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The Work of the Women:
The Misogyny of the Contagious Disease Acts and the Women Who Opposed Them.
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HIST4303: History of England

In Kent and Kentish London from the years 1864-1881 there was an average of 17,417, nonconsensual, unethical, and violating medical examinations conducted on women accused of prostitution.¹ These invasive examinations were the result of the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 66, and 69. These Acts were put in place in order to reduce the number of venereal diseases that were being contracted by military men living in garrison towns and naval dockyards. The Acts allowed any women who was suspected of prostitution to be subject to examination. The policy and practice of enforcing these Acts varied from place to place throughout England. In some areas only the most blatant disturbances of peace were cause for accusation, in other places women were accused simply for loitering outside of an area for too long a time.² However, the commonality that was found throughout England was that only women were accused and punished. The Contagious Disease Acts targeted women as the sole cause of the spread of venereal disease and ignored the role that men played in the solicitation of sex. The Acts illuminated the misogyny that tainted Victorian England. The Acts were met with strong opposition as women broke their political silence in order to protest these laws and encouraged other women to do the same. The Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 66, and 69 spurred a women's rights movement in England as women such as Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Blackwell spoke out against the misogynistic laws of Victorian England.

The idea of the perfect woman in Victorian society was one of dependence, morality, and chastity. Women were to be dependent upon their fathers, and when married, their husbands for both economic and social status. They were supposed to aspire to marriage and commit their

¹Catherine Lee, "Prostitution and Victorian Society Revisited: The Contagious Diseases Acts in Kent," *Women's History Review* 21, no. 2 (April 2012): 309.

²Ibid, 307.

lives to motherhood, confined within the home. They were not to be as well educated as the man, as they were to be inferior in every way. The exception to this inferiority was in the realm of morality. In her book, *Suffer and Be Still*, Martha Vicinus writes of the woman, “Morally she was left untested, and kept under the watchful eye of her mother, in her father’s home.”³ The woman was to personify innocence from adolescence into adulthood. The idea of the chaste woman is also apparent, as girls were kept sexually ignorant and taught to avoid and suppress any form of sexual desire.⁴ There was an acute sexual double standard in regard to how men and women conducted themselves, as men were allotted a significantly greater measure of sexual freedom than women. A man was socially permitted to live a promiscuous life as a bachelor, as well as, to keep a mistress as a married man, while at the same time women were supposed to uphold and protect their virginity until marriage and then remain undoubtedly faithful to their husbands.⁵ Keith Thomas, in his article, “The Double Standard”, explained the realities of this double standard, “When men took liberties, women had to be educated to tolerate them, and in the great mass of didactic literature for young ladies one of the main themes was that women should recognize that the double standard was in the nature of things, that model wives should turn a blind eye to their husband’s liaisons.”⁶ The need for women to maintain perfect purity, while ignoring the sexual transgressions of their husbands is an idea that was being passed down generationally in England, keeping women trapped in the societal double standard. The double standard was not only present in societal norms, but it was reinforced through legislation.

³Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still; Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 9.

⁴Ibid

⁵Keith Thomas, “The Double Standard,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no. 2 (April 1959): 197.

⁶Ibid 196.

Women were not entitled to the same liberties as men when it came to divorce laws, property laws, or prostitution.⁷ Prostitution was ample in Victorian England, although not supported, it was viewed as a sexual necessity within society if men were to be allowed to act on their unrestrained sexual desires, and women were to remain pure and chaste. The idea that prostitutes were a class of ‘fallen women’ who were needed to maintain the purity of the rest of the nation was popularized in W.E.H. Lecky’s *History of European Morals*. In this work he described prostitutes as, “the supreme vice of...ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue...the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be would pollute...she remains, while creeds and civilizations rise and fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people.”⁸ The idea of prostitution as “a necessary evil and a buttress for the morals of society” did not however guarantee prostitutes any rights or advantages within society.⁹ On the contrary prostitutes became the scapegoats for the increasing outbreaks of venereal disease in military towns. The Contagious Disease Acts were pieces of legislation that reinforced the double standard within society as they only condemned women and allowed men to remain unchecked in their sexual pursuits.

During the mid-1800’s the Royal Army and Navy saw a great increase in the number of venereal diseases that were being spread throughout the military bases. The number of men who were afflicted with disease became so high that officers feared that it would affect the effectiveness of the military. Prostitution in garrison towns was targeted as the cause of the increasing number of diseases. In 1864 Parliament passed the first Contagious Disease Act,

⁷Keith Thomas, 199.

