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Reaping the Fruits of Resistance: Josephine Butler and Sarah Grand

Christina Rossetti’s poetics of reclamation finally turns away from work within the public sphere; indeed, the poet explicitly distanced herself from the growing women’s movement as the nineteenth century drew to a close, most famously signing Mrs Humphrey Ward’s “Protest against Female Suffrage” published in the Nineteenth Century in 1889.1 Yet, the political potential of a philanthropic discourse that linked the fate of the “fallen” and “pure” would continue to be harnessed for explicitly radical ends by fin-de-siècle proto-feminist activists and New Woman authors. Indeed, it is a resisting discourse that comes to dominate public opinion as well as governmental policy during Josephine Butler’s successful “crusade” against the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts of 1864, 1867, and 1869, a battle waged by the reformer in the press as a writer and on the platform as an orator. In addition to her effective contestation of the governmental regulation of prostitution and its requisite institutions of Lock hospitals and medical police, Butler’s prominence as a public speaker facilitated greater frankness on the subjects of female sexuality and venereal disease, as well as the importance of “feminine” influence in public policy-making. I argue that Butler’s opposition to a “conspiracy” of male silence on the subjects of prostitution and sexual transgression, as well as her cultivation of a high profile public persona, set the stage for the emergence of a very particular “feminist” heroine at the end of the century: a figure partly based upon Butler herself.

In this chapter, I place Sarah Grand’s representation of a New Woman of “genius” in The Beth Book (1897) in the context of Butler’s campaign against the CD Acts. Grand was a declared admirer of Butler and pays homage to the repeal movement in The Beth Book. Her heroine, a New Woman proto-feminist orator, comes of age just as the

R. Eberle, Chastity and Transgression in Women’s Writing, 1792–1897
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Acts are repealed in the mid-1880s. Grand employs the proto-feminist victory against the Acts to imagine a freer future for Beth; she is divested of a tyrannical husband in the domestic sphere as well as dangerously patriarchal institutions in the public sphere. Most significantly, however, I explore the ways in which Grand constructs her text without an explicit representation of the “harlot’s progress” even as she relies upon her reader’s awareness of it. Employing a narrative strategy dependent upon distanced empathy, as well as disavowal, Grand merely alludes to the intertwined history of the “harlot” and the “reformer”. It functions as a trace narrative in the text, allowing the author to draw upon its literary legacy of protest but yet avoid the risks inherent in representing sexual transgression and social reform. New Woman texts inevitably stress the emergence of the “woman of genius”, whose work among the “poor and friendless” is most significant as a marker of the heroine’s singular abilities, rather than the greater aims of social reform. Indeed, as in the 1790s, politicized activism on the part of women is paired with an emphasis upon the under-appreciated exceptional individual. But at the end of the nineteenth century this tends to be accompanied by an even more explicit privileging of one woman over another, usually upon the basis of class, intellect, and race, as well as sexual reputation. Lessons derived, no doubt, from Butler’s own vexed representation of an empowering (but hierarchical) femininity, as well as an inclusive (and yet racist and imperialist) feminism. I argue that Grand’s response to Butler is further complicated by her reluctance to acknowledge her predecessor as a “mother” even as she simultaneously marks her discomfort with an alternative model of “sisterhood”.

Josephine Butler’s campaign was forced to develop a discursive rhetoric capable of countering an economic and class-based objectification of prostitutes, as well as a more generalized pathologizing of female sexuality. In the second edition of *Prostitution*, republished in 1870, William Acton gives detailed descriptions of how the Contagious Diseases Acts were enforced. Instituted in an attempt to control the spread of venereal diseases in garrison and port towns, the CD Acts focused upon “common prostitutes” patronized by enlisted men in the Queen’s Army. The first Act of 1864 was instituted for a three-year period in eleven English and Irish towns. A woman identified as a prostitute was required to either submit to an internal examination or face sentencing by a judge for her refusal to comply. If found to have a venereal disease, she was then confined to a Lock