

Josephine Butler (1828 – 1906) as depicted by Alexander Munro in sculpture (1855) and obituary (1907).

Philippa Toogood

Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to explore the extent to which Alexander Munro's 1855 sculpture of Josephine Butler and her obituary, published in 1907 are helpful when attempting to explore her life and achievements. The two artefacts will be examined in order to assess how much synthesis can be found between them and the impression of Josephine Butler which they present. George and Josephine Butler met Alexander Munro when he was commissioned to produce statues for the Natural History Museum in Oxford. The friendship between Munro and the Butlers continued after they left Oxford. Munro sculpted Josephine Butler three times and also produced several medallion sculptures of the couple's only daughter, Evangeline, who died aged 5. Josephine was the leader of the Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. She actively campaigned against the imprisonment of women accused of prostitution in Lock hospitals.

Josephine Butler (1828 – 1906), the notable Victorian reformer and social activist, is a much written about and discussed character. Her pioneering work with prostitutes¹ and her (eventually) successful campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts² mark her out as an extraordinary individual. A wealth of letters and her own personal writings contribute to an impressive archive of information on her life. This is further enhanced by a number of significant biographical works including George and Lucy Johnson's autobiographical memoir *Josephine E Butler*³ which is composed almost entirely of Josephine Butler's own writing and first appeared in 1909 less than three years after her death.

Given Josephine Butler's extensive writing and her very public life a comparison between her obituary, published in the *Times* on Wednesday 2nd January 1907, and Alexander Munro's 1855 bust of Josephine Butler, offer an interesting insight into how she was represented by her contemporaries. These two artefacts, one predating the other by more than fifty years, each present a portrait of Josephine Butler and potentially give, when seen together, a fuller picture of her life and character than either the written work or material object can do independently. Beyond this they also give an indication of what is deemed notable or of importance at a particular time in history. Both of the artefacts contribute to our impression of her personality and interests.

The original 1855 sculpture is now in the possession of Girton College Cambridge⁴. Interestingly, Josephine Butler argued with the approach that Girton took towards women's

¹ Josephine Butler firstly invited various women who had been mistreated into her home. Later she set up her own 'House of Rest' for disadvantaged women. She had no clear plan, other than to help: "my sole wish," she explained, "was to plunge into the heart of some human misery, and to say (as I now knew I could) to afflicted people, "I understand. I, too, have suffered." As a result of rescuing many young girls from the workhouse, and either finding them homes or taking them into her own household, Josephine worked to set up her own refuge, believing it to be a divine calling.

<http://www.josephinebutler.org.uk/a-brief-introduction-to-the-life-of-josephine-butler/> [accessed 19/02/2013].

²See page 9

³George W Johnson and Lucy A Johnson, ed. *Josephine Butler E Butler An Autobiographical Memoir* (Bristol; J W Arrowsmith, 1909)

⁴ The bust was given to the College by Agnata Butler in 1918. This is recorded in the College's Council Minutes, volume 21, p286, 30 April 1918 (Archive reference: GCGB 2/1/21).

university education⁵, finding herself favouring the educational pedagogy of her friend Anne Clough⁶ (the first principle of Newnham College).

Alexander Munro's 1855 bust of Josephine Butler is carved in white marble and stands at 67 cm high. It is 46 cm wide and has a depth of 27 cm making it almost life sized. The bust is in the round and free standing. As Tim Barringer, Art Historian, comments, 'her drapery – it is hardly conventional Victorian dress – reveals one bare shoulder'⁷. Her hair is adorned with seven stars, perhaps a reference to Rossetti's poem about the damsel looking down from heaven.⁸ There is a similarity between the bust and other sculpture of the time, for example Sir Francis Leggatt Chantrey's marble bust of Queen Victoria 1841 (figure 5). The difference is that Victoria retains her regal pose in the position of the drapery and the addition of the tiara, as opposed to Josephine Butler who is portrayed with her drapery more unconventionally positioned and her hair loose. Munro himself was at pains to emphasise that the 1855 bust was not really a portrait at all. He 'considered the treatment so unusual that the work would not be recognised as a portrait at all and that there would be 'a likely enough supposition that it is only an "ideal" subject''.⁹ This description offers the viewer an insight to his work. He was perhaps not aiming to present a portrait of Josephine Butler but instead a bust of a beautiful woman, inspired more by poetry and his own idea of beauty than by Josephine Butler herself. The term ideal should be applied to the bust indicating not a representation of the object, in this case Josephine Butler, but of the thought of the object.

