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'Unfortunate Objects': Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London

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Eighteenth-century motherhood is a subject often neglected by historians. Literary scholars have contributed fascinating commentaries on the development of ideals of motherhood and their deployment in empire and state-building narratives and class formation. Historians of feminism note the politicised use to which motherhood was put in the later eighteenth century. Those interested in aristocratic family life or women have also marshalled evidence about the experience and emotions of elite maternity. (1) Many areas of this topic remain understudied, however. *'Unfortunate Objects': Lone Motherhood in Eighteenth-Century London* offers important insights into the experience and culture of motherhood outside the upper classes. Tanya Evans examines unmarried, married and widowed lone mothers and the strategies open to them when unable to financially support their offspring.

Tanya Evans deploys an admirable wealth of diverse sources from popular literature to poor law material to records generated by philanthropic authorities in her endeavours to uncover lone mothers' lives. These include 6,000 ballads and chapbooks about courtship, the bastardy examinations of the London parishes of Aldgate, Islington, and Lambeth, the Foundling Hospital's minutes, its public image, and petitions for admission and reclamation of children, as well as the emotive tokens left with babies, and the accounts, admissions registers, minutes, and settlement examinations pertaining to the City, British, Westminster, Store Street and General Lying-In Hospitals. The nature of many of these records means that Evans analyses motherhood at points when it was under most strain. After all, these were mothers who were attempting to obtain poor relief or gain admission for their babies to the Foundling Hospital. By looking at all lone mothers, however, and not just the unmarried ones, Evans moves beyond a study of illegitimacy to get at the shared meanings and experience of poor plebeian maternity. To facilitate this she draws on a range of current methodologies. Part of a generation of historians who examine the material life of their subjects, she

shows that lone mothers commonality of experience was due to the absence of a joint income due to the father's desertion or death and their inability to earn enough to support their families. Like many scholars of the poor laws she sees negotiation and agency in such women's dealings with parish and philanthropic authorities and their personal strategies for survival. Also, like several gender historians, Evans nuances the severity of the sexual double standard and its impact on women in order to move beyond the traditional view of lone motherhood as shaped by the disastrous consequence of sexual transgression and its concomitant shame and ill treatment. What emerges therefore is not an account of deviant maternity, but a sincere and often moving analysis of the way in which harsh living conditions and economic status shaped poor women's lives as mothers.

Evans's introduction situates her findings in the intertwining debates of illegitimacy and infanticide. She points out that these histories inevitably stress the victimhood of unmarried mothers whose illicit sexual behaviour jettisoned their reputation and cut them adrift from the security of family and community norms, unable to find work as a result of the double burden of shame and a dependent baby. Work on infanticide infers that these prospects led some such women to take the desperate step of killing their baby. Evans sets aside this picture of victimised lone mothers and offers an alternative image. First, lone mothers had some degree of agency, though their choices were limited. Second, that they were more likely to be treated with compassion than harshness by friends, families, employers and, even, parish officers. Moreover, she sees this as buttressed by the establishment of new philanthropic institutions in London – the Foundling Hospital and the Lying-in hospitals – which sought to aid poor women and their children. Third, that these friendship and support networks suggest that unmarried mothers were not penalised for sexual immorality but aided due to their extreme want. The final point that Evans makes throughout this book is that the act of abandoning was one of love not callous indifference. While these themes drive the structure of the book, the chapters are mostly rooted in discrete bodies of evidence. This is often successful, such as the three chapters based on the records of the Foundling Hospital, but it can lead to some fragmentation. For example, chapter 7 on the records of the lying-in hospitals slightly disrupts the flow of the book.

Chapters 2 and 3 situate eighteenth-century lone motherhood in its social, economic and cultural worlds. Chapter 2 explores the solvent effect on family and community support networks of high migration, mobility and mortality in London. Combined with insecure employment opportunities, this created economic and sexual vulnerability for women. Evans links the precarious nature of employment to the incidence of illegitimacy, finding that the fathers of bastard children were in irregular and low paid work. Her findings here confirm existing work showing that illegitimacy resulted from traditional courtship practices when the path to a ceremony, or at least informal union, was disrupted. The impression gained from bastardy exams is that men evaded their responsibilities in the face of economic or social disruption. The ballads and chapbooks explored in chapter 3 supplement this picture since they emphasise the inconstancy of men during courtship. There is evidence here of female shame at unmarried motherhood, but Evans focuses on the images of resourceful, vengeful women. Even so, these cultural sources emphasise that women bore the brunt of the fluidity of relationships. Thus both chapters make it quite clear that while poor mothers might demonstrate some agency in their coping strategies, they had few avenues open to them and always laboured under considerable economic and social handicaps.

