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Courtship and the Failure of Engagement Rituals among Isolated Working Women in Late Victorian London: A case-study based on the London Foundling Hospital archives, 1875-1901¹

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Ritual not only brings order out of chaos, but relieves people's fears about their personal and collective futures².

In the nineteenth century, London was already a “powerful magnet³”, attracting young provincial men and women hoping to escape rural poverty and find employment among the increasingly wide array of better-paid occupations. This exodus was a social phenomenon which reached its height in the 1840s. Most young women from the countryside generally worked in domestic service when they arrived in the capital. This occupation was however intended to be temporary, enabling the girls to migrate. According to the social historian Theresa McBride, domestic service even became the means through which these girls “effected the transition to modern urban society⁴”. Indeed, in Britain's rapidly changing society, with industrial progress accelerating its pace, levels of education reaching record

¹ This article is adapted from a speech I gave during the 2015 national congress of specialists in English Studies in higher education (S.A.E.S., Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur) which took place in Toulon (France) focusing on the themes of “Engagement and Commitment”.

² John R. Gillis. *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1985. p. 260.

³ Author unknown. *Tempted London*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889, p. 1-3, in Jerry White, *London in the 19th Century, A Human Awful Wonder of God*. London: Vintage Books ; 2008, p. 102.

⁴ Theresa McBride. *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820-1920*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1976. p. 17.

highs⁵ and following the adoption of groundbreaking social reforms in the second half of the century⁶, living in London became increasingly synonymous with greater independence for women⁷.

Even though the young women who worked in London didn't leave a lot of historical documentation behind – most of them originating from poor backgrounds and being employed in subordinate positions – it is possible to find records of their lives in the archives of many contemporary institutions, be they legal, health-related or charitable. In this article, we will focus on exploring the archives of a British charitable institute dedicated to the reception of abandoned and illegitimate children: the London Foundling Hospital⁸. Containing the application files for adoption submitted by single mothers who had been abandoned by their fiancés, these archives give a rare insight into the lives of young women workers at the time. In the files under study, the women are young, generally aged between 17 and 23 years old, clearly at the age when they went out with men in the hope of getting married. With only a few exceptions, they came from families whose earnings were quite low – their fathers were small farmers, manual labourers, craftsmen etc. The vast majority of the cases studied had left their homes in order to live in the city, and more particularly at their employer's residence as about 60% of the applicants were live-in domestic servants. Some of them also worked as

⁵ Following major educational reforms in 1870 (Forster's Education Act), and 1880 (Elementary Education Act) which made elementary education universal and compulsory, the levels of illiteracy dropped down drastically to such an extent that, by the end of the century, 95 per cent of people were able to sign their name at marriage, from David F. Mitch. *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England, The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. p.xvi.

⁶ Most notably, with regards to violence perpetrated against women and children, such as the Offences against the Person Act (1861), Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885), but also concerning the limitation of working hours (most notably with the Factory Acts) or the legal rights of married women, of parents: Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), Married Women's Property Acts (1870 and 1882), Custody Acts (1873 and 1886).

⁷ J. A. Banks. "The Contagion of Numbers", in H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff eds. *The Victorian City*, 2 vols London: Routledge, 1973, p. 113-114; Anne-Marie Sohn. *Chrysalides: femmes dans la vie privée (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Volume II, Paris : Publication de la Sorbonne ; 1996, p. 477.

⁸ From 1801 onwards, this philanthropic institution limited access to illegitimate children less than a year old and war orphans provided that their mothers were deemed worthy of help. In 1979, John Gillis was the first to work on the archives of the L.F.H. as a precious source of information on illegitimacy in nineteenth century Britain, but also on the social condition of servants and on marriage. It then attracted a small number of researchers including Bernd Weisbrod, Ana Clark, Françoise Barret Ducrocq, and more recently Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen, Alys Levene, Samantha Williams, Pamela Horn and Ginger Frost. My own doctoral dissertation was also the study of these archives in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (see selected bibliography). Today, the archives of the London Foundling Hospital are mostly filed at the London Metropolitan Archives.⁸

waitresses, hotel staff and in shops, some were craftswomen, seamstresses, dress-makers, or milliners⁹. The putative fathers also generally came from the lower social strata¹⁰. When looking at the files, one is struck by how isolated the women appear to be. Most had come to find work in the British capital, and were usually without any family assistance. They had just been abandoned by the father of their child and had no choice but to keep on working though sometimes they managed to put their baby with a minder. In spite of the 1872 reforms on illegitimate children¹¹, it was still quite difficult for these women, if not impossible, to enforce their rights¹².

