BASTARDS and FOUNDLINGS

Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England

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Introduction

CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF ILLEGITIMACY

Demographers and historians refer to the eighteenth century as the “century of illegitimacy,” 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.” While they offer a variety of reasons to explain this increase, which remains “unprecedented in the known history of the British population,” 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.

But if so many families had to deal with the presence of illegitimate daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, and stepchildren, how did it influence the fictional stories that these families wanted, or pointedly did not want, to read? When contemporary writers portrayed bastard children and their parents—or when they carefully edited direct references to bastardy out of their narratives—whose perspective did they espouse, and why? And can we say that the fictional reimaginings of the social practices surrounding illegitimacy had any effect on these practices? For example, did the endless succession of plays and novels featuring lost and found children—the “foundlings”—impact the period’s view of the real-life foundlings, that is, the illegitimate children of serving women liable to be abandoned or even murdered by their mothers? Or, turning to another representational tradition, did the stories portraying sympathetically the “little ones o’both sides” (to adopt Laurence Sterne’s euphemistic phrasing) contribute to the gradual erosion of the official view of the bastard as a social and economic pariah?

To begin to answer these questions, this study brings together research from several different disciplines, such as law, history, and
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cultural and literary studies. It pits the official legal views on illegitimacy against the actual everyday practices that frequently circumvented the law. It reconstructs the history of social institutions called upon to regulate illegitimacy, such as the London Foundling Hospital, and it examines a series of foundling narratives written, arguably, in response to the same concerns that underlay the emergence and functioning of such institutions. And throughout, it emphasizes the multiplicity of cultural meanings of bastardy, striving to redefine the “century of illegitimacy” as the “century of illegitimacies.”

Eighteenth-Century Bastardy: Definition and Categories

What constituted the eighteenth-century category of bastard? The official view can be summed up by referencing two contemporary authorities. Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language viewed a bastard as a child “begotten out of wedlock”; William Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England asserted that an illegitimate child could “inherit nothing, being looked upon as the son of nobody . . . incapable even of a gift from [his] parents” (1:434). In practice, Johnson’s and Blackstone’s definitions were belied by the bewildering variety of legal and informal unions comprising the fabric of eighteenth-century family life as well as by the broad range of attitudes toward bastard children held by people belonging to different social classes and geographic regions. To begin to make sense of this multitude of perspectives, I have grouped the eighteenth-century views of bastardy into the four categories, with a brief note on the relative prominence of each category in the works of fiction:

- The bastard could be viewed as the threatening pretender to the legal family’s property, bearing out William Wycherley’s 1676 observation that even though there is a “Law . . . against Bastards, . . . the Custom is against it, and more people get estates by being so, that lose ’em.” 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].” Although the relationship between the legitimate and illegitimate siblings could develop in many different directions, not always following the trajectory of enmity, the middle-class perspective on a bastard frequently centered on his capacity to disrupt the smooth transfer of property and to poison the emotional well-being of the legal family. Even though I am generally reluctant to use the word middle-class as an umbrella term for the complex internal hierarchies of that elusive and much debated social entity, the term is quite useful for the discussion of illegitimacy because it denotes the middle ground between the extreme “haves” and “have-nots” of the English population. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of eighteenth-century fictional bastards either came from this sprawling social stratum, or, importantly, expressed its views. That is, a character could be presented as a daughter of a baronet, but her own and her family’s perspective of her (presumably) bastardy would unmistakably reflect the concerns of middle-class readers, whose experience of illegitimacy was very different from that of aristocracy (as discussed in detail in the chapter on Burney’s Evelina).

- Illegitimacy had no discernible economic consequences and carried relatively little social stigma for children born to common-law unions among the rural poor of the south and east, especially toward the end of the century. The incidence of such unions increased in times of high prices of food and housing and resulted in a variety of domestic living arrangements. The offspring of common-law marriages were still recorded in parish registers as “bastards,” but because their parents “had no inheritance to pass on” and expected the children to enter the labor market as early as possible, their illegitimate status did not put them at any manifest disadvantage compared to the children born to officially married couples. The practice of cohabitation among agricultural laborers thus effectively demystified the cultural category of “bastard” by demonstrating vividly its dependence on the presence or absence of heritable property. Not surprisingly, there is hardly a mention of this particular type of bastard in the period’s fiction.

- The upper-class attitude toward illegitimacy was also tolerant because, as Ruth McChure has argued, aristocrats were protected by their “great wealth” from any “economic threat, including that posed by bastards.” If the father and the mother both belonged to nobility, their illegitimate offspring could marry well and (if male) could be advanced to high office. We learn from John Habakkuk that
where “the father had legitimate issue, even if it was only female, illegitimate children posed no problem for the succession to the family estate. They were, however, sometimes generously treated, as a sort of younger children.” So when a “virtuous and brave fellow” from Fielding’s Jonathan Wild (1743) complains that after serving for twenty-five years as “the eldier lieutenant of the ship,” he was not able to obtain a ship of his own, all the while seeing “several boys, the bastards of noblemen, put over his head” (185; emphasis added), we may remember the fate of the illegitimate son of the tenth Earl of Pembroke, who was “brought up in the family and in due course became an admiral.” Similarly, Habakukkus tells us that “one of the illegitimate daughters of Sir Edward Walpole married successively the second Earl of Waldegrave and the Duke of Gloucester. It was when a landowner had illegitimate male issue and no other children that a problem arose of succession to the estates, as it did in the families of the Duke of Bolton, the Earl of Nottingham, and the last Sheffield Duke of Buckingham.” Although occasionally referred to in eighteenth-century fiction, well-to-do aristocratic bastards did not figure prominently in it. With its relative lack of conflict, the upper-class legitimacy had as little dramatic potential for writers as did the everyday illegitimacy among rural laborers.

