

Josephine Butler's *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* in Context

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Introduction

Josephine Butler (1828-1906) was a nineteenth-century English feminist activist, best known for her involvement with the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts mandated periodic gynecological examination of sex workers to curtail the spread of sexually transmitted infections among British soldiers. Throughout the seventeen-year campaign, spanning from 1869 to 1886, Butler led the Ladies' National Association, organized meetings, gave speeches, wrote political tracts, and traveled extensively. She traveled through England, France, Switzerland, and Italy, and supported the formation of similar campaigns throughout the British Empire and the United States.¹ During the 1870s, when the campaign appeared to be lagging and male allies were questioning women's role in the movement, she wrote a biography of the fourteenth century Italian saint, Catherine of Siena.² *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* may initially appear disconnected from Butler's activist work, but is actually deeply indicative of Butler's political position at the time of its publication in 1878, as she endeavoured to protect women's bodies and amplify their voices.

Butler's involvement in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts tends to receive the most attention from scholars. Her other work is studied only insofar as it is directly relevant to her activism. *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, while clearly reflective of her values, appears only tangentially related to the repeal campaign. *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* has

¹ Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler. *Josephine E. Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir*, ed. George W. Johnson and Lucy A. Johnson (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Company Limited, 1909), 87, Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), 7, Josephine E. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1896), 142, 155, 132, 180.

² Janet L. Larson, "Josephine Butler's 'Catharine of Siena': Writing (Auto)Biography as a Feminist Spiritual Practice," *Christianity & Literature* 48, no. 4 (1999): 447.

also not been studied by scholars of Catherine of Siena.³ This is not surprising given it is a comparatively minor entry in the catalogue of Catherinian study. A popular history written by a woman without academic credentials during the nineteenth century would be unlikely to leave a large scholarly footprint. It is clearly of its time and place and influenced by the tastes and values of its author, but so too were other accounts of Catherine's life. *The Companion to Catherine of Siena* notes that the first person to order Catherine's letters chronologically, Niccolo Tommaseo (1802-1874) in 1860, did so to promote Italian nationalism.⁴ *The Companion to Catherine of Siena* does not mention Butler once, even though *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* was genuinely doing something new in the realm of English language scholarship on Catherine of Siena. *The Companion to Catherine of Siena* says that the first modern scholarship to focus on Catherine's involvement in papal affairs was Alfonso Capececiatti's *Storia di santa Caterina e del papato del suo tempo*, published in 1878. *Catharine of Siena* was published the same year, and Butler also framed it as innovative for focusing on Catherine's political career.⁵ As the work of a female popular historian, it makes sense that *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* would not have received serious scholarly attention at the time, and the lack of attention now can be explained by the importance of Butler's legacy in other areas, but her work on Catherine of Siena nevertheless deserves more attention.

Prime minister William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) provided the forward to the third edition of *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*. In it he said, "It is evident that Mrs. Butler is on the level of her subject, and it is a very high level. To say this is virtually saying all [...] It is

³ Butler spells Catherine's name as "Catharine." I use the standard spelling of her name, with an "e," except when directly quoting *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, or referring to the book's title.

⁴ F. Thomas Luongo, "The Historical Reception of Catherine of Siena," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle, (Boston: Brill, 2012), 30.

⁵ Blake Beattie, "Catherine of Siena and the Papacy," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle, (Boston: Brill, 2012), 74.

interesting to divine the veins of sympathy which may have guided Mrs. Butler in the choice of her subject.”⁶ Although it may not have significantly influenced Catherinian scholarship, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* can tell us a great deal about Josephine Butler. Janet Larson has called it an autobiographical project.⁷ While not entirely inaccurate, this is an overstatement. *Catharine of Siena* was not simply a thinly veiled medieval Josephine Butler. However, *Catharine of Siena* strongly reflects Butler’s values, what she imagined the ideal activist to be, how she believed religion ought to motivate good works, and how she perceived feminism, religion, history, and activism to be intertwined. She said of Catherine,

The courage and originality of mind required in her time to set aside the maxims of traditional propriety were beyond what we can at this day easily imagine. Among the Greeks and Romans in ancient times, the highest praise that could be bestowed on a woman was that ‘she was never seen out of her own house,’ and the Christian tradition had been so far in accordance with the heathen one: the Apostle had commanded that the young women should be ‘keepers at home.’ Monastic ideas and customs in the middle ages had strengthened this tradition in prescribing but one alternative for the young maiden, marriage or the cloister. Yet despite the minute directions of the Apostle Paul, wise and prudent, no doubt, for the state of the society in which he lived, the germs of all true freedom which dwelt in the doctrine and teaching of Christ slowly became fruitful in this direction, and to those who waited upon God, as Catharine did, for direct personal guidance, the path before them gradually widened into greater freedom, and the sphere of responsibility and duty presented itself more largely, and was judged by them more courageously and directly, apart from conventional traditions.⁸

She expressed her political beliefs explicitly elsewhere, but *Catharine of Siena* is noteworthy in demonstrating her values through the actions of another person in another time, rather than stating them herself. *Catharine of Siena* nuances Butler’s reflexive statements, pulling at the threads of what has, deliberately or not, been left unsaid in her autobiographical or political writings.

⁶ Josephine Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1894).

⁷ Larson, “(Auto)Biography as Feminist Practice,” 446.

⁸ Josephine Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, (London: Dyer Brothers, 1878), 72.

Butler's biography details the life of Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). The book was first published in England in 1878. It went through three editions, two reprints, and a French translation published in Switzerland in 1887.⁹ Catherine of Siena is one of the patron saints of Italy, and one of four female doctors of the Catholic church. Although she never married, she joined a mendicant Dominican order that normally consisted of married and widowed laywomen. She was also a mystic who devoted her life to helping people through her prayer, charity, labour, and political advocacy. Catherine aided the destitute and the persecuted and cared for the sick before and during the plague of the 1370s. She advised the nobility and arbitrated aristocratic feuds. She mediated between the papacy and the Florentine government during the War of the Eight Saints, exhorted Gregory XI to move the papal court from Avignon back to Rome and advised his successor Urban VI during the papal schism. She advocated throughout her life for church reform. Catherine died in Rome at the age of thirty-three and was buried in the Basilica of Saint Mary of Minerva, except for her head which was detached and sent to Siena as a relic. She was canonized in 1461.¹⁰

Josephine Butler was born 13 April 1828 and died 30 December 1906. Like her father John Grey (1785–1868), she was involved in political advocacy against slavery and was in favour of women's education.¹¹ Through her father, she was related to Lord Charles Grey (1764–1846), the Whig politician who served as British Prime Minister between 1830 and 1834.¹² Despite her aristocratic connections, Butler preferred not to identify herself as a member of the

⁹ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 445, Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 163.

¹⁰ Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, 68, 74, 82, 95, 158, 215, 228, 183, 153.

¹¹ Judith R. Walkowitz, "Butler [née Grey], Josephine Elizabeth (1828–1906), social reformer and women's activist," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004. Helen Mathers, "The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist: Josephine Butler, 1828–1906," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52, no. 2 (2001): 292.

¹² E. A. Smith, "Grey, Charles, second Earl Grey (1764–1845), prime minister," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004, Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 1.

gentry but instead as a member of the middle class.¹³ Although her father eventually became an advocate for women's education, Butler's own childhood education was quite traditional, and therefore limited.¹⁴ As an adult she criticized how her education had been handled and made efforts to educate herself. She learned French and Italian, which aided her not only in the Continental campaigns against laws similar to the Contagious Diseases Acts, but also in her research for *Catharine of Siena*.¹⁵ Her mother, Hannah Annett, was descended from Huguenot silk weavers.¹⁶ Although an Evangelical Anglican herself, Hannah was tied to nonconformist groups, particularly Presbyterians and Methodists.¹⁷ Butler was Anglican in the sense that she regularly attended Anglican services, but like her mother she was very connected with nonconformists.¹⁸ She was particularly associated with Quakers, whom she lauded for their traditional opposition to slavery, and who made up some of her most steadfast allies.¹⁹ The publisher of *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, Dyer Brothers, was a Quaker firm.²⁰ She did not personally identify strongly as anything more specific than Protestant.²¹ A devout Christian, her faith was a primary motivating factor for her advocacy and a clear focus in all of her writings.²² She viewed her political missions to fight societal injustice as her God-given duty.²³ Her husband, George Butler (1819-1890) was an Anglican clergyman and university professor. They

¹³ Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 1.

¹⁴ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 292.

¹⁵ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 292.

¹⁶ Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 2.

¹⁷ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 289, 290, Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 5.

¹⁸ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 294.

¹⁹ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 301.

²⁰ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 455.

²¹ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 287.

²² Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 283.

²³ Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 2.

were well suited to each other both spiritually and politically, and he consistently supported her public work.²⁴

Before involving herself with the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, Butler assisted other causes. She was an early supporter of women's suffrage and Edwardian suffragists would look to her as a founding figure of their cause.²⁵ Like her father she advocated against slavery. Her support for abolitionists during the American Civil War was her first experience supporting a controversial cause which enjoyed only minority support. She described the experience of social alienation that resulted from her advocacy as an experience which disciplined and fortified her for future fights.²⁶ Also like her father, she supported women's education and employment. The first pamphlet she ever published was called *The Education and Employment of Women* (1868), in which she pointed out that according to the 1861 census, "the proportion of wives to widows and spinsters over twenty was only about three to two, [...] and that over three million women were earning or partly earning their living."²⁷ A woman's place therefore could not, practically speaking, only be in the home. Butler's experiences living in Oxford, surrounded by male academics, were particularly radicalising for her. She was often disgusted by the sexual double standards of Oxford academics, and by their inaction in the face of violence committed against women and girls by their faculty and students. She said that,

On one occasion, when I was distressed by a bitter case of wrong inflicted on a very young girl, I ventured to speak to one of the wisest men—so esteemed—in the university, in the hope that he would suggest some means, not of helping her, but of bringing to a sense of his crime the man who had wronged her. The sage, speaking kindly however, sternly advocated silence and inaction. "It could only do harm to open up in any way such a question as this. It was dangerous to arouse a sleeping lion." I left him in some amazement and discouragement.²⁸

²⁴ Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 3.

²⁵ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 446.

²⁶ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 45.

²⁷ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 80.

²⁸ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 31.

Their behaviour towards women was a revelation to her and partly motivated the start of her rescue work. In her memoir she spoke of,

A young mother [who] was in Newgate for the murder of her infant, whose father, under cover of the death-like silence prescribed by Oxford philosophers—a silence which is in fact a permanent endorsement of injustice—had perjured himself to her, had forsaken and forgotten her, and fallen back, with no accusing conscience, on his easy, social life, and possibly his academic honours.²⁹

Butler and her husband decided to write to the chaplain of Newgate Prison requesting that the woman be sent to her once she had served her sentence so that she might work as their servant.

Butler said, “She came to us. I think she was the first of the world of unhappy women of a humble class whom he welcomed to his own home. She was not the last.”³⁰ The Butlers continued to take in fallen women and when their home reached capacity, they took another house entirely for the purpose of housing women who would otherwise be in workhouses. They later founded an ‘incurable hospital’ to tend to the needs of women dying of sexually transmitted infections.³¹ Important as these causes were in shaping her identity and outlook, the cause that would dominate her life and legacy was her seventeen-year involvement in the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts.

The first of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) was passed in 1864 and renewed in 1866.³² Based on similar continental laws that originated in Napoleonic France, the CDAs mandated that women who were identified by policemen as prostitutes be subject to periodic internal examination. If diagnosed with gonorrhoea or syphilis they were sent to hospitals with venereal wards called “lock hospitals” for up to nine months, until their symptoms subsided.³³

²⁹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 32.

³⁰ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 32.

³¹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 62.

³² Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 87.

³³ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 2.

The CDAs applied only to women in certain military and naval towns, as the laws were intended to protect military men from contracting sexually transmitted infections.³⁴ In 1869 the government expanded the number of towns to which the Acts applied, and it was at this point that Josephine Butler became involved in the campaign for their repeal. She opposed the Contagious Diseases Acts because they violated women's bodily autonomy and civil liberties, and because they applied only to female sex workers and not their male clients. They subjected women to arrest, forcible medical examination, and possible imprisonment with hard labour. Meanwhile, men's activities were not regulated at all. They could continue to act as disease vectors, making the Acts degrading, unfair, and ineffective.³⁵ The National Association formed in opposition to the Acts in December of 1869, but it initially excluded women. As a result, the Ladies' National Association (LNA) formed soon after under Butler's leadership.³⁶ She campaigned vigorously all over England on behalf of political candidates who would support the cause, and formed alliances between the LNA, working-class men, and trade unionists.³⁷ After a setback in 1874, when the Conservative Party won the general election and many allies lost their seats, Butler began a correspondence with opponents of similar regulations abroad.³⁸ In 1875 the British, Continental, and General Federation formed with Butler acting as secretary.³⁹ She spent much of the next several years travelling in France, Italy, and Switzerland, gathering support and galvanizing allies.⁴⁰ It was also during this period of travel that she wrote *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*.⁴¹

³⁴ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 87.

³⁵ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 18.

³⁶ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 2.

³⁷ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 453.

³⁸ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 454, Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 130.

³⁹ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 168.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 155, 229.

⁴¹ Larson, "Autobiography as Feminist Practice," 445.

Catharine of Siena: A Biography was not Butler's only literary output; she wrote prolifically. She wrote pamphlets, essays, and autobiographical memoirs, in addition to biographies of several family members and Pastor Oberlin of Alsace.⁴² I make use of two of her memoirs. The first is *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, published 1896. It focuses primarily on her role in the fight for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and provides greater context for her advocacy work, and for the specific time when Butler was writing *Catharine of Siena*. The other is *Josephine E. Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir*, published posthumously in 1909. While it is called a memoir, it is actually an edited collection of her writings. It includes excerpts from *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, the aforementioned biographies of her relatives, published letters, pamphlets, and essays. Arranged chronologically and held together with context provided by the book's editors, it offers a good overview of both her public and private life, mostly in her own words, and has the benefit of including work written over the entire course of her adult life. I also use her introduction to *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays*, which is notable both for its religious content and for the clarity of its messaging. As a straightforward manifesto regarding women's place in society, it provides useful contrast to the more implicit messaging in *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*. Because Butler was so strongly influenced by her religious beliefs, the articles "Josephine Butler's 'Catharine of Siena': Writing (Auto)Biography as a Feminist Spiritual Practice," by Janet Larson and "The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist: Josephine Butler, 1828–1906," by Helen Mathers were especially helpful. In conjunction with Butler's autobiographical works, they provided further insight into how her religious beliefs impacted

⁴² Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 292.

