Josephine Butler and *Ruth:* A Case Study on How Literature Can Instigate Social and Legal Reform Regarding the Fallen Woman

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes how the protagonist in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Ruth* (1853) challenged the stereotypes projected onto the fallen woman in nineteenth century England. The prime moral figure, Mr. Benson, a clergyman in the story, cares for Ruth and provides for her with the help of his sister. Their kindness to a woman who would have been considered an outcast argues for a different response to sin than what society suggested.

After reading the novel, Josephine Butler acted upon the novel's ethos and became an activist for women who were viewed as social outcasts because they were prostitutes or unwed mothers. This eventually led not only to social reform, but also legal, as her work helped repeal the Contagious Diseases Act in 1886 (Watt 1). This had long lasting implications for women's emancipation movement (Hamilton 27). The novel's influence on Butler shows how literature can challenge, on moral grounds, people's reactions to those less fortunate, as well as motivate practical change in the forms of social and legal activism and reform.

Josephine Butler and *Ruth:* A Case Study on How Literature Can Instigate Social and Legal Reform Regarding the Fallen Woman

During the nineteenth century, both male and female authors said much regarding the "fallen woman" within works of literature. For instance, Charles Dickens includes fallen women in several of his works. These works were strongly influenced by current beliefs surrounding fallen women, namely, that "women were divided into pure and impure and on the principle that dirt should be exorcised to be fully purified" (Fusco 56). Both Dickens in *Dombey and Sons* and William Thakeray in *Vanity Fair* include fallen women, placing her at "the fringes of the family . . . always ostracized from the sanctity of the hearth (Auerbach 33). Elizabeth Gaskell also involves a fallen woman as the protagonist in her novel *Ruth* (1853), but portrays her in a sympathetic light which helped challenge the law's equality for all women. Many people equate the fallen woman with the prostitute, but the fallen woman does not necessarily have to sell herself for sex in order to be considered fallen. Instead, an unmarried pregnant woman may be viewed on the same social rung as a prostitute, like Ruth (Fusco 57).

The unmarried mother was a common literary character in the Victorian Era, seen in works such as Charles Dicken's *Bleak House,* where Lady Dedlock's "physical disfigurement as a result of contracting smallpox is suggestive of her social impairment" or Collin's novel *Hide and Seek*, where the fallen woman ends up with a physical disability, "used as a metaphor for social disability" (Cox 152). In contrast, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel portrays a non-stereotypical fallen woman, one who maintains an innocence throughout, in order to challenge preconceived notions about these outcasts

while humanizing them. One woman who read *Ruth,* Josephine Butler, went on to help repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, which discriminated against women (Watt 1). The Contagious Diseases Act (CDA) was based on the ideology which said fallen women were inherently "linked to criminality and disease," and were "a biological danger that society had to fight" (Fusco 54). This act permitted police to stop women on the street who they presupposed to be prostitutes, and force them to undergo a medical examination (Watt 2). The repeal of the CDA not only advocated for the equality of fallen women, but for all women and individuals, as its driving theme was that all people should receive the same basic rights. *Ruth* led to the repeal of the CDA, challenging legal structures towards women and demonstrating the written word's power. *Ruth,* with its humane and helpful attitude towards a fallen woman, motivated Butler's social and legal reform efforts, which had lasting impacts on the women's emancipation efforts.

The Victorian Era's View of the Fallen Woman

While Ruth does not sell herself for sex in the novel, she is still a fallen woman, and per Victorian England culture, receives all the blame for her fall. According to Fraser Joyce, this is because "women who lost their virginity outside marriage were frowned upon as illegitimacy was sinful: as they showed desire they must be slaves to greed and lust" (qtd. in Fusco 57). It was believed to be unnatural for women to have sexual desires, so society viewed women acting on these desires as immoral and odd. As McBee says, "Victorians believed that women lacked sexual desire, so to give in to temptation had to be a deliberate decision" (McBee 30). In Gaskell's novel, Ruth, a poor orphan who works as a seamstress, is seduced by Bellingham, and her own innocence and surrounding

factors lead her to run away with him, which results in her becoming pregnant. Fusco explains that according to people in the Victorian Era, "Being Bellingham's lover without being married to him transforms Ruth into a fallen woman . . . Being a single mother parallels Ruth to a prostitute, with the aggravating circumstance that she succumbs to an upper-class seducer" (Fusco 57). Despite the necessity of two parties in Ruth's fall, as a woman she receives all of the blame from society, and people consider her fallen when her sexual encounter with Bellingham leaves her an unwed mother.

