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 theatre’s prescient recognition of the rising (“always rising,” as one critic has noted) power of the middle-class audience. The happy discovery is followed by a wedding: Indiana’s steadfast admirer and protector, Bevil Junior, a scion to an old aristocratic family, can now marry the 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.”
“Polite” to the point of being characterized as “wooden” by modern critics, *The Conscious Lovers* seems to be the least likely candidate among early-eighteenth-century plays for embodying the period’s preoccupation with illegitimacy. The comedies of the preceding decades were, after all, much more outspoken in their references to bastards. At times such references scored political points, alluding to the adulterous virility of the kings, but by and large they simply treated illegitimacy as a fact of life integral to everyday economic, social, and sexual interactions. In Colley Cibber’s *Love’s Last Shift* (1696), a young woman named Hillaria wonders who the “over-shy” Lady seen at a fashionable outing is. Her cousin, Young Worthy, offhandedly replies: “Hang her, she’s a Jest to the whole Town: For tho’ she has been the Mother of two By-blows, she endeavors to appear as ignorant in all Company, as if she did not know the Distinction of Sexes” (575). Also, in George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), Captain Plume advises his friend (also named Worthy), whose courtship has stalled, to mortify his haughty lady’s pride by lying “with her Chamber-maid and [hiring] three or four Wenches in the Neighborhood to report that [Worthy] had got them with Child.” Plume rounds out his advice with an implicit panegyric to the sexual prowess of the king’s army, noting that with “so many Recruiting Officers in Town,” the number of “Bastards” has to increase: “I thought ’twas a Maxim among [our Officers] to leave as many Recruits in the Country as they carry’d out.” Worthy acknowledges the double entendre with a pun of his own: “No body doubts your Good-will, Noble Captain, in serving your Country with your best Blood—Witness our Friend Molly at the Castle—There have been Tears in Town about that Business, Captain” (697).

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

But commendable as the project of sanitizing the language of the stage was in the post-Collier England, it was not just the vernacular of illegitimacy that needed to be reformed or excised. The crucial turns of the play’s plot and even its famed “politeness” were informed, at least in part, by Steele’s determination to silence a host of public and personal problems bound with bastardy that were forcing their way into his comedy. It is likely, in other words, that the eighteenth-century paradigmatic sentimental comedy owes some of its distinguishing features to the author’s commitment to negotiating the scandalous issues of bastardy and child murder through the idiom of the traditional “foundling” romance featuring a serendipitously discovered long-lost child.

In this chapter I begin my argument about the possible “bastard” origin of Steele’s “foundling” comedy by turning to the children whose fate provided an important (if largely unmentionable in polite society) point of reference for the fictional reimagining of bastards: the illegitimate offspring of the poor, liable to be abandoned and even murdered by their desperate mothers. I discuss Steele’s project of providing a respectable ancient genealogy for his new “improved” comedy and demonstrate that the plays of his chosen literary progenitor—Terence—acquired an eerie topicality in infanticide-infested London because of the Roman playwright’s casual references to the exposure of unwanted infants. (Even his admiring translator, Laurence Echard, had to admit that such references make Terence’s comedies unsuitable for the English stage.) Somewhere in the process of working on The Conscious Lovers, which took almost a decade, Steele might have realized that by deciding to base his new play on Terence’s widely popular Andria (166 B.C.), he had put himself in a difficult position. Steele had to purge the Roman original of any references resonating with contemporary problems of infanticide and illegitimacy, a particularly challenging undertaking given how integral the anxiety about the unhallowed sexuality is to the plots of both Andria and The Conscious Lovers. Compounding Steele’s already daunting task was his own domestic situation, which I discuss later in this chapter. In 1720, Steele’s “natural” daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, was snubbed on the marriage market because of her bastardy, bringing home, so to speak, the issues that his comedy tried to politely circumvent.
In the concluding section, I return to the story of Indiana as a foundling—a story replete with the stale paraphernalia of the traditional foundling narrative: tell-tale tokens, improbable coincidences, and tearful recognitions. I suggest that Steele emphasized those embarrassingly formulaic aspects of his play in order to muffle the disturbing social relevance of *The Conscious Lovers*. I cannot claim that Steele’s project of rewriting “bastards” into “foundlings” was altogether successful: in fact, his play seemed to articulate with a new force the anxiety surrounding the transfer of property down the legal line in a society besieged by illegitimacy, even as it made a strenuous effort to disavow this anxiety. I do believe, however, that by uncovering the “bastard” provenance of eighteenth-century foundling fictions, we can qualify the current critical assumption that when eighteenth-century authors framed their plots through the idiom of the classical foundling narrative, they did so because of a certain lack of literary sophistication or imagination. Rather, they did it because, for a variety of pressing public and private reasons, bastardy needed to be rewritten.