Catharine of Siena, and how *Catharine of Siena* in turn reflected her beliefs beyond the ways in which she consciously defined herself.

The first chapter of this thesis, “*Catharine of Siena* and Nineteenth-Century Historiography,” outlines the place of *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* in nineteenth-century historiography. Nineteenth-century Britain had a long history of literary historical writing, and history was the most popular non-fiction genre. It was at the same time beginning to professionalise into an academic discipline taught in universities. This professionalization codified certain research and methodological practices. It also explicitly excluded women from academic circles even as they started writing literary history in greater numbers. Biographies of great women were generally the only form of historical writing considered acceptable for female authors, but while *Catharine of Siena* fits that designation in the general sense, it was also clearly influenced by academic history writing and pushed against the boundaries of what kinds of historical non-fiction women ought to write and read. The second chapter, “*Catharine of Siena* and Medievalist Motifs,” discusses the relationship between *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* and the broader medievalist movement of the nineteenth century. Victorian medievalism captured the public’s imagination and affected literature, architecture, art, fashion, historiography, and politics. Medieval motifs and aesthetics were used across the political spectrum to reflect modern social problems. Butler’s incorporation of medievalist ideas into *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, shows how her ideology related to those of conservatives, liberals, evangelicals, and feminists. The third chapter, “*Catharine of Siena: A Biography of Catherine or Josephine*,” explains how Butler used *Catharine of Siena* to model the ideal female political activist, and how that model is informed by Butler’s personal experiences, religious views, and the state of the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1870s.

The ways in which Butler drew on the popularity of medieval settings, the legitimacy of academic writing, and the respectability of historical biography highlights the radicalism of her perspective in comparison with her female literary peers, her male academic counterparts, and society in general. She used *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* to portray an ideal of female political activism unconstrained by the separation between the public and private spheres, led by the hand of God unapologetically to influence politics.

***Catharine of Siena* and Nineteenth-Century Historiography**

Butler wrote *Catharine of Siena* during a transitional period for British historiography. Previously, history had primarily been a literary genre, but over the course of the nineteenth century it transitioned toward being an established academic field. Its institutionalisation resulted in new standards for research, new philosophies of history, and a new scholarly hierarchy: professional male academics at the top, and amateur female writers at the bottom. Masculine professional history was distinct in tone and subject matter from most feminine amateur history. *Catharine of Siena* did not conform neatly to the standards of either feminine or masculine historical writing, but was clearly influenced by both, and stands as a product of the time in which it was written.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries religious and secular understandings of the truth were not clearly delineated. In the wake of the Reformation, as John Arnold notes, Protestants and Catholics both used history to bolster their authority at each other's expense.¹ Protestants looked for pre-Reformation examples of like-minded individuals or groups through which they could claim longer history and greater legitimacy.² Catholics, who had a stronger claim to historical authority, were more easily able to return to their own past in order to construct historical narratives that bolstered the Catholic faith.³ These sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholars were not historians in the modern sense. While they did make extensive use of evidence in service of their arguments, assembly of evidence was an objective in itself, rather

¹ John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

² Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 38.

³ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 38.

than the more sophisticated analysis of documentary evidence carried out by antiquaries, and later by historians.⁴

Before the nineteenth century, both “historians” and antiquaries wrote histories. The two groups were not clearly distinct from one another, but there were stylistic differences in their scholarly outputs. As Arnold says in *History: A Very Short Introduction*, “to generalize broadly, ‘historians’ wrote expansive and entertaining histories, inspired by the Ciceronian model of a grand and educational tale. Antiquarians, in contrast, amassed all available material related to whichever period in the past had taken their fancy.”⁵ Antiquaries prior to the eighteenth century also usually approached historical scholarship from adjacent fields. They were often philosophers, philologists, numismatists, and cartographers first, using their expertise to study historical thought, linguistics, coins, or maps. It is from them that we get the modern historian’s preoccupation with the interpretation of primary evidence.⁶ In the eighteenth century Enlightenment scholars began to merge the writing of grand historical narratives on the model of Cicero, with the extensive use of archival research of the kind performed by antiquaries.⁷

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution was changing British society drastically. A population boom, rapid urbanization, and technological advances were fundamentally changing the natures of agriculture, industry, and trade.⁸ In a world changing so much so quickly, history became a useful means by which a nation (or in Britain’s case, an empire) could define itself.⁹

⁴ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 38.

⁵ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 39.

⁶ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 41, 43.

⁷ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 51.

⁸ A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History*, (Binghamton: Yale University Press, 1985), 21.

⁹ Peter Burke, “Lay History: Official and Unofficial Representations, 1800–1914,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Maignashca, Attila Pók, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124.

No discussion of nineteenth-century historiography is complete without mention of the German historian Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886), who is widely considered to be the father of modern historiography.¹⁰ Although he eventually became a scholar of modern history, he initially studied ancient history and philology¹¹ Ranke asserted that historical writing ought to be founded on documentary research, through which it might take on the form of a scientific discipline, capable of reaching objective truth about the past.¹² History for Ranke not only sought facts, but also coherence.¹³ Naturally this theoretically objective history was not objective in practice. He believed in progressive history, and in the power of individual human action to shape events, but as a devout Lutheran, he also believed in a God-given moral order and in the role of Providence in dictating the movements of history.¹⁴ Ranke himself saw no contradiction in this.¹⁵

Like Ranke, Butler's interest in history lay in her desire to elucidate the facts of history. She criticized previous biographies of Catherine for focusing so strongly on her sanctity that they failed to depict her as she really was. She said,

It is no easy task, looking back through the mists of ages, to discover athwart the medium of the apotheoses of the saint which are presented to us by Catholic writers as biography, the real woman, such as she was in her true human character. The greatest of the saints were flesh and blood like ourselves; yet not so, by any means, are they represented by the mediaeval hagiologist. The memoir by Father Raymond gives us the internal life of Catharine as faithfully as he was able to render it; but her wonderful outward life and public career are almost entirely left out of his record. When he mentions any part of

¹⁰ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 35.

¹¹ Daniel Woolf, *A Concise History of History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 176.

¹² Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 45.

¹³ Georg G. Iggers, "The Intellectual Foundations of Nineteenth Century 'Scientific' History: The German Model," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Manguerra, Attila Pók, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 48.

¹⁴ Woolf, *A Concise History*, 177, Iggers, "The German Model," *Oxford History*, 48, 51.

¹⁵ Woolf, *A Concise History*, 177.

these, he does so only parenthetically, and in order to illustrate the several virtues which formed, as he says, 'her aureole.'¹⁶

Even so, Butler's interest in the facts of Catherine's life did not render her visions or miracles suspect. As with Ranke, the facts of history included the fact of God's existence. Butler explicitly rejected the idea that religious belief was incompatible with science. In defending the veracity of Catherine's mystical experiences with God, she said:

Not less unscientific is he who, never having used the means for the discovery of spiritual truth, and being profoundly ignorant of the most elementary laws which must be understood and followed in order to arrive at such truth, declares that he does not believe there is a God, or does not believe that any communication can be established between a creature and his Creator, and attributes to delusion and fancy all that experimental philosophers in divine things have told us they have found and seen.¹⁷

In Butler's conception, ignoring the validity of religious experience by providing atheistic explanations for actions and events was unscientific and indicated incomplete research and inattention to evidence.

The idea of objective, scientific history was hugely influential, and led to the idea that proper historiographical methodology could, according to Georg Iggers, "overcome contingencies of religious creed, national origin, class, race, ethnicity, and gender."¹⁸ Although Ranke was most influential outside of Western Europe, (Romania, Russia, and particularly the United States) his significance was also felt in England.¹⁹ William Stubbs, (1825-1901) who held the position of Regius professor of modern history at Oxford between 1866 and 1884, inculcated his own pupils with Rankean methods of source criticism, and they in their turn refashioned the British historical profession according to those principles in the decades preceding the First

¹⁶ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 331.

¹⁷ Josephine Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, (London: Dyer Brothers, 1878), 38.

¹⁸ Iggers, "The German Model," *Oxford History*, 55, Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁹ Woolf, *A Concise History*, 179.

World War.²⁰ While others had previously emphasised the need for extensive research and critical analysis, Ranke's influence rendered it a universal maxim.²¹ Ranke's scientific history, as Daniel Woolf says, "carries with it [...] an abdication of the historian's long-standing judicial-didactic role." Influential though it may have been in newly emerging professional historical circles, it did not necessarily spread so quickly to popular historians, who still used their works to explicitly didactic ends.²²

In "The Institutionalization and Professionalization of History in Europe and the United States," Gabriele Lingelbach defines the process of professionalization as the "standardization, formalization, and thus homogenization of an education based on fixed curricula; the knowledge acquired is accredited through exams and confirmed by certificates; the profession increasingly defines standards of education, observing their compliance, and thus also controlling access to the profession itself."²³ The rise of history as a scholarly profession is tied to the rise of the nation state.²⁴ Just as Protestants had looked for historical evidence for legitimacy, so too did newly formed nations.²⁵ Between the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 and the unification of Germany in 1871, German nationalism flourished. German scholars, Ranke among them, were thus pioneers in the professionalization of history, alongside France and the United States.²⁶ As previously mentioned, the German model of scientific history was imitated elsewhere in Europe and the United States, though subject to varied interpretations according to the particular needs of each nation and its scholars.

²⁰ J. Campbell, "Stubbs, William," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2023, Woolf, *A Concise History*, 179.

²¹ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 53.

²² Woolf, *A Concise History*, 178.

²³ Gabriele Lingelbach, "The Institutionalization and Professionalization of History in Europe and the United States," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Maiguashca, Attila Pók, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88.

²⁴ Burke, "Lay History," *Oxford History*, 124.

²⁵ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 37.

²⁶ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 56.

England was precocious in developing a national consciousness and had an extensive history of successful imperialism. Because it was more established and confident in its nationhood, England professionalised historical study later in the nineteenth century than many other European countries.²⁷ Nevertheless, once professionalization began in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it served the imperial project. As Julie Pridmore says, imperial historians “sought to expand the empire through their narratives, the written and visual iconography of the ‘island story’ of Britain [...] was the paramount patriotic myth of the New Imperial age.”²⁸ Professionalization began in earnest in the 1860s when historians specialising in the study of archival sources were appointed to the Regius chairs of history, first at Oxford in 1866, and then at Cambridge in 1869.²⁹ The aforementioned William Stubbs was the first to be appointed to that role at Oxford, only twelve years before the publication of *Catharine of Siena*, introducing the German scholarship model when he did so.³⁰

While universities did teach history prior to the nineteenth century, history professors were mostly theologians or legal scholars, so when universities started including history as a distinct discipline, there were essentially no trained historians.³¹ Many of the first dedicated historians, Ranke included, began as classicists.³² Bonnie Smith posits in *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, that the rigorous (and sometimes abusive) academic culture around the study of Classical texts accounts for early historians’ focus on documentary

²⁷ Iggers, “The German Model,” *Oxford History*, 54, Michael Bentley, “Shape and Pattern in British Historical Writing, 1815–1945,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Manguashca, Attila Pók, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 206.

²⁸ Pridmore, “Reconstructing the Middle Ages,” 97.

²⁹ Eckhardt Fuchs, “Contemporary Alternatives to German Historicism in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Manguashca, Attila Pók, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59.

³⁰ Iggers, “The German Model,” *Oxford History*, 55.

³¹ Iggers, “The German Model,” *Oxford History*, 45.

³² Woolf, *A Concise History*, 176.

evidence. She says, “Beaten in school for mistakes with words in the recondite classics, professionalizers came to fetishize the written document, devaluing everyday objects and artifacts, and emphasizing their shared, lofty male identity as experts who were beyond ordinary life.”³³ Another reason was that, as stakeholders in a newly institutionalised field, historians needed to establish a clear methodology with a seemingly scientific basis, in order to come across as a legitimate academic discipline.³⁴

The need to establish a distinctly professional version of historical scholarship meant that academic historians began consciously distinguishing themselves from the gentlemen-scholars who studied and wrote history as a hobby, attacking them as shallow, biased, and moralizing.³⁵ Part of the appeal of scientific history was that it offered clear distinctions on which scholars could base their status as professionals worthy of academic respect.³⁶ Just as Britain institutionalised history more slowly, the link between the literary and scholarly survived longer in Great Britain than in other places.³⁷ However, academics were keen to break that link and define themselves as separate from, and superior to their literary counterparts.³⁸ The institutionalisation of historical practice, and the definition of its parameters, included not only the creation of departments of history at universities, but also the creation of professional historical associations and the founding of academic journals through which academic historians could guard access to their profession.³⁹ These institutions encouraged the standardisation of historiographical practices through their publishing criteria and the publication of book

³³ Smith, *Gender of History*, 9.

³⁴ Fuchs, “Alternatives to German Historicism,” *Oxford History*, 59.

³⁵ Fuchs, “Alternatives to German Historicism,” *Oxford History*, 63.

³⁶ Fuchs, “Alternatives to German Historicism,” *Oxford History*, 63.

³⁷ Iggers, “The German Model,” *Oxford History*, 54.

³⁸ Burke, “Lay History,” *Oxford History*, 130.

