Lost Girls, Lost Women: 
Foundlings in the Art and Poetry of 
William Blake

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I

The woman had black hair, a bit disheveled, and an open smile. She called herself Mary. Sometimes, when she was lonely, she did risky things like run with gypsies or sleep with men she did not know.

Which is probably why, in 1813, Mary signed herself into the Magdalen, a home for reformed prostitutes in Blackfriars Road, London. When she entered the institution, the administrators asked her how long she'd been "on the town," meaning "in prostitution." She answered as if she thought they were asking how long she had been "in town," demonstrating both innocence and wit. Like all women in her situation, Mary was also brought before a board of male investigators who questioned her in order to "judge of the sincerity" of her "professions and to ascertain the truth" of her "assertions." She admitted she was no saint. She was sorry for everything she'd done wrong. She said she was an orphan
who had spent her life moving from job to job. At first she said she had been employed by the Rector of Reckingford, where a gentleman visitor seduced her, brought her to London, and then abandoned her—this was as close as she got to admitting she had once worked as a prostitute.

II

A 1751 biography of the retired sea-captain Thomas Coram reported that on his daily walks through the Rotherhithe district of London, he often saw “young Children exposed, sometimes alive, sometimes dead, and sometimes dying” or their corpses heaped on a dunghill.1 Though childless himself, the daily sight of abandoned children motivated Coram to spend the next seventeen years of his life petitioning Parliament to establish a place for orphans. He received a Royal Charter in 1739 to establish a Foundling Hospital. The building, which opened in 1742, was erected at a time when, as historian Gillian Wagner wrote, “tens of thousands of children left the shores of Britain, and were sent overseas.”2 Later, when Britain and France went to war, the Hospital volunteered to care for the orphans and fatherless children of soldiers and sailors. But as well as helping orphaned children, the Hospital served single mothers.

Today, the Foundling Hospital archives—which are housed in the London Metropolitan Archives in Clerkenwell, a short walk of the Foundling Hospital Museum—provide the best information on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century single mothers who in most cases, left behind few records. Although historians have made significant use of the archives, the records are in fact limited in the sense that they provide only a brief glimpse of the hard lives single mothers endured. Once in a great while, however, the historical record delivers up more, as in the case of Mary.

Mary worked as a servant in a respectable home for the next three years where she learned to read and write. She seemed to be on the right track, until one day, after an argument with her mistress, she suddenly ran away. After that, she disappeared from the public record until February 11, 1816, when she gave birth to a child whom she named John Wilcox, an alternate spelling of her family name, Willcocks. No one knows where the child was born, though one witness claimed she delivered at Westminster Lying-in Hospital, one of the hundreds of charities operating at the turn of the eighteenth century in London. Anyway, by April, Mary and her son were living in St. Mary’s Workhouse, Lambeth.3

Mary was among many single mothers in the workhouse, as one early eyewitness reported: “According to the present law, the woman practically is obliged to maintain her child, without her companion in crime being compelled to contribute towards the support of such an unfortunate offspring; the consequence is, that the instances are numerous of young women . . . compelled to take refuge in the Workhouse with their infants,” and they could rarely leave. It was difficult for single mothers to find work because “from their past misconduct, no confidence is felt in their future steadiness.”4

This was not a good situation for Mary or John Wilcox. Workhouses were notoriously hostile places where “the old are teased by the children, who are growled at when they talk and scolded when they play . . . the able bodied men are the noisy orators of the room . . . while a poor idiot or two, hideously twisted, stands grimacing at the scene or, in spite of remonstrances, incessantly chattering to himself.”5

While it’s true that few could thrive in such an environment, Mary could less easily than most. Her choice was singular and obvious: she had to give her child up and find work again. The Foundling Hospital seemed a natural place to go.

III

From its beginnings, the Hospital’s goal was not only to care for single mothers and children, but also to represent them. The Hospital had the support of one of England’s most talented and innovative artists, William Hogarth. Hogarth was one of the original members of the Hospital and was the artist who designed the coat of arms. He began his tenue by encouraging British painters and sculptors to display their artwork in the Hospital for public viewing. At one of the annual artist dinners held at the Hospital, he united a group who called themselves the Society of Artists. Together, the Society of Artists and the Foundling Hospital brought to public attention many of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century artists we know today.6 In fact, because of Hogarth, the Foundling Hospital became not only the most important art gallery in London, it was the only exhibition center until 1760, and was a direct
precursor to the Royal Academy of Arts.

