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## *Articles*

# Single, Unwed, and Pregnant in Victorian London: Narratives of Working Class Agency and Negotiation

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The social norms governing sex and sexuality in mid-nineteenth century England left single women who transgressed societal expectations with few options. As with any study of working class sexuality, particularly of illicit unions and unwed motherhood, we must begin by understanding the dominant family values of the day. In Victorian England, working class families could expect to live below the poverty line until their children were old enough to earn for themselves and their families.<sup>1</sup> Bypassing this fate was to some degree a matter of luck, although the right choice of partner was seen as a guarantee against future destitution. Finding a partner was not difficult in a period epitomized by the throws of industrialization. Masses of rural people flooded cities like London, Manchester, and Liverpool looking for work in the newly established job market. This social dislocation challenged Victorian norms of sexuality as disparate internal migrants met and connected with a number of people on the city's bustling streets. In this context, unplanned pregnancies proliferated. Still, engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage was risky business for unwed women. If the woman became pregnant, there were few avenues the would-be mother could take to thwart poverty and avoid severe damage to her reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Gillis, "Servants, Sexual Relations and the Risk of Illegitimacy in Nineteenth Century London," *Feminist Studies* 5:1 (Spring 1979): 154.

One avenue open to the better-off members of the working class was the London Foundling Hospital. Founded in 1739, The Foundling Hospital was a product of the great wave of philanthropic activity that took place in England during the eighteenth century. This period was characterized by the ‘cult of sensibility,’ which encouraged the engagement of an individual’s compassion and sense of moral and spiritual duty to the plight of the less fortunate. A window into the Victorian ‘cult of sensibility’ or benevolence is accessible through the Foundling Hospital, in which unwed mothers petitioned the institution to adopt their child. The petitions were effectively written pleas to the hospital by pregnant and unwed women who were looking for a way out of the destitution of being a single mother, notwithstanding the pain of giving away their children. These petitions form the documentary basis of this research project (See Appendix A for a copy of an 1868 petition form).

This article is built around the Foundling Hospital petitions, transcripts, and recommendation letters, as well as any correspondence the mother had with the father from 1849 to 1872. There are a couple of reasons for concentrating on these specific years. Secretary John Brownlow, himself a Foundling Hospital child, succeeded John Lievesly as Hospital Secretary in 1849.<sup>2</sup> Brownlow was not only the poster child of the Foundling Hospital, he had a reputation among Foundling Hospital historians of being the most thorough with petitioners’ background checks. In an account that wishes to reveal the agency petitioning women could exercise under this rigorous system, it seems fitting to begin the story when the most steadfast and strict secretary was appointed in 1849, and end it with his retirement in 1872. Furthermore, selecting the ‘Brownlow years’ helps to ensure procedural consistency in the primary sources utilized here. Finally, 1872 was not only the year of Brownlow’s retirement; it was also when the first Infant Life Protection and the Bastardy Law Amendment Acts were passed, prompting a chain of legislation that gradually placed

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<sup>2</sup> Bernd Weisbrod, “How to Become a Good Foundling in Early Victorian London,” *Social History* 10 (1985): 198.

adoption and foster care under the protection and regulation of the state. This greatly changed the circumstances of illegitimate children in England, which is also why the passing of these acts is where this study culminates.

The idea that petitioners used their agency to try and secure a Foundling Hospital spot for their child is highlighted throughout the documentary record. Admittedly, the term ‘agency’ has become so commonplace in academic circles that there is a need to define the precise way in which the term is used here. Feminist theories have used agency to stress the deliberation, judgment, and action of historical actors. Human agency is also conceptualized in this way here, and is seen to combine past, present, and future hopes and intentions, to be more than a matter of impulse and reaction.<sup>3</sup> Agency is exposed when the records show how the powerless attempt to exercise influence over the powerful. In this case, the powerful embrace all aspects of the London Foundling hospital: the petition itself, the oral examination, and the judgment of the Hospital’s Board of Governors.

The documents analysed stress the social attitudes, discourse, and practices of the period. Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the feminist social history of the working classes in two ways. From a methodological standpoint, the article exhibits how interdisciplinary research can benefit social historians. It emphasises the value of integrating the ideas and theories of various academic disciplines into historical inquiries in order to uncover original and valuable insights that such an approach can bestow. This study is a ‘history from below’ written from primary sources, but it also drawing heavily on philosophy, literary theory, and sociology in its interpretation of the historical records. Secondly, the small historiography of Foundling Hospital applicants has yet to illustrate the ways in which the petitioning mothers could utilize the application process to help their cause; particularly with respect to the written petition and the in-person examination by the Hospital’s Board of Governors, who held the

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<sup>3</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What is Agency?” *American Journal of Sociology* 103: 4 (Jan. 1998): 963.

mother and baby's fate in their hands. While the evidence presented here illuminates the distress the mothers were under, it also rejects any assertions that the petitioners were simply passive victims of their social or material circumstance.

Naturally, gender plays a significant role in this article. Following Joan Scott, this article identifies gender as a "primary way of signifying relationships of power."<sup>4</sup> Gender roles not only impacted the power dynamics between the petitioners and the Hospital's Board of Governors, but gendered constructions of power also significantly shaped the admission policies both inside and outside the Foundling Hospital. Men organized and administered many British charities, including ones that helped orphans, unwed mothers, foundlings, and prostitutes. Men determined the rules surrounding proper female behaviour to such an extent that female benefactors who received assistance were compelled to behave in accordance with male expectations.<sup>5</sup> The Founding Hospital's nineteenth century development of a strict, man-made admission procedure offers a crucial link for recognizing the increasing institutionalization of controlling organizations such as the Foundling Hospital in this period.

In Foucauldian terms, institutions like the Foundling Hospital utilized an 'examination apparatus.' In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault explains that an examination apparatus is a source of power and can be used as a disciplinary tool that establishes norms and classifies individuals.<sup>6</sup> The examination is "a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them."<sup>7</sup> In this way, power produces 'rituals of truth,' or a "general politics" of truth. These

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<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (Dec. 1986): 1067–69.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group 2012): 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977), 184.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184.

