



Jane Givens and Professor Elizabeth Dolan

My thesis examines the use of the language and imagery of slavery in the feminist discourse of Romantic-era radical women writers. Late eighteenth-century authors acknowledged and protested the connection between the disenfranchisement and oppression of women and that of African slaves. In both their prose and fiction, authors and thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith and Mary Darby Robinson adopted abolitionist rhetoric in order to contextualize their feminist arguments politically, and to invite critical thought about the lack of legal and social rights for women. However, Robinson's discourse is distinguished from that of her contemporaries in its exploration not only of the connection between the *condition* of women and that of slaves, but also in the *causes* of their oppression. While Wollstonecraft and Smith are concerned with inciting indignation for the treatment of English women, Robinson simultaneously extends their critiques and circumvents the problems of equating race and gender relations by pointing to white male oppressors of both populations. In her political treatise, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799), Robinson borrows the language and rhetoric of prominent abolitionists like Thomas Clarkson and Hannah More to identify the ways in which white men seek to dominate both women and slaves through institutionalized oppression. Comparatively, her novel, *The Natural Daughter* (1799), illuminates the domestic strife that links the suffering of both women and slaves at the hands of their white male masters. Robinson's two works are not only distinguishable from other feminist texts of the era, but they are also discernable from each other. While her prose is more direct, and outright names

women as the “slaves” of men, her fiction is subtler, and avoids making such direct comparisons. I argue this subtlety is a strategic appeal to the domestic affections, a tactic used by the well-known abolitionist William Wilberforce. In both her prose and her fiction, Robinson proves herself an effective advocate for women’s rights, and forces her readers to undertake a critical analysis of the connections between the subjugation of women and that of slaves. Her work attacks systematic white male dominance as the source of widespread oppression in two related populations, and demands the action necessary to dismantle it.

Jane Givens, “The Language of Slavery in the Feminist Discourse of Mary Darby Robinson,” submitted spring 2014. Advisor: Professor Beth Dolan.