

'It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world': Charity, English Literature and an Eighteenth-Century Culture War

In his keynote, Andrew Rudd will discuss a major, but overlooked, theme in eighteenth-century English literature: that of charity, the ancient practice of giving to others, which coincided in this period with an outburst of new humanitarian organisations, many of which remain in existence in the modern UK. The paper will introduce the historical background to charity in eighteenth-century England, then will examine in closer detail the extraordinary debate in the decade following the French Revolution of 1789 between defenders of traditional charity and advocates of radical philanthropy; including idealists who believed that literature itself had the power permanently to improve the world. The paper will give new readings of Mary Wollstonecraft's writings (from which the title quotation is drawn) and William Godwin's novel St Leon (1799), which offers a philosophical perspective on the theme of charity in the midst of this eighteenth-century culture war. The debate over the need for charity in modern-day society has not gone away, nor have imaginative representations of charity as a force for good or its opposite; on the contrary, recent films and sculptures have critiqued charity, while recent academic studies hold out tantalising possibilities about the capacity of literature itself to spur charitable behaviour.