Hospital art included portraits of some of the more important figures in the Hospital's history; John Shackleton's George II, Joshua Reynolds' William Legge, and several portraits of Thomas Coram, one by Hogarth himself. There were landscapes, such as Charles Brookin's 1754 A Flagship before the wind, and Hogarth's March to Finchley, and Biblical scenes, Giovanni Camillo Sagrestani's Woman taken in Adultery (appropriately). One painting by an unidentified artist was called A Piping Shepherd Boy, and the fireplace mantle sculpture Charity by Michael Rysbrack, shows children clinging to their mother, playing with a rope under a tree, or gathering bushels of wheat. The only male figures in the sculpture seem to be ascending in a hot air balloon. But, as usual, it was the portraits of children that captured the attention. These included Benjamin West's Christ presenting a little Child, James Wills' Little Children brought to Christ, and Hogarth's Moses brought before Pharaoh's Daughter, and Francis Hayman's The Finding of the Infant Moses in the Bulrushes (see Hogarth's "March to Finchley").

The Foundling Hospital became the basis for a national British art by artists representing single mothers and their children. Yet among these, William Blake, who was one of the strongest proponents of a socially conscious art, has not been associated with the Hospital in most scholarship. Yet Blake's work shows traces of not only Foundling Hospital children in his "lost" and "found" boys and girls in the Songs of Innocence and Experience, but also of the lost women like Mary who bore these children. His poems and images are an important but little acknowledged record among Hospital art and popular ballads. Blake records childhood abandonment and single motherhood unlike artists formally connected with the institution as far as Blake's poems and images convey the deeply personal nature of lived experience for people who have left few records behind.

When Blake was twenty-eight years old, in 1785, he moved to 28 Poland Street, where he composed most of the Songs of Innocence. A compelling mixture of rich and poor pervaded this area of London. At number 54 Poland Street lived a celebrated actress. Yet right next door to him stood the St. James Workhouse, "capable of containing 300 poor people" but probably housing at least six hundred, so that "the stench was hardly supportable, poor creatures, almost naked, and the living go to bed to the dead." In another small Poland Street flat lived a young woman who had been a foundling herself. In 1790, Blake and Catherine moved to Lambeth, right across the street from the Chapel for Female Orphans. Blake produced most of his important poetry and art in Lambeth. But he also remembered hearing the cries of the female orphans echoing from the chapel. A short stroll down Lambeth Walk was the Lambeth Workhouse where Mary waited with her child for admission. By the time Mary and her son arrived at the Lambeth Workhouse, Blake had moved to the Strand. But Lambeth would become mythologized in some of his greatest poems, Milton and Jerusalem.

When Blake was ten years old, his parents sent him to Mr. Pars drawing-school in the Strand, a preparatory school sponsored by the very Society of Artists Hogarth established at the Hospital. Later Blake engraved designs after Hogarth's paintings, and he would no doubt have had access to the picture collection through one of his fellow artists. But the absence of any documented connection between Blake and the Foundling Hospital means that the relevance to the poems must bear the weight of evidence.

Although Blake's chimney-sweeper pair, his tiger and lamb couple, and the "Little Black Boy" receive the bulk of critical attention, the "Lost" and "Found" poems are significant. In Innocence, Blake includes one pair, "Little Boy Lost" and "Little Boy Found." In Experience there is a corresponding "Little Girl Lost" and "Little Girl Found," and later in the Experience poems, another "A Little Boy Lost" and "A Little Girl Lost"—neither of which are found. There are certain similarities. The children mostly have mothers who worry about them, while their fathers are sinister. But a strange disparity exists between the lost boy of Innocence and the lost girl of Experience. They are all lost in abstract spaces, except for Lyca in Experience, who is lost in the jungle of a southern clime.

On the literal level, most of Blake's children were not explicitly orphans. The little girls have parents, and so do the lost boy of Experience and the found boy of Innocence. Only the lost boy of Innocence is parentless. The two chimney sweeps seem too young to have been brought up in the Foundling Hospital and released from it, and the one chimney sweep in Experience says his parents "sold" him to the master sweep. But the Foundling Hospital proved not that children were
parentless, but that they were lost to their parents and found by an institution that primed them for service to the British Empire—both at home and abroad. Indeed, many foundlings were still in touch with their mothers, and in other cases, mothers expected to reclaim them at a later date.

The item that most clearly shows that mothers, or parents, often did not think of their children as forever lost to them was the token. Some tokens were flimsy and homemade: paper cards, embroidery, and cloth. Some were made of metal, engraved with the child’s name and date of birth. There were coins and various pieces of metal, some pierced with holes or nicked in a pattern; button, ribbons, gold rings, earrings, studs, and specialty items like an initialed mother-of-pearl heart, a gold locket, and a carved ivory fish. Since orphaned children were assigned a new name upon admittance, single mothers often left these strange, poignant objects as identity markers so that they could one day reclaim the child.

