Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* appeared in 1722, the same year as Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, but here the similarities would seem to end. Neither the eighteenth-century reading and theater-going public nor twentieth-century literary critics have ever thought of seeking parallels between Defoe’s “debauched from her youth” heroine and Steele’s paragon of “merit and virtue” (Steele 376). Yet Defoe’s frequent allusions to the classical foundling narrative (such as the recognition scene between the long-lost child and the parent, when Moll meets her mother in Virginia) compel us to consider aligning Moll with other eighteenth-century foundlings, such as Indiana, Fidelia, Evelina, and Emmeline.

As a thought experiment, such an alignment can be surprisingly illuminating. Moll’s picturesque list of transgressions—she fornicates, commits incest, lies, steals, cross-dresses, and steals again—appears to set her apart from these irreproachable maidens. Yet *Moll Flanders* represents an early and important articulation of the question that perplexed many later eighteenth-century authors of the admittedly more “polite” foundling fictions: was it possible to portray a female foundling as ultimately not tainted by the problems associated with bastardy at a time when the renewed cultural interest in foundling narratives pointedly reflected the painful necessity to deal with socioeconomic and moral repercussions of illegitimacy on an everyday basis? In *Moll Flanders*, Defoe did not manage, nor perhaps try very hard, to sustain such representational separation. He used the rhetoric of the early-eighteenth-century infanticide prevention campaign to introduce his repentant heroine; he made Colchester—the site of a sensational
seventeenth-century infanticide case—her adopted hometown; and he depicted a network of wet nurses who took unwanted bastard infants off their mothers' hands, thus documenting the existence of informal social institutions that had evolved to deal with illegitimacy. In other words, if, with our vantage of hindsight, we consider both *Moll Flanders* and *The Conscious Lovers* as artifacts of a culture expressing its anxiety about illegitimacy and infanticide through the idiom of the foundling narrative, we can say that whereas Steele nearly succeeded in camouflaging this anxiety, Defoe allowed it to take over his foundling plot.

*Moll* is thus an uneasy hybrid. From the point of view of the eighteenth-century differentiation between legally born fictional foundlings and bastards, she is both a bastard and a foundling. As an (arguably) illegitimate daughter of a convict, she is a poster child for the campaign for the opening of an English foundling hospital, actively promoted by Defoe in his journalistic writings. At the same time, as an innocent victim of circumstances beyond her control (an image that she assiduously cultivates), unexpectedly discovered by her mother in a faraway land, she is a throwback to the heroine of the classical foundling romance. Although we cannot be certain that Defoe consciously intended the "foundling" plot of *Moll Flanders* as a corrective for its "bastard" plot, the complex dialogical relationship between the two is indicative of the precariousness of the eighteenth-century strategy of reimagining the treacherous issue of illegitimacy through the presumably safe medium of a classical foundling story.

In what follows, I begin with the "bastard" plot of *Moll Flanders*. I outline the history of the early-eighteenth-century infanticide prevention campaign and discuss the rhetoric of "national interest" and "public good" used by its champions, such as Joselph Addison, Thomas Coram, Thomas Bray, and Defoe. I then show that, written at the early stages of the anti-infanticide crusade, *Moll Flanders* expressed its political message, critiquing the impotence of traditional authorities in the face of the growing practice of child murder, but it could not and would not sustain the impersonal tone of Addison's essays, Coram's petitions, and Defoe's own pamphlets, such as *The Generous Projector*. As a novel, *Moll Flanders* necessarily had to foster the readers' emotional involvement with its title heroine, which meant giving the practice of abandonment of bastard children by their mothers a human face and a psychological motivation. Such a human touch complicated the public discussions of child murder that tended to conform to the "new standards of polite discourse," which focused on the ways in which infanticide threatened "public good" and "national interest." I further
examine the foundling plot of the novel and conclude by suggesting that, in contrast with Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, the framing of *Moll Flanders* as a conventional foundling narrative did little to neutralize its disturbingly personal treatment of the double themes of infanticide and illegitimacy.

**The People’s Campaign against Infanticide**

Even a cursory look at the history of illegitimacy and infanticide in early modern England shows that the infanticide-preventive measures practiced by state and church were often at cross-purposes with the measures supposed to curb illegitimacy. On the one hand, the Acts of 1575 (18 Eliz.c.3) and 1609 (7 Jac.1c4) stated that mothers of bastard children might be corporally punished or placed in a House of Correction, and the notorious 1650 “Fornication” Act made incest and adultery capital offenses. On the other hand, a 1624 Jacobean statute (the only English law dealing with infanticide until the Lord Ellenborough’s Act of 1803) dispensed with the presumption of innocence and declared that if an unwed woman concealed the birth and death of her child, she would be automatically accused of child murder. In practical terms, this particular combination of laws meant that the fear of corporal punishment and public ostracism would often prompt the unwed woman (particularly of the serving class) to conceal her pregnancy and try to get rid of the child as soon as it was born even though the 1624 statute targeted precisely this sort of behavior.

The archdeaconry courts of Anglican England complemented the efforts of justices of the peace by enforcing public penance for illegitimacy. Such penance took different forms in different regions of the country, ranging from the denouncement of the offending woman from the pulpit, to her placement in a so-called “stool of repentance” in front of the congregation, to the excommunication of the unwed parent and the denial of baptism to the child. Again, as in the case with punishments meted out by justices of the peace, the fear of being shamed in front of her co-parishioners and of having her reputation ruined could lead a woman to conceal her pregnancy and to murder her child. As Keith Wrightson points out, a “thorough investigation of infanticide . . . raises the disturbing possibility that . . . Christian social morality . . . may have exacerbated the resort to infanticide to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy.” The ecclesiastical attempts to prevent infanticide includ-
ed regularly preached sermons condemning child murder and the encouragement of neighborly snooping and reporting to ministers about suspected pregnancies.

