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Worthy Widows, Feckless Fathers, and Innocent Babes: Experiences of Poverty in Early Industrial England

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Worthy Widows, Feckless Fathers, and Innocent Babes: Experiences of Poverty in Early
Industrial England

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for Highest Honors
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Introduction

The parish Trustees of the Poor of St. Leonard, Shoreditch had a very short meeting on July 30, 1779; finding “no particular business to be done,” they adjourned until the next week.¹ Similarly, the committee for transacting the affairs of the London Foundling Hospital adjourned a meeting of just the Vice President and three other Governors on April 21, 1808, and delayed again when only two more joined them on the 28th.² In 1813, the St. Leonard Trustees responded to persistent problems of attendance by dividing themselves into weekly workhouse visiting committees and fining those who failed to attend their rotation five shillings.³ The St. Saviour, Southwark overseers noted in their letter replying to a poor woman’s entreaty for relief in 1829 that her urgent petition had been mislaid for several weeks following the death of the previous clerk.⁴ Each of these documents is a silence in the record, a blank space between the events which make up historical narratives. Yet in the context of those actions, this inaction is important; while trustees and committees were making powerful decisions about the lives of London’s poor, they also often neglected to show up to meetings and perform necessary duties. Especially during these decades at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, these bodies were beginning to assert greater control over the poor, from abandoned children to the aged and destitute, and at the same time often slipping into apathy about the effort of oversight. Workhouses, restrictions, and rules increased power quantitatively, but authority

¹ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, July 30, 1779, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), P91/LEN/0008, London, UK.

² Foundling Hospital Committee Minutes, April 21, 1808; April 28, 1808, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/026.

³ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 8, 1813, LMA P91/LEN/0011.

⁴ Sophia Matthews to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, April 2, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2356.

varied qualitatively week by week; such inconsistency did not make for administrative efficiency.

The administration of the English poor laws did not happen in a vacuum, and decisions made by overseers, clerks, and trustees not only meant life or death for paupers in their parishes, but were also open to contest, negotiation, and response from the working classes themselves. On the national stage, politicians and pamphleteers observed rising poor rates and changing economic and social structures and determined that the poor laws were to blame for demoralizing large swathes of the workforce; in local arenas, parishes struggled to apply this developing ideology of poverty when confronted with the practical effects of industrialization. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century records of poverty and the poor laws illustrate the strategies developed from above and below to adapt the meaning of poor relief in the new industrial age. As parishes sought to cut costs and assert authority by changing the balance of indoor and outdoor relief, the poor responded with their own calculations of cost and benefit. Despite the increasing use of more punitive and restrictive methods of relief, the concurrent growth of working-class consciousness would have an enduring influence on social, political, and economic systems.

The Old Poor Law was obviously not yet old when enacted in 1597 and amended in 1601 under Elizabeth I.⁵ The Elizabethan laws codified some existing practices of charity into mandated relief to at the very least prevent death from destitution, supported by poor rates levied on local householders in a parish. This parochial foundation reinforced a sense of collective responsibility for vulnerable neighbors such as the young, elderly, or ill, while also emphasizing

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1984), 25.

the importance of membership in a community by legally defining the basis for belonging. The 1662 Act of Settlement allowed parishes to return migrating paupers to their place of birth, marriage, or apprenticeship to prevent outsiders from becoming a burden on communities which felt no obligation to support them.⁶ Overseers and churchwardens appointed by local justices and parish boards of trustees managed the collection and distribution of funds. The allocation of relief to those in need, whether through money, food, shelter, or work, evolved in local practice over the centuries with little centralized interference from Parliament until rising expenditures (and therefore higher taxes) ignited debates about the causes of poverty and the effects of relief as the industrial age approached.

By 1802, the census produced a rough estimate that those receiving temporary or permanent relief amounted to around ten per cent of the population of England and Wales, seeming to confirm fears that pauperism was rising at a dangerous pace.⁷ Urbanizing parishes which first experienced the cataclysm of industrialization responded to rising population density, changing patterns of unemployment, and stagnating wages with administrative innovation to reduce the number of paupers or decrease expenditure per head, often by making the terms of relief more stringent or punitive. In the East End of London, many parishes obtained Local Acts of Parliament to allow them to modify poor law administration on an individual basis. Charities also proliferated to address the specific needs of various vulnerable populations, from abandoned children to reformed prostitutes.⁸ Some rural parishes, experiencing seasonal unemployment, wages below subsistence, and high food prices, instituted unprecedented allowance and work

⁶ Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930*, (Social History in Perspective. New York: Palgrave, 2002), 10.

⁷ Mark Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New," (*The Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 2 (1963): 151-84), 157.

⁸ See Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

schemes to ensure a minimal standard of living, such as the 1795 Speenhamland system in Berkshire.⁹ Commentators and reformers warned that indiscriminate relief only encouraged pauperism by rewarding laziness and replacing wages; some blamed the poor laws for creating more poverty and did not recognize the upheavals of industrialization which contributed to this need. Many policies became more conservative throughout the century, and still costs continued to rise. After several reform proposals and parliamentary investigations, the New Poor Law was enacted in 1834 to restrict the terms of relief given to able-bodied paupers under the more centralized authority of the Poor Law Commissioners and local Boards of Guardians.

The historiography of the poor laws is almost as old as the legislation itself. Reformers from each century cast their proposals as historical narratives, though their assessments of the poor laws were rarely objective. More systematic analyses emerged in the early twentieth century, when Beatrice and Sidney Webb characterized the history of the poor laws as a history of class relations, “a record of the collective and public relations between them.”¹⁰ As members of the Fabian society and advocates for working-class politics and collective bargaining, the Webbs turned poor law historiography on its head by rejecting top-down, administrative histories in favor of plebeian politics. Their analysis was therefore rooted in the argument that the initial goal and ultimate function of the Old Poor Law were not the alleviation of poverty, but the suppression of peasant revolt. The Webbs attributed the “remarkable immunity of England for four centuries from any effective rebellion or drastic revolution” to the Poor Law’s narrow success in meeting the bare needs of subsistence for agricultural and then industrial workers, and concurrently in regulating both behavior and ideology to prevent poverty from breeding violent

⁹ George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁰ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act, Part 1, The Old Poor Law*. (London: Longmans, Green and, co., 1927), vi.

discontent.¹¹ Their work noted the rise of radicalism in workers' movements with satisfaction, anticipating their own involvement with collective bargaining and reform movements, and their growing sympathy with revolutionary tactics. The apparent contradiction between the Webbs' characterization of the anti-political function of the poor laws and their celebration of the political responses of working-class consciousness is due to their own political and economic motivations, but is also appropriate given their analysis of the contradictory and paradoxical functions of the Poor Law itself.

E.P. Thompson continued this focus on class relations in *The Making of the English Working Class* and its study of the processes which fueled the formation of class consciousness between 1790 and 1830. Thompson reasserted a "cataclysmic" view of the Industrial Revolution and emphasized the profound changes to economy and society which destroyed traditional relationships of community and made way for new definitions of solidarity.¹² Though for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the working classes were denied voting rights without possession of substantial property, Thompson argued that the productive relations between employee and employer determined class experience, and thence common political organization.¹³ Industrial production involved more transparent forms of exploitation through the vast acquisition of wealth by capitalists, distant both socially and economically from their own workers. Thompson contrasted his analysis with those of other twentieth-century historians which took the positive advances of industrialization as the almost inevitable goal of society, ignoring the reactions and opinions of historical actors themselves and the concurrent misery, uncertainty, and resistance of working-class populations during the painful transition. Although

¹¹ Webb and Webb, 404.

¹² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1963), 444.

¹³ Thompson, 9.

disagreeing with Thompson on the strength and pervasiveness of working-class consciousness, Gertrude Himmelfarb similarly criticized the “whig fallacy” of historians who imposed linear views of progress on history without acknowledging or exploring ambiguity and regression.¹⁴ The “idea of poverty” was never monolithic or consistent in interpretation and policy, as Himmelfarb’s work shows.

Both Thompson and the Webbs also discussed poverty and class consciousness in Darwinian terms. The “struggle for existence” in a competitive, free market economy occurred not just among individuals, but between classes. Charles Darwin himself was influenced by Thomas Malthus and his essay on the effects of overpopulation among the poor, despite Malthus’ own denial of the possibility of progress arising from this competition for resources.¹⁵ The Webbs pondered whether the failures of the poor laws could have been avoided and the poor left to struggle on their own in the “survival of the fittest.”¹⁶ Yet this question revealed the importance of their conclusion about the function of the poor laws: in the unmitigated survival of the fittest, no class could be immune from the effects of competition. Without the poor laws, more people may have experienced destitution or death from hunger and disease, but these experiences may also have ignited the anger and revealed the power of the working classes against the apathy of their employers. But in the midst of this class conflict, expressed as a biological as well as sociological fact, both the Webbs and Thompson found elements of older paternalist relationships. Thompson argued that paternalist feeling was not always condescending, and that once social conscience was reawakened, upper-class humanitarians

¹⁴ Himmelfarb, 7.

¹⁵ Himmelfarb, 128. Malthus argued that there was a “limit to improvement” in both animal breeding and human population, always resulting in the same negative checks on human birth and death in accordance with the limited availability of resources.

¹⁶ Webb and Webb, 402.

advocated for and with working-class interests.¹⁷ The Webbs recognized local variations in poor relief practice which allowed parish officials to be more generous to some individual instances of need, and further argued that much of the responsibility for controlling behaviors was transferred to industrial employers, allowing parish authorities to be more benevolent.¹⁸

An important interjection in this historiography of class consciousness is Joan Wallach Scott's essay on "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*." Scott criticized Thompson's awkward treatment of gender in his narrative, such as when he argued that working-class women expressed their radicalism through nostalgia for a "golden" past of domesticity.¹⁹ Thompson's emphasis on a completely unified class identity left little room for individual diversity or even gender equity. Scott argued that this narrow definition of political consciousness excluded women because Thompson's conception of industrial exploitation denied that domestic spaces could also be creators of collective political identity.²⁰ Of course, poor women were increasingly working outside the home, and were further disadvantaged by lower wages and restricted opportunities, but Thompson portrayed female political organization as subsidiary to or less successful than male leaders and movements. Gender could not feature in traditional working-class histories because it challenged teleological conceptions of unity and the reification of class identity, and because these narratives cast feminist movements as privileged pastimes of the middle class.²¹ Scott suggested that historians should view both class and gender

¹⁷ Thompson, 343-4. "Whenever the traditionalist Tory passed beyond reflective argument about the factory system, and attempted to give vent to his feelings in action, he found himself forced into an embarrassing alliance with trade unionists or working-class Radicals."

¹⁸ Webb and Webb, 417; 422.

¹⁹ Thompson, 416.

²⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 79.

²¹ Scott, 79-80. "Work, in the sense of productive activity, determined class consciousness, whose politics were rationalist; domesticity was outside production, and it compromised or subverted class consciousness often in alliance with (religious) movements whose mode was 'expressive.'"

as connected, constructed, and culturally specific identities with varieties of formation, expression, and interpretation.

My study seeks to explore these themes in a focused setting and unique context: poverty in early industrial London. The parishes of the East End were in many ways exceptional, to the extent that the Poor Law Commissioners considered exempting London from the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834,²² but the city was a symbolic focus and practical laboratory for the debates and reforms of poor relief. The early industrial period, 1750 to 1850, is bisected by the 1834 New Poor Law, and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before this national change are an important transitional time for British economy, society, and poverty. The pressures which motivated the changes of the New Poor Law were gathering for decades before, and more extensive poor law histories, from the Webbs to the present, have tended to miss some of the nuance and local variation of this period, or have accepted 1834 as a turning point without exploring continuity and change on either side of the event. The movement of recent poor law historiography to use previously untapped parish records and other sources to look at history from the bottom up encourages this kind of local focus to explore case studies and small details in connection to larger trends. My sources – the minute books, correspondence, and accounts housed in the London Metropolitan Archives – are not all truly plebeian in being able to explore pauper perspectives and agency in their own words, but I approach them with the analytical framework of class and gender history.

Together, these chapters extend Thompson's mechanism of class consciousness to the places and people associated with the Poor Law: just as exploitative productive relations fueled

²² David R. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870*, (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 19.

antagonistic redefinitions of class interests, so too did restrictive and punitive interactions with parish authorities contribute to working-class identity. This perspective also creates opportunity to explore the intersection of class and gender as poor women, mothers, and wives sought relief for themselves and their families. The parish and charity sources from this period show an increasing concern with control over the thoughts and behaviors of paupers, and administrative involvement in the lives of vulnerable populations to assert class and gender hierarchies. These policy and ideology shifts responded to the uncertainty and upheaval of industrialization by seeking to reaffirm social and economic order according to the interests of authority.

Chapter One has the closest access to the responses of paupers themselves through their letters to parish overseers requesting nonresident relief and their developing strategies of negotiation and petition. Parishes struggled to balance financial calculations and to assert control over distance, while these pauper letters reflect the accumulation of collective knowledge which is deployed against those authorities. Chapter Two focuses on the treatment and education of children, comparing the strategies and priorities of parishes and the London Foundling Hospital as shifting conceptions of the future of work and society focused on the malleability of childhood. The Hospital and surrounding parishes differed in their assessment of new industrial opportunities versus traditional modes of education and apprenticeship. Chapter Three examines the institutions most emblematic of the New Poor Law, workhouses, as developed by London parishes long before 1834 in response to the financial and cultural pressures of urban change. While acting on fears of fraud and immorality among paupers, parish records reveal that, on the contrary, the administration countenanced the most mismanagement, at the expense of workhouse inmates. The themes of working class identity, gender hierarchy, pauper negotiation, and administrative response are explored and developed in these three different settings. At its

heart, each chapter seeks to connect analyses of long term and large scale trends to the stories of individuals and communities which are the most compelling narratives of history.