Illegitimate children of unwed serving women abandoned by their sexual partners (who, as Randolph Trumbach has persuasively demonstrated, mostly came from the same social stratum) fared worst of all. Their mothers were known to attempt to conceal their pregnancies and get rid of their infants to avoid shame, the certain loss of employment (prostitution was often the only remaining option), and, frequently, punishment for burdening their parishes with fatherless charges. Those able to afford a nominal fee could turn to wet nurses, grimly nicknamed “killer-nurses,” who were willing to quietly starve bastard infants left in their custody. [The cost of a nurse who would really take care of the child was “often equivalent to the [woman’s] entire annual wage”]. Writing in 1727, Tomas Coram, one of the champions of the English infanticide prevention campaign, complained about the “daily sight of infant corpses thrown on the dust heaps of London.” He was seconded by Thomas Bray, who compared the illegitimate victims of infanticide to “Warts and Wens, and other filthy Excrescencies . . . defacing and weakening . . . the Body Politic” (16), and Bernard Mandeville, who observed that the abandonment of illegitimate children by their indi-

Students of eighteenth-century literature wishing to understand the role of fiction in the reimagining of bastardy in the Enlightenment may well find themselves doubting the usefulness of the blanket concept of illegitimacy when applied across social classes and geographic regions. Being recorded in the parish register as “bastard” must have meant one thing to an agricultural laborer from Culcheth in South Lancashire, whose cohabiting parents—like the parents of the majority of his peers—could not afford to marry, and quite another to Richard Savage, an ambitious nobody who spent years demanding that the Countess of Macclesfield acknowledge him as her long-lost “natural” son and bestow upon him the proper accoutrements of aristocratic wealth and prestige (she refused). It must have meant yet something else to a young charge of the London Foundling Hospital, whose early awareness of her humble station in life was to be fostered, among other things, through learning by heart and singing during public performances the following hymn:

Wash off my foul offence,  
And cleanse me from my Sin;  
For I confess my crime, and see  
How great my Guilt has been.  

In Guilt each part was form’d  
Of all this sinful frame;  
In Guilt I was conceiv’d and born  
The Heir of Sin and Shame.

But if we accept that eighteenth-century writers lived in a world where the concept of bastardy was anything but monolithic and where the lack of the parents’ marriage license hardly established any meaningful
common denominator between an illegitimate son of a duke brought up to inherit a portion of his father’s estate and an inmate of the Foundling Hospital, we begin to realize that the period’s fictional treatment of illegitimacy was faithful and selective. Some experiences of illegitimacy were completely obliterated from the literary discourse; others were rewritten so thoroughly that they have so far remained unrecognized as such by students of eighteenth-century culture; still others were presented as normative or universal, masking the remarkable diversity of personal and cultural readings of the phenomenon of “dishonourable birth.”

The project of reconstructing the cultural history of eighteenth-century illegitimacy thus necessarily involves probing textual omissions and strategic silences. This approach is similar to that used by John Boswell, whose seminal study of representations of abandoned children from antiquity to Renaissance was an inspiration for this book. Boswell observed that literature tends to provide “essential information almost in spite of itself—like a witness whose nervousness is more revealing than his testimony—and is a kind of evidence which would rarely if ever occur in purely historical sources.”

The eighteenth-century fictional treatment of bastardy was increasingly subject to a system of unspoken cultural conventions, bound up with deeply felt familial concerns of readers and writers; to detect those conventions, however, one has to look not only at the texts openly obsessed with bastardy, such as Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, and Mary Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter*, but also at those that testify “in spite of themselves” by either appearing to have nothing to do with illegitimacy, such as Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, or by treating it only marginally, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*.

