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## **“The Insulted Rights of Man”— Poetic Language Criticism by Women Writers 1788-1792\***

### Abstract

The study illustrates that the term “rights of man”, born in the context of the French revolution, met with criticism by French and British feminists very early on. However, this criticism was not only expressed in pamphlets such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, read in many parts of Europe, but also in poems, which prominently shaped the British discussion and at least indirectly the further European history of the notion of “rights of man”, or “human rights” respectively. In these poems, however, language criticism is not only linked to the feminist aspects only, but also to slavery and poverty. The study analyses poems by Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith.

### Sommaire

L’étude montre que l’expression “rights of man”, née dans le contexte de la Révolution française, a très tôt fait l’objet de critiques de la part des féministes françaises et britanniques. Pourtant, cette critique n’a pas été exprimée seulement dans des pamphlets comme *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, écrit par Mary Wollstonecraft et lu dans maints parts de l’Europe, mais aussi dans des poèmes, lesquels influençaient fortement la discussion en Angleterre et, au moins indirectement, l’histoire européenne ultérieure de la notion de “droits de l’homme” ou bien “droits des être humains”. Dans ces poèmes la critique de langue n’est cependant pas seulement liée à des aspects féministes, mais aussi à l’esclavage et la pauvreté. L’étude analyse des poèmes par Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson et Charlotte Smith.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Studie veranschaulicht, dass der Begriff “rights of man”, entstanden im Kontext der Französischen Revolution, bei französischen und britischen Feministinnen sehr früh auf Kritik stieß. Diese Kritik erschien jedoch nicht nur in Pamphleten wie Mary Wollstonecrafts *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, das in vielen Teilen Europas gelesen wurde, sondern auch in Gedichten; letztere prägten die britische Diskussion sowie, zumindest indirekt, die weitere europäische Entwicklung des Begriffs der “Menschenrechte”. In diesen Gedichten wird die Sprachkritik jedoch nicht nur mit feministischen Aspekten verbunden, sondern auch mit Sklaverei und Armut. Die Studie analysiert Gedichte von Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson und Charlotte Smith.

### Introduction

Today we connect the term *human rights* with the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights (1948). However, it already started to be discussed by European intellectuals in many circles, including literary salons, from the British isles to Russia in the 1790s. The growing number and circulation of newspapers spread the idea of the French Revolution. The concept of human rights was at the core of revolutionary thought both in America and in France. In the two contexts, this found its expression in the attempts at including the rights of man as the most essential element within the respective constitutional frameworks. The *U.S. Declaration of Independence* (1776), the *U.S. Bill of Rights* (June 1789) and the French *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* (August 1789) propagated the universal rights of man, including those to life, liberty, property, resistance to oppression and the right to political participation.

