as “peer learning” as well. In the series of passages quoted above, Bragwell learns, for instance, the importance of reasoning and self-reflection as well as the immorality of swearing. The learning is not unidirectional; Worthy also learns the folly of a human being and the blindness to his own follies from the dialogues with his friend, Bragwell.

Claire Howell’s statement that “peer learning” “takes place in a more reciprocal and democratic process” explains the discursive condition of the passages quoted above. Or as Keith Topping points out, “peer learning allows a positive use of differences” between people, “turning them into learning opportunities” (Topping 206). The two characters, Bragwell and Worthy teach and learn in a quite reciprocal manner. And thus, we can safely say that More tried to construct an ideal discursive atmosphere where one teaches another a lesson, especially the significance of conservative philosophies.

More aimed to disseminate the conservative principles and practices among the lower orders. More’s Cheap Repository Tracts were the good organ for her conservative project. Let us examine more about Cheap Repository Tracts:

Bragwell. "Well, well, I must take a little more care, I believe: I vow to heaven I did not know there had been so much harm in it; but my daughters seldom speak without using some of these words [of swearing]." (More 40)

Here Bragwell recognizes his folly and moral ignorance sincerely. This is an extremely crucial moment as Bragwell's recognition testifies to the effectiveness of Worthy's tutoring or peer teaching and learning. We need to think of the implication of Bragwell's confession, "I must take a little more care." It means that his life will not be led by passion and violence from now on; he promises that he will be self-reflective and rational. In other words, Bragwell is becoming a person whom More thinks of as an ideal personality equipped with conservative elements.

More's conservative principles are interrelated with her didacticism. As Claire Grogan rightly states, "it is not too much of an exaggeration to claim that any discussion of didactic literature written specifically for the poor at the turn of the nineteenth century starts and often ends with Hannah More's *Village Politics* and *Cheap Repository Tracts*" (Grogan 160). After Bragwell's recognition of his folly as shown in the passage above, More introduces Bragwell and Worthy's dialogue on the sixth commandment forbidding murder:

Worthy. "Very well; only bear in mind that you wilfully break this commandment, whether you abuse your servant, are angry at your wife, watch for a moment to revenge an injury on your neighbor, or even wreak your passion on a harmless beast; for you have then the seeds of murder working in your breast; and if there were no law, no gibbet to check you, and no fear of disgrace neither, I am not sure where you would stop." (More 46)

As Willard Spiegelman rightly puts it, "the major current of Western poetics has flowed from the wells of pleasure to the depths of instruction" and "that poetry serves pedagogy seemed as unarguable in the classical and early modern worlds" (Spiegelman 3). But "instruction" and "pedagogy" were crucial and formative

elements in More's Cheap Repository Tracts as well.

As clearly shown in the passage above, Worthy's or More's didacticism is quite strict. Worthy interprets the significance of murder in an extremely broad sense; in his view, it is murderous acts to "abuse your servant," "to watch a moment to revenge an injury on your neighbor" and "to wreak your passion on a harmless beast." In the following passage Bragwell is enraged at the injustice of being called a murderer:

Bragwell. "Why, Mr. Worthy, you have a strange way of explaining the commandments! So you set me down for a murderer, merely because I bear hatred to a man who has done me a hurt, and am glad to do him a like injury in my turn."  
(More 46)

Bragwell raises a question on the legitimacy of Worthy's "way of explaining the commandments." But in the subsequent scene, Bragwell is conquered by the persuasive power of Worthy once again: "I go by the scripture rule, which says, 'he that hateth his brother is a murderer'" (More 46). Worthy's statement is robust as it is based upon the proper evidence, which is from the Bible.

Here More tries to teach the morals for everyday life through the medium of the sixth commandment forbidding murder. As Ursula Henriques comments, the moral instructions of More are much richer by the discursive support from religious implications:

Hannah More's sharp eye for the failings of nominal Christians did more credit to her powers of observation than her charitable instincts. Both were convinced that morality without religion had no staying power. Christianity was a religion of motives; and morality without religion was a body without a soul. (Henriques 232)

More's Cheap Repository Tracts were the result of her moral and literary aspirations; deliberations about the religious precepts helped More to achieve her

goal to give the moral instructions to the British public. More's wish to recover the order of the society at that time was the epicenter of the literary aspirations. As Andrew O'Malley points out, "Hannah More's concerns over potential disruption of the social order fueled the Cheap Repository projects" (O'Malley 37).

### III

We have explored More's Cheap Repository Tracts and discussed the range and extent of More's conservative philosophies expressed chiefly in *The Two Wealthy Farmers, or the History of Mr. Bragwell*, a quite lengthy story anthologized in it. As clearly registered in the title of the story, *The Two Wealthy Farmers* deals with the "history" of Mr. Bragwell. The "history" in the context is synonymous with psychological transformation or moral change. Indeed, Bragwell regrets his follies committed in his past and is transformed into a better person as the story goes.

More's conservative philosophies embodied in her Cheap Repository Tracts are closely related with didactic messages. More's didacticism is both political and religious; More attempted to transform and educate the lower orders multilaterally. And thus, More's political and religious aspirations shown in her Cheap Repository Tracts need to be reconsidered. But More's works have been criticized by some critics:

When book-length studies do not simply synopsise, they discount her writing as "verbose and repetitive, unread and unreadable" and the writer herself as "always didactic, always moralistic, and practically always conventional." (Demers 21)

Quite indeed, More is extremely didactic and moralistic, but she seems to have thought that didacticism and moralism were efficient mediums through which she could alleviate the passion and violence among the lower orders and convey her

messages swiftly. More's Cheap Repository Tracts were the result of her patriotic wish to keep the order of Britain in the threat and turmoil of the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars.

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Im, Bora (Jeonbuk National University / Assistant Professor)  
Address: School of English, Jeonbuk National University, Jeonju, Korea  
Email: ramartin435@yahoo.com

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