The early break-ups which are recorded in the London Foundling Hospital archives are perceived as a social phenomenon which particularly affected women who had migrated to London for work. Some specialists indeed agree that in the case of these women workers isolated in big cities, the separation from their families and their working conditions (for instance the typical “no followers rule” applied to anyone working in service) weakened their social standing, and appears to have encouraged illicit sexual relations¹³. In the sources at hand, more than 80% of the girls nevertheless stated that they were engaged to be married when abandoned. The striking contradiction between the apparent formalized status of these relationships and their evident failure will be the focus of this article. What does this contradiction tell us about the meaning and value of the engagement ritual for the couples in question? What role did parents and communities play in the relationships of these young urban couples?

⁹ It should be underlined that by the 1890s, many girls felt an urge to escape servile work, and began to avoid employment as domestic servants, aiming at other types of work, most especially factory work, which gave much greater independence than domestic service. Between 1881 and 1901, there was a 7% decrease in the number of women, aged 15 to 20, who were employed as domestic servants, *from* Pamela Horn. *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, 2nd edition. Stroud: Sutton; 1995. p. 24; Jennifer Phegley. *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁰ Only 5% came from privileged, middle-class backgrounds. 21.8% were skilled artisans, *from* Florence Pellegrin. *Cultures sexuelles et rapports sociaux de sexe à la fin de l'ère victorienne : Le cas des classes laborieuses à partir des archives du London Foundling Hospital, 1875-1901*. Lille: ANRT, 2013. Part 1, section 3.

¹¹ Bastardy Laws Amendment Act, 1872: This amendment allowed single mothers to again receive help from associations for poor people; the fathers of illegitimate children became responsible for the child under the law.

¹² The procedure was still quite costly and would usually lead to nothing as quite often fathers couldn't be condemned for “lack of evidence”, *from* George K. Behlmer. *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England 1870-1908*, Stanford: Stanford University Press ; 1982, p. 41.

¹³ Ellen Ross, Rayna Rapp. “Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No. 1, jan 1981, p. 69; Margaret L. Arnot “Understanding Women Committing Newborn Child Murder in Victorian England”, *in* Shani D’Cruze (ed). *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950, Gender and Class*. London: Longman; 2000.

The corpus at hand is composed of 390 selected admission files dating from 1875 to 1901 and contains testimonies, enquiry reports, and also a number of other documents used as evidence by the mothers such as photographs, letters of recommendation, plus a total of more than 600 private letters mainly written by the fathers of illegitimate children. When accepting private correspondence, the Foundling Hospital officials would carefully ask for the stamped envelopes to be provided. This process and detailed inquiries allowed them to ascertain to the best of their ability the authenticity of the information and documents provided¹⁴. When working on the archives, we can see that the amount of private correspondence increases significantly in the last decade of the century, testifying to the democratization of the practice of letter writing¹⁵.

While the vast majority of young single women who worked in London didn't end up in situations as dramatic as those recorded in the London Foundling Hospital archives¹⁶, the study of the documents contained in the files for adoption allows the researcher to discover elements pertaining to the intimate life of people who have long been absent from official history. One should nevertheless keep in mind that the sources at hand only inform us about some isolated trends and events which cannot be deemed representative of the entire population of London's women workers.

Rites, like those of walking together, courting, getting engaged, enjoyed an enduring popularity at all echelons of society in the late Victorian period. In the mid to late nineteenth century, in spite of the erosion of former rural traditions due to the rural exodus, young people from the labouring classes in the cities were usually described as having kept a keen sense of the conventions governing love relations¹⁷. According to the historian John R. Gillis, the ceremonial dimension became even more important at a time when the working classes were gaining more political representation and becoming more independent and to a certain extent more "respectable"¹⁸. These rituals also remained a comfort to people in the

¹⁴ In the sample under study, the quality of the writing varies greatly depending on the level of education and the social milieu. Indeed, the very existence of these letters testifies to the democratization of the practice of letter writing.