Josephine Butler was regarded as a great beauty. The portrait by the artist George Richmond, for whom Josephine Butler had sat in 1851 before her marriage, was much admired and can still be seen at the National Portrait Gallery (see figure 6). The main image (figure 1) is a photograph by W Tams, dated c.1924 showing the sculpture from the front. Further, more recent images from a Sotheby's sale of a plaster copy of the bust by Munro show the front, side and rear views of the sculpture.

⁵ 'Josephine and Anne crossed swords with Emily Davies, founder of Girton College, Cambridge, over tertiary education issues of both pragmatic and philosophical kinds.' L S Nolland, *A Victorian Feminist Christian – Josephine Butler, the Prostitutes and God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) page 216.

⁶ Anne Clough argued that her female students should attend lectures alongside their male colleagues and both she and Josephine Butler were of the opinion that all educational resources should be available both men and women.

⁷ Barringer; Rosenfeld and Smith *Pre-Raphaelites Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012) p. 158.

⁸The blessed Damozel lean'd out

From the gold bar of Heaven:

Her blue grave eyes were deeper much

Than a deep water, even.

She had three lilies in her hand,

And the stars in her hair were seven.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti *The Blessed Damozel* (Oxford: The Germ, February 1850). See also Rossetti's painting *The Blessed Damozel* Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard, Massachusetts.

⁹ Barringer (London: Tate Publishing, 2012) p. 158



Figure 1: Black and white photograph (circa 1928) of a marble bust of Josephine Butler
Photographer: W. T/ams. Reference ZBU/E/3/A/11/16, Northumberland Archives.¹⁰ The
information that follows relates to the bust, not the photograph.
Munro; Alexander, *Josephine Butler*, 1855, marble, 67 cm x 46 cm x 27 cm, Girton College
Cambridge

¹⁰ <http://www.experiencewoodhorn.com/archive.ZBU~E~3~A~11~16>



Figure 2:¹¹ Photograph of a plaster copy of the bust, signed ALEX MUNRO Sc. It is in plaster and stands at 68cm. (26 3/4 in.) tall. It was sold in 2010 by Sotheby's for 4,500GBP. Plaster copy of the Josephine Butler Bust.



Figure 3¹²



Figure 4¹³

¹¹The three images provided enable the reader to see the front, side and back views of the plaster reproduction. Note the stars woven into her flowing hair. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/19th-and-20th-century-european-sculpture/110232/lot.13.lotnum.html>

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid



Figure 5: Queen Victoria

Replica by Sir Francis Leggatt Chantrey, marble bust, 1841 (1839); 27 3/4 in. (705 mm) high. Purchased with help from George Harland Peck, 1913, Primary Collection, National Portrait Gallery 1716.



Figure 6: Josephine Elizabeth Butler (née Grey)¹⁴

George Richmond, pastel, 1851; 22 7/8 in. x 17 1/2 in. (581 mm x 445 mm). Purchased, 1999, Primary Collection, National Portrait Gallery 6482.

The bust offers the viewer one view of Josephine Butler, captured at a particular time and idealised by Munro. At the time when the sculpture was made Josephine had not established a particular reputation for herself outside of her role as wife to George and being a woman of beauty and intelligence. The obituary offers a very different image of Josephine Butler. Josephine Butler's obituary was published in the *Times* on 2nd January 1907, appearing on page 8 in the Court Circular and News section just three days after her death on

¹⁴ George Richmond, pastel, 1851; 22 7/8 in. x 17 1/2 in. (581 mm x 445 mm). Purchased, 1999, Primary Collection, NPG 6482. <http://www.npg.org.uk/>

30th December 1906. The obituary is not credited to a particular author. The readers would have been literate and therefore a certain level of education can be assumed. The editor at the time was George Earle Buckle. The *Times* was a broadsheet newspaper with a close and small typeface (Times New Roman was introduced in 1908). The obituary of Josephine Butler is extensive, reflecting her importance as a national figure. The role of an obituary is to offer an overview of an individual's life and achievements. There is the advantage for the writer of being able to draw on the whole of a life. For this reason the interest for the historian lies both in the accuracy of the account and the choice made by the author as regards what is significant when examining the life and achievements of a particular individual. The style of writing is formal giving a factual emphasis to the obituary. The author's choice of important dates and events create a framework onto which a more subjective and personalised account is woven.

