

Virtual and Real Slavery: Women on Abolition

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John Lennon: "Woman is the nigger of the world."

In the wake of the radical questioning of the social and political order in the late eighteenth century, the emancipation of women and of slaves became prominent topics of debate in Great Britain. It is remarkable how often women referred to slavery in discourses on gender and to gender in discourses on slavery. Their arguments were fuelled by the lawyer who defended the Virginian slave owner in the famous case of the slave Somerset in 1772. The lawyer said that Somerset was not entitled to freedom in England because slavery was a legal construction like marriage and therefore not subject to natural law.¹ Male abolitionists did not necessarily see a connection between the emancipation of slaves and that of their wives, let alone the emancipation of the working classes.² They considered women to be important allies in the struggle against the slave trade because of their allegedly sentimental nature, which made them more prone than men to feel and to arouse sympathy for the victims of slavery. Eric Williams denies that sentimental abolitionism was of any significance to the abolition of the slave trade and that slavery was abolished primarily for economic and political reasons.³ Although it is very difficult to assess the specific impact of the various causes that contributed to abolition,⁴ Clare Midgley clearly demonstrates that sentimentalism, economic and political action went hand in hand as abolitionist women boycotted West Indian sugar and handed in numerous petitions to Parliament.⁵ Moira Ferguson and Clare Midgley explain convincingly that the

- 1 Cf. Anne K. Mellor, " 'Am I not a Woman, and a Sister?': Slavery, Romanticism, and Gender." Ed. Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh, *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 311.
- 2 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 181-182; J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery. The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade. 1787-1807* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 138-41.
- 3 See Williams, "The Golden Age of the Slave System in Britain," *Journal of Negro History* 25 (1940), 105; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 188.
- 4 James Walvin, "The Propaganda of Anti-Slavery," *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), 62-63.
- 5 Cf. Midgley, *Women against Slavery. The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London and

women's struggle against the slave trade and slavery negotiated gender positions at home and indirectly advanced their own emancipation.⁶ It is my intention to continue their research and to specify some ambiguous connections between feminist and abolitionist discourses of repression and reform in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and women's poems against the slave trade and slavery between the 1780s and the 1830s.

In spite of considerable differences concerning the master's absolute rule over the slave and the man's relative rule over the woman, ardent feminists used "slavery" as a pertinent concept to describe the women's situation in England. But feminists and abolitionists usually proposed different means and goals for the women's and the slaves' emancipation. Feminists criticised the fact that patriarchal rule reduced women to slaves because it denied them liberty, equality, and justice. Their argument that women are virtual slaves was opposed by voices which claimed that English women enjoyed a privileged status in comparison to their European sisters.⁷

Whereas the emancipation of women from virtual slavery aimed at liberty, their vision of the emancipation of slaves hardly went beyond virtual slavery under colonial rule which was infused with Christian missionary zeal.⁸ Feminists rather claimed equality with men if women were given the same opportunities. Abolitionist women strategically used their difference from men in order to enhance their position. Female writers against slavery turned male prejudices towards women into political instruments on their own behalf. They defined their sentiments as an advantage over men as they identified with slaves as feeling human beings, but they also transferred male prejudices of female irrationality and ignorance to other races as they assumed the position of the enlightened guides and representatives of the silenced victims of slavery. Female writers considered white women to be perfectible but other races less so because they never seemed to outgrow their childhood and their need for tutelage.

New York: Routledge, 1992), 1-120. Minchinton summarises and discusses Williams's materialistic thesis and his numerous antagonists' idealistic arguments, which qualify but do not destroy his thesis by different interpretations of economic, political, humanitarian, and religious forces that contributed to abolition and emancipation. See Walter E. Minchinton, "Williams and Drescher: Abolition and Emancipation," *Slavery and Abolition* 4 (1983), 81-105.

- 6 Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others. British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670- 1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 299; Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, 202-203.
- 7 Vera Nünning, "The slaves of our pleasures' oder 'our companions and equals'? Die Konstruktion von Weiblichkeit im England des 18. Jahrhunderts aus kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," *ZAA* 44:3 (1996), 199.
- 8 See Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 302-03; Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, 200; Mellor, 'Am I not a Woman, and a Sister?', 318-20.