Stanley Gardner makes a convincing case for Hogarth’s 1739 *The Foundlings*, and the corresponding engraving of 1798, which was used as letterhead for the Hospital when collecting subscriptions. The engraving shows one child in the background laying on the ground, being picked up by a nurse, but the central action is a mother who kneels on the ground, and beneath her, in the right corner, a naked child, presumably hers, lays exposed and unprotected. Gardner links this engraving to Blake’s “Holy Thursday” of *Experience,* where a naked and abandoned child dominates the bottom half of the plate, the lonely mother-figure, standing under a barren tree, is the focal point for the upper half of the plate. Being the opposite of the “Holy Thursday” of *Innocence,* the plate provides a sinister dark side to the orderly procession of the charity children on their annual pilgrimage to St. Paul’s (see Blake’s “Holy Thursday”).

Blake’s lost and found children in the *Songs* bear many resemblances to representations of Foundling Hospital women and children. If Blake was designing images that had correspondences in the Hospital art, what was his relationship to the art? Hospital artists represented children in one of three ways: in pastoral settings (*The Piping Shepherd*), in idealized biblical settings (Francis Hayman’s *The Finding of the Infant Moses in the Bulrushes*), and, finally, in settings of danger, suffering, and atrocity (Hogarth’s *The March to Finchley* and the anonymous *Massacre of the Innocents*). Likewise, Blake’s *Songs* depict pastoral settings (“The Shepherd”) and biblical subjects (“The Lamb”), and they document childhood dislocation and suffering (“The Chimney Sweeper”). Yet it is Blake’s representations alone that trace the lived experience of women who were forced to navigate the extreme difficulties of institutions, public discourse, and their own personal desires and circumstances.

IV

The Foundling Hospital was the only way Mary could ensure safety for her baby and freedom for herself. She visited the neo-classical building in Lamb’s Conduit’s Fields with three-month-old John Wilcox in her arms on Wednesday, May 15, 1816. She told the investigator that she had been living in Devonshire working as a servant where she met the child’s father. He was handsome. He looked like a gentlemen even though he was a bricklayer. She went with him to his sister’s house where he said he would marry her the next morning, so she let herself be seduced and then, in the months that followed, found herself pregnant.

“[I] delivered on the road [to London],” she told the investigator. She said the father of her child came with her as far as Hyde Park Corner and then deserted her.

The investigator took her list of references—which include her father and her uncle—and told her to carry her child away. He would talk to some people, see if her story panned out, and then consider admitting the child. She could return the following Wednesday, he told her. When Mary came back the next week as instructed, the investigator told her he had visited two of her references and that both had questioned her sanity. One of her employers, for whom she had worked as a house servant, said she was “sober, honest, and industrious, but appears sometimes to be deranged in her understanding.” Another said that she was so “eccentric, and her ways so mysterious” that unless a person had met her, he or she wouldn’t believe such a creature actually existed. A clergyman who had known her said, “I will not say she is insane, but in some instances she has talked and acted in a wild, incoherent manner.” The man sent her away again and told her to come back the next week.
Blake’s work now seems to offer us something the Foundling Hospital’s investigations apparently could not—a level of compassion and sense of emotion regarding the lives of these women and their children. Fatherlessness dominates Blake’s two lost boy poems in the Songs. To begin with, “The Little Boy Lost” of Innocence calls to his parent: “father, father, where are you going / O do not walk so fast” because, he warns his father, “I shall be lost” (13.1–2, 4). The father never answers, which suggests that he is simply a vaporous figment of the child’s imagination. In the second stanza readers learn that the child may never have known his father, since “the night was dark no father was there” (13.5): instead of a father the child finds only a treacherous “mire,” a site that implies the psychological and physical bog of the boy’s life.

Blake explores the grim consequences of fatherly care more fully in “A Little Boy Lost” of Experience, where he presents perhaps the most devastating depiction of the entire book, a scene of infanticide at the hands of a priest. Infanticide is the suspiciously disproportionate punishment for the boy’s “sin,” which, it turns out, was to claim that he could “love” only in the same measure that he was granted agency. Since “no one loves another” as much as one loves oneself, and neither is it “possible to Thought / A greater than itself to know” (50.1, 3–4), the boy can love the priest only “like the little bird / That picks up crumbs around the door” (50.7–8). It is a damning observation and all the more powerful for its subtlety. The relationship between the lowly child and the priest “standing on the altar high” (50.13) characterized the relationship between London’s poor children and the stand-in priestly fathers who supposedly cared for them. The priest sadomasochistically strips the boy “to his little shirt,” binds him “in an iron chain,” and then burns him “in a holy place” (50.19–21). As the priest throws the boy into the flames of religion, the boy becomes “lost”: he loses agency completely and is silenced absolutely, since his weeping “could not be heard” (50.17). Blake ends the poem with no hope of rescue for anyone, since if innocent children are lost, then the nation is too. Rhetorically, he asks, “Are such things done on Albions shore” (50.24) (see Blake’s “A Little Boy Lost”).