The woman binary, which defined women as either innocent or fallen, a viewpoint prevalent in the Victorian Era, justified the plight of the fallen woman, allowing society to ignore their own part in it. During this time period, fallen women were believed to be "generally desperate women who had no other chance to survive, an unacceptable view to the Victorian mind, which could not tolerate any possible disharmonies in the ideal image of the world it intended to support" (Fusco 55). Individuals in the Victorian Era failed to admit how industrialism and capitalism did not in effect solve all of the world's problems and that these very systems could drive women to fall in the first place. While people in the Victorian Era wanted to believe that the economic and societal structures in place were without flaw, individuals who were not favored by those structures, such as orphans and widows, were put in precarious situations. For instance, the social expectation to work and make something of herself as a seamstress places Ruth in a vulnerable situation where Bellingham then seduces her. Thus, in order to rationalize the presence of fallen women in a society in which it must be possible to make something of oneself, "it was fundamental to drastically split wrong

from right. This kind of classification divided women into two categories: madonnas and harlots" (Fusco 55). Instead of taking responsibility for the flaws in their society, people in the nineteenth century used a binary in order to fault the fallen for their problems. In order to commence with daily life and resist guilt for society's problems, then, the Victorian Era blamed their societal issues on fallen women.

Ruth's **Resistance**

In multiple ways *Ruth* challenged the assumptions and beliefs held by individuals in the Victorian Era regarding the fallen woman. The surrounding influences shaping Ruth and motivating her fall demonstrate how the fallen woman may not be inherently flawed, but instead pushed by society itself. Ruth's story shows that "through seduction and betrayal, unwed pregnancy and motherhood, [Ruth] remains the victim of her destitution, her unprotected orphan state, her sexual ignorance, and the Phariseeism of respectability that generates all three" (Auerbach 40). Logan echoes Auerbach's belief by arguing how "Gaskell vindicates Ruth of responsibility for her fall, thereby creating a heroine victimized by fate, by society, and by the class, gender, and economic circumstances into which she was born" (Logan 38). Ultimately, instead of blaming Ruth for her circumstances, there are many various outside influences which push helpless Ruth into this "fallen" state (Watt 22).

The external factors influencing Ruth's fall exhibit how some of the responsibility lies with society itself and its structures. First, *Ruth* challenged the woman binary by establishing God as the sole judge of sin and portraying Ruth as innocent despite her fall. Moreover, while many believed the economic structures in Victorian England were

praiseworthy, *Ruth* exhibits a protagonist who suffers because of them. That, compounded with her class and orphan status, which have problems of their own, help exhibit the tangible needs of the fallen which will not be met by society continuing to ignore and displace blame. Finally, Ruth's ignorance regarding sexual activities, which was normal in the Victorian Era, is a contributing factor to the ease with which she is seduced, also challenging the practices of the time period. The overt inclusion and mention of these influences make it difficult to ignore the realities of the Victorian Era which motivate Ruth's fall, thereby challenging individuals like Butler to reform society.

In contrast to how individuals in the Victorian Era placed all blame on the fallen woman, Faith Benson's active humility in her and Ruth's relationship destabilizes the woman binary as the role of judge is removed from human individuals and given back to God. Miss Benson confesses her own fallen-ness when she says, "We are both of us great sinners in the eyes of the Most Holy" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 130). However, before this conversation, Benson struggled with judging Ruth, saying that "it would be better for her to die at once" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 112). Once meeting her and recognizing Ruth's humility, Miss Benson recognizes her own sinfulness and does not claim any power to cast judgment on others. Her words suggest that there is no excuse for pride or passivity in helping the less fortunate. Moreover, her humility informs her compassionate and encouraging treatment of Ruth. She and Sally care for Ruth when the latter is ill (Gaskell, *Ruth* 164). Faith also suggests that Ruth adopt her family name when she says that they will "call you by my mother's name" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 130). In this way, Miss Benson does more than simply love Ruth; she adopts her into her family. Faith's love for Ruth,

evidenced by her gentle attitude towards her and acts of service, demonstrate how as subjects of God, people should humbly serve the fallen woman, recognize their own fallen-ness, and leave the judgment to God. Faith and Ruth's interactions, the stereotypical "madonna" and "harlot," respectively, deconstruct the binary of women, challenging society's view and treatment of the fallen (Fusco 55).

