

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Demanding a Say: The Contagious Diseases Act, Josephine Butler, and Conflicting  
Gender Ideologies in Victorian Britain

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

in History

By

Monique Ann McKenna

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The graduate project of Monique McKenna is approved:

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Jeffrey Auerbach, Ph.D.

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Date

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John Paul Nuño, Ph.D.

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Date

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Thomas Devine, Ph.D., Chair

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Date

California State University, Northridge

## Dedication

I dedicate this research to my mother, and all women who braved the storm before me: thank you for your strength, persistence, and stubborn attachment to inclusivity.

### Acknowledgments

My continuing growth as an historian, writer, artist, ethnographer, teacher, activist, seeker, traveler, curator, and inexpert political critic would not have transpired without the support and mentorship from many History Department faculty. I would like to especially thank Jeffrey Auerbach for both guiding my research and teaching me about the importance of quarter-life crises. To my fellow graduate students – notably Rebecca Howland – thank you for sharing your frustrations, triumphs, anxieties, and laughs; it's been a pleasure spending the last two years with you. My best friend Alex, thank you for encouraging my every move; from acting to academics, your interminable support has kept me afloat for the last thirteen years. Finally, to my family – thank you for all the noise over the years, it's been a gas.

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## Abstract

Demanding a Say: The Contagious Diseases Act, Josephine Butler, and Conflicting Gender Ideologies in Victorian Britain

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Monique McKenna

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In accordance with university regulations, the following is an abstract of my culminating experience project, which serves as the final requirement towards the completion of a Master of Arts Degree in History. While the following abstract summarizes my project's scholarly contribution, research questions, methods and conclusions, the final project is archived in the Department of History at California State University, Northridge.

Parliament and supporters of the Contagious Diseases Act believed that the spread of venereal diseases could be controlled by regularly examining sex workers, without regard for their personal safety or liberty. Regulation advocates were unmoved by calls to

consider prostitutes' welfare, and perpetuated a destructive double standard that placed women as the sole source of impropriety and disease. Conversely, the Act's adversaries believed in the responsibility of both sexes, and argued that state regulation directly infringed upon the liberty of sex workers. Josephine Butler, leader of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, spearheaded both the anti-vice and anti-regulationist movements. Her unsuccessful twenty year campaign attempted to not only destigmatize sex work, but to push women into the public sphere, and abolish oppressive gender constructs, both in and out of the home. Despite her commitment, Butler's platform failed to sway Parliament and the public. Upon investigating the debates surrounding the Contagious Diseases Act, it is evident that discussions entailed much more than disagreements on legalized sex work: they evoked the Victorian Era's conflicting gender ideologies, one that sought to emancipate women, and the other that strove to maintain the nation's male power structure. Historical research surrounding the Contagious Diseases Act has largely focused on arguments from supporters and opponents, but little to no scholarship has considered its debates as a lens from which to assess conflicting gender constructs in Victorian culture. This essay will show how the Acts offered Victorian women an opportunity to insert themselves politically by defending the civil rights of Britain's sex workers.