**Infanticide in Ancient Rome and in Eighteenth-Century England**

In 1694, a distinguished literary scholar, Laurence Echard, published a new translation of the plays of Publius Terentius Afer (185–159 B.C.), commonly known as Terence. In the preface to his volume, Echard issued a seemingly puzzling warning for his readers, observing that “Roman plots, often founded upon the exposing of Children and their unexpected Delivery,” should not be transplanted onto the English stage.12 Echard considered Terence “the most Exact, the most Elaborate, and withal the most Natural of all Dramatic Poets,” yet he still asserted that the “difference between the Romans and our selves in Customs, Humors, manners and theatres is such, that it is impossible to adapt their Plays to our Stages” (15).

To appreciate the peculiarity of Echard’s observation on Terence’s unsuitability for the English stage, we have to remember that Terence was a perennial favorite with late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers. Public school students translated him as part of their learning routine.13 John Dryden proudly claimed him as his role model in the preface to *An Evening’s Love*. Terence’s plays were constantly in circulation: his *Andria* alone was destined to go through more than one hun-
dred editions between 1700 and 1800. To understand Echard’s ambivalence, we may want to take a closer look at the plot of this famous play—the same play that Steele would later select as the basis for his “new” comedy.

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

We can see why the conclusion of the play would not sit well with the late-seventeenth-century critics of theatre (only four years separate Echard’s warning and Jeremy Collier’s A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage). Terence emphasizes the rediscovered Athenian citizenship of his female protagonist—a point that remained moot for the English audiences because Greek and Roman categories of citizenship did not correlate easily with the British class system. (According to Pericles’s law, Athenian citizens could not marry non-Athenians; if they did, the offspring of such marriages were considered illegitimate.) At the same time, Terence allows his fornicating heroine to wed her lover, manifesting a scandalous lack of concern for the notion of female virtue of the kind that came to dominate eighteenth-century belles lettres.14 Glycerium’s story is particularly provoking because she is actually a courtesan-in-the-making—not marriage material even by the standards of Terence’s day. Early in the play, we find out that she was adopted by a hetaera (introduced politely as her “sister”), a damning revelation because, as Daniel Ogden points out, it was common for hetaerae to adopt beautiful girls and prepare them for a similar career: “For free hetairai, bearing a girl-child of one’s own was a costly alternative (not only in terms of direct expense, but also in terms of one’s own looks) to buying a slave-girl. . . . [Thus Demosthenes refers to a procuress who] is said to have bought . . . a number of . . . little girls that
she judged would grow into beautiful women, in order to rear them as courtesans to keep her in her old age.”

The hetaera who takes in Glycerium conveniently dies before the play begins, so we are spared the details of the “sisters’” domestic arrangement and see Glycerium only in the care of Pamphilus (the motif of dependence on one’s protector that would make so ambiguous Indiana’s position in *The Conscious Lovers*).

Terence’s occasionally lighthearted approach to female virtue was one apparent reason to question his plays’ immediate suitability for the late-seventeenth-century stage. The main reason, however, as Echard himself pointed out in his preface, was Terence’s reliance on the plots of “Exposure and unexpected Delivery of Children.” I suggest that Echard saw the Roman plots of exposure as disturbingly relevant to the current English problem of infanticide and could not think of a way to neutralize these plots so as to remove their offensive topical sting.