Moreover, Ruth's purity, as established by the comparison of her to Mary the mother of Jesus, challenges the woman binary. From the beginning of the novel, Ruth is described as "innocent and snow-pure" (*Ruth* 44). Moreover, the quote which reads, "hiding her guilty front with innocent snow," from Milton's poem "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," compares Ruth to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Ruth, the fallen woman, is compared to the Madonna herself, which directly combats the binary of "harlot" and "madonna" (Fusco 55). While Ruth clearly fell in regards to morality by becoming pregnant before being married, the description of her throughout the novel challenges the idea that she is wholly ruined because of one sin. As Fusco says, Ruth "is a fallen woman, but not a stereotype . . . a round character, in which angelical aspects are mixed with carnal experiences" (Fusco 55). This is something all humans are, a mix of earthly and heavenly, of bad and good, of sin and innocence. Miss Benson says to Ruth, when the latter asks permission to pray for the former, in spite of her sin: "Certainly, my dear . . . you don't know how often I sin; I do so wrong, with my few temptations. We are both of us great sinners in the eyes of the Most Holy; let us pray for each other" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 130). Moreover, the comparison of Ruth to the Madonna is fitting as both are unmarried mothers and subject to judgmental societies (Watt 6). This calls into question the validity

of society's judgments, and again places the ultimate role of judge back in the hands of God. Ultimately, this conversation between Miss Benson and Ruth, or as Victorians might label them, the "madonna" and the "harlot," challenges the belief that people are either good or evil and instead argues all people are flawed and sinful in some way, which confronted the Victorians on their dismissive binary.

Moreover, the economic class structure of the Victorian era contributes to Ruth's fall. The disparity between classes points out Ruth's dire situation: "no regard was paid to the wants of the middle class, who neither drove about in coaches of their own, nor were carried by their own men in their own sedans into the very halls of their friends" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 1). This passage contrasts the upper class and Ruth, a member of the middle class, as instead of driving in a coach, she walks the dark streets in the wee hours of the morning, instead of being accompanied and adored, she runs errands in streets "where it was no uncommon thing for robbers to be in waiting for their prey," and she enters the room without admiring friends (Gaskell, *Ruth* 2-3). Her economic class restricts her social standing and places her in potentially dangerous situations. In fact, a reader in the Victorian Era would have challenged "her morality immediately" merely from Ruth walking alone "at night in such a town" (McBee 60). This shows how "Ruth's orphan status and apprenticeship endanger her morality and position. Ruth is 'unchaperoned' because she has no family to watch over her, and she is out late at night because of her apprenticeship" (McBee 60). She has no other option but to run errands late at night in order to survive, and society, by placing judgment on her because of it, is

merely avoiding the true problem in the situation. The consequences inherent in Ruth's class motivate her fall as she is left to fend for herself in dangerous situations.

Moreover, Ruth's detrimental working conditions ultimately lead her straight to her seducer, which challenges society's easy ability to shirk responsibility for the economic standards they adhere to. Ruth, as a poor orphan, must work as a seamstress in order to survive, or stitch "away as if for very life" (*Ruth* 3). The shop where she works has an "unhealthy environment" and "exploitative working conditions," as Ruth's employer, Mrs. Mason, "makes impossible promises to customers that result in the apprentices' working through the night" (Logan 39). However, the greatest peril related to Ruth's workplace is how her employer puts her directly in the path of Mr. Bellingham. Mrs. Mason's "favoring Ruth because her fresh appearance" and "neglecting to warn her workers against breaches of social decorum that result in sexual snares" contribute to Ruth's vulnerability and obliviousness when she meets Bellingham (Logan 39). These situations show Ruth's need to survive is the very thing that puts her in the susceptible situation with Mr. Bellingham. As Logan says, Ruth's "sexual [fall] implicate[s] the needlework milieu as an exploitative occupation in more ways than one" (Logan 34). *Ruth* indicates that society places judgment on the wrong thing, the woman herself instead of the harmful working conditions that Victorian England either ignored or supported.

Ruth's orphan status also motivates her fall, which again argues that the blame for the fall should not be placed solely on Ruth, but also the circumstances beyond her control. The beginning of the novel reads, "The daily life into which people are born, and

into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right times comes" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 2). For Ruth, her mother's death leaves her destitute and forced her to work as a seamstress, which places her in vulnerable situations. Beyond walking alone in the streets at the beginning, Ruth's vulnerability also makes her easy prey for Mr. Bellingham, a wealthy member of the upper class. Ruth's loss of her mother and the mourning that follows make her more "ready to value and cling to sympathy—first from Jenny, and now from Mr Bellingham (Gaskell, *Ruth* 44). Her thirst for a sense of belonging becomes a motivating factor in pushing Ruth towards falling for Mr. Bellingham, while her ignorance in the ways of the world pushes her over the edge.

Ruth's lack of knowledge regarding the evils of the world explains another external factor of Ruth's fall. No one warns Ruth concerning "men's possible dishonorable intentions, and rather than protecting [her], this put [her] at risk" (McBee 74). Ruth "was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life--if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot be put into words" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 44). While this statement in the novel implies that she would advise parents to steer clear of discussing the dangers in the world regarding sexuality, the consequences of Ruth's ignorance seem to say otherwise. Ironically, Ruth's lack of knowledge in the dangers of the world ends up being the characteristic which attracts Bellingham to her. While she is obviously attractive, "he had seen others equally beautiful," and ultimately, it was the combination of her beauty "with the naiveté, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent

child . . . a spell in the shyness" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 33). Ultimately, Ruth's obliviousness, partially explains why she fell, but also implies that those who did not educate her have a part in her disgrace as well.

