

**"When We with Magic Rites the White Man's Doom Prepare":  
Representations of Black Resistance in British Abolitionist Writing During  
the Era of Revolution**

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Haste! The magic shreds prepare –  
Thus the white man's corpse we tear.  
Lo! Feathers from the raven's plume,  
That croaks our proud Oppressor's doom  
Now to aid the potent spell,  
Crush we next the brittle shell –  
Fearful omen to the foe  
Look the blanched bones we throw.  
From mouldering graves we stole the hallow'd earth,  
Which mix'd with blood, winds up the magic charm;  
Wide yawns the grave for all of northern birth,  
And soon shall smoke with blood each sable warrior's arm.  
(W. Shepherd)

O, my troubled spirit sighs  
When I hear my people's cries!  
Hurry, O'rah, o'er the flood,  
Bathe thy sword in Christian blood!  
Whidah will thy side protect  
Whidah will thy arm direct.  
(Anon)

These excerpts of British abolitionist poems envision the preparation for black revolution as a secret nightly gathering with wild dances and ritualistic incantations stimulating the slaves to avenge themselves upon their masters. They raise the specter of a strange religious practice that has the power to fuel the frenzy of black liberation in the most violent ways. Just like the poems quoted above, many abolitionist texts published during the Age of Revolution reveal a preoccupation with forms of African occultism, especially with the practice of Obeah. Obeah, a syncretized religion which played a dominant role in the British Caribbean isles, was considered the most subversive, inspirational and dangerous slave religion. Less based on communal worship than on other hybrid forms such as Voodoo or Santeria, Obeah threatened to undermine European authority because it involved secret nightly rituals and individual consultations with an Obeah-Man or Woman which could not always be supervised by the slave master.

Both poems were written in the 1790s as a response to the Haitian Revolution, the emergence of Toussaint L'Ouverture as a political presence, and the nightmare of British defeat in Santo Domingo. Nevertheless, rather than representing black revolutionary and military successes and confronting the futile attempts to restore slavery in the French colony, these poems envision black self-liberation in terms of individual religious rituals of obscure African origin. They portray the slaves' gatherings and their ritualistic practices as the seedbed of rebellious plotting. Thus, simultaneously, these stanzas connect fear of uncontrollable "African savagery" with a reassuring message to the British readership: if black revolutionary spirit is kindled by singular events of heathen ritual, the threatening scenario of violent anarchy may still be controlled.

In significant acts of displacement these documents attempt both to contain and exorcise European anxieties caused by a loss of imperial control in the Caribbean. In his best-selling

*History of the West Indies* (1793), the historian Bryan Edwards provided Britain not just with historical facts and statistical data but also with the rationale that allowed the British public to come to terms with the unsettling revolutionary events on the French island of Santo Domingo and in its own colonies. A planter himself, Edwards suggested that the practice of Obeah was mainly responsible for the restlessness of the slaves. Rather than looking at Obeah as a hybrid slave religion which had developed in response to the coercion and suffering of slave life, Bryan Edwards chose to represent the slaves' ceremonies as an African-based cult, which was constantly being fuelled through the importation of fresh slaves from Africa. Once the slave trade would be stopped, he argued, Obeah and all its threatening implications of resistance to white dominance would immediately decline. Education, especially in the form of Christianisation, would assist the process and teach the slaves to be contented under improved conditions of gentle slave-holding. He thus justified a prolonged enslavement on the basis of ameliorated conditions and at the same time offered a suggestion of how to contain the threat of colonial instability.

Even though the slave revolt in the French Caribbean island of Santo Domingo and the utter defeat of Leclerc's troops ultimately opened the eyes of the British public to the limitations of colonial power and expansionist politics, most literary production addressing the theme of black revolution chose to reshape these traumatic events and to rewrite colonial history in a reassuring manner. The discourse of black revolution provided a screen upon which Britons projected their colonial anxieties. These interesting strategies of displacement, which underlie the poems quoted above, were symptomatic of the prevailing mood of the 1790s – a period characterized by national insecurity and a dawning sense that imperial control as well as domestic authority were increasingly more difficult to maintain.