³⁹ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, 56.

reviews.⁴⁰ Likewise the introduction of history as a distinct subject in universities often coincided with its introduction in school curricula.⁴¹ In 1875, three years before the publication of *Catharine of Siena*, there were forty-two history journals in Britain.⁴² The British Royal Historical Society was founded in 1886, by which time *Catharine of Siena* had already gone through three editions.⁴³

The academic field of history did not initially include women, who only began to join university faculties around the turn of the twentieth century and were not initially allowed to publish their work in major scholarly journals.⁴⁴ When they did become professional scholars, they usually did not marry. This afforded them independence, but as women, they lacked the domestic support a wife provided to her husband.⁴⁵ Writing around 1900, Butler said of the changes concerning women's education in her lifetime,

It may be difficult for the present generation to realise what an amount of dogged opposition and prejudice the pioneers of this movement had to encounter only some twenty-five years ago. We have made such rapid strides in the direction of women's education, that we almost forget that our ladies' colleges, higher examinations, and the various honours for which women compete so gallantly with men, are but of yesterday.⁴⁶

Women were only barely starting to receive formal education in the 1870s, when Butler was writing *Catharine of Siena*. The first English university to admit men and women on an equal basis was University College, Bristol (now the University of Bristol), founded in 1876, only two years before *Catharine of Siena*'s publication.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Lingelbach, "Institutionalization and Professionalization," *Oxford History*, 85.

⁴¹ Lingelbach, "Institutionalization and Professionalization," *Oxford History*, 82.

⁴² Lingelbach, "Institutionalization and Professionalization," *Oxford History*, 86, Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 455.

⁴³ Janet L. Larson, "Josephine Butler's 'Catharine of Siena': Writing (Auto)Biography as a Feminist Spiritual Practice," *Christianity & Literature* 48, no. 4 (1999): 455.

⁴⁴ Lingelbach, "Institutionalization and Professionalization," *Oxford History*, 85, Bentley, "Shape and Pattern," *Oxford History*, 205.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Gender of History*, 11.

⁴⁶ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 74.

⁴⁷ "Our History," University of Bristol, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/women/our-history/>.

Although Butler did not herself attend university, she lived in an academic environment adjacent to university culture as her husband was a university professor. History was not the only discipline emerging as a distinct field. George Butler was a professor of divinity, but he also introduced of geography as a university subject. Butler said in her memoir,

At Oxford he was the first who brought into prominence the study of geography. His geographical lectures there were quite an innovation, creating some amusement and a good deal of wonder as to how he would succeed. It was a subject which had hitherto been relegated in an elementary form to schools for boys and girls, and was unrecognised, except by a very few persons, as the grand and comprehensive scientific study which it is now acknowledged to be. At Oxford the subject was entirely new, at least to the older members of the university, who, however, to their credit, came to the lectures, and listened with teachable minds to truths novel to them concerning the world they were living in.⁴⁸

He was also one of the first, she says, “who introduced and encouraged the study of Art in Oxford in a practical sense. In the winter of 1852-53 he obtained the permission of the Vice-Chancellor and Curators to give a course of lectures on Art in the Taylor building.”⁴⁹

Butler said of her own upbringing that she lived in “in the pre-educational era” for women.⁵⁰ Her childhood education was limited, as was conventional for girls in the 1830s,⁵¹ but she said,

We owed much to our dear mother, who was very firm in requiring from us that whatever we did should be thoroughly done, and that in taking up any study we should aim at becoming as perfect as we could in it without external aid. This was a moral discipline which perhaps compensated in value for the lack of a great store of knowledge. She would assemble us daily for the reading aloud of some solid book, and by a kind of examination following the reading assured herself that we had mastered the subject. She urged us to aim at excellence, if not perfection, in at least one thing.⁵²

⁴⁸ Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler. *Josephine E. Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir*, ed. George W. Johnson and Lucy A. Johnson (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Company Limited, 1909) 25.

⁴⁹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 26.

⁵⁰ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 12.

⁵¹ Helen Mathers, “The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist: Josephine Butler, 1828–1906,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52, no. 2 (2001): 292.

⁵² Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 12.

Her father eventually took an interest in women's education, but by that point she had already reached adulthood.⁵³ Butler herself began campaigning for women's education in the 1850s.⁵⁴ Although she had not herself been provided with a comprehensive education, she was proactive in educating herself as an adult. She and her husband studied Italian together, and hosted lectures in their drawing room at Oxford.⁵⁵ Her eventual fluency in both Italian and French served her well both in the international campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, and for the research and writing of *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*.⁵⁶

By the 1870s, history in England was becoming a professional, academic field, but then as now, the general public mostly consumed historical content, not through academic history written by scholars, but through popular history written by those whom academic historians called 'amateurs.'⁵⁷ Obviously many writers of popular histories did so as their main sources of income and we might therefore consider them professionals. They were called amateurs at the time because they were not affiliated with scholarly institutions.⁵⁸ As such, because they were prohibited from joining scholarly institutions, women historians were, by virtue of their sex, almost entirely self-taught amateurs.⁵⁹

Although women had written historical fiction and non-fiction in previous centuries, women's historical writing became much more commonplace over the course of the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ This may seem counterintuitive as the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries saw the roles of middle-class women narrow, while the concept of public and private spheres

⁵³ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 292.

⁵⁴ Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 450.

⁵⁵ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 29.

⁵⁶ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 292.

⁵⁷ Burke, "Lay History," *Oxford History*, 125.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Gender of History*, 6.

⁵⁹ Burke, "Lay History," *Oxford History*, 130.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Gender of History*, 11.

became more strictly defined and their boundaries more heavily enforced.⁶¹ Why then were women writing commercial history so much more than they had previously? Smith suggests this was the result of the advent of history as an academic field. Professional male historians denigrated amateur history as lower quality and less serious, hence they viewed women as more fit to write it. They were, after all, only filling out the lower orders of the genre.⁶²

While women were amateurs as a rule, there were some women who were involved in professional scholarship. Apart from writing their own popular histories, some women were involved in invisible labour on behalf of their professional historian husbands. This included the management of his domestic affairs, which granted him more time for work and leisure than his amateur female counterparts could afford. It also involved women acting as his research assistants. His female relatives could be relied upon to do the work of research, organisation, editing, and on occasion writing, without requiring any credit.”⁶³

At the time Butler was writing, amateur women writers tended to downplay any scholarly ambition. They did not make claims of conducting original research, and when writing for adults, they claimed women as their primary audience rather than attempting to appropriate the presumably male audience of academic historians.⁶⁴ Butler had no such compunctions. She unapologetically framed *Catharine of Siena* as both a stringently researched and original work of history. She said of biographies of Catherine that, “first in order stands that of Raymond of Capua, her contemporary [...] It contains a faithful picture of her spiritual life, but records very imperfectly her public action in connection with contemporary events. The greater number of the

⁶¹ Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image, 1830-1870*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 141.

⁶² Smith, *Gender of History*, 7.

⁶³ Smith, *Gender of History*, 10.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 151.

biographies which followed were based upon that of Raymond, with little variation.”⁶⁵ She went on to say that,

It can scarcely be asserted with truth that any Life of Catharine, properly so called, exists in English. There is an English translation, abridged, of the memoir of Raymond of Capua, by an anonymous Catholic writer, published in America and in Dublin, 1863. It has the great defect of the original — i.e, the absence of any consecutive account of the active life and public career of Catharine ; and the translation itself is not extremely well done. There did exist also a short Life in English, by a Catholic writer under the assumed name of Doctor Gaterinus Senensis, 1609, and more recently re-edited with preface, by James Dominick Aylward, Priest. This is out of print. These, so far as I am aware, are the only Lives which have appeared in English, unless we include two which are old and very rare.⁶⁶

Her intention in writing the biography was to do something new, by reconstructing the events of Catherine’s life as a figure of political influence. This required not just translation, but analysis and interpretation. She said of Raymond of Capua that

He rarely condescends [...] to give a plain statement of any of the facts of her life. For example, he never states historically that she went to Florence, or why. He merely says, in different parts of his book, ‘When we were at Florence, she did or said so and so;’ and then calls upon the reader to admire the great humility or the superhuman patience of the saint. He very rarely gives a date. There are, it may be said, three dates in the whole course of the book, which come to the eager student of her active life with a sense of surprise and relief, as a sign-post would to a traveller after a hundred miles of vague wandering through a country without roads.⁶⁷

Plotting out Catherine’s life therefore took a great deal of reconstruction on her part “to bring out truthfully, as far as was possible, the real woman, Catharine of Siena.”⁶⁸ In drawing attention to the quality of her sources, research, and analysis, Butler aligned her work with that of professional scholars, regardless of her own status as an amateur historian and her limited access to scholarly institutions.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, VII.

⁶⁶ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, VIII.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 332.

⁶⁸ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 332.

At the time she was writing, history was the most popular non-fiction genre, and primarily the purview of male writers, with the exception of female biographies.⁶⁹ Women historians in the Victorian era primarily wrote biographies of important (usually royal or aristocratic) women.⁷⁰ Although the subjects themselves were not necessarily English by birth, they were usually queens of England, with the exception of Mary, Queen of Scots. The tone tended to be picturesque and domestic, focusing on the domestic lives of their subjects and echoing the roles women were meant to play in the nineteenth century.⁷¹ This served a didactic purpose, extolling the good behaviour of historical domestic goddesses, or criticizing the bad behaviour of women who left their proper place. Clare Broome Saunders calls these sorts of biographies “role model anthologies.”⁷² They focused on the ideal depictions of maternal, conjugal, and filial affection and loyalty, which their subjects either succeeded or failed to exemplify.⁷³

This growth in the popularity of royal biographies coincided, not coincidentally, with Queen Victoria’s ascension and reign.⁷⁴ One might be surprised that, especially in the cases of biographies of queens regnant, the positioning of the queenly biographies of the nineteenth century would not be in favour of women taking on roles in public life.⁷⁵ Victoria positioned herself variously as a liege-lady and a damsel in distress, in both cases deserving of chivalric support from her lords and MPs, and the fidelity of her people. During the Crimean War she portrayed herself as the essence of domesticity, the mother England, waiting for news of her

⁶⁹ Clare Broome Saunders, “Women Writers and the Medieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, (Oxford, United Kingdom ; Oxford University Press, 2020), 569.

⁷⁰ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 141.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 142.

⁷² Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

⁷³ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 152.

⁷⁴ Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

⁷⁵ Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

sons.⁷⁶ In much the same way, biographies of historical women, including those of queens, pretended to be above politics and promoted the ideal of domestic femininity.

Agnes Strickland (1796-1874) dedicated the twelve-volume *Lives of the Queens of England, from the Norman Conquest*, published between 1840 and 1848, to Victoria. In its introduction it presented her as the ideal queen and compared her favourably to England's four previous queens regnant.⁷⁷ Often, the biographies that glorified Victoria's delicate, domestic brand of femininity portrayed Elizabeth I with an equivalent degree of disdain. Whereas Victoria presented herself as a domestic goddess devoted to her husband and many children, Elizabeth's childlessness and virginity were viewed as unfeminine. Elizabeth was unabashedly autocratic and wielded her power in a manner that was unnerving and subversive to the average Victorian.⁷⁸ Authors did not always portray Elizabeth negatively, but it was the norm to compare her unfavourably with Victoria, and with her contemporary foil, Mary, Queen of Scots. To the Victorians, Mary, Queen of Scots was a figure of legendary beauty and tragedy and because she was a mother Victorian authors depicted her far more sympathetically than Elizabeth, whose chastity they viewed as selfish and aggressive rather than virtuous.⁷⁹

The framing of ideal femininity as essentially domestic followed the Victorian concept of the 'Angel in the House,' a concept taken from the 1854 novel of the same name, by Coventry Patmore. According to Christine E. Crouse-Dick, Patmore framed a woman's ideal role as entirely private and domestic, lauding "her devotion to [her husband's] happiness, her subservience to his wishes, and her commitment to creating and maintaining the home as a

⁷⁶ Saunders, "Women Writers," *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

⁷⁷ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 105.

⁷⁸ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 107.

⁷⁹ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 106.

haven".⁸⁰ The novel put a name to the pre-existing idea that men and women occupied separate spheres. The man existed in the public sphere, and the woman in the private.⁸¹

Given that mainstream historical biographies tended to counterintuitively use queens as examples of ideal domestic femininity, Butler would have faced an uphill battle to make Catherine of Siena appear sympathetic and laudable to an audience outside her own progressive circles. Catherine was a virgin who explicitly rejected marriage and motherhood in favour of a life of active public service. Butler did not herself believe that every woman's primary purpose in life was to be a wife and mother. As she said in *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, "I cannot believe that it is every woman's duty to marry, in this age of the world. There is abundance of work to be done which needs men and women detached from domestic ties; our unmarried women will be the greatest blessing to the community when they cease to be soured by disappointment or driven by destitution to despair."⁸² Even so, she did feel the need to defend Catherine's choice to her audience. One of the ways in which Butler tried to qualify Catherine's chastity was to outline the circumstances by which she rejected marriage and motherhood in the most favourable possible light. When guided in the direction of marriage Catherine became, in Butler's words, "Sad, her manner nervous, and she often fled suddenly from any company in which she found herself. Her secret determination to devote herself wholly in the unmarried state to the service of God and man was never, however, given up, and the 'life angelical' continually attracted her in the midst of the pleasures of earth, in which her heart found no rest".⁸³ This frames Catherine's chastity as something she could not entirely help. She consciously decided to

⁸⁰ Christine E. Crouse-Dick, "Reframing the Domestic Angel: Real Simple Magazine's Repackaging of the Victorian-Era 'Angel in the House' Narrative," *Communication Studies* 63, no. 4 (2012): 442.

⁸¹ Crouse-Dick, "Reframing the Domestic Angel," 442.

⁸² Josephine Butler, "Introduction," *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A series of Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1869), xxxv.

⁸³ Josephine Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, (London: Dyer Brothers, 1878), 28.

remain unmarried, but it came naturally to her. To have been forced to marry regardless would have been self-destructive. Her family also tested her resolve and eventually accepted her decision as divinely ordained.⁸⁴ Although Catherine may not have been a literal wife and mother, she had mystically married Christ. She was, in a sense, mother of humanity: as Butler suggests, if Catherine had married, she might have spread her piety to her descendants, but “she would not have done the work which Catharine of Siena, the subject of this biography, did: her whole soul, her whole time, the whole strength of her affections would not have been reserved to be lavished upon that great family for whom she elected to live — humanity.”⁸⁵

The women who wrote mainstream historical biographies were not as radical as Butler. They did not laud women who eschewed matrimony in the name of political progress. This does not mean that they were trying to disempower women by leaving them entirely in the private sphere. They intended to show the proper way that women could exert influence on the public by way of the private. They could influence their fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands with regard to religious, social, and cultural issues, by way of subtle, gentle, feminine persuasion.⁸⁶ Particularly prevalent was the idea of women as peacemakers. For example, Agnes Strickland (1796-1874), in her *Lives of the Queens of England*, drew attention to Joan of England as a mediator between her husband King Alexander I of Scotland, and her father King John, as well as to Catherine Parr, as mediator between her husband Henry VIII and her stepdaughters.⁸⁷

Butler’s politics were rather more radical, and so although there are similarities between the way women were broadly depicted in historical biographies, and the way she depicted

⁸⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 29.