Ruth's ignorance, which contributes to her fall, shows the need for sexual education and awareness for young women. Women were taught very little, if anything, regarding sexuality or intercourse from their parents. McBee says, "The Victorians repressed all information about sex from girls, assuming that if a girl did not know what sex was, she could not participate in it" (McBee 4). Mitchell points out that "the ideal Victorian woman was completely ignorant about sex . . . She could not fall: she could not consciously decide to engage in sexual activity was . . . because of her ignorance—which was more attractive when it was called innocence—she could be seduced" (qtd. in McBee 73). Ultimately, however, this ignorance did not help young girls and women in Victorian society, as Gaskell points out in her novel. As McBee says, "Gaskell shows how silence does not serve the women in these stories; in fact, their ignorance, which arose from silence, is what caused one's fall" (74). In Ruth's situation, she had not been talked to about sex, and her "innocence is why she cannot comprehend Mr. Bellingham's attentions, nor can she understand her own emotions" (McBee 61). Ironically, while people in the Victorian Era believed ignorance would lead to heightened "virtue" and "purity," it heightened their vulnerability, as in the case of Ruth (McBee 4).

The pride that reigned among the caste system portrays how Ruth's fall could also be blamed on the wrong perspective and prejudice people held regarding those considered less than them. In Auerbach's words, the "Phariseeism of respectability"

influences how Ruth's economic, relational, and mental vulnerability cause her moral fall (40). This "Phariseeism" is exemplified in Mrs. Bellingham's judgment of Ruth. When discussing the affair with her son, Mrs. Bellingham describes Ruth as having an "improper character," and says to her son that she "does not wish to ascertain your share of the blame" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 88-90). Ultimately, Mrs. Bellingham shirks the guilt on to Ruth, and takes advantage of her low social and economic class by leaving money as a sort of recompense, saying in her letter that she recommends her to "enter some penitentiary" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 92). In so doing, Mrs. Bellingham pays her way to a fake innocence in order to excuse her son's treatment and abandonment of Ruth. While Mrs. Bellingham solely blaming Ruth is not surprising given the cultural context of the novel, it shows how Ruth is not only blamed because she is a woman, but also seen as easily appeasable because of her lack of resources. Bellingham's mother demonstrates how the upper classes of the Victorian Era wrongly viewed the fallen woman as wholly responsible and deserving of blame, which led to individuals easily dehumanizing them.

Moreover, Benson depicts Bellingham in a negative light and places blame on him instead of just Ruth, which was counter-cultural, as most times the fallen woman was solely held accountable. When first falling in love with her, Bellingham's desire is to "attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park (Gaskell, *Ruth* 33). Bellingham's view of himself as the conqueror in this picture, as well as his comparison of Ruth to a vulnerable animal, shows how he views himself as elevated above her. However, despite Bellingham's pride, Mr. Benson's reflections at the inn reflect how Bellingham should also be held accountable for the

relationship between him and Ruth. Benson thinks to himself, after Bellingham has abandoned Ruth, "Where was her lover? Could he be easy and happy? Could he grow into perfect health, with these great sins pressing on his conscience with a strong and hard pain? Or had he a conscience?" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 117). Bellingham's ability to leave Ruth behind with no accountability or responsibility unsettles Benson. He believes that the fact men are able to leave without a mar on their character, yet the woman is ruined in the eyes of society, is unfair. Bellingham should have received some of the blame and consequences for these "great sins," and Benson is frustrated with how he takes no responsibility (Gaskell, *Ruth* 117). Ultimately, while Ruth is not completely innocent in this affair, clearly she should not be the scapegoat, as Bellingham is also to blame and should have taken responsibility.

How Gaskell's Faith Informs Ruth's Purity

Gaskell's theological beliefs, which blame sin on external factors, not on the individual, greatly inform how she portrays Ruth as pure. Fusco states that Gaskell, a Unitarian, "rejected Original Sin . . . considered the environment as fundamentally responsible for shaping and determining an individual's character and fate" (Fusco 58). Gaskell's religious background helps make sense of her shifting blame from solely Ruth to the environment, or more specifically, the flawed systems within Victorian England. Some of these systems, as previously mentioned, include Ruth's vulnerable position because of her economic status and the necessity of her working under dangerous conditions (Logan 34, 39). Moreover, Gaskell's faith "permeates Gaskell's response to the problem of the fallen woman, perceiving female sexuality not to be inherently

corruptible or dangerous" (Fusco 58). Thus, Gaskell's religious beliefs challenge the oppressive patriarchal structures by arguing that all humans, both men and women, are inherently good and are both equally blank slates when they are born. In other words, neither have a stronger tendency towards sin or are more culpable than the other sex. Gaskell's theology establishes men and women as equal in the eyes of God and challenges shame-based culture surrounding fallen women.