Chapter 1: “It is a thing omitted which is absolutely my due:” Pauper Letters to Early Industrial London

The layers of dust caking collections of pauper letters reveal the years that these documents have gone untouched by historians. Despite a historiography that stretches back to the years of the poor laws themselves, studies of poverty in England have often relied on clerical sources to write an administrative and political history of the institution, and the experiences of the poor themselves have only recently begun to figure in those bird’s eye narratives. Peeling back each page of a letter reveals the words painstakingly written within, perhaps for the first time since they were neatly folded in the drawer of some parish overseer or clerk. If these documents are windows into the lives of the poor, the glass is often obscured by time and limited in perspective; one letter alone cannot tell us everything about individual experience or administrative change. In the midst of top-down histories of the Industrial Revolution and the poor laws, it is careful attention to the individual manifestation of broad averages of experience that will rescue these lives “from the enormous condescension of posterity.”¹ Letters preserved in the London Metropolitan Archives from paupers requesting relief outside of their parish of settlement provide opportunities to view the process of industrialization as one in which the poor and the poor laws played an important part. These letters reveal both a savvy understanding of legal and rhetorical strategies, and a growing resentment of the unequal distribution of industrial benefits and burdens, mediated by gender as well as class. Tension between the decisions of parish officers and the demands of petitioning paupers contributed to the formation of working-

¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1963), 12.

class consciousness and played a vital role in motivating the changes made by the New Poor Law in 1834. If, as E.P. Thompson argued, the dominant experience of the Industrial Revolution was “cataclysmic” in its changes to work, tradition, and quality of life, these letters to London reveal the day-to-day manifestations of that experience and the growing consciousness of an exploited class.²

Due to the parochial basis of administration under the Old Poor Law, most pauper interactions with the system would have been through face-to-face meetings with committees, overseers, and clerks, the officials responsible for keeping records of those meetings, to establish their place of settlement and need for relief. In order to prevent vagrants or destitute migrants from becoming burdensome to the ratepayers of a community which felt no obligation to support them, the 1662 Act of Settlement established the basis for determining where a pauper legally belonged and had claim to parish support, even after years of residence elsewhere. Until 1795, the law allowed overseers not only to send away the nonresident paupers who applied for relief, but also to preemptively remove recent arrivals whom they deemed “likely to be chargeable” to the parish at some future date.³ Examinations of paupers to determine their legal settlement must have included some details of their life histories in addition to the remembrance of dates and places of birth, marriage, apprenticeship, or tenancy; however, parish records often preserve only the bare minimum of these statements in a formulaic deposition signed by the presiding officers, with a space for the pauper to make their own mark, signature, or initial attesting to the truth of their account.⁴

² Thompson, 444.

³ Anthony Brundage, *The English Poor Laws, 1700-1930*, (Social History in Perspective. New York: Palgrave, 2002), 10.

⁴ Settlement Examinations, 1758-1764, St. Leonard, Shoreditch Trustees, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), P91/LEN/1200, London, UK.

Although the laws of settlement solidified the principles of collective responsibility for the poor based on their membership in a local community, the seeds of industrialization were disrupting these paternalist relationships by the mid-eighteenth century. Changing patterns of landownership from subsistence farming to tenantry created a large class of rural laborers accustomed to wage labor and not tied to the land, ready to participate in new forms of manufacture.⁵ Adam Smith criticized the restrictive nature of the settlement laws as not only detrimental to the free mobility of labor necessary for economic growth, but also in “evident violation of natural liberty and justice,”⁶ or as later commentators would put it, making parishes “the gaols of their own poor people.”⁷ The Old Poor Law established parishes’ obligation for the maintenance of the poor and vulnerable members of a community, but in upsetting this system, migration revealed the difficulty of defining entitlement by membership to a locality rather than by the national laws which governed citizens or the natural ones which governed humanity. Looking back on the poor laws during another round of twentieth-century reforms, Beatrice and Sidney Webb characterized the settlement laws as a “Framework of Repression” which treated poverty like a public nuisance to be swept away rather than an experience of citizens who had a right to public support.⁸ Not just restriction of movement, but the forced removal of the alien poor were constituent parts of the Poor Law’s demand for obedience and submission in exchange for relief.

⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire; the Making of Modern English Society, 1750 to the Present Day*. (1st American ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 24.

⁶ Quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1984), 61.

⁷ David R. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870*. (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 3.

⁸ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act, Part 1, The Old Poor Law*. (London: Longmans, Green and, co., 1927), 407.

Though established in the seventeenth century, the power to remove nonresident paupers and potential paupers became more important to growing industrial cities in the second half of the eighteenth century. Migrants from the country who could not find work, or contributed to increased demand on relief expenditure during trade downturns, could be returned to their rural parishes and prevented from becoming a long-term burden on the urban ones. But industrial circumstances also complicated this solution, as overseers understood that economic cycles could create temporary need for relief which could be better provided in situ and would save the trouble and expense of sending paupers back to rural parishes which themselves had fewer employment opportunities and low agricultural wages.⁹ For the rapidly growing parishes in and around London, the wholesale removal of a large number of nonresident paupers to settlements as far away as Ireland would have been a hugely expensive and ineffective way of dealing with rising poverty rates; thus rural and urban parishes developed informal agreements to establish nonresident relief without the cost and trouble of removal.¹⁰ The parish troubled with a nonresident pauper would allow them to stay and receive a short or long term allowance, and then send the bill to their parish of settlement, forming what has been described as a “system of parochially funded labor migration.”¹¹ This practice, and the increasing movement of workers associated with the Industrial Revolution, created a whole new set of documents through which to view the administration and experience of the poor laws: letters from paupers to overseers requesting, negotiating, pleading, and demanding nonresident relief. Though the letters which survive have been gathering dust in archives for centuries, it is only in the last few decades that

⁹ George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 257.

¹⁰ Green, 37.

¹¹ Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe, *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 130.

studies of these collections have unearthed the agency of the poor out of the depths of poor law historiography, to emphasize their own understanding of the laws and their relationship to them.

In particular, the collections of letters from Essex, edited by Thomas Sokoll, and from Kirkby Lionsdale, used by James Stephen Taylor, Lynn Hollen Lees and others, have led scholars to develop a new methodology to discuss and analyze the voices which they preserve.¹² Far from accepting every statement at face value, scholars have tried to situate these letters in the conversations which they originally formed, considering the persuasions, exaggerations, and strategies which colored the accounts of poor petitioners and the likely response of their audience, and further redefining conceptions of voice and authorship in the context of a semiliterate community. Handwriting itself becomes a subject for discussion, as changes in a letter or a series of letters can reflect a plural participation in its writing which is unacknowledged in the text. Scholars have also recognized the similar language and rhetoric used by many pauper letters imitating the formal style of petition to ask for the merciful consideration of the overseers.¹³ These letters sought to appeal to a narrative in which relief was granted by enlightened and discriminating officers to the most deserving and industrious paupers. But any collection of these documents also contains examples of more direct letters asserting the authors' expectation to receive parochial support which they consider their right, based on their settlement, status, illness, or unemployment.

¹² See James Stephen Taylor, "Voices in the Crowd: The Kirkby Lionsdale Township Letters 1809-36" and Thomas Sokoll, "Old Age in Poverty: The Record of Essex Pauper Letters 1780-1834," in *Chronicling Poverty*; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³ Peter Jones and Stephen King, "Obligation Entitlement and Dispute: Navigating the English Poor Laws 1600-1900," in Peter Jones and Steven King, *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*, (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

These examples complicate the simple exchange between petitioner and petitioned, such as a letter from Mary Russell to her husband which was delivered to the overseer of the parish of St. Saviour, Southwark enclosed in another letter from his employer, John Murray. Russell's original missive was calculated to both exhort a reply from the absent spouse and appeal to the pity of a larger audience, as she threatened, "if you do not send me an answer immediately to this I will next Sunday write to your master and the week following I will come down, let the consequences be what ever it may."¹⁴ Though the letter enclosing hers confirmed Mary's worst fears by informing the overseer that her husband "keeps a bad woman in the town instead of remitting his poor dear wife," one suspects that this outcome was intended by Russell from the beginning, and that Murray's comment that he received her letter "by accident" in fact reflected a more contrived plan to garner sympathy and intervention through this "accidental" insight into the struggles of an abandoned wife. This and many other letters to the overseers of London parishes in the LMA collections reveal the tension between a discourse of deservingness propounded by policymakers and administrators, and a distinct language of entitlement and right articulated by the poor themselves. In contrast to many studies of pauper letters which focus on nonresident relief given by rural parishes to their poor who had sought employment in the new industrial cities, the records of St. Saviour, Southwark reflect more complicated patterns of migration between the counties around London, other industrial cities, and more rural parishes, and the decisions made by overseers and committees already burdened by the urban poor.

Paupers who petitioned by letter did not have the advantage of displaying their physical distress to parish overseers in person, but could assert their lawful settlement, legitimate need, and shrewd understanding of the comparative cost of removal in often blunt terms. Overseer

¹⁴ Mary Russell to husband, January 15, 1826, LMA P92/SAV/2353.

Henry Curtis wrote from West Wycombe in Buckinghamshire to the parish officers of St. Saviour complaining of the behavior of George Brown, who made Curtis “much displeased at his dragging his five little children down here” as physical proof of their distress, but went on to say that he had given Brown £2 and would do more on reply from St. Saviour.¹⁵ Through different means but similar motivation John Field sought to impress the need of his family on the minds of the St. Saviour overseers when he wrote: “I am compelled in justice to my family to make this application which I pray may not be in vain as for this six months we have had nothing but a little straw to lie on with one old blanket between myself, wife, and the three children.”¹⁶ Though this vivid illustration of poverty still excites compassion, it may have been consciously calculated to do so by employing some poetic license. If we cannot uncritically accept this picture as absolute truth, neither can we dismiss it as empty exaggeration, but rather acknowledge the function of such details of poverty in asserting the immediate need of the petitioner, and appealing to the humanity of his audience.

Such petitions not only emphasized the destitution of the pauper’s family and their inability to obtain the basic necessities of life from a limited wage or temporary unemployment, but also sought to establish the author as an industrious and sober worker, the victim of unfortunate circumstances, and morally deserving of parish support. In this mission, petitions were often supplemented by notes from employers, overseers, or clergymen attesting to the character and veracity of the pauper. The St. Saviour collection includes several such interventions on behalf of widows, made both vulnerable and deserving by their status as single women. A letter ostensibly written from the dictation of Jane Simpson in October of 1828

¹⁵ Henry Curtis to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, November 22, 1831, LMA P92/SAV/2359.

¹⁶ John Fields letter to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, February 3, 1829, LMA, P92/SAV/2356.

obviously benefited from all the eloquence which her scribe the schoolmaster could add to the petition when it pleaded, “the intelligence that you had the reduction of my pay in contemplation has been a cause of very great grief to me since my health and the want of employment preclude the possibility of making up for the reduction.”¹⁷ Though written in the first person and signed in her name, the writing throughout is in the sophisticated language and hand of J.H. Brook, with the only sign of Jane’s own participation in the composition perhaps marked by the thick line added under her name. Despite the force of Brook’s eloquence in the voice of Simpson asking the overseers to “take into deliberate consideration my pitiable case and believe your truly deserving servant, who supplicates for herself and unfortunate children,” and another letter on her behalf from the Stockport overseer attesting to her distress, no appeal could reverse the decision of the St. Saviour officers who suspended her payment in June, 1829. The Stockport overseer alluded to layoffs of factory operatives in the greater Manchester area and recommended that they “resume payment a little longer – say another year, and then we think you might take it off with propriety.” Nevertheless, the overseers still resolved and noted in the letter’s margin that “no further payment be made to Jane Simpson.”¹⁸ Despite everything that had been done to assert her deference, deservingness, and distress by a multitude of educated male authorities, the demands of efficiency and economy could be capricious in their treatment of paupers, and Jane Simpson was forced to either make do on her own, or return to London.

In contrast, the success of Caleb Thomas and his benefactors in successfully petitioning against the withdrawal of his allowance reveals the extremes of language to which letter-writers resorted in their desperate struggle for subsistence. Writing on behalf of Thomas, an officer of

¹⁷ Jane Simpson to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, October 4, 1828, LMA P92/SAV/2355.

¹⁸ J. Halton to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, June 30, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2356.

his parish in South Wales suggested that, “if the gentlemen of the committee were to see him and to know the very distressed circumstances he is in, they would rather be induced to increase his rate than to lower it, much less to take off the whole of it.”¹⁹ Here old age was another consideration for overseers to be more generous in relief, although in reducing costs the officers of St. Saviour might have sought to encourage family members to take responsibility for their father’s support. William Lenes’ letter stating the distress of the family was not less eloquent than the expression of Thomas himself following another contemplated reduction of his allowance in 1829. Thomas expressed surprise at the reversal of his fortunes in language which offered a soft rebuke to overseers who perhaps made financial decisions without considering the human consequences, but he did not remonstrate with them long before saying, “now I prostrate self and family before your sublime compassion to protect me from falling into deeper calamity.”²⁰ Consistency in handwriting suggests that Thomas either wrote the letter himself or had a long-term proxy to act as scribe, but regardless these words were successful, and another letter of petition crossed paths in the post with a reply granting him two shillings and sixpence per week. What determined the different fates of Caleb Thomas and Jane Simpson? Writing in the same year, employing the same strategy of humility in their petitions, supported by character references from local authorities, their formula was not always successful. There were many factors contributing to the overseers’ decisions, including knowledge and circumstances which are not reflected in the surviving written record. Though statements made on behalf of paupers by the overseers of their current parishes often encouraged generosity, those officers could afford to be liberal in their recommendations because they were not the ones responsible for paying those allowances out of local poor rates. Ultimately the decision lay in the hands of the St.

¹⁹ William Lenes to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, March 31, 1824, LMA P92/SAV/2352.

²⁰ Caleb Thomas to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, June 27, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2356.

Saviour officers, and both the strength and weakness of these petitions were in their subjective appeal to the claims of sympathy and compassion which were so prone to variation.

The strategies of these paupers might also have been foiled by the opposing stratagems of overseers themselves. Parish officers often decided to purge both outdoor and nonresident relief rolls in an effort to reduce perceived dependency or symbolically assert their discretionary power over these types of relief, even if this only temporarily decreased expenditure and the same paupers quickly regained their pensions and allowances.²¹ A letter from the vestry clerk of Cheshunt, just north of London, informed the overseer of St. Saviour that “it being the intention of our parish officers to discontinue granting relief to paupers out of the parish, I have to request you will from and after the 24th next advance no further pay to Wackett and family...if they cannot do without assistance they must come into the workhouse.”²² This decision was calculated to force paupers to weigh their poverty against the prospect of returning to their parish and entering the workhouse, and to encourage the able-bodied to support themselves. It may also have effectively threatened the subsistence of families and individuals where low wages were legitimately insufficient for the necessities of life. When the Trustees of St. George-in-the-East “ordered that all bread be stopped delivering to persons from this house after this week and those persons who have bread be directed to apply to the next board at this place,” they required a face-to-face meeting with long-term recipients of even this most humble pittance, and reinforced the relationship between the committee and the pauper through their expectations of obedience, deference, and respectable appearance.²³ The wholesale withdrawal of relief, not necessarily in

²¹Jones and King, 9.