**Male Bastards and Female Foundlings**

To understand how some bastards managed to enter the polite discourse while others were barred from it, we need to rediscover the complex literary innuendoes of the eighteenth-century term *foundling*. Although in some contexts this word was used interchangeably with *bastard* (e.g., people could refer to any abandoned child as a foundling, and it was widely, though not always correctly, assumed that all abandoned children were born outside of marriage), this was rarely so in fiction. Authors aiming at fostering “good breeding” in their audience were extremely careful about specifying whether the parents of their lost and found protagonists had been married at the time of their conception, and, as it turns out, the overwhelming majority of temporarily displaced children of the Enlightenment’s belles lettres were conceived within lawful if ill-starred wedlock, as were, for instance, Indiana from Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, Fidelia from Edward Moore’s *The Foundling*, Amelia from George Colman’s *The English Merchant*, Evelina from Frances Burney’s eponymous novel, Emmeline from Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline*, Joanna from Thomas Holcroft’s *The Deserted Daughter*, Rosa and Elina from Agnes Maria Bennett’s *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors*, Virginia from Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda*, Fanny from the anonymous *Fatherless Fanny*, and others. A typical “foundling” would be raised by strangers, leave her adopted family upon reaching marriageable age, go through numerous ordeals (during which she acquired an eligible suitor while retaining her chastity), and finally discover her true kin, reassert her legitimate status, and reestablish herself as part of her biological family.

Though structurally similar to the real-life bastard as an outsider forcefully inserting herself into the family and social order, the fictional foundling differed in important ways from her money- and status-hungry illegitimate counterpart. Her quest was for moral excellence and true identity, and if the revelation of that identity was accompanied by a shower of tears, titles, and estates, this bounty was bestowed by the parent who frequently did not have any other children and was therefore delighted with the reappearance of the long-lost legitimate offspring. One can speak, in other words, about the culturally recognizable literary category of *legally born* foundlings (henceforth referred to simply as “foundlings”) carefully conceptualized as having nothing in common with such people as the illegitimate correspondent of the *Universal Spectator*, perceived as a “robber” by his disgruntled legitimate siblings. As I will argue, however, it is precisely the insistence that the fictional foundling represents no threat to the economic and emotional well-being of her biological family that makes such a character embody most trenchantly the eighteenth-century anxiety about illegitimacy.

But once we place the eighteenth-century fictional foundling into a separate cultural category suggestively related to and yet recognizably different from the category of “bastard,” we are confronted with *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. The most famous eighteenth-century “foundling” clearly does not fit the paradigm of rediscovered legitimacy. Tom’s bastardy alerts us to a curious pattern in the period’s literary
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treatment of children born outside or "almost" outside of wedlock. When eighteenth-century fictional narrative featured an abandoned child, his or her gender served as a largely reliable predictor of whether at the end of the story, he/she would turn out to be a legitimately born foundling or a bastard. Lost male children, such as Tom Jones and Humphrey Clinker, were allowed to stay illegitimate. The majority of their female counterparts, on the other hand, suffered the threat of illegitimacy throughout the story, only to discover at the end that their parents had been married at the time of their conception. If the bastardy of male foundlings could be decried by readers (e.g., Fielding was widely criticized for refusing to "reveal" at the end of his novel that Tom's parents had been secretly married), the bastardy of female foundlings was not even considered a controversial issue: it barely existed.

A closer look reveals that it is not just the fictional lost and found children who were coded as legitimate or illegitimate depending on their gender. If the work of eighteenth-century literature featured a pregnant woman who was not married at all or married to a man other than the father of her child, in the majority of cases, her newborn child would turn out to be a boy. Examples include not only Daniel Defoe's Colonel Jack, Fielding's Tom Jones, Tobias Smollett's Humphrey Clinker, and, possibly, Sterne's Tristram Shandy, but also several boys born to Defoe's Moll and Roxana; the son of the younger daughter of Monsieur Douxmoirou from Eliza Haywood's Lasselia; William Godolphin Jr. from Smith's Emmeline; Peregrine Pickle from Smollett's eponymous novel; Mr. Macartney from Burney's Evelina; the son of Theodosia Snap from Fielding's Jonathan Wild; the sons of Sir Thomas Grandison and Mrs. Oldham from Samuel Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison; the sons of "Thomasine" and Tom Belton from Clarissa; the son of Lovelace and Miss Betterton; the imaginary twins that Lovelace envisions suckling at Clarissa's breast; the son of Miss Burchell in Frances Sheridan's The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph; the son of Katie Buhann and Lord Denningcourt from Bennett's The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors; Mr. Milford from Holcroft's The Road to Ruin and the son of Mr. Elford's servant, Mary, from Holcroft's Hugh Trever; Gregory Glen from Robert Bage's Hornspring; or, Man As He Is Not; the son of William and Hannah from Elizabeth Inchbald's Nature and Art; Frederick, the son of Baron Wildenham and Agatha Friburg from August von Kotzebue's Love Child, known to the English audiences as Lovers' Vows, adapted by Inchbald (and almost performed at Mansfield Park); the anonymous victim of infanticide from Mary Hays's Memoirs of Emma Courtney; two anonymous boys from Amelia Opie's Adeline Mowbray; and many others.

This list may seem long, but its length underscores the casual ubiquity of male bastards in the works of fiction. The comparable list of female bastards would be much shorter, including the daughter of Mr. B and Sally Godfrey from Richardson's Pamela, a daughter of Mr. Bilson from Sarah Fielding's The History of the Countess of Delvigne, the daughters of Solomon Mushroom from Bennett's The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors, Louisa from Haywood's The Fortunate Foundlings, and Eliza and Harriet from Austen's Sense and Sensibility and Emma, respectively. In other words, the eighteenth-century tendency to allow fictional male foundlings—not their female counterparts—to remain illegitimate seems to be part of a larger literary tradition of conceptualizing bastardy as a fate reserved predominantly for male characters.