⁸⁵ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 46, Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 42.

⁸⁶ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 152.

⁸⁷ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 158.

Catherine, Butler was clearly advocating for a different model of feminine virtue. Catherine's role in politics did not stem from any familial connections to political power. The Sienee daughter of a wool-dyer, she was sent to mediate the conflict between the Pope and the Florentine government by the Florentine war council, the Eight of War.⁸⁸ There was no convenient overlap between the public and private spheres; Catherine's work was entirely a matter of public politics.

Like the women in other biographies, Catherine's power stemmed entirely from her ability to persuade men to act, rather than to act herself. While she often portrayed herself as a humble, ignorant woman, she could be very firm and direct, rather than subtle or gentle. Butler said that "The personal hatred of Catharine felt by some of the cardinals is easily understood; for she made herself obnoxious to them, not only by her design to put an end to the 'Babylonish captivity' of the papacy, but by her acute discernment of character, and her fidelity in rebuking vice."⁸⁹ Her obnoxiousness does not imply subtlety. She would also switch between the roles of humble peasant and messenger of God.⁹⁰ Butler describes the conversation where Catherine fully convinces Gregory that he must return to Rome.

"[Gregory said] 'Catharine, I do not ask you to give me advice; I ask you to declare to me the will of God' Still she continued her reserve: she had already declared to him the will of God, and he had still hesitated to obey. She understood when to speak, and when to keep silence: she knew that to multiply words, even in the holiest cause, is often to weaken the spiritual force which impels the soul of man in the direction of that cause. At last Gregory said; "I command you, in the name of obedience, to tell me what is the will of God in this matter." She bowed her head, and replied: "Who knows more perfectly the will of God than your Holiness, who has pledged himself by a secret vow?"⁹¹

⁸⁸ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 159.

⁸⁹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 171.

⁹⁰ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 172.

⁹¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 183.

In this case, Catherine acts both as a deferent subservient and as divine messenger. Butler does not frame either of these postures as deception on Catherine's part. While Catherine often made use of appearing humble and deferent as a rhetorical tool, her persuasive abilities were simply portrayed as far broader and more flexible than those of biographies in which women's main form of power came from gently coaxing their male relatives toward the path of morality.

Another overlap between *Catharine of Siena* and other female biographies was that Catherine's main political role was mediation. As previously mentioned, Catherine initially went to the papal court at Avignon to mediate a peace between the Papacy and the Florentine Republic, but throughout her life, she often acted as mediator between feuding aristocratic families.⁹² However, she was not only a peacemaker. She also advocated for a holy crusade.⁹³ Histories written by women often took an implicitly anti-war stance, with women consistently portrayed as peacemakers.⁹⁴ Although Butler portrayed Catherine's desire for Holy War quite neutrally, it is clear that she did not herself advocate such wars in the past or present, as she said, "The motives for such an enterprise are not sufficiently clear to us in our day to enable us fully to comprehend the strength of the pure religious fervour which filled the souls of those holy men who preached the necessity of the undertaking as a pledge of fidelity to Christ."⁹⁵ Butler evidently also wanted to portray Catherine as a peacemaker, and therefore had to justify her holy bloodlust. She portrayed Catherine's crusading zeal as itself a product of her desire for peace, saying that,

Although loyalty to her Lord was the leading principle in this, as in all her thoughts and acts, she regarded the undertaking also from the point of view of a politician. She saw her country filled with, and ravaged by troops of foreign mercenary soldiers — Germans, Bretons, English, and Hungarians. She saw the Visconti and other ambitious nobles

⁹² Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 82

⁹³ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 123.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 163.

⁹⁵ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 124.

continually at war with their own countrymen and Christian blood shed every day by Christian hands. She longed to see a practical means of diverting into a legitimate channel the furious passions and restless fighting zeal of these lawless troops, and of her own countrymen who made use of them. It would be, she conceived, a double benefit to society, to rid Christendom of the presence of these brigands, and to change this rude military ardour itself into a chivalrous zeal for a holy cause⁹⁶

The inherent violence of a crusade is elided and pushed to the land of elsewhere and what-if and the emphasis is shifted to the resultant peace for her own people in Italy. There is a hint of imperialist thinking in this explanation that would have fit in very well with other female biographies of the time, although the tenor was rather different. In many biographies women were presented as guardians of British morals and values, and as the mothers of the nation in need of protection against the encroachment of foreign adversaries.⁹⁷ This was their passive role in contrast to the active role the man took in the imperial project, passively complicit, active only in the production of offspring, the future subjects of the empire.⁹⁸

Rosemary Mitchell, in *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image, 1830-1870*, says that “Women historians exploited the idea of separate spheres to establish a distinct female identity and role, but they also used it to attempt to write women into national history and even to mount a criticism of male historical views and values.”⁹⁹ This is likely part of the reason why royal and aristocratic women were such popular subjects for biography. Apart from name recognition and availability of usable evidence, royal and noble women existed inherently in both the public and private spheres and could therefore be useful as models on how to successfully negotiate the reified spheres of public and private which were not so separate in practice as they were meant to be in theory.¹⁰⁰ They could also provide a female perspective on

⁹⁶ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 124.

⁹⁷ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 140.

⁹⁸ Pridmore, “Reconstructing the Middle Ages,” 100.

⁹⁹ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 142.

historical events, both in the sense of providing their own perspectives, but also by offering a glimpse into the lives of historical women.¹⁰¹ There is a similar paradox inherent in the work of the female author, for although they may have extolled the private, domestic virtues of their subjects, and framed their involvements in politics as reluctant, the authors themselves were voluntarily entering the public sphere by publishing their work commercially. This blurring at the edges of the separate spheres may have made the slight misnomer of ‘amateur’ historian convenient for female writers who did not wish to invite public scrutiny.¹⁰²

Butler does not seem to have been particularly concerned about public scrutiny, which is unsurprising considering she was an ardent activist for the rights of women and had been physically assaulted while campaigning for the rights of sex workers.¹⁰³ She had already publicly and explicitly outlined her views on women’s rights and was accustomed to receiving hostile reactions. As such she was much more willing to be explicitly supportive of the ways in which Catherine did not conform to traditional gender expectations than other female writers were of their subjects. She said,

The desire to be allowed to preach arose very early in her mind. She dreamed that she was changed to a man, and had received the ordination of St. Dominic, and sighed on awaking to find herself still a girl. She used to collect around her in the little valley an assembly of little girls of her own age, and preach to them with ‘wonderful eloquence and power.’ She gained so much the hearts and imaginations of these little girls, that many of them imitated in their degree her manner of life, and continued to be her friends and fellow-workers when they grew up.¹⁰⁴

Women writers may have been able to manipulate the theory of separate spheres in order to carve out a space in history for women, but it was a very small space nonetheless, and Butler clearly had a broader definition of the woman’s sphere.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 142.

¹⁰² Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 142.

¹⁰³ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 454.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 169.

Not only were women writers all amateur historians because, on an institutional level, they were barred from publishing in academic journals and denied access to university educations, professional certification, and membership in historical societies; they were also attacked socially for doing ‘men’s’ work and dealing with masculine subject matter. As such, to avoid censure, many women writers avoided writing explicitly about violence or politics and instead remained in the safer territory of female biography. Author and historian Louise Stuart Costello (1799-1870), when translating medieval poetry, had to soften sexual or violent language, using archaisms to emphasize the poetic beauty of the medieval language, and to increase the appeal of the work by instilling a sense of antique charm.”¹⁰⁶ When Agnes Strickland wrote of the Battle of Flodden, she used Walter Scott’s poem *Marmion* in order to avoid having to write about war herself.¹⁰⁷ Biographies of historical women could remain charmingly domestic, lighter in tone, and therefore suitable for a female writer’s pen and a female reader’s eyes.¹⁰⁸ *Catharine of Siena* is neither particularly light in tone, nor does it shy away from politics. Butler provides extensive background on the history of the Popes at Avignon, the War of the Eight Saints, civil strife in Siena, the Papal schism, and the salacious intrigues of Queen Joanna of Naples.¹⁰⁹ She also did not shy away from depicting violence. At the beginning of *Catharine of Siena*, when providing political background for the situation in fourteenth century Italy, she describes The Massacre of Cesena by the mercenary John Hawkwood:

Hawkwood hesitated for a moment to execute this horrible deed; the Cardinal, persuading, taunting, and bribing, urged him on to the massacre, crying out, ‘I want blood, blood, blood!’ None were spared, neither the aged nor the young; mothers, maidens, and infants at the breast were murdered and flung in heaps in the streets. From

¹⁰⁶ Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 571.

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 151.

¹⁰⁸ Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 150.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, [pn].

morning till night the slaughter continued. The Cardinal stood all day as the presiding genius of the scene, a crucifix held aloft in one hand, and a sword in the other, reiterating, 'Kill them, kill them! all, all!' and resting not until the last of the five thousand of the peaceful inhabitants of Cesena was slain.¹¹⁰

In this case also, it is likely that Butler felt less pressure to conform to traditional standards of femininity in her writing. Not only would conformity not suit the message of her book, but scandal and censure could hardly touch her more than it already had.

Like her female counterparts, Butler was writing a biography of an influential female historical figure, but her radical politics are evident in her approach. Butler did not focus very strongly on the political within the domestic, but on politics full stop. Her work was obviously didactic in a way that would not have appealed to the scientific history espoused by her professional counterparts, but their standards and methodologies exerted a clear influence. Although she made it clear that Catherine was quite capable of filling the role of angel in the house, Catherine's life was not one of private domesticity, but of far-reaching political maneuverings, and that, according to Butler, also exemplified proper feminine behaviour.

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 11.

Catharine of Siena and Medievalist Motifs

In order to better understand *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*'s place in nineteenth-century historical scholarship and feminist politics, it must be situated within the framework of the social, cultural, historical, political, architectural, artistic, and poetic phenomenon that was the Victorian medievalist movement. As evidenced by the range of mediums it affected, nineteenth-century medievalism was not merely the scholarly study of a historical period, but an all-encompassing cultural movement that lasted over a hundred years and generated its own motifs and guidelines which were not always in accordance with the prevailing norms of professional historical scholarship. In many respects *Catharine of Siena* fits better into the milieu of medievalist themes and theories, than into those of late nineteenth-century historical scholarship. In general, academic historians at least attempted to reach an objective understanding of the past that rose above contemporary politics. Medievalism, on the contrary, necessarily engaged with contemporary politics in a similar manner as *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*.

Medievalism was fashionable across the political spectrum, and its underlying themes varied accordingly, but there were common motifs. In conservative circles, the Middle Ages were a prelapsarian feudal utopia to which society must return.¹ For Tory politicians such as Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), or historians like Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the medieval period was an idealised setting onto which present concerns could be grafted, rather than a past to which the present was connected through banalities of historic shifts and changes.² Meanwhile to proponents of Whig history, the Middle Ages served as the starting point for England's natural progress toward constitutional monarchy and liberal democracy, founded upon the principles of

¹ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 129.

² Pridmore, "Reconstructing the Middle Ages," 90.

Anglo-Saxon government, interrupted by the Norman invasion, codified by Magna Carta, and finally realised in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.³

To Queen Victoria, medieval aesthetics based on codes of chivalry were a means by which she could justify her own right to rule as liege lady, and shore up the popularity of her consort Prince Albert by framing him as her loyal knight.⁴ Suffragettes used the language of sainthood and martyrdom in their often-violent fight for female suffrage, and they looked to the Middle Ages as a time of greater freedom for women than their own day.⁵ Women writers frequently used ostensibly medieval settings to discuss contemporary political issues for which they would receive censure if discussed openly, as well as to find women from the past whom they could use as models for good behaviour in the present.⁶ The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed around the idea of recreating the aesthetic principles of medieval art, preferring what they considered to be the suffusion of the divine in medieval artwork, to the more secular art produced after the Renaissance.⁷ Evangelical Protestants looked to pre-Augustinian Celtic Christianity and medieval English heresies for evidence of a proto-Protestant past native to the British Isles.⁸

The Middle Ages were seen by the Victorians as an antidote to the problems of the modern day. What the medieval period looked like, what it represented, and what the nature of the antidote, depended heavily on the ideology of the medievalist in question. All of these

³ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 130.

⁴ Clare Broome Saunders, "Women Writers and the Medieval," in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 569.

⁵ Carolyn P. Colette, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Religion and Medievalism in the British Women's Suffrage Movement," *Religion and Literature* 44, no. 3 (2012): 173.

⁶ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 104.

⁷ Herbert Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the 'Mood of the Cloister,'" *Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980): 46.

⁸ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, "Counter-Medievalism: Or, Protestants Rewrite the Middle Ages," in *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, ed. Lorretta M. Holloway and Jennifer Palmgren, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 148.

variations on Victorian medievalism inform *Catherine of Siena: A Biography*, which plays into, or rejects, aspects of each part of the movement. Through the lenses of other types of medievalism, we may discern Butler's particular place within the kaleidoscope of medievalist perspectives.

The term "medievalism" was first attested in 1844. The word "medieval" is only slightly older, first attested in 1817, entering general use in the 1820s.⁹ Antiquarian Thomas Dudley Fosbroke (1770-1842) coined the term from "medium aevum" meaning "middle age."¹⁰ The antiquaries of the eighteenth century were essentially the founders of the medievalist movement. The collecting and translating of medieval texts by the London Society of Antiquaries provided the creative foundation for the scholars, authors, poets, painters, architects, and politicians of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) were particularly influential.¹² In the early nineteenth century, the republication of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* stimulated literary interest in the Arthurian canon and inspired poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), William Morris (1834-1896), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894).