²² Henry Crawler to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, June 13, 1833, LMA P92/SAV/2363.

²³ St. George-in-the-East Trustees Minutes, September 8, 1790, LMA P93/GEO/090.

response to particular instances of fraud or consistent policy change, was a strategy to remind the poor of the authority of parish officers and the precarity of outdoor relief practices.

Efforts to reduce expenditure reflected late eighteenth-century anxieties about the unintended economic consequences of the poor laws, but the relative generosity of relief sought by these petitions recalled mid-century optimism about the possibility of economic progress. In contrast to the idea of a limited “wage fund” divided among workers, Smith’s doctrine of high wages suggested that the proceeds of industrialization could be enjoyed by all levels of society, and that well-paid workers would further contribute to economic productivity.²⁴ Many pauper petitions came from families with several wage-earners whose combined incomes were still below subsistence, and policies like nonresident relief and the often-cited Speenhamland system allowed the subsidization of low wages to contribute to general welfare and productivity.²⁵ Humble petitions appealed to the feelings of sympathy which directed market interactions just as much as self-interest in Smith’s moral economy.²⁶ When Thomas Hawkins asked for relief to support his family outside the workhouse, so that “the decline of my life may not be embittered by a cruel separation from my family,” he not only elicited compassion from the high-born for the suffering of the lowly, but also spoke to the empathy of shared humanity between husbands and fathers of all classes.²⁷ The poor laws had established the responsibility of government towards its poor citizens, and paupers often took it upon themselves to remind parish officers of their obligation by appealing to the moral ties which bound together members of a parish. By

²⁴ Himmelfarb, 52; see also A. W. Coats, "Changing Attitudes to Labour in the Mid-Eighteenth Century," (*Economic History Review* 11, no. 1 (1958): 35-51).

²⁵ Mark Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New," (*The Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 2 (1963): 151-84), 152. The “Speenhamland counties” in the agricultural south east were called after the parish in Berkshire which enacted a policy supplementing low wages with relief relative to the price of bread and size of family.

²⁶ Himmelfarb, 47.

²⁷ Thomas Hawkins to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, [n.d.], LMA P92/SAV/2362.

describing their worthy characters and humble distress, petitioners established their dutiful contribution to the community, and indirectly reminded overseers of their own duty which could be as motivated by human sympathy as it was bound by legal settlement. The balance of these claims could shift in an instant, making the assertion of indisputable settlement a vital part of negotiation in the moral economy of the poor.²⁸ When sympathy failed, it was this claim to the obligation of overseers and the entitlement of paupers which characterized their letters.

Extensive studies of pauper letters have emphasized the departure from the simple petitionary form in the late eighteenth century and the many strategies which complicate attempts to categorize or characterize these records.²⁹ It is difficult to trace a consistent change in the style of letters over time, due to both silences in the historical record and high levels of variation between regions and individuals, but a series of letters related to one person or family can demonstrate this evolution within an extended interaction. When Eleanor Chandler first wrote from Birmingham, she told the St. Saviour overseers, “I am sorry I am under the painful necessity of troubling you with this statement of our present affliction and distress” and ended, “your speedy answer and remittance gentlemen will be deemed the greatest favor and received with respectful gratitude by your ever grateful petitioners.”³⁰ With the entire family afflicted with typhus fever, Chandler noted that it had been five years since they had last applied for relief; after receiving no reply and writing again two weeks later, this turned into “seven or eight years since we troubled you before and that was a case of illness and distress.”³¹ Chandler wrote

²⁸ Lees, 79.

²⁹ Jones and King, 65. Sokoll described three types of letters: the “standard epistolary address,” “the straightforward petition,” and the “authentic or orally written pauper letter,” though each style can often be seen at different points in the same letter.

³⁰ Eleanor Chandler to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, February 13, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2354.

³¹ Eleanor Chandler to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, February 24, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2354.

again, and again, having also solicited the intercession of the Birmingham vestry clerk Mr. Bynner to verify the family's illness and need, and he also received no reply.

Finally, a terse letter from Bynner complaining that "to write to parish officers and not get a reply is particularly inconvenient and is seldom the case with London parishes" received an answer (copied on the opposite side of Bynner's letter) that the petitions had been received, "but in consequence of the death of Mr. Courtney late clerk to the overseers, they were mislaid; they have now been laid before the board, who have come to the resolution that the application be not complied with."³² Frustrated, Eleanor Chandler wrote again in language that echoed but subtly undermined the humility of her previous letters, beginning: "I am sorry you oblige me to trouble you again as real necessity compels me as you gave Mr. Bynner no satisfaction in your letter but rather treated him with contempt."³³ Bynner had evidently showed her the reply which he received, since Chandler regretted the death of Mr. Courtney, calling him "a true friend to the deserving poor," a category in which she included herself. She ended with a threat that was another common theme in pauper letters, weighing the cost of immediate relief against the greater trouble of removal, for "if you do not comply with our request before Saturday you may expect to see all our family which will be a far greater expense to you than sending the small trifle we requested." Chandler's letter ended with the same professions of gratitude from "your distressed petitioners," but this final appeal stands out for its confrontational stance borne out of the family's resentment of the apparent disinterest of the St. Saviour officers and the sudden change in policy with the death of Mr. Courtney. Whether consciously choosing a different

³² W. W. Bynner to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers and copy of reply, March 28, 1829, LMA P92/SAV/2356.

³³ Eleanor Chandler to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, April 13, 1829.

rhetorical style or simply venting her anger and desperation, Chandler's letter reflects a more assertive and less deferential strain in the interactions between paupers and overseers.

The prevalence of female voices in the examples explored thus far is significant because of the potential importance of settlement in the lives of poor women, whether married or single. Of 149 letters in the St. Saviour collection, 57.7 per cent were written by, on behalf of, or regarding women. Lynn Lees and Pamela Sharpe have argued that settlement represented a form of intangible property, especially from the view of the poor themselves.³⁴ Assertion of settlement in a parish could also function as an assertion of entitlement to some form of relief, whether in money, in kind, or in the workhouse. Women could also appeal to the balance of domestic duties and wage labor, as when Sophia Matthews complained that "I have never been able to earn a halfpenny since I came here on account of the child's illness."³⁵ While support for unemployed, able-bodied men could seem like an unpardonable disincentive to labor, wives and mothers could cite traditional expectations for women's domesticity to receive relief in aid of or replacing insufficient wages. The cases of Eleanor Chandler and Sophia Matthews show women assuming responsibility for their families while their husbands fade into the background; emphasizing their feminine vulnerability and domestic struggles drew attention away from the apparent failure of their husbands to provide for the family. Yet for these married women, settlement was determined by their husbands' status, so their petitions for relief reflect an active effort to understand and assert their legal rights in a complicated web of obligation and discretion.

³⁴ Lees, 29; Pamela Sharpe, "Parish Women: Maternity and the Limitations of Maiden Settlement," in Jones and King, *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws*, 172.

³⁵ Sophia Matthews to St. Saviour overseers, November 14, 1827, LMA P92/SAV/2354.

Although Beatrice and Sidney Webb later criticized the Old Poor Law for establishing relief as an obligation on the part of the parish rather than a right of the poor as residents and citizens, pauper letters reveal the ways in which the poor reinterpreted the spirit of the law in light of the Act of Settlement.³⁶ These laws together established a system of “dual inequalities” as paupers were placed on the lowest ranks of society and those without settlement were even further marginalized by having no place in that society at all.³⁷ William Beale, writing from another parish in Southwark, exposed the strategic negotiations of the settlement laws undertaken by the nonresident poor: “knowing that the small parishes in the city are better for those who are obliged to seek relief from them than it is possible for so extensive a one as St. Saviour’s to be, I was induced at Christmas last to take a house...I shall fail in the attempt to gain a settlement unless I can get some assistance.”³⁸ Despite protesting his reluctance and regret at having to petition the parish for relief, Beale’s ultimate object was to secure a safety net for the future through settlement in another parish.

The ability before 1795 for parishes to remove newcomers on suspicion that they were likely to become chargeable rested on the question of their morality as well as of their legal standing.³⁹ Migrants were tainted by the associations of vagrancy and illegitimacy, appearing outside of the knowledge and observation of the parish. Even living in an area for many years did not automatically achieve settlement without the accident of birth or the contracts of apprenticeship or rent, making knowledge and communication of their legal settlement all the more important when poor people came to seek relief from the parish. This also underscores the

³⁶ Webb and Webb, 406.

³⁷ Lees, 39.

³⁸ W. Beale to St. Saviour overseers, November 21, 1831, LMA P92/SAV/2359.

³⁹ David Feldman, "Migrants, Immigrants and Welfare from the Old Poor Law to the Welfare State," (*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (2003): 79-104), 87.

importance of testimonies to character and industry in pauper letters which distanced them from the suspicion of immorality; single women petitioning for nonresident relief could emphasize their vulnerability to gain the sympathy of overseers, but they also had to avoid associations of prostitution or illegitimacy with movement outside their parish. The settlement laws were one of the mechanisms by which parish officers could exercise oversight and control over the behavior of the poor based on their status as potential paupers. Yet in contrast, there are also examples of relief enshrined in law notwithstanding immorality or even criminality. Despite all efforts by parish officials to intimidate, punish, or remove unwed mothers before the birth of illegitimate children, bastardy laws commanded the responsibility of the parish for the maintenance of such children if their paternity could not be determined.⁴⁰ Thus Grace Buckley could complain shamelessly about delay in the payment of an allowance for her illegitimate child because “it is a thing omitted which is absolutely my due,” without the ceremony of humility and petition,⁴¹ and the St. Saviour overseers could allow relief to the family of John Dyson during his imprisonment and after his transportation to Australia for embezzlement.⁴²

Another strategy of overseers to prevent the availability of relief from encouraging pauperism and vice was to make relief conditional on work for the parish in or out of the workhouse. But this restriction could be perceived by paupers as unfairly exploiting their labor and shirking the parish responsibility for the destitute. In 1831, William Bowder wrote to St. Saviour regarding a former servant: “the bearer, Benjamin Perry, is not able to perform the labour of a horse to which you wish to put him. He is entitled to relief from his parish and if it is not given I shall bring his case before the public as well as that of Thomas Jackson who was

⁴⁰ Brundage, 15.

⁴¹ Grace Buckley to St Thomas, Southwark overseers, April 1824, LMA P71/TMS/813.

⁴² Isaac Jackson to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, May 4, 1833, LMA P92/SAV/2363.

brought to his grave by the treatment of those whose duty it is to protect the poor.”⁴³ This striking intervention summarized the resentment of the poor when faced with conditions placed on their relief, and it is all the more significant coming from a third party who both took responsibility for Perry on himself and displaced that responsibility onto the parish. Against an interpretation of the poor laws as a tool to prevent the destitute from becoming a public nuisance, Bowder argued that the parish had a duty, and paupers had the right, to support and protection from the casualties and exploitation of the market. The ill treatment of paupers doing work for the parish, such as street cleaning, ditch digging, or stone breaking, would be damning evidence of the abuse of parish power to extract profit from the unpaid labor of the poor. This perception anticipated the criticism of workhouses under the New Poor Law as places for incarcerating innocent people for the crime of being poor.⁴⁴

Historical controversy about the general impact of the settlement laws dates back to Adam Smith himself. While some scholars have argued that parishes selectively applied the settlement laws to regulate immigration of the poor, others have contended that there is little evidence to suggest that the healthy state of migration necessary for industrial growth was impeded by these policies.⁴⁵ The practices of nonresident relief and the existence of pauper letters show that poor people still moved to the cities, between cities, and back to the country, but they also show that knowledge of the settlement laws was an ever present consideration in these interactions. However many people moved across them, parish boundaries under the settlement laws remained structurally and significantly similar to international boundaries governed by

⁴³ W. Bowder to St. Saviour, Southwark overseers, July 21, 1831, LMA P92/SAV/2359.

⁴⁴ Webb and Webb, 415.

⁴⁵ See Norma Landau, “The Laws of Settlement and the Surveillance of Immigration in Eighteenth-Century Kent,” (*Continuity and Change* 3, no. 3 (1988): 391–420) and K. D. M. Snell, “Pauper Settlement and the Right to Poor Relief in England and Wales,” (*Continuity and Change* 6, no. 3 (1991): 375–415).

immigration law.⁴⁶ There are striking echoes between the settlement laws and the policies of today's governments attempting to control the movement of vulnerable people across borders by restricting their access to public support, and by placing the burden of their maintenance on their place of origin. The United States has a long history of limiting the immigration of individuals and groups deemed likely to become a "public charge" in order to define belonging and citizenship in terms of class and race; the settlement laws were an early application of this ideology on the local level.

As migration disrupted the local basis of identity, protracted interaction with the poor laws contributed to the development of a more general working-class identification. As far as statistics can be estimated, around 10 percent of the population of England and Wales was in receipt of relief in some form during the Napoleonic Wars.⁴⁷ Much like the poverty line today, this estimate also masks the movement in and out of pauperism by laborers living on the edge of subsistence. A significant portion of the working-class population therefore had at least passing experience with the working of the poor laws, and the recurring strategies reflected in pauper letters reveal the acquisition of collective knowledge among the poor. Paupers who used the threat of removal as an argument for nonresident relief not only knew the formal and informal policies of the poor laws, but also understood the financial motivations of overseers weighing the cost of removal with temporary relief. This knowledge reflected the acceptance of poor relief as a fact of life instead of a last resort, and contributed to a growing unease among administrators and policymakers about the creation of dependence and pauperization. Pauper status was no longer a source of shame as it was when Mary Lovett wished "it should be kept a secret about

⁴⁶ Feldman, 81.