¹⁵ The letters which survived have little in common with those written by people from wealthier backgrounds. They are ordinary and deal with mundane matters linked to the condition of the young women but also with key moments in the love relationship.

¹⁶ The London Foundling Hospital only accepted an average of 45 pupils each year between 1879 and 1907.

¹⁷ Françoise Barret-Ducrocq. *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London*, London, New York: Penguin; 1992. p.93.

¹⁸ In the nineteenth century, a strict distinction between the "respectable" poor, who were considered deserving of help from charitable institutions and those who were not respectable, described as "rough" was generally accepted. This antinomy "rough/respectable" increased even more in the years 1870 and 1890, from Ellen Ross. "Not the Sort That Would Sit on the Doorstep": Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighborhoods", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 27 (spring

midst of vast changes¹⁹. In the most privileged classes, there existed “strict courtship rules” which were detailed in the myriad of Victorian conduct books and etiquette manuals of the time²⁰. The official celebration of the betrothal was traditionally a key stage in all love relations and changed it for good. A few meetings supervised by a chaperon²¹ were enough to push the father or the brother of the young lady to ask the admirer about his intentions. Once the suitor had been approved, the betrothal celebration would follow and the young lovers could get to know each other and begin to grow close during the engagement period.

In the cases under study, however, the betrothal celebration is far from systematic, and the relationship can become more serious without any official engagement or fixed wedding date. It is indeed quite difficult to discern when the couple decided to get engaged. The lovers themselves often struggled to remember the exact date when interrogated by the Foundling Hospital Secretary. In the sources at hand, the promises are whispered and kept secret until the couple decides to reveal the truth to their entourage. It is most often a verbal engagement as underlined by Adelaide R. in 1896: “I have only one letter from him we became engaged verbally²²”. Getting engaged seems to have been a private matter, most especially when people were far away from their families and unable to make the relationship official. As for servants, they were compelled to keep the relationship secret in order to preserve their employment. It is for this specific reason that some couples in the sources hide their union for months, even years. This is the case of Frieda E.S., a housemaid who was seeing a gardener and hid their engagement from her employer for a whole year. As she testified: “We became engaged, the servants knew, not my lady²³”. Annie K.W. a housemaid also kept her engagement secret. Here is an extract from the testimony of her former employer: “She²⁴ had been told that there appeared to be a mutual attraction between the two from their first entering her service and this resulted in a formal engagement between them which was known to their fellow-servants, but carefully concealed from her (Mrs

1985), p.40 ; Patricia Thane. “Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England”, *History Workshop Journal*, VI, autumn 1978, p. 39.

¹⁹ John R. Gillis. *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1985. p. 260.

²⁰ For instance conduct books such as: Blood Gertrude Elizabeth; Campbell, Lady Colin. *Etiquette of Good Society, Edited and revised by Lady Colin Campbell*, London: Cassell & Co.; 1893; Cheadle, Eliza. *Manners of Modern Society: Being a Book of Etiquette*, London : Cassell, Petter and Galpin; 1872 ; Grey, Theresa. *Idols of Society: or Gentility and Femininity*, London: William Ridgway; 1874; Unknown author. *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony: with a Complete Guide to the Forms of a Wedding*, London: David Bogue, 1852.

²¹ They were usually either governesses or hired society women (already married or widowed), from Sally Mitchell. *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. p. 151-152.

²² London Foundling Hospital Archive (L.F.H.A.), “Petitions Admitted”, Adelaide R. 1896.

²³ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Frieda E. S., 1896.

²⁴ Referring here to the former employer.