However, it was Sir Walter Scott's (1771-1832) historical novel *Ivanhoe* (1819) that truly captured the public's imagination, spawning legions of imitators.¹³ More than any scholarly work

⁹ Tom Duggett and Catherine Spooner, "From Romantic Gothic to Victorian Medievalism: 1817 and 1877," in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, ed. Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 115.

¹⁰ Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner, (Oxford, United Kingdom; Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

¹¹ Lorretta M. Holloway and Jennifer Palmgren, introduction to *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, ed. Lorretta M. Holloway and Jennifer Palmgren, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

¹² Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

¹³ Parker and Wagner, introduction to *Oxford Handbook*, 8.

or medieval text, *Ivanhoe* formed the basis for the popular Victorian conception of the Middle Ages.¹⁴ As Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner observe in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*, “Scott explored questions that would become central to Victorian authors about the relationship between the individual and the nation.”¹⁵ This juxtaposition between the past and the present forms the core of Victorian medievalism. Those who studied the medieval period in the nineteenth century, and those who made use of medieval sources, subjects and aesthetics, did not do so in order to present an authentic view of the past, but to provide a lens through which to view the present.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century medievalism was fundamentally presentist. Regardless of whether it focused on that which has been lost or gained, whether triumphalist or regretful, utopian or dystopian, Victorian medievalism always reflected the issues and ideas of the present.

In 1840, the eminent Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle began a series of lectures called *On Heroes, the Heroic, and Hero-Worship in History*, in which he outlined what we now know as the “great man” theory of history. As Caitríona Ní Dhúill says, “The *On Heroes* lectures cast history itself as a heroic narrative of struggle and leadership in which personality, individual achievement, self-actualization, and self-overcoming are the driving forces, and the structural, material, and social factors determining historical change are effectively written out.”¹⁷ Carlyle’s ideas were very influential during his own lifetime, and his emphasis on biography is reflective of the growing popularity of historical biography in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ However, while Carlyle may have been preoccupied exclusively with male biography, as discussed in the first

¹⁴ Holloway and Palmgren, introduction to *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, 1.

¹⁵ Parker and Wagner, introduction to *Oxford Handbook*, 8.

¹⁶ Rosemary Jann, “Democratic Myths in Victorian Medievalism,” *Browning Institute Studies*, no. 8 (1980): 129.

¹⁷ Caitríona Ní Dhúill, “World History as Heroic Biography: Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Great Men,’” in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 30.

¹⁸ Fred Kaplan, “Carlyle, Thomas (1795–1881), author, biographer, and historian,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004; Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

chapter, the nineteenth century saw a marked expansion in the realm of biographies of women, written by women.¹⁹ Although biographies of women were written before the Victorian era, they were given new impetus by Victoria's ascension to the throne in 1837. Throughout Victoria's reign a new biography of great women was published in Britain and the United States almost every year, and throughout the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s as many as a dozen were published in a single year.²⁰ Authors like Louisa Stuart Costello, Agnes Strickland, and Anna Jameson, were all commissioned by publishers to write such biographies.²¹

Although queenly biographies tended to affirm the status-quo, they were far from the only type of medievalist writing undertaken by women writers. Women often used medieval settings as a guise for discussing contemporary politics in their historical non-fiction, novels, and poetry. In 1812 Anna Barbauld published *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, a poem which openly criticized the then-ongoing Napoleonic Wars and predicted England's eventual decline and fall. She wrote, "And thinks't thou, Britain, still to sit at ease, / An island Queen amidst thy subject seas, / While the vext billows, in their distant roar, / But soothe thy slumbers, and but kiss thy shore? / To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof, / Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof? / So sing thy flatterers; but, Britain, know, / Thou who hast shared the guilt must share the woe."²² Critics reacted extremely negatively and vitriolically to the poem's publication due to the perceived vulgarity of a woman bluntly expressing political dissent. The reaction was so strong that it destroyed Barbauld's career and had a chilling effect on other women writers, who subsequently avoided openly expressing political opinions in their work.²³ Four years before the

¹⁹ Saunders, "Women Writers," *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

²⁰ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 104.

²¹ Saunders, "Women Writers," *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

²² Anna Barbauld, "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven," Project Gutenberg, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14100/pg14100.html>.

²³ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 6.

publication of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Amelia Opie published “The Warrior’s Return,” which dealt with the same subject matter, and similarly criticized Britain’s tendency to enter into what she considered to be unnecessary wars, but while her work was not particularly acclaimed, it was also not particularly censured, as she had added a thin medieval veneer to her work.²⁴ Future female writers would follow her example, couching their criticisms in terms of historical events, rather than directly entering the political sphere.²⁵

Concern over causing scandal by discussing politics does not, on the surface, make particular sense with regard to Josephine Butler. Butler had no need to abstract her point about women’s public, political role. It would not destroy her career to do so when she had made political campaigning for the rights of women her life’s work and was very much accustomed to openly and critically discussing contemporary politics. She had previously written very explicitly on nineteenth-century women’s roles outside of the domestic sphere in her introduction to the essay collection *Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture*, saying,

I think that any theory of life or of public arrangements is thoroughly unscientific, as well as unchristian, which leaves this mass of people out of account, which deals with it as a fact which must be endured, but which must be as much as possible pushed into a corner, and fenced round so as to annoy and hurt the rest of the community as little as possible. Such economy resembles that of an indolent housewife who is aware of a certain chamber in her house which is full of the accumulated dirt of years, but which she fears to look into, hopeless of any possible cleansing, and the door of which she keeps carefully closed, content so long as the rest of the dwelling is not fatally infected by the presence of the evil.”²⁶

Clearly, she was not afraid of addressing contemporary concerns head on. One can infer that one of her reasons for writing about Catherine of Siena was a genuine interest in her life and work, but another factor might have been that a biography of Catherine of Siena, in a time when history

²⁴ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 31.

²⁵ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 32.

²⁶ Butler, “Introduction,” *Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture*, xvii.

was the largest non-fiction genre,²⁷ would have been more accessible to a wider audience, and more palatable to those who would consider a woman plainly discussing contemporary politics objectionable.

People across the political spectrum used medievalism to convey very different messages, adjusting the facts of history to varying degrees to support their theories. The particular view of the past provided by *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* does not neatly fit into the ideology of any one group, but it is evident that aspects of medievalism drawn from various sources influenced Butler, and her work likely exerted a certain influence in turn.

The ideology of conservative medievalism was probably the most influential at the time. It took its most prominent form in the ideas of Young England, a loose grouping of mostly young, mostly aristocratic, Tory politicians. They were monarchists with vestigial Jacobite leanings, who sought the regeneration of society through the reimposition of social hierarchies and the centering of the Anglican church within English culture. They were opposed to liberal utilitarianism, and nostalgic for the seemingly more stable and well delineated world of the feudal Middle Ages.²⁸ Young Englanders, according to Rosmary Jann, thought that “the antidote to those modern poisons - laissez faire capitalism, Utilitarian ethics, [and] Liberal individualism - lay in a resuscitation of medieval hierarchy, one which called on the Captains of Industry to form a new aristocracy, and the state to assume control over the economy and social welfare”.²⁹ The best remembered Young Englander was Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), who held the office of Prime Minister twice, first in 1868, and then again from 1874 to 1880, in his second term

²⁷ Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 569.

²⁸ Robert O’Kell, “Past and Present: Young England and Industrial Medievalism,” *Victorian Review* 41, no. 1 (2015): 9.

²⁹ Jann, “Democratic Myths,” 129.

replacing Gladstone in the election that Butler said heralded “a period of great depression and discouragement for our cause”.³⁰

Conservative medievalism was the most dominant version with the public. As Holloway and Palmgren say, “Instead of pestilence and peasant revolts, the Victorians found glorious knights and fair ladies more interesting and more marketable. Belief in the ideal of a unified medieval church overshadowed the medieval period’s religious intolerance. The overlooked even the dangerous capriciousness of feudal lords in favor of envisioning them as benevolent keepers of the community.”³¹ However, as one might imagine from her reaction to a Young Englander taking office, Butler and *Catharine of Siena* had little in common with the medievalism of conservatives. She chose Italy in the fourteenth century as the setting for her book; a land of plague, civil wars, unruly mercenaries, and papal schisms. Butler was not interested in framing the medieval period as a utopia to which we must return, and she was not a conservative. Though she had familial ties to the aristocracy, was more strongly politically linked with Whig Liberals, workers, and socialists. As such, the themes of conservative medievalism differ significantly from those of *Catharine of Siena* and are not particularly comparable. Butler simply did not share many priorities with conservatives.

Butler had far stronger connections to the Whig Liberals. Her cousin-once-removed was Whig politician Lord Charles Grey (1764-1845), the second Earl Grey, Prime Minister from 1830 to 1834. He oversaw the Great Reform Act (1832) and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (1833).³² She was also connected to William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), the

³⁰ Josephine E. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1896), 99.

³¹ Holloway and Palmgren, introduction to *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, 4.

³² E. A. Smith, "Grey, Charles, second Earl Grey (1764–1845), prime minister," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

aforementioned predecessor of Disraeli. He supported the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts and considered the rescue and conversion of prostitutes a personal crusade.³³

The Whig view of the Middle Ages was similar to the conservative view in idealising and mythologizing the period, however while conservatives saw the medieval period as featuring an ideal form of government, the Whigs saw it as the starting point of forward progress toward modern liberal democracy.³⁴ Where the conservatives longed for the feudal hierarchy of the Normans and the absolute monarchy of the Stuarts, Whigs saw pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon culture as the origin point of Britain's representative parliament, justice system, and focus on the individual rights of man.³⁵ Royalists argued that the Anglo-Saxon *witan*, which Whigs considered parliament's predecessor, had been subordinated under an absolute monarch by the Norman conquest.³⁶ Although serfdom pre-dated the Norman conquest, Whigs nevertheless emphasised that men had been guaranteed their rights in Anglo-Saxon culture.³⁷ They viewed the Norman Conquest merely as an interruption of the native English membership in what Jann calls the "Western European family of limited monarchies."³⁸

This allegiance to Western Europe was partly an anti-Catholic stance as eastern Europe, and especially areas influenced by Roman Catholicism, were seen as naturally tending towards autocratic and tyrannical governments. Whig historians explicitly contrasted the virtuous austerity of the Goths with the decadence and depravity of the Romans.³⁹ Another factor, connected with the first, was the popular Whig belief in Teutonic racial superiority, wherein

³³ H. C. G. Matthew, "Gladstone, William Ewart (1809–1898), prime minister and author," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

³⁴ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 130.

³⁵ Gaunt, "Toryism and Young England," 341, Parker and Wagner, introduction to *Oxford Handbook*, 2.

³⁶ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 130.

³⁷ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 134.

³⁸ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 132.

³⁹ Jann, "Democratic Myths," 132.

English democracy was not merely tied to Anglo-Saxon culture, but also to their Germanic heritage. They contrasted their own prosperity with the perceived backwardness of Celtic states such as France and Spain.⁴⁰

Butler subscribed to the Whig view of history as one of progress, continuous with disruptions but not breaks. This is indicated at the end of *Catharine of Siena*, where she wrote of “The wonderful power with which God has endowed us, as social and sympathetic beings, to impart what we know and love, to pass on from hand to hand the torch we bear, be it of a blazing brightness or as yet but dimly burning.”⁴¹ However, Whig ideas of racial hierarchy or English exceptionalism are absent from her work. Much in the same way her Protestantism did not fit into any particular denomination, her political allegiances were not clearly defined. Although she was most strongly allied with the Whigs, she supported them insofar as they aligned with her beliefs, rather than conforming her beliefs to theirs. Butler does not ever seem to have been interested, in any of her writings, in the sort of racial science popular with Whigs. While she was not immune to ethnic stereotyping, it was on the order of thinking calling Italians passionate rather than thinking of them as naturally prone to autocracy.⁴² She supported emancipation of the enslaved in the American Civil War, and she neither denigrated nor glorified Celts particularly, following neither the Whigs nor her fellow evangelical Protestants in that regard.⁴³

Both conservative and liberal medievalists were focused for the most part on medieval England. Whig medievalism in particular was nationalistic and imperialist in attitude.⁴⁴ Why then, did Butler choose to focus on an Italian saint? Firstly, while Britain may have been the

⁴⁰ Jann, “Democratic Myths,” 131.

⁴¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 338.

⁴² Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 40.

⁴³ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 45.

⁴⁴ Jann, “Democratic Myths,” 138.

most popular focus for British medievalists, it was not the only focus.⁴⁵ Translations of medieval texts, primarily from French, German, and Icelandic, were also being produced in England at the time.⁴⁶ The advent of tourism on a wider scale brought with it the increased popularity of travel writing. Louise Stuart Costello (1799-1870) was a well-known travel writer and medievalist who, as a result of her travels, wrote several biographies of medieval French figures.⁴⁷ *Catharine of Siena*, which opens with a loving description of Siena, overlaps with the travel writing genre in certain respects, and Butler wrote it in part while traveling on the Continent.⁴⁸

Butler also studied Italian alongside her husband. Her fluency in the language allowed her to use Raymond of Capua's hagiography of Catherine, and Catherine's own letters as her sources. Here is another connection to medievalist—specifically Pre-Raphaelite—circles, as she and her husband were friends with Italian-English painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). He would occasionally send them “some of his translations of the exquisite sonnets of Dante, the English of which he was anxious to make as perfect as possible,” and whom they visited in his studio in Chelsea, where he showed them “his portfolios of original sketches for his great paintings, besides many unfinished drawings and pathetic incidents expressed in artist's shorthand—slight but beautiful pencil designs.”⁴⁹ Butler's sister lived in Naples, and she often traveled there, both to visit her sister and to pursue the repeal of similar laws regulating vice in Italy.⁵⁰ In her memoir, she said of the 1860 Expedition of the Thousand, which contributed to the unification of Italy, that “Among the public events which interested us most during these years was the revolution in Naples, the change of dynasty, and Garibaldi's career. Our interest was in

⁴⁵ Parker and Wagner, introduction to *Oxford Handbook*, 7.

⁴⁶ Holloway and Palmgren, introduction to *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, 1.

⁴⁷ Saunders, “Women Writers,” *Oxford Handbook*, 570.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 2, Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 229.

⁴⁹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 28.