⁴⁷ Green, 28.

her coming from the workhouse” to her new employers.⁴⁸ Joseph Townsend (among so many others) argued that even deterrent policies had the effect of extending relief to the most undeserving, as “the worthless and the impudent would not regard it; the modest would sooner die.”⁴⁹ Paupers who asserted their right to relief as a matter of course could seem to overseers to fall into this category of laziness and vagrancy. Even the humblest of petitions, couched in the same language as many other appeals, could make the recipient suspicious of fraud and false pretenses, especially in the context of urban struggles with keeping track of relief recipients in a crowd of parishes and paupers.⁵⁰

These two concerns – that the poor laws were creating pauperism and were subject to rampant fraud – were major motivators of the reforms proposed by the Poor Law Commissioners’ Report in 1834. Although the commissioners, including Edwin Chadwick and Nassau Senior, recognized the expense and trouble caused by the laws of settlement, their final recommendations did not propose abolishing the laws to fully centralize the basis of relief, preferring to keep them as a necessary evil in the administration of local government.⁵¹ Pressures from ratepayers and policymakers to reduce relief expenditures had long been moving parish officers to purge pension lists and develop the “workhouse test” to gauge the true distress of petitioners. While the New Poor Law did not abolish outdoor relief outright, pension and allowance policies were limited and circumscribed by what the Webbs deemed “Charity in the grip of Serfdom.”⁵² In their analysis, the poor laws established the bare minimum of support to

⁴⁸ John Hey to St. Thomas, Southwark overseers, August 11, 1834, LMA P71/TMS/808.

⁴⁹ Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, (Second edition. London: printed for C. Dilly, 1787), 69.

⁵⁰ Green, 74.

⁵¹ Himmelfarb, 166. The settlement laws essentially remained in effect until the creation of the welfare state post-WWII. After considering their abolition, the Poor Law commissioners concluded that doing so would be administratively complicated, and that general national control would be open to abuse; Himmelfarb points out that these concerns would have applied to most other aspects of the New Poor Law as well.

⁵² Webb and Webb, 396.

prevent desperation and unrest from fomenting a workers' revolution that would disrupt the acquisition of industrial wealth. But though England did not experience significant or violent revolts, this did not reflect apathy or lack of organization among the working class. The distress and discontent which characterized the two decades after the Napoleonic Wars were not a result of the "revolution of rising expectations" as workers sought to enjoy modern luxuries, but rather a sign of the unequal distribution of the proceeds of industrialization.⁵³ Even when economic cycles recovered from recessions, "cultural lag" preserved memories of the deepest distress and resentment of those perceived to be the cause of it.⁵⁴

The economic relationships of the poor laws themselves established the distinctions of status and right which contributed to the cohesion of working-class consciousness. Pauper letters reveal the articulation of individual rights as workers and citizens defined against the accidents of the market and apathy of employers. Thompson described the industrial economy as an intensification of exploitation,⁵⁵ and the retrenchment and reform of the poor laws was a transparent form of this process. Paupers recognized this as such when their pensions were suddenly stopped, or their appeals for temporary nonresident relief were met with orders of removal and admission to the workhouse. Women are mainly silent bystanders in Thompson's narrative of class consciousness because he did not view the domestic sphere as a site of exploitation which could give rise to political action;⁵⁶ nevertheless, for the many poor women who expressed themselves in these letters, interaction with the poor laws was an experience of exploitation just as much as that of men working in factories and organizing unions. Women's

⁵³ Hobsbawm, 55.

⁵⁴ Himmelfarb, 137.

⁵⁵ Thompson, 198.

⁵⁶ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 74.

understanding of the law and insistence of their settlement and entitlement could be profound political statements. Pauper letters reflect this strand of class consciousness and a concurrent construction of gender identity both in the home and in industrial workplaces. Gender comprises an additional triple inequality for paupers, as women without support or settlement could be at the same time deserving objects of relief and tainted by suspicions of prostitution or illegitimacy. These women who took responsibility for their families' support did not look wistfully back to a pre-industrial domestic Eden as much as they continued to participate in a labor market moving from cottage industry to factory wages.

Thus, Thompson's analysis of working-class consciousness can be extended to apply to domestic spaces and family dynamics through women's interactions with the poor laws. Reduction of the poor rates had the effect of raising the profits of local manufacturers,⁵⁷ redirecting the monies which had been so long established as to be considered a right and entitlement by many of the laboring poor. The alarm created by their assertion of that right, both in letters and through acts of resistance in workhouses and at committee meetings,⁵⁸ made parish officers prefer the authority and control of the workhouses over outdoor relief despite the evidently greater cost of supporting indoor paupers. Thomas Malthus himself argued that poverty was a necessary stimulus to labor, so that "hard as it may appear in individual instances, dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful."⁵⁹ Insistent petitions for relief and calls for higher standards of living challenged the characterization of poverty as a natural, inevitable, and necessary state of society. The perceived inhumanity of the New Poor Law would only further

⁵⁷ Boyer, 256.

⁵⁸ Green, 184. It was not uncommon for paupers denied relief to smash windows to gain shelter in prison or create disturbances in the workhouse in order to bring complaints of ill treatment before sympathetic magistrates.

⁵⁹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1798).

contribute to working-class resentment of administrative and industrial elite. No longer able to appeal to a “true friend to the deserving poor,” the paupers of St. Saviour, Southwark were prepared to petition, negotiate, and demand their place in new industrial relations of obligation and entitlement.

Chapter 2: “Designed to be servants of the public:” Children in the London

Foundling Hospital and Eighteenth-Century Urban Parishes

In the summer of 1802, André-Jacques Garnerin, Official Aeronaut of France, was preparing to demonstrate his hot air balloon and canvas parachute in London, having already astounded crowds in Paris.¹ Looking for a suitable location for his public ascension, outside the city center but still convenient for onlookers, Garnerin contacted the Governors of the London Foundling Hospital to request the use of their courtyard, and offered payment of £50 for the favor. Though perhaps an obscure choice for a foreign scientist, the Hospital was by no means unknown to the public, as gentry and gentlemen worshipped in its chapel, ladies visited its wards and workshops, and the city’s poor mothers petitioned for the refuge of their unprotected or unwanted children. However, this proposed opportunity for further publicity and excitement around the charity was rejected by the committee which oversaw the affairs of the Hospital, ordering that “M. Garnerin be informed that the committee cannot accede to his application.”² Garnerin made history in Grosvenor Square instead.

The committee’s minutes record no reason for their refusal; perhaps they were concerned about the management of crowds, or wary of the request from a Frenchman during the fragile Peace of Amiens. Perhaps they were worried about the effect of the demonstration on the 400 children living in the Hospital, some of whom might enter apprenticeships in the navy and fight in the next French wars. The regimented lifestyle, plain uniforms, and humble prospects of the foundlings would have made a stark contrast to the soaring balloon, a symbol of scientific

¹ “André-Jacques Garnerin,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, August 14, 2019.

² Foundling Hospital General Committee Minutes, June 9, 1802, London Metropolitan Archives, A/FH/A/03/002/021, London, UK.

progress and human imagination. The Hospital Governors, like those of many other children's charities, preferred their spectacles to be orderly demonstrations of obedience and simplicity.³ Though the Hospital had saved orphaned, abandoned, and illegitimate children for half a century and provided them with a much higher standard of care than the parish workhouses, the charity was not established to give them aspirations above their station. A hymn presented by Reverend Hewlett for the children to sing in chapel put these pleasing reflections into the mouths of babes:

...Dark on our sinful, dreaded birth,
The day of shame and sorrow rose;
No pleasing hope, no Joy on Earth
Could sooth a Mother's frantic woes...

...To dearest Ties of Kindred dead,
Oh, God! We know no Parents' care,
'Till to Thy Throne of Mercy led,
We found a Father's pity there...⁴

The founders, Governors, and benefactors of the Foundling Hospital were very clear about their mission to redeem children from the poverty or immorality of their parents, and mold them into sober and industrious workers. The alternative was parish care and the workhouse, where infant mortality could be above ninety per cent.⁵ Nevertheless, the underfed, ill-treated, impoverished children growing up in the shadow of the workhouse probably had a better chance to see Monsieur Garnerin's balloon.

³ Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century*, (Family, Sexuality, and Social Relations in past times. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 47. It was common for children from charity schools in London to take part in events to showcase their piety and industry for the benefit of their patrons.

⁴ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, December 19, 1801, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

⁵ Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54. Mortality was especially high for infants born in the workhouse and living in unsanitary conditions there during the first few weeks of their life.

While some politicians and pamphleteers considered the burden of childhood to be rightly placed on the poor parents who bore their children out of lust or imprudence, others began to recognize the environmental conditions of poverty and the possible fruits of intervention during childhood development. These changing conceptions of childhood were not unique to the founders and supporters of the Foundling Hospital, but that institution was distinctive in its practical and ideological treatment of outcast children from infancy through adulthood. The Hospital's policies evolved during the half century after its founding in 1739 to balance judgement with redemption, work with education, and paternalist past with industrial future. Yet both charitable gentlemen and poor law authorities worked within hierarchies of class and gender. Any optimism about the untapped possibilities of childhood was tempered by the dual systems of capitalism and patriarchy.⁶ Far from challenging these inequalities, charities and parishes worked to reinforce social stability in accordance with their own interests in class deference and economic productivity. Acknowledgement of the childhood of the poor and application of gender values to their behavior distanced these authorities from monolithic conceptions of poverty, but also worked to restrict any fluidity in class and gender boundaries. From infancy to education to apprenticeship, paupers and foundlings were reminded of their status and its concomitant expectations. The feelings of the children themselves were often "imagined rather than known" by their elders, who hoped to have taught the right thoughts as well as the right manners.⁷ Government and philanthropic involvement in the lives of poor

⁶ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 86. Scott describes "dual systems" analysis as recognizing the intersections of capitalism and patriarchy and complicating any monolithic view of class or gender as discrete identities.

⁷ Cunningham, 42.

children, though never fully consistent or unified in its approach during the eighteenth century, epitomized institutional commitments to maintaining social order during economic upheaval.

In eighteenth-century industrializing London, these children were potentially potent symbols of society and economy. Scholars have argued that conceptions of childhood shifted during the Enlightenment and were gradually applied to poor as well as rich children towards the end of the eighteenth century.⁸ Childhood became a distinct and privileged state in addition to mere preparation for adulthood, yet the distinctions of class still determined the balance of education, work, and leisure necessary for proper upbringing. Child labor was incorporated increasingly into the industrial market by both manufacturing interests and poor families struggling to make up for stagnating wages.⁹ Children were thus important to the national interest as future workers, consumers of manufactured goods, and net producers for the commonwealth. At the same time, Enlightenment writers like Locke and Rousseau emphasized the innocence and moral potential of children, and advocated education as both a tool for molding model citizens, and a wise investment in future productivity.¹⁰ Even the children of the poor and indigent could be deserving objects of such investment in the form of charity and relief, as a group with needs and possibilities distinct from those of their parents. The Laws of Settlement established parochial obligations to provide relief to adults and children born within the parish, whether in the form of allowances to families or care in the workhouse. Parishes and charities which suspected that increasing levels of poverty were due to the laziness and improvidence of poor adults could turn their attention to the children of paupers in order to

⁸ Cunningham, 5.

⁹ Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, (Cambridge Studies in Economic History. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.

¹⁰ Alysa Levene, *The Childhood of the Poor: Welfare in Eighteenth-century London*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

remove them from such immoral influences. Before Thomas Malthus incited fears of overpopulation, the opposite concern for labor shortages depleted by war and disease focused attention on infant mortality and childhood influences as both social and economic problems.¹¹

The Foundling Hospital was established in 1739 by the zeal of Captain Thomas Coram, who had been collecting support from among the nobility for his petition for a royal charter since 1720.¹² Coram, a retired sea captain and shipwright with philanthropic tendencies, sought to address the too-common sight of abandoned children in the streets of London, victims of persistent poverty and rising illegitimacy.¹³ To save these infants from death by exposure was the immediate consideration; to provide them with better care than parish nurses or the workhouse required comprehensive vision and extensive funding. Built on a large parcel of land in Lamb's Conduit Fields, the Hospital had the resources to admit only a small portion of infants brought to it when reception days were advertised, and apart from the period of General Reception (1756-60) during which the Hospital received parliamentary funding to receive all unwanted children under two months old, the institution grew conservatively to house around 400 children by the end of the century. The surrounding parishes of London resented the burden of orphaned or abandoned children in their care, often trying to transfer it to others by proving the children had legal settlement elsewhere or finding and prosecuting the absconding parents. These foundlings were also tainted by the presumed immorality of their illegitimate birth, making them historically unpopular objects of charity. Nevertheless, Coram's recruitment of respectable, noble, and even royal supporters made his cause a fashionable pastime for London

¹¹ Ruth K. McClure, *Coram's Children: The London Foundling Hospital in the Eighteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 80.

¹² McClure, 28.

¹³ McClure, 33.

society, which shaped the development of the charity's mission and action.¹⁴ On admittance, infants were baptized and given new names, often inspired by Governors, patrons, or historical figures, as well as a serial number for the Hospital records – a symbolic beginning of their new life and a complete separation from their unfortunate mothers. While rhetorically reminding foundlings of their humble status and duty of obedience and gratitude, the Hospital turned shame into spectacle by inviting society to witness baptisms, services, and apprenticeships, gaining financial and ideological support by showcasing the physical proofs of success. It was longstanding Hospital policy that the children were not allowed to receive gifts of money from visiting gentry, lest they “forget the lowness of their station, and their being designed to be the servants of the public in the most laborious offices.”¹⁵

From the beginning, it was the Hospital's policy to send newly received infants who were healthy enough to travel to wet nurses in the country, away from the pollution and disease of the city.¹⁶ The early years of childhood would therefore be spent in more domestic surroundings with nurses almost becoming foster mothers, to the extent that many over the years formed such strong attachments to the children in their care that they petitioned the Hospital to adopt them.¹⁷ Both at nurse and on returning to the Hospital, Foundlings also benefitted from a high standard of medical care for the time. The relative success of this system in reducing infant mortality inspired Jonas Hanway, one of the Hospital Governors, to gather statistics and report on the deadly conditions in urban workhouses, contributing to the Act for the Better Protection of

¹⁴ McClure, 29.

¹⁵ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, January 10, 1814, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

¹⁶ McClure, 47. Before admission, infants were examined by an apothecary for signs of venereal disease and other infectious diseases.