Echard’s careful wording of his brief discourse on “Roman Customs and Manners” implied that the abandonment of newborn children was a thing of a safely contained Roman past, deeply alien to his fellow countrymen, and as such out of place on the English stage. Intentionally or not, Echard, thus, refrained from spelling out the real reasons the contemporary audiences would not appreciate watching staged representations of exposure. Such representations were undesirable not because British audiences could not relate to this antiquated custom, but, unfortunately, because they could relate to it too well. Echard might or might not have been familiar with William Petty’s suggestion in the 1680s that England needed a publicly founded institution dedicated to saving the lives of illegitimate children liable to be abandoned or even murdered by their parents, typically, desperate serving-class women trying to avoid the punishment for bringing forth “bastards.” But even if we presume that Echard had never heard of Petty’s proposals, he still must have been aware of the practice of exposing unwanted illegitimate children, which seemed to increase in proportion with the rapid growth of an urban population and which affected the everyday life of his fellow Londoners. As Toni O’Shaughnessy Bowers points out, by the first decades of the eighteenth century, “abandoned or exposed children—in Augustan slang, children who had been ‘dropped’—constituted a social presence that could not be ignored; their bodies, dead or (barely) alive littered London and the countryside.” As the choice of contraceptive techniques was as limited in eighteenth-century England as it had been in ancient Rome, to farm an infant out to a “killer-nurse” or to abandon it shortly after
birth were often the only options available to an unmarried woman who anticipated being ostracized (and often physically punished) for burdening her parish with a bastard and who had no means for supporting a child on her own. Even though, as Keith Wrightson notes, only a few women among those with the “stringent rational motive to commit infanticide” actually did, the abandonment and murder of newborn children remained a tragically constant feature of the social landscape of the British Enlightenment.

The terms exposure and abandonment themselves underwent a subtle yet important transformation by the end of the seventeenth century. As Boswell points out, exposure was not necessarily synonymous with infanticide for most of European history. It became so, however, by the late Renaissance, when informal social networks of adoption grew increasingly obsolete and were only partially replaced by parochial provisions for “bastards” and by the spread of foundling hospitals. If we agree with Boswell’s argument that the complex “systems of transfer developed in ancient and medieval Europe” ensured that a significant number of “unwanted and burdensome” infants could be “shifted . . . to situations where they were desired or valued,” then we can assume that Roman audiences appreciated the comic potential of the exposure scene in Terence’s Andria and read this scene as an implicit manifestation of the cohesiveness of their community rather than of its breakdown. By contrast, for late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century British audiences, the sight of the exposed infant would bring on associations with infanticide and the disintegration of community as well as the unpleasant memories of parochial squabbles over the cost of maintaining the abandoned illegitimate children of the poor. (Thomas Bray would aptly express such associations in his 1728 comparison of illegitimate victims of infanticide to “Warts and Wens, and other filthy Excrecences . . . defacing and weakening . . . the Body Politic” [16]). Paradoxically, it was in part the historical remoteness of the society depicted in Andria—and thus the lack of historical context for its exposure references—which made possible the “re-accentuation” (to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept) of those references and infused Terence’s comedy with a topicality disturbing for early-eighteenth-century audiences regularly jolted by the “daily sight of infant corpses thrown on the dust heaps of London.”

Since we know that the issue of infanticide had not become any less painful by the time Steele turned to Terence’s Andria in the early 1710s (both illegitimacy and the abandonment of illegitimate children had increased steadily as the century went on), we may ask why Steele
chose such an inauspicious literary forbear. If Echard could see that the disturbing parallels between the “Roman custom” of exposure and the English custom of infanticide render plays such as *Andria* unfit for the theatre, why couldn’t Steele? My tentative answer to this question is that other considerations had outweighed a possible concern on Steele’s part about just how problematic the task of “Englishing” a Roman play dealing with bastardy and abandonment might turn out to be. For Terence did seem—or at any rate was made to seem—such a perfect match in other ways! John Loftis characterizes the affinities between the two playwrights as follows: “In Terence, Steele had found out a precedent for his own comic theory, in which the laughter was relegated to a subordinate position. Praising *The Self-Torturer* in the *Spectator*, No. 502, he found it a merit in the play that it did not provoke laughter; rather it was remarkable for ‘worthy Sentiments.’ Such admiration for the Roman dramatist’s humanity doubtless led to his selection of *The Andria* as the source for *The Conscious Lovers*, the Roman play providing ample incident for displaying tender emotions.”