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The translation of *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* is 'Declaration of the rights of [the] man and [the] citizen'. The French word *homme*, just as the English *man*, the Italian *uomo* or the Spanish *hombre* (but unlike G. *Mensch*, Du. *mens*, Swed. *människa*, Pol. *człowiek*, Ru. *chelovek*), could mean both 'human being (in general)' and 'male human being'. From the very beginning, the term was criticized as in reality obviously referring to the rights of males only. This drove the first internationally known feminist Olympe de Gouges to composing the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* 'Declaration of the rights of women and female citizens' in 1791. In the British context, too, radical thinkers demanded the recognition of the rights of man on a broader scale.<sup>1</sup> Not just male voices shaped the social climate of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also women writers took a political stance in many of their essays and their poetry. While in France Olympe de Gouges's activities led to her tragic death through the guillotine, Mary Wollstonecraft's texts had more lasting effect both in England and in many other parts of Europe. Like Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft complained that the "rights of man" had not yet been extended to women as well.<sup>2</sup> In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft pointed at the deplorable state that women found themselves in: Many were economically dependent on their husbands or families, they were denied political participation and they were, instead, confined to the private sphere. As most women were, in fact, unable to escape male domination Wollstonecraft labelled them domestic "slaves"<sup>3</sup> and pleaded for a general recognition of more rights for women.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was widely discussed in European literary salons, reaching even Avdotya Yakovlevna's salon in Russia.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the text also encouraged British women writers in her circle to incorporate the criticism of the terms *rights of man* and *human rights* in some of their poems. It is this poetic criticism of language that is in the focus of the paper.<sup>5</sup> The paper will highlight some female voices within the contemporary political discourse. It will show how female Romantic poets participated in the debate on human rights against the background of the afore-mentioned historical events. Much of their poetry clearly expresses the hope for liberty and equality especially for the still underprivileged, be it slaves, the economically deprived or women. Amongst others, the poets Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith tried to make the British public realize the necessity of reform in Britain as well. As women and poets<sup>6</sup> they presented themselves as endowed with an intense kind of sensibility which enabled them to pity the underprivileged and to eloquently express their belief in the need for change.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they criticized contemporary British politics and social injustice in terms of "race", "class" and "gender"<sup>8</sup> with the aim of advancing the realization of the "Reign of Reason, Liberty and Peace", as Charlotte Smith writes in the last line of her poem "The Emigrants" (1793), for a broader range of people.<sup>9</sup>

While it is proven that there was a wide international reception of Wollstonecraft's pamphlet in the 1790's, the degree of reception of the poems selected here is undocumented; however, it can be assumed that the writers in the direct sphere of Wollstonecraft were discussed in literary circles. German Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, for example, was familiar with Charlotte Smith's works and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Claeys (2007: 2ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wollstonecraft (1790) and Claeys (2007: 53).

<sup>3</sup> Wollstonecraft (1790: s.p.), cf. Tomaselli (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the descriptions of women networks through literary salons in Brown/Dow (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Some of the poems studied here are also analyzed in Raupach's unpublished doctoral thesis (2004), with a different focus, though.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Card (2005: 225-230) and McGann (1996: 114).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Waters (2013: 89) and McGann (1996: 50f.).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ashcroft et al. (2000), Butler (1991) and Knapp (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Waters (2013: 89f.), Ellis (1996) and Carey (2005).

commented on some of them<sup>10</sup>. Mary Robinson's "Ainsi va le monde" was translated into French<sup>11</sup>; so were works by Barbauld, More and Smith<sup>12</sup>. At any right, they influenced contemporary British discussion, which in turn, shaped the European debate on human rights, which at least makes them indirectly influencers of the denotative and connotative history of "human rights".

## Slavery and "Moral Contagion"

The agitation on abolition was one of the major reform movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries although there had been anti-slavery initiatives before. In the 1780s, the movement was primarily directed against the slave trade. It received an institutional frame in May 1787 in the *Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*.<sup>13</sup> The society's activities culminated in two nationwide petition campaigns. In the first of these, in 1788, over 100 petitions attacking the slave trade were presented to the House of Commons. The succeeding campaign of 1791 was even more ambitious. By means of mass petitioning, MP William Wilberforce hoped to bring Parliament to end the slave trade. His attempts were not successful at first: only in 1792 the House decided that the slave trade might be gradually abolished – a decision that was again reversed in 1794.<sup>14</sup>

In 1788, Hannah More published "Slavery: A Poem" in anticipation that the Parliament would pass Sir William Dolken's Bill to restrict the number of slaves who could be transported from Africa to British colonies in the west.<sup>15</sup> The poem's speaker presents herself as equipped with three major abilities that qualify her to raise her voice on this issue. First, she claims to be guided and inspired in her "song" by "fair truth".<sup>16</sup> Second, she presents herself as capable of sensibility in the sense of empathy.<sup>17</sup> Third, as a "bard"<sup>18</sup>, she hopes she will be eloquent enough to dissuade her contemporaries from their crimes against humanity by appealing to *their* empathy with other human beings.