John Shebbeare's The Marriage Act (1754) is paradigmatic in this respect. A veritable catalogue of illicit coupleings, it was written to condemn Lord Hardwicke's 1753 "An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages" (26 George II, c.33), which introduced mandatory parental consent for marriages of children under the age of twenty-one. The new bill was aimed at deterring penniless opportunists of both sexes from eloping with underage heirs and heiresses by postulating that a priest who weds such a couple without parental permission would be tried and transported, and that the children born to this faux marriage would be considered illegitimate. Those objecting to the Act pointed out that it would serve mainly the interests of aristocrats who could further consolidate their power by arranging marriages within their own class or with the richest segment of population, that it would force young people into marriages of convenience aimed at pleasing their avaricious parents rather than at following their own hearts, and that it would enable unscrupulous men to seduce and abandon naive young women after having allegedly "married" them. Shebbeare's novel is a passionate two-volume harangue against the Act, which "has given designing people the power of... bastardizing whole families to their utter destruction" (2:181). The author presents one fictional case study after another in which a daughter perishes after being married off to a man chosen by her greedy parents or is ruined by a rake who tricks her into a secret marriage not considered legal under the new law. The novel fleshed out a widely held prediction that the bill would dramatically increase the incidence of bastardy, a prediction that apparently never materialized because although bastardy rates continued to rise, historians do not see it as a consequence of the Marriage Act. Also,
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significantly for the present argument, Shebbeare’s concept of illegitimacy is unequivocally gendered.

Thus when one of the least sympathetic victims of the new law, Lady Sapplin, runs off to Paris with her lover, leaving behind her aristocratic husband whom she married on the instigation of her nouveau riche parents hankering after a title, she is treated to the following explanation of how extramarital affairs are looked upon in France: “There is so much suspicion in all husbands that the children are not their own, [one] seldom [sees] any tenderness between the father and son; the first finding no inclination for a child which he suspects is not of his begetting, and the child having but little reverence for a man who very probably is not his father” (2:154).7 Note the automatic assumption of the gender of the child born to an adulterous French mother, France functioning here and throughout the novel as a sad example that England, newly wrecked by Lord Hardwicke’s Act, is sure to follow soon. Meanwhile, back in England, all bastard children born as a consequence of the Act are also male, as is the son of Lady Sapplin and her hairdresser, Mr. Samuel Waitwell; the son of Lord Sapplin and Lucy Shelton; the son of Miss Standish and Mr. Wright; and the son of Mrs. Lulworth and Mr. Thomas. The uniform gendering of these “true” bastards appears even more striking when we hear the story of one Mr. Sterlin and his three legitimate children, who are retroactively bastardized after the death of their parents by their evil uncle, who wishes to steal their estate and is abetted in his criminal designs by the new law. One of these three children is a girl, “called Patty after her [late] Mamma” (2:222), who was a paragon of virtue and elegance. The little Patty’s gender thus underscores the profound falsity of the uncle’s insinuations that these children are “all bastards” and as such “don’t inherit any estates,” and it reinforces the unspoken convention rendering a bastard heroine a conceptual monstrosity (2:225).

Further eloquent testimony to the force of this convention comes from a novel that all but advertised itself as the story of the female bastard: Mary Robinson’s The Natural Daughter (1799). Midway into the narrative, we learn that its nominal title character, the little Fanny, was conceived in circumstances that drastically palliate her illegitimacy (I emphasize the word nominal because Robinson cultivates her readers’ confusion about who exactly the “natural daughter” of the title is). Traveling through revolutionary France, an English gentlewoman is arrested on the orders of Marat and thrown in prison. She is told that an English gentleman of her acquaintance can procure her freedom if she agrees to marry him. Faced with the imminent execution, she accepts his offer only to learn, after the marriage is consummated, that her new husband (who swiftly departs for England) deceived her and that the “pretended priest who . . . united [them] was nothing more than the valet de chambre of the infamous Marat” (166). When she does manage to escape the French reign of terror and return to her native country, she first abandons the newborn Fanny but then recovers her and retires to rural Switzerland to raise her. The rhetoric describing the marital status of the woman who sincerely believes herself to be married at the time when her child is conceived is purposively ambiguous. On the one hand, Robinson gets much ideological mileage from condemning heartless self-righteous people who censure unwed but virtuous motherhood. On the other hand, rendering the issue of Fanny’s bastardy and her parents’ unwed state moot, her mother is characterized as “married and deserted,” and mourning “the falsehood of an ungrateful husband” (282; emphasis added).