⁵⁰ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 8, Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 155.

part of a personal nature, as my sister, Madame Meuricoffre, and her husband were in the midst of these events.”⁵¹ Butler also had ties to Aurelio Saffi (1819-1890), an Italian politician, active in the fight for Italian unification, who visited her while in exile in England, and gave lectures on Dante in her drawing room.⁵² While it is beyond the scope of this thesis it is possible that her apparent support for Italian unification influenced her depiction of Catherine. Italian unification had only occurred seven years prior to the book’s publication and she emphasised Catherine as an Italian saint beloved by the whole of Italy and especially concerned with the welfare of all Italians.⁵³ This was sixty-one years before Catherine was officially made patron saint of Italy.

Teutonic racial superiority was founded on the perceived differences between Protestant Germanic peoples and Roman Catholic Celts and Romans. Anti-Catholic sentiment was common in nineteenth-century England, especially in Whig circles. Butler’s affection for Italy may have softened her anti-Catholic tendencies, although they were not worn away entirely. Although she clearly held no love for the Roman Catholic curia, she also did not portray the Popes Gregory XI or Urban VI as evil, but as flawed mortal men, rather than living saints. She said of Gregory that he was “naturally inclined to good, and, although surrounded on all sides by an atmosphere of moral turpitude, he maintained a blameless life; but he was no hero”.⁵⁴ More importantly, the form that her anti-Catholicism took adhered more closely to that of her fellow evangelical Protestants than it did to the Whig establishment.

Butler was most aligned with the medievalism of evangelical Protestants. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein calls evangelical Protestant medievalism “counter-medievalism,” which

⁵¹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 48.

⁵² Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 29.

⁵³ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 36.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 168.

sought to bolster the legitimacy of the “as-yet unfinished project of Reformation [...] by reading the Middle Ages as a series of tragically incomplete attempts at asserting Protestant principles.”⁵⁵ It was counter-medievalism in the sense that it stood contrary to the dominant medievalist idea that medieval Catholic culture was more unified and just than the disorganised and disparate sects which formed in response to the Reformation.⁵⁶ Instead, they looked for examples of proto-Protestant ideas in pre-Reformation figures and heresies.⁵⁷ Attempting to find examples of Protestant principles in pre-Reformation history was not new, but the project was given new impetus by the increased acceptance of Catholics over the course of the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Counter-medievalism was essentially a backlash to Catholic emancipation in 1819, the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, and the Ritualist and Anglo-Catholic movements, which sought to revive Catholic practices within the Church of England.⁵⁹

One supposed example of Protestant principles in medieval Britain was found in the existence of pre-Augustinian British Christianity, maintained by the native Britons in the face of pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders.⁶⁰ In this conception, there is no Teutonic racial superiority as it is the Anglo-Saxons, converted by the Roman Catholic Augustine of Canterbury, who are closer to Catholicism, thus reversing the Celts versus Germans paradigm proposed by Whigs. Protestant evangelicals were also enamoured with the proto-Protestantism of John Wycliffe and the Lollards (c. 1328-1384). John Wycliffe was an English priest who advocated for vernacular translations of the Bible. Whether or not he personally translated Wycliffe’s Bible is debated by modern scholars, and it is considered likely that many of his supposed writings were false

⁵⁵ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 147.

⁵⁶ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 148.

⁵⁷ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 148.

⁵⁸ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 148.

⁵⁹ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 150.

⁶⁰ Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism,” 150.

attributions, but even so, Victorian evangelicals believed him to be an English forerunner of Luther. According to evangelicals, he anticipated the doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*.⁶¹ In neither the case of the pre-Augustinian Britons nor of John Wycliffe and the Lollards is there particularly convincing evidence that they were proto-Protestant in any meaningful sense, but their cooptation by Protestant evangelicals does put Butler's claims about Catherine into perspective. At several points in *Catharine of Siena*, Butler makes the claim that, had she been born after the Reformation, Catherine would have been a Protestant, and that, as a reformer, she sat among the likes of John Wycliffe, Jan Huss, and Martin Luther.⁶² At one point in the biography she specifically compares Catherine and John Wycliffe, saying,

Precisely at this time there lived in far-off England a stern monk who, in order to rebuke the luxury of the clergy in his own land, had adopted a life of extreme poverty, and who, lean and fasting, and dressed in a coarse garment, was going barefooted on his missions, preaching repentance, and carrying terror to the consciences of wicked professors and false teachers. He laid the wooden cross he carried over the backs of the vicious priests, fulminating terrible curses upon their cupidity, impurity, and pride, and beating them till they cried out for mercy. This monk was John Wycliffe, Catharine's contemporary. In their opposition to practical ungodliness, the spirit of the fiery reformer animated both.⁶³

Butler's claim that Catherine would have been a Protestant may appear far-fetched. It was not as though there had been no loyal reformers within the Catholic church in the time since the Reformation. However, there was a prevailing evangelical tendency to attach the label of proto-Protestant to pre-Reformation religious figures and peoples. Butler, as an evangelical herself, drew from that particular evangelical niche in the medievalist movement when making that claim.

⁶¹ Burstein, "Counter-Medievalism," 153.

⁶² Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 239.

⁶³ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 229.

Although Butler is best known for her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, she was also involved in the early women's suffrage movement.⁶⁴ The continued influence of medievalism, and perhaps Butler herself, is noticeable in the later activities of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which fought militantly for women's suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Butler, they used the language of religion to galvanise their supporters, not by invoking liturgy or church doctrine, but by appealing to mystical ideas concerning the immanence of God, and the ability to act as a divine light in the darkness.⁶⁵ The WSPU periodical *Votes for Women* often employed the language of saintliness and martyrdom with regard to women's oppression generally, and the state violence that Suffragettes endured in particular. Suffragettes who went on hunger strike while imprisoned were often force-fed, but Carolyn P. Colette says, "The heroism of the suffragettes who endured this torture was hailed in the pages of *Votes for Women* in an essay titled 'Calendar of Saints'. Women who suffered forcible feeding for the cause were said to have joined 'The Church Militant.'"⁶⁶

Suffragettes also looked to medieval history for female role models. Butler's introduction of Catherine of Siena to English feminists seems to have had some staying power. A 1911 issue of *Votes for Women* features a review of another biography of Catherine of Siena, by Mrs. Aubrey Richardson, which also presented Catherine as a role model for female political agitators.⁶⁷ However, although Butler may have wanted Catherine to be the medieval role model for modern feminist activism, the true medieval figurehead of the suffrage movement was Joan of Arc. She was the 'patron saint' "of the Actresses Franchise League, which displayed her image

⁶⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, "Butler [née Grey], Josephine Elizabeth (1828–1906), social reformer and women's activist," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004.

⁶⁵ Colette, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 173

⁶⁶ Colette, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 173.

⁶⁷ "Catherine of Siena: Mystic and Politician," *Votes for Women*, Jul. 28, 1911.

on its banners,”⁶⁸ and in the United States women dressed as Joan and rode on horseback during suffrage parades.⁶⁹ Like Butler, and including Butler, suffragists looked to the Middle Ages for female role models on which they could base their activism. Unlike Butler, many feminist writers saw the Middle Ages as a better time for women than the nineteenth century, as in Anglo Saxon England they had property rights and greater legal control over domestic affairs and their children.⁷⁰ Like almost all the other versions of medievalism, they used the Middle Ages to point out the inadequacies of the society in which they themselves lived.

Given the broad trend of Victorian medievalism toward treating the Middle Ages as a positive point of comparison the nineteenth century, it is noticeable that *Catharine of Siena*'s fourteenth century is far from utopian. Medievalists were criticized at the time for being reductive in portraying the Middle Ages as a picture of perfect social harmony.⁷¹ Apart from being a utopian ideal to which politicians could point, the Victorian idea of the Middle Ages provided an escapist fantasy for a public all too familiar with political, economic, and social turmoil. According to Julie Pridmore, it served as a “powerful social nostalgia for the shared and ordered life of the feudal system, contrasted with inadequate poor relief, commercial greed and the anarchy of uncontrolled competition.”⁷² If the nineteenth-century medievalist perspective was overwhelmingly of a prelapsarian period of greater rights, freedoms, and stability, why did Butler not depict Catherine's fourteenth century that way?

⁶⁸ Colette, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 171.

⁶⁹ Suzanne LaVere, “‘The Great Original Suffragist’: Joan of Arc as a Symbol in the US Women's Suffrage Movement,” in *International Medievalisms: From Nationalism to Activism*, ed. Mary Boyle, (Boydell & Brewer, 2023).

⁷⁰ Saunders, *Women Writers and Medievalism*, 5.

⁷¹ Holloway and Palmgren, introduction to *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, 4.

⁷² Pridmore, “Reconstructing the Middle Ages,” 93.

Apart from the fact that her depiction of the period is more realistic than those of her medievalist peers, and perhaps her reasoning was as simple as scholarly ethics, the answer is that it would not have served her message. Butler was idealising a person in time, rather than the time itself. She depicted Catherine as a model social reformer rather than the medieval period as a model social order. Butler chose a woman who was a product of fourteenth-century Italy, which was full of civil and religious strife, mercenaries, massacres, and the third wave of the Plague. She did not shy away from depicting any of the above because their existence necessitated Catherine's intervention, and the necessity and defensibility of Catherine's intervention into public affairs was the entire point of the book.

Catharine of Siena: A Biography of Catherine or Josephine?

Catharine of Siena: A Biography reflects Josephine Butler's view of Catherine as an ideal activist. Although it is easy to see the comparisons between Catherine and Butler, Butler did not frame Catherine purely as an analog of herself, but also as a role model for other female activists, and a representation of her own views regarding activism as religious work. Butler compared herself to Catherine of Siena as a defense of herself in the middle of a difficult activist campaign in which she and her female compatriots were attacked by her opponents and sidelined by members of her own movement.

Josephine Butler called 1874 a bad year for those campaigning against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809-1898), who had been sympathetic to their cause, resigned suddenly. The subsequent general election resulted in a decisive victory for the Conservatives, who were generally in favour of the acts. Several of their political allies lost their seats, and the campaign was low in the public consciousness.¹ It was around this time that Butler began writing *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*. At the same time, due to leadership changes, the women of the campaign were being marginalised by the men in the movement. Butler had been leading the Ladies' National Association (LNA) since 1869, but in 1874 she needed to step aside due to her health. Sir James Stansfield, a Liberal politician who had been a cabinet minister under Gladstone, was chosen to lead the LNA in her place.² Between 1874 and the publishing of *Catharine of Siena* in 1878, the women involved in the campaign against the CDAs were pushed aside because the men were more strictly interested in

¹ Josephine E. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1896), 99.

² Janet L. Larson, "Josephine Butler's 'Catharine of Siena': Writing (Auto)Biography as a Feminist Spiritual Practice," *Christianity & Literature* 48, no. 4 (1999): 445, Arnold Charles Baker, "Stansfield, Sir James (1820-98)," (London: Routledge, 2001), 1169, Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 453.

parliamentary victory. They were unconvinced of the persuasive power of religious arguments and viewed female political participation as unnecessary. Instead, they pushed their female counterparts to engage in “rescue work” rather than campaigning in direct service of the cause.³ Stansfield had chosen to emphasise the constitutional and legal grounds for the repeal of the Acts. Although Butler did not disagree with the constitutional or scientific arguments for repeal, she preferred to build the campaign against the Acts upon a moral and spiritual framework.⁴

This power struggle between the men and women in the campaign does not get mentioned in her memoir *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*. Its absence is not particularly surprising as the memoir was published in 1896, twenty years after *Catharine of Siena*, and ten years after the Acts were repealed.⁵ As evidenced by the title, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* was meant to be a triumphant history of a successful activist campaign, and at no point is it particularly critical of any of her allies. Any internal conflicts within the LNA are not brought up. However, in the *Personal Reminiscences*, she included a letter she wrote in 1877, a year before she published *Catharine of Siena*, wherein she directly told Swiss women that English men would not be willing to sideline the women in the movement. In advance of the first International Abolitionist Federation congress in Geneva, some Swiss members had suggested women should not be allowed at some of the meetings. They objected to women being exposed to sensitive subject matter in the “Hygienic Section” especially.⁶ Some female members on the Swiss side, though inclined to agree that they should not attend, wrote to their English counterparts for their advice. Butler unequivocal stated that

³ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 447.

⁴ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 454.

⁵ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 7.

⁶ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 286.

although female members were perfectly within their rights to not attend meetings which would make them uncomfortable, they must not allow themselves to be systematically excluded. She said, “It is utterly useless for you to ask Mr. Stansfeld to promote such a public act of exclusion. He will not do it. You might as well ask him to strike you or thrust you out of the room. I think you hardly know what our best Englishmen are. They will be true to women now, even in spite of those women themselves”.⁷ She said this even as Stansfield was trying to restrict women’s role within the movement in England.⁸

Although Butler clearly chose Catherine as her subject for political reasons, it is also evident she felt a real affinity with her. Janet Larson says, “Although she gives no personal reasons for choosing her subject, it is fairly transparent that the author, while making the saint’s story speak to present public needs, was simultaneously engaged in a private autobiographical project extending well beyond the striking narrative parallels between their unconventional careers in public service.”⁹ There is clear evidence to support this reading of *Catharine of Siena*. A parallel reading of Butler’s own memoir, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* shows some points of overlap. In 1870, Butler travelled to Colchester ahead of a by-election to campaign against Sir Henry Storks, a supporter of the Acts.¹⁰ While in Colchester she was hounded by an angry mob, led by Colchester’s brothel owners.¹¹ She wrote in a letter to her sons:

I have tried several hotels; each one rejects me after another. At last I came to a respectable Tory hotel, not giving my name. I had gone to bed very tired, and was dropping asleep, when I heard some excitement in the street, and a rap at my door. It was the master of the hotel. He said, ‘I am sorry, madam, I have a very unpleasant announcement to make.’ ‘Say on,’ I replied. He said, ‘I find you are Mrs. Josephine

⁷ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 287.

⁸ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 448.

⁹ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 446.

¹⁰ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 52.

¹¹ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 44.