Also, some parishes—though perhaps not the same ones that practiced excommunication and denial of baptism as punishment for illegitimacy—attempted to forestall child murder by modifying the practice of register keeping so as to include both the birth date and the baptism date of every child instead of the baptism date alone. The Prayer Book of 1662 extended the permissible interval between the date of birth and the date of baptism to fourteen days, which was already a substantial extension of the seven-day interval stipulated previously. However, as scholars working on reconstitution demographics have discovered, the real intervals between birth and baptism varied, for example, from about eighteen days in the late seventeenth century to 111 days in the late eighteenth century in the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire parishes, and from twenty-seven days in the late seventeenth century to 444 days in the late eighteenth century in the Cambridgeshire parishes. The custom of recording baptism dates as birth dates meant that the children who died unbaptized were not recorded at all, which offered ample opportunity for infanticidal parents to do away with their unwanted offspring. The overt purpose of recording the birth dates and the baptism dates separately was to shame tardy parents into baptizing their children sooner. Less explicitly, this practice also served to mitigate the problem of child murder by ensuring that fewer newborns would end up as anonymous victims of infanticide.

It is difficult to estimate the effectiveness of the combined efforts of church and state to prevent, and if such prevention failed, to punish infanticide. What is important for the purposes of this study is the early-eighteenth-century view of the perceived success of state- and church-sponsored anti-infanticidal measures, and we have sufficient evidence that by the early 1720s, infanticide had come to be viewed as a “Pest to the Public” that religious and state authorities could neither prevent nor punish. Thomas Coram’s complaint about the “daily sight of infant corpses thrown on the dust heaps of London” captures well the outraged helplessness felt in the face of this crime by his early-eighteenth-century contemporaries. As William Burke Ryan notes, London parks, ditches, and garbage heaps were the typical places where onlookers could come across dead infants (43). Those strolling close to waterways could expect to see the bodies of drowned children, as the Thames was the favorite depository for unwanted infants.
FIGURE 1. *Study for the Foundlings* by William Hogarth (1697–1764); pen, ink, and wash; 4 7/8 by 8 5/8 in. (11.1 by 21.3 cm). Reproduced with permission of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
William Hogarth’s 1739 engraving, *Study for the Foundlings* (figure 1) unapologetically lists some of the methods for disposing of such children: stabbing, drowning, or abandoning them in common pathways in hopes that someone would pick them up. (The engraving was part of the fundraising campaign for the London Foundling Hospital, but notwithstanding its intended shock value, the untoward activities it depicted had unmistakable real-life references.)

Compared to what people saw in the streets and heard rumors about, the number of infanticide cases tried in the courts of law must have seemed ludicrously low. According to the Old Bailey Sessions Papers, the actual number of cases brought before the jurors was less than one a year. In the period 1707–1787, there were fifty-seven such cases registered in Middlesex and London. The records of the Northern Circuit assize courts between 1720 and 1799 contain the description of 207 cases, which comes to fewer than three cases per year.\(^1\) Similarly, recently uncovered records of the Court of Great Sessions of Chester show the following reduction in the number of prosecuted infanticide cases:

The period 1700–49 witnessed less than half the prosecutions experienced within the previous fifty years, and prosecutions roughly halved again between 1750 and 1799. The 1680s experienced the highest level of prosecutions (eighteen), but during the eighteenth century, no decade experienced more than eight prosecutions and the average for that century was about five per decade. Overall, then, the Cheshire evidence would suggest a situation in which infanticide was... a crime fairly regularly prosecuted in the later seventeenth century but which, in statistical terms, declined steadily over the eighteenth century.\(^2\)

The meager number of infanticide cases reaching the courts prompted Addison to observe in a 1713 article in *The Guardian* that although “there is scarce an assizes where some unhappy wretch is not executed for the murder of a child... many more of these monsters of inhumanity [go] wholly undiscovered, or cleared for want of legal evidence.”\(^3\) Defoe concurred in 1731: “But alas! What are the exploded Murders to those which escape the Eye of the Magistrate, and dye in Silence?”\(^4\) The feeling that the legal response to infanticide did not address the problem adequately was compounded by the realization that the traditional measures directed at preventing illegitimacy in fact spurred infanticide. As John Brownlow, an alumnus and the first

1. The period 1707–1787
2. The period 1700–49
3. The period 1713
4. The period 1731
historiographer of the London Foundling Hospital, would note in 1858, the “Fornication” Acts and Poor Laws ensured that the mother of a bastard was “punished with the infamy of years . . . for the error of the day. . . . A woman with a sense of honour expected being left to the reproach of the world and her own conscience, and [perceiving] no other means of saving her character, [would vent] her fury on the consequences of her seduction—the child of her seducer!”

It was in this atmosphere of growing public dismay over the spreading practice of exposing unwanted infants and the perceived impotence of church and state authorities to do anything about it that Addison decided to call the people of England to action:

I shall mention a piece of charity which has not been yet exerted among us, and which deserves our attention the more, because it is practised by most of the nations about us. I mean a provision for foundlings, or for those children who, through want of such a provision, are exposed to the barbarity of cruel and unnatural parents. One does not know how to speak on such a subject without horror: but what multitudes of infants have been made away with by those who brought them into the world, and were afterwards either ashamed or unable to provide for them! . . . [This crime] certainly deserves the utmost application and wisdom of a people to prevent it.

It is significant that Addison appeals to the “utmost application and wisdom of a people” and not that of justices of the peace or of concerned clergymen. Addison’s language implied that the traditional authorities, such as the church and state, had forfeited their “monopoly of interpretation” (to adopt Jürgen Habermas’s concept) in the case of newborn child murder: the daily eyesore of “infant corpses thrown on the dust heaps of London” appeared to testify to their inability or unwillingness to resolve the problem.