The assertion that Terence’s “worthy sentiments” and “tender emotions” made him an obvious role model for Steele needs some historical qualification. In claiming *Andria* as a valuable precedent of a comedy that eschewed “transitory laughter” for a more refined sensation of “joy too exquisite for laughter” (Steele 323), Steele followed a tradition established earlier by Restoration playwrights. In 1671, Dryden evoked Terence when he was charged with making “debauch’d persons [his] protagonists . . . and [leaving] them happy in the Conclusion of [his plays,] against the Law of Comedy, which is to reward virtue and punish vice.” “I know no such law to have been constantly observ’d in Comedy, either by the Ancient or Modern Poets,” Dryden wrote defiantly in the preface to his *An Evening’s Love*, adding that “Chaerea is made happy in the *Eunuch*, after having deflour’d a Virgin: and Terence generally does the same through all his Plays, where you perpetually see, not only debauch’d young men enjoy their Mistresses, but even the Courtezans themselves rewarded and honour’d in the Catastrophe” (Dryden 188).

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

And yet, paradoxically, it was Terence’s cultural prominence—something that Steele wanted to capitalize on in developing new drama—that must have amplified Steele’s troubles. Freeman reminds us that eighteenth-century audience members would form a complicated set of expectations about the play before they “even entered the theater,” and Steele knew that his audiences would be familiar with Andria and that at least some of them would compare The Conscious Lovers to Terence’s comedy (a cultural experience comparable to watching a Hollywood adaptation of a classic novel and filling in details and psychological motivations from the original). What he could not foresee was how their knowledge would color their perception of the play, that is, he could not gauge the extent to which they would—intentionally or not—“supplement” his innocent love scenes with the scandalous (and even “unspeakable,” to adapt Addison’s parlance) innuendos of the original. It was this uncertainty, I suggest, that led Steele to try to make his play so irreproachably innocuous as to be regarded as “ridiculously whimsical” by an eighteenth-century critic (Dennis 533) or “wooden” by a twentieth-century one.

Richard Savage and Elizabeth Ousley

There was yet another complication possibly factored into Steele’s endeavor to obliterate the disturbing social relevance of his comedy: the story of Steele’s own illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, and her failed engagement to Steele’s notorious protégé Richard Savage. Steele met Savage sometime in 1718, when the younger man’s play, Love in a Veil, was being prepared for its Drury Lane production. Savage claimed to be a natural son of Earl Rivers, the product of the earl’s adulterous liaison with the Countess of Macclesfield. As Willard Connely nonchalantly notes, there was no doubt that “the fine-mannered but coarse-featured wretch was somebody’s bastard . . . , but that he was Lady Macclesfield’s no one seemed to be able to affirm but himself.” Impressed by the talented young man—and touched by his poignant personal history (the presumed offspring of the peer of the
realm was indigent and had to earn his living by his wits)—Steele began patronizing Savage by introducing him to his friends, procuring him writing commissions, and paying him a modest stipend. Steele’s devotion to Savage went so far as to offer to him, in 1719, the hand of his daughter, Elizabeth Ousley, in marriage—his “natural” daughter, to be sure, but very well educated and so beloved by her father as to make Betty, his legitimate child, “a little jealous of the fondness Steele showed for his vivacious Elizabeth.”

We learn of the treaty of marriage from Samuel Johnson’s Life of Savage (1743). Johnson tells us that the negotiations came to naught because Steele failed to come up with a promised dowry of £1,000. Savage, however, implies a different reason in Memoirs of Mrs. Carter. He claims that he was so averse to the union with the “natural daughter” of Sir Richard that he “could never be induced to see the lady, though [Steele] frequently and warmly pressed [him] to an interview.” Interestingly, neither Johnson nor Savage refers to Elizabeth by name; the appellation of the “natural daughter” seems to suffice in both men’s accounts of Steele’s ill-fated scheme.

That the self-proclaimed “natural” son of Earl Rivers could reject a prospective bride with a curt explanation invoking her bastardy was not at all surprising to those familiar with Savage’s propensity for self-aggrandizement and obliviousness. This was the same man, after all, who would write nine years later in his satire An Author To be Lett that most Grub Street writers are of “very low Parentage,” mock them for “aspiring to the Rank of Gentlemen,” and observe smugly that “though bad writers, they might have been good Mechanicks”—all this notwithstanding that, as the anonymous 1727 The Life of Mr. Richard Savage reported, he himself had nearly become a “mechanick” when he was “solicited to be bound Apprentice to a Shoemaker” (7–8), and that his own aspiration, from the days when he pursued his presumed mother to the time when he sponged off Lord Tyrconnel, had always been to be, or to at least live like, a gentleman.