While Blake’s lost and found poems underscore the absence and cruelty of fathers, they explore the confused desperation of mothers. The one “found” boy poem, “The Little Boy Found” of Innocence, ends with such a mother, though the poem also features an absent father and a crying boy, who at last sees a fatherly “God” appear. God, however, does anything but comfort. He is a spooky, ethereal being, described in liminal terms: “like his father in white.” And he has a macabre sense of intervention in the boy’s situation. The white-clothed figure supposedly brings the lost boy close to his mother, but Blake records no scene of reconciliation and reuniting between mother and child. Readers are left with only an image of the mother, who wanders the vales in a perpetual state of bereavement and searching. It is significant that Blake ends “The Little Boy Found” not with the title character—the lost child or his security—but with a distraught mother, “who in sorrow pale, thro’ the lonely dale / Her little boy weeping sought.”

VII

In 1742, when it first opened, the Foundling Hospital was only concerned with housing orphans, and women were not questioned about their sexual lives. Children were admitted through an arbitrary lottery wherein women brought their children into a general Court Room and sat quietly on benches. Nurses held bags containing different colored balls: white balls for the number of children the hospital could reasonably admit, a small number of red balls, and the remaining number of black balls representing the children that the hospital had to turn away. One by women, each woman drew a ball. The rules were as follows:

That each Woman who draws a white Ball shall be carried with her Child into the Inspecting Room in order to have the Child examined.
That each Woman who draws a red Ball be carried with her Child into another Room there to remain till the Examination of the Children, whose Nurses drew white Balls is ended. That each Woman who draws a black Ball shall be immediately turned out of the Hospital with her Child.

It was also not unusual to see gentlewomen among the single mothers. From 1749 to 1759, George Frederick Handel performed at the
Hospital, debuting his now celebrated *Hallelujah Chorus* there. Because of the art and music, gentry and fashionable people flocked to the Hospital, making it London's most important charity. Even so, some people objected to it from its inception, and, predictably, complaints were directed at foundling mothers as immoral women. As early as 1761, for instance, one writer reasoned, "Allowing for a very few who might have been murdered, it is reasonable to imagine from what I have said, that the Foundling Hospital consists chiefly of such children as were sent there by their mothers to avoid shame." That same year, a pamphlet was published entitled *Some Objections to the Foundling Hospital Considered by a Person in the Country to whom they were sent*, registering the social fears associated with foundlings. The anonymous writer concluded that: "the children brought up by the hospital have no parents or relations, and thus they are a body of people void of all social regards, and detached from the rest of the nation, and therefore may become inconvenient or dangerous"; but worse, the Hospital encouraged vice and immorality, "by making an easy provision for illegitimate children, and taking away, by concealment, shame, which is the due portion of vice."

The Hospital, some believed, encouraged women to bear illegitimate children and then rewarded their immoral behavior, as demonstrated in the broadsheet "Joyful News to Batchelors and Maids: Being a Song: In Praise of the Foundling Hospital, and the London Hospital Aldersgate Street," which claimed to show "how young Maids may safely take a Leap in the dark with their Sweethearts; and if they should chance to be with Child may go to Aldersgate-street and lie-in; and when their Month is up, they may go to the Foundling Hospital and get rid of their Bantling, and pass for pure Virgins." Though the poem scorns men and women of all walks of life for indulging in sexual pleasure without marriage commitment, it targets women because they abandon their children for the sake of reputation:

You jolly Rakes and buxom Jades,
Young Maidens fair and lusty Blakes,

Good News to you I bring;
You still may follow brisk your Trade
Of Love and need not be afraid
To kiss and kiss again.

No one will know my charming Fair,
But you are gone to take the Air,
So return a Maid again.

... Because you shan't suspected be
In staining your Virginity,
When that your Month is out,

You to the Foundling House may go
And there may leave the Child you know
And go take t'other Bout."

At the end of the eighteenth century, the foundling's birth began to signify the woman who exercised sexual and emotional freedom, and what Blake called the "youthful Harlots curse" (46.14). It was a time, as the young woman of "A Little Girl Lost" laments, when "Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime" (51.4). It was at this time that the Foundling Hospital emphasis shifted from only housing orphans to taking care of orphans and reforming single mothers. This emphasis was rooted in the 1763 decision to replace the lottery system with the maternal petitioning system. Women told their stories to Hospital authorities who then assumed they had exact knowledge of the mother's situation and character. Maternal petitioning may have been the earliest form of "individual casework," as Ruth McLure explains in her 1981 book on the Foundling Hospital, but, more importantly, the petitioning system brought single mothers to the forefront of national consciousness. In 1797, the Foundling treasurer wrote:

The Foundling Hospital has Two Objects to preserve and educate Infants otherwise exposed to perish, and to restore the mothers to a course of Industry and Virtue so that almost every Act of Charity is attended with a double Benefit; the preservation of the Child and of the Parent. In this respect the Governors have great reason to be satisfied for in Course of the preceding Year ... not less than 50 unfortunate Women have been preserved from Vice and Despair ... and it is deserving of observation that no Instance has come to the Knowledge of the Committee of any Woman so relieved, who has not been thereby saved from what she would in all probability have been involved in a Course of Vice and Prostitution."
The shift to single mother rehabilitation accompanied a change in how unmarried women’s sexual desire was represented, according to Tanya Evans in her recent book Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, female lust had become an untenable concept and was replaced by the cult of seduction. Single mothers who applied to the Foundling Hospital therefore had to present themselves as helpless victims of their male seducers. Evans observes that the new emphasis on “male sexual aggressiveness and female sexual passivity filtered through metropolitan charities” and eventually characterized all men and women.21 One poem, pinned to a child who was admitted on 18 May 1799, laments the fact that the law did not permit sexual relationships between young men and women:

The Child of Crimes, (so call'd by human Laws)  
By Laws divine, unask’d, unsoought, I came  
Say, will ye let me stay, to plead my Cause,  
Ah me! indeed, indeed, I’m not to blame.

I examined the petitions for the years 1793–94, the year Blake published his completed Songs from his Lambeth flat, when a clear shift took place from the discourse of need to that of seduction. Although the Hospital kept an accounting book of the petitions, separating children into “rejected” and “admitted,” not unlike Blake’s designations of “lost” and “found,” the most compelling aspect of these records is the stories told by the women themselves. The point of view shifts uneasily between the formal third person and more intimate first, and many of the records are disorderly and lacking in uniformity. I reproduce a representative segment in their own words:

23 June, 1793. Petition of Elizabeth Jennings of No. 8 American Street, Southwark. “Some time back I was courted by a young man who with much assiduity and promises made me consent to grant him the last favor in my power to bestow, the moment after I had given up my honor he informed me he was married, Your Grace may judge of my feelings on such an occasion and to add to my distress he quitted me and I have never seen nor heard of him since, He then went under the name of Brunton and since which I have tried every means in my power to discover him but to no purpose, The fruits of this

Connection in the course of a short time became conspicuous and the consequence was I was obli ged to leave my place and about five months back brought into the World a Daughter for whom I cannot possibly provide and what is still worse if I do not get it take care off my reputation will be forever blasted I have from a child got my bread by servitude and it is still my intention to do so, could I but get the Child taken care of as without it both I and it must beg, not having a friend in the World I can apply to I have applied to the Stewart of the Hospital and from an Idea of saving my reputation I told him that the Child belonged to a sister of mine, but such deception I find will not answer the end proposed.”

13 April 1793. “The Humble Petition of Black Peggy a native of Bengal is now offer’d to your humane Gentlemen, Being a poor unfortunate Girl just arrived at the Age of fourteen was on my Voyage to England with Mrs. Hasting, unhappily seduced by my fellow Servant James Murray by a false promise of Marriage, but on our arrival at Ostend he knowing of my pregnancy left me friendless and unprotected. Nothing but the kind humanity of My Mistress could have supported me through this scene of Misery and embarassment and who is still inclin’d to be my Friend could I conceal my Disgrace by your Benevolence. This Gentleman urges me in the most supplicating manner to entreat and solicit your generous aid and protection to the unhappy Infant of you very humble Petitioner. This is Peggy’s Mark X.”

28 November 1792. Petition of Mary McCormack. “Placed by her Friend in a Respectable Situation with a Muslin Manufacturer in Glasgow, from which she was Seduced by one of the Workmen under a Promise of Marriage and who Afterwards turn’d out an Idle Dissipated fellow and Enlisted for Soldiers, that she has since bore a Child now near Ten Months old and which she has Endeavoured by her Labour to Support not having had the smallest assistance from him, but owing to bad Health and other Misfortunes is reduced to the Utmost distress, having to make way with all her Clothes.”

February 9, 1793. The Petition of Catherine Negus, No 9 Dorrington Street Brook’s Market Gray: Inn. “That your Petitioner was on the 8th day of this February [1793] delivered of a Male Child; that, William Kurton is the father of the Child; & he is now a Servant of Mress. Bungoynes No 31 Dress Street Manchester; & he is married &
has one child by his wife; who is in Service. That your petitioner never was married, and that She has no means of Support . . . That she verily believes if the Child is not admitted unto Your Charitable Institution, both the Child and herself must perish. Your petitioner, therefore, humbly prays Your Honors will on tender Commiseration to her lamentable case, give admission to her Innocence Babe into your Charity," [Catherine Negus’ case was dismissed based on a note from the inspectors, next to child number 11: “The Petitioner’s Child died since her application for its admission as by Information at Wm. Butler’s Bloomsbury Square the person referred to for inquiry into the truth of the Petition.”]

5 December 1792. “The Humble petition of Hester Broad humbly sheweth That on the 9th of May last she had the misfortune to be delivered of a Female Child the Father of which went to Sea before the Child was born to avoid paying anything towards the support of myself or Infant and I have never seen him or Rec’d the smallest assistance from him since by which I have been exposed to the greatest hardships and Obliged to live on part of the small earning of an aged Father who is a poor Gardiner at Footing-Your Petitioner humbly Craves the assistance of the above Charity that Your Petitioner may be able to go out to service again & Your Petitioner will as in Duty bound ever pray.”