⁸W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European Morals* , II. (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 282.

⁹Thomas, 197.

superseded by the Contagious Disease Act of 1866, which was entitled, 'An Act for the better prevention of contagious diseases at certain naval and military stations.' This Act would receive royal assent in 1869.¹⁰ These acts were put into place in order to protect military men, however, they protected men at the expense of women. Under the Contagious Disease Acts women were subjected to nonconsensual and invasive medical examinations if they were suspected of prostitution. Section four of the 1869 Act states:

“Where an information on oath is laid before a justice by a superintendent of police, charging to the effect that the informant has good cause to believe that a woman therein named is a common prostitute, and either is resident within the limits of any place to which this Act applies, or being resident within ten miles of those limits, or having no settled place of abode, has within 14 days' before the laying of the information, either been within those limits for the purpose of prostitution or been outside of those limits for the purpose of prostitution in the company of men resident within those limits, the justice may, if he thinks fit, issue a notice thereof, addressed to such woman, which notice the superintendent of police shall cause to be served on her.' Moreover, any woman who, on attending for examination, or being examined by the visiting surgeon, is found by him to be in such a condition that he cannot properly examine her, shall, if such surgeon has reasonable grounds for believing she is affected with a contagious disease, be liable to be detained in a certified hospital, subject and according to the provisions of the Contagious Diseases Act, 1866 to 1869, until the visiting surgeon can properly examine her so that she be not so detained for a period exceeding five days.”¹¹

The reality of the situation was that the women who were engaged in prostitution were the recipients of all the blame for the diseases of men who had paid to engage in sexual acts with them. There was zero accountability on the part of the man. Not only was the lack of accountability an issue, but the prostitutes, or women accused of prostitution, were treated at less than human. Under the enforcement of these Acts their basic human rights were stripped away,

¹⁰Hansard Parliamentary Debates, “Stranger Ordered to Withdraw,” HC 24 May 1870, v. 201: col 1308. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

¹¹Ibid: col 1309.

as they were subject to unethical and nonconsensual medical examinations. Women who were diagnosed with a venereal disease were forced to stay in a hospital until they were clear. However, these hospitals more closely resembled jails than medical facilities. The Contagious Disease Acts played off of the idea of the ‘fallen woman’, that was present in Victorian Society.¹² First introduced by John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, the fallen woman was the descendent of Eve, the tempted-turned-temptress in the Garden of Eden.¹³ Expected to be the gatekeepers of purity, while also being labeled as the seductive mistress, women were under an impossible sexual, social standard. Lacking position, prestige, and power, women became the scapegoats of society. This is extremely apparent in the passing of the Contagious Disease Acts, as women were held accountable for the consequences of the actions of men. Parliament tried to pass these laws quickly and quietly. There was little talk amongst the press regarding the laws because it was not a topic suitable for public discussion.¹⁴ The Contagious Disease Acts were met with opposition as many women and men worked to repeal them. The outrage against the enforcement of these acts spurred a women’s rights movement in England and brought women’s voices to the forefront of society. The work of Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Blackwell, united women and exposed the misogynistic nature of the Contagious Disease Acts.

The Contagious Disease Acts moved many women to speak out against the misogyny of the English law. Josephine Butler was on the frontlines of the movement. Butler inherited her

¹²Nina Auerbach, “The Rise of Fallen Woman,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (June 1980): 29.

¹³Ibid, 30.

¹⁴Margaret Hamilton, “Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1864-1886,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10, no. 1 (1978): 16.