Gaskell's beliefs influence how she portrays Ruth as inherently worthy of a meaningful life, which challenges the typical form of redemption for the fallen woman. In the Victorian Era, authors typically showed the fallen woman deteriorating into ultimate disparity after their fall, a ploy used with the purpose of crushing "romantic ambitions of working-class girls who might otherwise set their sights on gentlemen" (Morris 41). If redemption was found, it was often discovered through marriage (Auerbach 41). However, instead of marrying Bellingham, Ruth chooses a "saint's life and a martyr's death" (Auerbach 41). Ruth risks her life to serve those suffering from the mass outbreak of the fever, which resulted in "the love and the reverence with which the poor and outcast had surrounded her" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 429). Leonard is proud of his mother, as Proverbs 31:28 is used to narrate that "many arose and called her blessed" in Eccleston (Gaskell, *Ruth* 430). Ruth's life is far from despairing; instead, it motivates others' admiration. Thus, despite rejecting the "conventional salvation" of marrying Bellingham, Ruth maintains an innocence and finds purpose, as "Gaskell defiantly re-claims this sweet soul for social reintegration and respectability" (Auerbach 40-41).

Ruth's full and meaningful life demonstrates the power of redemption, even for those who seem beyond reach.

In many ways, Ruth's death displays how her actual fall sets her on the path towards redemption instead of despair, as Victorian England stereotypes would have presumed. Her ultimate end demonstrates how her fall "touches her only as a benediction . . . her martyr's death is the fullest expression of her rare-fed life rather than a denial of it . . . Ruth's fall becomes an allegory of the triumph of spirit over life" (Auerbach 42). Ruth dies as a martyr as she chooses to nurse Mr. Bellingham which leads to her own death (Gaskell, *Ruth* 442-49). She leaves behind a son whose deep love is seen by his equally strong grief (Gaskell, *Ruth* 449). Her death also leads to Mr. Benson and Mr. Bradshaw reconciling, the latter "anxious to do something to show his respect for the woman" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 458). The fullness of Ruth's life is displayed through the wake of her death as she leaves behind those who deeply love and admire her while simultaneously motivating reconciliation. As *Ruth* ends with hope, the opposite of despair, the novel challenges the assumption that the fallen could not find redemption.

Immediate Reactions to the Novel

However, many individuals, from church members and husbands to librarians, condemned Gaskell and her novel, and since many had problems with the novel itself, they were unable and unwilling to recognize that women were in dire situations (Gaskell, *Letters* 223). In a letter to Anne Robson, Gaskell admits she knew the topic of the novel was "an unfit subject for fiction . . . but I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it" (Gaskell, *Letters* 220). People viewed the inclusion of the unmarried mother

as inappropriate subject matter, and while this content condemned the novel in the eyes of the public, it also denounced Gaskell herself. For, as McBee explains, as a woman, Gaskell was "not supposed to know of sexuality . . . for a woman, especially a minister's wife, to write of it so knowledgeably called into question the woman's purity" (McBee 56-7). Gaskell felt people judging her as "improper" at her church, and tells Anne Robson and Eliza Fox that there were several occurrences of the book being burned by fathers, prohibited by husbands, and even libraries (Gaskell, *Letters* 223). The attacks Gaskell received targeted towards her own character led to her comparison of herself to "St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows" (Gaskell, *Letters* 221). Thus, many people's initial reaction to her novel was extremely negative and showed a continued chosen ignorance towards the plight of the fallen woman. More than that, since many had problems with the novel itself, they were unable and unwilling to recognize the dire situation many women were in.

Gaskell wrote *Ruth* in order to help the fallen woman in society, by inspiring her readers to enact change. Despite all of the hardship Gaskell experienced due to the negative responses she received regarding *Ruth*, she believed "what was meant so earnestly *must* do some good, though perhaps not all the good, or not the *very* good I meant" (Gaskell, *Letters* 221). It turned out she was right, as she received several positive reviews about the novel (Gaskell, *Letters* 225-6). Her novel *Ruth* was not the first time she had advocated for women who had found themselves in dire social situations, as her letters to Charles Dickens prove. One letter held a similar story to Ruth's plight: A young girl, whose father died and mother abandoned her (effectively left an orphan) who