In the poem she uses "human rights", rather than "rights of man"<sup>19</sup>. But even when the focus is on the word *man*, she applies the word not only to white men, but says in reference to Africans: "They still are men and men shou'd still be free".<sup>20</sup> The poem confronts its readers with some of the atrocities committed by the (British or European?) colonizers: They are labelled "murderers"<sup>21</sup>, who are "of ruffian heart, and ruthless hand"<sup>22</sup>, driven by base motives, such as "thirst of empire"<sup>23</sup> and "lust of gold".<sup>24</sup> In order to legitimize their inhuman behaviour towards the enslaved, More explains, the slave traders depict their victims as "savage[s]"<sup>25</sup> incapable of any "sense of feeling".<sup>26</sup> More, however, has her speaker point out that it is the slave traders who display a deficit of "feeling": They do not realize that there is a shared humanity of both themselves and the members of other ethnic groups: "Does [...] th' immortal principle within / Change with the casual

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Niethammer (1998: 432f.).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Elyot (2008: 342).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. e.g. Ellis (1874: 88), Astbury (2014), More (1817).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Erdman (1954: 132).

<sup>14</sup> Kitson (2008: 326).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wu (2012: 69) and Hampsher-Monk (2005: 195).

<sup>16</sup> More (1788: l. 50).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. More (1788: l. 49f.).

<sup>18</sup> More (1788: l. 49).

<sup>19</sup> More (1788: l. 260).

<sup>20</sup> More (1788: l. 140).

<sup>21</sup> More (1788: l. 111).

<sup>22</sup> More (1788: l. 113f.).

<sup>23</sup> More (1788: l. 125).

<sup>24</sup> More (1788: l. 127).

<sup>25</sup> More (1788: l. 187).

<sup>26</sup> More (1788: l. 148).

colour of the skin?”<sup>27</sup> Those who do not perceive and acknowledge this shared humanity but regard skin colour as a determinant of personhood and use it as a reason for oppression, she claims, lose the right to call themselves “Christians”.<sup>28</sup> These people end up as the true “white savage[s]”<sup>29</sup> and thus less civilized than the assumedly uncivilized.

Finally, More has her speaker half-ironically attack her British countrymen and, at the same time, offer a perspective for redemption to the British people that have tolerated slavery and the slave trade far too long: “Shall Britain, where the soul of freedom reigns, / Forge chains for others she herself disdains? / [...] O let the nations know / The liberty she loves she will bestow; [...]”<sup>30</sup> In an appeal to British patriotism, she claims that, if Britain is really the cradle of liberty (a reference to 1689), it should act accordingly. Beginning in Britain, More explains, the spirit of liberty might then cover the whole globe in a universal recognition of human rights: “What page of human annals can record / A deed so bright as human rights restor’d?”<sup>31</sup>

A similar point is made by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in her “Epistle to William Wilberforce”, published in 1791 on Wilberforce’s activities for the abolition of the slave trade. The poem addresses “generous”<sup>32</sup> Wilberforce directly. It praises not only his commitment but also that of different groups of people – “the Preacher, Poet, Senator” – and then deplores that this has all been “in vain”<sup>33</sup> as the Bill has failed due to the activities of those who profit from the slave trade.<sup>34</sup> The slave trade is referred to as “human traffic”<sup>35</sup>, and the African slave is seen as the “fellow-man”<sup>36</sup>. While Wilberforce and his followers are praised for “wit” and “eloquence”<sup>37</sup>, their opponents are accused of “sophistry”<sup>38</sup>, “avarice”<sup>39</sup> and a lack of “moral sense”.<sup>40</sup> Here, Barbauld hints at the laughter issued by some MPs when confronted with accounts of the slave trade – a reaction that was reported on in contemporary newspapers.<sup>41</sup> Such behaviour, she argues, equals the opponents of the Bill with the Antichrist due to the extreme malignity expressed by such a reaction: “from scoffing fiends burst forth the laugh of hell”.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously, the two poets argue according to similar patterns: Both texts suggest a specific kind of sensibility in their (female) poet-speakers which enables them to empathize with the suffering of others, here: non-European slaves. The poems address their audience’s feelings in strong emotional terms to make them share the poets’ outrage over the mistreatment of other ethnic groups. Moreover, there seems to be a note of solidarity between women and the enslaved since women, too, found themselves in a state of subordination – probably a strong motive why so many female writers were keen to support the notion of abolitionism and have emancipation granted to any kind of “slave”.