Butler, and the mob outside have found out that you are here, and have threatened to set fire to the house unless I send you out at once.' I said, 'I will go immediately. But how is it that you get rid of me when you know that though I am a Liberal I am practically working into the hands of Colonel Learmont, the Conservative candidate?' He replied, 'I would most gladly keep you, madam; undoubtedly your cause is a good one, but there is a party so much incensed against you that my house is not safe while you are in it.'¹²

Compare this with Butler's description of Catherine encountering a similarly violent mob while trying to mediate between warring political factions in Florence:

The citizens, who no longer dared to shelter her, begged her to depart from the city. 'Catharine lost nothing of her ordinary tranquillity,' says Raymond. 'Confident of her own innocence, she rejoiced to suffer for the sake of the cause she had at heart.' She encouraged her companions with more than her usual sweetness and cheerfulness of manner. Chased from every retreat, she retired into a deserted garden which she found, and there kneeling down, she poured out her soul in prayer before God. While she was thus engaged, there approached a band of the woolcarders of the quarter of San Giovanni. They were armed with halberds, swords, and clubs, and were crying out, 'Where is the wicked woman! Where is Catharine?'¹³

Both women were denied shelter for pursuing their causes, and both responded to the threat of violence with remarkable equanimity. Although Butler did not explicitly draw attention to these comparisons, they would have been evident to anyone familiar with her as a public figure, and as her allies were liable to be her primary audience, she could rely on their familiarity with her. Reviews noticed the parallels. In the "Books Worth Reading" column of *Women's Penny Paper*, a nineteenth-century feminist publication, Annie Holdsworth wrote: "Interesting, indeed, would it be for us to follow the parallel thus delicately suggested, and in the life of the modern woman who writes with such rare appreciation of the saint of the middle ages, to trace again the strength, the purpose, and the heroism that have made Catharine of Siena the light of her century."¹⁴

¹² Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 46.

¹³ Josephine Butler, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, (London: Dyer Brothers, 1878), 214.

¹⁴ Annie Holdsworth, "Books Worth Reading: Catharine of Siena," *Women's Penny Paper*, Jan. 3, 1895, 9.

However, Butler's accounts of her own experiences, while similar in action, differ in characterization. Much as she may have seen herself in Catherine, she did not simply insert her own personality into her. In the previous anecdote from her memoir, Butler was afraid to go out to her meeting because the mob was threatening her life. She prayed to God and heard the words, "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day [...] A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, thy habitation," and reassured by the heavenly words, she went to her meeting without fear.¹⁵ On the other hand, Catherine, upon meeting with her own mob, replied to their threats by saying "I am ready to die for Jesus Christ and for his people; that, indeed, is the end of all my desires. If you are charged to kill me, act fearlessly; here I am in your hands; and be assured that no harm will come to you from any of my friends."¹⁶ Upon their leaving her unharmed she wept, having "not been accounted worthy, she thought, to suffer death for Christ's sake."¹⁷ Although Catherine of Siena and Josephine Butler may have at times faced comparable dangers, and, as shall be further discussed, held comparable religious beliefs, Butler did not attempt to paint Catherine purely as a fourteenth-century version of herself.

While Butler may have been primarily using *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* as a framing device for her own work, it is evident from her memoir that Catherine also echoed other people in her life. Particularly notable was her relationship with a woman called Marion, whom Butler met in a workhouse in the mid-1860s, and who lived with Butler for three months, before

¹⁵ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 48.

¹⁶ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 214.

¹⁷ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 215.

dying from an unspecified illness of the lungs.¹⁸ Butler clearly saw something holy in Marion, saying of her:

It was difficult to suppress the thought, 'If she had not been so destroyed, what a brightness and blessing she might have been in the world. 'Untaught, unacquainted with the Scriptures till she came to us, she mastered the New Testament so thoroughly in that brief time that her acute questions and pregnant remarks were often a subject of wonder to my husband.'¹⁹

Her descriptions of Marion, and the anecdotes she shared, echo passages from *Catharine of Siena*. During the time that Marion was living with her, Butler was not yet directly involved in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, but she would soon join what she termed her 'Great Crusade'. Just before Marion died, Butler says she prophesied,

Of hard days and a sad heart which were in store for me in contending against the evil to which she had fallen a victim. I recall her words with wonder and comfort. She would say, 'When your soul quails at the sight of the evil, which will increase yet awhile, dear Mrs. Butler, think of me and take courage. God has given me to you, that you may never despair of any.'²⁰

In *Catharine of Siena*, Catherine wrote a letter to Johanna of Naples, likewise entreating her to take part in a crusade, although in their case the holy war was more literal:

I therefore pray you, and would constrain you, madam," she writes, " in the name of Christ crucified, to animate your soul and prepare yourself by a humble attitude before God, to aid this work. If you will take up the cross, many will follow you. Awake, my sister, and act courageously! It is no time to sleep: time itself sleeps not; it flies like the wind."²¹

Marion's near miraculous mastery of the New Testament is similar to Catherine, who, according to Butler,

¹⁸ Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler. *Josephine E. Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir*, ed. George W. Johnson and Lucy A. Johnson (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Company Limited, 1909) 64.

¹⁹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 64.

²⁰ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 68.

²¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 126.

Taught herself to read, for she had had hitherto no knowledge whatever of letters. She desired to be able to study for herself the Scriptures, especially the Psalms and Gospels, as well as the lives and writings of the fathers, confessors, and martyrs. She learned with such rapidity that her friends declared that the angel Gabriel himself had come down to her cell with a spelling-book to teach her, for nothing but a miracle, they thought, could account for her sudden accession of learning.²²

At one point in her memoir Butler straightforwardly calls Marion a saint, although through the voice of another. She tells of a clergyman who went to speak to Marion while she was staying with the Butlers and upon returning from his conversation with her, “His face was radiant, and he spoke, not of any teaching or comfort which he might have conveyed to her, but of the help and privilege it was to himself to have held communion during a short half hour with a dying saint, so young, yet so enlightened, and so near to God.”²³

The difficulty with charting the parallels between Catherine and Butler, and their rhetorical purpose, is that the parallels are both real and imagined. Butler drew upon similarities that were fairly obvious. For example, she said that Catherine paid regular visits to Siena’s prisons, brought comfort to prisoners, “and in her walks through the city, she would track the steps of the poor outcast woman, ask to be allowed to enter her dwelling with her, and, embracing her tenderly and frankly, would sit down by her side and plead with her concerning the beauty of that soul which was in peril of eternal death.”²⁴ She could likewise have been describing herself, as she took ‘fallen’ women from jails and workhouses, and from the streets, to convalesce in her own home and provided them with religious instruction, as was the case with Marion.²⁵

²² Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 46.

²³ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 65.

²⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 81.

²⁵ Judith R. Walkowitz, "Butler [née Grey], Josephine Elizabeth (1828–1906), social reformer and women's activist," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004, Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 64.

On the other hand, if someone completely divorced from Butler had written the same book at the same time, it is very unlikely that anyone would have connected Catherine to Butler. As Larson points out, Butler was the “beautiful, gifted daughter of landed gentry with a distinguished family record in Whig politics and an Evangelical by firm persuasion who understood the women's movement of her time as an extension of the Protestant Reformers' work. Her subject, on the other hand, was a ‘Daughter of the People’ and a Dominican lay mendicant.”²⁶ Butler herself preferred to elide her aristocratic connections and frame herself as middle class.²⁷ In her memoir she described her mother’s family as being “descended from the poor but honest families of silk-weavers, driven out of France by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.” This might readily be compared with her description of Catherine of Siena as “The wool-dyer's daughter.”²⁸ Even so, it would be an exaggeration to draw too close a comparison between the life of a fourteenth-century Italian artisan’s daughter, and that of a nineteenth-century gentleman’s daughter.

In *Catharine of Siena*, the persecution Catherine experienced took the form of gossiping townfolk, restrictive gender expectations, classism, and aversion to her mysticism, both from layfolk and clerics.²⁹ Butler framed this persecution as something that instilled discipline in her, and helped her defend herself from Satan’s temptations. She said of Catherine’s controversial reputation during her lifetime that,

The goodwill of society is easily and quickly won by those who maintain an amiable and harmless mediocrity in virtue ; but those who are inspired and enabled to rise above the ordinary standard of excellence, or who step beyond the conventional limits of what is commonly esteemed becoming and consistent, run the risk of incurring more or less, for a

²⁶ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 450.

²⁷ Walkowitz, “Social reformer and women’s activist,” 1.

²⁸ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*; 5, Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 11.

²⁹ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 465.

time at least, the displeasure of society. Their sternness of virtue seems to rebuke the lower attainments of others; and it is more frequently among the pious and the good that their critics and detractors are to-be found than among the ignorant and erring multitude.³⁰

This perspective of the caprices of public opinion is likely the result of her own experience supporting unpopular causes, the first of which was the abolition of slavery in the United States.

She says in *Josephine Butler, An Autobiographical Memoir*,

It was a good training in swimming against the tide, or at least in standing firm and letting the tide go by, and in maintaining, while doing so, a charitable attitude towards those who conscientiously differed, and towards the thousands who float contentedly down the stream of the fashionable opinion of the day. In this case the feeling of isolation on a subject of such tragic interest was often painful; but the discipline was useful, for it was our lot again more emphatically in the future to have to accept and endure this position for conscience' sake.³¹

It is generally in the parts of *Catharine of Siena* where Butler is talking of Catherine's reputation that the parallels between Catherine and herself feel the most obvious and intentional.

As previously mentioned, Larson calls *Catharine of Siena* a "a private autobiographical project," and Walkowitz likewise says that "'Butler presents Catherine as a plebeian and medieval variant of herself."³² I take issue with the idea that Butler chose Catherine as her subject as a means of writing a veiled autobiography, not because it is entirely untrue, but because it implies that Butler was not also interested in Catherine for her own sake. Why should we assume that she wrote *Catharine of Siena* simply to present herself as the saint, rather than to highlight the life of a woman whom she admired? Catherine of Siena is a Catholic saint and Butler was Protestant, but Catherine, in Butler's mind at least, exemplified her core principles

³⁰ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 69.

³¹ Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 45.

³² Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 446, Walkowitz, "Social reformer and women's activist," 8.

regarding women's work, specifically with regard to religion. Although she never defined herself as such, Josephine Butler's religious worldview was firmly evangelical.³³ The four broadly accepted elements of Evangelical religion are, in the words of Helen Mathers,

Conversionism, a belief in a conversion experience as the route to Christian faith; activism, the need to do some 'work' for Christ, especially to spread the gospel; biblicism, a belief that the Bible is the authoritative source of all spiritual truth; and crucicentrism, the conviction that the foundation of Christianity is Christ's atoning death on the cross to redeem mankind.³⁴

According to these metrics both Butler and Catherine were Evangelical. Therein lies the foundation of Butler's affinity for Catherine.

Butler viewed prayer as having tangible benefit but also believed that action was its necessary counterpart. In *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, when discussing the necessity of holding laws and politicians to (Christian) moral standards, she said,

For my part, I have never been able to hail our salvation from this horrible system as *near*, in any country, until the question has entered into the political stage. While saying this I hold firmly the truth that 'our weapons are *spiritual*, to the pulling down of strongholds'; that it is by the faith of the true servants of God, by their persistent prayers and their confidence in Him, that we shall win the victory. But in all matters of human action and conflict we use means. The hand of the warrior grasps the sword, while his heart is stayed on God.³⁵

Catherine exemplified this mixture of political and spiritual actor in a way that few other female religious figures had. Carol Engelhardt-Herringer, in her book *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and gender in England, 1830–85* notes that Catherine was preferable to the Virgin Mary as the subject of a biography because she was a reformer. As she says, Butler "Praises the saint as

³³ Helen Mathers, "The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist: Josephine Butler, 1828–1906," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52, no. 2 (2001): 287.

³⁴ Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 286.

³⁵ Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 314.

a Christian woman who confronts and reforms the corrupt male hierarchy. The Virgin Mary offered no such possibilities to reform-minded women like Butler.”³⁶

Butler believed that God’s purpose for her was to fight against human corruption just as it had been Catherine’s, that throughout history He has chosen people to light the way forward and fight for Him, and that those people pass that light on to each other through time. She believed that the torch borne by herself and her compatriots in their campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, had once been held in Catherine’s hands. In the conclusion of *Catharine of Siena*, she said:

Catharine — the wonderful power with which God has endowed us, as social and sympathetic beings, to impart what we know and love, to pass on from hand to hand the torch we bear, be it of a blazing brightness or as yet but dimly burning. But first we must ourselves possess the light. Look well, then, reader, at this poor saint, at all the saints, at the good and noble, the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before, and are going. For as they were and are, so you may be.³⁷

Her point was not merely to compare herself to Catherine, but to embolden women to behave as Catherine did, to embody God’s will and face down worldly injustice without fear.

In foregrounding Catherine’s public work and leadership, she tried to disprove the notion that women were not meant to take on public roles or involve themselves in politics. According to Butler, Catherine was the main driver in the return of Pope Gregory XI to Rome, that only through her persistence was he able to gather sufficient willpower to leave Avignon.³⁸ This is probably not entirely historically accurate. Catherine was not the only force working toward the return of the papacy to Rome, and vacillating as Gregory XI was known to be, he already firmly

³⁶ Carol Engelhardt-Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830–85*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 172.

³⁷ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 338.

³⁸ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 183.

believed that the papacy belonged in Rome before Catherine arrived.³⁹ Although it is a little reductive to claim that Catherine was the driving force in Gregory XI's return to Rome, its rhetorical purpose is clear. Catherine's success in bringing the papacy to heel shows just how effective a woman's touch could be in the realm of politics.

In order to show that women could involve themselves in politics in non-traditional ways, Butler portrayed Catherine unconventionally in terms of gender expectations.⁴⁰ She often contrasted Catherine's physical frailty with her spiritual strength, and shifted between her posture as an ignorant, submissive female, and an unstoppable warrior for God. An example of this can be found in her first meeting with Gregory XI. When asked how she could be so knowledgeable of clerical vice, Butler wrote that,

Catharine had been maintaining a humble posture before the Pope; but she 'left that position,' [...] 'and assumed an air of authority which astonished everyone.' Standing erect, she raised her thin white hand to heaven, and said: 'I declare, in the name of Almighty God, that I perceived more distinctly the horrors of the sins which are committed in this Court, while I was yet in my little room at Siena than even those do who are in the midst of these vices.'⁴¹

In this depiction Catherine plays with the expectation of how a woman should behave when confronted by a powerful man, by first adhering to expectations and then subverting them to drive home her point. Butler may not have explicitly framed Catherine's behaviour as tactical maneuvering in service of political goals, but that is what she depicted, and she depicted it as both admirable and effective.