¹⁷ Foundling Hospital General Committee Minutes, May 5, 1802, LMA A/FH/A/03/002/021. Without formal adoption procedures, the Hospital usually sought to ensure the support of these children by apprenticing them to one of the nurse's relatives or other farmers in the area.

Parish Poor Children, or Hanway's Act, which mandated a similar policy of country nursing in 1762.¹⁸ London parish records reveal how Trustees of the Poor struggled to balance these new standards with ratepayer demands to cut costs and reduce the number of paupers as the century progressed.

While many urban parishes shifted practices to address increasing poor relief expenditure, St. Leonard, Shoreditch considered a plan in 1795 put forth by James Saltwell to increase efficiency and savings by keeping children, whether orphaned or with parents in the workhouse, at a separate establishment outside of London. Saltwell calculated that, allowing for the costs of renting a house with garden, furnishings, medical care, and provisions, the parish could save £50 or more per year by caring for children in bulk rather than paying individual nurses two shillings and nine pence per week for 80 children, and caring for 80 more in the workhouse.¹⁹ He criticized the parish nurses for neglecting their charges, saying that: "I have been several times to see them, and always found some either badly clothed, poorly fed and lodged, disordered, or full of vermin." Women with their own children to feed and clothe, meager parish allowances, and limited oversight from parish officials had little motivation to use their wages as intended for the care of pauper children, though the degree of neglect and apathy was often exaggerated.²⁰ Instead, Saltwell suggested that eight new nurses could be chosen from among the "most respectable" women in the Poor House to work for their bed and board, and a gratuity of one shilling per week to encourage diligent care.²¹ In contrast to the careful

¹⁸ Levene, 13.

¹⁹ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, November 27, 1795, LMA P91/LEN/10.

²⁰ Levene, 48.

²¹ It seems unlikely that these women were to serve as wet nurses for approximately 160 children, though the language of Saltwell's report does not distinguish "infants" as nursing babies from "infants" as toddlers. Nor does this proposal clarify whether the new nurses should be mothers themselves or single women – young, unmarried girls in the workhouse might have been associated with prostitution and therefore not deemed fit to care for children.

inspections of country nurses carried out by Foundling Hospital Governors, critics like Hanway had even suggested that some parish officials tacitly encouraged neglect, “not that they ordered them to be killed; but that they did not order such means to be used, as are necessary to keep them alive.”²² If children were seen only as long-term burdens on the parish, there was no reason to invest in their survival.

Saltwell’s plan for St. Leonard acknowledged that money was motivation, and even as he budgeted for more efficient allocation of resources, he argued that equal or even increased spending for poor and orphaned children would benefit the parish. Rather than continuing as burdens on the parish purse, “the children would be much better looked after, better clothed and fed, and by that means would get off your hands, on an average, at least one year sooner.” Healthier children could be put to work spinning, knitting, and picking cotton to offset the costs of their maintenance, would be separated from the immoral influences of adult paupers and vagrants (including, perhaps, their own parents), and would attract better apprenticeships at younger ages. Acknowledging the perennial problem of half-hearted administration by reluctant parish officers, Saltwell suggested that the convenience and aesthetic appeal of this little Eden would encourage the trustees to take a greater interest and “go oftner to see the said children than they now do, which certainly would be of great utility.” Though St. Leonard initially rejected this plan, it was reconsidered five years later when the workhouse population had grown past capacity, and a suitable house was found for the parish to finally contract with the workhouse master Mr. Walton to “farm the children” at three shillings per head per week.²³ This practice of

²² Quoted in Levene, 46.

²³ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, November 14, 1800, LMA P91/LEN/10. St. Leonard frequently chose to “farm the poor” by drawing up contracts for a year or more with a workhouse master who would receive a fixed rate per head and the right to a certain percentage of the profits generated by pauper labor, in addition to money from the sale of their urine.

transferring administration to a third party, while convenient and sometimes cheaper for the parish, was also vulnerable to poor management and abuse, as St. Leonard had already seen in the greed and embezzlement of previous workhouse masters.

These parish reforms, partly inspired by and in tandem with the Foundling Hospital's mission, alluded to the possibility of ending cycles of poverty by molding the characters and abilities of the next generation; children who were kept in good health and taught habits of industry would theoretically gain greater stability as adults and cease to be a burden on the parish. Unlike the Hospital's uninterrupted control of children in their care, parishes might have truncated influence over children moving in and out of the workhouse with parents, and were motivated to relegate responsibility for orphans as soon as possible; yet policies enacted by both bodies reflected an interest in children distinct from criticism of their parents. Some benevolent impulses were checked by rising relief expenditures following stagnating wages, bad harvests, and the Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the century.²⁴ Though children might not be responsible for their poverty, institutional care for them removed the financial and social burden from their parents, whose improvidence and lack of family planning were to blame. Joseph Townsend lamented that honest, industrious farmers had to take the bread from their own children's mouths to feed the paupers: "he would feed them better, but the prodigal must *first* be fed. He would purchase warmer clothing for them, but the children of the prostitute must *first* be clothed."²⁵ Undue preference given to the children of the poor would threaten the moral order of society.

²⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1984), 65.

²⁵ Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws by a Well-wisher to Mankind*, (2nd ed. London: C. Dilly, 1786), 9.

However, as the Hospital Governors' philosophy evolved at the end of the eighteenth century, they expanded their purview from the salvation of infants to the redemption of their mothers.²⁶ It was always implicit in the charity's function that taking in unwanted children would remove the burden of their care and stigma of their birth from unwed mothers, but this effect was gradually codified in practice as the Hospital changed its admissions policies to focus on illegitimate children and seduced or abandoned women. By 1813, instructions to petitioners stipulated that "no woman need apply who previous to her present misfortune, did not bear a good character for virtue, sobriety and honesty."²⁷ Under this policy, women had to prove, through testimony and, if necessary, witnesses, that they had only yielded to their seducers once, on promise of marriage, and were not otherwise known to have encouraged their advances. These regulations were intended to enable unwed mothers, many of whom were domestic servants, to return to their work and regain a degree of respectability, often with the support of their employers. Inquiry into character and circumstance constructed mothers as deserving objects of charity and distanced the Hospital from accusations of supporting or encouraging prostitution. With this moral grounding of their mission, it follows that Hospital education policies were similarly concerned with the characters of their charges.

Pamphleteers argued that too much education would make poor children unfit for the manual labor for which they were destined, or make them unhappy or dissatisfied in their work; some modern scholars have even argued that the isolated and regulated environment of the Hospital ill-prepared foundlings for the realities of urban life when they left to be apprenticed.²⁸ The Governors were always concerned with practical education in suitable work, but further

²⁶ McClure, 143.

²⁷ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, July 30, 1813, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

²⁸ McClure, 219; 243.

implemented curricula and teaching methods beyond the standard of working-class learning. These differences in educational attainment were partly a function of time, since poor families generally could not afford to send their children to school for long, uninterrupted terms, and those in the workhouse might be moving in and out of the institution. Education represented both monetary and opportunity costs for families who could not afford to give up children's current earnings for the delayed benefits of literacy.²⁹ Similarly, even in parishes which employed a schoolmaster for the workhouse, education could be construed as idleness. Parishes sought to turn pauper labor to their profit, and the St. Leonard Trustees argued that children, where possible, should be separated from their parents and "trained up in the habits of industry – preserved from the evil of bad examples, be instructed in the knowledge of their duty" in the workhouse.³⁰ When the parish contracted for the management of the workhouse, the master was incentivized to tip the balance in favor of child labor, as he took a share of all profits.³¹ Since it was often assumed that poverty was a result of an aversion to hard work, the solution was to enforce industry until it became an unquestioned and lifelong habit.

In contrast, the Hospital sought to provide a balanced schedule of work and education, the fruits of which could be displayed in the hymns, anthems, and catechisms learned by the children for worship on Sundays. The element of spectacle in the Hospital's public relations favored a more robust education in moral as well as academic principles. These motives also contributed to attitudes and curricula that were consciously gendered. Considering the fate of their mothers, the Hospital was especially concerned with the characters of foundling girls, and

²⁹ Humphries, 316. Humphries found that families which sent children to work instead of mothers were making a rational financial choice, given the incorporation of child labor in the industrial market and the low wages paid to women.

³⁰ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, May 26, 1797, LMA P91/LEN/10.

³¹ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act*, Part 1, *The Old Poor Law*. (London: Longmans, Green and, co., 1927), 413.

sought to instill the virtues of chastity and sobriety in addition to industry and humility.³² While girls were taught basic reading and writing, and perhaps how to keep household accounts, they were otherwise employed in the kitchen, laundry, and at needlework to supply the housekeeping needs of the Hospital.³³ This was all that the Governors deemed necessary in preparation for their eventual employment as domestic servants. To go further would not only waste time and resources, but perhaps also give these girls ideas above their station, a dangerous precursor to the kinds of relationships with employers and young men of their households which had ruined their mothers. The Hospital committee minutes recorded frequent reports on the employment and profit generated by girls' labor. Describing the division of tasks between kitchen, laundry, and fine needlework, the Matron noted in 1813 "eighteen girls, mentioned underneath, six from each ward, have all behaved very well and are deserving of any little reward the Gentlemen may think proper to give them."³⁴ The committee resolved that the girls be awarded silver thimbles for their industry and good conduct. Monthly accounts of incoming funds recorded between four and sixteen pounds for sewing work done by the children. In addition to facilitating the domestic functions of the Hospital, the labor of foundling girls essentially subsidized the education of their male peers. Their dependent and auxiliary roles as women were emphasized from a young age.

In contrast, the curriculum and pedagogy for foundling boys was progressive for its time. In 1813, the committee set out new rules for the schoolmaster, including a daily schedule of prayer, catechism and religious instruction, as well as reading, writing, and cyphering according

³² Helen Berry, *Orphans of Empire: The Fate of London's Foundlings*, (First ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 130.

³³ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, February 10, 1800, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

³⁴ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, January 11, 1813, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

to class and ability. In addition, the plan established a complicated hierarchy of roles for boys to assist in keeping order in the classroom and instructing their peers:

“the ushers (under the master) shall be responsible for the care and management of the school during school hours...the duty of the teacher is to direct his class in the learning of their lessons...the duty of the assistants is to assist the teachers...the duty of the monitor and his deputy (when so appointed) shall be to take care of the school room...keeping it open for the benefit of those scholars who choose to read, write, cypher, or study there; and for the confinement of those who have incurred that punishment...he shall also report to the master the names of such of them as neglect their tasks...The ushers, teachers and assistants, monitor and deputy monitor, shall each wear a Badge of Distinction...the usher, monitor, and teachers shall have the same authority out of school as in school...”³⁵

Along with helping to maintain discipline, these boys were encouraged in their leadership and rewarded weekly according to their position, receiving wages between tuppence and sixpence. This method of instruction favored positive aspiration over negative discipline, emphasizing values of obedience and industry through a systematic ranking of the students. The schoolmaster would also reward “the scholar, who has most distinguished himself that day in his class, for conduct and for proficiency...and the scholar who has improved most” with tickets redeemable at an exchange rate of six for one penny. All of these monetary rewards were to be divided, half paid immediately and half recorded in a “Fund Book” to be paid to the boys upon their apprenticeship, or reduced in the case of bad conduct. These policies were remarkable for their introduction of monetary motive at such young ages, preparing the boys to equate both good conduct and scholastic achievement with financial success. They also rewarded leadership initiatives and abilities which might be useless to apprentices in semi-skilled labor and manufacturing occupations. This education prepared boys for an idealized world which rewarded merit in direct and measured proportion to its value, and taught them to consider their own

³⁵ Foundling Hospital Select Committee Minutes, January 4, 1813, LMA A/FH/A/03/014/001/001.

behavior and ability in that financial light. While the morality of the girls was essential to the religious core of society, the enterprise of the boys was vital to the industrial productivity of the nation.

The Hospital Governors based this plan on the curriculum of a Free School in Whitechapel which, among other similar charity schools, was the work of Dr. Andrew Bell. Bell had started as a chaplain in Madras, India, and developed his hybrid system of religious and practical education to serve the illegitimate children of European soldiers and Indian women.³⁶ Bell's plan intended to increase efficiency and allow one schoolmaster to oversee more pupils by delegating many responsibilities for teaching and discipline to the students themselves. Constant evaluations of behavior and merit would encourage industry among the monitors and assistants to maintain their positions, and among the students to aspire to them. Bell wrote and preached frequently on the subject of the education of the poor, noting that the greater malleability of children made them more responsive to religious and moral instruction. He spoke from his own experience which "bears living evidence to the happy effects of education, on the character of the people, and on the prosperity of the state."³⁷ Though primarily motivated by the power of education for evangelizing throughout the empire, Bell acknowledged and celebrated the economic functions of a well-educated society. Bell compared his innovation to an efficient factory, noting that "machinery has been contrived for spinning twenty skeins of silk, and twenty hanks of cotton, where one was spun before; but no contrivance has been sought for, or devised,

³⁶ Jana Tschurenv, "Diffusing Useful Knowledge: The Monitorial System of Education in Madras, London and Bengal, 1789 – 1840," (*Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 3 (2008): 245-64), 247. A Quaker teacher, Joseph Lancaster, developed a similar technique at around the same time, leading modern scholars to call it the "Bell-Lancaster Method." The association with dissenting religion made Anglican charities and institutions cite Bell as their predecessor instead of Lancaster.

³⁷ Andrew Bell, *Extract of a Sermon on the Education of the Poor, under an Appropriate System Preached at St. Mary's, Lambeth, 28 June, 1807; for the Benefit of the Boys' Charity-School at Lambeth*, (2nd ed. London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), 9.

that twenty children may be educated...as one was taught before.”³⁸ The conscious imitation of industrial organization anticipated the fate of his students in factories and manual labor. Bell chose to emphasize moral values which, while based in religious instruction, were particular to class expectations, especially industry, frugality, obedience, sobriety, and subordination. Extracts from his sermons focused more on these benefits to social stability and economic productivity than on the practical skills of literacy or labor. In noting that education represented “a present regard to the greatest possible good,” perhaps Bell alluded to a secular, utilitarian motivation beyond the propagation of the Gospel. He contrasted this form of charity not with ignorance, but with an alternative education in vice and criminality, learned on the streets or in the workhouses. While children were a *tabula rasa*, the better classes of society must be the authors of their character.