'truths' are the outcome of the discourse which society accepts and validates, the procedures that enable one to distinguish true and false statements, and the methods by which it is sanctioned and controlled.<sup>8</sup> Therefore the examination is both a ritual of power and the attainment of knowledge; it sanctions normative judgements and surveillance.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, wherever deviant behaviour is legitimately defined, be it in a criminal trial, church, penitentiary, medical examination, or in the chambers of the London Foundling Hospital, an examination apparatus can act as a power and knowledge producer.

On the face of it, the Foundling Hospital seemed to realize a Foucauldian epistemology, both in its treatment of the mothers and their children. The Hospital's 'inmates' were received into an institution which cut them off permanently from the outside world, including their biological parents, until the institution felt they were ready to re-enter it (in this case, when they were ready to be apprenticed or sent into service). Three times a year the Foundling Hospital's boys were permitted to take an excursion to Primrose Hill, but the girls were always kept within the hospital walls.<sup>10</sup> As for the mothers, they had to undergo a stringent application procedure, where they were examined, validated, and judged against the administrators 'rituals of truth.'

Foucault also provides a critical treatment of the language used to articulate the undeveloped and unspoken quandaries of Victorian sexuality. What Foucault called the "discourse on sexuality" – the permeation of society by the discussion of the nature, definition, use, and abuse of sexuality – is epitomized in the period under discussion.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the past couple of centuries, says Foucault, the focus of historical discourse has been on what anthropologists describe as 'boundary-keeping problems,' whereby what is defined as 'normal' or 'deviant' is continually refined and

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184.

<sup>10</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), ff.

codified. This article will demonstrate how power wielded by the Foundling Hospital's admission process exhibited societal expectations of that particular place (London) and time (Victorian era) in history. The article will also establish how the mothers who applied to have their child taken in by the Hospital manoeuvred the patriarchal application process by tapping into the 'rituals of truth.' But first, why would the mother undertake the daunting Foundling Hospital application procedure in the first place?

It is important to note that the Foundling Hospital's children lived privileged lives when compared to many of the children growing up in other parts of London, especially considering they lived longer than the general population of illegitimate children.<sup>12</sup> While the Hospital publicly focused on saving the lives of infants and children, its private mission was to salvage the mother's reputation. Considering that the Foundling Hospital offered the child a better life than the mother could on her own and that she could then reclaim a good reputation, it is no surprise that many unwed, deserted, and pregnant women applied to have their child taken in by the Hospital. While there is no accurate count of how many petitioners applied to the Hospital, some general statistics offer context. Moreover, coupling these statistics with the stories of seduction found in the Foundling Hospital's archives also helps thwart some preconceived notions about Victorian sexuality.

While there is an enduring popular identification of Victorianism with sexual prudery, modern historians have confirmed the dualist character of working class culture. Waiting for marriage to engage in sexual intercourse was not only the ideal but the expectation. Still, between 1860 and 1890, 30,000 to 40,000 illegitimate infants were born each year in England and Wales.<sup>13</sup> The Industrial Revolution and its simultaneous urbanization created the space for more sexual and social

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen, "Calculus of Respectability: Defining the World of Foundling Hospital Women and Children in Victorian London," *Annales de demographie historique* 2: 114 (2007): 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ann R. Higginbotham, "Sin of the Age: Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London," *Victorian Studies* 32: 3 (Spring 1989): 324.

intercourse, which raised illegitimacy to historic heights. The years 1790 to 1860 were, as Edward Shorter points out, “the peak period of illegitimacy.”<sup>14</sup> So despite the perception that Victorian sexuality was prudish, it is clear that Victorian people did not necessarily prescribe to values widely upheld, especially in large urban centres like London. How unwed mothers negotiated this dilemma requires some amplification.

Historian Jessica Sheetz-Nguyen is one of only two historians to publish work derived from the Foundling Hospital archives. In her book, *Victorian Women, Unwed Mothers and the London Foundling Hospital*, Sheetz-Nguyen explored the transcripts of the oral examinations, which are of particular interest since they are less heavily mediated than the written petitions. Sheetz-Nguyen attempted to uncover the petitioner’s agency, albeit in a different way than our process. Her method gave both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the petitions’ information seen through four analytical frames: time, space, gender, and agency.

Sheetz-Nguyen highlighted the non-negotiable admittance criteria that the Foundling Hospital Committee required for a successful application. She argued that applicants from affluent districts, particularly West London, received favourable treatment.<sup>15</sup> Age and employment also factored into these judgments, as the authorities preferred relatively young women and those employed as respectable servants in wealthy households.<sup>16</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen also demonstrated that “The Foundling Hospital Board of Governors, committee men, recommenders, and the working women who applied agreed on what constituted a respectable character.”<sup>17</sup> Here Sheetz-Nguyen provided a useful framework – ‘the calculus of respectability’— for the prevailing honour code or process the Foundling Hospital

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Shorter, “Illegitimacy, Sexual Revolution, and Social Change in Modern Europe,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2:2 (Autumn 1971): 246.

<sup>15</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 147.

Committee used in deciding whether to accept or reject an application for a child's admission.

When confronted by committees like that of the London Foundling Hospital's, marginalized groups had to show that their social values were compatible with mainstream values. Even when the social mores of the day were not truly valued by the working classes, 'respectability' meant maintaining a reputable façade, one that was encouraged by contemporary social commentators, reformers, and novelists. To be respectable was to exhibit prudence, temperance, self-help, and to regard sex as a solely procreative act occurring between married people. In this way, respectability acted as a powerful agent of hegemony in London's nineteenth century society. It drew "a sharper line by far than that between rich and poor, employer and employee, or capitalist and proletarian."<sup>18</sup> To be respectable was to have a good moral character; to be an upstanding adult. In the words of an 1856 successful petitioner, "If you will kindly take [my baby] from me, you will save my character."<sup>19</sup>

Sheetz-Nguyen's conclusions differ from what is argued here because she believed the petitioners could not deceive the Committee. She stated, "the women had to answer these questions as honestly as possible."<sup>20</sup> Conversely, this article maintains, in line with historians Peter Bailey and Natalie Zemon Davis, and sociologist Erving Goffman, that the petitioners' testimonies before the Hospital Committee were performances; role-playing that could easily incorporate falsities. Performances were crucial before a powerful institution like the London Foundling Hospital. Moreover, the Foundling Hospital was not the only reform institution where expectations of respectability were well-defined.

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 256-263.

<sup>19</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1856, LMA.

<sup>20</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 105.