³⁹ Blake Beattie, "Catherine of Siena and the Papacy," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 84.

⁴⁰ Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 449.

⁴¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 172.

Walkowitz says that “Butler only partially challenged orthodox Victorian assumptions about women's separate sphere. She defended the right of women to maintain legal, political, and economic identities outside the family, but she also sought to exploit the notion of women's moral pre-eminence.”⁴² Indeed, she believed women had a special relationship with Christ. She gestures toward this both in her introduction to *Women's Work and Women's Culture*, a series of essays regarding women's place in the workforce, and in *Catharine of Siena*. In *Women's Work and Women's Culture* she says that because women have been oppressed by men “It is no wonder that there should be some women whose love for this Saviour exceeds the love which it is possible for any man to feel for Him, and that, retiring from the encounter with prejudices which are apt to lurk even in the minds of the most just and most generous of men, they should be driven to cast themselves in a great solitude of heart before Him.”⁴³ Men and women are equal under God and Christ's teachings reflect this, but because women have nevertheless been subjugated by men throughout history, they gravitate more strongly to Christ as the one man capable of recognizing their full personhood, and as a result have a deeper relationship with him than men are capable of forming.

In *Catharine of Siena*, Christ's injunction to Catherine once again presents the idea that women are especially close to Christ specifically because men view them unequally. He says to her,

I desire thee then to know that at the present time the pride of man has become so great — especially in those who esteem themselves to be learned and wise — that my justice can no longer bear with them [...] I will first send to them a salutary and useful confusion, that they may acknowledge their error and humble themselves ; even as I did with the Jews and Gentiles when I sent them simple persons filled by me with divine wisdom. Yes,

⁴² Walkowitz, “Social reformer and women's activist,” 5.

⁴³ Josephine Butler, “Introduction,” *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A series of Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1869), lx.

I will send to them women, unlearned, and by nature fragile, but filled by my grace with courage and power, for the confusion of their forwardness.⁴⁴

Butler evidently also believed that women, as an oppressed class, were better suited to humbling powerful men, as she believed that women needed to be central to the repeal movement. In opposition to the shift toward male-centered constitutional and scientific arguments for repeal “she warned the LNA executive council in 1877, women were coming to be seen as “less necessary” as “the inspiring, and even the guiding power” of the movement, and it was time to [...] recapture ‘the light.’”⁴⁵

Unfortunately for Butler, there were some obvious drawbacks to choosing Catherine of Siena as a role model for nineteenth-century Englishwomen. Firstly, Catherine is a Catholic saint. In the nineteenth century, Catholics in Great Britain were an oppressed religious minority. Progress had been made toward their emancipation over the previous century, culminating in the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 which removed most of the restrictions against Catholics entering Parliament.⁴⁶ However, this progress, alongside the Tractarian and Ritualist movements, which sought to align the Church of England more closely with Catholicism, resulted in an anti-Catholic backlash that would have made Catherine of Siena a problematic role model to Englishwomen.⁴⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, Butler dealt with this by stating outright that, had Catherine lived a few centuries later, she would surely have been a Protestant:

There can be little doubt that, had she lived two centuries later, in the midst of the convulsion which rent Christendom, she would have stood firm on the side of evangelic truth, and joined her protest to that of the Reformers. [...] But Catharine never raised a protest, it may be said, against false doctrine. Her efforts were directed solely to moral

⁴⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 67.

⁴⁵ Larson, “(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice,” 454.

⁴⁶ Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, “Counter-Medievalism: Or, Protestants Rewrite the Middle Ages,” in *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, ed. Lorretta M. Holloway and Jennifer Palmgren, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 150.

⁴⁷ Engelhardt-Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary*, 3.

reformation, her attacks being mainly aimed at the vices, worldliness, and ungodliness of the clergy. The same may be asserted concerning the earlier part of the career of almost all the great reformers of the succeeding centuries. Savonarola, Wycliffe, Huss, and Luther, each and all attacked in the first instance the immoral and irreligious life of the clergy, and denounced the practical abuses and corruptions of the Church.⁴⁸

This type of projection was not uncommon among evangelical Protestant historians.⁴⁹ It is probable that Butler, as a firm Protestant herself, truly believed this, but it is also likely that she wanted to pre-empt the anti-Catholic sentiment that would otherwise be leveled at Catherine by her primarily Protestant English audience. Reviews of the book further emphasise this point. *The Englishwoman's Review: A Journal of Woman's Work* said, in 1878, "Catherine was a true reformer. She was a contemporary of our own Wycliffe, and, like him, was unsparing in her reprobation of the vices which disgraced the Church. Had she lived two centuries later she might have been one of the first movers of the Reformation, standing firm on the side of evangelic truth, but the time was not ripe for this."⁵⁰ Evidently, at least among Butler's cohort of feminist activists, this was sufficient to allow Catherine space in their midst.

To reinforce her argument that Catherine was a proto-Protestant, Butler emphasised the ways in which Catherine's words, actions, and experiences were compatible with Protestant ideology. She made sure to mention that Catherine rarely invoked saints in her written prayers, saying,

Her written prayers are all, with one exception, addressed to the Father in Heaven, to Jesus Christ, and to the Eternal Spirit who helpeth our infirmities. The one exception is the prayer written on the feast of the Annunciation. In the first sentences of this she apostrophizes the Virgin Mary, enumerating her virtues, and setting these forth before her

⁴⁸ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 239.

⁴⁹ Burstein, "Counter-Medievalism," 147.

⁵⁰ "Reviews of Books," *The Englishwoman's Review: A Journal of Women's Work*, Oct. 15, 1878, 14.

own soul as worthy of imitation. This apostrophe breaks off, however, suddenly into an address to God.⁵¹

This would have been reassuring to Protestant readers given the Protestant aversion to the Catholic veneration of Saints, which they viewed as idolatrous.

It is amusing that Butler tried to distance Catherine, a saint, from saint worship, especially since she made it very clear that she believed in Catherine's sanctity. Her perspective on sainthood, though not discussed directly, is evidently rather nuanced. There are several saints in *Catharine of Siena*, but not all are treated with the same reverence afforded to Catherine. She compared Saint Bridget of Sweden unfavourably with Catherine, saying,

The stern and simple Sieneſe full of thoughts of noble and uſeful enterpriſe, and the beautiful high-born lady pleaſantly prattling of the romance of her own paſt life, the wondrous beauty of her youth, and her many ſuitors, we are conſtrained to acknowledge that there are in the Roman Calendars ſaints of widely different degrees of ſelf-forgetfulneſs and magnanimity.⁵²

She was likewise not particularly reverent of any of the Popes mentioned, calling Gregory XI "weak and irresolute," and saying that Urban VI had an "unchristian and unchastened temper."⁵³ She seemed to believe that sanctity is conferred both by a certain inherent relationship to God, as well as through the active pursuit of closeness with Him. She thought that there was no fundamental difference between saints and everyone else, saying that, "The greatest of the saints were flesh and blood like ourselves."⁵⁴

Apart from her Catholicism, Butler almost certainly omitted some aspects of Catherine's life so as not to offend the sensibilities of her Victorian audience. She generally downplayed

⁵¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 241.

⁵² Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 256.

⁵³ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 252.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 331.

Catherine's asceticism. While she did note her self-denial of food, sleep, and comfort, she also pointed out that she "allowed no outward marks of asceticism to appear in her person," as though to reassure her readers of Catherine's moderation and respectability despite her self-abnegation.⁵⁵ She went on to defend Catherine's asceticism by saying,

Such conquests over self and over the infirmities, even over many of the just and natural demands of the body, have never been absent in the lives of those whom, par excellence we call "the saints," those who have left behind them an influence which is of God, and imperishable ; an influence which even the most skeptical must confess to have been benign, and charged with blessing for humanity.⁵⁶

However, she did not include in her biography those instances of asceticism which might have been too vulgar for Victorian sensibilities. Catherine's wedding ring of Christ's foreskin is omitted, and the language of the union, which was originally described as a literal exchange of hearts taken from chests, is toned down into something more metaphysical.⁵⁷ Likewise omitted is the anecdote wherein Catherine drinks cancerous pus taken from a woman with breast cancer, instead only saying of that episode that "The disease was so repelling that no one could be found to wait on Andrea. As soon as Catharine knew this, 'she comprehended that God had reserved for her this poor forsaken one, and hastened to comfort her.'"⁵⁸ Her inability to eat is mentioned at several points, but Butler does not give a reason for it, saying only that "She suffered all her life from a weakness of the stomach, which made it difficult for her to take any food without pain, succeeded often by violent sickness and vomiting."⁵⁹ According to Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner in

⁵⁵ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 32.

⁵⁶ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 32.

⁵⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 174, Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 467.

⁵⁸ Carolyn Muessig, "Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval Sermons," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 223, Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 74.

⁵⁹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 33.

A Companion to Catherine of Siena, Catherine's confessor, Raymond of Capua "linked his portrayals of Catherine's fasting with her frequent Communion, which began at the same time as her cycles of complete abstinence deepened. He even argued that Communion changed Catherine's constitution so that it became impossible for her to assimilate nutrition."⁶⁰ Raymond of Capua's biography of Catherine was one of Butler's main sources, so she was almost certainly aware of this explanation, but as a Protestant, she would likely not have wanted to grant unnecessary significance to the power of Communion.⁶¹

Butler probably omitted these details of Catherine's life in part because audiences would have found them unseemly, but it is also probable that she was trying to avoid making Catherine seem driven too much by emotion or superstition. As Mathers said, Butler was conscious of the stereotype of women as irrational creatures who used religion to indulge their feelings rather than to achieve any kind of greater understanding of the divine.⁶² If Butler wanted Catherine to be effective as a role model, her version of religion needed to be made acceptable to her broadly Protestant audience, and in order that men not scoff at the hysterical religion of women, the more obviously medieval and mystical facets of Catherine's life had to be elided.

Among Butler's allies, *Catharine of Siena: A Biography*, was a success. Reviews from the feminist publications *Women's Penny Paper* and *The Englishwoman's Review* were positive. The book went through several editions, including a cheap one intended for wider circulation, and a French translation produced in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, one of the centers for the

⁶⁰ Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, "Denial as Action—Penance and its Place in the Life of Catherine of Siena," in *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, ed. Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Boston: Brill, 2012), 84.

⁶¹ Butler, *Catharine of Siena*, 331.

⁶² Mathers, "Evangelical Spirituality," 298.

international fight against the regulation of vice.⁶³ *The Englishwoman's Review* said of the book that, "The publication of such a life so sacrificing and self-devoted in the cause of religion and humanity is of special value at the present day, when so many may be found who prize the blessings of ease and leisure, forgetful that they will have to give an account of the stewardship of their wealth."⁶⁴ These reviews, written by allies, cannot be taken as indicative of the wider reception of Catharine of Siena, but they offer insight into Butler's intended message, and they seem to have taken the biography as a call-to-arms for the women of leisure who could be taking part in their campaign against "regulated vice." Women who were convinced to join the cause could then use Catherine as an example of moral behaviour and effective political activism, as Butler intended.

⁶³ Larson, "(Auto)biography as Feminist Spiritual Practice," 455, Butler, *An Autobiographical Memoir*, 163.

⁶⁴ "Reviews of Books," 14.

Conclusion

Over the course of the nineteenth century, history developed from a literary genre into an established academic field. There were more women writers than ever before, but at the time Butler was writing they were barred from academic institutions and could therefore only write literary history. Women were also allowed very limited space in public life and were encouraged to exist merely as the angels in the household. To avoid public backlash, women writers often maintained the appearance of distance from academics and politics. They tended to focus on the domestic lives of important women, reinforcing the gendered division between the private and public spheres. Historical non-fiction allowed some women writers to express opinions about modern politics under the guise of a historical setting, but in the cases of both female authors and their subjects, open involvement in politics was taboo.

Although *Catharine of Siena: A Biography* shared many genre conventions with other Victorian female biographies, Butler made little attempt to distance her work from either academic histories or politics. Like other Victorian biographies of great women, she intended to provide a role model for her female readers, but while most other biographies idealised the domestic, Butler chose to portray Catherine as a public figure and political agent. She avoided explicitly discussing modern politics and did not simply write an autobiography detailing her own political triumphs, or a step-by-step manual on how to organize an activist group. Instead, like other female authors and medievalists, she used a historical setting to offer a digestible and entertaining format for her guiding principles.

Her claim that Catherine was a kind of proto-Protestant was both a means by which she could endear Catherine to her largely Anglican audience, and a common tactic of evangelical Protestant historians seeking to legitimize Protestantism by claiming its existence prior to the

Reformation. In a similar fashion, her choice to write about Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century artisan's daughter, legitimized political activism on the part of women. She showed that normal women had been making huge, positive, intentional changes to their societies long before her own time. Women could be effective political agents, sometimes even more effective than their male counterparts. This message was especially important given that men within the campaign against the CDAs were beginning to sideline the women in the movement, viewing their contributions as less important. Female campaigners tended to focus on moral and religious arguments, whereas male campaigners took a more legalistic approach. Butler wanted to show that religious and moral arguments were, not just effective, but essential to the success of the movement, and used Catherine of Siena's successes to illustrate her point. According to Butler, no one but Catherine could have convinced Gregory XI to return to Rome, and she convinced him, over the arguments of all his cardinals, by showing that it was God's will.

Catharine of Siena: A Biography is understudied by scholars of Josephine Butler because it appears disconnected from Butler's political achievements. It is mostly treated as a side project or a footnote, but it offers valuable insight into Butler's inner life at the moment of its writing. It is reflective of her ideals, politics, academic interests, insecurities, religious beliefs, virtues, and eccentricities. It also provides insight into the world in which Butler lived. It is a unique, but representative example of nineteenth-century female biography, medievalist literature, amateur scholarship, and feminist activism. Although *Catharine of Siena* it is not quite an autobiography, through *Catharine of Siena*, we are nevertheless able to catch a glimpse of Josephine Butler.

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