Moreover, Robinson’s readers cannot help applying the novel’s title not just to Fanny, a secondary character, but also to its main protagonist, the unquestionably legitimate Martha Morley. Martha’s kindness and attention to her family members render her the true—that is, “natural”—daughter, as opposed to her clearly “unnatural” sister, spoiled, sensual, and deceitful Julia, whose acts of selfishness include ostracizing the upright and suffering Martha and locking her own mother in a madhouse. Robinson’s editor, Sharon Setzer, sees the contrast between Martha and Julia as complicating “the easy equation between ‘natural’ and ‘illegitimate.’”8 One effect of such complication is further attenuation of our perception of Fanny as bastard and thus the “natural child of the novel.

Predictably, the indisputably illegitimate child figuring in The Natural Daughter is a boy, the infant son of the hypocritical Mr. Morley and Julia, who augments “her catalogue of crimes” (281) by neglecting and destroying her newborn. Robinson’s fancy footwork around the issue of female but not male illegitimacy—the story of Fanny’s “revolutionary” conception presents a striking contrast to the chronicle of shameless fornication leading to the birth of the male bastard—is particularly remarkable given what we know about the possible origins of her novel. Setzer considers the earlier critical tradition of tracing The Natural Daughter to Robinson’s plan to write “a fictional expose of Susan Priscilla Bertie, the natural daughter of the Duke of Ancaster and the recent bride” of Robinson’s lover, Banastre Tarleton, and she counters it with a different explanation, pointing to Robinson’s “sympathetic identification with women like Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother of
another illegitimate Frances conceived in revolutionary France. That the textual genesis of *The Natural Daughter* can be traced not to just one but two different female bastards makes even more poignant the novel's endeavor to represent Fanny as not really illegitimate or, in any case, less illegitimate than her male counterpart.

How far back can we trace the literary genealogy of the eighteenth-century correlation of legitimacy with gender? In her 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 bastards 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." Since Findlay does not make a distinction between foundlings and bastards, referring to all abandoned children as bastards, she does not acknowledge 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 so omnipresent in eighteenth-century belles lettres.

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

To take this argument further, one may 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 novel of antiquity (e.g., Heliodorus is careful to show that his Chariclea was born within a legal union) and to the Old Testament precept that prohibited priests from marrying women whose mothers had been born out of wedlock. If we consider that a patriarchal culture would tend to seize on any correlation that seems to render female sexual behavior less threateningly unpredictable to the surrounding males, the tradition of predicting the young woman's sexual virtue through the known chastity of her female ancestor(s), could account, at least in part, for the vitality of the literary trope of the legitimate female protagonist, including the female foundling.

Readers thus must not have been too surprised to learn that the illegitimate daughters of Sir Solomon Mushroom from Bennett's *The Beggar Girl and Her Benefactors* (1797), though brought up as heiresses of a rich Member of Parliament with no knowledge of their bastardy, still possess "innate vulgarity" (4:28), which renders their style of clothing a "satire on decency" (4:37). Predictably, these fruits of cohabitation later distinguish themselves by their own sexual misdemeanors: the elder cheats her husband with the uncouth Jacob Lowder; the younger sleeps with her fiancé before marriage and impudently defends her actions with a speech that glibly mixes the rhetoric of "honour" and "keeping" (the term often used to refer to the practice of keeping mistresses): "Lord Delworth and I have been as good as man and wife ever since I have been in the country. . . . My honour and my heart are in my own keeping; I have pledged the one, and yielded the other, [and] I shall keep to my engagement" (5:236-37). To emphasize that whereas the sisters' vulgarity could be explained by the modest origins of their parents, their lack of chastity is the direct consequence of their illegitimacy, Bennett contrasts their behavior with that of Elinor Bawsky, one of the novel's numerous foundlings. The legitimate child of a serving-class couple, Elinor is mistakenly thought to be the daughter of a countess and taken into her presumed mother's mansion, from which she later elopes with the low-born Jackie Croak. Whereas her embarrassing infatuation with Jackie, who at one point hires himself out as a footman, betrays her own inconspicuous origins, her legitimacy guarantees that she will not "yield" her "heart" in the manner of Charlotte Mushroom before officially marrying her "dearest love" (5:203). In other words, blood (class) will out, but female bastardy will out even surer.

But, apart from the old literary convention of "guaranteeing" the chastity of fictional heroines via the chastity of their mothers, can the requisite legitimacy of the female protagonist be traced to certain real-life social practices? Did female bastards indeed fare worse in the eighteenth-century marriage market than their male counterparts? I have found no consistent evidence of such discrimination and have to
conclude that the money and social connections, or lack thereof, of the bastard typically trumped the consideration of gender. In the cases where bastardy of a prospective bride had indeed been used as a pretext for rejecting her, financial problems had also been conspicuously present. Thus, as I show in the next chapter, the lack of adequate funds might have played a key role in the rejection of Steele's own natural daughter by Richard Savage, even though her illegitimacy was used as an excuse (illegitimacy, one should add, that did not prevent her from soon marrying another man, and one who must have made a much better husband than the unstable Savage ever could). In other words, the emphasis on the legitimacy of the fictional female protagonist emerges as a complex compensatory fantasy that responded to a gamut of readers' personal anxieties, ranging from the desire to control and predict young women's reproductive behavior to the acute awareness of the particularly weak bargaining position of that female bastard who could command no financial and social support from her family.