As children approached adolescence, they prepared for the realities of gainful employment. The tradition of apprenticeship stretched back centuries to the heyday of guilds and artisans, but it continued to be a useful tool for working-class families, parishes, and charities to secure both job training and legal settlement in the parish of their employer. For foundling children whose histories were sealed, this represented their first claim to belonging in a parish and ensured entitlement to relief should they ever fall on hard times. The same was true for pauper children who were often apprenticed at younger ages by parish authorities eager to transfer responsibility for their maintenance.³⁹ This eagerness also extended to new opportunities for apprentices in industrial occupations; both small scale manufacturers and large factories took pauper children *en masse* as cheap labor to fuel their economic growth.⁴⁰ Despite the apparent

³⁸ Bell, 17.

³⁹ Humphries, 197.

⁴⁰ McClure, 153.

incongruence between a modernizing economy and an unchanging medieval practice, scholars have argued that apprenticeship continued to be associated with greater earning potential and social status, even in semi-skilled trades.⁴¹ Nevertheless, these arrangements were vulnerable to fraud and abuse, as employers mistreated apprentices, failed to fulfill promises of housing or education, or even went out of business, leaving children stranded far from home. The St. George-in-the-East parish Trustees petitioned in 1791 for several children to be released from apprenticeships with Sebastian Hilliard on account of ill treatment, but resolved “that whenever they apply to this parish for relief they be passed to the parish of Barking in the county of Essex where their settlement is.”⁴² Though the ancient association between apprenticeship and settlement protected these children from complete abandonment, it also exposed the failures of this system as growing industrial markets demanded mobile labor.

During a period when the industrial future was far from certain, however, London parishes evaluated their options in different ways. While St. George-in-the-East several times apprenticed all suitable children in their care to a cotton manufactory in Manchester, St. Leonard Trustees resolved that “no child shall be apprenticed to cotton mills or any other employ by which there does not appear to be a probability of such child gaining a livelihood when his time is expired.”⁴³ The parish not only was wary of economic downturns, but also recognized that factory workers had few other skills to make a living during times of unemployment. Within the East End, variations in poverty between parishes led to widely disparate policies towards children. Even the Foundling Hospital had to resort to mass apprenticeships during the period

⁴¹ Humphries, 266.

⁴² St. George-in-the-East Trustees Minutes, October 5, 1791, LMA P93/GEO/090.

⁴³ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustee Minutes, November 1806, LMA P91/LEN/11.

after the General Reception when thousands of children were coming of age on their hands.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the Governors had decided early on that the continued moral education of the children was a priority, and therefore rejected apprenticeships in environments deemed to be harmful, including pin factories like those whose economic efficiency was praised by Adam Smith.⁴⁵ Instead, the Hospital relied on the connections of its Governors and tireless efforts of its employees to find good situations in trades, as well as domestic service. Industrial employment came to be reserved for restless or disobedient children, straight from the Hospital or after failed apprenticeships. The Governors often sent boys as young as nine to sea through the Marine Society, and girls to Samuel Oldknow, a small-scale manufacturer outside Manchester. The committee minutes record the apprenticeships of girls as young as ten, removed from the Hospital as examples to their peers, and as old as nineteen, discharged from apprenticeships for bad conduct. Oldknow was similarly concerned for his charges' moral welfare, noting in a letter to the Governors about Sarah Hopkins: "should she have any thing bad in her temper and disposition it is sure to diffuse itself throughout all the junior class and to the great detriment of good order."⁴⁶ Though enlightened capitalists like Oldknow could run moral businesses and reform their apprentices, the Hospital Governors in general viewed industrial labor as a potentially corrupting and degrading occupation. Despite the outcast status and provenance of the foundlings, the Governors envisioned their future employment within traditional social structures.

This perspective contributed to the overwhelming apprenticeship of foundling girls in domestic service, often to the families of Governors themselves. In apprenticeship agreements

⁴⁴ McClure, 127.

⁴⁵ Berry, 158.

⁴⁶ Foundling Hospital General Committee Minutes, October 28, 1801, LMA A/FH/A/03/002/021.

the employment was referred to as “household business,” perhaps to make the situation seem more like a training period than a source of cheap servants. Domestic service represented the largest share of employment in London, and continued to rise during the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ It is probable that many of those servants were the mothers of foundlings, having been seduced by employers or abandoned by lovers. Yet the Governors considered domestic service a respectable occupation, and prepared girls with instruction in housework as well as obedience (and chastity). Master-servant relations represented a focus for visions of the proper structure of society, the idealized deference of the employee and paternalism of the employer.⁴⁸ This benevolent view of household hierarchy was shaken by the case of Ann Peers, who returned from her apprenticeship in Mr. Randolph’s house “on account of pregnancy.”⁴⁹ The committee minutes made no reference to the probable paternity of the child, but noted the “recent good conduct of Ann Peers” as reason for the Governors to arrange for her to give birth at a lying in hospital. Ann was more than eight months pregnant, and her own voice and agency in ending the apprenticeship and planning for her delivery are not present in the surviving records. The Governors coordinated with her parish of settlement in St Ann’s Soho, presumably also the place of her apprenticeship, to pay for her admittance to Westminster Hospital and arrange for the maintenance of her child. The Foundling Hospital did not offer to admit the infant. Nevertheless, the Governors did resolve to find another situation for Ann Peers after her delivery, probably again in domestic service.

Another foundling apprentice, Mary Harrison, was released from her apprenticeship after several depressive episodes. Her employer wrote to the Governors saying, “she becoming

⁴⁷ Himmelfarb, 138.

⁴⁸ Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*, (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

⁴⁹ Foundling Hospital General Committee Minutes, June 17, 1801, LMA A/FH/A/03/002/021.

perfectly melancholy, tired of life and expressing several times her intention to destroy herself, one whole day she wandered she knew not whither,” and asked that the Hospital “consider her melancholy case, and provide for her during the remainder of her life, as may appear to you most proper.”⁵⁰ The Governors resolved to find Mary a place in Bethlem Hospital or another mental asylum and pay for her support there. Though struggles with mental illness, and limited treatment, made Mary Harrison unable to perform her work and integrate into society, the Hospital and her employers recognized her continuing need for care. Her story, along with that of Ann Peers and many other foundlings, reflected the Hospital’s long-lasting commitment to the children in its care, providing even the badly behaved with work and medical attention. The Governors promised good apprentices financial gratuities at the end of their service, and testimonies to their character with the seal of the Hospital as surety. In contrast to parish officers who washed their hands of pauper apprentices or were hindered by settlement laws and strained resources, the Foundling Hospital sought to ensure its legacy in London and beyond by supporting children through the transitions to adulthood. Whether or not the care and education provided within the Hospital had well-prepared the foundlings for life outside its walls, they were not left to face the world alone. Intimate understanding of the histories and opportunities of former foundlings perhaps made Governors more sympathetic to some struggles during adolescence and adulthood, and therefore more likely to use their influence to intervene. This kind of understanding was a privilege of wealth and benevolence, as well as an advantage peculiar to a children’s charity, which was not common among London parishes.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, both the Poor Law and charities like the Foundling Hospital were becoming more involved in the lives of poor children. Periodic efforts

⁵⁰ Foundling Hospital General Committee Minutes, July 15, 1801, LMA A/FH/A/03/002/021.

to coordinate between parishes, Parliament, and the Hospital anticipated the more central administration of the New Poor Law and even the later welfare system.⁵¹ Administrative problems encountered during the period of General Reception revealed the difficulties of running an institution on such a large scale, but also reflected a developing commitment to addressing problems of childhood poverty for the common good. The examples cited in this chapter affected a small portion of the poor population in a limited geographic area, yet their significance was far reaching. Charles Dickens featured the Foundling Hospital in several novels and brought attention to the lives of the “blank children” in *Household Words*.⁵² Meanwhile, the institutional accoutrement of workhouses continued to grow after 1834. In time, the government intervened in the lives of children to restrict their involvement in work and industry, instead of drawing up the contracts of child labor. Those modern policies which sought to protect children and childhood exceeded eighteenth-century ideology; changing ideals of childhood which had begun to trickle from rich to poor were tempered by pragmatic commitment to class and gender hierarchies. Both government and charity remained committed to bolstering social order through their influence over poor children. The particular attention given to the sexuality of women and girls suggests that their submission to institutional patriarchy was vital to this mission, in contrast to the fledgling ambitions of their male peers. Caught between Enlightenment rationality and Victorian morality, poor children at the turn of the century were molded for economic productivity and social stability.

⁵¹ Berry, 278.

⁵² Charles Dickens and William Henry Wills, ‘Received, A Blank Child,’ (*Household Words*, Volume VII, Magazine No. 156, March 19, 1853), 49.

As adults, many former foundlings maintained connections with the Hospital, visiting old friends or seeking help and advice from the Governors.⁵³ They left few autobiographies or other accounts of their experiences growing up in the Hospital environment and transitioning to adulthood. No longer physically marked by uniforms, some may have sought to break with the stigmatized status of their past and discard their foundling identity. Their very names were given by the whims of their benefactors, and in official records they appeared next to serial numbers which marked their place among thousands of other children. In the wider world, did society reward and reinforce the values of the Hospital's education, or were foundlings forever marked by their origin? We can only speculate about how apprentices and young adults made friends, formed relationships, and navigated society; despite their sheltered upbringing, they were, in theory, prepared for the prevailing expectations of class and gender. Many foundlings, particularly boys, were essentially given the tools of social mobility, and simultaneously taught not to use them. The inherent contradiction between the Governors' commitment to upholding social hierarchies, and their imposition of upper class values of literacy and ambition, must have caused some cognitive dissonance. To some extent, survival in the "real world" required a questioning of those inequalities and integration into working-class consciousness, which turned shared experiences of economic exploitation into common identity defined against employers and institutions. Despite the dangers and disadvantages of life in parish care, pauper children might have understood better the abuses and failures inherent in the systems of capitalism and patriarchy. The fate of Ann Peers perhaps suggests that foundling children too sometimes glimpsed the shortcomings of the people and institutions to whom they had been taught to submit.

⁵³ Berry, 281.

Chapter 3: “The Root of All Public Good:” Policy and Ideology in London

Workhouses

It would take one million, five hundred thousand bricks to build a new workhouse for the parish of St. Leonard, Shoreditch, according to the Trustees minutes of December, 1774.¹ This vast quantity of bricks reflected the size of the proposed building to receive growing numbers of paupers seeking relief from the parish, under the auspices of a Local Act of Parliament which allowed St. Leonard to raise special funds for the project. In the timeless tradition of contractors, the building progress was continually behind schedule, provoking complaints and ultimatums from parish Trustees until the workhouse finally opened in 1777. The new workhouse would replace several old buildings housing less than one hundred inmates, and be up-to-date with modern practices for maintaining parish paupers, infants and adults alike. Larger wards and workshops would provide the parish with an alternative to granting paupers outdoor relief in the form of allowances, food, or clothing, and thus prevent the Trustees and overseers from becoming incentives to idleness by replacing wages with relief. Perhaps most importantly, the workhouse would be a permanent symbol of parish authority, a sign both of its commitment to the poor and of its control over their lives. Even as construction progressed, the Trustees appointed a committee to “provide a proper place for the reception of such poor as the workhouse will not contain.”² Workhouses would become more common with the New Poor Law in 1834, but in the century before, urban parishes had long been building them in response

¹ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, December 7, 1774, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), P91/LEN/0007, London, UK.

² St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, August 19, 1775, LMA P91/LEN/0007. The committee decided to “do nothing at present.”

to rising demands of poor relief and as signs of a changing ideology of poverty in the early industrial age.

By London standards, St. Leonard was rather late in erecting a large workhouse; many of its neighboring parishes had built the first of such institutions after being empowered to do so by the Poor Relief Act of 1722.³ Many parishes in the East End which had built workhouses in the 1720s and 30s were enlarging and repairing them to house ever more paupers in the 1770s.⁴ The principle of this indoor relief was to make the prospect of relinquishing personal independence and enduring the spartan conditions in workhouses less appealing to paupers who might otherwise have been inclined to shirk labor in the expectation of generous parish allowances. The 1723 Workhouse Test Act, also known as Knatchbull's Act, allowed parishes to deny relief to any able-bodied person not willing to enter the workhouse to receive it, thereby "testing" their true need of assistance.⁵ As the name implies, the workhouse was also a mechanism to supervise the employment of the poor for the benefit of the parish, to offset some of the costs of their maintenance. Total monies spent on poor relief had risen sharply during the last decades of the seventeenth century, and would continue to grow in the eighteenth; the workhouse test, though conceived as a mechanism to reduce relief expenditure by discouraging unnecessary claims on the parish, also shifted the balance towards more expensive indoor relief and the higher costs of providing for large numbers of paupers in larger buildings. As industrialization began,

³ George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22.

⁴ David R. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870*. (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 58.

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. (1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1984), 26. Unlike the New Poor Law, the Workhouse Test Act was permissive rather than obligatory, allowing parishes to enact such policies by their own discretion rather than requiring them to do so.

urbanization intensified, and poverty concentrated in East End parishes, poor relief both in and out of workhouses grew exponentially during the eighteenth century.

The ideology which motivated these changes, in spite of financial realities, was rooted in a perceived failure of the Old Poor Law. Commentators argued that regular, guaranteed relief encouraged pauperism by removing any incentives to labor. As average costs and numbers of paupers grew, the “sunken sixth” of people dependent on poor relief illustrated the (exaggerated) degree of degradation among the laboring poor.⁶ Joseph Townsend wrote in 1787 that generous relief would be met with greedier demands, and therefore “wherever is most expended for their support, there objects of distress are most abundant.”⁷ Townsend subscribed to a conception of poverty which argued that the laboring poor were only motivated to work by hunger or fear, and therefore that wages should be kept near the level of subsistence, disposable income only encouraging laziness and drinking.⁸ Expectation of support regardless of labor emboldened the working classes beyond their station, dissolving the distinctions of class and rank which were the foundation of society. Townsend idealized the paternalistic relationship between master and servant which could motivate discretionary charity to deserving objects, but argued that “without due subordination all government must end.”⁹ Though the poor laws had at first only established the parish’s obligation to prevent death from destitution, the laboring poor had come to consider it their right to expect parish support during economic downturns or life-cycle poverty.

⁶ Himmelfarb, 152. Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that one-sixth of the population of England was dependent on poor relief in 1833.

