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### *Caleb Williams* as a depiction of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century

William Godwin's *Things as they are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, commonly referred to simply as *Caleb Williams* is a late eighteenth century novel steeped with prevalent ideas and depictions of situations of that time. To put the novel in the frame of the late eighteenth century, this essay starts with exploring how *Caleb Williams* can be read in the light of the debate concerning the French Revolution. At first, this essay will refer to Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France*, showing that chivalry is a main element in the discussion, and that chivalry is also a main element in *Caleb Williams*. Secondly, the essay will refer to Wollstonecraft's reaction to Burke, highlighting that liberty is also a main element of the discussion concerning the French Revolution, and showing how this element can be found in *Caleb Williams*.

Furthermore, this establishes that social inequality is still pervasive in late eighteenth century Britain. Thirdly, to elaborate on the topic of inequality, this essay will connect inequality to the system of justice in late eighteenth Britain, and show how this inequality is made apparent in the first trial and in the last trial of the novel. Finally, this essay will come back to the notion of chivalry, showing that even the protagonist,

Caleb, is influenced by this notion. *Caleb Williams* is a novel that depicts the late eighteenth century society, which is apparent in the notions of chivalry and liberty as well as in the system of justice.

Chivalry is a main element in *Caleb Williams* and also in the debate concerning the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. A heated debate concerning the French Revolution was going on in the press in the last decade of the century. This debate, instigated by Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France* in 1790, reveals the ideas circulating about liberty and chivalry. Burke defends the old vertical hierarchy of society. He defends what he calls the law of inheritance, and says that their system has its origin in the ancient chivalry. (Burke) Notably, Falkland, the antagonist, adheres to these same old values of chivalry. This is clearly made evident when his history is related at the beginning of the book. Falkland's favourite authors were from Italy, and from early on he acquired "a love of chivalry and romance". (Volume I. 9) The notion of chivalry was an integral part of the political discourse on the French Revolution in England, Godwin himself was deeply involved in this discussion, and its prominence in a novel would have been easily recognized by his contemporary audience. (Stuart 4)

This love for chivalry ultimately leads to Falkland's downfall. The related event begins at the climax of volume one. At a rural assembly, Tyrrel, the landowner whose social standing equals Falkland's, physically attacks Falkland. He repeatedly knocks him to the floor and even kicks him when he is down, humiliating Falkland. Apparently not being able to suffer such humiliation, Falkland murders Tyrrel when he leaves the building.

He was too deeply pervaded with the idle and groundless romances of chivalry, ever to forget the situation, humiliating and dishonourable according to his ideas, in which he had been placed upon this occasion. There is a mysterious sort of divinity annexed to the person of a true knight, that makes any species of brute violence committed upon it indelible and immortal.”  
(Volume I. 95)

Interestingly, Godwin gives his own opinion in these lines, calling romances of chivalry “idle and groundless”. Although Burk may not agree that these romances of chivalry are idle and groundless he does write down that “the age of chivalry is gone”, interpreting the French Revolution as the beginning of an age of barbarism. (Dart 79)

Liberty is also a main element in the discussion concerning the French Revolution and this can easily be linked to the *Caleb Williams*. The various responses to Edmund Burke’s letter indicate that, liberty and chivalry are not always compatible, and that society was rethinking its ideals. The response of Wollstonecraft seems to be in line with this new thinking:

The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact. (Wollstonecraft 195)

Reading the *Caleb Williams*, it is evident that the liberty which Falkland has is clearly not compatible with the liberty of others. In line with his love of chivalry, he does everything to keep his reputation intact. He murders Tyrrel, the Hawkins become convicted in his stead and get hanged. However, the case is especially apparent in Caleb’s person. From the moment that Caleb knows Falkland’s secret he is robbed his liberty, what Wollstonecraft calls “The birthright of man”. The examples of this are

numerous, Caleb's biased trial, his being put in to jail, the life he leads when he has escaped jail. In short, Caleb leads a restless life and everywhere he comes he is afraid of being caught. This is certainly not the egalitarianism that Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution advocate, on the contrary, it illustrates the inequality in late eighteenth century Britain.

Another instance of inequality in the late eighteenth century is the first trial of Caleb. It is an illustration of the way the justice system worked at the end of the eighteenth century, condemning it, and pleading for a reform. Indeed, during the second half of the eighteenth century, there was a growing interest in favour of reforming the theory and practice of the law. A growing number of writers introduced new theories about how the legal system could be more fair. (Dart 82) By showing how unfair such a trial can be Godwin gives a voice to this debate in his novel. In the first trial of the novel, he illustrates how the whole audience is prejudiced. Falkland's social position and his education are seen as signs of moral superiority. While Caleb is too poor and insignificant to possess any virtue. The audience is willing to attribute the meanest of motives to Caleb. When Caleb appeals to Falkland in his defence, the prejudice is made apparent.

One thing more I must aver; Mr Falkland is not deceived: he perfectly knows that I am innocent. I had no sooner uttered these words than an involuntary cry of indignation burst from every person in the room. (Volume II. 163)

The slightest suggestion that there is a gap between Falkland's public persona and his private feelings is seen as the most unnatural insubordination and treachery.

According to Godwin, the British legal system was designed to serve the ruling class. It

privileged the rich at the expense of the poor. (Dart 82)

How pervasive this inequality in the eighteenth century was, along with the notion of chivalry, becomes apparent in the last trial. Caleb goes to the magistrate and charges Falkland for murder, but first he needs to convince the magistrate to summon Falkland. The magistrate is reluctant and Caleb relates “he was determined upon no account to be the vehicle of my depravity” (Volume III. 294) However, Caleb tells him he is only calling upon him to exercise his function. Caleb’s revolution is carried out within an essentially hierarchical framework, that favours the ruling class.

Institutionally through a lawsuit, but also psychologically, motivated by chivalric notions. It is on the basis of these chivalric that Falkland confesses his guilt. (Moritz 8) “Williams, said he, you have conquered! I see too late the greatness and elevation of your mind... My name will be consecrated to infamy, while your heroism, your patience, and your virtues will be for ever admired ” (Volume III. 301) Caleb has his triumph of justice on the rational level, but shows how he too is influenced by chivalric notions. The conviction of Falkland actually triggers thoughts of self-reproach. Caleb’s revolution remains incomplete because he is unable to break the emotional bond with Falkland. Notions of chivalry are made apparent in Caleb’s mind, when at the end of the story he relates: “I wantonly inflicted on him an anguish a thousand times worse than death” (Volume III. 302) This anguish Caleb inflicted on Falkland is the loss of his reputation. Thus, Caleb betrays that he too adheres to the notion of chivalry while at the same time fighting for liberty.

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