27 February 1793. “The Humble Petition of Ann Little Widow Sheweth that your Petitioner being left a Widow with one Child about 6 Years of age was married again in February last to Abraham Smith Colourman and lived with Him as his Lawful Wife untill she Discovered he was married to another Woman who is still living & two Children by Her. She expressed her astonishment and told him He had much deceived her and that she was Determined to leave Him at which time she was three months gone with Child Soon after leaving Him she got into Service and Continued untill near the time of lying in at the Hospital over Westminster Bridge and having no other income that what she can obtain in Servitude puts it out of Her Power to Maintain Both by Her Honest Industry Hoping Your Honors will take Her Case into Consideration and if she should be so fortunate as to Succeed in getting Her Infant provided for she will as in Duty Bound Pray.”

5 December 1792. “The Humble petition of Jane Child Therewith that she had the Misfortune to have a Child by a journeyman where she lived Servant & she had every Reason to believe he would have supported the unhappy Infant, but to her great sorrow he died of a fever a Month before the Child was born. Since which time it has been wretchedly maintain. I by the assistance of a few friends, as it was totally out of her power to do, being only a poor servant girl. & at present out of place should the Gentlemen be so kind as to admit the destitute infant into this Charity, the poor Mother will be Humbly thankfull & in Duty Bound to pray for such kind Benefactors.”

19 March 1792. The Petition of Harvey Chris Combe of Great Russell Street Bloomsbury in behalf of the Two Orphan Children of Margaret Cartwright dec’d. Sheweth That the above Margaret Cartwright lived Servant in the said H.C. Combe’s Family upwards of six years during which she behaved herself so well as to give entire satisfaction-some months before She was delivered of the above Children she left his Service without any cause assigned and since the above has been known there is no doubt but that it was to conceal the consequences of her indiscretion-She was delivered of Twins both of the Male Sex on the 21St of the last month and died an hour after, having never divulged to any one, nor has it transpired since her Death who was the father of her Children.—She had no Friend or Relations but a Sister who is married to a Man that works hard for his livelihood, & not in a condition to give them any assistance—From the foregoing particular circumstances your Petitioner requests to submit to your humane consideration whether the aforesaid poor Orphans may not be deemed proper Objects of your charitable protection & be admitted under it accordingly.”

VIII

The Foundling Hospital shift of emphasis from lost children to lost mothers and lost children, mirrors the shift in Blake’s lost and found poems. Yet while Blake does make this shift, he does not propose to save lost women but instead to expose and critique the behaviors that force women outside social boundaries and deny their sexuality.

The stain of sexual experience leaves Lyca of “The Little Girl Lost” in a state of austere isolation. The poem is set “in the southern clime, / Where the summers prime, / Never fades away” (43.9–11). It is a mysti-
cal land, one surreal and highly symbolic. “Lovely Lyca,” the poem’s subject, is only “Seven summers old”—or so readers are told (34.12–13). However, the accompanying relief etching tells a different story, showing a blossoming woman, clearly older than seven. Given the girl’s pubescent consciousness, it is no wonder that the mother’s—not the father’s—emotional state is bound up with the child’s. For Lyca has no psychological peace or freedom while her mother still clings to her:

How can Lyca sleep,
If her mother weep,
If her heart does ache,
Then let Lyca wake;
If my mother sleep,
Lyca shall not weep. (34.23–28)

Because the mother sleeps, Lyca is curious rather than upset. She wanders away to sexual experience, which she undergoes in a dream. “Beasts of prey” come “from caverns deep” to look upon this virgin, and then a coded yet sexually explicit licking and undressing occurs (34.34–35):

... the lion old,
Bow’d his mane of gold, And her bosom lick,
And upon her neck,
From his eyes of flame, Ruby tears there came;
While the lioness
Loos’d her slender dress,
And naked they convey’d
To caves the sleeping maid. (35.42–51)

So ends the poem; loss here implies a sexual encounter with “beasts” more powerful and more knowledgeable than the budding Lyca, so that her sexual awareness must happen in a trance-like state, and far from the reach of her ambivalent mother.

The poem’s accompanying piece, “The Little Girl Found,” offers little hope for the errant girl. Even though she is “found,” she is less a foundling than one of the lost women who lived outside the reach of most institutions that might offer her security. The poem opens with Lyca’s parents on a weeping, “woe-begone” trek over the “desart ways” (35.5, 8). They can only imagine the worst for their daughter, which is obvious from the opening scene where the parents are “horse with making moan” (35.6), and from the nightmarish vision of their daughter “starv’d in desart wild” (35.12). Finally, when the mother reaches her breaking point and can go no further, both parents suddenly see a “couching lion” laying in their path (36.24). Although they might have been inclined to turn back, the lion’s mane “bore them to the ground” and “stalk’d around” them, until finally, as if to reflect the oral stroking he gave their daughter, he “licks their hands” (36.27–28, 31).