B.) and her husband²⁵. These secret relationships which became more serious without any official ceremony were severely frowned upon in all social classes and types of employment. There are many instances in the sources where employees lost their position because of a love relationship. Ann M. H.'s case, a general servant in East Dulwich, was made redundant after her employer saw her come out of the footman's bedroom: "One day at Brighton when we were staying there I was seen coming from his room and was discharged²⁶". Under such circumstances, men were also discharged as exemplified by Ethel B.'s testimony, a young woman who worked as an apprentice in the post office and fell in love with a fellow employee: "I told Mr Squibb. The Father was accused he admitted and was dismissed so was I²⁷".

Following a close analysis of the cases under study, these transgressions of the traditional "respectable" rituals clearly appear to have been directly linked to the young lovers' strict working conditions. Indeed, whenever possible, most couples tried to comply with social conventions, as was underlined by Françoise Barret-Ducrocq when working on earlier files from the London Foundling Hospital archives (1850 to 1880):

Everything seems to indicate, then, that relations between the sexes were codified among these young citizens. They were constrained by more or less implicit rules, inherited from parents or employers, and reinforced by the attitudes of friends and acquaintances; most submitted with a good grace. Reading the files of the Foundling Hospital one can discern the outlines of a general set of regulations, or rather a collection of recipes which, like home cooking, were passed on in an imprecise manner and which everyone felt entitled to modify, to season according to circumstances and their personal taste²⁸.

They exchanged presents – flowers, locks of hair, pictures, handkerchiefs, watches or also, more rarely, animals – and of course rings. When James B., a soldier, wrote to Elizabeth Mc C., a general servant, he reminded her that he was going to buy the ring: "Don't forget dear that I am going to get the ring this month dear, and the sizes you sent will answer very well for measurement²⁹". It could take a long time before a man was able to buy the expensive ring, which cost about one week's salary³⁰. Like today, this precious item acted as a promise of marriage.

²⁵ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Annie K. W., 1883.

²⁶ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Ann M.H., 1878.

²⁷ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Ethel B., 1898; Even though many recommendation letters given by the single mothers to the Foundling Hospital were written by their former employers, promising to employ them again if the baby was adopted by the institution, one notices that in the great majority of cases under study, the general disrepute linked to having a pregnant employee lead to instant rejection by the employer.

²⁸ Françoise Barret-Ducrocq. *Love in the Time of Victoria*, op. cit., p. 93.

²⁹ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Elizabeth Mc C., 1895.

³⁰ John R. Gillis. *For Better, for Worse*, op.cit., p. 271.

When she was on holidays at her cousin's, Lilian C. yielded to a young tailor she met for the first time only a few days before. He offered her a ring: "He did not promise to marry me but he brought a ring and gave it to me as an engagement ring³¹". Another example is that of a young barmaid, Lizzie A.B. and one of her customers, a builder's clerk, who promised to marry her after a few weeks of courtship and mentions the ring in one of his letters to her³²:

Little did I think it possible it would come to "substance" so quickly, did you dearest? Now things has advanced so far and if I am right to conjuncture our future, it is only justice you should have something to show for same and with your acceptance I will present you with a ring as a token of engagement (what do you think?) and with your sanction send me the size of your finger and I will bring you up a few, on approval on Sunday when I hope to see you, If there is any particular shape, don't be afraid to mention³³.

Couples from the working classes also traditionally walked together on Sundays or in the evenings in order to make their relationship official and these walks testified to the seriousness of the relationship³⁴. So walking out with a boy was considered a serious matter and the young girls had to be aware of what it implied. The following testimony by a former servant who talked about her youth at the beginning of the twentieth century underlines the ceremonial aspect of these walks:

I began to attract young men. My sister got very annoyed with me for encouraging them and said I ought to be ashamed of myself. I did not try to prevent any of my male friends from taking me for a walk. I could not see any reason against it. No thought of evil came into my mind, but when each of my male friends wanted to monopolise all my time, then I realised that some of them were hoping for more than friendship³⁵.

Walking together could never be trivial, even amongst the lower social classes. References to this tradition are overwhelming in our sources, enabling young mothers to show to the Foundling Hospital committee that the relationship was serious and that they were beyond reproach. On the 13th of July 1892, Ada B.'s suitor wrote her a letter in which he refers to a previous walk, expressing concern about some pain in her leg she complained about: "My dearest Ada, I hope you enjoyed your walk on Sunday as much as I did. I am afraid you had rather too much walking as you complained of your leg. Is it any better yet³⁶?" These walks

³¹ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Lilian C., 1886.

