

Department of English, Carleton University

ENGL 5408F

Fall 2012

*** Preliminary Course Outline / Subject to Change

Studies in Romanticism- Romanticism and Human Rights

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Course description:

This course examines a series of texts from the 1790's in Britain that are all concerned, at some level, with the question of natural rights, or what we now call "human" rights. Writers in the 1790's furiously debated the question of rights – of women, children, slaves, and animals, to name a few – but the issue is perhaps best captured in the polarized stance of Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke, the latter famously declaring that he preferred "the rights of an Englishman" to "the rights of man." Exploring the multi-faceted dimensions of these debates, we will pair our analysis of 1790s texts with 20th and 21st-century discussions – philosophical, literary, theoretical, politico-legal – of human rights in particular, and biopolitics or "the politics of life itself," in general. In so doing, we will take up questions pertaining to bare life, the state of exception, sovereign power, human life, and animal life, by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Ranciere, Jacques Derrida, Joseph Slaughter, Ian Baucom, and others. How does the politicization of bare life that results from the discourse of the "rights of man" reshape the discursive terrain of life at the turn of the nineteenth century? From trials for sedition and treason that occurred against the backdrop of the suspension of *habeas corpus* throughout the 1790s, to calls for the rights of women (by Mary Wollstonecraft) and infants (by Thomas Spence), to the 1781 Zong Massacre, in which 133 slaves were thrown overboard a British slave ship so that the owners could claim the loss against an insurance policy, the end of the eighteenth century is central to any history of human rights.