Women as Slaves

Feminists deplored the enslavement of women by men but exempted themselves from male subjection. Mary Wollstonecraft stressed her independence: "I love man as my fellow; but his scepter, real, or usurped, extends not to me."⁹ She rivalled male authority on gender because she assumed an unassailable position based upon the ultimate authority of God.¹⁰

Wollstonecraft seems to confirm male prejudice about women as the weaker sex, but she denied the argument of innate inferiority and attributed women's degradation to their repression by men. She regarded the women's bondage to their bodies as a key impediment to emancipation. She conceded that men are naturally superior in physical strength, which justifies the subordination of the female to the male in the animal world.¹¹ In spite of the subordination of bodily power to moral and mental power in civilized societies, men tend to ignore women's minds and to consider them primarily as bodily subjects.¹² She added that a woman is made a slave to her body because male sensuality reduces her value to arbitrary and short-lived physical beauty.¹³ Since marriage is the only way to rise in society, women turn themselves into "insignificant objects of desire"¹⁴ in order to attract prospective husbands and acquire his social status. A married woman, the feminist deplored, forfeits her status as a legal person under the law of coverture and "is reduced to a mere cypher."¹⁵ Wollstonecraft attacked marriage as an absolute male rule, which turned women into slaves, who are submissive or obtain power by cunning like children or favourites.¹⁶ Wollstonecraft's description of the relationship between husband and wife resembles Patterson's analysis of that between master and slave: The domination of the slave is marked by "the use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another [...] the capacity to persuade another person to change the way he perceives his interests and his circumstances," and the authority to transform might into right.¹⁷

9 A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft 5. Ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering 1989), 105. Mary Hays also refutes the male assumption of superiority over educated women; *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798). Eds. Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, *British Literature 1780-1830* (Fort Worth, TX, etc.: Harcourt, 1996), 38-41.

10 *Vindication*, 83-84; cf. also Hays, *Appeal*, 38.

11 *Vindication*, 74, 108.

12 *Ib.*, 115.

13 *Ib.*, 113, 208.

14 *Ib.*, 76.

15 *Ib.*, 215.

16 *Ib.*, 77, 215, 226.

17 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1-2.

Mary Wollstonecraft demanded the liberation of women from male domination "in a physical, moral, and civil sense."¹⁸ Instead of being kept in the state of "perpetual childhood,"¹⁹ women should become "rational creatures," "moral agents," and "free citizens."²⁰ Reason and judgement should be their guides to virtuous behaviour and replace coercion, which merely enforces the slavish fulfilment of duties. She considered moral and intellectual education as a prime instrument in order to improve women's characters and functions in the private and the public spheres. The feminist demanded a "revolution in female manners [...] to restore to them their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world."²¹ The end of women's liberation is nothing less than the "progress of knowledge and virtue"²² of mankind. - Without necessarily being feminists, abolitionist women indirectly claimed a leading role in the reformation of the Empire.

Women against Slavery

Female writers negotiated the position of white women and of slaves with regard to their physical, moral, and social position. If Hannah More and Helen Maria Williams constructed slaves as silenced and helpless victims in "mute affliction,"²³ they stressed the abolitionists' role as speaking and powerful moral agents, who also identify with their oppressed fellow beings.²⁴ Moira Ferguson argues convincingly that the generalisation of the passive slave - in spite of contemporary evidence to the contrary - was designed to raise active support for abolition.²⁵ She adds that More "empowers white female abolitionists to inter- lace worries about themselves as subjects with concerns about colonized others"²⁶ but hardly comments upon More's problem of raising her voice in the public debate about slavery. More and H.M. Williams supported sentimental male abolitionists who acted on the public stage of politics. The two authors attributed "inspiration," "genius," and "eloquence"²⁷ to male advocates against

18 *Vindication*, 266.

19 *ib.*, 75.

20 *ib.*, 250.

21 *ib.*, 114.

