

Bastard Daughters and Foundling Heroines: Rewriting Illegitimacy for the Eighteenth-Century Stage

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Demographers and historians refer to the eighteenth century as the “century of illegitimacy,”¹ pointing out that “in every city in England and the continent for which data are available, the upsurge of illegitimacy commenced around 1750 or before.”² Whereas scholars such as Edward Shorter, Peter Laslett, Lawrence Stone, John Gillis, and, most recently, Randolph Trumbach and Joseph Emer have offered very different reasons to explain the increase in the rate of illegitimacy that remains “unprecedented in the known history of the British population,”³ they all agree that this phenomenon must have touched everyone who lived at that time and played a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural life of the Enlightenment. This article considers several eighteenth-century plays featuring “foundling” heroines—Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), Edward Moore’s *The Foundling* (1748), and George Colman’s *The English Merchant* (1767)—in the context of the period’s obsessive attempts to justify, regulate, modify, and reimagine the social practices surrounding bastardy.

1. Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

2. Edward Shorter, “Illegitimacy, Sexual Revolution, and Social Change in Modern Europe,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 2 (1971): 251.

3. John R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 110. For a statistical analysis of eighteenth-century illegitimacy, see Shorter, “Illegitimacy,” 237–72; Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen, and Richard Michael Smith, *Bastardy and Its Comparative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 71–249; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Methuen, 1977); Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and Gender Revolution*, vol. 1, *Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 229–334; Joseph Ehmer, “Marriage,” in *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century, 1789–1913*, ed. Daniel I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 317–19.

My argument is divided into five parts, the first three laying out historical and theoretical background for situating the “foundling” narratives of the period in relation to the issue of illegitimacy, and the last two focusing on Steele’s, Moore’s, and Colman’s plays. The first part outlines the differences between the eighteenth-century categories of “bastard” and “foundling” and addresses the literary-historical stakes of such a categorization. The second part considers the correlation between the gender of the fictional foundling and his or her legitimacy. The third part turns to the children whose fate added an important (if largely unmentionable in polite society) point of reference for the fictional reimagining of bastards: the illegitimate offspring of the poor, liable to be abandoned and even murdered by their desperate mothers. In the fourth part, I discuss Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, focusing, in particular, on his project of providing a respectable ancient genealogy for his new “improved” comedy. I demonstrate that the plays of his chosen literary progenitor, Terence, on whose 166 BC *Andria* Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers* is based, acquired an eerie topicality in infanticide-infested London because of the Roman playwright’s casual references to the exposure of unwanted infants. I also consider Steele’s domestic situation at the time when he was finishing his comedy. In 1720, his “natural” daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, was snubbed on the marriage market ostensibly because of her bastardy, bringing home, so to speak, the issues that his comedy tried to circumvent politely. The fifth part follows the literary tradition of reimagining illegitimacy in the plays of Moore and Colman, arguing, in particular, that the prominent place occupied in the English cultural imagination by the London Foundling Hospital, opened in 1739, must have forced the respective authors of *The Foundling* and *The English Merchant* to think of new strategies of rewriting bastardy for polite audiences.

BASTARDS AND FOUNDLINGS

What constituted the eighteenth-century category of bastard? The common wisdom about what illegitimacy really entailed inevitably transcended the purely legal meaning of the word. According to William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the bastard could “inherit nothing, being looked upon as the son of nobody . . . incapable even of a gift from [his] parents.”⁴ This law effectually sentenced every third child born in England (especially if we count the off-

4. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England, in four books* (London, 1793–95), 1:434.

spring of common-law unions)⁵ to the lifelong status of social pariah. At the same time, as Henry Swinburne pointed out in *A Brieft Treatise of Testaments and Last Willes*, “the Parents of a Bastard may by Deed executed in their Lifetime, or by last Will, give or devise their Lands to their Bastards”;⁶ as a character in William Wycherley’s play *The Plain Dealer* (1676) observed, even though there is a “Law . . . against Bastards, . . . the Custom is against it, and more people get estates by being so, than lose ’em.”⁷

The popular image of the bastard thus inspired both compassion and fear. The “innocent offspring of his parents’ crimes” (*Commentaries*, 432), the bastard hovered on the outskirts of the family, ready to swoop down upon the contrite patriarch and extort material recompense for his undeserved suffering—at the expense of his legitimate siblings. In 1735, the *Universal Spectator* published an anguished letter from an illegitimate man who complained that his “liberal education,” charity, and good principles notwithstanding, his relatives viewed him as a pariah, and particularly those on his father’s side considered him “as a Robber who . . . unjustly deprived them of a small Estate [his father] settled upon [him].”⁸ Although the relationship between the legitimate and illegitimate children did not always develop into enmity, and, moreover, bastardy was treated quite differently in different social classes and geographic regions,⁹ the prevalent eighteenth-century cultural view of a bastard centered on his capacity to disrupt the smooth transfer of property and to poison the emotional well-being of the legal family.

The foundling as a literary character evoked very different associations. As a staple feature of literary narrative going back to the romances of antiquity (such as Heliodorus’s *Aithiopika* and Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*),¹⁰ the foundling was typically born within legal

5. See Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, 110–14; and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 158.

6. Henry Swinburne, *A Brieft Treatise of Testaments and Last Willes* (London, 1728), 288.

7. William Wycherley, *The Plain Dealer*, in *Restoration Drama: An Anthology*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 267.

8. Quoted in Ruth McClure, *Coram’s Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 11.

9. For a discussion, see *ibid.*, 10; John Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership, 1650–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 153–54; Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, 110–14.

10. See Martha G. Brown, “Fanny Burney’s ‘Feminism’: Gender or Genre?” in Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. Stewart J. Cooke (New York: Norton, 1998), 395–96; Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 21–46; Margaret Anne Doody, “Beyond *Evelina*: The Individual Novel and the Community of Literature,”

if ill-starred wedlock and raised by loving strangers. Upon leaving her adopted family (I switch gender pronouns here because most eighteenth-century fictional foundlings were female), she would go through numerous ordeals to be finally rewarded for her virtuous behavior by the discovery of her true kin. Though structurally similar to the bastard in her position of an outsider reinserting herself into the family and social order, the foundling differed radically from her money- and status-hungry illegitimate counterpart. Her quest was for moral excellence and true identity,¹¹ and if the revelation of that identity was accompanied by a shower of tears, titles, and estates, this bounty was bestowed voluntarily and legally by the parent who frequently did not have any other children and was therefore delighted with the reappearance of the long-lost offspring. With some exceptions, this is what happened on stage (e.g., in Steele's, Moore's, and Colman's plays) and in the novel (e.g., in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, Frances Burney's *Evelina*, and Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline*).

The antithetical use of the categories "bastard" and "foundling" is potentially confusing because in eighteenth-century day-to-day interactions, these words were frequently interchangeable: people would refer to any abandoned child as a "foundling," and it was widely (though not always correctly) assumed that all abandoned children were illegitimate. Moreover, in rare cases, a writer could call her character a "foundling" and still leave him or her illegitimate, as Eliza Haywood did in *The Fortunate Foundlings* (1744) and Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* (1749). Nevertheless, because the parents of the overwhelming majority of abandoned children featured in eighteenth-century fiction were ultimately revealed to have been married, we can speak about the culturally recognizable literary category of *legally born* foundlings as opposed to their irredeemably illegitimate real-life counterparts, the bastards.

What is at stake in positing the differentiation between bastards and foundlings as an important representational project of the British Enlightenment? Reading a broad selection of literary texts as struggling with, responding to, and constituting this project commits us to a new level of historicizing the eighteenth-century foundling narrative, something that literary critics, primarily interested in the rich symbolic po-

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 3 (1991): 359–71; Susan G. Greenfield, *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of the Family Romance: Frances Burney to Jane Austen* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 36–37.

11. As McKeon points out, "what 'happens' at the end of . . . *Tom Jones* . . . is less a social than an epistemological event; not upward mobility but—as in the invoked model of Oedipus . . . —the *acquisition of knowledge*" (*Origins of the English Novel*, 408; italics mine).

tential of the foundling trope or in its indebtedness to the literature of antiquity, have not done. (For the purpose of this article, I deliberately place both plays and novels that depict foundlings under the umbrella headings of “foundling fiction” or “foundling narrative,” thus drawing on the work of David Marshall and Jean-Christophe Agnew, who have each argued that “the novel achieves a distinctive form in the eighteenth-century by virtue of its internalization of ‘the figure of theater.’”¹² Elsewhere, I explore the possibility that the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with bastardy presented playwrights and novelists with different representational challenges.¹³) When eighteenth-century scholars have considered the Enlightenment’s representations of “bastards,” they have not, as a rule, distinguished bastards from legitimately born foundlings. The bastard, the foundling, and the orphan all merge into one fuzzy category, and the titillatingly fluid kin and class affiliation of such a character, on the one hand, and his or her fascinating literary genealogy, on the other, exert a powerful pull upon the reader-critics’ imagination.