Crucially, Addison did more than just tap into the brewing feeling of communal dissatisfaction and point to the usual suspects—inept clergymen and corrupted jurors; he also shaped this feeling, gave it an appropriate voice, and established its legitimacy. What right had the “people” to interfere with the life and death of someone else’s children? What right had they to police other people’s reproductive behavior? The church had that right because of its concern with the victims’ and perpetrators’ salvation. The state had that right because it was supposed to protect the lives of its citizens and punish criminals. Above all,
the agents of the church and state who dealt with infanticide (from the pulpit or in the court of law) were permitted to delve into these private and painful issues precisely because they functioned as disinterested representatives of larger institutions that had presumably sprung up as natural expressions of an underlying and unquestionable moral order. Priests and judges were configured as devoid of their own (reproductive) agendas and of petty human curiosity. Not so with the “people”—private, unaffiliated persons. Who appointed them to censor other people’s vices and devise new charities?

Addison answered this question as he made an effective rhetorical move from infanticide as something private and unspeakable—and hence belonging to the jurisdiction of an impersonal institution represented in each particular case by a functionary lacking any private agenda—to a problem in which every Englishman appeared to have a stake. Apart from lamenting “the greatness of the crime,” he invited his readers to “consider it as [robbing] the common-wealth of its full number of citizens,” for as such, it certainly warranted “the utmost application and wisdom of a people to prevent it.” Addison noted that “Paris, Milan, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, and many other large towns” had already built great hospitals and thus had ensured that “many [were] by this means preserved, and [did] signal services to their country.” Infanticide thus became a touchstone of national self-definition: were British citizens to stand and watch helplessly as their country’s precious human resources were being depleted while other countries (mostly Catholic ones, too) worked to resolve their infanticide problem?

The appeal of Addison’s approach was manifest in the frequency with which the rhetoric of public good and national interest cropped up in subsequent print discussions of child murder. In his Fable of the Bees, Bernard Mandeville wrote that a “civiliz’d Nation” could not tolerate a woman whose “mind [was] capable of divesting itself so entirely of Humanity” (65; emphasis added). Jonathan Swift’s Modest Proposal also tapped into the perception that newborn babies constituted a valuable public asset. His satire implicitly acknowledged the seriousness of the infanticide problem. Mindful of the “public good of [his] country” (a formula quickly becoming a must in any discussion of infanticide), the “proposer” asserts that his scheme “will prevent . . . that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children alas too frequent among [his countrymen]” (2182). Thomas Bray, arguing for the necessity of “Erecting in the City of London . . . a Hospital for the Reception of Poor Cast Off Children,” claimed that such a measure would enable the saved children to become “useful Members of the
Commonwealth” (16). In his *Generous Projector or a Friendly Proposal to Prevent Murder and Other Enormous Abuses by Erecting an Hospital for Foundlings and Bastard-Children*, Daniel Defoe bemoaned the negative effect that infanticide was imagined to have on British demographics: “Thus is the World [robbed] of an Inhabitant, who might have been of use; the King of a Subject; and future generations of an Issue not to be accounted for, had this Infant lived to have been a Parent” (10). Finally, Thomas Coram, who had been lobbying for opening a foundling hospital in London since the early 1720s, in his first personal petition to the king in 1737 (the petitions of the previous decade had been orchestrated by Coram but signed by Noblemen and Gentlemen, or “Ladies of Quality and Distinction”) described the victims of infanticide as deprived of their chance of becoming “Useful Members of ye Common Wealth.”

The prevalence of the rhetoric of “public good” and “national benefit” is indicative of the very special position the self-appointed champions of the infanticide prevention campaign occupied in relation to the women that they represented and the powers that they hoped to influence. A part of the moral cachet of movers and shakers of the public sphere, such as Addison, Defoe, and Coram, came from their perceived ability to serve as a conduit between the disenfranchised, voiceless part of the population and those in possession of enough money and power to change the state of things, in this case, the king, Parliament, and the rich donors supporting the idea of the British “House of Orphans.” This conduit function was especially prominent in the case of the infanticide prevention campaign. Information and propaganda concerning the handling of this crime always flowed in one direction: from journalists and writers (such as Addison and Defoe) and unaffiliated private citizens (such as Coram) to their middle- and upper-class audience. Those immediately implicated in child murder and abandonment (working-class women) had no access to the information produced and discussed in the public sphere, and they could not participate in shaping public opinion on the issue. Seemingly present in the public discussion (being, after all, its subject) they were, in fact, glaringly absent from it, allowing other people to represent their case in any way they wanted.

The pamphlets, petitions, and newspaper articles dealing with the problem of child murder thus contained almost no reference to concrete situations involving particular women; it would have been very difficult, indeed nearly impossible, to talk about “public good” and
“national interest” after presenting the case of, say, Hannah Warwick, who had kept her pregnancy and the birth—and death—of her child secret because she was mortally afraid of her parents’ wrath and her bullying brother’s sermons,30 or that of one Mary Doe, “a good-natured, inoffensive, and modest girl,” made pregnant by her own father, and accused of “strangling and choking” her bastard infant shortly after delivering it.31 We do not know if the champions of the infanticide prevention campaign ever consulted the depositions at the Old Bailey and read the sad histories of the mothers of the potentially “useful members of the Commonwealth,” but whether they did or not, their public writing on the subject contained no reference to such personal histories. The absence of any mention of specific situations seemed to further legitmate their right to deal with the problem of child killing, as they appeared commendably devoid of idle curiosity and concerned with the well-being of their country rather than with gossipmongering. The latter was the presumed prerogative of numerous broadsides, pamphlets, and ballads, such as “The Bloody Minded Midwife,” “The Cruel Mother,” “Blood for Blood,” and “Inquest after Blood,” describing in gory detail incidents of child abandonment and murder.32