Butler's obituary begins with this framework. 'Josephine Grey was a Northumbrian, the daughter of John Grey, of Dilston, where she was born on April 13, 1828.'¹⁵ This simple statement places Butler in context, her place and date of birth and reference to her father which perhaps indicates that he was also a person of note.¹⁶

The obituary continues by chronologically detailing the life of Josephine Butler in terms of both her personal life and her geographical location. Following her marriage to George Butler in 1852, Josephine Butler and her husband arrived in Oxford, setting up a modest home on The High as George Butler took up his position as an examiner at the university schools. The Butlers moved from Oxford to Cheltenham then Liverpool, Winchester and finally, following George Butler's death in 1890, returned home to Woolner in Northumberland.

For a woman of such independence of thought and notable political activity¹⁷, it is curious to the twenty-first-century reader that each different period in her life should be described not through her own activity but her husband's. George Butler, a tutor at Durham University came from a distinguished clerical and academic family although it would be reasonable to argue that his own potential was never fully realised due in part to the lack of society's acceptance of his wife's political and humanitarian activities. Josephine Butler's domestic location was dictated by George's professional life but this life was curtailed by her passionate adoption of the cause for the plight of fallen and failed women¹⁸. Despite this they are described as being a very close and mutually supportive couple, each assisting with the work and interests of the other:

The first five years of her married life were spent at Oxford, where she proved a most capable and sympathetic helpmate to her husband, drawing maps for his lectures, or puzzling out old Chaucers in the Bodleian.¹⁹

The description here firmly places Josephine Butler as wife and supporter. In later life it was George Butler who would enthusiastically embrace his wife's work in social reform.

¹⁵ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Jan 02, 1907; p.8; Issue 38219

¹⁶ He had, with important political connections to the reformers of the time due to his relationship with the second Earl Grey who, 'employed John's services and depended upon his judgement as a regional Whig leader in the tumultuous years prior to the 1832 Reform Bill.' (see Nolland p. 23)

¹⁷ Josephine Butler is remembered as a feminist and reformer. Nolland makes the following observation: 'According to Judith Walkowitz, she involved herself with a dozen different moral, social and political reform movements which ranged from anti-slavery, republicanism and female suffrage to medical reform, temperance and social purity. She published her first work, *The Education and Employment of Women* in which she argued that the millions of self-supporting women in Britain needed a broader range of work options than the existent ones of sewing, domestic service and teaching.' Nolland p. 215

¹⁸ 'Fallen' here refers to those who had adopted prostitution as a means of income. 'Failed' refers to those let down by society, through the legal constraints of different Acts, such as that for Contagious diseases.

¹⁹ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Jan 02, 1907; pg.8; Issue 38219

The description of their Oxford life is brief but other more detailed biographical accounts of Josephine Butler give greater colour and depth to the time which the couple spent in the city. Oxford in the 1850s was a place of contradictions. In her 2001 biography Jane Jordan writes that:

It took some time before Josephine Butler could admit to herself that the wisdom of Oxford was undermined by many areas of deplorable ignorance which resulted in dangerous prejudices and bigoted judgements.²⁰

The perception of Josephine Butler by those in Oxford society at the time seemed to be more focussed on her beauty than it was on her lively mind and passionate moral and religious convictions. She is described by Sir William Hamilton who sees her out riding as having ‘firmness [...] a general sense of harmony! And a light figure!’²¹

It was during these early years of married life in Oxford that Josephine Butler met Alexander Munro. Munro skirted the pre-Raphaelite movement, not one of the original seven but closely enough involved to have been asked by Dante Gabriel Rossetti to contribute the carved tympanum over the entrance to the Oxford Union building. In 1855 George Butler was given the task of looking after Munro, offering him lodgings in the Butler’s home. Munro had been commissioned to produce some of the statues for the interior decoration of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (he produced six, including Newton and Galileo).