Reflecting on the figure of the foundling, Margaret Anne Doody has argued, for example, that it manifests the “community of literature”—strong evidence of continuity between the ancient romance and the eighteenth-century fictional narrative, particularly the novel.¹⁴ From a different perspective, Michael McKeon and Lynn Hunt have seized on the ontological uncertainty central to the image of the foundling to present her as a vexed symbol of broader social changes. Commenting on the popularity of representations of abandoned children around the time of the French Revolution, Hunt argues persuasively that such representations were co-opted to serve a wide variety of political agendas; what remained invariable, however (and connected the French foundling novel to its English counterpart), was the tendency to use the figure of a seemingly free-floating child as a symbol of the “shifting world.” McKeon sees the eighteenth-century fictional bastard-hero as conveying an “implicit criticism of aristocratic ideology . . . within the context of progressive ideology” (159). Illegitimate characters, in this view, are representative of the larger class of “progressive protagonists who possess ‘true,’ as distinct from inherited, gentility, especially in narratives that progressively insist . . . that their heroes are

12. Quoted in James Chandler, “Moving Accidents: The Emergence of Sentimental Probability,” in *The Age of Cultural Revolutions, Britain and France, 1750–1820*, ed. Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 158.

13. See Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), chap. 3.

14. Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

capable 'of acquiring Honour' even in the total absence of ancestry" (406). Significantly, neither Hunt nor McKeon differentiate explicitly between fictional bastards and foundlings. Hunt, in fact, refers instead to a broad category of "children . . . almost always without fathers . . . illegitimate, foundlings, orphans, or . . . virtually so."¹⁵ The illegitimacy of characters thus matters only insofar as it frees them from an allegiance to a specific family or social class and allows them to embody the promise of expanded social and economic possibilities of the Age of Enlightenment.

In the most recent articulation of this view, Wolfram Schmidgen argues that as "a creature of the threshold,"¹⁶ existing "both inside and outside society" (140), the eighteenth-century fictional bastard can "cross hierarchical divisions and . . . enact a radicalized social mobility," even if "this mobility . . . remains curiously disembodied, simultaneously traversing and leaving inviolate the boundaries of an uneven social space" (142). Yet Schmidgen's compelling analysis of the illegitimate protagonist's "placelessness" (149) also does not differentiate between bastards and foundlings, calling Fidelity in Moore's *The Foundling* and Evelina in Burney's eponymous novel "bastards" (134, 151, 153), even though both Moore and Burney went to some lengths to present their heroines as *legitimate* foundlings.¹⁷

The ideological and symbolic potentials of the foundling figure as well as the "genetic inheritance" (Doody, *The True Story*, 298) of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative constitute a crucial background for this essay, but my approach differs radically from those outlined above. I operate on the assumption that illegitimacy was a fact of life that touched everyone who lived at that time, and as such profoundly affected the production and reception of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative. Furthermore, I see the British Enlightenment as committed to denying connection between its fictional foundlings and its real-life bastards—a denial that still haunts eighteenth-century studies as scholars continue to treat their period's literary obsession with the foundling motif as separate from the vexed historical issue of illegitimacy.

15. Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 175.

16. Wolfram Schmidgen, "Illegitimacy and Social Observation: The Bastard in the Eighteenth-Century Novel," *ELH* 69, no. 1 (2002): 139.

17. For a related discussion of *Evelina*, see Irene Fizer, "The Name of the Daughter: Identity and Incest in *Evelina*," in *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, ed. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace and Patricia Yaeger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 78–107.

As Jenny Teichman, Akira Hayami, and Daniel Ogden have separately demonstrated, illegitimacy is not a universal social institution.¹⁸ The crucial factor that set eighteenth-century England apart from other societies practicing illegitimacy, and thus lent a broader cultural meaning to the various fictional expressions of private anxieties about illegitimacy, was the eighteenth-century view of property as the catalyst of social personality. The notion that property functions as “both an extension and a prerequisite of personality” and that “different modes of property [generate] different modes of personality”¹⁹ constituted an important tenet of Western tradition inherited by the English Enlightenment. The seminal study that follows the crisis of this view in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, J. G. A. Pocock’s *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, is not concerned with the epistemologies of illegitimacy, but it provides a useful starting point for our discussion of eighteenth-century representations of bastardy by exploring the “fascinating and elusive relationship between the notions of right and ownership, and . . . that world of language in which ‘property’—that which you owned—and ‘propriety’—that which pertained or was proper to a person or situation—were interchangeable terms” (104). I suggest that we have to consider the figure of the eighteenth-century bastard in the context of this broader crisis of the ideological system. As long as heritable, preferably landed, property remained the only source of livelihood and the only guarantee of what Pocock calls the “moral personality . . . and the opportunity of virtue” (110), the illegitimate offspring could only be viewed as “improper” because “unpropertied”—threatening, socially subversive, and amoral.

Hence, the emphasis on representing illegitimate characters as outsiders in the Renaissance. Bastards figured largely in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, mostly as villains associated with treachery, promiscuity, atheism, disintegration of community, and death (e.g., Shakespeare’s Edmund, Caliban, and Don John; John Kirke’s Suckabus; Gervase Markham and William Sampson’s Antipater), or—in rare cases—as benevolent if zany aliens, often endowed with a poetic or prophetic gift (e.g., Springlove from Richard Brome’s *A Merry Crew* [1641]). Sometimes historical figures were retroactively bastardized in order to provide a psychosocial explanation for inauspicious turns

18. Jenny Teichman, *Illegitimacy: An Examination of Bastardy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Akira Hayami, “Illegitimacy in Japan,” in Laslett et al., *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, 6; see also Daniel Ogden’s argument that there was no bastardy in Sparta because the land was allocated by the state and not inherited (*Greek Bastardy in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods* [Oxford University Press, 1996], 246).

19. J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 103.

in a community's political past. The anonymous *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* (1591), for example, depicted the peasant revolt of 1381 as headed by a character whose bastardy was invented by the author of the play. The anonymous *Claudius Tiberius Nero* (1607) featured an emperor whose illegitimacy was also an invention, a fitting symbol of the "illegitimate" nature of his political regime.²⁰

Pocock argues that the Financial Revolution of the 1690s strengthened the developing moral opposition between the "landed interests" and "monied interests" and thus precipitated a crisis in the traditional association of landed property with propriety: "property moved from being the object of ownership and right to being the subject of production and exchange, and . . . the effect of this on the proposition that property was the basis of social personality was to make personality itself explicable in terms of a material and historical process of diversification, refinement and perhaps ultimate decay and renewal" (119). The challenge of defining—and accepting—social personality in relation to volatile property demanded a new conceptual flexibility and could allow, among other things, for a more "enlightened" perspective on the social position of bastards, whose relationship to property had been paradigmatically troubling.

Thus, the further along we are in the "long, slow, cumulative process culminating in the industrial revolution,"²¹ the more ambiguous the fictional representations of bastards become. The reason for this representational adjustment is the slowly developing awareness on the part of the middle-class population (the group arguably most sensitive to the economic threat represented by bastardy)²² that, at least up to a point, inheritance did not define a person's financial destiny, and that the loss of some heritable property (to an illegitimate sibling) could in principle be recouped by future economic entrepreneurship. To put it starkly, a slightly more enlightened attitude toward "sons of nobody" was possible because their legitimate brothers felt increasingly empowered by the economic possibilities of venture capitalism.

This new feeling of empowerment by no means translated into a legally sponsored embrace of bastards as fully enfranchised members of the economic order. (In fact, the British laws postulating the socio-

20. Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (Manchester University Press, 1995), 78.

21. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), xix. Barker-Benfield here quotes Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1800* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 99.

22. See McClure, *Coram's Children*, 10; Gillis, *For Better, for Worse*, 111.

economic exclusion of illegitimate children were remarkably resilient; as late as 1978, the House of Commons rejected “A Bill to remove the legal disabilities of children born out of wedlock.”²³) A tentative development of a more tolerant attitude manifested itself rather in the increasingly vocal articulation of the view that the “unhappy innocents”²⁴ should not be made to pay for their parents’ sexual sins. The opening in 1739 of the London Foundling Hospital, dedicated to saving the lives of illegitimate children of the poor, was one concrete manifestation of that view, a manifestation by no means unambiguous, however, since this public charity could be described as shouldering the burden that might have been otherwise borne by the legitimate children of the father of the bastard.

When it came to fictional representations of illegitimacy, the situation was equally complicated. On the one hand, the figure of the bastard venomous because of his bastardy disappears from polite eighteenth-century literature (or moves so radically to the back of the stage that we hardly notice its skulking presence). This excision of the vile bastard as a ubiquitous literary type is accompanied by the introduction of the similarly ubiquitous virtuous foundling. Furthermore, whereas the overwhelming majority of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literary texts featuring illegitimate characters conclude with the triumphant expulsion of the malevolent bastard from the community,²⁵ most of the eighteenth-century supposed bastards (particularly female) turn out to be legally born foundlings who wind up reintegrated into the social order. The ascendance of the benevolent foundling as a literary type exemplified the Enlightenment’s more humane attitude toward illegitimate children—a *belles-lettres* equivalent of the fact that the public charitable institution designed to shelter *bastards* was called the *Foundling* Hospital. On the other hand, the literary rewriting of bastards as foundlings fit to be claimed by their long-lost families was crucially implicated with the perpetuation of the socioeconomic system that privileged legitimate children. A more enlightened perspective on the plight of bastards notwithstanding, the transfer of property to the hands of the legal heir remained the key concern of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative.

Emphasizing the psychosocial function of property in our analysis of the eighteenth-century representations of foundlings serves to qualify the current critical view of the foundling/bastard/orphan character

23. Teichman, *Illegitimacy*, 153, 162–64.

24. Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1:366.