Resisting Symbolism: Property, Social Personality, and the Foundling Narrative

As a persistent feature of the eighteenth-century literary endeavor, the foundling motif has generated a fair share of critical discussions in the last thirty years. These discussions, however, focus primarily on the rich symbolic potential of the foundling trope and, to a lesser degree, on its indebtedness to the literature of antiquity, and as such they do not require any principled differentiation between bastards and legitimately born foundlings. The bastard, the foundling, and the orphan all merge into one fuzzy category, and it is the fascinating literary genealogy of such a character, on the one hand, and her titillatingly fluid kin and class affiliation, on the other, that piques scholars' interest.

A paradigmatic example of the "genealogical" perspective is Margaret Anne Doody's analysis of the relationship between the eighteenth-century foundling and the protagonist of such ancient novels as Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Romance* (c. 250–380 a.d.). Drawing in particular on the striking similarities between the journeys of self-discovery of Heliodorus's Charicleia and Burney's Evelina, Doody develops her argument about the "community of literature," that is, the strong tradition of continuity between the ancient romance and the early modern novel.

Using a different approach, scholars such as Lynn Hunt and Michael McKeon explore the ontological uncertainty central to the image of the foundling, which renders her a fit symbol of broader social changes. Commenting on the popularity of representations of abandoned children around the time of the French Revolution, Hunt demonstrates 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 as a hero used to convey an "implicit criticism of aristocratic ideology... within the context of progressive ideology." 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 capable 'of acquiring Honour' even in the total absence of ancestry." It is significant that neither Hunt nor McKeon differentiates 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." The illegitimacy of characters thus matters only so far 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.

Two recent rearticulations of this view are offered by Wolfram Schmidgen and Ala A. Ahryes. Schmidgen argues that as "a creature of the threshold," existing "both inside and outside society," the bastard can "'cross hierarchial divisions and... act a radicalized social mobility,' even though his or her mobility remains compromised: "curiously disembodied, simultaneously traversing and leaving inviolate the boundaries of an uneven social space." Note that in his compelling analysis of the illegitimate protagonist's "placelessness," Schmidgen does not differentiate between bastards and foundlings either, calling both Fidelia from Moore's *The Foundling* and Evelina from Burney's eponymous novel "bastards," even though both Moore and Burney went to some lengths to present their heroines as *legitimate* foundlings.

Ahryes takes as his starting point Lauren Berlant's "theory of infantile citizenship," with its focus on "a young person" as a "*stand-in* for a complicated and contradictory set of anxieties about national
identity,” to argue that the “sufferings of the homeless child” become “a central element in nationalist narratives” of eighteenth-century England. Alyrees does touch on the differences in the status of children who “leave home, such as Robinson Crusoe, or children who have no homes, such as the bastard Colonel Jacque, the kidnapped Captain Singleton, or the abandoned Moll Flanders.” On the whole, however, his study is dedicated to investigating the possible “nationalist” meaning of the fictional protagonists’ “natural” or self-imposed orphan state, and as such is not invested in differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate characters. Tellingly, he observes that “central” as “the orphan’s story” has been to the nineteenth-century British novel, its origins can be found in Tom Jones, for “like the orphans of the nineteenth-century novel, Fielding’s foundling’s loose parentage allows him a freedom not granted the other child heroes.”

Among the scholars who did comment on the difference between bastards and foundlings, Marthe Robert and Christine van Boheemen offer a Freudian interpretation of this difference that pointedly transcends specific historical circumstances. Having argued that the classical romance was at times instantiated as a story of the murderous Bastard—thus reflecting the complex Freudian dynamics of the child’s fantasy about his family—Robert has read the “bastardy” of such a protagonist as a reflection of his dark impulses rather than his actual illegitimacy. Consequently, she refers to Oedipus, who was actually legitimate, as a “Bastard . . . never done with killing his father in order to take his place, imitate him or surpass him.” Similarly, van Boheemen locates the bastardy of Tom Jones in the context of “Lacan’s revision of Freudian psychoanalysis,” suggesting that Tom’s illegitimacy transforms the search for an “actual father . . . into the quest for the name-of-the-father, for a symbol in language representing the law of patriarchal transmission of power, property, and identity.”

The explorations of the symbolic potential of the foundling figure as well as of the “genetic inheritance” of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative constitute an important background for this study, even though my approach differs significantly from those outlined above. I assume that illegitimacy profoundly impacted the production and the reception of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative. Moreover, I consider the British Enlightenment as invested in downplaying a connection between its fictional foundlings and its real-life bastards, an investment that still haunts eighteenth-century studies today as scholars continue to treat their period’s obsession with the foundling motif as separate from the vexed issue of illegitimacy.

Although it may not always be possible or even necessary to resist a symbolic interpretation of eighteenth-century foundling stories, we ought to remember that for the readers of that time any possible symbolic meaning of such stories was impacted by their everyday dealing with practical repercussions of illegitimacy.