### ***Brief History of the Foundling Hospital***

The absence of state institutions to provide relief and support to the poor and indigent resulted in the establishment of volunteer associations. Historian Lesley Hall explained that these associations were headed by those, “interested in maintaining order and reducing the amount of unacceptable public behaviour.”<sup>21</sup> These philanthropists who sought moral reformation through social purity generated institutions that attempted, for example, to save prostitutes and rescue illegitimate children and their mothers. Among them was the Foundling Hospital, considered to be the most respectable orphanage of the time.<sup>22</sup>

A relic from the eighteenth century, the name ‘London Foundling Hospital’ was something of a misnomer, given that it no longer took in foundlings (abandoned children) in this period. The rescue of all abandoned children had originally been its goal, but after a number of experiments with admission policies over the course of the 1700s, coupled with the rising population rates, it strictly limited its admissions. Likewise, the word ‘hospital’ in the institution’s name was used in a more general sense than it is today, simply indicating the institution’s ‘hospitality’ to those less fortunate. This hospitality was not easy to attain by 1842, where we begin our story. By that point, a mother had to prove herself worthy of obtaining the Foundling Hospital’s help, which began with filling in a very detailed petition. This was the first step in the Foundling Hospital’s screening procedure.

The Foundling Hospital admittance processes evolved over time. By the early 1820s, the Hospital’s administrators prided themselves on the fact that the applicants were carefully vetted in order to carry out a mission to “hide the shame of the mother as well as to preserve the life of the child.”<sup>23</sup> Only mothers who were thought to have a chance of regaining their respectability and

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<sup>21</sup> Lesley A Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> R.H. Nichols et al., *History of the Foundling Hospital*, 357.

integrating back into respectable society once the Foundling Hospital took their baby were considered for admission during this period. The written petition was a policy requirement from 1763. Beginning in 1801, the Hospital focused on taking in illegitimate children and started a more thorough petitioning and acceptance process that carried on into the ‘Brownlow years.’ Unlike orphanages, the Foundling Hospital allowed for the reclamation of children by a mother who married and could prove financial stability. This was why the Foundling Hospital refused to allow adoptions of the children by strangers.<sup>24</sup> Yet the inability of mothers to ever possess the means to reclaim the child reduced the percentage of reclaimed children in this period to an average of between three and four percent.<sup>25</sup>

The members of the Foundling Hospital Committee’s Board of Governors were a selected group of middle to upper class men chosen to deliberate over each petitioning case brought before them. The admission of one’s infant evolved from an unrestricted acceptance policy in the mid-1700s into a negotiated practice between the petitioning mother and these Committee men. If successful in convincing the Committee to take her child, the mother was expected to gratefully hand over the baby to the Hospital. While the mother could check-in on her child, there were strict policies governing visitations.

The Foundling Hospital had specific rules regarding parental contact with their wards. Once admitted, no further contact was allowed between parent and child until the child had reached the age of 21, or if all parties were agreeable, once the child had been apprenticed in their late teens.<sup>26</sup> The only way for parents to receive information on their offspring was to visit the Hospital on Monday mornings. Then, after producing the receipt they were given at the time of the child’s admission, they were

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<sup>24</sup> Ginger Frost, “Your Mother Has Never Forgotten You: Illegitimacy, Motherhood, and the London Foundling Hospital, 1860-1930,” *Annales de demographie historique* 1:127 (2014): 51.

<sup>25</sup> Frost, “Your Mother Has Never Forgotten You,” 51.

<sup>26</sup> FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/030, Jan. 26, 1850; Aug. 17, 1850, LMA.

informed of their child's health and progress.<sup>27</sup> Besides this, it was actually people unbeknownst to the mother who became a big part of their child's life. Almost as soon as they were admitted, the foundlings were sent on a journey to foster families. The children then remained in their foster homes until they were of school age, when they were recalled to the Foundling Hospital for their education. This general pattern continued until the Second World War.

As many historians have noted, the Foundling Hospital had very strict guidelines for admitting infants, as a glance at the petition reveals. As Sheetz-Nguyen pointed out, "In the wake of the New Poor Laws, the institution combined sympathetic understanding with a stringent no-nonsense approach to the petitioners" under John Brownlow.<sup>28</sup> In all cases, men determined the mother's worthiness by the assumed respectability of her character.

### ***Respectability: The Backbone of Victorian Society & The Foundling Hospital Petitioning Process***

According to Sheetz-Nguyen, the Committee based their assessment on the following factors: where the petitioner met the father; how long she knew the father before "criminal conversation" (sexual intercourse) outside the bonds of marriage took place; and whether the father used drugs or alcohol to ply his way, or whether he had used force.<sup>29</sup> The Committee also considered whether family members, friends, or employers knew of this relationship, whether the petitioner had told anyone of her impending "confinement," the time of birth, what the mother got up to in the six weeks following, and whether she had saved money for the birth or if the father had provided it. Also important were the issues of whether the mother had a skill or whether her ranking in the hierarchy of maids and servants in Victorian London

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<sup>27</sup> FHA, General Committee Minutes, X041/024, Nov.23, 1847, LMA.

<sup>28</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 118.

was of sufficient status.<sup>30</sup> A petitioner's character, then, was crystallized into measurable objectives, some printed on the application and some not. Many women did not meet these requirements, and consequently, the hospital rejected far more petitions than it accepted, with the result being that some of the poorest babies went unassisted.<sup>31</sup>

By 1849, an unwed mother completed her form and appeared for a hearing. At the hearing, three to seven lawyers from the Inns of Courts heard the mother's petition orally. They recorded her testimony in a word-by-word transcript, took the names of no less than three references, and decided the worthiness of her case.<sup>32</sup> Recommendation letters were integral to the petitioner's success as they offered the Committee verification of the petitioning mother's account. The recommendations arrived in private notes from a wide range of personal and/or professional connections. The Committee would consider the petition, the recommendations, any letter correspondence, and the oral examination in their decision to accept or reject a petition.

It is interesting to note a rather curious administrative practice that underlined the Committee's adherence to the male bread-winning model. The father of the unborn baby was always referred to as the "father" throughout the petitions. Yet the mother was just referred to as the "pet" (short for petitioner) and never the "mother" of the baby. Nonetheless, the Governors' philosophy was to offer a second chance to both the mothers and their children. So, in this context, who was in dire need of a second chance, the mother or her child?