25. Shakespeare’s *King John* and Richard Brome’s *A Jovial Crew* constitute notable exceptions to this rule.

as embodying “an implicit criticism of aristocratic ideology” (McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel*, 159). On the one hand, there is a certain appeal in considering such a character as representing what John Richetti describes as the eighteenth-century fictional narrative’s “progressive, even at times utopian, conviction that things should be different from the way that they have always been and that the new order is full of opportunity for the hard-working and the meritorious.”²⁶ On the other hand, the traditional exegetical model that collapses foundlings, bastards, and orphans into one broad category of “progressive” protagonists begins to look less persuasive once we notice how many of the Enlightenment’s fictional foundlings depend on the acquisition of inherited property—especially landed property—and how sensitive a subject the correlation between the acquisition of that property and the establishment of the marital status of the protagonist’s parents is. The theme of the acquisition of heritable property looms so large in the foundling fictions of the Enlightenment that it needs to be factored into both the argument about the romance origins of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative and into the argument about that narrative’s critique of aristocratic values.²⁷ We need to keep in mind the period’s acute concern about a large class of actual people—illegitimate daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, and stepchildren—who were officially denied social personality by being denied the right to inherit property and whose attempts to acquire such personality through inheriting property were read with the uneasy mixture of opprobrium and compassion. The relentless, if carefully camouflaged, focus on the “adventures of property” in eighteenth-century foundling stories is what allows me to link the fictional foundling and the real-life bastard.

ILLEGITIMACY AND GENDER

A remarkable correlation appears to underlie the eighteenth-century reimagining of bastardy. In any fictional narrative featuring an abandoned child, his or her gender serves as a largely reliable predictor of whether, at the end of the story, he or she would turn out to be a legitimately born foundling or a bastard. Lost male children are allowed to stay illegitimate; examples include Fielding’s Tom Jones and Tobias Smollett’s Humphrey Clinker. The majority of their female counterparts, on the other hand, suffer the threat of illegitimacy throughout

26. John Richetti, *The English Novel in History, 1700–1780* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

27. For related analyses, see Jo Alyson Parker, *The Author’s Inheritance: Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, and the Establishment of the Novel* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 87; Schmidgen, “Illegitimacy,” 148–51.

the story, only to discover at the end that their parents were married at the time of their conception.

How far back can we trace the literary genealogy of the eighteenth-century correlation of legitimacy with gender? In her important study of illegitimacy in Renaissance drama, Alison Findlay observes that the overwhelming majority of the period's fictional bastards were male. To explain such demographic uniformity, she suggests that female bastardy simply did not present the playwright with much dramatic potential: "legal illegitimacy affected one's rights to inheritance, succession, and the exercise of authority, advantages usually enjoyed by men. [As] under patriarchal law, women were normally excluded from the inheritance of estate, position, or power . . . bastardy merely reinforced their already marginal status" (5). Since Findlay does not make a distinction between foundlings and bastards, referring to all abandoned children as bastards, she does not acknowledge the fact that in the rare cases in which Renaissance writers did portray abandoned female children (e.g., Shakespeare's *Perdita* and *Marina*), they were born to married parents. The legitimate status of such heroines makes a crucial difference, however, for the present argument because the figure of the abandoned female child, relatively rare in Renaissance drama, becomes omnipresent in eighteenth-century belles-lettres.

The sharp increase in female protagonists in the fiction of the Enlightenment is a well-discussed phenomenon in eighteenth-century studies. So it would be logical that the tendency to use a woman as the "vehicle for testing the possibilities of an individualist ethic"²⁸ manifested itself in the growing numbers of literary female foundlings. We can argue, furthermore, that whereas both Renaissance and eighteenth-century writers were reluctant to leave their foundling heroines illegitimate, the shifting gender ratio of the protagonists in the later period finally forces us to recognize the obligatory legitimacy of the female foundling as a significant literary phenomenon.

We can take this argument further and suggest that the tendency to monitor the legitimacy of the female protagonist more vigilantly than that of her male counterpart could be traced to the novels of antiquity (e.g., *Heliiodorus* is careful to show that his *Charicleia* was born within a legal union). In other words, if a patriarchal culture would seize on

28. April London, *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25. For discussions of the centrality of women in eighteenth-century fiction, see Doody's *The True Story of the Novel*, 279–80; and Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 89–90. For a related discussion of the "repeated appearances" of the "long-lost daughter" in sentimental comedies, see Lisa Freeman, *Character's Theater: Gender and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 219–20.

any correlation that seems to render female sexual behavior less threateningly unpredictable, the tradition of predicting a woman's "virtue" through the chastity of her female ancestor(s) could account in part for the vitality of the trope of the legitimate female protagonist, including the female foundling.

Can we also associate the fictional insistence on the legitimacy of the marriageable heroine with greater prejudice against female than male bastards in real life? On the one hand, in *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System*, John Habakkuk offers eloquent testimony to the relatively equal treatment of bastard sons and daughters, at least among landed families (the class to which the majority of fictional female foundlings belong):

The [economic] system could also accommodate the illegitimate offspring of landed families so long as paternity was acknowledged and the parent was prepared to pay a portion large enough to compensate. Where there were *only* illegitimate children and they were well endowed they could make very good marriages. All three daughters of Sir Edward Walpole, Sir Robert's second son, married into the aristocracy with the full panoply of settlements. Ann Newcomen, illegitimate daughter of Sir Francis Wortley, married the second son of the first Earl of Sandwich. Rachel Bayton, illegitimate daughter of John Hall, married the eldest son of the Earl of Kingston. Anne Wellesley, the natural daughter of the Marquess Wellesley, married in 1806 Sir William Abdy, baronet of an ancient family. (153–54)

On the other hand, as Habakkuk admits, some marriage treaties might have stalled because of the bride's illegitimacy, as did the 1769 projected match between Edward Mann's illegitimate daughter Mary and her cousin-german. The bridegroom "'grew cold,' ostensibly because of scruples about marriage to a cousin, but more probably, Mann suspected, 'from pride and from her being a natural daughter.' Horace Walpole commented that Mann 'may now be tempted to scrape all he can together, in order to match his daughter more highly'" (*Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System*, 154).

We may never be able to establish beyond reasonable doubt that Mann's daughter's bastardy was indeed the reason why her cousin "grew cold." As Habakkuk observes in his discussion of treaties in which all the parties were legitimate, the disapproval of a prospective bride or groom could arise from many causes, such as religious differences, a family's bad reputation, personal disinclinations, and "disparity of fortune so great that the possibility of an equal bargain was virtually ruled out from the start" (*Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System*, 153). The illegitimacy of a young woman was thus one of several factors that could, but just as often did not, endanger her marital prospects.

With this in mind, if we do want to ground the insistence on the legitimacy of the fictional female foundling in any real-life practices, we may read it as a compensatory fantasy that responded to the weak bargaining position of the female bastard who could command no extra financial and social support from her family. The emphasis on female legitimacy in the foundling narratives may have obviated the less appealing emphasis on money and social connections that drove the marriage negotiations of illegitimate daughters in reality.

INFANTICIDE IN ANCIENT ROME AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

In 1694, a distinguished literary scholar, Laurence Echard, published a new translation of the plays of Publius Terentius Afer (185–159 BC), known in England as Terence. In the preface to his volume, Echard issued a seemingly puzzling warning for his readers, observing that “Roman plots, often founded upon the exposing of Children and their unexpected Delivery,” should not be transplanted onto the English stage.²⁹ Echard considered Terence “the most Exact, the most Elaborate, and withal the most Natural of all Dramatic Poets,” yet he still asserted that the “difference between the Romans and our selves in Customs, Humors, manners and theatres is such, that it is impossible to adapt their Plays to our Stages” (15).

To appreciate the peculiarity of Echard’s observation on Terence’s unsuitability for the English stage, we have to remember that Terence was a perennial favorite with late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers. Public-school students routinely translated him.³⁰ Dryden proudly claimed him as his role model.³¹ Terence’s plays were constantly in circulation: his *Andria* alone went through more than one hundred editions between 1700 and 1800. To begin to understand Echard’s ambivalence, we may want to take a look at the plot of that famous play—the same play, we should remember, that Steele would later select as the basis for his “new” comedy, *The Conscious Lovers*.

29. *Terence’s Comedies: made English. With his life; and some remarks at the end. By several hands* (London, 1694), 13. Echard’s name was omitted from several first editions. It was finally reinstated in the sixth edition, the full title of which is as follows: *Terence’s comedies made English, by Mr. Laurence Echard, and others. Revis’d and corrected by Dr. Echard, and Sir R. L’Estrange, The sixth edition* (London, 1726).

30. As H. Grant Sampson points out, Terence’s plays were “universally taught” throughout the eighteenth century (“Comic Patterns, and the Augustan Stage,” in *All the World . . . : Drama Past and Present*, ed. Karelisa V. Hartigan [Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982], 90).

31. John Dryden, *An Evening’s Love or the Mock-Astrologer*, in *John Dryden: Four Comedies*, ed. L. A. Beaurline and Fredson Bowers (University of Chicago Press, 1967), 188.