⁷ Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, (Second edition. London: printed for C. Dilly, 1787), 7. Modern analysis has proposed the opposite cause and effect, showing that wages fell below subsistence before relief expenditures grew. See Mark Blaug, “The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New,” (*The Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 2 (1963): 151-84).

⁸ Donna T. Andrew characterizes this view as a “minimalist psychology of labor.” Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 138.

⁹ Townsend, 19.

Though not able to follow Townsend's advice to abolish all poor relief, parishes which turned to workhouses in the late eighteenth century sought to regain this kind of authority over the poor. The term "less-eligibility" would later describe their policies of making indoor relief always less desirable relative to the average condition of laborers.¹⁰ Efforts to encourage industry and punish vice through the same institutional mechanism predated the national reforms of the New Poor Law through parish-level innovation and response to the pressures of industrialization and working-class demands. A focus on 1834 and national legislation as a turning point neglects the transitional periods between paternalism and less eligibility; parishes concerned with policing behavior were neither wholly punitive nor wholly paternalist, and the interactions of paupers with these bodies were neither wholly activist nor wholly reactionary. The early industrial period exposed and aggravated class tensions as institutions adjusted to new economic and social realities. Parish and pauper ideologies met in workhouses where individual rights and collective obligations were negotiated through the relationship to and assertion of institutional authority. Workhouses were spaces for contesting the meaning of poor relief in the industrial age through restriction, resistance, and the formation of class consciousness through common experience.

As potent symbols and institutional case studies, workhouses have featured prominently in poor law historiography for centuries. In *English Local Government* and its volumes on *English Poor Law History*, Beatrice and Sidney Webb described some of the failures and inconsistencies in poor relief up to 1834 as the result of the law's "two distinct and in some ways conflicting functions – maintaining those who were destitute, and punishing the idle and

¹⁰ Himmelfarb, 163. The principle of less-eligibility was enshrined in the New Poor Law's requirement that relief to able-bodied laborers only be granted in the workhouse.

turbulent,” or in other words, “Relief of the Poor within a Framework of Repression.”¹¹ While outdoor relief supported the deserving and destitute, parishes responded to problems of unemployment by turning to workhouses to punish the idle. The late eighteenth-century development of general workhouses to house both populations revealed the fallacy of such an economic and social theory. The workhouse test, while seeking to discriminate the destitute from the idle, doomed all paupers to the same semi-criminal existence; the use of labor as both a punishment and a profit-making enterprise “always rendered nugatory both the one and the other.”¹² The workhouses were “instruments of compulsion,” like the Poor Law as a whole, and any humanitarian efforts to soften their effects were therefore doomed to fail. The Webbs acknowledged the merit of such reforms in theory, especially in connection with their plans for twentieth-century change, such as the idea of a minimum wage; nevertheless, their original condemnation of the class inequalities in the system of upper class control and working class disenfranchisement colored their conclusion on the weaknesses and failures of the Poor Law.

In his study of political activism and consciousness, E.P. Thompson referred to workhouses as “Bastilles,” using the language of his working-class activist subjects and emphasizing the oppressive discipline of institutions which treated the innocent victims of capitalism as criminals.¹³ As Bastilles, workhouses were symbols of tyrannical government, but the experiences of paupers inside them were less important to Thompson’s analysis; removed from the industrial workplace, often predominately composed of women, children, and the elderly, workhouse inmates were not the politically vigorous working men of Thompson’s

¹¹ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act*, Part 1, *The Old Poor Law*. (London: Longmans, Green and, co., 1927), 396.

¹² Webb and Webb, 414.

¹³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1963), 267.

narrative. Nevertheless, Thompson disagreed with the Webbs about the nature of working-class political sensibilities. While the Webbs argued that the newly ordered lifestyles of industrial labor “increased the capacity of the working-class for industrial and political democracy,”¹⁴ Thompson asserted that working-class consciousness was “not so much democratic, in any positive sense, as anti-absolutist.”¹⁵ Without universal suffrage, working-class political agitation focused not so much on democratic participation in making laws, as on individual rights to be protected from unjust legislative intrusion. In both analyses, the workhouse represented a direct assault on citizenship. Pauper status entailed the duties but not the rights of citizenship, further increasing the burden of the duty of subjection to government control through the restrictions of the Poor Law and the workhouse.

Parishes were obliged to provide some form of relief for the destitute who had obtained legal settlement through birth, marriage, apprenticeship or householding, but these local ties were disrupted by internal and international migration throughout the eighteenth century. Shifts in industrial production and urbanization demanded a more mobile labor force, while the growing empire brought goods and people from far flung territories. The Parish of St. George-in-the-East, near the busy docks of East London, relieved a nameless black woman with two shillings in 1791, and the next year, the parish admitted “John Boss, a Black” into the workhouse without noting the circumstances or duration of his application for relief.¹⁶ If these individuals were formerly enslaved, perhaps travelling back to England as servants before falling into poverty, they would have no legal settlement and ability to petition for this relief.¹⁷ This

¹⁴ Webb and Webb, 421.

¹⁵ Thompson, 80.

¹⁶ St. George-in-the-East Trustees Minutes, May 4, 1791; April 12, 1792, LMA P93/GEO/090.

¹⁷ David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2017), 97.

anonymity and mystery may have reflected their uncertain status and the informal aid of the parish, or perhaps if they had obtained settlement, for example by serving a year-long contract as a servant, St. George may have only reluctantly recognized their claim to belonging. These free or forced immigrants to the imperial metropole could be excluded from local institutions like poor relief, especially when those institutions were already unwilling to extend their protection to outsiders. Parishes like St. George had to adapt to more diverse and transient populations, though their records preserve few details of imperial encounters. The silence of parish records on the subject reflects the complicated webs of local administration which muddy the waters of bottom-up history.

The neighboring Parish of St. Leonard Shoreditch was caught between eras and ideologies. The old paternalism was persistent, as the parish continued to administer charities which had been endowed in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the growing population of London shifted the geography of poverty to ever more crowded parishes in the East End where housing became twice as dense.¹⁹ Because rates for poor relief were levied at the local level, the burden fell most heavily on poor parishes with populations most in need of relief and least able to pay for it.²⁰ Indoor relief was more expensive, as demonstrated by the large sums of money needed to be raised or borrowed by the parish just to build the new workhouse, but the St. Leonard Trustees hoped to be able to diminish the number of paupers by making relief more centralized around the workhouse, regulating and restricting the allocation of outdoor relief, and making use of pauper labor to defray costs. One major part of their drive for efficiency was the

¹⁸ John Ware, vestry clerk, "An Account of the several Charities and Estates, Held in Trust, For the Use of the Poor of the Parish of St. Leonard, Shoreditch, Middlesex; And of the Benefactions to the Same; Compiles in the Years 1833, 184, 1835," LMA P91/LEN/D/2/MS10025.

¹⁹ Green, 54. The number of houses in St. Leonard, and therefore the chances of gaining legal settlement through renting, doubled between 1801 and 1831.

²⁰ Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, (Studies in Economic History. London; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1978), 83.

practice of “farming the poor,” paying a contractor a lump sum or rate per head to manage the workhouse on behalf of the parish. Contract workhouses had become common in London in the 1760s, and more specialized, as St. Leonard’s later use of a separate establishment for children at Enfield reflected.²¹ The Webbs vehemently criticized the practice of farming the poor, pointing out the faulty economic motivations of the scheme: if the workhouse master was paid in a lump sum, “it was to the pecuniary advantage of the contractor to make the workhouse a ‘House of Terror’” and pocket the leftover money; if he was paid per head, his profit would “be increased indefinitely if pauperism increased,” and he therefore had no incentive to discourage paupers from entering the workhouse.²² Neither policy encouraged careful management except through the oversight of parish officials, which was often lacking.

Farming the poor allowed the Trustees to assert authority through a proxy while maintaining class distinctions and their personal distance from interactions with paupers. In 1779, two years after the new workhouse opened, the Trustees meeting minutes recorded complaints about the quality of milk and bread served to paupers.²³ Such complaints recurred sporadically throughout the next half century, eventually spurring an extensive investigation in 1830 in which the committee examined the bread minutely, as well as witnesses from paupers, overseers, and bakers on the acceptable quality of loaves.²⁴ The committee’s report included some trepidation about pauper testimonies, noting in the case of Margaret Wildman that “it was attempted to be shown that this witness’ testimony was not worthy of credit, but that nothing was proved that induced your committee to come to such a conclusion.” The parish official or

²¹ Tim Hitchcock and Robert Brink Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690-1800*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 296.

²² Webb and Webb, 412-13.

²³ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, October 8 and December 3, 1779, LMA P91/LEN/0008.

²⁴ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, March 26, 1830, LMA P91/LEN/0015.

member of the committee who cast such aspersions was not named, but their doubt reflected a problem of pauper agency in the workhouse. Though complaints from inmates ultimately resulted in an investigation and improvement in the quality of bread, such initiative could be taken as presumption to levels of luxury inappropriate to the workhouse. The association between pauperism and criminality could suggest that witnesses like Wildman could not be trusted. It was a common tactic to threaten to or actually break windows in workhouses to escape bad conditions by going to jail, and thereby obtain an audience with a magistrate as a more sympathetic arbiter of workhouse disputes.²⁵ Such tactics for negotiating the terms and conditions of relief which were shared by the poor population could achieve greater success through collective pressure.²⁶ The avenues open to paupers to seek redress were limited, but their use reflects the determined assertion of the rights of the poor.

However, the Trustees were by no means primarily concerned with responding to the needs and demands of paupers. In 1785 they reprimanded the master of the workhouse, James Robertson, for allowing many paupers to go in and out of the workhouse as they pleased.²⁷ Not only did this liberty defeat the purpose of the workhouse as a place of industry, but such casual movement also suggested that the poor considered it a convenient and cheap lodging house rather than a last resort from destitution. The Trustees hoped that restricting the movements of paupers would “not only lend greatly to diminish the number thereof, but be a means of lessening the expense.” Less genial conditions would discourage paupers from entering the workhouse, while those that remained would be forced to work for their maintenance. In contrast to this punitive policy towards adults, the Trustees decided that “preventing the several children

²⁵ Green, 158.

²⁶ Hitchcock and Shoemaker, 23.

²⁷ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 10, 1785, LMA P91/LEN/0009.

in the House from going out as usual to work would habituate them to idleness,” and therefore allowed Robertson to continue contracting for the labor of children under the age of eleven “for his benefit.” Under the terms of his contract, Robertson received two shillings four pence per head per week, along with half of the proceeds of pauper labor both in and out of the workhouse. Various attempts were made to make that labor more profitable, such as the motion in 1795 that the new master of the workhouse be familiar with silk manufacture (narrowly defeated by five votes).²⁸ Despite the Trustees’ idealization of labor and profit from the parish paupers, they did not turn the workhouse into a factory; workhouse inmates were often unsuited to manufacturing work by age, illness, or education, and the silk trade itself was in decline, contributing to the rise in pauperism in the first place.²⁹ That suggestion came in the midst of discussions about the contracting of the workhouse following demands from the temporary master, John Walton, for a higher rate of compensation in response to the rising prices of provisions. Walton was eventually reappointed with the increased allowance of two shillings six pence per head per week.³⁰

In 1797, a crisis developed. A committee appointed to investigate conditions in the workhouse reported that “we feel it impossible to describe the condition many, if not most, of [the beds] are in – loaded with dirt, and no doubt, from their appearance (for it was such that we freely acknowledge we could not closely examine them) are filled with vermin of various kinds.”³¹ The Trustees on the committee had evidently not visited the workhouse for some time, while the dirt and vermin collected on beds and people and the wards crumbled from lack of maintenance. Apart from brief description of the filth and stench of the wards and the ragged

²⁸ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 15, 1795, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

²⁹ Green, 64.

³⁰ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 19, 1792, LMA P91/LEN/0009.

³¹ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, May 26, 1797, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

state of the inmates, the committee turned its attention to the wider implications of their discoveries. The report continued:

“Your committee considering the very great sums, which are collected annually in this parish, and at the same time reflecting on the disgraceful conclusions that must be drawn by every one who should be inclined to walk through the house, need not tell you sir, what they felt – and indeed words would be incapable of expressing the sensations of their minds.”

It was uncomfortably easy to arrive at the conclusion that the master of the workhouse was guilty of mismanagement of parish funds, and the parish officials of gross neglect. The committee’s report was more concerned with this failure of authority than with the physical needs of the paupers. Hoping to assuage their uneasy consciences, the committee looked to the workhouses of neighboring parishes for comparison, but found very different conditions in St. Matthew Bethnal Green, St. Luke Old Street, St. James Clerkenwell, and St. Saviour’s Southwark. Those parishes, with similar or even greater pauper populations, had reportedly found the perfect balance of regulation, care, and labor.

Key to this apparent success was a significantly broader use of pauper labor. Wards and bedding were supposed to be kept clean by the inmates airing and sweeping the rooms each day, and making repairs in the spring, “so that the parish is put to no other expense than that of purchasing wood and other materials.” Most of the burden of this work must have fallen on women and children, for no remuneration except the prospect of decent living conditions. St. Leonard’s neighbors at least understood that healthier paupers could work harder and were more likely to regain independence, thereby ultimately decreasing the burden on the parish. Yet the committee further claimed that those parishes gained a positive profit from the labor in their workhouses, in contrast to the small sums generated by approximately 400 inmates in St. Leonard by winding silk, picking cotton and oakum, and spinning. Bethnal Green, with 100

fewer inmates, made twice the profits per annum. St. James Westminster, with the majority of its 713 inmates too ill or old to work, nevertheless made £930 per annum from the labor of just 223 people doing needlework, stripping cotton, carding wool, slop work, weaving calico, spinning twine, and opening horse hair. Such profits must have been raised from longer working hours and more efficient production, and without St. Leonard's practice of letting the paupers keep some of the proceeds of their work in order to incentivize industry. Though total expenses still exceeded profits, the neighboring parishes maintained their paupers for less – two shillings two and a half pence in St. James – and in better conditions. The St. Leonard committee attributed this to better assertion of control and moral authority in addition to savvy economic management.