This essay will examine the multi-faceted representations of slave resistance in British antislavery texts as a reaction to the revolutionary events in France and the colonies, with a special emphasis on female abolitionist writing. It will become obvious that the discussion of black self-liberation during the Age of Revolution went far beyond mere colonial affairs. In fact, the various plays, novels and tales written in support of the antislavery campaign in Britain reflected important changes taking place within British culture. Representations of black revolution were employed to discuss questions of national identity and to address domestic concerns, such as issues of social stability and prevailing gender hierarchies. Therefore, antislavery writing of the 1790s must be relocated in the changing social and economic order of Britain just as it needs to be read against the political background of shifting colonial power-relations.

From yet another perspective, a more focused interrogation of antislavery writing by British women will further complicate the rhetoric of slave revolution. The ambivalence of their double role as colonizer and subjugated other was reflected in British women's abolitionist writing and added subtle and often provocative twists to the antislavery debate. By drawing parallels between colonial and domestic slavery, women writers unmasked the overlap between the machinations of imperial power in the suppression of slaves, on the one hand, and of patriarchal power in the suppression of women, on the other. Even though slavery and gendered oppression were inadequately equated – erasing crucial differences between tyranny based on color and tyranny based on sex – this discursive strategy nevertheless allowed for a simultaneous negotiation of racial subordination and gender hierarchies. Whenever women approached the theme of revolution, they addressed both – issues of black freedom and their own liberation from the confinements of marriage.

From its earliest stage British women's abolitionist writing was characterized by a close interconnection of feminist and antislavery concerns. However, when widespread anxieties of political unrest during the revolutionary period of the 1790s resulted in a predominantly conservative counter-movement in which abolitionist sentiment as well as a feminist agenda

came to be equated with Jacobinism, women writers were forced to create new strategies in order to challenge power relations within British society and the colonies. A closer look at those female abolitionists who "wrote revolution" during a period of shifting imperial and domestic relations reveals equally complex and ambivalent messages about femininity and race. The various strategies British women employed in order to answer to the growing anxieties about the identity and power of the English nation reveal how they responded to counter-revolutionary propaganda and how they took on the theme of black revolution in order to wed their abolitionist agenda with pre-existing conservative discourses on white womanhood. The tropical revolutionary setting they chose for their tales provided a suitable background to express or even check their own rebellious impulses.

In order to comprehend the overall shift in abolitionist sentiment it is important to take into account how seriously self-affirming and self-aggrandizing notions of European power and black powerlessness were challenged during the 1790s. In 1791 news reached Britain of the outbreak of a massive slave revolution in the French colony of Santo Domingo, with over 100,000 slaves in revolt. As early as 1792 it became clear that the French could not suppress the revolution. When even British troops failed to conquer the colony and to re-install slavery on the French island, the newspapers were strewn with names of officers who had died of yellow fever in the colonial enterprise, and abolitionist sentiment diminished in influence. (Geggus 128) Thereafter, any critique of the system of slavery seemed inappropriate and even unpatriotic. (Davis 117) Meetings of the Antislavery Society ceased. The House of Commons rejected the bill to abolish the slave trade and agreed on a compromise to delay action until 1796. British plantation holders, fearing that revolutionary violence might spread over to their own colonies, petitioned for military assistance. Slaves, they argued, needed firm control. Any inattention would lead to violent resistance.

As a result of the severe challenge to British dominance, antislavery writers were confronted with the need to create original and effective strategies to win support for abolition at a time when the voicing of abolitionist ideas had almost become a taboo. Revolutionary unrest in the Caribbean severely undermined popular support for abolition. Even the most radical activists were troubled. As a consequence, the number of poems, tales and plays written in support of slave emancipation decreased rapidly during the 1790s. The on-going revolutionary events in France and on French territory seemed to affect British national security in such a way that during the decade following the French Revolution, the English ruling classes became ever more fearful of Jacobinism at home. The ideological implications of revolution were equated with the popular belief that calls for change of any sort were motivated by agitators of the French Revolution and destructive to the foundations of British society. Radical abolitionists were thought of as Jacobins and enemies to the structure of the British state. With reports of violent events in France under Robespierre's Reign of Terror, the approach of war, and the impending danger of Irish rebellion, as well as on-going slave resistance and Maroon upheavals in the British colonies, any form of radicalism in Britain was prohibited. Parliamentary legislation, the Two Acts of 1792 and 1795, prohibited public gatherings. Thomas Paine, who had left the country for France, was charged with High Treason. Other radicals such as Thomas Holcroft, John Horne Tooke and Thomas Hardy were arrested. (Walvin 116)

Simply stated, the prevailing mood turned increasingly conservative, even reactionary. During the revolutionary period it was not only class barriers that threatened to dissolve; race and gender divisions seemed equally unstable. This shifting context led to a conservative re-enforcement of traditional hierarchies and categories of difference. Since abolitionism in the 1790s was mostly concerned with the containment of domestic tensions and the struggle to maintain national order and international power, it is not surprising that antislavery texts became repositories of cherished British values. This is especially true for female antislavery writing, which from the first was concerned with issues of race and gender. However, female

antislavery activists had to compromise in significant ways to adjust their discourses of femininity and racial equality to shifting political and social dynamics.