In *Andria*, a young woman named Glycerium gives birth to the illegitimate child of her lover, Pamphilus. The couple cannot get married because Glycerium's origins are unknown—it is likely that she is not a free citizen—and anyway, Pamphilus's father has made other matrimonial arrangements for him. Shortly before Glycerium goes into labor, Pamphilus promises to her that he will never expose (i.e., abandon in the street) their baby—come what may, even if it is a girl!—but will acknowledge it as his and raise it. Nevertheless, in the third act, Glycerium's newborn is put out in the street as part of a complicated plot hatched by Pamphilus's slave Davos in order to prevent Pamphilus's marriage to another woman. Since this is a comedy, the infant is abandoned only temporarily, and the play ends with the discovery that Glycerium is the long-lost daughter of an Athenian citizen and thus can wed the father of her child.

We can see why this conclusion would not sit well with the late seventeenth-century critics of the stage (only four years separate Echard's warning and Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*). Terence emphasizes the rediscovered Athenian citizenship of his female protagonist—a moot point for the English audiences because Greek and Roman categories of citizenship did not correlate easily with the British class system (according to Pericles' law, Athenian citizens could not marry non-Athenians; if they did, the offspring of such marriages were considered illegitimate). At the same time, Terence allows his fornicating heroine to wed her lover, manifesting a scandalous lack of concern for the notion of female virtue that came to dominate eighteenth-century belles-lettres.³² Glycerium's story is particularly provoking because she is actually a courtesan-in-the-making—not marriage material even by the standards of Terence's day. Early in the play, we find out that she was adopted by a hetaira (introduced politely as her "sister"), a damning revelation because, as Daniel Ogden points out, it was common for hetairai to adopt beautiful girls and prepare them for a similar career.³³ The hetaira who takes in Glycerium conveniently dies before the play begins, so we are spared the details of the "sisters'" domestic arrangement, and see Glycerium only in the care of Pamphilus (the motif of dependence on one's protector that makes Indiana's position in *The Conscious Lovers* so ambiguous).

Terence's occasionally lighthearted approach to female virtue was one reason to question his plays' suitability for the late seventeenth-

32. We can situate Echard's critique of Roman customs and manners in the context of what Howard Weinbrot sees as the late seventeenth-century critique of Roman decadence and paganism (*Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* [Cambridge University Press, 1993], chap. 7).

33. Ogden, *Greek Bastardy*, 105.

century stage. The main reason, however, as Echard himself pointed out in his preface, was Terence's reliance on the plots of exposure and unexpected delivery of children. Echard saw the ancient Roman plots of exposure as disturbingly relevant to the current English problem of infanticide and could not think of a way to neutralize these plots so as to remove their offensive topical sting.

In fact, Echard's careful wording of his brief discourse on "Roman Customs and Manners" implied that the abandonment of newborn children was a thing from a safely distant Roman past, alien to his fellow countrymen, and as such out of place on the English stage. Echard thus refrained from spelling out what we can reconstruct as the real reason his readers would not appreciate watching staged representations of exposure. Such representations were undesirable not because British audiences would not be able to relate to this antiquated custom, but, unfortunately, because they could relate to it too well. Echard might or might not have been familiar with William Petty's suggestion in the 1680s that England needed a publicly founded institution dedicated to saving the lives of illegitimate children liable to be abandoned or even murdered, typically by desperate serving-class women trying to avoid the punishment for bringing forth "bastards."³⁴ Even if Echard had never heard of Petty's proposals, he still must have been aware of the contemporary practice of exposing unwanted illegitimate children, a practice that seemed to increase in proportion with the rapid growth of an urban population and that affected the everyday life of his fellow Londoners. As Toni Bowers points out, by the first decades of the eighteenth century, "abandoned or exposed children—in Augustan slang, children who had been 'dropped'—constituted a social presence that could not be ignored; their bodies, dead or (barely) alive littered London and the countryside."³⁵ Since the choice of contraceptive techniques was as limited in eighteenth-century England as it had been in ancient Rome, to farm an infant out to a "killer-nurse"³⁶ or to abandon it shortly after birth were often the only options available to an unmarried woman who had no means for supporting a child on

34. See William Petty, *An Essay Concerning the Multiplication of Mankind: Together with Another Essay in Political Arithmetick, Concerning the Growth of the city of London: with the Measures, Periods, Causes, and Consequences Thereof . . .* (London, 1686), and *Two Essays in Political Arithmetick, Concerning the People, Housing, Hospitals, &c. of London and Paris* (London, 1687). For a discussion of Petty's proposals see Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 58.

35. Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680–1760* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

36. Richard Adair suggests that "there may possibly . . . have been semi-institutionalized networks of infanticidal wet-nurses, although it is difficult to distinguish neglect from deliberate killing" (*Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* [Manchester University Press, 1996], 44).

her own and who anticipated being ostracized (and often physically punished) for burdening her parish with a bastard. Even though, as Keith Wrightson notes, only a few women among those with the “stringent rational motive to commit infanticide”³⁷ actually did so, the abandonment and murder of newborn children remained a tragically constant feature of the social landscape of the British Enlightenment.³⁸

The terms “exposure” and “abandonment” themselves underwent a subtle yet important transformation by the end of the seventeenth century. As John Boswell points out, “exposure” was not necessarily synonymous with “infanticide” for most of European history. It became so, he argues, by the late Renaissance, when informal social networks of adoption grew increasingly obsolete and were only partially replaced by parochial provisions for “bastards” and by the spread of Foundling Hospitals. If we agree with Boswell’s argument that the complex “systems of transfer developed in ancient and medieval Europe” ensured that a significant number of “unwanted and burdensome” infants would be “shifted . . . to situations where they were desired or valued,”³⁹ then we can assume that Roman audiences appreciated the comic potential of the exposure scene in Terence’s *Andria* and read this scene as an implicit manifestation of the cohesiveness of their community rather than of its breakdown. By contrast, for late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century British audiences, the sight of an exposed

37. Keith Wrightson, “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” *Local Population Studies* 15 (1975): 19.

38. A number of scholars have examined fictional depictions of victimized children and their deviant parents in conjunction with transformations in political, economic, and reproductive landscapes of early modern Europe. Proposed models of interaction between the literary and the sociohistorical range from Thomas Laqueur’s radical assertion of an ontological linkage between eighteenth-century forensic descriptions of dead infants and the developing British novel (“Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 176–204) to Deborah A. Symonds’s analysis of a careful repositioning of the figure of the “unnatural” (murderous) mother in fictional and legal discourses of the time (*Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 191–210]). See also Jennifer Thorn’s introduction to her collection, *Writing British Infanticide: Child Murder and Narrative, 1664–1876* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003); Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1770* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Betty S. Travitsky, “Child Murder in English Renaissance Life and Drama,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 6 (1993): 63–84; Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood*; and Marilyn Francus, “Monstrous Mothers, Monstrous Societies: Infanticide and the Rule of Law in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21, no. 2 (May 1997): 135.

39. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 76–79.

infant would bring on associations with infanticide and the disintegration of community as well as unpleasant memories of parochial squabbles over the cost of maintaining the abandoned illegitimate children of the poor. (Thomas Bray would aptly express such associations in his 1728 comparison of potential victims of infanticide to “Warts and Wens, and other filthy Excrescencies . . . defacing and weakening . . . the Body Politic.”)⁴⁰ Paradoxically, it was in part the historical remoteness of the society depicted in *Andria*—and thus the lack of historical context for its exposure references—that made possible the “re-accentuation” (to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept)⁴¹ of those references and infused Terence’s comedy with a topicality disturbing for early eighteenth-century audiences regularly jolted by the “daily sight of infant corpses thrown on the dust heaps of London.”⁴²

STEELE REWRITES ILLEGITIMACY

The Conscious Lovers occupies a special place in eighteenth-century literary history. It is considered a paradigmatic “sentimental comedy . . . associated with the early eighteenth-century reform movement”⁴³ and testifying to the theater’s prescient recognition of the rising power of the middle class audience.⁴⁴ The play features a young woman named Indiana whose origins remain unknown until, in the last scene of the play, she is revealed to be the long-lost daughter of an affluent London merchant, Mr. Sealand. This happy discovery is followed by a wedding: Indiana’s steadfast admirer and protector, Bevil Junior, a scion to an old aristocratic family, can now marry the beautiful foundling with the blessing of his father, Sir Bevil. Where the Dorimants

40. Thomas Bray, *A Memorial Concerning the Erecting in the City of London or the Suburbs thereof of an Orphanotrophy or Hospital for the Reception of Poor Cast Off Children or Foundlings* (London, 1728), 16.

41. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 417.

42. Thomas Coram, quoted in William Langer, “Infanticide: A Historical Survey,” in *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1974): 358.