Another topic typically skirted in the polite discussion of infanticide was the sexual behavior of men who fathered illegitimate children. Although the image of the “seducer” does figure in such discussions, it remains vague: the man appears out of nowhere, ruins a hapless female, and vanishes forever.33 The lack of interest in fathers typical for the discourse concerning infanticide in the first half of the eighteenth century is suggestively corroborated by a pattern emerging from the contemporary parish registers. Among each hundred cases of recorded illegitimate births in the northwest part of the country in the period from 1538 to 1650, both the mother and the father are named in 61 cases, the father alone is named in 27, and only the name of the mother is listed in 12. By contrast, in the period from 1651 to 1754, both parents are listed in 40 cases, the father alone in 12, and the mother alone in 48. In the east region of the country, in the period from 1538 to 1650, both parents are listed in 18 cases, only the father in 9, and only the mother in 73. In the period from 1651 to 1754, both parents are listed in 20 cases, fathers alone in 5 cases, and mothers alone in 76 cases. Apart from the curious difference in the regional attitudes toward parental responsibility, these numbers demonstrate that from the second part of the seventeenth century, “bastardy was felt increasingly to be the sole responsibility of the mother of the child.”34
Although it is risky to extrapolate too much from this data, it does seem to correlate with the tacit consensus shared by the champions of the infanticide prevention campaign that child murder would remain a problem as long as there were no suitable facility where working-class mothers, abandoned by their sexual partners and newly mindful of their country’s needs, could deposit their unwanted children instead of killing or abandoning them clandestinely. Such an approach concentrated squarely on the behavior of unwed women and ignored larger social problems, such as the particular combination of public attitudes toward illegitimacy and legal measures that seemed in many cases to promote infanticide rather than forestall it. By ignoring such issues and presenting instead a blueprint for a practical local measure such as the English “House of Orphans,” Addison, Bray, Defoe, and others managed to develop an ideologically appealing and aesthetically acceptable way of speaking about the Unspeakable.

Moll as a Bastard and Bastard-Bearer

*Moll Flanders* enters the early-eighteenth-century discourse on infanticide immediately upon introducing its title heroine. The novel opens with Moll’s glowing description of the French L’Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés (“the House of Orphans,” as Defoe puts it), the charitable institution designed to take in the children of convicted criminals:

I have been told, that in one of our neighbor nations, whether it be in France or where else I know not, they have an order from the king, that when any criminal is condemned, either to die, or to the galleys, or to be transported, if they leave any children, as such are generally unprovided for, by the forfeiture of their parents, so they are immediately taken into the care of the government, and put into an hospital called the House of Orphans, where they are bred up, clothed, fed, taught, and when fit to go out, are placed to trades, or to services, so as to be well able to provide for themselves by an honest, industrious behavior. (7)

Moll then complains that no such institution existed in her native England when she was left to shift for herself at the tender age of six months: “Had this been the custom in our country, I had not been left a poor, desolate girl without friends, without clothes, without help or helper, as was my fate” (7).
Defoe’s contemporaries must have immediately recognized the rhetorical alignments of Moll’s opening speech. Her complaints about the sluggishness of the English government in establishing a “House of Orphans” in the fashion of “one of our neighbor nations” as well as her reference to the “honest, industrious behavior” of the hypothetical inmates of such a “House” repeat almost verbatim the arguments advanced in the press in the early stage of the infanticide prevention campaign by such figures as William Petty, Addison, and Bray. Note that Defoe attempts to soften the frankly propagandist tone of the “House of Orphans” passage by having Moll remark that she is not quite sure whether it is France or some other neighboring nation that takes care of its abandoned children in such an enlightened way. Moll’s coquettish ignorance must have struck eighteenth-century readers as disingenuous because the Paris Foundling Hospital, established in 1670, was treated throughout the English infanticide prevention campaign as, first, the most conspicuous model for, and, after 1739, as the most conspicuous rival of, the London Foundling Hospital. In the 1720s, Bray was known to praise the French “Princesses and Duchesses, and other Ladies of the Prime Nobility of Paris . . . [who] entered into a Confraternity to manage [L’Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés]” (28). The 1749 engraving by Samuel Wale, entitled *A Perspective View of the Foundling Hospital with Emblematic Figures I*, featured a group of aristocratic visitors promenading by the Hospital and a “sneering Frenchman” envying the splendor of this charity. The little poem underneath the image brought the point home: “Though Frenchmen sneer, their boasted first Design, / Brittish Benevolence shall far out-shine.”

“Left a poor desolate girl without friends,” Moll wanders “among a crew of those people they call gypsies” (8), and then settles at Colchester, Essex, in the care of a parish nurse. Defoe’s choice of Colchester as Moll’s adopted hometown is remarkable, for Colchester was notorious in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England as the site of a multiple infanticide case: in the late 1630s, one of its inhabitants “buried one child, poisoned another, [and] smothered a third”—all of them illegitimate. During a series of depositions following her crimes, she confessed to trying first to abort her children with the help of her lover, who “by phisick [had] often assayed to destroy the same child within her,” but did not succeed. As Pat Rogers points out, “Defoe had extensive links with [Colchester], sixty miles north-east of London, and bought the lease of several hundred acres of land there in August 1722. . . . His plans for the site included a tile factory. It is clear
from his *Tour thro’ Great Britain*, vol. 1 (1724) that he made many trips to this region around this time.™ It is likely that Defoe was familiar with the infamous highlight of Colchester history involving the triple infanticide and that he selected Colchester as a scene for Moll’s earliest adventures for this particular reason. Note that Moll’s initial encounter with the concept of illegitimacy takes place in Colchester when she naively chooses as a role model a neighboring “gentlewoman” who mends lace and washes “ladies’ laced heads,” and is then told by her nurse that she, Moll, “may soon be such a gentlewoman as that, for [this woman] is a person of ill fame and has had two bastards” (12). The history of Colchester’s murderous mother of bastards provides a context for Moll’s first discovery of illegitimacy and foreshadows her future dealings with a network of wet nurses who take care of bastard children.