³² This letter also contains a clear reference to their having sexual relations for the first time.

³³ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Lizzie A.B., 1894.

³⁴ Shani D'Cruze. *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women*, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998. p. 129.

³⁵ Margaret Llewelyn Davies ed. *Life as we have Known it*, London: Virago Press limited; 1977 (1931), p. 31-32.

³⁶ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Ada B., 1894, letter n° 4, 13 juillet 1892

were imbued with romance. They also allowed young lovers to spend some time together, to get closer and to have a moment of intimacy which could even lead to sexual intimacy. When Ada B.'s lover writes to her, "I hope you are alright after that long walk of last Sunday³⁷", one might think that he is referring to more than the simple physical exhaustion following their walk. Indeed, we learn from the woman's testimony that they had sexual relations during one of their walks. In the sources at hand, the presence of chaperons is seldom mentioned. There are only two references to young couples walking with other couples or with a family member. It was for instance the case of Ellen G., who reports having "walked out" with her "sister" and "another young man"³⁸.

In order to further inquire about a relationship, the people investigating the cases at the Foundling Hospital asked about parental consent. Usually, as was the norm in the "respectable" sections of society, young people were expected to have asked their parents' permission before going out together or deciding to get married, or at least to have told their parents³⁹. In the sources, we find traces of some very formal exchanges with the parents, as for instance in 1875, with Louisa S., a general servant who was in love with a coachman: "The F. came to her husband and asked his permission to pay his addresses to Pet. After making enquiries and finding that he and his family were respectable, the required permission was given. He thereafter visited Petitioner at their house and also, at her place of service, and it was generally expected they would marry⁴⁰". One can however notice that the girls who mention these official demands came from better-off families and were also still living with their parents. It was for example the case with Gertrude C., the daughter of a grocer, who asked her parent's permission in order to go out with a young foreman: "After a time, he suggested we should keep company and I referred him to my parents and they consented as he was in a good position earning his 40 shillings a week: then I used to visit his parents and he used to visit at my home: this went on until December 1884⁴¹". The same goes for Emily M.W., whose father was the manager of a public house. She finally managed to get her parents' approval to go out with the man she loved, her parents having been sensitive to the genuine feelings of love which blossomed between the young lovers: "Although they knew that the father was in a much lower social position, a footman, than they approved of, [...] especially as she could do very much better, they consented to her engagement when it was evident she was attached to him⁴²".

³⁷ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Ada B., 1894. letter n° 9, no date.

³⁸ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Ellen G., 1875.

³⁹ The 1753 Hardwicke Act stipulates that parental consent is necessary to any wedding taking place between people younger than 21.

⁴⁰ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Louisa S., 1876.

⁴¹ He was foreman in the chemical works, *from* L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Gertrude C., 1886; for more information on wages in the nineteenth century see Arthur L. Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom in the 19th Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900.

⁴² L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Emily M.W., 1883.

In the sources at hand, some applicants merely stated to the London Foundling Hospital officials that their families were informed of the love relation, as if obtaining parental consent was a mere perfunctory event rather than a crucial element in the development of the courtship. This is confirmed throughout testimonies such as that of Emily E.W. in 1896: “We became engaged. My father knew⁴³” and that of Harriet H.’s, in 1878: “My parents have seen him and knew we were to be married⁴⁴”. How independent were these couples from their families? Many specialists in Victorian studies have described the last decades of the nineteenth century as having witnessed a marked recoil of parental authority⁴⁵. Indeed, at the end of a century in which “companionship marriage” is accepted as having become a “common aspiration⁴⁶”, there is ample evidence that many young couples went against their parents’ will keeping their love relation secret. Differences in age, religion, social rank, but also bad habits (for example, excessive alcohol consumption) could lead to the parents’ disapproval. Louisa M.W.’s parents for instance didn’t want her to go out with one of their tenants because he drank⁴⁷. Unable to stop seeing him, she continued the relationship in secret. We witness the same process with Nellie E.C., a young seamstress who went out with a public house employee in spite of her family’s complete disapproval. Her father, a plumber, ended up engaging a fight with the young man when he refused to help his daughter after the birth of the child:

After I had known him about 7 months he had c.c.⁴⁸ with me at our apartments my father did not then know [...] but he found out later and told me to have nothing to do with him and went to where he worked and told him the same – they fought. Five months after he wrote to me. I met him and without my parents knowledge continued to meet him and in their absence I took him home and c.c. was repeated 3 or 4 times. I soon found my condition and told him. He said that would be alright we should get married and go to Paris⁴⁹.