43. John Loftis, *Steele at Drury Lane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 196.

44. Raymond Williams sees sentimental comedy as “the least attractive” but a remarkably resilient and influential cultural phenomenon. He points out that “while the early products of eighteenth-century middle-class culture were regarded (often with justice) as vulgar, we must, to tell the whole story, follow the development down, to the points where the vulgar novel became a major literary form, and where the despised forms of ‘bourgeois tragedy’ and ‘sentimental comedy’ served, in their maturity, a wide area of our modern drama” (“Sentimentalism and Social History,” in *The Long Revolution* [London, 1961], 256–60; reprint in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin [New York: Norton, 1997], 621).

and Harriets of the Restoration stage thrust and parry with witty repartees, Bevil Junior and Indiana vie with each other in noble and disinterested behavior. To devotees of Wycherley and Etherege, *The Conscious Lovers* did not even feel like a comedy—John Dennis thought that Indiana’s story was “downright tragical”⁴⁵—but Steele remained convinced that “it must be an improvement of [comedy] to introduce a joy too exquisite for laughter, that can have no spring but in delight, which is the case of this young lady.”⁴⁶ Steele, as Lisa Freeman points out, billed his “new kind of drama” as offering the growing middle class audience “something of more enduring value than the transitory laughter and passions of laughing comedies: an education in polite values, polite behavior, and polite feeling”—a ticket into the “class of the refined.”⁴⁷

“Polite” to the point of being considered “wooden” by twentieth-century critics,⁴⁸ *The Conscious Lovers* seems the least likely of Restoration and early eighteenth-century plays to embody the period’s preoccupation with illegitimacy. The comedies of the preceding decades were much more outspoken in their references to bastards, treating illegitimacy as part of everyday economic, social, and sexual interactions. In Colley Cibber’s *Love’s Last Shift* (1696), a young woman named Hilaria wonders who the “over-shy” Lady seen at a fashionable outing is. Her cousin, Young Worthy, offhandedly replies: “Hang her, she’s a Jest to the whole Town: For tho’ she has been the Mother of two By-blows, she endeavors to appear as ignorant in all Company, as if she did not know the Distinction of Sexes.”⁴⁹ In George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), Captain Plume advises his friend (also named Worthy), whose courtship has stalled, to mortify his haughty lady’s pride by lying “with her Chamber-maid and [hiring] three or four Wenches in the Neighborhood to report that [Worthy] had got them with Child.” Plume rounds out his advice with an implicit panegyric to the sexual prowess of the King’s army, noting that with “so many Recruiting Officers in Town,” the number of “Bastards” has to increase: “I thought ’twas a Maxim among [our Officers] to leave as many Recruits in the Country as they carry’d out.” Worthy acknowledges the

45. John Dennis, “Remarks on *The Conscious Lovers*,” in McMillin, *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, 530.

46. Richard Steele, *The Conscious Lovers*, in McMillin, *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, 323. All subsequent quotations from *The Conscious Lovers* are from this edition. Page numbers are supplied, not line numbers.

47. Freeman, *Character’s Theater*, 204.

48. Shirley Strum Kenney, “Richard Steele and the ‘Pattern of Genteel Comedy,’” *Modern Philology* 70 (1972): 34.

49. Colley Cibber, *Love’s Last Shift*, in Womersley, *Restoration Drama*, 575.

double entendre with a pun of his own: “No body doubts your Goodwill, Noble Captain, in serving your Country with your best Blood—Witness our Friend Molly at the Castle—There have been Tears in Town about that Business, Captain.”⁵⁰

The action of *The Conscious Lovers* is obliquely driven by Sir Bevil’s fear of having an illegitimate daughter-in-law or illegitimate grandchildren; the happy ending of the play is a quiet sigh of relief prompted by the public confirmation that, though a child “lost” by her parents, Indiana is no bastard and has never been—contrary to what was suspected—Bevil Junior’s kept mistress. (That Indiana could have been a bastard is tacitly indicated in Steele’s 1720 essay in *The Theatre*, in which, as Freeman observes, Steele “takes great pains to underline the idea that while Sealand may have fallen into the dissipated and spendthrift ways of a Restoration rake in his earlier years, he has subsequently undergone a kind of reformation and is now distinguished by a fastidious sense of industry [and] economy” [216]. Indiana, in other words, could have been conceived out of wedlock back in the heady days of the last century, and she seems to have avoided such a destiny by a hair’s breadth.⁵¹) Nonetheless, *The Conscious Lovers* contains no explicit mention of bastardy, and its author manages to work around that notorious issue in a newly polite way, without the coarse references to “by-blows” and “new recruits.”

But commendable as the project of sanitizing the language of the stage was in post-Collier England, it was not just the vernacular of illegitimacy that needed to be reformed or excised. I suggest in the following pages that the crucial turns of the play’s plot and even its famed “politeness” are informed by Steele’s determination to silence a host of public and personal problems bound up with bastardy that were forcing their way into his comedy. If I am right, the paradigmatic eighteenth-century sentimental comedy owes much of its rhetoric to its author’s commitment to negotiating the scandalous issues

50. George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, in Womersley, *Restoration Drama*, 697.

51. Here is the relevant excerpt from the essay in *The Theatre*: “This Gentleman was formerly what is call’d a Man of Pleasure about the Town; and having, when young, lavish’d a small Estate, retir’d to India, where by Marriage, and falling into the Knowledge of Trade, he laid the Foundation of the great Fortune, of which he is now Master. . . . He is a true Pattern of that kind of third Gentry, which arose in the World this last Century: I mean the great, and rich Families of Merchants, and eminent Traders, who in their Furniture, their Equipage, their Manner of Living, and especially their Oeconomy . . . deserve the Imitation of the modern Nobility” (quoted in Freeman, *Character’s Theatre*, 216). Indiana must have been conceived just at the moment of Mr. Sealand’s reformation from a Man of Pleasure into the “true Pattern” of a new gentry, and she thus narrowly avoided the fate of a “natural” child.

of bastardy and child-murder through the idiom of the traditional “foundling” romance.

An obvious question occurs to a literary historian reconstructing the origins of Steele’s play: since we know that the issue of infanticide had not become any less painful by the time Steele turned to Terence’s *Andria* in the early 1710s (both illegitimacy and the abandonment of illegitimate children had increased steadily as the century went on),⁵² why did Steele choose such an inauspicious literary forebear? If Echard felt that the disturbing parallels between the “Roman custom” of exposure and the English custom of infanticide rendered plays such as *Andria* unfit for the theater, why didn’t Steele? My tentative answer is that other considerations outweighed any concern on Steele’s part about how problematic the task of “Englishing” a Roman play dealing with bastardy and abandonment might be. For Terence did seem—or at any rate was made to seem—such a perfect match in other ways! Here is John Loftis characterizing the affinities between the two playwrights:

In Terence, Steele had found out a precedent for his own comic theory, in which the laughter was relegated to a subordinate position. Praising *The Self-Torturer* in the *Spectator*, No. 502, he found it a merit in the play that it did not provoke laughter; rather it was remarkable for “worthy Sentiments.” Such admiration for the Roman dramatist’s humanity doubtless led to his selection of *The Andria* as the source for *The Conscious Lovers*, the Roman play providing ample incident for displaying tender emotions. (*Steele at Drury-Lane*, 200)

The claim that Terence’s “worthy sentiments” and “tender emotions” made him an obvious role model for Steele needs a bit of historical qualification. In claiming *Andria* as a valuable precedent of a comedy that eschewed “transitory laughter” (Freeman, *Character’s Theater*, 204) for a more refined sensation of “joy too exquisite for laughter,” Steele followed a tradition established earlier by Restoration playwrights. In 1671, Dryden turned to Terence’s plays when he was charged with making “debauch’d persons [his] protagonists . . . and [leaving] them happy in the Conclusion of [his plays,] against the Law of Comedy, which is to reward virtue and punish vice.” “I know no such law to have been constantly observ’d in Comedy, either by the Ancient or Modern

52. See Laslett, “Introduction: Comparing Illegitimacy Over Time and Between Cultures,” in Laslett, Oosterveen, and Smith, *Bastardy*, 14, 18, 52. Furthermore, for a suggestive related discussion of the difference between the perceived and the actual increase in infanticide in early eighteenth-century England, see Pier Paolo Viazzo, “Mortality, Fertility, and Family,” in *The History of the European Family*, ed. David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, vol. 1, *Family Life in Early Modern Times, 1500–1789* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 176.

Poets,” Dryden wrote defiantly in the preface to his *An Evening’s Love*, adding that “Chaerea is made happy in the *Eunuch*, after having deflour’d a Virgin: and Terence generally does the same through all his Plays, where you perpetually see, not only debauch’d young men enjoy their Mistresses, but even the Courtezans themselves rewarded and honour’d in the Catastrophe” (188).

There is an obvious irony in the fact that whereas Dryden used Terence to defend his right to reward “debauchery,” Steele proceeded to elevate Terence as the patron saint of the new comedy, conceived as a radical correction to the libidinous exuberance of Restoration comedy. Terence clearly was as open to appropriation and reappropriation as any of the venerable “ancients,” and claiming the Roman author as his literary forefather enhanced Steele’s self-representation as a reformer of the English stage. These considerations must have helped him carry on even as he became cognizant of how difficult it was to chisel his “new” comedy out of a play built around the theme of exposure when his countrymen, in the words of Joseph Addison, did “not know how to speak on such a subject without horror.”⁵³

Paradoxically, it was Terence’s cultural prominence—something that Steele wanted to capitalize on in developing his new drama—that amplified Steele’s troubles. He knew that his audiences would be familiar with *Andria* and that they would inevitably compare *The Conscious Lovers* to Terence’s comedy (a cultural experience comparable to watching a Hollywood adaptation of a classic novel and filling in details and psychological motivations from the original). What he could not foresee was how their knowledge would color their perception of the play; he could not gauge the extent to which they would—intentionally or not—“supplement” his innocent love scenes with the scandalous (and even “unspeakable,” to adapt Addison’s parlance) innuendos of the original. It was this uncertainty, I suggest, that led Steele to try making his play so irreproachably innocuous as to be regarded as “ridiculously whimsical” by an eighteenth-century critic (Dennis, “Remarks on *The Conscious Lovers*,” 533) or “wooden” by a twentieth-century one (Kenney, “Richard Steele and the ‘Pattern of Genteel Comedy,’” 34).