The intimations of the existence of such a network align Defoe’s novel with the newspaper and coffeehouse discussions, which called for the “people” to attempt to resolve the problem of infanticide since the traditional methods used by state and church seemed to have had proven inadequate. When Moll finds herself pregnant with a child whose father is gone, she knows that the only impact that the intervention of official authorities could have on her life at this juncture is to make it much more difficult. Defoe (via Mother Midnight) euphemistically refers to that intervention as “the parish impertinence usual in such cases” (129), meaning “the right of the parish to remove an unmarried woman who was pregnant to her place of settlement, if not the place of her birth then the parish from which she had most recently come.”™ Moll confesses that her fear of the parish is stronger than even her concern of “how to dispose of the child when it comes” (129)—a damning testimony to the adverse role played by the official authorities in the dilemma faced by unwed mothers. And because the forced removal to the place of settlement (and what would it be for the itinerant Moll: Colchester? Virginia? Bath?) is the only “service” which the parish could offer to Moll at this point, she comes to rely instead on Mother Midnight and her helpers. In the ironic reprise of Addison’s rallying call for the “people” to step in where the church and state had proved impotent, Defoe’s novel prominently features the informal network of “people” as the only resource available to an unmarried pregnant woman wishing to escape public disgrace.

The “people’s” network consists of the women who put pregnant women in touch with Mother Midnight and the wet nurses who work for her. In Moll’s case, it is her landlady who functions as a go-between
Moll Flanders and the English “Shelter for Bastards”

for Moll and Mother Midnight: “It seems the mistress of the house was not so great a stranger to such cases as mine was as I thought at first she had been, as will appear presently; and she sent for a midwife of the right sort—that is to say, the right sort for me. . . . My landlady . . . said to her, “Mrs. B——, I believe this lady’s trouble is of kind that is pretty much in your way, and therefore if you can do anything for her, pray do, for she is a very civil gentlewoman” (128).

Moll is quickly impressed by her new acquaintance’s bookkeeping (Mother Midnight carefully tailors her bills of fare to different levels of income), and she gradually learns about a larger system behind that bookkeeping. Moll, of course, first proclaims that to give an “account of the nature of the wicked practices of this woman . . . would be but too much encouragement to the vice, to let the world see what easy measures were here taken to rid the women’s burthen of a child clandestinely gotten,” only to proceed with such an account with the typically Defoesque relish for a smoothly functioning organization:

This grave matron had several sorts of practice, and this was one, that if a child was born, though not in her house (for she had the occasion to be called to many private labours), she had people always ready, who for a piece of money would take the child off their hands, and off the hands of the parish too; and those children, as she said, were honestly taken care of. What should become of them all, considering so many, as by her account she was concerned with, I cannot conceive.

I had many times discourses upon that subject with her; but she was full of this argument, that she saved the life of many an innocent lamb, as she called them, which would perhaps have been murdered; and of many a woman, who, made desperate by the misfortune, would otherwise be tempted to destroy their children. I granted her that this was true, and a very commendable thing, provided the poor children fell into good hands afterwards, and were not abused and neglected by the nurses. She answered, that she always took care of that, and had no nurses in her business but what were very good people, and such as might be depended upon. (133; emphasis added)

It appears from Mother Midnight’s description that her underground “business” prevents infanticide more efficiently than the system of preventive and punitive measures evolved by church and state, and that in any case, it makes much more sense for an unwed pregnant woman to
turn to Mother Midnight (provided she could afford it) than to try to do away with a bastard infant on her own.

What must have rendered the novel’s account of Mother Midnight’s network simultaneously more compelling and more unsettling for Defoe’s eighteenth-century readers was that wet nursing constituted one of the key elements of the period’s “informal economy” and as such contributed to one of the earliest known proto-professional organizations of women. As Gillian Clark has demonstrated in her edited *Correspondence of the Foundling Hospital Inspectors in Berkshire, 1757–68*, the London Foundling Hospital was able to implement its program of taking in illegitimate infants precisely because it could rely on “women’s networks [functioning] in the occupation of wet nursing.” Clark argues that the correspondence of inspectors shows “very clearly . . . that there was active co-operation between nurses.” Although women’s networks are seen [in the correspondence] through the relationship of the nurses with the representatives of the single organization [the Hospital], . . . there is a strong sense that co-operation would have thrived without this focus and that nurses employed by private families would have worked together in just the same way. . . . Nurses of the foundlings . . . acted individually and collectively by protecting each other against the employer, asking for their rights as employees to pay and rewards. . . . Their common interest in rates of pay and in bonus payments were subjects of discussion across the country network of relations and neighbours and on journeys together to and from London. It was, for example, the nurses who in 1764 told their inspectors of the differential pay rates between those [working for one particular inspector] and those in the neighbouring areas; their neighbourhood and kinship networks are thus very apparent.

There is something quietly ironic in Defoe’s portrayal of Mother Midnight’s network of wet nurses as a successful “grassroots” alternative to the failing anti-infanticidal efforts of the traditional authorities. It seems that the network designed to take care of unwanted children is already in place; all that is needed now is to legitimize it with a Royal Charter and some Parliamentary grants and to replace the old headmistress, Mother Midnight, with a respectable public figure, preferably a titled male (such as his Lordship the Duke of Bedford, the first official head of the Foundling Hospital after it became an incorporated charity in 1739).
It is unlikely that Defoe consciously intended this kind of rhetorical effect: The procuress and stolen-goods-taker Mother Midnight and the “Persons of Compassion and Generosity,” whom he envisions in his Generous Projector as “hiring a House” where the “innocent Children” of the “wicked Parents” could be raised, have to belong to the opposite ends of his moral universe (10). Nevertheless, his novel does seem to underscore a similarity between Mother Midnight’s organization and the House of Orphans as envisioned by Bray, Coram, and Defoe himself.

