Historiographies and Book Reviews

Josephine Butler, born 1828
Historiography: Josephine Butler and the Contagious Diseases Acts

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Although authors generally agree on the topic of prostitution and how it functioned in Victorian society, not all authors write with the same purpose. The authors that discuss the Contagious Diseases Acts and the way they affected prostitution and society fall into three categories: authors writing histories of prostitution in the Victorian period, biographers writing on prominent Victorian figures, and authors writing about the history of women’s rights. There are some small differences between authors within these categories, primarily due to when their works were published. They also differed in their discussion of Josephine Butler and her involvement in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Thus, although the authors discussing Victorian society and the Contagious Diseases Acts largely agree, there remain dissimilarities in their purposes and focuses.

Authors Judith R. Walkowitz and Trevor Fisher write histories of prostitution in Victorian society in which they discuss the Contagious Diseases Acts, and although they share similar information about the Acts, the authors create different conversations; these authors have similar theses, but different
purposes for writing.\textsuperscript{1} Walkowitz’s book, published in 1980, was one of the first works synthesizing information about prostitution in Victorian England. When she began writing in 1970, the subject of prostitution had been shockingly absent from the history books, and “sexuality and prostitution were only just emerging as legitimate subjects for historical inquiry.”\textsuperscript{2} In the 1980’s, more research on prostitution and Victorian society began to appear. Fisher published his work twenty years later in 2001, after several authors had already explored the subject. His rationale for this publication is that there is so much material to study about prostitution in the Victorian period that “no single volume could claim to be exhaustive.”\textsuperscript{3} Rather than attempt the impossible exhaustive work, Fisher chose to focus his work on the contemporary debate about prostitution in the Victorian era and examine how the existence of commercial sex in that era compares to present day. By writing his book, Fisher hoped to help his readers better understand the current “pressing political dilemma over prostitution.”\textsuperscript{4}

Despite their different time and purpose for writing, Walkowitz and Fisher assert similar theses regarding how prostitution functioned in Victorian society. In her book, Walkowitz shows how prostitution demonstrates the social standing of the period. Men and women were held to very different standards during the Victorian period. Women were thought to be the paradigm of virtue


\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., vii.

\textsuperscript{3} Fisher, viii.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., ix.
and were required to act in ways that demonstrated their purity of mind and body. Men, however, could lapse in their morals and be forgiven. Although society held both to strict regulations and an outward moral code, there was a double standard between the sexes. Prostitution exemplifies the separation between men and women in the Victorian period.\(^5\) Both genders engaged in prostitution, but while the woman was disgraced and criticized for her actions, the man was considered a tragic victim of human urge. It was thought that men were plagued by sexual desire and therefore acceptable for them to engage in prostitution, but women were required to maintain their innocence. Fisher talks about the same subject with similar conclusions about the appalling double standard that existed in Victorian society. Echoing Walkowitz, Fisher points out the societal evils involved in prostitution. Many women had no choice in their profession. Society limited women’s occupational options to the point that few were left to women besides factory or domestic work. In both positions, women were paid significantly less than men, often driving them to supplement their meager earnings with money made participating in prostitution.\(^6\) Once driven to prostitution, women were blamed for their employment and branded as unfit for society. They became victims of the upper classes, scorned and unable to regain their status. The Victorian period was a time of class separation, and no separation was as clear as the attitude of upper class women towards fallen women. In this way, not only did prostitution illustrate a barrier between different

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\(^5\) Walkowitz, 5.
\(^6\) Ibid., 9.
sexes, but also classes of the same sex. Victorian society was a perfect trap for women in the lower class, allowing them neither dignity nor equality.

In their discussions of prostitution and double standards, Walkowitz and Fisher draw attention to the issue of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts were written as a method of improving public health through eradicating venereal disease. They stated that a man could, if he suspected a woman of prostitution, forcibly take her to a hospital where she would be required to submit to testing. If she were found to have a venereal disease, she could be committed to a lock hospital for up to nine months. The Acts had no requirements for men, however. Both authors consider this system an atrocious double standard that accentuated the masculine bias in society. Also, by not testing and curing men as well as women, the Acts failed to accomplish health improvement because both genders spread disease. Since the Acts not only failed to accomplish their goal, but also had a negative impact on the freedom of women in society, the Contagious Diseases Acts were strongly opposed. Demonstrating an act of cooperation, both men and women reacted fiercely to the Acts. Societies such as the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts were formed. Men in the field of law fought for the repeal as well, and men such as John Stuart Mill, an influential philosopher and libertarian, wrote strong words against gender segregation. Walkowitz and Fisher use examples like the Contagious Diseases Acts and the reaction they inspired to illustrate the feeling

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7 Fisher, 80-82.
8 Ibid., 102.
of the time and the political action being taken addressing prostitution.