One possible question which arises in comparing this bust to the more regimented and formulaic content of her obituary is why a woman of such high moral and religious ideals would choose to be presented in such a fashion? Josephine Butler was familiar with the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and George Butler had assisted Rossetti with some work on a translation of Dante Alighierie. The Butler’s had visited Rossetti’s studio and there is clear reference to the Rossetti poem *The Blessed Damozel* in the sculpture. The portrayal of Josephine Butler by Munro is according to Jane Jordan:

a most incongruous one [...] for Josephine. The gaze is resolute, and recognizable, but the long hair is unbound, flowing loosely down her back and she is wearing nothing but the simplest drapery, a plain chemise which reveals one naked shoulder.²²

Josephine Butler was influenced by her husband’s interest in renaissance art which perhaps explains her willingness to be portrayed in such a manner. This might imply that she did not see a contradiction between a sculpture which showed femininity and beauty and campaigning for the rights of women in society.

Munro became a highly respected sculptor, his other sitters included Gladstone and his work was exhibited frequently including at the 84th exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1852. As a guest in the Butlers home he would have had a more intimate relationship with the family than would be usual for a portrait sculptor and yet the drapery and the loose hair seem at odds with the picture of Josephine Butler which can be drawn from the other writings about her. Munro sculpted Josephine Butler more than once; the second bust shows a more demure and formal figure, shoulders covered and hair in a long plait down her back. Josephine Butler herself is said to have favoured this particular image, ‘Butler chose to represent herself by a photograph made after 1872 of the second Munro bust which she

²⁰ Jane Jordan, *Josephine Butler* (London; John Murray, 2001) p. 44

²¹ Ibid page 36 (note that this is Sir William Hamilton, metaphysician 1788 – 1865)

²² ibid p. 41

circulated as a carte-de-visite²³. The second bust was finished in 1865, the year in which he referred to the sculpture in a letter to George Butler as his ‘Beatrice Marble’. This second bust is described by Jordan in the following way: ‘Josephine wears a plain chemise drawn up to the neck, over which hangs a simple antique yoked dress. The eyes are lowered, the gaze introspective and solemn, even grave.’²⁴

There is the possibility that the effect on Josephine Butler of the tragic death in a domestic accident of Evangeline, her only daughter, in 1864, is shown in this second bust. The change in position and focus reflects the change in Josephine Butler’s outlook. It was after Eva’s death that her work with disadvantaged women which had begun in Oxford really escalated. The author of the obituary is keen to identify Josephine Butler’s motivation for her work with poor and desolate women with her own personal tragedy, ‘At Cheltenham [...] a still greater trial was in store – the death of her only daughter by falling over a banister.’²⁵ Butler herself is quoted as saying that she was ‘possessed with an irresistible desire to go forth and find some pain keener than my own.’²⁶ Munro made a medallion portrait Eva Butler²⁷, having taken the image of her death mask showing Munro’s continued contact with the family after their move from Oxford to Cheltenham.



Figure 7:²⁸ *Eva Butler with a Dove*, 21 x 18 7/8 in, Marble, serpentine (mineral – sometimes used for headstones, an appropriate choice given the posthumous nature of the work). Munro, Alexander, Circa 1864, Private Collection. Photograph Type: A-negative Negative number: A92/41

²³ Ibid p.158

²⁴ Ibid p.42

²⁵ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Jan 02, 1907; pg.8; Issue 38219

²⁶ ibid

²⁷ See figure 7

²⁸ *Eva Butler with a Dove*, 21 x 18 7/8 in, Marble, serpentine (mineral – sometimes used for headstones, an appropriate choice given the posthumous nature of the work). Munro, Alexander, Circa 1864, Private Collection. Photograph Type: A-negative Negative number: A92/41

The obituary associates some of the movement of the Butlers around the country with Josephine Butler's ill health, 'in Cheltenham her health greatly improved,'²⁹. It is also at pains to emphasise George's support of Josephine Butler's work with poor and displaced women despite a keen 'happiness (like hers) centring in domestic life'³⁰. This should be seen in conjunction with the overall tone of the obituary which is portraying Josephine Butler as wife first and reformer second. The author of the obituary points out that when the Butlers moved in 1866 for George Butler to take up the position of Principle of Liverpool College into the Butlers' house was 'crowded as many as possible of the most friendless girls who were anxious to make a fresh start'³¹.