Such similarity primarily concerned the negative effect that the presumed lack of accountability for their sexual trespass would have on the morals of women. From the early days of the crusade to establish a “House of Orphans” in England, its opponents argued that by taking the infant off the mother’s hands, no questions asked, the “shelter for bastards” would encourage “irresponsibility and licentiousness.” Coram complained in a private letter, soon after the opening of the London Foundling Hospital, that when an acquaintance of his requested his wife to hand over some money to the Hospital, she replied that “she would by no means encourage so wicked a thing.” Troublingly, Moll Flanders seemed to substantiate those apprehensions as the availability of a network enabling a woman to get rid of her children frees Moll for further adventures (i.e., marriage to an unsuspecting banker from London and a subsequent career as a cross-dressing thief). The “gentlewoman” from Moll’s hometown gives birth to two bastards, but since there is no Mother Midnight to make her children disappear, her sexual history becomes public knowledge and as such a social handicap; in contrast, aided by the “Old Beldam,” Moll can dispose of her child swiftly and clandestinely and continue her depredations upon mankind (3) with perfect impunity. Moll’s progress through the circles of gentility thus seemed to substantiate the apprehensions voiced throughout the campaign for the establishment of the English House of Orphans that in a misguided attempt to increase the number of “useful citizens,” Coram and his supporters would shatter the bedrock of social stability: the age-honored practice of regulating women’s social mobility though the control of their reproductive behavior.

The ideological valence of the hypothetical English House of Orphans thus seems to undergo a metamorphosis as Moll changes from a “poor, desolate girl” to a sexually active woman. For the infant Moll, the presence of a House of Orphans would have meant not only that she would have been sheltered from any immediate danger but also that her future social ambitions would have been severely circumscribed. None of the champions of the infanticide prevention campaign
had envisioned a foundling hospital as providing anything but the most basic education for its charges, and when the London Foundling Hospital opened in 1739, special care was taken to prepare the children for a life of menial labor and instigate in them the proper social humility. Had Moll grown up in such an institution, she would not be able to speak French, play the spinet, and generally behave like “quality.” For the adult Moll, however, the presence of a House of Orphans would have meant the exact opposite: an increased social mobility, made possible by the availability of the repository for her illegitimate children. One can speculate about ways to resolve this ambiguity (e.g., had Moll been brought up in the House of Orphans, she would have been humble and “virtuous” and wouldn’t have needed to get rid of her own children), or chalk it to up to the essentially “heteroglot” nature of novelistic discourse. The writer may try to advocate his favorite social project in his novel, but he cannot hope to rein in the multiplicity of conflicting readings and ideological inferences resulting from such “incorporation of genres.”

Moreover, a novel can highlight, in a rather controversial fashion, the hitherto obscured aspects of that social project. *Moll Flanders* complemented the “public good–national benefit” rhetoric of the infanticide prevention campaign with a vivid picture of a specific woman poised on the brink of infanticide. Although Moll never actually commits child murder or abandons her child in the street, her story was one of the rare instances of early-eighteenth-century literature presenting the point of view of the abandoning mother herself. This point of view was quite different from the one implied by the newly accepted polite way of talking about the crime. Where Mandeville, for instance, would settle for a glibly impersonal description of the infanticidal mother as a woman divested “entirely of Humanity,” Defoe painted an all-too-human heroine trying to think rationally and yet deeply depressed by her dilemma.

First, Moll argues very reasonably that keeping the child would annihilate her marriage prospects, a sacrifice which she is not up to: “I knew there was no marrying without concealing that I had had a child, for he [the banker, her intended husband] would soon have discovered by the age of it that it was born, nay, and gotten too, since my parley with him, and that would have destroyed all the affair” (137). Second, she enlists her readers’ empathy by describing her pregnant self as being in “extreme perplexity,” full of “apprehensions,” growing “very melancholy,” falling “very ill, [with her] melancholy really increasing [her] distemper” (127–28). Moll’s matter-of-fact reasoning about the
dire personal consequences of keeping the child as well as her emotional appeal to the reader explore approaches to infanticide very different from the one adopted by such people as Addison, Bray, and Coram, who focused on the negative effects that the early deaths of potentially “useful citizens” could have on the national well-being. Moll, as Toni O’Shaughnessy Bowers points out, was “locked into cultural assumptions and material relations that [made] infanticide, symbolic and actual, a necessary condition of maternal survival.” There was no room, however, amidst the discussion of “national good” and “public benefit,” for the articulation of these “cultural assumptions and material relations,” particularly from the point of view of the infanticidal mother herself, just as there was no room for referring to personal plights of the teenage child murderesses Hannah Warwick and Mary Doe.

Moll Flanders might not have much in common with those unfortunate girls; indeed, as John Richetti observes, Moll is a “female impersonator,” masculine in her “skill and cunning for survival, . . . [and] untouched by the special quality of female experience.” At the same time, if we compare her down-to-earth talk about how unwanted motherhood could impact her life to the lingo of “public good” and “national benefit” used by the champions of the infanticide prevention crusade, we realize that “male creation” though she may be, her perspective on child murder expressed striking empathy with mothers faced with excruciating personal choices and fostered an emotional identification with such women hardly available through other public discourses on the subject. One wonders, moreover (thinking of eighteenth-century “polite” audiences’ rejection of Moll Flanders) if the cultivation of such empathy in print was particularly welcome in a culture that has just found a relatively acceptable, impersonal way to speak about these unspeakable, personal matters.

