

Thesis Abstract

The inequality of sexes in England has been a sore point in society for centuries. Since the seventeenth century, with the rise of the genre of the novel, writers touched upon this unevenness of rights. During the eighteenth century, there was an increase in the number of female writers and some of them made the issue of female rights their central theme. But to understand the problem, it is necessary to understand the laws concerning women in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This thesis follows the course of a life of a woman, from before birth until the time after marriage has ended and the rights to property she possessed over the course of her life. It is concerned consecutively with the period before, during and after a marriage, as whatever rights a woman had changed dramatically with the change of her marital status. Since rights to property differed through time, but also through the social layers of the society, there is also a division into social classes.

The focus of this work is the period in between 1753 and 1857, years that mark the two important Acts of Parliament that changed the matrimonial law and with it women's rights. In 1753, it was the *Act for Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages* that put an end to the widespread clandestine and contract marriages. More than a hundred years later, in 1857, the Parliament approved *An Act to Amend the Law Relating to Divorce and Matrimonial Causes in England*, which legalized divorce, but also was a first step to abolishing marital coverture.

Both fiction and non-fiction are used to show how the rights of women were perceived by writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The views were influenced by the sex and the social sphere of the authors, but also the exact period when they wrote. It is shown, how sometimes the difference of a few decades changed the way a legal phenomenon was viewed.