The lion’s lick changes vision. Now, when the couple look up they see anew; no more afraid of the lion, they observe a “spirit arm’d in gold,” wearing a crown and flowing with “golden hair” (36.36, 39). This vision releases them from the tear-filled anxiety of the opening stanzas, but what replaces that is more profoundly dreadful. They follow the lion (at his command) to his “palace deep” where their daughter “lies asleep” in the trance of sexual experience (36.43, 44). If the parents experienced any comfort at this point, it is washed away when they realize they can only view “their sleeping child./ Among tygers wild,” not interact with her (36.47–48). Because of her sexual experience, she is lost, at least to them: Lyca is socially severed from those who might care for her.

Lyca’s experience in “The Little Girl Lost,” which Blake treats in coded language, is made explicit in “A Little Girl Lost” where he condemns those who sit in judgment on such young women. While “The Little Girl Lost” begins with a prophecy:

In futurity
I prophetic see . . . (34.1–2)

“A Little Girl Lost” begins with a prophecy and a command to look with a critical eye on the present:

Children of a future Age,
Reading this ignignant page;
Know that in a former time,
Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime. (51.1–4)

The story this poem tells is of two innocent lovers, a “youthful pair / Fill’d with softest care” (51.10–11). Blake sets them in a state of perfect bliss: they meet in a “garden bright” and a “holy light” has just pushed
back the heavy "curtains of the night" (51-12-14). They play on the
grass, and since their parents are "afar" and no "strangers" enter into their
self-enclosed world, they express such complete sexual and emotional
freedom that the "maiden soon [forgets] her fear" (51.17–19). After a
period of innocence, and "tired with kisses sweet, / They agree to meet"
in a secret place and time (51.20–21). Yet this moment is short-lived, for
when the social conventions of the day are brought into play, in the final
two stanzas of the poem, the "maiden bright" must approach her vicious
"father white," which causes "all her tender limbs to shake uncontroll-
ably in terror" (51.25, 26, 29). So disturbing is this that the narrator
himself shakes as he intercedes, saying, "O the trembling fear! / O the
dismal care! / That shakes the blossoms of my hoary hair." It was this
child-woman of "A Little Girl Lost," "The Little Girl Lost," and "The
Little Girl Found," taught to be ashamed of her sexual experience, who
came to the fore of the Foundling Hospital's concerns during Blake's life-
time.

IX

When Mary went to the Hospital in 1816, she was obliged to submit to
the discourse of seduction. During Mary's visit, the investigator recorded
the following story, which includes the requisite information on promis-
es of marriage, seduction, and abandonment:

She was living with Mrs. Coles of Teignmouth Devonshire-Baker the
father a bricklayer lived at Exeter—but went to Mrs. Coles to see some
grates, and from which time an acquaintance commenced. He corre-
sponded with her promiscuously—she has 3 of his letters in her
possession—she left Mrs. Coles in a month and then went to Mr.
Burgess Fore Street Exeter, a carpenter. Baker visited her there and
courted her. Mr. Burgess objected to the match, but Baker persuaded
her to accompany him to his House to see his sister and that he would
marry her next morning—he seduced her that night and put her off
with promises next morning—she lived with him 9 months and they
set off to London. She was delivered on the road—they proceeded
partly riding and partly walking and when they reached Hyde Park
Corner he deserted her. She had lived with Mrs. Matthews No 1
Clapham Road Place and intended going there, but she was taken ill

Some of Mary's peers at the Hospital in 1816 included twenty-year-old
Esther Davis, who had given birth to a son on December 29. She
explained that "as she was going from Paddington to Brompton about 9
o'clock in the evening across Hyde Park, she met a gentleman who said
he would throw her into the river unless she complied with his
wishes." When asked for a character reference, Davis said she had no
one to speak on her behalf. Her child was denied admittance. Mary
Payne delivered a daughter on April 8. She'd "met the father: in the street
on a very rainy day. He offered her his umbrella and from this circum-
stance an acquaintance commenced." From then on, "they met by
appointment once or twice a week in Finsbury Lane," and "on the night
of seduction she remained with the father until 2 o'clock in the morn-
ing." Now a friend of the child's father said that he was "gone to India." The
investigator asked her for references, but, she was sorry, she had
none. Her child was also denied.

But when Mary came back for the third week in a row, the investiga-
tor had good news. A letter from one of her references, named
Burgess, confirmed that Mary "always bore a very sober honest charac-
ter." Burgess—who was probably a relative—wrote: "[I] also sent to her
Parents to let them know I had heard from you. Her father came here
yesterday and he tells me that they had heard nothing from her for eight-
teen months and they are very sorry to hear that she been so let fall, but
the Circumstances they are in will not enable them to do anything for
her."