As for Elizabeth N., a second cook who fell in love with a gardener, the age difference led to the family’s disapproval. Her parents, by refusing their daughter the right to marry this man, were implicated in her downfall as she fell pregnant a

⁴³ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Emily E. W., 1896.

⁴⁴ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Harriet H., 1878. She was living in London, working as a housemaid.

⁴⁵ Michael Mason. *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1994; Weeks Jeffrey. *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, 2nd edition, London: Longman; 1989; John R. Gillis. *For Better, for Worse, op. cit.*; Jennifer Phegley. *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England, op. cit.*; Anne-Marie Sohn. *Chrysalides : femmes dans la vie privée (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Volume II, Paris : Publication de la Sorbonne ; 1996.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Phegley. *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England, op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Louisa M. W., 1894: “my parents objected because he drank.”

⁴⁸ “Criminal conversation”: an expression used to refer to sexual relations.

⁴⁹ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Nellie E. C., 1894.

few weeks later. Katrine G. also risked clandestine relations out of love for Frederick W., a wheelwright, “who was not considered by her family to be good enough for her⁵⁰”. As detailed in a report compiled many decades later in her file destined for her child who had been adopted by the London Foundling Hospital:

The friendship continued and they became very much in love. Eventually Kate became pregnant and her horrified family sent her away as soon as they found out. Two brothers in law made all arrangements and the baby – yourself – was born in Clapham maternity Hospital on the 22nd November, 1889. In those days it was considered a terrible thing for a girl to go wrong and her parents refused to have her at home with the child. She could not earn her living with a child to care for and, though a summons was obtained against the father, for an affiliation order, it could not be served upon him as he could not be found. In the end an application was made to the Foundling Hospital and you were admitted on the 3rd of June, 1890⁵¹.

Working class families expected to have their say about any love relationship⁵², but in the face of geographical separation or disobedience in the name of romantic love, they became powerless, unable to prevent the unfortunate choices of their daughters. Influenced by what Lawrence Stone identified as a new type of “affective individualism”, the young lovers might have attached less importance to the approval of their parents⁵³. The quest for romantic love became widespread resulting in a “reordering of priorities⁵⁴”, in which personal happiness superseded family interests. According to Pat Hudson and W.R. Lee, the young women who migrated to London for work started to give more importance to their own desires and interests, saving money for leisure purposes or for their own personal use rather than sending it all to their families⁵⁵. Indeed, the women in our sources have access to leisure activities reporting having been out to see exhibitions, to the zoo, to the park, taking train journeys, attending balls and fairs. They also mention having some savings, even though we find references to women admitting having given all their money to their former fiancé. Clara M., a general servant, stated for

⁵⁰ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Katrine G. 1890, Letter written on the 14th April 1948 by a Foundling Hospital secretary, addressed to Kate G.’s illegitimate child who had been raised at the London Foundling Hospital.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Some even continued to choose a fiancé for their daughters. As we can see in this extract from a letter received by Kate H. from her painter boyfriend: “My darling Kate, I do hope you will not carry out your present intention I can assure you that I am in dreadful agony to night I really do hope that you will not let your people lead you to have anybody else but me as I have a misgiving that is what they are about”; L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Kate H, 1895.

⁵³ Lawrence Stone. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, Harmondsworth: Penguin; 1979 (1977). p. 4.

⁵⁴ Edward Shorter. *The Making of the Modern Family*, New York: Basic Books; 1977. p. 17.