Moreover, another complication possibly factored into Steele’s endeavor to obliterate the disturbing social relevance of his comedy: the story of Steele’s own illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, and her failed engagement to Steele’s notorious protégé Richard Savage. Steele met Savage sometime in 1718, at the time when the younger man’s play, *Love in a Veil*, was being prepared for its Drury Lane production. Savage claimed to be a natural son of Earl Rivers, the product of

53. Joseph Addison, *The Guardian* No. 105, Saturday, July 11 (1713).

the earl's adulterous liaison with the Countess of Macclesfield. As Willard Connely nonchalantly notes, there was no doubt that "the fine-mannered but coarse-featured wretch was somebody's bastard . . . but that he was Lady Macclesfield's no one seemed to be able to affirm but himself."⁵⁴ Impressed by the talented young man and touched by his poignant personal history (the presumed offspring of the peer of the realm was indigent and had to earn his living by his wits), Steele began patronizing Savage by introducing him to his friends, procuring him writing commissions, and paying him a modest stipend. Steele's devotion to Savage went so far as to lead him offer to him, in 1719, the hand of his daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, in marriage. Ousley was Steele's "natural" daughter, to be sure, but she was very well educated and so beloved by her father as to make Betty, his legitimate child, "a little jealous of the fondness Steele showed for his vivacious Elizabeth" (Connely, *Sir Richard Steele*, 371).

We learn of the treaty of marriage from Samuel Johnson's *Life of Savage* (1743). Johnson tells us that the negotiations came to naught because Steele failed to come up with a promised dowry of one thousand pounds. Savage, however, implies a different reason in the *Memoirs of Mrs. Carter* (1807). He claims that he was so averse to the union with the "natural daughter" of Sir Richard that he "could never be induced to see the lady, though [Steele] frequently and warmly pressed [him] to an interview."⁵⁵ Interestingly, neither Johnson nor Savage refer to Elizabeth by name; the appellation of the "natural daughter" seems to suffice in both men's account of Steele's ill-fated scheme.

That the self-proclaimed "natural" son of Earl Rivers could reject a prospective bride with a curt explanation invoking her bastardy was not at all surprising to those familiar with Savage's propensity for self-aggrandizement and obliviousness. Steele's reaction was also predictable. When "he was officiously informed that Mr. Savage had ridiculed him . . . he was so much exasperated, that he withdrew the Allowance which he had paid him, and never afterwards admitted him to his House" (Johnson, *Life of Savage*, 16). The story gets more interesting, however, when we realize that Steele's disappointment in the matrimonial plan for his daughter coincided with his working on *The Conscious Lovers*. Steele, of course, began thinking of the play that would become *The Conscious Lovers* long before he met Richard Savage—in fact, Loftis locates Steele's first references to the planned comedy as early as in 1710 (184)—but the last three years before the 1722 produc-

54. Willard Connely, *Sir Richard Steele* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 380.

55. Quoted by Clarence Tracy, the editor of Samuel Johnson, *Life of Savage* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 17.

tion of *The Conscious Lovers* saw a number of important revisions, some suggested by Colly Cibber, some informed by Steele's evolving concept of "new comedy." Given Steele's devotion to his "natural" daughter and his pain and humiliation at Savage's refusal even to "see the lady," let alone marry her, certain crucial details in the plot of *The Conscious Lovers* can be read as reflecting the unfortunate 1719 affair.

One such detail is the play's treatment of female virtue. On the one hand, Steele conventionally identifies woman's virtue with her chastity; on the other, he posits virtue as more important in a prospective bride than her social class. Or does he? Critics disagree about the significance of the fact that Bevil Junior feels fully committed to Indiana (albeit without informing her about it), before she is found to be the long-lost daughter of the rich Mr. Sealand. J. Douglas Canfield argues that while "Sealand and Bevil Junior may both protest that virtue only is their concern in a marriage, as in the typical tragicomic romance each of the nubile characters turns out to be in the right class anyway, so any real challenge to the traffic in women to improve estates proves moot."⁵⁶ James Thompson allows Steele more social subversiveness by observing that

Steele insists that the female protagonist's individual worth, her beauty and virtue, must be recognized prior to elevation in class status, prior to the revelation of her birth, and in so doing he clearly ranks individual worth above class status. . . . Class transgression in marriage is eventually avoided, and all of the couples are paired off according to their class status—servant with servant, gentry with gentry—but still Steele is at considerable pains to say that class considerations are secondary.⁵⁷

The story of Elizabeth Ousley's aborted marriage treaty may suggest a new backdrop for the "considerable pains" that went into her father's affirmation of the primacy of virtue over parentage. The virtue of the play's beauteous foundling seems to be more important than her social standing—or is it the guilt-ridden Steele dreaming about a world where his daughter's marital pursuits would not be hampered by the lack of the ready thousand pounds? The aristocratic Bevil Junior knows true virtue when he sees it and would be willing to take Indiana "as she is,"

56. J. Douglas Canfield, "Shifting Tropes of Ideology in English Serious Drama, Late Stuart to Early Georgian," in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 220.

57. James Thompson, "'Sure I Have Seen That Face Before': Representation and Value in Eighteenth-Century Drama," in Canfield and Payne, *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, 295.

without money or advantageous social position—mark that, Richard Savage, low-bred pretender to gentility!⁵⁸ It is not difficult to read *The Conscious Lovers* as Steele's attempt to sublimate his parental heartache through portraying his rather pressed-for-money "natural" daughter as a legally born offspring of a rich Londoner, marrying a man who can afford her delicate sentiments and exquisite education. In 1720, his own Elizabeth wed a glover, one William Aynston, a "prominent villager" of Almeley, Herefordshire, perhaps a bit of a letdown given her "expensive schooling" (Connely, *Sir Richard Steele*, 381) and her father's early ambitions to marry her to a son of an earl, even if illegitimate and not yet acknowledged by his mother.

PROPERTY IN *THE CONSCIOUS LOVERS*

It has become a commonplace in literary criticism to infer a relatively "progressive" bent of the eighteenth-century fiction from the fact that all those Fidelias, Amelias, Evelinas, and Emmelines receive advantageous marriage proposals on the strength of their virtue alone, just before their high status and affluence are revealed. I propose that the particular sequencing of events in the eighteenth-century foundling narrative—first, the intimation that the heroine is about to marry very much above her station, then the discovery of her own affluence—could be explained, at least in part, by the writers' commitment to obfuscating the connection between real life bastards and fictional foundlings. Because the presence of illegitimate children threatened the uninterrupted transfer of property down the legal line, their fictional counterparts had to be portrayed as not even needing the property they would ultimately inherit: the needy real-life bastards had nothing in common with the idealistic and lucky, as far as marriages go, foundlings.

If the appeal of the "first find a rich husband and *then* a rich father" motif of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative was indeed its capacity to both express and assuage the cultural anxiety about bastards disrupting the transmission of property to legal heirs, then it is worthwhile to take a closer look at property in *The Conscious Lovers*. When Mr. Sealand discovers that Indiana is his daughter, he immediately announces that she will get "a fortune equal to [Sir John Bevil's] hopes" (380), thus cutting in half the inheritance of his other daughter, Lucinda, who has been, until then, the sole heiress to his wealth. The news that Lucinda's estate is halved leads her learned suitor Cimberton

58. Ironically, the role of Indiana in the Drury Lane performances of *The Conscious Lovers* was played by Anne Oldfield, an object of Savage's perennial (if not necessarily erotic) attachment and herself a mother of two illegitimate children.

to break off his courtship, reasoning that he “was in treaty for the whole, but if that is not to be come at, to be sure, there can be no bargain” (380). By having Cimberton denounce Lucinda, Steele forces his audience/readers to treat lightly the partial loss of Lucinda’s estate. If they take this loss seriously, they are identified with the ridiculous Cimberton; if they ignore it they resemble the noble Mr. Myrtle, Lucinda’s preferred admirer, who hastens to proclaim that “no abatement of fortune shall lessen her value to [him]” (381). Some property is well lost if with it goes the “unseasonable puppy” (356) Cimberton, the play assures us cheerfully.

Still, if we set aside this manipulation of audience emotions, Cimberton’s reaction is important because it shows a real consequence of reintegrating a long-lost child into the family: because Lucinda’s estate is halved, her value on the marriage market goes down. A legitimate child lost and then discovered again was the stuff of fiction; in real life, a “suddenly discovered” or a “long-lost” child was usually a bastard who had moved from a hushed-down existence to the room where the will was read and legitimate offspring gnashed their teeth over the sudden diminution of their property. In other words, Steele’s eighteenth-century audience could relate to the situation in which a grown-up pretender to family fortunes materializes out of nowhere and claims his or her share of property and parental affection. Although the play treats Lucinda’s financial loss as a personal gain, the underlying socio-economic dynamics of this “foundling” narrative were recognizably informed by the issue of bastardy.

