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Hannah More: Burdened for the Beasts

excerpted and adapted from

Fierce Convictions—The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist

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Nelson Books, 2014

Although largely forgotten today, the British poet and dramatist Hannah More (1745-1833) was well known during her lifetime for her widespread efforts at reforms across all of society. While not a central focus of her efforts, animal welfare was a concern for her. More was a close friend of William Wilberforce, the abolitionist who also helped begin England's first society for prevention of animal cruelty, and she joined him in advocating, even if less prominently, mercy and kindness toward animals.

The culture into which More was born was one that imagined, and had imagined for many centuries, that all of creation, from top to bottom, was bonded together from heaven to earth like the links of a chain. Every category of creation was seen as a link on this great chain of being, as it was called. Human beings were the middle links, each order of angels ascended as the upward links, and each order of animal, plants and minerals descended along the lower ones. This hierarchical view extended into the general categories as well. Within the category of human beings all were hierarchically arranged by class, with royalty and nobility on the links above commoners, and so on. This image of the great chain of being held powerful sway over the image by which More's society viewed the relationships of human beings with one another and the rest

of creation. People were only beginning to imagine a world that did not consist of rigid, hierarchical boundaries.

From today's vantage point, one in which equality is valued, the problems with such a controlling image are readily apparent. Yet the strength of such a view of the order of creation was the belief that each link, whether placed high or low on the chain, was equally important to the strength of the entire chain. The wellbeing of society as a whole depended on the wellbeing of each link in the chain and on maintaining each link's proper place in the chain. While members of More's society found it difficult to envision a form of equality that would not upend all order, they valued the importance of each link in the chain.

The understanding that on the great chain humans held a higher place than animals had a two-fold implication for reform efforts by More and her friends. First, human beings were understood as superior in moral significance and value in the chain of being; however, their elevated place on the chain was accompanied by great responsibility toward the lower creatures. By the same thinking, the upper classes were likewise responsible for the wellbeing of the lower classes. More and her like-minded reformers, therefore, saw the reform of one part of society as having ripple effects for all of society. The work More undertook in educating the poor was not an endeavor separate from her attempts to elevate the morals of the upper class. Nor were these efforts separate from her quieter endeavors to promote kindness toward animals. In strengthening the separate links, each of these activities served to strengthen the entire chain.

The image of the great chain of being made the interconnectedness of all creation impossible to ignore to minds of moral clarity and integrity. A famous series of

engravings printed in 1751 by the eighteenth-century artist William Hogarth dramatically portrayed this kind of interconnectedness within the scales of both creation and morality. *The Four Stages of Cruelty* depicts a central figure that goes from torturing small animals as a boy, to beating a fallen horse as a corrupt coachman, to murdering his lover and finally to receiving his just reward of public dissection after being tried, convicted and hanged. Each print is highly detailed (including the depiction of various acts of horrific cruelty perpetrated on animals), expanding the story as unfolded through the sequence of pictures and creating a visual narrative that sets forth a holistic moral vision. While in the previous century, Descartes and his followers had viewed animals as mere machines to be used by humans with no regard in the name of science, Hogarth's work reflects a shifting attitude. Kindness toward animals was a growing concern in the eighteenth century.

The evolution of More's own views on animal welfare reflects both this societal shift and her own strengthening faith convictions. In her earlier literary career, More criticized poetic expressions of sentimentality toward animals as a form of rhetorical excess and emotional self-indulgence, especially in her poem "Sensibility," published in 1782 in the same volume as *Sacred Dramas.* During the so-called "long eighteenth century," 1660-1830, a "cult of sensibility" arose which exalted the outward manifestations of emotional sensitivity—weeping, fainting and the like—as the marks of morality and refined character, to the point that signs of sensibility became more important than benevolent or moral action. In addressing the virtues and limits of sensibility in the poem, More cautioned against the hypocrisy of an overly sentimental view of animals that neglects higher moral obligations:

There are, who fill with brilliant plaints the page,

If a poor linnet meet the gunner's rage;
There are, who for a dying fawn deplore,
As if friend, parent, country, were no more;
Who boast, quick rapture trembling in their eye,
If from the spider's snare they snatch a fly;
There are, whose well-sung plaints each breast inflame,
And break all hearts--but his from whom they came.
He, scorning life's low duties to attend,
Writes odes on friendship, while he cheats his friend … (lines 267-276)
[1]

When More's interests and work later shifted in response to her growing Christian conviction, her view toward animal welfare underwent a parallel expansion. Despite the excesses of sensibility which concerned More, it was sensibility that helped foster the growing opposition toward cruelty in all forms, whether that of slavery, prison and labor conditions or animal mistreatment. Sensibility was part of a larger social and theological framework that encompassed all of society and creation. This meant that the welfare of animals was an important issue for the reformers. "England is a paradise for women and hell for horses," Robert Burton, the famous seventeenth century Oxford scholar, had written as far back as 1621 in *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* More was joining others in attesting the truth of the latter point.

William Cowper—the poet More described as one she could read on Sunday and co-author with John Newton's of the *Olney Hymns*—reflected both emotional sensibility and Evangelical conviction in his poetic treatment of animals. Indeed, Cowper has been called the "eighteenth-century poet of animal welfare"[2] for his poetic (and personal) identification with suffering animals, most famously in *The Task.* Here Cowper likens his own pain to that of a struck deer, which he then links to the crucified Christ:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
My panting side was charged when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
There was I found by one who had himself
Been hurt by th' archers. In his side he bore
And in his hands and feet the cruel scars.[3]

Such cultivation of the moral imagination through art and literature undergirded the efforts of the reformers across a range of concerns. The same empathy for slaves that More and her friends sought to develop through a moral imagination ran along the entire chain of being, all the way down to the brutes. The abolitionists' inclusion of animal welfare in their attempts to cultivate benevolence across society went back at least to More's friend and fellow abolitionist Margaret Middleton, who was an early role model to Hannah in the animal welfare concern. More said of Middleton that "her kindness, which you would think must needs be exhausted on the negroes, extends to the suffering of every animal." [4] Imaginative identification with others illuminated, More and her friends believed, the relationship of humanity in relationship to God.

In the view of reformers like More, a society that mistreated animals presented a distorted image of God's relationship to his human creation.

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[1] Hannah More, *Works* vol. *5*.

[2] Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation 1712-1812*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p.74.

[3] William Cowper, *The Task,* Book III. http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3698/pg3698.html

[4] Qtd. in Ann Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 87.