became an apprentice to a dress-maker, and was seduced by a surgeon (Gaskell, *Letters* 98-99). The ending of this woman was different from Ruth's situation, however, as she ended up in a penitentiary. Perhaps Gaskell's more positive ending for *Ruth* demonstrated how an alternate fate was possible for the fallen woman, if good Samaritans such as Mr. and Miss Benson gave of themselves to help others. Gaskell's fiction tried to motivate her readers to action, just as the Bensons did. She saw an evident problem in society, and while also taking active steps in her own individual life to try to enact change, she "used her fiction as a way to help the fallen" (McBee 14). More specifically, "Gaskell wanted Victorians to take their heads out of the sand and look around them; she wanted them to see what was really happening, and she also wanted them to speak about these issues" (McBee 14). Gaskell's novel was not an end in itself, but designed to instigate reform.

Josephine Butler and Reform Efforts

One such advocate that arose, inspired by Gaskell's fiction, was Josephine Butler. Watt defines her as "a strong-minded, zealous woman who gave the women's movement sufficient unity, strength and purpose to mount its first head-on collision with the establishment, the male world of Victorian England" (1). Moreover, Morris notes how "'pure' women (including Gaskell herself) did involve themselves in the charitable and practical matters of helping their 'fallen' counterparts, which led to progressive measures such as Josephine Butler's organization of the National Ladies' Association" (Morris 43). While authors such as Dickens and Trollope argued that "pure" women should not associate, much less help, the fallen women, Gaskell advocated that they should, which motivated Butler to reform work (Morris 43). Watt argues the novel *Ruth* directly

impacted Butler's actions regarding reforming Victorian England's attitudes and practices towards prostitutes. Specifically, he states that *Ruth* "was a novel read by Mrs. Butler some thirty years before 1886, which prompted her to make an effort to help women, especially those who suffered" (Watt 1). As *Ruth* beckoned women to support those who could not advocate for themselves, the work welcomed reform efforts for the plight of the fallen woman. *Ruth* motivating Butler towards enacting change demonstrates the power of the written word in challenging assumptions and restrictions supported by society.

While *Ruth* brought the injustice of the fallen woman's plight to Butler's attention, a personal experience further motivated her desire to reform and protest the injustices she saw around her. As Watt narrates, Butler, "finding a girl pregnant and discovering the father was an Oxford don," made it her goal to "force the offending gentleman to accept fair responsibility" (1). A fallen woman's need also motivated Gaskell to instigate change, as she narrated in an aforementioned letter to Dickens (Gaskell, *Letters* 98-9). Butler encountered much resistance in her efforts, also similar to Gaskell, as people responded to her entreaty for change by arguing that reform was unnecessary and would only create more of a nuisance (Watt 1). *Ruth* motivated Josephine Butler, but she soon found that just as Gaskell encountered resistance, many viewed reform efforts as not only pointless, but as a hazard to the comfort ignorance provided people in the Victorian Era.

Individuals' passivity, and sometimes contribution, towards the plight of the fallen woman in the Victorian Era made it difficult for Butler to enact change. Watt

observes the general attitude towards prostitution in the Victorian Era when explaining "that a large but hidden number of Victorians accepted the presence of a large body of prostitutes, not as a force against the *status quo* but rather as a supporter of it" (Watt 7). Many believed that "in absorbing the destructive excess of intemperate and overwhelming male sexuality . . . the prostitute not only prolonged the marriage relationship, but created conditions as a result which favoured the smooth transfer of property through unbroken inheritance and the stable family" (Nield qtd. in Watt 7). Basically, the prostitute was seen as a means to maintain the stability of marriage by allowing the men permission to satisfy their sexual desires as they pleased, especially if the wife and husband were having difficulty in their relationship. Men could get married for the sake of money or familial obligations, all the while knowing they could easily use a prostitute to satisfy their physical needs. The binary society constructed of the good and bad woman could, in effect, be translated from good and bad to "one to be married, the other to be used," in every sense of the word (Watt 8). Thus, the cultural assumptions regarding fallen women made it harder for individuals such as Butler to enact actual change.

Despite the opposition she faced, Butler continued reform efforts, starting on a smaller, personal level, as Gaskell advocated for in *Ruth*. In the 1850s, she started social reform at home, quite literally, when she invited those deemed "fallen" into her own house (Watt 1). Gaskell advocated for similar action in *Ruth.* Instead of displaying a huge political movement, Gaskell merely used two good Samaritans, Mr. and Miss Benson, to demonstrate redemption. Fusco says, "The novelist challenges the institutionalised

separatist response of penitentiary restoration by locating Ruth's redemptive process within the family home of the Bensons" (58). The institutionalized separatist response placed fallen women in penitentiaries, as Mrs. Bellingham suggests in the novel should be done with Ruth (Gaskell, *Ruth* 108). The specific penitentiary Bellingham suggests, Fordham Penitentiary, was "supposed to be one of those Magdalene Asylums created with the mission to reinsert women into society, but as years progressed they became prison-like places, characterized by cruelty" (Fusco 58). Instead, Gaskell argues in *Ruth* that a better approach to helping fallen women is to open up one's own home which humanizes the fallen woman, as she is welcomed into a safe community, not ostracized from one. Butler opened her home as the Bensons did, and began reform efforts by sacrificing of herself to serve those less fortunate.