**Moll as a Foundling**

If the second paragraph of the novel proper introduces Moll as a poster child for the infanticide prevention campaign—an illegitimate baby abandoned by her mother—the third paragraph blurs that image by casting doubt on Moll’s bastardy. Here is Moll carefully glossing over the issue of her illegitimacy:

My mother was convicted of felony for a petty theft, scarce worth naming, viz. Borrowing three pieces of fine holland of a certain draper in
Cheapside. The circumstances are too long to repeat, and I have heard them related so many ways, that I can scarce tell which is the right account. However it was, they all agree that my mother pleaded her belly; and being found quick with a child, she was respited for about seven months. . . . This is too near the first hours of my life for me to relate anything of myself but by hearsay . . . nor can I give the least account how I was kept alive, other than that, as I have been told, some relation of my mother took me away, but at whose expense, or by whose direction, I know nothing at all of it. (8; emphasis added)

Moll never states explicitly that her mother was not married at the time of her birth (neither does the question of her paternity come up in Moll’s subsequent conversations with her mother in Virginia), and she cuts herself off every time she comes perilously close to blurting out that she is illegitimate. Moll assures the reader that the circumstances surrounding her birth are “scarce worth naming . . ., too long to repeat”; that she cannot “relate anything” of herself “but by hearsay,” that she cannot “give the least account” of what was going on; and that plainly she knows “nothing at all of it.” This, incidentally, is coming from a person who had a detailed account of her birth from her own mother, and who has a prodigious memory that allows her to remember the price of the hundreds of trinkets that passed through her hands during her highly productive career as a thief.

That Moll’s evasive account of her early days is indeed aimed at obscuring her bastardy is corroborated by the mirror opening of Defoe’s novel Colonel Jack, written in the same year. Like Moll, Jack is an indigent bastard intent on moving up in the world, dreaming “of nothing but being a Gentleman Officer, as well as a Gentleman Soldier” (105), who begins as a London criminal and ends as an affluent plantation owner in Virginia. Like Moll, Jack goes through several troubled marriages (as the novel’s subtitle explains, the Colonel “married four Wives, and five of them prov’d Whores”) and tries on various social disguises (such as passing “for a natural Spaniard” in front of Spanish merchants). Consider, however, the opening paragraphs of Jack’s story. As he informs his audience, “my Nurse told me my Mother was a Gentlewoman, [and] my Father was a Man of Quality, and she (my Nurse) had a good piece of Money given her to take me off his Hands, and deliver him and my Mother from the Importunities that usually attend the Misfortune, of having a Child to keep that should not be seen or heard of” (3). Here Defoe’s language admits of
no ambiguity. There are no strategic pauses, equivocations, or interruptions that would allow us to question Jack’s illegitimacy later. And no such questioning would ever be needed: we are squarely in the domain of Mother Midnight and her efficient wet nurses, and no anagnorisis awaits Jack somewhere in the middle of his mad dash through continents, languages, and identities.

Jack’s gender is the decisive factor in his unapologetic illegitimacy. That Defoe had no qualms about allowing Moll to lie, steal, and fornicate but would not allow her to remain as unquestionably illegitimate as her male counterpart aligns *Moll Flanders* with other eighteenth-century works of fiction that conceptualized bastardy as a fate reserved primarily for male characters. However, unlike Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, and other writers for whom the correlation between the legitimacy and gender assumes the status of a moral absolute, Defoe never fully commits to this correlation: Moll, after all, is neither absolutely legitimate nor absolutely illegitimate. Still, Defoe’s reluctance to leave Moll a bastard indicates his awareness of the pressures of a literary market that would not countenance illegitimacy in romantic heroines heading toward a happy resolution of their troubles. I emphasize “happy” because when eighteenth-century novels did feature avowedly illegitimate female characters, such as the Mushroom sisters in Agnes Maria Bennett’s *The Beggar Girl*, Eliza in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, and the nameless daughter of Lady V. from Tobias Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle*, such personages were denied happy marriages, emotional tranquility, and, sometimes, even life itself.

But given what Defoe attempts to accomplish in *Moll Flanders*, perhaps it is inevitable that he would have difficulties with the tradition that aligns the gender of the heroine with her legitimacy and that legitimacy with her “deserved” happy fate. Defoe depicts an infanticidal mother, herself perhaps a product of an illegitimate union, who fights for survival in a world hostile to poor women, to single mothers, to older women, and to bastards lacking useful family connections, and he endeavors to tell her essentially modern, difficult, and dark story through the idiom of the foundling romance. This idiom, of course, had always been susceptible to re-appropriation and parody (witness Heliodorus’s treatment of each anagnorisis scene as a miniature theatrical performance), but in *Moll Flanders*, it begins to feel downright surreal. When Moll meets her long-lost mother in Virginia, the recognition is clinched by a token very different in its meaning from the nobility-
confirming rings or scars of the classical romance: the mother’s Newgate scar is a sign of a woman branded for her criminal strivings in the service of economic survival. Similarly, when Moll realizes that she has committed incest with her own brother—a revelation that would completely destroy the protagonist in the classical foundling narrative—she simply shakes off that unpleasant experience and goes on with her eventful life. Moll must go on, or, rather, rush on her story must, for any stasis is as fatal to it as is passivity to an unprovided-for middle-aged woman in the 1720s.

When it comes to heritable property—the cornerstone of the eighteenth-century literary endeavor to camouflage bastards as foundlings—Moll’s position as quasi-bastard/quasi-foundling translates into a relationship with economic assets that resists any neat classification. On the one hand, like every fictional foundling of the Enlightenment, who secures an aristocratic spouse prior to inheriting parental property and thus differentiates herself from the beggarly real-life bastard by not really needing her inheritance, Moll marries a “Noble Lord” before coming back to Virginia and learning that her mother left her “a plantation on York River . . . with the stock of servants and cattle upon it” (266). On the other hand, Moll’s Noble Lord turns out to be moonlighting as an indigent highwayman, and if she does not need her inherited property so desperately at the end, it is because she has accumulated enough independent wealth by stealing.