⁵⁵ Pat Hudson and W.R. Lee (eds). *Women’s Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective*, Manchester, Manchester University Press; 1990. p. 62.

instance that she gave all her savings to the man she was meant to marry: "I left my place in June 1886 to get married but he wanted me to go into lodgings he said, while he bought the home, I gave him my savings £17. Before I left my situation (in May 1886) he promised to marry me⁵⁶". Sarah H. committed the same mistake, after receiving desperate pleading letters from her fiancé⁵⁷.

In a rapidly changing society where young people were increasingly distant from their original communities, one could argue that some courtship rituals which were deemed respectable became inadequate, or even meaningless. In the sources, engagement promises took place quite hastily. The majority of the women stated they got engaged to their lover only a few weeks or months after they first met. This can help explain why many knew so little about their husband to be. Gertrude W. was engaged to the father of her child for three months. They met at church and after a few weeks of walking out, he proposed. She accepted without knowing what his job was or where he lived. So when he disappeared after learning she was pregnant, she was unable to find him⁵⁸. These hasty engagements were highly criticized in the higher echelons of society. According to the father of a dentist who was accused of having abandoned Charlotte H., a barmaid in Colchester, any respectable woman would not accept engagement to a man she didn't know thoroughly: "Charlotte H., What woman would have engaged herself to a man without knowing something about him, I cannot encourage such conduct. It is no use you trying to exact money from me⁵⁹".

It is quite difficult to imagine that most engagement promises described throughout the London Foundling Hospital archives had a proper binding value. The promise seems too predictable. It is sometimes suspiciously kept secret or whispered just before the sexual act. In January 1888, Rosa N., a servant between jobs, met a baker who was a lodger at her sister's. After a year of corresponding, she yielded to him during a walk and explained that the promise had been uttered "some time before this⁶⁰". Were the women naïve or did they lie in their depositions, pretending there had been a promise when there was none in order to preserve their respectability when facing the London Foundling Hospital committee? Undoubtedly these promises were used by male suitors as a means of gaining the trust of young women and the approval of their families when necessary. But they would also have been used as a way of convincing the young women to yield to them sexually. We get this impression from many testimonies such as that of Emily E.W. who looked after her father's tenants: "February 1893, I met him. He was, and for a year had been working as gardener to Mr B. and lodged with his brother in law Charles E., close by. We became engaged. My father knew. June 1896 he

⁵⁶ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Clara M., 1887.

⁵⁷ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Sarah H., 1899.

⁵⁸ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Gertrude W., 1880.

⁵⁹ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Charlotte H., 1894.

⁶⁰ L.F.H.A., "Petitions Admitted", Rosa N., 1888. "It was just before I went there that he had c.c. with me twice outdoors he had promised to marry me some time before this".

had c.c. with me outdoors this was repeated 8 or 9 times up to July⁶¹”. For the women, the marriage promise presumably came as a guarantee of a better, more secure future. In Victorian times, a respectable man giving his word was still considered as a firm promise⁶². This emphasis on traditional Victorian gentlemanly behavior is evident in the private correspondence given to the Hospital officials where references to “masculinity”, “honor”, “honesty” and “respectability” abound. Repeatedly, the researcher finds mention of the promises made, the ideal of “true love”, and the necessity of trusting the loved one. Keeping one’s promises was indeed one of the core elements of gentlemanly etiquette. Here is an extract of a letter written by Daniel B., working in a dairy farm on Farrington road, engaged for almost two years to Elisabeth M., a waitress: “You can trust me for I will never deceive you my dear I love you too well for that. You have had enough to put up with old girl but you shall be well repaid for it for I will always try and do my duty to you now⁶³”. The following extract written in 1894 by a young photographer in love with a general servant is also a fair illustration of the importance of gentlemanly qualities:

My own little pet, you love and trust me just the same don’t you, and you will have no fear of consequences in being with me again. Dearest I solemnly promise that no harm whatever will come of it, and see no reason why we should wish to give each other up. I can only repeat my promise to be faithful to you Bessie as I believe you have been to me⁶⁴.

