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The Fallen Woman

By Hilary Fraser

WHEN I DECIDED TO INVITE MY MOTHER to see *The Fallen Woman* exhibition on her ninety-first birthday last year, it was, to be sure, in part because I knew we could park easily right outside (thereby hoping to avoid any more falls). I also noticed that the newly released film *Suffragette* (2015) was screening at the Curzon cinema just across the road from the Foundling Museum. I thought we could manage to take in both, and that the exhibition and the movie would speak to each other, and to us as mother and daughter. They did.

I had already been to see the exhibition – the museum, which is built on the site of the eighteenth-century Foundling Hospital, is located only a few minutes from my office in Gordon Square. It was quite brilliant. Imaginatively curated by Lynda Nead and sympathetically researched by Victoria Mills, both colleagues at Birkbeck, it offered fresh perspectives on a familiar theme by displaying some of the best-known Victorian narrative paintings depicting ideal and “fallen” womanhood alongside a heart-wrenching collection of material objects and records from the Foundling archives. A haunting sound installation commissioned from composer and musician Steve Lewinson, entitled “Fallen Voices,” enabled the women themselves to be heard, and gave the entire show an edgy contemporary inflection.

Mediated by the film, and by the companionship of my mother, the exhibition acquired further, more personal resonances the second time around. As the foreword to the catalogue observes, “Foundling mothers and fallen women may seem to belong to a distant Victorian world, entirely different from our own,” but there are parallels to be drawn, and there are connections to be made. Mum, nicknamed when young “the suffragette” by her father, and the film of that name provided such a connective

thread. She was born in 1924, four years before universal suffrage was achieved for women in Britain. This was the year that the decision was made to move the still thriving Foundling Hospital from Bloomsbury to a healthier location in the countryside. I was born in 1953, the year before its last pupil was placed in foster care. That distant Victorian world spilled into our own lifetimes. We felt part of this history, and privileged to be experiencing the stories of these women together in the face of so much loss.

The film we had watched as a prelude to our visit to the exhibition showed how many of the mid-nineteenth-century issues explored in *The Fallen Woman* had continued well into the twentieth century and had fuelled the campaign for political reform. Its contemporary relevance was underscored at the London premiere by a demonstration organized by the group Sisters Uncut against cuts to domestic violence services. The fictional heroine of *Suffragette* works long hard hours in a laundry where the sexual abuse of women by their male supervisor is routine. She is, because of her increasingly radical political activities, ostracized by her community and prevented from seeing her son, who is eventually put up for adoption by her estranged husband. Sex and motherhood are the dramatic and emotional focus of this film about the campaign for women's suffrage. They are also the crucially, and often painfully, entwined themes of this exhibition.

The exhibition provides new perspectives on the figure of the "fallen woman" by exploring the specific experience of the unmarried mothers who petitioned the Foundling Hospital to accept, educate, and care for their children in the middle of the nineteenth century. Freighted by the connotations of the first Fall, conventionally blamed on Eve, the Victorian phenomenon of the "fallen woman" was mythologized

in Victorian literature, journalism, and painting. As the excellent gallery guide explains, the term refers to “a particular kind of moral identity; neither a prostitute, nor an ideal wife and mother, it implies that the woman had been respectable but had dropped out of respectable society through her experience of sexual relations outside of marriage.” These were the very women whose illegitimate babies were admitted into the Foundling Hospital in the Victorian period, and its archives, which include hundreds of first-person testimonies of mothers as well as records of the decisions made by its Governors, offer a particularly nuanced insight into Victorian sexual morality.