22 *ib.*, 66.

23 Helen Maria Williams, "A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave-Trade (1788)." Ed. Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 243.1. 253; cf. Hannah More: "Slavery: A Poem (1788)." Wu, *Romanticism*, 45-46, 11. 99-110.

24 Cf. Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 163.

25 *ib.*, 146-47.

26 *ib.*, 152.

27 More deplures her lack of "inspiration" (*ib.*, 44, 1. 44); H.M. Williams stresses male "genius" (239,1.75) and "eloquence" (*ib.*, 245,1. 321) she seems to emulate in her poem.

slavery in a rhetorical gesture of humility that registers their own unease about writing on salient political affairs. For H.M. Williams, the ideal campaigner combines feminine sentiment and masculine power, embodied in the abolitionist Charles Lennox and the strong but compassionate sailor.²⁸ More clearly reserved the right to procure liberty for slaves to individual English representatives as she disparaged the irrational noise of the contorted voice of oppressed masses clamouring for mercy, not justice.²⁹ Whereas H.M. Williams directly exhorted abolitionists to political action, the more conservative More invokes "the cherub Mercy from above", who will raise the banner of Liberty so that "The chain, untouched, drops off."³⁰

Even if women writers shared racist preconceptions, they deplored the reduction of slaves to physical animals. Women revealed the suffering inflicted but ignored by slavers, "Who view unmoved the look that tells / The pang that in the bosom dwells; / Heed not the nerves that terror shakes, / The heart convulsive anguish breaks; / The shriek that would their crimes upbraid."³¹ Women translated the slaves' body language into an articulate criticism of callous men, who did not perceive the slaves as human beings. Intended as an oblique appeal to the readers, model abolitionists, albeit condescendingly, sympathised with the slaves and responded in kind with bleeding hearts and teardrops as they "ease the pangs ye stoop to share and rescue millions from despair."³²

The degradation of slaves to bodies and their subjection to their masters' pleasures and to their arbitrary power recalls Mary Hays's criticism of men, who abuse women as drudges and instruments of their passions (Appeal 41).³³ Women poets may have subconsciously articulated both the fear of their own violent victimisation and the desire to protect themselves by a preemptive accusation of potential victimises.³⁴ The British held husbands responsible for

28 Williams, "A Poem on the Bill", 239,11. 67-80; 243,11. 229-48.

29 Hanna More, "Slavery", 43-44,11. 19-36, claims to give truthful expression to Oroonoko's feelings as a representative of millions of his kind but clearly situates her voice between Southeme's authorial control in his tragedy of Oroonoko and the slaves' silence as she mentions that language fails to convey the horrors of the slave trade (46,1. 144).

30 More, "Slavery", 49,1. 263 and 50,1. 288.

31 H.M. Williams, "Poem on the Bill", 243,11. 221-25.

32 *Ib.*, 241, 11. 171-72. Opie depicts a very intense form of sympathy when the girl Anna shrieks as Zambo groans under the lash ("Negro" 357,11. 141-43).

33 Hay, Appeal, 41.

34 For reasons of decency, Romantic women poets hardly touched sexual abuse under slavery. The anonymous poem "The Sorrows of Yamba" projects onto African women the shame of being exposed nakedly to men (28,11. 33-36). Mary Robinson's "Negro Girl" escapes her master's desire by suicide (214-17). In an orientalist argument, Barbauld attacks the moral corruption of Englishmen in the East, and addresses the violation of innocent young women in a distancing allegory: "Simplicity! Most dear of rural maids, / Weeping resigns her violated shades" ("Epistle" 22-23,11. 100-01).

their households, and authorised them to physically punish wives, children, and servants within "reasonable" limits.³⁵ However, reasonable is a rather arbitrary male concept, as Judge Buller proved, who limited the diameter of a stick for punishment to a man's thumb in 1782.³⁶ Wollstonecraft's opinion that marriage reduces women to objects of property and to insignificance is similar to Patterson's comparison of the slaves' social death to the position of wives: the husbands have "proprietary claims and powers in their wives, powers that they all too frequently exercise with naked violence."³⁷ In contrast to the British husband's rule over his wife, the slave-owner's power over the slave was almost unlimited. In both cases, the master determined the social status of the dependent subject. But whereas the husband could exert control over the life of his wife, the slave owner had the power over the life and the death of his slave.³⁸ In order to contradict those advocates of slavery who justified the peculiar institution by dehumanising other races, female writers stressed their human nature, particularly by conceiving sentimental attachments between lovers, and between mothers and children.