drive for reform from her father, John Grey, who was on the forefront of some of the greatest reform movements of his day, including the “First Reform Bill, Free Trade, and the Agitation for the Abolition of the Slave Trade”¹⁵. Born in 1828 in Millfield, Northumberland, Josephine grew up in a wealthy and politically prominent family.¹⁶ She received an education from her mother and governess and even had the opportunity to take some classes at a school in Newcastle.¹⁷ Butler was an intelligent young woman and quickly became profoundly aware of the disparities between the opportunities for education between men and women. Lack of education excluded women from working highly skilled jobs and limited to employment opportunities that paid extremely low wages and took place in dangerous working environments. Josephine Butler saw these conditions as the cause of the increasing number of women forced into prostitution as it became one of the only viable ways for many women to make a living. In 1868, Butler published, *The Education and Employment of Women*, which addressed the need for more opportunities for women’s education and for jobs outside of the household. Josephine Butler recognized education as the key to break women out of the cycle of oppression. She understood that women lacked opportunities because men feared having to acknowledge them as equals and compete with them for jobs. In the *The Education and Employment of Women*, she writes, “Education was what the slave-owners most dreaded for their slaves, for they knew it to be the sure road to emancipation. It is to education that we must first look for the emancipation of women from the industrial restrictions or a bygone age”¹⁸ Butler wished to emancipate women

¹⁵Susan Mumm, 90.

¹⁶“Josephine Butler (1828-1906) | Towards Emancipation?,” accessed April 14, 2021, <https://hist259.web.unc.edu/josephinebutler/>.

¹⁷Susan Mumm, “Josephine Elizabeth Butler (15 April 1828-30 December 1906),” *British Reform Writers, 1832-1914* (1998): 92.

¹⁸Josephine Butler, 17.

from the traditions of the day of old and encourage them to reach their full potential as human beings outside the home. Butler understood the urgency of the matter and was desperate others to join in her fight for greater education opportunities for women. She wrote,

“I grant that too much stress cannot be laid upon the improvement of the education of women who will be actually the mothers of a future generation, yet I wish, on the one hand, that persons who only look at it from this point of view would take more into account the valuable service our country might command if it but understood the truth about the condition and feelings of its unmarried women, and that a more generous trust were felt in the strength of woman’s nature, and the probable direction of its development when granted more expansion, while on the other hand I should like to see a truer conception of the highest possibilities for women than is implied in the attempt to imitate men, and a deeper reverence for the God of nature, whose wisdom is more manifested in variety than in uniformity.”¹⁹

In an effort to convince her contemporaries of the need for women to be further educated she proposed the notion that the betterment of women meant the betterment of the nation as a whole. When women are not expected to be dependent upon the patriarch of the family they are capable of earning their own wages and further stimulating the economy. Also, when women are seen as individuals and not just male accessories, their talents and intellects are able to contribute to society as a whole. As a very religious woman, Josephine Butler also brought to attention the idea that limiting women is limiting God. She emphasized that God’s wisdom is more greatly seen in variety, rather than uniform. This not only allows women to pursue their own personhood apart from men, but instructs them to, as a way to magnify God’s nature.

Butler pressured Cambridge University for them to expand their opportunities for women to further their education.²⁰ The persistence with which Butler pushed for opportunities led to the eventual opening of an all-girls college in Newnham. In 1867, Butler was named head

¹⁹ Josephine Butler, 26.

²⁰Susan Mumm, 92.

of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women, where she was able to work with other women who were passionate about education reform and was given a platform to continue to influence the nation.²¹

Josephine Butler was extremely influential in her work for educational reforms, but she was also the forefront of the opposition to the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 66, and 69. Butler was aware of the problem of prostitution in England in the 1800's and was by no means in support of the profession. She was however, in support of the women who were forced into prostitution because they had no other viable way to earn a living. One of Butler's main motivations in her education reforms was to create more job opportunities for women, so that prostitution was not the only feasible option for an unmarried woman. Butler sought to reclaim the ideals of womanhood in society and envisioned them as strong, independent beings who were on the forefront of reform.²² When working to get the Acts repealed, Josephine Butler, appealed to the deeply religious culture of England in the 1800's. In her pamphlet, *The Duty of Women*, she called women "God's agents" working for the moral reclamation of "Christ's Kingdom".²³ This not only caught the attention of devout men and women to the severity of her cause, but it brought a sense of unity to the movement. Women were now characterized as something bigger than themselves and the legislature. It gave them a powerful voice in the male-dominated, political arena.²⁴

²¹Susan Mumm ,94.

²²Chieko Ichikawa, "A Body Politic of Women's Own: Josephine Butler, Social Purity, and National Identity," *Victorian Review* 41, no. 1 (2016): 109.

²³Josephine Butler, "The Duty of Women: In Relation to Our Great Social Evil, and Recent Legislation Thereupon, Being an Address Delivered, in the County, Carlisle " (Carlisle, November 25, 1870): 27.

²⁴Ichikawa, 110.