It was in Liverpool that the substantive part of Josephine Butler's work with prostitutes began. She visited the workhouses and the quay, the hospitals and 'oakum picking sheds'³². Throughout their account of Josephine Butler in the obituary, the author is at pains to recognise George Butler's support of his wife's campaign, emphasizing again their close relationship and solid marriage. George Butler encouraged her, recognising the 'call of God to conflict'³³ and whilst she initially 'shrank back'³⁴ Josephine Butler eventually responded fully and wholeheartedly to the call to help lead a movement that would be successful in its aim of repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts.

The Contagious Diseases Act was first passed in 1864 with further alterations and amendments added in 1866 and 1869 by which time it covered 18 districts, mainly those with working docks. The act allowed the police to arrest prostitutes and examine them for venereal disease. If found to be infected a woman could be imprisoned until cured. The objection to the acts focussed on the abysmal treatment of women in the arrest and examination process and the lack of equality, men were not subject to the same treatment despite also being capable of carrying the disease.

It is in Josephine Butler's initial reaction to the request for her help that the obituary offers its fullest description of her:

A woman of extreme delicacy and refinement of mind, with a horror not only of contact with vice, but of publicity and agitation, she was only driven to action by passionate love of purity and justice, and boundless love of her unhappy sister-women.³⁵

This statement about Josephine Butler does not seem to fit well with the woman portrayed by Munro. Her 'delicacy' could be a reference to the poor health which she suffered but her forthright approach to the rights of women is certainly not delicate. Speaking at a public meeting she described the medical examinations used to assess whether or not prostitutes were carrying venereal disease as 'surgical rape', surely not the words of an extremely delicate woman.

The obituary offers a reasonably detailed account of the progress of the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act through parliament in the 1870s and 1880s, the first attempt in 1873 having failed with two thirds of the house voting against the repeal. When the movement was finally successful in 1886, Josephine Butler did not cease her work but continued to campaign for the rights of prostitutes, shifting her focus onto the colonies, notably India where the system of arresting and forcibly hospitalising prostitutes suspected of carrying disease

²⁹ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Jan 02, 1907; pg.8; Issue 38219

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid* (common term for prisons)

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

continued. The obituary does not mention Josephine Butler's work in promoting the higher education of women or her connection to Newnham College, Cambridge. This is an interesting omission and one which would possibly lead the reader to the conclusion that her only work was with the disadvantaged women that she encountered in Oxford, Cheltenham and Liverpool and the political campaign surrounding the repeal of the Act. The obituary therefore does not fully illustrate the life of Josephine Butler but selects those aspects of her work which are deemed, by the author, appropriate to commemorate her and her legacy. Ending with a powerful and highly complementary description of Josephine Butler, the obituary draws together a number but not all of her commendable characteristics and actions.

Mrs Butler is described by one of her fellow-workers³⁶ as 'an almost ideal woman; a devoted wife, exquisitely human and feminine, with no touch in her of the "woman of the platform," though with a great gift of pleading speech; with a powerful mind, and a soul purged through fire.'³⁷

It is this description which perhaps synthesises most successfully with the Munro portrait bust of 1855. The two sculptures and the smaller but exquisite medallion sculpture of Eva Butler cradling a bird (figure 2) are all typical of Munro's sentimental and idealised style which evokes a level of reflection and pathos in the viewer.

As an artefact the 1855 bust tells us little of Josephine Butler's socially and politically reforming works. It represents a beautiful young woman, focussed straight ahead and dressed in a style that would require a level of bravery and disregard for the social expectations of the period. As the bust perhaps presents an 'ideal' so does the obituary. The more radical and unacceptable aspects of Josephine Butler's reforming work are not directly referenced and her life is seen in conjunction with that of her husband. Munro offers us no image of George Butler, only of Josephine Butler and later Eva. The obituary offers a formal and assumedly objective portrait of Josephine Butler, the bust a more personal and intimate image. Both artefacts present an ideal, the bust of a young and prosperous woman and the obituary of a slightly fragile but religiously committed member of society. In combination, as artefacts which show the image and life of one woman each adds a depth that both highlights the achievements of the other and exposes their deficiencies. The artefacts show more about the standards of the time, of beauty, social activity and the perception of women than they show us about Josephine Butler herself.

³⁶ The Ladies National Association is recorded as having 811 members and 57 branches in 1871.

³⁷ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Jan 02, 1907; pg.8; Issue 38219

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