Hannah More gave voice to a widely held racist opinion when she claimed that slaves are equal in feelings and understanding but lack knowledge and faith, being "dark and savage, ignorant and blind."³⁹ Women criticised the idea that slave-owners do not convert slaves to Christianity and thus enslave their souls in addition to their bodies.⁴⁰ However, the Christian education that was provided for slaves did not necessarily entitle them to physical liberty and social equality, as in the education for women that feminists proposed. Abolitionists suggested that converted slaves may find a compensation in Christianity for their captivity,⁴¹ an argument which is likely to be misinterpreted as a justification for the subjection of pagans. Phillis Wheatley may have been their model, who, in retrospect, blessed her captivity as a way to spiritual liberation through Christianity. In "The Black Man's Lament," Amelia Opie considered religion as balm,

35 Vera Nünning, "Die Entdeckung der Humanität als kulturgeschichtliches Phänomen. Veränderungen im Menschenbild und Selbstverständnis von Engländern im 18. Jahrhundert," DVLG 68 (1994), 215.

36 *Ib.*, 216.

37 Patterson's statement even refers to contemporary American marriages, and he admits that wives have claims in their husbands. But he also adds: "The fact that a man does not say he 'owns' his wife, or that she is part of his property, is purely conventional"; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 22.

38 *Ib.*, 5.

39 More 46,11. 137; cf. Dacre 365,11. 9-12.

40 Ann Yearsley, "A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade (1788)." Wu, *Romanticistn*, 162,11. 205-12.

41 Yearsley 165,11. 330-35; More, "Sorrows of Yamba," 30,11. 105-112; E. Williams, *Capitalism*, 192.

that is opium, for slaves.⁴² If Christian slaves patiently endure their suffering and even forgive their oppressors, the victims can hope for salvation.⁴³ The abolitionists gave no palpable reason why God withholds the means of liberation and justice from slaves in this world. The female poets usually turned Christian slaves into disempowered moral authorities, whose position partly mirrored their own towards the plantocracy, and partly invited their support. In order to authorise and support their moral appeal to slavers, women invoked the help of the most powerful ally as they threatened recalcitrant sinners with divine vengeance.⁴⁴ In order to compensate for their subordinate role in politics, abolitionist women assumed the position of an enlightened authority, which was superior to the slave-owner and the slave alike.

Amelia Opie's "Negro Boy's Tale" explored the difficult function of white women as mediators between slaves and masters.⁴⁵ Opie's Zambo reproduces racist arguments and talks about his moral improvement by Christian education. The black boy speaks with a white tongue. Zambo claims to be a coconut with an ugly skin but with a sweet white heart that was made good by prayer.⁴⁶ He appeals to his friend Anna, the daughter of his owner, to help him return to his mother in Africa. The compassionate Anna realises that she cannot liberate him but merely ask her father to alleviate his suffering. As the ship departs with Anna and her father, Zambo plunges into the waves to join them. The father's heart softens but his help comes too late and Zambo drowns. The use of a boy and girl appealed not only to the reader's sentiments but reflected the subordination of both slave and daughter to patriarchal power. Nevertheless, the girl can mediate between the slave and his master by an appeal to his heart. The story attributes the role of a model Christian reformer to the English woman, but also mirrors the female abolitionists' limits of power under patriarchal rule. The girl's failure to have Zambo saved in time adds weight to the speaker's final exhortation to abolish the slave trade and slavery, but acknowledges that abolition depends upon the cooperation of male slave-owners.⁴⁷

Imagined slaves hardly ever change from passive victims to moral agents in women's abolitionist poems.⁴⁸ Mary Robinson's poem "Negro Girl" exemplified

42 Amelia Opie, "The Black Man's Lament (1826)." Mellor/Matlack, *British Literature 1780-1830*, 84,1. 156.

43 Opie, "Black Man's Lament", 84, 11. 161-68; More, "Sorrows of Yamba", 30, 11. 99-100; Fanny Holcroft, "The Negro." Ed. Andrew Ashfield, *Romantic Women Poets 1788-1848*. Vol. II (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 92,11. 29-32.