The Foundling Hospital was established in Bloomsbury in 1739 by the philanthropist Thomas Coram “for the education and maintenance of exposed and deserted young children,” but during the nineteenth century other criteria were introduced that seemingly had more to do with the character of the mother than the welfare of the child. According to its new admission procedures, only the children of women who could demonstrate their respectability before their fall from grace, and could convince the Governors of their capacity for reform, would be considered. The selection process was gruelling, at once bureaucratic and shockingly invasive. Having completed a petition form, the mother who wished her child to be taken into the Hospital’s care had to present herself for interview by a panel of male Governors. The records show that she was there subjected to interrogation about her background and sexual history, the circumstances of her becoming pregnant (which were often traumatic), and the identity and whereabouts of the father. Françoise Barret-Ducrocq researched these records for her ground-breaking history of sexuality, class and gender in nineteenth-century London, *Love in the Time of Victoria* (1991).

As Victoria Mills writes in the catalogue, “The sexual encounters reported by petitioners were often described as ‘seductions’ in the Enquirer’s reports. Many of these would now be classed as rape. There are myriad examples of women being lured into houses by strangers or casual acquaintances and forced to engage in sexual activity against their will.” Their stories were then investigated by the Hospital’s Enquirer, character references were sought, and a decision was made. One of the most poignant exhibits showed how the petitions and decisions were filed by the Hospital authorities: on metal spikes. One pierced the pile of acceptances, the other the much larger heap of rejections.

The women’s stories of how they came to be in this plight are a wonderful resource. This is history from below at its finest. We read the accounts, hear the voices of real women whose intimate sexual lives, so hard to access by modern scholars, are laid bare in fully documented and authenticated form. It makes heartbreaking, sometimes harrowing reading. And the site-specific location of the exhibition, with its evocative soundtrack, intensifies the sense of authenticity. The curator, though, introduces a note of caution. She reminds us that the petitioners’ pleas are narratives. The criteria for acceptance were well known, and women seeking admission for their children were aware of the story they had to tell if their petition was to be successful. And of course there was no legitimate language available to these women for talking about their own desire in cases where intercourse was not unwanted but consensual. Whilst the letters displayed in the exhibition had the ring of truth, and had me and my mother in tears, this was a timely reminder that the petition is a genre with its rules like any other. The women’s experience is mediated, even in these first-person testimonies, by a story of fallenness that cannot but shape the way they represent themselves.

And it is this story that the rest of the exhibition told through a well-chosen selection of paintings and texts. It is a story that is both factual and mythologized: factual, in that the reason why these women were so willing to give up their children to institutional care was to increase their life chances, because the alternative, life on the streets, was even worse (the Foundling's children were the lucky ones); mythologized, because the literary and pictorial representation of their likely fate exploits a vision of womanhood that is symbolic and ideological.

Here too, the siting of the exhibition of paintings at the Foundling Museum seemed apt, for the Hospital had from its inception been associated with the arts. Public exhibitions there, organized by the Dilettante Society, led to the formation of the Royal Academy in 1768. William Hogarth was among its founders, and he encouraged other artists, such as Reynolds and Gainsborough, to donate their work. Handel too was a prominent benefactor, and *Messiah* was often performed there. The Hospital's connections with the arts continued into the nineteenth century. Dickens lived in nearby Doughty Street in the 1840s and the foundlings inspired some of his fictional characters. His novels are also populated by stereotypical "fallen" women. The exhibition pays homage to this in its inclusion of David Lean's 1948 film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, which memorably opens with Oliver's mother's desperate journey across the moorlands to the workhouse. This scene is not actually in Dickens's novel, and was displayed to demonstrate the enduring sentimental appeal of the figure of the outcast unmarried mother in twentieth-century visual culture.

Sentimentality was, unsurprisingly, the overwhelming keynote of the Victorian paintings chosen for this exhibition. The "fallen" woman was, as we have seen, defined in relation to the virtuous woman she had once been, and both types, and all the intermediary stages in her fall, were well represented at the Foundling

Museum. Two mid-century paintings by George Elgar Hicks and another by Charles West Cope invoke religious imagery of the Madonna and Child to celebrate the Victorian secular vision of motherhood, while George Smith's *Evenings at Home* (1852-53), a group family portrait of art patron Henry Cole's wife and children, offers a powerful image of the feminine domestic ideal. Other works show how women who strayed from the home, especially into paid employment, were vulnerable to the attentions of men with dishonourable motives. Robert Dowling's *Breakfasting Out* (1859), for example, depicts a young milliner out alone in the city, easy prey to the flashily dressed gentleman, with his back to the viewer, who is eying her up. The exhibition included several petitions from milliners who had succumbed to the attentions of such men, and this is one of many eloquent juxtapositions of visual and archival materials.