In trying to comprehend how the ideological conservative back-lash caused by international and colonial affairs also affected perceptions of white womanhood, it must be noted that matters of gender divisions, racial hierarchies and class stability were closely associated in the British mind. This can best be illustrated by the following excerpts from Edmund Burke's influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790. Burke described the procession of Parisian women who forced the royal family to return to Versailles. The breakdown of the political order he envisioned in terms of the violation of proper gender roles:

... they act amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men, and of women lost to shame, who, according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode them; and sometimes mix and take their seats amongst them; domineering over them with a strange mixture of servile petulance and proud presumptuous authority. As they have inverted order in all things, the gallery is in place of the house. (Burke 161)

Women, "lost to shame," had not only mixed with the royal couple and thus overstepped class barriers but had also abandoned their femininity and adopted "male" power and authority. "Domineering" women would "direct, control, applaud, explode." In Burke's horrific vision the unfeminine act of invading male territory made them resemble "savages":

... a spectacle more resembling a procession of American savages ... after some of their murders called victories, and leading into hovels hung round with scalps, their captives, overpowered with the scoffs and buffets of women as ferocious as themselves, much more than it resembled the triumphal pomp of a civilised martial nation. (Burke 159)

Not only was the male/female division overstepped in such a formulation, simultaneously, racial boundaries were blurred. In their uncontrollable wildness women became more like other races, "subhuman" creatures:

... they [the royal couple] were conducted to the capital of their kingdom [...] amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women. (Burke 164-165)

In Burke's rhetoric women were linked to members of "darker" races. Evoking traditional representations of devil-figures and witches, women became "unsexed" fiendish creatures: "furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women." Revolution in Burke's terms signified the reversal of all categories of order. The dissolution of class, race and gender boundaries was encoded as the reversal of cosmic order: dark powers ruled over good ones. Revolutionary women, politically dangerous and sexually liberated – voicing "horrid yells," "shrilling screams," dancing "frantic dances" – played the dominant role in bringing about the threatening instabilities of the social edifice. Burke set up the revolutionary events in France as a warning. His conservative propaganda was intended to quell pro-French sympathies and at the same time aimed at the re-enforcement of traditional gender divides within British society. Both openly and implicitly, Burke's message was to stifle any challenges to Britain's own *ancien régime* – and that meant the colonial order based on slavery as well as the domestic order based on patriarchy.

Significantly, then, even though the decade of the 1790s witnessed the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), it was predominantly a period of conservative backlash that sought to restate the need for female subordination. In order to understand how the shifting social and political dynamics of the

period undermined women's efforts to free the slave, it is important to note how Godwin's frank publication of the *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) detailing the love affairs of Mary Wollstonecraft, his dead wife, and her attempted suicide, was met with public disapproval and condescension. (Butler 94-95) With the publication of her posthumous biography, her previous work, especially *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, came to be regarded as more radical than it actually was. As a result, Mary Wollstonecraft herself was demonised, since her own lifestyle seemed to testify to the consequences of Jacobin principles in action.

The shifting historical contexts provide an important backdrop to the texts themselves. British women did not write out of one tradition alone or about only one set of concerns. Their discursive strategies reflected, in many regards, the changing temper of the times. Just how did abolitionist women writers deal with a situation that restricted the voicing of abolitionist and feminist sentiment alike, and how did they approach the theme of revolution in their abolitionist writing? One interesting example is the novel *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) by Mary Hays. Hays, a friend and disciple of Mary Wollstonecraft, employed the theme of black revolution as a foil to the emancipatory development of her white heroine. As was customary in female abolitionist writing, feminist concerns and matters of racial equality were closely interlinked. Hays portrayed a group of West Indian planters who in a discussion about the threatening violence of revolutionary Africans voted on adopting stricter methods of slave-holding:

Mr Melmoth interposed, by wishing, 'that they had some thousands more of these murderers in the West Indies, to keep the slaves in subordination, who, since absurd notions of liberty had been put into their heads, were grown very troublesome and refractory, and, in a short time, he supposed, would become as insolent as the English servants. [...] Think!, sister, said the lordly Mr Malmoth, with an exulting laugh, 'what have servants or women, to do with *thinking*?' (Hays 111)

The characters who oppress slaves are also shown denying women's rights; the text equally condemns the patriarchal position of power that allowed for the abuse of slaves and of women. At first sight, an alternative stance seems to be offered by the novel's protagonist, who advocates Bryan Edwards' gradualist concept of ameliorative slave laws in combination with religious instruction. The approving smiles of the heroine, the protagonist's self-conscious defense of the slaves' humanity and their right to education suggest that he is the author's spokesperson. His moderate views also reflect the present course of the British government, which carefully avoided interfering with slave trade laws and practices and delayed action. At the end of the novel, however, his gradualist position is undercut and exposed as being of a similar cruelty as the planters' violence against their slaves. The protagonist's wavering attitude towards the heroine – he can never bring himself to stand up to the woman he loves and as a consequence causes her social downfall – is already foreshadowed in the half-hearted gradualist stance he adopted earlier on. Male ill-treatment of slaves and of women correspond with one another. For Mary Hays, only the resolution to liberate both without compromise was acceptable. Though subtly disguising her radicalism, she still clung to and advocated the unpopular concept of immediate slave emancipation and female liberation. Yet Hays' treatment of the theme of slave revolution was a rare exception; there are only a few other radical authors, like Charlotte Smith, who, to voice their immediatist schemes, were forced to use similar strategies to disguise their feminist and abolitionist ambitions.

In the predominant ideological set-up of war phobia, the perceived excesses of the French Revolution and the British nightmare of defeat in Santo Domingo, new and non-radical approaches to antislavery emerged. Abolition was now carefully redefined in ameliorative terms, indicating that the right to freedom needed to be earned through moral improvement.

Slave emancipation should be done carefully and be postponed to some indefinite point of time in the future. This new concept of gradualism popularized through Bryan Edwards found wide acceptance. Edwards' ideology of amelioration and education featured largely in female abolitionist writing in the post-revolutionary years. An abolitionist model that regarded Christianisation as a prerequisite for slave emancipation provided women writers with the arguments that allowed them to continue antislavery agitation in modified terms and to promote gradual abolition on the basis of women's religious calling and moral agency. The adjustment of their discursive strategies to the emerging conservatism of the age allowed them continued participation in a political debate while avoiding any tint of revolutionary sentiment that Burke had conjured up. This is why the 1790s produced many texts by abolitionist women writers who seem to have blinded themselves to the political upheavals in the colonies.

Outdated portrayals of tame, forgiving, quiescent slaves and depictions of grateful, happily converted bondswomen and men imply an acceptance of slavery. In addition, the powerful new image of the grateful slave came to replace earlier representations of the melancholy suicidal victim and seemed suited to the needs of women writers who had accommodated themselves to Bryan Edwards's gradualist approach. Through these harmless, non-violent and often child-like black characters, readers did not have to confront the on-going revolutionary struggle, and anxieties of white loss of control could thus be contained. At the same time these images allowed women to confirm their new social role as "educators" of colonial subjects and to prescribe the slaves' instruction and religious conversion. Moreover, the themes of slave revolution and violent resistance were regarded as "unfeminine" and inappropriate and were thus hardly ever addressed straightforwardly by most women writers.

Interesting exceptions are the novels and tales by Elizabeth Helme and Maria Edgeworth. When these women wrote about race matters abroad, however, they simultaneously discussed concepts of white femininity and promoted strict adherence to traditional gender roles. By locating themselves within a separate spheres ideology, they distanced themselves from any radical approaches such as Mary Wollstonecraft's fervent feminism and her call for universal human rights. Tellingly, in their gradualist antislavery writing they argued for a stabilization of the stratified and gendered order of society and promoted the maintenance of cultural and racial hierarchies.