Despite the grievous failures of the St. Leonard workhouse, the committee argued in its report that the parish should take even more paupers into their institutional care. With proper management of the old and young, pensioners could be maintained more efficiently and children would be removed “from the bad examples that are set before them from being brought up amongst the vicious and profligate...hence lying becomes the first lesson they learn...until they end their career on the gallows.” Disregarding their recent criticism of the vicious and profligate populations of their own workhouse, the committee suggested that the parish could be a better parent than the poor by ending outdoor relief in the form of family allowances and training up children in the habits of industry. A complete separation between the sexes, including the separation of families, for work, sleeping, and eating would prevent the contamination of morals. These suggestions show a remarkably unshaken faith in the power of the workhouse as an institution of relief and restoration. The unbelievably efficient and orderly workhouses of the rest of the East End seem to have inspired St. Leonard's Trustees to reform their own, rather than to

question the basis of indoor relief as an effective response to urban poverty. This was due in part to parish pride in appearances and gentlemanly competition between Trustees, but also reflected a deep ideological commitment to the economic and social underpinnings of the poor laws. The committee's report combined a perception of the degeneracy of paupers with a belief in the parish's paternalist obligation to redeem them and in the capitalist benefits of their reformation. Although, as the Webbs later criticized,³² the poor were treated as a public nuisance for the parish, yet the committee blamed the parish itself for making them so through administrative apathy: "because it has appeared to be every body's business, it has dropt, and become the business of no one."

Even with this acknowledgement of collective responsibility, the committee also maintained a faith in the individual powers of a proper workhouse master, one "who will feel with the poor, and at the same time, act as though they were maintained out of his own pocket." This optimism justified the Trustee's choice to continue to farm the poor, with some increased oversight from a weekly workhouse visiting committee, rather than take management of the workhouse into their own hands. This belief would be naïve, according to their contemporary Joseph Townsend, who argued that the ideal parish overseer did not exist in nature, since "in him should centre all the excellencies, which are scattered with a sparing hand among the human race."³³ For Townsend, the poor laws were doomed to failure by both flawed ideology and human weakness which would prevent well-meaning reforms from taking root. When the St. Leonard Trustees' social conscience was awakened, it was nevertheless still tempered by class condescension and the need to shift blame to another party. The most obvious target was the

³² Webb and Webb, 412.

³³ Townsend, 65.

workhouse master John Walton, who was immediately fired with no further payment.³⁴ The trustees advertised for a new master and mistress, a married couple between 30 and 50 years of age, with testimonials to their character and experience with some form of manufacture.³⁵ Like before, they would have a salary in addition to a percentage of profits from pauper labor, including “the urine, kitchen stuff, and whatever may be the produce of the poor be considered as earnings.” While the trustees congratulated themselves on their excellent regulations and intentions for managing the workhouse, the doctor who had been attending the poor of the parish resigned after several rejected petitions for a higher salary, and two former overseers were indicted for conspiracy.³⁶

There was something rotten in the state of St. Leonard. Self-righteous emphasis on the characters of applicants during the selection process had failed to identify able or even moral administrators. Yet another report in December, 1798 revealed the recent fraud and embezzlement of Samuel Carter and Rose Hill, Walton’s successors as master and mistress of the workhouse.³⁷ The testimony of several paupers and servants agreed that Carter and Hill were using common sugar and butter, often skimming cream off the milk to make their own, while charging the parish for the highest quality provisions. The committee had deposed many witnesses to corroborate this accusation, while an examination of the sick book revealed the further fact that Carter and Hill had charged the parish money for the nursing of paupers who were already dead. Finally, a witness testified on behalf of Sarah Kain, “a poor girl, who went with some others [as] apprentice to Nottingham, had 3 linen frocks and a dimity petticoat taken

³⁴ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 8, 1797, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

³⁵ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, June 15, 1797, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

³⁶ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, November 30, 1798, LMA P91/LEN/0010. Dr. Willian Sharpe resumed his position a month later when the Trustees increased his salary by £20 per annum, retroactively applied to the previous quarter.

³⁷ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, December 28, 1798, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

from her by Mrs. Hill, who gave her an old camblet gown, saying it would do better for her.” Kain also lamented that the lost dresses had sentimental value as they were made from an old gown of her mother’s. The Trustees voted unanimously “that the master and mistress of the workhouse be dismissed from their situations.” The parish would not tolerate such egregious misuse of funds, expressing more indignation on behalf of the Trustees and ratepayers than for the poor themselves, whose own experiences in the workhouse must have deteriorated under the regime. After advertising yet again, the Trustees reappointed John Walton to farm the poor, preferring mild incompetence to criminal embezzlement.

Administrative continuity restored, economic conditions continued to worsen. In 1802, Walton’s contract was renewed with an increased allowance of four shillings per pauper per week, almost double his rate in 1792.³⁸ By that time the parish was also maintaining a separate establishment for children outside of the city at Enfield, where Walton managed their work and education for three shillings three pence per week. In 1809, Walton complained of the high price of provisions and the allowance was increased to four shillings three pence, then again to four shillings nine pence in 1810.³⁹ In 1812, Walton noted to the Trustees that “the earnings of the poor had of late been almost nothing owing to the stagnation in the silk trade,” and that meanwhile the price of bread had risen to one shilling eight pence per loaf.⁴⁰ He therefore proposed to maintain the poor at 5 shillings per head until the price of bread fell below fifteen pence. This proposal to make the level of relief proportional to the price of bread recalled the policies of the often-criticized Speenhamland system which instituted generous allowances to

³⁸ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, March 12, 1802, LMA P91/LEN/0010.

³⁹ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, September 15, 1809 and September 13, 1810, LMA P91/LEN/0011.

⁴⁰ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, September 11, 1812, LMA P91/LEN/0011.

rural laborers where wages were below subsistence.⁴¹ St. Leonard's plan created an intermediary between these funds and the poor, maintaining their commitment to pauper labor despite the decline of their chosen industry, and preferring the inefficient expense of the workhouse to generous outdoor relief. Much of the increased expenses were also due to demand: the 400 inmates in St. Leonard's workhouse in 1797 increased to 700 in 1826, and 1,100 in 1827, swelled by the numbers of unemployed silk weavers.⁴²

In addition, St. Leonard's relentless crusade against outdoor relief further contributed to larger workhouse populations. Between 1808 and 1827, the Trustees periodically commissioned reports on ways to decrease pension rolls and better regulate the workhouse; committees recommended restricting access and conditions of outdoor relief to prevent fraud and vagrancy, while instituting strict schedules in the workhouse and requirements that the poor "demean themselves orderly and peaceably, with decency and cleanliness."⁴³ Thus the Trustees explicitly put the principles of less eligibility into practice. Though the vast sums of money spent to maintain paupers in the workhouse may have created better physical conditions than those experienced by the poor outside, yet the demeaning obedience and twelve hour workdays demanded by regulations fulfilled the requirements of "less eligibility" to repel or reform the lazy and criminal poor. The Trustees continued to compare themselves to other parishes, and a committee reported in 1811 that Bethnal Green had cancelled all pensions, offering paupers relief in the workhouse as their only option of support, and claimed that only four had accepted those conditions.⁴⁴ These draconian measures would result in a temporary decrease in relief

⁴¹ Boyer, 11. The allowance system allowed a laborer a minimum weekly income determined by the price of bread and size of his family. It was first instituted by the parishes of Speenhamland in Berkshire in 1795.

⁴² St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, October 5, 1826 and March 14, 1827, LMA/P91/LEN/0014.

⁴³ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, December 19, 1816, LMA P91/LEN/0011.

⁴⁴ St. Leonard Shoreditch Trustees Minutes, March 25, 1811, LMA P91/LEN/0011.

expenditure, until those who had lost their pensions were driven into the workhouse by necessity, costing the parish even more than before.⁴⁵ The parish of St. George-in-the-East considered a proposal to extend the imposed stigma beyond the workhouse, and require outdoor paupers to wear armbands as a sign of their shameful dependence, which was narrowly rejected by the Trustees.⁴⁶ Confronted by rising numbers of paupers, rising prices, and rising pressures from ratepayers, East End parishes turned from paternalist to punitive policies. This attitude both responded to and in some ways denied the realities of industrial change by using new methods of relief within an older ideological framework which continued to blame the poor for their poverty. By the time the New Poor Law was enacted in 1834, these methods had ceased to be new, though their national expansion was.

It has long been recognized (by contemporaries as well as historians) that the New Poor Law was not entirely new. Its emphasis on the workhouse test was based on earlier legislation and practices developed by individual parishes like the hard-pressed communities of the East End. Even though more workhouses were built in the following century and became the most recognizable and Dickensian symbols of Victorian poverty, their ideological foundations were firmly in the early industrial age. Analysis of the New Poor Law and workhouse system as reactions to industrialization neglects the transitional periods when changes occurred in tandem; the fact that practices and institutions were developing decades before 1834 reveals the adaptation of individual parishes to industrial demands and the failure of the New Poor Law to evaluate the success and failure of those practices and be innovative in response to later industrial stages, especially in regard to much larger populations in insufficient workhouses. In

⁴⁵ Hitchcock and Shoemaker, 123.

⁴⁶ St. George-in-the-East Trustees Minutes, October 12, 1791, LMA P93/GEO/090.

contrast to persistent public fears of fraud perpetrated by the improvident poor, made up of vagrants and prostitutes preying on the public purse, the records of St. Leonard Shoreditch reveal that it was the paupers themselves who were more vulnerable to abuse from the administration, with few opportunities to seek redress from parish authorities. The idea that most paupers were so by choice, and that pauperism could be decreased by restriction and compulsion in the workhouse, had already been disproved in practice even while it remained enshrined in law and belief. There was more at stake for parish officials and ratepayers than the well-being of paupers; despite grumbling about ever-increasing costs, parishes continued to pay for indoor relief as an alternative to the feared social consequences of a revised economic system.

Modern scholarship has sought to move away from administrative and institutional histories, and use different sources and techniques to illuminate the lives of ordinary people and their interactions with institutions such as the poor laws or, as criminals, the justice system. When these new narratives of pauperism and crime are presented together, despite their focus on plebian politics and working-class experience, they can nevertheless reinforce ancient assumptions about the relationship between poverty and crime. Analysis of the economic and social contexts and individual experiences which contributed to crime, whether petty or felony, is limited by the type and availability of sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, unexamined associations between poverty and criminality, in popular discourse as well as in modern scholarship, cast working-class consciousness and action as inherently subversive and dangerous to social order. For paupers in and out of workhouses, advocacy for personal health and safety within severely limited bounds of autonomy was vital for survival. E.P. Thompson's analytical framework of working-class consciousness, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb's language of institutional compulsion and class conflict, can together be applied to a

broader population than envisioned by either authors. Economic exploitation in the workhouse as well as the factory fueled the formation of working-class identity, for women and children in addition to adult male laborers. The fraud and abuse of workhouse masters, visible to paupers long before parish trustees took notice, contributed to disillusionment with the paternalist obligations of authority and to collective interests defined against those of the parish. The fruits of this cohesion could be seen in negotiation of the terms and conditions of relief as much as in attempts to claim rights by violence or political activism. Parishes managing the balance between compassion and self-interest sought to increase social distance, both in class hierarchy and physical separation, to ease the nagging paternalist conscience and pay the price of apathy.

Conclusion

One of the original interests of this research was the concept of deservingness, the administrative question of who gets what and why. What became immediately apparent from working in the archives is that these parish and charity sources are often not the most detailed records of the individual thought processes of relief, but instead reflect a broader and shifting ideology of poverty. The theory of deservingness itself was not a consistently applied idea to separate the worthy from the unworthy, the outdoor from the indoor pauper. Definitions of the deserving poor were not the metric for facilitating relief, but rather another mechanism for controlling behavior and asserting authority. Thus, what has emerged as the focus of this study has been the quality of that control and the degree of authority asserted by parishes and charities over the lives of the poor in order to maintain social and economic systems. The poor laws represented government bureaucratic involvement in almost every aspect of life and death, and as workhouses loomed and policies were revised in the eighteenth century, the exploitation and restriction of this relationship became more transparent. The concept of deservingness was one of many strategies to provide cover for the caprice of parish administrators and preserve their social distance from any form of accountability to the poor.

What also became apparent during this study is that these institutional actions did not go uncontested. Despite a great diversity of experience and the persistent stigma attached to the poor laws, it is clear that many paupers understood and advocated for their own rights. The methodology of working-class history and the poor laws is still developing as historians find new ways to analyze and publish sources from the archives. Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker's *London Lives* project is an important recent example of bottom-up history through mining

records from the Old Bailey and London parishes to explore plebeian politics, while also making these resources available online to explore new ways of academic collaboration.¹ The precedence of Webb, Thompson, and Himmelfarb still stands, and it can sometimes feel like most of the historical ground has been covered already, but this movement to expand our understanding of the historical actors of the poor laws remains an important injection of nuance into this narrative. Interpretation will also change based on the contexts of our own society, as we seek new meaning from the past for the present. I am aware of the limitations of my own study, due to experience, time, and access to archival sources, as well as a narrow frame of analysis. I have been interested in the forces of industrialization and their interactions with the poor laws, and without being able to statistically define the scope of those forces, I have focused instead on their ideological impact. With limited access to written expressions of working-class consciousness, I have approached administrative sources with an analytical framework which emphasizes the evidence of class and gender relations. In short, I have relied heavily on explicating primary sources, and I hope to explore these themes in the future with greater methodological variety.

In the past, the poor laws have been seen as a story of administration, not experience. This study combines that narrative of parish control, which anticipates the developments of the New Poor Law, with a relational view of the effect of authority on individual paupers and working-class communities. Changes in policy and ideology had profound consequences for experiences of poverty, restriction, and exploitation. The individual manifestations of those experiences varied between time and place, but together formed the basis for a collective identity. Pauperism, the shadow of pauperism, and the stigma attached to pauper status were

¹ Tim Hitchcock and Robert Brink Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690-1800*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

more diffuse in the laboring population than historians can quantify. More detailed and extensive study could perhaps parse out the cause and effect of class antagonism; did restriction first fuel consciousness or did activism first prompt reaction? It is an important lesson in social and political identity to reflect on how efforts to maintain inequality directly fueled the consciousness and organization which would later work to overturn such hierarchies. The transitional nature of the early industrial period reveals how many changes occurred in tandem. While the urgency of the present distracts us from the dynamism and vitality of the past, studies of industrialization and poverty remind us of humanity's previous record of surviving and reforming through times of cataclysm.

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