However, Josephine Butler grew in her advocacy and began to take larger steps towards reform as the years progressed, specifically in education opportunities. The decade after Butler opened her home to those in need, she "became president of a society, the aim of which was to provide higher education for women" (Watt 1-2). Similarly, Ruth's quest for knowledge in order to teach her child shows the necessity of education in seeking one's improvement (Gaskell, *Ruth* 177). She later becomes a governess to the Bradshaw family, a testament to her increase in education and her ability to make a reputable living for herself (Gaskell, *Ruth* 201). Ruth's educational efforts shows the importance of helping the so-called fallen woman obtain a second chance as without the Benson's help, Ruth would not have the opportunity of a better life. Butler's efforts to educate women reflects the same desire to provide practical methods of recovery to fallen

women. However, Butler was not just limited to education and hospitality, and as Hamilton says, "Butler might well have become leader of the higher education effort had her conscience not made her feel that she must dedicate her entire time and energy to repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts" (15). While Butler instilled educational reform because of its inherent value in practically assisting the fallen woman, she later shifted towards legal reform, in efforts to advocate for women's equality in a different arena.

Practical Legal Reform: Butler and the Contagious Diseases Acts

Butler's efforts to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts helped reveal both the discrimination behind them and how a normal citizen can stand against inequality. These Acts were put into effect in 1864 because of "the idea that prostitutes and other fallen women were "linked to criminality and disease, and . . . considered a biological danger that society had to fight" (Fusco 55). Margaret Hamilton directly regards Butler as a major leader in challenging these Acts (Hamilton 16). The Contagious Diseases Acts "gave the police power, in garrison towns, to subject any woman they suspected to compulsory and regular hospital checks for venereal disease" (Watt 2). From there, if she had a Sexual Transmitted Disease, she was either sent to a hospital for at least a few months, or to jail if she resisted the checkup or going to the hospital (Hamilton 14). Butler used Articles 39 and 40 of the Magna Carta to challenge the Acts, which said "no freeman could be denied his freedom without a trial by his peers" (Hamilton 17). Since the acts allowed policemen to arrest women with no background or proof, Butler argued that the CDA deprived women of their rights. She refuted the double standard of the implementation of the acts, because, while supposedly the original "aim was to cut down

the incidence of venereal disease in the armed forces . . . the members of these forces were not inspected at all" (Watt 2). Thus, the very enactment of the Acts was sexist and unjust. Regarding the medical checks, a part of the acts, Butler "considered this provision an infraction of liberty, and the examination demeaning" (Hamilton 17). Ultimately, she argued that the Acts were unreasonable because they only affected women, saying "Let your laws be put in force, but let them be for male as well as female" (qtd. in Hamilton 17). Butler challenged the equality of the acts, thus demonstrating the need for those with a voice and influence to stand up for those with neither.

Just as awareness through the written word was influential in motivating Butler to action through Gaskell's *Ruth,* newspapers helped broaden Butler's audience and motivate others to action. *The Daily News* helped garner 150,000 signatures for one of Butler's petitions, and the *Shield* and *The Times* helped raise more awareness regarding the injustices of the Acts as well as Butler's thoughts on them (Hamilton 22). Moreover, Butler began the Ladies' National Association with the goal of repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts (Watt 2). Morris defines this association as "a unification of women for a cause which was a springboard for organized feminism" (43). Butler motivated people to action by dispelling ignorance and creating communal efforts to advocate change.

Butler's efforts to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts were motivated by her deep belief in true equality, which argued that prostitution as a practice was unjust. She comments on the acts' injustice, as quoted by Hamilton, by saying, "It is a regulating of vice for the facilitating of its practice . . . a lowering of the moral standard in the eyes the people . . . the practice of vice will be increased" (Hamilton 15-16). One of Butler's

problems with the acts was that through its regulations and medical examinations, the public would view sexual promiscuity as controllable and forget about the inherent sin and consequences involved in the sex trade. Ultimately, her efforts to repeal the acts were not just for the general public, but for the prostitutes as well, arguing that since the Acts would increase the practice, government was in effect legalizing a custom in which "a woman is made a chattel for the use of men" (Butler qtd. in Hamilton 15-16). Moreover, Butler stated the Contagious Diseases Acts "placed all the responsibility on the women themselves" (Watt 2). For instance, since only the women were being examined for sexual diseases, they were the only ones held accountable for the trade, while the men were allowed to partake in the trade, but not be examined. Butler believed both men and women should be held accountable for their interaction in the sex trade, for their safety and moral betterment. Thus, Butler's moral beliefs and concern for the fallen women of her day motivated her efforts.