The claim that a personal involvement with the issue of illegitimacy affected both the authors and the readers of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative can be easily interpreted as an invitation to inquire into the private circumstances of the authors of foundling fictions. This approach is neither new (Richardson, after all, insisted that Tom Jones was “made a natural child” because Fielding’s first wife, Charlotte Cradock, “was such”) nor, by itself, particularly illuminating. The acknowledgment that the writer could indeed use the foundling motif with all its traditional classical trappings to express in a sublimated form his worries about the fate of his own bastard child is simply a first step in historicizing the eighteenth-century foundling narrative. The next step is to ask what factors set eighteenth-century England apart from other societies practicing illegitimacy, thus lending a recognizable common meaning to the various fictional expressions of private anxieties about “natural” children. One crucial factor to consider here is 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” constituted an important tenet of Western tradition inherited by the English Enlightenment. Whereas the seminal study that follows the crisis of this view in late eighteenth- and eighteenth-century England, J. G. A. Pocock’s Virtue, Commerce, and History, is not concerned with the epistemologies of illegitimacy, it provides a useful starting point for our discussion of eighteenth-century representations of bastardy. Pocock posits the “fascinating and elusive relationship between the notions of right and ownership, and . . . that world of language in which ‘property’—that which you own—and ‘propriety’—that which pertained or was proper to a person or situation—were interchangeable terms.” The evolution of the early modern views of bastardy could then be understood within the context of the broader crisis of the ideological system engendered by the old feudal mode of production, according to which property and propriety were indeed interchangeable terms.

Thus, as long as the heritable, preferably landed, property remained the only source of livelihood and a guarantee of what Pocock
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calls the “moral personality . . . and the opportunity of virtue,” the illegitimate offspring could be viewed as “improper” because “unpropertied”—that is, threatening, socially subversive, and amoral. Hence the emphasis was 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 Suckabas; 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 1641 A Jovial Crew). Sometimes historical figures were retroactively bastardized in order to provide a psychosocial legitimation for inauspicious turns in a community’s political past. The 1591 anonymous The Life and Death of Jack Straw, for example, depicted the peasant revolt of 1381, headed by a character whose bastardy was invented by the author of the play. The 1607 anonymous Claudius Tiberius Nero featured an emperor whose illegitimacy was also an invention, a fitting symbol of the “illegitimate nature” of his political regime.

Pocock argues that England’s 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.” 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.

The relationship between the socioeconomic history of England and the cultural view of bastards could be thus described as follows: The further along we are in the “long, slow, cumulative process culminating in the industrial revolution,” the more ambiguous the fictional representations of bastards seem to become. The reason for this representational adjustment is the slowly developing awareness on the part of the middle-class population (i.e., the population most sensitive to the economic threat represented by bastardy) that, at least up to a point, inheritance did not define in absolute terms the person’s financial destiny, and that the loss of some part of one’s heritable property to an illegitimate sibling could in principle be recouped by future economic entrepreneurship. To put it starkly, the Enlightenment could in principle afford a slightly more enlightened attitude toward “sons of nobody” because their legitimate brothers felt increasingly empowered by the economic possibilities of venture capitalism.

This new feeling of empowerment by no means translated into the legally sponsored embrace of bastards as fully enfranchised members of the economic order. (In fact, the British laws postulating the socioeconomic exclusion of illegitimate children had been remarkably resilient; as late as 1978, the House of Commons rejected “A Bill to remove the legal disabilities of children born out of wedlock.”) A tentative development of a relatively more tolerant attitude toward bastards manifested itself rather in the increasingly vocal articulation of the view that the “unhappy innocents” (Richardson, Sir Charles Grandison, I:366) should not be made to pay for their parents’ sins. The opening of the London Foundling Hospital in 1739, dedicated to saving the lives of illegitimate children of the poor, was one palpable manifestation of that view, a manifestation by no means unambiguous, however, since this public charity was sometimes described as shoveling the burden that might have otherwise been borne by the legitimate children of the father of the bastard.

When it came to fictional representations of illegitimacy, the situation was equally complicated. To begin with, the figure of the dripping-with-venom bastard—venomous because of his bastardy—disappears from eighteenth-century belles lettres or moves so radically to the back of the stage that we hardly notice his skulking presence. This excision of the vile bastard as a nearly ubiquitous literary type is accompanied by the introduction of the similarly ubiquitous virtuous foundling. Furthermore, whereas the overwhelming majority of sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century literary texts featuring illegitimate characters conclude with the triumphant expulsion of the malevolent bastard from the community, most of the eighteenth-century supposed bastards (particularly the females) turn out to be legally born foundlings who wind up reintegrated into the social order. One way of reading this crowding out of one literary type/social destiny by another is to suggest that the ascendance of the benevolent foundling exemplified the Enlightenment’s readiness to assume a more humane attitude toward
introduction

illegitimate children—a belles lettres equivalent of the fact that the charitable public institution designed to shelter bastards was called the Foundling Hospital.

At the same time, the literary rewriting of bastards as foundlings fit to be claimed by their long-lost families was crucially implicated with the self-perpetuation of the socioeconomic system privileging legitimate children. A cultural potential for 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.