<sup>27</sup> More (1788: l. 63f.).

<sup>28</sup> More (1788: l. 188).

<sup>29</sup> More (1788: l. 211).

<sup>30</sup> More (1788: l. 251f.).

<sup>31</sup> More (1788: l. 259f.). Apart from her involvement in the abolitionist movement, More was a political conservative who was upset by the thought of an impending radicalization of the economically deprived (cf. Wu 2012: 58 and Claeys 2007: 87).

<sup>32</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 1).

<sup>33</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 3).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Barbauld (1791: l. 29).

<sup>35</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 16).

<sup>36</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 44).

<sup>37</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 20).

<sup>38</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 27).

<sup>39</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 25).

<sup>40</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 29).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Wu (2012: 41f.).

<sup>42</sup> Barbauld (1791: l. 38).

## “The Insulted Rights of Man”: Perspectives on Poverty

Another violation of human rights that women writers took up in their works was the suffering of the economically underprivileged. Female poets harshly criticized the poor's limited degree of freedom, their exclusion from political participation, and the refusal of the majority of the better-off to change the situation of the poor.<sup>43</sup> The argumentative pattern of these texts is similar to the one applied in anti-slavery poetry: Those who accept social injustice and cling to decrepit structures of class division are portrayed as heartless and un-Christian. They lack the very sensibility that the poets claimed to be capable of.

In her poem “Ainsi va le monde” (1790), Mary Robinson (well acquainted with poverty herself) takes up the spirit of the French Revolution rather enthusiastically and calls for the realization of the rights of man. At the same time, she reveals what “rights of man” contemporarily means: “Where many a sad memorial marks the hour, / That gave the rights of man to rav’ous pow’r”<sup>44</sup>, “[...] Who shall the nat’ral Rights of Man deride, / When Freedom spreads her fost’ring banners wide?”<sup>45</sup> Ongoing oppression of the underprivileged is said to be but another form of “slavery”<sup>46</sup> and, as she claims, almost inevitably results in revolutionary activity, as had been the case in France. There, she argues, man had risen to claim “his birth-right”<sup>47</sup> and to unfold “the energies of social love”<sup>48</sup>, bringing forth the “rights of man” for “all mankind”.<sup>49</sup>

In the poem “The Dead Beggar” (1792), from the *Elegiac Sonnets* by Charlotte Smith, a speaker addresses an upper-class woman who is moved when she witnesses the funeral of a nameless pauper. The character has a “feeling heart”<sup>50</sup> and is affected by the fate of this “deserted being, poor and old”.<sup>51</sup> Merely emotional response instead of political commitment, however, is shown to be insufficient. The speaker bitterly suggests that death might be the better alternative for a member of the lower classes, for which human rights are evidently not to be realized: “Rather rejoice that here his sorrows cease, / Whom sickness, age, and poverty oppress’d; / Where death, the leveller, restores to peace / The wretch who living knew not where to rest / [...] Death vindicates the insulted rights of man.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, “Death” is presented as the instrument of justice that can finally bring about the equality that women writers felt the society of the living was yet unable to realize.