Eventually, the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed, and just as Gaskell's novel had more influence than originally thought, the repeal of the Acts affected more than just those deemed fallen. In 1883 "parliament deleted the most controversial aspect of the laws, that which made obligatory periodical medical examination . . . The Acts were fully repealed in 1886" (Hamilton 15). The affect was larger than many probably envisioned, however, as the "revocation of the Contagious Diseases Acts not only assured women at the lowest rung of society that their constitutional rights would be upheld, but it was also a landmark in the woman's emancipation effort, for repeal signified that attitudes toward women were changing" (Hamilton 27). Morris explains this in more

detail when she says, “the activity of women working to unvictimize other women would conceivably have been extremely threatening to a masculine identity which defines itself largely in opposition to helpless femininity” (43). Also, the repeal revealed a strong comradery between women, as Morris even says that the fallen woman is “a means by which to bring women together, and an impetus for female action . . . 'pure' women (including Gaskell herself) did involve themselves in the charitable and practical matters of helping their 'fallen' counterparts, which led to progressive measures such as Josephine Butler's organization of the national Ladies' Association” (Morris 43). Ultimately, the repeal of the acts demonstrated that all women deserved rights, whether or not people might deem them as fallen or not. The repeal helped break the woman binary, because all women were given basic human rights over their bodies and viewed as independent from men in a new way. It showed women were willing to fight for equality amongst themselves, and this advocacy stretched across social, economic, and even moral “classes.”

The social and legal reform that authors like Gaskell instigated in the nineteenth century should challenge current readers and writers to also use literature to enact practical change. Throughout her novel, Gaskell not only instigated reform, but also challenged the entire oppressive patriarchal structure in Victorian England as well as the Pharisaical mindset many had towards those deemed lesser (Auerbach 40). Watt evaluates many Victorian authors, including Gaskell, who wrote on the fallen woman, and says that all of them, challenged the binary of “pure and the fallen” women, showing how “there was no one fall, no single disgrace, no automatic placing in categories of

purity or prostitution" (7). By doing so, the authors not only challenge the perspective regarding fallen women, but also "highlight the intense and complex problems of Victorian women from all classes, expose the sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and give themselves the role of social reformer in the process" (Watt 7). In other words, novelists like Gaskell were able to use their books for multiple purposes, including shifting perspectives, fighting for equality, and advocating for social reform. More than this though, as Josephine Butler proved, literature was able to instigate legal reform with lasting impacts. The power of literature in implementing practical legal change should motivate writers to use their craft to enact change. This potential should also challenge readers to critique what they read thoroughly and learn from it. The lasting impact novels in the nineteenth century had, especially *Ruth,* should challenge readers' and writers' initiative and motivation, both in their production and consumption of literature.

While not all those who read Gaskell's novel agreed with her theological beliefs, her novel still instigated change through its portrayal of Ruth. A clear explanation of how external influences prompted Ruth's fall demonstrated that society had problems in need of fixing. Ruth's fall is believable--her innocence and vulnerability place her in a position from which she is easily persuaded. This was not unique to her, as many young girls were forced into precarious working conditions in the Victorian Era. The inclusion of this in *Ruth* helps develop how easy it would be for any young working girl to be seduced. Josephine Butler, as well as other readers, were forced then with a decision: whether or not they would try to reform society in a way that would protect girls from this abuse.

One way, as Gaskell advocated for and Butler continued to suggest, was helping those who had already fallen, those who had no place to go. Gaskell recognized that opening one's home, and leading one to better themselves instead of despairing would do more for individuals and society in general. Thus, readers more concerned with the growth and change of society versus true redemption in Christ still would have been challenged by the novel.

While literature clearly shifted perspectives of the fallen woman in the nineteenth century and brought about real legal and social reform, it is also important to apply this knowledge to the present to ensure history does not repeat itself in how women were dehumanized because of their sin. This applies to many other areas as well, as people's judgment of others' behavior influences their treatment of them. Literature is powerful and can play a crucial role in changing wrong societal practices and behaviors, but people must acknowledge those mistreatments first and act second. These actions can include social reform such as humanitarian efforts, but also legal change. There is much power in the written word, and the nineteenth-century progress towards breaking down stereotypes should be applauded, but also motivate writers of today to use literature in society's favor to bring about social justice, recognizing that despite gender or sins committed, all are created equal.

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