Similarly, opinions about the Contagious Diseases Acts are matched by biographical authors such as Jane Jordan and Nancy Boyd.\(^9\) Jordan and Boyd, unlike Walkowitz and Fisher, do not write about Victorian society in general. Instead, both authors join the conversation about the Acts and prostitution by writing about Josephine Butler, the president of the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Butler was a middle-class woman who was considered radical and strange. She believed strongly in acting out her Christian faith and expressed a hesitancy for symbolic rituals in a church. Often she was excluded from respectable societal circles because of her extreme charity and her activist conduct.\(^10\) Going against commonly accepted practices, Butler was known for acts of kindness towards women in unfortunate circumstances. She is most commonly known for her work with prostitutes and the fight against the Contagious Diseases Acts.\(^11\)

Boyd’s biography was written significantly earlier than Jordan’s, and there is a notable difference between the two authors’ expression and praise of Josephine Butler. Boyd published Butler’s biography in 1982 in a book containing biographies of three influential women of the period, one of which was Josephine Butler.\(^12\) Boyd’s discussion of Butler consists largely of quotations

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\(^10\) Boyd, 31-34.

\(^11\) Jordan, 2.

\(^12\) Boyd, 23-92.
from primary sources and centers around Butler’s faith. Although Boyd mentions some of the struggles that Butler underwent, the biography focuses on the admirableness of her strong character and commitment to Christianity. The descriptions make Butler seem like a saint, losing her human characteristics in awe of her good works. In contrast, Jordan, who published her book almost thirty years later, in 2007, wrote Butler’s biography to expose the “real woman” behind the saint-like actions.\textsuperscript{13} Jordan certainly does not minimize Butler’s Christianity or the value of her work, but Jordan does attempt to humanize Butler. Jordan’s biography is significantly longer, lasting 298 pages compared to Boyd’s 69. The length and completeness of Jordan’s biography is no doubt due to the fact that it is solely focused on Butler and published significantly later in time, allowing for a greater accumulation of research. Both books, however, give sufficient information for the reader to understand the life and lifestyle of Josephine Butler and the battles that she fought in Victorian society.

Editor Martha Vicinus continues the discussion of Victorian society in a collection of essays concerning the rights of women, providing an earlier source on the same topic as previous authors.\textsuperscript{14} Published in 1972, the purpose of the book is to highlight the struggle for gender equality in the Victorian period and relate that battle to the 1970’s feminist movements. Besides the earlier publication date, Vicinus differs from the other authors in the style with which she presents the information. Research on prostitution in the Victorian period was

\textsuperscript{13} Jordan, 5.
\textsuperscript{14} Martha Vicinus, \textit{Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 77-99.
just beginning to emerge in the 1970’s, so Vicinus’ book is written more broadly than Walkowitz’s or Fisher’s because the research was less developed. Furthermore, Vicinus writes on a different basic topic, focusing on the lives of women in general during the Victorian period, and commenting more on middle and upper class women than lower class women. The short discussion of prostitution in the book utilizes the Contagious Diseases Acts to prove the inequality of men and women and emphasize the need for equality. E. M. Sigsworth and T. J. Wyke, the authors of the essay discussing the Acts, use essentially the same information and opinions that Walkowitz and Fisher share in their historical analysis several years later.

These authors largely agree on the nature and function of the Contagious Diseases Acts and Victorian society, but there is some contention about the role that Josephine Butler played in the repeal of the Acts. Butler’s biographers portray her as the leading heroine and the driving force behind the repeal movement. However, Walkowitz argues that although she was instrumental, Butler’s role was overstated. There were many other people involved in the repeals, and they too should receive credit: “The exclusive focus on Butler does a disservice to male and female repealers alike. It ignores the role of male leaders… who directed the political strategy of the campaign at certain stages,

15 Walkowitz, vii.
17 Boyd, 39-40.
and it fails to examine the repeal campaign as an organized movement.”

Walkowitz explains that Butler was not alone in the battle nor was she the only significant party. Fisher shares the opinion that more people should be recognized in the fight against the Acts and that Butler may be over-glorified in the biographies.

Although the books discussing the Contagious Diseases Acts generally concur regarding the negative social impacts of the Acts, the authors wrote with different purposes and focuses. The difference in purpose sets each book apart and provides three different categories of writers: historians of prostitution in the Victorian period, biographers, and women’s rights writers. There is also some disagreement on the role of Josephine Butler in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Whether or not Butler played a vital role, the Acts were repealed because of their negative social impact and failure to function as a health improvement.

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18 Walkowitz, 4.