Here again, as when he felt compelled to neutralize the dangerous topicality of Terence’s exposure references, Steele was faced with the challenge of muffling the bastard overtones of his foundling plot. If in the first case he opted for stressing the sexual innocence of his conscious lovers (unlike Pamphilus and Glycerium, Bevil Junior and Indiana would never have a child out of wedlock!), here he emphasized his plot’s reliance on the conventions of the classical foundling narrative, playing up, for example, the role of the material token in the recognition scene. In the last act of *The Conscious Lovers*, Indiana, distraught by the conversation with Mr. Sealand (who comes to her house to inquire into the nature of her relationship with Bevil Junior), throws away a bracelet which Mr. Sealand immediately recognizes as belonging to his late wife (378). Writing in 1723, Dennis called the bracelet sequence contrived and completely unnecessary, pointing out that the discovery could have been brought off more convincingly and efficiently if Mr. Sealand’s sister, Isabella (who had been lost at sea together with Indiana and had since raised her) were to have acknowledged her brother upon first seeing him at Indiana’s house or if

Indiana were to have directly answered Mr. Sealand's questions about herself. As Dennis put it, had Steele "known anything of the art of the stage, he would have known that those discoveries are but dully made which are made by tokens; that they ought necessarily or probably to spring from the whole train of the incidents contrary to our expectation" (533-34).

The date of Dennis's observation could be used to qualify the currently accepted critical view according to which the writer's reliance on such stale conventions is to be read as a sign of immaturity of the early eighteenth-century literary endeavor, a stylistic shortcoming to be gradually overcome and viewed with embarrassment or self-conscious irony by the last quarter of the century. Deidre Shauna Lynch expresses this view eloquently when she observes, "In the eighteenth century, the surplus materiality of the means by which [the] scenes of anagnorisis were generated became increasingly embarrassing for writers on literature and theater. By the end of the century critics began to sanction only those recognition scenes that arose from action. They were eager to consign recognitions arising from telltale rings, scars, and other distinguishing features to the debased category of popular entertainment."⁵⁹

Is it really the case that early in the century the use of telltale rings and scars was accepted as the necessary evidence clinching the anagnorisis? Dennis's assertion that anybody conversant with the "art of the stage" knows that "those discoveries are but dully made which are made by tokens" qualifies Lynch's argument about the evolution in the eighteenth-century critics' reaction to the "surplus materiality" of recognition scenes. Lynch observes that critics began to insist that recognition scenes arise "from action" only "by the end of the century," but Dennis ridiculed Steele's reliance on tokens instead of a "train of incidents" as early as 1723. Indeed, already in 1692, André Dacier had observed in his influential *La Poétique d'Aristotle* that recognition plots with their "marvelous effects" seemed to be "on the wane" among playwrights.⁶⁰ These facts prompt us to reexamine the traditional notion that it took most of the century for authors to "grow out" of their naive reliance on the formulaic conventions of the classical foundling narrative. We should consider instead the possibility that they relied on those conventions both in the early and in the late part of the century, and both in the newly "respectable" plays and novels and in the fictions produced for "popular entertainment," not because

59. Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26.

60. Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 120.

they could not do any better—they could—but because by flaunting those conventions, they could hope to calibrate the perceived topicality of their pieces.

Dennis is absolutely correct in his view of Steele's "bracelet" maneuver as superfluous: Indiana and her father would have indeed arrived at the discovery of their consanguinity in the course of their conversation, and if not, Aunt Isabella would have set the matter straight. In fact, Dennis's critique is so germane that we have to ask why the expert playwright, author of *The Funeral* (1701), *The Tender Husband* (1705), and *The Lying Lover* (1703), had recourse to such superfluous gimmicks. This was, after all, the same Steele who made fun of foundlings and their tokens—their "marks"—in *The Tender Husband*, when Biddy Tipkin, whose head runs on romances, informs her aunt that she is "not satisfied in the point of [her] nativity. Many an infant has been placed in a cottage with obscure parents, till by chance some ancient servant of the family has known it by its marks."⁶¹ Steele did not need Dennis to enlighten him as to the exact aesthetic value of a "mark" as a dramatic device. Why then did he leave himself so vulnerable to the charge of theatrical amateurism?

I suggest that by deploying the contrived bracelet gimmick, Steele intended to signal the "literariness" of his play at the expense of its social relevance. The tale about a "suddenly found" daughter of an affluent merchant assimilated itself all too easily to the pernicious and well-known real-life scenario, and one possible way to deflect the audience from that identification was to emphasize the stylized nature of the plot. Indiana as an antiquated foundling somewhat out of place on the early eighteenth-century stage (the stage, according to Dennis, too sophisticated for stale conventions) was still better than Indiana as a covert bastard too much at home with the eighteenth-century anxiety about the effects of illegitimacy on the transmission of property.

It is difficult to say whether Steele's project of rewriting "bastards" into "foundlings" was altogether successful: it could be argued that his play articulated with new force the anxiety surrounding the transfer of property down the legal line in a society besieged by illegitimacy even as it made a strenuous effort to disavow this anxiety. But, more generally, we should consider the possibility that there was no "age of innocence" in eighteenth-century literary history when the conventions of the ancient foundling narrative were taken at face value or at least tolerated because of a presumed paucity of dramatic devices available

61. Richard Steele, "The Tender Husband: Or, The Accomplished Fools," in *Richard Steele*, ed. G. A. Aitken (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 218.

to the writer. It appears that throughout the eighteenth century—and not just at its end—writers consciously employed conventions of the foundling romance both to evoke and to disavow a wide host of troubling issues bound up with illegitimacy. We see both of these impulses at work in *The Conscious Lovers*. There Steele gave voice to the “unspeakable” issue of infanticide and to the thousands of everyday familial crises over the transmission of property while simultaneously burying these jarring voices under the stylized surface of his “innocent” foundling comedy.

MOORE AND COLMAN REWRITE ILLEGITIMACY

Edward Moore's *The Foundling* premiered at Drury Lane in February 1748, and the author was immediately accused of copying Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*. Indeed, at times the plot of *The Foundling* closely follows that of Steele's play; moreover, judging by Moore's careful handling of the early history of his female protagonist, he was just as concerned about the issue of illegitimacy as Steele had been a quarter of a century earlier. To ensure that his heroine's tribulations do not imply that something was amiss with her parents' marital arrangement, Moore significantly modified Steele's explanation of how the beautiful foundling happened to find herself “fatherless” at the most crucial juncture of her life.⁶²

The action of *The Foundling* takes place in the house of Sir Roger Belmont (a character similar to Steele's Sir John Bevil), whose son, young Belmont (corresponding to Bevil Junior) is a fashionable rake. Prior to the beginning of the play, Belmont introduces into his father's household one Fidelia (the Indiana figure), a young woman of beauty and sense whose origins remain a mystery. Belmont claims that Fidelia is the sister of his late college friend, Jack, who bequeathed her to Belmont's guardianship. Belmont's own sister, Rosetta (somewhat reminiscent of Steele's Lucinda),⁶³ believes this improbable story, but Sir

62. Edward Moore, “*The Foundling, A Comedy*,” and “*The Gamester, a Tragedy*,” ed. with introduction and notes by Anthony Amberg (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996). Quoted parenthetically by page number.

63. Moore's biographer, John Homer Caskey, considers Rosetta an invention of Moore's, not corresponding to any particular character in Steele's play, except perhaps Indiana's Aunt Isabella, since like Isabella, Rosetta takes Fidelia under her protection (*The Life and Works of Edward Moore* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1923], 41). I think that Rosetta in her vivacity also bears some resemblance to Steele's Lucinda. Also in *The Conscious Lovers*, Lucinda and Indiana turn out to be sisters, and one important consequence of this discovery is the halving of Lucinda's fortune. In the case of Moore's Fidelia, she is the sister of Colonel Raymond, Rosetta's suitor, and by being readmitted into her family, she makes Rosetta's fortune smaller indirectly—via diminishing the portion of Colonel Raymond.

Belmont is nonplussed that Fidelity was brought to his house in the middle of the night and that her family name and circumstances are shrouded in secrecy. The audience is informed that Fidelity had been lost by her father, who had to flee England for political reasons, and was brought up by a nurse who found the “helpless infant at her door.” When Fidelity was twelve years old, the avaricious nurse sold her to one Villiard “for the worst of purposes.” After soliciting in vain Fidelity’s sexual favors for several years, Villiard finally “had recourse to violence.” Fidelity’s cries brought in Belmont Junior, who was “accidentally passing” (191) their house at midnight, just in time to save her from being raped (Steele’s *Indiana*, we recall, was saved by Bevil Junior shortly after being dragged “to prison” [337] by her latter-day guardian, who had failed to seduce her with promises and menaces and decided to prosecute her for allegedly refusing to pay him back for her maintenance).

The difficulty of Belmont Junior’s situation is that, after carrying Fidelity away from her guardian-ravisher and installing her at his father’s house, he realizes that in these circumstances he cannot safely seduce her—something that he has intended since he first saw her. Belmont has to find a way to remove Fidelity to a separate lodging. He attempts this removal by arranging for a letter injurious to Fidelity’s reputation to be delivered anonymously to Rosetta, his sister, so that, worried about associating so closely with a woman of questionable virtue, Rosetta will withdraw her friendship from Fidelity and insist on her leaving their house. The plan backfires. Sir Charles Raymond, father of Rosetta’s military admirer, Colonel Raymond, discovers that the young Belmont is at the bottom of this vile stratagem, confronts the rake, and accuses him of abusing his status as Fidelity’s protector. The older man is willing to take Fidelity into his own house to guard her against the younger man’s advances (the familiar motif of father and daughter meeting in a sexually ambiguous situation). Belmont Junior is jealous of Sir Charles and angry with himself for mistreating Fidelity. In a fit of repentance, he renounces his aversion to marriage and proposes to the indignant and hurt Fidelity, just as her former “owner,” Villiard, turns up to claim his lawful “property.” A duel between Villiard and Belmont Junior, as well as Sir Roger Belmont’s cruel mortification at having a penniless daughter-in-law, are averted by Sir Charles’s announcement that he has just been informed by the dying and penitent nurse that Fidelity is really his long-lost daughter. The play ends with a double wedding—Fidelity marries Belmont Junior, and Rosetta marries Colonel Raymond—and with Belmont’s self-proclaimed conversion into a man of “Honour.”