Elizabeth Helme, in her three-volume novel *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (1796), set part of her plot in the middle of a Jamaican slave revolt. In order to highlight the cruelty of the slaves' action Helme constructed the slaves' resistance as a re-enactment of the French Revolution as envisioned by Burke and paralleled the planters' execution and that of the royal couple: "Mr. And Mrs. Walter dead-naked and disfigured, were carried and exposed in the open court, together with several overseers, whom the negroes considered as their oppressors." (Helme 191) The fact that Helme modeled her plot on French events though setting her tale in Jamaica, in the British colony, illustrates how severely national security at home seemed to be threatened. However, in advocating Bryan Edwards' gradualist concept of ameliorative slave laws in combination with religious instruction – "Kindness and humanity make slavery bearable" (Helme 189) – Helme provided a reassuring solution for her British readership. The revolutionary spirit of the slaves is soothed through the intervention of the grateful slave Felix who, having been benevolently treated by his master, now declines to participate in the slave revolt. As a reversed image of Toussaint L'Ouverture he stands up, confronts the raging mob and gives a powerful speech that quiets revolutionary unrest: "Their [the British] powers and resources in this island are numerous, what are ours? A herd of naked, unarmed men, whose sole defense against their numerous engines of death, is bodily strength and undaunted courage; poor auxiliaries to ward off the thunder of their cannon, or yet more certain musket-shot." (Helme 194) By envisioning victorious British troops Helme offered an ironic reversal of a political situation that, in fact, was characterized by a vast

number of dying British soldiers and the frequent military successes of Toussaint's army. In having the slaves eventually submit to the greater military and intellectual powers of the Europeans, Helme displayed an optimistic patriotism and distanced herself from any form of immediatist radical thinking. Through promoting gradualism she aligned herself with the more moderate views of social reform that also reflected the present course of the British government – delayed action and a carefully avoidance of interfering with slave trade practices and colonial laws.

While writing revolution Helme at the same time carefully negotiated values of white womanhood and established models of appropriate female behavior. Discourses of race and gender are thus closely intersected and employed in order to support established structures of white supremacy and male dominance. Black resistance in *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* was only provoked when the slave master Mr. Walters chose as his second wife a West Indian woman. Mr. Walters "had no will but what this woman pleased, and was blindly subservient to all her arts." (Helme 127) Physically alluring and passionate, the Creole woman gains control over her husband, manipulates his will and exerts power over their slaves "with an inhumanity unbecoming of her sex." (Helme 188) Though constant and repeated ill-treatment the slaves' rebellious spirit is kindled. In echoing Burke's scenario of the mob of Parisian women, Helme linked unfeminine and inappropriate gender behavior to the potential consequences of revolution and social anarchy. Mrs. Walters' "arts," connoting witchcraft and the employment of magical skills, were reminiscent of Burke's images of the fiendish women from hell. The planter's wife is both a white European and a native of the island, and thus a national hybrid woman. Her being of darker complexion than her British sisters, even if only through exposure to the tropical sun, also suggests the possibility of racially obscure origin. By racializing the Creole woman and linking her to "darker" races, Elizabeth Helme rehearsed Burke's anti-feminine rhetoric and employed it to uphold traditional racial divides between colonizer and the colonized. Unbecoming female behavior, the refusal to accept a divinely appointed place within the separate sphere model is thus revealed to be the ultimate source of all revolutionary upheaval that might ensue. In Helme's narrative, proper traditional hierarchies were inverted: first unfeminine women enslaved men, then a mob of uncontrollable black revolutionaries gained control. Insistence on strict gender, race and class boundaries appeared to be an important measure to avoid the spread of revolution to British colonial shores.

A similar counter-revolutionary feminism that associated slave rebellion with demonic female emasculation was to be found in Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda*. By 1801, when she published *Belinda*, Edgeworth was well aware of the shift in power relations in the Caribbean. The threat of a black empire had become a fearful manifestation. Religious instruction, benevolent treatment, and ameliorative slave laws seemed to provide the ideal solution to prevent a British Haiti. The character of the slave Juba, child-like, well-meaning and naive, answered to the conservative needs of half-hearted gradual abolitionism. Faithful Juba insists on following his master to Britain. His wish is motivated, however, not by the prospect of gaining freedom, but by the desire to escape the threats of Obeah occultism in Jamaica. Once arrived in England Juba willingly accepts his place in the lower stratum of British society and becomes an obedient and productive working-class member. Class boundaries are thus held in place. In her novel Edgeworth contained fears of a loss of white supremacy by insisting on a strictly hierarchical order of society. *Belinda* offered a model of how to deal with the potential influx of self-liberated slaves into British society – a pressing issue, which for example gave rise to a paranoid vision that West Indian slaves, responding to abolitionist efforts in England, were not only conspiring to rise against their masters and to cut their throats, "but once free would come to England, mix with the natives, and spoil the breed of the common people." (Reeve 91)