What finally becomes apparent when dealing with the love relations recorded in the archives of the London Foundling Hospital is that there is indeed a direct link between the failure of the relationships and the level of estrangement from a given community. In the case of Ellen G. who had known the man she was seeing since childhood and admitted that there hadn’t been any proper engagement, her stating to the Hospital officials that: “We have always been considered engaged⁶⁵” offers a striking illustration that the problem didn’t lie so much in the official aspect of the relationship but rather in the presence and authority of a community. After the girl discovered her pregnancy, the young man should have felt compelled

⁶¹ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Susan J. G., 1889.

⁶² Ginger S. Frost. *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia; 1995. p. 9. Dealing mostly with lower middle-class and upper working-class cases, Ginger Frost explains: “Expectations of gender were far harder on men than women in courtship. Proper manly behaviour demanded honesty, kindness to inferiors, responsibility for sexual immorality, and especially the keeping of promises”.

⁶³ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Elizabeth M., 1891.

⁶⁴ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Bessie H., 1896.

⁶⁵ L.F.H.A., “Petitions Admitted”, Ellen G., 1875: “During one of our walks he took advantage of me, and used handkerchiefs with strong scent on them: and once again it was repeated in the same way, we were walking out with my sister and another young man and they strolled away from us: we have always been considered engaged, and he has often promised me marriage”.

by the community to marry Ellen whom he had known for so long. However, in the late nineteenth century, the new urban conditions and individualistic value system disturbed this traditional system, communities became transient or anonymous leaving young women isolated and unsupported and perhaps more easily manipulated. In London, many couples existed anonymously, entertaining love relations which were based on mutual trust. Conditions were completely different to what they had been previously when young people didn't migrate as often and as Tanya Evans states: "migration and increased mobility disrupted long-standing marital practices⁶⁶". In rural communities, informal contracts or betrothals had been the norm for centuries. Some of the informal contracts we observe in the sources at hand could indeed be directly linked to those former rural traditions where rituals were quite often overlooked given the influence of communities and families¹. In the anonymous big cities, verbal love contracts could easily be broken, with waning parental supervision no longer guaranteeing that the putative fathers would fulfill their duty.

The first hand documents contained in the archives of the London Foundling Hospital allow the historian to gain a glimpse into the emotional life and daily experiences of individuals which can serve to enhance and enrich the more mundane information provided by statistical data, parish registers or census records⁶⁷. They reveal that for single women workers who migrated to London in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the will to find a husband and even to fall in love could not easily be separated from the fear of being abandoned and having to raise a child alone. As demonstrated in this article, the engagement promises depicted in the primary sources we studied may have testified to the young people's will to comply with accepted courtship rituals but this was often done in quite an informal way, lightly and frequently, and sometimes so early in the relationship that it appeared to be more for show (or for seduction) than as part of a meaningful ritual. In the expanding late nineteenth century urban environment, one might argue that the nature of love relationships was undergoing drastic changes. In the face of ongoing industrialization, urban migration and rampant individualism, families and communities lost some of their control and influence over their children. Couples were often formed without parental approval and could also intentionally go against parental consent. Looking at the stories of failed courtships preserved in the London Foundling Hospital archives, it becomes evident that these early break-ups and their unfortunate consequences were linked not only to

⁶⁶ Tanya Evans. "Women, Marriage and the family", in Barker Hannah, Chalus Elaine eds. *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850, An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge; 2005. p. 59; see also Bridget Hill. *Women Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 1994.

⁶⁷ The study of these archives is still a work in progress. As these are only made available to the public one hundred and ten years after the children's admission, we're therefore only beginning to discover documents dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

geographical separation but also to the moral isolation of these couples from their communities and families. Migration and the consequent independence was not therefore always a positive move for these young women. Although working conditions and salaries were indeed much better than in rural areas⁶⁸, in the anonymity of this urban environment, many must have felt frustrated by the inadequacy of their inherited marital expectations. Moving away from one's family involved many risks and often meant postponing the quest for a suitable husband and for many of the young women workers who migrated to London, a good marriage seems to have been difficult to attain.

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⁶⁸ Jane Lewis. *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change*, Brighton, Bloomington: Wheatsheaf, Indiana University Press; 1984. In London, young women could expect to receive "£12-£15 a year rather than the £10 paid to fieldworkers".

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