Steele’s reaction was also predictable. When “he was officiously informed that Mr. Savage had ridiculed him . . . he was so much exasperated, that he withdrew the Allowance which he had paid him, and never afterwards admitted him to his House.” The story gets more interesting, however, when we realize that Steele’s disappointment in the matrimonial plan for his daughter coincided with his working on The Conscious Lovers. Steele, of course, began thinking of that play long before he met Richard Savage—in fact, Loftis locates Steele’s first references to the planned comedy as early as 1710—but the last three years
before the 1722 debut of The Conscious Lovers saw a number of important revisions, some suggested by Colley Cibber, some informed by Steele’s evolving concept of “new comedy.” I suggest that given Steele’s devotion to his “natural” daughter and his pain and humiliation at Savage’s refusal even to “see the lady” let alone marry her, certain crucial details in the plot of The Conscious Lovers could be read as reflecting the unfortunate 1719 affair.

One such detail is the play’s treatment of the theme of female virtue. On the one hand, Steele conventionally identifies a woman’s virtue with her chastity; on the other, he posits virtue in a prospective bride as more valuable than her social class. Or does he? Critics disagree about the significance of the fact that Bevil Junior feels fully committed to Indiana (albeit without informing her about it), before she is found to be the long-lost daughter of the rich Mr. Sealand. J. Douglas Canfield argues that while “Seeland and Bevil Junior may both protest that virtue only is their concern in a marriage, . . . each of the nubile characters turns out to be in the right class anyway, so any real challenge to the traffic in women to improve estates proves moot.”41 James Thompson allows Steele something more of social subversiveness:

Steele insists that the female protagonist’s individual worth, her beauty and virtue, must be recognized prior to elevation in class status, prior to the revelation of her birth, and in so doing he clearly ranks individual worth above class status. . . . Potential conflict is resolved by romance conventions: the incognita is eventually recognized as having the requisite genealogical credentials to marry into the male protagonist’s class, and so the question of whether individual qualities are determined by class and breeding is, as usual, begged. But unlike a virtuous servant character such as Cherry in George Farquhar’s The Beaux’s Stratagem (1707), a character whose beauty and virtue are recognized but whose value remains debased because of her low parentage, Steele insists that Indiana should be highly valued even if her parentage remains obscure. Class transgression in marriage is eventually avoided, and all of the couples are paired off according to their class status—servant with servant, gentry with gentry—but still Steele is at considerable pains to say that class considerations are secondary.42

The story of Elizabeth Ousley’s aborted marriage treaty provides a new backdrop for the “considerable pains” that her father took to affirm the primacy of virtue over parentage considerations. The virtue of the
play’s beauteous foundling seems to be more important than her social standing—or is it a guilt-ridden Steele dreaming about the world in which his daughter’s marital pursuits would not be hampered by his youthful indiscretions and by the lack of a ready thousand pounds? The aristocratic Bevil Junior knows true virtue when he sees it and would be willing to take Indiana “as she is,” without money or advantageous social position—mark that, Richard Savage, low-bred pretender to gentility harping on the bride-to-be illegitimacy to mask your own cupidity! It is not difficult to read *The Conscious Lovers* as Steele’s attempt to sublimate his parental heartache through reimagining his rather pressed-for-money “natural” daughter as a legally born offspring of a rich Londoner marrying a man who can afford her delicate sentiments and exquisite education. In 1720, his own Elizabeth wed a glover, one William Aynston, a “prominent villager” of Almeley, Herefordshire, perhaps a bit of a letdown given her “expensive schooling” and her father’s earlier ambitions to marry her to a son of an earl, even if illegitimate and not yet acknowledged by his mother.

**Bastards, Foundlings, and the Transmission of Property**

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

If part of the appeal of the “first find a rich husband and then a rich father” motif of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative was indeed this motif’s capacity to both express and assuage the cultural anxiety about the ability of bastards to disrupt the transmission of property to
legal heirs, then it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what is going on with property in *The Conscious Lovers*. When Mr. Sealand discovers that Indiana is his daughter, he immediately announces that she will get “a fortune equal to [Sir John Bevil’s] hopes” (380), thus cutting in half the inheritance of his other daughter, Lucinda, who until then has been considered the sole heiress to his wealth. The news that Lucinda’s estate is halved leads her learned suitor, Cimberton, to break off his courtship: “Why then if half of Mrs. Lucinda’s fortune is gone, you can’t say that any of my estate is settled upon her. I was in treaty for the whole, but if that is not to be come at, to be sure, there can be no bargain. Sir, I have nothing to do but to take my leave of your good lady, my cousin” (380).