Insistence on the maintenance of race, class and gender hierarchies culminated in the satirical portrayal of a radical feminist, who echoes the unspeakable Jacobin philosophies suspected of undermining the hierarchical social order: "... you can say what you will, but the present system of society is radically wrong! – whatever is, is wrong." (Edgeworth 230) Dressed in male clothing, involved in duels with other women, Mrs. Frecke displays unfeminine conduct and usurps male power. By aligning her eccentric character with revolutionary radicals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth equally distanced herself from liberal ideologies and fervent feminism. Mrs. Frecke's enthusiastic response: "I hate slavery, viva la liberté!" (Edgeworth 229) discredits her as a hypocrite. After all, she is the one who plays abusive tricks on black Juba, when, dressed up in the disguise of an Obeah woman, she almost scares the fearful slave to death. The association of unchecked female radicalism and Obeah power evoked Burke's misogynist rhetoric and his representation of liberal women as witches. The man-woman became the Obeah-woman; a danger to political stability and counter-productive to the interest of the slaves' well-being and happiness.

In her tale of 1802 "The Grateful Negro," Edgeworth pushed the association of unfeminine conduct, demonic darkness and revolutionary impulses even further. She now presented a black Obeah woman who instigates her fellow slaves to revolt. Obeah power was considered the main source of revolution since Bryan Edwards had published his account on *The History of the West Indies*. Esther, an old "Koromantyn Negress," prepares her fellow slaves for rebellion and administers the "solemn fetish oath" to the revolutionary slaves. While she sings "incantations" by "the blue flame of a cauldron," she provides a "bowl of poison" into which the conspirators are supposed to dip their knives. Edgeworth extended Bryan Edwards' exclusive focus on male Obeah practitioners by inventing an Obeah woman and modeling her on Burke's fiendish revolutionary women. According to European concepts of witchcraft, Esther is an old "hag" with "shrivelled hand[s]" who viciously "burst[s] into an infernal laugh" while stirring a venomous liquid in a "cauldron" on a "blue flame". The sorceress Esther becomes the chief instigator of the planned rebellion. By adopting a master's authority she violates race, class and gender barriers and reverses established hierarchies. The representation of a black Obeah woman thus reflects white fears and anxieties over gradual loss of imperial control as well as social disintegration at home. Nevertheless, Edgeworth also offered a consolation to her British readership: the evil powers of Esther are utterly defeated and exorcised through the loyalty and love of the grateful slave, Caesar, who – having encountered a planter's benevolence as promoted by Bryan Edwards – warns his master and helps him regain control over the conspirators. In the end, class distinctions are upheld, and the resolution of the tale reaffirms cultural, racial and gendered hierarchies. Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Helme's narrations are perfect examples of how abolitionist writing was turned into a self-referential repository of British values of femininity and the ideology of white womanhood.

British abolitionist discourse of slave revolution in the 1790s reflected colonial insecurities and anxieties of a potential loss of imperial control. Antislavery writers, who depended on and worked within a colonial framework, believed that they had to make compromises in order to adjust to a changing political climate; they sought to reaffirm cultural categories of difference, especially at a time when colonial resistance seemed to threaten social stability. This became especially apparent in female antislavery writing. Women's abolitionist texts simultaneously negotiated gender roles and race relations. During the 1790s only few women writers dared to promote open radicalism. Those who did, opted for the novel which allowed them to conceal their radical message by a complicated set of narrative layers and discursive strategies; their political stance could never be pinned down unambiguously. However, the majority of women writers in the Age of Revolution exchanged the radical concept of immediatism for the half-hearted concept of gradualism. Most of the revolutionary tales written by abolitionist

women writers during the Age of Revolution turned increasingly conservative and advocated non-interference. At the same time they distanced themselves from fervent feminism and insisted on a separate sphere gender concept. However, while abolitionist writers carefully rethought their discursive strategies and adjusted their abolitionist rhetoric in order to come to terms with revolution, black resistance in the Caribbean persisted in intense forms. This ensured that issues of race and ethnicity could no longer be avoided and had to be confronted directly.

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