In Virginia, Moll’s “bad” wealth—gotten at someone else’s expense—gets mixed with the “good”—legally inherited—property until we can no longer decide on the emotional coloration of the resulting hybrid. Mocking, perhaps unintentionally, Locke’s Second Treatise of Government, Defoe has Moll cultivating her plantation with tools bought both with stolen money and the money inherited from her mother, and rewarding her dutiful son Humphrey—the one who has kept her land in good shape—with the gold watch that she “stole from a gentlewoman’s side, at a meeting-house in London” (268). Moll means well with both her farming enterprise and her gift to Humphrey, and yet one wonders how, if at all, she fits into the system described by J. G. A. Pocock, in which the “moral personality . . . and the opportunity of virtue” are directly contingent upon inheriting landed property. Is Moll more virtuous now that she invested parts of her loot into the inherited land that she will eventually pass on to her son? Or has she in fact violated the law once more and shall transgress even further in the future by making Humphrey her heir, for, as William Blackstone’s
Commentaries reminds us, bastards could neither inherit nor will property (she does both)?

Deeply ingrained into the plot, these troubling questions remain unanswerable, even if the novel does attempt to use conventions of the foundling romance to mediate the issue of Moll’s virtue. Moll intersperses the account of her “depredations upon mankind” with musings about that “evil counselor within her,” which prompted her and hurried her on, that “busy devil that drew [her] in [and] had too fast hold of [her] to let [her] go back (153).” She insists that she “knew not what fate guided her,” and that her “fate was strangely determined” (134). Such evocations of fate aim at softening Defoe’s opportunistic heroine into “a victim of circumstance,” a familiar literary figure, because the majority of legitimate foundling heroines from Heliodorus’s Chariclea to Smith’s Emmeline were not allowed to learn about their origins and firmly establish their legitimacy while sitting placidly at home with their adoptive parents. Instead, they went out into the world, risking their lives and more importantly, their reputations.

The female foundlings’ particular brand of unwilling heroism had long been useful for the writers faced with the challenge of producing titillating, commercially viable stories while keeping the young unmarried heroines of those stories miraculously untainted by their expeditions. (After all, as Miss Glanville of Charlotte Lennox’s 1752 novel The Female Quixote would perspicaciously observe, marriageable “young ladies” do not have “troublesome adventures” [87–88].) Having been thrust into the wide wild world as helpless infants and brought up by strangers, such heroines could not help going through their gripping—and often erotically charged—“adventures” to reinscribe themselves into the familial and social order; thus framed as reluctant heroines, they retained their claims to respectable, upwardly mobile marriages.

Note, then, how similar Moll’s rhetoric is to that of another early-eighteenth-century foundling, Indiana, from Steele’s The Conscious Lovers. Indiana’s turbulent past should, in principle, disqualify her from a successful performance in the marriage market: after all, she has been “plundered” in her cradle, “tossed on the seas,” and made “an infant captive”; she lost her mother, heard “but of her father,” was adopted, lost her adopter, and was “plunged again in worse calamities” as the brother of her late benefactor sexually assaulted her. But since Indiana cannot be held responsible for her past—“twas Heaven’s high will” that as a “helpless infant” she was exposed to “such variety of sorrows”—she is allowed to marry the impeccable Bevil Junior.
Though the appeals to fate sound much less convincing in Moll’s case than they do in Indiana’s, they are symptomatic of Defoe’s attempt to recruit the literary tradition of “forgiving” the itinerant virgins for the “troublesome adventures” that they have to go through prior to finding their legal families and acquiring upscale spouses.

Yet, there is a typically Defoesque twist to Moll’s talk about fate. In the early parts of her story, the nameless, faceless, unfathomable fate has something approaching a name, face, and public accountability: it is identified with the inept British State. Moll claims that had her government been mindful of the well-being of its citizens and made provision for an English House of Orphans, she would not have been “left a poor, desolate girl without friends, without clothes, without help or helper, as was [her] fate . . . by which, [she] was not only exposed to very great distresses, even before [she] was capable either of understanding [her] case or how to amend, but brought into a course of life, scandalous in itself, and which in its ordinary course tended to the swift destruction both of soul and body” (7; emphasis added). In other words, whereas a typical eighteenth-century fictional foundling, such as Indiana, tearfully blamed fate for inflicting upon her a past that was a bit too interesting, Defoe’s ambitious heroine aimed at both excusing her past and sticking it to the British government for not taking care of the bastard children of the poor.

Could she indeed do both? And, generally speaking, could a novel lobby for the opening of an English “shelter for bastards” by portraying an abandoned bastard child, who grows up into a mother prone to leaving her own bastard children behind her, and still claim the protection of the representational tradition that allowed the female protagonists some adventures (provided those adventures bore the stylized marks of the ancient romance)? The literary fate of *Moll Flanders*, a book that remained excluded from the “highest literary company” of its era, suggests the negative answer to this question. *Moll Flanders* went too far in its engagement with the issues of bastardy, and no appeal to the foundling romance could redeem it in the eyes of “polite” reading public.

At the same time—especially when compared with *The Conscious Lovers*—the uneasily cohabiting bastard and foundling plots of *Moll Flanders* raise the possibility that there was something about the novel as a literary genre, as opposed to drama, that made it in principle less amenable to camouflaging the bastard origins of its foundling plot. Novels and plays seemed to mediate differently the dialogic tension.
Moll Flanders and the English “Shelter for Bastards”

implicit in a story of a legitimate, lucky foundling making her way in a society both invested in and deeply ambivalent about its discrimination against bastards. The next chapter considers this possibility by tracing references to illegitimacy in Edward Moore’s 1747 play, The Foundling, and Samuel Richardson’s 1747–48 novel, Clarissa.