By having Cimberton denounce Lucinda, Steele forces his audience to treat lightly the partial loss of Lucinda’s estate. If they take this loss seriously, they are identified with the ridiculous Cimberton; if they ignore it, with the noble Mr. Myrtle, Lucinda’s preferred admirer, who hastens to proclaim that “no abatement of fortune shall lessen her value to [him]” (381). A property is well lost if with it goes the “unseasonable puppy” Cimberton (356), the play assures us cheerfully.

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

Here again, as when he felt compelled to neutralize the dangerous topicality of Terence’s exposure references, Steele was faced with the challenge of muffling the bastard overtones of his foundling plot. If in the first instance he opted for stressing the sexual innocence of his *conscious* lovers (unlike Pamphilus and Glycerium, Bevil Junior and
Indiana would never have a child out of wedlock!), here he emphasized his plot’s reliance on the conventions of the classical foundling narrative, playing up, for example, the role of the material token in the recognition scene.

In the last act of *The Conscious Lovers*, distraught by the conversation with Mr. Sealand (who comes to her house to inquire into the nature of her relationship with Bevil Junior), Indiana throws away a bracelet, which Mr. Sealand immediately recognizes as belonging to his late wife (378). Writing in 1723, John Dennis called the bracelet sequel contrived and completely unnecessary, pointing out that the discovery could have been brought off more convincingly and efficiently if Mr. Sealand’s sister, Isabella (who had been lost at sea together with Indiana and has since raised her on her own), acknowledged her brother upon first seeing him at Indiana’s house or if Indiana directly answered Mr. Sealand’s questions about herself. As Dennis put it, had Steele “known anything of the art of the stage, he would have known that those discoveries are but dully made which are made by tokens; that they ought necessarily or probably to spring from the whole train of the incidents contrary to our expectation” (533–34).

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

Is it really the case that early in the century the use of telltale rings and scars was countenanced as the necessary evidence clinching the anagnorisis? Dennis’s assertion that anybody conversant with the “art of the stage” knows that “those discoveries are but dully made which are made by tokens” contradicts Lynch’s argument about the evolution in the eighteenth-century critics’ reactions to the “surplus materiality” of recognition scenes. Lynch observes that critics began to insist that recognition scenes arise “from action” only “by the end of the centu-
Bastard Daughters and Foundling Heroines

ry,” but Dennis ridiculed Steele’s reliance on tokens instead of a “train of incidents” as early as 1723! Indeed, already in 1692, André Dacier had observed in his influential La Poétique d’Aristote that recognition plots with their “marvelous effects” seemed to be “on the wane” among playwrights.46 These facts should prompt us to reexamine the traditional notion that it took most of the century for authors to grow out of their naive reliance on the formulaic conventions of the classical founding narrative. We should consider instead the possibility that they relied on those conventions both in the early and in the late part of the century and both in the newly “respectable” plays and novels and in the fictions produced for “popular entertainment,” not because they could not do any better—they could—but because by flaunting those conventions they could hope to calibrate the perceived topicality of their pieces.

Dennis is absolutely correct in his view of Steele’s bracelet maneuver as superfluous: Indiana and her father would have indeed arrived at the discovery of their consanguinity in the course of their conversation, and if not, Aunt Isabella would have set the matter straight. In fact, Dennis’s critique is so germane that we have to ask why the expert playwright, the author of The Funeral, The Tender Husband, and The Lying Lover, would have recourse to such superfluous gimmicks. This was, after all, the same Steele who made fun of foundlings and their tokens—their “marks”—in his The Tender Husband (1705), in which Biddy Tipkin, whose head runs on romances, informs her aunt that she is “not satisfied in the point of [her] nativity. Many an infant has been placed in a cottage with obscure parents, till by chance some ancient servant of the family has known it by its marks” (218). Steele did not need Dennis to enlighten him as to the exact aesthetic value of a “mark” as a dramatic device; why then did he leave himself so openly vulnerable to the charge of theatrical amateurism?47