The laws originated as a means to protect the effectiveness of the military and its men, but they became polarizing political issues because of the intense role that religion played in society. Religious members of society supported the Acts as they saw them as purifying agents within society and a way to restore moral order. The women leading the opposition had the challenge of combining spirituality with their fight for the equality of sexual expression, as many people's intense feelings towards sexual immorality blinded them from seeing the dehumanizing effects of the Acts. Josephine Butler had a reputation as a highly religious woman, yet she was not hesitant to fight for the rights of prostitutes. Josephine Butler was not only a political activist, but a theologian.²⁵ She saw the need for women to be given basic human rights, as more important than the need to punish women for engaging in sexually immoral acts. In her book, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, Kathleen Barry wrote, "The issue of religious morality is a tricky one in relationship to the sexual exploitation of women. On one hand, religious morality aimed at social purity was hypocritical, paternalistic, and elitist. On the other hand, Josephine Butler represented the kind of religious conviction that turned toward humanitarian relief and human rights."²⁶

A common inclination amongst the reformers was the desire to eliminate the double standard that was present between men and women. The Contagious Disease Acts officially sanctioned a double standard unto society. The examinations violated the rights of many women and reinforced the idea of women as the scapegoats, as they were penalized for participating in the same act as men, whereas the men had no repercussions to their actions a lack of female

²⁵Rebecca Styler, "JOSEPHINE BUTLER, ESOTERIC CHRISTIANITY, AND THE BIBLICAL MOTHERHOOD OF GOD," *Religion & Literature* 49, no. 2 (2017): 94. should the entire title be capitalized?

²⁶Kathleen Barry, "Josephine Butler: The First Wave of Protests," in *The Prostitution of Sex* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 10.

representation in the legislature meant there was no female opinion on any law that affected women. In an address given to the women of the Ladies National Association, Butler said,

“It seems to be that we women shall soon have to fight for the last inch of ground left us;--not for our civil rights only, but for our hearths, our homes, our beds, our babies, our very persons. The crudeness of intellect of some of our young male legislators need to be corrected by the wisdom of the thoughtful matrons of England.”²⁷

Butler was urging women to take the next step in the women’s right movement and break their silence. She implored women to get involved in the repeal campaign, but on a larger scale she implored women to live freely from the gender norms of the day and not to settle for the double standards.

Another woman who turned to her writings to amplify her voice against the Contagious Disease Acts was Harriet Martineau. Like Butler, Martineau was raised by parents who had progressive views on women’s education. She and her four sisters all received a similar education to her four brothers. However, the girls were never expected to work anywhere outside of the home, whereas the boys were trained to explore further employment opportunities.³² Following the death of her father and her betrothed, Martineau was left to provide financially for herself employment opportunities were scarce and after Martineau lost her hearing at the age of eighteen, the job market became even more limited.³³ She eventually came to earn a living doing needlework, but she had a knack for writing. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities for women in the workforce, she anonymously published an article in 1823 titled “On Female Education” in the

²⁷Josephine Butler, “Address Delivered in Craigie Hall” (Edinburgh, 1871).

³²“Harriet Martineau (1802-76) – Martineau Society,” n.d., accessed April 14, 2021, <https://martineausociety.co.uk/the-martineaus/harriet-martineau/>.

³³Ira B. Nadel, “Harriet Martineau (12 June 1802-27 June 1876),” *Victorian Novelists before 1885* (1983): 244.

Monthly Repository, in which she expressed her dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of women's education.³⁴ She received high praise and acknowledgement for her undeniable talent as a writer and was able to earn wages off of her writing alone. She continued to write for the *Monthly Repository* and specialized in articles focused on political economy.³⁵ She published a monthly series entitled, *Illustrations of the Political Economy*, in which she educated a wide audience on the fundamentals of modern economic science.³⁶

Martineau secured her place in history as an accomplished economist and diversified writer. She wrote everything from children's study books, novels, autobiographies, and essays concerning social and political issues.³⁷ Harriet Martineau was a woman who suffered from many physical ailments and who was constantly in poor health. She retired from her work in the early 1860s. However, the enactment of the Contagious Disease Acts, was enough to bring Martineau out of retirement. She joined the fight alongside Josephine Butler and used her platform as a writer to speak out against the misogynistic laws. Martineau wrote a series of letters in protest to the Acts that were published and carried by the *Daily News*.³⁸ Martineau was extremely critical of the lack of male accountability in the Victorian Age. She despised the idea that men were allowed to act superfluously on their sexual desires, and she expanded on this idea in a letter that was published in the *Daily News* in July of 1864

³⁴“Harriet Martineau (1802-76) – Martineau Society,” n.d., accessed April 14, 2021, <https://martineausociety.co.uk/the-martineaus/harriet-martineau/>.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶ANKA RYALL, “Medical Body and Lived Experience: The Case of Harriet Martineau,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 4 (2000): 37.