44 Anna Laetitia Barbauld, "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade (1792)." Wu, *Romanticism*, 21, 1. 42; Isabelle Lickbarrow, Isabelle, "On the Slave-Trade (1814)." Wu, *Romanticism*, 477,11. 24-32

45 "The Negro Boy's Tale (1802)." Wu, *Romanticism*, 353-58.

46 *Ib*, 353.

47 *Ib*, 358.

48 Mellor points out that slaves become active moral agents in abolitionist drama and prose

the limited freedom of an educated slave woman. Zelma was submitted to her master's education without yielding to his desire because she loves the African slave Draco: "The tyrant white man taught my mind / The lettered page to trace; / He taught me in the soul to find / No tint, as in the face; / He bade my reason blossom like the tree / But fond affection gave the ripened fruits to thee."⁴⁹ White education teaches her racist prejudices, whitewashes her soul, and develops her understanding. Her master is jealous of her faithful love for Draco and sells him to a trader. A tempest mirrors both her inner turmoil and nature's revolt at the arbitrary separation of the lovers. The storm wrecks the ship, drowns Draco, and Zelma commits suicide. God's vengeance, however, does not annihilate the master: such a conclusion would have been too radical a condemnation and questioning of the social order. Her suicide deprives her master of her desired body and seems to be her only escape from misery. Wylie Sypher laconically remarked that suicide in order to escape from slavery is one of the few instances where sentimental poetry meets reality.⁵⁰ These slaves appropriated their owner's power over their life and death but implicitly admitted that they could not change the system on their own.

It is significant that slaves figured as independent agents rather in pro-slavery than in anti-slavery literature.⁵¹ Abolitionists had difficulties to acknowledge slaves as agents of their own liberation, which might render their intervention obsolete. Pro-slavery literature also represented violent conflicts between the slave's desire for freedom and the owner's right to property.⁵² In Maria Edgeworth's narrative "The Grateful Negro," the colonial plantocracy is undermined from the top and the bottom of the hierarchy. A negligent master, a tyrannical slave driver, and an evil and powerful slave women prepare the ground for a rebellion by the slave Hector. Edgeworth subscribes to stereotypes of race and gender. The Planter's wives modestly remain in the background, whereas the most powerful woman among the superstitious slaves is an old hag who practices Obeah and incites the slaves to bloodshed. The noble slave Caesar alarms his benevolent master, and they crush the impending revolution. Needless to say, the witch is burned. The loyal slave is willing to sacrifice his affiliation to his race, his desire for freedom, his friendship to Hector, and even his love and his life in order to save his benevolent master. The feminised selfless slave is uncondition-

but after all are still shown to be in need of English parental guidance (320).

49 Mary Robinson, "The Negro Girl (1800)." Wu, *Romanticism*, 216,11. 73-78.

50 *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 183.

51 A good example for the rare abolitionist version of physical resistance is Yearsley's *Luco*, who strikes back instinctively once and not with premeditation. Yearsley does not foreground the agent but the victim because she dwells extensively on his suffering and dying under slow torture, appealing to pity and voyeurism (163-64,11. 249-297).