For help in answering this question, we draw again on John Gillis' admirable study of illegitimacy in nineteenth century London. From a sample of 1,200 cases out of a total of 5,000, he concluded that London illegitimacy was, above all, an issue

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<sup>30</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, "Calculus of Respectability," 15.

<sup>31</sup> Weisbrod, "How to Become a Good Foundling," 193-209; Francoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality and Desire Among Working-Class Men and Women in 19th Century London* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 39-43

<sup>32</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, "Calculus of Respectability," 16.

involving domestic servants.<sup>33</sup> This is hardly surprising, considering the fact that domestic service was the largest female occupation in London and consequently loomed large among Foundling Hospital applicants. The Committee was biased in favour of not only those with permanent employment but also, as Bernd Weisbrod noted, the higher grades of domestic service with which they would have been familiar.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the need to fill out a petition and gain written references required working class women to possess literacy skills and have connections to the middle and upper classes. The preponderance of successful applications were from domestic servants who had these class connections. In fact, 64 percent of successful applicants in this period were domestic workers. Working class women not versed in the language and customs of these classes or with no alliances to the higher orders of London had more trouble navigating the selection process than those who did.

The administrative procedures of the London Foundling Hospital produced a rich documentary legacy. Upon arrival at the Foundling Hospital, the petitioner likely met the secretary or his assistant when she came to collect or hand in the printed petition form. Beginning in 1815, she was informed that the mother of the child (if alive) must be the petitioner unless satisfactory reason was shown to the Committee for a rare exception, such as severe illness. Because the female applicants were anxious to establish their innocence despite the extramarital pregnancy, the files are extraordinarily detailed on the circumstances under which they became pregnant. Therefore, the files provide a close look into the courtship and sexual lives of the Victorian poor, including demographic information about the couples.

The first section of the petition requested some basic information about the father: his occupation, address, when he was last seen, and his likely whereabouts.<sup>35</sup> This information reveals that most unwed mothers met the man on their own, either at their

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<sup>33</sup> Gillis, "Servants," 144.

<sup>34</sup> Weisbrod, "How to Become a Good Foundling," 197.

<sup>35</sup> A/FH/A/08/1, LMA.

place of work (masters, fellow servants, jobbing tradesmen, local shopkeepers) or, by chance, on the street while traveling.<sup>36</sup> At this stage of the investigation, no inquiries were made into the mother's own situation, nor the circumstances of her relatives. Still, the Foundling Hospital was unwavering in its inviolable criterion surrounding the father's whereabouts as the petition stated clearly in its clause: the petitioner's success was "wholly dependent on Your petitioner, being deserted by the father."<sup>37</sup> There were other, less fixed stipulations for the child's admittance.

While the petition clearly stated, "No person need apply, unless she shall have previously borne a good Character for Virtue, Sobriety, and Honesty,"<sup>38</sup> this moral criterion was hard to measure. The Committee refused to accept the petition of any woman who had a hint of past sexual indecencies, which were circumstances that came to light during Brownlow's investigation into her past. For instance, the Committee rejected a petitioner because "previous to her acquaintance with the father she had sexual intercourse, four years ago with a man who was married."<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that Brownlow's inquirers only found out about this because, as a result of the bigamous affair, the petitioner got pregnant with the adulterer's child, but claimed to be childless because she gave birth to a stillborn baby.

Before delving into the negotiable criterion and the question of agency, there are some peculiarities to bear in mind when thinking of the Foundling Hospital petition process as a 'ritual of truth.' Unlike the workhouses that did not allow a woman to leave without their child, the Foundling Hospital required the mother to do just that. The mother was expected to simply go back to her life unburdened by the past.<sup>40</sup> The Foundling Hospital's 'rituals of truth' purported that true motherhood was doing what was best for a child, even if that meant giving that child away and never getting to know them. The final act, the separation from the

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<sup>36</sup> Gillis, "Servants," 158.

<sup>37</sup> A/FH/A/08/1, LMA.

<sup>38</sup> A/FH/A/08/1, LMA.

<sup>39</sup> Rejected Petition, A/FH/A/08/1 - 1851, LMA.

<sup>40</sup> Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, 39-43.

child, who was by now several months old, was a rather casual one. The child was exchanged for a receipt, which could be used as a means of identification if the mother wanted to find out about the health of her child or eventually reclaim it (although this, as we have observed, was rather rare). This was not a flexible condition. What was flexible was the ethical criteria established in the petitioner's tales. But first, let us examine the framework in which these tales were told.

Each mother had to present detailed information about her relationship with the baby's father in her petition, as well as the context for the 'criminal conversation.' The decision-makers viewed those who had been in relatively stable relationships and those who reported promises of marriage more favourably than women who did not know the fathers well or who had been coerced into sex. For example, Sarah B.'s successful 1865 petition stated, "When Crim. Con. occurred it was under his promise of protection...we were to be married as soon as we were able."<sup>41</sup>

The ideology of middle class 'respectability' had become dominant by the 1840s, and, although slackened by the 1870s, was still powerful up to the century's end. Respectability acted as a powerful agent of hegemony in this society. It was "a creed and a code for the conduct of personal and family life," one which applied to all classes.<sup>42</sup> Per Peter Bailey, respectability "was considered a principal prerequisite for true citizenship."<sup>43</sup> Respectability primarily demanded the moral decency of all social classes, whether they followed these axioms or not. Respectability was recognized and represented as the exalted ideal in this period and was characterized by citizenship, temperance, and firm commitment to the values of hearth and home. The acquirement of respectability was a matter of independent individual achievement through an ongoing process of self-discipline and self-

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<sup>41</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1865, LMA

<sup>42</sup> F.M.L. Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 251.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Bailey, "Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up." *Journal of Social History* 12:3 (Spring 1979): 338.

improvement. While this particular concept of respectability was a manifestation of evangelical disciplines, it came to demand secular social conduct and thus fused an ideology that was defined by a respectable lifestyle – one in which the person exhibited self-control, manners, and sobriety.<sup>44</sup> Women, especially mothers, constituted respectability in the private sphere, but in the public world, including the realm of the Foundling Hospital, men took charge of calculating and maintaining respectability.