³⁷Ira B. Nadel, “Harriet Martineau (12 June 1802-27 June 1876),” *Victorian Novelists before 1885* (1983): 245.

³⁸Jane Caplan and Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 86.

“will surely not forget that to pass such a measure as this is to enter on a new and fearful province of legislation, from which we can never withdraw to the previous moral position; and that it is proposed to us to do this while existing laws against brothels and violations of decency in our streets remain unenforced, and while there is evidence in existence of the operation in other countries of laws for the protection of men from the consequences of their own passions which would make it a less evil to any conscientious member to quit public life than to have the smallest share in bringing down such a curse on his nation and on the moral repute and prospects of his country”

She was outraged by the double standard that was in effect not just socially but legislatively as well. The Contagious Disease Acts were a legal manifestation of the misogyny that plagued the Victorian Age in England. The goal of the letters was to educate the public on the illicit sexism that was written into the legislation.

Along with Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau was a member of the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts (LNA).³⁹ Many of Martineau’s letters to the *Daily News* were published and reprinted as pamphlets and posters in order to educate the public and support opposition to the Acts. In a one letter, Martineau addressed the women of Colchester, in an effort to encourage women to get involved in the repeal efforts, even though they did not have the right to vote. She wrote, “ ‘lift up your voices within your homes and neighborhoods, against being ruled by lawmakers like the authors of these Acts.’ ”⁴⁰

Martineau and the women of the LNA were determined to raise up women everywhere in opposition of the Contagious Disease Acts and bring women’s rights into the social and political conversation in England. Martineau was extremely influential in the fight to repeal the Acts. She was highly praised in Josephine’s Butler’s autobiography, as Butler described the full extent to

³⁹Jane Caplan and Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 86.

⁴⁰Martineau, H. (1870) Contagious Diseases Acts. Liverpool, T. Brackell, reprint of the 1863 Daily Newsletters.

which Martineau moved the women's right movement forward.⁴¹ Although Josephine Butler is regarded as the leader of the fight to repeal the Contagious Disease Acts, she was highly influenced by her older counterpart, Martineau.⁴² In her old age Martineau felt that she was well-suited to boldly attack the Acts, as she was an established writer who had no fear of any consequences for her words. Her boldness inspired Butler to continue to aggressively pursue the repeal of the Acts and lead the movement courageously.⁴³

Elizabeth Blackwell was another woman who strongly opposed the Contagious Disease Acts and joined in the fight to repeal them.⁴⁴ Born in Bristol, England in 1821, Elizabeth Blackwell pushed the envelope of women's rights her whole life. At the age of eleven she emigrated with her family to New York. Here she was first exposed to reform movements as her family attended abolitionist meetings and advocated for the end of slavery.⁴⁵ Upon the death of her father, Elizabeth and her sisters were sent to an all-girls boarding school to receive an education. It was here that Blackwell first began to recognize the need for women's educational reform and would later in life advocate for greater opportunities for women.⁴⁶ Blackwell was incredibly intelligent and after studying medicine on her own, applied and was granted admission

⁴¹Ira B. Nadel, "Harriet Martineau (12 June 1802-27 June 1876)," *Victorian Novelists before 1885* (1983): 244.

⁴²George Richmond, "Changing the Female Lot: Josephine Butler and Harriet Martineau," *National Portrait Gallery*, last modified April 10, 2012, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2011/changing-the-female-lot-josephine-butler-and-harriet-martineau>.

⁴³George Richmond, "Changing the Female Lot: Josephine Butler and Harriet Martineau," *National Portrait Gallery*, last modified April 10, 2012, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2011/changing-the-female-lot-josephine-butler-and-harriet-martineau>.

⁴⁴"Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia," accessed April 25, 2021, <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/elizabeth-blackwell-1821-1910>.