Moore’s play is similar to *The Conscious Lovers* insofar as both comedies feature an attractive and virtuous young woman of unknown origins under the protection of an amorous young nobleman,

a woman who finally discovers her long-lost father in a friend of the family and turns out to be well-born as well as rich. For many eighteenth-century playgoers, those parallels were enough to charge Moore with plainly copying Steele. After watching *The Foundling*, Horace Walpole wrote that he liked “the old *Conscious Lovers* better, and that not much. The story is the same, only that Bevil of the new piece is in more hurry, and consequently more natural.”⁶⁴ It took Henry Fielding’s spirited defense of Moore’s piece in his *Jacobite Journal* to put the issue of plagiarism somewhat to rest. Fielding pronounced “the comedy of the *Foundling* to be a good Play” and “adjudged” it to “be represented and received as such,” noting that as “to the malicious Insinuations of Plagiarism, they do not deserve an Answer: They are indeed made in the true Spirit of modern Criticism.”⁶⁵

In fact, as several scholars have noted, *The Conscious Lovers* might have been less important an influence on *The Foundling* than was Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740). Moore himself advertised his play’s indebtedness to Richardson’s novel by having Belmont tell his confidant, Colonel Raymond, that to resolve to marry the portionless, obscure Fidelity he should “read *Pamela* twice over first.” What if, muses the reluctant Belmont, Fidelity is “but the Out-case of a Beggar, and oblig’d to Chance for a little Education,”—to which his upright friend, the Colonel, replies: “Why then her Mind is dignified by her Obscurity; and you will have the Merit of raising her to a Rank which she was meant to adorn—And where’s the mighty Matter in all this!—You want no Addition to your Fortune, and have only to sacrifice a little necessary Pride to necessary Happiness” (144–45). Luckily, those exalted egalitarian sentiments are never put to the test because, unlike *Pamela*, Fidelity is revealed to be a lady of birth and fortune and the Colonel’s own sister. The weak attempt at a social critique in the Colonel’s speech is neutralized, even before he opens his mouth, by the telltale title of the play.

Like Steele before him, Moore must have been aware of the dangerous relevance of some of his plot turns to the problem of illegitimacy. Moore’s fleeting reference to Fidelity as a possible “Out-case of a Beggar” and his mention of the corrupted nurse who sold “the helpless infant” she had found “at her door” as soon as the foundling approached sexual maturity must have given pause to an eighteenth-century audience attuned to the distinction between the well-recommended nurse employed by a respectable household to take

64. Quoted in Caskey, *Edward Moore*, 39.

65. Henry Fielding, *The Jacobite’s Journal and Related Writings*, ed. W. B. Coley (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 209.

care of a legitimate child and the shady personage—a Mother Midnight figure⁶⁶—paid to take an unwanted bastard off the parent’s hands. Fidelia’s avaricious caregiver seems, troublingly, to belong to the latter category. At the same time, Moore carefully modifies the history of his heroine’s father so as not to substantiate our suspicions about the circumstances of her birth. Indiana, as we remember, was conceived immediately upon Mr. Sealand’s abandoning the wicked ways of a “Man of Pleasure about the Town”—a detail implying that she has narrowly avoided the fate of being a “natural” child. Fidelia’s father, on the other hand, had never been a rake. Driven into banishment by his mistaken political zeal rather than by a profligate’s need to recover a wasted estate, Sir Charles is the picture of moral uprightness; if anything, the political naïveté which had caused him to be loyal to a lost cause strengthens this favorable impression. By the end of the play, we have no choice but to take at its face value the story about the misguided nurse who mistakenly treated the legitimate daughter of a nobleman as a common bastard abandoned by her parents.

George Colman’s *The English Merchant* (1767) replicates Moore’s strategy of explaining why “a young lady of great beauty and virtue”⁶⁷ could possibly find herself in the unseemly position of a “wretched vagabond” (16) suspected of being a “strolling princess . . . more frugal of [her] favors than the rest of [her] sisterhood, merely to enhance the price of them” (20). Because Sir William Douglas, the father of Colman’s heroine, Amelia, had formerly supported the cause of “disloyalty and insurrection” (11), he is now “proscribed, condemned, attainted (alas, but too justly!)” (10), and forced to conceal his identity and whereabouts. “Abandoned by the relation who succeeded to [her guardian’s] estate” (10), Amelia lives alone in London, supporting herself with “the work of her own hands” (22), exposed to “dishonorable proposals” from “presuming” lords (14). Like Moore, Colman substitutes a father’s political misdemeanors for sexual ones, a strategy that appeared to gain popularity among eighteenth-century playwrights groping for a respectable explanation for a strange denouement in which a man suddenly “discovers” his daughter in a boarding-house after not having seen her for twenty years. Infusing the traditional foundling plot with political meaning helped Moore and Colman further obscure the potentially indelicate “bastard” contexts of their plays.

66. Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne) (New York: AMS Press, 1986).

67. George Colman, *The English Merchant, A Comedy as it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane*, the second edition (London: Printed for T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, near Surry-Street, in the Strand; and by R. Baldwin, in Pater-noster-Row, 1767), 7.

Neither Moore nor Colman used the traditional tokens to confirm the identity of their lost and found heroines. Instead, *The Foundling* relies on the proto-detective thinking of Fidelia's father. After listening to the story told by the repentant nurse, who has confessed to having sold his daughter to a stranger for the "worst of purposes," and to the story of Mr. Villiard who had bought a girl from the same nurse years ago, Sir Charles is convinced that the young woman in question is indeed his long-lost Harriet. Similarly, in Colman's play, Sir William Douglas begins to suspect early that the "age, [the] country [of origin, and the] manner of living" of the young stranger that he meets in a boarding house all concur to prove her the "dear child, whom he left to taste of misfortune from her cradle" (32). Upon learning the circumstances of her life, he reveals to her his family name, a name that she joyfully recognizes as her own.

The absence of straightforward tokens in either play allows us to further qualify the view that as the century went on, writers became increasingly reluctant to use formulaic tokens to reunite long-lost parents and children. In the cases when we do register this reluctance,⁶⁸ we have to consider the possibility that it was informed by the change in the cultural meaning of such tokens brought about by the opening, in 1739, of the London Foundling Hospital. The foundation of the Hospital, as Laura Schattschneider points out, transformed profoundly the "cultural context of English foundling narratives."⁶⁹ Whereas in the early decades of the century, Steele could use such antiquated devices as tokens to signal the literariness of his play and its remoteness from the real-life issues bound up with bastardy, authors writing after 1739 must have been aware that by using tokens they would, in fact, emphasize their narratives' association with such issues.

We learn from Schattschneider's analysis of reception practices at the Foundling Hospital that parents (mostly mothers) who wanted to leave their infants there "were asked to 'affix on each child some particular writing, or other distinguishing mark or token, so that the children may be known hereafter if necessary.' This measure also prevented women from being charged with infanticide: after presenting their tokens, they were given a certificate attesting to the reception of their child at the Foundling" (78). The tokens ranged from "coins, ribbons, snowflake-like or otherwise ornate paper cutouts, [and] pieces of needlework" to inscriptions in Latin and lengthy poems containing

68. And clearly, many writers, including Fielding, Smollett, and Bennett, continued to rely on such tokens in their foundling fictions.

69. Laura Schattschneider, "The Infant's Petitions: An English Poetics of Foundling Reception, 1741–1837," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 33 (2004): 71–99.

“infant’s petitions” to their benefactors. Schattschneider further points out that, given the Hospital’s “exemplary place in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural and literary imagination . . . it seems likely that any author who read widely enough in the London journals would have been familiar with its reception protocols” (82). The rich metaphorical iconography of these protocols “resonated across the culture,” making it impossible for writers to continue using telltale rings and scars to conveniently align their narratives with the ancient literary tradition and distance such narratives from the array of immediate social practices surrounding bastardy. Hence Moore’s and Colman’s avoidance of the token device and their reliance, instead, on circumstantial information about Fidelia’s and Amelia’s origins.

To conclude, eighteenth-century dramatists depicting lost-and-found children in their plays continuously walked a thin line between, on the one hand, articulating their contemporaries’ anxieties about the moral and economic repercussions of bastardy and, on the other, occluding those anxieties through a variety of rhetorical strategies. These strategies varied from using the gender of the virtuous foundling as both a proof of her mother’s past and a guarantee of her own future chastity and stressing the antiquated turns of the plot via depictions of telltale tokens to emphasizing the unpopular political affiliations of the foundling’s father. In a way that mirrored their officially invisible and yet actually omnipresent position in last testaments and in family debates about the distribution of property, bastards remained both politely absent from and inescapably present on the eighteenth-century stage.