52 The feminist Mary Wollstonecraft did not avoid the conflict but passionately placed the right to liberty above the right to property (*Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 14-15).

ally devoted to his master. They form a mutual bond of the heart that sustains the good patriarchal order in contrast to the barbaric rule of the old witch. Edgeworth's implication that the bond of hearts renders the liberation of slaves unnecessary parallels Barbauld's argument that mutual love between husbands and wives replaces the need for women's formal emancipation.⁵³ This embellished form of slavery "is but a name," Thomas Bellamy said in *The Benevolent Planters*,⁵⁴ The myth of benevolent slavery closely resembles virtual slavery after emancipation in abolitionist literature. But whereas pro-slavery literature championed the "friendship" between patriarchal owners and their slaves, abolitionist women's literature rather established a bond of sympathy between slaves and women. Both forms of relationships embellish the Eurocentric domination of others.

Wylie Sypher and Eric Williams condemned sentimental abolitionism as selfish and irrelevant for the demise of the slave trade and slavery.⁵⁵ But abolitionist literature did not only cause streams of philanthropic tears. Since the trade, ownership and management of slaves was largely a male domain, slavery served as a good vehicle to negotiate gender.⁵⁶ Abolitionist women poets tended to foreground violent masters and to ignore the jealous and cruel mistress, who loomed large in novels⁵⁷ and in slave narratives, such as *The History of Mary Prince*.⁵⁸ The abolitionists would have preferred to see the planter's wife at least as an ally in the struggle for the amelioration of slavery. An engraving from the *Anti-Slavery Scrap Book*⁵⁹ represents a slave mother who appeals with her chained hands clasped as if in prayer to the planter's wife for help to her keep her child from being sold. The black mother is juxtaposed to the white mother in the pose of the Virgin Mary with the infant on her lap, both of whom raise their right hands as if to pacify the woman: the mistress's facial expression of gentle sympathy does not indicate whether she will help her or whether she is pointing out to the slave that the only help which can be gained is by an appeal to heaven, to which the slave woman raises her eyes. On the one hand, the domestic interior seems to be a space which allows a benevolent encounter between women of

53 "The Rights of Woman (1793)." Mellor/Matlack, *British Literature 1780-1830*, 187, 11. 29-32.

54 *The Benevolent Planters* (1789). Mellor/Matlack, *British Literature 1780-1830*, 67.

55 Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings*, 217; Williams, "Golden Age," 105-06.

56 Cf. Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 299.

57 *Ib.*, 160-61.

58 *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself* Ed. with introd. Moira Ferguson. London: Pandora, 1987. If for once Barbauld described a cruel, voluptuous, and decadent beauty with her "household scourge" ("Epistle" in Wu, *Romanticism*, 22, 1. 68), she stressed the pervasive moral corruption even of "gentlewomen" under slavery rather than the oppression of race and gender or "the influence of profiteering males" (Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 161).

59 See Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, 101.

different races, which is separated from the male public sphere outside, where a man leads a black child to a slave ship, and an overseer raises a whip to drive slaves to work, hinting at the future of the sold child. On the other hand, a tea set with a sugar bowl right in the center of the picture and between the women betrays the fact that the planter's wife is complicit in slavery. The engraving can be read in many different ways: (1) as a criticism of the hypocrisy of those who raise sentimental Christian appeals against slavery and consume goods based on slave labour, (2) as an indication of the limited power of female appeals against slavery outside their sphere of influence, or (3), and that may have been the intention, as an exhortation to combine trust in divine mercy and justice with political action as private consumers, i.e. the boycott of sugar. Appeals to sympathy and to political action did not exclude each other.

Women questioned the prominent social, economic, and political position of the plantocracy. Women criticised male slavers as deficient human beings, who lack sentiment and ethics. If slavers behave in a barbarian and inhuman way, which proves that they are anti-social and uncivilised at heart, they do not deserve social esteem.⁶⁰ The abolitionists castigated the hypocritical slavers' savage behaviour, which mocks their Christianity.⁶¹ Female abolitionists tended to transform the economic argument that slavery is necessary for Great Britain into the moral argument that slaveholders are themselves unrestrained "slaves] of avarice."⁶² Abolitionists suggested that slavers are not guided by reason but merely use sophistry in order to mask base and selfish passions.⁶³ Finally, abolitionist women not only insinuated that they are better human beings than the slave owners but also better British citizens: they drew on the British tradition of liberty as the basis of the regeneration and expansion of a humanitarian and enlightened Empire. Soon after the British regulation of the slave trade in 1787, abolitionist women proposed that Great Britain in contrast to other imperial powers should atone for the national guilt of slavery and redeem itself by restoring liberty and human rights to the world.⁶⁴ Helen Maria Williams proclaimed that the abolitionist Mguardian[s] of the injured" initiated generous