⁴⁵"Routes Into Women's History," accessed April 24, 2021, http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/bhr/Main/women_routes/6_some.htm.

into medical school in New York. In 1842, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to receive her medical degree in the United States. Following the acquisition of her M.D., she founded an institution of women's physicians for the poor. This institution would later be developed into the New York Infirmary and College for Women.⁴⁷ Blackwell taught at the college, practiced medicine, and even served as a nurse during the American Civil War, but her passion was in women's health. She was instrumental in educating women about their own bodies. One thing that set Blackwell apart was her willingness to talk about female sexuality. She did not allow the social taboos surrounding the topic keep her from producing literature on menstruation, masturbation, and sexual intercourse.⁴⁸ She addressed some of these things in her book, *The Human Element in Sex: Being a Medical Enquiry into the Relation of Sexual Physiology to Christian Morality*, in which she emphasized the need for proper sex education. In order to combat the double standard, it was imperative that women understood their own sexuality. She wrote,

“The abuses of sex and the misunderstanding of actual facts, which have led to widespread error on this subject, will be dwelt on later. Every parent, however, who has been able fulfil the true parental relationship to the child, will realize to some extent the beneficence of this law. The obligatory and premature marriage of daughters, so largely the custom abroad, is one result of error on this subject.”⁴⁹

Education was a key component in the fight against the Contagious Disease Acts and Elizabeth Blackwell understood that better than anyone. She utilized the education that she was able to receive in order to educate others.

Ibid

⁴⁸Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia,” accessed April 25, 2021, <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/elizabeth-blackwell-1821-1910>.

⁴⁹Elizabeth Blackwell, *The Human Element in Sex: Being a Medical Enquiry Into the Relation of Sexual Physiology to Christian Morality*. (London: J. and A. Churchill, 1884), 25.

Blackwell was an outlier within society. She was a woman, who chose never to marry but instead committed her life to medicine. She intimidated the men around her, as she never wavered in her beliefs and was unafraid to criticize male privilege in the medical field. Blackwell was part of “the most overtly and determinedly feminist wing of the social purity movement”, known as the Moral Reform Union.⁵⁰ The Moral Reform Union had three main objectives:

- I. To study, and confer upon, all subjects which especially affect the moral welfare of the young.
- II. To collect, sell, distribute, or publish Literature for Moral Education.
- III. To Consider how best to carry out practical measures for the reform of public opinion law, and custom on questions of sexual morality.”⁵¹

The Moral Reform Union urged their members to join them in the fight against the Contagious Disease Acts, stating in a letter, “no moral reform can be hoped for whilst the Contagious Disease Acts remain unrepealed.”⁵²

Blackwell was one of the only doctors who spoke in opposition to the Acts and published many articles to inform the public of the unethical examinations and to support the idea of women as sexual beings. In her work, *Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution*, Butler spoke to the double standard of the suppression of sexual desire between men and women. She wrote,

“The central point of all this monstrous evil is an audacious insult to the nature of men, a slander upon their human constitution. It is the assertion that men are not capable of self-control, that they are so inevitably dominated by overwhelming physical instincts, that they can neither resist nor control the animal nature...Now it is extremely important that you should understand exactly the nature of the danger of this falsehood.”⁵³

⁵⁰Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex Press, 2010), 20, accessed April 18, 2021, <http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1657843>.

⁵¹“Image 3 of Blackwell Family Papers: Elizabeth Blackwell Papers, 1836-1946; Subject File, 1847-1910; Moral Reform Union,” image, *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*, accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss12880.mss12880-046_0424_0436/?sp=3.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Elizabeth Blackwell, *Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution and Disease* (London: T. Danks, 1881), 5.