The consequences of exposure to the dangers of the world are spelled out in other works that map the decline from the "before" of respectability to the "after" of disgrace. An engraving in the journal *Echoes from the Clubs* (1869), "Passion: Its Beginning/Its End," portrays a seduction and its dire consequences for the woman. Other artists draw attention to the dangers of alcohol. George Cruikshank's series of etchings entitled *The Bottle* (1847) charts the ruin of a respectable family when both parents take to drink, and the once virtuous daughter is forced into prostitution. Gambling was another vice to which women were deemed especially vulnerable, and which could make them teeter and fall. Alfred Elmore's *On the Brink* (1865) portrays a young woman exposed by her passion for gambling to the dangers of the streets. In this heavily symbolic painting, the woman, her life in the balance, is shown outside the gambling-rooms. A man leans out of the window behind her, and she holds an empty purse. Like Laura, in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), she has "no

copper” in her purse, and “no silver either,” but, just as Laura has “much gold upon [her] head,” this woman wears a golden dress. The symbolism suggests that it is herself she will sell; of the flowers depicted on the right hand side of the canvas, we fear she will choose the passionflower over the lily.

The work of Christina’s brother, Dante Gabriel, was represented in the exhibition by his watercolour *The Gate of Memory* (1857), which shows a prostitute standing under an archway looking at a group of young girls playing together in the street, and remembering her own innocent past. The painting refers to a scene near the end of William Bell Scott’s poem “Maryanne” (1854) which relates, year by worsening year, the story of a girl who falls into prostitution. Watching the carefree innocence of the girls at play, “in her utter abandonment / She loathed their loveliness.” This is the final trajectory of the fallen woman’s fate once she is cast out from respectable society. The moment of ejection poignantly captured by Richard Redgrave’s *The Outcast* (1851), which shows a young woman being expelled from the safety of the family home by her father. Her mother looks on sympathetically but helplessly.

When I revisited the exhibition with my own mother, I was especially struck by these women looking on: by the mother seeing her daughter cast out into the dangerous unknown; by the prostitute looking on at the young girls and recalling her own lost innocence; by the older woman at the centre of *Breakfasting Out* looking knowingly at the man who homes in on the young milliner. We look to our mothers for protection, for education and guidance. This exhibition showed a history of mothers exercising their best duty of care by giving up the right to care for their children, as captured by Henry Nelson O’Neil’s painfully beautiful painting *A Mother Depositing her Child at the Foundling Hospital in Paris* (1855). And it also showed

women looking down the generations in other ways, thinking about what lies ahead for younger women. The paintings displayed, through their use of narrative, colour, light and shade, and symbolism, invite the viewer to respond emotionally to these issues. Their sentimental register seems quintessentially Victorian. But sentimentality is not entirely absent from the representation of the suffering and abuse of mothers and children in twentieth-century visual culture, or indeed in our own century, as the films *Oliver Twist* and *Suffragette* demonstrate. And this seems to me not aesthetically unforgiveable but entirely proper. My mother and I were convinced by the points made about the petitions as narrative constructions, and about their authors inhabiting the subject position of “fallen women,” but we also wept when confronted by all those images of desperate women and by their revenant voices, and we smiled at their courage and resourcefulness. And that’s as it should be for women looking back to the struggles of our grandmothers and looking on to coming generations.

Birkbeck College

The Fallen Woman. The Foundling Museum, London, 25 September 2015 to 3 January 2016. Curator: Lynda Nead.

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