With this evidence, the investigator told Mary to leave her child,
and she could visit him every Monday. She left him on July 1, 1816, and
that same day she wrote a long letter to her parents, filled with repen-
tance, promises, and lies. She wanted to apologize for "my undutiful
conduct, for which I beg your forgiveness," saying "I will write to you
every three months," telling them about the child, and to keep up an air
of respectability, saying "my husband (Baker), whose christian name is
the same as the child, sends his love and duty to you." She
claims to have been seduced in her Foundling Hospital petition because
that is the discourse they required. Equally, she claims to be his wife in her letter to her parents because that is the discourse they required. The truth of Mary’s sexual experience therefore lies somewhere between the lines of these documents.

Mary visited baby John Wilcox, who had been renamed Edward King, every week. Four months later, on October 27, 1816, he died and one year later, Mary tried to take her own life.

Blake, in speaking on behalf of lost and found children, necessarily represented women like Mary who, despite their Hospital petitions, left a shadowy historical legacy in a time when sexual innocence was the dominant discourse for single mothers.

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Figure 1. Holy Thursday, William Blake.

Figure 2. Little Boy Lost, William Blake.

Figure 3. Foundlings, William Hogarth.
5. "No. 432, Mary Wilcox admitted one age 25 ward 9 and John Wilcox admitted once age 4 weeks ward 9 and baptised 26.3.1816. 19.4.1816 Ware 4 No 432, Mary Wilcox age 25 and John Wilcox age 8 weeks removed to Parish of S. Mary Lambeth." Westminster City Library Record Office, Records of St. Martins in the Fields, F4026 Daybook of Workhouse.


8. R. H. Nichols, _Foundling Hospital Catalogue of Pictures, Relics, and Works of Art_. London, 1946. This move on the part of Hogarth may have been responsible for the Royal Academy, as Hardwick H. Nichols explains: The donation of paintings for public display to the Foundling Hospital between 1740 and 1760 gave the British public a chance to see these works for the first time, and it was the Foundling Hospital’s reputation that gave artists the idea of running a full-scale exhibition of their work; thus, the Hospital was the precursor to the Royal Academy. "The building... was completed in 1745, and then it was that Hogarth formulated his scheme, with the cooperation of his fellow artists, of presenting to the Hospital, Works of Art for exhibition to the public. From this moment the Society of Arts was formed and an Annual Dinner was held at the Hospital. Gifts to the Hospital of paintings and other works of art increased, and "being exhibited to the public drew a daily crowd of spectators in their splendid equipages; and a visit to the Hospital became the fashionable morning lounge of the Reign of George II. The eclair thus created in favour of the Arts, suggested the annual exhibition of the united artists, which Institution was the precursor of the Royal Academy."—last page of book.


12. McKlure, 83.

13. Gardner interprets the abandoned child in this plate "from the enervating indifference of Experience, the deliberately shared title can only mean that Blake saw its antecedent in Innocence as belonging totally there, without justification or compromise; and we are faced once more with the proposition that it is the organized, disinterested nurture of children which Blake now sees as lost. The retrospective title sets the impersonal, exploitative neglect of the poem in Experience, against the particular fact of caring which generated its own response in "Holy Thursday" in _Innocence_ (123–24).

14. Gardner provides a highly compelling and well-researched reading of the "Nurses Song" in terms of Blake’s own paris: at St. James, where children were sent to nurses in Wimbledon (6–14), greatly increasing the rate of infant survival. In fact, Gardner proves that James Blake, Blake’s father, provided haberdashery to the St. James Workhouse.

15. Gutch, 50–51.
16. Quoted in McLure, 78.
17. Sacred Music, Composed by the late George Frederick Handel, Esq; and performed at the Chapel of the Hospital, for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children; on Thursday, the 26th of May, 1759.
18. Some Objections to the Foundling Hospital Considered by a Person in the Country to whom they were sent. London: T. Pasham, 1761.
23. There are three hands on these petitions, and Mr. Cox, Mr. R.A., and another hand that bears no signature. For the petitioners 1816, three people bore direct responsibility: Mr. Cox, who reviewed the petitions after they had been completed and investigated; two assistants: one who wrote and received letters relating to each woman's moral character, and another who transcribed each woman's history onto the back of the petition on her first visit to the Hospital.
24. But since she had no one to speak for her character, she was denied.
25. This case was denied.
26. "Received 19.4.1816 by Order from St. Martin in the Fields No.2764 Mary Wilcox and her illegitimate child (age 2 months); "17.16.1816 Discharged Mary Wilcox aged 25 and John Wilcox aged 3 months and 29 days." G.L.C. Record Office, St. Mry's Lambeth Records, P85/MRY1/282, Register of Removals to Lambeth 1799 to February 1829, and Admissions and Discharges from Workhouse August 1810 to October 1817.

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