Blackwell approached the idea of untamed male sexuality, not as a freedom they were granted, but as a burden. She proposed that allowing men to act on their sexual desires without consequence is limiting, not only to men, but to society as a whole. Sexuality is not something that should control the man, but that the man should control. She aimed to take the responsibility of purity gatekeeping out of the hands of the women and shift some of the responsibility onto men as well. Blackwell, like Butler and Martineau, also emphasized the double standard that was inherent within the Contagious Disease Acts. In an address given at the Conference of Rescue Workers held in London, June, 188, Blackwell highlighted the double standard,

“If you will bear in mind that unchecked licentiousness or promiscuity, contains in itself the faculty of originating venereal disease, you will possess a test but which you may judge good or evil effects of any proposed measure. Ask yourself whether any particular legislative act tends to check licentiousness in men and women. If not it is either useless or injurious to the nation because it does not check that source of constantly increasing danger.”⁵⁴

The laws of the Contagious Disease Acts failed to keep the licentious nature of men in check, while simultaneously punishing women for the same act. As a doctor, Blackwell recognized that the double standard that was present in the legislature, was not only sexist, but did not allow for the eradication of venereal disease amongst military men. The exclusion of men from medical examinations and quarantines allowed them to continue to spread the diseases that they were carrying. She wrote, “The futility of any system which leaves the cause of disease unchecked and only tries to palliate its effects is false.”⁵⁵ Blackwell criticized not only the social aspects of the Acts, but also the failure in their ability to meet their medical goals.

⁵⁴Elizabeth Blackwell, *Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution and Disease* (London: T. Danks, 1881), 3.

⁵⁵Ibid, 10.

In 1869, Josephine Butler founded and led the Ladies National Association (LNA). This was a feminist organization that condemned the flagrant example of gender discrimination that was exercised through the Contagious Disease Acts.⁵⁶ In her article, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, Judith Walkowitz describes the LNA as a movement that, “drew thousands of women into the political arena for the first time, by encouraging them to challenge male centers of power- such as police, Parliament, and military establishments.”⁵⁷ The LNA was instrumental in fighting against the Contagious Disease Acts. Not only did it serve the purpose of repealing a discriminatory law, but it served the greater purpose of validating the female voice in a male-dominated society. The LNA utilized propaganda techniques to help gain awareness and support for repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts. They used dramatized depictions of women as the victims of oppressive male tyranny. Walkowitz described the propaganda as being, “sensationalized stories of entrapment of instrumental rape to appeal to all supporters of repeal- working-class radicals and middle class.”⁵⁸ The LNA was effective in gaining support, however they were not without their flaws. The LNA encouraged support from women, but also relied upon the support of men. They often appealed to the patriarchal nature of society urging men to protect their wives and daughters, which was counterintuitive to creating a society of independent women. The LNA also relied heavily on middle-class women and pushed working class women to the side. There was a hierarchy within the LNA, and on top of that, the deep religious roots created a divide

⁵⁶Jane Caplan and Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 79.

⁵⁷Ibid, 80

⁵⁸Jane Caplan and Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *History Workshop Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 82.

between saved and savior.⁵⁹ Despite its shortcomings, the Ladies National Association, under the leadership of Josephine Butler, was an effective campaign against the Contagious Disease Acts and it gave women such as Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Blackwell the opportunity to fight for something they were passionate about. Not only that, but the LNA was able to bring their voices and the voices of other women into the male-dominated, political arena, and secure their place in history.

Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Blackwell all utilized their own backgrounds, experiences, talents, and spheres of influence to challenge the Contagious Disease Acts and demanded their repeal. They were able to raise awareness and encourage many others to join them in their cause. Each of these women had the advantage of receiving an education as young girls, something most women in England did not have the opportunity to do. They did not sit quietly in this privilege, they used it to bring awareness to and remove the disparities between men and women within society. The Contagious Disease Acts were a direct attack on the rights of women and highlighted the inequality that men and women experienced under the law. Women who were forced into prostitution as means to earn a living were left violated and disgraced by the abusive laws. The misogyny of Victorian England was on display as women carried the burden of sexual purity and the blame for immortality, and as men relished in their sexual freedom and lack of accountability. Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Blackwell rallied their fellow citizens and petitioned the government to repeal the Acts, and in 1886, the Contagious Disease Acts were repealed, “in rising to call attention to the subject, and to move, “That, in the opinion of this House, the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1866–1869, ought to

⁵⁹Ibid.

be repealed," said, he did so with a confident hope that his Motion would be successful.”⁶⁰ Not only did Butler, Martineau, and Blackwell break down barriers by asserting their voices in the male-dominated world of politics, but they were successful in repelling the Acts. The passing of the Acts ignited a spark in the women’s rights movement and the successful petitions of repeal illuminated the power that women possessed. In England, the work of the women had just begun.

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⁶⁰Hansard Parliamentary Debates, “Resolution,” HC 16 March 1886, v. 303: col 982.
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