All petitioners were expected not only to show signs of shame or regret, but also to let as few people as possible in on the secret. Domestic servants concealed their pregnancy as long as possible to avoid loss of wages or costs in dwellings. Most of the accepted Foundling Hospital petitioners in the nineteenth century delivered their children in lodgings that were provided either with the help of former female employers or that of their own families.<sup>45</sup> Despite the Hospital's insistence on secrecy, it was actually the petitioner that could rely on some sort of clandestine support from her own family or employer that stood the best chance of admitting her child. In contrast, those who tried to go it alone (perhaps from shame), and who were consequently liable to detection by some public agency, were normally excluded.<sup>46</sup> Children born in the workhouses were refused on these grounds as well. The Committee realized that having a child in the workhouse risked a breach of secrecy, which was key to re-establishing the mother's respectability. As a result, once chargeable to a parish, a child was automatically excluded from Foundling Hospital adoption eligibility.

Twenty-three-year-old Ann H.'s case offers us a good example. Ann was a servant whose parents were dead. Upon reading a recommendation letter from a curate at St. Matthew's, one cannot help but sympathize with her plight. The curate had found Ann and her newborn baby on the brink of starvation and suggested she take her baby to the Foundling Hospital. The curate

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<sup>44</sup> Bailey, "Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up," 338-339.

<sup>45</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 103

<sup>46</sup> Weisbrod, "How to Become a Good Foundling," 202.

then wrote to Brownlow promising that the church would take Ann in if she could leave her baby in the Hospital's care. Despite this ecclesiastical support, Brownlow rejected Ann because she had no alternative but to give birth in a workhouse. The curate responded to Brownlow:

I was much grieved to find there was no hope of admission for the child of Ann H. Of course, I cannot pretend to remonstrate against the decision of the Committee but I cannot help observing that the ground for refusal does appear rather strange for she only went into the workhouse to be confined...if she had one friend in the world no doubt she would not have gone there at all or at least would have left immediately.<sup>47</sup>

Ann's story demonstrates how power was wielded by the Foundling Hospital in its unwavering goal to help only those who could be reintegrated into respectable society. Accordingly, some of the most impoverished petitioners had the least possibility of a second chance. There were other ways in which the Hospital adhered to strict guidelines. For instance, legitimate children were rejected. Hence, if a wife died in childbirth, the husband was not able to undergo the strict mother-only petition process, excluding both illegitimate and legitimate infants whose mother died giving them life. Yet if the petitioner met the stringent situational criteria, she was then able to negotiate the moral criteria with the Foundling Hospital Committee.

Questions dealing with the sexual relationship of the petitioners and the reputed fathers were quite detailed. The petitioners had to vouch for their character by not only admitting to the frequency of sexual engagement but also by revealing the *locus*

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<sup>47</sup> Curate Richard Croft, St. Matthew's Westminster, Letter to Secretary John Brownlow, October 24 1855, A/FH/A/08/1-1855, LMA

*delictus*.<sup>48</sup> The conditions under which sex took place mattered greatly to the interrogators, since in almost all successful cases the petitioner relied on a promise of marriage, whether it was clearly pronounced before intercourse or after. According to Sheetz-Nguyen, 82.14 percent of the successful petitioners she observed in her study claimed there was a promise of marriage; an astounding rate when compared to the 23.26 percent of rejected petitions that claimed there was a promise of marriage.<sup>49</sup>

The recounting of sexual details in the interrogation evidently played a crucial role in the Foundling Hospital's overall impression of the petitioner. It forced the petitioner into the position of a defendant in a criminal trial and wrung from her a confession for an act that was not necessarily regarded by her as an offence. Thereby, the admission of guilt was central to successful applications. The Foundling Hospital Committee strove to admit children of mothers they believed did not get pregnant because of sexual promiscuity or loose morality.

### ***“He Seduced Me with a Promise of Marriage”***

Extreme formality was not exceptional in this period and was a reflection of the cautious, highly practical disposition that typified a respectable person of any class. The language was that of contract. Ellen P.'s petition offers an example:

Father got permission from my mistress to walk with me. Father and I used to go walking together every Sunday... [this] continued for 6 months... Our family and friends knew about the relationship. The seduction took place in the stables because he promised me marriage. I did not resist as I thought we would be posting the Banns soon.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *locus delicti* (pl.) Latin term that translates to the 'scene of the crime.' It is the place where offence or injury was committed or the place where the last event necessary to make the actor liable occurred, in this case, the sexual intercourse that resulted in pregnancy.

<sup>49</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 114-115.

<sup>50</sup> Rejected Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1851, LMA.

We can see from this example that part of this period's semantic conventional formality included an expectation to keep one's word.

Promises were given and redeemed in a market of social exchange that was subject to its own tight rules. Solemn betrothal was apparently viewed, as it had been for centuries, as a significant commitment which permitted considerable intimacy. Most of the couples behaved initially as if pregnancy were a prelude to eventual marriage. For example, in an 1866 letter from a gardener named Walter to his fiancée, Sarah, Walter complains that the wretched winter weather put him out of work until he became dependant on his brother to house and feed him. Therefore, it was "impossible" for him to marry her now that she was pregnant.<sup>51</sup> Men were expected to be responsible and self-sufficient; charity, especially if it lifted the man's burden, was regarded as inappropriate.

There are many examples in letters penned by fathers that show the promise of marriage before intercourse was not just a female expectation. For instance, John D.'s letter to Judy T. that is signed, "All my love to you my dearest Judy, I remain your true and devoted lover and soon husband..."<sup>52</sup> and Aaron N.'s letter to Frances L., claiming, "We will soon be wed my darling and i should like us to settle and go to America."<sup>53</sup> There are even instances where the woman refused to marry the father because she did not believe the man could properly take care of her. Abigail B., a housemaid who applied to the Foundling Hospital in 1851, felt this way and presented us with one of the examples of women who took matters into her own hands by deserting the father: "I have every reason to believe that Father is too indolent to maintain himself."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Letter, A/FH/A/08/1-1866, LMA.

<sup>52</sup> Letter, A/FH/A/08/1-1859, LMA.

<sup>53</sup> Letter, A/FH/A/08/1-1860, LMA

<sup>54</sup> Rejected Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1851, LMA.