The emphasis on the psychosocial function of property thus qualifies the current critical view of the eighteenth-century generic foundling/bastard/orphan character as a paradigmatic progressive protagonist embodying “an implicit criticism of aristocratic ideology.” On the one hand, there is a certain intuitive appeal to considering such a character 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 hardworking and the meritorious.” On the other hand, the traditional exegetical model that collapses foundlings, bastards, and orphans into one broad category of “progressive” protagonists seems less persuasive once we notice how many of the Enlightenment’s fictional foundlings depend on the acquisition of inherited property (preferably landed property) and how sensitive a subject the correlation between the acquisition of that property and the establishment of the exact marital status of the protagonist’s parents is. Our tendency to look for an overarching narrative of progress emerging from the eighteenth-century foundling fictions is thus checked by our realization that those fictions were fueled, to a significant degree, by the very real presence of a large class of 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—via inheriting property—were read with an uneasy mixture of opprobrium and compassion.

A Brief Outline of This Book

Each following chapter focuses on one or two “canonical” plays and novels (such as The Conscious Lovers, The Foundling, Tom Jones, and Emma) and a constellation of lesser-known works (such as Hays’s The Victim of Prejudice, Haywood’s The Fortunate Foundlings, and Bennett’s The Beggar Girl), considering them in the context of everyday practical dilemmas posed by illegitimacy. The first and second chapters, respectively, analyze Steele’s play The Conscious Lovers (1722) and Defoe’s Moll Flanders (also 1722) in relation to the early-eighteenth-century concern about the widespread practice of infanticide and the campaign to establish the English “House of Orphans,” a foundling hospital similar to those existing by that time in many European countries. The third chapter offers a bifurcated analysis of Edward Moore’s play The Foundling (1747) and Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa (1747–48), highlighting the difference between the representational challenges faced by the playwrights and novelists responding to the eighteenth-century preoccupation with the issue of bastardy. The fourth chapter compares the bastard-foundling hero of Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749) with other illegitimate heroes of eighteenth-century fiction, such as Savage’s “Bastard” (1728), Haywood’s Horatio (The Fortunate Foundlings, 1744), and Smollett’s Peregrine Pickle (1751) and Humphrey Clinker (1771), problematizing the accepted critical view of Tom Jones as a paradigmatic progressive protagonist of eighteenth-century belles lettres.

The fifth chapter returns to the history of the London Foundling Hospital, reading Richardson’s last novel, Sir Charles Grandison (1753–54), as offering an ambivalent emotional justification for the presumably self-imposed exclusion of women of quality from public participation in the affairs of the Foundling Hospital at mid-century. The sixth chapter uses Charles Burney’s attempt, in 1774, to turn the Hospital into the first national public school of music—a project in which he was assisted by Frances Burney—as an important background for the treatment of the theme of illegitimacy in Evelina (1778). The concluding chapter focuses on the story of Harriet Smith, the bastard protégé of Emma Woodhouse in Jane Austen’s Emma (1816), arguing that Austen capitalized on the cultural iconography of the Hospital to offer a corrective to the rule of configuring the legitimacy of the fictional foundling as a function of her gender.

The larger goal of the insistent cross-referencing between the historical and the literary that drives the argument of this book is to put illegitimacy on the map of eighteenth-century studies as a crucial feature of the period’s imaginative landscape. Whereas I cannot claim that the reconstruction of the dialogue between the foundling fictions and the concern about bastardy somehow covers or exhausts the complex topic of the cultural meanings of illegitimacy in the “long” eighteenth
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century, I am convinced that by listening to the many voices of that
hitherto unnoticed dialogue, we come closer to recognizing illegitimacy
as an important, far-reaching, and immensely complex sociopoliti-
cal institution of the British Enlightenment.

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BASTARD DAUGHTERS AND
FOUNDLING HEROINES

Rewriting Illegitimacy in The Conscious Lovers

Richard Steele’s play The Conscious Lovers (1722) occupies a
special place in eighteenth-century literary history. It is
considered a paradigmatic “sentimental comedy... associated with the
early-eighteenth-century reform movement” and testifying to the thea-
tre’s prescient recognition of the rising (“always rising,” as one critic
has noted) power of the middle-class audience. The Conscious Lovers
features a young woman named Indiana whose origins remain
unknown until the last scene of the play, in which she is revealed to be
the long-lost daughter of an affluent London merchant, Mr. Sealand.
The happy discovery is followed by a wedding: Indiana’s steadfast
admirer and protector, Bevil Junior, a scion to an old aristocratic fam-
ily, can now marry the beauteous foundling with the blessing of his
father, Sir Bevil. Where the Dorimants and Harriets of the Restoration
stage thrust and parry with witty repartees, Bevil Junior and Indiana vie
with each other in their noble and disinterested behavior. To devotees
of William Wycherley and George Etherege, The Conscious Lovers
did not even feel like a comedy (John Dennis thought that Indiana’s story
was “downright tragical”), 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.” Steele, as Lisa Freeman argues, billed his “new kind of
drama” as offering to 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.”