## Conclusion

Diverse as the poems discussed in this paper may seem, what they have in common, besides their topic, is their connection to the late 18th-century discourse on sensibility in the sense of a person’s capacity to be affected by the world around them. Appropriate emotional response, however, was gendered: All over Europe, women as the presumably weaker sex were thought to display a particular delicacy of feeling related to the female nervous system.<sup>53</sup> This stereotype went together with the notion of passive “feminine weakness” due to women’s assumedly non-rational frame.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Kitson (2008: 311ff.) and Lerner (2008: 84).

<sup>44</sup> Robinson (1790: l. 254).

<sup>45</sup> Robinson (1790: l. 294).

<sup>46</sup> Robinson (1790: p. 24).

<sup>47</sup> Robinson (1790: p. 24).

<sup>48</sup> Robinson (1790: p. 25).

<sup>49</sup> Robinson (1790: p. 26).

<sup>50</sup> Smith (1792: l. 1).

<sup>51</sup> Smith (1792: l. 2).

<sup>52</sup> Smith (1792: ll. 13-16 and 20).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ferber (2012: 5), Becker-Cantarino (2005: 20 f.) and Goring (2005: 151; 180).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Abrams (1993: 190), Barker-Benfield (1992: 3) Perkins (1998: 3) and McGann (1996: 13ff. and 98).

Romantic women writers adapted the contemporary ideal of female sensibility for their own purposes. As women were expected to respond to emotional triggers in a special way, many female poets emphasized their own “sensibility” in their poems and thus, superficially, acted according to the gender conventions of their male-dominated environment. However, it is important to note that the poets included here did not limit their poetic scope to domestic affairs, but published commentary on contemporary politics and topical issues, thus breaching gendered codes to a certain degree.<sup>55</sup> As Isobel Armstrong argues, they consciously employed “customary ‘feminine’ forms [...] and languages [...]”<sup>56</sup> with the aim of criticizing contemporary language, society and politics for the neglect of human rights and the toleration of inequalities in terms of “race”, “class” and “gender”.<sup>57</sup> The aim behind their “rhetoric of sensibility” was thus to create an awareness of social grievances and appeal to their environment to change them.<sup>58</sup> “Sensibility”, here, is no longer just a passive form of perception but a source of “social advancement”<sup>59</sup> as it includes the call for political commitment in the public sphere.

Women writers, accordingly, supported the abolition movement by commenting on several attempts to eliminate the slave trade, as could be seen in the poems by the otherwise conservative Hannah More and the more radical Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Amongst others, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith (two ardent supporters of the French Revolution) accused the privileged of depriving the poor of economic justice and the right to political participation, the background of which were the claims for equality made in the French context. Smith, additionally, paralleled the situation of women to that of the disenfranchised and called for political reform to avoid revolutionary mayhem, similar to that in France.

It has to be added that, despite their enthusiasm, these authors were by no means uncritical about the development of the French Revolution, which – at the time of their writing – had already begun to contradict its own promises. The violent terror, however, did not prevent these women writers from envisioning peaceful progress—again in Charlotte Smith words: away from “the insulted Rights of Man” towards “The Reign of Reason, Liberty, and Peace” in an indefinite future.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. McGann (1996: 55ff.; 102).

<sup>56</sup> Armstrong (1995: 15).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Craciun (2005: 89), who speaks of “a fusion of sensibility and radical politics”. Cf. also Ferber (2012: 6). Especially the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith, was disapproved by many of their contemporaries. In *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (1798), the Anglican clergyman Richard Polwhele labelled them “unsex'd females” because they turned to topics beyond the private sphere. Cf. also McGann (1996: 111).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Smith (2013: 105).

<sup>59</sup> McGann (1996: 102).

<sup>60</sup> It would, however, take a lot of time until the changes propagated by these authors were actually brought about. In Britain, the slave trade was not outlawed until 1807, and abolition did not take effect before the 1830s. Social inequality remained a bone of contention throughout the nineteenth century and was only very gradually reduced in several Reform Bills. The same holds true with regard to the rights of women: While the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw only slight improvement of the situation of women, this group finally got the right to vote in the 1920s.

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