Victorian marriage is often depicted as characteristically cold, and the relations between husband and wife, emotionally distant and formal. Nonetheless, according to historian Steven Seidman, “Middle class Victorians accepted sex as a natural and positive part of human life” only if it happened in “the proper sphere...of marriage.”<sup>55</sup> In these carefully phrased petitions from two centuries ago, the petitioners often deployed the rhetoric of sentimental fiction in their tales of betrothal — the closest thing to marriage besides marriage itself. Most of the petitioners in this period admitted that they had consented to the sexual acts, which they appeared to believe were pre-nuptial relations. This reveals that the sex act itself, by ratifying the promise of marriage, was expected to strengthen an engaged couple’s relationship and hasten their move towards marriage.<sup>56</sup>

The next section of this article examines the ways in which the London Foundling Hospital drew on the deeply embedded myths and fantasies that surrounded illegitimacy and reshaped them during the nineteenth century. This was such the case that the Committee members were more apt to believe the infrequency of the ‘criminal conversations,’ even with no way to confirm it. Accordingly, a petitioner who knew that frequent sex with her partner was abhorred by the Committee easily stretched the truth about her number of liaisons.

### *An Argument for Agency*

Although illegitimacy was fundamentally an economic and legal issue, it allowed for a range of social discourses and their legitimizing frames. Such discourses related to the multiple meanings of family, marriage, and kinship, and necessarily embodied fluctuating ideas about genealogy, sex, and national identity. Narratives of illegitimacy express complex forms of psychic and social legacies.<sup>57</sup> The conventions of the Foundling Hospital’s

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<sup>55</sup> Steven Seidman, “The Power of Desire and the Danger of Sexual Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Reconsidered.” *Journal of Social History* 24:1 (Autumn 1990): 51.

<sup>56</sup> Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, 113.

<sup>57</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, “Nobody’s Secret: Illegitimate Inheritance and the Uncertainties of Memory,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 21 (2000): 574.

petition process allowed the petitioner to distance herself from her own actions. In the words of Natalie Zemon Davis, "Turning a terrible action into a story is a way to distance oneself from it, at worst a form of self-deception, at best a way to pardon the self."<sup>58</sup>

The London Foundling Hospital became a crucial arena for many contested areas of culture. Even in the most literal sense, no petition can be separated from a mesh of narratives. Both at the level of interpretation and at the level of enactment, the Foundling Hospital petitioners' cases included both narrative plots and conspiratorial plots, allocating agency and blame. All of the petitioner's statements were constructed with the specific aim of convincing the hospital to take the child. This agenda influenced the mothers' narratives in key ways. This influence is most noticeable when one compares the petitions and transcripts with the abovementioned correspondence between the woman and her lover. These letters illuminate working class patterns of courtship, love, and sex, and clearly did not have the constraints that the petitions did. Thus, it is conceivable that a woman's autobiographical narrative might tend to conform to the prevailing melodramatic fiction of seduction and abandonment, for "language is the site of history's enactment."<sup>59</sup>

Melodramatic narratives of the period were shaped by the trope of respectability, the growth of the metropolitan press, and the discourses of sexual normalization. Both the Foundling Hospital admission criteria and the stories the unwed mothers gave in their petitions demonstrate the power of melodramatic socio-sexual scripts. Assertions of female agency, sexual and otherwise, were often contained within a demure narrative. The women who figured in these Foundling Hospital scenarios were similarly reduced by the Foundling Hospital and their society to either helpless victims or sexual profligates. According to these narratives, the Victorians denied that women possess sexual

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<sup>58</sup> Natalie Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 114.

<sup>59</sup> Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (Summer 1991): 793.

feelings. They sought to purge sex of its sensual aspects and restrict its role to a procreative one. In order to save themselves from a miserable fate, petitioners' purported these gendered tropes, as it was likely to help their cause. We can see this from some of the language used most in the petitions.

A large majority of the petitioners in this period use "he seduced me," placing the responsibility of initiating the sexual act on the father. Likewise, many petitioners, when describing how they met the fathers, claimed that in their first encounter the father "accosted" her, alluding to the idea that the petitioner was guided into her inappropriate actions by the man. It is possible that this language was employed by the women to help construct the image of her as the victim. For example, Daisy M., a chambermaid at a house in Kensington, claimed:

I met Father in the summer. He accosted in the street on my way to run an errand with a fellow servant... He took particular notice of me and wrote asking if he could go walking with me...after nearly 6 months in Jan. '61 he seduced me after a servant's party – in my own pantry.<sup>60</sup>

The father of Daisy's baby was a student at Oxford and Daisy worked as a servant in the house where the pantry was located, over 50 miles from Oxford's residence. So, it is not unreasonable to assume that an Oxford student would have had no way to enter the pantry without her actively letting him in, or at least inviting him to the servant's party. Perhaps Daisy was at least partially implicit in her 'seduction.' It is important to acknowledge that some of the petitioners were in fact raped and these situations should not be taken lightly in our exploration of Victorian narratives and discourse, even if these cases were a very small percentage, as Sheetz-Nguyen purported in her study which used a much larger sample.

The archival evidence reveals compromising situations that question the legitimacy of the claims made by the petitioners. For

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<sup>60</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1861, LMA.

example, Harriet Q. reported that the fellow servant she worked with “molested” her, “following [her] about the house,” until she “fainted” and “awoke to found myself pregnant.”<sup>61</sup> Whether the petitioner wished to dramatize the lack of control she felt in her relationship with the father, or whether she thought appearing completely powerless would help her case with the Committee, we cannot know. No matter the reason, the Committee took her story at face value, did not inquire into her story, and accepted her petition.

This article argues that the strategic use of the dominant discourse that plays on ‘rituals of truth’ could be used by the petitioners against the Foundling Hospital and thus provides new insight into ways those with and without power relate to the dominant discourse. This same recognition led Foucault to see discourse as having “tactical elements,” which can leave room for strategizing and developing “identical formulas for contrary objectives.”<sup>62</sup> Hence the dominant discourse can become a “point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.”<sup>63</sup> Tapping into this tactic is one way in which the petitioner could stand strong in relation to the powerful. In this way, ‘fallen women’ could convince the Committee that they were respectable women who simply had a weak moment with a man that promised marriage. In doing so, the petitioner could secure a spot for her child. If an unwed mother could convince the Committee of her previous and hopefully ongoing respectability, she had a much better chance at success.

Society generally preserves the images and iconography that meet the expectations of the dominant discourse. In this way, the images acquire a dangerous stability.<sup>64</sup> The domestic image of women was encouraged by the grim facts of economic necessity, inefficient birth control, and frequent and dangerous childbirth, which were mainstays of Victorian life. Even as these conditions

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<sup>61</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1861, LMA.