60 See Yearsley, "Poem on the Inhumanity", 163; H.M. Williams, "Poem on the Bill", 238. 61 Yearsley, "Poem on the Inhumanity," 158, II. 21-30, 80-82. In consideration of the negative examples among the Christian English who turn into savages, it seems surprising that the abolitionists full-heartedly advocated Christian education for pagan savages. However, they never questioned Christianity as such but rather the faith of individuals, who may lack any fear of divine vengeance or any hope for divine mercy (Yearsley, 163, 11. 226-33).

62 Yearsley, "Poem on the Inhumanity", 159,1. 39.

63 Cf. More, "Slavery," 47, 11. 147-70; Barbauld, "Epistle," 21, I. 25-36; Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, 109-11.

64 Cf. More, "Slavery," 49, II. 251-276; H. M. Williams, "Poem on the Bill," 245, II. 351-62; Lickbarrow, "Slave-Trade," 476-77,11. 15-32.

British "deeds of mercy that embrace / A distant sphere, an alien race."⁶⁵ Women poets relegitimised the British Empire because they presented Britain as an elect model nation with a humanitarian and Christian missionary zeal.⁶⁶ These poems claimed that humanitarian sentiment should play a significant part in foreign affairs and that it would pay - at least in the symbolic capital of spiritual credit in heaven and of international reputation in this world.

Both feminist and abolitionist women derived their mutual authority from the ultimate patriarch God. Radical feminist speakers placed themselves outside of the secular patriarchal rule, which degraded other women. Ironically, quite a number of these other women considered themselves as privileged advocates of the repressed races: the "virtual slaves" spoke out for the real slaves, to whom they seemed to pass on the role of the suffering silenced victims they had discarded. Abolitionist women transferred the male prejudices they suffered from to other races because they felt superior to slaves in terms of intellectual development even if they identified with slaves as feeling human beings: "Though few can reason, all mankind can feel."⁶⁷ They reversed the feminist slogan to reform themselves in order to reform the world. The abolitionist women aimed at reforming the world and thereby enhanced their own position. Whereas the radical feminist Wollstonecraft stressed the education of understanding as a means of women's empowerment and social reform, abolitionist women rather relied on sentiment and sympathy, which the ardent feminist regarded as female weaknesses. According to Wollstonecraft, education served to discipline the female passions, which abolitionists considered to be an asset in their campaigns. Wollstonecraft claimed equal rights for women as they became free moral agents, abolitionist women presupposed that they were morally superior as they clamoured for mercy. The demand of equal rights for women was based on justice. Abolitionist women stressed mercy rather than justice. Acts of mercy maintained a hierarchy between the giver and the receiver, the abolitionists and the converted slavers on the one side, and (ex-)slaves on the other.⁶⁸ The enlightened education feminists desired led to women's economic independence and social equality. The Christian education provided and projected for slaves perpetuated economic dependence and social inferiority. The discipline of the body under slavery was replaced by the discipline of the soul and the mind after slavery. Abolitionist women tended to transfer virtual slavery from gender to race, imitating the male domination of women: "Of all bondage, mental bondage is surely the most fatal;

65 "Poem on the Bill," 239,1. 74 and 1. 59-60.

66 See Midgley, *Women against Slavery*, 200.

67 More, "Slavery," 47,1. 150.

68 Mellor does not oppose justice and mercy but follows Gilligan in her juxtaposition of a male ethic of justice and a female ethic of care, which would take the needs of all into consideration (316-17).

the absurd despotism which has hitherto, with more than gothic barbarity, enslaved the female mind."⁶⁹

69 Mary Hays, *Letters, and Essays, Moral, and Miscellaneous* (1793). Mellor/Matlak, *British Literature 1780-1830*, 37.