The next three chapters are rooted in the records of the Foundling Hospital which opened in 1741. Chapter 4 looks at the public face of the charity, examining its various intake policies, its charitable objectives and its self-imagery through art to establish that the Foundling Hospital was open to legitimate as well illegitimate children throughout its life in the eighteenth century. She then turns to the private face of the charity and uses mothers' petitions (submitted from 1763) to analyse the narratives they employed in seeking admission for their babies. She demonstrates that lone mothers did not adopt the narrative of seduction and desertion developed at this time, which increasingly emphasised male sexual aggressiveness and female sexual passivity. If they described male seduction it was to highlight male flattery and deception, rather than their own sin or passivity. Instead, petitioners drew on the rhetoric of need, which was the criterion prioritised by the Hospital itself. The final chapter that draws on the Foundling Hospital's records is most novel. Evans utilises the petitions and the poignant tokens that mothers left with their babies. Her findings contribute to

the view that mothers abandoned their babies out of love rather than neglect: a last ditch attempt to secure their child's future wellbeing. This chapter is innovatory, however, in looking more broadly at what such sources reveal about plebeian motherhood in general. They show a strong sense of maternal duty to provide, which is a characteristic too often associated only with husbands and fathers. The language of distress associated with leaving babies, and the tokens that were left to ensure that maternal links with foundling babies would continue into the future, also show that babies were loved and cherished. Evans finds, however, that poverty and necessity were the ultimate arbiters in lone mothers' decisions. In common with deserted wives' requests for poor relief, lone mothers stressed that they had tried for as long as possible to rear their children through work and the selling-off of possessions. Interestingly, this was a maternal narrative of emotion. It contrasted with the handful of petitions from fathers who did not weave feelings of desperation through their accounts. They explained that their work allowed no time for childcare rather than vice versa, and did not describe the same level of economic destitution.

Chapter 7 revisits the idea that the pro-natalist institutions of the second half of the eighteenth century were not necessarily set up for only one constituency of women. Having shown that the Foundling Hospital accepted the offspring of married mothers, Evans shows that a number of Lying-In Hospitals accepted unmarried as well as married mothers. This chapter also introduces the role of employers in securing aid for their pregnant and recently delivered servants. They often recommended their employees' admissions to Lying-In Hospitals and, as the next chapter shows, actively supported their petitions to have their babies admitted to the Foundling Hospital. Indeed, Evans sees this as part of a network of assistance from employers, family, and friends, particularly female ones, in offering temporary and immediate assistance to lone mothers. This persuasively echoes research into poor law material and court records, which demonstrate the role of family, friends and neighbours as sources of permanent and temporary assistance to poor and disadvantaged women. (2) Nonetheless, though the master/mistress-servant relationship was probably far less predatory and exploitative than it is sometimes portrayed, one might question the balance between altruism and self-interest. After all, it was difficult to keep good servants and the keenness of employers to prevent household disruption prioritises their own rather than their servants' wellbeing. One also wonders at the complexities of the master-mistress/servant power-relationships after the former guaranteed the latter's job having arranged for her baby to be disposed of.

Though focused upon women's experience, *'Unfortunate Objects'* raises interesting questions about gender. Most obvious is the unflattering picture that arises of lower-ranking men. Like studies of marital desertion, it is difficult to avoid seeing plebeian and rural men who deserted their partners before and after marriage as feckless and unprincipled. (3) More research into lower-ranking masculinity is essential to help us understand how and why men were able to act in this way. Also, while making a plausible case that unmarried mothers were not victims and stressing the agency of plebeian women, whether married or not, it is difficult to escape the overwhelming impression of their vulnerability and the constraints within which they acted. They had little control over their reproduction, over securing marriage, and over their low status and low pay in the workforce. What they were mistresses of was the economy of expedients, which included reciprocal support networks, based round family, friends, neighbours and employers and the negotiation of parish relief. In providing insights into the love, duty and obligation felt by poor plebeian mothers towards their children, and in exposing the complexities behind the abandonment of babies by showing that it cannot simply be equated with illegitimacy or indifference, Evans makes significant contributions to the historiographies of eighteenth-century maternity, illegitimacy, the plebeian experience, and poverty, as well as touching on those of infanticide and courtship. There is no doubt that this book will be invaluable to anyone teaching or researching the family, marriage, childhood, gender, the urban poor or sexuality.

Notes

1. T. Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood. British Writing and Culture 1780–1760* (Cambridge, 1996); R. Perry, 'Colonizing the breast: sexuality and maternity in eighteenth-century England', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2 (1991–2), 204–34; B. Caine, *English Feminism 1780–1980* (Oxford, 1997); A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, Conn., 1998). Back to (1)
2. Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: a Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000). Back to (2)
3. J. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England 1660–1800* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 168–178. Back to (3)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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