<sup>62</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 79.

changed in this period, the image of women did not. Especially in uncertain times, society does not relent its stable images. In the words of British economist and philosopher Kenneth Boulding, “As the world moves on, the image does not.”<sup>65</sup> The result is the prolonging of a melodramatic narrative that encompasses the view of man as the seducer of the innocent. In order to exert agency as a petitioner, one could not challenge this traditional morality. The petitioner’s task was not to lessen the responsibility of the fallen woman, but to extend responsibility for the child’s upkeep to both society and the father of the child. Because the father had abandoned the child, the woman was justified in seeking assistance from the Committee. This view resonated with the Committee’s belief that a man is the protector/benefactor of women and would avoid conjuring an offensive image of the petitioner in their minds.

It is difficult to ascertain how successful highly-crafted appeals that met the gendered and societal expectations of the dominant discourse were. Still, Sheetz-Nguyen’s claimed that “all petitioners understood that truth telling during the hearing process was a requisite for acceptance,” which is hard to accept considering the evidence provided here.<sup>66</sup> In any case, we will now highlight how both the cult of sensibility and the detachment between the two parties – the petitioner and the Foundling Hospital Committee – provided the petitioner an opportunity to utilize the piety of old beliefs. We recognize that one may object to the arguments presented here on the basis that some women candidly and openly declared there was no promise of marriage and dispensed with the courtship formalities of the time, as in the case of Mary Ann P.: “Father did not pay me particular attention. There was no promise of marriage.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps because of the Hospital’s strict regulations, or perhaps because of naivety, these cases appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, “they are certainly – judging by the petitioners’, at least – a very small band.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Boulding, *The Image*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 134.

<sup>67</sup> Rejected Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1851, LMA

<sup>68</sup> Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria*, 95.

Working class respectability was, sometimes paradoxically, a self-conscious product of the undisguised class hostility of the Chartist era that carried within it the tensions of unresolved social conflict.<sup>69</sup> It could also be understood as a defensive device, since knowing and saying a few ‘passwords’ about respectability “might secure immunity from the badgering of middle-class charity workers or district visitors.”<sup>70</sup> The middle and upper classes did not always take into account the likelihood that respectability was practiced in the bubbling London centre in a more limited and situational sense than that of a permanent code of values. In this way, respectability was an assumed role as much as an ideology. Societal mores established discourse. Thus, the petitioner had the opportunity and power to craft a version of reality which suited her needs and also tapped into the dominant rhetoric.

Let us assume that the petitioner knew exactly what societal expectations of respectability were required of her. She would only need to know what the Foundling Hospital criteria was if she wanted to make the best admission case possible. Word about the Foundling Hospital did spread at the time. Women heard about the Foundling Hospital through various networks, “such as Queen Charlotte’s Lying-In Hospital, Mrs. Marchmont at Urania Cottage, Mrs. Ranyard’s Bible women, clergymen, employers and friends.”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, popular figures such as Charles Dickens attended charity events frequently and wrote about the Hospital in journals and newspapers; he promoted the idea that people with financial means should consider employing an apprentice or domestic trained by the Foundling Hospital.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, word was traveling fast about the institution and its services. So, when Sheetz-Nguyen purported that aside from the few women who had undergone the petitioning process, “few knew the details of the admissions policy,”<sup>73</sup> she did not consider that word about the petitioning procedure and successful applicants traveled quickly,

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<sup>69</sup> Bailey, “Will the Real Bill Banks,” 337.

<sup>70</sup> Bailey, “Will the Real Bill Banks,” 343.

<sup>71</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, “Calculus of Respectability,” 26.

<sup>73</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 86.

and secretly, through women's social webs, especially among women in the same predicament.

We need to consider how obvious the moral expectations of the Committee may have been to women in that society. Sheetz-Nguyen asserted that, "a smart girl might take a chance and lie about the length of the relationship, but it was risky business" because of Brownlow's follow-up investigation.<sup>74</sup> Conceivably, the risk lessened if the 'smart girl' figured out that societal expectations required a longer duration of dating to be taken seriously as a respectable woman. Or perhaps her social networks somehow informed her that it was best to claim the relationship lasted long enough to permit premarital sex on the promise of marriage. If the details could not be corroborated, it was easier to believe the petitioner's tale. For instance, Caroline D., a newcomer to the city of London claimed:

Both my parents are dead...He accosted me in the street and then requested to keep company with me. When he had courted me for 4 or 5 months, seduction took place... I can refer to nobody who knows about our relationship or has seen the Father...<sup>75</sup>

Margaret B. had a similar tale in 1863: "Father courted me and promised me marriage. This was unknown to my father and friends."<sup>76</sup> The most common characteristics of a winning tale included a disruption of older patterns of courtship, coupled with a convincing story of seduction. This may have been apparent to mothers petitioning to the Foundling Hospital; especially when one considers that the Hospital selected, amplified, and then projected their standards back onto those women applying for its help, whether successful or not. Consequently, we must respectfully disagree with those who claim that there was no room for the misrepresentation of facts. Even Sheetz-Nguyen admitted, "Word

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<sup>74</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 106-107.

<sup>75</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1854, LMA

<sup>76</sup> Accepted Petition, A/FH/A/08/1-1863

[of the Foundling Hospital] had spread as far as Brighton, via small town vicars, who were among the recommenders that provided support for women in trouble.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Sheetz-Nguyen’s acknowledged, “[Sarah F.] understood, if she wanted to succeed, she needed to prove her respectability to the committee,” and thereby realized that the petitioners had some idea of the Hospital’s expectations.<sup>78</sup>

Recognizing respectability as a chosen role rather than a universal normative way of being brings to light its calculative potential for working class relationships with outsiders. Historian Peter Bailey showed how working class men sometimes used bourgeois institutions as a convenient way of realizing their own initiatives by taking advantage of the various amenities at their mentors’ disposal.<sup>79</sup> Thus, by putting on a respectable face to their class superiors, working people could extract practical benefits often unobtainable from the resources of their own culture. One of these benefits could be realized by the successful female petitioners of the London Foundling Hospital.