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

There was no age of innocence, then, in eighteenth-century literary history in which the conventions of the ancient foundling narrative were taken at their face value or at least tolerated because of the presumed paucity of dramatic devices available to the writer. I suspect that we could push the time when such naive reception was indeed possible much further back than is currently accepted. Already in *An Ethiopian Romance* (c. 250–380 A.D.), Heliodorus coyly comments on the artificiality of the convention of anagnorisis when Charicleia is dramatically reunited with one of her adoptive fathers, Calasiris, at the house of the merchant Naucicles. Amidst the happy cries—“Oh, father!” “Oh, daughter!”—Nausicles remains “dumbfounded” as he sees Calarisis “embracing Charicleia as hard as he could and weeping,” for he can “make nothing of the recognition scene, so like a stage play, until Calarisis, warmly embracing and kissing him,” explains the situation (118–19; emphasis added). Charicleia’s meeting with Calasiris represents just one of many similarly histrionic reunion scenes sprinkled generously throughout *An Ethiopian Romance*, whose characters are acutely aware of the stylized, literary nature of those occasions. When Calasiris is finally reunited with his two biological sons, who are on the brink of killing each other, his appearance is described as a “novel episode” of the “tragedy being enacted” (164). Calasiris is said to enter “like a deus ex machina” (165); and the onlookers who witness the anagnorisis (for there are always appreciative spectators at hand) say “nothing and [do] nothing but [stand] like statues . . . enthralled by the spectacle, when the inner curtain [opens] on a new character—Charicleia,” who is on the way to one of her own miraculous reunions (165–66; emphasis added throughout).

Along these spectacular performances of familial sentiment runs the novel’s more low-key but nevertheless persistent preoccupation with succession and legacies. Calasiris’s sons fight bitterly over the right to inherit their father’s priestly post. Also, upon first hearing Charicleia’s claims to his paternity, her biological father, King Hydaspes, does not believe her and fears that he would be tricked into making this “suppositious and illegitimate” child “his successor” (254), thereby delivering the throne of Ethiopia to his enemies and rivals. Thus the problem of inheritance, as Robert Markley observes, still “lies at the conceptual center” of *An Ethiopian Romance*. The use, or, rather, the pointed overuse, of literary conventions, such as anagnorisis, testifies to the novel’s tongue-in-cheek negotiation of anxieties surrounding the passing of economic resources and political power.
The reliance on such conventions does not become less self-conscious as we move further back into ancient history. As Jean-Joseph Goux points out, another foundling narrative of antiquity, the story of Oedipus (c. 430 B.C.) is in fact a literary “anomaly,” a parody of the “regular heroic myth.” Following the earlier study of Bernard Knox, who insisted on the “polemical significance” of Sophocles’s tragedy in Periclean Athens and demonstrated that “the play can be read as a declaration of rejection of the new concepts of the fifth-century philosophers and sophists,” Goux argues that Sophocles deploys literary formulas to draw attention to them, and that this literary self-consciousness is critical for the play’s reflection on the emerging new class of philosophers-autodidacts.

Historicizing the ancient foundling narrative is beyond the objectives of the present study. The quick glance at *An Ethiopian Romance* and *Oedipus Rex* was intended merely as a reminder of how easy it may be for us to ascribe literary naiveté to certain historical periods and how mistaken such ascriptions could be. Returning to the English Enlightenment and its dealings with wives, concubines, the liberated and “obstructed” glands, and the “little ones o’both sides” (Sterne 451), we should consider the possibility that throughout the eighteenth century—not just at its end—writers employed conventions of the foundling romance both to evoke and disavow a wide host of troubling issues related to illegitimacy. We see both of these impulses at work in *The Conscious Lovers*, in which Steele gave voice to the “unspeakable” issue of infanticide and to the thousands of everyday familial crises over the transmission of property, while simultaneously burying these jarring voices under the stylized surface of his “innocent” foundling comedy (322).

The next chapter considers a novel written at the same time as *The Conscious Lovers*, whose author also relied on the conventions of the foundling narrative to mediate his story of bastardy and infanticide. In his case, however, the effect was very different, for, unlike Steele, who took pains to camouflage his play’s social topicality, Daniel Defoe wanted his readers to hear and to understand and to act upon his references to child murder. *Moll Flanders* thus emerges as a novel that cannot quite make up its mind about the status of its title heroine, who is now represented as a bastard, a bastard-bearer, and a spokesperson for the infanticide prevention campaign, and now as a foundling with a convenient amnesia about her origins and adventures—a dangerous ambiguity, as it turns out, in a literary culture increasingly using gender as a guarantee of the character’s legitimacy.