As this article established, working class Londoners knew what behaviours were expected of them and thereby role-playing was not too difficult. But how much role-playing did the female petitioners resort to in their potentially contrived performances in the Hospital Committee’s meeting room? While trying to seek out the truthful intentions of historical agents is difficult, it is useful to turn to other academic disciplines for help. Sociologist Erving Goffman’s concept of role helps us sift through what the unwed mother’s petition and interview actually recorded. It looks at what could possibly, but never affirmatively, be reinforced with a performance put on by desperate women who likely felt they were out of options.

Goffman highlighted how, in the interests of social practicality, a social actor (the mother) can perform a role (respectable woman) with sufficient conviction to meet the

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<sup>77</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Bailey, “Will the Real Bill Banks,” 343.

expectations of the other (in this case, the Foundling Hospital Committee). He used extensive evidence to prove that role-playing is especially true in relationships between social actors who are in situations in which they are governed by a strong authority structure.<sup>80</sup> Thus, because the Foundling Hospital petitioners knew what high society expected of them, they exercised their agency in this capacity. If we take Goffman's role theory and couple it with historian Natalie Zemon Davis' findings, we open the door of negotiation to a petitioner's agency.

Davis has showed how historians tend to reconstruct particular details of everyday life from archival documentation, and place them within the synthetic context of larger social and cultural patterns. In her book *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, Davis demonstrated how "pardon tales" are fictional accounts of the particular circumstances which attended the commission of crimes. These narrative 'stories' were mixed with elements of formal, judicial speech, and designed to conjure the intervention and dispensation of the sovereign's grace. Davis' study reveals a unique way to interpret archival texts. Her microhistory tries to peel away the informational value of the primary documents in order to focus on the evidential qualities of the discourse implicit in Davis' sixteenth century petitioners' narratives. In doing so, Davis shows how 'pardon tale' petitioners responded to a different set of social and cultural reference points; they concealed them in a complex narrative discourse particular to their immediate environment. Davis analyzed letters of reprieve using their contextual language, the shaping and order of narrative detail, and the crafting of discourse by the 'tellers' (the writers and the accused) in order to present an interpretive reading of the documents.<sup>81</sup> This historical method provides a much more

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<sup>80</sup> James J Chris, "Role Distance and the Negational Self," in *Goffman and Social Organization: Studies in a Sociology Legacy*, ed. Greg Smith. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65.

<sup>81</sup> Natalie Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1987).

nuanced understanding of a letter writer's intentions, inspirations, and intended audience. Similarly, the rereading of Foundling Hospital petitions as narrative discourse is integral to their historical interpretation.

Discourses surrounding respectability together with a host of local and national expectations were commonly used in the petitions to help excuse and make sense of a mother's predicament. Many poor men and women learned to behave in ways that endeared them to middle class philanthropists. Where working class notions of respectability did not align with the attitudes of elites, petitioners could put on a show and say what they needed to say in order to get what was offered. There may have been little distance, as Sheetz-Nguyen suggests, between the values and standards internalized by these women and those of the elite men who judged them.<sup>82</sup> However, it makes sense that these women sought to put on the best face possible in their interviews. Furthermore, it is likely that the petitioners also utilized role-playing as a form of repentance.

Petitioners may have felt legitimized by the acceptance of their child into the Hospital and could view their confession to premarital sin as a means to self-savaging. Foucault discussed the confessional ritual:

... a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor, but the authority who requires the confession ...<sup>83</sup>

Like any lawful proceedings, the truth-value of the testimony of the petitioner is paramount. The 'story' of the petitioner must contain an essential core of moral and legal veracity. For Davis, the ultimate expression of truth in the remission narrative is the relation of the accused: the confession of the crime.<sup>84</sup> The mothers

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<sup>82</sup> Sheetz-Nguyen, *Victorian Women*, 64.

<sup>83</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 61-62.

<sup>84</sup> Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, ff.

who petitioned to the Hospital were guided by the Committee's expectations and, as a result, they had some understanding of what was expected of them. This is demonstrated by the fact that almost all petitions were riddled with the same sequence of events. By categorically removing oneself from the unacceptable excuses of drunkenness, poverty, and promiscuity in a petition, the mother could play into the socially constructed narrative that gave her child a better chance of acceptance into the Foundling Hospital, even if she had deceived the Committee to some degree. Petitioners played upon the language of humility, repentance, and subjection; this was integral to a petitioning process which rarely pursued a different line of inquiry. Using a Davis-framed lens, we can search for the narrative discourse that exploits the knowledge of the time – giving historical actors a chance to employ constrained agency.

### *Conclusion*

Let us review what has been presented thus far: the desperation of a petitioner, her knowledge of social customs, her ability to learn the admittance criteria for the Foundling Hospital's deciding administration, our understanding of Goffman's role distance theory, Davis' methodology, and the ability of the father to abandon his child and lover without a trace. Taken together, we can see how the petitioning mother had a space to exercise her agency in her bid to have her child accepted to the Foundling Hospital.

Ascribing to conventional 'fallen woman' tropes, a petitioning mother could use the Foundling Hospital to negotiate a better life for both her and her unborn child. It is important to note that by conforming to benefit their own situation, petitioners perpetuated the dominant Victorian gender roles of the day. Moreover, it is likely that the Foundling Hospital Committee wished the narratives to be truthful as they did not want to see their philanthropic system of justice discredited by allowing any children in who came from women of ill-repute.

Despite the tightening constraints of the Foundling Hospital's investigation process under John Brownlow, this article has shown that among a diversity of situational contexts is the ability to manipulate the social order in such a way as to preserve what Goffman identifies as a kind of second-order self-realization and autonomy.<sup>85</sup> This is especially true when we see how contrived the entire Foundling Hospital application process was. The fact that the first line of every petition read from the period between 1849 and 1872 began with, 'When first acquainted with the father I was...' proves that there was an inventory of respectable behaviour and conduct, which provided a mental checklist by which petitioners could read both status and intention.

It is, however, imperative that discussions of working class women do not unnecessarily generalize their experiences. It is important to remember that success for a mother in this situation was measured by the admission of the child, and the mother's relief of responsibility; events we might consider tragic today. If some unwed mothers wept, it may have been because their petitions failed or because they had succeeded and had to surrender their babies. In this way, while it is important to continue to write 'history from below,' we must recognize that homogenizing personal experiences is almost as unhelpful as failing to recognize their previous exclusion from the historical record.

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<sup>85</sup> Erving Goffman. "The Nature of Deference and Demeanour," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58 (1956): 501.